Fenn George Manville

Mad: A Story of Dust and Ashes

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Содержание

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Volume One – Chapter One. The Thin End of the Wedge

Septimus Hardon bore his Christian name from no numerical reason, for he was an only child; but his father, Octavius Hardon, Esquire, of Somesham, thought that, like his own, the name had a good bold sound with it – a sonorous classical twang. There was a vibration with it that should impress people in the future life of the bearer and add importance denied by Nature; but Mrs Octavius, during her lifetime, was always in disgrace with her lord for shortening the name into Sep, which was decidedly not impressive; while as for Septimus himself, he too was always in trouble with his father for being what he was – decidedly impressive, but not in the way his father wished; for to look at Septimus Hardon it might have been supposed that Nature, after trying her 'prentice hand on man, and then making "the lasses, O," had had a quantity of rough stuff left – odds and ends, snips and scraps and awkward tags – when, sooner than there should be

any waste of the precious material, she made Septimus Hardon. You could not say that he was deformed, but there was an odd look about him; his head seemed too big, and was badly thatched, while, by contrast, his body was too small; then his nose was a trifle on one side, and his mouth too wide, though it certainly disclosed an enviable set of teeth; his arms were long, and swung about too much, while one leg was slightly shorter than the other, short enough to make him limp; but there was mildness written in his pitted face, and honesty peered at you from his clear bright eyes. And there was a true heart too in his breast, a large swelling heart, to which must have been due the obtrusiveness of his breast, and the decided roundness of his shoulders. And while Septimus Hardon had in some things most excellent taste – taste that his cousins sneered at, save when they wanted their music copied neatly, or their drawings touched up – yet dress was not his forte, since he always made the worst of himself by wearing clothes that did not fit him, and bad as his figure was, some tailor could have been found who would have guaranteed fit, if not style. Septimus generally wore shabby faded black coats and vests, trousers of a dead leaf or baker's drab, blucher boots of the pattern known as contract – very bulgy and wrinkly; and a real beaver hat, with a propensity for growing irritated under the brush, and becoming rough and startling.

Born in London, Septimus had lived since childhood with his father at the Grange, a solitary house about a couple of miles from Somesham town; and for years past the amusement and

toil of the father and son had been centred in a little amateur printing-office, fitted up in a side-room, where they laboriously printed, page by page, the work that Octavius Hardon called his brother Thomas – the doctor practising in the town – a fool for not appreciating, – a work upon political reform, one that was to astonish the world at large when it was completed; and though Septimus owned to himself that the world would be easily astonished and its state rather startling if it accepted and acted upon the opinions there set forth, yet, at forty years of age, he was still working on day after day at his father's beck and call, obedient as a child, and never venturing an opinion of his own in presence of the irascible old man, who always called him "boy."

It might have been supposed that living so secluded a life himself, and being so strange of aspect, the idle god would have spared him as an object for his shafts; but for long years Septimus Hardon had loved in secret, loved and sorrowed, – for he was not happy in the choice he had made. Mary Phillips was the betrothed of Tom Grey, the mate of an East Indiaman; and Septimus Hardon had been divided between love for the fair girl and friendship for his old schoolfellow, who made him the repository, in his frank, sailorlike fashion, of all his secrets.

So while the sailor had wooed and won, Septimus Hardon had nursed his love for years, hardly realising the passion he had harboured, till one night when, after a woodside ramble, he stood leaning upon a stile, and glancing down with bitterness at his uncouth form. The shadows were growing deeper, when, hearing

approaching footsteps, he entered the wood, where before him lay many a dark mossy arcade – fit places for the sighs of a sorrowful heart; and he thought as he entered one that he could wander here in peace for a while; but the next instant the hot blood flushed up into his face, making his veins throb as he stood with clenched hands gazing through the thin screen of leaves at Mary, leaning lovingly upon his friend's arm, and listening with downcast eyes to his words.

The listener could hardly see the looks of those who passed, but their words seemed to ring through the stillness of the summer eve, each one falling with a heavy impact upon his ear, and vibrating through his frame, as if a sharp blow had been struck upon sonorous metal. For a moment a wild fury seemed to blind him, and he stood trembling with passion till the footsteps died away; when, half wild with agony, he dashed headlong, deeper and deeper into the wood, crashing through the light hazels, tripping over the tortuous roots; and at last, stumbling over a fallen bough, he fell heavily, and lay insensible in the calm depths of the wood. But thought soon dawned upon him again, and he lay and shuddered as the anguish of heart came slowly creeping back; for he now thoroughly understood his fate, and knew that the bright dreamy structures in which his imagination had revelled had crumbled before him into bitter dust.

Time sped on, and after another voyage Tom Grey was back, and standing with his hand upon Septimus Hardon's shoulder.

"Come? Why, of course, my boy; what should we do without

you? Mary begs that you won't refuse; and, Sep, old fellow, I shall expect you to be her bodyguard when I'm far away at sea."

Septimus Hardon was standing opposite to a tall pier-glass in his father's drawing-room when these words were spoken; and he glanced at himself, and then, sighing bitterly, wondered whether, had he been as other men, he would have been chosen. But the next moment the thought was crushed down, and he was returning the frank, handsome sailor's honest grasp.

Septimus Hardon nursed his love, but he hid it, buried it in the deepest recesses of his heart; and no one knew of the secret held by the bridegroom's friend, who held by one of the pews when a swimming came upon him in the church, and he would have fallen had not Tom Grey grasped his arm. But that soon passed, and the stricken man added his congratulations to those of the friends assembled to follow the couple, in whose path flowers were strewn – the couple joined together till death did them part.

And that was soon – soon to the loving wife – soon to the husband whose journeyings were upon the great deep; but years passed first, during which quiet, vacillating Septimus Hardon was the faithful friend of his schoolfellow's wife, and the patient slave of her bright-eyed child, at whose bidding he was always ready to attend, even to the neglect of his father's book.

Then came the day when, after whispering of hope, for many months, Septimus learned that his fears were but too well founded, and that his friend's ship had gone down with all on board.

A bitter trial was his to break the fatal tidings to the widow, and he stood trembling as she, the woman he had for long years worshipped in secret, reviled him and cursed him in her madness for the news – the blasting news that he had brought upon her home.

Then two years glided away, when the widow, passing through many a phase of sorrow, sickness, and misery, sat hoping on that he whom she mourned would yet return, and all the while ignorant of the hand that supplied her wants, or of the good friend with so great a love for fancy-work that she sent order after order, liberally paid for by the hands of Septimus Hardon. The beauty of the past slowly faded, so that she became haggard and thin; a lasting illness seemed to have her in its grasp; but still faithful to his trust, true to the love he bore her, Septimus Hardon set at naught the frowns of his father and the sneers of his cousins, while he devoted himself to the alleviation of the widow's sufferings, and kept her from the additional stings of want, for she had been left totally unprovided for by her young and hopeful husband.

And what was the result? Such as might have been expected from such a nature as Septimus Hardon's. Patient and true, the love he bore this woman was hidden for years, and then, when in her hopeless misery the widow turned her head upon the sick pillow and asked his advice, he told her to give him the right to protect her, to be to her child, little Lucy, a second father, and then shrank, crushed and trembling, from the room, affrighted

at her look of horror, and the words accusatory which told him of faithlessness to his trust, to his schoolfellow, who she felt yet lived.

But it was only in her hopeful heart he lived, and six months after forbidding Septimus her house, Mary Grey, weeping bitterly over the discovery she had made of the hand that had so long sustained her, wrote these words and sent them to the Grange: “Forgive me!”

Volume One – Chapter Two.
Sep's Complaint

Octavius Hardon's book was at a standstill, and the world still in the thick darkness of ignorance as regarded political reform upon his basis, for Septimus Hardon was ill, sick almost unto death. He had slowly grown listless and dull, careless of everything, daily becoming weaker, until, apparently without ailment, he had taken to his bed, over which his uncle, Doctor Hardon; his assistant, Mr Reston, a handsome, cynical-looking man, and the rival practitioner of the town, had all concurred in shaking their heads and declaring that nothing could be done, since Septimus Hardon was suffering from the effects of an internal malformation.

They were quite right; the poor fellow had too much heart; and though the wise of this earth declare that people do not die of or for love, yet most assuredly Septimus Hardon would slowly have faded from his place among men, and before many months had passed over his head gone where there is rest.

But there was medicine of the right kind coming, and the very perusal with lack-lustre eyes of the prescription brought to his bedroom sent a flash of light into the glassy orbs, and in the course of a few weeks Septimus disappointed the doctors by getting well, Nature having arranged respecting the internal

malformation.

"I don't think you did him a bit of good, Mr Brande; not a bit – not a bit – not a bit," said Octavius to the rival practitioner. "He never took any of your stuffs. Now, come and set me up again, for I'm wrong."

"Better, yes, he's better," said the old man to Mr Reston. "Good-morning – good-morning – good-morning."

Doctor Hardon had sent his assistant over; but in place of seeing the patient he found himself bowed out; and on loudly complaining to the doctor, not on account of missing his interview with the patient, but for reasons of his own, Doctor Hardon now called.

"Well, Tom – well, Tom – well, Tom?" said Octavius, smiling cynically, and looking his younger brother well over from top to toe. "What is it, Tom?"

"O, about Septimus?"

"There, be off; I'm busy. Septimus is getting on, and Mr Brande will physic him if he wants any more. A man who can't morally physic his own children can't do other people's good."

Doctor Hardon, portly and pompous, rose to speak; but Octavius took hold of his arm and led him to the door, giving him his hat at the same time.

"Good-bye, Tom – good-bye – good-bye. Don't come till I send for you again. You always were a fool, and an ass, and an idiot, and a humbug, Tom – always – always – always."

There was a slight storm at Doctor Hardon's that day, and

neither his wife nor daughters ventured much into his presence; but when, some weeks afterwards, the doctor knew of a scene that took place in his brother's house, he smiled softly, and after a fashion of his own he purred, while that night he was graciousness itself.

Octavius Hardon sat writing, and listening to the words of his son till, as he grew interested, the pen ceased to form letters, and at last he pushed back his chair, overturning the inkstand, so that the sable current streamed across a fresh paragraph of his book. He thrust up his glasses and sheltered his eyes to look at his son – the son who had obeyed his every word and look, who had never seemed to have a thought of his own – the son who was even now, in spite of his forty years, but a boy; and as he looked, he saw that he seemed inches taller, that there was an elate look in his countenance, which it would have been hard at that moment to have called plain.

"Going to be what?" gasped the father.

"To be married," said the son firmly.

"Married?"

"Married, father."

"And to whom? One of those hussies, your cousins?"

"To Mrs Grey," replied Septimus.

"What?" gasped the old man. "To a woman – a widow with a family – a proper inmate for the union – a pauper!"

"Hush, father!" cried Septimus. "I love her;" and he said those simple words with such reverence, such tenderness, that the old

man paused and gazed almost wonderingly at the aspect worn by his son; but by degrees his anger gained the ascendant, and a stormy scene ensued in which the father threatened and besought in turn, while the son remained calm and immovable. Once he shrunk back and held up his hands deprecatingly, when the old man spoke harshly of the stricken woman; but directly after his face lit up with a pride and contentment which almost maddened the speaker.

"You cannot keep a wife!" he gasped.

Septimus smiled.

"You were always a helpless, vacillating fool, and you have nothing but the few hundreds from your mother."

Septimus bowed his head.

"Dog!" roared the old man, "I'll leave every penny I have to your uncle's hussies if you dare to marry this woman."

The son smiled sadly, but remained silent.

"Why don't you speak?" roared Octavius, foaming with rage.

"What would you have me say, father?" said Septimus calmly.

"Say!" gasped the old man; "why, that you are a thankless, graceless, unnatural scoundrel. But where do you mean to go?"

"To London," said Septimus.

"To London!" sneered the old man; "and what for? No; go to Hanwell, or Colney Hatch, or sink your paltry money at a private asylum, if they will take you. To London, to leave me to my infirmities, with my book unfinished! But you'll take my curse with you; and may yon brazen, scheming woman – "

"Hush!" cried Septimus fiercely, as he laid his hand upon his father's lips, when, beside himself with fury, Octavius struck his son heavily in the face, and then, as he fell back, the old man seized the poker, but only to throw it crashing back into the fender.

Just at that moment, the door opened, a tall, dark, handsome girl hurried into the room, and stood between father and son, gazing in an agitated way from one anger-wrought countenance to the other.

"Septimus! Uncle!" she cried, "what is the matter?"

"He's a villain, girl – an unnatural scoundrel. He's going to marry that woman – Grey's wife – widow – relict – curse her!"

"What, poor Mrs Grey?" said the girl, with the tears springing to her eyes.

"God bless you for that, Agnes!" cried Septimus passionately, as he caught her in his arms, and kissed her affectionately.

"Yes, *poor* Mrs Grey," sneered the old man, looking savagely at the pair before him. "But there, let him go; and mind *you*, or you won't have what I've got. But there, you will, and your sisters will have something to fleer and jeer at then, and your father will purr in my face, and spit and swear behind my back. Bah! a cursed tom-cat humbug!"

"Hush, uncle dear!" whispered Agnes, laying one hand upon his arm and the other upon his breast, her lip quivering as she spoke, – "hush! you are angry. – Don't say any more, Septimus."

"No," replied Septimus sternly, "I have done."

"No, *no*, no! you have not," roared the old man, firing up again. "You have to beg my pardon, and tell me that this folly is at an end."

"I'll beg your pardon, father," said Septimus sternly, "and I do ask it for anything I have done amiss; but I have pledged my word to the woman I have loved these ten years." And again there was the look of proud elation on Septimus Hardon's countenance.

"And you are going to London, eh?" said Octavius.

"To London," said Septimus calmly.

The old man frowned, pressed his lips tightly together, and, holding Agnes firmly by her shoulder, he stood pointing with one hand towards the door.

"Then go!" he said; "go – go!"

"O, Septimus!" cried Agnes in appealing tones, – "uncle!"

"You're mad, Septimus Hardon," said the old man coldly. "Mad – stark mad: a private asylum, Septimus – an asylum – mad! You're mad – stark mad! Go!"

Volume One – Chapter Three. Further Introductions

In the faint light of early morning, some ten years after the scene described in the last chapter, at that cold dank hour when the struggle is going on between night and day, and the former is being slowly and laboriously conquered, – when Chancery-lane looked at its worst, and the passed-away region of Bennett's-rents more sordid and desolate than ever. The gas-lamps still glimmered in the street, while the solitary light at the end of the Rents yet burned dimly, and as if half-destroyed by mephitic vapour, when the door of Number 27 was opened, closed loudly, and a man clattered heavily over the broken pavement, creating an unnecessary amount of noise as he slowly made his way out through the narrow archway into the street, but watching on either side with observant eye the while. It seemed darker when he reached the Lane, where, after glancing hastily up and down for a minute, he softly thrust off his boots, – a pair of heavy lace-ups, – and then, taking them in his hand, he ran lightly back, with the stooping gait and eager hound-like air of some savage beast on the trail of its prey. But the next moment he was at the door he had quitted, had opened it softly and slipped in, ignorant that a face at the third-floor window opposite was watching his movements with looks yet keener than his own.

Holding his breath, the man stood in the passage of the old house for a few seconds; then, passing along softly, he stole down the damp, half-rotten cellar-stairs, starting once and giving vent to a half-suppressed ejaculation as a cat dashed hastily by him, when he paused to wipe the cold perspiration from his forehead with his sleeve. Then he stood at the bottom in front of the cellar-door, in the damp dark place where ashes gritted beneath his feet, and the foul smell of half-decayed vegetable refuse arose. Apparently guided by caution, he now carefully felt around him, letting his hands glide along the wall, while his feet probed every corner to insure that he was alone, before, after listening an instant at the foot of the stairs, he slipped quickly through the door, and stood in the large front cellar.

It was lighter here, for the morning was struggling down through the grating; and now, after a careful tour of inspection, peering into every dim corner, the man passed through a low archway and into a back-cellar, darker and damper than the first, – a place that had once been used for wine, and into every one of whose cobweb-hung and sawdust-floored bins the man looked in turn, as he made his way farther from the light.

He was a big, heavy man; but there was something soft and cat-like in his movements as he passed along the dark cellar. The obscurity seemed to have but little effect upon him, for the way appeared familiar; and when right at the end he stopped to listen attentively for a few moments before, going down upon hands and knees, he crawled rapidly, and more cat-like than ever, into one

of the darkest bins. Then there was a low grating noise heard, as if a heavy stone had been pushed aside; there was a deep expiration, as of one moving a weight; a rustling, the grating sound once more, and then for a few minutes silence.

The light descending the grating struggled hard to illumine the obscure place; but this was one of the strongholds of darkness – a spot where it lurked through the bright hours of the day; and the efforts of the light only served to faintly illumine the front cellar, where stood a huge water-butt with a pipe leading to it for the supply of the house; and here now began an echoing drip, drip, drip; while from the tap came a strange, sighing, hissing sound, as the air was forced by distant pressure along the pipe.

Now came the sharp crack of a stair, the very faint rustle of a dress, and then slowly and cautiously appeared, coming forward, as it were, out of the gloom like one of the phantoms of a nightmare, the face that had been gazing from the opposite window, an old, eager, hawk-like, pinched woman's face, peering through the opening of the ajar door, and followed directly by the shabbily-clothed body.

Cautiously, and with eyes peering in every direction, the woman advanced into the cellar, her head thrust forward, with her thin grey hair pushed behind her ears, which twitched and seemed on the alert to catch the faintest sound. Close behind her followed a cropped poodle-dog, which now ran forward, when at a menacing gesture it half stood up, but the raised hand made it shrink down instantly, and crouching to the earth it crawled

for a few moments and then lay motionless, while its mistress, as if walking in the steps of the man, nimbly examined the cellar, even peering behind and in the great butt, which her thrust-in hand showed her was nearly full of water.

She then softly made her way to the dark arch, and with one hand holding by the side leaned in and tried to penetrate the darkness, but without avail; when, muttering softly to herself, she stepped in, but only to pass out the next moment shaking her head, as with one hand she busily searched her pocket, from which she drew forth a box of matches. Stepping once more beneath the arch she struck a match upon the damp wall, and a long phosphorescent line of light shone feebly out, but the match did not blaze.

Impatiently throwing down the splint of wood, the woman tried another and another, but without effect, till she rubbed one upon the outside of the box, when it ignited silently, and illumined the place for a little distance round, when eagerly catching up the tiny splints thrown down she lit first one and then another, and as they burned their brief span a hasty examination was made. Everywhere the same features: old cobwebbed wine-bins, damp and fungoid growths, and though the woman peered even into the bin where the man had so lately crawled, nothing presented itself to her hurried gaze more than in the others, and as her last lit splint burned out she stepped lightly back to the entrance.

As she stood within the front cellar she turned once more to

gaze down the dark place she had quitted, when a low grating noise struck her ear, and starting back she was about to run to the steps; but, making an effort over herself, she stood, trembling, and listened.

The noise continued for a few seconds, then came the sound as of clothes rustling against a wall, then the heavy breathing, the grating once more, and then silence as, turning her back to both entrances, the woman stole softly to where her dog lay crouching upon the damp floor.

The next moment a sharp yelp and a succession of howls came from the stricken dog as the woman caught it by the thick curled hair of its neck, and beat it savagely.

"Ah, then, *méchant chien*, bad tog, how I have looked for you!" she cried. "Why do you steal down here? There, there, there!" and each word was followed by a blow, while the wretched little animal lay cowering and yelping on the ground, till, lifted by its ears, the skin seemed drawn out of place, the eyes elongated, and the poor brute, now silent, the most abject specimen of canine misery imaginable.

There was a quick step behind the woman, and, as if surprised, she started, and turned to gaze at the evil face behind her, for the man had stepped close to the entrance-door.

"Ah! Meester Jarker, but you did frighten me. My bad tog he runs away. What shall I do wis him?"

The man looked keenly at the speaker, and slowly drew a large clasp-knife, which he opened, and the woman could hardly

repress a shudder as there in the dim light she saw him run his thumb along the edge.

"Ah, yes!" she said with a half-laugh; "he deserves, but I cannot spare him; I must teach him better than to come into uzzer people's house. I look everywhere before I think of dis cellar."

The man did not speak, but glanced first at the mistress, then at the dog, and then at his knife and the great butt, and then involuntarily his suspicious looks turned to the dark arch of the inner cellar, when once more their eyes met in a long penetrating stare.

"I once knowed somethin' as got its throat cut for coming into this here cellar. I ain't sure, but I think that 'ere was a dawg," growled the man.

"O yes, he must not come any more, Meester Jarker; but you will not cut my troat. O, no," laughed the woman jeeringly, as sending her dog on first, and fixing her eyes upon the man, she slowly backed out of the cellar. "O, no, for we will both be good and come no more."

As she slowly made her way to the cellar-stairs, the man stood looking after her; but as she mounted them he followed softly, and listened till he heard her rustle along the passage, when he slipped through the cellar and caught sight of her from the rusty grating as she crossed the court, when he once more went back to the dark arch and looked about him.

All at once his keen eye caught sight of something upon the floor – a newly-burned scrap of match, and snatching it up, he

held it to his cheek to try and detect whether it was dry or damp. It seemed to be dry, so after once more going to the door, and from thence to the stairs, to make out whether he was sure to be free from interruption, he returned hastily, drew forth a tin match-box, lit a scrap of wax-candle from his pocket, and then shading the light with his cap and carefully examining the floor, he picked up three more tiny pieces of half-burned match, lying here and there amongst the blackened dirt and sawdust. These scraps he carefully placed in his pocket along with the piece of candle, and then hurried out, with his lips drawn away from his teeth, and his face wearing a diabolically savage aspect. But the next moment he gave his head a shake, and stole softly up the stairs muttering:

"It must have been arter the dawg."

Mr William Jarker walked out into the court with his boots on now, and his hands very far down in his pockets, and then made his way into the Lane, where he paused in doubt as to whether he should go to the right or to the left; but as in the latter direction there was a policeman, Mr Jarker betook himself to the right, and made his way into the Strand, now nearly empty, while church-spire and chimney-pot stood out clear in the unsmoked morning air. But the street-sweepers were busy, the butchers' carts from westward came rattling along, bound for Newgate-market; watercress-girls tramped by from Farringdon, making up their dark-green bunches as they walked; while every now and then a red newspaper-cart dashed by with its universal budget for

the various railway termini. London was waking again, the great heart was beating fast, and the streams of life beginning to ebb and flow through the street-veins of the City.

But all this affected Mr Jarker very little, he only seemed interested at times during his walk, being apparently in a very contemplative mood. Once he half-stopped as a tall, dark, fierce-eyed woman walked hastily by in company with a slightly-formed girl; but they noticed him not, and were soon out of sight, while Mr Jarker continued his walk, with eyes directed at the ground, as if he thought that being an early bird he must get the first peck at the worms – worms that might take the form of some valuable waif. However, not meeting with any reward from the earth he turned his eyes heavenward, where he could see no waifs, but an occasional stray in the shape of a pigeon, darting across the clear strip of atmosphere above his head, or settling upon the housetop, and so much did these gentle birds attract his notice, that he would now and then stop, and inserting a couple of tolerably clean, soft, unworked fingers in his mouth, whistle to them.

For the pigeons are many in London, and at early morn single birds may be seen darting in swift flight like airy messengers; flocks may be seen in circle round their home, or cooing in company upon the tower of some lofty church – one of the many hidden amidst the labyrinths of bricks and mortar – cooing softly sweet notes, heard plainly now, but soon to be drowned in the roar of the busy streams of life ebbing and flowing through the streets; now but a gentle hum as of a honey-seeking bee, but soon

increasing in intensity as the bees swarm.

There was no help for it this time, for suddenly turning a corner, Mr Jarker come upon a sergeant and a dozen policemen walking with measured step, on their way to relieve those who had been on duty through the night.

"I'm gallussed!" muttered Mr Jarker, trying to look unconcerned, and slouching on; and it was observable that though Mr Jarker looked straight before him and whistled, the policemen, one and all, looked very hard at Mr Jarker, as if they knew him and felt hurt at his pride; while one man was even seen to wink to himself, and smile a very peculiar, hard smile – the kind of smile only seen upon policemen's faces, and one that means so much that its interpretation would be a task of difficulty.

"I'm gallussed!" muttered Mr Jarker again, when he was well past the men in uniform, and then, apparently satisfied with the length of his morning walk, he took a short cut to make his way back to Bennett's-rents, while, upon thus once more having his thoughts directed homeward, he again muttered – "It must have been arter the dawg."

Volume One – Chapter Four. With the Dragon's Teeth

In the gloomiest part of that gloomy street called Carey, and in the darkest corner of his printing-office, sat Septimus Hardon. The dragon's teeth and their appurtenances lay around, but all thickly covered with that strange black dust peculiar to the region; the dust compounded of who can tell what, as it rests on every ledge, and settles thickly upon every article in room or workshop, office or chamber. Business had not prospered with Septimus, though his place looked business-like, save for the animation that a few moving figures would have lent to it, while for position it was all that could be desired. But the star of Septimus Hardon was not in the ascendant. With the knowledge full upon him that he must work to keep the wife and child he had taken to his breast upon leaving Somesham, he had adopted the trade which seemed most congenial from the little knowledge that he possessed; but as the years passed on, leaving him poorer, and with increased expenses, he grew hopeless, helpless, and, if it were possible, less fitted than ever for fighting his way amidst the busy throngs of the great city. At times, almost in despair, he would go forth into the streets of the busy hive and canvass for work; but he always carried with him an atmosphere of his own, so quiet, strange, and retiring a manner, that his very appearance

invited either pity or rebuff, and often and often, when tired out, he would return to his wife for the comfort that she, grown more sickly than ever, could ill afford to give.

But Septimus seldom complained, and there was always a pleasant smile for Lucy Grey, now grown a blooming girl, the mainstay of the family for cheerfulness, and the constant attendant of her invalid mother; and, in spite of her years, almost taking the place of parent to the two children, the fruit of Septimus Hardon's marriage.

And now, after long years of straggling, Septimus sat thinking of the state of his affairs, of the rent he had to make up, and the silence of his father in spite of the many humble appeals that he had made to him for help. Mattering and calculating, with a piece of paper and a pencil, he suddenly stopped short, for he saw that he was not alone, and shuffling off his high stool he hurried towards the new-comer, in the hope that some solicitor had sent orders for some large amount of work, or that, better still, an estimate was wanted for a new magazine.

"Any chance of a job, sir?" said the new-comer, who might have been Septimus Hardon twenty years older, and more shabby. There was 'old compositor' oozing out of him at every corner, and the corners in his person were many; he smelt of stale tobacco-smoke, and he was taking almost his last pinch of snuff out of a dirty piece of paper, with his long, lithe, active fingers as Septimus Hardon approached him. A shabby black frock-coat was buttoned tightly to his chin; his shiny black trousers had

the gloss of age thick upon them; Wellington boots were upon his feet that rivalled his tall hat for dilapidations; old, sallow, dirty, and wild-looking, he was not the man a master would have employed unless from some latent idea that he suited the district. "Any chance of a job, sir?"

Septimus Hardon shook his head and sighed, which was, to say the least of it, unbusiness-like.

The old man echoed the sigh, leaned one hand upon the case of type at his elbow, and began to finger the letters, bringing up the bright unused types from the bottom of the boxes. He then sighed again, took in at one glance the fittings of the office, and ended by fixing his eyes upon the owner.

"Might do a deal of work with all this, sir."

Septimus Hardon nodded drearily, and sighed again, instead of promptly ordering the man off his premises.

"Yes; should be glad of an hour's work or so, sir. Seems hard here in this world of ours that when a man's ready and willing to work he can't get it to do, sir; don't it?"

Septimus nodded, and looked hard at the man, thinking how his was after all the worse lot.

"I'm faint, sir," continued the old printer, "and hungry, and hard up;" and then he looked down at his clothes with a dreary smile upon his grim, unshorn face.

"I would give you work with pleasure," said Septimus; "but I might as well close the office for all that comes to my share."

The man scraped the last of his snuff out of the shabby piece

of newspaper, and lost it all beneath his long dirty finger and thumb-nails; when, not to disappoint his itching organ, he ran a lean finger along a ledge where dust lay thick, and administered it to his nose in an absent way, snapped his fingers loudly to get rid of the residue, and then slowly turned to go; but, on reaching the door, he faced round again:

"If you'd stand an advance of a shilling, sir, I'd come honestly another time and work it out; for I *am* hard up, sir, and no mistake."

Mistake there certainly was none; but shillings were then scarce things with Septimus Hardon. A shilling, the sum tossed carelessly to the cabman for a few hundred yards' ride, meant, perhaps, the dinner of himself and family; and he knew in his heart that the odds were very long against his ever seeing man or shilling again; but there was so great a knowledge of want in his heart that he could not bear to see it in others, and almost the last shilling in his pocket was slipped into the visitor's hand.

The old printer took the money with his trembling fingers; looked at it, then at the donor; tried to speak, but choked over it; and then, with something like a maundering tear in each eye, he shuffled out of the office, taking with him: The solicitor's work; The magazine estimate; and, most needed of all, Septimus Hardon's shilling.

There was so little weight in the pocket before, that the shilling was not missed; and in spite of the black look of his affairs there was something in the act which made Septimus Hardon's heart

feel light as his pocket, as, thrusting his papers into the desk and locking it, he went and stood before a piece of looking-glass and stretched his face to take out the care-wrinkles, smiled two or three times to give a pleasant tarnish to his countenance, and then, loudly humming a tune, he hurried up to the first-floor, where Mrs Septimus, Lucy, and the children, were located.

Carey-street was a most desirable place for residence or business, as any landlord would have told you in the old days, before the houses I write of were carted away by contractors, and huge law-courts threatened in their stead. Lucy Grey knew the place now by heart. There was generally something out of the common way to be seen there, in spite of the place being so retired and its echoes so seldom disturbed by carriages, unless by those of the judges, when coachman and footman thought it advisable to wash down the legal dust of the place by copious draughts of porter at the Barley Mow or the Blue Horse. The dust-cart – that hearse for bearing off the remains of many a dancing, merry, cheery fire – might be seen there in the morning; and at every cloud of dust raised by the emptying of the fantail man's basket, scraps of parchment and torn folios of cold, bitter cold crabbed writing, were caught up by the fierce winds of the place, and away they went scudding down the street, to the amusement of Septimus Hardon's children; for the mocking wind tossed the scraps on high, as if to show how light and empty they were. Interesting words they were too, mostly about "our client" and his "heirs, executors, administrators, and assigns;"

while of a morning the man whom Septimus Hardon himself knew well as a class, "our client" himself, might be seen in the streets; now early in his suit – Chancery suit, perhaps, – wrapped in it and looking busy and important, glossy and shiny, and, on the whole, apparently liking it. Now with the suit old and shabby, with the pocket-holes frayed and worn with the passage in and out of papers – papers always without end, while the owner crept along, dejected and dismal as Septimus himself, ready at times to enter his office, and sit down and make him the repository of the fact that he hoped the Lord Chancellor or his Vice will give judgment next week. Now he went along, silent and thoughtful; now he brightened up and became energetic, and gesticulated to an audience composed of the apple-woman at the corner, who sat there beneath the lamp summer and winter, like some dowdy old hen in a nest, for her lower extremities were all tightly tucked in a worn sieve-basket.

"Our client" generally went into Carey-street to eat his sandwiches; now looking crumby, now crusty, as the case might be, while he paced irresolutely up and down, or round into the Lane or Portugal-street, or even into the Fields for a change, to gaze at the trees beyond those railings, upon every spike of which a disappointed or broken heart might be stuck by way of ornament. As before said, "our client" had generally plenty of papers with him; some yellow and frayed, some new, but all carefully tied with red tape, which by its friction has a wonderful effect upon black-kid gloves, soon wearing out the fingers, as the

papers are untied in doorways for reference while the tape-string is held in the mouth.

"Our client" was decidedly the principal object of interest in Carey-street; but there were thin, clever, cold-looking lawyers; thin, cold, and underpaid clerks, blue-bag bearing; portly thick clerks, warm, glossy, and gold-chained, red-bag bearing – bags gasping and choking fearfully with their contents – choking horribly with the papers thrust into them, sticking out of their very mouths; long-headed barristers, whose eyes seemed to have turned cold and oysterish – meaningless, and as if gazing within – men upon whose long heads briefs rained incessantly; men in gowns, men bewigged, and with the insignia of their rank put on all ways – straight, crooked, here awry, and there awry, with the frontal apex descending upon the nose, and the caudal beauty behind raised at right angles to display the undergrowth, black, brown, grey, or sandy, or perhaps resting upon the nape of the wearer's neck, with the tails beating a white powdery tune upon his back, like a hare's feet upon a tabor; shabby witnesses, shabby porters, shabby inhabitants; dirt everywhere, and a sharp, gritty, pouncey dust flying before the wind to bring tears into the eyes.

Lucy Grey knew all this by heart, and so did Septimus Hardon's children – lessons learned from the windows, or during their walks, when Lucy showed them the wonders of the shops at hand, and that ever-banging, restless door where the shabby law-writers went in and out, night and day; the three wigs resting upon as many blockheads – wooden blockheads – new,

fresh, and cool for their future wearers; the works in the law-booksellers', all bound in dismal paper, or Desert-of-Sahara-coloured leather – law-calf – Tidd on this, Todd on that, Equity Reports, Chancery Practice, Common Law, Statutes at Large, Justice of the Peace, Stone's Manual. Law everywhere: Simson, tin deed-box manufacturer; Bodgers, deeds copied; Screw, law-writer; Bird, office-furniture warehouse – valuations for probate; S Hardon, legal and general printer; while, like a shade at the end of the street, stood the great hospital, where the wan faces of patients might be seen gazing up at the sky, towards where the clouds scudded before the wind, hurrying to be once more in the country. Away they went, each one a very chariot, bearing with it the thoughts of the prisoned ones – captives from sickness, or poverty, or business. There were faces here at the hospital that would smile, and heads that would nod to Septimus Hardon's little golden-haired children when Lucy held them up; when perchance the patient went back to sit upon some iron bedstead's edge, and tell some fellow-sufferer of the bright vision she had seen, – a vision of angels in the legal desert.

With such surroundings, no one upon entering Septimus Hardon's rooms would have been surprised to see Mrs Septimus careworn, and lying upon a shabby couch, and the children slight and fragile. The rooms were close, heavy, and dull, heavy-windowed, heavy-panelled, earthy-smelling, and cryptish, as though the dust of dead-and-gone suitors lay thick in the place. There was but little accommodation for the heavy rent he paid;

and Septimus Hardon looked uneasily from face to face, crushing down the sorrowful thoughts that tried to rise; for in that close room there was not space for more than one complaining soul. Mrs Septimus told of her troubles often enough; and Septimus felt that his task was to cheer. Still, it was hard work when he had to think of the landlord and the rent; the landlord who, when he complained of this said rent, told him to look at the situation; which Septimus Hardon did, and sighed; and then, by way of raising his spirits, took down and read the copies of the letters he had from time to time sent to his father, unanswered one and all; and then he sighed again, and wondered how it would all end.

Volume One – Chapter Five.
A Pair of Shoes

This is a world of change; but the time was when you could turn by Saint Clement's Church, from the roar of the waves of life in the Strand, and make your way between a baked-potato can – perspiring violently in its efforts to supply the demands made upon it – and a tin of hot eels, steaming in a pasty mud; then under a gateway, past old-clothes shops and marine-store dealers; thread your way along between crooked tumbledown houses in dismal fever-breeding lanes, which led you into the far-famed region of Lincoln's-inn, where law stared you in the face at every turn. It will doubtless behave in as barefaced a manner to you at the present day; but you will have to approach it by a different route, for the auctioneer's hammer has given those preliminary taps that herald the knocking-down of a vast collection of the houses of old London; and perhaps ere these sheets are in the press, first stones will be laid of the buildings to occupy the site as law-courts. But take we the region as it was, with its frowsy abodes and their tenants. They are clipped away now; but in every direction, crowding in upon the great inns of court, were dilapidated houses pressing upon it like miserable suitors asking for their rights, or like rags of the great legal gown. But it is a rare place is Lincoln's-inn – a place where

the law is rampant, and the names of its disciples are piled in monuments upon the door-posts – a place where you may pick your legal adviser according to the length of your purse. The doors stand open, and the halls are cold, cheerless, and echoing, while the large carven keystone looks down at the entering client with its stony eyes, which seem to wink and ogle as the sly, sneering, tongue-thrusting image apparently chuckles at the folly of man. The cold shivers are always out in Lincoln's-inn, and they attack you the moment you enter the precincts; probably they are spirits of past-and-gone suitors, in past-and-gone suits, wandering to avenge themselves upon the legal fraternity by freezing the courage of litigants and turning them back when about to perform that wholesale shovelling of an estate into the legal dust-cart known as "throwing it into Chancery." Cold stone posts stand at intervals along the sides of the square, looking, in their grey, bleak misery, like to stripped and bare clients waiting for redress at their legal advisers' doors. A dreary place for an assignation, if your friend possesses not the virtue of punctuality; for the eye wanders in vain for some pleasant oasis where it may rest. You have not here in autumn those melancholy, washed-out flowers – the chrysanthemums of the Temple, but you may gaze through prison-like bars at soot-dusted grass – verdure apparently splashed with ink from the surrounding offices; at the trees, adapted by nature to the circumstances of their fate; for, as in the arctic zone the thinly-clad animals grow furry as a protection from the cold, so here, in this region of law costs

and voluminous writing, the trees put forth twigs and sprays of a sharp spiky nature, a compromise between porcupine penholders and a *chevaux de frise*, to enable them to set attack at defiance.

Enter one house here, and you would have found upon the ground-floor your QC or Serjeant – Brother So-and-so as he is so affectionately called by the judge; upon the first-floor, your substantial firms of family solicitors, deep in title, lease, covenant, and tenancy in every form or shape – men who set such store by their knowledge that they dole it out to you at so much per dozen words – words adulterated with obsolete expressions repeated *ad nauseam*; while upon the second-floor you would probably find firms of sharp practitioners, ready for business in any shape; and, as elsewhere through the house, the names of the occupants were painted upon the doors – black letters upon a parchment ground.

But the house in question was not entirely legal in its occupants, for if you had been ascending the stairs, before you had gone far, a loud sniff would have made you raise your head sharply towards the skylight, beneath which, sitting, or rather perched, upon the top balustrade, would have been visible the doughy, big, baby-like face of Mrs Sims, strongly resembling, with the white-muslin wings on either side, a fat-cheeked cherub, freshly settled after some ethereal flight.

Mrs Sims was the lady who did for those gentlemen of the house who wanted doing for, took in parcels, answered bells, and was also well-known in the neighbourhood as a convenient party

in times of sickness, being willing to nurse a bachelor gentleman of the legal profession, or one of the poor fraternity of the rags around. She had stood at many a bedside had Mrs Sims, and seen the long sleep come to many a weary, broken-hearted suitor, and she had sniffed and sobbed at the recital of their miseries, offering the while such consolation as she could from the depths of a very simple but very honest heart.

After another loud sniff, and a curtsey performed invisibly, except that the cherubic head was seen to bob out of sight, and then apparently re-perch itself upon the balustrade, Mrs Sims would say "At home," or "Not at home," as the case might be. Then, as you left the staircase, the head would disappear, and, summer or winter, Mrs Sims might be heard refreshing herself with a blow at the fire by means of a very creaky, asthmatic pair of bellows.

Mrs Sims was busy, and had made visible the whole of her person, as standing at the door she pointed out into the square, calling the attention of one of *her* lodgers, as she termed them, to a passer-by.

"Here, you sir; fetch a cab – a four-wheeler," shouted the lodger. "No; confound your bird – I don't want birds, I want a cab."

The person addressed was the inhabitant of Bennett's-rents – the big, slouchy, large-jawed gentleman, in a fur cap and a sleeved-waistcoat, already known to the reader. He carried a small birdcage, tied in a cotton handkerchief, beneath his

arm, while another spotted handkerchief wrapped his bull-neck, where it was pinned with a silver-mounted Stanhope lens, which was apparently regarded as a rare jewel. Upon being first called, he commenced expatiating upon the qualities of the bird, whose cage-envelope he began to unfasten, until so unceremoniously checked by the gentleman who summoned him.

"You're a fine sort, you are," growled the man as he went off in search of the cab; "and if I warn't as dry as sorduss, I'd see you furder afore I'd fetch your gallus cab, so now, then. My name's Jarker, chrissen William, that's about what my name is, stand or fall by it – come, now."

As nobody seemed disposed to "come, now," Mr Jarker hastened his steps, and soon returned with the cab, placed his cage behind the hall-door, and then, under the direction of Mrs Sims, fetched down portmanteau and bags groaning and sighing beneath their weight, and raising up a smile of contempt upon his employer's face as he watched the fellow's actions, and scanned his powerful development and the idleness written so plainly upon his countenance. But soon the task was ended, the cab-door banged, Mrs Sims had turned on a little more of her laughing-gas to brighten her features by way of valediction to the departing lodger, and then, as she sniffed loudly, the cab drove off, leaving Mr Jarker spitting upon that curiosity, an honestly-earned sixpence in his hand.

"How's the missus? why, she's okkard, and I don't s'pose you a-coming would do her any good, and she's a-going to spend a

shillin' in ankerchers for someone as has a cold in her head, that's what she's a-goin' to do," said Mr Jarker, with a grin at Mrs Sims, and then he watched the affronted dame as she sniffed her way upstairs; but before she had reached the second flight, Mr Jarker had grinned again, drawing his lips back from his white teeth with a smile that more resembled a snarl.

Mr William Jarker, birdcatcher, fancier of pigeons, and of anything else which came to his net, stood listening to the sniffs and receding footsteps of Mrs Sims, placed the sixpence he had earned in the pocket of his tight corduroys, pulled off his large, flat, fur cap, and gave his head a scratch, thereby displaying a crop of hair which it would have been useless to attempt to brush or part, for it was decidedly short, and the barber who had last operated had not been careful, but left the said hair nicky and notchy in places. However, the style gave due prominence to the peculiar phrenological development of Mr Jarker's bumps, while his ears stood out largely, and with an air that suggested cropping as an improvement to them as well, more especially since there was a great deal of the bull-dog in his appearance.

Mr Jarker replaced his cap, took his little birdcage from behind the door, and was just moving off, when a barrister came out of one of the lower rooms in full legal costume, muttering loudly, and evidently reciting a part of the performance he was about to go through.

Upon hearing the door open, Mr Jarker turned his head, and then gave an involuntary shudder as he moved off, while the

counsel followed closely behind, wrapped in his brief, and at times talking loudly:

"Instead, m'lud, of the case being tried in this honourable court, m'lud, devoted as it is to civil causes, the defendant should be occupying the felon's dock at the Old Bailey, m'lud; for a more shameful case of robbery – "

"I'm gallussed!" muttered Mr Jarker, quickening his steps, and perspiring profusely, as he gave a furtive glance over his shoulder at the barrister, still rehearsing; "I'm gallussed! It didn't oughter be allowed out in the public streets."

Mr Jarker felt his nerves so disarranged in consequence of low diet, that after making his way out of the Inn, across Carey-street, and into the rags of the legal cloak, that is to say into Bennett's-rents, he resolved to take advantage of there being a "public" at either end of the rents, and regardless of the whooping children who dashed by him, he went in and had "three-ha'porth" of the celebrated cream gin advertised outside upon a blue board with golden legend. After which enricher of his milk of human kindness, Mr Jarker wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as he passed through the swinging doors, hugged his cage against his ribs, muttered, "Didn't oughter be allowed in the public streets," and then forcing a way through a noisy tribe of children, he paused at Number 27 in the Rents – a dismal-looking old house, worse perhaps by broad daylight than in the early dawn, when some of its foulness had remained concealed. It had been a mansion once, in the days of the Jameses probably, when fresh

air was a more abundant commodity in the City, and was not all used up long before it could penetrate so narrow a thoroughfare.

Mr Jarker slowly tramped up flight after flight of stairs till he came to the attic-floor, when, without removing his hands from his pockets, he kicked open the badly-hung door, and entered the bare room.

"O, you're here agen, are yer?" he said sulkily to a dark, well-dressed woman, in black silk and fashionable bonnet, strangely out of place in the wretched room, whose other occupant was pale-faced, weary-looking Mrs Jarker, whose crimply white hands betokened a very late acquaintanceship with the washtub by the steamy window. "O, you're here agen, are yer?" said Mr Jarker.

"Yes, Bill," said Mrs Jarker timidly, every word she spoke seeming to flinch and dart out of reach of hearing almost before it was uttered. "Yes, Bill, she's come again, and we've been talking it over – and – and – and – if you wouldn't mind, Bill, I'd – "

"How much?" growled Mr Jarker.

"Five shillings," said his wife timidly; "five shillings a-week."

"'Tain't enough," said Mr Jarker; "it's worth six. Look at the trouble."

Mrs Jarker looked from her husband to the stranger and back again, and was about to speak, when her lord exclaimed roughly, "Shut Up!"

The visitor's eyes flashed for a moment, and then she glanced

hastily round the room, her gaze resting for a moment upon the ruffianly, bull-dog face of Jarker, and she hesitated; but another glance at the timid, gentle countenance of his wife seemed to reassure her, and she said hoarsely, with her look fixed upon the flinching woman, "I'll give you six."

"And if 'tain't paid up reg'lar, I'm blest if I sha'n't chuck it outer winder, or somethin'; so look out," said Mr Jarker.

The visitor's lips quivered, but, still gazing fixedly upon the woman, she said in the same hoarse voice: "I shall bring the money once a-week."

"In advance, yer know," growled Mr Jarker.

"Yes, yes; only be kind to it," exclaimed the visitor with something like a sob, but without removing her eyes.

"O, ah! in course we will. We're the right sort here, ain't we, Poll?" growled Mr Jarker.

"Yes, Bill," said his wife in a husky whisper.

"And now," said Mr Bill Jarker, with what was meant for a pleasant smile, but which consisted of the closing of his eyes, and the display of his teeth, – "and now as we've made it all snug, you'll stand somethin'; that's what you'll do, ain't it now?"

Still without removing her eyes from the pale-faced woman before her, the visitor drew a shilling from a little bead-purse, and laid it upon the table, her lips now moving as if trying to form words for Mrs Jarker to understand.

"Go away now, Bill," whispered she to her husband.

"What for?" growled Bill, untying the knots of his

handkerchief with his teeth, to set his cage at liberty, and nearly frightening the soul out of the tiny, fluttering, panting body contained therein. Then, by way of reply to a whisper, he sullenly took the shilling from the table, bit it, spat upon it, and spun it up, before depositing it in his pocket; made his way to the back part of the attic, where birdcages and the paraphernalia of his profession lay thick; ascended a ladder to a trap in the ceiling, and then, only his legs visible as he stood upon one of the top rounds, Mr Jarker, with half his body above the tiles, busied himself amongst his pigeons, and started them for a flight over the houses.

The next moment, after a hurried glance at the ceiling, where the light streamed down past the ruffian's legs, the visitor's face was seen to work, and, rising from her seat, she went down upon her knees before poor Mrs Jarker, kissing her work-worn hands, and bathing them with the tears that streamed from her eyes.

"God – God bless you!" she whispered passionately. "O, be kind to it!"

But Mrs Jarker could not answer for something swelling in her throat; and the next minute she too was weeping, with her hand resting upon her visitor's shoulder.

This paroxysm of tears seemed to have its effect upon the visitor, for, forcing back her own emotion, she appeared more at ease within herself, as, gazing once more into the pale, worn, common face of the birdcatcher's wife, she kissed her in so loving and sisterly a way, that the tears flowed faster from Mrs

Jarker's eyes. And yet, knowing full well who was her visitor, Mrs Jarker did not shudder, but rose from her choir, glanced timorously at the open trap, and then drew the stranger towards a box – a common deal-box, with the blue-stained paper that had once covered it hanging here and there in rags. She went upon her knees now, and raised the creaking lid, when an impatient movement of the feet upon the ladder made her start up hastily, and close the lid again. But a long, loud whistling from above showed her that Mr Jarker was still busy with his birds; so once more raising the lid, the poor creature thrust her hand down to a well-known spot beneath the few rags of clothes the box contained, and brought out a pair of little, stained red boots, which she pressed passionately to her lips, the tears gushing from her eyes the while, and a broken hysterical wail burst from her overladen breast. But it was checked instantly, for Jarker's feet scraped on the ladder, and the boots were hidden beneath the woman's apron; then the whistling was heard again, and the little boots were brought forth once more.

A pair of tiny red boots, the only relic she had of something that was not – something that she had once warmed within her breast – the breast before now bruised and blackened by a ruffian hand, but beneath which was the same warm, God-implanted love for her offspring that glows in the bosom of the noblest of her sex.

For a moment or two the younger woman gazed in the other's eyes with a soft, tender, pitying look – a look in this case of

true sympathy; and the hand of the lost rested lovingly upon Mrs Jarker's breast as she whispered softly: "How old was it?"

"Only a twelvemonth," was the reply, followed by a moan. "But perhaps it was best – perhaps it was best."

The visitor's hand still rested upon the other's breast, and she was about to speak, when an impatient shuffle startled both, for it seemed that Mr Jarker was about to descend; but he came not. And now a look of ineffable sweetness and content came over the well-moulded features of the visitor. She was satisfied now respecting the step she was about to take; for Mrs Jarker's heart had been laid open to her. A true chord of sympathy existed between them, and she could feel that her little one would be taken to a motherly breast, and protected – protected; but who, she asked herself, would injure one so tender and frail?

But there was no time for further communion between these motherly hearts, for a loud rasp on the ladder told that Mr Jarker was descending, and the visitor prepared to leave.

"You've been a-pipin' again," growled Mr Jarker to his wife, who had hastily concealed the boots – "pipin' about that 'ere kid as has gone; and a good thing too. Wot's the good when here's another a-coming?" and he looked menacingly at the shivering woman. "I say," he continued to the visitor, who now stood at the door, "you'll pay up reg'lar, and in advance!"

"Yes, yes!" she said hoarsely, almost fiercely, as she turned to him with a steady contemptuous look, which made the great brute shuffle about uneasily – "yes, yes, so long as I live;" and

the next moment the door closed upon her retreating form.

"Long as you live? Yes; I should just think you will, or else there'll precious soon be a kid found at somebody's door, with the perlice, cuss 'em, taking the brat to the workus. – And don't you pipe no more," he snarled to the trembling woman, who slowly retreated to the washtub. "A taking of it to the workus, cuss 'em," muttered Mr Jarker again, removing his fur cap and passing his hand over his cropped head, as if the name of the police, and their probable future duty, had reminded him of former injuries. "Now then, you!" he shouted, as if calling his dog, and he threw the shilling upon the table – "d'yer hear?"

"Yes, Bill," said the woman meekly, and hastily passing her hands over her dull red eyes before she turned to him the face from which all that was attractive had long since fled.

"Tripe!" said Mr Jarker.

"Yes, Bill," said his wife.

"Pipe and screw," growled Mr Jarker.

"Yes, Bill," said the woman, hurriedly tying on a miserable bonnet.

"And here, you!"

"I wasn't going, Bill," said the woman meekly.

"Who said you was?" growled the ruffian; "don't you be so sharp, now, then. Now, where's that money?"

"What money, Bill?"

The next moment the ruffian had seized her by the front of her dress and dragged her to him, so that she went down upon

her knees. “Don’t you try to put none of your games on me. What did she give you when I was out of sight?” And he put his black face down close to hers, as, half from fear, half from bitterness, her lower lip worked as she tried to keep back the tears, and to answer; but no words would come.

“D’yer hear? What did she give yer?”

“Nothing, Bill,” whispered the woman.

He looked at her fiercely; but though faded and lack-lustre, her eyes blenched not, but gave him back the same true steady look that had always shone for him since – young, ignorant, ill-taught, weak – she had believed he cared for her, and she could be happy with him: not the first of Eve’s daughters that has made the same mistake.

“Get up!” snarled Jarker, loosing his hold; and his wife rose hastily without a word.

“Pint of porter, with half-a-quartern of gin in it.”

“Yes, Bill,” she whispered, and drew on a washed-out shawl.

“And no fiddling, you know; put all the gin in.”

“Yes, Bill,” said the woman, hastily taking the shilling, and descending the creaking stairs to procure her lord’s refreshments; tripe stewed, and gin and beer, being special weaknesses of his when in funds.

“Don’t let her forget to bring some inguns, that’s all,” he muttered as he listened to the retreating steps. He then crushed down the fire with the heel of his heavy boot, and, putting his hand in his waistcoat-pocket, his fingers came in contact with

two or three scraps of burnt match, which he took out, looked at thoughtfully, and then burned. “She must have been arter the dawg,” he muttered, and walking to one of the lattice-windows, he opened it and framed himself as he leaned out with his arms resting upon the rotten sill, a splinter of which he picked off to chew. Then he gazed steadfastly across the court at the opposite window, which was hung round with birdcages, whose occupants twittered sweetly, while one, a lark, seemed to fill the court with his joyous song.

This reminded Mr Jarker of his own birds, and, stepping back growling, he looked to see if the little cages hung over his nets all contained water, which they did.

“And a blessed good job for her as they do!” he muttered on finding that his wife had performed this duty. Then walking again towards the front he watched the opposite window, where he could see a pale, sallow face eagerly looking at the birds, while from behind came the sharp sound as of the lash of a whip striking the floor, followed by the shrill yelp of a dog.

Mr Jarker stood thoughtfully watching and listening, as if in doubt upon some particular subject; and as he watched he pulled out that ugly clasp-knife of his that he had opened a short time before in the cellar, and now opening and closing it again, his brow lowered – that is, a trifle more than usual. But he seemed to grow easier in his mind, for he shut the knife with a snap, and thrust it into his pocket; and now he appeared to be moved by that spirit which prompts so many people who can hardly keep

themselves to have dumb animals about their homes, probably for the reason that the dumb brutes are faithful, and friends are few – who knows?

"I think I shall have a dawg," said Mr Jarker to himself, as a louder yelp than usual rang across the court; when he shut the window, and went and stood gazing into the fire once more, till he heard the returning step of his wife, when he roused himself:

"Yes," said Mr Jarker half-aloud; "I'll have a bull-pup."

Volume One – Chapter Six.
The Sorrows of Septimus Hardon

With a pleasant smile upon his countenance, and a bunch of watercresses in his hand, Septimus Hardon hummed loudly, like some jocular bee, as he entered his rooms one day, when he ceased, for there was a visitor gazing with sympathising eyes upon the flush-cheeked child lying upon Mrs Hardon's arm.

"I think you had better have advice, Mrs Hardon," said the visitor, the Rev. Arthur Sterne, the calm, earnest, quiet-looking curate of the neighbouring church.

Lucy Grey, now budding into womanhood, was seated upon the floor by the couch, with a little boy in her lap, and letting the hands of the child on her mother's arm stray amongst the glossy tresses of her hair.

"Advice? What? doctor?" said Septimus, gazing in his wife's anxious face; "is Letty really ill, then?" and then in a bewildered way he began rubbing his hands together as if washing them in emptiness, and afterwards drying them upon nothing.

"Let me send in a doctor," said Mr Sterne kindly, as he took his hat to leave; "there are symptoms of fever, I think. Don't let it get too firm a hold before you have advice."

"Thank you, thank you; do send him, please," said Septimus helplessly. "But – " He was about to alter his request, for just then

his hand came in contact with the light leather purse in his pocket, but the curate had hurriedly left the room. Then taking his step-child's place by the sofa the father parted the golden hair upon the sick girl's forehead, and anxiously questioned Mrs Septimus respecting the illness.

As the night came on the little one grew wild and restless, and what the mother had taken to be but a slight childish ailment, began to assume a form that added anxiety where it was hardly needed. The doctor had been, and spoken Seriously, and the medicine he had sent had been administered; but the fever seemed to increase, for the child grew worse, starting from fitful sleeps, and calling for sister Lucy to take something away from her. Septimus looked weakly from face to face for comfort, and then wandered about the room, wringing his hands and trying to think this new trouble some horrible dream.

And so days passed – days of trouble and anxiety – during which Mrs Septimus forgot her own ailments, and watched and nursed in turn with Lucy. The doctor had talked as so many doctors will talk, in an indefinite strain, which left the anxious parents in a state of doubt and bewilderment, though it never occurred to Septimus Hardon that so great an affliction could fall upon him, as that he should lose his little one.

About a week after the seizure, Mrs Septimus was watching by the child, who, after partaking eagerly of some tea, had apparently dropped off to sleep.

"Take little Tom down into the office," whispered Mrs

Hardon, "perhaps she will sleep awhile if we keep her quiet."

So Septimus Hardon, looking dazed and worn with mental anxiety, took his boy in his arms, and Lucy being asleep after watching nearly all night, he left Mrs Septimus with the sick child, and carried the little fellow down into the dusty, unused office, where, taking advantage of his father's abstraction, the child proceeded to make a heap of type upon the floor, thoroughly covering himself with the black dust, and even going so far as to try the flavour of some of the pieces of metal.

At last the little one began to grow tired, and tried to gain the attention of its father – no light task, for with his face buried in his hands he was seated at his desk trying to see his way clearly through the future – a task so many of us attempt, and some even fancy we have achieved, but only to find the falseness of our hopes when the days we looked forward to have come upon us.

But the child was at last successful, and as Septimus raised his head from the desk, he became aware of the presence of the old man of a few days before, and apparently as far from prosperity as ever.

"Nothing doing; no work," said Septimus.

"Any little job will do, sir," said the old man. "Just come to get out of debt, that's all. What's it to be, sir?"

"Another time," said Septimus. "I've – "

A loud cry from above cut short his words, and darting to the door, forgetting his customary indecision, he bounded up the stairs, while, finding himself left with a stranger, the little fellow

burst into a dismal wail.

"O, Sep, Sep, Sep!" cried his wife, throwing herself into his arms, "is it always to be sorrow; is there always to be a black cloud over our lives?" then tearing herself away she frantically caught the child from Lucy, who, pale and frightened, sat nursing.

"Run, run, Lucy!" cried Septimus hoarsely as he caught a glimpse of his blue-eyed darling's face; "the doctor, quick!" and then, as the frightened girl ran from the room, he threw himself upon his knees beside his sobbing wife, praying that they might be spared this new sorrow. But before the doctor could reach Carey-street the agonised couple had seen the little weary head cease its restless tossings from side to side, the blue eyes unclose, dilate, and gaze wildly, as if at some wondrous vision; then a plaintive shuddering sigh passed from the pale lips, and Septimus Hardon and his wife were alone, though they knew it not.

The Rev. Arthur Sterne was at the door as Lucy returned, overtaken by the doctor's brougham at the same moment; but to the agony of all the man of medicine gave one glance at the little form in its mother's lap, shook his head, and left the room on tiptoe.

"O, sir, Mr Sterne," cried Lucy, turning with quivering lips and streaming eyes to the clergyman, "tell me, tell me," she sobbed, clasping one of his hands in hers; "tell me – is it, is it death?"

There was silence in the room for a few moments, and then placing his disengaged hand upon the fair head of the weeping

girl, the curate, in low reverent tones, but loud enough to thrill the hearts of the living, said, "No, it is life – the life eternal!"

And now, amidst the bitter sobs of those who mourned, the curate stepped softly from the room, and left the house with bended head. Then there was silence, till a step was heard upon the stairs, which stopped by the partly-closed door, where stood the old compositor with little Tom asleep in his arms, the bright, soft, golden locks mingling like dashes of sunshine with the old man's ragged, grizzly whiskers. For a few moments the old printer stood gazing into the room, when, waking to the consciousness of the affliction that had befallen its inmates, he turned, and with halting step descended to the office.

At last the recollection of the living came to the stricken mother's heart, and wildly sobbing as she clasped Lucy in her arms, she asked for her boy.

Half-stunned with this new shock, Septimus Hardon staggered down to where he had left the child, having till his wife spoke forgotten its very existence; but when he reached the office, stricken as he was, he could not but stop to gaze at the group before him. Seated upon a low stool, beneath the dingy skylight of the back-office, where the light that filtered through the foul panes looked dim and gloomy, was the old man with the child in his lap, gazing, too, intently down at the little fair face which so wonderingly looked up into his own – not fearfully, but with a puzzled expression, as if some problem were there that the little brain could not solve; while the biscuit the tiny fist held

was hardly touched, but told its own tale of how the old man had carried the child to the nearest baker's for its purchase. The printer's back was towards Septimus as he stood in the doorway, and as he listened the old man was apostrophising the child:

"Why, God bless your little innocent face, this is me, old Matt – Matthew Space – old Quad, as they call me; a battered, snuff-taking, drinking old scamp; and here have I been these two hours drinking innocence, and feeling my heart swell till it cracked and the scales fell off. Why – save and bless his little heart, sir!" he cried, for the child saw its father and sprang up – "see how good he is! Work's slack, sir; let him stop, for it seems to do one good – it does indeed, sir. Why, how rich you must be!"

Septimus Hardon thought mournfully of the treasure he had just lost, and, taking the child, he hurriedly bore it to its mother, telling the old man to wait.

Matthew Space, compositor, waited until the owner of the office came down, when, friendless as he was, Septimus Hardon was glad to turn even to this rough old waif of the streets in his helplessness.

"Why, I wouldn't do that, sir," said the old man, after listening for some time in silence; "you may want it to-morrow."

"But I want money to-day," cried Septimus fiercely. "Will you give me money? will the world outside? will anybody here in this city of wealth trust me the money to bury my child? Would you have me go to the parish?" He stopped, and the animation that had flashed into his face began to fade again, to leave it dull and

despairing.

"Why, as to the first, sir," said the old man, "I would, upon my soul, if I had it, – I would indeed; but as to the people outside – " and he began to shake his head grimly. "Poor men have no friends, sir – as a rule, you know – as a rule."

"None!" said Septimus bitterly; "none!"

"But it would be a pity," said the old man; "such a new, well-cut letter too; and you'll get next to nothing for it. Gave 'most half-a-crown a pound for it, I dessay?"

Septimus nodded.

"Thought so, sir, and – well, if you must, sir, I'll help you all the same, and gladly – only too gladly; but I don't like to see it pawned or sold. You helped me, sir, when it was harder with me than ever it was in my life before, sir; and damme, sir, I'll sell my shirt, sir, to help you, if it will do any good. In the morning, then, sir, I'll be here with a barrow."

"A barrow?" said Septimus.

"Yes; you know, type's heavy stuff."

"Matthew Space," said the snuffly old fellow, screwing his face up as if with disgust, when he stood once more in Carey-street, "Matthew Space, follower of the profession of noble Caxton, as a rule, sir, I respect you. I don't despise you for your poverty, or your seedy coat, for you are a man of parts and education; but at the present moment, sir, I'm disgusted with you. You have been drinking innocence from the tiny prattling lips of that little child – God bless it!" he cried earnestly, dashing a

maundering tear from one eye – "God bless it! a child like that would have made another man of me; and now that poor fellow has lost one like it. But there, sir, I'm disgusted with your ways: a man does what nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand wouldn't do – lends you almost his last shilling – and now, sir, that an opportunity offers of helping him in his trouble, you make empty professions, false promises, and offer to sell your shirt, you humbug, you – to sell your shirt, sir, when you haven't got a shirt in the world!"

"That's true enough," said the old man, after walking a little way, "true, if it ain't decent; but it's a kind of poverty that buttons will always conceal, which they won't if it's a coat; while if there is anything that looks beggarly, it's the want of boots. I'd sooner be without a hat any day in the week. But you're taking fresh copy, Matt Space, before you've finished the old, and leaving out your points."

The old man cocked his hat very fiercely over the left ear, stuck his hands into his coat-tail pockets, and walked on for some distance, muttering, "Poor fellow – good sort – trump." All at once he stopped short before a lamp-post, drew his hands from his pockets, and took a pinch of snuff; he then slapped the cold iron upon the shoulder, and, as if addressing the post confidentially, he exclaimed:

"His name's Hardon, sir; but he isn't a hard un. He's as soft as butter, sir, easy as a glove, sir, deep as a halfpenny plate. You might turn him inside out like a stocking. He'd never get on here,

he's too honest. Business! why, he's about as business-like as – as – as – well, sir, as I am. He'd never any business to be in business; but after all, what's the good of being a business man, and sharp, and knowing, and deep, if it's to be hammering on, beating out money day after day to make a hard case for a man's heart, so as there ain't room for a kind thought to get in, or a gentle word to come out?"

Old Matt stuck his hat a little more on one side, and giving the post a parting slap, he left the freshly-lit light, quivering and winking down at him as he gave it a nod, and then he crossed the road diagonally to the next post, which he favoured as the last.

"Damme, sir," he cried, "don't tell me. I ought to know what the world is, and I think I do. That man's a trump, sir, if I know anything of character. Soft? well, suppose he is. Don't tell me: men were never made to be sharp-edged tools, chiselling and cutting one another as hard as ever they can, while the keenest ones chisel the most. They weren't meant for it; but that's what they are. And what's worse, they do so much under the cloak of religion, and snuffle and cant, and tell you to do the same. Things are all wrong, sir, all wrong; and I'm wrong, and according to some people, I'm I don't know what; but there, sir; there; I've done."

Old Matt walked to another post, to prove he had not done, and began again; but someone coming along the pavement, he shuffled off to the public-house he frequented in Bell-yard, where he discoursed for long enough upon human nature in

general, to the great delight of his audience, till his pint of porter was finished, when he hurried off through the wet streets to his lodging.

Volume One – Chapter Seven.
The Doctor and his Dame

"A tom-cat, smooth-coated, purring rascal," said old Octavius when he heard the news. "*Doctor* Hardon, indeed; *doctor*, bah!" And many of the townspeople of Somesham, though they did not use Octavius Hardon's language, agreed with him in spirit, and sneered at the new doctor's visit to Scotland, and the paragraph that by some means found its way into the paper, congratulating the people on the acquisition to their town of a physician. Of course the doctor himself did not know of its existence until it was pointed out to him at one of the public meetings, when he looked perfectly astonished, and declared that it was a matter that he meant to have kept a profound secret from everybody. However, as it was made so public, and in such a manner, of course he felt himself bound to take steps to inform his friends and patients that the fact of his being a physician should make no difference, that he looked upon the degree merely in the light of an honour; and hoped for many years to come to be the simple country apothecary, in whose humble skill his fellow-townsmen would have confidence. Guinea-fees and prescriptions had never been in his thoughts, the honour having been completely thrust upon him, so he said, for he knew that he could command a practice as a country apothecary while he would have starved as

a physician. For he had practised for many years in Somesham, while he was greatly annoyed that his brother Octavius would reside there, as the doctor told his lady, to quarrel with him and lower him in the eyes of the people. Doctor Hardon had stood at many sick-beds in the district; spoken smooth nothings respecting the various increases in families which took place beneath his watchful eyes; when in every case, whatever the sex, the child was sure to be the finest he had ever seen in the whole course of his career as a medical practitioner. But the doctor had also worn a great many pairs of black-kid gloves, and many a long-flowing silk scarf upon those other occasions – at those stopping-places of the journey of life; and ill-natured persons had been known to declare that one of Mrs Hardon's dresses had been composed of these long black-silk strips sewn together. But then people will be ill-natured.

"Thomas Hardon, Esq, MD," sat at his breakfast-table in his dressing-gown, but his black frock-coat lay upon a chair at his side, ready brushed, and the rest of his costume was of the correct doctorial black. He did not even allow himself to sit down in slippers, but wore boots of the most lustrous black until bedtime. Of an imposing presence, with fine grey hair, a good complexion, sufficiently stout, he was the very acmé of a quiet family doctor; and even if he was not so skilful as he might have been, there was that in his quiet ease and assumption which often gave confidence, and insured faith in trembling patients – matters which had before now worked wonders when the doctor's

medicine alone would have failed. The world is much given to taking people at their own value, and undoubtedly by those who merely looked at the surface, a much higher price would have been set upon the doctor in that imposing suit of black, and that stiffest of stiff white neckcloths, than upon friend Matthew Space in his black shabbiness. But then, of course, the doctor's double gold eyeglass, gold-chain, studs, diamond ring, and the shape of his repeater seen through the soft black kerseymere waistcoat, added weight in people's estimation, without taking into consideration that air of profundity, and shake of the noble grey head, which implied so much at so little expense of thought. People at Somesham shook their heads with the doctor, and declared him to be a man of worth; while other people there were who shook their heads with his brother Octavius, and considered him a sham.

But people joined in speaking well of his wife – downright, blunt, plain-spoken Mrs Hardon – who now sat, pale-faced and anxious, opposite to her husband, supplying his wants, while she waited for an answer to her last question, her hand slightly trembling as it held a letter the doctor had lately passed to her.

"You will let me answer this, Tom, won't you?" she said gently, with all the motherly woman in her tones, and the hard, business, doctor's wife, who often made up his medicines, and even prescribed in simple cases in his absence, gone. "You will let me answer this, Tom?"

The doctor kept his paper before his face, and read on without

condescending to reply.

"Tom," she repeated, leaning towards him, "Tom, be tender and gentle now, Tom; and – "

Mrs Hardon stopped; for a maid had entered the room with a note, which she handed to Mrs Hardon.

"Confound you!" hissed the doctor as soon as the door was closed; and then, instead of the mild, beaming doctorial countenance, there was his brother's angry face scowling on his wife – "Confound you! how many times have I told you not to 'Tom' me before the servants? No, no, no! if you will have an answer," he shouted; "let her starve – let her die – let her jump off one of the bridges if she likes; she left me, and she may suffer for it. She sha'n't come back here to disgrace me in my profession."

Mrs Hardon was not at all afraid of her husband, and in many of their little matrimonial differences she had been known to come off the better. The blood rose to her cheeks, and she was about to answer angrily, but she checked herself, and, crossing over, laid her hand upon her husband's shoulder.

"Tom!" she whispered.

"Damn! I tell you I won't have it!" roared the doctor.

"Hush!" said Mrs Hardon sternly, but with a touch of softness in her voice. "You know I was ill, Tom, when I came back from town last week."

"Well?" said the doctor, shuffling impatiently in his seat.

"I did not tell you the reason, Tom."

"Well, what of that?" said the doctor savagely.

"O, Tom!" she said, her voice breaking as she sank at his feet, "I saw her; I met her. She passed me as I was going to my cab, wild-eyed, pale, worn-looking; and O, Tom, if you had seen her too – seen her as I saw her then, when I held out my arms to her and she fled away shamefaced before me – you would have felt, as I did, as I do now, something tugging at your heartstrings, and whispering to you that it was your child that you did not use well, and telling you that if you had done your duty by her she would never have gone to Octavius, and then fled with that base villain. Tom," she continued softly, "I feel all this. We are getting old, Tom, and what are we to say at the last hour, what forgiveness can we ask for, if our own child is driven from us? She hurried from me then; but see now how it has made her write. Look at the address here; where is it? some horrible part of – O, Tom!"

The exclamation was hardly shrieked from Mrs Hardon's lips before the letter the doctor had snatched from her hand was blazing upon the fire, he fiercely dragging off his dressing-gown, and preparing to put on his black coat; while, the softness gone from her face, Mrs Hardon stood before him frowning and hard; but far from noticing her husband's acts, she was gazing introspectively, and trying to recall the address she had so lately read; an address which the more she tried to bring back, the more it seemed to glide from her mind; first a number, then a word, then the whole, and it was gone.

The doctor pulled on his coat by snatches, ejaculated, and went through many of the evolutions favoured by persons who wish

to impress others with the fact that they are in a tempestuous passion; but he had resisted the advances made by his wife when she had thrown off the mask that years of worldliness had fixed there, and now she was ready to engage him with his own weapons. As to his real or simulated anger, she valued it not in the least, holding it in the most profound contempt, while a stranger would hardly have believed her to be the same woman who a few minutes before had kneeled at the doctor's feet.

"I want some money before you go out," said Mrs Hardon coldly; and the doctor started with surprise at the change the conversation had taken. "I want some money," said Mrs Hardon in a louder key.

"How much?" said the doctor, calming down as his wife seemed disposed to take the upper hand.

"Twenty-five – thirty pounds," said Mrs Hardon.

"What for?" said the doctor.

"What for?" said Mrs Hardon fiercely. "Not to send away – not for *that*, but for the tradespeople's bills; since you are so proud of your reputation – your professional reputation – have them cleared off. Richards has sent twice, and threatens proceedings;" and she held out the note the maid had brought in; "and now I insist upon knowing how you stand. I will not be kept here in the dark over these speculations. I know matters are going wrong; and do you suppose that I will sit by like a child and see ruin come upon my home; I who was always trusted to keep your books and purse, until you became a physician? There is something wrong,

Thomas Hardon, or there would not always be this pinching and holding back of every sovereign. You drive me from your side – me, the wife of five-and-thirty years – when I would be the loving woman. Now, then, I will be the firm woman of the world, and be satisfied upon these points at issue. You had better write me a cheque at once; for I will not be disgraced by the tradespeople, since we are to stand so upon our dignity."

Doctor Hardon looked viciously at his wife, spoiling his generally placid countenance to a degree that, had one of his best patients seen him then, it would have been a serious loss to the doctor and a gain to the rival practitioner; but he made no movement towards drawing the cheque for which Mrs Hardon stood waiting, till, seeing that nothing was to be gained, she left the room in anger; but the next minute she had returned, to once more lay her hand gently upon the doctor's arm:

"Have you a heart, Tom?" she whispered. "Is our old age to be an old age of regret? Think of Octavius and his son; look at his desolate, wretched life, and don't let ours be quite the same."

Mrs Hardon had had a hard battle with self, and crushed down the angry feelings that had been fighting for exit; for there was the thought of her child in her heart – maternity asserting itself and thrusting aside in its greatness all that was petty and contemptible; but as she stood there appealing to the doctor the struggle grew harder. Obstinate, bitter, cruel, the doctor masked all beneath his cold, calm, professional aspect, treating the weeping woman with a cutting indifference that roused her

indignation thoroughly at last; and to conceal her anger she hurried from the room, but this time not to return.

The doctor may have had a heart, but it was thoroughly unmoved by all that his wife had said; in fact the appeal had come at a wrong time, since the same post which brought the letter he had passed over to Mrs Hardon had given him other letters whose contents he so thoroughly knew that he had not even opened them, but, glancing at their directions, thrust them hastily into his pocket, where they acted as so much fuel to feed the fire of his wrath. There was something so unmistakable in the particularly-distinct handwriting upon the envelopes – something so very blue about the paper – that, expecting unpleasant communications, the doctor detected them at a glance, and mentally he went over the contents.

The fact was the doctor was short of cash, and that through more than one unfortunate speculation in which he had embarked. Like a great many more men of moderate income, he had been bitten with the desire to increase it, though the bite came in the first instance from his wife, who scolded him fiercely when, after the MD honour had been thrust upon him, he gave up the union practice, which entailed the loss of the regular salary of one hundred pounds per annum. The doctor said that it was not becoming for a physician to be the medical attendant of the parish; and Mrs Hardon, who was then in a worldly, everyday phase, declared that it was "all fiddlesticks' ends," when there was his cheque regularly at certain times, while

the greater part of the work could be done by the assistant, who would do very well for the poor people. It was a sin and a shame, she declared, though how connected with fiddlesticks' ends was best known to herself. There was, however, something relating to the musical science in the matter, for Mrs Doctor Hardon kept harping upon the same string until the doctor snapped it by furiously threatening her if another word was said about it – threats which Mrs Hardon noticed so much that she certainly held her tongue; and she held her hand too, and tried to annoy the doctor by keeping a bad table, which she said so great a loss every year necessitated. Poor woman! she little knew that the time would come when such economy would be forced upon her. What, she asked the doctor, was honour without money? What was the use of her being a physician's wife if they had nothing to support it with? And, then, too for him to be such an ass – the doctor started and puffed out his cheeks at this – "Yes, ass," said Mrs Hardon, "as to play into your adversary's hand like that, when he was on the verge of ruin, as everybody said, and could not have kept on another six months; for you to throw the union practice and a hundred a-year into his lap, and supply him with the material for carrying on the war!"

Mrs Doctor Hardon spoke of the rival practitioner, a poor, gentlemanly man, who had set up some years before in the dusty town of Somesham, and had been fighting ever since with difficulties; for, as in all small country towns in this land of liberty, every new-comer was looked upon as an intruder – a

foreigner – and one who will probably interfere with the fine old conservative notions of the place. They don't want him, and they won't have him if they can help it. He is clever, perhaps; but they don't want clever people, and they would prefer being half-killed by the old practitioner to being cured by the new. Trade or profession, it is just the same; and perhaps the acts of the town are only the acts of the country in miniature. Hospitality we have in plenty, and our share of the virtues, no doubt; but truly we English have most strongly in us the propensity for turning our backs upon those who are trying to fight their way on, until they can manage to do without help, when we turn round, smiling with the features that frowned before, pat the successful man upon the back, and say, "Well done!"

Mr Brande, "the new man," as he was called, had found all this, and had been ready to despair again and again through the many years he had been trying to make a practice; but now the turning-point had come in the honours of Thomas Hardon, Esq, MD; not that he had reaped much present advantage, and it was doubtful if he would have had the practice at all if Doctor Hardon had not had immediate want for a hundred and fifty pounds, and, trusting to Mr Brande's honour as a gentleman, offered to throw up the parish work on condition of receiving that sum, which Mr Brande gave him in bills, and, what was more, screwed, economised, and met them as they fell due. But Mrs Doctor Hardon did not know this, nor yet the extent of the liabilities her lord had incurred; while the deeper he sunk in that black, clinging

mire of debt, the more reticent he grew.

Volume One – Chapter Eight.
Mr Pawley's Performance

"Such a beautiful, well-cut letter too!" said old Matt Space, as he stood looking at the empty type-rack from whence the cases had been taken to furnish money for Septimus Hardon's present expenses. "In such good order too. Puts me in mind of being so low down that I had to sell my own stick. Fellow always seems so badly off when he gets selling his tools."

A tap at the door, following the sound of wheels, interrupted the old man's soliloquy, and going to the door he admitted the undertaker, who had just arrived with his shabby Shillibeer hearse and mourning-coach in one, with which he performed the economic funerals so frequent in his district.

"Here you are, then," said old Matt, grimly surveying the new-comer.

"Yes, here we are," said the undertaker, in a subdued, melancholy tone; and then he drew out a pocket-handkerchief and wiped his eye, as if to remove a tear – in fact, he did remove a tear – though not sorrow-shed, for Mr Pawley was in very good spirits just then; but he had an eye afflicted with a watery weakness which necessitated the constant application of a handkerchief, and this had passed with a certain class of people for the manifestation of sorrow for their griefs. Some said that

this eye had been a little fortune to him. Perhaps it had, but doubtless the crowded courts clustering round Lincoln's-inn had done more to keep up the incessant "rat-tat-tat-tat" heard in his shop, a sound as if grim Death were tapping with those bony fingers of his at the door.

"Such a feeling man!" said Mrs Sims, who was always at home upon such occasions as this, and had now come to mind Septimus Hardon's boy, and help; "if she could be of service leastways, for it's few berrins take place about here, mom, that they don't send for me," she said with a sniff, and the corner of her apron to her eye.

"Here you are, then," said old Matt to the undertaker.

"Yes, here we are," said Mr Pawley; "but you ain't a-going, are you?"

"Well, who said I was?" said Matt gruffly. "You're a-going, ain't you? and that's enough for you."

Mr Pawley took so much pride in his funerals being properly performed, that going himself did not seem enough for him, and he continued to gaze doubtfully over a very uncomfortable white cravat, one of which the bow was supposed to be tied behind, giving him a good deal the aspect of a man who had been decapitated, and then had his head secured in its place by a bandage.

But old Matt did not give the undertaker an opportunity for a long inspection of his shabby black clothes, for having announced the grim functionary, that gentleman went up the creaking stairs

upon the points of his toes to proceed with the duties he had in hand; while, as old Matt stood in the passage watching his long black body it seemed to him that the stairs cracked and creaked mournfully, as if resenting the feet laid upon them, in anticipation of a heavier descent.

But there was to be no heavy load for them to bear this time, for it was but a little coffin – a little white coffin that had been gazed into for the last time, where the gentle waxen features seemed to wear a smile, so sad, speaking such a tender farewell in its sweetness, that Lucy Grey sobbed aloud with the parents, until Mrs Sims entered the room, whispered to Septimus, and then they all slowly passed out to give place to Mr Pawley. And then standing in the next room, Mrs Septimus, weak and ailing, almost fainted as she heard the harsh noise of the driver as it slipped first in one and then another of the screws.

But now the last screw had been tightened, the light burden placed in the receptacle, and Mrs Sims, quite a regular aid to Mr Goffer, arranged the scarf upon Septimus Hardon's hat; pinned and tied the hoods and cloaks upon mother and daughter; and then, in a simple but feeling way, wept many a salt tear into her black-alpaca apron, sniffing terribly the while Mr Pawley, satisfied in his mind that the respectability of his performance was not to be damaged by so doubtful a character as the old compositor, stood holding open the door of the carriage with one hand, wiping his eye with the other, and awaiting the mourners' descent.

For this was no grand funeral; there had been no mutes standing with draped staves at the door; there was no squadron of men with scarves and brass-tipped truncheons; no tray of black plumes to be carried in advance; no high-stepping, long-tailed black horses, with velvet housings and tossing heads; nothing to make a funeral imposing and attractive. But there were spectators even for this: inhabitants of Carey-street were stealthily watching from door-steps, or from the corners of windows, as if afraid of intruding upon the mourners' sorrow; a knot of dirty children from Bennett's-rents had collected, many of whom toiled beneath shawl-wrapped burdens of heavy babies almost equal to themselves in bulk; two women stood upon the opposite side with arms wrapped in their aprons; a ticket-porter, in apron and badge, leaned against the nearest lamp-post; the apple-woman at the corner did something unusual, she left her basket, knocked the ashes out of her short black pipe, and then rubbed a tear – a bright, gem-like tear – off her poor old cheek, withered as one of her own pippins, before placing her pipe in her pocket, and leaning with arms akimbo against the railings to see the hearse pass with a little customer of hers, for whom she had always picked out the best lot, and in her simple homely way called down heavenly favour with a hearty "God bless you!" An old law-writer, a man who reckoned life as a long brief in so many folios, old and snuffy, and shabby almost as Matt himself, walked by house and hearse to the office where he worked, pretending to whistle; but no sound came, and he blew his nose in a way that

raised an echo in the silent street as soon as he was a few yards past the place; even the policeman, beating his Berlin gloves together, quietly sent off the children gathered in the way, and posted them at a distance, that they might not annoy the sad party so soon to leave the house.

And now a tall dark woman, carrying a child, appeared upon the scene, and stood with dimmed eye watching till the mourners descended, when, catching sight of Septimus Hardon's bent form, she stepped forward eagerly, but only to shrink back shivering as she clutched her babe to her breast, pressing her lips upon its plump cheek, while an air of wonderment came into the woman's face as the announcement above the door now caught her eye: – "S Hardon, Legal and General Printer."

For there was sorrow in Carey-street that day – sorrow of a novel kind. All the neighbourhood knew why the blinds were down at Hardon's; for all knew the tall graceful girl who led about the two golden-haired children that seemed so out of place in the legal region; all knew that one of these little ones had passed away – that the little flower, sweet and fragrant, so lately blooming in the cold harsh place, and raising its heaven-whispering head amongst them, had been cut down by the cold winds that swept the weary waste. "Our client" had stopped at this oasis in the desert he was crossing, for he had often paused to look up at the golden head at the upper window, gazed at it awhile, and then passed on, refreshed and gladdened in heart. Every dweller in the neighbourhood had had a kind word or look for Lucy's

charges; and there was a sun in those golden tresses, a warm light, that would often melt the icy frost of some old lawyer's countenance, and bring there a smile of pleasure. But a month before, two men were passing Carey-street with Punch, bound westward to the district where there is less constraint and mind-engrossing; and the man who bore the show, following the usage which to him was second nature, looked up at the dirty windows with wandering eye, caught sight of the blue-eyed fairy, looked at her with doubt for an instant, and then pitched his theatre, to the astonishment of his drum-and-pan-pipe "pardner," who would as soon have thought of playing in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey.

"Jest five minutes," whispered his mate, pointing upwards; when, as if by magic, the pipes squeaked, the drum rolled, raising up the wondering ghosts of echoes from amidst the pouncy dust of ages, while the yellowy, torn green baize fell, to conceal the motive power of the puppets; and then for "jest five minutes" "our client" was startled, the parchments in the offices crackled, dust floated from ledges out upon the murky air, and the sanctity of the place was broken by the ribald jokes of our old friend. Then, just as an astonished troop of children came with a rush out of Bennett's-rents, up went the green curtain; there came a friendly nod from one of the men, who placed himself Atlas-like beneath his drum, a broad grin from the other at the child's delight, and then off due west.

And now the change had come; the cold blast that sweeps

down Carey-street had been colder and keener; the fragile flower-stalk was broken; the white coffin was in its place, the mourners in the coach; the door banged gently, for the wood had warped. Mr Pawley had climbed beside his red-nosed driver, and sat wiping his eye; while the poor old broken-kneed black horse ambled and shambled off with its head down, as if ashamed of the false tail that it knew was fastened to the crupper of its harness.

Then the rest, – the sad rite, the solemn words, the swelling hearts aching to leave so sweet a form in so cold and damp a bed, loth to believe that what they had loved could turn to corruption, and then to the dust of the earth. Then back to the shabby carriage, whose driver had refreshed himself with gin, which attacked his nose; while the horse yet twisted an obstinate wisp of hay that hung sideways in his bit, and would not be ground into nutriment. Once more the banging of the door, and Mr Pawley up beside the driver, with his grief still unassuaged; while as the poor beast that drew the carriage shambled back, his load was so little lightened that he knew not the difference.

The house in Carey-street had looked sad and gloomy for days past, for even the lodgers had drawn down their blinds, and ascended the stairs carefully and even stealthily, speaking, too, in whispers; but now the light was freely admitted, and Mrs Sims had blown up a good fire, only stopping to sniff, and drop a tear or two upon the bellows now and then, the last being a domestic implement that she had run home to the Square and fetched for

the occasion. The tea was prepared, and she had made what she called the most of the place, – not that that was much, – ready for the mourners' return; while old Matt was ruining the knees of his trousers by making himself a horse, and crawling up and down the dirty printing-office floor with the little boy upon his back. The rooms looked almost cheerful now, for, save in the returned mourners' hearts, all was over, and the solemn scene, the dark, damp grave, the catching of the breath as the first earth fell, the long last look at the white coffin – all things of the past.

Old Matthew Space was a wise man in his way; and as soon as he thought that there had been time for the changing of habiliments, – that is to say, about a quarter of an hour after Mr Pawley had presented his account, been paid, and taken his departure, offering old Matt sixpence, which he indignantly refused to take, – he put on a bright face, and took the little fellow in his charge upstairs, crowing and chattering with delight at riding upon the old man's shoulders.

"No, thankee, sir," said the old man, in answer to Septimus Hardon's invitation to stay to tea; and as he declined he glanced down at his clothes.

"I did not ask the clothes," said Septimus warmly, "but the man who has shown sympathy in this weary time of trouble; and God knows I did not expect to find friends where I have," muttered the dejected man, who looked ten years older; while at times his eyes wandered in a weary abstracted way about the room, and his hands were wrung together, till Lucy came to his

side and spoke to him, when the lost, helpless look would pass off, and he would brighten up for a few minutes.

"Such a beautiful, well-cut letter, though!" muttered old Matt as he took the chair placed for him by Mrs Sims, when the little fellow forced himself off his mother's lap, and climbed upon the old man's knee.

"You must hold up, mum," whispered Mrs Sims to poor, broken-down, invalid Mrs Septimus. "I know what it all is; for when I lived in the Rents, mum, I lost four; and all within three year."

"*You* did!" said Mrs Septimus, laying a tender hand upon the poor woman's arm.

"O yes!" said Mrs Sims. "It was before I went to mind the house in the Square, and used to wash; but it was sich work, mum! nowhere to dry except a bit of leads, and the strings tied across the room, and the blacks allus a-coming down like a shower, while every drop o' water had to be fetched from right at the bottom of the house. One was obliged to do it, though, for times were very hard just then; but having so much washing ain't good and healthy for children, let alone being stived up so closte. You see, 'm, it's a bad place to live in, them Rents, there's too many in a house, and there's so much wants doing; but then, when you're a bit behind with your rent, you can't grumble, or there's your few bits of sticks taken, and plenty more glad to have your room. But the way the poor little children is snatched off there, mum, 's terrible, though I do sometimes say, as it's a happy

release. Mr Pawley, mum, he 'ave told me that them Rents is as good as an annuity to him; for you see, though it isn't a big place, there's a many families in each house; and where there's families, mum, there's mostly children."

Mrs Septimus sighed bitterly at the last word, while, poor woman, she was too much intent upon her cares to notice the wisdom of the speech.

"But you hold up now, mum, there's a good creetur. I know it's very hard, but then we all has to suffer alike, and you've got to recklect what you owes to that poor dear child there, and young miss, and the master."

As for Septimus Hardon, he was talking in an abstracted way to old Matt, who was discussing business matters, and urging energetic measures in the office; but talking to Septimus Hardon was a difficult matter, and put you much in mind of catching a grazing horse: you held a bait before him, and then gradually edged him up into a corner, when, just as you thought you had him, he was off and away full gallop to another part of the mental field; and so the work had to be done all over again. Old Matt found it so, and after several times over waking to the fact that while he was talking upon one subject Septimus Hardon was thinking upon another, he rose and took his departure.

Volume One – Chapter Nine.
Old Matt on Manners

Old Matt Space came daily to Carey-street in search of a job, and generally made an excuse for seeing little Tom, for whom he had a cake, a biscuit, or some small penny toy, purchased of one of the peripatetic vendors in the street.

"I always like to support honest industry," said the old man; and when in work, and with a few shillings in his pocket, he would take a walk along the busy streets, and perhaps spend a couple of his shillings with the people whose place of business is the edge of the pavement. "Well, suppose I am a fool for doing it, what then?" said Matt one day. "Ain't ninety per cent of the inhabitants of this precious country of ours what you call fools; and if I, in my folly, help twenty or thirty poor folks up a step in getting their bit of a living, where's the harm? Don't tell me," old Matt would say to his fellow-workmen, beginning to unload the pockets which made his coat-tails stick out almost at right angles; "I don't buy the things because I want them, I do it to help them as wants it; and their name, as it says in the Testament, is 'legion.' Now, that's a jumping frog, made of wood, a bit of paint, a bit of string, and a bit of my friend Ike's wax. That's an ingenious toy, that is: who'll have it? whose got a youngster?"

Speaking in a large printing-office, amongst twenty or thirty

men, there was soon a market for the jumping frog; and then the old man drew out a scrap of something soft and flabby, and held it up.

"You wouldn't tell what that is in a hurry," said Matt. "All to encourage industry, you know; that's a big indy-rubber balloon, that is, only I couldn't pocket it, so I made it collapse first; so that's no good to nobody – pitch it away. Here we have – ah, this is an out-and-out toy, this is, only I've broke the stick, and it wants a bit of glue – who'll have a climbing monkey?"

And so the old man would pull out perhaps twenty toys, balls, dolls, gelatine cards, to the infinite amusement of his companions, who laughed on, but without discomposing Matt in the least, who practised his humble philanthropy as long as he had money, and often, in consequence, went without a meal; for saving was an utter impossibility with the old man – a feat, he said, he had often tried to accomplish; but how, he said, could a man keep money in his pocket when he saw others wanting? "It is done," said Matt; "but old as I am, I can't quite see it."

But there had been no toy distributions lately, for old Matt had found times very hard, and even if they had been better, there would have been no more such amusements for the denizens of the offices he worked at, for there was another way for Matt's philanthropical purchases to go, namely, to Carey-street, to Septimus Hardon's little boy, for whose special benefit the old man had made several purchases on credit, which was freely accorded by those to whom he was known; but as to work

at Septimus Hardon's printing-office, there was none for him, further than that of disposing of type and materials at one or another of the brokers', which duties he performed without recompense, grumbling sorely the while at the wretched sums he obtained for the goods.

"You ought to find fault then, sir," he would say to Septimus; "I can't help it; but I'm ashamed, that I am, to think that people will give such a beggarly price. It grieves me, sir, to see the stuff go like that."

But Septimus did not find fault, only smiled feebly; for in this time of his sore distress he had so aged, and grown so helpless and wanting in reliance, that he trusted to the old compositor in almost everything.

"Might rob him right and left, sir," said old Matt to a favourite lamp-post in Carey-street. "He's no business up here at all. I could quarrel with him sometimes for being so simple, if it wasn't that he's such a thorough good sort at bottom. What's to become of them when the things are all gone, goodness knows; for he'll never do what I've done, sir – lived two days upon a large dose of sleep, a penn'orth of snuff, and three back numbers of the *London Journal*."

For troubles now came thickly crowding on Septimus Hardon's horizon. His wife's health failed fast, and the means were wanting to procure her the necessary comforts. But there is always light behind the darkest cloud; and now it was that Lucy, young in years, but a woman in self-reliance, proved a stay

to the family. Ever busily plying her needle, ever cheerful, she was a ray of sunshine in their sad home, shedding her brightness in the darkest hours. And though Septimus Hardon querulously complained of his standing so friendless in the world, there was another who watched anxiously the failing fortunes of the family, and was always ready with counsel and aid – the Reverend Arthur Sterne, who became more constant in his visits as the affairs of Septimus grew darker. Old Matt and he, too, often met, but somehow not without feelings of distrust on either side – distrust perhaps excusable on the side of the clergyman; for the ways of Matthew Space shed no softening lustre upon his outer man.

One day old Matt went into Carey-street to find the broker in possession; for Septimus was far behind with his heavy rent, and the landlord was alarmed at seeing his tenant's worldly possessions shrinking at so rapid a rate; while, when the old man made his way into the sitting-room, he found weary-looking Septimus waiting with aching heart for a reply to the appealing letter he had sent to his father.

Old Matt went again, day after day, asking himself how he could be such an old idiot as to care for other people's affairs to the neglect of his own; but there was always the same weary shake of the head, and the same answer – "No letter, Matt."

At last there was a cart at the door, and Septimus Hardon, roused up into something like energy for the time being, busily helped old Matt to remove the remnants of his furniture to the rooms the old man had secured for him in that salubrious court,

Bennett's-rents.

"'Tain't the nicest of spots," old Matt had owned; "but then look at the convenience; and for what you are going to do, sir, you must be right on the spot; for though law's very slow work for them as goes into it, it's very quick, sharp work for them as does the copying."

That evening Septimus Hardon looked dolefully round the front room of the two the old man had secured for him; then he glanced at his wife, who tried to smile; at Lucy, busily arranging; and lastly at old Matt, who looked very cheerful and happy as he helped Lucy in her arrangements, and was now lustily polishing a table that did not require it with a duster.

"Good luck to you, sir, don't look like that; why, you're fetching the tears into Miss Lucy's eyes – as is quite bright enough without," muttered Matt to himself. "Don't be down, sir, the wheel's always going round – bottom spokes to-day, top spokes to-morrow; and not the best place neither, for folks often knocks their heads through going too high. This ain't nothing, bless you; this is riches, this is – cheerful prospect of ten foot in front; pigeons on the roof; birds a-singing upstairs; children a-rollicking in the court; orgin three times a-day; writers popping in and out at the corner this side, public at the corner on t'other – brown stout threepence a pot in your own jugs; side-view almost into Carey-street, through the alley. Why, you're well off here, sir; and I've known the time when a ha'porth o' snuff and a recess in one of the bridges has been board and lodging to me; and – Servant,

sir. – Anything more I can do for you to-day, Mr Hardon? If not, I'll go, sir," said the old man, suddenly becoming very distant and respectful; for a new-comer appeared upon the scene in the shape of Mr Sterne; when, after a very stiff bow all round, old Matt departed, stumbling more than once as he descended the worn stairs.

Matthew Space's cheerfulness was gone as soon as he left the court, and it took him some considerable time to reach his resting-place – a neighbouring public-house; for he was troubled and anxious, and had to stop every now and then to think; but he could not think aloud to his old friends the lamps, on account of its being daylight; though after an hour or two's sojourn at first one and then another of his places of resort when making his way homewards, he paused frequently and long.

"Now I tell you what it is, sir!" he exclaimed, on stopping at the corner of Carey-street once more, and slapping a favourite post on the shoulder, "things are coming to a pretty pass; here we are sending our thousands to prison and penal servitude for dishonesty, robbery, and petty theft; and out of those thousands no end wanted to be honest, and we would not give them the chance. There are thousands wanting to get an honest living, and we won't let them. Rogue, sir!" he cried, excitedly slapping the cold iron with such energy that his hand ached, "don't tell me; you may talk of your charity and benevolence till all's blue; but I mean to say that, in the eyes of the world, sir, there isn't a greater rogue than a poor man. Beat him, kick him, turn him out, off

with him – a vagabond, what business has he to be poor?"

Old Matt was out of breath, and strode on to another post.

"What business has he to be poor – a villain? What do we want with a Septimus Hardon, legal and general printer, and poor man? 'Nothing at all,' says the world, and it won't go to his shop; 'see him starve first,' says the world; 'we'll go to the people who don't want help, who keep their carriages and country-seats; and if the little men fail and become bankrupt, serve 'em right, too, what business had they to aspire? why weren't they content as shopmen or journeymen? Too many already! Pooh! then let them get out. Let them plod and crawl, or turn agricultural labourers, and earn eight or nine shillings a-week. Won't they get premiums, sir, for bringing up their families without parish help, eh? And what more can they want in this great and glorious land? Won't that do? Well, then, let 'em go to the workhouse, where there's every convenience for letting 'em die off out of the way.'"

The old man crossed the muddy street to another lamp, chuckling to himself the while, when, laying both hands upon the post, he began again: "It's a strange thing, sir, a wonderful thing, how lonesome a man may be here in this great city of London: he may work till he drops for a living, and not get it; and he may then go and lie down and die, and all that, while nobody has known him or helped him; but when he's found there's a fuss in the papers for a few hours, and then – on we go again. We're all wrong, sir. What's the use of our spending our hundreds of thousands, sir, in converting a few Indians, or Africans, or

Australians, sir, and then holding our meetings, with the Bishop of Somewhere-or-another coming home to hold forth upon the benefits that have followed the missionary enterprise, but saying nothing about the miseries that have followed wherever the white man has set his foot? Very fine, sir; very fine, this civilisation, and town and village and church springing up; but what has become of the Indian? what has become of the Australian? and what will become of the New Zealander? It's aggrandisement from beginning to end, sir, – dead robbery; call it conquest if you will; but there, it's all for the extension of our glorious empire. Let's see, sir," said Matt, stopping; "I'm getting it into a knot; what was I going to say? How dare we go on so busily cleaning other people's houses when our own is in a state that we ought as a nation to blush for? Convert savages, benighted heathen! Why, I can take you, sir, where, here in the heart of this Christian city, London, you shall see savages ten times worse than any you shall find in Africa – more cruel, more licentious. There, hang it, sir, if it warn't for the fear of being eaten, I'd sooner trust myself amongst the blacks ten times over than the whites, hang me if I wouldn't! I know what you'll say to me, sir! 'Go and preach the Gospel to every creature!' Ah, but oughtn't we to be fit to do it first? oughtn't we to look at home first? I say yes, sir, yes; and what we're doing now, sir, 's playing the Pharisee and whitening the outside of the sepulchre; and there's no mistake about it, sir, some parts of this London of ours make a very foul sepulchre indeed."

Another fifty yards brought Matt to the next post, where he again stopped.

"I'm a leveller, am I, sir? P'r'aps so; but we levellers make the way smooth for those poor folks who are to tramp the road of life in days to come. I'm very sorry for the blacks, sir; and no doubt here and there you may find one who, under proper management, would turn out bright; but they can't be much account, or else they would have made some progress among themselves, whereas they're just where they were hundreds of years ago. It's a good job slavery is done away with; but you'll never make white men of 'em, never, sir; and they all look just as if, when their father Ham was cursed, he scowled like a naughty boy, and was cross and pouted his lips, and so all his children have looked thick-lipped since. But there, sir, that's neither here nor there, as you may say; though I've begun here in Carey-street and got right over into Africa; and that's the way I always do go on when I'm speaking in public. Now look here, sir; now what am I, eh? a battered, worn-out, seedy old stamp – good for nothing. 'Whose fault is that?' you say. 'Halves!' I cry, with the world: we share the blame between us. I've been foolish: I've given way good-humouredly in the squeeze for place, and everyone has pushed by me and got in front. Now, sir, what ought I to have done, eh? Why, told the world that I was a big man; caressed those who believed me, and kicked and bullied those who did not. I ought to have shoved my way through the crowd; and what would have followed, eh? why, people would have pushed again

and grumbled; but they would have given way until I got a good standing. Now look at that man, sir, – Hardon, sir, a gentleman every inch of him, but as helpless and unbusiness-like as a baby. Why, he'll starve, sir, before he'll ask for help, if his father don't send. 'More fool he,' says the world. To be sure: what business has he with a heart and feelings and nerves, that make him flinch because he has got an ugly shell over his beautiful works, and so feels every slight put upon him. Why, he's just one of those men who would go in despair and make an end of himself; and then you have your inquest, and people say 'How shocking!' and never stop to think that such things keep on happening every day; and will, too, so long as the world goes round; and I'm blest sometimes if I believe that it does go round, sir, or else things would come right in time for everybody. But they don't, for they mend worse every day. Here we are, with one man rolling in riches he never did a stroke to gain, and don't even know the value of; and here's Septimus Hardon, with a sick wife, and with hardly common necessaries. I might have introduced myself to your notice, sir, but present company is always excepted. The fact of it is, sir, that things are all wrong; and though I've been studying the matter these twenty years I can't see how to put 'em all right."

Old Matt drew a long breath, for he had been speaking loudly and with vehemence; and now, upon reaching another post, he began gesticulating fiercely, for he had warmed to his subject.

"But if I had time, sir, I'd go into the matter, sir. I'd take the

poor man as he stands, and the rich man as *he* stands; and I'd – "

"Now, come; that's about enough for one night, anyhow. I don't mind a little, now and then, but they'll be hearing of you acrost the square d'reckly."

"I'd take him, sir," continued Matt, "and hold him up for the whole world – "

"O, ah! all right," said Matt's interrupter, the policeman on the beat; "I dessay you would; only the world wouldn't look at him. For why? 'cause the world's too busy. Good-night, old chap."

"Good-night," said Matt, cooling down suddenly, and shuffling off in a quiet spiritless way, the fire out, and his head bent as he thrust his hands in his pockets. "Ah, he's about right; so he is. 'The world's too busy!' so it is; and I ain't got a morsel of snuff left."

Volume One – Chapter Ten.
Brotherly Love

"There, there, there; sit down, sit down, sit down!" croaked old Octavius Hardon as he cowered over a miserable fire in his paper-strewn room. "Sit down, sit down, sit down," he kept on repeating, after just glancing over his shoulder as his brother, sleek, pompous, and black-clothed, entered the room – "such a gentlemanly man," as the old women of Somesham declared over cups of tea. "Sit down, Tom," croaked the withered, dry old man, pulling his black skull-cap close down to his yellow ears, and peering sideways from under his shaggy grey eyebrows at the chair he meant his brother to take. There was a dry, mocking sneer upon his thin lips, while the grey unshorn beard wagged and twitched about as he spoke, as, without taking further notice of his visitor, he made his chair scroop on the worn carpet as he dragged it closer to the fire and warmed his lean shins.

Doctor Hardon slowly subsided into a seat, giving a hasty glance round the cheerless room as he did so, and then finishing with a long curious look at the lean figure before him, with its wrinkled bony face and attenuated form showing through the faded dressing-gown drawn tightly round him, and tucked-in between his knees, while the trembling hands were stretched out over the fire.

"How are we?" said Octavius after a long silence, broken with an effort by his brother; "how are we? Shall I put out my tongue, Tom? Would you like to feel my pulse, Tom, and sound my chest, eh, Tom? Come and try, Tom, and perhaps I shall knock you down – you humbug, you; for I'm sound as a roach yet, Tom, and shall live a score of years. Only seventy-five, Tom; that's boyish, isn't it? Better than being sixty, and fat, and a humbug like you, ain't it? 'How are we?' Ugh! drop that professional cant, or else stand up and rub your hands together softly, as you ought. What did you come for? Did you come to quarrel?"

"I came because you sent for me, sir," said Doctor Hardon with dignity, settling his chin in his voluminous white neckcloth and using a gold toothpick as he leaned back in his easy-chair.

"Sent for you – sent for you? Well, yes; so I did – so I did, Tom," chuckled Octavius; "but not to doctor me, Tom, nor to send 'the mixture as before,' nor to send 'the pill at bedtime and the draught in the morning.' No, Tom, no. How long would it take you to kill me decently, Tom, eh? – decently and respectably; eh, Tom, eh?"

"Fond of your joke as ever, Octy," said the doctor with a sickly smile.

"Just so, Tom; just so," croaked and chuckled Octavius; "but you are no joke, Tom. I'm not fond of you. Brande's bad enough, but you're a devil, Tom."

"I've been thinking of coming over to see you several times," said the doctor, trying to change the conversation; "and I should

have called when passing, only you will misconstrue my ways, Octy."

"Me? misconstrue? No, no, Tom, not I," chuckled Octavius; "I don't misconstrue. I believe you want to come, that I do. Now what's up, Tom, eh?" said the old man, fixing his keen grey eyes upon the doctor. "You want money, Tom, don't you? But, there, you won't own to it like a man, but be indignant and offended. You've a soul above money, you have, Tom; and you wouldn't stoop to borrow money of your poor brother, Tom, even if he'd lend it to you."

The doctor moved uneasily in his chair, glancing again and again round the room, while his brother continued to watch him with his keen unflinching eyes.

"Yes, I sent for you, Tom, – I sent for you," continued Octavius; "but not to doctor me. I should be afraid of your not thoroughly understanding my constitution, Tom, and overdosing me. But look here, Tom," chuckled the old man, leaving his seat and coughing drily, as, bent and failing, he crossed the room to a bureau and brought out a silver teaspoon and a bottle containing some dark liquid. "Look here, Tom," he said, reseating himself, and then pouring with trembling hand a portion of the liquid into the spoon, and in the act spilling a few drops over the side. "There," he said, smacking his lips after swallowing the fluid, and then stooping fumbling about in the fender for the stopper, that had slipped through his fingers.

"There, Tom, there; that's nectar, Tom; that's son, and

daughter, and wife, and brother, and doctor, and friend, and everything but lawyer. That's how I doctor myself, Tom; that's how I doctor myself. 'Tain't lawyer, Tom; but I can manage that myself and arrange about my few bits of things. You'd like my mourning-ring when I'm gone, wouldn't you now, my dear brother?"

Doctor Hardon did not speak, but again shuffled in his chair, glancing uneasily at the sneering face before him; and as he thought of the goodly lands lying fallow, and the tenements in ruins, belonging to his brother, he recalled a case where he had been one of the certifiers respecting the sanity of an elderly lady; and then he wondered whether his brother had made a will, and what it specified.

"That's how I doctor myself, Tom. That's a cure for every kind of ache, Tom; try it. It's good for runaway scoundrels of sons, and it's good for runaway daughters, Tom, and runaway nieces, Tom. It's good for everything, Tom; and I live on it," chuckled the old man. "I didn't want you for that, you see. You all left me; Septimus, and your jade of a girl, and you keep away; so I have it all to myself."

"You are not going to take any more of that now?" said the doctor, as his brother once more drew the stopper from the bottle.

"No, no; not yet, not yet, Tom," said the old man, placing the bottle on the chimney-piece. "Not yet, Tom, till after business. I wanted you about my will, Tom. D'ye hear? about my will."

Doctor Hardon could not conceal the start he gave at hearing

this last sentence; but he made an effort, and began to take snuff from a massive gold box.

"Ha, ha! I thought that would interest you, Tom," chuckled the old man, watching his brother narrowly, and shading his keen eyes with his hand. "My will, Tom, my will, and what I shall do with my money; for I haven't a soul belonging to me; not a soul, Tom. So you were coming to see me, Tom, were you, eh? Then you want money, don't you? What have you been at, now? Mining-shares, eh? Just like one of your fool's tricks."

"Hadn't you better refer to your solicitor?" said the doctor with assumed nonchalance, and not noticing the latter part of the speech.

"What for – what for, eh? No, no; I can do what I want with little help; and I have had nearly all I want done; and you can do the rest. It's about money, Tom; and you always worshipped it – always – always. Now look here, Tom," he continued, going back to the bureau and taking out a large envelope; "that's my will, Tom, and I want it witnessed; d'ye hear, Tom? – witnessed. I've had it made for years; and it only wants another signature and then I think it will do, and it will be off my mind and be at rest; for I want to finish my reform work, Tom, – reform – reform – reform. Now look here, Tom; but see first that there's no one listening at the door."

Doctor Hardon rose and went across the room upon the points of his toes, peered out into the passage, closed the door silently, and then returned smiling, without having made a sound. But the

smile of self-satisfaction at his successful management gave way the next moment to a look of astonishment, and then of anger, as Octavius exclaimed, "You sleek-looking, tom-cat humbug, you! I almost wish I had not sent for you – you treacherous-looking, smooth-coated rascal!"

Doctor Hardon turned almost purple with rage, but by an effort he choked it down.

"So you are, Tom; so you are," snarled the old man, watching him keenly, and enjoying his discomfiture; "but you can't afford to be affronted, Tom, can you?"

The doctor tried to laugh it off. "You always did love to tease me, Octy," he said, with a twist of his whole body, as if the mental torture shot through every nerve.

"Tease!" snarled the old man – "yes; call it teasing if you like; but look here," he said, drawing out the will, and folding it back so that only the bottom was visible – "bring that pen and ink, and come to the table here and sign;" and then he placed both hands tightly upon the paper, holding it down upon the table, and just leaving room for his brother to sign his name, all the while watching him suspiciously.

Doctor Hardon took the inkstand from a side-table, and placed it beside the will, glancing as he did so at the paper, but only to gaze upon the blank space. He then drew out a morocco case, and set at liberty an elaborate pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, ignoring for the time being the hand some double eyeglass hanging by a black ribbon from his neck. The glasses were wiped

upon a delicately-scented cambric handkerchief; there was a soft professional cough given as they were fitted in their place; and then, taking a fresh dip of ink, the doctor again advanced majestically towards the table.

All this while Octavius Hardon had been watching his every action with a cynical smile upon his withered face, apparently deriving great pleasure from the ostentatious performance of his brother.

"Why don't you purr, eh, Tom?" he snarled; "why don't you purr, eh?"

Doctor Hardon tried to laugh pleasantly, but it was only a fat copy of his brother's snarl; and then, once more dipping the pen, he leant over the table, placing a hand upon the paper, while at the same moment Octavius slid one of his own on one side, to give more room – perhaps to save it from touching the doctor's plump, white, beringed digits.

The lamp was shaded, and cast a light full down upon the paper; and as the doctor stooped to write, he suddenly started as if he had been stung, and then stood trembling and wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"Humbug, Tom! humbug!" snarled his brother; "that's your baggage of a girl's name; but it don't upset you like that? What did you act like a brute for, and drive her away, eh? You did, Tom; you did!"

"But I cannot sign the paper without knowing its contents," stammered the doctor.

"Bah, fool! tom-cat! humbug!" snarled the old man, snatching up the paper, and trying with trembling hands to force it back into the envelope. "It's my will, I tell you. There, be off!" and he began to shuffle back again to his chair.

"I'll sign," said the doctor reluctantly.

Octavius took not the slightest notice, only reseated himself.

"I'll sign the paper, Octy," said the doctor, in a tone of voice that seemed to prove his brother's words – that he could not afford to offend him.

"You can do as you like," croaked Octavius, shuffling the envelope into the breast-pocket of his dressing-gown, where it stuck out tantalisingly before the doctor, who would have given a week's income to have known its contents. "You can do as you like, Tom – as you like."

"I know that," growled the doctor, in an undertone; but the old man heard him.

"There, go!" he shouted, in a harsh, cracked voice.

"Don't I tell you I'll sign?" said the doctor, in a lachrymose, injured tone.

The old man looked at him from beneath his hand for a few moments, with a cynical grin wrinkling up his eyes, and then, slowly leaving his seat, he took out and replaced the paper upon the table, jealously holding it down with both hands; and then the doctor signed his name just beneath the fair, clear characters of his daughter's writing, while he ended with a flourish and a ponderous "MD."

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Octavius, snatching the paper up hastily, and then holding it over the lamp, and afterwards to the fire to dry the ink.

"MD! Ha, ha, ha! Got your diploma framed and glazed, Tom? you purring, sleek, tom-cat humbug, you!" Then, without waiting to double the will in its original folds, the old man hastily replaced it in the envelope, took the shade and globe from the lamp, an old gold signet-ring and a stick of wax from the bureau; and then with his half-palsied hand he sealed the great envelope, and stamped the sprawling, blotchy patch of wax with the crest in the ring.

"There, Tom; that's done!" chuckled the old man, replacing the will in the bureau, turning the key, and dropping it on the carpet as he tried to place it in his pocket. "Now, look here, Tom," he said, taking the poker, and making a hole in the fire, "that envelope isn't to be opened till I'm gone, Tom; and I'll tell you this – you're one of the executors, and then you'll know what's in it, eh? – what's in it. Now, I won't tamper with it any more, and no one else shall." As he spoke he dropped the fine old ring into the hot pit he had prepared for its reception, and sat down, chuckling at his brother.

Doctor Hardon sat down breathing heavily, with strange thoughts in his heart, as he looked upon the weak old man before him, and thought of his possessions.

"Now, Tom," said Octavius, chuckling and placid, as he took the little bottle and spoon from the chimney-piece, "there's a decanter with some old port in that sideboard cellaret, and a glass

with it. Help yourself, Tom; help yourself; this is my wine."

"But you took a quantity of that laudanum just now," said the doctor.

"You're a fool, Tom! You're a purring, sleek-coated fool!" chuckled the old man, hastily filling the spoon again, and swallowing its contents, "Help yourself – you like port, Tom – and then go, and don't come here any more till you're sent for."

Doctor Hardon drew himself up to display his offended dignity, but the old man only watched him and chuckled sneeringly; so he slowly rose, and with his professional roll walked to the sideboard and back, filled his glass, and then placed the decanter upon the table. He then sat down, curiously watching his brother, who lay back in his chair, apparently gazing into the fire. The doctor raised the glass to his lips, lowered it once more, and then his fat white hand played nervously round his mouth, for there were strange thoughts in his heart again – strange, undefined thoughts that did not take any particular shape, though there was the glint and chink of money in them all, and its uselessness to the wreck before him; while the hints he had wanted to give him respecting a loan had been passed for want of opportunity.

The doctor sighed, and seemed relieved; and then he wiped his forehead, which had turned damp; performed the same operation upon his hands, till the neat white cambric handkerchief was reduced to a miserable wisp; when, apparently further relieved, he took up his glass and drained it, but only to fill it again directly.

The port was good, certainly. The doctor played with his glass amorously, touching the rim with his lips, sipping at the bell of the ruby flower like some mammoth bee; held it before the light, and closed one eye to get a more concentrated look at the deep, rich, tawny hue of the fine old wine. Soon he sipped again – largely this time – and rinsed the generous liquor round his mouth, assuming all the airs of a connoisseur; and then he finished the second glassful, and sighed gently, for the effect was decidedly mollifying.

All this while Octavius Hardon never moved, but lay back in his chair. The doctor drew out his watch, and found it was ten; but he felt in no hurry to move, for he was accustomed to being late, and it would cause no uneasiness at home; besides, something might come of this, he thought; and as the idea crossed his mind, his forehead again turned slightly moist, and he glanced uneasily at the motionless figure before him. Then he started, for there was a rustle in the passage, and a tap at the door, which was directly after opened, and the housekeeper brought in a chamber-candlestick.

"Shall I wait up till you go, sir?" she said to the doctor.

"O, no; not for me," said he. "My brother will let me out. Good-night, Mrs Berry!" And the doctor's voice was soft and amiable.

"Good-night, sir!" said the woman, and then the door closed. There was once more the rustle in the passage, the sound of a chain and bolts being shot somewhere in the back, the closing of

a door, which sent a hollow echo through the deserted house; and then there was silence – a stillness that was quite oppressive; for Octavius lived with but one servant here at the Grange, a middle-aged woman, who attended to the whole of his simple wants. And now the wind sighed mournfully through the trees, a few spots of rain pattered against the window, and the doctor thought uneasily of his long walk home, but not for long, for, softly rubbing his hands, he now turned once more to the decanter.

"A good glass of wine, brother. I think I'll take another," he said unctuously; but there was no reply. So the doctor took another; and then, after thoroughly enjoying that glass, another; when now feeling decidedly comfortable, and that the awkward, sharp-cornered, acid crystals his brother's words had caused to form in his nature were dissolved by the good wine, he rose, smiling, put the decanter carefully away, and began to don his overcoat, which lay across a chair.

It is possible that had the doctor been less intent upon his thoughts and the wine, he might have heard something more than the pattering of a drop or two of rain upon the window, the soughing of the wind, and the regular "tick-tick" of his own large gold watch – a something that sounded like the working of a sharp gimlet boring through the panel of a door, cautiously and softly, to render that door pervious to a sharp, bright eye; but the doctor heard no sound, and turning towards Octavius, he said, "Good-night, Brother Octy!"

There was no answer, and the doctor repeated his valediction,

but still without effect; so he knocked the glass over, making it jingle loudly against the lamp, and still Octavius did not move.

Doctor Hardon's forehead grew damp again, but very slightly now; he drew out his watch – it was half-past eleven, and he was surprised to see how the time had gone. He walked round in his soft, silent way, in those boots of his that never creaked, to the fireplace on the other side of his brother; took the phial, removed the stopper, and smelt at the contents; replaced the bottle, and after looking in the withered face for a few moments, he lightly rested a finger upon the uncovered wrist before him.

Apparently satisfied, he leaned over the fire where the signet-ring had been cast; then stooped to pick up the tongs, but shook his head, rose again, and stepping silently towards the door, he gave one glance at the bureau, when his toe struck something, kicking it along the carpet.

The doctor stopped and stooped again, feeling about the floor; took the lamp from the table, whose glass jingled loudly, so that he stopped to gaze at his brother, who, however, never stirred; while, after a moment's search, the doctor picked up the bureau-key, and then replacing the lamp, stood beside the table quite irresolute. He glanced at his brother, then at the door and window, and lastly at the bureau; sighed, laid down the key beside the lamp, said "Good-night" again, stepped softly to the door, passed through and closed it after him; when, for the space of five minutes, there was a silence in the room, broken only by the sighing of the wind, and the tinkle of the cinders falling into the

ash-pan.

Did Octavius Hardon, in his opium-produced sleep, dream of his son struggling with sorrow and despair in the desolation of his heart; of the son who had appealed to him again and again for the help the father's obstinacy refused? Perhaps so, for more than once he moaned, but so softly that it might have been but the wind with whose sighs the sound was strangely mingled.

The lamp burned brightly, shedding a well-defined halo for a certain space around; but the shadows that it cast in the distant parts of the room were wild and grotesque. The motionless figure of Octavius Hardon, with the light full upon the skull-cap, was thrown in strange relief upon the ground in the semblance of a sleeping goblin; chairs were elongated, while the easy *prie-dieu* that the doctor had occupied seemed turned into some strange beast stooping for its spring upon the sleeping man. The corners of the room were full of dark moving shades, as the lamp-flame danced; while the tall bureau and bookcases looked in their black solemnity the repositories of mysteries untold.

Suddenly the door opened again very softly, and Doctor Hardon's face appeared. His brother had not moved – he was satisfied of that before he entered. He came in, closed the door, and stepped softly up to the chair, and touched the sleeping figure; but there was no pretence, as far as he could tell – it was the heavy stupor produced by laudanum. The doctor paused for a few moments irresolutely, then, taking up the key from beside the lamp, crossed to the bureau, when, turning the key in the

lock, the bolt flew back with a loud snap, while, starting round, the doctor stood gazing with pallid face at the sleeping man, who, however, did not move. To cross to where the wine stood in the sideboard cupboard was the next act, and, removing the stopper, the doctor drank eagerly from the decanter's mouth. This gave him fresh courage; and, replacing the wine, he crossed once more to the bureau, opened it quickly, stepped back again, and walked over to his brother, still motionless; then once more to the door, to open it and peer out.

All silent; and he returned to the bureau.

There was the large blue envelope with its great seal; and now, with his forehead covered with big drops, where before it had been but damp, the doctor, trembling visibly, put the paper to the light, when a sharp cry as of pain from his brother made him drop it upon the table, and turn as if to flee. But the old man only moaned the word "Septimus" in a bitter tone of voice, and then all was silent.

Assuring himself once more that all was well, the doctor again took the envelope and held it to the light to see if it was transparent enough for him to make out anything of its contents; but no: all was firm and close – close and secret as Octavius himself: the folds would not give way, nor bulge so that he could look inside, the great seal was fast, and nothing was to be seen but the words, "My Will – Octavius Hardon," scrawled in a large hand upon the front.

The doctor stood irresolute. There was the fire, with its warm

glow; and he thought of how soon it would devour the will; and how that if there was no will he would be the next of kin; and – but about Septimus? Perhaps Septimus was dead; for he had not heard of him for years; and besides, possession – and – yes – that would do, if he should ever show himself. Then Doctor Hardon smiled bitterly, for he had been Castle-building, and thinking of the matter as if his brother were past away; while now, even if the will were destroyed, Octavius would suspect him and make another. But why wish it destroyed? It might contain all he could desire! Could he but have seen inside – and the paper crackled as his trembling hands bent the envelope here and there. Should he break the wax and reseal the envelope? He looked in the fire, but could not see a trace of the ring; while, upon comparing his own massive seals with the impression upon the wax, there was not one that bore the faintest resemblance, so as to give him a chance of deception.

Sighing, he replaced the will, locked the bureau, and threw the key upon the carpet, and had once more reached the door, when a sudden thought struck him. He darted almost, in spite of his weight, to the bureau, the slow ponderous motions giving place to an eager activity.

He tried to open it with his nails inserted beneath the lid, forgetting that it was locked; but he soon had the key again, opened the flap, and seizing the will, stood with it by the lamp, whose shade and glass he removed with trembling hands.

Holding lamp in one hand and envelope in the other, he turned

the lamp sideways, so that the oil began to flow, and the light to sputter, and go out on one side of the wick; but out flowed the clear oil – drip, drip, drip – upon the envelope, till a tiny pool was formed upon the paper. This he spread lightly over the front with his finger, and held the envelope to the fire for a few minutes, when, returning to the lamp, he could distinctly trace, in faint characters, through the now transparent paper, "Son Septimus Hardon the whole of houses, lands, hereditaments – " then the paper was folded, so that no more was visible, but he knew enough now: he knew that Septimus was forgiven, and if living, that he would be in possession of his father's property. But would he if there were no will? Could it be managed that he should not succeed? Doctor Hardon apparently thought it could, for there was a strange smile upon his countenance. But what should he do? replace the soiled envelope in the bureau? or should he burn it? How it would burn now, soaked in oil as it was! And what if his brother thought he had destroyed it? What mattered? he had evidently left him nothing. But he was not sure of that; he might have left him something – something pitiful – a mourning-ring, as he hinted; or a watch, or suit of mourning. Better play the bold game, and burn the will; he might never make another – he might not live; and as his thoughts took this bent, the doctor shudderingly gazed at the laudanum-bottle.

Once he advanced towards the fire, and then shrunk back; a second time he advanced and receded, trembling visibly, for it was an act of felony he thought of performing; then, fiercely

crushing the envelope in his hand, he stepped forward, when the lamp was dashed over, and as he started round a cold chill struck through him, for he was forced upon his knees, while, ever tightening and crushing down even the gurgling cry he half uttered, there was a bony set of fingers at his throat.

Volume One – Chapter Eleven.
Hard Times

Times were hard with Septimus Hardon, and too often he was quite in despair. There was that difficult problem before him, always waiting to be solved, and he not able to solve it: given so many mouths to feed, how to do it. It was a problem that many a better man had failed over, and those who knew him, while commiserating, saw how weak and helpless and unfitted he was for the task. But times might have been worse; for he learned now that even in the lowest depths of poverty, whatever may have been written to the contrary, there are such people as friends, any one of whom, in his genuine truth of heart, is worth a score of the parasites who cling to a man in the hours of his prosperity. Old Matthew Space, oddly as his acquaintanceship had begun, was such a friend; and so, to a certain extent, was Mr Sterne; but there was, and he knew it too, a tinge of selfishness in the latter's friendship towards Septimus Hardon, and though he battled with it, and thought again and again that he had beaten it down, there it still was in spite of all. The mistrust he had felt for old Matt had somewhat softened down, after seeing his disinterested attention towards the Hardon family; while the curate argued, upon seeing the old man with Septimus Hardon's child, that no man could be bad at heart who had so true a love for innocence as embodied

in a child, almost fresh and pure from the hands of its Maker. But somehow, he and Matt never seemed to get a jot nearer to each other. Difference of position had nothing to do with it, for Arthur Sterne was ready to extend the hand of friendship to the humblest dweller in the court, and aid and teach to the best of his ability. But Matt said he daresay it was all right, but somehow he was one who did not like to be patronised; while as to being taught, the clay had grown too stiff, and hard, and cracked, to submit to the moulding of the potter's hands. "And you see, sir, to be able to do anything with me, you must moisten my clay with beer, which softens me a little; and it isn't likely as a clergyman is going to supply me with my malt liquor, and all for the sake of giving me a few lessons. I respect him, sir, and always shall, but we don't seem the sort to mix." This to Septimus Hardon.

Mr Sterne, finding his advances of no avail, ceased to make any; and soon he and old Matt were upon a friendly neutral ground, while the extent of their communications was a bow upon either side. Their visits to the first-floor in Bennett's-rents were frequent, and in time they so arranged their calls that they should not clash; while, for further convenience, by a tacit understanding, it was come curate, go printer; and *vice versâ*.

"I much wish you had chosen some better neighbourhood," said Mr Sterne one day, "for your wife and child's sake; and this is not a nice place for Miss Grey."

Lucy looked up in the curate's subdued face with a grateful smile; and then there was a faint blush upon her cheek as she

looked down again.

"No, it's not a nice place – not at all nice," said Septimus drearily; "but then it seemed right in the thick of the law-writing, which I'm trying to acquire; but it's very hard work – it's so crooked and crabbed and hard to make out. One ought to have begun young. I've been trying for weeks now; but they all find fault with my hand."

"It is too good – too flowing and clear," said the curate, looking at some sheets of foolscap Septimus laid before him. "But patience, and you will do it. Keep your elbow more away from your side – so." And he leaned over the paper, and wrote a couple of lines so rapidly, and exactly in the style required, that Septimus looked on in admiration, but only to sigh directly after for his own want of skill.

"Never mind," he said, "I shall manage it some day;" and he smiled cheerfully, for he had just caught sight of the worn face of his wife. "'Tis a bad neighbourhood this, sir," he said, to change the conversation; "but it's cheap for London, I suppose."

"Doubtless – doubtless," said the curate; "but it is a sad place; and I know it well, as you may easily suppose. And now, Mr Hardon," he said as he rose to leave, "do not let me be so great a stranger to you. Ask my advice on matters, and take me into your counsels at all times. Come; you promise?"

Septimus Hardon did not speak, but wrung the curate's hand; and in the future he did precisely what might have been expected of him – let matters get from bad to worse, and never once spoke

to the visitor upon his dreary prospects – prospects that from delicacy the curate forbore to inquire into, while to old Matt, Septimus was openness itself.

One day Septimus sat gnawing his nails in despair, for some law-copying that he had hoped would bring him in a few shillings had been thrown back upon his hands, with some very sharp language from the keen, business-like law-stationer who, after many solicitations, had employed him.

"Don't grieve, papa," whispered Lucy, looking up from the paid warehouse needlework she was employed upon – "don't grieve, papa, they will pay me for this when I take it home;" and the words were spoken in a sweet soothing strain that comforted the poor fellow in his trouble.

"He said I must be a fool to undertake work I could not perform," said Septimus lugubriously; "and I suppose I must be."

"Don't, don't talk so, dear," whispered Lucy, glancing uneasily at the door of the back-room. "Don't let her hear you."

"Well, I won't," said Septimus, rousing up and crossing the room to kiss the soft cheek held up so lovingly to him – "I won't, pet Lucy; and I'll try again, that I will;" and he returned to his seat.

"Yes, do; yes, do!" cried Lucy, with smiles and tears at one and the same time. "Don't mind what they said; you are so clever, you must succeed."

Septimus screwed up his face, but Lucy shook her head at him, still busily stitching, while, with his head resting upon his hand,

Septimus gazed on that budding figure before him, growing fast into the similitude of the woman who had first taught him that he had a heart; but she looked up again, and Septimus turned to his papers.

"Were there many mistakes, dear?" said Lucy.

"Well, not so many," said Septimus; "only the writing I copied from was so bad; and I've put in the contractions where I ought not, and altered them where they should have stayed; and you see, my child, I don't know how it is, but I do get so wild in my spelling. I know when the worst of it was, it was when Tom would sit on my knee and put his fingers in the ink-bottle; and that is distracting, you know, when one copies crabbed handwriting. But the worst fault was what I didn't see – and how I came to put it in, I'm sure I don't know, but it was a part of that line of Goldsmith's, 'But times are altered, trade's unfeeling train.' I don't know how it came there, only that it was there, and I must have written it when I was half-asleep. Let me see, it was – ah, yes, here it is, in folio 15, and I began that at half-past two this morning. I couldn't say anything, you know, my child, could I? for of course it didn't look well in amongst a lot about a man's executors and administrators, and all that sort of thing. It's a bad job, ain't it?"

Poor Lucy looked up at the wretchedly-doleful face before her, hardly knowing whether to smile or be serious; and then, in spite of the trouble they were in, and perhaps from the fact of tears being so near akin to smiles, they both laughed merrily over the

disaster; and Septimus set to work to try and remedy the wrong doings, by rewriting several of the sheets – a task he was busily engaged upon when old Matt came with his tap at the door and entered.

"And how's Mrs Hardon, sir?" said Matt respectfully.

A faint voice responded from the back-room, for Mrs Septimus spent much of her time in a reclining position.

"Busy as ever, miss, I see," said Matt; "and bright as a rose."

Lucy, bright as a rose truly, but only as the pale white blossom that shows the faintest tinge of pink, looked up from the hard sewing which made sore her little fingers, and smiled upon the old man.

"And how's the writing, sir?" said Matt.

"No good – no good, Matt," said Septimus wearily. "I'm out of my element, and shall never do any good at it, I'm afraid."

"Don't have nothing to do with it, then, sir; come and finger the types again. I've no opinion of copying, only as a combination of law-stationers to do honest printers out of their work. Try setting again, sir, and I'll give you grass first time I get a chance."

"Grass!" said Septimus absently.

"Well, yes, sir; put you on a job instead of doing it myself; first chance I have."

Septimus shook his head, went and thrust some sheets of paper into the fire, and then walked to the window, where his apathetic air passed off for an instant, as he seemed to recognise the face of a woman who passed quickly from the opposite house,

and then hurriedly made her way out of the court.

"Strange!" muttered Septimus to himself; "but there, it couldn't be her."

"And where's my little di'mond?" said Matt to Lucy.

"Asleep by mamma," replied Lucy.

"Bless him! I've brought him a steam-ingin," said Matt, bringing a toy-model, with a glorious display of cotton-wool steam, out of his pocket; "and I don't know what this here's meant for," he continued, drawing a wooden quadruped from the other pocket. "Stands well, don't he, miss? Wonder what it's meant for! 'Tain't a horse, nor a halligator, nor a elephant – can't be a elephant, you know, because they haven't got these Berlin-wool-looking sides; no, nor it ain't no trunk neither. Let's call it a hippopotamus, and see how he'll tie his pretty little tongue in a knot, bless him! a-trying to say it when he wakes. You'll tell him Uncle Matt brought 'em, won't you, miss?" he said, holding them behind his back.

Lucy nodded, while Matt blew out and arranged the cotton-wool steam as carefully as if it was a matter of the greatest importance, or a jewel for a queen; and who shall say that the old printer's task was not of as great importance, and that the pleasure of the child is not of equal value with that of the greatest potentate that ever ruled; while as to the amount of enjoyment derived, there can be no doubt.

"And what time is the work to go home, miss?" said Matt, after contriving with great difficulty to make the wild quadruped

use his four supports in the way intended by his manufacturer – the beast's idea being that its nose was the proper front rest for its body, and that by rights it was a tripod.

"I'm afraid I shall not be ready before eight," said Lucy, bending to her task.

"I'll be here to the moment, brushed up and smart," said the old man. "Why, how proud you ought to be of having such a bodyguard, Miss Lucy!"

The girl looked up and smiled, half sadly, at the old man as she held out her hand, which he took in his own for a moment, kissed respectfully, and then he shuffled from the room.

Ten minutes after, old Matt's step was again heard upon the stairs, and he directly after appeared with a pot of porter in one hand, and something tied up in a cotton handkerchief in the other; while, as he entered, he glanced stealthily from face to face to see what effect his proceedings would have before he spoke.

"You see, Mr Hardon, sir, it's a busy morning with me, and as I'm so far from my lodging – what a fib!" he thought to himself – "I thought I'd ask the favour of being allowed to have a bite here."

Of course there was no objection raised, and the old man's roast potatoes were soon warming, while Lucy left her work to frizzle the large portion of prime steak over the fire.

"No, no, miss; none of that," said Matt, taking the fork out of Lucy's hand; "I've cooked hundreds of bits of steak, miss, and I'm too particular to trust you; and, besides, you'll be keeping me waiting to-night when it's time the work was taken home; and my

time's the only valuable possession I'm worth."

Here old Matt directed a very knowing wink at Septimus Hardon; but he was deep in thought, with his head resting upon his hand. However, Lucy understood the old man's quaint kindness, and resumed her work; but there was a tear twinkling in her eye.

"Lord, Miss Lucy," said Matt, turning the steak upon the gridiron, and distributing a most appetising odour through the room, where more than once of late hunger had sat gaunt and staring, – "Lord, Miss Lucy, how I should like to see you with one of those new machines; stitch away they do, and the work comes running out by the yard."

Lucy sighed, and pressed a sore finger to her rosy lips.

"'Spose I may put the cloth on, miss, mayn't I?" said Matt, who was quite at home in the place.

Lucy nodded; and the old man soon had the cloth spread, and the steak done; when, pulling a long face, he groaned heavily.

"There!" he exclaimed, "that's always the way. Who'd be troubled with a complaint? Thought I could just pick a bit; but now it's all nice and ready, and as prime as can be, I'm done. Such a steak as that is, too, juicy and done to a twist, and the very best cut out of the whole beast. But there, don't let it be spoiled, miss, please;" and before anyone could stay him the old man was shuffling down the stairs, chuckling to himself as he made his way into the court, while Septimus, stung to the heart by his poverty, and overcome by the old man's kindness, left his

chair, and began to pace the room wringing his hands.

"O, that it should have come to this! O, that it should have come to this!" he groaned; but the next moment Mrs Septimus had forgotten her own trouble, and was weeping upon his breast, while Lucy had work enough to pacify the frightened child.

"Don't, don't, darling," whispered Mrs Septimus in a supplicating voice. "I know it is all my fault, and I'm thinking of it constantly; but don't let me think that you reproach me, or it will kill me outright."

There was such agony of spirit in Mrs Hardon's words that Septimus forgot his own wounded pride and misery by turn, in busily trying to soothe the poor invalid, who gladly took her seat at the table, while Septimus, with a smile upon his countenance, kept on vowing how hopeful he would be, as, casting pride to the winds, he distributed old Matt's much-needed steak, not hesitating to partake himself of the old man's bounty.

A gleam of hopeful sunshine seemed to have darted into the room that afternoon as Septimus sat busily writing, and the sharp click of needle upon thimble could be heard from the back-room, where Mrs Septimus was busy helping Lucy, so that the work might be finished in time, though every now and then it fell to someone's lot to amuse the little boy, who, a very spoiled tyrant, seemed bent upon being as capricious and unreasonable as children can be at times. But ever and again the wrinkles would deepen upon Septimus Hardon's forehead, and he would lay down his pen, in dread lest he should include some of his

busy thoughts in his copying. What should he do to better his condition? Time back it had seemed so easy a task, that of keeping his wife and children; but, put to the proof, how difficult. Some that he saw were almost without trouble; wealth poured in upon them in return for their bright thoughts. And why should not he be rich when schemes in plenty came flashing to his brain? There were scores of fortunes to be made had he but capital – that golden key that should open the treasure-house; but he was poor – a beggar, as he told himself again and again, when, to drive away the thoughts, he stooped over his copying, but only to lay it aside once more and sigh.

Old Matt came again that evening, vowing that he was much better, for he had been trying a favourite remedy of his – abstinence. "A first-rate thing, sir, for indigestion," said Matt; "rather lowering, certainly, but surprisingly efficacious as a medicine, while it costs nothing, and saves at the same time. A good walk helps, too, but then that requires what the shoe-shops call a pair of 'stout walking,' and my old feet want an easy style of boot. I wouldn't use a new boot on any consideration," said Matt, stretching out a dilapidated and crushed Wellington, polished to the highest pitch of lustre by a scarlet-coated brigadier. "I study comfort, sir; ease before appearances."

Lucy was soon ready, and then, with a couple of inches added to his stature, the old man proudly escorted her through court, lane, and street, to the warehouse; and then patiently waited till her business was transacted. Many a glance was directed at

the strangely-assorted couple, but he would have been a bold man who would have insulted the poor girl, who leaned so trustingly upon the old printer's arm till they reached the court, where he allowed her to go first, stopping and scratching his cheek viciously as he saw Lucy tremblingly hold out her hand to a woman who hurriedly passed from the house opposite that occupied by Septimus. They seemed to have met before; but old Matt looked vexed and undecided. Once he closed up, but a glance from Lucy sent him back, when he passed the rest of his time in returning with interest the bold, inquisitive stare of Mr William Jarker, who stood with a couple of friends in the entrance of the court, watching Lucy and the stranger with some degree of interest, till Mr Jarker caught Matt's eye, when he turned to his companions, said something, and they walked off together, Matt's quick ear catching the words, "9:30," and a click or two as if one of the men carried tools in the pocket of his shooting-jacket.

Directly after, the stranger passed old Matt with a quiet appealing look, to which he replied with a nod of a very undecided description, half civil, half angry; and then, still scratching his silver-stubbled cheek, he wished Lucy good-night, shaking his head the while, to which she replied, "Please don't be angry," in a way that brought a smile into the old man's countenance; a sunny smile that began at one corner of his month, and then spread through stubbly whisker, and over wrinkle, till it was all over his face, clearing away the shadow

that had lain there; but as old Matt turned away, his head began to shake, and the shadow that had been lurking in the farther whisker crept back again, slowly and surely, as night crept down over Bennett's-rents to hide the sordid misery that chose the court for its home.

"What's '9:30'?" said Matt to himself, as passing out of the court his thoughts took a fresh direction. "Nice-looking party that. 'Spose I button up my coat over my gold repeater. They were thinking about what's o'clock, they were, hang 'em."

Old Matt Space suited the action to the word, bursting off a button in the operation, and then carefully picking it up and saving it, as he strode off muttering.

"'Nine-thirty'? What's their little game?"

Volume One – Chapter Twelve. Friends from Town

"For God's sake, Octy," gurgled Doctor Hardon almost inaudibly, so tightly were the fingers clutching his throat, – "don't! don't! I was only looking."

"Turn on the glim, Joe," croaked a harsh voice; when a bright light flashed in a broad, well-defined, ever-widening path right across the room, leaving the untouched portion in a darkness of the blackest; but the light shone where the doctor could see his brother upon the floor, with a rough fellow kneeling beside him, while a coarse, big-jawed ruffian, the upper portion of whose face was covered with crape, held on tightly by the doctor's throat with fingers whose bony force he had at first taken for his brother's. It was evident that another man was present holding the lantern; but from the position of the light he was in the shadow, and so invisible.

"Light that there lamp again," croaked the same voice; and at the same time the doctor felt himself dragged at until he rose to his feet, when he was backed into a chair, one hand being loosened from his throat. Directly after a heavy blow fell upon his head, causing the light to dance and sparkle before his eyes.

"There," growled the voice; "that's jest a reminder, that is. That didn't hurt, that didn't; but it's jest to show what we could do

if yer get to be troublesome. Now, then," growled the ruffian to his companion, who was stooping over the fire, "light that lamp, d'yer hear? You're gallus sharp, you are."

"Who's to light the butcherly thing when hain't got no ile in?" growled the ruffian addressed.

"I wish you'd got a little more ile in you," croaked the first speaker in a voice that seemed to ascend through a tubular rasp. "Hang on here, will yer, and give us holt."

The doctor felt himself delivered over into another pair of hands, the change not being for the better; for the new gaoler seemed to be experimentalising, and trying to find out the best place for holding on by when doing a little modern Thuggee, consequently the doctor's was not a pleasant situation.

Directly after, a little oil was spilt upon the fire, causing it to blaze up and illumine the room, displaying to the doctor's starting eyes the three costermonger-like figures of the men in the room; when, seeing his quiescence, the one acting as gaoler called attention to a couple of candles in old bronze-holders upon the chimney-piece, and, loosing his hold of his prisoner, leaned forward to reach them down.

It was a tempting moment for the doctor, and, without pausing to think of its uselessness, he seized the bell-rope within his reach, and dragged at it heavily. But the next instant he had fallen back in his chair from a well-planted blow between the eyes, and then, half-stunned, he listened to the faint tones of the bell as the men produced what seemed to be so much clothes-line from a

small carpet-bag, with which they dexterously and firmly bound him to his chair.

"You improves, you do," growled the first ruffian to the man lighting the candles. "Been all the same if that there jangler had alarmed the whole blessed country."

"How was I to know as he'd jump up like so much watchworks?" said the other, placing the lighted candles, whose tops were encrusted with ash from the fire, upon the table.

"Know! not you; but you knows how to claim yer share of the swag."

Then the poor old man upon the floor, whose wild, staring eyes seemed to betoken some violent seizure, was lifted into a chair opposite his brother, and bound after the same fashion, when the spokesman of the party shook the heavy leaden knob of that misnamed article a life-preserver in the doctor's face, saying: "Don't you try no more games, my kiddy, or else" – a playful tap illustrated his meaning. "She's safe in bed, and tied up so as she won't answer no ringing nohow. She's tucked up all right, she is; d'yer hear?"

The preserver-handle was very elastic, and the knob tapped playfully upon the doctor's forehead as the ruffian spoke; but the bound man was too confused to answer, and though what followed seemed to him like a wild dream, yet his heart leaped once as he saw the fellow snatch the will from the floor, where it had fallen, tear open the seal, and hold the paper to the light.

"What's in it, Bill?" growled another of the gentry.

"Gallussed if I know," said the other; "but 'tain't no good;" and the doctor saw it crushed together and thrown upon the fire, where it blazed up and was soon consumed. But confused as the doctor was, the next proceedings of the ruffians produced groan after groan from his breast, as they attacked his vanity, and metaphorically rolled him in the dust; for removing a fur cap that he wore, so as to cool his brain perhaps, and displaying thereby a very closely-cropped bullet-head, the leader of the gang, as he seemed to be, first snapped the doctor's gold-chain, and set it and watch at liberty; for the doctor's bonds would have impeded their being taken off in the normal fashion. Then followed, one after the other, to be placed in a small carpet-bag with the watch and chain, the spectacle-case and gold eyeglass; the handsomely-chased gold snuff-box from one pocket, gold toothpick from another. The set of studs were dragged from the cambric front; a massively-set diamond ring from the doctor's right hand, and a signet from his left; while as the various ornaments were passed from one to the other, and deposited in the bag, a broad grin followed each groan from the doctor.

"Where's his puss, Bill?" said Number 8 ruffian, who was the Judas Iscariot of the party, and carried the bag.

"Here it is," growled Bill, whose hands were wonderfully active for so heavy, burly-looking a man, diving in and out of pocket after pocket, and now drawing forth a very handsome, elaborately-gilt, russia-leather portemonnaie – half purse, half pocket-book – and grinning as he opened it, he drew out and laid

upon the table, first a railway insurance ticket, next a lancet, then a crooked sixpence, and lastly a threepenny-piece.

"Here, lay holt o' this 'ere, and slit it up," said Number 2 ruffian, handing his companion an open clasp-knife.

The gentleman called Bill took the knife and ripped the purse all to pieces, tearing leather from lining everywhere; but no notes fell out, no secret pocket was disclosed; and throwing the remains of the purse upon the fire with an aspect of the most profound disgust upon his face, the fellow exclaimed, "I'm gallussed!"

"Let's wet it, Bill, afore we goes any further," said Number 8, and as he crossed silently to the sideboard, and brought out the port and another decanter, the doctor saw that the men were without boots, which accounted to him for their sudden attack.

The wine and glasses were placed upon the table, and the burglars very coolly proceeded to refresh themselves – one seating himself upon the table, another upon a chair, and the last taking his place upon the coal-scuttle – treating it as if it were a saddle.

"Here's towards yer, old un!" growled the big-jawed gentleman called Bill, tossing, or rather pouring, a glass of wine down his bull throat as he looked at the doctor – his companions paying the same compliment to Octavius, who, however, seemed to be perfectly insensible.

All at once a faint scream was heard from another part of the house, when one of the men rose.

"She thinks as we're gone, Bill," said ruffian Number 2, with

a grin. “Just go and show her that mug of yours, and she’ll soon shut them pipes.”

Bill of the big jaw rose, displaying his teeth so that the lips seemed to assimilate with the gums; and he, apparently taking his comrade’s remark for a compliment, walked out on the points of his toes, in a peculiar fashion of his own; when, winking to his companion, Number 2 stole softly to the sideboard, looked about a bit, and then seizing a small silver salver, doubled it by main force, and slipped it into the pocket of his velveteen coat. He then darted back to his place, whispered “halves” to his companion, and began helping himself to more wine, just as Bill hurried in again, glancing suspiciously about him with his peculiarly restless, chameleon-like eyes, which seemed to be on the watch for plunder, trickery, and Nemesis, at one and the same time, and now it was evident that he suspected a march to have been stolen upon him.

However, a few more glasses of wine were drunk, and then the men proceeded to methodically ransack the place, finding a tolerable booty of old-fashioned plate in the sideboard; while from the bureau, another gold watch, with its old-fashioned broad chain and seals; a ring or two, some quaint jewellery, and a few sovereigns and small change were obtained.

The cords which bound the brothers were then carefully examined, and a knot or two tightened, so that the doctor winced; then the candles were extinguished, and the big-jawed man growled in the doctor’s ear, “Now, jest you move, that’s all; and

I'm gallussed – "

The fellow did not finish his speech verbally, but again illustrated his meaning with a tap of the life-preserver.

"We ain't a-goin' yet," growled Number 8; "so don't you think it. I *have* used this 'ere, and I ain't used it," he said, showing his clasp-knife; "but it's a sharp un – so I tell you; and where it does go, it goes – so look out."

"This one's been a-drinkin'; smell his breath," said Number 2, nodding at old Octavius, as he cast the light from the lantern upon his wild face.

Just then the doctor gave a loud groan, for his cords hurt him.

"Shove a bit in his mouth, Bill, or he'll begin to pipe, p'r'aps," growled Number 8.

"He'd best not," said Bill savagely; "but how-so-be he shall have it; there's some knives in that there drawer."

Doctor Hardon's eyes rolled in their sockets as he saw one of the men go to the sideboard drawer and bring out a large table-knife. Then the head of the party took it from his companion's hand and held the blade between the bars, where the fire yet glowed, when the effect in a few minutes was to loosen the handle, for the resin melted, and the blade slipped out. The man then took the handle, untied and slipped off the doctor's white cravat, and then turning his back, rolled the knife-haft tightly in its folds; while, wondering what was to follow, the horror-stricken captive began to groan dismally.

"Now for it," cried Bill sharply, seizing the bound and helpless

man by the throat, when, fancying that his last hour had come, the doctor opened his mouth to cry out, when the knife-handle was thrust between his teeth, and the cravat tightly tied behind his head, keeping the gag securely in its place, and thoroughly robbing him of the power of even crying out.

"Now t'other," said Bill. "Get another knife out."

"Ah! he's all right," said Number 2. "I'd leave him."

"P'r'aps you would," said Bill; "but we two don't want to be blowed on, if you do."

"But he's a-most dead now," said Number 2; "and if you stop his mouth that way, I'm blessed if I don't think he will be quite afore morning."

"And what then?" said Bill contemptuously; "what if he is? What's the good of an old cove like him? Yah!"

However, that part of the ceremony was left undone. The doctor heard the door close, open again, for the key to be dragged out of the lock and replaced in the other side; when once more the door was closed and double-locked. Then followed the sound as of a whispered dispute, and again silence, till it was broken by a faint scream from upstairs; while, with every nerve on the stretch, the doctor listened for the next movement, as, still somewhat confused in mind, he kept fancying that the stertorous breathing of his brother was that of one of the ruffians on guard at the door.

An hour must have passed, during which time the doctor still fancied there was a man on guard, and dared not move, though at that time the three visitors were coolly taking their tickets of a

sleepy porter, the only one of the railway company's servants in charge of the station, and soon after they were being whirled up by the night mail which called at Somesham for the letter-bags at two o'clock. But at last, as the doctor's mind became clearer, he made out that the breathing must be that of his brother; and rousing himself, he tried to free his hands. The cord only cut deeply into his plump flesh, though, and a sharp pain was the sole result, though he could tell that his arms and legs were swelling, and that the circulation was almost stopped. He tried to get rid of the gag in his mouth, but only made it press the harder upon his false teeth, so that the gold setting seemed almost to crush his gums. Then he waited awhile, to gain strength, and as his head grew clearer, he recalled how that the will had been destroyed, and thought of how, had he known what was to happen, he would have opened and read it. If now Octavius would neglect to make another! He was old and helpless, and no doubt getting to be imbecile – at least, in his doctorial eyes; and if he would but neglect to make another! Then he remembered how the villains had denuded his person, and he writhed with fury so that his chair cracked.

Back to the thoughts of the will and of Septimus Hardon; and for a time so deep was his musing, that the doctor almost forgot his own position till the pain recalled him, and he found he was fast growing numb and cold.

All at once a terrible shudder ran through his frame, for a rustling and squeaking behind the oak wainscot startled him.

"Rats!" he thought to himself; and he recalled how the house was said to swarm with them, and how that they had once attacked a child in bed. Started upon that train of thought, there were plenty of anecdotes to startle him with the reputed courage of the fierce little animals when hunger-driven.

Another hour passed in the darkness, as regularly and slow came the stertorous breathing of Octavius, interrupted at times by the fierce scratching of the rats behind the wainscot, or their scampering beneath the floor in their many galleries; and again and again the doctor shivered with fear, as he sat listening and longing for help.

But no help came – neither was it likely to come, since the lonely house might have been passed again and again without there being a suspicion excited of anything being wrong. Besides, late in the night it was a great chance if a soul passed. He knew, from his professional habits, that no surprise would be felt at home because of his absence, and he had not said where he was going.

Another hour passed, and the doctor sat listening eagerly for his brother's breath, which, from being loud and stertorous, had now become so faint as to be hardly perceptible; indeed at times it appeared to have ceased, and in his then excited condition he began to dread that the overdose of laudanum, or the shock, had been too much for the old man, and that he was to pass the remainder of the night with a corpse. He dreaded the corpse horribly, but did he dread that such was the case – that his brother

was dead? He was old and useless certainly, but he was rich, and his will was destroyed; and were there no Septimus, or could he be put aside, that property would come to him. But was his brother dead? Death was nothing new to him; he had stood by hundreds of deathbeds; but under these circumstances, bound down there, with nerves unstrung, numbed, cold, and in agony, Doctor Hardon had at times a difficult matter to contain himself, and he trembled fearfully with a new horror lest he should lose control over himself.

He listened, and the breathings had ceased; the only sounds he could hear were the horrible gnawings of the vermin. At last, though, he heard a breath; but he shuddered again, for his excited fancy told him that it was the harsh, rattling expiration that he had often heard – that last effort of the lungs ere stilled for ever.

The tearing and scratching of the vermin now grew louder, and the doctor asked himself why? as, beside himself with horror, he sat listening. His temples throbbed, the cold sweat stood upon his face, and he struggled again and again to free himself, but only to tighten the well-tied knots. At times he could hardly breathe, while at last a thrill ran through him – a thrill of indescribable terror – such a shock as would have made him yell, had he been able; for quickly, and with a sharp scratching, he felt something run up one of his bound legs, across his lap, and then he heard the soft "pat" as a rat leaped upon the carpet.

Doctor Hardon could bear no more; horrible, stifled groans burst from his breast, as, mad with dread, he leaped and bounded

spasmodically in his seat, making the cords cut deeply into his flesh till, in one of his agonised convulsions, the chair went over backwards with a crash; when, stunned and helpless, the wretched man lay in a wild dream of horror, from which he only awoke to relapse again and again.

Volume One – Chapter Thirteen. At the County Arms

The people of Somesham, whom Doctor Hardon regulated as to their internal economy, were of opinion that there was not such another town as theirs in the whole kingdom; and no doubt they were right. It was situated at the foot of a range of chalky wolds, and in dry weather always gave the visitors an idea that its inhabitants were a slovenly race, and had not dusted their town lately. There was a long, white, dusty road that led to it on one side, and a long, dusty road that led to or from it on the other side; there was one long, dusty street, with shops and private houses mixed up anyhow; there were a few dusty cross streets which led nowhere; a market-place where pigs squealed and butter was sold on Tuesdays; a town-hall, combined with a corn-exchange and an assembly-room, forming an ugly dust-coloured building, which was like the memoranda and papers in people's pocket-books when they are advertised as lost – of no value to anyone but the owners; and the sole use it would have been to them was to sell it for old building-materials. There were public-houses, and, above all, a commercial inn, kept by one Mrs Lower, a stout, elderly lady, who had formerly occupied the post of nurse in Octavius Hardon's house until such times as a nurse was no longer required, when she did needlework, and helped in

the domestic concerns till her mistress died, and then acted as housekeeper up to the advent of Agnes Hardon, when one John Lower, keeper of the County Arms in Somesham market-place, persuaded her to say "Yes" to the question he had so many times asked her, and she became landlady of the goodly inn; nurse again to the failing old man her husband; and lastly, sole owner of the goods, chattels, and tenements of the said John Lower, who went to his long sleep with a blessing upon his lips for the good woman who had smoothed the last hours of his life.

Mrs Lower made a very comfortable widow – one whose hostelry was much frequented by commercial gentlemen, and those given to running down from town once or twice a week for the purpose of having a turn with the Low Wold hounds; stout, as a matter of course, for no woman could be expected to make a good landlady who was angular or pointed in her person. Mrs Lower was stout, but not uncomfortably so, and this stoutness she kept in its proper proportion by a comfortable diet, and by being a woman without one of those unpleasant parasites known as cares. Doubtless she had plenty of the little troubles of life to encounter – those little three-cornered affairs that bother everyone – matters that to some people would be cares; but in her case, being a mild, cheerful, and amiable woman, they made but little impression, the consequence being that these acidities of life never ate into her countenance, running down it in wrinkles, and puckers, and channels; and at an age one never dare mention in her presence, or out of it either, for fear of not

being believed, she was plump of face, rosy, and comfortable-looking, to an extent that made more than one well-to-do farmer, and tradesman too, make her an offer that she would not accept.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.