

Fenn George Manville

The Story of Antony Grace



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Chapter One.

The Man in Possession

Mr Rowle came the day after the funeral, walking straight in, and, nodding to cook, who opened the door, hung up his shabby hat in the hall. Then, to my surprise, he took it down again, and after gazing into it as Mr Blakeford used to do in his when he came over to our church, he turned it round, made an offer as if about to put it on wrong way first, reconsidered the matter, put it on in the regular way, and as it seemed to me drew his sword.

But it was not his sword, only a very long clay pipe which he had been carrying up his left sleeve, with the bowl in his hand. Then, thrusting the said hand into his tail-pocket, he brought out a little roll of tobacco, upon which was printed, as I afterwards saw, a small woodcut, and the conundrum, “When is a door not a door?”

“Ho!” said cook; “I suppose you’re the – ”

“That’s just what I am, my dear,” said the stranger, interrupting her; “and my name’s Rowle. Introduced by Mr Blakeford; and just fetch me a light.”

“Which you’d best fetch this gentleman a light, Master Antony,” said cook; “for I ain’t going to bemean myself.”

As she spoke she made a sort of whirlwind in the hall, and whisked herself out of the place, slamming the door at the end quite loudly.

“Waxey!” said Mr Rowle, looking hard at me, and shutting one eye in a peculiar way. “Got a light, young un?”

“Yes,” I said, feeling sorry that cook should have been so rude to the visitor; and as I hurried into the study to get a match out of the little bronze stand, and lit the curled-up wax taper that my father used to seal his particular letters, I found that Mr Rowle had followed me, tucking little bits of tobacco in the pipe-bowl as he came.

He then proceeded to look about, stooped down and punched the big leather-covered chair, uttered a grunt, took the taper, lit his pipe, and began to smoke.

“Now then, squire,” he said, “suppose you and I have a look round.”

There was such a calm at-homeness about him that the thought struck me that he must somehow belong to the place now; and I gazed at him with a feeling akin to awe.

He was a little man in a loose coat, and his face put me greatly in mind of the cover of a new spelling-book. He was dressed in black, and his tail-coat had an enormously high collar, which seemed to act as a screen to the back of his half-bald head when he sat down, as he did frequently, to try the different chairs or sofas. It never struck me that the coat might have been made for another man, but that he had had it shaped to come down to the tips of his fingers, and so keep him warm. When he had taken off his hat I had noticed that his hair lay in streaks across the top of his head, and the idea occurred to me that his name might be Jacob, because he was in other respects so smooth.

I followed Mr Rowle as he proceeded to have what he called “a look round,” and this consisted in going from room to room, in every one of which he kept his hat on, and stood smoking as he gradually turned his eyes on everything it contained, ending with a grunt as of satisfaction at what he saw.

Every room was taken in turn, even to the kitchen, where our entry caused a sudden cessation of the conversation round the tea-table, and the servants turned away their heads with a look of contempt.

“That’ll do,” said Mr Rowle quietly; then, “Mary, my dear, you can bring me my tea in the study.”

No one answered, and as we went back I remember thinking that if Mr Rowle was to be the new master at Cedar Hill he would soon send our old servants away. He walked back, smoking all the time, and seated himself in my father’s chair, staring hard at me the while.

“Shut the door, young un,” he said at last, and when I had obeyed, “sit down, and make your miserable life happy.”

My face began to work, and I had to battle hard to keep back the tears, as for a few minutes I could not speak, but sat there feeling sure Mr Rowle must think me sulky and strange; and it troubled me, for the old man seemed disposed to be kind.

“Poor boy!” he said all at once, and his voice seemed to me to come out of a cloud of smoke; “so you’ve lost both your father and your mother?”

“Yes, sir!” I said piteously.

“Hah! so have I,” said Mr Rowle, and he went on smoking.

I was thinking as I tried to stare at him through the smoke, that this must have been a very long time ago, when he quite startled me by seeming to read my thoughts, as he said suddenly:

“Yes; that’s a long time ago.”

“Yes, sir; I thought it must be,” I ventured to say; and then there was a long silence, during which I sat there wanting to go away, but not daring to stir, lest Mr Rowle should think me rude, and still he smoked on.

“I say, young un,” he exclaimed, making me start out of a reverie, in which I was thinking how vexed mamma would have been to see Mr Rowle smoking in all the bedrooms, “s’pose you’d just come here to stop, which room should you sleep in?”

“The blue room’s the biggest and the best, sir,” I said, “but I like the little pink room the most.”

“Hah! then the pink room it must be,” he said, sending out such a long puff of smoke that I wondered how his mouth could have held it all. “I say, young un, ain’t it time Mary brought up my tea?”

“It’s past tea-time ever so much,” I said, “and her name’s Jane.”

He took hold of an old brass key hanging at the end of a thin steel chain, and dragged out a very big old silver watch, looked at it, shook it, and held it to his ear, and then lowered it down once more into its particular pocket.

“Then Mary – Jane won’t bring it,” said Mr Rowle.

As he spoke the door opened, and Jane, our housemaid, exclaimed sharply, “Now, Master Antony, I want you;” and I rose and followed her into the dining-room, where my solitary tea was spread out for me. I stood gazing at it when she left me in a miserable dejected way, for I felt as if I could not eat, and as if the tea when I poured it out would be bitter and salt as my tears; and then I began to think about Mr Rowle, and stole to the door, opened it, and stood listening to the laughing and talking in the kitchen.

“I wonder whether they will take Mr Rowle his tea,” I thought; and I leaned against the door, listening still, but there was no sign of any preparation. The strong smoke crept out into the hall, and in imagination I could see the little yellow man sitting back and smoking in the chair always used by my father.

At last I summoned up my courage and went to the study door, opened it, and asked Mr Rowle if he would come and have some tea.

“I will that!” he said with alacrity; “I never despise my beer, but a cup o’ tea’s my reglar drink.”

He followed me into the dining-room, and we sat down, I feeling very awkward, especially as Mr Rowle leaned across, lifted the pot, and gave me his peculiar wink.

“Silver?” he said.

“Yes, sir; and the coffee-pot and basin and jug too,” I replied.

“Hah! yes.”

It was very awkward, for there was only one teacup and saucer, and I did not like to ring for another; so I filled that and passed it to Mr Rowle, who sat smoking all the while.

“Thankye!” he said, nodding, and he was about to pour it into the saucer when he stopped short. “Hallo!” he said, “where’s your’n?”

“I – I have not got another cup,” I stammered.

“Worse disasters at sea!” he said. “Never mind; look ye here, I’ll have the saucer and you have the cup,” and pouring out the tea, he passed me back the cup, and the meal went on.

For the first time since his arrival Mr Rowle laid down his pipe, and after hewing off a great piece of bread, he proceeded to cut it up in little cubes, all six sides of which he buttered before he ate them, while I contented myself with a modest slice or two, for my appetite was gone.

It was a doleful meal, but he seemed to enjoy it, and after partaking of five or six saucerfuls he nodded at me again, took up and refilled his pipe, and then walked back to the study, where he sat smoking till ten o’clock, when he went up to bed.

I’m afraid that I was a very ignorant boy. Perhaps not so in the ordinary sense of the word ignorant, for I had been fairly educated, and besides being pretty forward with my Latin, I could have written a letter or carried on a decent conversation in French; but, living in a secluded part of the country, I was very ignorant about the matters of ordinary every-day life, and I found it hard to understand how it was that Mr Blakeford, the lawyer, should be allowed to do just as he pleased in our old house.

The terrible misfortunes that had come, one after the other, had seemed to stun me and take away my breath. One day we seemed to be all so happy together, and I was sitting reading to my invalid mother in the pleasant old room opening on to the lawn. And the next day I was holding my throbbing head in my bedroom, after crying till it ached as if about to split, while I tried again and again to believe that it was all some dreadful dream, that my father had been carried home dead, killed in an instant by a fall from his horse, and that my mother lay beside him in the darkened room, silent too in death, for the shock had been too great for her delicate frame.

All that followed seemed to me dreamlike and strange – the darkened house and the rustling sounds of the black dresses that were made for the servants; my own new black things and stiff black hat; the terrible stillness of the place, and the awe with which I used to gaze at the closed room upstairs; and lastly that dreadful darkest day when I was the companion of Mr Blakeford and an old uncle in the mourning coach which followed the hearse with its nodding plumes to the grave.

I wanted to be alone and sit and think, but those about me seemed to consider that it was their duty to try and comfort and cheer me in my affliction, when all they did was to worry me and make me more wretched than before. It troubled me, too, terribly, that people should think me callous and indifferent to my loss, when all the time my heart was throbbing, and I felt a sensation of desolation and misery that I tried my best to conceal.

I remember going on tiptoe towards the dining-room on the day of the funeral, dreading lest my new boots should make a noise, when, as I reached the mat at the door, I stopped short, for my uncle was saying roughly —

“Don’t seem to trouble *him* much.”

“No, of course not,” Mr Blakeford replied. “What can you expect? I dare say he’s thinking more of his new black clothes.”

I had to clench my hands and bite my lips to keep from bursting out into a passionate fit of weeping, and I stood there for some minutes, unable to move, as I heard all that was said.

“Well, it’s no business of mine,” said my uncle. “It was his own money.”

“Yes,” said Mr Blakeford, with a sigh. “I was his legal adviser, but he would not be advised.”

“Never would,” said my uncle. “All he thought of was catching butterflies and drying weeds in blotting-paper.”

“But he was a good man,” said Mr Blakeford.

“Bah! good? What, to plunge into speculation and ruin himself?”

“We are none of us perfect,” said Mr Blakeford.

“Who wants to be?” said my uncle. “Well, I wash my hands of the whole affair. You know where I am if you want me. He was never like a brother to me. I will do as you said.”

“Yes,” said Mr Blakeford, “of course. You may trust me, Mr Grace.”

“I don’t trust anybody,” said my uncle, just as one of the servants, coming along the passage, said kindly —

“Why don’t you go in, Master Tony?”

There was a sudden movement of a chair, and I saw Mr Blakeford come forward and look at me curiously as I entered in a shamefaced way. Then he exchanged glances with my uncle, and my heart sank as I felt that they both suspected me of having been listening on the mat.

It was only at nights when I was alone in my own room that I could cry as a half heart-broken boy of eleven can cry in the desolation of his heart. My uncle had gone away the day after the funeral, telling me shortly that I must be a man now, and mind what Mr Blakeford said; and Mr Blakeford had looked at me in his peculiar way, tightening his thin lips, and smiling strangely, but saying nothing.

I knew that some arrangements had been made about my future, but though I was the person most concerned, every one seemed to consider that I was only a boy, and no explanation was vouchsafed. So it was, then, that I rambled about the house and grounds almost alone, growing more and more thoughtful and wretched as the change oppressed me like a weight of lead.

As the days went on, though, and the first passionate feelings of grief gave way to a strange sense of despair, I began to take notice of what was passing around me. It seemed as if the servants in their new black dresses looked upon the change as a holiday. They had frequent visitors; there seemed to be always a kind of lunch in progress, and as I sat alone of an evening I could often hear laughter from the kitchen; and at last, unable to bear the solitude, I used to go into the study and sit down and stare at Mr Rowle.

It was not cheerful, even there, for Mr Rowle used to sit and stare at me. We rarely spoke. Still, it was company, and the old man did sometimes give me a nod, and say, in allusion to a burst of mirth from the kitchen —

“They’re keeping the game alive, young un?”

Chapter Two.

Mr Rowle and I Become Friends

As I have said, in the days that followed, I used, when feeling very lonely, to go and sit and stare at Mr Rowle and he at me. Few words were spoken, but quite a friendship sprang up between us, and by degrees I learned what his position really was – that of man in possession, placed there by Mr Blakeford.

Mr Rowle was not an active busy man, but somehow he had a way with him that seemed to take charge of everything in the house. I verily believe that in a few moments he made a mental inventory of the contents of the room, and he quite offended Jane one morning by ringing the blue-room bell.

I was with him at the time, and after the ring had been twice repeated, Jane came bouncing upstairs, and, quite ignoring the presence of Mr Rowle, addressed herself sharply to me.

“I’m surprised at you, Master Antony, ringing the bells like that, knowing how busy I am. Whatever do you want?”

“It was me as rung, Jane, my dear,” said Mr Rowle. “What’s gone of those two little chayney candlesticks off this table?”

“I’ve took ’em down to clean, Master Antony, if you must know,” said Jane, addressing me spitefully. “You don’t suppose as I’ve took them away?”

She looked at me angrily, while I felt as if I had been accusing her unjustly.

“Oh no, my dear, of course not!” said Mr Rowle. “You’re too highly respectable a girl to do such a thing; but where I was once there was a housemaid as stole a little bronze pen-tray out of the study, and she was found out about it, and given into custody of the police, and got three months.”

Jane looked fiercely at him and whisked out of the room.

“Please, Mr Rowle,” I said, “the little pen-tray that mamma gave poor papa has – has – ”

I could say no more, for the recollection of that birthday present, towards which I had subscribed some of my pocket-money, caused such a choking sensation that I was ready to break down once more, and I had to strive hard to keep it back.

“Gone out of the study, young un? Oh no, not it. You fancy as it has.”

“I’m sure it has gone, sir,” I said eagerly. “I was looking for it yesterday.”

“Ah, well, you’ll see when we get downstairs,” said Mr Rowle, and he went on from room to room, always sending a few puffs of smoke into each, till we went downstairs, meeting Jane on the way, looking very hot and indignant as she carried up the little china candlesticks, and sure enough, to my great surprise, on entering the study, there was the pen-tray in its familiar place.

“There; what did I tell you?” said Mr Rowle, laughing. “It was underneath some papers, or p’raps Jane took it down to give it a rub or two.”

“That must have been it, sir,” I said; and I went out to have a walk round the garden. But somehow everything looked so different: the grass had not been cut for days, the beds were rapidly growing weedy, and the flowers and fruit looked so different, or seemed to look so different, that I was glad to go back into the house, where I found another stranger, a little dapper, red-faced man, who nodded to me familiarly, and then resumed a conversation with Mr Rowle.

“My clerk will be here directly,” I heard him say, “and we’ll soon run over the inventory.”

“The sooner the better, I say, Mr Jevins, sir,” said Mr Rowle, “and then we shall know what we’re at.”

“You don’t mean – ” began the newcomer.

“No, sir, I don’t, because I’ve had too sharp a hye on ’em; but there’s one young lady here as wouldn’t take nothing out of her reach, and if I was Mr Blakeford I’d make a clean sweep out, and the sooner the better.”

The little man drew a silver pencil-case out of his pocket, slid out a pen, and then, taking a little ink-bottle from another pocket, he took out the cork and balanced it on the top of a china figure; then, securing the ink-bottle to one of the buttons of his coat by a little loop, he pulled out a long pocket-book, drew from it an elastic band with a snap, opened it, and fastened the leaves back with the band, just as a tall, gaunt, elderly man came in with a pen behind one ear, a pencil behind the other, making him look in profile like some peculiar kind of horned snail.

I watched their acts with boyish interest as they proceeded methodically to set down the contents of room after room, punching the chairs, turning up the settees, feeling the curtains, and tapping the mirrors, till at the end of the second day, all being done, they closed their books with a snap, nodded to me, and after a short chat with Mr Rowle took their departure.

"Sale's on Toosday week," said that gentleman as I looked at him inquiringly. "What's going to be done o' you?"

"Done with me?" I said.

"Yes; where are you going to be?"

"I'm going to stop here," I said.

"That can't be, anyhow, young un. Haven't you got any friends?"

"Yes," I said; "there's Dick Wilmot, but he's at school."

"I say, young un, what a precious innocent you are! Haven't you never been away at school?"

"No, sir."

"Where have you been, then?"

"Here at home with papa and mamma."

"Lor', what a shame, to be sure! Why, you don't seem to know nothin'."

"Indeed I do," I said indignantly. "I can read, and write, and cipher, and I know a little botany, and Latin, and French, and papa was teaching me the violin."

"What, the fiddle? Well, that may be some use to you; but as for t'others, bah! I never found the want of any on 'em. How old are you?"

"Just turned eleven, sir."

"Leven, and bless your 'art, young un, you're about as innocent as a baby."

"If you please, sir, I'm very sorry."

"Sorry? So am I. Why, up in London I've seen boys of 'leven as was reglar old men, and know'd a'most everything. Lookye here, young un, don't you know as your poor guv'nor died ever so much in debt through some bank breaking?"

"I heard poor papa say that the bank had shut its doors."

"That's right," said Mr Rowle, nodding. "Well, young un; and don't you know what that means for you?"

"No, sir," I said.

"Phew?" replied, Mr Rowle, whistling; "well, p'raps it's kindest to tell you, after all. Why, look here, young un, this place, with every stick in it, is going to be sold up – plate, linen, furniture, chayney, glass, and the house and all, and you'll have to go to some of your friends, unless Mr Blakeford's got his plans made for you."

"Please, sir, I don't think I've got any friends to go to," I said; "I thought I was going to stay at home – at least, I hoped so," I added despondently.

"It's a rum go," muttered Mr Rowle, as he raised his hat with one hand and re-arranged his hair with the stem of his pipe. "Ah, well, I s'pose I've no call to be putting things into your head, only I should like to see you not quite so innocent, and better able to look after yourself."

Mr Rowle and I had many such conversations during the interval before the sale, in all of which he was so much troubled by what he called my innocence, that I began to look upon my ignorance of the world as something approaching a crime. I saw no more of Mr Blakeford or my uncle, and the

days glided slowly by till just before the sale, when the servants came upon me one evening in the dining-room, to announce that they were going, and to say “good-bye.”

“Going?” I said; “what, all?”

“Yes,” said cook sharply, and I think there was a twinkle of moisture in her eyes; “yes, Master Antony, we’re all going, and we’ve come to say good-bye.”

I believe that cook would have taken me in her arms and hugged me in good motherly fashion, but for the third person. As it was, she shook hands very warmly and looked tenderly at me for a moment – not more – for her soul seemed to be aroused within her at the presence of Mr Rowle, at whom she darted the most furious of glances, an example followed by the other two maids; and then we were alone.

“Bless ’em!” said Mr Rowle, taking his pipe for a moment from his lips, and then going on smoking.

Chapter Three.

Mr Blakeford Shows His Teeth

The morning of the sale arrived, and still no one took any notice of me. I had stood by in a melancholy fashion, and seen little tickets pasted or tied upon the various articles of furniture; the stair rods done up in bundles and the carpets in rolls. The chimney ornaments seemed to be holding a meeting in a corner of the sideboard recess, presided over by a bronze Neptune; and apparently deceived by the reflection of the sunshine, the steel fender had settled itself calmly on a table before the tall pier-glass as if it were a fire; the pictures looked down in the most melancholy way from the walls at the doleful chaos of furniture, all except one of her Majesty the Queen, and that seemed to follow me in a sorrowful, pitying fashion that made me gaze up at it again and again.

Wearied with wandering from room to room – all dust and confusion now – I turned to go upstairs. As I did so I passed the study, whose door was wide open, with Mr Rowle in the easy-chair smoking away, his hat on, and the wretchedness of the place with its piled-up bundles of books seeming to have no effect upon him whatever.

Upstairs matters appeared even worse, though it struck me that the rooms were not so dusty. After the “view” on the previous day the auctioneer’s men had arranged the things so that they would be handy for taking downstairs, and the grotesque positions they were now in suggested endless ideas. Pairs of sheets and blankets hung from pegs like so many culprits; towel-horses stood upon their heads, while chairs did acrobatic tricks, one at the bottom sustaining four or five piled up in a state of equilibrium; the tooth-brush trays all seemed to have been frightened into taking refuge in the ewers; while the bedsteads and toilet-tables appeared to think the place so dirty and untidy that they were holding up their trailing garments to keep them from being soiled.

On the previous day I had taken refuge in my favourite haunt, the summer-house, till the strangers had gone, and now, hearing the auctioneer’s men below, I was hurriedly taking a farewell glance round before once more making my retreat.

I had heard footsteps on the stairs, and supposed it to be one of the owners of the carpet-caps and aprons that lay tucked in a corner, when suddenly passing out of one of the bedrooms into the passage I came face to face with Mr Blakeford.

“Oh! you’re there, are you?” he said, in quite an ill-used tone, as if he had been hunting for me for days. “Why, where have you been hiding yourself?”

“Please, sir, I’ve been here all the time.”

“It’s false, sir. How dare you tell me such a lie! I was hunting for you all day yesterday and you were not here. I supposed you had run away.”

“If you please, sir,” I said, “I was in the summer-house – indeed!”

“Then how dare you tell me, sir, that you were here! Now look here, Master Antony Grace; don’t you try to trifle with me, for I’m not the man to be played with. You’ve been allowed to grow up in sloth, ignorance, and idleness; and now that out of pure charity I am going to take you into my office, you had better try to make yourself of some use, unless you want to be turned adrift and starved;” and he bent down and shook his finger in my face.

“Come to your office, sir?” I cried, wondering.

“Come to my office, sir, yes,” he snarled. “What else were you going to do? Did you think you were going to spend your life sticking pins through butterflies and running about picking buttercups and daisies, as you did with your defrauding scoundrel of a father?”

“How dare you say that!” I cried, as a fierce burst of passion swept over me at hearing him speak thus of my poor dead father.

I have some recollection of rushing at him with clenched fists, and being caught roughly by a strong hand, of being shaken, my ears sharply boxed, and of being then thrown panting, sobbing, and half heart-broken upon the floor, as Mr Blakeford stood over me.

“That’s your temper, is it, you young dog?” he cried; “but I’ll soon tame that down. What, am I to lose thousands of pounds by your cheating scoundrel of a father, and then, when to save his wretched brat from starvation I have arranged to give him a home, I am to have him turn and rend me? But I’ll soon cure all that, my fine fellow. You’ve got the wrong man to deal with, and it was quite time your career of spoiled child was over.”

He turned and left the room, and after crouching there sobbing for a few minutes, I got up in a stunned, hopeless way, brushed the dust off my clothes, and as I turned I caught a glimpse of my hot red face and wet eyes in the glass.

I was hastily removing the traces of the childish tears when I smelt the pungent odour of tobacco, and my first impulse was to run away and hide; but there was no way of escape, and I had to turn round and face Mr Rowle, who stood smoking in the doorway.

“What’s he been leathering you for?” he said, without removing his pipe.

“I – I struck him!” I panted out, trembling with shame and indignation.

“You? You hit Lawyer Blakeford?” he said, with a broad grin overspreading his face. “Come, I like that. I didn’t think there was so much stuff in you.”

“He – he – said false things about my poor dead father,” I faltered.

“And you tried to punch his head for it, young ’un; and serve him right, that’s what I say. Never mind: cheer up, young un; you’ll grow a man some day, see if you don’t. But, I say, look here, where are you going to stay? The house’ll be full of people directly.”

“I’m – I’m to go to Mr Blakeford – to his office, he says.”

“Whee-ew!” whistled Mr Rowle. “That’s it, is it? Your guv’nor owed him money, eh, and he’s going to take it out of you? I say, young un, you’re in for it.”

“Am I, sir?” I said, in a dull, despairing way, for I understood by his words that my future was not to be a very pleasant one, but just then I heard Mr Blakeford’s voice below, and Mr Rowle gave me a friendly nod and turned away, while I stood listening, expecting to be called.

I can recall those feelings that came over me to this day – shame, mortification, wounded pride, misery, and despair. What was to become of me? How could I ever live with a man who spoke so cruelly of one who had always been so firm and yet so gentle with me? No mother, no father, no one to say one kind and encouraging word to me but that poor rough man in possession, towards whom in those hours of misery my young heart went out with all its passion of childlike affection.

I was half stunned. Had I been so idle and spoiled a boy? I did not know, only that I had been very happy – that every lesson had been a pleasure, and those summer-day entomological and botanical rambles with my father times of joy and delight. It was all a puzzle, too, about my father and Mr Blakeford and their money matters, and of course I was too young to comprehend the legal instruments which empowered the solicitor to take possession of everything of which my father died possessed.

The entry of one of the porters made me creep hurriedly away, and going downstairs, I found room after room filling with the people coming to the sale, with the result that I crept into the garden and down the old laurel walk to the little summer-house at the bottom, where I shut myself in to lean my head against my arm and try to check the miserable tears that would come.

It was very weak and girlish, but I was only eleven, and during the past few days there had been so much to give me pain. I was heartily ashamed of my weakness, feeling all the time a kind of instinct that I ought to be more manly, and trying hard to become so, though now I can smile at the thought of the little, slight boy of eleven battling with his natural emotions, and striving to school them to his will.

It was very quiet and lonely down there, and in a few minutes I felt calmer and better, seating myself and wondering whether I ought not to go up and look for Mr Blakeford, as I watched the robin – an old friend of mine – hopping about amongst the twigs.

Perhaps it was a foolish idea. But it seemed to me then as if that bird, as it gazed at me with its large round eyes, could feel for my sorrow, and I felt a kind of envy of the little thing's freedom from pain and care.

While I sat there thinking in my despondent way, the low humming of voices up at the house came to me, and now and then I could hear steps on the gravel paths, but that leading up to the summer-house was of short turf, so that I was suddenly surprised by hearing a fresh young voice exclaim:

“Oh, look here, mamma! What a nice summer-house!”

“Yes, my dear,” said some one, in cold, harsh tones. “The Graces knew pretty well how to take care of themselves. I haven't patience with such ways.”

I jumped up angrily to go away, but I was too late, for the door opened suddenly, and I was face to face with a young girl of about my own age, and a tall thin lady, with a careworn, ill-used expression of countenance; and as she seemed to know who I was, she caught the girl's arm and gave her a snatch, exclaiming:

“Come away, Hetty; it's young Grace.”

The girl took her eyes unwillingly from mine, and as she accompanied the lady away, she turned round once, and I fancied I read in her looks sorrow for my position, and a desire to come and lay her little hand in mine.

I sat all through that dreary day alone, and getting faint and hungry – though my memories of my encounter with Mr Blakeford kept me from thinking much about the latter, and it must have been nearly five o'clock when the door once more opened, and Mr Rowle stood there, holding a bundle tied up in a red handkerchief in one hand; his pipe in the other.

“Why, here you are then, young 'un,” he said. “I thought old Blakeford had carried you off. Lookye here! you're just right. I'm going to have a bit of wittles down here in peace, and you'll join in.”

As he unfastened the bundle handkerchief and displayed a pork pie and a small loaf, he took a couple of table-knives from his tail-pocket.

“Borrowed,” he said, holding them up. “They're a part of lot hundred and forty-seven. Stop a moment, let's make sure.”

One hand dived into the breast-pocket of his old coat to bring out a dirty catalogue, leaf after leaf of which he turned over, and then, running a dirty thumb down one page he read out:

“Lot hundred and forty-seven: sixteen black – No, that ain't it. Here it is, young 'un. Lot hundred and fifty-seven: two dozen and seven ivory balance-handle knives. Them's them, and they won't be none the worse for my using on 'em.”

Mr Rowle's intentions were most friendly, but I could hardly eat a mouthful, and I was sitting watching him making heavy onslaughts upon the loaf when I heard Mr Blakeford's voice calling me, and I started up, feeling as if I must run away.

“What are you up to?” said Mr Rowle, with his mouth full.

“Let me go,” I cried excitedly. “Let me run somewhere.”

“Gammon! Why, what for? You go out like a man and meet him, and if he gives it to you again, why, there, if I was you I'd take it like a man, that I would.”

I hesitated for a moment, and then took my rough friend's advice by going out into the garden, where I found Mr Blakeford with a black bag in his hand.

“Take that,” he said harshly, and threw the bag towards me.

I was taken by surprise, caught at and dropped the bag, which burst open, and a number of papers tied with red tape fell out.

“Bah! you clumsy oaf,” he exclaimed angrily. “There, pick them up.”

I hastily stooped, gathered them together, and tremblingly replaced the packets in the bag, and as soon as it was closed followed my new master towards the gate, through which he passed to where a man was holding a thin pony attached to a shabby four-wheeled chaise.

"Jump up behind," he said; and I climbed into the back seat, while he took the reins, got into the front, and fumbled in one pocket. "Here, catch!" he cried to the man, as he gave the reins a shake. The pony started off, and we had not gone a dozen yards before something hard hit me in the back, and turning sharply, I saw one of the big old-fashioned penny-pieces fall into the road, while the man who had thrown it after us was making a derisive gesture at Mr Blakeford, by which I concluded that he was dissatisfied with the amount that had been given him.

"Sold badly, very badly," Mr Blakeford kept muttering, and at every word he gave the reins a jerk which made the pony throw up its head; and so he kept on muttering during our four-miles ride into the town, when he drove into a little yard where a rough-looking man was waiting, threw him the reins, and then turned to me.

"Jump down, and bring that bag."

I jumped down, and as I did so leaped aside, for a large dog rushed out to the full extent of his chain and stood baying at me, till Mr Blakeford gave him a kick, and he disappeared into a kennel that had once been green. I followed the lawyer through a side door and into a blank-looking office cut in two by a wooden partition topped with little rails, over which hung old and new posting-bills, many of which papered the wall, so that look which way I would my eye rested on, "To be sold by auction," "Estate," or "Property," in big black letters.

On one side of the partition were a high double desk and a couple of tall stools; on the other some cocoa-nut matting, a table covered with papers, a number of shelves on which stood black-japanned boxes, each of which had upon it somebody's name or only initials in white letters, with perhaps the word "Exors." after them; while on the chimney-piece were a letter-weight, two or three large ink-bottles, and a bundle of quill pens.

It was growing dusk, and Mr Blakeford struck a match and lit a gas-jet over the fireplace, just in front of a yellow-looking almanack; and now I could see that the place was one litter of papers, parchments, and dust, save at the end, which was occupied by a bookcase full of great volumes all bound in leather about the colour of Mr Rowle's skin.

"Sit down there," he said shortly, and he pointed to one of the tall stools by the great desk; and as I climbed upon it he picked up the bag I had placed upon the desk, threw it upon the table, and walked out of the place.

"Like a man – take it like a man," I said to myself as I recalled Mr Rowle's words; and, pressing my teeth tightly and clenching my fists, I sat there fighting down the depressing feelings that came upon me in a flood, and wondering what I should have to do.

My musings were interrupted by the loud entry at the end of about half an hour of a cross-looking servant-girl, who banged a small tray containing a mug and a plate of bread and butter down before me.

"There's your tea," she said roughly; "and look here, I'm not going to wait on you. Bring the mug to the kitchen when you've done, and you'll have to fetch it in future."

I looked up at her very wistfully as she scowled at me, but I did not speak.

"Sulky, eh?" she said. "You'll soon get that taken out of you here, I can tell you."

With these words she whisked herself out of the office, the swing-door creaked dismally and banged behind her, and I was left to enjoy my meal.

At first I felt that I could not touch it, but I was faint and hungry, and after a few mouthfuls a boy's young healthy appetite asserted itself, and I drank all the mean thin tea and finished the bread and butter.

Then I remembered that I was to take the things back to the kitchen. Where was the kitchen, and dare I leave that stool without Mr Blakeford's orders?

I felt that I dare not, and therefore sat there patiently gazing about the room, my eyes resting longest on those bills which told of sales of furniture, as I wondered whether those who had belonged to the furniture had died and left a son alone in the world, as I seemed to be just then.

There was a clock, I found, in one corner – an old Dutch clock – that ticked away in a very silent, reserved fashion, giving further every hour a curious running-down noise, as if it were about to strike; but though I watched it patiently as the minute-hand passed on, it never fulfilled the expectations given, but confined itself to its soft subdued *tick, tick, tick, tick*, hour after hour.

Seven, eight, nine, ten had been marked off by that clock, and still I sat there, waiting, and wondering whether I was to sleep there as well as to have my meals; and then I heard a door bang, the sound of a footstep, and with a great tin candlestick in his hand Mr Blakeford entered the room.

Chapter Four.

I Become a Lawyer's Clerk

"This way!" he said abruptly, and there was a curious look in his face that I could not understand. "Here, hold this," he cried, thrusting the candlestick into my hand; and I held it trembling as he crossed unsteadily to the gas-jet, turned it down, and then strode out of the office.

"There!" he said, opening a door, "up there; and get down in good time. You'll have to clean the boots and things."

"Up there" was up a flight of steps which led into a low sloping-ceiled chamber that had been evidently meant for a lumber-room, but had now been fitted up with an old stump bedstead with a coloured counterpane, a little corner washstand with a cracked jug, a strip of carpet, and a three-legged painted chest of drawers, which had gone down at one corner, and left a corresponding leg slightly raised in the air.

The place was cold and miserable, chilling to a degree, but it was clean; and as I looked round I was surprised by seeing on a chair a heap of my clothes and a brush and comb.

I had just finished looking round when I heard a noise below.

"You Antony!" shouted Mr Blakeford; "mind you put that candle out safely, and look sharp into bed."

I obeyed by hastily undressing and putting out the candle to get quickly into bed. It was not to lie down, but, after once more battling with my weakness, to offer up the simple prayers I had been taught, and then, still upon my knees, but with my head drooping on to the pillow, falling fast asleep.

I awoke terribly depressed at daybreak, to listen to some noisy fowls close by, and then I could hear that the rain was pattering heavily down.

Ought I to get up then, or should I lie a little longer? I could not tell, but I recollected Mr Blakeford's words, and as I did so the same wretched despondent feeling came over me as I thought of my helplessness, and trembled, feeling sure I should give offence.

There are few people who thoroughly realise the sufferings of a tenderly nurtured, sensitive boy when first called upon to battle with the world amongst unsympathising strangers. He is only a boy in their eyes, and they fail to give him credit for the same feelings as themselves, when too often he is far more finely strung, and suffers acutely from every unkind word and look. The very act of going from home is distressing enough, but when it is supplemented by his finding himself forced to make his first *essays* in some uncongenial task to which his hands and the brain that should guide are totally unaccustomed, a feeling of despair often takes possession of his young spirit, and is accompanied by a hopeless despondency that is long before it wears away.

I had had painful afflictions enough during the past weeks, so that I was anything but well prepared for my new life. Besides, I had been badly fed, and the natural sinking caused by the want of proper food terribly augmented my sense of misery.

The rain pattered down on the slates and skylight, while the water ran along the gutter and gurgled strangely in a pipe close to the corner where my bed was placed, as I lay wondering what I had better do. The office was below me, with its silent clock, but perhaps I should not be doing right, I thought, if I got up and went down to see the time. Perhaps, too, the place might be locked up.

I lay thinking in this undecided way till all my doubts were set aside, for there was a loud continuous ringing just outside my door, one which was kept up as if some angry person were sawing away at the wire with the full intention of dragging it down.

It agonised me as I jumped out of bed and began hastily to dress, for I felt as if it must be to rouse me up, and as if I had inadvertently been guilty of some lapse.

The bell stopped ringing as suddenly as it had begun, and with a feeling of relief I continued dressing, but only to start nervously as I heard Mr Blakeford's voice at the foot of the stairs shouting my name.

"Do you hear that bell, sir?" he cried.

"Yes, sir."

"Then make haste down; don't be all the morning dressing."

Then there was the loud banging of a door, and I hastily finished, and went down cautiously, found the office door at the end of the dim passage, and was just going in when the sharp voice of the servant arrested me.

"Here, you – what's your name?" she said harshly.

"Antony, ma'am."

"Ho! Then, Mister Antony, missus says you're to make yourself useful. They've pretty well worked the flesh off my bones since I've been here, so you must just help to put a little on."

I looked at her in amazement, and she certainly was not at all prepossessing, being a tall raw-boned woman of some three or four and twenty, in a hastily-put-on cotton dress, her hair rough and untidy, and displaying a general aspect of having spent as little time as possible upon her toilet.

"Now, then, don't stand staring like that!" she said. "Come along here, and fill this scuttle."

She led the way into the kitchen and pointed to a large coalscuttle, which I had to take and fill for her, after which she seemed to hesitate as to whether she should place the broom she held in my hands; but, probably under the impression that it would save her no trouble, she altered her mind, and went and fetched a large pair of dirty Wellington boots, which she threw down upon the floor.

"There, go into that shed and clean them and your own too, and mind you do 'em well," she cried. "He's a reg'lar winner about his boots."

My experience in boot-cleaning consisted in having seen the groom at home occasionally polish a pair, so I was no adept: but hastily setting to, I worked hard at the task, and succeeded indifferently well with the big Wellingtons before bestowing the same pains upon my own shoes.

I need hardly say that I was not very quick over my task, and so it happened that when I returned to the kitchen the fire was brightly burning, the kettle boiling, and my new friend, or enemy, seated at her breakfast.

"There, you can put 'em down," she said, with her mouth full of bread and butter. "And now you'd best go and wait in the orfice till he comes. You're too much of a gent, I s'pose, to have meals with me?"

"I'm sure I don't know," I said, rather piteously.

"Don't you? Well, then, I do. You're to have your victuals in the orfice, and I s'pose they'll send some out to you when they're done, seeing as you're took here out o' charity."

I felt a red spot burn in each cheek at these words, but I said nothing, only went sadly to the office, which looked terribly dim and gloomy in the morning light. The dust lay thick upon bill and parchment, and the drab books with their red patches upon their backs I could see by this light were old, discoloured, and worn.

Judging from the appearance of the place, in spite of the ink marks and well-stained blotting-paper, there was not much work carried on there, though, of course, I could not judge that then. All that struck me was that the place looked most melancholy, and that a gloomy yew-tree that half shaded one window was heavily laden with drops of rain.

Seeing my mug and plate upon the big desk, I remembered the words of the servant, and hastened to take them to the kitchen, where I was received with a scowl, and hastened to retreat back to the office.

I had been standing there about an hour, and had just noticed that the clock pointed to half-past eight, when I heard a light step behind me, and, turning round, there stood the girl I had seen in the garden at home.

Her bright, fresh young face was the first pleasant thing upon which my eyes had rested since I came the night before, and as we stood gazing at each other it seemed to me that I could read sympathy and welcome in her frank smile.

“Good-morning,” she said quietly, and held out her hand, which I was in the act of taking, when a wiry sharp voice cried loudly —

“Hetty! Hetty! where are you?”

“Here, mamma,” cried my visitor.

“Then you’ve no business there,” cried the same voice; and the owner – to wit, the lady I had seen in the garden – came in. “Go back to the parlour directly, miss; and mind this, you are never to come in here at all.”

The girl looked eagerly at me again, nodded, and tripped away, leaving a hopeful feeling behind that I could not explain.

“So you are young Grace,” said the lady, whom I presumed to be Mrs Blakeford, and I gazed wonderingly at her pained wrinkled face and weak-looking, wandering eyes. “Mind this: you are to keep in the office. I won’t have you in my rooms; and Mr Blakeford says you are not to be in the kitchen on account of the neighbours’ remarks. I’m sure I don’t know why we study people who never study us; and I’m pinched enough for money now, without having you thrown on to my housekeeping.”

“Now then, what are you doing there?” cried Mr Blakeford harshly, as he entered in his slippers. “Go and make the tea; what do you want to begin chattering to that boy for about our private affairs?”

Mrs Blakeford muttered something about being always wrong, and turned to go.

“Always wrong? Of course you are, when you will come meddling with what don’t concern you. Now then,” he cried, turning sharply round to me, “what are you staring at? Get a cloth and rub down that desk and table. Can’t you see how dusty they are?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, for it was very evident. “Then why don’t you go and do it, blockhead?”

I started to perform the task in great alarm; but I had no duster, and dared not ask him. Fortunately he was called away just then to his breakfast; but he seemed to me to be there still, gazing at me with his keen dark eyes, while his tightly closed thin lips seemed as if they were about to be drawn aside to bite.

As soon as I was alone I stole into the kitchen to ask for a duster.

“Don’t bother me; can’t you see I’m making toast?” was my greeting.

I could see she was making toast, and my attention was further called to it by the sharp ringing of a bell.

“Ah, ring away,” said the woman, going on with her task. “You may ring the bell down, and then I shan’t come till the toast’s done, do now then!”

“Please, Mary, is the – ”

I turned upon hearing the pleasant little voice again, which stopped short as I looked round, and our eyes met once more.

“No, Miss Hetty, my dear, the toast ain’t done,” said the woman more softly; “and you may tell your ma that if she is in a hurry she must wait till her hurry’s over.”

“Don’t be cross, Mary,” said the child; and tripping across the kitchen, she ran up to where the woman was kneeling before the fender, kissed her cheek, and tripped out again.

“They may thank her for it, that they may,” grumbled Mary, as if speaking to the fire, “for if it wasn’t for her I wouldn’t stop a day longer in their nasty, disagreeable old house. There!”

The toast was by this time done, and Mary was scraping away at a burnt spot, when the bell began to ring more violently than before, with the result that, instead of running off with the toast, Mary deliberately placed it upon the fender and went across to one of the dresser drawers, out of which she took a clean duster.

“Ring away!” she grumbled. “There’s a duster for you, boy. And look here; you must be hungry. Stop a minute and I’ll cut you a slice. Ah, ring away! You don’t frighten me.”

To my horror, she coolly spread thickly a slice of bread, cut it, and handed it to me before buttering the toast with which she at last crawled out of the kitchen, while I literally fled to the office, laid the bread and butter on the desk, and stopped to listen.

At the end of half an hour the bell rang again, and soon after Mary came sulkily into the office with a mug of half-cold weak tea and some lumps, not slices, of bread and butter. These she thrust before me, and I was sadly making my breakfast when Mr Blakeford entered the place.

“Come, make haste!” he said sharply; and as I glanced up at him I read in his face that for some reason or another he had taken a great dislike to me. I could not tell then, nor did I know for long afterwards, why this was; but it grew more evident hour by hour that he hated the sight of my anxious young face, and that my sojourn with him was to be far from pleasant.

He took his seat at the table while I tried to finish my breakfast, but his coming had completely taken away my appetite, and at the end of a few minutes I hastened to take the mug and plate to the kitchen, and then returned to the office.

“Now, sir,” Mr Blakeford began, “just look here. Your father owed me a large sum of money when he died, and I have taken you on here quite out of compassion. Do you hear?”

“Yes, sir,” I faltered.

“Well, you’ve got to learn to be of use to me as soon as you can. You can write, I suppose?”

“Yes, sir – not very well,” I faltered.

“Of course you can’t. No boy brought up as you have been, without going to a school, could be expected to write a decent hand. But look here, you’ll have to try and write well; so take that paper to the desk and copy it out in a neat round hand.”

I took the paper with trembling hands, climbed to the desk, spread the sheet of foolscap ready upon a big piece of blotting-paper, and took up one of the pens before me.

Those were the days before steel nibs had become common, and the pen I took was a quill split up and spoiled.

I took another and another, but they were all the same; and then, glancing at the inkstand, I found that it was dry.

I hardly dared to do it, but he glanced up at me to see if I had begun, and I ventured to say that there was neither pen nor ink.

“Of course not, blockhead. Get down and fetch some off the chimney-piece.”

I gladly obeyed; and then, resuming my seat, with the words on the paper dancing before my eyes, made my first essay as Mr Blakeford’s clerk.

The writing before me was not very distinct, but I managed to decipher it pretty well, getting a little puzzled as to the meaning of “ads.” and “exors.,” with various other legal contractions, but after the first line or two going steadily on, for, bad as my education had been, I was able to write a boy’s neat round hand, consequent upon often copying out lists for my father, or names to label the collections we made.

I had been writing about half an hour, working away diligently enough, when I heard the chair on the other side of the partition scroop, and Mr Blakeford came up behind me. I fully expected a severe scolding or a blow when he took up my sheet of foolscap and scanned it over, but he threw it down before me again with a grunt.

Soon afterwards he rose and went out, leaving me busy over my task, writing till I grew giddy and my head began to ache.

About the middle of the day Mary came in with some bread and meat; and about six o’clock there was another mug of thin tea and some pieces of bread and butter. Then the night came on, the gas was lighted, and I finished my first day in what seemed to be, and really was, as I look back upon it now, little better than a prison.

The days crept slowly by as I took my place each morning at the desk, finding always something fresh to copy in a neat round hand, and at this I patiently toiled on, with my old griefs growing more

dull as a little hope began to arise that I might soon see little Hetty to speak to again; but though from time to time I heard the voice and the sound of a piano upon which some one was industriously practising, she never came near the office.

Mr Blakeford seemed as brutal to everyone in the house as he was to me. The only person who did not seem afraid of him was Mary, and upon her his angry scoldings had no effect whatever. To me she was harsh and uncouth as on my first arrival, but, seeing that the amount given me for my meals was disgracefully small, after the first week she did take care that I had a sufficiency of food, although it only took one form.

I remember upon one occasion, having to go to the kitchen door, and finding her muttering angrily to herself, while upon seeing me she exclaimed:

“They’ve been going on about too much butter being used again. Come here!”

I went closer to her, and she hurried into the larder, and came out with a roll of fresh butter and a new loaf, cutting off a thick piece and plastering it excessively with butter.

“There!” she exclaimed, “you go back into the office, and don’t you show your face here again until you’ve eaten up every scrap of that. I’ll teach ’em to grumble about the butter.”

From that day forward Mary was always cutting me great slices of new bread and thickly spreading them with butter.

“There,” she used to say ungraciously, “I don’t like boys, but they shan’t half-starve you while I’m here.”

I was so moved by her unexpected kindness – for it really was done out of goodness of heart – that, having become somewhat hardened to being a confederate in this unlawful acquisition of provender, on one occasion I threw my arms round her neck and kissed her.

“Why, you impudent young scamp, what d’yer mean?” she exclaimed, in astonishment.

“Please, Mary,” I said, “I didn’t mean to be impudent; it was because you were so good to me.”

“Good? Stuff!” she said roughly, “I’m not good. There, get along with you, and don’t you do that again.”

I certainly should have run a good chance of being half-starved but for Mary and another friend.

One day when I opened my desk, I found just inside it a plate with an appetising piece of pudding therein, and concluded that it was Mary’s doing; but I could not be sure, for her benevolence always took the form of thick slices of bread and butter.

The next day there was a piece of cake; another day some apples; another, a couple of tartlets; and at last I determined to hide and see who was the donor of these presents, so welcome to a growing boy. I had made up my mind at last that they came from Hetty, and I was right; for going inside the large paper cupboard one day, instead of going out to fetch the newspaper according to custom, this being one of my new duties, I saw the office door gently open and Hetty’s little head peering cautiously in. Then, satisfied that no one was near, she ran lightly to the big desk; I heard it shut down hastily, and then there was a quiet rustling noise, the office door closed and she was gone.

This went on regularly, and at last one day it occurred to me that I should like to make her a present in return. I had a few shillings, the remains of my pocket-money, and I turned over in my own mind what I should give her. Cakes or sweets I voted too trifling, a doll too childish. What should I buy then? Suddenly I recollected that there were in a window in the little town some pretty silver brooches formed like a knot of twisted ribbon, and one of these I determined to buy.

It took three out of my five shillings; but it looked very pretty in its little box, reposing on pink cottonwool; and having secured it, I returned to my copying at the desk, to think out how I could make my gift.

Nothing was more simple. I wrapped up the little box neatly in a quarter-sheet of foolscap, sealed it with the office wax, and directed it in my best hand to “Miss Hetty Blakeford. From one who is very grateful.”

I felt very conscious and excited as I finished and laid it in the bottom of the desk, just where the presents were always placed for me, and to my great delight, when I looked again there was a plate of tart which the poor child had saved from her own dinner, and the packet was gone.

Chapter Five.

Mr Blakeford Suffers, and I Catch the Echo

My life at Mr Blakeford's knew but little change. It was one regular monotonous occupation – copy, copy, copy, from morning till night; and but for stolen bits of reading I believe I should have gone melancholy mad. I had no companions of my own age, no older friends to whom I could confide my troubles or ask for advice. Mr Blakeford was always stern and repellent; Mrs Blakeford, on the rare occasions when I encountered her, ill-used, and ready to say something about my being an extra expense. Only at rare intervals did I see little Hetty, and then it would be in the street, when I had been sent to the post, to fetch stamps, or on some such errand. Then I had a smile and a pleasant look to think about till our next encounter.

A year glided by in this fashion, during which time, in spite of his constant complaints, I must have grown very useful to Mr Blakeford, for my handwriting was clear and firm, and I copied a great many documents in the course of the month.

He was as brutal to me as ever, and never lost an opportunity of abusing me for my being an incumbrance, or saying something which sent me miserable to my room.

My tender point, and he knew it well enough, was an allusion to my father's debt to him; and afterwards, when I went up wretched and low-spirited to bed, I used to make a vow that some day or another I would save enough money to pay him all my father owed, and so free his memory from what the lawyer always told me was a disgrace.

Quite eighteen months had elapsed, when it became evident to me that Mr Blakeford was in some trouble with one of his clients. This latter, a tall florid-looking farmer, had, as I learned from what I heard of their conversation, borrowed money from my employer upon some security, with the understanding that payment was not to be enforced so long as the heavy interest was provided for.

Mr Blakeford's business seemed to consist a great deal in money-lending, and every now and then my old acquaintance, Mr Rowle, came to the office for instructions, and found time for a friendly chat.

Upon this occasion I noticed that Mr Blakeford was very anxious about the coming of some one to the office, and he spent a good deal of time in watching from one of the windows.

He was sternly examining a piece of copying that I had just finished, when there came three heavy knocks with a stick upon the outer door of the office.

Mr Blakeford turned yellow, and, catching me by the arm, whispered —

“It's Mr Wooster. Antony, say I'm not at home. Say I've gone out. Quick.”

He pushed me towards the door, and I went to open it just as there were three more heavy knocks, and on drawing back the fastening, there stood Mr Wooster, the stout, tall, farmer-looking man, scowling and angry.

“Where's Mr Blakeford?” he cried, catching me fiercely by the collar, and shaking a stout ash stick he carried.

“Please, sir – ” I began.

“It's a lie!” he roared; “he's not out. Didn't he tell you to say he was out?”

“Yes, sir,” I faltered, and he strode straight in; and as I followed, I saw him catch Mr Blakeford by the throat and pin him in his chair.

“Fetch the constable, Antony,” cried Mr Blakeford. “Quick!”

“Stop where you are, you young dog,” roared the farmer, “or I'll kill you. Now, you scoundrel, what do you mean by seizing my goods, by putting your rascally man in possession after promising me in this office that you would never put me to any inconvenience?”

“If you have any complaint to make against me, Mr Wooster, employ your solicitor,” cried Mr Blakeford hoarsely.

“Hang your solicitor and the whole crew, you scoundrelly serpent!” roared the farmer. “You’ve ruined me, as you ruined that poor boy’s father, and a score more before him.”

“Antony – a constable – help!” cried Mr Blakeford, for he was yellow and green with fear.

“If Antony Grace stirs, I’ll crush him like I would a snail,” cried the farmer. “And now look here, you crawling snake; I trusted you because I didn’t believe any one could deliberately ruin another for the sake of a few pounds.”

“Mr Wooster, if you dare to strike me,” cried the miserable coward, “I shall proceed against you for assault.”

“So you may,” cried the farmer, with a bitter laugh; “and as you’ve got every penny I had, much good may it do you. Look here, Blakeford; if I knew that I should be transported for life to Botany Bay for what I’m going to do, I’d do it now.”

As he spoke, he spat in his hand, took a fresh grip of the ash stick, and, in spite of Mr Blakeford’s cries for help and mercy, he thrashed him till the stick broke in pieces; and then, taking him by the collar with both hands, he shook him till he was tired, and ended by throwing him back in his chair.

“There!” cried the farmer; “now do your worst, you cheating scoundrel. I’m satisfied; go and satisfy yourself, and much good may the money you have stolen from the poor, the fatherless, and the widow do you.”

As he said this he strode out of the office and banged the door.

I was half stunned with fear and horror, and I remember how thankful I felt that I had seen Mrs Blakeford go out with Hetty half an hour before. While the thrashing was going on Mary had opened the door and looked in, but as if it were no business of hers, she had gone out again, and I was left the sole spectator.

“Are you much hurt, sir?” I said in trembling tones as soon as we were alone.

“Yes,” he whispered hoarsely, and showing his teeth, “a good deal.”

“Shall I get you something, sir?”

“Yes,” he said, panting less hoarsely, “fetch that leather case out of the passage.”

I ran and fetched the heavy leather-covered box he meant, and placed it beside him, watching him anxiously, to see if he were better.

“Now, fasten both the doors,” he whispered, laying his hand upon his breast to keep down the panting as he drew his breath more easily, and wiped the perspiration from his face.

I obeyed him, and then returned to his side.

“Now unfasten that case, Antony,” he said in quite a faint whisper; and going down on one knee I unbuckled a thick strap that was round it, and was about to raise the lid, but it was locked.

“That will do,” he said, suddenly changing his tone as he seized me by the jacket collar with one hand, the strap with the other. “You young villain!” he hissed; “you dog! Didn’t I tell you to say I was out, and you let that bully in? I’ll give you such a lesson as you will never forget.”

I was half stupefied as he raised the thick strap, and then brought it heavily down in blow after blow, cutting me all over the body, across the face, hands, legs, anywhere, and causing the most intense pain. I writhed and twined and screamed out under the first few blows in my agony; then a feeling of blind passion came over me, and I caught at and struggled with him for the possession of the strap, but in vain; for he kept me at bay with one hand and continued to beat me cruelly till I fell and then, placing one foot upon my chest, he beat me again till his arm fell in weariness to his side.

“I’ll teach you to mind me another time,” he panted, as he gloated over me in his pitiful revenge for the beating he had himself received. “I’ll give you something to remember this day by;” and, as I rose, he once more began to strike me; but this time I caught at the strap and held it with hands and teeth, twisting it round me and holding on while he strove to drag it away.

My resistance seemed to half madden him as I still held on.

“Let go, you dog!” he roared, “let go!” but I held on the more tightly; when, beside himself with rage, as a loud knocking came now at the inner door, he caught up a heavy office ruler from the table and struck me so cruel a blow across the head that I staggered backwards, and should have fallen to the floor if the door had not been dashed in and Mary caught me up.

Chapter Six.

Under Mary's Mask

"You great coward!" she cried in a rage, as, sick, faint, and heavy, and seeing everything now as in a dream, I was lifted in her stout arms.

"Leave this room, woman!" I heard him say.

"Yes, and your house too, you wretch?" she retorted; and then I heard no more till I seemed to wake in a heavy, dull, throbbing fashion in the kitchen, where some one seemed to be wetting my head with water smelling very strongly of pickles.

The place looked as if it was early morning, and the walls, with the dresser, plates, and tureens, and the bright tin dish-covers, seemed to be going round and round, but not regularly, for it was as if they went up and down in a wavy billowy way, and all the time I seemed to feel terribly sick.

"Oh, if I was a man!" I heard Mary mutter; and then more softly, "There, don't you cry, Miss Hetty; he ain't killed. It's left off bleeding now. You go to your mar's work-basket and get me a strip of rag. You ain't got any sticking-plaister, have you?"

"I've got some black court-plaister, Mary."

"That'll do, chucky; go and get it. Poor boy, he has had a beating!" she muttered as I heard Hetty's steps crossing the kitchen floor.

"I'm – I'm better now, Mary," I said faintly; and I tried to rise.

"No, you ain't better, neither; and you'll just lie quite still till your head's done," said Mary, in her rough ungracious way. "You needn't be afraid about him; he's gone to bed and sent for the doctor, because he pretends he's so bad, and Mr Emmett the constable is upstairs with him, about going to the magistrates and taking up Mr Wooster for beating him; but he didn't say nothing about taking his self up for beating you, a great ugly coward! Oh! here you are, are you?"

"Here's some clean soft linen and the court-plaister," I heard Hetty say with a sob.

"Where's your mar?" said Mary.

"Upstairs in papa's room."

"Ho?" ejaculated Mary, "and I hope she'll stay there. There, don't you begin a-crying again. Hold his hair back while I put this bit on. There, it's not going to bleed any more, and you needn't get shuddering like that at the sight of a little blood. That's the way. Poor boy, it was enough to knock down a hox. Never mind the wet hair; it's only vinegar and water. That's the way; we'll soon strap it up. I don't want to hurt your feelings, Miss Hetty, but your par's a brute."

"Oh, Mary! I won't stop in the kitchen if you say such things," cried Hetty, stamping her little foot.

"Then you'd better go back into the parlour, my dear, for I shall say what I like in my own kitchen; so there now."

"It's very cruel and unkind of you, Mary."

"And it's very cruel and unkind of your par to keep this poor boy half-starved in that orfis."

"He did not, Mary. I'm sure papa would not do such a thing."

"And that's why you go without half your dinner, and then take and put it in Antony's desk."

"Mary!"

"Ah, you may Mary as long as you like, but I've seen you do it."

"Hush! pray don't, Mary; he'll hear you."

"Not he, my dear. Poor boy! he's dropped off asleep, and the best thing too. You're asleep, aren't you?"

I tried to answer "No," but the faint deathly feeling came over me again as strongly as ever, and all seemed dark and silent once more.

It was getting dark when I awoke; for, from fainting, I must have lapsed into a heavy sleep, the result of exhaustion and the shock. My head ached, and I was very stiff and in great pain as I tried to raise myself from the pillow which propped me up in the great Windsor chair. Mary was seated opposite to me, crooning some ditty in a low voice as she sat sewing, the needle clicking against her thimble as she thrust it through the work.

The fire was burning brightly, the tea-things on the table, the pot on the hob, and some buttered toast upon the fender.

As I was gazing at her, and noticing the play of the flames over her red and rugged countenance, she suddenly raised her eyes, gazed full at me, and the harsh repulsive look passed away as she showed a set of white teeth in a pleasant smile, and rose and came to me, bending down and laying her hand upon my burning forehead.

“You won’t want no doctor,” she said; and to my utter astonishment she bent lower, kissed me, and then softly patted my cheek. “Poor boy,” she said, “it was a shame!”

I gazed up piteously and wildly, I believe, in her face, for it was so strange. She had always been so rough and harsh towards me, and her frequent donations of bread and butter seemed to have been given to me more out of spite to her employers than out of kindness to me; but now it was plain enough that under her rugged crust she possessed a true woman’s nature, and the ill-treatment I had received had completely made her my friend.

“I’ve been waiting all this time for you to wake and have tea,” she said, placing the pot and the toast on the table. “Now then, see if you can’t sit up and have some.”

“I couldn’t drink any, thank you,” I said faintly.

“Such stuff and nonsense! It’s quite fresh, and I’ve put in some extra as Miss Hetty give me. Come now, sit up and try, there’s a dear.”

I tried to sit up, but the pain was so great that I sank back, having hard work not to cry out; and seeing this, with a tenderness for which I should not have given her credit, she gently raised me and backed the pillows up, so as to support me; and then, finding that this was not sufficient, she ran out of the kitchen, to return in a few minutes, doubling up what I knew was her best shawl, which she now formed into a cushion.

“There, now we shall do,” she said cheerily; and, pouring out a cup of tea, she tasted and added milk till it was to her liking, and then held it to my lips.

It was like nectar, and I gave her a grateful look for that which seemed to impart new life to my bruised body.

“Now, you’ve got to eat some toast,” she said, and I stared at her in wonder, for it seemed to be a new Mary upon whom I gazed.

“I couldn’t eat a bit,” I said helplessly.

“But you must,” she said imperatively. “Now look here, you have had hardly anything since breakfast, and if you don’t eat, you can’t get well.”

I took the toast she held to me, and managed to eat it. That done, I had another cup of tea, and the sickly faint feeling I had had every time I moved seemed less overpowering; and at last I lay back there, listening helplessly to Mary as she chatted to me and washed up the tea-things.

“Don’t you trouble about them; they won’t come in my kitchen. He’s ill in bed, or pretending to be, and the doctor says he ain’t to move for a week. I hope he mayn’t for a month – a brute! I never see such a cowardly trick. I wish my William had him. He’s going to have the law of Mr Wooster, so Mr Emmett the constable told me; and him and the doctor’ll make out a nice case between ’em, I know. Pah! I hate lawyers and doctors. So you make yourself comfortable. I’ll be your doctor, and if they ain’t pretty civil to me, I’ll be your lawyer, too, and go to the madgistrits, see if I don’t. If I was you I wouldn’t stay with ’em a minnit after I got well. I shan’t; I’m sick of ’em.”

“I wish I could go, Mary,” I said, “but I don’t want to go now you’ve been so kind.”

“Kind! Stuff! It’s only my way. There ain’t a better-tempered girl nowheres than I am; only when you come to live in a house where the master’s a snarling, biting, growling hound, and the missus is a fault-finding, scolding, murmuring himidge, it’s enough to put out a hartchangel. But I say, if I was you, and could write such a lovely hand, I should send and tell my father and mother. Oh, I am sorry, dear – I forgot about your poor father and mother. But I would write and tell somebody.”

Mary’s allusion to my lovely handwriting was consequent upon my having copied a letter for her to one Mr William Revitts, who was a policeman in London. She had asked me to copy it for her, and direct it “proper,” because her hands were so dirty when she wrote that she was afraid he might not be able to read it. All the same, Mary’s hands seemed to have been perfectly clean, though the probabilities were that the said Mr William Revitts, “mi one dere willim,” would certainly not have been able to read the letter. In fact, I broke down over the very beginning by mistaking “one” for the number, and had to be corrected, Mary having meant to say *own*.

Her allusion to my parents touched a tender chord, and my face worked as I recalled the happy times gone by. “I have nobody to write to,” I said at last – “only my uncle.”

“Then I’d write and tell him, that I would.”

“I am not quite sure where he lives,” I said. “I never saw him till – till he came to the funeral.”

“But haven’t you got nobody belonging to you – no friends at all?”

“I think not,” I said helplessly. “No one who would help me.”

“Well, you are a one,” said Mary, pausing in the act of wiping out the tea-tray after half filling it and pouring the dirty water off at one corner. “Why, I’ve got no end o’ people belonging to me; and if that brute upstairs – as I wish he may ache bad for a week! – was to raise his hand against me, my William would be down and serve him worse than Mr Wooster did, I can tell him – a wretch!”

“Is that Mr William Revitts,” I asked, “the policeman?”

“Yes; but he wouldn’t come down here as a policeman, but as a gentleman, and he’d soon teach Mr Blakeford what he ought to – Yes! What is it?”

This was in answer to a shrill call for Mary in Mrs Blakeford’s voice, and that lady came in immediately after, to Mary’s great disgust.

“You must get hot water ready directly, Mary,” she began in an ill-used way. “I’m sure *I* don’t know what I shall do. He’s very bad indeed.”

“Oh, there’s lots of hot water,” said Mary shortly. “Biler’s full, and kettle’s full, and I’ll put on the great black saucepan and light the copper if you like.”

As she spoke Mary seized the big poker, and began stoking and hammering away at the fire in a most vicious manner, as if determined to vent her spleen upon Mr Blakeford’s coals.

“Your poor master’s dreadfully bad,” said Mrs Blakeford again, and she kept on looking at me in a way that seemed quite to indicate that I alone was to blame.

“Oh, yes, mum, I dessay he is, and so’s other people too, and wuss. I dessay he’ll get better again if he don’t die.”

Mrs Blakeford stared at Mary in a half-terrified way, and backed to the door.

“You ring the bell when you want it, and I’ll bring you a can of water upstairs,” continued Mary ungraciously.

“And couldn’t you help me a little in attending upon your master, Mary?”

“No, I couldn’t, mum,” she said shortly, “for I’m the worst nuss as ever was; and besides, I’ve got my kitchen work to do; and if you wants a nuss, there’s Mrs Jumfreys over the way would be glad to come, I dessay, only I ain’t going to have her here in my kitchen.”

Mrs Blakeford hastily backed out of the kitchen and retreated upstairs, while Mary’s rough mask dropped off as soon as she had gone.

“I wasn’t going to tell her as I nussed an invalid lady two years ’fore I came here,” she said, smiling. “Besides, I didn’t want to have nothing to do with him, for fear I should be tempted to

give him his lotion 'stead of his physic, he aggravates me so. Lotions is pison, you know – outward happlication only.”

That night I had a bed made up down in the kitchen, and passed a weary, feverish time; but towards morning a pleasant feeling of drowsiness came over me. I fell asleep to dream that I was at home once more, and all was bright and sunshiny as I sat half asleep in the summer-house, when my mother came and laid her hand upon my forehead, and I opened my eyes to find it was Mary, ready to ask me whether I was better; and though the sweet, bright dream had gone, there was something very tender in the eyes that looked in mine.

Chapter Seven.

Dreams of the Great Magnet

I was very stiff and sore, and there was a peculiar giddiness ready to assail me as soon as I moved, so Mary, in her double capacity of doctor and nurse, decided that I was not to attempt to walk about that day.

The consequence was that she made no scruple about dragging a little couch out of the parlour into the kitchen, and after I was dressed, making me lie down near the fire.

"If they don't like it about the sofy, they must do the other thing," she said, laughing. "I say, do you know what time it is?"

"No," I replied.

"Half-past ten, and I've been waiting breakfast till you woke. You *have* had a sleep. I wouldn't wake you, for I thought it would do you good."

"I am better, a great deal," I said.

"Yes; so you are. He ain't, or pretends he ain't. Miss Hetty's been catching it."

"Has she?"

"Yes; for wanting to know about you. Missus told her you were a wicked young wretch, and had half killed your master, and she was never to mention your name again."

I was decidedly better, and in the course of the afternoon I got up and found that the various objects had ceased to waltz around. I made my way up to my bedroom, and for the first time had a look at myself in the glass, where I found that a sore feeling upon my face was caused by a couple of black marks which crossed each other at a sharp angle, and that high up above my temple, and just where the hair would cover it, there was a patch of black court-plaister, which was placed across and across in strips to cover a long and painful cut.

The days glided by; the weals on my face changed colour and began to fade, while the cut on my head grew less painful. I was thrown a good deal with Mary, for no work had been set me in the office, and Mr Blakeford kept his bed, being regularly attended by the doctor.

I found – Mary being my informant – that there was to be quite a serious case made of it, and Mrs Blakeford had told her that I was to be an important witness to the assault.

A fortnight had passed; and as I sat alone day after day in the office thinking of a plan that had suggested itself to my mind, but fearing to put it into execution, I had two visitors who completely altered my career in life.

The first came one morning as I was writing a letter to my uncle – a letter destined never to reach him – in the shape of the big farmer, Mr Wooster, who rapped sharply at the office door, and gazed sternly at me as I opened it and stood in the little passage.

"Where's Blakeford?" he said sharply.

"Ill in bed, sir," I said.

"It's a lie, you young rascal," he cried, catching me by the collar. "Here, how old are you?"

"Thirteen, sir."

"And you can tell lies like that, eh? and without blushing?"

"It is not a lie, sir," I said stoutly. "Mr Blakeford hasn't been down since – since –"

"I thrashed him, eh?" he said, laughing. "It was a good thrashing too, eh, youngster? But, hallo! what's the matter with your head?"

"A cut, sir."

"What! Did you tumble down?"

"No, sir. It was done the day you – you beat Mr Blakeford."

"How?"

I was silent.

“He – he didn’t dare to do it, did he?”

I was still silent.

“Look here, youngster, tell me the truth and I’ll give you a shilling.”

“I never told a lie yet, sir,” I said stoutly, “and I don’t want your shilling.”

He looked at me intently for a few moments, and then held out his hand. “Shake hands,” he said.

I placed mine in his, and he squeezed it so that he hurt me, but I did not flinch.

“I believe you, my lad. You don’t look like a lying sort, and I wish you were out of this. Now, tell me, did he make that cut on your head?” I nodded. “What with?”

“That ruler.”

“Humph! And what for?”

“Because I let you in on that day.”

“Hang him!” he cried, striding up and down the office, for he had walked straight in, “he’s a bigger scoundrel than I thought him. Now, look here, my man, there’s going to be an action, or a trial, or something, against me, and you’ll be the principal witness. Now, what are you going to do?”

“Going to do, sir?”

“Yes,” he said impatiently; “you’ll have to appear before the magistrates, and you’ll be asked all about my thrashing your master. What are you going to say?”

“I shall tell them the truth, sir.”

“No, you won’t, my boy. You’ll say what Mr Blakeford tells you to say.”

“I shall tell the truth, sir,” I said stoutly.

“Look here, my lad, if you tell the truth, that’s all I want; if you don’t, you’ll ruin me.”

“I’m sure I shall tell the truth, sir,” I said, colouring up and speaking earnestly.

“You’ll tell the magistrates, then, that I snatched up the poker and beat Mr Blakeford with that, eh?”

“No, sir, it was your walking-stick.”

“Was it anything like that?” he said, holding out the one he carried.

“Yes, sir, just like it. Here are the pieces, sir,” I said; and I took them out of my desk, where I had placed them.

“You’re a brave boy,” he cried, rubbing his hands; “so they are. Now look here, my boy: Mr Blakeford says I assaulted him with the poker. Just you button those pieces of stick up in your socket – no, give them to me; I’ll take them. Now; when the day comes, and I ask you to tell the truth about it, you speak out honestly, or, better still, go and hide yourself and never come near the court at all. There’s half-a-crown for you. What, you won’t take it! Well, just as you like. Good-bye!”

He shook hands with me again, and nodding in a friendly way, left the office.

He had not been, gone more than an hour when there was another knock at the door, and on opening it, I admitted Mr Rowle, who smiled at me as he took off his hat and smoothed his thin streaky hair across his bald head.

“Well, young un,” he said, “why, you’re growing quite a man. But what’s the matter with your forehead?”

I told him, and he gave a low, long whistle.

“I say, young un,” he said, “I dare say it ain’t no business of mine, but if I was you, I should look after another place. Perhaps, though, he wouldn’t let you go.”

“Mr Blakeford often says, Mr Rowle, that he wishes I was out of his sight.”

“Gammon!” said my visitor; “don’t you believe him. You do as you like; but if I was a boy like you, I wouldn’t stay here.”

I looked up at him guiltily, and he stared hard at me, as if reading my thoughts.

“Why, what’s wrong?” he said; “you look as red as a turkey cock!”

“Please, Mr Rowle – but you won’t tell Mr Blakeford?”

“Tell Mr Blakeford? Not I.”

“I mean to go up to London, and try and find my uncle.”

“Try and find him? What, don’t you know where he lives?”

“No, sir.”

“Humph! London’s a big place, you know.”

“Yes, sir, but I dare say I could find him.”

“What is he – a gentleman?”

“Yes, sir, I think so.”

“So don’t I, my boy, or he’d never have left you in charge of old Pouncewax. But lookye here now; out with it! What do you mean to do – give notice to leave, or are you going to cut?”

“Cut what, sir?”

“Cut what! Why, cut away – run up to London.”

I hesitated for a few moments and hung my head; then, looking up in my old friend’s face, as he thrust his hand into his cuff – and I expected to see him draw his pipe – I felt that I had nothing to fear from him, and I spoke out.

“Please, Mr Rowle, I’m so unhappy here, that I was going to run away.”

He caught me by the collar so sharply that I thought he was going to punish me; but it was only touring down his other hand with a sharp clap upon my shoulder.

“I’m glad of it, young un. Run away, then, before he crushes all the hope and spirit out of you.”

“Then you don’t think it would be very wrong, sir?”

“I think it would be very right, young un; and I hope if you find your uncle, he won’t send you back. If he wants to, don’t come: but run away again. Look here; you’ll want a friend in London. Go and see my brother.”

“Your brother, sir?”

“Yes, my brother Jabez. You’ll know him as soon as you see him; he’s just like me. How old do you think I am?”

“I should think you’re fifty, sir.”

“Fifty-eight, young un; and so’s Jabez. There, you go and put his name and address down. Fifty-eight he is, and I’m fifty-eight, so there’s a pair of us. Now, then, write away: Mr Jabez Rowle, Ruddell and Lister.”

“Mr Jabez Rowle,” I said, writing it carefully down, “Good. Now Ruddell and Lister.”

“Ruddell and Lister.”

“Commercial printers.”

“Com-mer-cial prin-ters.”

“Short Street, Fetter Lane.”

“Fetter Lane.”

“And now let’s look.” I handed him the scrap of paper.

“Why, it’s lovely. Copper-plate’s nothing to it, young un. There, you go up and see him, and tell him you’ve come up to London to make your fortune, and he’ll help you, I went up to London to make mine, young un.”

“And did you make it, sir?” I said eagerly. He looked down at his shabby clothes, smoothed his hair, and then, with a curious smile upon his face —

“No, young un, I didn’t make it. I made something else instead.”

“Did you, sir?”

“Yes, young un – a mess of it. Look here, I might have got on, but I learned to drink like a fish. Don’t you. Mind this: drink means going downwards into the mud; leaving it alone means climbing up to the top of the tree. Bless your young heart, whatever you do, don’t drink.”

“No, sir,” I said, “I will not;” but I did not appreciate his advice.

“There, you stick to that paper. And now, how much money have you got?”

“Money, sir?”

“Yes, money. London’s a hundred miles away, and you can’t walk.”

“I think I could, sir.”

“Well, try it; and ride when you’re tired. How much have you got?”

I took out my little blue silk purse, and counted in sixpences half-a-crown.

He looked at me for some few moments, and then stood thinking, as if trying to make up his mind about something.

“I’ll do it,” he muttered. “Look here, young un, you and I are old friends, ain’t we?”

“Oh, yes!” I said eagerly.

“Then I will do it,” he said, and untying his neckerchief, he, to my great surprise, began to unroll it, to show me the two ends that were hidden in the folds. “For a rainy day,” he said, “and this is a rainy day for you. Look here, young un; this is my purse. Here’s two half-sovs tied up in these two corners – that’s one for you, and one for me.”

“Oh, no, sir,” I said, “I’d rather not take it!” and I shrank away, for he seemed so poor and shabby, that the idea troubled me.

“I don’t care whether you’d rather or not,” he said, untying one corner with his teeth. “You take it, and some day when you’ve made your fortune, you give it me back – if so be as you find I haven’t succeeded to my estate.”

“Do you expect to come in for an estate some day, sir?” I said eagerly.

“Bless your young innocence, yes. A piece of old mother earth, my boy, six foot long, and two foot wide. Just enough to bury me in.”

I understood him now, and a pang shot through me at the idea of another one who had been kind to me dying. He saw my look and nodded sadly.

“Yes, my lad, perhaps I shall be dead and gone long before then.”

“Oh, sir, don’t; it’s so dreadful!” I said.

“No, no, my boy,” he said quietly; and he patted my shoulder, as he pressed the half-sovereign into my hand. “Not so dreadful as you think. It sounds very awful to you youngsters, with the world before you, and all hope and brightness; but some day, please God you live long enough, you’ll begin to grow very tired, and then it will seem to you more like going to take a long rest. But there, there, we won’t talk like that. Here, give me that money back?”

I handed it to him, thinking that he had repented of what he had done, and he hastily rolled the other half-sovereign up, and re-tied his handkerchief.

“Here,” he said, “stop a minute, and don’t shut the door. I shall soon be back.”

He hurried out, and in five minutes was back again to gaze at me smiling.

“Stop a moment,” he said, “I must get sixpence out of another pocket. I had to buy an ounce o’ ’bacco so as to get change. Now, here you are – hold out your hand.”

I held it out unwillingly, and he counted eight shillings and four sixpences into it.

“That’s ten,” he said; “it’s better for you so. Now you put some in one pocket and some in another, and tie some up just the same as I have, and put a couple of shillings anywhere else you can; and mind and never show your money, and never tell anybody how much you’ve got. And mind this, too, when anybody asks you to give him something to drink, take him to the pump. That’s all. Stop. Don’t lose that address. Gov’nor’s not down, I s’pose?”

“No, sir,” I said.

“All right then, I shan’t stay. Good-bye, young un. When are you going?”

“I’m not quite sure yet, sir.”

“No? Well, perhaps I shan’t see you again. Jabez Rowle, mind you. Tell him all about yourself, mind, and – good-bye.”

He trotted off, but came back directly, holding out his hand.

“God bless you, young un,” he said huskily. “Good-bye.”

Before I could speak again, the door closed sharply, and I was alone.

Chapter Eight.

I Take a Bold Step

My head was in a whirl as soon as Mr Rowle had gone, and I sat at my desk thinking over my project, for I had felt for days past that I could not stay where I was – that I would sooner die; and night after night I had lain awake thinking of the, to me, terrible step I proposed to take. My life at Mr Blakeford's had been such a scene of misery and torture, that I should have gone long enough before, had I dared. Now that I had grown older, and a little more confident, I had gradually nurtured the idea as my only hope, and the events of the past weeks had pretty well ripened my scheme.

As I sat there, I laid my arms on the big desk, and my head down upon them, trembling at my daring, as the idea took a far more positive shape than ever; and now a feeling of reluctance to leave had come upon me. Mary had been so kind; and then there was little Hetty, who had silently shown me so many tokens of her girlish goodwill.

I felt as I sat there, with the money and address in my pocket, that I must go now; and to act as a spur to my intentions, the words of Mr Wooster came trooping across my memory.

Would Mr Blakeford want me to go to the magistrates and say what was not true?

In imagination, I saw his threatening dark face before me, and his thin lips just parting to display his white teeth in that doglike smile of his, and I shuddered, as I felt how I feared him. It would be horrible to be threatened till I promised to say what he wished, and to lie to the magistrates with Mr Wooster's threatening face watching me the while.

But he would not ask me to tell a lie, I thought, and I could not run away. Mary would never forgive me, and Hetty would think that I really did cause her father to be so beaten. No: I felt I could not go, and that somehow I must get away from the house, go straight to Mr Rowle's lodgings, and give him back the money, which I had received upon such a false pretence.

It was all over. I felt the idea of freeing myself from my wretched slavery was one that could never be carried out, and I must wait patiently and bear my miserable lot.

Crack!

I leaped up as if I had been shot, to see Mr Blakeford, in dressing-gown and slippers, his hair cut short, and looking very pale, standing in the office, the ruler in his hand, with which he had just struck the table and made me start.

"Asleep?" he said sharply.

"No, sir," I said, trembling as I looked at him over the partition. "No, sir, I was not asleep."

"It's a lie, sir, you were asleep. Come here."

I descended from the stool, and opening the partition door, went slowly into his part of the office, and stood by the table, his dark eyes seeming to pierce me through and through.

"Been worked so hard since I was ill, eh?" he said sneeringly.

"No, sir, I – "

"Hold your tongue. What's the matter with your head?"

"My head, sir?" I stammered.

"Yes, that half-healed cut. Oh, I remember, you fell down didn't you?"

"Fell down, sir! No, I – "

"You fell down – pitched down – I remember, while climbing."

"No, sir, I – "

"Look here, you dog," he hissed between his teeth; "you fell down, do you hear? and cut your head when climbing. Do you understand?"

"No, sir, I – "

“Once more, Antony Grace, listen to me. If anyone asks you how you came by that cut, mind – you fell down when climbing – you fell down when climbing. If you forget that – ”

He did not finish, but seemed to hold me with his eye as he played with the ruler and made it go up and down.

“Look here, my boy, you are my clerk, and you are to do exactly as I tell you. Now, listen to me. The day after to-morrow there is to be a case of assault brought before the magistrates, and you will be sworn as a witness. You let Mr Wooster in – curse him! – and you saw him come up to my table where I was sitting, and make a demand for money.”

“Please, sir, I did not hear him ask for money.”

“You did, sir,” he thundered; “and you saw him strike me with his stick.”

“Yes, sir, I saw him strike you,” I cried hastily. “Oh, you did see that, did you?” he said in sneering tones.

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you see the stick break?”

“Yes, sir,” I said eagerly.

“Oh, come; I’m glad you can remember that. Then he caught up the poker and beat me with it heavily across the body, till the poker was bent right round; and at last, when I was quite stunned and senseless, and with the blood streaming from my lips, he left me half dead and went away.”

There was a pause here, during which I could not take my eyes from his. “You saw all that, didn’t you?”

“No, sir,” I said, “he did not take the poker.”

“What?”

“He did not take the poker, sir.”

“Oh! and he did not beat me with it till it was bent?”

“No, sir.”

“Go and fetch that poker,” he said quietly; and I went trembling, and picked it up, to find it quite bent. “There, you see?” he said.

“Yes, sir, it is bent.”

“Of course it is, Antony. You don’t remember that he struck me with it, eh?”

“No, sir,” I said, trembling.

“Ah, I shall have to refresh your memory, my boy. You remember, of course, about the blood?”

“No, sir.”

“What’s that on the floor?”

I looked down at the place to which he pointed with the bent poker, and there were some dark stains where I had fallen. Then, raising my eyes to his again, I looked at him imploringly.

“I shall soon refresh your memory, Antony,” he said, laughing silently, and looking at me so that I shivered again. “You will find, on sitting down and thinking a little, that you recollect perfectly well how Mr Wooster beat me cruelly with the poker, till it was bent like this, and left me bleeding terribly on the office floor. There, hold your tongue. You’ll recollect it all. Sit down and try and remember it, there’s a good boy. I’m better now, but I can’t talk much. Let me see, Antony, what time do you go to bed?”

“Nine o’clock, sir,” I faltered.

“Exactly. Well, don’t go to sleep, my boy. I’ll come up to you after you are in bed, and see if you remember it any better. Go back to your desk.”

I crept back, watching him the while, as he stood balancing the poker in his hand, and smiling at me in a way that made my blood turn cold. Then, throwing the poker back with a crash into the grate, he went out as silently as he had come, and I sat there thinking for quite two hours.

At the end of that time, I took a sheet of paper, and wrote upon it as well as my wet trembling hands would let me —

“My dear Mary, —

“Please don’t think me a very ungrateful boy, but I cannot, and I dare not, stay here any longer. When you read this I shall be gone, never to come back any more. Please tell Miss Hetty I shall never forget her kindness, and I shall never forget yours.

“I remain, your affectionate friend, —

“Antony Grace.

“P.S. — Some day, perhaps, we shall meet somewhere. I am very unhappy, and I cannot write any more. Mr Blakeford frightens me.”

This letter I doubled and sealed up in the old fashion, and kept in my pocket, meaning to post it, and at last, when I went into the kitchen to tea, I was half afraid to meet Mary. She noticed my pale face, and I told her the truth, that I had a bad headache, making it an excuse for going up to bed at eight o’clock, feeling as if the greatest event in my life were about to take place, and shaking like a leaf.

I felt that I had an hour to spare, and spent part of the time in making a bundle of my best clothes and linen. I tied up in a handkerchief, too, some thick slices of bread and butter, and some bread and meat that I had found that afternoon in my desk. Then, as the night grew darker, I sat thinking and asking myself, after placing my bundles ready, whether I should go at once, or wait till I heard Mr Blakeford coming.

I had just decided to go at once, feeling that I dare not face Mr Blakeford again, when I heard his voice downstairs, and started up, trembling in every limb.

“Where’s that boy?”

“Gone to bed,” said Mary surlily. Then I heard a door shut directly after, and breathed more freely. I felt that I must go at once, and stood in the middle of the room, shivering with nervous excitement, as I thought of the madness of the step I was about to undertake.

A dozen times over I felt that I dare not go, till the recollection of Mr Blakeford’s dark threatening face and sneering smile gave me strength, and made me call up the picture of myself before the magistrates telling all I knew about the assault, of course not saying anything about the poker, or my employer’s injuries; and then I began to think about meeting him afterwards.

“He’ll half kill me,” I thought; and stopping at this, I nerved myself for what I had to do, and putting on my cap, went to the door and listened.

I had spent so much time in indecision that the church clock was striking ten, and I started as I thought of Mr Blakeford being already upon the stairs.

From where I stood I could have seen the light shining out of the kitchen where Mary sat at work; but it was not there, and I knew that she must have gone up to bed.

It now flashed upon me that this was why Mr Blakeford had been waiting – he did not want Mary to interfere; and a cold chill came over me as I felt that he meant to beat me till I consented to say what he wished.

There was no time to lose, so, darting back, I caught up my two bundles, crept to the door, descended the stairs on tiptoe, and felt my heart beat violently at every creak the woodwork of the wretched steps gave.

Twice over a noise in the house made me turn to run back, but as there was silence once more, I crept down, and at last reached the mat in front of the office door.

At the end of the passage was the parlour, where I knew Mr Blakeford would be sitting, and as I looked towards it in the darkness, I could see a faint glimmer of light beneath the door, and then heard Mr Blakeford cough slightly and move his chair.

Turning hastily, I felt for the handle of the office door, which was half glass, with a black muslin blind over it, and moving the handle, I found the door locked. The key was in, though, and

turning it, there was a sharp crack as the bolt shot back, and then as I unclosed this door, I heard that of the parlour open, and a light shone down the passage.

“He’s coming?” I said in despair; and for a moment, my heart failed me, so great an influence over me had this man obtained, and I stood as if nailed to the floor. The next moment, though, with my heart beating so painfully that it was as if I was being suffocated, I glided into the office and closed the door, holding it shut, without daring to let the handle turn and the catch slip back.

If he came into the office, I was lost, and in imagination, I saw myself with my cap on, and my bundles under my arm, standing trembling and detected before him. Trembling, indeed, as the light came nearer, and I saw him dimly through the black blind approaching the office door.

He was coming into the office, and all was over! Closer, closer he came, till he was opposite the door, when he stopped short, as if listening.

His face was not a yard from mine, and as I gazed at him through the blind, with starting eyes, seeing his evil-looking countenance lit up by the chamber candlestick he carried, and the grim smile upon his lips, I felt that he must hear me breathe.

I was paralysed, for it seemed to me that his eyes were gazing straight into mine – fascinating me as it were, where I stood.

He was only listening, though, and instead of coming straight into the office, he turned off sharp to the left, and began to ascend the stairs leading to my bedroom.

There was not a moment to lose, but I was as if in a nightmare, and could not stir, till, wrenching myself away, I darted across the office to the outer door, slipped the bolts, and turned the key with frantic haste, just as his steps sounded overhead, and I heard him calling me by name.

The door stuck, and I could not get it open, and all the time I could hear him coming. He ran across the room, every footstep seeming to come down upon my head like lead. He was descending the stairs, and still that door stuck fast at the top.

In a despairing moment, I looked behind me to see the light shining in at the glass door as he descended, and then my hand glided to the top of the door, and I found that I had not quite shot back the bolt.

The next moment it was free, the door open, and I was through; but, feeling that he would catch me in the yard, I tore out the key, thrust it into the hole with trembling fingers, and as he dashed open the inner door I closed the one where I stood, and locked it from the outside.

I had somehow held on to my bundles, and was about to run across the yard to the pump in the corner, place one foot upon the spout, and by this means reach the top of the wall, when I stopped, paralysed once more by the fierce barking of the dog.

To my horror I found that he was loose, for his hoarse growling came from quite another part of the yard to that where his kennel was fixed; and I stood outside the door, between two enemies, as a faint streak of light shot out through the keyhole, playing strangely upon the bright handle of the key. – “Are you there, Antony? Come back this moment, sir. Unlock this door.”

I did not answer, but stood fast, as the handle was tried and shaken again and again.

“You scoundrel! come back, or it will be worse for you. Leo, Leo, Leo!”

The dog answered the indistinctly heard voice with a sharp burst of barking; and as the sound came nearer, I seemed to see the animal’s heavy bull-head, and his sharp teeth about to be fixed in my throat.

The perspiration dripped from me, and in my horror I heard Mr Blakeford exclaim —

“You are there, you scoundrel, I know. I heard you lock the door. Come in directly, or I’ll half kill you.”

My hoarse breathing was the only sound I heard. Then, directly after, there were hasty steps crossing the office, and I knew he had gone round to reach the front.

There was not a moment to lose, and I was about to risk the dog’s attack, sooner than face Mr Blakeford, when a thought struck me.

I had the little bundle loosely tied up in a handkerchief, and in it the bread and meat.

This might quiet the dog; and with a courage I did not know I possessed, I hastily tore it open, and taking a couple of steps into the yard, called out, in a loud quick voice, "Here, Leo, Leo!" throwing the bread and meat towards where I believed the dog to be.

There was a rush, a snarling whine, and the dog was close to me for the moment. The next, as I heard him in the darkness seize the meat, I was across the yard, with one foot on the pump, and as I raised myself the front door was flung open, and I heard Mr Blakeford rush out.

Chapter Nine.

On the Road to London

As Mr Blakeford ran down to the garden gate, I reached the top of the wall, from whence I should have dropped down, but that he was already outside, and would, I felt sure, have heard me. If I had then run away, it seemed to me that it would be the easiest of tasks for him to pursue me, and hunt me down.

If I stayed where I was, I felt that he would see me against the sky, and I knew he would pass close by me directly to reach the yard doors, when, half in despair, I threw myself flat down, and lay as close as I could, embracing the wall, and holding my bundle in my teeth.

I heard him pass beneath the wall directly, and enter the yard by the gate, which he closed after him, before running up to the office door and unlocking it, allowing a stream of light to issue forth just across where the dog was peaceably eating my provender.

“Curse him, he has gone!” I heard Mr Blakeford mutter, and my blood ran cold, as he made a hasty tour of the place. “I’ll have him back if it costs me five hundred pounds,” he snarled. “Antony, Antony! Come here, my boy, and I’ll forgive you.”

He stopped, listening, but of course I did not move; and then, in an access of rage, he turned upon the dog.

“You beast, what are you eating there?” he roared. “Why didn’t you seize him? Take that!”

There was a dull thud as of a heavy kick, a yelp, a whine, a snarl, and then a dull worrying noise, as if the dog had flown at his master, who uttered a loud cry of pain, followed by one for help; but I waited to hear no more, for, trembling in every limb, I had grasped my bundle and dropped from the wall, when with the noise growing faint behind me I ran with all my might in the direction of the London Road.

Hearing steps, though, coming towards me directly after, I stopped short, and ran into a garden, cowering down amongst the shrubs, for I felt certain that whoever it was in front would be in Mr Blakeford’s pay, and I waited some time after he had passed before continuing my flight.

I ran on that night till there was a hot feeling of blood in my throat, and then I staggered up to, and leaned panting upon, a hedge by the roadside, listening for the sounds of pursuit. A dog barking in the distance sounded to me like Leo, and I felt sure that Mr Blakeford was in hot chase; then I stumbled slowly on, but not for any great distance, my pace soon degenerating into a walk, till I regained my breath, when I ran on again for a time, but at a steady trot now, for I had not since heard the barking of the dog. Still I did not feel safe, knowing that at any moment Mr Blakeford might overtake me in his pony-chaise, when, unless I could escape by running off across country, I should be ignominiously dragged back.

At last, after several attempts to keep up my running, I was compelled to be content with a steady fast walk, and thus I trudged on hour after hour, till Rowford town, where I had spent so many wretched hours, was a long way behind.

I had passed through two villages, but so far I had not met another soul since leaving Rowford, nor heard the sound of wheels.

It was a very solitary road, leading through a pretty woodland tract of the country, and often, as I toiled on, I came to dark overshadowed parts, passing through woods, and I paused, not caring to go on. But there was a real tangible danger in the rear which drove me onwards, and, daring the imaginary dangers, I pushed on with beating heart, thinking of robbers, poachers, and highway men, as I tried to rejoice that there were no dangerous wild beasts in England.

At last, I could go no farther, but sank down perfectly exhausted upon a heap of stones that had been placed there for mending the road; and, in spite of my fears of pursuit, nature would have her way, and I fell fast asleep.

The sun was shining full upon me when I awoke, stiff and sore, wondering for a moment where I was; and when at last I recalled all the past, I sprang up in dread, and started off at once, feeling that I had been slothfully wasting my opportunity, and that now I might at any moment be overtaken.

As I hurried on, I looked down at my feet, to find that my boots and trousers were thickly covered with dust; but there was no one to see me, and I kept on, awaking fully to the fact that I was faint and hungry.

These sensations reminded me of the contents of the little handkerchief, and I wistfully thought of the bread and butter that I might have saved.

Then I stopped short, for the recollection of one bundle reminded me of the other, and it was gone. Where was it? I had it when I sank down upon that stone-heap, and I must have come away and left it behind.

In my faint, hungry state, this discovery was terribly depressing, for the bundle contained my good suit of mourning, besides my linen and a few trifles, my only valuables in this world.

"I must have them back," I thought; and I started off to retrace my steps at a run, knowing that I had come at least a couple of miles.

It was dreadfully disheartening, but I persevered, gazing straight before me, lest I should run into danger.

It seemed as if that stone-heap would never come into sight, but at last I saw it lying grey in the distant sunshine, and forgetting my hunger, I ran on till I reached the spot, and began to look round.

I had expected to see the bundle lying beside the stone-heap, as soon as I came in sight, but there were no traces of it; and though I searched round, and in the long grass at the side, there was no bundle.

Yes; I was certain that I had it when I sank down, and therefore somebody must have taken it while I slept, for no one had passed me on the road.

I could have sat down and cried with vexation, but I had pretty well outgrown that weakness; and after a final glance round I was about to go on again, when something a hundred yards nearer the town took my attention, and, running up to it, I saw a pair of worn-out boots lying on the grass by the roadside.

They seemed to be nothing to me, and, sick at heart, I turned back and continued my journey, longing now for the sight of some village, where I could buy a little milk and a few slices of bread.

The sun was growing hot, and licking up the dew beside the dusty road, but it was a glorious morning, and in spite of my loss there was a feeling of hopefulness in my heart at being free from the slavery I had endured at Mr Blakeford's. I thought of it all, and wondered what Mary would say, what Hetty would think, and whether Mr Blakeford would try to fetch me back.

As I thought on, I recovered the ground I had lost, and reached a pretty part of the road, where it dipped down in a hollow as it passed through a wood. It was very delicious and shady, and the birds were singing as they used to sing from the woods around my old home; and so sweet and full of pleasant memories were these sounds, that for the moment I forgot my hunger, and stood by a gate leading into the woods and listened.

My reverie was broken by the sound of wheels coming up behind me, and taking alarm on the instant, I climbed over the gate and hid myself, crouching down amongst the thick bracken that showed its silvery green fronds around.

I made sure it was Mr Blakeford in pursuit, and, once secure of my hiding-place, I rose up gently, so that I could peer in between the trees and over the high bank to the sloping road, down which, just as I had pictured, the four-wheeled chaise was coming at a smart trot, with Mr Blakeford driving, and somebody beside him.

My first impulse was to turn round and dash wildly through the wood; but I partly restrained myself, partly felt too much in dread, and crouched there, watching through the bracken till, as the chaise came nearer, I saw that a common, dusty, tramp-looking boy was seated beside Mr Blakeford, and the next moment I saw that he had my bundle upon his knee.

For a moment I thought I might be deceived; but no, there was no doubt about it. There was my bundle, sure enough, and that boy must have taken it from me as I lay asleep, and then met and told Mr Blakeford where he had seen me.

I was pretty nearly right, but not quite, as it afterwards proved. But meanwhile the chaise had passed on, Mr Blakeford urging the pony to a pretty good speed, and gazing sharply to right and left as he went along.

I had hardly dared to breathe as he passed, but crouched lower and lower, fancying that a robin hopping about on the twigs near seemed ready to betray me: and not until the chaise had gone by some ten minutes or so did I dare to sit up and think about my future movements.

The recollection of the dusty, wretched look of the lad who held my bundle set me brushing my boots and trousers with some fronds of fern, and feeling then somewhat less disreputable-looking, I ventured at last to creep back into the road and look to right and left.

I was terribly undecided as to what I ought to do. Go back I would not, and to go forward seemed like rushing straight into danger. To right or left was nothing but tangled wood, wherein I should soon lose myself, and therefore nothing was left for me to do but go straight on, and this I did in fear and trembling, keeping a sharp look-out in front, and meaning to take to the woods and fields should Mr Blakeford's chaise again appear in sight.

For quite an hour I journeyed on, and then the roofs of cottages and a church tower appeared, making me at one moment press eagerly forward, the next shrink back for fear Mr Blakeford should be there. But at last hunger prevailed, and making a bold rush, I walked right on, and seeing no sign of danger, I went into the village shop and bought a little loaf and some wonderfully strong-smelling cheese.

"Did you see a gentleman go by here in a chaise?" I ventured to say.

"What, with a boy in it?" said the woman who served me.

I nodded.

"Yes, he went by ever so long ago. You'll have to look sharp if you want to catch them. The gentleman was asking after you."

I felt that I turned pale and red by turns, as I walked out into the road, wondering what it would be best to do, when, to my great delight I saw that there was a side lane off to the left, just a little way through the village, and hurrying on, I found that it was quite a byway off the main road. Where it led to I did not know, only that there was a finger-post with the words "To Charlock Bridge" upon it, and turning down I walked quite a couple of miles before, completely worn out, I sat down beside a little brook that rippled across the clean-washed stones of the road, and made the most delicious meal I ever ate in my life.

Bread and cheese and spring water under the shade of a high hedge, in which a robin sat – it looked to me like the one I had seen in the wood – and darted down and picked up the crumbs I threw it from time to time. As my hunger began to be appeased, and I had thoroughly slaked my burning thirst, by using my closed hand for a scoop, I began to throw crumbs into the bubbling brook, to see them float down for some distance, and then be snapped up by the silvery little fishes with which the stream seemed to swarm. All the while, though, my head had been constantly turning from side to side, in search of danger, and at last just as I was about to continue my journey, hoping to gain the London Road once more, I saw the danger I sought, in the shape of the boy with my bundle running across the fields, as if he had come from the high road, and was trying to get into the lane below me to cut me off.

I looked sharply behind me, expecting to see the chaise of Mr Blakeford, but it was not in sight; so, stooping down, I waded quickly through the brook, kept under the shelter of the hedge, and ran on steadily, so as not to be out of breath.

The water filled my boots, but it only felt pleasantly cool, and, as I thought, made me better able to run, while, as I raised my head from time to time, I could catch sight of the boy with the bundle running hard across field after field, and losing so much time in getting through hedges or over gates that I felt that I should be past the spot where he would enter the lane before he could reach it.

To my surprise, though, I found that the lane curved sharply round to the right, giving him less distance to run, so that when I tried hard to get by him, having given up all idea of hiding, I found that he had jumped over into the lane before I came up. Then to my horror, as I turned a sharp corner, I came straight upon him, he being evidently quite as much surprised as I at the suddenness of our encounter – the winding of the lane and the height of the hedges having kept us out of sight the one of the other, until the very last moment, when we came face to face, both dusty, hot, weary, and excited as two lads could be, and for the moment neither of us moved.

I don't know how it was that I did not try to run off by the fields in another direction, but it seems to me now that I was stirred by the same savage instincts as an ostrich, who, seeing any hunter riding as if to cut him off, immediately forgets that there is plenty of room behind, and gallops across his pursuer's track, instead of right away.

As I ran panting up, the lad stopped short, and my eyes falling upon my bundle, a new set of thoughts came flashing across my mind, making me forget my pursuer in the high road.

As for the lad, he stood staring at me in a shifty way, and it soon became evident that he gave me as much credit for chasing him as I did him for chasing me.

He was the first to speak, and calling up the low cunning of his nature, he advanced a step or two, saying:

"I say, you'd better hook it; that, gent's a-looking for you."

"You give me my bundle," I said, making a snatch at it, and getting hold with one hand, to which I soon joined the other.

"Taint your bundle," he said fiercely. "Let go, or I'll soon let you know. Let go, will yer?"

He shook at it savagely, and dragged me here and there, for he was the bigger and stronger; but I held on with all my might. I was horribly frightened of him, for he was a coarse, ruffianly-looking fellow; but inside that bundle was my little all, and I determined not to give it up without a struggle.

"Here, you wait till I get my knife out," he roared. "It's my bundle, yer young thief!"

"It is not," I panted: "you stole it from me while I lay asleep."

"Yer lie! Take that!"

That was a heavy blow on my chin which cut my lip, and seemed to loosen my teeth, causing me intense pain; but though for a moment I staggered back, the blow had just the opposite effect to that intended by the boy. A few moments before, I was so horribly afraid of him, that I felt that I must give up; now the pain seemed to have driven all the fear out of me, for, springing at him with clenched fists, I struck out wildly, and with all my might; the bundle went down in the dust, and, after a minutes scuffle, and a shower of blows, there, to my intense astonishment, lay the boy too, grovelling and twisting about, rubbing his eyes with his fists, and howling dismally.

"You let me alone; I never did nothing to you," he whined.

"You did; you stole my bundle," I cried, in the heat of my triumph.

"No, I didn't. I on'y picked it up. I didn't know it was yourn."

"You knew I was by it," I said.

"Yes; but I thought perhaps it weren't yourn," he howled.

"Now look here," I said, "you give me what you took out of it."

"I didn't take nothing out of it," he whined. "I was only going to, when that gent came along on the shay, and asked me where you was."

“You’ve got my best shoes on,” I said. “Take them off.”

He pulled them off, having half spoiled them by cutting the fronts, to let his feet go in.

“Where’s that gentleman now?” I said.

“I don’t know,” he whined. “He said if I didn’t show him where you was, he’d hand me over to the police; and I cut off across the fields, when we was walking the pony up a hill.”

“You’re a nice blackguard,” I said, cooling down fast now, as the fear of Mr Blakeford came back. I was wondering, too, how to get rid of my conquest, when, just as I stooped to pick up the shoes, he shrank away, uttering a cowardly howl, as if I had aimed a blow at him; and, starting up, he ran back along the lane shoeless, and seemed making for the high road.

“He’ll tell Mr Blakeford,” I thought; and catching up the bundle, I hurried on in the opposite direction, till, finding the brook again cross the road, I hastily stooped down and washed my bleeding knuckles, before starting off once more, getting rid of the marks of the struggle as fast as I could, and looking back from time to time, in momentary expectation of seeing Mr Blakeford’s head above the hedge.

Chapter Ten.

Along the Towing-Path

I felt in better spirits now. My rest and breakfast, and my encounter with the boy, had given me more confidence in myself. Then, too, I had recovered my bundle, replacing in it my shoes, and, after carefully wrapping them up, the remains of my bread and cheese.

Hour after hour I walked on, always taking the turnings that led to the right, in the belief that sooner or later they would bring me to the London Road, which, however, they never did; and at last, in the afternoon, I sat down under a tree and made a second delicious meal.

I passed, during the rest of that day's journey, through a couple more villages, at the latter of which I obtained a large mug of milk for a penny; and at last, footsore and worn out, I found myself at nightfall far away in a pleasant pastoral country, where haymaking seemed to be carried on a good deal, from the stacks I passed. There were hills behind me, and hills again straight before me, the part where I was being very level.

"What am I to do?" I asked myself, for I could go no farther, and a feeling of desolation began to make my heart sink. "I must sleep somewhere – but where?"

The answer came in the shape of a haystack, one side of which was being cut away, and soon after, I was seated on the sweet-scented, soft stuff, feasting away once more, to drop at last, almost unconsciously, into a sweet sleep, from which I started up to find it quite dark, and that I was growing cold.

There was plenty of loose straw close by, as if threshing had been going on, and taking my bundle for a pillow, and nestling beneath the straw which I drew over the hay, I was soon fast asleep once more, only to wake up rested and refreshed as the birds were singing cheerily upon another sunshiny morning.

My toilet consisted in getting rid of the bits of straw and hay, after which I started to walk on once more, following a winding lane, which brought me out at a wooden bridge, crossing a river, down by whose pebbly side I finished my toilet, and rose refreshed and decent-looking, for my bundle contained my brush and comb.

There was a little public-house on the other side of the stream, with cows in a field hard by, and directing my steps there, after stopping on the bridge for a few minutes to gaze at the fish glancing in the sunshine, I found I could buy some bread and milk, the privilege being given me of sitting down on a bench and watching the sparkling river as I made my breakfast.

With every mouthful came hope and confidence. I felt as if I really was free, and that all I now had to do was to trudge steadily on to London. How long it would take me I did not know – perhaps a month. But it did not matter; I could continue to be very sparing of my money, so as to make it last.

It was a red-armed, apple-faced woman who gave me the mug, and she stared at me curiously, frightening me so much, lest she should ask me questions, that I hastily finished my milk, and, picking up the bread, said "good-morning," and walked along by the side of the river, there being here a towing-path, upon which I soon encountered a couple of horses, the foremost of which was ridden by a boy with a whip, while they dragged a long rope which kept plashing down into the river, and then, being drawn taut, showered down pearly drops of water, which seemed to be smoothed out by a long, low, narrow barge, painted yellow and red, at the end of which was a man smoking, with his eyes half shut, as he leaned upon the tiller gear.

They were going against the stream, and their progress was slow, as I sat down and watched them go out of sight round the bend of the river.

“I wonder where this river runs to, and where I should go, if I walked all along this path?” I said to myself, and then like a flash, the idea came, right or wrong, I could not tell, that it must go on and on to London.

It was full of hope, that thought; so full that I leaped up, and trudged on so steadily, that at the end of an hour I again saw a couple of horses in front, drawing another barge, with the rope plashing in and out of the river; but this barge was going on in the same direction as I was, and as I drew nearer I began to envy the boy riding so idly on the foremost horse, and wished it were my fate to change places with him, for one of my feet was very sore.

It pained me a good deal; but, all the same, there was a joyous feeling of freedom to cheer me on, and I limped forward, thinking how I had nothing to fear now, no dreary copying to do, and then stand shivering, expecting blows, if I had omitted a word, or forgotten to cross some *t*. All was bright and beautiful, with the glancing river, the glorious green meadows, and the gliding barge going so easily with the stream.

There was a stolid-looking man holding the tiller of the barge, staring dreamily before him, and smoking, looking as motionless, and smoking nearly as much, as the chimney of the cabin beside him. The barge itself was covered with great tarred cloths of a dingy black, but the woodwork about the cabin was ornamented with yellow and scarlet diamonds and ovals carved in the sides.

The man took not the slightest notice of me as I limped on, gazing at him and the gliding barge, but smoked away steadily, and I went on, getting nearer and nearer to the horses, thinking as I did so of how pleasant it would be to lie down on that black tarpaulin, and glide along upon the shiny river without a care; and it seemed to me then, ill-used and weary as I was, that the life of a bargeman would be perfect happiness and bliss.

As I drew near the boy, who was sitting sidewise on the foremost horse, with a shallow round-bottomed zinc bucket hanging from the collar on the other side, I found that he was watching me as he whistled some doleful minor ditty, pausing every now and then to crack his whip and utter a loud “Jeet!”

This was evidently a command to the horses, one of which gave its head a toss up and the other a toss down, but paid no further heed, both continuing their steady way along the tow-path, while the boy went on with his whistling.

I gradually drew up closer and closer, as the whistling kept on, to find that about every minute, as if calculated exactly, but of course from mere habit, there was the crack of the whip, the loud “Jeet?” and the nod up and nod down of the two horses.

I trudged up close alongside the boy now, being anxious to learn where the river really did run, but not liking at first to show my ignorance, so we went on for some time in silence.

He was a rough, common-looking lad, with fair curly hair, and the skin of his face all in scaly patches where it had been blistered by the sun, and I took him to be about my own age. He was dressed in a loose jacket and a pair of cord trousers, both of which were several sizes too large for him, but the jacket-sleeves had been cut off above the elbow, and the trousers were rolled up above his knees, showing his bare legs and clean white feet. His coarse shirt was clean, what could be seen of it, but the tops of the trousers were drawn up by strings over his shoulders, so that they took the place of vest.

Altogether, even to his old, muddy, torn felt hat, through which showed tufts of his curly hair, he was ragged to a degree; but he seemed as happy as the day was long and as healthy as could be, as he whistled away, stared at me, and uttered another loud “Jeet!” going a little further this time, and making it “Jeet, Sammy – jeet, Tommair-y!”

The horses this time tightened the rope a little, but only for a few moments, when it fell back into the water with a splash, the barge glided on, the horses’ hoofs crushed the sandy gravel, and the rope whisked and rustled as it brushed along the thick growth of sedge by the water-side.

“Woss the matter with yer foot, matey?” said the boy at last, breaking the ice as he gave his whip another crack, and then caught and examined the thong.

“Sore with walking,” I said; and then there was another pause, during which he kept on whistling the minor air over and over again, while I waited for another opening.

“Why don’t you take off your shoes, matey?” he said. “They allus makes my feet sore. I don’t like shoes. Jeet, Tommair-y! Jeet, Sam-mair-y?”

This was a new light, and I thought, perhaps, I should be easier, for one shoe was constantly scraping the tendon at the back of my heel. So sitting down on the grass, I untied and slipped off my shoes, my socks following, to be thrust into my pocket, and I limped on, setting my feet delicately on the gravel, which hurt them, till I changed on to the short soft turf beside the path.

The barge had passed me, but I soon overtook it, and then reached the boy, who watched me complacently as I trudged on, certainly feeling easier.

“One on ’ems a-bleeding,” said my new friend then. “Shoes allus hurts. Jeet!”

“Yes, when you walk far,” I said, the conversation beginning to warm now.

“Walked far, matey?”

“Yes, ever so far. Have you come far?”

“*Pistol*,” I thought he said.

“Where?” I asked.

“Bristol. Jeet, Sammy!” *Crack!*

“All along by the river?”

“We don’t call it the river, we call it the canal here. It’s river farther up towards London.”

“Are you going to London?” I said.

“Yes. Are you?”

“Yes,” I said; and my heart was at rest, for I knew now that which I wanted to find out without asking. This river did go right to London, and I must be on the upper part of the Thames.

We went on for some little time in silence, and then my new friend began:

“Why don’t you go and paddle yer feet in the water a bit?”

It was a good suggestion, and the shallow sparkling water looked very delicious and cool.

“Tie your shoestrings together and hing ’em on to Tommy’s collar. You can hing yer bundle, too, if yer li-ak.”

I hesitated for a moment. One boy had already appropriated my bundle, but he had not the frank honest look of the one on the horse, and besides, I did not like to seem suspicious. So, tying the shoestrings together, I hung them on the tall hame of the collar, and the bundle beside them, before going quickly over the gravel down to the shallow water.

“Turn up yer trousers!” shouted the boy; and I obeyed his good advice, ending by walking along the shallow water close behind the tow-ropes, the soft sand feeling delicious to my feet as the cool water laved and eased the smarting wound.

At last I walked out with my feet rested, and the blood-stain washed away, to run forward and join my companion, who looked at me in a very stolid manner.

“Hev a ride?” he said at last.

“May I?”

“Fey-ther!”

“Hel-lo-a!” came slowly from the barge.

“May this chap hev a ri-ad?”

“Ay-er!”

The boy slipped down off the horse with the greatest ease, and stuck his whip into a link of the trace.

“Now, then,” he said, “lay holt o’ his collar, and I’ll give yer a leg up.”

I obeyed him, and seizing my leg, he nearly shot me right over the horse, but by hanging tightly on to the collar I managed to save myself, and shuffled round into the proper position for riding

sidewise, feeling the motion of the horse, in spite of a certain amount of boniness of spine, delightfully easy and restful.

"They're all right," the boy said, as I glanced at my bundle. "They won't fall off. Are yer comfortable?"

"Yes, capital," I said, and we journeyed on, my luck seeming almost too good to be believed.

We went on talking away, now and then passing another barge, when the ropes were passed one over the other boat, and the journey continued.

Soon afterwards I made my first acquaintance with a lock, and got down off the horse to stand by the barge and gaze in wonderment at the process. As it glided softly into the space between walls, a pair of great doors were shut behind it, and I and my new companion helped to turn handles, with the result that I saw the water foam and rush out, and the barge slowly sink down to a lower level, when a couple of great doors were swung open at the other end. There was a certain amount of pushing and thrusting, and the barge glided out into the river ten feet lower than it was before.

Then the rope was once more made fast, the horses tugged, and we went on again, but not far before a shrill voice shouted "Jack!" and my companion stood still till the barge came abreast of him, being steered close in, when I saw a woman lean over the side and hold out a basket, which the boy caught, and then ran after me once more, where I was mounted on the first horse.

"My dinner," he said eagerly. "Got yourn?"

"Yes," I said, colouring up as I pulled the remains of my bread and cheese out of my pocket, there being a large piece of the latter.

"Steak pudden to-day," said my companion, hanging his basket on to the collar by my knee, and revealing a basin half full of savoury-odoured beef-steak pudding, which was maddening to me in my hungry state.

"I say, what a whacking great piece of cheese! I like cheese," said my companion; "let's go halves."

Pride kept me back for a moment, and then I said —

"I'll give you threepence if you'll give me half your dinner."

"I don't want your threepence," he said scornfully. "You shall have half if you give me half your new bread and cheese. Ourn's allus stale. Look, here's some cold apple puff too."

So there was, and delicious it looked, sufficiently so to make my mouth water.

"Got a knife, matey?"

"Yes," I said, "but —"

"I say, I tell you what," said my would-be host. "Have you really got threepence?"

"Yes," I said, and was about to say more, when Mr Rowle's words occurred to me and I was silent.

"Then we'll have half a pint o' cider at the next lock, and twopen'orth o' apples, shall us?"

"Yes," I said, delighted at the prospect; and the result was that we two hearty boys soon finished pudding, puff, and the last scrap of the bread and cheese, after which my new friend shouted, "Mother!" The boat was steered in close, and the shrill-voiced woman took the basket back.

"Is your name Jack?" I said, as I descended, and we trudged on together slowly beside the horses, each of which was now furnished with a tin bucket hung from the top of its head, and containing some beans and chaff.

"Yes; what's yourn?"

"Antony."

"Ho!"

There was silence after this, for we came up to another lock, close by which was a little public-house, where Jack was sent to get a stone bottle filled with beer, and up to whose door he summoned me, and we partook of our half-pint of cider, Jack proving most honourable as to his ideas of half.

Then the beer having been passed on board, Jack's mother and father taking not the slightest notice of me, the barge was passed through the lock, and Jack beckoned and waved his hand.

"You give me the twopence, and I'll buy," he said. "If we ask Mother Burke for twopen'orth all at once she won't give us more than she would for a penny. Stop a moment," he said, "you only give me a penny, and we'll keep t'other for to-morrow."

I handed a penny to him, and we went into the lock cottage, in whose lattice window were displayed two bottles of ginger-beer, a couple of glasses of sugar-sticks, and a pile of apples.

Our penny in that out-of-the-way place bought us a dozen good apples, and these we munched behind the horses as we trudged on slowly, mile after mile.

I did not feel tired now, and we boys found so much to talk about that the time went rapidly by. Jack's father and mother did not trouble themselves about my being there, but towards six o'clock handed the boy out his tea in a bottle, whose neck stuck out of the basket that had held his dinner, and in which were some half a dozen slices of bread and butter.

"Tain't full," said Jack, holding the bottle up to the light; "she might ha' filled it. There is more brem-butter. Never mind, I'll fill it up with water. You won't mind?"

"No," I said; but as a lock was then coming in sight, and a decent-looking village, an idea occurred to me. "Let's buy a pen'orth of milk and put to it," I said.

Jack's eyes sparkled, and hanging the basket *pro tem.* on the hames, he cracked his whip, and we proceeded a little more quickly towards the lock, where I bought a twopenny loaf and some milk for our tea. I say *ours*, for Jack literally shared his with me.

"Where are you going to sleep?" said Jack to me at last, as the evening mists were beginning to rise on the meadows.

"I don't know," I said rather dolefully, for the idea had not occurred to me before.

"Come and bunk along o' me."

"Where?" I asked.

"Under the tarpaulin in front o' the barge," he said; "I allus sleeps there now, cos father says my legs gets in the way in the cabin."

"But would your father mind?"

"Not he. He'll go ashore as soon as we make fast for the night and lets the horses loose to feed. He wouldn't mind."

And so it turned out, for the barge was made fast to a couple of stout posts in a wider part of the canal, close to a lock where there was a public-house. The horses were turned out to graze on the thick grass beside the tow-path, and after a little hesitation I took my bundle and shoes and crept in beneath a tarpaulin raised up in the middle to make quite a tent, which Jack had contrived in the fore port of the barge.

"Ain't it jolly and snug?" he cried.

"Ye-es," I replied.

"On'y it won't do to stop in when the sun gets on it, 'cos it's so hot and sticky. I like it. Feyther can't kick you here."

This was a revelation. I had been thinking Jack's life must be one of perfect bliss.

"Does your father kick you, then?"

"Not now. He used to when he came home after being to the public, when he was cross; but he didn't mean nothing. Feyther's werry fond o' me. I wouldn't go back to sleep in the cabin now for no money."

Jack's conversation suddenly stopped, and I knew by his hard breathing that he was asleep: but I lay awake for some time, peering out through a little hole left by the tarpaulin folds at the stars, thinking of Mr Blakeford and his pursuit; of what Mary would say when she read my letter; and from time to time I changed the position of my bundle, to try and turn it into a comfortable pillow; but,

try how I would, it seemed as if the heel of one or other of my shoes insisted upon getting under my ear, and I dropped asleep at last, dreaming that they were walking all over my head.

Chapter Eleven.

My Vagabond Life Comes to an End

Somehow or other that idea about my boots being in antagonism to me seemed to pervade the whole of my slumbers till morning, when one of them, I fancied, had turned terribly vicious, and was kicking me hard in the side.

I could not move, and the kicking seemed to go on, till a more vigorous blow than before roused me to consciousness; but still for a few moments I could not make out where I was, only that it was very dark and stuffy, and that. I felt stiff and sore.

Just then a gruff voice awoke my mind as well as my body, and I found that some one was administering heavy pokes through the tarpaulin with what seemed to be a piece of wood.

“All right, feyther,” cried Jack just then; and as we scrambled out from beneath the tent I found it was grey dawn, that a heavy mist hung over the river, and that Jack’s father had been poking at the tarpaulin with the end of a hitcher, the long iron-shod pole used in navigating the barge.

“Going to lie abed all day?” he growled. “Git them horses to.”

“Come along, matey; never mind your boots,” cried Jack, and he leaped ashore.

I did not like leaving my bundle behind, but I felt bound to help, and following Jack’s example, I helped him to catch the horses, which were soon attached to the tow-line thrown ashore by the bargeman, who cast loose the mooring ropes, and with the stars still twinkling above our heads we were once more on our way, Jack walking beside the horse and I barefooted beside him.

My feet did not pain me now, but I felt that to replace my boots would be to chafe them again, so I contented myself with letting them ride, while for the present I made my way afoot.

My proceedings as we went along seemed to greatly interest Jack, who stared hard as he saw me stoop down and wash my face and hands at a convenient place in the river, for a shake and a rub of his curly head seemed to constitute the whole of his toilet. My hair I smoothed as I walked by his side, while he looked contemptuously at my little pocket-comb.

“That wouldn’t go through my hair,” he said at last. Then in the same breath, “Old woman’s up.”

I turned to see how he knew it, expecting his mother to be on the little deck: but the only thing visible besides Jack’s father was a little curl of smoke from the iron chimney in front of the rudder.

“That means brakfass,” said Jack, grinning; “don’t you want yourn?”

I said I did, and asked how soon we should get to a lock where I could buy some bread and milk.

“Don’t you waste your money on bread and milk,” said my companion, “there’ll be lots o’ brakfass for both on us. You wait till we get farther on and we can get some apples and a bottle of ginger-beer.”

It seemed so fair an arrangement that when the shrill voice summoned Jack to fetch his breakfast I shared it with him, and so I did his dinner and tea, while we afterwards regaled ourselves with fruit, and sweets, and cider, or ginger-beer.

This went on day after day, for though the pace was slow I found that I could not have got on faster. Besides which, I had endless rides, Jack’s proceedings with me never once seeming to awaken either interest or excitement on the part of his parents. In fact, Jack’s father seemed to occupy the whole of his time in leaning upon the tiller and smoking, with the very rare exceptions that he might occasionally make use of the hitcher in rounding some corner. As for the passing of other barges, the men upon them seemed to do the greater part of the necessary work in lifting tow-ropes. At the locks, too, he would stolidly stare at Jack and me as we turned the handles with the lock-keeper, and then perhaps grunt approval.

Jack's mother appeared to spend all her time in cooking and other domestic arrangements, for she never showed herself on deck except to announce the readiness of a meal by a shrill shout for her boy, rarely speaking a word to him at such times as he took his food from her hands.

Life on the river seemed to breed taciturnity, and though we boys generally had something to say, for the most part we jogged on silently with the horses, who hung their heads and kept on their course as if half asleep.

To me it was a dreamy time of constant journeying by the shining river; for at last we passed through a lock into the Isis, and then continued our way on and on through locks innumerable till we passed out again into what I suppose must have been the Grand Junction or Regent's Canal – to this day I am not sure which. The hundred miles or so I was to have walked to London must have been more than doubled by the turnings and doublings of the river; but I was never tired, and Jack never wearied of my society. There was always something to see in the ever-changing scenery, and sometimes, if we came to a stoppage early in the evening, Jack brought out a rough line and a willow wand, and we fished for perch by some rushing weir.

I could have been content to go on for ever leading such a free, enjoyable life, like some young gipsy, so peaceable and happy seemed my existence as compared to that with Mr Blakeford; but at last, after a very long, slow journey, we began to near the metropolis, the goal of my wanderings, and one evening the pleasant communings of Jack and myself were suddenly brought to an end.

We had been making slow progress along the canal as it wound now amongst houses and large buildings. The pleasant fields were far behind, and the water was no longer bright. It seemed, too, as if we had left the sun behind, while the tow-path had long grown so hard and rough that I was glad to get my boots out of the bundle in which they were tied up and wear them once again.

"Here, you sir," Jack's father shouted to me from the barge, "you must sheer off now."

It was said in a rough, peremptory fashion that was startling; but he took no further notice of me, only went on smoking, and I went back to Jack, who was now seated on the horse just as at our first meeting.

"Feyther say you must go now?"

"Yes," I said dolefully.

"Then you'd better cut off. I say, feyther!"

"Hullo!"

"Lash the tiller, and go and get his bundle and chuck it ashore."

The great rough fellow methodically did as he was told – fastening the rudder, going slowly forward, and fishing out my bundle from under the tarpaulin, and turning to me:

"Ketch!" he shouted, and he threw the bundle from the barge to the shore, where I caught it, and he slowly plodded back, after giving me a friendly nod.

I took my bundle under my arm and rejoined Jack, who was whistling his minor air, and then we boys looked at each other dolefully.

"Aintcher going?" said Jack at last.

"Yes," I said, "I'm going directly." Then, quickly pulling out a little penknife I had in my pocket, I held it to Jack. "Will you have that, Jack?" I said.

His eyes sparkled as he took it, but he did not speak.

"Do you think I might give your father something for letting me come up along with you?" I said.

Jack stared in a dull, stolid way for a moment, the idea being so novel to him. Then his face lit up and he checked the horses.

"Hold on, fey-ther," he shouted; and as if it was quite right to obey his son's words, the great fellow steered the long barge so that it came close in.

"There's a beer-shop," said Jack, pointing to a place close by the towing-path, all glorious with blue and gold announcements of Barclay, Perkins and Co.'s Entire. "You go and get a pot o' porter – it's threepence ha'penny, mind – and give it the old man; we'll wait."

I ran up to the door of the public-house and asked the man in shirt-sleeves and white apron for a pot of porter, which he drew in the bright pewter vessel, and I paid for it with one of my sixpences, received my change, and then had to make solemn assurance that I would bring back the pot before I was allowed to take it down to the canal-side, where Jack and his father were waiting.

The latter's face was as stolid as ever as I went up to him; but there was a little extra opening of his eyes as he saw the foaming liquid in the bright pewter and stretched out his hand.

"Beer ain't good for boys," he said gruffly; and then, blowing off the froth, he put the vessel to his lips, and slowly poured it all down, without stopping, to the very last drop; after which he uttered a heavy sigh of either pleasure or regret, and brought his eyes to bear on me.

"Feyther likes a drop o' beer," said Jack.

"Ketch!" said "father," and he threw the empty pot to me, which luckily I caught, and stood watching him as he went to the tiller. "Go on!"

Jack gave me a nod, cracked his whip, and the horses drew the slack rope along the cindery tow-path till it was tight. Jack's father paused in the act of refilling his pipe and gave me another nod, and Jack's mother's head came above the hatchway to stare at me as the barge moved, and I stood watching it with my bundle under my arm and the bright pewter vessel in my hand.

My reverie was interrupted by a shout from the public-house door, and I took the pot back, to return once more to the towing-path, sick at heart and despondent, as I thought of the pleasant days of my short vagabond career.

It was like parting with very good friends, and I sat down at last upon a log, one of a pile of timber, full of regrets; for these rough people had in their way been very kind to me, and I thought that perhaps I should never see them any more.

Chapter Twelve.

My First Night in Town

I did not sit thinking long, for I felt that I must be up and doing. The long barge had crept silently away and was out of sight, but I felt that after my dismissal I ought not to follow it; so I crossed a bridge over the canal and went on and on between rows of houses and along streets busy with vehicles coming and going, and plenty of people.

For the first half-hour I felt that everybody knew me and was staring at the boy who had run away from Mr Blakeford's office; but by degrees that idea passed off and gave place to another, namely, that I was all alone in this great city, and that it seemed very solitary and strange.

For above an hour I walked on, with the streets growing thicker and the noise and bustle more confusing. I had at last reached a busy thoroughfare; gas was burning, and the shops looked showy and attractive. The one, however, that took my attention was a coffee-shop in a side street, with a great teapot in the window, and a framed card on which I read the list of prices, and found that a half-pint cup of coffee would be one penny, and a loaf and butter twopence.

My money was getting scarce, but I was tired and hungry, and after staring at that card for a long time I thought I would venture to go in, and walked right up to the door. I dared, however, go no farther, but walked straight on, turned, and came back, and so on several times, without being able to make up my mind; but at last, as I was still hovering about the place, I caught sight of a policeman advancing in the distance, and, fully assured that it must be Mary's friend, Mr Revitts, in search of me, I walked breathlessly into the coffee-house and sat down at the nearest table.

There were several men and lads seated about, but they were all, to my great relief, reading papers or periodicals, and I was recovering my equanimity somewhat, when it was upset by a bustling maid, who came as I thought fiercely up to me with a sharp "What's for you?"

"A cup of coffee, if you please," I stammered out.

"And roll and butter?"

"Yes, please," I said, somewhat taken aback that she should, as I felt, have divined my thoughts; and then, in an incredibly short space of time, a large cup of steaming coffee and a roll and pat of butter were placed on the table.

After timidly glancing round to find that it was no novel thing for any one to enter a coffee-house and partake of the fare before me, I proceeded to make my meal, wishing all the while that Jack had been there to share it, and wondering where he was, till at last the coffee was all drunk, the roll and butter eaten, and after paying what was due I stole off once more into the streets. I went on and on in a motiveless way, staring at the wonders ever unfolding before me, till, utterly wearied out, the thought struck me that I must find a resting-place somewhere, for there were no haystacks here, there was no friendly tarpaulin to share with Jack, and, look where I would, nothing that seemed likely to suggest a bed.

I had wandered on through wide, well-lighted streets, and through narrow, poverty-stricken places, till I was in a busy, noisy row, along the pavement of which were broad barrows with flaming lamps, and laden with fish, greengrocery, and fruit. There was noise enough to confuse anyone used to London; to me it was absolutely deafening.

I had seen by a clock a short time before that it was nearly ten, and my legs ached so that I could scarcely stand; and yet, in the midst of the busy throng of people hurrying here and there, I alone seemed to be without friend or home.

I had been wandering about in a purposeless way for a long time, trying to see some one who would win my confidence enough to make me ask where I could obtain a night's lodging, when I suddenly became aware that a big lad with a long narrow face and little eyes seemed to be watching

me, and I saw what seemed to me so marked a resemblance to the young scoundrel who had stolen my bundle, that I instinctively grasped it more tightly and hurried away.

On glancing back, I found that the boy was following, and this alarmed me so that I hastened back into the big street, walked along some distance, then turned and ran as hard as I could up one street and down another, till at last I was obliged to stop and listen to make sure whether I was pursued.

To my horror I heard advancing steps, and I had just time to shrink back into a doorway before, by the dim light of the gas, I saw the lad I sought to avoid run by, and as soon as his heavy boots had ceased to echo, I crept out and ran in the other direction, till, completely worn out, I sat down upon a doorstep in a deserted street, and at last dropped off fast asleep.

I was startled into wakefulness by a strange glare shining in my face, and, looking up, there was a round glowing eye of light seeming to search me through and through.

For a few moments I could do nothing but stare helplessly and then started nervously as a gruff voice exclaimed – “Here; what’s in that bundle?”

“My clothes and clean shirt, sir,” I faltered. “Let’s look.”

My hands shook so that I was some time before I could get the handkerchief undone; but in the meantime I had been able to make out that the speaker was a policeman, and in my confusion at being awakened out of a deep sleep, I associated his coming with instructions from Mr Blakeford.

At last, though, I laid my bundle open on the step, and my questioner seemed satisfied.

“Tie it up,” he said, and I hastened to obey. “Now, then, young fellow,” he continued, “how is it you are sitting here asleep? Why don’t you go home?”

“Please, sir, I came up from the country to-day, and I ran away from a boy who wanted to steal my bundle, and then I sat down and fell asleep.”

“That’s a likely story,” he said, making the light of the lantern play upon my face. “Where were you going?”

“I don’t know, sir. Yes I do – to Mr Rowle.”

“And where’s Mr Rowle’s?”

“It’s – it’s – stop a minute, sir. I’ve got the address written down. It’s at a great printing-office.”

As I spoke I felt in my pockets one after the other for the address of Mr Rowle’s brother, but to my dismay I found that it was gone, and, search how I would, there was no sign of it in either pocket. At last I looked up full in the policeman’s face, to exclaim pitifully – “Please, sir, it’s gone.”

“Is it now?” he said in a bantering, sneering tone. “That’s a wonder, that is: specially if it warn’t never there. Look here, young fellow, what have you come to London for?”

“Please, sir, I’ve come to seek my fortune.”

“Oh, you have, have you? Now look here, which are you, a young innocent from the country, or an artful one? You may just as well speak out, for I’m sure to find out all about it.”

“Indeed I’ve come up from the country, sir, to try and get a place, for I was so unhappy down there.”

“Then you’ve run away from your father and mother, eh?”

“No, sir; they are both dead.”

“Well, then, you’ve run away from home, eh?”

“No, sir,” I said sadly; “I haven’t any home.”

“Well, what’s got to be done? You can’t stop here all night.”

“Can’t I, sir?”

“Can’t you, sir? Why, what a young gooseberry it is! Have you been to London before?”

“No, sir.”

“When did you come up?”

“Only this evening, sir.”

“And don’t you know that if I leave you here some one’ll have your bundle, and perhaps you too, before morning?”

"I was so tired, sir, I fell asleep."

"Come along o' me. The best thing I can do for you's to lock you up till morning."

"Thank you, sir."

He burst out into a roar of laughter as he turned off the light of his bull's-eye.

"Come along, youngster," he said, "it's all right, I see. Why, you are as green as a gooseberry."

"Am I, sir?" I said piteously, for I felt very sorry that I was so green, as he called it, but I was too much confused to thoroughly understand what he meant.

"Greener, ever so much. Why, if you'd gone down Covent Garden to sleep amongst the baskets you'd have got swept up for cabbage leaves."

"Covent Garden Market, sir? Is that close here?" I said.

"As if you didn't know," he replied, returning to his doubting vein.

"I've heard my papa speak of it," I said, eager to convince him that I was speaking the truth. "He said the finest of all the fruit in the country went there, and that the flowers in the central – central –"

"Avenue?" suggested the constable.

"Yes, central avenue – were always worth a visit."

"That's so. And that's what your papa said, eh?"

"Yes, sir, I have heard him say so more than once."

"Then don't you think, young fellow, as it looks very suspicious for a young gent as talks about his *papa* to be found sleeping on a doorstep?"

"Yes, sir, I suppose it does," I said, "but I have no friends now."

"Well, you'd better come along o' me, and tell your tale to the inspector. I'm not going to leave you here. He'll soon get to know the rights of it. You've run away, that's what you've done."

"Yes, sir," I said; "I did run away, but –"

"Never mind the buts, youngster. You'll have to be sent back to your sorrowing friends, my absconding young sloper."

"No, no, no?" I cried wildly, as he took hold of my cuff. "Don't send me back, pray don't send me back."

"None o' that 'ere now," he said, giving me a rough shake. "You just come along quietly."

"Oh, I will, sir, indeed I will!" I cried, "but don't, pray don't send me back."

"Why not? How do you know but it won't be best for yer? You come along o' me sharp, and we'll soon physic your constitution into a right state."

The agony of dread that seized me at that moment was more than I could bear. In imagination I saw myself dragged back to Mr Blakeford, and saw the smile of triumph on his black-looking face, as he had me again in his power, and, boy as I was then, and full of young life and hopefulness, I believe that I would gladly have jumped into the river sooner than have had to trust to his tender mercies again.

In my horror, then, I flung myself on my knees before the policeman, and clasped his leg as I appealed wildly to him to let me go.

"If you sent me back, sir," I cried piteously, "he'd kill me."

"And then we should kill him," he said, laughing. "Not as that would be much comfort to you. Here, get up."

"You don't know what I suffered, sir, after poor papa and mamma died. He used me so cruelly, and he beat me, too, dreadfully. And now, after I have run away, if he gets me back he will be more cruel than before."

"Well, I s'pose he wouldn't make it very pleasant for you, youngster. There, come: get up, and you shall tell the inspector, too, all about it."

"No, no, no," I cried wildly, as in spite of his efforts to get me up I still clung to his leg.

"Come, none of that, you know. I shall have to carry you. Get up."

He seized me more roughly, and dragged me to my feet, when with a hoarse cry of dread, I made a dash to escape, freed my arm and ran for freedom once again, as if it were for my life.

Chapter Thirteen.

P.C. Revitts

In my blind fear of capture I did not study which way I went, but doubling down the first turning I came to, I ran on, and then along the next, to stop short directly afterwards, being sharply caught by the constable from whom I had fled, and who now held me fast.

“Ah! you thought it, did you?” he said coolly, while, panting and breathless, I feebly struggled to get away. “But it won’t do, my lad. You’ve got to come along o’ me.”

“And then I shall be sent back,” I cried, as I tried to wrestle myself free. “I’ve never done any harm, sir; and he’ll half kill me. You don’t know him. Pray let me go.”

“I know you to be a reglar young coward,” he said roughly. “Why, when I was your age, I shouldn’t have begun snivelling like this. Now, then, look here. You ain’t come to London only to see your Mr Hot Roll, or whatever you call him. Is there any one else you know as I can take you to? I don’t want to lock you up.”

“No, sir, nobody,” I faltered. “Yes, there is – there’s Mr Revitts.”

“Mr who?”

“Mr Revitts, sir,” I said excitedly. “He’s a policeman, like you.”

“Ah, that’s something like a respectable reference!” he said. “What division?”

“What did you say, sir?”

“I said what division?”

“Please, sir, I don’t know what you mean.”

“Do you know P.C. Revitts, VV division?”

“No, sir,” I said, with my heart sinking. “It’s Mr William Revitts I know.”

“Which his name is William,” he muttered. Then, aloud, “Here, come along.”

“No, no, sir,” I cried in alarm. “Don’t send me back.”

“Come along, I tell yer.”

“What’s up?” said a gruff voice; and a second policeman joined us.

“Don’t quite know yet,” said the first man; and then he said something in a low voice to the other, with the result that, without another word, I was hurried up and down street after street till I felt ready to drop. Suddenly my guide turned into a great blank-looking building and spoke to another policeman, and soon, after a little shouting, a tall, burly-looking constable in his buttoned-up greatcoat came slowly towards us in the whitewashed room.

“Here’s a lad been absconding,” said my guide, “and he says he’ll give you for a reference.”

“Eh! me?” said the newcomer, making me start as he stared hard in my face. “Who are you, boy. I don’t know you.”

“Antony Grace, please, sir,” I faltered.

“And who’s Antony Grace?”

“There, I thought it was a do,” said the first constable roughly. “What d’yer mean by gammoning me in this way? Come along.”

“No, sir, please. Pray give me time,” I cried. “Don’t send me back. Please, Mr Revitts, I have run away from Mr Blakeford, and if I am sent back to Rowford he’ll kill me. I know he will.”

“Old ’ard, Smith,” said the big constable. “Look here, boy. What did you say? Where did you come from?”

“Rowford, sir. Pray don’t send me back.”

“And what’s the name of the chap as you’re afraid on?”

“Mr Blakeford, sir.”

“I’m blest!”

“What did you say, sir?”

“I said I’m blest, boy.”

“Then you do know him?” said the first constable.

“I don’t quite know as I do, yet,” was the reply.

“Well, look here, I want to get back. You take charge of him. I found him on a doorstep in Great Coram Street. There’s his bundle. If he don’t give a good account of himself, have it entered and lock him up.”

“All right,” said the other, after a few moments’ hesitation.

“Then I’m off,” said the first man; and he left me in charge of the big constable, who stood staring down at me so fiercely, as I thought, that I looked to right and left for a way of escape.

“None o’ that, sir,” he said sharply, in the words and way of the other, whose heavy footsteps were now echoing down the passage. “Lookye here, if you try to run away, I’ve only got to shout, and hundreds of thousands of pleecemen will start round about to stop yer.”

As he spoke he pushed me into a Windsor arm-chair, where I sat as if in a cage, while he held up one finger to shake in my face.

“As the Clerkenwell magistrate said t’other day, the law’s a great network, and spreads wide. You’re new in the net o’ the law, young fellow, and you can’t get out. Just look here, we knows a deal in the law and police, and I can find out in two twos whether you are telling me the truth or doing the artful.”

“Please, sir – ”

“Hold your tongue, sir! You can make your defence when your time comes; and mind this, it’s my dooty to tell you that what you says now may be used in evidence again you.”

Thus silenced, I stood gazing up in his big-whiskered face, that seemed to loom over me, in the gaslight, and wondered why there should be so much form and ceremony over taking my word.

“Now look here,” he said pulling out a notebook and pencil, like the auctioneer’s, only smaller, and seeming as if he were going to take an inventory of my small person. “Now, look here,” he repeated, moistening the point of his pencil, “you told Joe Smith you knowed me, and I never set eyes on you afore.”

“Please, sir,” I said hastily, “I told him I know Mr Revitts, who’s in the police.”

“Yes, and you said you had run away from Rowford and a Mr Blake – Blake – What’s his name?”

“Blakeford, sir,” I said despondently, for it seemed that this was not my Mr Revitts.

“Blakeford. That’s right; and he ill-used you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“He’s a little fair man, ain’t he, with blue eyes?” And he rustled the leaves of his notebook as if about to take down my answer.

“No, sir,” I cried eagerly; “he’s tall and dark, and has short hair, and very white teeth.”

“Ho! Tall, is he?” said the constable, making believe to write, and then holding out his pencil at me. “He’s a nice, kind, amiable man, ain’t he, as wouldn’t say an unkind word to a dorg?”

“Oh no, sir,” I said, shuddering; “that’s not my Mr Blakeford.”

“Ho! Now, then, once more. There’s a servant lives there at that house, and her name’s Jane – ain’t it?”

“No, sir, Mary.”

“And she’s got red hair and freckles, and she – she’s very little and – ”

“No, no,” I cried excitedly, for after my heart had seemed to sink terribly low, it now leaped at his words. “That isn’t Mary, and you are saying all this to try me, sir. You – you are Mr William Revitts, I know you are;” and I caught him eagerly by the arm.

“Which I don’t deny it, boy,” he said, still looking at me suspiciously, and removing my hand. “Revitts is my name. P.C. Revitts, VV 240; and I ain’t ashamed of it. But only to think of it. How did you know of me, though?”

“I wrote Mary’s letters for her, sir.”

“Whew! That’s how it was she had so improved in her writing. And so you’ve been living in the same house along a her?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, “and she was so good and kind.”

“When she wasn’t in a tantrum, eh?”

“Yes, sir, when she wasn’t in a – ”

“Tantrum, that’s it, boy. We should ha’ been spliced afore now if it hadn’t been for her tantrums. But only to think o’ your being picked up in the street like this. And what am I to do now? You’ve absconded, you have; you know you’ve absconded in the eyes of the law.”

“Write to Mary, please, sir, and ask her if it wasn’t enough to make me run away.”

“Abscond, my lad, abscond,” said the constable.

“Yes, sir,” I said, with a shiver, “abscond.”

“You didn’t – you didn’t,” he said in a half hesitating way, as he felt and pinched my bundle, and then ran his hand down by my jacket-pocket. “You didn’t – these are all your own things in this, are they?”

“Oh yes, sir!” I said.

“Because some boys when they absconds, makes mistakes, and takes what isn’t theirs.”

“Do they, sir?”

“Yes, my lad, and I’m puzzled about you. You see, it’s my duty to treat you like a runaway ’prentice, and I’m uneasy in my mind about what to do. You see, you did run away.”

“Oh yes, sir, I did run away. I was obliged to. Mr Blakeford wanted me to tell lies.”

“Well, that seems to come easy enough to most people,” he said.

“But I am telling the truth, sir,” I said. “Write down to Rowford, and ask Mary if I’m not telling the truth.”

“Truth! Oh, I know that, my boy,” he said kindly. “Here, give’s your hand. Come along.”

“But you won’t send me back, sir?”

“Send you back? Not I, boy. He’s a blackguard, that Blakeford. I know him, and I only wish he’d do something, and I had him to take up for it. Mary’s told me all about him, and if ever we meets, even if it’s five pounds or a month, I’ll punch his head: that’s what I’ll do for him. Do yer hear?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Now, what’s to be done with you?”

I shook my head and looked at him helplessly.

He stood looking at me for a few moments and then went into another room, where there was a policeman sitting at a desk, like a clerk, with a big book before him. I could see him through the other doorway, and they talked for a few minutes; and then Mr Revitts came back, and stood staring at me.

“P’r’aps I’m a fool,” he muttered. “P’r’aps I ain’t. Anyhow, I’ll do it. Look here, youngster, I’m going to trust you, though as you’ve absconded I ought to take you before a magistrate or the inspector, but I won’t, as you’re a friend of my Mary.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

“And if you turn out badly, why, woe betide you.”

“Please, sir, I won’t turn out badly if I can help it; but Mr Blakeford said I was good for nothing.”

“Mr Blakeford be blowed! I wouldn’t ask him for a character for a dorg; and as for Mary, she don’t want his character, and he may keep it. I’ll take her without. I wouldn’t speak to any one like this, youngster; but you know that gal’s got a temper, though she’s that good at heart that – that – ”

“She’d nurse you so tenderly if you were ill,” I said enthusiastically, “that you wouldn’t wish to be better.”

He held out his hand and gave mine a long and solemn shake.

“Thankye, youngster,” he said, “thankye for that. You and I will be good friends, I see. I *will* trust your word, hang me if I don’t. Here, come along.”

“Are you – are you going to take me up, sir?” I faltered, with a shiver of apprehension.

“I’m a-going to give you the door-key where I lodges, my lad. I’m on night duty, and shan’t be home till quarter-past six, so you may have my bed and welcome. Now, look here,” he said, “don’t you go and let anybody fool you. I’m going to show you the end of a long street, and you’ll go right to the top, then turn to the right along the road till you come to the fourth turning, and on the right-hand side, number twenty-seven, is where I lodges. Here’s the key. You puts it in the lock, turns it, shuts the door after you, and then goes gently upstairs to the second-pair back.”

“Second-pair back, sir?” I said dubiously.

“Well there, then, to the back room atop of the house, and there you may sleep till I come. Now then, this way out.”

It was a change that I could not have believed in, and I accompanied the constable wonderingly as he led me out of the police-station and through several dark-looking streets, till he stopped short before a long dim vista, where straight before me two lines of gaslights stretched right away till they seemed to end in a bright point.

“Now, then,” he said, “you can’t make any mistake there.”

“No, sir.”

“Off you go then to the top, and then you’ll find yourself in a big road.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Turn to the right, and then count four streets on the right-hand side. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Go down that street about halfway, till you see a gaslight shining on a door with number twenty-seven upon it. Twenty-seven Caroline Street. Now, do you understand? Straight up to the top, and then it’s right, right, right, all the way.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Good luck to you then, be off; here’s my sergeant.”

I should have stopped to thank him, but he hurried me away; and half forgetting my weariness, I went along the street, found at last the road at the end, followed it as directed, and then in the street of little houses found one where the light from the lamp shone as my guide had said.

I paused with the key in my hand, half fearing to use it, but summoning up my courage, I found the door opened easily and closed quietly, when I stood in a narrow passage with the stairs before me, and following them to the top, I hesitated, hardly knowing back from front. A deep heavy breathing from one room, however, convinced me that that could not be the back, so I tried the other door, to find it yield, and there was just light enough from the window to enable me to find the bed, on which I threw myself half dressed, and slept soundly till morning, when I opened my eyes to find Mr Revitts taking off his stiff uniform coat.

“Look here, youngster,” he said, throwing himself upon the bed, “I dessay you’re tired, so don’t you get up. Have another nap, and then call me at ten, and we’ll have some breakfast. How – how – ” he said, yawning.

“What did you say, sir?”

“How – Mary look?”

“Very well indeed, sir. She has looked much better lately, and – ”

I stopped short, for a long-drawn breath from where Mr Revitts had thrown himself upon the bed told me plainly enough that he was asleep.

I was too wakeful now to follow his example, and raising myself softly upon my elbow, I had a good look at my new friend, to see that he did not look so big and burly without his greatcoat, but all the same he was a stoutly built, fine-looking man, with a bluff, honest expression of countenance.

I stayed there for some minutes, thinking about him, and then about Mary, and Mr Blakeford, and Hetty, and I wondered how the lawyer had got on before the magistrates without me. Then, rising

as quietly as I could, I washed and finished dressing myself before sitting down to wait patiently for my host's awakening.

The first hour passed very tediously, for there was nothing to see from the window but chimney-pots, and though it was early I began to feel that I had not breakfasted, and three hours or so was a long time to wait. The room was clean, but shabbily furnished, and as I glanced round offered little in the way of recreation, till my eyes lit on a set of hanging shelves with a few books thereon, and going on tiptoe across the room, I began to read their backs, considering which I should choose.

There was the "Farmer of Inglewood Forest," close by the "Old English Baron," with the "Children of the Abbey," and "Robinson Crusoe." Side by side with them was a gilt-edged Prayer-book, upon opening which I found that it was the property of "Mr William Revitts, a present from his effectinat friend Mary Bloxam." On the opposite leaf was the following verse: —

"When this yu see, remember me,
And bare me in yure mind;
And don't forget old Ingerland,
And the lass yu lef behind."

The Bible on the shelf was from the same source. Besides these were several books in shabby covers – Bogatsky's "Golden Treasury," the "Pilgrim's Progress," and the "Young Man's Best Companion."

I stood looking at them for a few minutes, and then reached down poor old "Robinson Crusoe," bore it to the window, and for the fourth time in my life began its perusal.

In a very short time my past troubles, my precarious future, and my present hunger were all forgotten, and I was far away from the attic in North London, watching the proceedings of Robinson in that wonderful island, having skipped over a good many of the early adventures for the sake of getting as soon as possible into that far-away home of mystery and romance.

The strengthening of his house, the coming of the savages, the intensely interesting occurrences of the story, so enchained me, that I read on and on till I was suddenly startled by the voice of Mr Revitts exclaiming:

"Hallo, you! I say, what's o'clock?"

Chapter Fourteen.

Breakfast with the Law, and what Followed

I let the book fall in a shamefaced way as my host took a great, ugly old silver watch from beneath his pillow, looked at it, shook it, looked at it again, and then exclaimed:

“It’s either ’leven o’clock or else she’s been up to her larks. Hush!”

He held up his hand, for just then a clock began to strike, and we both counted eleven.

“Then she was right for once in a way. Why didn’t you call me at ten?”

“I forgot, sir. I was reading,” I faltered; for I felt I had been guilty of a great breach of trust.

“And you haven’t had no breakfast,” he said, dressing himself quickly, and then plunging his face into the basin of water, to splash and blow loudly, before having a most vigorous rub with the towel. “Why, you must be as hungry as a hunter,” he continued, as he halted in what was apparently his morning costume of flannel shirt and trousers. “We’ll very soon have it ready, though. Shove the cloth on, youngster; the cups and saucers are in that cupboard, that’s right, look alive.”

I hastened to do what he wished, and in a few minutes had spread the table after the fashion observed by Mary at Mr Blakeford’s, while Mr Revitts took a couple of rashers of bacon out of a piece of newspaper on the top of the bookshelf, and some bread and a preserve jar containing butter out of a box under the table. Next he poured some coffee out of a canister into the pot, and having inserted his feet into slippers, he prepared to go out of the room.

“Bedroom, with use of the kitchen, for a single gentleman,” he said, winking one eye. “That’s me. Back in five minutes, youngster.”

It must have been ten minutes before he returned, with the coffee-pot in one hand and the two rashers of hot sputtering bacon in the other, when in the most friendly spirit he drew a chair to the table, and saying, “Help yourself, youngster,” placed one rasher upon my plate and took the other upon his own.

“I say, only to think of my mate coming upon you fast asleep in London,” he said, tearing me off a piece of bread. “Why, if he’d been looking for you, he couldn’t ha’ done it. Don’t be afraid o’ the sugar. There ain’t no milk.”

I was very hungry, and I gladly began my breakfast, since it was offered in so sociable a spirit.

“Let’s see. How did you say Mary looked?”

“Very well indeed, sir,” I replied.

“Send me – come, tuck in, my lad, you’re welcome – send me any message?”

“She did not know I was coming, sir.”

“No, of course not. So you’ve come to London to seek your fortune, eh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where are you going to look for it first?” he said, grinning.

“I don’t know, sir,” I said, rather despondently.

“More don’t I. Pour me out another cup o’ coffee, my lad, while I cut some more bread and scrape. Only to think o’ my mate meeting you! And so Mary looks well, does she?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And ain’t very comfortable, eh?”

“Oh no, sir! It’s a very uncomfortable place.”

“Ah, I shall have to find her a place after all! She might just as well have said yes last time, instead of going into a tantrum. I say, come; you ain’t half eating. I shall write and tell her I’ve seen you.”

If I was half eating before, I was eating nothing now, for his words suggested discovery, and my being given up to Mr Blakeford: when, seeing my dismay, my host laughed at me.

“There, get on with your toke, youngster. If I tell Mary where you are, you don’t suppose she’ll go and tell old Blakeford?”

“Oh no, sir! she wouldn’t do that,” I said, taking heart again, and resuming my breakfast.

“And I say, youngster, suppose you don’t say *sir* to me any more. I’m only a policeman, you know. I say, you were a bit scared last night, weren’t you?”

“Yes, sir – yes, I mean, I was very much afraid.”

“Ah, that’s the majesty of the law, that is! Do you know, I’ve only got to go into a crowd, and just give my head a nod, and they disperse directly. The police have wonderful power in London.”

“Have they, sir?”

“Wonderful, my lad. We can do anything we like, so long as it’s men. Hundreds of ’em ’ll give way before a half-dozen of us. It’s only when we’ve got to deal with the women that we get beat; and that ain’t no shame, is it?”

“No, sir,” I said, though I had not the faintest notion why. “You’re quite right,” he said; “it ain’t no shame. What! Have you done?”

“Yes, sir – yes, I mean.”

“Won’t you have that other cup of coffee?”

“No, thank you.”

“Then I will,” he said, suiting the action to the word. “Well, now then, youngster, what are you going to do, eh?”

“I’m going to try and find Mr Rowle’s brother, sir, at a great printing-office,” I said, searching my pockets, and at last finding the address given me. “Perhaps he’ll help me to find a situation.”

“Ah, p’raps so. They do have boys in printing-offices. Now, if you were a bit bigger you might have joined the police, and got to be a sergeant some day. It’s a bad job, but it can’t be helped. You must grow.”

“I am growing fast, sir,” I replied.

“Ah, I s’pose so. Well, now lookye here. You go and see Mr Rowle, and hear what he says, and then come back to me.”

“Come back here?” I said, hesitating.

“Unless you’ve got somewhere better to go, my lad. There, don’t you mind coming. You’re an old friend o’ my Mary, and so you’re an old friend o’ mine. So, for a week, or a fortnight, or a month, if you like to bunk down along o’ me till you can get settled, why, you’re welcome; and if a man can say a better word than that, why, tell him how.”

“I – I should be very, very grateful if you would give me a night or two’s lodging, sir,” I said, “and – and I’ve got six shillings yet.”

“Then don’t you spend more than you can help, youngster. Do you know what’s the cheapest dinner you can get?”

“No, sir – no, I mean.”

“Penny loaf and a pen’orth o’ cheese. You come back here and have tea along o’ me. I don’t go on duty till night. There, no shuffling,” he said, grinning. “If you don’t come back I’ll write and tell old Blakeford.”

I could see that he did not mean it, and soon after I left my bundle there, and started off to try if I could find Mr Rowle’s brother at the great printing-office in Short Street, Fetter Lane.

Chapter Fifteen.

“Boys Wanted.”

I went over the address in my own mind to make sure, and also repeated the directions given me by Mr Revitts, so as to make no mistake in going into the City. Then I thought over again Mr Rowle’s remarks about his brother, his name, Jabez, his age, and his being exactly like himself. That would, I thought, make it easy for me to recognise him; and in this spirit I walked on through the busy streets, feeling a good deal confused at being pushed and hustled about so much, while twice I was nearly run over in crossing the roads.

At last, after asking, by Mr Revitts’ advice, my way of different policemen when I was at fault, I found myself soon after two in Short Street, Fetter Lane, facing a pile of buildings from the base of which came the hiss and pant of steam, with the whirr, clang, and roar of machinery; while on the doorpost was a bright zinc plate with the legend “Ruddle and Lister, General Printers;” and above that, written on a card in a large legible hand, and tacked against the woodwork, the words “Boys Wanted.”

This announcement seemed to take away my breath, and I hesitated for a few minutes before I dared approach the place; but I went up at last, and then, seeing a severe-looking man in a glass box reading a newspaper, I shrank back and walked on a little way, forgetting all about Mr Jabez Rowle in my anxiety to try and obtain a situation by whose means I could earn my living.

At last, in a fit of desperation, I went up to the glass case, and the man reading the newspaper let it fall upon his knees and opened a little window.

“Now then, what is it?” he said in a gruff voice.

“If you please, sir, there’s a notice about boys wanted – ”

“Down that passage, upstairs, first floor,” said the man gruffly, and banged down the window.

I was a little taken aback, but I pushed a swing-door, and went with a beating heart along the passage, on one side of which were rooms fitted up something like Mr Blakeford’s office, and on the other side a great open floor stacked with reams of paper, and with laths all over the ceiling, upon which boys with curious pieces of wood, something like long wooden crutches, were hanging up sheets of paper to dry, while at broad tables by the windows I could see women busily folding more sheets of paper, as if making books.

It was but a casual glance I had as I passed on, and then went by a room with the door half open and the floor carpeted inside. There was a pleasant, musical voice speaking, and then there was a burst of laughter, all of which seemed out of keeping in that dingy place, full of the throb of machinery, and the odour of oil and steam.

At the end of the passage was the staircase, and going up, I was nearly knocked over by a tall, fat-headed boy, who blundered roughly against me, and then turned round to cry indignantly —

“Now, stoopid, where are yer a-coming to?”

“Can you tell me, please, where I am to ask about boys being wanted?” I said mildly.

“Oh, find out! There ain’t no boys wanted here.”

“Not wanted here!” I faltered, with my hopes terribly dashed, for I had been building castles high in the air.

“No; be off!” he said roughly, when a new character appeared on the scene in the shape of a business-looking man in a white apron, carrying down an iron frame, and having one hand at liberty, he made use of it to give the big lad a cuff on the ear.

“You make haste and fetch up those galleys, Jem Smith;” and the boy went on down three stairs at a time. “What do you want, my man?” he continued, turning to me.

“I saw there were boys wanted, sir, and I was going upstairs.”

“When that young scoundrel told you a lie. There, go on, and in at that swing-door; the overseer’s office is at the end.”

I thanked him, and went on, pausing before a door blackened by dirty hands, and listened for a moment before going in.

The hum of machinery sounded distant here, and all within seemed very still, save a faint clicking noise, till suddenly I heard a loud clap-clapping, as if a flat piece of wood were being banged down and then struck with a mallet; and directly after came a hammering, as if some one was driving a wooden peg.

There were footsteps below, and I dared not hesitate longer; so, pushing the door, it yielded, and I found myself in a great room, where some forty men in aprons and shirt-sleeves were busy at what at the first glance seemed to be desks full of little compartments, from which they were picking something as they stood, but I was too much confused to notice more than that they took not the slightest notice of me, as I stopped short, wondering where the overseer’s room would be.

At one corner I could see an old man at a desk, with a boy standing beside him, both of them shut up in a glass case, as if they were curiosities; in another corner there was a second glass case, in which a fierce-looking man with a shiny bald head and glittering spectacles was gesticulating angrily to one of the men in white aprons, and pointing to a long, narrow slip of paper.

I waited for a moment, and then turned to the man nearest to me.

“Can you tell me, please, which is the overseer’s office?” I said, cap in hand.

“Folio forty-seven – who’s got folio forty-seven?” he said aloud.

“Here!” cried a voice close by.

“Make even. – Get out; don’t bother me.”

I shrank away, confused and perplexed, and a dark, curly-haired man on the other side turned upon me a pair of deeply set stern eyes, as he rattled some little square pieces of lead into something he held in his hand.

“What is it, boy?” he said in a deep, low voice.

“Can you direct me to the overseer’s office, sir?”

“That’s it, boy, where that gentleman in spectacles is talking.”

“Wigging old Morgan,” said another man, laughing.

“Ah!” said the first speaker, “that’s the place, boy;” and he turned his eyes upon a slip of paper in front of his desk.

I said, “Thank you!” and went on along the passage between two rows of the frame desks to where the fierce-looking bald man was still gesticulating, and as I drew near I could hear what he said.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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