"Well, and what a thing that is," returned Mrs. Jarley. "*I* can't!"

Nell said "Indeed," in a tone which might imply, either that she was reasonably surprised to find the genuine and only Jarley, who was the delight of the nobility and gentry, and the peculiar pet of the royal family, destitute of these familiar arts; or that she presumed so great a lady could scarcely stand in need of such ordinary accomplishments. In whatever way Mrs. Jarley received the response, it did not provoke her to further questioning, or tempt her into any more remarks at the time, for she relapsed into a thoughtful silence, and remained in that state so long that Nell withdrew to the other window and rejoined her grandfather, who was now awake.

At length the lady of the caravan shook off her fit of meditation, and, summoning the driver to come under the window at which she was seated, held a long conversation with him in a low tone of voice, as if she were asking his advice on an important point, and discussing the pros and cons of some very weighty matter. This conference at length concluded, she drew in her head again, and beckoned Nell to approach.

"And the old gentleman too," said Mrs. Jarley; "for I want to have a word with him. Do you want a good situation for your granddaughter, master? If you do, I can put her in the way of getting one. What do you say?"

"I can't leave her," answered the old man. "We can't separate. What would become of me without her?"

"I should have thought you were old enough to take care of yourself, if you ever will be," retorted Mrs. Jarley sharply.

"But he never will be," said the child, in an earnest whisper. "I fear he never will be again. Pray do not speak harshly to him. We are very thankful to you," she added aloud; "but neither of us could part from the other if all the wealth of the world were halved between us."

Mrs. Jarley was a little disconcerted by this reception of her proposal, and looked at the old man, who tenderly took Nell's hand and detained it in his own, as if she could have very well dispensed with his company, or even his earthly existence. After an awkward pause, she thrust her head out of the window again, and had another conference with the driver upon some point on which they did not seem to agree quite so readily as on their former topic of discussion; but they concluded at last, and she addressed the grandfather again.

"If you're really disposed to employ yourself," said Mrs. Jarley, "there would be plenty for you to do in the way of helping to dust the figures, and take the checks, and so forth. What I want your granddaughter for, is to point 'em out to the company; they would be soon learned, and she has a way with her that people wouldn't think unpleasant, though she *does* come after me; for I've been always accustomed to go round with visitors myself, which I should keep on doing now, only that my spirits make a little ease absolutely necessary. It's not a common offer, bear in mind," said the lady, rising into the tone and manner in which she was accustomed to address her audiences; "it's Jarley's wax-work, remember. The duty's very light and genteel, the company particularly select; the exhibition takes place in assembly-rooms, town halls, large rooms at inns, or auction galleries. There is none of your open air wagrancy at Jarley's, recollect; there is no tarpaulin and sawdust at Jarley's, remember. Every expectation held out in the hand-bills is realised to the utmost, and the whole forms an effect of imposing brilliancy hitherto unrivalled in this kingdom. Remember that the price of admission is only sixpence, and that this is an opportunity which may never occur again!"

Descending from the sublime, when she had reached this point, to the details of common life, Mrs. Jarley remarked that with reference to salary she could pledge herself to no specific sum until she had sufficiently tested Nell's abilities, and narrowly watched her in the performance of her duties. But board and lodging, both for her and her grandfather, she bound herself

to provide, and she furthermore passed her word that the board should always be good in quality, and in quantity plentiful.

Nell and her grandfather consulted together, and while they were so engaged, Mrs. Jarley, with her hands behind her, walked up and down the caravan, as she had walked after tea on the dull earth, with uncommon dignity and self-esteem. Nor will this appear so slight a circumstance as to be unworthy of mention, when it is remembered that the caravan was in uneasy motion all the time, and that none but a person of great natural stateliness and acquired grace could have forborne to stagger.

"Now, child," cried Mrs. Jarley, coming to a halt as Nell turned towards her.

"We are very much obliged to you, ma'am," said Nell, "and thankfully accept your offer."

"And you'll never be sorry for it," returned Mrs. Jarley. "I'm pretty sure of that. So as that's all settled, let us have a bit of supper."

In the meanwhile, the caravan blundered on as if it too had been drinking strong beer and was drowsy, and came at last upon the paved streets of a town, which were clear of passengers and quiet, for it was by this time near midnight, and the townspeople were all abed. As it was too late an hour to repair to the exhibition room, they turned aside into a piece of waste ground that lay just within the old town gate, and drew up there for the night, near to another caravan, which, notwithstanding that it bore on the lawful panel the great name of Jarley, and was employed besides in conveying from place to place the wax-work which was its country's pride, was designated by a grovelling Stamp Office as a "Common Stage Wagon," and numbered too—seven thousand odd hundred—as though its precious freight were mere flour or coals!

This ill-used machine being empty (for it had deposited its burden at the place of exhibition, and lingered there until its services were again required was assigned to the old man as his sleeping place for the night; and within its wooden walls Nell made him up the best bed she could, from the materials at hand. For herself, she was to sleep in Mrs. Jarley's own travelling-carriage, as a signal mark of that lady's favour and confidence.

She had taken leave of her grandfather and was returning to the other wagon, when she was tempted by the pleasant coolness of the night to linger for a little while in the air. The moon was shining down upon the old gateway of the town, leaving the low archway very black and dark; and with a mingled sensation of curiosity and fear, she slowly approached the gate, and stood still to look up at it, wondering to see how dark, and grim, and old, and cold it looked.

There was an empty niche from which some old statue had fallen or been carried away hundreds of years ago, and she was thinking what strange people it must have looked down upon when it stood there, and how many hard struggles might have taken place, and how many murders might have been done, upon that silent spot, when there suddenly emerged from the black shade of the arch a man. The instant he appeared she recognised him.—Who could have failed to recognise, in that instant, the ugly, misshapen Quilp!

The street beyond was so narrow, and the shadow of the houses on one side of the way so deep, that he seemed to have risen out of the earth. But there he was. The child withdrew into a dark corner, and saw him pass close to her. He had a stick in his hand, and, when he had got clear of the shadow of the gateway, he leaned upon it, looked back—directly, as it seemed, towards where she stood—and beckoned.

To her? Oh, no, thank God, not to her; for as she stood in an extremity of fear, hesitating whether to scream for help, or come from her hiding-place and fly, before he should draw nearer, there issued slowly forth from the arch another figure—that of a boy—who carried on his back a trunk.

"Faster, sirrah!" cried Quilp, looking up at the old gateway, and showing in the moonlight like some monstrous image that had come down from its

niche and was casting a backward glance at its old house, "faster!"

"It's a dreadful heavy load, sir," the boy pleaded. "I've come on very fast, considering."

"*You* have come fast, considering!" returned Quilp; "you creep, you dog, you crawl, you measure distance like a worm. There are the chimes now, half-past twelve."

He stopped to listen, and then turning upon the boy with a suddenness and ferocity that made him start, asked at what hour the London coach passed the corner of the road. The boy replied, "At one."

"Come on, then," said Quilp, "or I shall be too late. Faster—do you hear me? Faster."

The boy made all the speed he could, and Quilp led onward, constantly turning back to threaten him, and urge him to greater haste. Nell did not dare to move until they were out of sight and hearing, and then hurried to where she had left her grandfather, feeling as if the very passing of the dwarf so near him must have filled him with alarm and terror. But he was sleeping soundly, and she softly withdrew.

As she was making her way to her own bed, she determined to say nothing of this adventure, as upon whatever errand the dwarf had come (and she feared it must have been in search of them), it was clear by his inquiry about the London coach that he was on his way homeward; and as he had passed through that place, it was but reasonable to suppose that they were safer from his inquiries there than they could be elsewhere. These reflections did not remove her own alarm, for she had been too much terrified to be easily composed, and felt as if she were hemmed in by a legion of Quilps, and the very air itself were filled with them.

The delight of the Nobility and Gentry and the patronised of Royalty had, by some process of self-abridgment known only to herself, got into her travelling-bed, where she was snoring peacefully, while the large bonnet, carefully disposed upon the drum, was revealing its glories by the light of a dim lamp that swung from the roof. The child's bed was already made upon the floor, and it was a great comfort to her to hear the steps removed as soon as she had entered, and to know that all easy communication between persons outside and the brass knocker was by this means effectually prevented. Certain guttural sounds, too, which from time to time ascended through the floor of the caravan, and a rustling of straw in the same direction, apprised her that the driver was couched upon the ground beneath, and gave her an additional feeling of security.

Notwithstanding these protections, she could get none but broken sleep by fits and starts all night, for fear of Quilp, who throughout her uneasy dreams was somehow connected with the wax-work, or was wax-work himself, or was Mrs. Jarley and wax-work too, or was himself, Mrs. Jarley, wax-work, and a barrel-organ all in one, and yet not exactly any of them either. At length, towards break of day, that deep sleep came upon her which succeeds to weariness and overwatching, and which has no consciousness but one of overpowering and irresistible enjoyment.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SLEEP hung upon the eyelids of the child so long, that, when she awoke, Mrs. Jarley was already decorated with her large bonnet, and actively engaged in preparing breakfast. She received Nell's apology for being so late with perfect good-humour, and said that she should not have roused her if she had slept on until noon.

"Because it does you good," said the lady of the caravan, "when you're tired, to sleep as long as ever you can, and get the fatigue quite off; and that's another blessing of your time of life—you can sleep so very sound."

"Have you had a bad night, ma'am?" asked Nell.

"I seldom have anything else, child," replied Mrs. Jarley, with the air of a martyr. "I sometimes wonder how I bear it."

Remembering the snores which had proceeded from that cleft in the caravan

in which the proprietress of the wax-work passed the night, Nell rather thought she must have been dreaming of lying awake. However, she expressed herself very sorry to hear such a dismal account of her state of health, and shortly afterwards sat down with her grandfather and Mrs. Jarley to breakfast. The meal finished, Nell assisted to wash the cups and saucers, and put them in their proper places; and these household duties performed, Mrs. Jarley arrayed herself in an exceedingly bright shawl, for the purpose of making a progress through the streets of the town.

"The wan will come on to bring the boxes," said Mrs. Jarley, "and you had better come in it, child. I am obliged to walk, very much against my will; but the people expect it of me, and public characters can't be their own masters and mistresses in such matters as these. How do I look, child?"

Nell returned a satisfactory reply, and Mrs. Jarley, after sticking a great many pins into various parts of her figure, and making several abortive attempts to obtain a full view of her own back, was at last satisfied with her appearance, and went forth majestically.

The caravan followed at no great distance. As it went jolting through the streets, Nell peeped from the window, curious to see in what kind of place they were, and yet fearful of encountering at every turn the dreaded face of Quilp. It was a pretty large town, with an open square which they were crawling slowly across, and in the middle of which was the town hall, with a clock-tower and a weather-cock. There were houses of stone, houses of red brick, houses of yellow brick, houses of lath and plaster, and houses of wood, many of them very old, with withered faces carved upon the beams, and staring down into the street. These had very little winking windows, and low-arched doors, and, in some of the narrower ways, quite overhung the pavement. The streets were very clean, very sunny, very empty, and very dull. A few idle men lounged about the two inns, and the empty market-place, and the tradesmen's doors, and some old people were dozings in chairs outside an almshouse wall; but scarcely any passengers who seemed bent on going anywhere, or to have any object in view, went by; and if perchance some straggler did, his footsteps echoed on the hot, bright pavement for minutes afterwards. Nothing seemed to be going on but the clocks, and they had such drowsy faces, such heavy, lazy hands, and such cracked voices, that they surely must have been too slow. The very dogs were all asleep, and the flies, drunk with moist sugar in the grocer's shop, forgot their wings and briskness, and baked to death in dusty corners of the window.

Rumbling along with most unwonted noise, the caravan stopped at last at the place of exhibition, where Nell dismounted amidst an admiring group of children, who evidently supposed her to be an important item of the curiosities, and were fully impressed with the belief that her grandfather was a cunning device in wax. The chests were taken out with all convenient despatch, and taken in to be unlocked by Mrs. Jarley, who, attended by George and another man in velveteen shorts and a drab hat ornamented with turnpike tickets, were waiting to dispose their contents (consisting of red festoons and other ornamental devices in upholstery work) to the best advantage in the decoration of the room.

They all got to work without loss of time, and very busy they were. As the stupendous collection were yet concealed by cloths, lest the envious dust should injure their complexions, Nell bestirred herself to assist in the embellishment of the room, in which her grandfather also was of great service. The two men being well used to it, did a great deal in a short time; and Mrs. Jarley served out the tin tacks from a linen pocket like a toll-collector's which she wore for the purpose, and encouraged her assistants to renewed exertion.

While they were thus employed, a tallish gentleman with a hook nose and black hair, dressed in a military surtout very short and tight in the sleeves, and which had once been

frogged and braided all over, but was now sadly shorn of its garniture and quite threadbare — dressed, too, in ancient gray pantaloons fitting tight to the leg, and a pair of pumps in the winter of their existence—looked in at the door, and smiled affably. Mrs. Jarley's back being then towards him, the military gentleman shook his forefinger as a sign that her myrmidons were not to apprise her of his presence, and stealing up close behind her, tapped her on the neck, and cried playfully, "Boh!"

"What, Mr. Slum!" cried the lady of the wax-work. "Lor! who'd have thought of seeing you here?"

"'Pon my soul and honour," said Mr. Slum, "that's a good remark. 'Pon my soul and honour that's a wise remark. Who *would* have thought it? George, my faithful feller, how are you?"

George received this advance with a surly indifference, observing that he was well enough for the matter of that, and hammering lustily all the time.

"I came here," said the military gentleman, turning to Mrs. Jarley—"'pon my soul and honour I hardly know what I came here for. It would puzzle me to tell you, it would, by Gad. I wanted a little inspiration, a little freshening up, a little change of ideas, and—— 'Pon my soul and honour," said the military gentleman, checking himself and looking round the room, "what a devilish classical thing this is! By Gad, it's quite Minervian!"

"It'll look well enough when it comes to be finished," observed Mrs. Jarley.

"Well enough!" said Mr. Slum. "Will you believe me when I say it's the delight of my life to have dabbled in poetry, when I think I've exercised my pen upon this charming theme? By the way — any orders? Is there any little thing I can do for you?"

"It comes so very expensive, sir," replied Mrs. Jarley; "and I really don't think it does much good."

"Hush! No, no!" returned Mr. Slum, elevating his hand. "No fibs. I'll not hear it. Don't say it don't do good. Don't say it. I know better!"

"I don't think it does," said Mrs. Jarley.

"Ha, ha!" cried Mr. Slum, "you're giving way—you're coming down. Ask the perfumers, ask the blacking-makers, ask the hatters, ask the old lottery-office keepers—ask any man among 'em what my poetry has done for him, and mark my words, he blesses the name of Slum. If he's an honest man, he raises his eyes to heaven and blesses the name of Slum—mark that! You are acquainted with Westminster Abbey, Mrs. Jarley?"

"Yes, surely."

"Then upon my soul and honour, ma'am, you'll find in a certain angle of that dreary pile, called Poets' Corner, a few smaller names than Slum," retorted that gentleman, tapping himself expressively on the forehead to imply that there was some slight quantity of brains behind it. "I've got a little trifle here, now," said Mr. Slum, taking off his hat, which was full of scraps of paper—"a little trifle here, thrown off in the heat of the moment, which I should say was exactly the thing you wanted to set this place on fire with. It's an acrostic—the name at this moment is Warren, but the idea's a convertible one, and a positive inspiration for Jarley. Have the acrostic?"

"I suppose it's very dear," said Mrs. Jarley.

"Five shillings," returned Mr. Slum, using his pencil as a toothpick. "Cheaper than any prose."

"I couldn't give more than three," said Mrs. Jarley.

"And six," retorted Slum. "Come. Three-and-six."

Mrs. Jarley was not proof against the poet's insinuating manner, and Mr. Slum entered the order in a small note-book as a three-and-sixpenny one. Mr. Slum then withdrew to alter the acrostic, after taking a most affectionate leave of his patroness, and promising to return as soon as he possibly could with a fair copy for the printer.

As his presence had not interfered with or interrupted the preparations, they were now far advanced, and were completed shortly after his departure. When the festoons were all put up as tastily as they might be, the stupendous collection was uncovered, and there were

displayed, on a raised platform some two feet from the floor, running round the room and parted from the rude public by a crimson rope breast high, divers sprightly effigies of celebrated characters, singly and in groups, clad in glittering dresses of various climes and times, and standing more or less unsteadily upon their legs, with their eyes very wide open, and their nostrils very much inflated, and the muscles of their legs and arms very strongly developed, and all their countenances expressing great surprise. All the gentlemen were very pigeon-breasted, and very blue about the beards, and all the ladies were miraculous figures; and all the ladies and all the gentlemen were looking intensely nowhere, and staring with extraordinary earnestness at nothing.

When Nell had exhausted her first raptures at this glorious sight, Mrs. Jarley ordered the room to be cleared of all but herself and the child, and, sitting herself down in an arm-chair in the centre, formally invested Nell with a willow wand, long used by herself for pointing out the characters, and was at great pains to instruct her in her duty.

"That," said Mrs. Jarley, in her exhibition tone, as Nell touched a figure at the beginning of the platform, "is an unfortunate maid-of-honour in the time of Queen Elizabeth, who died from pricking her finger in consequence of working upon a Sunday. Observe the blood which is trickling from her finger; also the gold-eyed needle of the period with which she is at work."

All this Nell repeated twice or thrice, pointing to the finger and the needle at the right times, and then passed on to the next.

"That, ladies and gentlemen," said Mrs. Jarley, "is Jasper Packlemerton, of atrocious memory, who courted and married fourteen wives, and destroyed them all, by tickling the soles of their feet when they were sleeping, in the consciousness of innocence and virtue. On being brought to the scaffold, and asked if he was sorry for what he had done, he replied Yes, he was sorry for having let 'em off so easy, and hoped all Christian husbands would pardon him the offence. Let this be a warning to all young ladies to be particular in the character of the gentlemen of their choice. Observe that his fingers are curled, as if in the act of tickling, and that his face is represented with a wink, as he appeared when committing his barbarous murders."

When Nell knew all about Mr. Packlemerton, and could say it without faltering, Mrs. Jarley passed on to the fat man, and then to the thin man, the tall man, the short man, the old lady who died of dancing at a hundred and thirty-two, the wild boy of the woods, the woman who poisoned fourteen families with pickled walnuts, and other historical characters, and interesting but misguided individuals. And so well did Nell profit by her instructions, and so apt was she to remember them, that by the time they had been shut up together for a couple of hours, she was in full possession of the history of the whole establishment, and perfectly competent to the enlightenment of visitors.

Mrs. Jarley was not slow to express her admiration at this happy result, and carried her young friend and pupil to inspect the remaining arrangements within doors, by virtue of which the passage had been already converted into a grove of green baize, hung with the inscription she had already seen (Mr. Slum's production), and a highly ornamented table, placed at the upper end for Mrs. Jarley herself, at which she was to preside, and take the money, in company with his Majesty King George the Third, Mr. Grimaldi as clown, Mary, Queen of Scots, an anonymous gentleman of the Quaker persuasion, and Mr. Pitt, holding in his hand a correct model of the bill for the imposition of the window duty. The preparations without doors had not been neglected either: a nun of great personal attractions was telling her beads on the little portico over the door; and a brigand, with the blackest possible head of hair, and the clearest possible complexion, was at that moment going round the town in a cart, consulting the miniature of a lady.

It now only remained that Mr. Slum's compositions should be judiciously distributed; that the pathetic effusions

should find their way to all private houses and tradespeople; and that the parody commencing, "If I know'd a donkey," should be confined to the taverns, and circulated only among the lawyers' clerks and choice spirits of the place. When this had been done, and Mrs. Jarley had waited upon the boarding-schools in person, with a hand-bill composed expressly for them, in which it was distinctly proved that wax-work refined the mind, cultivated the taste, and enlarged the sphere of the human understanding, that indefatigable lady sat down to dinner, and drank out of the suspicious bottle to a flourishing campaign.

CHAPTER XXIX.

UNQUESTIONABLY Mrs. Jarley had an inventive genius. In the midst of the various devices for attracting visitors to the exhibition, little Nell was not forgotten. The light cart in which the brigand usually made his perambulations being gaily dressed with flags and streamers, and the brigand placed therein, contemplating the miniature of his beloved as usual, Nell was accommodated with a seat beside him, decorated with artificial flowers, and in this state and ceremony rode slowly through the town every morning, dispersing handbills from a basket to the sound of drum and trumpet. The beauty of the child, coupled with her gentle and timid bearing, produced quite a sensation in the little country place. The brigand, heretofore a source of exclusive interest in the streets, became a mere secondary consideration, and to be important only as a part of the show of which she was the chief attraction. Grown-up folks began to be interested in the bright-eyed girl, and some score of little boys fell desperately in love, and constantly left inclosures of nuts and apples, directed in small-text, at the wax-work door.

This desirable impression was not lost on Mrs. Jarley, who, lest Nell should become too cheap, soon sent the brigand out alone again, and kept her in the exhibition room, where she described the figures every half-hour to the great satisfaction of admiring audiences. And these audiences were of a very superior description, including a great many young ladies' boarding-schools, whose favour Mrs. Jarley had been at great pains to conciliate by altering the face and costume of Mr. Grimaldi as clown to represent Mr. Lindley Murray as he appeared when engaged in the composition of his English grammar, and turning a murderess of great renown into Mrs. Hannah More, both of which likenesses were admitted by Miss Monflathers, who was at the head of the head boarding and day establishment in the town, and who condescended to take a private view with eight chosen young ladies, to be quite startling from their extreme correctness. Mr. Pitt, in a nightcap and bed-gown, and without his boots, represented the poet Cowper with perfect exactness; and Mary, Queen of Scots, in a dark wig, white shirt-collar, and male attire, was such a complete image of Lord Byron that the young ladies quite screamed when they saw it. Miss Monflathers, however, rebuked this enthusiasm, and took occasion to reprove Mrs. Jarley for not keeping her collection more select, observing that his lordship had held certain opinions quite incompatible with wax-work honours, and adding something about a dean and chapter, which Mrs. Jarley did not understand.

Although her duties were sufficiently laborious, Nell found in the lady of the caravan a very kind and considerate person, who had not only a peculiar relish for being comfortable herself, but for making everybody about her comfortable also; which latter taste, it may be remarked, is, even in persons who live in much finer places than caravans, a far more rare and uncommon one than the first, and is not by any means its necessary consequence. As her popularity procured her various little fees from the visitors on which her patroness never demanded any toll, and as her grandfather too was well treated and useful, she had no cause of anxiety in connection with the wax-work beyond that which sprung from her recollection of

Quilp, and her fears that he might return, and one day suddenly encounter them.

Quilp, indeed, was a perpetual nightmare to the child, who was constantly haunted by a vision of his ugly face and stunted figure. She slept, for their better security, in the room where the wax-work figures were, and she never retired to this place at night but she tortured herself—she could not help it—with imagining a resemblance, in some one or other of their death-like faces, to the dwarf; and this fancy would sometimes so gain upon her that she would almost believe he had removed the figure and stood within the clothes. Then there were so many of them with their great glassy eyes, and as they stood, one behind the other, all about her bed, they looked so like living creatures, and yet so unlike in their grim stillness and silence, that she had a kind of terror of them for their own sakes, and would often lie watching their dusky figures until she was obliged to rise and light a candle, or go and sit at the open window and feel a companionship in the bright stars. At these times, she would recall the old house and the window at which she used to sit alone; and then she would think of poor Kit and all his kindness, until the tears came into her eyes, and she would weep and smile together.

Often and anxiously at this silent hour her thoughts reverted to her grandfather, and she would wonder how much he remembered of their former life, and whether he was ever really mindful of the change in their condition and of their late helplessness and destitution. When they were wandering about, she seldom thought of this, but now she could not help considering what would become of them if he fell sick, or her own strength were to fail her. He was very patient and willing, happy to execute any little task, and glad to be of use; but he was in the same listless state, with no prospect of improvement—a mere child—a poor, thoughtless, vacant creature—a harmless, fond old man, susceptible of tender love and regard for her, and of pleasant and painful impressions, but alive to nothing more. It made her very sad to know that this was so—so sad to see it that sometimes when he sat idly by, smiling and nodding to her when she looked round, or when he caressed some little child and carried it to and fro, as he was fond of doing by the hour together, perplexed by its simple questions, yet patient under his own infirmity, and seeming almost conscious of it too, and humbled even before the mind of an infant—so sad it made her to see him thus, that she would burst into tears, and withdrawing into some secret place, fall down upon her knees and pray that he might be restored.

But the bitterness of her grief was not in beholding him in this condition, when he was at least content and tranquil, nor in her solitary meditations on his altered state, though these were trials for a young heart. Cause for deeper and heavier sorrow was yet to come.

One evening, a holiday night with them, Nell and her grandfather went out to walk. They had been rather closely confined for some days, and the weather being warm they strolled a long distance. Clear of the town, they took a footpath which struck through some pleasant fields, judging that it would terminate in the road they quitted, and enable them to return that way. It made, however, a much wider circuit than they had supposed, and thus they were tempted onward until sunset, when they reached the track of which they were in search, and stopped to rest.

It had been gradually getting overcast, and now the sky was dark and lowering, save where the glory of the departing sun piled up masses of gold and burning fire, decaying embers of which gleamed here and there through the black veil, and shone redly down upon the earth. The wind began to moan in hollow murmurs, as the sun went down, carrying glad day elsewhere; and a train of dull clouds coming up against it, menaced thunder and lightning. Large drops of rain soon began to fall, and, as the storm-clouds came sailing onward, others supplied the void they left behind, and

spread over all the sky. Then was heard the low rumbling of distant thunder, then the lightning quivered, and then the darkness of an hour seemed to have gathered in an instant.

Fearful of taking shelter beneath a tree or hedge, the old man and the child hurried along the high-road, hoping to find some house in which they could seek a refuge from the storm, which had now burst forth in earnest, and every moment increased in violence. Drenched with the pelting rain, confused by the deafening thunder, and bewildered by the glare of the forked lightning, they would have passed a solitary house without being aware of its vicinity, had not a man, who was standing at the door, called lustily to them to enter.

"Your ears ought to be better than other folks' at any rate, if you make so little of the chance of being struck blind," he said, retreating from the door and shading his eyes with his hands as the jagged lightning came again. "What were you going past for, eh?" he added, as he closed the door and led the way along a passage to a room behind.

"We didn't see the house, sir, till we heard you calling," Nell replied.

"No wonder," said the man, "with this lightning in one's eyes, by the bye. You had better stand by the fire here, and dry yourselves a bit. You can call for what you like if you want anything. If you don't want anything, you are not obliged to give an order. Don't be afraid of that. This is a public-house, that's all. The Valiant Soldier is pretty well known hereabouts."

"Is this house called the Valiant Soldier, sir?" asked Nell.

"I thought everybody knew that," replied the landlord. "Where have you come from, if you don't know the Valiant Soldier as well as the church catechism? This is the Valiant Soldier, by James Groves—Jem Groves—honest Jem Groves, as is a man of unblemished moral character, and has a good dry skittle ground. If any man has got anything to say again Jem Groves, let him say it *to* Jem Groves, and Jem Groves can accommodate him with a customer on any terms from four pound a side to forty."

With these words, the speaker tapped himself on the waistcoat to intimate that he was the Jem Groves so highly eulogised; sparred scientifically at a counterfeit Jem Groves, who was sparring at society in general from a black frame over the chimney-piece; and, applying a half-emptied glass of spirits-and-water to his lips, drank Jem Groves's health.

The night being warm, there was a large screen drawn across the room, for a barrier against the heat of the fire. It seemed as if somebody on the other side of this screen had been insinuating doubts of Mr. Groves's prowess, and had thereby given rise to these egotistical expressions; for Mr. Groves wound up his defiance by giving a loud knock upon it with his knuckles, and pausing for a reply from the other side.

"There ain't many men," said Mr. Groves, no answer being returned, "who would ventur' to cross Jem Groves under his own roof. There's only one man I know that has nerve enough for that, and that man's not a hundred mile from here neither. But he's worth a dozen men, and I let him say of me whatever he likes in consequence—he knows that."

In return for this complimentary address, a very gruff, hoarse voice bade Mr. Groves "hold his nise and light a candle." And the same voice remarked that the same gentleman "needn't waste his breath in brag, for most people knew pretty well what sort of stuff he was made of."

"Nell, they're — they're playing cards," whispered the old man, suddenly interested. "Don't you hear them?"

"Look sharp with that candle," said the voice; "it's as much as I can do to see the pips on the cards as it is; and get this shutter closed as quick as you can, will you? Your beer will be the worse for to-night's thunder, I expect.—Game! Seven-and-sixpence to me, old Isaac. Hand over."

"Do you hear, Nell, do you hear them?" whispered the old man again,

Quilp, and her fears that he might return, and one day suddenly encounter them.

Quilp, indeed, was a perpetual nightmare to the child, who was constantly haunted by a vision of his ugly face and stunted figure. She slept, for their better security, in the room where the wax-work figures were, and she never retired to this place at night but she tortured herself—she could not help it—with imagining a resemblance, in some one or other of their death-like faces, to the dwarf; and this fancy would sometimes so gain upon her that she would almost believe he had removed the figure and stood within the clothes. Then there were so many of them with their great glassy eyes, and as they stood, one behind the other, all about her bed, they looked so like living creatures, and yet so unlike in their grim stillness and silence, that she had a kind of terror of them for their own sakes, and would often lie watching their dusky figures until she was obliged to rise and light a candle, or go and sit at the open window and feel a companionship in the bright stars. At these times, she would recall the old house and the window at which she used to sit alone; and then she would think of poor Kit and all his kindness, until the tears came into her eyes, and she would weep and smile together.

Often and anxiously at this silent hour her thoughts reverted to her grandfather, and she would wonder how much he remembered of their former life, and whether he was ever really mindful of the change in their condition and of their late helplessness and destitution. When they were wandering about, she seldom thought of this, but now she could not help considering what would become of them if he fell sick, or her own strength were to fail her. He was very patient and willing, happy to execute any little task, and glad to be of use; but he was in the same listless state, with no prospect of improvement—a mere child—a poor, thoughtless, vacant creature—a harmless, fond old man, susceptible of tender love and regard for her, and of pleasant and painful impressions, but alive to nothing more. It made her very sad to know that this was so—so sad to see it that sometimes when he sat idly by, smiling and nodding to her when she looked round, or when he caressed some little child and carried it to and fro, as he was fond of doing by the hour together, perplexed by its simple questions, yet patient under his own infirmity, and seeming almost conscious of it too, and humbled even before the mind of an infant—so sad it made her to see him thus, that she would burst into tears, and withdrawing into some secret place, fall down upon her knees and pray that he might be restored.

But the bitterness of her grief was not in beholding him in this condition, when he was at least content and tranquil, nor in her solitary meditations on his altered state, though these were trials for a young heart. Cause for deeper and heavier sorrow was yet to come.

One evening, a holiday night with them, Nell and her grandfather went out to walk. They had been rather closely confined for some days, and the weather being warm they strolled a long distance. Clear of the town, they took a footpath which struck through some pleasant fields, judging that it would terminate in the road they quitted, and enable them to return that way. It made, however, a much wider circuit than they had supposed, and thus they were tempted onward until sunset, when they reached the track of which they were in search, and stopped to rest.

It had been gradually getting overcast, and now the sky was dark and lowering, save where the glory of the departing sun piled up masses of gold and burning fire, decaying embers of which gleamed here and there through the black veil, and shone redly down upon the earth. The wind began to moan in hollow murmurs, as the sun went down, carrying glad day elsewhere; and a train of dull clouds coming up against it, menaced thunder and lightning. Large drops of rain soon began to fall, and, as the storm-clouds came sailing onward, others supplied the void they left behind, and

spread over all the sky. Then was heard the low rumbling of distant thunder, then the lightning quivered, and then the darkness of an hour seemed to have gathered in an instant.

Fearful of taking shelter beneath a tree or hedge, the old man and the child hurried along the high-road, hoping to find some house in which they could seek a refuge from the storm, which had now burst forth in earnest, and every moment increased in violence. Drenched with the pelting rain, confused by the deafening thunder, and bewildered by the glare of the forked lightning, they would have passed a solitary house without being aware of its vicinity, had not a man, who was standing at the door, called lustily to them to enter.

"Your ears ought to be better than other folks' at any rate, if you make so little of the chance of being struck blind," he said, retreating from the door and shading his eyes with his hands as the jagged lightning came again. "What were you going past for, eh?" he added, as he closed the door and led the way along a passage to a room behind.

"We didn't see the house, sir, till we heard you calling," Nell replied.

"No wonder," said the man, "with this lightning in one's eyes, by the bye. You had better stand by the fire here, and dry yourselves a bit. You can call for what you like if you want anything. If you don't want anything, you are not obliged to give an order. Don't be afraid of that. This is a public-house, that's all. The Valiant Soldier is pretty well known hereabouts."

"Is this house called the Valiant Soldier, sir?" asked Nell.

"I thought everybody knew that," replied the landlord. "Where have you come from, if you don't know the Valiant Soldier as well as the church catechism? This is the Valiant Soldier, by James Groves—Jem Groves—honest Jem Groves, as is a man of unblemished moral character, and has a good dry skittle ground. If any man has got anything to say again Jem Groves, let him say it *to* Jem Groves, and Jem Groves can accommodate him with a customer on any terms from four pound a side to forty."

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"Do you hear, Nell, do you hear them?" whispered the old man again,

with increased earnestness, as the money chinked upon the table.

"I haven't seen such a storm as this," said a sharp, cracked voice of most disagreeable quality, when a tremendous peal of thunder had died away, "since the night when old Luke Withers won thirteen times running on the red. We all said he had the devil's luck and his own, and as it was the kind of night for the devil to be out and busy, I suppose he *was* looking over his shoulder, if anybody could have seen him."

"Ah!" returned the gruff voice; "for all old Luke's winnings through thick and thin of late years, I remember the time when he was the unluckiest and unfortunatest of men. He never took a dice-box in his hand, or held a card, but he was plucked, pigeoned, and cleaned out completely."

"Do you hear what he says?" whispered the old man. "Do you hear that, Nell?"

The child saw with astonishment and alarm that his whole appearance had undergone a complete change. His face was flushed and eager, his eyes were strained, his teeth set, his breath came short and thick, and the hand he laid upon her arm trembled so violently that she shook beneath its grasp.

"Bear witness," he muttered, looking upward, "that I always said it—that I knew it, dreamed of it, felt it was the truth, and that it must be so! What money have we, Nell? Come! I saw you with money yesterday. What money have we? Give it to me."

"No, no, let me keep it, grandfather," said the frightened child. "Let us go away from here. Do not mind the rain. Pray let us go."

"Give it to me, I say," returned the old man fiercely. "Hush, hush, don't cry, Nell. If I spoke sharply, dear, I didn't mean it. It's for thy good. I have wronged thee, Nell, but I will right thee yet—I will, indeed. Where is the money?"

"Do not take it," said the child. "Pray do not take it, dear. For both our sakes let me keep it, or let me throw it away—better let me throw it away than you take it now. Let us go; do let us go."

"Give me the money," returned the old man, "I must have it. There—there—that's my dear Nell. I'll right thee one day, child. I'll right thee, never fear!"

She took from her pocket a little purse. He seized it with the same rapid impatience which had characterised his speech, and hastily made his way to the other side of the screen. It was impossible to restrain him, and the trembling child followed close behind.

The landlord had placed a light upon the table, and was engaged in drawing the curtain of the window. The speakers whom they had heard were two men, who had a pack of cards and some silver money between them, while upon the screen itself the games they had played were scored in chalk. The man with the rough voice was a burly fellow of middle age, with large black whiskers, broad cheeks, a coarse, wide mouth, and bull neck, which was pretty freely displayed, as his shirt-collar was only confined by a loose red neckerchief. He wore his hat, which was of a brownish-white, and had beside him a thick knotted stick. The other man, whom his companion had called Isaac, was of a more slender figure—stooping, and high in the shoulders—with a very ill-favoured face, and a most sinister and villainous squint.

"Now, old gentleman," said Isaac, looking round, "do you know either of us? This side of the screen is private, sir."

"No offence, I hope," returned the old man.

"But, by G——, sir, there *is* offence," said the other, interrupting him, "when you intrude yourself upon a couple of gentlemen who are particularly engaged."

"I had no intention to offend," said the old man, looking anxiously at the cards. "I thought that——"

"But you had no right to think, sir," retorted the other. "What the devil has a man at your time of life to do with thinking?"

"Now, bully boy," said the stout man, raising his eyes from his cards for the first time, "can't you let him speak?"

The landlord, who had apparently

resolved to remain neutral until he knew which side of the question the stout man would espouse, chimed in at this place with, "Ah, to be sure, can't you let him speak, Isaac List?"

"Can't I let him speak?" sneered Isaac, in reply, mimicking as nearly as he could, in his shrill voice, the tones of the landlord. "Yes, I can let him speak, Jemmy Groves."

"Well, then, do it; will you?" said the landlord.

Mr. List's squint assumed a portentous character, which seemed to threaten a prolongation of this controversy, when his companion, who had been looking sharply at the old man, put a timely stop to it.

"Who knows," said he, with a cunning look, "but the gentleman may have civilly meant to ask if he might have the honour to take a hand with us?"

"I did mean it," cried the old man. "That is what I mean. That is what I want now!"

"I thought so," returned the same man. "Then who knows but the gentleman, anticipating our objection to play for love, civilly desired to play for money?"

The old man replied by shaking the little purse in his eager hand, and then throwing it down upon the table, and gathering up the cards as a miser would clutch at gold.

"Oh! That, indeed," said Isaac; "if that's what the gentleman meant, I beg the gentleman's pardon. Is this the gentleman's little purse? A very pretty little purse. Rather a light purse," added Isaac, throwing it into the air and catching it dexterously, "but enough to amuse a gentleman for half an hour or so."

"We'll make a four-handed game of it, and take in Groves," said the stout man. "Come, Jemmy."

The landlord, who conducted himself like one who was well used to such little parties, approached the table and took his seat. The child, in a perfect agony, drew her grandfather aside, and implored him, even then, to come away.

"Come, and we may be so happy," said the child.

"We *will* be happy," replied the old man hastily. "Let me go, Nell. The means of happiness are on the cards and the dice. We must rise from little winnings to great. There's little to be won here, but great will come in time. I shall but win back my own; and it's all for thee, my darling."

"God help us!" cried the child. "Oh, what hard fortune brought us here?"

"Hush!" rejoined the old man, laying his hand upon her mouth, "Fortune will not bear chiding. We must not reproach her, or she shuns us; I have found that out."

"Now, mister," said the stout man. "If you're not coming yourself, give us the cards, will you?"

"I am coming," cried the old man. "Sit thee down, Nell, sit thee down and look on. Be of good heart; it's all for thee—all—every penny. I don't tell them—no, no—or else they wouldn't play, dreading the chance that such a cause must give me. Look at them. See what they are and what thou art. Who doubts that we must win?"

"The gentleman has thought better of it, and isn't coming," said Isaac, making as though he would rise from the table. "I'm sorry the gentleman's daunted — nothing venture, nothing have—but the gentleman knows best."

"Why, I am ready. You have all been slow but me," said the old man. "I wonder who is more anxious to begin than I."

As he spoke he drew a chair to the table; and the other three closing round it at the same time, the game commenced.

The child sat by and watched its progress with a troubled mind. Regardless of the run of luck, and mindful only of the desperate passion which had its hold upon her grandfather, losses and gains were to her alike. Exulting in some brief triumph, or cast down by a defeat, there he sat so wild and restless, so feverishly and intensely anxious, so terribly eager, so ravenous for the paltry stakes, that she could have almost better borne to see him dead. And yet she was the innocent cause of all this torture, and he, gambling with such a savage

thirst for gain as the most insatiable gambler never felt, had not one selfish thought!

On the contrary, the other three—knaves and gamesters by their trade—while intent upon their game, were yet as cool and quiet as if every virtue had been centred in their breasts. Sometimes one would look up to smile to another, or to snuff the feeble candle, or to glance at the lightning as it shot through the open window and fluttering curtain, or to listen to some louder peal of thunder than the rest, with a kind of momentary impatience, as if it put him out; but there they sat, with a calm indifference to everything but their cards, perfect philosophers in appearance, and with no greater show of passion or excitement than if they had been made of stone.

The storm had raged for full three hours; the lightning had grown fainter and less frequent; the thunder, from seeming to roll and break above their heads, had gradually died away into a deep, hoarse distance; and still the game went on, and still the anxious child was quite forgotten.

CHAPTER XXX.

At length the play came to an end, and Mr. Isaac List rose, the only winner. Mat and the landlord bore their losses with professional fortitude. Isaac pocketed his gains with the air of a man who had quite made up his mind to win all along, and was neither surprised nor pleased.

Nell's little purse was exhausted; but although it lay empty by his side, and the other players had now risen from the table, the old man sat poring over the cards, dealing them as they had been dealt before, and turning up the different hands to see what each man would have held if they had still been playing. He was quite absorbed in this occupation, when the child drew near and laid her hand upon his shoulder, telling him that it was near midnight.

"See the curse of poverty, Nell," he said, pointing to the packs he had spread out upon the table. "If I could have gone on a little longer, only a little longer, the luck would have turned on my side. Yes, it's as plain as the marks upon the cards. See here—and there—and here again."

"Put them away," urged the child. "Try to forget them."

"Try to forget them!" he rejoined, raising his haggard face to hers, and regarding her with an incredulous stare. "To forget them! How are we ever to grow rich if I forget them?"

The child could only shake her head.

"No, no, Nell," said the old man, patting her cheek; "they must not be forgotten. We must make amends for this as soon as we can. Patience—patience, and we'll right thee yet, I promise thee. Lose to-day, win to-morrow. And nothing can be won without anxiety and care—nothing. Come, I am ready."

"Do you know what the time is?" said Mr. Groves, who was smoking with his friends. "Past twelve o'clock——"

"And a rainy night," added the stout man.

"The Valiant Soldier, by James Groves. Good beds. Cheap entertainment for man and beast," said Mr. Groves, quoting his sign-board. "Half-past twelve o'clock."

"It's very late," said the uneasy child. "I wish we had gone before. What will they think of us? It will be two o'clock by the time we get back. What would it cost, sir, if we stopped here?"

"Two good beds, one-and-sixpence; supper and beer, one shilling; total, two shillings and sixpence," replied the Valiant Soldier.

Now Nell had still the piece of gold sewn in her dress; and when she came to consider the lateness of the hour, and the somnolent habits of Mrs. Jarley, and to imagine the state of consternation in which they would certainly throw that good lady by knocking her up in the middle of the night—and when she reflected, on the other hand, that if they remained where they were, and rose early in the morning, they might get back before she awoke, and could plead the violence of the storm by which they had been

overtaken as a good apology for their absence—she decided, after a great deal of hesitation, to remain. She therefore took her grandfather aside, and telling him that she had still enough left to defray the cost of their lodging, proposed that they should stay there for the night.

"If I had had but that money before—if I had only known of it a few minutes ago!" muttered the old man.

"We will decide to stop here, if you please," said Nell, turning hastily to the landlord.

"I think that's prudent, returned Mr. Groves. "You shall have your suppers directly."

Accordingly, when Mr. Groves had smoked his pipe out, knocked out the ashes, and placed it carefully in a corner of the fireplace, with the bowl downwards, he brought in the bread and cheese and beer, with many high encomiums upon their excellence, and bade his guests all to, and make themselves at home. Nell and her grandfather ate sparingly, for both were occupied with their own reflections; the other gentlemen, for whose constitutions beer was too weak and tame a liquid, consoled themselves with spirits and tobacco.

As they would leave the house very early in the morning, the child was anxious to pay for their entertainment before they retired to bed. But as she felt the necessity of concealing her little hoard from her grandfather, and had to change the piece of gold, she took it secretly from its place of concealment, and embraced an opportunity of following the landlord when he went out of the room, and tendered it to him in the little bar.

"Will you give me the change here, if you please?" said the child.

Mr. James Groves was evidently surprised, and looked at the money, and rang it, and looked at the child, and at the money again, as though he had a mind to inquire how she came by it. The coin being genuine, however, and changed at his house, he probably felt, like a wise landlord, that it was no business of his. At any rate, he counted out the change, and gave it her. The child was returning to the room where they had passed the evening, when she fancied she saw a figure just gliding in at the door. There was nothing but a long dark passage between this door and the place where she had changed the money, and, being very certain that no person had passed in or out while she stood there, the thought struck her that she had been watched.

But by whom? When she re-entered the room, she found its inmates exactly as she had left them. The stout fellow lay upon two chairs, resting his head on his hand, and the squinting man reposed in a similar attitude on the opposite side of the table. Between them sat her grandfather, looking intently at the winner with a kind of hungry admiration, and hanging upon his words as if he were some superior being. She was puzzled for a moment, and looked round to see if any else were there. No. Then she asked her grandfather in a whisper whether anybody had left the room while she was absent. "No," he said, "nobody."

It must have been her fancy, then; and yet it was strange that, without anything in her previous thoughts to lead to it, she should have imagined this figure so very distinctly. She was still wondering and thinking of it, when a girl came to light her to bed.

The old man took leave of the company at the same time, and they went upstairs together. It was a great, rambling house, with dull corridors and wide staircases, which the flaring candles seemed to make more gloomy. She left her grandfather in his chamber, and followed her guide to another, which was at the end of a passage, and approached by some half-dozen crazy steps. This was prepared for her. The girl lingered a little while to talk, and tell her grievances. She had not a good place, she said; the wages were low, and the work was hard. She was going to leave it in a fortnight; the child couldn't recommend her to another, she supposed? Indeed, she was afraid another would be difficult to get after living there, for the house had a very indifferent character; there

was far too much card-playing, and such like. She was very much mistaken if some of the people who came there oftenest were quite as honest as they might be, but she wouldn't have it known that she had said so, for the world. Then there was some rambling allusions to a rejected sweetheart, who had threatened to go a-soldiering—a final promise of knocking at the door early in the morning—and "Good-night."

The child did not feel comfortable when she was left alone. She could not help thinking of the figure stealing through the passage downstairs; and what the girl had said did not tend to reassure her. The men were very ill-looking. They might get their living by robbing and murdering travellers. Who could tell?

Reasoning herself out of these fears, or losing sight of them for a little while, there came the anxiety to which the adventures of the night gave rise. Here was the old passion awakened again in her grandfather's breast, and to what further distraction it might tempt him Heaven only knew. What fears their absence might have occasioned already! Persons might be seeking for them even then. Would they be forgiven in the morning, or turned adrift again? Oh, why had they stopped in that strange place? It would have been better, under any circumstances, to have gone on!

At last, sleep gradually stole upon her—a broken, fitful sleep, troubled by dreams of falling from high towers, and waking with a start and in great terror. A deeper slumber followed this—and then—— What! That figure in the room!

A figure was there. Yes, she had drawn up the blind to admit the light when it should dawn, and there, between the foot of the bed and the dark casement, it crouched and slunk along, groping its way with noiseless hands, and stealing round the bed. She had no voice to cry for help, no power to move, but lay still, watching it.

On it came—on, silently and stealthily, to the bed's head. The breath so near her pillow, that she shrunk back into it, lest those wandering hands should light upon her face. Back again it stole to the window—then turned its head towards her.

The dark form was a mere blot upon the lighter darkness of the room, but she saw the turning of the head, and felt and knew how the eyes looked and the ears listened. There it remained, motionless as she. At length, still keeping the face towards her, it busied its hands in something, and she heard the chink of money.

Then, on it came again, silent and stealthy as before, and replacing the garments it had taken from the bedside, dropped upon its hands and knees and crawled away. How slowly it seemed to move, now that she could hear but not see it, creeping along the floor! It reached the door at last, and stood upon its feet. The steps creaked beneath its noiseless tread, and it was gone.

The first impulse of the child was to fly from the terror of being by herself in that room—to have somebody by—not to be alone—and then her power of speech would be restored. With no consciousness of having moved, she gained the door.

There was the dreadful shadow, pausing at the bottom of the steps.

She could not pass it; she might have done so, perhaps, in the darkness without being seized, but her blood curdled at the thought. The figure stood quite still, and so did she; not boldly, but of necessity, for going back into the room was hardly less terrible than going on.

The rain beat fast and furiously without, and ran down in plashing streams from the thatched roof. Some summer insect, with no escape into the air, flew blindly to and fro, beating its body against the walls and ceiling, and filling the silent place with murmurs. The figure moved again. The child involuntarily did the same. Once in her grandfather's room, she would be safe.

It crept along the passage until it came to the very door she longed so ardently to reach. The child, in the agony of being so near, had almost darted forward with the design of bursting into the room and closing it

behind her, when the figure stopped again.

The idea flashed suddenly upon her — What if it entered there, and had a design upon the old man's life? She turned faint and sick. It did. It went in. There was a light inside. The figure was now within the chamber, and she, still dumb—quite dumb, and almost senseless—stood looking on.

The door was partly open. Not knowing what she meant to do, but meaning to preserve him or be killed herself, she staggered forward and looked in.

What sight was that which met her view?

The bed had not been lain on, but was smooth and empty. And at a table sat the old man himself—the only living creature there—his white face pinched and sharpened by the greediness which made his eyes unnaturally bright — counting the money of which his hands had robbed her.

CHAPTER XXXI.

With steps more faltering and unsteady than those with which she had approached the room, the child withdrew from the door, and groped her way back to her own chamber. The terror she had lately felt was nothing compared with that which now oppressed her. No strange robber, no treacherous host conniving at the plunder of his guests, or stealing to their beds to kill them in their sleep, no nightly prowler, however terrible and cruel, could have awakened in her bosom half the dread which the recognition of her silent visitor inspired. The gray-headed old man, gliding like a ghost into her room and acting the thief while he supposed her fast asleep, then bearing off his prize and hanging over it with the ghastly exultation she had witnessed, was worse—immeasurably worse, and far more dreadful for the moment to reflect upon—than anything her wildest fancy could have suggested. If he should return—there was no lock or bolt upon the door—and if, distrustful of having left some money yet behind, he should come back to seek for more, a vague awe and horror surrounded the idea of his slinking in again with stealthy tread, and turning his face toward the empty bed, while she shrank down close at his feet to avoid his touch, which was almost insupportable. She sat and listened. Hark! A footstep on the stairs, and now the door was slowly opening. It was but imagination, yet imagination had all the terrors of reality; nay, it was worse, for the reality would have come and gone, and there an end, but in imagination it was always coming, and never went away.

The feeling which beset the child was one of dim uncertain horror. She had no fear of the dear old grandfather, in whose love for her this disease of the brain had been engendered; but the man she had seen that night, wrapped in the game of chance, lurking in her room, and counting the money by the glimmering light, seemed like another creature in his shape, a monstrous distortion of his image, a something to recoil from and be the more afraid of, because it bore a likeness to him, and kept close about her, as he did. She could scarcely connect her own affectionate companion, save by his loss, with this old man, so like yet so unlike him. She had wept to see him dull and quiet. How much greater cause she had for weeping now!

The child sat watching and thinking of these things, until the phantom in her mind so increased in gloom and terror, that she felt it would be a relief to hear the old man's voice, or if he were asleep, even to see him, and banish some of the fears that clustered round his image. She stole down the stairs and passage again. The door was still ajar as she had left it, and the candle burning as before.

She had her own candle in her hand, prepared to say, if he were waking, that she was uneasy and could not rest, and had come to see if his were still alight. Looking into the room, she saw him lying calmly on his bed, and so took courage to enter.

Fast asleep. No passion in the face, no avarice, no anxiety, no wild desire —all gentle, tranquil, and at peace.

This was not the gambler, or the shadow in her room; this was not even the worn and jaded man whose face had so often met her own in the gray morning light; this was her dear old friend, her harmless fellow-traveller, her good, kind grandfather.

She had no fear as she looked upon his slumbering features, but she had a deep and weighty sorrow, and it found its relief in tears.

"God bless him!" said the child, stooping softly to kiss his placid cheek. "I see too well now that they would indeed part us if they found us out, and shut him up from the light of the sun and sky. He has only me to help him. God bless us both!"

Lighting her candle, she retreated as silently as she had come, and gaining her own room once more, sat up during the remainder of that long, long, miserable night.

At last the day turned her waning candle pale, and she fell asleep. She was quickly roused by the girl who had shown her up to bed, and, as soon as she was dressed, prepared to go down to her grandfather. But first she searched her pocket and found that her money was all gone—not a sixpence remained.

The old man was ready, and in a few seconds they were on their road. The child thought he rather avoided her eye, and appeared to expect that she would tell him of her loss. She felt she must do that, or he might suspect the truth.

"Grandfather," she said, in a tremulous voice, after they had walked about a mile in silence, "do you think they are honest people at the house yonder?"

"Why?" returned the old man, trembling. "Do I think them honest?—yes, they played honestly."

"I'll tell you why I ask," rejoined Nell. "I lost some money last night—out of my bedroom, I am sure. Unless it was taken by somebody in jest—only in jest, dear grandfather, which would make me laugh heartily if I could but know it——"

"Who would take money in jest?" returned the old man, in a hurried manner. "Those who take money, take it to keep. Don't talk of jest."

"Then it was stolen out of my room, dear," said the child, whose last hope was destroyed by the manner of this reply.

"But is there no more, Nell?" said the old man; "no more anywhere? Was it all taken—every farthing of it—was there nothing left?"

"Nothing," replied the child.

"We must get more," said the old man, "we must earn it, Nell—hoard it up, scrape it together, come by it somehow. Never mind this loss. Tell nobody of it, and perhaps we may regain it. Don't ask how—we may regain it, and a great deal more—but tell nobody, or trouble may come of it. And so they took it out of thy room, when thou wert asleep!" he added, in a compassionate tone, very different from the secret, cunning way in which he had spoken until now. "Poor Nell, poor little Nell!"

The child hung down her head and wept. The sympathising tone in which he spoke was quite sincere; she was sure of that. It was not the lightest part of her sorrow to know that this was done for her.

"Not a word about it to any one but me," said the old man; "no, not even to me," he added hastily, "for it can do no good. All the losses that ever were are not worth tears from thy eyes, darling. Why should they be, when we will win them back?"

"Let them go," said the child, looking up. "Let them go, once and for ever, and I would never shed another tear if every penny had been a thousand pounds."

"Well, well," returned the old man, checking himself as some impetuous answer rose to his lips, "she knows no better. I ought to be thankful for it."

"But listen to me," said the child earnestly; "will you listen to me?"

"Aye, aye, I'll listen," returned the old man, still without looking at her; "a pretty voice. It has always a sweet sound to me. It always had when it was her mother's, poor child."

"Let me persuade you, then—oh, do let me persuade you," said the child, "to think no more of gains or losses,

and to try no fortune but the fortune we pursue together."

"We pursue this aim together," retorted her grandfather, still looking away and seeming to confer with himself. "Whose image sanctifies the game?"

"Have we been worse off," resumed the child, "since you forgot these cares and we have been travelling on together? Have we not been much better and happier without a home to shelter us, than ever we were in that unhappy house, when they were on your mind?"

"She speaks the truth," murmured the old man, in the same tone as before. "It must not turn me, but it is the truth—no doubt it is."

"Only remember what we have been since that bright morning when we turned our backs upon it for the last time," said Nell; "only remember what we have been since we have been free of all those miseries—what peaceful days and quiet nights we have had—what pleasant times we have known—what happiness we have enjoyed. If we have been tired or hungry, we have been soon refreshed, and slept the sounder for it. Think what beautiful things we have seen, and how contented we have felt. And why was this blessed change?"

He stopped her with a motion of his hand, and bade her talk to him no more just then, for he was busy. After a time he kissed her cheek, still motioning her to silence, and walked on, looking far before him, and sometimes stopping and gazing with a puckered brow upon the ground, as if he were painfully trying to collect his disordered thoughts. Once she saw tears in his eyes. When he had gone on thus for some time, he took her hand in his as he was accustomed to do, with nothing of the violence or animation of his late manner; and so, by degrees so fine that the child could not trace them, he settled down into his usual quiet way, and suffered her to lead him where she would.

When they presented themselves in the midst of the stupendous collection, they found, as Nell had anticipated, that Mrs. Jarley was not yet out of bed, and that, although she had suffered some uneasiness on their account overnight, and had indeed sat up for them until past eleven o'clock, she had retired in the persuasion that, being overtaken by the storm at some distance from home, they had sought the nearest shelter, and would not return before morning. Nell immediately applied herself with great assiduity to the decoration and preparation of the room, and had the satisfaction of completing her task, and dressing herself neatly, before the beloved of the Royal Family came down to breakfast.

"We haven't had," said Mrs. Jarley, when the meal was over, "more than eight of Miss Monflathers's young ladies all the time we've been here, and there's twenty-six of 'em, as I was told by the cook when I asked her a question or two, and put her on the free-list. We must try 'em with a parcel of new bills, and you shall take it, my dear, and see what effect that has upon 'em."

The proposed expedition being one of paramount importance, Mrs. Jarley adjusted Nell's bonnet with her own hands, and declaring that she certainly did look very pretty, and reflected credit on the establishment, dismissed her with many commendations, and certain needful directions as to the turnings on the right which she was to take, and the turnings on the left which she was to avoid. Thus instructed, Nell had no difficulty in finding out Miss Monflathers's boarding and day establishment, which was a large house, with a high wall, and a large garden gate with a large brass plate, and a small grating through which Miss Monflathers's parlour-maid inspected all visitors before admitting them; for nothing in the shape of a man—no, not even a milkman—was suffered, without special license, to pass that gate. Even the tax-gatherer, who was stout, and wore spectacles, and a broad-brimmed hat, had the taxes handed through the grating. More obdurate than gate of adamant or brass, this gate of Miss Monflathers's frowned on all mankind. The very butcher respected it as a gate of mystery, and left off whistling when he rang the bell.

As Nell approached the awful door

it turned slowly upon its hinges with a creaking noise, and forth from the solemn grove beyond came a long file of young ladies, two and two, all with open books in their hands, and some with parasols likewise. And last of the goodly procession came Miss Monflathers, bearing herself a parasol of lilac silk, and supported by two smiling teachers, each mortally envious of each other, and devoted unto Miss Monflathers.

Confused by the looks and whispers of the girls, Nell stood with downcast eyes and suffered the procession to pass on, until Miss Monflathers, bringing up the rear, approached her, when she curtsied and presented her little packet; on receipt whereof Miss Monflathers commanded that the line should halt.

"You're the wax-work child, are you not?" said Miss Monflathers.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Nell, colouring deeply, for the young ladies had collected about her, and she was the centre on which all eyes were fixed.

"And don't you think you must be a very wicked little child," said Miss Monflathers, who was of rather uncertain temper, and lost no opportunity of impressing moral truths upon the tender minds of the young ladies, "to be a wax-work child at all?"

Poor Nell had never viewed her position in this light, and not knowing what to say, remained silent, blushing more deeply than before.

"Don't you know," said Miss Monflathers, "that it's very naughty and unfeminine, and a perversion of the properties wisely and benignantly transmitted to us, with expansive powers to be roused from their dormant state through the medium of cultivation?"

The two teachers murmured their respectful approval of this home-thrust, and looked at Nell as though they would have said that there indeed Miss Monflathers had hit her very hard. Then they smiled and glanced at Miss Monflathers, and then, their eyes meeting, they exchanged looks which plainly said that each considered herself smiler-in-ordinary to Miss Monflathers, and regarded the other as having no right to smile, and that her so doing was an act of presumption and impertinence.

"Don't you feel how naughty it is of you," resumed Miss Monflathers, "to be a wax-work child, when you might have the proud consciousness of assisting, to the extent of your infant powers, the manufactures of your country; of improving your mind by the constant contemplation of the steam-engine; and of earning a comfortable and independent subsistence of from two-and-ninepence to three shillings per week? Don't you know that the harder you are at work, the happier you are?"

"'How doth the little——'" murmured one of the teachers, in quotation from Dr. Watts.

"Eh?" said Miss Monflathers, turning smartly round. "Who said that?"

Of course the teacher who had not said it indicated the rival who had, whom Miss Monflathers frowningly resquested to hold her peace, by that means throwing the informing teacher into raptures of joy.

"The little busy bee," said Miss Monflathers, drawing herself up, "is applicable only to genteel children.

'In books, or work, or healthful play,'

is quite right as far as they are concerned; and the work means painting on velvet, fancy needlework, or embroidery. In such cases as these," pointing to Nell with her parasol, "and in the case of all poor people's children, we should read it thus—

'In work, work, work. In work alway
Let my first years be past,
That I may give for ev'ry day
Some good account at last.'"

A deep hum of applause rose not only from the two teachers, but from all the pupils, who were equally astonished to hear Miss Monflathers improvising after this brilliant style; for although she had been long known as a politician, she had never appeared before as an original poet. Just then somebody happened to discover that Nell was crying, and all eyes were again turned towards her.

There were, indeed, tears in her eyes,

and drawing out her handkerchief to brush them away, she happened to let it fall. Before she could stoop to pick it up, one young lady of about fifteen or sixteen, who had been standing a little apart from the others, as though she had no recognised place among them, sprang forward and put it in her hand. She was gliding timidly away again, when she was arrested by the governess.

"It was Miss Edwards who did that, I *know*," said Miss Monflathers predictively. "Now I am sure that was Miss Edwards."

It was Miss Edwards, and everybody said it was Miss Edwards, and Miss Edwards herself admitted that it was.

"Is it not," said Miss Monflathers, putting down her parasol to take a severer view of the offender, "a most remarkable thing, Miss Edwards, that you have an attachment to the lower classes which always draws you to their sides? or, rather, is it not a most extraordinary thing that all I say and do will not wean you from propensities which your original station in life have unhappily rendered habitual to you, you extremely vulgar-minded girl?"

"I really intended no harm, ma'am," said a sweet voice. "It was a momentary impulse, indeed."

"An impulse!" repeated Miss Monflathers scornfully. "I wonder that you presume to speak of impulses to me"—both the teachers assented—"I am astonished"—both the teachers were astonished—"I suppose it is an impulse which induces you to take the part of every grovelling and debased person that comes in your way"—both the teachers supposed so too.

"But I would have you know, Miss Edwards," resumed the governess, in a tone of increased severity, "that you cannot be permitted—if it be only for the sake of preserving a proper example and decorum in this establishment—that you cannot be permitted, and that you shall not be permitted, to fly in the face of your superiors in this exceedingly gross manner. If *you* have no reason to feel a becoming pride before wax-work children, there are young ladies here who have, and you must either defer to those young ladies or leave the establishment, Miss Edwards."

This young lady, being motherless and poor, was apprenticed at the school—taught for nothing—teaching others what she learned, for nothing—boarded for nothing—lodged for nothing—and set down and rated as something immeasurably less than nothing, by all the dwellers in the house. The servant-maids felt her inferiority, for they were better treated; free to come and go, and regarded in their stations with much more respect. The teachers were infinitely superior, for they had paid to go to school in their time, and were paid now. The pupils cared little for a companion who had no grand stories to tell about home; no friends to come with post-horses, and be received in all humility, with cake and wine, by the governess; no deferential servant to attend and bear her home for the holidays; nothing genteel to talk about, and nothing to display. But why was Miss Monflathers always vexed and irritated with the poor apprentice?—how did that come to pass?

Why, the gayest feather in Miss Monflathers's cap, and the brightest glory of Miss Monflathers's school, was a baronet's daughter—the real, live daughter of a real, live baronet—who, by some extraordinary reversal of the laws of nature, was not only plain in features, but dull in intellect, while the poor apprentice had both a ready wit and a handsome face and figure. It seems incredible. Here was Miss Edwards, who only paid a small premium, which had been spent long ago, every day outshining and excelling the baronet's daughter, who learned all the extras (or was taught them all), and whose half-yearly bill came to double that of any other young lady's in the school, making no account of the honour and reputation of her pupilage. Therefore, and because she was a dependent, Miss Monflathers had a great dislike to Miss Edwards, and was spiteful to her, and aggravated by her, and, when she had compassion on little Nell, verbally fell upon and maltreated her, as we have already seen.

"You will not take the air to-day,

Miss Edwards," said Miss Monflathers. "Have the goodness to retire to your own room, and not to leave it without permission."

The poor girl was moving hastily away, when she was suddenly, in nautical phrase, "brought to" by a subdued shriek from Miss Monflathers.

"She has passed me without any salute!" cried the governess, raising her eyes to the sky. "She has actually passed me without the slightest acknowledgment of my presence!"

The young lady turned and curtsied. Nell could see that she raised her dark eyes to the face of her superior, and that their expression, and that of her whole attitude for the instant, was one of mute but most touching appeal against this ungenerous usage. Miss Monflathers only tossed her head in reply, and the great gate closed upon a bursting heart.

"As for you, you wicked child," said Miss Monflathers, turning to Nell, "tell your mistress that if she presumes to take the liberty of sending to me any more, I will write to the legislative authorities and have her put in the stocks, or compelled to do penance in a white sheet; and you may depend upon it that you shall certainly experience the treadmill if you dare to come here again. Now, ladies, on."

The procession filed off, two and two, with the books and parasols, and Miss Monflathers, calling the baronet's daughter, to walk with her, and smooth her ruffled feelings, discarded the two teachers—who by this time had exchanged their smiles for looks of sympathy—and left them to bring up the rear, and hate each other a little more for being obliged to walk together.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MRS. JARLEY'S wrath, on first learning that she had been threatened with the indignity of stocks and penance, passed all description. The genuine and only Jarley exposed to public scorn, jeered by children, and flouted by beadles! The delight of the Nobility and Gentry shorn of a bonnet which a lady mayoress might have sighed to wear, and arrayed in a white sheet, as a spectacle of mortification and humility! And Miss Monflathers, the audacious creature who presumed, even in the dimmest and remotest distance of her imagination, to conjure up the degrading picture; "I am a'most inclined," said Mrs. Jarley, bursting with the fullness of her anger and the weakness of her means of revenge, "to turn atheist when I think of it!"

But instead of adopting this course of retaliation, Mrs. Jarley, on second thoughts, brought out the suspicious bottle, and ordering glasses to be set forth upon her favourite drum, and sinking into a chair behind it, called her satellites about her, and to them several times recounted, word for word, the affronts she had received. This done, she begged them, in a kind of deep despair, to drink; then laughed, then cried, then took a little sip herself, then laughed and cried again, and took a little more; and so, by degrees, the worthy lady went on, increasing in smiles and decreasing in tears, until at last she could not laugh enough at Miss Monflathers, who from being an object of dire vexation, became one of sheer ridicule and absurdity.

"For which of us is best off, I wonder," quoth Mrs. Jarley, "she or me! It's only talking, when all is said and done; and if she talks of me in the stocks, why, I can talk of her in the stocks, which is a good deal funnier if we come to that. Lord, what *does* it matter, after all?"

Having arrived at this comfortable frame of mind (to which she had been greatly assisted by certain short interjectional remarks of the philosophical George), Mrs. Jarley consoled Nell with many kind words, and requested, as a personal favour, that whenever she thought of Miss Monflathers she would do nothing else but laugh at her all the days of her life.

So ended Mrs. Jarley's wrath, which subsided long before the going down of the sun. Nell's anxieties, however, were of a deeper kind, and the checks they imposed upon her cheerfulness were not so easily removed.

That evening, as she had dreaded, her grandfather stole away, and did not

come back until the night was far spent. Worn out as she was, and fatigued in mind and body, she sat up alone, counting the minutes until he returned — penniless, broken-spirited, and wretched, but still hotly bent upon his infatuation.

"Get me money," he said wildly, as they parted for the night. "I must have money, Nell. It shall be paid thee back with gallant interest one day, but all the money that comes into thy hands must be mine—not for myself, but to use for thee. Remember, Nell, to use for thee!"

What could the child do, with the knowledge she had, but give him every penny that came into her hands, lest he should be tempted on to rob their benefactress? If she told the truth (so thought the child) he would be treated as a madman; if she did not supply him with money, he would supply himself; supplying him, she fed the fire that burned him up, and put him perhaps beyond recovery. Distracted by these thoughts, borne down by the weight of the sorrow which she dared not tell, tortured by a crowd of apprehensions whenever the old man was absent, and dreading alike his stay and his return, the colour forsook her cheek, her eye grew dim, and her heart was oppressed and heavy. All her old sorrows had come back upon her, augmented by new fears and doubts; by day they were ever present to her mind; by night they hovered round her pillow, and haunted her in dreams.

It was natural that, in the midst of her affliction, she should often revert to that sweet young lady of whom she had only caught a hasty glance, but whose sympathy, expressed in one slight, brief action, dwelled in her memory like the kindnesses of years. She would often think, if she had such a friend as that to whom to tell her griefs, how much lighter her heart would be—that if she were but free to hear that voice, she would be happier. Then she would wish that she were something better, that she were not quite so poor and humble, that she dared address her without fearing a repulse; and then feel that there was an immeasurable distance between them, and have no hope that the young lady thought of her any more.

It was now holiday-time at the schools, and the young ladies had gone home, and Miss Monflathers was reported to be flourishing in London, and damaging the hearts of middle-aged gentlemen, but nobody said anything about Miss Edwards, whether she had gone home, or whether she had any home to go to, whether she was still at the school, or anything about her. But one evening, as Nell was returning from a lonely walk, she happened to pass the inn where the stage-coaches stopped, just as one drove up, and there was the beautiful girl she so well remembered, pressing forward to embrace a young child whom they were helping down from the roof.

Well, this was her sister, her little sister, much younger than Nell, whom she had not seen (so the story went afterwards) for five years, and to bring whom to that place on a short visit she had been saving her poor means all that time. Nell felt as if her heart would break when she saw them meet. They went a little apart from the knot of people who had congregated about the coach, and fell upon each other's neck, and sobbed, and wept with joy. Their plain and simple dress, the distance which the child had come alone, their agitation and delight, and the tears they shed, would have told their history by themselves.

They became a little more composed in a short time, and went away, not so much hand in hand as clinging to each other. "Are you sure you're happy, sister?" said the child, as they passed where Nell was standing. "Quite happy now," she answered. "But always?" said the child. "Ah, sister, why do you turn away your face?"

Nell could not help following at a little distance. They went to the house of an old nurse, where the elder sister had engaged a bedroom for the child. "I shall come to you early every morning," she said, "and we can be together all the day."—"Why not at night-time too? Dear sister, would they be angry with you for *that?*"

Why were the eyes of little Nell wet

that night with tears like those of the two sisters? Why did she bear a grateful heart because they had met, and feel it pain to think that they would shortly part? Let us not believe that any selfish reference—unconscious though it might have been—to her own trials awoke this sympathy, but thank God that the innocent joys of others can strongly move us, and that we, even in our fallen nature, have one source of pure emotion which must be prized in heaven!

By morning's cheerful glow, but oftener still by evening's gentle light, the child, with a respect for the short and happy intercourse of these two sisters which forbade her to approach and say a thankful word, although she yearned to do so, followed them at a distance in their walks and rambles, stopping when they stopped, sitting on the grass when they sat down, rising when they went on, and feeling it a companionship and delight to be so near them. Their evening walk was by a river's side. Here, every night, the child was too, unseen by them, unthought of, unregarded; but feeling as if they were her friends, as if they had confidences and trusts together, as if her load were lightened and less hard to bear; as if they mingled their sorrows, and found mutual consolation. It was a weak fancy, perhaps, the childish fancy of a young and lonely creature; but night after night, and still the sisters loitered in the same place, and still the child followed with a mild and softened heart.

She was much startled, on returning home one night, to find that Mrs. Jarley had commanded an announcement to be prepared, to the effect that the stupendous collection would only remain in its present quarters one day longer; in fulfilment of which threat (for all announcements connected with public amusements are well known to be irrevocable and most exact), the stupendous collection shut up next day.

"Are we going from this place directly, ma'am?" said Nell.

"Look here, child," returned Mrs. Jarley. "That'll inform you." And so saying, Mrs. Jarley produced another announcement, wherein it was stated, that, in consequence of numerous inquiries at the wax-work door, and in consequence of crowds having been disappointed in obtaining admission, the exhibition would be continued for one week longer, and reopen next day.

"For now that the schools are gone, and the regular sight-seers exhausted," said Mrs. Jarley, "we come to the general public, and they want stimulating."

Upon the following day at noon, Mrs. Jarley established herself behind the highly-ornamented table, attended by the distinguished effigies before mentioned, and ordered the doors to be thrown open for the readmission of a discerning and enlightened public. But the first day's operations were by no means of a successful character, inasmuch as the general public, though they manifested a lively interest in Mrs. Jarley personally, and such of her waxen satellites as were to be seen for nothing, were not affected by any impulses moving them to the payment of sixpence a head. Thus, notwithstanding that a great many people continued to stare at the entry and the figures therein displayed, and remained there with great perseverance by the hour at a time, to hear the barrel-organ played and to read the bills, and notwithstanding that they were kind enough to recommend their friends to patronise the exhibition in the like manner, until the doorway was regularly blockaded by half the population of the town, who, when they went off duty, were relieved by the other half, it was not found that the treasury was any the richer, or that the prospects of the establishment were at all encouraging.

In this depressed state of the classical market, Mrs. Jarley made extraordinary efforts to stimulate the popular taste, and whet the popular curiosity. Certain machinery in the body of the nun on the leads over the door was cleaned up and put in motion, so that the figure shook its head paralytically all day long, to the great admiration of a drunken, but very Protestant, barber over the way, who looked upon the said paralytic motion as typical of the degrading effect wrought upon the human mind by the ceremonies of the Romish

Church, and discoursed upon that theme with great eloquence and morality. The two carters constantly passed in and out of the exhibition room, under various disguises, protesting aloud that the sight was better worth the money than anything they had beheld in their lives, and urging the by-standers, with tears in their eyes, not to neglect such a brilliant gratification. Mrs. Jarley sat in the pay-place chinking silver money from noon till night, and solemnly calling upon the crowd to take notice that the price of admission was only sixpence, and that the departure of the whole collection, on a short tour among the crowned heads of Europe, was positively fixed for that day week.

"So be in time, be in time, be in time," said Mrs. Jarley at the close of every such address. "Remember that this is Jarley's stupendous collection of upwards of one hundred figures, and that it is the only collection in the world; all others being imposters and deceptions. Be in time, be in time, be in time!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

As the course of this tale requires that we should become acquainted, somewhere hereabouts, with a few particulars connected with the domestic economy of Mr. Sampson Brass, and as a more convenient place than the present is not likely to occur for that purpose, the historian takes the friendly reader by the hand, and springing with him into the air, and cleaving the same at a greater rate than ever Don Cleophas Leandro Perez Zambullo and his familiar travelled through that pleasant region in company, alights with him upon the pavement of Bevis Marks.

The intrepid aeronauts alight before a small dark house, once the residence of Mr. Sampson Brass.

In the parlour window of this little habitation, which is so close upon the footway that the passenger who takes the wall brushes the dim glass with his coat sleeve—much to its improvement, for it is very dirty—in this parlour window, in the days of its occupation by Sampson Brass, there hung, all awry and slack, and discoloured by the sun, a curtain of faded green, so threadbare from long service as by no means to intercept the view of the little dark room, but rather to afford a favourable medium through which to observe it accurately. There was not much to look at. A rickety table, with spare bundles of papers, yellow and ragged from long carriage in the pocket, ostentatiously displayed upon its top; a couple of stools set face to face on opposite sides of this crazy piece of furniture; a treacherous old chair by the fireplace, whose withered arms had hugged full many a client and helped to squeeze him dry; a second-hand wig box, used as a depository for blank writs and declarations and other small forms of law, once the sole contents of the head which belonged to the wig which belonged to the box, as they were now of the box itself; two or three common books of practice; a jar of ink, a pounce box, a stunted hearth-broom, a carpet trodden to shreds, but still clinging with the tightness of desperation to its tacks—these, with the yellow wainscot of the walls, the smoke-discoloured ceiling, the dust and cobwebs, were among the most prominent decorations of the office of Mr. Sampson Brass.

But this was mere still life, of no greater importance than the plate, "Brass, Solicitor," upon the door, and the bill, "First floor to let to a single gentleman," which was tied to the knocker. The office commonly held two examples of animated nature, more to the purpose of this history, and in whom it has a stronger interest and more particular concern.

Of these, one was Mr. Brass himself, who has already appeared in these pages. The other was his clerk, assistant, housekeeper, secretary, confidential plotter, adviser, intriguer, and bill of cost increaser, Miss Brass—a kind of amazon at common law, of whom it may be desirable to offer a brief description.

Miss Sally Brass, then, was a lady of thirty-five or thereabouts, of a gaunt and bony figure and a resolute bearing,

which, if it repressed the softer emotions of love and kept admirers at a distance, certainly inspired a feeling akin to awe in the breasts of those male strangers who had the happiness to approach her. In face she bore a striking resemblance to her brother, Sampson; so exact, indeed, was the likeness between them, that had it consorted with Miss Brass's maiden modesty and gentle womanhood to have assumed her brother's clothes in a frolic and sat down beside him, it would have been difficult for the oldest friend of the family to determine which was Sampson and which Sally, especially as the lady carried upon her upper lip certain reddish demonstrations, which, if the imagination had been assisted by her attire, might have been mistaken for a beard. These were, however, in all probability, nothing more than eyelashes in a wrong place, as the eyes of Miss Brass were quite free from any such natural impertinences. In complexion Miss Brass was sallow—rather a dirty sallow, so to speak—but this hue was agreeably relieved by the healthy glow which mantled in the extreme tip of her laughing nose. Her voice was exceedingly impressive—deep and rich in quality, and, once heard, not easily forgotten. Her usual dress was a green gown, in colour not unlike the curtain of the office window, made tight to the figure, and terminating at the throat, where it was fastened behind by a peculiarly large and massive button. Feeling, no doubt, that simplicity and plainness are the soul of elegance, Miss Brass wore no collar or kerchief except upon her head, which was invariably ornamented with a brown gauze scarf, like the wing of the fabled vampire, and which, twisted into any form that happened to suggest itself, formed an easy and graceful head-dress.

Such was Miss Brass in person. In mind she was of a strong and vigorous turn, having from her earliest youth devoted herself with uncommon ardour to the study of the law; not wasting her speculations upon its eagle flights, which are rare, but tracing it attentively through all the slippery and eel-like crawlings in which it commonly pursues its way. Nor had she, like many persons of great intellect, confined herself to theory, or stopped short where practical usefulness begins; inasmuch as she could engross, fair-copy, fill up printed forms with perfect accuracy, and, in short, transact any ordinary duty of the office, down to pouncing a skin of parchment or mending a pen. It is difficult to understand how, possessed of these combined attractions, she should remain Miss Brass; but whether she had steeled her heart against mankind, or whether those who might have wooed and won her were deterred by fears that, being learned in the law, she might have too near her fingers' ends those particular statutes which regulate what are familiarly termed actions for breach, certain it is that she was still in a state of celibacy, and still in daily occupation of her old stool opposite to that of her brother, Sampson. And equally certain it is, by the way, that between these two stools a great many people had come to the ground.

One morning Mr. Sampson Brass sat upon his stool copying some legal process, and viciously digging his pen deep into the paper, as if he were writing upon the very heart of the party against whom it was directed; and Miss Sally Brass sat upon her stool making a new pen preparatory to drawing out a little bill, which was her favourite occupation; and so they sat in silence for a long time, until Miss Brass broke silence.

"Have you nearly done, Sammy?" said Miss Brass, for in her mild and feminine lips, Sampson became Sammy, and all things were softened down.

"No," returned her brother. "It would have been all done, though, if you had helped at the right time."

"Oh, yes, indeed," cried Miss Sally; "you want my help, don't you?—*you*, too, that are going to keep a clerk!"

"Am I going to keep a clerk for my own pleasure, or because of my own wish, you provoking rascal?" said Mr. Brass, putting his pen in his mouth, and grinning spitefully at his sister. "What do you taunt me about going to keep a clerk for?"

It may be observed in this place, lest the fact of Mr. Brass calling a lady a rascal should occasion any wonderment

or surprise, that he was so habituated to having her near him in a man's capacity, that he had gradually accustomed himself to talk to her as though she were really a man. And this feeling was so perfectly reciprocal, that not only did Mr. Brass often call Miss Brass a rascal, or even put an adjective before the rascal, but Miss Brass looked upon it as quite a matter of course, and was as little moved as any other lady would be by being called an angel.

"What do you taunt me, after three hours' talk last night, with going to keep a clerk for?" repeated Mr. Brass, grinning again with the pen in his mouth, like some nobleman's or gentleman's crest. "Is it my fault?"

"All I know is," said Miss Sally, smiling drily, for she delighted in nothing so much as irritating her brother, "that if every one of your clients is to force us to keep a clerk, whether we want to or not, you had better leave off business, strike yourself off the roll, and get taken in execution as soon as you can."

"Have we got any other client like him?" said Brass. "Have we got another client like him, now—will you answer me that?"

"Do you mean in the face?" said his sister.

"Do I mean in the face!" sneered Sampson Brass, reaching over to take up the bill-book, and fluttering its leaves rapidly. "Look here—Daniel Quilp, Esquire—Daniel Quilp, Esquire—Daniel Quilp, Esquire—all through. Whether should I take a clerk that he recommends, and says, 'This is the man for you,' or lose all his, eh?"

Miss Sally deigned to make no reply, but smiled again, and went on with her work.

"But I know what it is," resumed Brass, after a short silence. "You're afraid you won't have as long a finger in the business as you've been used to have. Do you think I don't see through that?"

"The business wouldn't go on very long, I expect, without me," returned his sister composedly. "Don't you be a fool and provoke me, Sammy, but mind what you're doing, and do it."

Sampson Brass, who was at heart in great fear of his sister, sulkily bent over his writing again, and listened as she said—

"If I determined that the clerk ought not to come, of course he wouldn't be allowed to come. You know that well enough, so don't talk nonsense."

Mr. Brass received this observation with increased meekness, merely remarking, under his breath, that he didn't like that kind of joking, and that Miss Sally would be "a much better fellow" if she forbore to aggravate him. To this compliment Miss Sally replied, that she had a relish for the amusement, and had no intention to forego its gratification. Mr. Brass, not caring, as it seemed, to pursue the subject any further, they both plied their pens at a great pace, and there the discussion ended.

While they were thus employed, the window was suddenly darkened, as by some person standing close against it. As Mr Brass and Miss Sally looked up to ascertain the cause, the top sash was nimbly lowered from without, and Quilp thrust in his head.

"Hollo!" he said, standing on tiptoe on the window-sill, and looking down into the room. "Is there anybody at home? Is there any of the devil's ware here? Is Brass at a premium, eh?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the lawyer, in an affected ecstasy. "Oh, very good, sir! Oh, very good, indeed! Quite eccentric! Dear me, what humour he has!"

"Is that my Sally?" croaked the dwarf, ogling the fair Miss Brass. "Is it Justice with the bandage off her eyes, and without the sword and scales? Is it the Strong Arm of the Law? Is it the Virgin of Bevis?"

"What an amazing flow of spirits!" cried Brass. "Upon my word, it's quite extraordinary!"

"Open the door," said Quilp, "I've got him here. Such a clerk for you, Brass, such a prize, such an ace of trumps. Be quick and open the door, or if there's another lawyer near and he should happen to look out of window, he'll snap him up before your eyes, he will."

It is probable that the loss of the phœnix of clerks, even to a rival practitioner, would not have broken Mr. Brass's heart; but, pretending great alacrity, he rose from his seat, and going to the door, returned, introducing his client, who led by the hand no less a person than Mr. Richard Swiveller.

"There she is," said Quilp, stopping short at the door, and wrinkling up his eyebrows as he looked towards Miss Sally; "there is the woman I ought to have married—there is the beautiful Sarah—there is the female who has all the charms of her sex and none of their weaknesses. Oh, Sally, Sally!"

To this amorous address Miss Brass briefly responded, "Bother!"

"Hard-hearted as the metal from which she takes her name," said Quilp. "Why don't she change it—melt down the brass, and take another name?"

"Hold your nonsense, Mr. Quilp, do," returned Miss Sally, with a grim smile. "I wonder you're not ashamed of yourself before a strange young man."

"The strange young man," said Quilp, handing Dick Swiveller forward, "is too susceptible himself not to understand me well. This is Mr. Swiveller, my intimate friend—a gentleman of good family and great expectations, but who, having rather involved himself by youthful indiscretion, is content for a time to fill the humble station of a clerk—humble, but here most enviable. What a delicious atmosphere!"

If Mr. Quilp spoke figuratively, and meant to imply that the air breathed by Miss Sally Brass was sweetened and rarefied by that dainty creature, he had doubtless good reason for what he said. But if he spoke of the delights of the atmosphere of Mr. Brass's office in a literal sense, he had certainly a peculiar taste, as it was of a close and earthy kind, and, besides being frequently impregnated with strong whiffs of the second-hand wearing apparel exposed for sale in Duke's Place and Houndsditch, had a decided flavour of rats and mice, and a taint of mouldiness. Perhaps some doubts of its pure delight presented themselves to Mr. Swiveller, as he gave vent to one or two short abrupt sniffs, and looked incredulously at the grinning dwarf.

"Mr. Swiveller," said Quilp, "being pretty well accustomed to the agricultural pursuits of sowing wild oats, Miss Sally, prudently considers that half a loaf is better than no bread. To be out of harm's way he prudently thinks is something too, and therefore he accepts your brother's offer. Brass, Mr. Swiveller is yours."

"I am very glad, sir," said Mr. Brass, "very glad indeed. Mr. Swiveller, sir, is fortunate enough to have your friendship. You may be very proud, sir, to have the friendship of Mr. Quilp."

Dick murmured something about never wanting a friend or a bottle to give him, and also gasped forth his favourite allusion to the wing of friendship and its never moulting a feather; but his faculties appeared to be absorbed in the contemplation of Miss Sally Brass, at whom he stared with blank and rueful looks, which delighted the watchful dwarf beyond measure. As to the divine Miss Sally herself, she rubbed her hands as men of business do, and took a few turns up and down the office with her pen behind her ear.

"I suppose," said the dwarf, turning briskly to his legal friend, "that Mr. Swiveller enters upon his duties at once? It's Monday morning."

"At once, if you please, sir, by all means," returned Brass.

"Miss Sally will teach him law, the delightful study of the law," said Quilp; "she'll be his guide, his friend, his companion, his 'Blackstone,' his 'Coke upon Littleton,' his 'Young Lawyer's Best Companion.'"

"He is exceedingly eloquent," said Brass, like a man abstracted, and looking at the roofs of the opposite houses, with his hands in his pockets, "he has an extraordinary flow of language. Beautiful, really."

"With Miss Sally," Quilp went on, "and the beautiful fictions of the law, his days will pass like minutes. Those charming creations of the poet, John Doe and Richard Roe, when they first dawn upon him, will open a new world

for the enlargement of his mind, and the improvement of his heart."

"Oh, beautiful, beautiful! Beau-ti-ful indeed!" cried Brass. "It's a treat to hear him!"

"Where will Mr. Swiveller sit?" said Quilp, looking round.

"Why, we'll buy another stool, sir," returned Brass. "We hadn't any thoughts of having a gentleman with us, sir, until you were kind enough to suggest it, and our accommodation's not extensive. We'll look about for a second-hand stool, sir. In the meantime, if Mr. Swiveller will take my seat, and try his hand at a fair-copy of this ejectment, as I shall be out pretty well all the morning——"

"Walk with me," said Quilp. "I have a word or two to say to you on points of business. Can you spare the time?"

"Can I spare the time to walk with *you*, sir? You're joking, sir, you're joking with me," replied the lawyer, putting on his hat. "I'm ready, sir, quite ready. My time must be fully occupied indeed, sir, not to leave me time to walk with you. It's not everybody, sir, who has an opportunity of improving himself by the conversation of Mr. Quilp."

The dwarf glanced sarcastically at his brazen friend, and, with a short, dry cough, turned upon his heel to bid adieu to Miss Sally. After a very gallant parting on his side, and a very cool and gentlemanly sort of one on hers, he nodded to Dick Swiveller, and withdrew with the attorney.

Dick stood at the desk in a state of utter stupefaction, staring with all his might at the beauteous Sally, as if she had been some curious animal whose like had never lived. When the dwarf got into the street, he mounted again upon the window-sill, and looked into the office for a moment with a grinning face, as a man might peep into a cage. Dick glanced upward at him, but without any token of recognition; and long after he had disappeared, still stood gazing upon Miss Sally Brass, seeing or thinking of nothing else, and rooted to the spot.

Miss Brass being by this time deep in the bill of costs, took no notice whatever of Dick, but went scratching on with a noisy pen, scoring down the figures with evident delight, and working like a steam-engine. There stood Dick, gazing now at the green gown, now at the brown head-dress, now at the face, and now at the rapid pen, in a state of stupid perplexity, wondering how he got into the company of that strange monster, and whether it was a dream, and he would ever wake. At last he heaved a deep sigh, and began slowly pulling off his coat.

Mr. Swiveller pulled off his coat, and folded it up with great elaboration, staring at Miss Sally all the time; then put on a blue jacket with a double row of gilt buttons, which he had originally ordered for aquatic expeditions, but had brought with him that morning for office purposes; and, still keeping his eye upon her, suffered himself to drop down silently upon Mr. Brass's stool. Then he underwent a relapse, and becoming powerless again, rested his chin upon his hand, and opened his eyes so wide, that it appeared quite out of the question that he could ever close them any more.

When he had looked so long that he could see nothing, Dick took his eyes off the fair object of his amazement, turned over the leaves of the draft he was to copy, dipped his pen into the inkstand, and at last, and by slow approaches, began to write. But he had not written half a dozen words when, reaching over to the inkstand to take a fresh dip, he happened to raise his eyes. There was the intolerable brown head-dress, there was the green gown—there, in short, was Miss Sally Brass, arrayed in all her charms, and more tremendous than ever.

This happened so often, that Mr. Swiveller by degrees began to feel strange influences creeping over him—horrible desires to annihilate this Sally Brass—mysterious promptings to knock her head-dress off and try how she looked without it. There was a very large ruler on the table—a large, black, shining ruler. Mr. Swiveller took it up and began to rub his nose with it.

From rubbing his nose with the ruler to poising it in his hand, and

giving it an occasional flourish after the tomahawk manner, the transition was easy and natural. In some of these flourishes it went close to Miss Sally's head; the ragged edges of the head-dress fluttered with the wind it raised; advance it but an inch, and that great brown knot was on the ground; yet still the unconscious maiden worked away, and never raised her eyes.

Well, this was a great relief. It was a good thing to write doggedly and obstinately until he was desperate, and then snatch up the ruler and whirl it about the brown head-dress with the consciousness that he could have it off if he liked. It was a good thing to draw it back, and rub his nose very hard with it, if he thought Miss Sally was going to look up, and to recompense himself with more hardy flourishes when he found she was still absorbed. By these means Mr. Swiveller calmed the agitation of his feelings, until his applications to the ruler became less fierce and frequent, and he could even write as many as half a dozen consecutive lines without having recourse to it, which was a great victory.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

In course of time—that is to say, after a couple of hours or so of diligent application—Miss Brass arrived at the conclusion of her task, and recorded the fact by wiping her pen upon the green gown, and taking a pinch of snuff from a little round tin box which she carried in her pocket. Having disposed of this temperate refreshment, she arose from her stool, tied her papers into a formal packet with red tape, and taking them under her arm, marched out of the office.

Mr. Swiveller had scarcely sprung off his feet and commenced the performance of a maniac hornpipe, when he was interrupted, in the fullness of his joy at being again alone, by the opening of the door, and the reappearance of Miss Sally's head.

"I am going out," said Miss Brass.

"Very good, ma'am," returned Dick. "And don't hurry yourself on my account to come back, ma'am," he added inwardly.

"If anybody comes on office business, take their messages, and say that the gentleman who attends to that matter isn't in at present, will you?" said Miss Brass.

"I will, ma'am," replied Dick.

"I shan't be very long," said Miss Brass, retiring.

"I'm sorry to hear it, ma'am," rejoined Dick, when she had shut the door. "I hope you may be unexpectedly detained, ma'am. If you could manage to be run over, ma'am, but not seriously, so much the better."

Uttering these expressions of goodwill with extreme gravity, Mr. Swiveller sat down in the client's chair and pondered; then took a few turns up and down the room and fell into the chair again.

"So I'm Brass's clerk, am I?" said Dick. "Brass's clerk, eh? And the clerk of Brass's sister—clerk to a female dragon. Very good, very good! What shall I be next? Shall I be a convict in a felt hat and a gray suit, trotting about a dockyard with my number neatly embroidered on my uniform, and the order of the garter on my leg, restrained from chafing my ankle by a twisted belcher handkerchief? Shall I be that? Will that do, or is it too genteel? Whatever you please, have it in your own way, of course."

As he was entirely alone, it may be presumed that, in these remarks, Mr. Swiveller addressed himself to his fate or destiny, whom, as we learn by the precedents, it is the custom of heroes to taunt in a very bitter and ironical manner when they find themselves in situations of an unpleasant nature. This is the more probable from the circumstance of Mr. Swiveller directing his observations to the ceiling, which these bodily personages are usually supposed to inhabit—except in theatrical cases, when they live in the heart of the great chandelier.

"Quilp offers me this place, which he says he can insure me," resumed Dick, after a thoughtful silence, and telling off the circumstances of his position, one by one, upon his fingers; "Fred, who, I could have taken my

affidavit, would not have heard of such a thing, backs Quilp, to my astonishment, and urges me to take it also—staggerer number one! My aunt in the country stops the supplies, and writes an affectionate note to say that she has made a new will, and left me out of it—staggerer number two. No money; no credit; no support from Fred, who seems to turn steady all at once; notice to quit the old lodgings—staggerers three, four, five, and six! Under an accumulation of staggerers no man can be considered a free agent. No man knocks himself down; if his destiny knocks him down, his destiny must pick him up again. Then I'm very glad that mine has brought all this upon itself, and I shall be as careless as I can, and make myself quite at home to spite it. So go on, my buck," said Mr. Swiveller, taking his leave of the ceiling with a significant nod, "and let us see which of us will be tired first!"

Dismissing the subject of his downfall with these reflections, which were no doubt very profound, and are indeed not altogether unknown in certain systems of moral philosophy, Mr. Swiveller shook off his despondency and assumed the cheerful ease of an irresponsible clerk.

As a means towards his composure and self-possession, he entered into a more minute examination of the office than he had yet had time to make—looked into the wig-box, the books, and ink-bottle; untied and inspected all the papers; carved a few devices on the table with the sharp blade of Mr. Brass's pen-knife; and wrote his name on the inside of the wooden coal-scuttle. Having, as it were, taken formal possession of his clerkship in virtue of these proceedings, he opened the window and leaned negligently out of it until a beer-boy happened to pass, whom he commanded to set down his tray and to serve him with a pint of mild porter, which he drank upon the spot and promptly paid for, with the view of breaking ground for a system of future credit and opening a correspondence tending thereto, without loss of time. Then three or four little boys dropped in on legal errands, from three or four attorneys of the Brass grade, whom Mr. Swiveller received and dismissed with about as professional a manner, and as correct and comprehensive an understanding of their business, as would have been shown by a clown in a pantomime under similar circumstances. These things done and over, he got upon his stool again and tried his hand at drawing caricatures of Miss Brass with a pen and ink, whistling very cheerfully all the time.

He was occupied in this diversion when a coach stopped near the door, and presently afterwards there was a loud double knock. As this was no business of Mr. Swiveller's, the person not ringing the office bell, he pursued his diversion with perfect composure, notwithstanding that he rather thought there was nobody else in the house.

In this, however, he was mistaken, for, after the knock had been repeated with increased impatience, the door was opened, and somebody with a heavy tread went up the stairs and into the room above. Mr. Swiveller was wondering whether this might be another Miss Brass, twin sister to the Dragon, when there came a rapping of knuckles at the office door.

"Come in!" said Dick. "Don't stand upon ceremony. The business will get rather complicated if I've many more customers. Come in!"

"Oh, please," said a little voice very low down in the doorway, "will you come and show the lodgings?"

Dick leaned over the table, and descried a small slipshod girl in a dirty coarse apron and bib, which left nothing of her visible but her face and feet. She might as well have been dressed in a violin case.

"Why, who are you?" said Dick.

To which the only reply was, "Oh, please will you come and show the lodgings?"

There never was such an old-fashioned child in her looks and manner. She must have been at work from her cradle. She seemed as much afraid of Dick as Dick was amazed at her.

"I haven't got anything to do with the lodgings," said Dick. "Tell 'em to call again."

"Oh, but please will you come and show the lodgings," returned the girl; "it's eighteen shillings a week, and us finding plate and linen. Boots and clothes is extra, and fires in winter time is eightpence a day."

"Why don't you show 'em yourself? You seem to know all about 'em," said Dick.

"Miss Sally said I wasn't to, because people wouldn't believe the attendance was good if they saw how small I was first."

"Well, but they'll see how small you are afterwards, won't they?" said Dick.

"Ah! But then they'll have taken 'em for a fortnight certain," replied the child, with a shrewd look; "and people don't like moving when they're once settled."

"This is a queer sort of thing," muttered Dick, rising. "What do you mean to say you are—the cook?"

"Yes; I do plain cooking," replied the child. "I'm housemaid too; I do all the work of the house."

"I suppose Brass and the Dragon and I do the dirtiest part of it," thought Dick. And he might have thought much more, being in a doubtful and hesitating mood, but that the girl again urged her request, and certain mysterious bumping sounds on the passage and staircase seemed to give note of the applicant's impatience. Richard Swiveller, therefore, sticking a pen behind each ear, and carrying another in his mouth as a token of his great importance and devotion to business, hurried out to meet and treat with the single gentleman.

He was a little surprised to perceive that the bumping sounds were occasioned by the progress upstairs of the single gentleman's trunk, which, being nearly twice as wide as the staircase, and exceedingly heavy withal, it was no easy matter for the united exertions of the single gentleman and the coachman to convey up the steep ascent. But there they were, crushing each other, and pushing and pulling with all their might, and getting the trunk tight and fast in all kinds of impossible angles, and to pass them was out of the question; for which sufficient reason Mr. Swiveller followed slowly behind, entering a new protest on every stair against the house of Mr. Sampson Brass being thus taken by storm.

To these remonstrances the single gentleman answered not a word, but when the trunk was at last got into the bedroom, sat down upon it, and wiped his bald head and face with his handkerchief. He was very warm, and well he might be; for, not to mention the exertion of getting the trunk upstairs, he was closely muffled in winter garments, though the thermometer had stood all day at eighty-one in the shade.

"I believe, sir," said Richard Swiveller, taking his pen out of his mouth, "that you desire to look at these apartments. They are very charming apartments, sir. They command an uninterrupted view of—of over the way, and they are within one minute's walk of—of the corner of the street. There is exceedingly mild porter, sir, in the immediate vicinity, and the contingent advantages are extraordinary."

"What's the rent?" said the single gentleman.

"One pound per week," replied Dick, improving on the terms.

"I'll take 'em."

"The boots and clothes are extras," said Dick; "and the fires in winter time are——"

"Are all agreed to," answered the single gentleman.

"Two weeks certain," said Dick, "are the——"

"Two weeks!" cried the single gentleman gruffly, eyeing him from top to toe. "Two years. I shall live here for two years. Here. Ten pounds down. The bargain's made."

"Why, you see," said Dick, "my name is not Brass, and——"

"Who said it was? *My* name's not Brass. What then?"

"The name of the master of the house is," said Dick.

"I'm glad of it," returned the single gentleman; "it's a good name for a lawyer. Coachman, you may go. So may you, sir."

Mr. Swiveller was so much confounded by the single gentleman riding rough-shod over him at this rate, that he stood looking at him almost as hard

as he had looked at Miss Sally. The single gentleman, however, was not in the slightest degree affected by this circumstance, but proceeded with perfect composure to unwind the shawl which was tied round his neck, and then to pull off his boots. Freed of these encumbrances, he went on to divest himself of his other clothing, which he folded up, piece by piece, and ranged in order on the trunk. Then he pulled down the window-blinds, drew the curtains, wound up his watch, and, quite leisurely and methodically, got into bed.

"Take down the bill," were his parting words, as he looked out from between the curtains; "and let nobody call me till I ring the bell."

With that the curtains closed, and he seemed to snore immediately.

"This is a most remarkable and supernatural sort of house!" said Mr. Swiveller, as he walked into the office with the bill in his hand. "She-dragons in the business, conducting themselves like professional gentlemen; plain cooks of three feet high appearing mysteriously from underground; strangers walking in and going to bed without leave or license, in the middle of the day! If he should be one of the miraculous fellows that turn up now and then, and has gone to sleep for two years, I shall be in a pleasant situation. It's my destiny, however, and I hope Brass may like it. I shall be sorry if he don't. But it's no business of mine—I have nothing whatever to do with it!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

Mr. Brass on returning home received the report of his clerk with much complacency and satisfaction, and was particular in inquiring after the ten-pound note, which, proving on examination to be a good and lawful note of the Governor and Company of the Bank of England, increased his good-humour considerably. Indeed, he so overflowed with liberality and condescension that, in the fullness of his heart, he invited Mr. Swiveller to partake of a bowl of punch with him at that remote and indefinite period which is currently denominated "one of these days," and paid him many handsome compliments on the uncommon aptitude for business which his conduct on the first day of his devotion to it had so plainly evinced.

It was a maxim with Mr. Brass that the habit of paying compliments kept a man's tongue oiled without any expense; and, as that useful member ought never to grow rusty or creak in turning on its hinges in the case of a practitioner of the law, in whom it should be always glib and easy, he lost few opportunities of improving himself by the utterance of handsome speeches and eulogistic expressions. And this had passed into such a habit with him, that, if he could not be correctly said to have his tongue at his fingers' ends, he might certainly be said to have it anywhere but in his face; which being, as we have already seen, of a harsh and repulsive character, was not oiled so easily, but frowned above all the smooth speeches—one of nature's beacons, warning off those who navigated the shoals and breakers of the world, or of that dangerous strait the law, and admonishing them to seek less treacherous harbours and try their fortune elsewhere.

While Mr. Brass by turns overwhelmed his clerk with compliments and inspected the ten-pound note, Miss Sally showed little emotion, and that of no pleasurable kind; for as the tendency of her legal practice had been to fix her thoughts and small grains and gripings, and to whet and sharpen her natural wisdom, she was not a little disappointed that the single gentleman had obtained the lodgings at such an easy rate, arguing that when he was seen to have set his mind upon them, he should have been at the least charged double or treble the usual terms, and that, in exact proportion as he pressed forward, Mr. Swiveller should have hung back. But neither the good opinion of Mr. Brass, nor the dissatisfaction of Miss Sally, wrought any impression upon that young gentleman, who, throwing the responsibility of this and all other acts and deeds thereafter to be done by him upon his unlucky destiny, was quite resigned and comfortable, fully prepared for the worst,

and philosophically indifferent to the best.

"Good-morning, Mr. Richard," said Brass, on the second day of Mr. Swiveller's clerkship. "Sally found you a second-hand stool, sir, yesterday evening, in Whitechapel. She's a rare fellow at a bargain, I can tell you, Mr. Richard. You'll find that a first-rate stool, sir, take my word for it."

"It's rather a crazy one to look at," said Dick.

"You'll find it is a most amazing stool to sit down upon, you may depend," returned Mr. Brass. "It was bought in the open street just opposite the hospital, and as it has been standing there a month or two, it has got rather dusty and a little brown from being in the sun, that's all."

"I hope it hasn't got any fevers or anything of that sort in it," said Dick, sitting himself down discontentedly, between Mr. Sampson and the chaste Sally. "One of the legs is longer than the others."

"Then we get a bit of timber in, sir," retorted Brass. "Ha, ha, ha! We get a bit of timber in, sir, and that's another advantage of my sister's going to market for us. Miss Brass, Mr. Richard is the——"

"Will you keep quiet?" interrupted the fair subject of these remarks, looking up from her papers. "How am I to work if you keep on chattering?"

"What an uncertain chap you are!" returned the lawyer. "Sometimes you're all for a chat. At another time you're all for work. A man never knows what humour he'll find you in."

"I'm in a working humour now," said Sally, "so don't disturb me, if you please. And don't take him," Miss Sally pointed with the feather of her pen to Richard, "off his business. He won't do more than he can help, I dare say."

Mr. Brass had evidently a strong inclination to make an angry reply, but was deterred by prudent or timid considerations, as he only muttered something about aggravation and a vagabond; not associating the terms with any individual, but mentioning them as connected with some abstract ideas which happened to occur to him.

They went on writing for a long time in silence after this—in such a dull silence that Mr. Swiveller (who required excitement) had several times fallen asleep, and written divers strange words in an unknown character with his eyes shut, when Miss Sally at length broke in upon the monotony of the office by pulling out the little tin box, taking a noisy pinch of snuff, and then expressing her opinion that Mr. Richard Swiveller had "done it."

"Done what, ma'am?" said Richard.

"Do you know," returned Miss Brass, "that the lodger isn't up yet—that nothing has been seen or heard of him since he went to bed yesterday afternoon?"

"Well, ma'am," said Dick, "I suppose he may sleep his ten pound out, in peace and quietness, if he likes."

"Ah! I begin to think he'll never wake," observed Miss Sally.

"It's a very remarkable circumstance," said Brass, laying down his pen; "really, very remarkable. Mr. Richard, you'll remember, if this gentleman should be found to have hung himself to the bedpost, or any unpleasant accident of that kind should happen—you'll remember, Mr. Richard, that this ten-pound note was given to you in part payment of two years' rent? You'll bear that in mind, Mr. Richard; you had better make a note of it, sir, in case you should ever be called upon to give evidence."

Mr. Swiveller took a large sheet of foolscap, and, with a countenance of profound gravity, began to make a very small note in one corner.

"We can never be too cautious," said Mr. Brass. "There is a deal of wickedness going about the world—a deal of wickedness. Did the gentleman happen to say, sir—— But never mind that at present, sir; finish that little memorandum first."

Dick did so, and handed it to Mr. Brass, who had dismounted from his stool, and was walking up and down the office.

"Oh, this is the memorandum, is it?" said Brass, running his eye over the document. "Very good. Now, Mr. Richard, did the gentleman say anything else?"

"No."

"Are you sure, Mr. Richard," said Brass solemnly, "that the gentleman said nothing else?"

"Devil a word, sir," replied Dick.

"Think again, sir," said Brass; "it's my duty, sir, in the position in which I stand, and as an honourable member of the legal profession—the first profession in this country, sir, or in any other country, or in any of the planets that shine above us at night and are supposed to be inhabited — it's my duty, sir, as an honourable member of that profession, not to put to you a leading question in a matter of this delicacy and importance. Did the gentleman, sir, who took the first floor of you yesterday afternoon, and who brought with him a box of property—a box of property—say anything more than is set down in this memorandum?"

"Come, don't be a fool," said Miss Sally.

Dick looked at her, and then at Brass, and then at Miss Sally again, and still said, "No."

"Pooh, pooh! Deuce take it, Mr. Richard, how dull you are!" cried Brass, relaxing into a smile. "Did he say anything about his property?—there!"

"That's the way to put it," said Miss Sally.

"Did he say, for instance," added Brass, in a kind of comfortable, cosy tone—"I don't assert that he did say so, mind; I only ask you to refresh your memory—did he say, for instance, that he was a stranger in London; that it was not his humour or within his ability to give any references; that he felt we had a right to require them; and that, in case anything should happen to him at any time, he particularly desired that whatever property he had upon the premises should be considered mine, as some slight recompense for the trouble and annoyance I should sustain; and were you, in short," added Brass, still more comfortably and cosily than before, "were you induced to accept him on my behalf, as a tenant, upon those conditions?"

"Certainly not," replied Dick.

"Why, then, Mr. Richard," said Brass, darting at him a supercilious and reproachful look, "it's my opinion that you've mistaken your calling, and will never make a lawyer."

"Not if you live a thousand years," added Miss Sally. Whereupon the brother and sister took each a noisy pinch of snuff from the little tin box, and fell into a gloomy thoughtfulness.

Nothing further passed up to Mr. Swiveller's dinner-time, which was at three o'clock, and seemed about three weeks in coming. At the first stroke of the hour, the new clerk disappeared. At the last stroke of five, he reappeared, and the office, as if by magic, became fragrant with the smell of gin and water and lemon-peel.

"Mr. Richard," said Brass, "this man's not up yet. Nothing will wake him, sir. What's to be done?"

"I should let him have his sleep out," returned Dick.

"Sleep out!" cried Brass; "why, he has been asleep now six-and-twenty hours. We have been moving chests of drawers over his head, we have knocked double knocks at the street door, we have made the servant-girl fall downstairs several times (she's a light weight, and it don't hurt her much), but nothing wakes him."

"Perhaps a ladder," suggested Dick, "and getting in at the first-floor window——"

"But then there's a door between; besides, the neighbours would be up in arms," said Brass.

"What do you say to getting on the roof of the house through the trap-door, and dropping down the chimney?" suggested Dick.

"That would be an excellent plan," said Brass, "if anybody would be"—and here he looked very hard at Mr. Swiveller—"would be kind, and friendly, and generous enough to undertake it. I dare say it would not be anything like as disagreeable as one supposes."

Dick had made the suggestion thinking that the duty might possibly fall within Miss Sally's department. As he said nothing further, and declined taking the hint, Mr. Brass was fain to propose that they should go upstairs together, and make a last effort

to awaken the sleeper by some less violent means, which, if they failed on this last trial, must positively be succeeded by stronger measures. Mr. Swiveller assenting, armed himself with his stool and the large ruler, and repaired with his employer to the scene of action, where Miss Brass was already ringing a hand-bell with all her might, and yet without producing the smallest effect upon their mysterious lodger.

"There are his boots, Mr. Richard!" said Brass.

"Very obstinate-looking articles they are, too," quoth Richard Swiveller. And truly they were as sturdy and bluff a pair of boots as one would wish to see; as firmly planted on the ground as if their owner's legs and feet had been in them; and seeming, with their broad soles and blunt toes, to hold possession of their place by main force.

"I can't see anything but the curtain of the bed," said Brass, applying his eye to the keyhole of the door. "Is he a strong man, Mr. Richard?"

"Very," answered Dick.

"It would be an extremely unpleasant circumstance if he was to bounce out suddenly," said Brass. "Keep the stairs clear. I should be more than a match for him, of course, but I'm the master of the house, and the laws of hospitality must be respected.—Hollo, there! Hollo, hollo!"

While Mr. Brass, with his eye curiously twisted into the keyhole, uttered these sounds as a means of attracting the lodger's attention, and while Miss Brass plied the hand-bell, Mr. Swiveller put his stool close against the wall by the side of the door, and mounting on the top and standing bolt upright, so that if the lodger did make a rush he would most probably pass him in its onward fury, began a violent battery with the ruler upon the upper panels of the door. Captivated with his own ingenuity, and confident in the strength of his position, which he had taken up after the method of those hardy individuals who open the pit and gallery doors of theatres on crowded nights, Mr. Swiveller rained down such a shower of blows that the noise of the bell was drowned; and the small servant, who lingered on the stairs below, ready to fly at a moment's notice, was obliged to hold her ears lest she should be rendered deaf for life.

Suddenly the door was unlocked on the inside, and flung violently open. The small servant flew to the coal-cellar; Miss Sally dived into her own bedroom; Mr. Brass, who was not remarkable for personal courage, ran into the next street, and finding that nobody followed him armed with a poker or other offensive weapon, put his hands in his pockets, walked very slowly all at once, and whistled.

Meanwhile, Mr. Swiveller, on the top of the stool, drew himself into as flat a shape as possible against the wall, and looked, not unconcernedly, down upon the single gentleman, who appeared at the door growling and cursing in a very awful manner, and, with the boots in his hand, seemed to have an intention of hurling them downstairs on speculation. This idea, however, he abandoned. He was turning into his room again, still growling vengefully, when his eyes met those of the watchful Richard.

"Have *you* been making that horrible noise?" said the single gentleman.

"I have been helping, sir," returned Dick, keeping his eye upon him, and waving the ruler gently in his right hand, as an indication of what the single gentleman had to expect if he attempted any violence.

"How dare you, then," said the lodger; "eh?"

To this, Dick made no other reply than by inquiring whether the lodger held it to be consistent with the conduct and character of a gentleman to go to sleep for six-and-twenty hours at a stretch, and whether the peace of an amiable and virtuous family was to weigh as nothing in the balance.

"Is my peace nothing?" said the single gentleman.

"Is their peace nothing, sir?" returned Dick. "I don't wish to hold out any threats, sir—indeed, the law does not allow of threats, for to threaten is an indictable offence—but if ever you do that again, take care you're not sat upon by the coroner and buried in a cross-road before you wake. We have been distracted with fears that you were

dead, sir," said Dick, gently sliding to the ground; "and the short and the long of it is, that we cannot allow single gentlemen to come into this establishment and sleep like double gentlemen without paying extra for it."

"Indeed!" cried the lodger.

"Yes, sir, indeed," returned Dick, yielding to his destiny, and saying whatever came uppermost; "an equal quantity of slumber was never got out of one bed and bedstead, and if you're going to sleep in that way, you must pay for a double-bedded room."

Instead of being thrown into a greater passion by these remarks, the lodger lapsed into a broad grin, and looked at Mr. Swiveller with twinkling eyes. He was a brown-faced, sunburned man, and appeared browner and more sunburned from having a white nightcap on. As it was clear that he was a choleric fellow in some respects, Mr. Swiveller was relieved to find him in such good-humour, and, to encourage him in it, smiled himself.

The lodger, in the testiness of being so rudely roused, had pushed his nightcap very much on one side of his bald head. This gave him a rakish, eccentric air, which, now that he had leisure to observe it, charmed Mr. Swiveller exceedingly; therefore, by way of propitiation, he expressed his hope that the gentleman was going to get up, and further, that he would never do so any more.

"Come here, you impudent rascal!" was the lodger's answer, as he reentered his room.

Mr. Swiveller followed him in, leaving the stool outside, but reserving the ruler in case of a surprise. He rather congratulated himself on his prudence when the single gentleman, without notice or explanation of any kind, double-locked the door.

"Can you drink anything?" was his next inquiry.

Mr. Swiveller replied that he had very recently been assuaging the pangs of thirst, but that he was still open to "a modest quencher," if the materials were at hand. Without another word spoken on either side, the lodger took from his great trunk a kind of temple, shining as of polished silver, and placed it carefully on the table.

Greatly interested in his proceedings, Mr. Swiveller observed him closely. Into one little chamber of this temple he dropped an egg; into another some coffee; into a third a compact piece of raw steak from a neat tin case; into a fourth he poured some water. Then, with the aid of a phosphorus-box and some matches, he procured a light and applied it to a spirit-lamp which had a place of its own below the temple; then he shut down the lids of all the little chambers; then he opened them; and then, by some wonderful and unseen agency, the steak was done, the egg was boiled, the coffee was accurately prepared, and his breakfast was ready.

"Hot water," said the lodger, handing it to Mr. Swiveller with as much coolness as if he had a kitchen fire before him—"extraordinary rum—sugar—and a travelling glass. Mix for yourself. And make haste."

Dick complied, his eyes wandering all the time from the temple on the table, which seemed to do everything, to the great trunk which seemed to hold everything. The lodger took his breakfast like a man who was used to work these miracles, and thought nothing of them.

"The man of the house is a lawyer, is he not?" said the lodger.

Dick nodded. The rum was amazing.

"The woman of the house—what's she?"

"A dragon," said Dick.

The single gentleman, perhaps because he had met with such things in his travels, or perhaps because he *was* a single gentleman, evinced no surprise, but merely inquired, "Wife or sister?"

"Sister," said Dick. "So much the better," said the single gentleman, "he can get rid of her when he likes."

"I want to do as I like, young man," he added, after a short silence; "to go to bed when I like, get up when I like, come in when I like, go out when I like—to be asked no questions and be surrounded by no spies. In this last respect, servants are the devil. There's only one here."

"And a very little one," said Dick.

"And a very little one," repeated the

lodger. "Well, the place will suit me, will it?"

"Yes," said Dick.

"Sharks, I suppose?" said the lodger.

Dick nodded assent, and drained his glass.

"Let them know my humour," said the single gentleman, rising. "If they disturb me, they lose a good tenant. If they know me to be that, they know enough. If they try to know more, it's a notice to quit. It's better to understand these things at once. Good-day."

"I beg your pardon," said Dick, halting in his passage to the door, which the lodger prepared to open. "When he who adores thee has left but the name——"

"What do you mean?"

"But the name," said Dick—"has left but the name—in case of letters or parcels——"

"I never have any," returned the lodger.

"Or in case anybody should call."

"Nobody ever calls on me."

"If any mistake should arise from not having the name, don't say it was my fault, sir," added Dick, still lingering. "Oh, blame not the bard——"

"I'll blame nobody," said the lodger, with such irascibility, that in a moment Dick found himself on the staircase, and the locked door between them.

Mr. Brass and Miss Sally were lurking hard by, having been, indeed, only routed from the keyhole by Mr. Swiveller's abrupt exit. As their utmost exertions had not enabled them to overhear a word of the interview, however, in consequence of a quarrel for precedence, which, though limited of necessity to pushes and pinches and such quiet pantomime, had lasted the whole time, they hurried him down to the office to hear his account of the conversation.

This Mr. Swiveller gave them — faithfully as regarded the wishes and character of the single gentleman, and poetically as concerned the great trunk, of which he gave a description more remarkable for brilliancy of imagination than a strict adherence to truth; declaring, with many strong asseverations, that it contained a specimen of every kind of rich food and wine known in these times, and in particular that it was of a self-acting kind, and served up whatever was required, as he supposed, by clock-work. He also gave them to understand that the cooking apparatus roasted a fine piece of sirloin of beef, weighing about six pounds avoirdupois, in two minutes and a quarter, as he had himself witnessed, and proved by his sense of taste; and further, that however the effect was produced, he had distinctly seen water boil and bubble up when the single gentleman winked; from which facts he (Mr. Swiveller) was led to infer that the lodger was some great conjurer or chemist, or both, whose residence under that roof could not fail, at some future day, to shed a great credit and distinction on the name of Brass, and add a new interest to the history of Bevis Marks.

There was one point which Mr. Swiveller deemed it unnecessary to enlarge upon, and that was the fact of the modest quencher, which, by reason of its intrinsic strength, and its coming close upon the heels of the temperate beverage he had discussed at dinner, awakened a slight degree of fever, and rendered necessary two or three other modest quenchers at the public-house in the course of the evening.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

As the single gentleman, after some weeks' occupation of his lodgings, still declined to correspond, by word or gesture, either with Mr. Brass or his sister Sally, but invariably chose Richard Swiveller as his channel of communication, and as he proved himself in all respects a highly desirable inmate, paying for everything beforehand, giving very little trouble, making no noise, and keeping early hours, Mr. Richard imperceptibly rose to an important position in the family as one who had influence over this mysterious lodger, and could negotiate with him, for good or evil, when nobody else durst approach his person.

If the truth must be told, even Mr. Swiveller's approaches to the single

gentleman were of a very distant kind, and met with small encouragement; but, as he never returned from a monosyllabic conference with the unknown without quoting such expressions as, "Swiveller, I know I can rely upon you"—"I have no hesitation in saying, Swiveller, that I entertain a regard for you"—"Swiveller, you are my friend, and will stand by me, I am sure," with many other short speeches of the same familiar and confiding kind, purporting to have been addressed by the single gentleman to himself, and to form the staple of their ordinary discourse, neither Mr. Brass nor Miss Sally for a moment questioned the extent of his influence, but accorded to him their fullest and most unqualified belief.

But quite apart from and independent of this source of popularity, Mr. Swiveller had another, which promised to be equally enduring, and to lighten his position considerably.

He found favour in the eyes of Miss Sally Brass. Let not the light scorners of female fascination erect their ears to listen to a new tale of love which shall serve them for a jest; for Miss Brass, however accurately formed to be beloved, was not of the loving kind. That amiable virgin, having clung to the skirts of the law from her earliest youth—having sustained herself by their aid, as it were, in her first running alone, and maintained a firm grasp upon them ever since—had passed her life in a kind of legal childhood. She had been remarkable, when a tender prattler, for an uncommon talent in counterfeiting the walk and manner of a bailiff—in which character she had learned to tap her little playfellows on the shoulder, and to carry them off to imaginary sponging-houses, with a correctness of imitation which was the surprise and delight of all who witnessed her performances, and which was only to be exceeded by her exquisite manner of putting an execution into her doll's house, and taking an exact inventory of the chairs and tables. These artless sports had naturally soothed and cheered the decline of her widowed father, a most exemplary gentleman (called "Old Foxey" by his friends from his extreme sagacity), who encouraged them to the utmost, and whose chief regret, on finding that he drew near to Houndsditch churchyard, was, that his daughter could not take out an attorney's certificate and hold a place upon the roll. Filled with this affectionate and touching sorrow, he had solemnly confided her to his son Sampson as an invaluable auxiliary; and from the old gentleman's decease to the period of which we treat, Miss Sally Brass had been the prop and pillar of his business.

It is obvious that, having devoted herself from infancy to this one pursuit and study, Miss Brass could know but little of the world, otherwise than in connection with the law, and that from a lady gifted with such high tastes, proficiency in those gentler and softer arts in which women usually excel was scarcely to be looked for. Miss Sally's accomplishments were all of a masculine and strictly legal kind. They began with the practice of an attorney and they ended with it. She was in a state of lawful innocence, so to speak. The law had been her nurse. And as bandy legs or such physical deformities in children are held to be the consequence of bad nursing, so, if in a mind so beautiful any moral twist or bandiness could be found, Miss Sally Brass's nurse was alone to blame.

It was on this lady, then, that Mr. Swiveller burst in full freshness as something new and hitherto undreamed of, lighting up the office with scraps of song and merriment, conjuring with inkstands and boxes of wafers, catching three oranges in one hand, balancing stools upon his chin and penknives on his nose, and constantly performing a hundred other feats with equal ingenuity; for with such unbendings did Richard, in Mr. Brass's absence, relieve the tedium of his confinement. These social qualities, which Miss Sally first discovered by accident, gradually made such an impression upon her, that she would entreat Mr. Swiveller to relax as though she were not by, which Mr. Swiveller, nothing loth, would readily consent to do. By these means a friendship sprang up between them. Mr. Swiveller gradually came to look upon her as her brother Sampson did,

and as he would have looked upon any other clerk. He imparted to her the mystery of going the odd man or plain Newmarket for fruit, ginger-beer, baked potatoes, or even a modest quencher, of which Miss Brass did not scruple to partake. He would often persuade her to undertake his share of writing in addition to her own; nay, he would sometimes reward her with a hearty slap on the back, and protest that she was a devilish good fellow, a jolly dog, and so forth; all of which compliments Miss Sally would receive in entire good part and with perfect satisfaction.

One circumstance troubled Mr. Swiveller's mind very much, and that was that the small servant always remained somewhere in the bowels of the earth under Bevis Marks, and never came to the surface unless the single gentleman rang his bell, when she would answer it and immediately disappear again. She never went out, or came into the office, or had a clean face, or took off the coarse apron, or looked out of any one of the windows, or stood at the street door for a breath of air, or had any rest or enjoyment whatever. Nobody ever came to see her, nobody spoke of her, nobody cared about her. Mr. Brass had said once that he believed she was a "love-child" (which means anything but a child of love), and that was all the information Richard Swiveller could obtain.

"It's of no use asking the Dragon," thought Dick, one day, as he sat contemplating the features of Miss Sally Brass. "I suspect if I asked any questions on that head, our alliance would be at an end. I wonder whether she *is* a dragon, by the bye, or something in the mermaid way. She has rather a scaly appearance. But mermaids are fond of looking at themselves in the glass, which she can't be. And they have a habit of combing their hair, which she hasn't. No, she's a dragon."

"Where are you going, old fellow?" said Dick aloud, as Miss Sally wiped her pen as usual on the green dress, and uprose from her seat.

"To dinner," answered the Dragon.

"To dinner!" thought Dick; "that's another circumstance. I don't believe that small servant ever has anything to eat."

"Sammy won't be home," said Miss Brass. "Stop till I come back. I shan't be long."

Dick nodded, and followed Miss Brass—with his eyes to the door, and with his ears to a little back parlour, where she and her brother took their meals.

"Now," said Dick, walking up and down with his hands in his pockets, "I'd give something—if I had it—to know how they use that child, and where they keep her. My mother must have been a very inquisitive woman; I have no doubt I'm marked with a note of interrogation somewhere. My feelings I smother, but thou hast been the cause of this anguish my—— Upon my word," said Mr. Swiveller, checking himself and falling thoughtfully into the clients' chair, "I should like to know how they use her!"

After running on in this way for some time, Mr. Swiveller softly opened the office door, with the intention of darting across the street for a glass of the mild porter. At that moment he caught a parting glimpse of the brown head-dress of Miss Brass flitting down the kitchen stairs. "And, by Jove!" thought Dick, "she's going to feed the small servant. Now or never!"

First peeping over the hand-rail, and allowing the head-dress to disappear in the darkness below, he groped his way down, and arrived at the door of a back kitchen immediately after Miss Brass had entered the same, bearing in her hand a cold leg of mutton. It was a very dark, miserable place, very low and very damp; the walls disfigured by a thousand rents and blotches. The water was trickling out of a leaky butt, and a most wretched cat was lapping up the drops with the sickly eagerness of starvation. The grate, which was a wide one, was wound and screwed up tight, so as to hold no more than a little thin sandwich of fire. Everything was locked up; the coal-cellar, the candle-box, the salt-box, the meat-safe, were all padlocked. There was nothing that a beetle could have lunched upon. The pinched and meagre aspect of the place would have killed a chameleon; he would have known, at the first

mouthful, that the air was not eatable, and must have given up the ghost in despair.

The small servant stood with humility in presence of Miss Sally, and hung her head.

"Are you there?" said Miss Sally.

"Yes, ma'am," was the answer, in a weak voice.

"Go farther away from the leg of mutton, or you'll be picking it, I know," said Miss Sally.

The girl withdrew into a corner, while Miss Brass took a key from her pocket, and opening the safe, brought from it a dreary waste of cold potatoes, looking as eatable as Stonehenge. This she placed before the small servant, ordering her to sit down before it, and then, taking up a great carving-knife, made a mighty show of sharpening it upon the carving-fork.

"Do you see this?" said Miss Brass, slicing off about two square inches of cold mutton, after all this preparation, and holding it out on the point of the fork.

The small servant looked hard enough at it with her hungry eyes to see every shred of it, small as it was, and answered, "Yes."

"Then don't you ever go and say," retorted Miss Sally, "that you hadn't meat here. There, eat it up."

This was soon done. "Now, do you want any more?" said Miss Sally.

The hungry creature answered with a faint "No." They were evidently going through an established form.

"You've been helped once to meat," said Miss Brass, summing up the facts; "you have had as much as you can eat, you're asked if you want any more, and you answer, 'No!' Then don't you ever go and say you were allowanced, mind that."

With those words, Miss Sally put the meat away and locked the safe, and then drawing near to the small servant, overlooked her while she finished the potatoes.

It was plain that some extraordinary grudge was working in Miss Brass's gentle breast, and that it was that which impelled her, without the smallest present cause, to rap the child with the blade of the knife, now on her hand, now on her head, and now on her back, as if she found it quite impossible to stand so close to her without administering a few slight knocks. But Mr. Swiveller was not a little surprised to see his fellow-clerk, after walking slowly backwards towards the door, as if she were trying to withdraw herself from the room, but could not accomplish it, dart suddenly forward, and falling on the small servant, give her some hard blows with her clenched hand. The victim cried, but in a subdued manner, as if she feared to raise her voice; and Miss Sally, comforting herself with a pinch of snuff, ascended the stairs, just as Richard had safely reached the office.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE single gentleman, among his other peculiarities—and he had a very plentiful stock, of which he every day furnished some new specimen—took a most extraordinary and remarkable interest in the exhibition of Punch. If the sound of a Punch's voice, at ever so remote a distance, reached Bevis Marks, the single gentleman, though in bed and asleep, would start up, and, hurrying on his clothes, make for the spot with all speed, and presently return at the head of a long procession of idlers, having in the midst the theatre and its proprietors. Straightway the stage would be set up in front of Mr. Brass's house; the single gentleman would establish himself at the first-floor window; and the entertainment would proceed, with all its exciting accompaniments of fife and drum and shout, to the excessive consternation of all sober votaries of business in that silent thoroughfare. It might have been expected that when the play was done, both players and audience would have dispersed; but the epilogue was as bad as the play, for no sooner was the devil dead, than the manager of the puppets and his partner were summoned by the single gentleman to his chamber, where they were regaled with strong waters from his private store, and where they held with him long conversations, the purport of which no human being could fathom. But the

secret of these discussions was of little importance. It was sufficient to know that while they were proceeding the concourse without still lingered round the house; that boys beat upon the drum with their fists, and imitated Punch with their tender voices; that the office window was rendered opaque by flattened noses, and the keyhole of the street door luminous with eyes; that every time the single gentleman or either of his guests was seen at the upper window, or so much as the end of one of their noses was visible, there was a great shout of execration from the excluded mob, who remained howling and yelling, and refusing consolation, until the exhibitors were delivered up to them to be attended elsewhere. It was sufficient, in short, to know that Bevis Marks was revolutionised by these popular movements, and that peace and quietness fled from its precincts.

Nobody was rendered more indignant by these proceedings than Mr. Sampson Brass, who, as he could by no means afford to lose so profitable an inmate, deemed it prudent to pocket his lodger's affront along with his cash, and to annoy the audiences who clustered round his door by such imperfect means of retaliation as were open to him, and which were confined to the trickling down of foul water on their heads from unseen watering-pots, pelting them with fragments of tile and mortar from the roof of the house, and bribing the drivers of hackney-cabriolets to come suddenly round the corner and dash in among them precipitately. It may, at first sight, be matter of surprise to the thoughtless few that Mr. Brass, being a professional gentleman, should not have legally indicted some party or parties, active in the promotion of the nuisance; but they will be good enough to remember, that as doctors seldom take their own prescriptions, and divines do not always practise what they preach, so lawyers are shy of meddling with the law on their own account, knowing it to be an edged tool of uncertain application, very expensive in the working, and rather remarkable for its properties of close shaving, than for its always shaving the right person.

"Come," said Mr. Brass, one afternoon, "this is two days without a Punch. I'm in hopes he has run through 'em all, at last."

"Why are you in hopes?" returned Miss Sally. "What harm do they do?"

"Here's a pretty sort of a fellow!" cried Brass, laying down his pen in despair. "Now, here's an aggravating animal!"

"Well, what harm do they do?" retorted Sally.

"What harm!" cried Brass. "Is it no harm to have a constant hallooing and hooting under one's very nose, distracting one from business, and making one grind one's teeth with vexation? Is it no harm to be blinded and choked up, and have the king's highway stopped with a set of screamers and roarers whose throats must be made of—of——"

"Brass," suggested Mr. Swiveller.

"Ah! of brass," said the lawyer, glancing at his clerk, to assure himself that he had suggested the word in good faith, and without any sinister intention. "Is that no harm?"

The lawyer stopped short in his invective, and listening for a moment, and recognising the well-known voice, rested his head upon his hand, raised his eyes to the ceiling, and muttered faintly—

"There's another!"

Up went the single gentleman's window directly.

"There's another," repeated Brass; "and if I could get a brake and four blood horses to cut into the Marks when the crowd is at its thickest, I'd give eighteenpence, and never grudge it!"

The distant squeak was heard again. The single gentleman's door burst open. He ran violently down the stairs, out into the street, and so past the window, without any hat, towards the quarter whence the sound proceeded—bent, no doubt, upon securing the strangers' services directly.

"I wish I only knew who his friends were," muttered Sampson, filling his pocket with papers; "if they'd just get up a pretty little Commission *de lunatico* at the Gray's Inn Coffee House, and give me the job, I'd be content to have

the lodgings empty for one while, at all events."

With which words, and knocking his hat over his eyes as if for the purpose of shutting out even a glimpse of the dreadful visitation, Mr. Brass rushed from the house and hurried away.

As Mr. Swiveller was decidedly favourable to these performances, upon the ground that looking at a Punch, or indeed looking at anything out of window, was better than working, and as he had been, for this reason, at some pains to awaken in his fellow-clerk a sense of their beauties and manifold deserts, both he and Miss Sally rose as with one accord and took up their positions at the window; upon the sill whereof, as in a post of honour, sundry young ladies and gentlemen who were employed in the dry nurture of babies, and who made a point of being present, with their young charges, on such occasions, had already established themselves as comfortably as the circumstances would allow.

The glass being dim, Mr. Swiveller, agreeably to a friendly custom which he had established between them, hitched off the brown head-dress from Miss Sally's head, and dusted it carefully therewith. By the time he had handed it back, and its beautiful wearer had put it on again (which she did with perfect composure and indifference), the lodger returned with the show and showmen at his heels, and a strong addition to the body of spectators. The exhibitor disappeared with all speed behind the drapery; and his partner, stationing himself by the side of the theatre, surveyed the audience with a remarkable expression of melancholy, which became more remarkable still when he breathed a hornpipe tune into that sweet musical instrument which is popularly termed a mouth-organ, without at all changing the mournful expression of the upper part of his face, though his mouth and chin were, of necessity, in lively spasms.

The drama proceeded to its close, and held the spectators enchained in the customary manner. The sensation which kindles in large assemblies, when they are relieved from a state of breathless suspense, and are again free to speak and move, was yet rife, when the lodger, as usual, summoned the men upstairs.

"Both of you," he called from the window; for only the actual exhibitor —a little fat man—prepared to obey the summons. "I want to talk to you. Come, both of you!"

"Come, Tommy," said the little man.

"I ain't a talker," replied the other. "Tell him so. What should I go and talk for?"

"Don't you see the gentleman's got a bottle and glass up there?" returned the little man.

"And couldn't you have said so at first?" retorted the other, with sudden alacrity. "Now what are you waiting for? Are you going to keep the gentleman expecting us all day? haven't you *no* manners?"

With this remonstrance the melancholy man, who was no other than Mr. Thomas Codlin, pushed past his friend and brother in the craft, Mr. Harris, otherwise Short or Trotters, and hurried before him to the single gentleman's apartment.

"Now, my men," said the single gentleman, "you have done very well. What will you take? Tell that little man behind to shut the door."

"Shut the door, can't you?" said Mr. Codlin, turning gruffly to his friend. "You might have knowed that the gentleman wanted the door shut without being told, I think."

Mr. Short obeyed, observing under his breath that his friend seemed unusually "cranky," and expressing a hope that there was no dairy in the neighbourhood, or his temper would certainly spoil its contents.

The gentleman pointed to a couple of chairs, and intimated, by an emphatic nod of his head, that he expected them to be seated. Messrs. Codlin and Short, after looking at each other with considerable doubt and indecision, at length sat down, each on the extreme edge of the chair pointed out to him, and held their hats very tight, while the single gentleman filled a couple of glasses from a bottle on the table beside him, and presented them in due form.

"You're pretty well browned by the

sun, both of you," said their entertainer. "Have you been travelling?"

Mr. Short replied in the affirmative, with a nod and a smile. Mr. Codlin added a corroborative nod and a short groan, as if he still felt the weight of the temple on his shoulders.

"To fairs, markets, races, and so forth, I suppose?" pursued the single gentleman.

"Yes, sir," returned Short, "pretty nigh all over the west of England."

"I have talked to men of your craft from north, east, and south," returned their host, in rather a hasty manner; "but I never lighted on any from the west before."

"It's our reg'lar summer circuit is the west, master," said Short; "that's where it is. We takes the east of London in the spring and winter, and the west of England in the summer time. Many's the hard day's walking in rain and mud, and with never a penny earned, we've had down in the west."

"Let me fill your glass again."

"Much obleeged to you, sir, I think I will," said Mr. Codlin, suddenly thrusting in his own and turning Short's aside. "I'm the sufferer, sir, in all the travelling, and in all the staying at home. In town or country, wet or dry, hot or cold, Tom Codlin suffers. But Tom Codlin isn't to complain for all that. Oh, no! Short may complain, but if Codlin grumbles by so much as a word—oh, dear, down with him, down with *him* directly. It isn't *his* place to grumble. That's quite out of the question."

"Codlin ain't without his usefulness," observed Short, with an arch look, "but he don't always keep his eyes open. He falls asleep sometimes, you know. Remember them last races, Tommy."

"Will you never leave off aggravating a man?" said Codlin. "It's very like I was asleep when five and tenpence was collected in one round, isn't it? I was attending to my business, and couldn't have my eyes in twenty places at once, like a peacock, no more than you could. If I ain't a match for an old man and a young child you ain't neither; so don't throw that out against me, for the cap fits your head quite as correct as it fits mine."

"You may as well drop the subject, Tom," said Short. "It isn't particular agreeable to the gentleman, I dare say."

"Then you shouldn't have brought it up," returned Mr. Codlin; "and I ask the gentleman's pardon on your account, as a giddy chap that likes to hear himself talk, and don't much care what he talks about, so that he does talk."

Their entertainer had sat perfectly quiet in the beginning of this dispute, looking first at one man and then at the other, as if he were lying in wait for an opportunity of putting some further question, or reverting to that from which the discourse had strayed. But, from the point where Mr. Codlin was charged with sleepiness, he had shown an increasing interest in the discussion, which now attained a very high pitch.

"You are the two men I want," he said, "the two men I have been looking for, and searching after! Where are that old man and that child you speak of?"

"Sir?" said Short, hesitating, and looking towards his friend.

"The old man and his grandchild who travelled with you—where are they? It will be worth your while to speak out, I assure you—much better worth your while than you believe. They left you, you say, at those races, as I understand. They have been traced to that place, and there lost sight of. Have you no clue—can you suggest no clue to their recovery?"

"Did I always say, Thomas," cried Short, turning with a look of amazement to his friend, "that there was sure to be an inquiry after them two travellers?"

"*You* said!" returned Mr. Codlin. "Did I always say that that 'ere blessed child was the most interesting I ever see? Did I always say I loved her, and doted on her? Pretty creetur, I think I hear her now. 'Codlin's my friend,' she says, with a tear of gratitude a-trickling down her little eye; 'Codlin's my friend,' she says—'not Short. Short's very well,' she says; 'I've no quarrel with Short; he means kind, I dare say; but Codlin,' she says, 'has the feelings for *my* money, though he mayn't look it.'"

Repeating these words with great

emotion, Mr. Codlin rubbed the bridge of his nose with his coat sleeve, and shaking his head mournfully from side to side, left the single gentleman to infer that, from the moment when he lost sight of his dear young charge, his peace of mind and happiness had fled.

"Good Heaven!" said the single gentleman, pacing up and down the room, "have I found these men at last, only to discover that they can give me no information or assistance! It would have been better to have lived on, in hope, from day to day, and never to have lighted on them, than to have my expectations scattered thus."

"Stay a minute," said Short. "A man of the name of Jerry—you know Jerry, Thomas?"

"Oh, dōn't talk to me of Jerrys," replied Mr. Codlin. "How can I care a pinch of snuff for Jerrys, when I think of that 'ere darling child? 'Codlin's my friend,' she says, 'dear, good, kind Codlin, as is always a-devising pleasures for me! I don't object to Short,' she says, 'but I cotton to Codlin.' Once," said that gentleman reflectively, "she called me Father Codlin. I thought I should have bust!"

"A man of the name of Jerry, sir," said Short, turning from his selfish colleague to their new acquaintance, "wot keeps a company of dancing dogs, told me, in a accidental sort of way, that he had seen the old gentleman in connection with a travelling wax-work, unbeknown to him. As they'd given us the slip, and nothing had come of it, and this was down in the country that he'd been seen, I took no measures about it, and asked no questions.—But I can, if you like."

"Is this man in town?" said the impatient single gentleman. "Speak faster."

"No, he isn't; but he will be to-morrow, for he lodges in our house," replied Mr. Short rapidly.

"Then bring him here," said the single gentleman. "Here's a sovereign apiece. If I can find these people through your means, it is but a prelude to twenty more. Return to me to-morrow, and keep your own counsel on this subject—though I need hardly tell you that; for you'll do so for your own sakes. Now, give me your address, and leave me."

The address was given, the two men departed, the crowd went with them, and the single gentleman for two mortal hours walked in uncommon agitation up and down his room, over the wondering heads of Mr. Swiveller and Miss Sally Brass.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Kit—for it happens at this juncture, not only that we have breathing time to follow his fortunes, but that the necessities of these adventures so adapt themselves to our ease and inclination as to call upon us imperatively to pursue the track we most desire to take—Kit, while the matters treated of in the last fifteen chapters were yet in progress, was, as the reader may suppose, gradually familiarising himself more and more with Mr. and Mrs. Garland, Mr. Abel, the pony, and Barbara, and gradually coming to consider them one and all as his own particular private friends, and Abel Cottage, Finchley, as his own proper home.

Stay—the words are written, and may go, but if they convey any notion that Kit, in the plentiful board and comfortable lodging of his new abode, began to think slightingly of the poor fare and furniture of his old dwelling, they do their office badly and commit injustice. Who so mindful of those he left at home—albeit they were but a mother and two young babies—as Kit? What boastful father in the fullness of his heart ever related such wonders of his infant prodigy, as Kit never wearied of telling Barbara in the evening time concerning little Jacob? Was there ever such a mother as Kit's mother on her son's showing; or was there ever such comfort in poverty as in the poverty of Kit's family, if any correct judgment might be arrived at from his own glowing account!

And let me linger in this place, for an instant, to remark that if ever household affections and loves are graceful things, they are graceful in the poor. The ties that bind the wealthy and the proud to home may

be forged on earth, but those which link the poor man to his humble hearth are of the truer metal, and bear the stamp of heaven. The man of high descent may love the halls and lands of his inheritance as a part of himself; as trophies of his birth and power; his associations with them are associations of pride and wealth and triumph; the poor man's attachment to the tenement he holds, which strangers have held before, and may to-morrow occupy again, has a worthier root, struck deep into a purer soil. His household gods are of flesh and blood, with no alloy of silver, gold, or precious stones; he has no property but in the affections of his own heart; and when they endear bare floors and walls, despite of rags and toil and scanty fare, that man has his love of home from God, and his rude hut becomes a solemn place.

Oh, if those who rule the destinies of nations would but remember this—if they would but think how hard it is for the very poor to have engendered in their heart that love of home from which all domestic virtues spring, when they live in dense and squalid masses where social decency is lost, or rather never found—if they would but turn aside from the wide thoroughfares and great houses, and strive to improve the wretched dwellings in byways where only poverty may walk—many low roofs would point more truly to the sky than the loftiest steeple that now rears proudly up from the midst of guilt, and crime, and horrible disease, to mock them by its contrast. In hollow voices from workhouse, hospital, and jail, this truth is preached from day to day, and has been proclaimed for years. It is no light matter—no outcry from the working vulgar—no mere question of the people's health and comforts that may be whistled down on Wednesday nights. In love of home, the love of country has its rise; and who are the truer patriots or the better in time of need—those who venerate the land, owning its wood, and stream, and earth, and all that they produce; or those who love their country, boasting not a foot of ground in all its wide domain?

Kit knew nothing about such questions, but he knew that his old home was a very poor place, and that his new one was very unlike it, and yet he was constantly looking back with grateful satisfaction and affectionate anxiety, and often indited square-folded letters to his mother, inclosing a shilling or eighteen-pence, or such other small remittance, which Mr. Abel's liberality enabled him to make. Sometimes, being in the neighbourhood, he had leisure to call upon her, and then great was the joy and pride of Kit's mother, and extremely noisy the satisfaction of little Jacob and the baby, and cordial the congratulations of the whole court, who listened with admiring ears to the accounts of Abel Cottage, and could never be told too much of its wonders and magnificence.

Although Kit was in the very highest favour with the old lady and gentleman, and Mr. Abel, and Barbara, it is certain that no member of the family evinced such a remarkable partiality for him as the self-willed pony, who, from being the most obstinate and opinionated pony on the face of the earth, was, in his hands, the meekest and most tractable of animals. It is true that in exact proportion as he became manageable by Kit, he became utterly ungovernable by anybody else (as if he had determined to keep him in the family at all risks and hazards), and that, even under the guidance of his favourite, he would sometimes perform a great variety of strange freaks and capers, to the extreme discomposure of the old lady's nerves; but as Kit always represented that this was only his fun, or a way he had of showing his attachment to his employers, Mrs. Garland gradually suffered herself to be persuaded into the belief, in which she at last became so strongly confirmed, that if, in one of these ebullitions, he had overturned the chaise, she would have been quite satisfied that he did it with the very best intentions.

Besides becoming in a short time a perfect marvel in all stable matters, Kit soon made himself a very tolerable gardener, a handy fellow within doors, and an indispensable attendant on Mr. Abel, who every day gave him

some new proof of his confidence and approbation. Mr. Witherden the notary, too, regarded him with a friendly eye; and even Mr. Chuckster would sometimes condescend to give him a slight nod, or to honour him with that peculiar form of recognition which is called "taking a sight," or to favour him with some other salute combining pleasantry with patronage.

One morning Kit drove Mr. Abel to the notary's office, as he sometimes did, and having set him down at the house, was about to drive off to a livery-stable hard by, when this same Mr. Chuckster emerged from the office door, and cried, "Woa-a-a-a-a-a!"—dwelling upon the note a long time, for the purpose of striking terror into the pony's heart, and asserting the supremacy of man over the inferior animals.

"Pull up, Snobby," cried Mr. Chuckster, addressing himself to Kit. "You're wanted inside here."

"Has Mr. Abel forgotten anything, I wonder?" said Kit, as he dismounted.

"Ask no questions, Snobby," returned Mr. Chuckster, "but go and see. Woa-a-a then, will you? If that pony was mine *I'd* break him."

"You must be very gentle with him, if you please," said Kit, "or you'll find him troublesome. You'd better not keep on pulling his ears, please. I know he won't like it."

To this remonstrance Mr. Chuckster deigned no other answer than addressing Kit with a lofty and distant air as "young feller," and requesting him to cut and come again with all speed. The "young feller" complying, Mr. Chuckster put his hands in his pockets, and tried to look as if he were not minding the pony, but happened to be lounging there by accident.

Kit scraped his shoes very carefully (for he had not yet lost his reverence for the bundles of papers and the tin boxes), and tapped at the office door, which was quickly opened by the notary himself.

"Oh, come in, Christopher," said Mr. Witherden.

"Is that the lad?" asked an elderly gentleman, but of a stout, bluff figure, who was in the room.

"That's the lad," said Mr. Witherden. "He fell in with my client, Mr. Garland, sir, at this very door. I have reason to think he is a good lad, sir, and that you may believe what he says. Let me introduce Mr. Abel Garland, sir—his young master; my articled pupil, sir, and most particular friend—my most particular friend, sir," repeated the notary, drawing out his silk handkerchief and flourishing it about his face.

"Your servant, sir," said the stranger gentleman.

"Yours, sir, I'm sure," replied Mr. Abel mildly. "You were wishing to speak to Christopher, sir?"

"Yes, I was. Have I your permission?"

"By all means."

"My business is no secret—or I should rather say it need be no secret *here,*" said the stranger, observing that Mr. Abel and the notary were preparing to retire. "It relates to a dealer in curiosities with whom he lived, and in whom I am earnestly and warmly interested. I have been a stranger to this country, gentlemen, for very many years, and if I am deficient in form and ceremony, I hope you will forgive me."

"No forgiveness is necessary, sir—none whatever," replied the notary. And so said Mr. Abel.

"I have been making inquiries in the neighbourhood in which his old master lived," said the stranger, "and I learn that he was served by this lad. I have found out his mother's house, and have been directed by her to this place as the nearest in which I should be likely to find him. That's the cause of my presenting myself here this morning."

"I am very glad of any cause, sir," said the notary, "which procures me the honour of this visit."

"Sir," retorted the stranger, "you speak like a mere man of the world, and I think you something better. Therefore, pray do not sink your real character in paying unmeaning compliments to me."

"Hem!" coughed the notary. "You're a plain speaker, sir."

"And a plain dealer," returned the stranger. "It may be my long absence and inexperience that lead me to the conclusion, but if plain speakers are

scarce in this part of the world, I fancy plain dealers are still scarcer. If my speaking should offend you, sir, my dealing, I hope, will make amends."

Mr. Witherden seemed a little disconcerted by the elderly gentleman's mode of conducting the dialogue; and as for Kit, he looked at him in open-mouthed astonishment — wondering what kind of language he would address to him, if he talked in that free and easy way to a notary. It was with no harshness, however, though with something of constitutional irritability and haste, that he turned to Kit and said—

"If you think, my lad, that I am pursuing these inquiries with any other view than that of serving and reclaiming those I am in search of, you do me a very great wrong, and deceive yourself. Don't be deceived, I beg of you, but rely upon my assurance. The fact is, gentlemen," he added, turning again to the notary and his pupil, "that I am in a very painful and wholly unexpected position. I came to this city with a darling object at my heart, expecting to find no obstacle or difficulty in the way of its attainment. I find myself suddenly checked and stopped short in the execution of my design, by a mystery which I cannot penetrate. Every effort I have made to penetrate it has only served to render it darker and more obscure; and I am afraid to stir openly in the matter, lest those whom I anxiously pursue should fly still farther from me. I assure you that if you could give me any assistance, you would not be sorry to do so, if you knew how greatly I stand in need of it, and what a load it would relieve me from."

There was a simplicity in this confidence which occasioned it to find a quick response in the breast of the good-natured notary, who replied, in the same spirit, that the stranger had not mistaken his desire, and that if he could be of service to him he would, most readily.

Kit was then put under examination, and closely questioned by the unknown gentleman touching his old master and the child, their lonely way of life, their retired habits, and strict seclusion. The nightly absence of the old man, the solitary existence of the child at those times, his illness and recovery, Quilp's possession of the house, and their sudden disappearance, were all the subjects of much questioning and answer. Finally, Kit informed the gentleman that the premises were now to let, and that a board upon the door referred all inquirers to Mr. Sampson Brass, solicitor, of Bevis Marks, from whom he might perhaps learn some further particulars.

"Not by inquiry," said the gentleman, shaking his head. "I live there."

"Live at Brass's the attorney's!" cried Mr. Witherden, in some surprise, having professional knowledge of the gentleman in question.

"Ay," was the reply. "I entered on his lodgings t'other day, chiefly because I had seen this very board. It matters little to me where I live, and I had a desperate hope that some intelligence might be cast in my way there, which would not reach me elsewhere. Yes, I live at Brass's—more shame for me, I suppose?"

"That's a mere matter of opinion," said the notary, shrugging his shoulders. "He is looked upon as rather a doubtful character."

"Doubtful?" echoed the other. "I am glad to hear there's any doubt about it. I supposed that had been thoroughly settled, long ago. But will you let me speak a word or two with you in private?"

Mr. Witherden consenting, they walked into that gentleman's private closet, and remained there, in close conversation, for some quarter of an hour, when they returned into the outer office. The stranger had left his hat in Mr. Witherden's room, and seemed to have established himself, in this short interval, on quite a friendly footing.

"I'll not detain you any longer now," he said, putting a crown into Kit's hand, and looking towards the notary. "You shall hear from me again. Not a word of this, you know, except to your master and mistress."

"Mother, sir, would be glad to know——" said Kit, faltering.

"Glad to know what?"

"Anything—so that it was no harm—about Miss Nell."

"Would she? Well, then, you may tell her if she can keep a secret. But mind, not a word of this to anybody else. Don't forget that. Be particular."

"I'll take care, sir," said Kit. "Thankee, sir, and good-morning."

Now, it happened that the gentleman, in his anxiety to impress upon Kit that he was not to tell anybody what had passed between them, followed him out to the door to repeat his caution, and it further happened that at that moment the eyes of Mr. Richard Swiveller were turned in that direction, and beheld his mysterious friend and Kit together.

It was quite an accident, and the way in which it came about was this. Mr. Chuckster, being a gentleman of a cultivated taste and refined spirit, was one of that Lodge of Glorious Apollos whereof Mr. Swiveller was Perpetual Grand. Mr. Swiveller, passing through the street in the execution of some Brazen errand, and beholding one of his Glorious Brotherhood intently gazing on a pony, crossed over to give him that fraternal greeting with which Perpetual Grands are, by the very constitution of their office, bound to cheer and encourage their disciples. He had scarcely bestowed upon him his blessing, and followed it with a general remark touching the present state and prospects of the weather, when, lifting up his eyes, he beheld the single gentleman of Bevis Marks in earnest conversation with Christopher Nubbles.

"Hollo!" said Dick, "who *is* that?"

"He called to see my governor this morning," replied Mr. Chuckster; "beyond that I don't know him from Adam."

"At least you know his name?" said Dick.

To which Mr. Chuckster replied, with an elevation of speech becoming a Glorious Apollo, that he was "everlastingly blessed" if he did.

"All I know, my dear fellow," said Mr. Chuckster, running his fingers through his hair, "is that he is the cause of my having stood here twenty minutes, for which I hate him with a mortal and undying hatred, and would pursue him to the confines of eternity if I could afford the time."

While they were thus discoursing, the subject of their conversation (who had not appeared to recognise Mr. Richard Swiveller) re-entered the house, and Kit came down the steps and joined them, to whom Mr. Swiveller again propounded his inquiry with no better success.

"He is a very nice gentleman, sir," said Kit, "and that's all *I* know about him."

Mr. Chuckster waxed wroth at this answer, and without applying the remark to any particular case, mentioned, as a general truth, that it was expedient to break the heads of snobs, and to tweak their noses. Without expressing his concurrence in this sentiment, Mr. Swiveller, after a few moments of abstraction, inquired which way Kit was driving, and, being informed, declared it was his way, and that he would trespass on him for a lift. Kit would gladly have declined the proffered honour, but as Mr. Swiveller was already established in the seat beside him, he had no means of doing so otherwise than by a forcible ejectment, and therefore drove briskly off—so briskly, indeed, as to cut short the leave-taking between Mr. Chuckster and his Grand Master, and to occasion the former gentleman some inconvenience from having his corns squeezed by the impatient pony.

As Whisker was tired of standing, and Mr. Swiveller was kind enough to stimulate him by shrill whistles, and various sporting cries, they rattled off at too sharp a pace to admit of much conversation, especially as the pony, incensed by Mr. Swiveller's admonitions, took a particular fancy for the lamp-posts and cart-wheels, and evinced a strong desire to run on the pavement, and rasp himself against the brick walls. It was not, therefore, until they had arrived at the stable, and the chaise had been extricated from a very small doorway, into which the pony dragged it under the impression that he could take it along with him into his usual stall, that Mr. Swiveller found time to talk.

"It's hard work," said Richard. "What do you say to some beer?"

Kit at first declined, but presently consented, and they adjourned to the neighbouring bar together.

"We'll drink our friend what's-his-name," said Dick, holding up the bright, frothy pot—"that was talking to you this morning, you know—*I* know him—a good fellow, but eccentric—very. Here's what's-his-name!"

Kit pledged him.

"He lives in my house," said Dick—"at least in the house occupied by the firm in which I'm a sort of a—of a managing partner—a difficult fellow to get anything out of, but we like him—we like him."

"I must be going, sir, if you please," said Kit, moving away.

"Don't be in a hurry, Christopher," replied his patron; "we'll drink your mother."

"Thank you, sir."

"An excellent woman that mother of yours, Christopher," said Mr. Swiveller. "'Who ran to catch me when I fell, and kissed the place to make it well? My mother.' A charming woman. He's a liberal sort of fellow. We must get him to do something *for* your mother. Does he know her, Christopher?"

Kit shook his head, and glancing slyly at his questioner, thanked him, and made off before he could say another word.

"Humph!" said Mr. Swiveller, pondering; "this is queer. Nothing but mysteries in connection with Brass's house. I'll keep my own counsel, however. Everybody and anybody has been in my confidence as yet, but now I think I'll set up business for myself. Queer—very queer!"

After pondering deeply, and with a face of exceeding wisdom, for some time, Mr. Swiveller drank some more of the beer, and summoning a small boy who had been watching his proceedings, poured forth the few remaining drops as a libation on the gravel, and bade him carry the empty vessel to the bar with his compliments, and above all things to lead a sober and temperate life, and abstain from all intoxicating and exciting liquors. Having given him this piece of moral advice for his trouble (which, as he wisely observed, was far better than halfpence), the Perpetual Grand Master of the Glorious Apollos thrust his hands into his pockets and sauntered away, still pondering as he went.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ALL that day, though he waited for Mr. Abel until evening, Kit kept clear of his mother's house, determined not to anticipate the pleasures of the morrow, but to let them come in their full rush of delight; for to-morrow was the great and long-looked-for epoch in his life—to-morrow was the end of his first quarter—the day of receiving, for the first time, one-fourth part of his annual income of six pounds in one vast sum of thirty shillings—to-morrow was to be a half-holiday devoted to a whirl of entertainments, and little Jacob was to know what oysters meant, and to see a play.

All manner of incidents combined in favour of the occasion; not only had Mr. and Mrs. Garland forewarned him that they intended to make no deduction for his outfit from the great amount, but to pay it him unbroken in all its gigantic grandeur; not only had the unknown gentleman increased the stock by the sum of five shillings, which was a perfect godsend, and in itself a fortune; not only had these things come to pass which nobody could have calculated upon, or in their wildest dreams have hoped; but it was Barbara's quarter too—Barbara's quarter that very day—and Barbara had a half-holiday as well as Kit, and Barbara's mother was going to make one of the party, and to take tea with Kit's mother, and cultivate her acquaintance.

To be sure Kit looked out of his window very early that morning to see which way the clouds were flying, and to be sure Barbara would have been at hers too, if she had not sat up so late overnight, starching and ironing small pieces of muslin, and crimping them into frills, and sewing them on to other pieces to form magnificent wholes for next day's wear. But they were both up very early for all that, and had small appetites for breakfast

and less for dinner, and were in a state of great excitement when Barbara's mother came in, with astonishing accounts of the fineness of the weather out of doors (but with a very large umbrella notwithstanding, for people like Barbara's mother seldom make holiday without one), and when the bell rung for them to go upstairs and receive their quarter's money in gold and silver.

Well, wasn't Mr. Garland kind when he said, "Christopher, here's your money, and you have earned it well;" and wasn't Mrs. Garland kind when she said, "Barbara, here's yours, and I'm much pleased with you;" and didn't Kit sign his name bold to his receipt, and didn't Barbara sign her name all a-trembling to hers; and wasn't it beautiful to see how Mrs. Garland poured out Barbara's mother a glass of wine; and didn't Barbara's mother speak up when she said, "Here's blessing you, ma'am, as a good lady, and you, sir, as a good gentleman, and Barbara, my love to you, and here's towards you, Mr. Christopher;" and wasn't she as long drinking it as if it had been a tumblerful; and didn't she look genteel, standing there with her gloves on; and wasn't there plenty of laughing and talking among them as they reviewed all these things upon the top of the coach; and didn't they pity the people who hadn't got a holiday!

But Kit's mother, again—wouldn't anybody have supposed she had come of a good stock, and been a lady all her life! There she was, quite ready to receive them, with a display of tea-things that might have warmed the heart of a china-shop; and little Jacob and the baby in such a state of perfection that their clothes looked as good as new, though Heaven knows they were old enough! Didn't she say, before they had sat down five minutes, that Barbara's mother was exactly the sort of lady she expected, and didn't Barbara's mother say that Kit's mother was the very picture of what *she* had expected; and didn't Kit's mother compliment Barbara's mother on Barbara, and didn't Barbara's mother compliment Kit's mother on Kit; and wasn't Barbara herself quite fascinated with little Jacob, and did ever a child show off when he was wanted as that child did, or make such friends as he made!

"And we are both widows too!" said Barbara's mother. "We must have been made to know each other."

"I haven't a doubt about it," returned Mrs. Nubbles. "And what a pity it is we didn't know each other sooner."

"But then, you know, it's such a pleasure," said Barbara's mother, "to have it brought about by one's son and daughter, that it's fully made up for. Now, ain't it?"

To this Kit's mother yielded her full assent, and tracing things back from effects to causes, they naturally reverted to their deceased husbands, respecting whose lives, deaths, and burials they compared notes, and discovered sundry circumstances that tallied with wonderful exactness—such as Barbara's father having been exactly four years and ten months older than Kit's father, and one of them having died on a Wednesday and the other on a Thursday, and both of them having been of a very fine make, and remarkably good-looking, with other extraordinary coincidences. These recollections being of a kind calculated to cast a shadow on the brightness of the holiday, Kit diverted the conversation to general topics, and they were soon in great force again, and as merry as before. Among other things, Kit told them about his old place, and the extraordinary beauty of Nell (of whom he had talked to Barbara a thousand times already); but the last-named circumstance failed to interest his hearers to anything like the extent he had supposed, and even his mother said (looking accidentally at Barbara at the same time) that there was no doubt Miss Nell was very pretty, but she was but a child after all, and there were many young women quite as pretty as she; and Barbara mildly observed that she should think so, and that she never could help believing Mr. Christopher must be under a mistake—which Kit wondered at very much, not being able to conceive what reason she had for doubting him. Barbara's mother, too, observed that it was very common for young folks to change at

about fourteen or fifteen, and whereas they had been very pretty before, to grow up quite plain; which truth she illustrated by many forcible examples, especially one of a young man, who, being a builder with great prospects, had been particular in his attentions to Barbara, but whom Barbara would have nothing to say to, which (though everything happened for the best) she almost thought was a pity. Kit said he thought so too; and so he did honestly, and he wondered what made Barbara so silent all at once, and why his mother looked at him as if he shouldn't have said it.

However, it was high time now to be thinking of the play, for which great preparation was required in the way of shawls and bonnets, not to mention one handkerchief full of oranges and another of apples, which took some time tying up, in consequence of the fruit having a tendency to roll out at the corners. At length everything was ready, and they went off very fast, Kit's mother carrying the baby, who was dreadfully wide awake, and Kit holding little Jacob in one hand, and escorting Barbara with the other—a state of things which occasioned the two mothers, who walked behind, to declare that they looked quite family folks, and caused Barbara to blush and say, "Now don't, mother!" But Kit said she had no call to mind what they said; and, indeed, she need not have had, if she had known how very far from Kit's thoughts any love-making was. Poor Barbara!

At last they got to the theatre, which was Astley's; and in some two minutes after they had reached the yet unopened door, little Jacob was squeezed flat, and the baby had received divers concussions, and Barbara's mother's umbrella had been carried several yards off and passed back to her over the shoulders of the people, and Kit had hit a man on the head with the handkerchief of apples for "scrowdging" his parent with unnecessary violence, and there was a great uproar. But when they were once past the pay-place, and tearing away for very life with their checks in their hands, and, above all, when they were fairly in the theatre, and seated in such places that they couldn't have had better if they had picked them out, and taken them beforehand, all this was looked upon as quite a capital joke, and an essential part of the entertainment.

Dear, dear, what a place it looked, that Astley's, with all the paint, gilding, and looking-glass; the vague smell of horses, suggestive of coming wonders; the curtain that hid such gorgeous mysteries; the clean white sawdust down in the circus; the company coming in and taking their places; the fiddlers looking carelessly up at them while they tuned their instruments, as if they didn't want the play to begin, and knew it all beforehand! What a glow was that, which burst upon them all, when that long, clear, brilliant row of lights came slowly up; and what the feverish excitement when the little bell rang and the music began in good earnest, with strong parts for the drums, and sweet effects for the triangles! Well might Barbara's mother say to Kit's mother that the gallery was the place to see from, and wonder it wasn't much dearer than the boxes; well might Barbara feel doubtful whether to laugh or cry, in her flutter of delight.

Then the play itself! the horses which little Jacob believed from the first to be alive, and the ladies and gentlemen of whose reality he could be by no means persuaded, having never seen or heard anything at all like them—the firing, which made Barbara wink—the forlorn lady, who made her cry—the tyrant, who made her tremble—the man who sang the song with the lady's-maid, and danced the chorus, who made her laugh—the pony who reared up on his hind legs when he saw the murderer, and wouldn't hear of walking on all fours again until he was taken into custody—the clown who ventured on such familiarities with the military man in boots—the lady who jumped over the nine-and-twenty ribbons and came down safe upon the horse's back—everything was delightful, splendid, and surprising! Little Jacob applauded till his hands were sore; Kit cried "an-kor" at the end of everything, the three-act piece included; and Barbara's mother beat her umbrella on the floor, in her

ecstasies, until it was nearly worn down to the gingham.

In the midst of all these fascinations, Barbara's thoughts seemed to have been still running on what Kit had said at tea-time; for, when they were coming out of the play, she asked him, with a hysterical simper, if Miss Nell was as handsome as the lady who jumped over the ribbons.

"As handsome as *her?*" said Kit. "Double as handsome."

"Oh, Christopher! I'm sure she was the beautifullest creature ever was," said Barbara.

"Nonsense!" returned Kit. "She was well enough, I don't deny that; but think how she was dressed and painted, and what a difference that made. Why, *you* are a good deal better-looking than her, Barbara."

"Oh, Christopher!" said Barbara, looking down.

"You are, any day," said Kit, "and so's your mother."

Poor Barbara!

What was all this though—even all this—to the extraordinary dissipation that ensued, when Kit, walking into an oyster-shop as bold as if he lived there, and not so much as looking at the counter or the man behind it, led his party into a box—a private box, fitted up with red curtains, white table-cloth, and cruet-stand complete—and ordered a fierce gentleman with whiskers, who acted as waiter, and called him—him, Christopher Nubbles—"sir," to bring three dozen of his largest-sized oysters, and to look sharp about it! Yes, Kit told this gentleman to look sharp; and he not only said he would look sharp, but he actually did, and presently came running back with the newest loaves, and the freshest butter, and the largest oysters, ever seen. Then said Kit to this gentleman, "A pot of beer"—just so—and the gentleman, instead of replying, "Sir, did you address that language to me?" only said, "Pot o' beer, sir? Yes, sir," and went off and fetched it, and put it on the table in a small decanter-stand, like those which blind men's dogs carry about the streets in their mouths, to catch the halfpence in; and both Kit's mother and Barbara's mother declared as he turned away that he was one of the slimmest and gracefullest young men she had ever looked upon.

Then they fell to work upon the supper in earnest; and there was Barbara, that foolish Barbara, declaring that she could not eat more than two, and wanting more pressing than you would believe before she would eat four; though her mother and Kit's mother made up for it pretty well, and ate, and laughed, and enjoyed themselves so thoroughly that it did Kit good to see them, and made him laugh and eat likewise from strong sympathy. But the greatest miracle of the night was little Jacob, who ate oysters as if he had been born and bred to the business—sprinkled the pepper and the vinegar with a discretion beyond his years—and afterwards built a grotto on the table with the shells. There was the baby, too, who had never closed an eye all night, but had sat as good as gold, trying to force a large orange into his mouth, and gazing intently at the lights in the chandelier—there he was, sitting up in his mother's lap, staring at the gas without winking, and making indentations in his soft visage with an oyster-shell, to that degree that a heart of iron must have loved him! In short, there never was a more successful supper; and when Kit ordered in a glass of something hot to finish with, and proposed Mr. and Mrs. Garland before sending it round, there were not six happier people in all the world.

But all happiness has an end—hence the chief pleasure of its next beginning—and as it was now growing late, they agreed it was time to turn their faces homeward. So, after going a little out of their way to see Barbara and Barbara's mother safe to a friend's house, where they were to pass the night, Kit and his mother left them at the door, with an early appointment for returning to Finchley next morning, and a great many plans for next quarter's enjoyment. Then Kit took little Jacob on his back, and giving his arm to his mother, and a kiss to the baby, they all trudged merrily home together.

CHAPTER XL.

FULL of that vague kind of penitence which holidays awaken next morning, Kit turned out at sunrise, and, with his faith in last night's enjoyment a little shaken by cool daylight and the return to everyday duties and occupations, went to meet Barbara and her mother at the appointed place. And being careful not to awaken any of the little household, who were yet resting from their unusual fatigues, Kit left his money on the chimney-piece, with an inscription in chalk calling his mother's attention to the circumstance, and informing her that it came from her dutiful son; and went his way, with a heart something heavier than his pockets, but free from any very great oppression notwithstanding.

Oh, these holidays! why will they leave us some regret? why cannot we push them back only a week or two in our memories, so as to put them at once at that convenient distance whence they may be regarded either with a calm indifference or a pleasant effort of recollection? why will they hang about us, like the flavour of yesterday's wine, suggestive of headaches and lassitude, and those good intentions for the future, which, under the earth, form the everlasting pavement of a large estate, and, upon it, usually endure until dinner-time or thereabouts?

Who will wonder that Barbara had a headache, or that Barbara's mother was disposed to be cross, or that she slightly underrated Astley's, and thought the clown was older than they had taken him to be last night? Kit was not surprised to hear her say so—not he. He had already had a misgiving that the inconstant actors in that dazzling vision had been doing the same thing the night before last, and would do it again that night, and the next, and for weeks and months to come, though he would not be there. Such is the difference between yesterday and to-day. We are all going to the play, or coming home from it.

However, the sun himself is weak when he first rises, and gathers strength and courage as the day gets on. By degrees they began to recall circumstances more and more pleasant in their nature, until, what between talking, walking, and laughing, they reached Finchley in such good heart that Barbara's mother declared she never felt less tired or in better spirits. And so said Kit. Barbara had been silent all the way, but she said so too. Poor little Barbara! She was very quiet.

They were at home in such good time that Kit had rubbed down the pony, and made him as spruce as a racehorse, before Mr. Garland came down to breakfast; which punctual and industrious conduct the old lady, and the old gentleman, and Mr. Abel, highly extolled. At his usual hour (or rather at his usual minute and second, for he was the soul of punctuality), Mr. Abel walked out, to be overtaken by the London coach, and Kit and the old gentleman went to work in the garden.

This was not the least pleasant of Kit's employments. On a fine day they were quite a family party—the old lady sitting hard by with her work-basket on a little table; the old gentleman digging, or pruning, or clipping about with a large pair of shears, or helping Kit in some way or other with great assiduity; and Whisker looking on from his paddock in placid contemplation of them all. To-day they were to trim the grape-vine; so Kit mounted half-way up a short ladder, and began to snip and hammer away, while the old gentleman, with a great interest in his proceedings, handed up the nails and shreds of cloth as he wanted them. The old lady and Whisker looked on as usual.

"Well, Christopher," said Mr. Garland, "and so you have made a new friend, eh?"

"I beg your pardon, sir?" returned Kit, looking down from the ladder.

"You have made a new friend, I hear from Mr. Abel," said the old gentleman, "at the office!"

"Oh—yes, sir, yes. He behaved very handsome, sir."

"I'm glad to hear it," returned the old gentleman, with a smile. "He is disposed to behave more handsomely still, though, Christopher."

"Indeed, sir! It's very kind in him, but I don't want him to, I'm sure," said Kit, hammering stoutly at an obdurate nail.

"He is rather anxious," pursued the old gentleman, "to have you in his own service—— Take care what you're doing, or you will fall down and hurt yourself."

"To have me in his service, sir?" cried Kit, who had stopped short in his work, and faced about on the ladder like some dexterous tumbler. "Why, sir, I don't think he can be in earnest when he says that."

"Oh! but he is, indeed," said Mr. Garland. "And he has told Mr. Abel so."

"I never heard of such a thing!" muttered Kit, looking ruefully at his master and mistress. "I wonder at him; that I do."

"You see, Christopher," said Mr. Garland, "this is a point of much importance to you, and you should understand and consider it in that light. This gentleman is able to give you more money than I—not, I hope, to carry through the various relations of master and servant, more kindness and confidence, but certainly, Christopher, to give you more money."

"Well," said Kit, "after that, sir——"

"Wait a moment," interposed Mr. Garland. "That is not all. You were a very faithful servant to your old employers, as I understand, and should this gentleman recover them, as it is his purpose to attempt doing by every means in his power, I have no doubt that you, being in his service, would meet with your reward. Besides," added the old gentleman, with stronger emphasis — "besides having the pleasure of being again brought into communication with those to whom you seem to be very strongly and disinterestedly attached. You must think of all this, Christopher, and not be rash or hasty in your choice."

Kit did suffer one twinge, one momentary pang, in keeping the resolution he had already formed, when this last argument passed swiftly into his thoughts, and conjured up the realisation of all his hopes and fancies. But it was gone in a minute, and he sturdily rejoined that the gentleman must look out for somebody else, as he did think he might have done at first.

"He has no right to think that I'd be led away to go to him, sir," said Kit, turning round again, after half a minute's hammering. "Does he think I'm a fool?"

"He may, perhaps, Christopher, if you refuse his offer," said Mr. Garland gravely.

"Then let him, sir," retorted Kit; "what do I care, sir, what he thinks? why should I care for his thinking, sir, when I know that I should be a fool, and worse than a fool, sir, to leave the kindest master and mistress that ever was or can be, who took me out of the streets a very poor and hungry lad indeed—poorer and hungrier, perhaps, than even you think for, sir—to go to him or anybody? If Miss Nell was to come back, ma'am," added Kit, turning suddenly to his mistress, "why, that would be another thing, and perhaps if *she* wanted me, I might ask you now and then to let me work for her when all was done at home. But when she comes back, I see now that she'll be rich, as old master always said she would; and being a rich young lady, what could she want of me? No, no," added Kit, shaking his head sorrowfully, "she'll never want me any more, and bless her, I hope she never may, though I *should* like to see her, too!"

Here Kit drove a nail into the wall, very hard — much harder than was necessary—and having done so, faced about again.

"There's the pony, sir," said Kit—"Whisker, ma'am (and he knows so well I'm talking about him that he begins to neigh directly, sir)—would he let anybody come near him but me, ma'am? Here's the garden, sir; and Mr. Abel, ma'am. Would Mr. Abel part with me, sir? or is there anybody that could be fonder of the garden, ma'am? It would break mother's heart, sir, and even little Jacob would have sense enough to cry his eyes out, ma'am, if he thought

that Mr. Abel could wish to part with me so soon, after having told me, only the other day, that he hoped we might be together for years to come——"

There is no telling how long Kit might have stood upon the ladder, addressing his master and mistress by turns, and generally turning towards the wrong person, if Barbara had not at that moment come running up to say that a messenger from the office had brought a note, which, with an expression of some surprise at Kit's oratorical appearance, she put into her master's hand.

"Oh," said the old gentleman, after reading it, "ask the messenger to walk this way." Barbara tripping off to do as she was bid, he turned to Kit, and said that they would not pursue the subject any further, and that Kit could not be more unwilling to part with them than they would be to part with Kit; a sentiment which the old lady very generously echoed.

"At the same time, Christopher," added Mr. Garland, glancing at the note in his hand, "if the gentleman should want to borrow you now and then for an hour or so, or even for a day or so, at a time, we must consent to lend you, and you must consent to be lent. Oh, here is the young gentleman. How do you do, sir?"

This salutation was addressed to Mr. Chuckster, who, with his hat extremely on one side, and his hair a long way behind it, came swaggering up the walk.

"Hope I see you well, sir," returned that gentleman. "Hope I see *you* well, ma'am. Charming box this, sir. Delicious country, to be sure."

"You want to take Kit back with you, I find?" observed Mr. Garland.

"I have got a chariot-cab waiting on purpose," replied the clerk. "A very spanking gray in that cab, sir, if you're a judge of horse-flesh."

Declining to inspect the spanking gray, on the plea that he was but poorly acquainted with such matters, and would but imperfectly appreciate his beauties, Mr. Garland invited Mr. Chuckster to partake of a slight repast in the way of lunch. That gentleman readily consenting, certain cold viands, flanked with ale and wine, were speedily prepared for his refreshment.

At this repast Mr. Chuckster exerted his utmost abilities to enchant his entertainers, and impress them with a conviction of the mental superiority of those who dwelled in town; with which view he led the discourse to the small scandal of the day, in which he was justly considered by his friends to shine prodigiously. Thus, he was in a condition to relate the exact circumstances of the difference between the Marquis of Mizzler and Lord Bobby, which it appeared originated in a disputed bottle of champagne, and not in a pigeon-pie, as erroneously reported in the newspapers; neither had Lord Bobby said to the Marquis of Mizzler, "Mizzler, one of us two tells a lie, and I'm not the man," as incorrectly stated by the same authorities; but "Mizzler, you know where I'm to be found, and, damme, sir, find me if you want me"—which, of course, entirely changed the aspect of this interesting question, and placed it in a very different light. He also acquainted them with the precise amount of the income guaranteed by the Duke of Thigsberry to Violetta Stetta of the Italian Opera, which it appeared was payable quarterly and not half-yearly, as the public had been given to understand, and which was *ex*clusive, and not *in*clusive (as had been monstrously stated), of jewellery, perfumery, hair-powder for five footmen, and two daily changes of kid gloves for a page. Having entreated the old lady and gentleman to set their minds at rest on these absorbing points, for they might rely on his statement being the correct one, Mr. Chuckster entertained them with theatrical chit-chat and the court circular; and so wound up a brilliant and fascinating conversation which he had maintained alone, and without any assistance whatever, for upwards of three-quarters of an hour.

"And now that the nag has got his wind again," said Mr. Chuckster, rising in a graceful manner, "I'm afraid I must cut my stick."

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Garland offered any opposition to his tearing himself away (feeling, no doubt, that such a

man could ill be spared from his proper sphere of action), and therefore Mr. Chuckster and Kit were shortly afterwards upon their way to town; Kit being perched upon the box of the cabriolet beside the driver, and Mr. Chuckster seated in solitary state inside, with one of his boots sticking out at each of the front windows.

When they reached the notary's house, Kit followed into the office, and was desired by Mr. Abel to sit down and wait, for the gentleman who wanted him had gone out, and perhaps might not return for some time. This anticipation was strictly verified, for Kit had had his dinner, and his tea, and had read all the lighter matter in the "Law List," and the "Post Office Directory," and had fallen asleep a great many times, before the gentleman whom he had seen before came in, which he did at last in a very great hurry.

He was closeted with Mr. Witherden for some little time, and Mr. Abel had been called in to assist at the conference, before Kit, wondering very much what he was wanted for, was summoned to attend them.

"Christopher," said the gentleman, turning to him directly he entered the room, "I have found your old master and young mistress."

"No, sir! Have you, though?" returned Kit, his eyes sparkling with delight. "Where are they, sir? How are they, sir? Are they—are they near here?"

"A long way from here," returned the gentleman, shaking his head. "But I am going away to-night to bring them back, and I want you to go with me."

"Me, sir?" cried Kit, full of joy and surprise.

"The place," said the strange gentleman, turning thoughtfully to the notary, "indicated by this man of the dogs, is—how far from here—sixty miles?"

"From sixty to seventy."

"Humph! If we travel post all night, we shall reach there in good time to-morrow morning. Now, the only question is, as they will not know me, and the child, God bless her, would think that any stranger pursuing them had a design upon her grandfather's liberty—can I do better than take this lad, whom they both know, and will readily remember, as an assurance to them of my friendly intentions?"

"Certainly not," replied the notary. "Take Christopher, by all means."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Kit, who had listened to this discourse with a lengthening countenance, "but if that's the reason, I'm afraid I should do more harm than good. Miss Nell, sir, *she* knows me, and would trust in me, I am sure; but old master—I don't know why, gentlemen; nobody does—would not bear me in his sight after he had been ill, and Miss Nell herself told me that I must not go near him, or let him see me any more. I should spoil all that you were doing if I went, I'm afraid. I'd give the world to go, but you had better not take me, sir."

"Another difficulty!" cried the impetuous gentleman. "Was ever man so beset as I? Is there nobody else that knew them? nobody else in whom they had any confidence? Solitary as their lives were, is there no one person who would serve my purpose?"

"*Is* there, Christopher?" said the notary.

"Not one, sir," replied Kit. "Yes, though—there's my mother."

"Did they know her?" said the single gentleman.

"Know her, sir! why, she was always coming backwards and forwards. They were as kind to her as they were to me. Bless you, sir, she expected they'd come back to her house."

"Then where the devil is the woman?" said the impatient gentleman, catching up his hat. "Why isn't she here? Why is that woman always out of the way when she is most wanted?"

In a word, the single gentleman was bursting out of the office, bent upon laying violent hands on Kit's mother, forcing her into a post-chaise, and carrying her off, when this novel kind of abduction was with some difficulty prevented by the joint efforts of Mr. Abel and the notary, who restrained

him by dint of their remonstrances, and persuaded him to sound Kit upon the probability of her being able and willing to undertake such a journey on so short a notice.

This occasioned some doubts on the part of Kit, and some violent demonstrations on that of the single gentleman, and a great many soothing speeches on that of the notary and Mr. Abel. The upshot of the business was, that Kit, after weighing the matter in his mind and considering it carefully, promised, on behalf of his mother, that she should be ready within two hours from that time to undertake the expedition, and engaged to produce her in that place, in all respects equipped and prepared for the journey, before the specified period had expired.

Having given this pledge, which was rather a bold one, and not particularly easy of redemption, Kit lost no time in sallying forth, and taking measures for its immediate fulfilment.

CHAPTER XLI.

Kit made his way through the crowded streets, dividing the stream of people, dashing across the busy roadways, diving into lanes and alleys, and stopping or turning aside for nothing, until he came in front of the old curiosity shop, when he came to a stand, partly from habit, and partly from being out of breath.

It was a gloomy autumn evening, and he thought the old place had never looked so dismal as in its dreary twilight. The windows broken, the rusty sashes rattling in their frames, the deserted house a dull barrier dividing the glaring lights and bustle of the street into two long lines, and standing in the midst, cold, dark, and empty—presented a cheerless spectacle which mingled harshly with the bright prospects the boy had been building up for its late inmates, and came like a disappointment or misfortune. Kit would have had a good fire roaring up the empty chimneys, lights sparkling and shining through the windows, people moving briskly to and fro, voices in cheerful conversation, something in unison with the new hopes that were astir. He had not expected that the house would wear any different aspect—had known, indeed, that it could not—but coming upon it in the midst of eager thoughts and expectations, it checked the current in its flow, and darkened it with a mournful shadow.

Kit, however, fortunately for himself, was not learned enough or contemplative enough to be troubled with presages of evil afar off; and, having no mental spectacles to assist his vision in this respect, saw nothing but the dull house, which jarred uncomfortably upon his previous thoughts. So, almost wishing that he had not passed it, though hardly knowing why, he hurried on again, making up by his increased speed for the few moments he had lost.

"Now, if she should be out," thought Kit, as he approached the poor dwelling of his mother, "and I not able to find her, this impatient gentleman would be in a pretty taking. And sure enough there's no light, and the door's fast. Now, God forgive me for saying so, but if this is Little Bethel's doing, I wish Little Bethel was—was farther off," said Kit, checking himself, and knocking at the door.

A second knock brought no reply from within the house; but caused a woman over the way to look out and inquire who that was a-wanting Mrs. Nubbles.

"Me," said Kit. "She's at—at Little Bethel, I suppose?" getting out the name of the obnoxious conventicle with some reluctance, and laying a spiteful emphasis upon the words.

The neighbour nodded assent.

"Then pray tell me where it is," said Kit, "for I have come on a pressing matter, and must fetch her out, even if she was in the pulpit."

It was not very easy to procure a direction to the fold in question, as none of the neighbours were of the flock that resorted thither, and few knew anything more of it than the name. At last, a gossip of Mrs. Nubbles's, who had accompanied her to chapel on one or two occasions when a comfortable cup of tea had preceded her devotions, furnished the needful

information, which Kit had no sooner obtained than he started off again.

Little Bethel might have been nearer, and might have been in a straighter road, though in that case the reverend gentleman who presided over its congregation would have lost his favourite allusion to the crooked ways by which it was approached, and which enabled him to liken it to Paradise itself, in contradistinction to the parish church and the broad thoroughfare leading thereunto. Kit found it at last, after some trouble, and pausing at the door to take breath, that he might enter with becoming decency, passed into the chapel.

It was not badly named in one respect, being, in truth, a particularly little Bethel—a Bethel of the smallest dimensions—with a small number of small pews, and a small pulpit, in which a small gentleman (by trade a shoemaker, and by calling a divine) was delivering, in a by no means small voice, a by no means small sermon, judging of its dimensions by the condition of his audience, which, if their gross amount were but small, comprised a still smaller number of hearers, as the majority were slumbering.

Among these was Kit's mother, who, finding it matter of extreme difficulty to keep her eyes open after the fatigues of last night, and feeling their inclination to close strongly backed and seconded by the arguments of the preacher, had yielded to the drowsiness that overpowered her, and had fallen asleep; though not so soundly but that she could, from time to time, utter a slight and almost inaudible groan, as if in recognition of the orator's doctrines. The baby in her arms was as fast asleep as she; and little Jacob, whose youth prevented him from recognising in this prolonged spiritual nourishment anything half as interesting as oysters, was alternately very fast asleep and very wide awake, as his inclination to slumber, or his terror of being personally alluded to in the discourse, gained the mastery over him.

"And now I'm here," thought Kit, gliding into the nearest empty pew, which was opposite his mother's, and on the other side of the little aisle, "how am I ever to get at her, or persuade her to come out? I might as well be twenty miles off. She'll never wake still it's all over, and there goes the clock again! If he would but leave off for a minute, or if they'd only sing——"

But there was little encouragement to believe that either event would happen for a couple of hours to come. The preacher went on telling them what he meant to convince them of before he had done; and it was clear that if he only kept to one-half of his promises, and forgot the other, he was good for that time at least.

In his desperation and restlessness, Kit cast his eyes about the chapel, and happening to let them fall upon a little seat in front of the clerk's desk, could scarcely believe them when they showed him—Quilp!

He rubbed them twice or thrice, but still they insisted that Quilp was there, and there indeed he was, sitting with his hands upon his knees, and his hat between them on a little wooden bracket, with the accustomed grin on his dirty face, and his eyes fixed upon the ceiling. He certainly did not glance at Kit or at his mother, and appeared utterly unconscious of their presence; still Kit could not help feeling, directly, that the attention of the sly little fiend was fastened upon them, and upon nothing else.

But, astounded as he was by the apparition of the dwarf among the Little Bethelites, and not free from a misgiving that it was the forerunner of some trouble or annoyance, he was compelled to subdue his wonder, and to take active measures for the withdrawal of his parent, as the evening was now creeping on, and the matter grew serious. Therefore, the next time little Jacob woke, Kit set himself to attract his wandering attention, and this not being a very difficult task (one sneeze effected it), he signed to him to rouse his mother.

Ill-luck would have it, however, that, just then, the preacher, in a forcible exposition of one head of his discourse, leaned over upon the pulpit-desk so that very little more of him than his legs remained inside; and,

while he made vehement gestures with his right hand, and held on with his left, stared, or seemed to stare, straight into little Jacob's eyes, threatening him by his strained look and attitude—so it appeared to the child—that if he so much as moved a muscle, he, the preacher, would be literally, and not figuratively, "down upon him" that instant. In this fearful state of things, distracted by the sudden appearance of Kit, and fascinated by the eyes of the preacher, the miserable Jacob sat bolt upright, wholly incapable of motion, strongly disposed to cry but afraid to do so, and returning his pastor's gaze until his infant eyes seemed starting from their sockets.

"If I must do it openly, I must," thought Kit. With that, he walked softly out of his pew and into his mother's, and as Mr. Swiveller would have observed if he had been present, "collared" the baby without speaking a word.

"Hush, mother!" whispered Kit. "Come along with me, I've got something to tell you."

"Where am I?" said Mrs. Nubbles.

"In this blessed Little Bethel," returned her son peevishly.

"Blessed indeed!" cried Mrs. Nubbles, catching at the word. "Oh, Christopher, how have I been edified this night!"

"Yes, yes, I know," said Kit hastily; "but come along, mother, everybody's looking at us. Don't make a noise—bring Jacob—that's right!"

"Stay, Satan, stay!" cried the preacher, as Kit was moving off.

"The gentleman says you're to stay, Christopher," whispered his mother.

"Stay, Satan, stay!" roared the preacher again. "Tempt not the woman that doth incline her ear to thee, but hearken to the voice of him that calleth. He hath a lamb from the fold!" cried the preacher, raising his voice still higher and pointing to the baby. "He beareth off a lamb, a precious lamb! He goeth about like a wolf in the night season, and inveigleth the tender lambs!"

Kit was the best-tempered fellow in the world, but considering this strong language, and being somewhat excited by the circumstances in which he was placed, he faced round to the pulpit with the baby in his arms, and replied aloud—

"No, I don't. He's my brother."

"He's *my* brother!" cried the preacher.

"He isn't," said Kit indignantly. "How can you say such a thing? And don't call me names, if you please; what harm have I done? I shouldn't have come to take 'em away, unless I was obliged, you may depend upon that. I wanted to do it very quiet, but you wouldn't let me. Now you have the goodness to abuse Satan and them as much as you like, sir, and to let me alone, if you please."

So saying, Kit marched out of the chapel, followed by his mother and little Jacob, and found himself in the open air, with an indistinct recollection of having seen the people wake up and look surprised, and of Quilp having remained, throughout the interruption, in his old attitude, without moving his eyes from the ceiling, or appearing to take the smallest notice of anything that passed.

"Oh, Kit!" said his mother, with her handkerchief to her eyes, "what have you done! I never can go there again—never!"

"I'm glad of it, mother. What was there in the little bit of pleasure you took last night that made it necessary for you to be low-spirited and sorrowful to-night? That's the way you do. If you're happy or merry ever, you come here to say, along with that chap, that you're sorry for it. More shame for you, mother, I was going to say."

"Hush, dear!" said Mrs. Nubbles; "you don't mean what you say, I know, but you're talking sinfulness."

"Don't mean it? But I do mean it!" retorted Kit. "I don't believe, mother, that harmless cheerfulness and good-humour are thought greater sins in heaven than shirt-collars are, and I do believe that those chaps are just about as right and sensible in putting down the one as in leaving off the other—that's my belief. But I won't say anything more about it, if you'll promise not to cry, that's all; and

you take the baby, that's a lighter weight, and give me little Jacob; and as we go along (which we must do pretty quick) I'll give you the news I bring, which will surprise you a little, I can tell you. There—that's right. Now you look as if you'd never seen Little Bethel in all your life, as I hope you never will again; and here's the baby; and little Jacob, you get atop of my back and catch hold of me tight round the neck, and whenever a Little Bethel parson calls you a precious lamb or says your brother's one, you tell him it's the truest thing he's said for a twelvemonth, and that if he'd got a little more of the lamb himself, and less of the mint sauce—not being quite so sharp and sour over it—I should like him all the better. That's what you've got to say to *him*, Jacob."

Talking on in this way, half in jest and half in earnest, and cheering up his mother, the children, and himself, by the one simple process of determining to be in a good-humour, Kit led them briskly forward; and on the road home he related what had passed at the notary's house, and the purpose with which he had intruded on the solemnities of Little Bethel.

His mother was not a little startled on learning what service was required of her, and presently fell into a confusion of ideas, of which the most prominent were that it was a great honour and dignity to ride in a post-chaise, and that it was a moral impossibility to leave the children behind. But this objection, and a great many others, founded on certain articles of dress being at the wash, and certain other articles having no existence in the wardrobe of Mrs. Nubbles, were overcome by Kit, who opposed to each and every of them the pleasure of recovering Nell, and the delight it would be to bring her back in triumph.

"There's only ten minutes now, mother," said Kit, when they reached home. "There's a bandbox. Throw in what you want, and we'll be off directly."

To tell how Kit then hustled into the box all sorts of things which could, by no remote contingency, be wanted, and how he left out everything likely to be of the smallest use; how a neighbour was persuaded to come and stop with the children, and how the children at first cried dismally, and then laughed heartily on being promised all kinds of impossible and unheard of toys; how Kit's mother wouldn't leave off kissing them, and how Kit couldn't make up his mind to be vexed with her for doing it, would take more time and room than you and I can spare. So, passing over all such matters, it is sufficient to say that within a few minutes after the two hours had expired, Kit and his mother arrived at the notary's door, where a post-chaise was already waiting.

"With four horses, I declare!" said Kit, quite aghast at the preparations. "Well, you *are* going to do it, mother! Here she is, sir. Here's my mother. She's quite ready, sir."

"That's well," returned the gentleman. "Now, don't be in a flutter, ma'am; you'll be taken great care of. Where's the box with the new clothing and necessaries for them?"

"Here it is," said the notary. "In with it, Christopher."

"All right, sir," replied Kit. "Quite ready now, sir."

"Then come along," said the single gentleman. And thereupon he gave his arm to Kit's mother, handed her into the carriage as politely as you please, and took his seat beside her.

Up went the steps, bang went the door, round whirled the wheels, and off they rattled, with Kit's mother hanging out at one window waving a damp pocket-handkerchief, and screaming out a great many messages to little Jacob and the baby, of which nobody heard a word.

Kit stood in the middle of the road, and looked after them with tears in his eyes—not brought there by the departure he witnessed, but by the return to which he looked forward. "They went away," he thought, "on foot, with nobody to speak to them or say a kind word at parting, and they'll come back, drawn by four horses, with this rich gentleman for their friend, and all their troubles over! She'll forget that she taught me to write——"

Whatever Kit thought about after this took some time to think of, for he stood gazing up the lines of shining lamps, long after the chaise had disappeared, and did not return into the house until the notary and Mr. Abel, who had themselves lingered outside till the sound of the wheels was no longer distinguishable, had several times wondered what could possibly detain him.

CHAPTER XLII.

It behoves us to leave Kit for a while, thoughtful and expectant, and to follow the fortunes of little Nell, resuming the thread of the narrative at the point where it was left, some chapters back.

In one of those wanderings in the evening time, when, following the two sisters at a humble distance, she felt, in her sympathy with them and her recognition in their trials of something akin to her own loneliness of spirit, a comfort and consolation which made such moments a time of deep delight, though the softened pleasure they yielded was of that kind which lives and dies in tears—in one of those wanderings at the quiet hour of twilight, when sky, and earth, and air, and rippling water, and sound of distant bells claimed kindred with the emotions of the solitary child, and inspired her with soothing thoughts, but not of a child's world or its easy joys—in one of those rambles which had now become her only pleasure or relief from care, light had faded into darkness and evening deepened into night, and still the young creature lingered in the gloom, feeling a companionship in Nature so serene and still, when noise of tongues and glare of garish lights would have been solitude indeed.

The sisters had gone home, and she was alone. She raised her eyes to the bright stars, looking down so mildly from the wide worlds of air, and gazing on them, found new stars burst upon her view, and more beyond, and more beyond again, until the whole great expanse sparkled with shining spheres, rising higher and higher in immeasurable space, eternal in their numbers as in their changeless and incorruptible existence. She bent over the calm river, and saw them shining in the same majestic order as when the dove beheld them gleaming through the swollen waters, upon the mountain tops down far below, and dead mankind, a million fathoms deep.

The child sat silently beneath a tree, hushed in her very breath by the stillness of the night, and all its attendant wonders. The time and place awoke reflection, and she thought with a quiet hope—less hope, perhaps, than resignation—on the past, and present, and what was yet before her. Between the old man and herself there had come a gradual separation, harder to bear than any former sorrow. Every evening, and often in the day-time too, he was absent, alone; and although she well knew where he went, and why—too well from the constant drain upon her scanty purse and from his haggard looks—he evaded all inquiry, maintained a strict reserve, and even shunned her presence.

She sat meditating sorrowfully upon this change, and mingling it, as it were, with everything about her, when the distant church-clock bell struck nine. Rising at the sound, she retraced her steps, and turned thoughtfully towards the town.

She had gained a little wooden bridge, which, thrown across the stream, led into a meadow in her way, when she came suddenly upon a ruddy light, and looking forward more attentively, discerned that it proceeded from what appeared to be an encampment of gipsies, who had made a fire in one corner at no great distance from the path, and were sitting or lying round it. As she was too poor to have any fear of them, she did not alter her course (which, indeed, she could not have done without going a long way round), but quickened her pace a little, and kept straight on.

A movement of timid curiosity impelled her, when she approached the spot, to glance towards the fire. There was a form between it and her, the outline strongly developed against the light, which caused her to stop abruptly. Then, as if she had reasoned with herself

and were assured that it could not be, or had satisfied herself that it was not that of the person she had supposed, she went on again.

But at that instant the conversation, whatever it was, which had been carrying on near this fire was resumed, and the tones of the voice that spoke—she could not distinguish words—sounded as familiar to her as her own.

She turned and looked back. The person had been seated before, but was now in a standing posture, and leaning forward on a stick on which he rested both hands. The attitude was no less familiar to her than the tone of voice had been. It *was* her grandfather.

Her first impulse was to call to him; her next to wonder who his associates could be, and for what purpose they were together. Some vague apprehension succeeded, and, yielding to the strong inclination it awakened, she drew nearer to the place; not advancing across the open field, however, but creeping towards it by the hedge.

In this way she advanced within a few feet of the fire, and standing among a few young trees, could both see and hear, without much danger of being observed.

There were no women or children, as she had seen in other gipsy camps they had passed in their wayfaring, and but one gipsy—a tall, athletic man, who stood with his arms folded, leaning against a tree at a little distance off, looking now at the fire, and now, under his black eyelashes, at three other men who were there, with a watchful but half-concealed interest in their conversation. Of these, her grandfather was one; the others she recognised as the first card-players at the public-house on the eventful night of the storm—the man whom they had called Isaac List, and his gruff companion. One of the low, arched gipsy-tents common to that people was pitched hard by, but it either was, or appeared to be, empty.

"Well, are you going?" said the stout man, looking up from the ground, where he was lying at his ease, into her grandfather's face. "You were in a mighty hurry a minute ago. Go, if you like. You're your own master, I hope?"

"Don't vex him," returned Isaac List, who was squatting like a frog on the other side of the fire, and had so screwed himself up that he seemed to be squinting all over; "he didn't mean any offence."

"You keep me poor, and plunder me, and make a sport and jest of me besides," said the old man, turning from one to the other. "Ye'll drive me mad among ye."

The utter irresolution and feebleness of the gray-haired child, contrasted with the keen and cunning looks of those in whose hands he was, smote upon the little listener's heart. But she constrained herself to attend to all that passed, and to note each look and word.

"Confound you, what do you mean?" said the stout man, rising a little, and supporting himself on his elbow. "Keep *you* poor! You'd keep us poor if you could, wouldn't you? That's the way with you whining, puny, pitiful players. When you lose, you're martyrs, but I don't find that when you win you look upon the other losers in that light. As to plunder!" cried the fellow, raising his voice—"damme, what do you mean by such ungentlemanly language as plunder, eh?"

The speaker laid himself down again at full length, and gave one or two short, angry kicks, as if in further expression of his unbounded indignation. It was quite plain that he acted the bully, and his friend the peace-maker, for some particular purpose—or rather, it would have been to any one but the weak old man; for they exchanged glances quite openly, both with each other and with the gipsy, who grinned his approval of the jest until his white teeth shone again.

The old man stood helplessly among them for a little time, and then said, turning to his assailant—

"You yourself were speaking of plunder just now, you know. Don't be so violent with me. You were, were you not?"

"Not of plundering among present

company! Honour among — among gentlemen, sir," returned the other, who seemed to have been very near giving an awkward termination to the sentence.

"Don't be hard upon him, Jowl," said Isaac List. "He's very sorry for giving offence. There—go on with what you were saying—go on."

"I'm a jolly, old, tender-hearted lamb, I am," cried Mr. Jowl, "to be sitting here at my time of life, giving advice when I know it won't be taken, and that I shall get nothing but abuse for my pains. But that's the way I've gone through life. Experience has never put a chill upon my warm-heartedness."

"I tell you he's very sorry, don't I?" remonstrated Isaac List, "and that he wishes you'd go on."

"*Does* he wish it?" said the other.

"Ay," groaned the old man, sitting down, and rocking himself to and fro. "Go on, go on. It's in vain to fight with it; I can't do it; go on."

"I go on, then," said Jowl, "where I left off, when you got up so quick. If you're persuaded that it's time for luck to turn, as it certainly is, and find that you haven't means enough to try it (and that's where it is, for you know yourself that you never have the funds to keep on long enough at a sitting), help yourself to what seems put in your way on purpose. Borrow it, I say, and when you're able pay it back again."

"Certainly," Isaac List struck in, "if this good lady as keeps the wax-works has money, and does keep it in a tin box when she goes to bed, and doesn't lock her door for fear of fire, it seems a easy thing; quite a Providence, *I* should call it—but then I've been religiously brought up."

"You see, Isaac," said his friend, growing more eager, and drawing himself closer to the old man, while he signed to the gipsy not to come between them — "you see, Isaac, strangers are going in and out every hour of the day; nothing would be more likely than for one of these strangers to get under the good lady's bed, or lock himself in the cupboard; suspicion would be very wide, and would fall a long way from the mark, no doubt. I'd give him his revenge to the last farthing he brought, whatever the amount was."

"But could you?" urged Isaac List. "Is your bank strong enough?"

"Strong enough!" answered the other, with assumed disdain. "Here, you, sir, give me that box out of the straw!"

This was addressed to the gipsy, who crawled into the low tent on all fours, and after some rummaging and rustling, returned with a cash-box, which the man who had spoken opened with a key he wore about his person.

"Do you see this?" he said, gathering up the money in his hand, and letting it drop back into the box, between his fingers, like water. "Do you hear it? Do you know the sound of gold? There, put it back; and don't talk about banks again, Isaac, till you've got one of your own."

Isaac List, with great apparent humility, protested that he had never doubted the credit of a gentleman so notorious for his honourable dealing as Mr. Jowl, and that he had hinted at the production of the box, not for the satisfaction of his doubts, for he could have none, but with a view to being regaled with a sight of so much wealth, which, though it might be deemed by some but an unsubstantial and visionary pleasure, was to one in his circumstances a source of extreme delight, only to be surpassed by its safe depository in his own personal pockets. Although Mr. List and Mr. Jowl addressed themselves to each other, it was remarkable that they both looked narrowly at the old man, who, with his eyes fixed upon the fire, sat brooding over it, yet listening eagerly — as it seemed from a certain involuntary motion of the head, or twitching of the face from time to time—to all they said.

"My advice," said Jowl, lying down again with a careless air, "is plain —I have given it, in fact. I act as a friend. Why should I help a man to the means perhaps of winning all I have, unless I considered him my friend? It's foolish, I dare say, to be so thoughtful of the welfare of other people, but that's my constitution, and

I can't help it; so don't blame me, Isaac List."

"*I* blame you?" returned the person addressed; "not for the world, Mr. Jowl. I wish I could afford to be as liberal as you; and, as you say, he might pay it back if he won—and, if he lost——"

"You're not to take that into consideration at all," said Jowl. "But suppose he did (and nothing's less likely, from all I know of chances), why, it's better to lose other people's money than one's own, I hope."

"Ah," cried Isaac List rapturously, "the pleasures of winning! The delight of picking up the money—the bright, shining yellow-boys—and sweeping 'em into one's pocket! The deliciousness of having a triumph at last, and thinking that one didn't stop short and turn back, but went half-way to meet it! The—— But you're not going, old gentleman?"

"I'll do it," said the old man, who had risen and taken two or three hurried steps away, and now returned as hurriedly. "I'll have it, every penny."

"Why, that's brave," cried Isaac, jumping up and slapping him on the shoulder; "and I respect you for having so much young blood left. Ha, ha, ha! Joe Jowl's half sorry he advised you now. We've got the laugh against him. Ha, ha, ha!"

"He gives me my revenge, mind," said the old man, pointing to him eagerly with his shrivelled hand; "mind—he stakes coin against coin, down to the last one in the box, be there many or few. Remember that!"

"I'm witness," returned Isaac. "I'll see fair between you."

"I have passed my word," said Jowl, with feigned reluctance, "and I'll keep it. When does this match come off? I wish it was over. To-night?"

"I must have the money first," said the old man; "and that I'll have to-morrow——"

"Why not to-night?" urged Jowl.

"It's late now, and I should be flushed and flurried," said the old man. "It must be softly done. No, to-morrow night."

"Then to-morrow be it," said Jowl. "A drop of comfort here. Luck to the best man! Fill!"

The gipsy produced three tin cups, and filled them to the brim with brandy. The old man turned aside, and muttered to himself before he drank. Her own name struck upon the listener's ear, coupled with some wish so fervent, that he seemed to breathe it in an agony of supplication.

"God be merciful to us!" cried the child within herself, "and help us in this trying hour! What shall I do to save him?"

The remainder of their conversation was carried on in a lower tone of voice, and was sufficiently concise; relating merely to the execution of the project, and the best precautions for diverting suspicion. The old man then shook hands with his tempters, and withdrew.

They watched his bowed and stooping figure as it retreated slowly, and when he turned his head to look back, which he often did, waved their hands, or shouted some brief encouragement. It was not until they had seen him gradually diminish into a mere speck upon the distant road, that they turned to each other, and ventured to laugh aloud.

"So," said Jowl, warming his hands at the fire, "it's done at last. He wanted more persuading than I expected. It's three weeks ago since we first put this in his head. What'll he bring, do you think?"

"Whatever he brings, it's halved between us," returned Isaac List.

The other man nodded. "We must make quick work of it," he said, "and then cut his acquaintance, or we may be suspected. Sharp's the word."

List and the gipsy acquiesced. When they had all three amused themselves a little with their victim's infatuation, they dismissed the subject as one which had been sufficiently discussed, and began to talk in a jargon which the child did not understand. As their discourse appeared to relate to matters in which they were warmly interested, however, she deemed it the best time for escaping unobserved; and crept away with slow and cautious steps, keeping in the shadow of the hedges, or forcing a path through them or the dry ditches, until

she could emerge upon the road at a point beyond their range of vision. Then she fled homeward as quickly as she could, torn and bleeding from the wounds of thorns and briars, but more lacerated in mind, and threw herself upon her bed distracted.

The first idea that flashed upon her mind was flight, instant flight—dragging him from that place, and rather dying of want upon the roadside, than ever exposing him again to such terrible temptations. Then she remembered that the crime was not to be committed until next night, and there was the intermediate time for thinking and resolving what to do. Then she was distracted with a horrible fear that he might be committing it at that moment; with a dread of hearing shrieks and cries piercing the silence of the night; with fearful thoughts of what he might be tempted and led on to do, if he were detected in the act, and had but a woman to struggle with. It was impossible to bear such torture. She stole to the room where the money was, opened the door, and looked in. God be praised! He was not there, and she was sleeping soundly.

She went back to her own room, and tried to prepare herself for bed. But who could sleep—sleep! who could lie passively down, distracted by such terrors? They came upon her more and more strongly yet. Half undressed, and with her hair in wild disorder, she flew to the old man's bedside, clasped him by the wrist, and roused him from his sleep.

"What's this?" he cried, starting up in bed, and fixing his eyes upon her spectral face.

"I have had a dreadful dream," said the child, with an energy that nothing but such terrors could have inspired. "A dreadful, horrible dream. I have had it once before. It is a dream of gray-haired men like you, in darkened rooms by night, robbing sleepers of their gold. Up, up!" The old man shook in every joint, and folded his hands like one who prays.

"Not to me," said the child, "not to me—to Heaven, to save us from such deeds! This dream is too real. I cannot sleep—I cannot stay here—I cannot leave you alone under the roof where such dreams come. Up! We must fly."

He looked at her as if she were a spirit—she might have been for all the look of earth she had—and trembled more and more.

"There is no time to lose; I will not lose one minute," said the child. "Up! and away with me!"

"To-night?" murmured the old man.

"Yes, to-night," replied the child. "To-morrow night will be too late. The dream will have come again. Nothing but flight can save us. Up!"

The old man rose from his bed, his forehead bedewed with the cold sweat of fear, and, bending before the child, as if she had been an angel messenger sent to lead him where she would, made ready to follow her. She took him by the hand and led him on. As they passed the door of the room he had proposed to rob, she shuddered and looked up into his face. What a white face was that, and with what a look did he meet hers!

She took him to her own chamber, and, still holding him by the hand as if she feared to lose him for an instant, gathered together the little stock she had, and hung her basket on her arm. The old man took his wallet from her hands and strapped it on his shoulders—his staff, too, she had brought away—and then she led him forth.

Through the strait streets, and narrow, crooked out-skirts, their trembling feet passed quickly. Up the steep hill, too, crowned by the old gray castle, they toiled with rapid steps, and had not once looked behind.

But as they drew nearer the ruined walls, the moon rose in all her gentle glory, and, from their venerable age, garlanded with ivy, moss, and waving grass, the child looked back upon the sleeping town, deep in the valley's shade; and on the far-off river, with its winding track of light; and on the distant hills; and as she did so, she clasped the hand she held less firmly, and bursting into tears, fell upon the old man's neck.

CHAPTER XLIII.

HER momentary weakness past, the child again summoned the resolution which had until now sustained her, and, endeavouring to keep steadily in her view the one idea that they were flying from disgrace and crime, and that her grandfather's preservation must depend solely on her firmness, unaided by one word of advice or any helping hand, urged him onward, and looked back no more.

While he, subdued and abashed, seemed to crouch before her, and to shrink and cower down, as if in the presence of some superior creature, the child herself was sensible of a new feeling within her, which elevated her nature, and inspired her with an energy and confidence she had never known. There was no divided responsibility now; the whole burden of their two lives had fallen upon her, and henceforth she must think and act for both. "I have saved him," she thought. "In all dangers and distresses I will remember that."

At any other time, the recollection of having deserted the friend who had shown them so much homely kindness, without a word of justification—the thought that they were guilty, in appearance, of treachery and ingratitude, even the having parted from the two sisters—would have filled her with sorrow and regret. But now, all other considerations were lost in the new uncertainties and anxieties of their wild and wandering life; and the very desperation of their condition roused and stimulated her.

In the pale moonlight, which lent a wanness of its own to the delicate face where thoughtful care already mingled with the winning grace and loveliness of youth, the too bright eye, the spiritual head, the lips that pressed each other with such high resolve and courage of the heart, the slight figure, firm in its bearing, and yet so very weak, told their silent tale; but told it only to the wind that rustled by, which, taking up its burden, carried, perhaps to some mother's pillow, faint dreams of childhood fading in its bloom, and resting in the sleep that knows no waking.

The night crept on apace, the moon went down, the stars grew pale and dim, and morning, cold as they, slowly approached. Then, from behind a distant hill, the noble sun rose up, driving the mists in phantom shapes before it, and clearing the earth of their ghostly forms till darkness came again. When it had climbed higher into the sky, and there was warmth in its cheerful beams, they laid them down to sleep upon a bank, hard by some water.

But Nell retained her grasp upon the old man's arm, and long after he was slumbering soundly, watched him with untiring eyes. Fatigue stole over her at last; her grasp relaxed, tightened, relaxed again, and they slept side by side.

A confused sound of voices, mingling with her dreams, awoke her. A man of very uncouth and rough appearance was standing over them, and two of his companions were looking on, from a long, heavy boat, which had come close to the bank while they were sleeping. The boat had neither oar nor sail, but was towed by a couple of horses, who, with the rope to which they were harnessed slack and dripping in the water, were resting on the path.

"Hollo!" said the man roughly. "What's the matter here?"

"We were only asleep, sir," said Nell. "We have been walking all night."

"A pair of queer travellers to be walking all night," observed the man who had first accosted them. "One of you is a trifle too old for that sort of work, and the other a trifle too young. Where are you going?"

Nell faltered, and pointed at hazard towards the west, upon which the man inquired if she meant a certain town which he named. Nell, to avoid more questioning, said, "Yes, that was the place."

"Where have you come from?" was the next question; and this being an easier one to answer, Nell mentioned the name of the village in which their friend the schoolmaster dwelled, as being less likely to be known to the men or to provoke further inquiry.

"I thought somebody had been robbing and ill-using you, might be," said the man. "That's all. Good-day."

Returning his salute and feeling greatly relieved by his departure, Nell looked after him as he mounted one of the horses, and the boat went on. It had not gone on very far when it stopped again, and she saw the men beckoning to her.

"Did you call to me?" said Nell, running up to them.

"You may go with us if you like," replied one of those in the boat. "We're going to the same place."

The child hesitated for a moment. Thinking, as she had thought with great trepidation more than once before, that the men whom she had seen with her grandfather might, perhaps, in their eagerness for the booty, follow them, and, regaining their influence over him, set hers at naught, and that if they went with these men, all traces of them must surely be lost at that spot, she determined to accept the offer. The boat came close to the bank again, and before she had had any more time for consideration, she and her grandfather were on board, and gliding smoothly down the canal.

The sun shone pleasantly on the bright water, which was sometimes shaded by trees, and sometimes open to a wide extent of country, intersected by running streams, and rich with wooded hills, cultivated land, and sheltered farms. Now and then a village, with its modest spire, thatched roofs, and gable-ends, would peep out from among the trees; and, more than once, a distant town, with great church towers looming through its smoke, and high factories or workshops, rising above the mass of houses, would come in view, and, by the length of time it lingered in the distance, show them how slowly they travelled. Their way lay, for the most part, through the low grounds and open plains; and except these distant places, and occasionally some men working in the fields, or lounging on the bridges under which they passed, to see them creep along, nothing encroached on their monotonous and secluded track.

Nell was rather disheartened, when they stopped at a kind of wharf late in the afternoon, to learn from one of the men that they would not reach their place of destination until next day, and that, if she had no provision with her, she had better buy it there. She had but a few pence, having already bargained with them for some bread; but even of these it was necessary to be very careful, as they were on their way to an utterly strange place, with no resource whatever. A small loaf and a morsel of cheese, therefore, were all she could afford, and with these she took her place in the boat again, and, after half an hour's delay, during which the men were drinking at the public-house, proceeded on the journey.

They brought some beer and spirits into the boat with them, and what with drinking freely before, and again now, were soon in a fair way of being quarrelsome and intoxicated. Avoiding the small cabin, therefore, which was very dark and filthy, and to which they often invited both her and her grandfather, Nell sat in the open air with the old man by her side, listening to their boisterous hosts with a palpitating heart, and almost wishing herself safe on shore again, though she should have to walk all night.

They were, in truth, very rugged, noisy fellows, and quite brutal among themselves, though civil enough to their two passengers. Thus, when a quarrel arose between the man who was steering and his friend in the cabin, upon the question who had first suggested the propriety of offering Nell some beer, and when the quarrel led to a scuffle in which they beat each other fearfully, to her inexpressible terror, neither visited his displeasure upon her, but each contented himself with venting it on his adversary, on whom, in addition to blows, he bestowed a variety of compliments, which, happily for the child, were conveyed in terms to her quite unintelligible. The difference was finally adjusted by the man who had come out of the cabin knocking the other into it head first, and taking the helm into his own hands, without evincing the least discomposure himself, or causing any in his friend, who, being of a tolerably strong constitution and perfectly inured to such trifles, went to sleep as he was, with

his heels upwards, and in a couple of minutes or so was snoring comfortably.

By this time it was night again, and though the child felt cold, being but poorly clad, her anxious thoughts were far removed from her own suffering or uneasiness, and busily engaged in endeavouring to devise some scheme for their joint subsistence. The same spirit which had supported her on the previous night upheld and sustained her now. Her grandfather lay sleeping safely at her side, and the crime to which his madness urged him was not committed. That was her comfort.

How every circumstance of her short, eventful life came thronging into her mind as they travelled on! Slight incidents, never thought of or remembered until now; faces, seen once and ever since forgotten; words, scarcely heeded at the time; scenes, of a year ago and those of yesterday, mixing up and linking themselves together; familiar places shaping themselves out in the darkness from things which, when approached, were, of all others, the most remote and most unlike them; sometimes, a strange confusion in her mind relative to the occasion of her being there, and the place to which she was going, and the people she was with; and imagination suggesting remarks and questions which sounded so plainly in her ears, that she would start, and turn, and be almost tempted to reply; all the fancies and contradictions common in watching and excitement, and restless change of place, beset the child.

She happened, while she was thus engaged, to encounter the face of the man on deck, in whom the sentimental stage of drunkenness had now succeeded to the boisterous, and who, taking from his mouth a short pipe, quilted over with string for its longer preservation, requested that she would oblige him with a song.

"You've got a very pretty voice, a very soft eye, and a very strong memory," said this gentleman; "the voice and eye I've got evidence for, and the memory's an opinion of my own. And I'm never wrong. Let me hear a song this minute."

"I don't think I know one, sir," returned Nell.

"You know forty-seven songs," said the man, with a gravity which admitted of no altercation on the subject. "Forty-seven's your number. Let me hear one of 'em—the best. Give me a song this minute."

Not knowing what might be the consequences of irritating her friend, and trembling with the fear of doing so, poor Nell sang him some little ditty which she learned in happier times, and which was so agreeable to his ear, that on its conclusion he in the same peremptory manner requested to be favoured with another, to which he was so obliging as to roar a chorus, to no particular tune, and with no words at all, but which amply made up in its amazing energy for its deficiency in other respects. The noise of this vocal performance awakened the other man, who, staggering upon deck and shaking his late opponent by the hand, swore that singing was his pride, and joy, and chief delight, and that he desired no better entertainment. With a third call, more imperative than either of the two former, Nell felt obliged to comply, and this time a chorus was maintained not only by the two men together, but also by the third man on horseback, who being by his position debarred from a nearer participation in the revels of the night, roared when his companions roared, and rent the very air. In this way, with little cessation, and singing the same songs again and again, the tired and exhausted child kept them in good-humour all that night; and many a cottager, who was roused from his soundest sleep by the discordant chorus as it floated away upon the wind, hid his head beneath the bedclothes, and trembled at the sounds.

At length the morning dawned. It was no sooner light than it began to rain heavily. As the child could not endure the intolerable vapours of the cabin, they covered her, in return for her exertions, with some pieces of sailcloth and ends of tarpaulin, which sufficed to keep her tolerably dry, and to shelter her grandfather besides. As the day advanced the rain increased. At noon, it poured down more hopelessly and heavily than ever, without the faintest promise of abatement.

They had, for some time, been gradually approaching the place for which they were bound. The water had become thicker and dirtier; other barges, coming from it, passed them frequently; the paths of coal-ash and huts of staring brick marked the vicinity of some great manufacturing town; while scattered streets and houses, and smoke from distant furnaces, indicated that they were already in the outskirts. Now, the clustered roofs and piles of buildings trembling with the working of engines, and dimly resounding with their shrieks and throbbings; the tall chimneys vomiting forth a black vapour, which hung in a dense, ill-favoured cloud above the house-tops, and filled the air with gloom; the clank of hammers beating upon iron, the roar of busy streets and noisy crowds, gradually augmenting until all the various sounds blended into one, and none was distinguishable for itself, announced the termination of their journey.

The boat floated into the wharf to which it belonged. The men were occupied directly. The child and her grandfather, after waiting in vain to thank them, or ask them whither they should go, passed through a dirty lane into a crowded street, and stood, amid its din and tumult, and in the pouring rain, as strange, bewildered, and confused as if they had lived a thousand years before, and were raised from the dead and placed there by a miracle.

CHAPTER XLIV.

The throng of people hurried by, in two opposite streams, with no symptom of cessation or exhaustion, intent upon their own affairs, and undisturbed in their business speculations by the roar of carts and wagons laden with clashing wares, the slipping of horses' feet upon the wet and greasy pavement, the rattling of the rain on windows and umbrella-tops, the jostling of the more impatient passengers, and all the noise and tumult of a crowded street in the high tide of its occupation; while the two poor strangers, stunned and bewildered by the hurry they beheld but had no part in, looked mournfully on, feeling, amidst the crowd, a solitude which has no parallel but in the thirst of the shipwrecked mariner, who, tossed to and fro upon the billows of a mighty ocean, his red eyes blinded by looking on the water which hems him in on every side, has not one drop to cool his burning tongue.

They withdrew into a low archway for shelter from the rain, and watched the faces of those who passed, to find in one among them a ray of encouragement or hope. Some frowned, some smiled, some muttered to themselves, some made slight gestures, as if anticipating the conversation in which they would shortly be engaged, some wore the cunning look of bargaining and plotting, some were anxious and eager, some slow and dull; in some countenances were written gain, in others loss. It was like being in the confidence of all these people to stand quietly there, looking into their faces as they flitted past. In busy places, where each man has an object of his own, and feels assured that every other man has his, his character and purpose are written broadly in his face. In the public walks and lounges of a town, people go to see and to be seen, and there the same expression, with little variety, is repeated a hundred times. The working-day faces come nearer to the truth, and let it out more plainly.

Falling into that kind of abstraction which such a solitude awakens, the child continued to gaze upon the passing crowd with a wondering interest, amounting almost to a temporary forgetfulness of her own condition. But cold, wet, hunger, want of rest, and lack of any place in which to lay her aching head, soon brought her thoughts back to the point whence they had strayed. No one passed who seemed to notice them, or to whom she durst appeal. After some time they left their place of refuge from the weather, and mingled with the concourse.

Evening came on. They were still wandering up and down, with fewer people about them, but with the same sense of solitude in their own breasts, and the same indifference from all

around. The lights in the streets and shops made them feel yet more desolate, for with their help, night and darkness seemed to come on faster. Shivering with the cold and damp, ill in body, and sick to death at heart, the child needed her utmost firmness and resolution even to creep along.

Why had they ever come to this noisy town, when there were peaceful country places, in which, at least, they might have hungered and thirsted with less suffering than in its squalid strife? They were but an atom here, in a mountain heap of misery, the very sight of which increased their hopelessness and misery.

The child had not only to endure the accumulated hardships of their destitute condition, but to bear the reproaches of her grandfather, who began to murmur at having been led away from their late abode, and demand that they should return to it. Being now penniless, and no relief or prospect of relief appearing, they retraced their steps through the deserted streets, and went back to the wharf, hoping to find the boat in which they had come, and to be allowed to sleep on board that night. But here again they were disappointed, for the gate was closed, and some fierce dogs, barking at their approach, obliged them to retreat.

"We must sleep in the open air to-night, dear," said the child, in a weak voice, as they turned away from this last repulse; "and to-morrow we will beg our way to some quiet part of the country, and try to earn our bread in very humble work."

"Why did you bring me here?" returned the old man fiercely. "I cannot bear these close, eternal streets. We came from a quiet part. Why did you force me to leave it?"

"Because I must have that dream I told you of no more," said the child, with a momentary firmness that lost itself in tears; "and we must live among poor people, or it will come again. Dear grandfather, you are old and weak, I know; but look at me. I never will complain if you will not, but I have some suffering, indeed."

"Ah, poor, houseless, wandering, motherless child!" cried the old man, clasping his hands, and gazing as if for the first time upon her anxious face, her travel-stained dress, and bruised and swollen feet; "has all my agony of care brought her to this at last? Was I a happy man once, and have I lost happiness and all I had for this?"

"If we were in the country now," said the child, with assumed cheerfulness, as they walked on, looking about them for a shelter, "we should find some good old tree, stretching out his green arms as if he loved us, and nodding and rustling as if he would have us fall asleep, thinking of him while he watched. Please God, we shall be there soon — to-morrow or next day at the furthest—and in the meantime let us think, dear, that it was a good thing we came here; for we are lost in the crowd and hurry of this place, and if any cruel people should pursue us, they could surely never trace us farther. There's comfort in that. And here's a deep old doorway —very dark, but quite dry, and warm too, for the wind don't blow in here.— What's that?"

Uttering a half shriek, she recoiled from a black figure which came suddenly out of the dark recess in which they were about to take refuge, and stood still, looking at them.

"Speak again," it said; "do I know that voice?"

"No," replied the child timidly; "we are strangers, and having no money for a night's lodging, were going to rest here."

There was a feeble lamp at no great distance; the only one in the place, which was a kind of square yard, but sufficient to show how poor and mean it was. To this the figure beckoned them; at the same time drawing within its rays, as if to show that it had no desire to conceal itself, or take them at an advantage.

The form was that of a man, miserably clad and begrimed with smoke, which, perhaps by its contrast with the natural colour of his skin, made him look paler than he really was. That he was naturally of a very wan and pallid aspect, however, his hollow cheeks, sharp features, and sunken eyes, no

less than a certain look of patient endurance, sufficiently testified. His voice was harsh by nature, but not brutal; and though his face, besides possessing the characteristics already mentioned, was overshadowed by a quantity of long, dark hair, its expression was neither ferocious nor bad.

"How came you to think of resting here?" he said. "Or how," he added, looking more attentively at the child, "do you come to want a place of rest at this time of night?"

"Our misfortunes," the grandfather answered, "are the cause."

"Do you know," said the man, looking still more earnestly at Nell, "how wet she is, and that the damp streets are not a place for her?"

"I know it well, God help me," he replied. "What can I do?"

The man looked at Nell again, and gently touched her garments, from which the rain was running off in little streams. "I can give you warmth," he said, after a pause; "nothing else. Such lodging as I have is in that house," pointing to the doorway from which he had emerged, "but she is safer and better there than here. The fire is in a rough place, but you can pass the night beside it safely, if you'll trust yourselves to me. You see that red light yonder?"

They raised their eyes, and saw a lurid glare hanging in the dark sky—the dull reflection of some distant fire.

"It's not far," said the man. "Shall I take you there? You were going to sleep upon cold bricks; I can give you a bed of warm ashes—nothing better."

Without waiting for any further reply than he saw in their looks, he took Nell in his arms, and bade the old man follow.

Carrying her as tenderly, and as easily too, as if she had been an infant, and showing himself both swift and sure of foot, he led the way through what appeared to be the poorest and most wretched quarter of the town; not turning aside to avoid the overflowing kennels or running waterspouts, but holding his course, regardless of such obstructions, and making his way straight through them. They had proceeded thus, in silence, for some quarter of an hour, and had lost sight of the glare to which he had pointed, in the dark and narrow ways by which they had come, when it suddenly burst upon them again, streaming up from the high chimney of a building close before them.

"This is the place," he said, pausing at a door to put Nell down and take her hand. "Don't be afraid. There's nobody here will harm you."

It needed a strong confidence in this assurance to induce them to enter, and what they saw inside did not diminish their apprehension and alarm. In a large and lofty building, supported by pillars of iron, with great black apertures in the upper walls, open to the external air—echoing to the roof with the beating of hammers and roar of furnaces, mingled with the hissing of red-hot metal plunged in water, and a hundred strange, unearthly noises never heard elsewhere—in this gloomy place, moving like demons among the flame and smoke, dimly and fitfully seen, flushed and tormented by the burning fires, and wielding great weapons, a faulty blow from any one of which must have crushed some workman's skull, a number of men laboured like giants. Others, reposing upon heaps of coal and ashes, with their faces turned to the black vault above, slept or rested from their toil. Others again, opening the white-hot furnace doors, cast fuel on the flames, which came rushing and roaring forth to meet it, and licked it up like oil. Others drew forth, with clashing noise, upon the ground, great sheets of glowing steel, emitting an insupportable heat, and a dull, deep light like that which reddens in the eyes of savage beasts.

Through these bewildering sights and deafening sounds their conductor led them to where, in a dark portion of the building, one furnace burned by night and day—so, at least, they gathered from the motion of his lips, for as yet they could only see him speak, not hear him. The man who had been watching this fire, and whose task was ended for the present, gladly withdrew, and left them with their friend, who, spreading Nell's little cloak

upon a heap of ashes, and showing her where she could hang her outer clothes to dry, signed to her and the old man to lie down and sleep. For himself, he took his station on a rugged mat before the furnace door, and resting his chin upon his hands, watched the flame as it shone through the iron chinks, and the white ashes as they fell into their bright hot grave below.

The warmth of her bed, hard and humble as it was, combined with the great fatigue she had undergone, soon caused the tumult of the place to fall with a gentler sound upon the child's tired ears, and was not long in lulling her to sleep. The old man was stretched beside her, and with her hand upon his neck she lay and dreamed.

It was yet night when she awoke, nor did she know how long, or for how short a time, she had slept. But she found herself protected, both from any cold air that might find its way into the building, and from the scorching heat, by some of the workmen's clothes; and glancing at their friend saw that he sat in exactly the same attitude, looking with a fixed earnestness of attention towards the fire, and keeping so very still that he did not even seem to breathe. She lay in the state between sleeping and waking, looking so long at his motionless figure that at length she almost feared he had died as he sat there; and, softly rising and drawing close to him, ventured to whisper in his ear.

He moved, and glancing from her to the place she had lately occupied, as if to assure himself that it was really the child so near him, looked inquiringly into her face.

"I feared you were ill," she said. "The other men are all in motion, and you are so very quiet."

"They leave me to myself," he replied. "They know my humour. They laugh at me, but don't harm me in it. See yonder there—that's *my* friend."

"The fire?" said the child.

"It has been alive as long as I have," the man made answer. "We talk and think together all night long."

The child glanced quickly at him in her surprise; but he had turned his eyes in their former direction, and was musing as before.

"It's like a book to me," he said—"the only book I ever learned to read; and many an old story it tells me. It's music, for I should know its voice among a thousand, and there are other voices in its roar. It has its pictures too. You don't know how many strange faces and different scenes I trace in the red-hot coals. It's my memory, that fire, and shows me all my life."

The child, bending down to listen to his words, could not help remarking with what brightened eyes he continued to speak and muse.

"Yes," he said, with a faint smile, "it was the same when I was quite a baby, and crawled about it, till I fell asleep. My father watched it then."

"Had you no mother?" asked the child.

"No, she was dead. Women work hard in these parts. She worked herself to death, they told me, and, as they said so then, the fire has gone on saying the same thing ever since. I suppose it was true. I have always believed it."

"Were you brought up here, then?" said the child.

"Summer and winter," he replied. "Secretly at first, but when they found it out, they let him keep me here. So the fire nursed me—the same fire. It has never gone out."

"You are fond of it?" said the child.

"Of course I am. He died before it. I saw him fall down—just there, where those ashes are burning now—and wondered, I remember, why I didn't help him."

"Have you been here ever since?" asked the child.

"Ever since I came to watch it; but there was a while between, and a very cold, dreary while it was. It burned all the time though, and roared and leaped when I came back, as it used to do in our play-days. You may guess, from looking at me, what kind of child I was; but for all the difference between us I *was* a child, and when I saw you in the street to-night, you put me in mind of myself as I was after he died, and made me wish to bring you

to the fire. I thought of those old times again, when I saw you sleeping by it. You should be sleeping now. Lie down again, poor child, lie down again!"

With that, he led her to her rude couch, and covering her with the clothes with which she had found herself enveloped when she woke, returned to his seat, whence he moved no more unless to feed the furnace, but remained motionless as a statue. The child continued to watch him for a little time, but soon yielded to the drowsiness that came upon her, and, in the dark strange place and on the heap of ashes, slept as peacefully as if the room had been a palace chamber, and the bed a bed of down.

When she awoke again, broad day was shining through the lofty openings in the walls, and, stealing in slanting rays but midway down, seemed to make the building darker than it had been at night. The clang and tumult was still going on, and the remorseless fires were burning fiercely as before; for few changes of night and day brought rest or quiet there.

Her friend parted his breakfast—a scanty mess of coffee and some coarse bread—with the child and her grandfather, and inquired whither they were going. She told him that they sought some distant country place, remote from towns or even other villages, and with faltering tongue inquired what road they would do best to take.

"I know little of the country," he said, shaking his head, "for such as I pass all our lives before our furnace doors, and seldom go forth to breathe. But there *are* such places yonder."

"And far from here?" said Nell.

"Ay, surely. How could they be near us, and be green and fresh? The road lies, too, through miles and miles, all lighted up by fires like ours—a strange, black road, and one that would frighten you by night."

"We are here and must go on," said the child boldly, for she saw that the old man listened with anxious ears to this account.

"Rough people—paths never made for little feet like yours—a dismal, blighted way—is there no turning back, my child?"

"There is none," cried Nell, pressing forward. "If you can direct us, do. If not, pray do not seek to turn us from our purpose. Indeed you do not know the danger that we shun, and how right and true we are in flying from it, or you would not try to stop us—I am sure you would not."

"God forbid, if it is so!" said their uncouth protector, glancing from the eager child to her grandfather, who hung his head and bent his eyes upon the ground. "I'll direct you from the door, the best I can. I wish I could do more."

He showed them, then, by which road they must leave the town, and what course they should hold when they had gained it. He lingered so long on these instructions, that the child, with a fervent blessing, tore herself away, and stayed to hear no more.

But before they had reached the corner of the lane the man came running after them, and, pressing her hand, left something in it—two old, battered, smoke-incrusted penny-pieces. Who knows but they shone as brightly in the eyes of angels as golden gifts that have been chronicled on tombs?

And thus they separated: the child to lead her sacred charge farther from guilt and shame; the labourer to attach a fresh interest to the spot where his guests had slept, and read new histories in his furnace fire.

CHAPTER XLV.

In all their journeying they had never longed so ardently, they had never so pined and wearied for the freedom of pure air and open country, as now. No, not even on that memorable morning, when, deserting their old home, they abandoned themselves to the mercies of a strange world, and left all the dumb and senseless things they had known and loved behind—not even then had they so yearned for the fresh solitudes of wood, hillside, and field, as now, when the noise, and dirt, and vapour of the great manufacturing town, reeking with lean misery and hungry wretchedness,

hemmed them in on every side, and seemed to shut out hope, and render escape impossible.

"Two days and nights!" thought the child. "He said two days and nights we should have to spend among such scenes as these. Oh, if we live to reach the country once again, if we get clear of these dreadful places, though it is only to lie down and die, with what a grateful heart I shall thank God for so much mercy!"

With thoughts like this, and with some vague design of travelling to a great distance among streams and mountains, where only very poor and simple people lived, and where they might maintain themselves by very humble helping work in farms, free from such terrors as that from which they fled—the child, with no resource but the poor man's gift, and no encouragement but that which flowed from her own heart, and its sense of the truth and right of what she did, nerved herself to this last journey, and boldly pursued her task.

"We shall be very slow to-day, dear," she said, as they toiled painfully through the streets; "my feet are so sore, and I have pains in all my limbs from the wet of yesterday. I saw that he looked at us and thought of that, when he said how long we should be upon the road."

"It was a dreary way he told us of," returned her grandfather piteously. "Is there no other road? Will you not let me go some other way than this?"

"Places lie beyond these," said the child firmly, "where we may live in peace, and be tempted to do no harm. We will take the road that promises to have that end, and we would not turn out of it if it were a hundred times worse than our fears lead us to expect. We would not, dear, would we?"

"No," replied the old man, wavering in his voice, no less than in his manner. "No. Let us go on. I am ready. I am quite ready, Nell."

The child walked with more difficulty than she had led her companion to expect, for the pains that racked her joints were of no common severity, and every exertion increased them. But they wrung from her no complaint or look of suffering; and, though the two travellers proceeded very slowly, they did proceed. Clearing the town in course of time, they began to feel that they were fairly on their way.

A long suburb of red brick houses—some with patches of garden-ground, where the coal-dust and factory smoke darkened the shrinking leaves and coarse, rank flowers, and where the struggling vegetation sickened and sank under the hot breath of kiln and furnace, making them by its presence seem yet more blighting and unwholesome than in the town itself—a long, flat, straggling suburb passed, they came, by slow degrees, upon a cheerless region, where not a blade of grass was seen to grow, where not a bud put forth its promise in the spring, where nothing green could live but on the surface of the stagnant pools, which here and there lay idly sweltering by the black roadside.

Advancing more and more into the shadow of this mournful place, its dark, depressing influence stole upon their spirits, and filled them with a dismal gloom. On every side, and far as the eye could see into the heavy distance, tall chimneys, crowding on each other, and presenting that endless repetition of the same dull, ugly form which is the horror of oppressive dreams, poured out their plague of smoke, obscured the light, and made foul the melancholy air. On mounds of ashes by the wayside, sheltered only by a few rough boards, or rotten pent-house roofs, strange engines spun and writhed like tortured creatures, clanking their iron chains, shrieking in their rapid whirl from time to time as though in torment unendurable, and making the ground tremble with their agonies. Dismantled houses here and there appeared, tottering to the earth, propped up by fragments of others that had fallen down, unroofed, windowless, blackened, desolate, but yet inhabited. Men, women, children, wan in their looks and ragged in attire, tended the engines, fed their tributary fires, begged upon the road, or scowled half-naked from the doorless houses.

Then came more of the wrathful monsters, whose like they almost seemed to be in their wildness and their untamed air, screeching and turning round and round again; and still, before, behind, and to the right and left, was the same interminable perspective of brick towers, never ceasing in their black vomit, blasting all things living or inanimate, shutting out the face of day, and closing in on all these horrors with a dense dark cloud.

But night-time in this dreadful spot! —night, when the smoke was changed to fire, when every chimney spirted up its flame; and places, that had been dark vaults all day, now shone red-hot, with figures moving to and fro within their blazing jaws, and calling to one another with hoarse cries—night, when the noise of every strange machine was aggravated by the darkness; when the people near them looked wilder and more savage; when bands of unemployed labourers paraded the roads, or clustered by torch-light round their leaders, who told them, in stern language, of their wrongs, and urged them on to frightful cries and threats; when maddened men, armed with sword and fire-brand, spurning the tears and prayers of women who would restrain them, rushed forth on errands of terror and destruction, to work no ruin half so surely as their own—night, when carts came rumbling by, filled with rude coffins (for contagious disease and death had been busy with the living crops); when orphans cried, and distracted women shrieked and followed in their wake—night, when some called for bread, and some for drink to drown their cares, and some with tears and some with staggering feet, and some with bloodshot eyes, went brooding home—night, which, unlike the night that Heaven sends on earth, brought with it no peace, nor quiet, nor signs of blessed sleep—who shall tell the terrors of the night to the young wandering child!

And yet she lay down, with nothing between her and the sky, and, with no fear for herself, for she was past it now, put up a prayer for the poor old man. So very weak and spent, she felt so very calm and unresisting, that she had no thought of any wants of her own, but prayed that God would raise up some friend for *him*. She tried to recall the way they had come, and to look in the direction where the fire by which they had slept last night was burning. She had forgotten to ask the name of the poor man, their friend, and, when she had remembered him in her prayers, it seemed ungrateful not to turn one look towards the spot where he was watching.

A penny loaf was all they had had that day. It was very little; but even hunger was forgotten in the strange tranquillity that crept over her senses. She lay down, very gently, and, with a quiet smile upon her face, fell into a slumber. It was not like sleep—and yet it must have been, or why those pleasant dreams of the little scholar all night long?

Morning came. Much weaker, diminished powers even of sight and hearing, and yet the child made no complaint—perhaps would have made none, even if she had not had that inducement to be silent travelling by her side. She felt a hopelessness of their ever being extricated together from that forlorn place—a dull conviction that she was very ill, perhaps dying—but no fear or anxiety.

A loathing of food, that she was not conscious of until they expended their last penny in the purchase of another loaf, prevented her partaking even of this poor repast. Her grandfather ate greedily, which she was glad to see.

Their way lay through the same scenes as yesterday, with no variety or improvement. There was the same thick air, difficult to breathe, the same blighted ground, the same hopeless prospect, the same misery and distress. Objects appeared more dim, the noise less, the path more rugged and uneven, for sometimes she stumbled, and became roused, as it were, in the effort to prevent herself from falling. Poor child! the cause was in her tottering feet.

Towards the afternoon her grandfather complained bitterly of hunger. She approached one of the wretched hovels by the wayside, and knocked with her hand upon the door.

"What would you have here?" said a gaunt man, opening it.

"Charity. A morsel of bread."

"Do you see that?" returned the man hoarsely, pointing to a kind of bundle on the ground. "That's a dead child. I and five hundred other men were thrown out of work three months ago. That is my third dead child, and last. Do you think *I* have charity to bestow, or a morsel of bread to spare?"

The child recoiled from the door, and it closed upon her. Impelled by strong necessity, she knocked at another, a neighbouring one, which, yielding to the slight pressure of her hand, flew open.

It seemed that a couple of poor families lived in this hovel, for two women, each among children of her own, occupied different portions of the room. In the centre stood a grave gentleman in black, who appeared to have just entered, and who held by the arm a boy.

"Here, woman," he said, "here's your deaf and dumb son. You may thank me for restoring him to you. He was brought before me this morning, charged with theft; and with any other boy it would have gone hard, I assure you. But, as I had compassion on his infirmities, and thought he might have learned no better, I have managed to bring him back to you. Take more care of him for the future."

"And won't you give me back *my* son?" said the other woman, hastily rising and confronting him. "Won't you give me back *my* son, sir, who was transported for the same offence?"

"Was *he* deaf and dumb, woman?" asked the gentleman sternly.

"Was he not, sir?"

"You know he was not."

"He was," cried the woman. "He was deaf, dumb, and blind to all that was good and right, from his cradle. Her boy may have learned no better! where did mine learn better? where could he? who was there to teach him better, or where was it to be learned?"

"Peace, woman," said the gentleman; "your boy was in possession of all his senses."

"He was," cried the mother; "and he was the more easy to be led astray because he had them. If you save this boy because he may not know right from wrong, why did you not save mine, who was never taught the difference? You gentlemen have as good a right to punish her boy, that God has kept in ignorance of sound and speech, as you have to punish mine, that you kept in ignorance yourselves. How many of the girls and boys—ah, men and women too—that are brought before you and you don't pity, are deaf and dumb in their minds, and go wrong in that state, and are punished in that state, body and soul, while you gentlemen are quarrelling among yourselves whether they ought to learn this or that? Be a just man, sir, and give me back my son."

"You are desperate," said the gentleman, taking out his snuff-box, "and I am sorry for you."

"I *am* desperate," returned the woman, "and you have made me so. Give me back my son, to work for these helpless children. Be a just man, sir, and as you have had mercy upon this boy, give me back my son!"

The child had seen and heard enough to know that this was not a place at which to ask for alms. She led the old man softly from the door, and they pursued their journey.

With less and less of hope or strength, as they went on, but with an undiminished resolution not to betray by any word or sign her sinking state, so long as she had energy to move, the child, throughout the remainder of that hard day, compelled herself to proceed; not even stopping to rest as frequently as usual, to compensate in some measure for the tardy pace at which she was obliged to walk. Evening was drawing on, but had not closed in, when—still travelling among the same dismal objects—they came to a busy town.

Faint and spiritless as they were, its streets were insupportable. After humbly asking for relief at some few doors, and being repulsed, they agreed to make their way out of it as speedily as they could, and try if the inmates of any lone house beyond would have more pity on their exhausted state.

They were dragging themselves along through the last street, and the child felt that the time was close at hand when her enfeebled powers would bear no more. There appeared before them, at this juncture, going in the same direction as themselves, a traveller on foot, who, with a portmanteau strapped to his back, leaned upon a stout stick as he walked, and read from a book which he held in his other hand.

It was not an easy matter to come up with him, and beseech his aid, for he walked fast, and was a little distance in advance. At length he stopped, to look more attentively at some passage in his book. Animated with a ray of hope, the child shot on before her grandfather, and, going close to the stranger without rousing him by the sound of her footsteps, began, in a few faint words, to implore his help.

He turned his head. The child clapped her hands together, uttered a wild shriek, and fell senseless at his feet.

CHAPTER XLVI.

It was the poor schoolmaster. No other than the poor schoolmaster. Scarcely less moved and surprised by the sight of the child than she had been on recognising him, he stood, for a moment, silent and confounded by this unexpected apparition, without even the presence of mind to raise her from the ground.

But, quickly recovering his self-possession, he threw down his stick and book, and dropping on one knee beside her, endeavoured, by such simple means as occurred to him, to restore her to herself; while her grandfather, standing idly by, wrung his hands, and implored her with many endearing expressions to speak to him, were it only a word.

"She is quite exhausted," said the schoolmaster, glancing upward into his face. "You have taxed her powers too far, friend."

"She is perishing of want," rejoined the old man. "I never thought how weak and ill she was till now."

Casting a look upon him, half-reproachful and half-compassionate, the schoolmaster took the child in his arms, and, bidding the old man gather up her little basket and follow him directly, bore her away at his utmost speed.

There was a small inn within sight, to which, it would seem, he had been directing his steps when so unexpectedly overtaken. Towards this place he hurried with his unconscious burden, and rushing into the kitchen, and calling upon the company there assembled to make way for God's sake, deposited it on a chair before the fire.

The company, who rose in confusion on the schoolmaster's entrance, did as people usually do under such circumstances. Everybody called for his or her favourite remedy, which nobody brought; each cried for more air, at the same time carefully excluding what air there was, by closing round the object of sympathy; and all wondered why somebody else didn't do what it never appeared to occur to them might be done by themselves.

The landlady, however, who possessed more readiness and activity than any of them, and who had withal a quicker perception of the merits of the case, soon came running in with a little hot brandy-and-water, followed by her servant-girl, carrying vinegar, harts-horn, smelling-salts, and such other restoratives; which, being duly administered, recovered the child so far as to enable her to thank them in a faint voice, and to extend her hand to the poor schoolmaster, who stood, with an anxious face, hard by. Without suffering her to speak another word, or so much as to stir a finger any more, the women straightway carried her off to bed; and, having covered her up warm, bathed her cold feet, and wrapped them in flannel, they despatched a messenger for the doctor.

The doctor, who was a red-nosed gentleman with a great bunch of seals dangling below a waistcoat of ribbed black satin, arrived with all speed, and, taking his seat by the bedside of poor Nell, drew out his watch, and felt her pulse. Then he looked at her tongue, then he felt her pulse again, and while he did so, he eyed the half-emptied wine-glass as if in profound abstraction.

"I should give her," said the doctor at length, "a teaspoonful, every now and then, of hot brandy-and-water."

"Why, that's exactly what we've done, sir!" said the delighted landlady.

"I should also," observed the doctor, who had passed the foot-bath on the stairs—"I should also," said the doctor, in the voice of an oracle, "put her feet in hot water, and wrap them up in flannel. I should likewise," said the doctor with increasing solemnity, "give her something light for supper—the wing of a roasted fowl now——"

"Why, goodness gracious me, sir, it's cooking at the kitchen fire this instant!" cried the landlady. And so indeed it was, for the schoolmaster had ordered it to be put down, and it was getting on so well that the doctor might have smelled it if he had tried; perhaps he did.

"You may then," said the doctor, rising gravely, "give her a glass of hot mulled port wine, if she likes wine——"

"And a toast, sir?" suggested the landlady.

"Ay," said the doctor, in the tone of a man who makes a dignified concession. "And a toast—of bread. But be very particular to make it of bread, if you please, ma'am."

With which parting injunction, slowly and portentously delivered, the doctor departed, leaving the whole house in admiration of that wisdom which tallied so closely with their own. Everybody said he was a very shrewd doctor indeed, and knew perfectly what people's constitutions were; which there appears some reason to suppose he did.

While her supper was preparing, the child fell into a refreshing sleep, from which they were obliged to rouse her when it was ready. As she evinced extraordinary uneasiness on learning that her grandfather was below stairs, and as she was greatly troubled at the thought of their being apart, he took his supper with her. Finding her still very restless on this head, they made him up a bed in an inner room, to which he presently retired. The key of this chamber happened by good fortune to be on that side of the door which was in Nell's room; she turned it on him when the landlady had withdrawn, and crept to bed again with a thankful heart.

The schoolmaster sat for a long time smoking his pipe by the kitchen fire, which was now deserted, thinking, with a very happy face, on the fortunate chance which had brought him so opportunely to the child's assistance, and parrying, as well as in his simple way he could, the inquisitive cross-examination of the landlady, who had a great curiosity to be made acquainted with every particular of Nell's life and history. The poor schoolmaster was so open-hearted, and so little versed in the most ordinary cunning or deceit, that she could not have failed to succeed in the first five minutes, but that he happened to be unacquainted with what she wished to know; and so he told her. The landlady, by no means satisfied with this assurance, which she considered an ingenious evasion of the question, rejoined that he had his reasons, of course. Heaven forbid that she should wish to pry into the affairs of her customers, which indeed were no business of hers, who had so many of her own. She had merely asked a civil question, and to be sure she knew it would meet with a civil answer. She was quite satisfied—quite. She had rather perhaps that he would have said at once that he didn't choose to be communicative, because that would have been plain and intelligible. However, she had no right to be offended, of course. He was the best judge, and had a perfect right to say what he pleased; nobody could dispute that, for a moment. Oh, dear, no!

"I assure you, my good lady," said the mild schoolmaster, "that I have told you the plain truth. As I hope to be saved, I have told you the truth."

"Why, then, I do believe you are in earnest," rejoined the landlady, with ready good-humour, "and I'm very sorry I have teased you. But curiosity, you know, is the curse of our sex, and that's the fact."

The landlord scratched his head, as if he thought the curse sometimes involved the other sex likewise; but he was prevented from making any remark

to that effect if he had it in contemplation to do so, by the schoolmaster's rejoinder.

"You should question me for half a dozen hours at a sitting, and welcome, and I would answer you patiently for the kindness of heart you have shown to-night, if I could," he said. "As it is, please to take care of her in the morning, and let me know early how she is; and to understand that I am paymaster for the three."

So, parting with them on most friendly terms (not the less cordial, perhaps, for this last direction), the schoolmaster went to his bed, and the host and hostess to theirs.

The report in the morning was, that the child was better, but was extremely weak, and would at least require a day's rest and careful nursing before she could proceed upon her journey. The schoolmaster received this communication with perfect cheerfulness, observing that he had a day to spare—two days for that matter—and could very well afford to wait. As the patient was to sit up in the evening, he appointed to visit her in her room at a certain hour, and rambling out with his book, did not return until the hour arrived.

Nell could not help weeping when they were left alone; whereat, and at sight of her pale face and wasted figure, the simple schoolmaster shed a few tears himself, at the same time showing in very energetic language how foolish it was to do so, and how very easily it could be avoided if one tried.

"It makes me unhappy, even in the midst of all this kindness," said the child, "to think that we should be a burden upon you. How can I ever thank you? If I had not met you so far from home, I must have died, and he would have been left alone."

"We'll not talk about dying," said the schoolmaster; "and as to burdens, I have made my fortune since you slept at my cottage."

"Indeed!" cried the child joyfully.

"Oh, yes," returned her friend. "I have been appointed clerk and schoolmaster to a village a long way from here—and a long way from the old one, as you may suppose—at five-and-thirty pounds a year. Five-and-thirty pounds!"

"I am very glad," said the child—"so very, very glad."

"I am on my way there now," resumed the schoolmaster. "They allowed me the stage-coach hire—outside stage-coach hire all the way. Bless you, they grudge me nothing. But as the time at which I am expected there left me ample leisure, I determined to walk instead. How glad I am to think I did so!"

"How glad should we be!"

"Yes, yes," said the schoolmaster, moving restlessly in his chair, "certainly, that's very true. But you—where are you going, where are you coming from, what have you been doing since you left me, what had you been doing before? Now, tell me—do tell me. I know very little of the world, and perhaps you are better fitted to advise me in its affairs than I am qualified to give advice to you; but I am very sincere, and I have a reason (you have not forgotten it) for loving you. I have felt since that time as if my love for him who died had been transferred to you who stood beside his bed. If this," he added, looking upwards, "is the beautiful creation that springs from ashes, let its peace prosper with me, as I deal tenderly and compassionately by this young child!"

The plain, frank kindness of the honest schoolmaster, the affectionate earnestness of his speech and manner, the truth which was stamped upon his every word and look, gave the child a confidence in him, which the utmost arts of treachery and dissimulation could never have awakened in her breast. She told him all: that they had no friend or relative—that she had fled with the old man to save him from a madhouse, and all the miseries he dreaded—that she was flying now to save him from himself—and that she sought an asylum in some remote and primitive place, where the temptation before which he fell would never enter, and her late sorrows and distresses could have no place.

The schoolmaster heard her with astonishment. "This child!"—he thought—"has this child heroically persevered under all doubts and dangers, struggled with poverty and suffering,

upheld and sustained by strong affection and the consciousness of rectitude alone! And yet the world is full of such heroism. Have I yet to learn that the hardest and best-borne trials are those which are never chronicled in any earthly record, and are suffered every day? And should I be surprised to hear the story of this child?"

What more he thought or said matters not. It was concluded that Nell and her grandfather should accompany him to the village whither he was bound, and that he should endeavour to find them some humble occupation by which they could subsist. "We shall be sure to succeed," said the schoolmaster heartily. "The cause is too good a one to fail."

They arranged to proceed upon their journey next evening, as a stage-wagon, which travelled for some distance on the same road as they must take, would stop at the inn to change horses, and the driver for a small gratuity would give Nell a place inside. A bargain was soon struck when the wagon came; and in due time it rolled away, with the child comfortably bestowed among the softer packages, her grandfather and the schoolmaster walking on beside the driver, and the landlady and all the good folks of the inn screaming out their good wishes and farewells.

What a soothing, luxurious, drowsy way of travelling, to lie inside that slowly-moving mountain, listening to the tinkling of the horses' bells, the occasional smacking of the carter's whip, the smooth rolling of the great broad wheels, the rattle of the harness, the cheery good-nights of passing travellers jogging past on little short-stepped horses — all made pleasantly indistinct by the thick awning, which seemed made for lazy listening under, till one fell asleep! The very going to sleep, still with an indistinct idea, as the head jogged to and fro upon the pillow, of moving onward with no trouble or fatigue, and hearing all these sounds like dreamy music, lulling to the senses—and the slow waking up, and finding one's self staring out through the breezy curtain half-opened in the front, far up into the cold, bright sky with its countless stars, and downward at the driver's lantern dancing on like its namesake, Jack of the swamps and marshes, and sideways at the dark, grim trees, and forward at the long, bare road rising up, up, up, until it stopped abruptly at a sharp high ridge as if there were no more road, and all beyond was sky—and the stopping at the inn to bait, and being helped out, and going into a room with fire and candles, and winking very much, and being agreeably reminded that the night was cold, and anxious for very comfort's sake to think it colder than it was!— What a delicious journey was that journey in the wagon.

Then the going on again—so fresh at first, and shortly afterwards so sleepy. The waking from a sound nap as the mail came dashing past like a highway comet, with gleaming lamps and rattling hoofs, and visions of a guard behind, standing up to keep his feet warm, and of a gentleman in a fur cap opening his eyes and looking wild and stupefied—the stopping at the turnpike where the man was gone to bed, and knocking at the door until he answered with a smothered shout from under the bed-clothes in the little room above, where the faint light was burning, and presently came down, night-capped and shivering, to throw the gate wide open, and wish all wagons off the road except by day. The cold sharp interval between night and morning — the distant streak of light widening and spreading, and turning from gray to white, and from white to yellow, and from yellow to burning red—the presence of day, with all its cheerfulness and life—men and horses at the plough—birds in the trees and hedges, and boys in solitary fields, frightening them away with rattles. The coming to a town—people busy in the markets; light carts and chaises round the tavern yard; tradesmen standing at their doors; men running horses up and down the street for sale; pigs plunging and grunting in the dirty distance, getting off with long strings at their legs, running into clean chemists' shops and being dislodged with brooms by 'prentices; the night-coach changing horses—the passengers cheerless, cold, ugly, and discontented, with three

months' growth of hair in one night—the coachman fresh as from a band-box, and exquisitely beautiful by contrast—so much bustle, so many things in motion, such a variety of incidents—when was there a journey with so many delights as that journey in the wagon!

Sometimes walking for a mile or two while her grandfather rode inside, and sometimes even prevailing upon the schoolmaster to take her place and lie down to rest, Nell travelled on very happily until they came to a large town, where the wagon stopped, and where they spent a night. They passed a large church; and in the streets were a number of old houses, built of a kind of earth or plaster, crossed and re-crossed in a great many directions with black beams, which gave them a remarkable and very ancient look. The doors, too, were arched and low, some with oaken portals and quaint benches, where the former inhabitants had sat on summer evenings. The windows were latticed in little diamond panes, that seemed to wink and blink upon the passengers as if they were dim of sight. They had long since got clear of the smoke and furnaces, except in one or two solitary instances, where a factory planted among fields withered the space about it, like a burning mountain. When they had passed through this town, they entered again upon the country, and began to draw near their place of destination.

It was not so near, however, but that they spent another night upon the road; not that their doing so was quite an act of necessity, but that the schoolmaster, when they approached within a few miles of his village, had a fidgety sense of his dignity as the new clerk, and was unwilling to make his entry in dusty shoes and travel-disordered dress. It was a fine, clear, autumn morning when they came upon the scene of his promotion, and stopped to contemplate its beauties.

"See—here's the church!" cried the delighted schoolmaster, in a low voice; "and that old building close beside it is the school-house, I'll be sworn. Five-and-thirty pounds a year in this beautiful place!"

They admired everything—the old gray porch, the mullioned windows, the venerable gravestones dotting the green churchyard, the ancient tower, the very weathercock; the brown thatched roofs of cottage, barn, and homestead, peeping from among the trees; the stream that rippled by the distant water-mill; the blue Welsh mountains far away. It was for such a spot the child had wearied in the dense, dark, miserable haunts of labour. Upon her bed of ashes, and amidst the squalid horrors through which they had forced their way, visions of such scenes—beautiful indeed, but not more beautiful than this sweet reality—had been always present to her mind. They had seemed to melt into a dim and airy distance, as the prospect of ever beholding them again grew fainter; but, as they receded, she had loved and panted for them more.

"I must leave you somewhere for a few minutes," said the schoolmaster, at length breaking the silence into which they had fallen in their gladness. "I have a letter to present, and inquiries to make, you know. Where shall I take you? To the little inn yonder?"

"Let us wait here," rejoined Nell. "The gate is open. We will sit in the church porch till you come back."

"A good place, too," said the schoolmaster, leading the way towards it, disencumbering himself of his portmanteau, and placing it on the stone seat. "Be sure that I come back with good news, and am not long gone!"

So the happy schoolmaster put on a brand-new pair of gloves which he had carried in a little parcel in his pocket all the way, and hurried off, full of ardour and excitement.

The child watched him from the porch until the intervening foliage hid him from her view, and then stepped softly out into the old churchyard—so solemn and quiet that every rustle of her dress upon the fallen leaves, which strewed the path and made her footsteps noiseless, seemed an invasion of its silence. It was a very aged, ghostly place; the church had been built many hundreds of years ago, and had once had a convent or monastery attached; for arches in ruins, remains of oriel windows, and fragments of blackened walls, were yet standing, while other portions of the old

buildings, which had crumbled away and fallen down, were mingled with the churchyard earth and overgrown with grass, as if they too claimed a burying-place, and sought to mix their ashes with the dust of men. Hard by these gravestones of dead years, and forming a part of the ruin which some pains had been taken to render habitable in modern times, were two small dwellings with sunken windows and oaken doors, fast hastening to decay, empty and desolate.

Upon these tenements the attention of the child became exclusively riveted. She knew not why. The church, the ruin, the antiquated graves, had equal claims at least upon a stranger's thoughts; but from the moment when her eyes first rested on these two dwellings, she could turn to nothing else. Even when she had made the circuit of the inclosure, and, returning to the porch, sat pensively waiting for their friend, she took her station where she could still look upon them, and felt as if fascinated towards the spot.

CHAPTER XLVII.

Kit's mother and the single gentleman—upon whose track it is expedient to follow with hurried steps, lest this history should be chargeable with inconstancy, and the offence of leaving its characters in situations of uncertainty and doubt—Kit's mother and the single gentleman, speeding onward in the post-chaise-and-four, whose departure from the notary's door we have already witnessed, soon left the town behind them, and struck fire from the flints of the broad highway.

The good woman, being not a little embarrassed by the novelty of her situation, and certain maternal apprehensions that perhaps by this time little Jacob, or the baby, or both, had fallen into the fire, or tumbled downstairs, or had been squeezed behind doors, or had scalded their windpipes in endeavouring to allay their thirst at the spouts of tea-kettles, preserved an uneasy silence; and meeting from the window the eyes of turnpike-men, omnibus-drivers, and others, felt in the new dignity of her position like a mourner at a funeral, who, not being greatly afflicted by the loss of the departed, recognises his everyday acquaintance from the window of the mourning-coach, but is constrained to preserve a decent solemnity, and the appearance of being indifferent to all external objects.

To have been indifferent to the companionship of the single gentleman would have been tantamount to being gifted with nerves of steel. Never did chaise inclose, or horses draw, such a restless gentleman as he. He never sat in the same position for two minutes together, but was perpetually tossing his arms and legs about, pulling up the sashes and letting them violently down, or thrusting his head out of one window to draw it in again and thrust it out of another. He carried in his pocket, too, a fire-box of mysterious and unknown construction, and as sure as ever Kit's mother closed her eyes, so surely—whisk, rattle, fizz—there was the single gentleman consulting his watch by a flame of fire, and letting the sparks fall down among the straw as if there was no such thing as a possibility of himself and Kit's mother being roasted alive before the boys could stop their horses. Whenever they halted to change, there he was—out of the carriage without letting down the steps, bursting about the inn-yard like a lighted cracker, pulling out his watch by lamplight and forgetting to look at it before he put it up again, and, in short, committing so many extravagances that Kit's mother was quite afraid of him. Then, when the horses were to, in he came like a harlequin, and before they had gone a mile, out came the watch and the fire-box together, and Kit's mother was wide awake again, with no hope of a wink of sleep for that stage.

"Are you comfortable?" the single gentleman would say after one of these exploits, turning sharply round.

"Quite, sir, thank you."

"Are you sure? Ain't you cold?"

"It is a little chilly, sir," Kit's mother would reply.

"I knew it!" cried the single gentleman, letting down one of the front glasses. "She wants some brandy-and-water! Of course she does. How could I forget it? Hollo! Stop at

the next inn, and call out for a glass of hot brandy-and-water."

It was in vain for Kit's mother to protest that she stood in need of nothing of the kind. The single gentleman was inexorable; and whenever he had exhausted all other modes and fashions of restlessness, it invariably occurred to him that Kit's mother wanted brandy-and-water.

In this way they travelled on until near midnight, when they stopped to supper, for which meal the single gentleman ordered everything eatable that the house contained; and because Kit's mother didn't eat everything at once, and eat it all, he took it into his head that she must be ill.

"You're faint," said the single gentleman, who did nothing himself but walk about the room. "I see what's the matter with you, ma'am. You're faint."

"Thank you, sir, I'm not indeed."

"I know you are. I'm sure of it. I drag this poor woman from the bosom of her family at a minute's notice, and she goes on getting fainter and fainter before my eyes. I'm a pretty fellow! How many children have you got, ma'am?"

"Two, sir, besides Kit."

"Boys, ma'am?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are they christened?"

"Only half baptised as yet, sir."

"I'm godfather to both of 'em. Remember that, if you please, ma'am. You had better have some mulled wine."

"I couldn't touch a drop, indeed, sir."

"You must," said the single gentleman. "I see you want it. I ought to have thought of it before."

Immediately flying to the bell, and calling for mulled wine as impetuously as if it had been wanted for instant use in the recovery of some person apparently drowned, the single gentleman made Kit's mother swallow a bumper of it at such a high temperature that the tears ran down her face, and then hustled her off to the chaise again, where—not impossibly from the effects of his agreeable sedative—she soon became insensible to his restlessness, and fell fast asleep. Nor were the happy effects of this prescription of a transitory nature, as, notwithstanding that the distance was greater, and the journey longer, than the single gentleman had anticipated, she did not awake until it was broad day, and they were clattering over the pavement of a town.

"This is the place!" cried her companion, letting down all the glasses. "Drive to the wax-work!"

The boy on the wheeler touched his hat, and setting spurs to his horse, to the end that they might go in brilliantly, all four broke into a smart canter, and dashed through the streets with a noise that brought the good folks wondering to their doors and windows, and drowned the sober voices of the town-clocks as they chimed out half-past eight. They drove up to a door round which a crowd of persons were collected, and there stopped.

"What's this?" said the single gentleman, thrusting out his head. "Is anything the matter here?"

"A wedding, sir, a wedding!" cried several voices. "Hurrah!"

The single gentleman, rather bewildered by finding himself the centre of this noisy throng, alighted with the assistance of one of the postillions, and handed out Kit's mother, at sight of whom the populace cried out, "Here's another wedding!" and roared, and leaped for joy.

"The world has gone mad, I think," said the single gentleman, pressing through the concourse with his supposed bride. "Stand back here, will you, and let me knock?"

Anything that makes a noise is satisfactory to a crowd. A score of dirty hands were raised directly to knock for him, and seldom has a knocker of equal powers been made to produce more deafening sounds than this particular engine on the occasion in question. Having rendered these voluntary services, the throng modestly retired a little, preferring that the single gentleman should beat their consequences alone.

"Now, sir, what do you want?" said a man, with a large white bow at his button-hole, opening the door, and confronting him with a very stoical aspect.

"Who has been married here, my friend?" said the single gentleman.

"I have."

"You! and to whom, in the devil's name?"

"What right have you to ask?" returned the bridegroom, eyeing him from top to toe.

"What right!" cried the single gentleman, drawing the arm of Kit's mother more tightly through his own, for that good woman evidently had it in contemplation to run away. "A right you little dream of. Mind, good people, if this fellow has been marrying a minor—— Tut, tut, that can't be. Where is the child you have here, my good fellow. You call her Nell. Where is she?"

As he propounded this question, which Kit's mother echoed, somebody in a room near at hand uttered a great shriek, and a stout lady in a white dress came running to the door, and supported herself upon the bridegroom's arm.

"Where is she?" cried this lady. "What news have you brought me? What has become of her?"

The single gentleman started back, and gazed upon the face of the late Mrs. Jarley (that morning wedded to the philosophic George, to the eternal wrath and despair of Mr. Slum, the poet) with looks of conflicting apprehension, disappointment, and incredulity. At length he stammered out—

"I ask *you* where she is. What do you mean?"

"Oh, sir!" cried the bride, "if you have come here to do her any good, why weren't you here a week ago?"

"She is not—not dead?" said the person to whom she addressed herself, turning very pale.

"No, not so bad as that."

"I thank God!" cried the single gentleman feebly. "Let me come in."

They drew back to admit him, and when he had entered, closed the door.

"You see in me, good people," he said, turning to the newly-married couple, "one to whom life itself is not dearer than the two persons whom I seek. They would not know me. My features are strange to them, but if they or either of them are here, take this good woman with you, and let them see her first, for her they both know. If you deny them from any mistaken regard or fear for them, judge of my intentions by their recognition of this person as their old humble friend."

"I always said it!" cried the bride. "I knew she was not a common child! Alas, sir! we have no power to help you, for all that we could do has been tried in vain."

With that, they related to him, without disguise or concealment, all that they knew of Nell and her grandfather, from their first meeting with them down to the time of their sudden disappearance; adding (which was quite true) that they had made every possible effort to trace them, but without success, having been at first in great alarm for their safety, as well as on account of the suspicions to which they themselves might one day be exposed in consequence of their abrupt departure. They dwelled upon the old man's imbecility of mind, upon the uneasiness the child had always testified when he was absent, upon the company he had been supposed to keep, and upon the increased depression which had gradually crept over her and changed her both in health and spirits. Whether she had missed the old man in the night, and, knowing or conjecturing whither he had bent his steps, had gone in pursuit, or whether they had left the house together, they had no means of determining. Certain they considered it, that there was but slender prospect left of hearing of them again, and that whether their flight originated with the old man or with the child, there was now no hope of their return.

To all this the single gentleman listened with the air of a man quite borne down by grief and disappointment. He shed tears when they spoke of the grandfather, and appeared in deep affliction.

Not to protract this portion of our narrative, and to make short work of a long story, let it be briefly written that before the interview came to a close, the single gentleman deemed he had sufficient evidence of having been told the truth, and that he endeavoured to force upon the bride and bridegroom an acknowledgment of their kindness to the unfriended child, which, however, they steadily declined accepting. In

the end, the happy couple jolted away in the caravan to spend their honeymoon in a country excursion; and the single gentleman and Kit's mother stood ruefully before their carriage door.

"Where shall we drive you, sir?" said the post-boy.

"You may drive me," said the single gentleman, "to the——" He was not going to add "inn," but he added it for the sake of Kit's mother; and to the inn they went.

Rumours had already got abroad that the little girl who used to show the wax-work was the child of great people, who had been stolen from her parents in infancy, and had only just been traced. Opinion was divided whether she was the daughter of a prince, a duke, an earl, a viscount, or a baron, but all agreed upon the main fact, and that the single gentleman was her father; and all bent forward to catch a glimpse, though it were only of the tip of his noble nose, as he rode away, desponding, in his four-horse chaise.

What would he have given to know, and what sorrow would have been saved if he had only known, that at that moment both child and grandfather were seated in the old church porch, patiently awaiting the schoolmaster's return!

CHAPTER XLVIII.

POPULAR rumour concerning the single gentleman and his errand, travelling from mouth to mouth, and waxing stronger in the marvellous as it was bandied about—for your popular rumour, unlike the rolling stone of the proverb, is one which gathers a deal of moss in its wanderings up and down—occasioned his dismounting at the inn-door to be looked upon as an exciting and attractive spectacle, which could scarcely be enough admired, and drew together a large concourse of idlers, who having recently been, as it were, thrown out of employment by the closing of the wax-work and the completion of the nuptial ceremonies, considered his arrival as little else than a special providence, and hailed it with demonstrations of the liveliest joy.

Not at all participating in the general sensation, but wearing the depressed and wearied look of one who sought to meditate on his disappointment in silence and privacy, the single gentleman alighted, and handed out Kit's mother with a gloomy politeness which impressed the lookers-on extremely. That done, he gave her his arm and escorted her into the house, while several active waiters ran on before as a skirmishing party, to clear the way and to show the room which was ready for their reception.

"Any room will do," said the single gentleman. "Let it be near at hand, that's all."

"Close here, sir, if you please to walk this way."

"Would the gentleman like this room?" said a voice, as a little, out-of-the-way door at the foot of the well staircase flew briskly open, and a head popped out. "He's quite welcome to it. He's as welcome as flowers in May, or coals at Christmas. *Would* you like this room, sir? Honour me by walking in. Do me the favour, pray."

"Goodness gracious me!" cried Kit's mother, falling back in extreme surprise, "only think of this!"

She had some reason to be astonished, for the person who proffered the gracious invitation was no other than Daniel Quilp. The little door out of which he had thrust his head was close to the inn larder; and there he stood, bowing with grotesque politeness, as much at his ease as if the door were that of his own house—blighting all the legs of mutton and cold roast fowls by his close companionship, and looking like the evil genius of the cellars come from underground upon some work of mischief.

"Would you do me the honour?" said Quilp.

"I prefer being alone," replied the single gentleman.

"Oh!" said Quilp. And with that he darted in again with one jerk, and clapped the little door to, like a figure in a Dutch clock when the hour strikes.

"Why, it was only last night, sir," whispered Kit's mother, "that I left him in Little Bethel."

"Indeed!" said her fellow-passenger.

—"When did that person come here, waiter?"

"Come down by the night-coach, this morning, sir."

"Humph! And when is he going?"

"Can't say, sir, really. When the chambermaid asked him just now if he should want a bed, sir, he first made faces at her, and then wanted to kiss her."

"Beg him to walk this way," said the single gentleman. "I should be glad to exchange a word with him, tell him. Beg him to come at once, do you hear?"

The man stared on receiving these instructions, for the single gentleman had not only displayed as much astonishment as Kit's mother at sight of the dwarf, but, standing in no fear of him, had been at less pains to conceal his dislike and repugnance. He departed on his errand, however, and immediately returned, ushering in its object.

"Your servant, sir," said the dwarf. "I encountered your messenger halfway. I thought you'd allow me to pay my compliments to you. I hope you're well. I hope you're very well."

There was a short pause, while the dwarf, with half-shut eyes and puckered face, stood waiting for an answer. Receiving none, he turned towards his more familiar acquaintance.

"Christopher's mother!" he cried. "Such a dear lady, such a worthy woman, so blessed in her honest son! How is Christopher's mother? Have change of air and scene improved her? Her little family, too, and Christopher? Do they thrive? Do they flourish? Are they growing into worthy citizens, eh?"

Making his voice ascend in the scale with every succeeding question, Mr. Quilp finished in a shrill squeak, and subsided into the panting look which was customary with him, and which, whether it were assumed or natural, had equally the effect of banishing all expression from his face, and rendering it, as far as it afforded any index to his mood or meaning, a perfect blank.

"Mr. Quilp," said the single gentleman.

The dwarf put his hand to his great flapped ear, and counterfeited the closest attention.

"We two have met before——"

"Surely," cried Quilp, nodding his head. "Oh, surely, sir. Such an honour and pleasure—it's both, Christopher's mother, it's both—is not to be forgotten so soon. By no means!"

"You may remember that the day I arrived in London, and found the house to which I drove empty and deserted, I was directed by some of the neighbours to you, and waited upon you without stopping for rest or refreshment?"

"How precipitate that was, and yet what an earnest and vigorous measure!" said Quilp, conferring with himself, in imitation of his friend Mr. Sampson Brass.

"I found," said the single gentleman, "you most unaccountably in possession of everything that had so recently belonged to another man, and that other man, who up to the time of your entering upon his property, had been looked upon as affluent, reduced to sudden beggary, and driven from house and home."

"We had warrant for what we did, my good sir," rejoined Quilp, "we had our warrant. Don't say driven, either. He went of his own accord—vanished in the night, sir."

"No matter," said the single gentleman angrily. "He was gone."

"Yes, he was gone," said Quilp, with the same exasperating composure. "No doubt he was gone. The only question was, where? And it's a question still."

"Now, what am I to think," said the single gentleman, sternly regarding him, "of you who, plainly indisposed to give me any information then—nay, obviously holding back, and sheltering yourself with all kinds of cunning, trickery, and evasion—are dogging my footsteps now?"

"I dogging!" cried Quilp.

"Why, are you not?" returned his questioner, fretted into a state of the utmost irritation. "Were you not, a few hours since, sixty miles off, and in the chapel to which this good woman goes to say her prayers?"

"She was there too, I think?" said

Quilp, still perfectly unmoved. "I might say, if I was inclined to be rude, how do I know but you are dogging *my* footsteps. Yes, I was at chapel. What then? I've read in books that pilgrims were used to go to chapel before they went on journeys, to put up petitions for their safe return. Wise men! journeys are very perilous—especially outside the coach. Wheels come off, horses take fright, coachmen drive too fast, coaches overturn. I always go to chapel before I start on journeys. It's the last thing I do on such occasions, indeed."

That Quilp lied most heartily in his speech, it needed no very great penetration to discover, although, for anything that he suffered to appear in his face, voice, or manner, he might have been clinging to the truth with the quiet constancy of a martyr.

"In the name of all that's calculated to drive one crazy, man," said the unfortunate single gentleman, "have you not, for some reason of your own, taken upon yourself my errand? Don't you know with what object I have come here, and if you do know, can you throw no light upon it?"

"You think I'm a conjurer, sir," replied Quilp, shrugging up his shoulders. "If I was, I should tell my own fortune—and make it."

"Ah! we have said all we need say, I see," returned the other, throwing himself impatiently upon a sofa. "Pray leave us, if you please."

"Willingly," returned Quilp. "Most willingly. Christopher's mother, my good soul, farewell. A pleasant journey—*back*, sir. Ahem!"

With these parting words, and with a grin upon his features altogether indescribable, but which seemed to be compounded of every monstrous grimace of which men or monkeys are capable, the dwarf slowly retreated, and closed the door behind him.

"Oho!" he said, when he had regained his own room, and sat himself down in a chair with his arms akimbo. "Oho! Are you there, my friend? In-deed?"

Chuckling as though in very great glee, and recompensing himself for the restraint he had lately put upon his countenance by twisting it into all imaginable varieties of ugliness, Mr. Quilp, rocking himself to and fro in his chair, and nursing his left leg at the same time, fell into certain meditations, of which it may be necessary to relate the substance.

First, he reviewed the circumstances which had led to his repairing to that spot, which were briefly these:—Dropping in at Mr. Sampson Brass's office on the previous evening in the absence of that gentleman and his learned sister, he had lighted upon Mr. Swiveller, who chanced at the moment to be sprinkling a glass of warm gin-and-water on the dust of the law, and to be moistening his clay, as the phrase goes, rather copiously. But as clay in the abstract, when too much moistened, becomes of a weak and uncertain consistency, breaking down in unexpected places, retaining impressions but faintly, and preserving no strength or steadiness of character, so Mr. Swiveller's clay, having imbibed a considerable quantity of moisture, was in a very loose and slippery state, insomuch that the various ideas impressed upon it were fast losing their distinctive character, and running into each other. It is not uncommon for human clay in this condition to value itself above all things upon its great prudence and sagacity; and Mr. Swiveller, especially prizing himself upon these qualities, took occasion to remark that he had made strange discoveries in connection with the single gentleman who lodged above, which he had determined to keep within his own bosom, and which neither tortures nor cajolery should ever induce him to reveal. Of this determination Mr. Quilp expressed his high approval, and setting himself in the same breath to goad Mr. Swiveller on to further hints, soon made out that the single gentleman had been seen in communication with Kit, and that this was the secret which was never to be disclosed.

Possessed of this piece of information, Mr. Quilp directly supposed that the single gentleman above stairs must be the same individual who had waited on him, and having assured himself by further inquiries that this surmise was

correct, had no difficulty in arriving at the conclusion that the intent and object of his correspondence with Kit was the recovery of his old client and the child. Burning with curiosity to know what proceedings were afoot, he resolved to pounce upon Kit's mother as the person least able to resist his arts, and consequently the most likely to be entrapped into such revelations as he sought; so taking an abrupt leave of Mr. Swiveller, he hurried to her house. The good woman being from home, he made inquiries of a neighbour, as Kit himself did soon afterwards, and being directed to the chapel, betook himself there, in order to waylay her at the conclusion of the service.

He had not sat in the chapel more than a quarter of an hour, and with his eyes piously fixed upon the ceiling, was chuckling inwardly over the joke of his being there at all, when Kit himself appeared. Watchful as a lynx, one glance showed the dwarf that he had come on business. Absorbed in appearance, as we have seen, and feigning a profound abstraction, he noted every circumstance of his behaviour, and when he withdrew with his family, shot out after him. In fine, he traced them to the notary's house; learned the destination of the carriage from one of the postillions; and knowing that a fast night-coach started for the same place, at the very hour which was on the point of striking, from a street hard by, darted round to the coach-office without more ado, and took his seat upon the roof. After passing and repassing the carriage on the road, and being passed and repassed by it sundry times in the course of the night, according as their stoppages were longer or shorter, or their rate of travelling varied, they reached the town almost together. Quilp kept the chaise in sight, mingled with the crowd, learned the single gentleman's errand, and its failure; and having possessed himself of all that was material to know, hurried off, reached the inn before him, had the interview just now detailed, and shut himself up in the little room, in which he hastily reviewed all these occurrences.

"You are there, are you, my friend?" he repeated, greedily biting his nails. "I am suspected and thrown aside, and Kit's the confidential agent, is he? I shall have to dispose of him, I fear. If we had come up with them this morning," he continued, after a thoughtful pause, "I was ready to prove a pretty good claim. I could have made my profit. But for these canting hypocrites, the lad and his mother, I could get this fiery gentleman as comfortably into my net as our old friend—our mutual friend, ha, ha!—and chubby, rosy Nell. At the worst, it's a golden opportunity, not to be lost. Let us find them first, and I'll find means of draining you of some of your superfluous cash, sir, while there are prison bars, and bolts, and locks, to keep your friend or kinsman safely. I hate your virtuous people!" said the dwarf, throwing off a bumper of brandy, and smacking his lips; "ah, I hate 'em, every one!"

This was not a mere empty vaunt, but a deliberate avowal of his real sentiments; for Mr. Quilp, who loved nobody, had by little and little come to hate everybody nearly or remotely connected with his ruined client—the old man himself, because he had been able to deceive him and elude his vigilance—the child, because she was the object of Mrs. Quilp's commiseration and constant self-reproach—the single gentleman, because of his unconcealed aversion to himself — Kit and his mother, most mortally, for the reasons shown. Above and beyond that general feeling of opposition to them, which would have been inseparable from his ravenous desire to enrich himself by these altered circumstances, Daniel Quilp hated them every one.

In this amiable mood, Mr. Quilp enlivened himself and his hatreds with more brandy, and then, changing his quarters, withdrew to an obscure alehouse, under cover of which seclusion he instituted all possible inquiries that might lead to the discovery of the old man and his grandchild. But all was in vain. Not the slightest trace or clue could be obtained. They had left the town by night; no one had seen them go; no one had met them on the road; the driver of no coach, cart, or wagon, had seen any travellers answering their

description ; nobody had fallen in with them, or heard of them. Convinced at last that for the present all such attempts were hopeless, he appointed two or three scouts, with promises of large rewards in case of their forwarding him any intelligence, and returned to London by next day's coach.

It was some gratification to Mr. Quilp to find, as he took his place upon the roof, that Kit's mother was alone inside ; from which circumstance he derived in the course of the journey much cheerfulness of spirit, inasmuch as her solitary condition enabled him to terrify her with many extraordinary annoyances ; such as hanging over the side of the coach at the risk of his life, and staring in with his great goggle eyes, which seemed in hers the more horrible from his face being upside down ; dodging her in this way from one window to another ; getting nimbly down whenever they changed horses, and thrusting his head in at the window with a dismal squint ; which ingenious tortures had such an effect upon Mrs. Nubbles, that she was quite unable for the time to resist the belief that Mr. Quilp did in his own person represent and embody that Evil Power who was so vigorously attacked at Little Bethel, and who, by reason of her backslidings in respect of Astley's and oysters, was now frolicsome and rampant.

Kit, having been apprised by letter of his mother's intended return, was waiting for her at the coach-office ; and great was his surprise when he saw, leering over the coachman's shoulder like some familiar demon, invisible to all eyes but his, the well-known face of Quilp.

"How are you, Christopher?" croaked the dwarf, from the coach-top. "All right, Christopher. Mother's inside."

"Why, how did he come here, mother?" whispered Kit.

"I don't know how he came or why, my dear," rejoined Mrs. Nubbles, dismounting with her son's assistance, "but he has been a-terrifying of me out of my seven senses all this blessed day."

"He has?" cried Kit.

"You wouldn't believe it, that you wouldn't," replied his mother, "but don't say a word to him, for I really don't believe he's human. Hush! Don't turn round as if I were talking of him, but he's a-squinting at me now in the full blaze of the coach lamp, quite awful!"

In spite of his mother's injunction, Kit turned sharply round to look. Mr. Quilp was serenely gazing at the stars, quite absorbed in celestial contemplation.

"Oh, he's the artfullest creetur!" cried Mrs. Nubbles. "But come away. Don't speak to him for the world."

"Yes, I will, mother. What nonsense. I say, sir——"

Mr. Quilp affected to start, and looked smilingly round.

"You let my mother alone, will you?" said Kit. "How dare you tease a poor lone woman like her, making her miserable and melancholy, as if she hadn't got enough to make her so without you. Ain't you ashamed of yourself, you little monster?"

"Monster," said Quilp inwardly, with a smile. "Ugliest dwarf that could be seen anywhere for a penny —monster—ah!"

"You show her any of your impudence again," resumed Kit, shouldering the bandbox, "and I tell you what, Mr. Quilp, I won't bear with you any more. You have no right to do it ; I'm sure we never interfered with you. This isn't the first time ; and if ever you worry or frighten her again, you'll oblige me (though I shall be very sorry to do it, on account of your size) to beat you."

Quilp said not a word in reply, but walking so close to Kit as to bring his eyes within two or three inches of his face, looked fixedly at him, retreated a little distance without averting his gaze, approached again, again withdrew, and so on for half a dozen times, like a head in a phantasmagoria. Kit stood his ground as if in expectation of an immediate assault, but, finding that nothing came of these gestures, snapped his fingers and walked away ; his mother dragging him off as fast as she could, and,

even in the midst of his news of little Jacob and the baby, looking anxiously over her shoulder to see if Quilp were following.

CHAPTER XLIX.

Kit's mother might have spared herself the trouble of looking back so often, for nothing was further from Mr. Quilp's thoughts than any intention of pursuing her and her son, or renewing the quarrel with which they had parted. He went his way, whistling from time to time some fragments of a tune; and, with a face quite tranquil and composed, jogged pleasantly towards home; entertaining himself as he went with visions of the fears and terrors of Mrs. Quilp, who, having received no intelligence of him for three whole days and two nights, and having had no previous notice of his absence, was doubtless by that time in a state of distraction, and constantly fainting away with anxiety and grief.

This facetious probability was so congenial to the dwarf's humour, and so exquisitely amusing to him, that he laughed as he went along until the tears ran down his cheeks; and more than once, when he found himself in a by-street, vented his delight in a shrill scream, which greatly terrifying any lonely passenger who happened to be walking on before him expecting nothing so little, increased his mirth, and made him remarkably cheerful and light-hearted.

In this happy flow of spirits, Mr. Quilp reached Tower Hill, when, gazing up at the window of his own sitting-room, he thought he descried more light than is usual in a house of mourning. Drawing nearer, and listening attentively, he could hear several voices in earnest conversation, among which he could distinguish not only those of his wife and mother-in-law, but the tongues of men.

"Ha!" cried the jealous dwarf, "what's this? Do they entertain visitors while I'm away?"

A smothered cough from above was the reply. He felt in his pockets for his latch-key, but had forgotten it. There was no resource but to knock at the door.

"A light in the passage," said Quilp, peeping through the keyhole. "A very soft knock; and, by your leave, my lady, I may yet steal upon you unawares. Soho!"

A very low and gentle rap received no answer from within. But after a second application to the knocker, no louder than the first, the door was softly opened by the boy from the wharf, whom Quilp instantly gagged with one hand, and dragged into the street with the other.

"You'll throttle me, master," whispered the boy. "Let go, will you?"

"Who's upstairs, you dog?" retorted Quilp, in the same tone. "Tell me. And don't speak above your breath, or I'll choke you in good earnest."

The boy could only point to the window, and reply with a stifled giggle, expressive of such intense enjoyment, that Quilp clutched him by the throat again, and might have carried his threat into execution, or at least have made very good progress towards that end, but for the boy's nimbly extricating himself from his grasp, and fortifying himself behind the nearest post, at which, after some fruitless attempts to catch him by the hair of the head, his master was obliged to come to a parley.

"Will you answer me?" said Quilp. "What's going on above?"

"You won't let one speak," replied the boy. "They—ha, ha, ha!—they think you're—you're dead. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dead!" cried Quilp, relaxing into a grim laugh himself. "No. Do they? Do they really, you dog?"

"They think you're—you're drowned," replied the boy, who in his malicious nature had a strong infusion of his master. "You was last seen on the brink of the wharf, and they think you tumbled over. Ha, ha!"

The prospect of playing the spy under such delicious circumstances, and of disappointing them all by walking in alive, gave more delight to Quilp than the greatest stroke of good fortune

could possibly have inspired him with. He was no less tickled than his hopeful assistant, and they both stood for some seconds, grinning and gasping, and wagging their heads at each other, on either side of the post, like an unmatchable pair of Chinese idols.

"Not a word," said Quilp, making towards the door on tiptoe. "Not a sound; not so much as a creaking board, or a stumble against a cobweb. Drowned, eh, Mrs. Quilp! Drowned!"

So saying, he blew out the candle, kicked off his shoes, and groped his way upstairs, leaving his delighted young friend in an ecstasy of somersets on the pavement.

The bedroom door on the staircase being unlocked, Mr. Quilp slipped in, and planted himself behind the door of communication between that chamber and the sitting-room, which standing ajar to render both more airy, and having a very convenient chink (of which he had often availed himself for purposes of espial, and had indeed enlarged with his pocket-knife), enabled him not only to hear, but to see distinctly what was passing.

Applying his eye to this convenient place, he descried Mr. Brass seated at the table, with pen, ink, and paper, and the case-bottle of rum—his own case-bottle, and his own particular Jamaica—convenient to his hand, with hot water, fragrant lemons, white lump sugar, and all things fitting; from which choice materials, Sampson, by no means insensible to their claims upon his attention, had compounded a mighty glass of punch, reeking hot, which he was at that very moment stirring up with a teaspoon, and contemplating with looks in which a faint assumption of sentimental regret struggled but weakly with a bland and comfortable joy. At the same table, with both her elbows upon it, was Mrs. Jiniwin; no longer sipping other people's punch feloniously with teaspoons, but taking deep draughts from a jorum of her own; while her daughter—not exactly with ashes on her head, or sackcloth on her back, but preserving a very decent and becoming appearance of sorrow nevertheless—was reclining in an easy-chair, and soothing her grief with a smaller allowance of the same glib liquid. There were also present a couple of waterside men, bearing between them certain machines called drags; even these fellows were accommodated with a stiff glass a-piece; and as they drank with a great relish, and were naturally of a red-nosed, pimple-faced, convivial look, their presence rather increased than detracted from that decided appearance of comfort, which was the great characteristic of the party.

"If I could poison that dear old lady's rum-and-water," murmured Quilp, "I'd die happy."

"Ah!" said Mr. Brass, breaking the silence, and raising his eyes to the ceiling with a sigh, "who knows but he may be looking down upon us now! Who knows but he may be surveying of us from—from somewheres or another, and contemplating us with a watchful eye! Oh, Lor!"

Here Mr. Brass stopped to drink half his punch, and then resumed; looking at the other half, as he spoke, with a dejected smile.

"I can almost fancy," said the lawyer, shaking his head, "that I see his eye glistening down at the very bottom of my liquor. When shall we look upon his like again? Never, never! One minute we are here"—holding his tumbler between his eyes—"the next we are there"—gulping down its contents, and striking himself emphatically a little below the chest—"in the silent tomb. To think that I should be drinking his very rum! It seems like a dream."

With the view, no doubt, of testing the reality of his position, Mr. Brass pushed his tumbler as he spoke towards Mrs. Jiniwin for the purpose of being replenished; and turned towards the attendant mariners.

"The search has been quite unsuccessful, then?"

"Quite, master. But I should say that if he turns up anywhere, he'll come ashore somewhere about Grinidge to-morrow, at ebb-tide, eh, mate?"

The other gentleman assented, observing that he was expected at the Hospital, and that several pensioners

would be ready to receive him whenever he arrived.

"Then we have nothing for it but resignation," said Mr. Brass; "nothing but resignation and expectation. It would be a comfort to have his body; it would be a dreary comfort."

"Oh, beyond a doubt," assented Mrs. Jiniwin hastily; "if we once had that we should be quite sure."

"With regard to the descriptive advertisement," said Sampson Brass, taking up his pen. "It is a melancholy pleasure to recall his traits. Respecting his legs, now——"

"Crooked, certainly," said Mrs. Jiniwin.

"Do you think they *were* crooked?" said Brass, in an insinuating tone. "I think I see them now coming up the street very wide apart, in nankeen pantaloons a little shrunk and without straps. Ah! what a vale of tears we live in. Do we say crooked?"

"I think they were a little so," observed Mrs. Quilp, with a sob.

"Legs crooked," said Brass, writing as he spoke. "Large head, short body, legs crooked——"

"Very crooked," suggested Mrs. Jiniwin.

"We'll not say very crooked, ma'am," said Brass piously. "Let us not bear hard upon the weaknesses of the deceased. He is gone, ma'am, to where his legs will never come in question. We will content ourselves with crooked, Mrs. Jiniwin."

"I thought you wanted the truth," said the old lady. "That's all."

"Bless your eyes, how I love you," muttered Quilp. "There she goes again. Nothing but punch!"

"This is an occupation," said the lawyer, laying down his pen and emptying his glass, "which seems to bring him before my eyes like the ghost of Hamlet's father, in the very clothes that he wore on workadays. His coat, his waistcoat, his shoes and stockings, his trousers, his hat, his wit and humour, his pathos and his umbrella, all come before me like visions of my youth. His linen!" said Mr. Brass, smiling fondly at the wall, "his linen which was always of a particular colour, for such was his whim and fancy — how plain I see his linen now!"

"You had better go on, sir," said Mrs. Jiniwin impatiently.

"True, ma'am, true," cried Mr. Brass. "Our faculties must not freeze with grief. I'll trouble you for a little more of that, ma'am. A question now arises, with relation to his nose."

"Flat," said Mrs. Jiniwin.

"Aquiline!" cried Quilp, thrusting in his head, and striking the feature with his fist. "Aquiline, you hag. Do you see it? Do you call this flat? Do you? Eh?"

"Oh, capital, capital!" shouted Brass, from the mere force of habit. "Excellent! How very good he is! He's a most remarkable man—so extremely whimsical! Such an amazing power of taking people by surprise!"

Quilp paid no regard whatever to these compliments, nor to the dubious and frightened look into which the lawyer gradually subsided, nor to the shrieks of his wife and mother-in-law, nor to the latter's running from the room, nor to the former's fainting away. Keeping his eye fixed on Sampson Brass, he walked up to the table, and beginning with his glass, drank off the contents, and went regularly round until he had emptied the other two, when he seized the case-bottle, and hugging it under his arm, surveyed him with a most extraordinary leer.

"Not yet, Sampson," said Quilp. "Not just yet!"

"Oh, very good indeed!" cried Brass, recovering his spirits a little. "Ha, ha, ha! Oh, exceedingly good! There's not another man alive who could carry it off like that. A most difficult position to carry off. But he has such a flow of good-humour, such an amazing flow!"

"Good-night," said the dwarf, nodding expressively.

"Good-night, sir, good-night," cried the lawyer, retreating backwards towards the door. "This is a joyful occasion indeed, extremely joyful. Ha, ha, ha! oh, very rich, very rich indeed, remarkably so!"

Waiting until Mr. Brass's ejaculations died away in the distance (for he

continued to pour them out all the way downstairs), Quilp advanced towards the two men, who yet lingered in a kind of stupid amazement.

"Have you been dragging the river all day, gentlemen?" said the dwarf, holding the door open with great politeness.

"And yesterday too, master."

"Dear me, you've had a deal of trouble. Pray consider everything yours that you find upon the—upon the body. Good-night!"

The men looked at each other, but had evidently no inclination to argue the point just then, and shuffled out of the room. This speedy clearance effected, Quilp locked the doors; and still embracing the case-bottle with shrugged-up shoulders and folded arms, stood looking at his insensible wife like a dismounted nightmare.

CHAPTER L.

MATRIMONIAL differences are usually discussed by the parties concerned in the form of dialogue, in which the lady bears at least her full half share. Those of Mr. and Mrs. Quilp, however, were an exception to the general rule; the remarks which they occasioned being limited to a long soliloquy on the part of the gentleman, with perhaps a few deprecatory observations from the lady, not extending beyond a trembling monosyllable uttered at long intervals, and in a very submissive and humble tone. On the present occasion, Mrs. Quilp did not for a long time venture even on this gentle defence, but when she had recovered from her fainting fit, sat in a tearful silence, meekly listening to the reproaches of her lord and master.

Of these Mr. Quilp delivered himself with the utmost animation and rapidity, and with so many distortions of limb and feature, that even his wife, although tolerably well accustomed to his proficiency in these respects, was well-nigh beside herself with alarm. But the Jamaica rum, and the joy of having occasioned a heavy disappointment, by degrees cooled Mr. Quilp's wrath; which, from being at savage heat, dropped slowly to the bantering or chuckling point, at which it steadily remained.

"So you thought I was dead and gone, did you?" said Quilp. "You thought you were a widow, eh? Ha, ha, ha, you jade!"

"Indeed, Quilp," returned his wife. "I'm very sorry——"

"Who doubts it?" cried the dwarf. "You very sorry! to be sure you are. Who doubts that you're *very* sorry?"

"I don't mean sorry that you have come home again alive and well," said his wife, "but sorry that I should have been led into such a belief. I am glad to see you, Quilp; indeed I am."

In truth, Mrs. Quilp did seem a great deal more glad to behold her lord than might have been expected, and did evince a degree of interest in his safety, which, all things considered, was rather unaccountable. Upon Quilp, however, this circumstance made no impression, further than as it moved him to snap his fingers close to his wife's eyes, with divers grins of triumph and derision.

"How could you go away so long without saying a word to me, or letting me hear of you or know anything about you?" asked the poor little woman, sobbing. "How could you be so cruel, Quilp?"

"How could I be so cruel! cruel!" cried the dwarf. "Because I was in the humour. I'm in the humour now. I shall be cruel when I like. I'm going away again."

"Not again!"

"Yes, again. I'm going away now. I'm off directly. I mean to go and live wherever the fancy seizes me—at the wharf—at the counting-house—and be a jolly bachelor. You were a widow in anticipation. Damme," screamed the dwarf, "I'll be a bachelor in earnest."

"You can't be serious, Quilp?" sobbed his wife.

"I tell you," said the dwarf, exulting in his project, "that I'll be a bachelor, a devil-may-care bachelor; and I'll have my bachelor's hall at the counting-house, and at such times come near it, if you dare. And mind,

too, that I don't pounce in upon you at unseasonable hours again, for I'll be a spy upon you, and come and go like a mole or a weazel. Tom Scott—where's Tom Scott?"

"Here I am, master," cried the voice of the boy, as Quilp threw up the window.

"Wait there, you dog," returned the dwarf, "to carry a bachelor's portmanteau. Pack it up, Mrs. Quilp. Knock up the dear old lady to help; knock her up. Hollo, there! Hollo!"

With these exclamations, Mr. Quilp caught up the poker, and, hurrying to the door of the good lady's sleeping-closet, beat upon it therewith until she awoke in inexpressible terror, thinking that her amiable son-in-law surely intended to murder her in justification of the legs she had slandered. Impressed with this idea, she was no sooner fairly awake than she screamed violently, and would have quickly precipitated herself out of the window and through a neighbouring skylight, if her daughter had not hastened in to undeceive her, and implore her assistance. Somewhat reassured by her account of the service she was required to render, Mrs. Jiniwin made her appearance in a flannel dressing-gown; and both mother and daughter, trembling with terror and cold—for the night was now far advanced—obeyed Mr. Quilp's directions in submissive silence. Prolonging his preparations as much as possible, for their greater comfort, that eccentric gentleman superintended the packing of his wardrobe, and, having added to it with his own hands a plate, knife and fork, spoon, tea-cup and saucer, and other small household matters of that nature, strapped up the portmanteau, took it on his shoulders, and actually marched off without another word, and with the case-bottle (which he had never once put down) still tightly clasped under his arm. Consigning his heavier burden to the care of Tom Scott when he reached the street, taking a dram from the bottle for his own encouragement, and giving the boy a rap on the head with it as a small taste for himself, Quilp very deliberately led the way to the wharf, and reached it at between three and four o'clock in the morning.

"Snug!" said Quilp, when he had groped his way to the wooden counting-house, and opened the door with a key he carried about with him. "Beautifully snug! Call me at eight, you dog."

With no more formal leave-taking or explanation, he, clutched the portmanteau, shut the door on his attendant, and climbing on the desk, and rolling himself up as round as a hedgehog, in an old boat-cloak, fell fast asleep.

Being roused in the morning at the appointed time, and roused with difficulty, after his late fatigues, Quilp instructed Tom Scott to make a fire in the yard of sundry pieces of old timber, and to prepare some coffee for breakfast; for the better furnishing of which repast he intrusted him with certain small moneys, to be expended in the purchase of hot rolls, butter, sugar, Yarmouth bloaters, and other articles of housekeeping; so that in a few minutes a savoury meal was smoking on the board. With this substantial comfort, the dwarf regaled himself to his heart's content; and being highly satisfied with this free and gipsy mode of life (which he had often meditated, as offering, whenever he chose to avail himself of it, an agreeable freedom from the restraints of matrimony, and a choice means of keeping Mrs. Quilp and her mother in a state of incessant agitation and suspense), bestirred himself to improve his retreat, and render it more commodious and comfortable.

With this view, he issued forth to a place hard by, where sea-stores were sold, purchased a second-hand hammock, and had it slung in seamanlike fashion from the ceiling of the counting-house. He also caused to be erected, in the same mouldy cabin, an old ship's stove with a rusty funnel to carry the smoke through the roof; and, these arrangements completed, surveyed them with ineffable delight.

"I've got a country-house like Robinson Crusoe," said the dwarf, ogling the accommodations—"solitary, sequestered, desolate-island sort of spot, where I can be quite alone when I have business on hand, and be secure

from all spies and listeners. Nobody near me here but rats, and they are fine, stealthy, secret fellows. I shall be as merry as a grig among these gentry. I'll look out for one like Christopher, and poison him—ha, ha, ha! Business though — business — we must be mindful of business in the midst of pleasure, and the time has flown this morning, I declare."

Enjoining Tom Scott to await his return, and not to stand upon his head or throw a somerset, or so much as walk upon his hands meanwhile, on pain of lingering torments, the dwarf threw himself into a boat, and crossing to the other side of the river, and then speeding away on foot, reached Mr. Swiveller's usual house of entertainment in Bevis Marks, just as that gentleman sat down alone to dinner in his dusky parlour.

"Dick," said the dwarf, thrusting his head in at the door, "my pet, my pupil, the apple of my eye, hey, hey!"

"Oh, you're there, are you?" returned Mr. Swiveller; "*how* are you?"

"How's Dick?" retorted Quilp. "How's the cream of clerkship, eh?"

"Why, rather sour, sir," replied Mr. Swiveller. "Beginning to border upon cheesiness, in fact."

"What's the matter?" said the dwarf, advancing. "Has Sally proved unkind? 'Of all the girls that are so smart, there's none like——' eh, Dick!"

"Certainly not," replied Mr. Swiveller, eating his dinner with great gravity, "none like her. She's the sphinx of private life is Sally B."

"You're out of spirits," said Quilp, drawing up a chair. "What's the matter?"

"The law don't agree with me," returned Dick. "It isn't moist enough, and there's too much confinement. I have been thinking of running away."

"Bah!" said the dwarf. "Where would you run to, Dick?"

"I don't know," returned Mr. Swiveller. "Towards Highgate, I suppose. Perhaps the bells might strike up 'Turn again, Swiveller, Lord Mayor of London.' Whittington's name was Dick. I wish cats were scarcer."

Quilp looked at his companion with his eyes screwed up into a comical expression of curiosity, and patiently awaited his further explanation; upon which, however, Mr. Swiveller appeared in no hurry to enter, as he ate a very long dinner in profound silence, finally pushed away his plate, threw himself back into his chair, folded his arms, and stared ruefully at the fire, in which some ends of cigars were smoking on their own account, and sending up a fragrant odour.

"Perhaps you'd like a bit of cake," said Dick, at last, turning to the dwarf. "You're quite welcome to it. You ought to be, for it's of your making."

"What do you mean?" said Quilp.

Mr. Swiveller replied by taking from his pocket a small and very greasy parcel, slowly unfolding it, and displaying a little slab of plum-cake, extremely indigestible in appearance, and bordered with a paste of white sugar an inch and a half deep.

"What should you say this was?" demanded Mr. Swiveller.

"It looks like bride-cake," replied the dwarf, grinning.

"And whose should you say it was?" inquired Mr. Swiveller, rubbing the pastry against his nose with a dreadful calmness. "Whose?"

"Not——"

"Yes," said Dick, "the same. You needn't mention her name. There's no such name now. Her name is Cheggs now, Sophy Cheggs. Yet loved I as man never loved that hadn't wooden legs, and my heart, my heart is breaking for the love of Sophy Cheggs."

With this extemporary adaptation of a popular ballad to the distressing circumstances of his own case, Mr. Swiveller folded up the parcel again, beat it very flat between the palms of his hands, thrust it into his breast, buttoned his coat over it, and folded his arms upon the whole.

"Now, I hope you're satisfied, sir," said Dick; "and I hope Fred's satisfied. You went partners in the mischief, and I hope you like it. This is the triumph I was to have, is it? It's like the old country-dance of that name, where there are two gentlemen to one lady, and one has her, and the other hasn't, but comes limping up behind

to make out the figure. But it's destiny, and mine's a crusher!"

Disguising his secret joy in Mr. Swiveller's defeat, Daniel Quilp adopted the surest means of soothing him, by ringing the bell, and ordering in a supply of rosy wine (that is to say, of its usual representative), which he put about with great alacrity, calling upon Mr. Swiveller to pledge him in various toasts derisive of Cheggs and eulogistic of the happiness of single men. Such was their impression on Mr. Swiveller, coupled with the reflection that no man could oppose his destiny, that in a very short space of time his spirits rose surprisingly, and he was enabled to give the dwarf an account of the receipt of the cake, which, it appeared, had been brought to Bevis Marks by the two surviving Misses Wackles in person, and delivered at the office door with much giggling and joyfulness.

"Ha!" said Quilp. "It will be our turn to giggle soon. And that reminds me—you spoke of young Trent—where is he?"

Mr. Swiveller explained that his respectable friend had recently accepted a responsible situation in a locomotive gaming-house, and was at that time absent on a professional tour among the adventurous spirits of Great Britain.

"That's unfortunate," said the dwarf, "for I came, in fact, to ask you about him. A thought has occurred to me, Dick; your friend over the way——"

"Which friend?"

"In the first floor."

"Yes?"

"Your friend in the first floor, Dick, may know him."

"No, he don't," said Mr. Swiveller, shaking his head.

"Don't! No, because he has never seen him," rejoined Quilp; "but if we were to bring them together, who knows, Dick, but Fred, properly introduced, would serve his turn almost as well as little Nell or her grandfather—who knows but it might make the young fellow's fortune, and, through him, yours, eh?"

"Why, the fact is, you see," said Mr. Swiveller, "that they *have been* brought together."

"Have been!" cried the dwarf, looking suspiciously at his companion. "Through whose means?"

"Through mine," said Dick, slightly confused. "Didn't I mention it to you the last time you called over yonder?"

"You know you didn't," returned the dwarf.

"I believe you're right," said Dick. "No. I didn't, I recollect. Oh, yes, I brought 'em together that very day. It was Fred's suggestion."

"And what came of it?"

"Why, instead of my friend's bursting into tears when he knew who Fred was, embracing him kindly, and telling him that he was his grandfather, or his grandmother in disguise (which we fully expected), he flew into a tremendous passion; called him all manner of names; said it was in a great measure his fault that little Nell and the old gentleman had ever been brought to poverty; didn't hint at our taking anything to drink; and—and, in short, rather turned us out of the room than otherwise."

"That's strange," said the dwarf, musing.

"So we remarked to each other at the time," returned Dick coolly, "but quite true."

Quilp was plainly staggered by this intelligence, over which he brooded for some time in moody silence, often raising his eyes to Mr. Swiveller's face, and sharply scanning its expression. As he could read in it, however, no additional information, or anything to lead him to believe he had spoken falsely; and as Mr. Swiveller, left to his own meditations, sighed deeply, and was evidently growing maudlin on the subject of Mrs. Cheggs; the dwarf soon broke up the conference and took his departure, leaving the bereaved one to his melancholy ruminations.

"Have been brought together, eh?" said the dwarf, as he walked the streets alone. "My friend has stolen a march upon me. It led him to nothing, and therefore is no great matter, save in the intention. I'm glad he has lost his mistress. Ha, ha! The blockhead mustn't leave the law at present. I'm sure of him where he is, whenever I want him for my own purposes; and,

besides, he's a good unconscious spy on Brass, and tells, in his cups, all that he sees and hears. You're useful to me, Dick, and cost nothing but a little treating now and then. I am not sure that it may not be worth while, before long, to take credit with the stranger, Dick, by discovering your designs upon the child; but for the present we'll remain the best friends in the world, with your good leave."

Pursuing these thoughts, and gasping as he went along, after his own peculiar fashion, Mr. Quilp once more crossed the Thames, and shut himself up in his Bachelor's Hall, which, by reason of its newly-erected chimney depositing the smoke inside the room and carrying none of it off, was not quite so agreeable as more fastidious people might have desired. Such inconveniences, however, instead of disgusting the dwarf with his new abode, rather suited his humour; so, after dining luxuriously from the public-house, he lighted his pipe, and smoked against the chimney until nothing of him was visible through the mist but a pair of red and highly-inflamed eyes, with sometimes a dim vision of his head and face, as, in a violent fit of coughing, he slightly stirred the smoke, and scattered the heavy wreaths by which they were obscured. In the midst of this atmosphere, which must infallibly have smothered any other man, Mr. Quilp passed the evening with great cheerfulness, solacing himself all the time with the pipe and the case-bottle, and occasionally entertaining himself with a melodious howl, intended for a song, but bearing not the faintest resemblance to any scrap of any piece of music, vocal or instrumental, ever invented by man. Thus he amused himself until nearly midnight, when he turned into his hammock with the utmost satisfaction.

The first sound that met his ears in the morning—as he half opened his eyes and, finding himself so unusually near the ceiling, entertained a drowsy idea that he must have been transformed into a fly or a blue-bottle in the course of the night—was that of a stifled sobbing and weeping in the room. Peeping cautiously over the side of his hammock, he descried Mrs. Quilp, to whom, after contemplating her for some time in silence, he communicated a violent start by suddenly yelling out—

"Hollo!"

"Oh, Quilp!" cried his poor little wife, looking up. "How you frightened me!"

"I meant to, you jade," returned the dwarf. "What do you want here? I'm dead, ain't I?"

"Oh, please come home, do come home," said Mrs. Quilp, sobbing; "we'll never do so any more, Quilp; and after all it was only a mistake that grew out of our anxiety."

"Out of your anxiety," grinned the dwarf. "Yes, I know that—out of your anxiety for my death. I shall come home when I please, I tell you. I shall come home when I please, and go when I please. I'll be Will-o'-the-Wisp, now here, now there, dancing about you always, starting up when you least expect me, and keeping you in a constant state of restlessness and irritation. Will you begone?"

Mrs. Quilp durst only make a gesture of entreaty.

"I tell you no," cried the dwarf. "No. If you dare to come here again unless you're sent for, I'll keep watch-dogs in the yard that'll growl and bite—I'll have man-traps, cunningly altered and improved for catching women—I'll have spring-guns, that shall explode when you tread upon the wires, and blow you into little pieces. Will you go?"

"Do forgive me. Do come back," said his wife earnestly.

"No-o-o-o-o!" roared Quilp. "Not till my own good time, and then I'll return again as often as I choose, and be accountable to nobody for my goings or comings. You see the door there. Will you go?"

Mr. Quilp delivered this last command in such a very energetic voice, and, moreover, accompanied it with such a sudden gesture, indicative of an intention to spring out of his hammock, and, night-capped as he was, bear his wife home again through the public streets, that she sped away

like an arrow. Her worthy lord stretched his neck and eyes until she had crossed the yard, and then, not at all sorry to have had this opportunity of carrying his point, and asserting the sanctity of his castle, fell into an immoderate fit of laughter, and laid himself down to sleep again.

CHAPTER LI.

The bland and open-hearted proprietor of Bachelor's Hall slept on amidst the congenial accompaniments of rain, mud, dirt, damp, fog, and rats, until late in the day; when, summoning his valet Tom Scott to assist him to rise, and to prepare breakfast, he quitted his couch, and made his toilet. This duty performed, and his repast ended, he again betook himself to Bevis Marks.

This visit was not intended for Mr. Swiveller, but for his friend and employer Mr. Sampson Brass. Both gentlemen, however, were from home, nor was the life and light of law, Miss Sally, at her post either. The fact of their joint desertion of the office was made known to all comers by a scrap of paper in the handwriting of Mr. Swiveller, which was attached to the bell-handle, and which, giving the reader no clue to the time of day when it was first posted, furnished him with the rather vague and unsatisfactory information that that gentleman would "return in an hour."

"There's a servant, I suppose," said the dwarf, knocking at the house door. "She'll do."

After a sufficiently long interval, the door was opened, and a small voice immediately accosted him with, "Oh, please will you leave a card or message?"

"Eh?" said the dwarf, looking down (it was something quite new to him) upon the small servant.

To this the child, conducting her conversation as upon the occasion of her first interview with Mr. Swiveller, again replied, "Oh, please will you leave a card or message?"

"I'll write a note," said the dwarf, pushing past her into the office; "and mind your master has it directly he comes home." So Mr. Quilp climbed up to the top of a tall stool to write the note, and the small servant, carefully tutored for such emergencies, looked on with her eyes wide open, ready, if he so much as abstracted a wafer, to rush into the street and give the alarm to the police.

As Mr. Quilp folded his note (which was soon written, being a very short one) he encountered the gaze of the small servant. He looked at her long and earnestly.

"How are you?" said the dwarf, moistening a wafer with horrible grimaces.

The small servant, perhaps frightened by his looks, returned no audible reply; but it appeared from the motion of her lips that she was inwardly repeating the same form of expression concerning the note or message.

"Do they use you ill here? Is your mistress a tartar?" said Quilp, with a chuckle.

In reply to the last interrogation, the small servant, with a look of infinite cunning mingled with fear, screwed up her mouth very tight and round, and nodded violently.

Whether there was anything in the peculiar slyness of her action which fascinated Mr. Quilp, or anything in the expression of her features at the moment which attracted his attention for some other reason; or whether it merely occurred to him as a pleasant whim to stare the small servant out of countenance; certain it is, that he planted his elbows square and firmly on the desk, and squeezing up his cheeks with his hands, looked at her fixedly.

"Where do you come from?" he said, after a long pause, stroking his chin.

"I don't know."

"What's your name?"

"Nothing."

"Nonsense!" retorted Quilp. "What does your mistress call you when she wants you?"

"A little devil," said the child.

She added in the same breath, as if fearful of any further questioning, "But please will you leave a card or message?"

These unusual answers might naturally have provoked some more inquiries. Quilp, however, without uttering another word, withdrew his eyes from the small servant, stroked his chin more thoughtfully than before, and then, bending over the note as if to direct it with scrupulous and hairbreadth nicety, looked at her, covertly, but very narrowly, from under his bushy eyebrows. The result of this secret survey was that he shaded his face with his hands, and laughed slyly and noiselessly, until every vein in it was swollen almost to bursting. Pulling his hat over his brow to conceal his mirth and its effects, he tossed the letter to the child, and hastily withdrew.

Once in the street, moved by some secret impulse, he laughed, and held his sides, and laughed again, and tried to peer through the dusty area railings, as if to catch another glimpse of the child, until he was quite tired out. At last, he travelled back to the Wilderness, which was within rifle-shot of his bachelor retreat, and ordered tea in the wooden summer-house that afternoon for three persons; an invitation to Miss Sally Brass and her brother to partake of that entertainment at that place having been the object both of his journey and his note.

It was not precisely the kind of weather in which people usually take tea in summer-houses, far less in summer-houses in an advanced state of decay, and overlooking the slimy banks of a great river at low water. Nevertheless, it was in this choice retreat that Mr. Quilp ordered a cold collation to be prepared, and it was beneath its cracked and leaky roof that he, in due course of time, received Mr. Sampson and his sister Sally.

"You're fond of the beauties of nature," said Quilp, with a grin. "Is this charming, Brass? Is it unusual, unsophisticated, primitive?"

"It's delightful indeed, sir," replied the lawyer.

"Cool?" said Quilp.

"N-not particularly so, I think, sir," rejoined Brass, with his teeth chattering in his head.

"Perhaps a little damp and aguish?" said Quilp.

"Just damp enough to be cheerful, sir," rejoined Brass. "Nothing more, sir, nothing more."

"And Sally?" said the delighted dwarf. "Does *she* like it?"

"She'll like it better," returned the strong-minded lady, "when she has tea; so let us have it, and don't bother."

"Sweet Sally!" cried Quilp, extending his arms as if about to embrace her. "Gentle, charming, overwhelming Sally."

"He's a very remarkable man, indeed!" soliloquised Mr. Brass. "He's quite a troubadour, you know; quite a troubadour!"

These complimentary expressions were uttered in a somewhat absent and distracted manner; for the unfortunate lawyer, besides having a bad cold in his head, had got wet in coming, and would have willingly borne some pecuniary sacrifice if he could have shifted his present raw quarters to a warm room, and dried himself at a fire. Quilp, however, who, beyond the gratification of his demon whims, owed Sampson some acknowledgment of the part he had played in the mourning scene, of which he had been a hidden witness, marked these symptoms of uneasiness with a delight past all expression, and derived from them a secret joy which the costliest banquet could never have afforded him.

It is worthy of remark, too, as illustrating a little feature in the character of Miss Sally Brass, that, although on her own account she would have borne the discomforts of the Wilderness with a very ill grace, and would probably, indeed, have walked off before the tea appeared, she no sooner beheld the latent uneasiness and misery of her brother than she developed a grim satisfaction, and began to enjoy herself after her own manner. Though the wet came stealing through the roof, and trickling down upon their heads, Miss Brass uttered no complaint, but presided over the tea equipage with imperturbable composure. While Mr. Quilp, in his uproarious hospitality, seated himself upon an empty beer-barrel, vaunted

the place as the most beautiful and comfortable in the three kingdoms, and elevating his glass, drank to their next merry meeting in that jovial spot; and Mr. Brass, with the rain splashing down into his tea-cup, made a dismal attempt to pluck up his spirits and appear at his ease; and Tom Scott, who was in waiting at the door under an old umbrella, exulted in his agonies, and bade fair to split his sides with laughing; while all this was passing, Miss Sally Brass, unmindful of the wet which dripped down upon her own feminine person and fair apparel, sat placidly behind the tea-board, erect and grizzly, contemplating the unhappiness of her brother with a mind at ease, and content, in her amiable disregard of self, to sit there all night, witnessing the torments which his avaricious and grovelling nature compelled him to endure, and forbade him to resent. And this, it must be observed, or the illustration would be incomplete, although in a business point of view she had the strongest sympathy with Mr. Sampson, and would have been beyond measure indignant if he had thwarted their client in any one respect.

In the height of his boisterous merriment, Mr. Quilp, having on some pretence dismissed his attendant sprite for the moment, resumed his usual manner all at once, dismounted from his cask, and laid his hand upon the lawyer's sleeve.

"A word," said the dwarf, "before we go further. Sally, hark'ee for a minute."

Miss Sally drew closer, as if accustomed to business conferences with their host which were the better for not having ear.

"Business," said the dwarf, glancing from brother to sister. "Very private business. Lay your heads together when you're by yourselves."

"Certainly, sir," returned Brass, taking out his pocket-book and pencil. "I'll take down the heads, if you please, sir. Remarkable documents," added the lawyer, raising his eyes to the ceiling, "most remarkable documents. He states his points so clearly that it's a treat to have 'em! I don't know any Act of Parliament that's equal to him in clearness."

"I shall deprive you of a treat," said Quilp. "Put up your book. We don't want any documents. So. There's a lad named Kit——"

Miss Sally nodded, implying that she knew of him.

"Kit!" said Mr. Sampson. "Kit! Ha! I've heard the name before, but I don't exactly call to mind—I don't exactly——"

"You're as slow as a tortoise, and more thick-headed than a rhinoceros," returned his obliging client, with an impatient gesture.

"He's extremely pleasant!" cried the obsequious Sampson. "His acquaintance with natural history, too, is surprising. Quite a buffoon, quite!"

There is no doubt that Mr. Brass intended some compliment or other; and it has been argued with show of reason that he would have said Buffon, but made use of a superfluous vowel. Be this as it may, Quilp gave him no time for correction, as he performed that office himself by more than tapping him on the head with the handle of his umbrella.

"Don't let's have any wrangling," said Miss Sally, staying his hand. "I've showed you that I know him, and that's enough."

"She's always foremost!" said the dwarf, patting her on the back and looking contemptuously at Sampson. "I don't like Kit, Sally."

"Nor I," rejoined Miss Brass.

"Nor I," said Sampson.

"Why, that's right!" cried Quilp. "Half our work is done already. This Kit is one of your honest people; one of your fair characters; a prowling, prying hound; a hypocrite; a double-faced, white-livered, sneaking spy; a crouching cur to those that feed and coax him, and a barking, yelping dog to all besides."

"Fearfully eloquent!" cried Brass, with a sneeze. "Quite appalling!"

"Come to the point," said Miss Sally, "and don't talk so much."

"Right again!" exclaimed Quilp, with another contemptuous look at Sampson, "always foremost! I say, Sally, he is a yelping, insolent dog to all besides, and, most of all, to me. In short, I owe him a grudge."

"That's enough, sir," said Sampson.

"No, it's not enough, sir," sneered Quilp; "will you hear me out? Besides that I owe him a grudge on that account, he thwarts me at this minute, and stands between me and an end which might otherwise prove a golden one to us all. Apart from that, I repeat that he crosses my humour, and I hate him. Now, you know the lad, and can guess the rest. Devise your own means of putting him out of my way, and execute them. Shall it be done?"

"It shall, sir," said Sampson.

"Then give me your hand," retorted Quilp. "Sally, girl, yours. I rely as much, or more, on you than him. Tom Scott comes back. Lantern, pipes, more grog, and a jolly night of it!"

No other word was spoken, no other look exchanged, which had the slightest reference to this, the real occasion of their meeting. The trio were well accustomed to act together, and were linked to each other by ties of mutual interest and advantage, and nothing more was needed. Resuming his boisterous manner with the same ease with which he had thrown it off, Quilp was in an instant the same uproarious, reckless little savage he had been a few seconds before. It was ten o'clock at night before the amiable Sally supported her beloved and loving brother from the Wilderness, by which time he needed the utmost support her tender frame could render, his walk being from some unknown reason anything but steady, and his legs constantly doubling up in unexpected places.

Overpowered, notwithstanding his late prolonged slumbers, by the fatigues of the last few days, the dwarf lost no time in creeping to his dainty house, and was soon dreaming in his hammock. Leaving him to visions, in which, perhaps, the quiet figures we quitted in the old church porch were not without their share, be it our task to rejoin them as they sat and watched.

CHAPTER LII.

After a long time, the schoolmaster appeared at the wicket-gate of the churchyard, and hurried towards them, jingling in his hand, as he came along, a bundle of rusty keys. He was quite breathless with pleasure and haste when he reached the porch, and at first could only point towards the old building which the child had been contemplating so earnestly.

"You see those two old houses," he said at last.

"Yes, surely," replied Nell. "I have been looking at them nearly all the time you have been away."

"And you would have looked at them more curiously yet, if you could have guessed what I have to tell you," said her friend. "One of those houses is mine."

Without saying any more, or giving the child time to reply, the schoolmaster took her hand, and, his honest face quite radiant with exultation, led her to the place of which he spoke.

They stopped before its low arched door. After trying several of the keys in vain, the schoolmaster found one to fit the huge lock, which turned back, creaking, and admitted them into the house.

The room into which they turned was a vaulted chamber, once nobly ornamented by cunning architects, and still retaining, in its beautiful groined roof and rich stone tracery, choice remnants of its ancient splendour. Foliage carved in the stone, and emulating the mastery of Nature's hand, yet remained to tell how many times the leaves outside had come and gone, while it lived on unchanged. The broken figures supporting the burden of the chimney-piece, though mutilated, were still distinguishable for what they had been—far different from the dust without—and showed sadly by the empty hearth, like creatures who had outlived their kind, and mourned their own too slow decay.

In some old time—for even change was old in that old place—a wooden partition had been constructed in one part of the chamber to form a sleeping-closet, into which the light was admitted

at the same period by a rude window, or rather niche, cut in the solid wall. This screen, together with two seats in the broad chimney, had at some forgotten date been part of the church, or convent; for the oak, hastily appropriated to its present purpose, had been little altered from its former shape, and presented to the eye a pile of fragments of rich carving from old monkish stalls.

An open door leading to a small room or cell, dim with the light that came through leaves of ivy, completed the interior of this portion of the ruin. It was not quite destitute of furniture. A few strange chairs, whose arms and legs looked as though they had dwindled away with age; a table, the very spectre of its race; a great old chest that had once held records in the church, with other quaintly-fashioned domestic necessaries, and store of firewood for the winter, were scattered around, and gave evident tokens of its occupation as a dwelling-place at no very distant time.

The child looked around her, with that solemn feeling with which we contemplate the work of ages that have become but drops of water in the great ocean of eternity. The old man had followed them, but they were all three hushed for a space, and drew their breath softly, as if they feared to break the silence even by so slight a sound.

"It is a very beautiful place!" said the child, in a low voice.

"I almost feared you thought otherwise," returned the schoolmaster. "You shivered when we first came in, as if you felt it cold or gloomy."

"It was not that," said Nell, glancing round with a slight shudder. "Indeed, I cannot tell you what it was, but when I saw the outside, from the church porch, the same feeling came over me. It is its being so old and gray, perhaps."

"A peaceful place to live in, don't you think so?" said her friend.

"Oh, yes," rejoined the child, clasping her hands earnestly. "A quiet, happy place—a place to live and learn to die in!" She would have said more, but that the energy of her thoughts caused her voice to falter, and come in trembling whispers from her lips.

"A place to live, and learn to live, and gather health of mind and body in," said the schoolmaster; "for this old house is yours."

"Ours!" cried the child.

"Ay," returned the schoolmaster gaily, "for many a merry year to come, I hope. I shall be a close neighbour—only next door—but this house is yours."

Having now disburdened himself of his great surprise, the schoolmaster sat down, and drawing Nell to his side, told her how he had learned that that ancient tenement had been occupied for a very long time by an old person, nearly a hundred years of age, who kept the keys of the church, opened and closed it for the services, and showed it to strangers; how she had died not many weeks ago, and nobody had yet been found to fill the office; how, learning all this in an interview with the sexton, who was confined to his bed by rheumatism, he had been bold to make mention of his fellow-traveller, which had been so favourably received by that high authority, that he had taken courage, acting on his advice, to propound the matter to the clergyman. In a word, the result of his exertions was, that Nell and her grandfather were to be carried before the last-named gentleman next day; and, his approval of their conduct and appearance reserved as a matter of form, that they were already appointed to the vacant post.

"There's a small allowance of money," said the schoolmaster. "It is not much, but still enough to live upon in this retired spot. By clubbing our funds together, we shall do bravely; no fear of that."

"Heaven bless and prosper you!" sobbed the child.

"Amen, my dear," returned her friend cheerfully; "and all of us, as it will, and has, in leading us through sorrow and trouble to this tranquil life. But we must look at *my* house now. Come!"

They repaired to the other tenement, tried the rusty keys as before, at length found the right one, and opened the worm-eaten door. It led into a chamber, vaulted and old, like that from which they had come, but not so spacious, and

having only one other little room attached. It was not difficult to divine that the other house was of right the schoolmaster's, and that he had chosen for himself the least commodious, in his care and regard for them. Like the adjoining habitation, it held such old articles of furniture as were absolutely necessary, and had its stack of firewood.

To make these dwellings as habitable and full of comfort as they could was now their pleasant care. In a short time each had its cheerful fire glowing and crackling on the hearth, and reddening the pale old wall with a healthy blush. Nell, busily plying her needle, repaired the tattered window-hangings, drew together the rents that time had worn in the threadbare scraps of carpet, and made them whole and decent. The schoolmaster swept and smoothed the ground before the door, trimmed the long grass, trained the ivy and creeping plants which hung their drooping heads in melancholy neglect, and gave to the outer walls a cheery air of home. The old man, sometimes by his side and sometimes with the child, lent his aid to both, went here and there on little patient services, and was happy. Neighbours, too, as they came from work, proffered their help, or sent their children with such small presents or loans as the strangers needed most. It was a busy day; and night came on, and found them wondering that there was yet so much to do, and that it should be dark so soon.

They took their supper together, in the house which may be henceforth called the child's; and, when they had finished their meal, drew round the fire, and almost in whispers—their hearts were too quiet and glad for loud expression—discussed their future plans. Before they separated, the schoolmaster read some prayers aloud; and then, full of gratitude and happiness, they parted for the night.

At that silent hour, when her grandfather was sleeping peacefully in his bed, and every sound was hushed, the child lingered before the dying embers, and thought of her past fortunes as if they had been a dream and she only now awoke. The glare of the sinking flame, reflected in the oaken panels whose carved tops were dimly seen in the dusky roof—the aged walls, where strange shadows came and went with every flickering of the fire—the solemn presence, within, of that decay which falls on senseless things the most enduring in their nature, and without, and round about on every side of Death—filled her with deep and thoughtful feelings, but with none of terror or alarm. A change had been gradually stealing over her in the time of her loneliness and sorrow. With failing strength and heightening resolution there had sprung up a purified and altered mind; there had grown in her bosom blessed thoughts and hopes, which are the portion of few but the weak and drooping. There were none to see the frail, perishable figure, as it glided from the fire and leaned pensively at the open casement; none but the stars to look into the upturned face and read its history. The old church bell rang out the hour with a mournful sound, as if it had grown sad from so much communing with the dead, and unheeded warning to the living; the fallen leaves rustled; the grass stirred upon the graves; all else was still and sleeping.

Some of those dreamless sleepers lay close within the shadow of the church—touching the wall, as if they clung to it for comfort and protection. Others had chosen to lie beneath the changing shade of trees; others by the path, that footsteps might come near them; others among the graves of little children. Some had desired to rest beneath the very ground they had trodden in their daily walks; some, where the setting sun might shine upon their beds; some, where its light would fall upon them when it rose. Perhaps not one of the imprisoned souls had been able quite to separate itself in living thought from its old companion. If any had, it had still felt for it a love like that which captives have been known to bear towards the cell in which they have been long confined, and, even at parting, hung upon its narrow bounds affectionately.

It was long before the child closed the window, and approached her bed. Again something of the same sensation

as before—an involuntary chill, a momentary feeling akin to fear—but vanishing directly, and leaving no alarm behind. Again, too, dreams of the little scholar; of the roof opening, and a column of bright faces, rising far away into the sky, as she had seen in some old scriptural picture once, and looking down on her, asleep. It was a sweet and happy dream. The quiet spot outside seemed to remain the same, saving that there was music in the air, and a sound of angels' wings. After a time, the sisters came there, hand in hand, and stood among the graves. And then the dream grew dim and faded.

With the brightness and joy of morning came the renewal of yesterday's labours, the revival of its pleasant thoughts, the restoration of its energies, cheerfulness, and hope. They worked gaily in ordering and arranging their houses until noon, and then went to visit the clergyman.

He was a simple-hearted old gentleman, of a shrinking, subdued spirit, accustomed to retirement, and very little acquainted with the world, which he had left many years before to come and settle in that place. His wife had died in the house in which he still lived, and he had long since lost sight of any earthly cares or hopes beyond it.

He received them very kindly, and at once showed an interest in Nell, asking her name and age, her birthplace, the circumstances which had led her there, and so forth. The schoolmaster had already told her story. They had no other friends or home to leave, he said, and had come to share his fortunes. He loved the child as though she were his own.

"Well, well," said the clergyman. "Let it be as you desire. She is very young."

"Old in adversity and trial, sir," replied the schoolmaster.

"God help her. Let her rest, and forget them," said the old gentleman. "But an old church is a dull and gloomy place for one so young as you, my child."

"Oh, no, sir," returned Nell. "I have no such thoughts, indeed."

"I would rather see her dancing on the green at nights," said the old gentleman, laying his hand upon her head, and smiling sadly, "than have her sitting in the shadow of our mouldering arches. You must look to this, and see that her heart does not grow heavy among these solemn ruins. Your request is granted, friend."

After more kind words, they withdrew, and repaired to the child's house, where they were yet in conversation on their happy fortune, when another friend appeared.

This was a little old gentleman who lived in the parsonage-house, and had resided there (so they learned soon afterwards) ever since the death of the clergyman's wife, which had happened fifteen years before. He had been his college friend, and always his close companion; in the first shock of his grief he had come to console and comfort him, and from that time they had never parted company. The little old gentleman was the active spirit of the place—the adjuster of all differences, the promoter of all merry-makings, the dispenser of his friend's bounty, and of no small charity of his own besides; the universal mediator, comforter, and friend. None of the simple villagers had cared to ask his name, or, when they knew it, to store it in their memory. Perhaps from some vague rumour of his college honours, which had been whispered abroad on his first arrival, perhaps because he was an unmarried, unencumbered gentleman, he had been called the bachelor. The name pleased him, or suited him as well as any other, and the bachelor he had ever since remained. And the bachelor it was, it may be added, who with his own hands had laid in the stock of fuel which the wanderers had found in their new habitation.

The bachelor, then—to call him by his usual appellation—lifted the latch, showed his little round mild face for a moment at the door, and stepped into the room like one who was no stranger to it.

"You are Mr. Marton, the new schoolmaster?" he said, greeting Nell's kind friend.

"I am, sir."

"You come well recommended, and I am glad to see you. I should have been in the way yesterday, expecting you, but I rode across the country to carry a message from a sick mother to her daughter in service some miles off, and have but just now returned. This is our young church-keeper? You are not the less welcome, friend, for her sake, or for this old man's; nor the worse teacher for having learned humanity."

"She has been ill, sir, very lately," said the schoolmaster, in answer to the look with which their visitor regarded Nell when he had kissed her cheek.

"Yes, yes. I know she has," he rejoined. "There have been suffering and heartache here."

"Indeed there have, sir."

The little old gentleman glanced at the grandfather, and back again at the child, whose hand he took tenderly in his, and held.

"You will be happier here," he said; "we will try, at least, to make you so. You have made great improvements here already. Are they the work of your hands?"

"Yes, sir."

"We may make some others—not better in themselves, but with better means, perhaps," said the bachelor. "Let us see, now; let us see."

Nell accompanied him into the other little rooms, and over both the houses, in which he found various small comforts wanting, which he engaged to supply from a certain collection of odds and ends he had at home, and which must have been a very miscellaneous and extensive one, as it comprehended the most opposite articles imaginable. They all came, however, and came without loss of time; for the little old gentleman, disappearing for some five or ten minutes, presently returned, laden with old shelves, rugs, blankets, and other household gear, and followed by a boy bearing a similar load. These being cast on the floor in a promiscuous heap, yielded a quantity of occupation in arranging, erecting, and putting away; the superintendence of which task evidently afforded the old gentleman extreme delight, and engaged him for some time with great briskness and activity. When nothing more was left to be done, he charged the boy to run off and bring his schoolmates to be marshalled before their new master, and solemnly reviewed.

"As good a set of fellows, Marton, as you'd wish to see," he said, turning to the schoolmaster when the boy was gone; "but I don't let 'em know I think so. That wouldn't do at all."

The messenger soon returned at the head of a long row of urchins, great and small, who, being confronted by the bachelor at the house door, fell into various convulsions of politeness—clutching their hats and caps, squeezing them into the smallest possible dimensions, and making all manner of bows and scrapes, which the little old gentleman contemplated with excessive satisfaction, and expressed his approval of by a great many nods and smiles. Indeed, his approbation of the boys was by no means so scrupulously disguised as he had led the schoolmaster to suppose, inasmuch as it broke out in sundry loud whispers and confidential remarks which were perfectly audible to them every one.

"This first boy, schoolmaster," said the bachelor, "is John Owen; a lad of good parts, sir, and frank, honest temper; but too thoughtless, too playful, too light-headed by far. That boy, my good sir, would break his neck with pleasure, and deprive his parents of their chief comfort—and between ourselves, when you come to see him at hare and hounds, taking the fence and ditch by the finger-post, and sliding down the face of the little quarry, you'll never forget it. It's beautiful!"

John Owen having been thus rebuked, and being in perfect possession of the speech aside, the bachelor singled out another boy.

"Now, look at that lad, sir," said the bachelor. "You see that fellow? Richard Evans his name is, sir. An amazing boy to learn, blessed with a good memory, and a ready understanding, and, moreover, with a good voice and ear for psalm-singing, in which he is the best among us. Yet, sir, that boy will come to a bad end; he'll

never die in his bed; he's always falling asleep in sermon-time—and to tell you the truth, Mr. Marton, I always did the same at his age, and feel quite certain that it was natural to my constitution, and I couldn't help it."

This hopeful pupil edified by the above terrible reproval, the bachelor turned to another.

"But if we talk of examples to be shunned," said he, "if we come to boys that should be a warning and a beacon to all their fellows, here's the one, and I hope you won't spare him. This is the lad, sir; this one with the blue eyes and light hair. This is a swimmer, sir, this fellow—a diver, Lord save us! This is the boy, sir, who had a fancy for plunging into eighteen feet of water, with his clothes on, and bringing up a blind man's dog, who was being drowned by the weight of his chain and collar while his master stood wringing his hands upon the bank, bewailing the loss of his guide and friend. I sent the boy two guineas anonymously, sir," added the bachelor, in his peculiar whisper, "directly I heard of it; but never mention it on any account, for he hasn't the least idea that it came from me."

Havin disposed of this culprit, the bachelor turned to another, and from him to another, and so on through the whole array, laying, for their wholesome restriction within due bounds, the same cutting emphasis on such of their propensities as were dearest to his heart, and were unquestionably referable to his own precept and example. Thoroughly persuaded, in the end, that he had made them miserable by his severity, he dismissed them with a small present, and an admonition to walk quietly home, without any leapings, scufflings, or turnings out of the way; which injunction, he informed the schoolmaster in the same audible confidence, he did not think he could have obeyed when he was a boy, had his life depended on it.

Hailing these little tokens of the bachelor's disposition as so many assurances of his own welcome course from that time, the schoolmaster parted from him with a light heart and joyous spirits, and deemed himself one of the happiest men on earth. The windows of the two old houses were ruddy again, that night, with the reflection of the cheerful fires that burned within; and the bachelor and his friend, pausing to look upon them as they returned from their evening walk, spoke softly together of the beautiful child, and looked round upon the churchyard with a sigh.

CHAPTER LIII.

NELL was stirring early in the morning, and having discharged her household tasks, and put everything in order for the good schoolmaster (though sorely against his will, for he would have spared her the pains), took down, from its nail by the fireside, a little bundle of keys with which the bachelor had formally invested her on the previous day, and went out alone to visit the old church.

The sky was serene and bright, the air clear, perfumed with the fresh scent of newly-fallen leaves, and grateful to every sense. The neighbouring stream sparkled, and rolled onward with a tuneful sound; the dew glistened on the green mounds, like tears shed by good spirits over the dead.

Some young children sported among the tombs, and hid from each other, with laughing faces. They had an infant with them, and had laid it down asleep upon a child's grave, in a little bed of leaves. It was a new grave—the resting-place, perhaps, of some little creature, who, meek and patient in its illness, had often sat and watched them, and now seemed, to their minds, scarcely changed.

She drew near and asked one of them whose grave it was. The child answered that that was not its name; it was a garden—his brother's. It was greener, he said, than all the other gardens, and the birds loved it better because he had been used to feed them. When he had done speaking, he looked at her with a smile, and kneeling down and nestling for a moment with his cheek against the turf, bounded merrily away.

She passed the church, gazing upward at its old tower, went through the wicket-gate, and so into the village. The old sexton, leaning on a crutch, was taking the air at his cottage door, and gave her good-morrow.

"You are better?" said the child, stopping to speak with him.

"Ay, surely," returned the old man. "I'm thankful to say, much better."

"You will be quite well soon."

"With Heaven's leave, and a little patience. But come in, come in!"

The old man limped on before, and warning her of the downward step, which he achieved himself with no small difficulty, led the way into his little cottage.

"It is but one room, you see. There is another up above, but the stair has got harder to climb o' late years, and I never use it. I'm thinking of taking to it again, next summer, though."

The child wondered how a gray-headed man like him—one of his trade, too—could talk of time so easily. He saw her eyes wandering to the tools that hung upon the wall, and smiled.

"I warrant now," he said, "that you think all those are used in making graves?"

"Indeed, I wondered that you wanted so many."

"And well you might. I am a gardener. I dig the ground, and plant things that are to live and grow. My works don't all moulder away, and rot in the earth. You see that spade in the centre?"

"The very old one—so notched and worn? Yes."

"That's the sexton's spade, and it's a well-used one, as you see. We're healthy people here, but it has done a power of work. If it could speak now, that spade, it would tell you of many an unexpected job that it and I have done together; but I forget 'em, for my memory's a poor one. That's nothing new," he added hastily; "it always was."

"There are flowers and shrubs to speak to your other work," said the child.

"Oh, yes. And tall trees. But they are not so separated from the sexton's labours as you think."

"No!"

"Not in my mind, and recollection—such as it is," said the old man. "Indeed, they often help it. For say that I planted such a tree for such a man. There it stands, to remind me that he died. When I look at its broad shadow, and remember what it was in his time, it helps me to the age of my other work, and I can tell you pretty nearly when I made his grave."

"But it may remind you of one who is still alive," said the child.

"Of twenty that are dead, in connection with that one who lives, then," rejoined the old man; "wife, husband, parents, brothers, sisters, children, friends—a score at least. So it happens that the sexton's spade gets worn and battered. I shall need a new one—next summer."

The child looked quickly towards him, thinking that he jested with his age and infirmity; but the unconscious sexton was quite in earnest.

"Ah!" he said, after a brief silence. "People never learn. They never learn. It's only we who turn up the ground, where nothing grows and everything decays, who think of such things as these—who think of them properly, I mean. You have been into the church?"

"I am going there now," the child replied.

"There's an old well there," said the sexton, "right underneath the belfry—a deep, dark, echoing well. Forty years ago, you had only to let down the bucket till the first knot in the rope was free of the windlass and you heard it splashing in the cold, dull water. By little and little the water fell away, so that in ten year after that a second knot was made, and you must unwind so much rope, or the bucket swung tight and empty at the end. In ten years' time, the water fell again, and a third knot was made. In ten year more, the well dried up; and now, if you lower the bucket till your arms are tired, and let out nearly all the cord, you'll hear it, of a sudden, clanking and rattling on the ground below, with a sound of being so deep and so far down, that your heart leaps into

your mouth, and you start away as if you were falling in."

"A dreadful place to come on in the dark!" exclaimed the child, who had followed the old man's looks and words until she seemed to stand upon its brink.

"What is it but a grave?" said the sexton. "What else? And which of our old folks, knowing all this, thought, as the spring subsided, of their own failing strength and lessening life? Not one!"

"Are you very old yourself?" asked the child involuntarily.

"I shall be seventy-nine — next summer."

"You still work when you are well?"

"Work! To be sure. You shall see my gardens hereabout. Look at the window there. I made, and have kept, that plot of ground entirely with my own hands. By this time next year I shall hardly see the sky, the boughs will have grown so thick. I have my winter work at night besides."

He opened, as he spoke, a cupboard close to where he sat, and produced some miniature boxes, carved in a homely manner, and made of old wood.

"Some gentlefolks, who are fond of ancient days and what belongs to them," he said, "like to buy these keepsakes from our church and ruins. Sometimes I make them of scraps of oak that turn up here and there; sometimes of bits of coffins which the vaults have long preserved. See here—this is a little chest of the last kind, clasped at the edges with fragments of brass plates that had writing on 'em once, though it would be hard to read it now. I haven't many by me at this time of year, but these shelves will be full—next summer."

The child admired and praised his work, and shortly afterwards departed; thinking, as she went, how strange it was that this old man, drawing from his pursuits, and everything around him, one stern moral, never contemplated its application to himself; and, while he dwelled upon the uncertainty of human life, seemed both in word and deed to deem himself immortal. But her musings did not stop here, for she was wise enough to think that by a good and merciful adjustment this must be human nature, and that the old sexton, with his plans for next summer, was but a type of all mankind.

Full of these meditations, she reached the church. It was easy to find the key belonging to the outer door, for each was labelled on a scrap of yellow parchment. Its very turning in the lock awoke a hollow sound, and, when she entered with a faltering step, the echoes that it raised in closing made her start.

If the peace of the simple village had moved the child more strongly because of the dark and troubled ways that lay beyond, and through which she had journeyed with such failing feet, what was the deep impression of finding herself alone in that solemn building, where the very light, coming through sunken windows, seemed old and gray, and the air, redolent of earth and mould, seemed laden with decay, purified by time of all its grosser particles, and sighing through arch, and aisle, and clustered pillars, like the breath of ages gone! Here was the broken pavement, worn, so long ago, by pious feet, that Time, stealing on the pilgrims' steps, had trodden out their track, and left but crumbling stones. Here were the rotten beam, the sinking arch, the sapped and mouldering wall, the lowly trench of earth, the stately tomb on which no epitaph remained—all—marble, stone, iron, wood, and dust — one common monument of ruin. The best work and the worst, the plainest and the richest, the stateliest and the least imposing—both of Heaven's work and man's—all found one common level here, and told one common tale.

Some part of the edifice had been a baronial chapel, and here were effigies of warriors stretched upon their beds of stone with folded hands — cross-legged, those who had fought in the Holy Wars—girded with their swords, and cased in armour as they had lived. Some of these knights had their own weapons, helmets, coats of mail, hanging upon the walls hard by, and dangling from rusty hooks. Broken and dilapidated as they were, they yet retained their ancient form, and something of their ancient aspect. Thus violent deeds

live after men upon the earth, and traces of war and bloodshed will survive in mournful shapes long after those who worked the desolation are but atoms of earth themselves.

The child sat down, in this old, silent place, among the stark figures on the tombs—they made it more quiet there than elsewhere, to her fancy—and gazing round with a feeling of awe, tempered with a calm delight, felt that now she was happy and at rest. She took a Bible from the shelf and read; then, laying it down, thought of the summer days and the bright spring time that would come—of the rays of sun that would fall in aslant upon the sleeping forms—of the leaves that would flutter at the window, and play in glistening shadows on the pavement—of the songs of birds, and growth of buds and blossoms out of doors—of the sweet air that would steal in, and gently wave the tattered banners overhead. What if the spot awakened thoughts of death! Die who would, it would still remain the same; these sights and sounds would still go on as happily as ever. It would be no pain to sleep amidst them.

She left the chapel—very slowly, and often turning back to gaze again—and, coming to a low door, which plainly led into the tower, opened it, and climbed the winding stair in darkness; save where she looked down, through narrow loopholes, on the place she had left, or caught a glimmering vision of the dusty bells. At length she gained the end of the ascent and stood upon the turret top.

Oh, the glory of the sudden burst of light; the freshness of the fields and woods, stretching away on every side, and meeting the bright blue sky; the cattle grazing in the pasturage; the smoke, that, coming from among the trees, seemed to rise upwards from the green earth; the children yet at their gambols down below—all, everything, so beautiful and happy! It was like passing from death to life; it was drawing nearer heaven.

The children were gone when she emerged into the porch and locked the door. As she passed the schoolhouse she could hear the busy hum of voices. Her friend had begun his labours only on that day The noise grew louder, and, looking back, she saw the boys come trooping out and disperse themselves with merry shouts and play. "It's a good thing," thought the child; "I am very glad they pass the church." And then she stopped, to fancy how the noise would sound inside, and how gently it would seem to die away upon the ear.

Again that day, yes, twice again, she stole back to the old chapel, and in her former seat read from the same book, or indulged the same quiet train of thought. Even when it had grown dusk, and the shadows of coming night made it more solemn still, the child remained, like one rooted to the spot, and had no fear or thought of stirring.

They found her there, at last, and took her home. She looked pale but very happy, until they separated for the night; and then, as the poor schoolmaster stooped down to kiss her cheek, he thought he felt a tear upon his face.

CHAPTER LIV.

The bachelor, among his various occupations, found in the old church a constant source of interest and amusement. Taking that pride in it which men conceive for the wonders of their own little world, he had made its history his study; and many a summer day within its walls, and many a winter night beside the parsonage fire, had found the bachelor still poring over, and adding to, his goodly store of tale and legend.

As he was not one of those rough spirits who would strip fair Truth of every little shadowy vestment in which time and teeming fancies love to array her—and some of which become her pleasantly enough, serving, like the waters of her well, to add new graces to the charms they half conceal and half suggest, and to awaken interest and pursuit rather than languor and indifference—as, unlike this stern and obdurate class, he loved to see the goddess crowned with those garlands of wild flowers which tradition wreathes for her gentle wearing, and which are

often freshest in their homeliest shapes —he trod with a light step and bore with a light hand upon the dust of centuries, unwilling to demolish any of the airy shrines that had been raised above it, if any good feeling or affection of the human heart were hiding thereabouts. Thus, in the case of an ancient coffin of rough stone, supposed, for many generations, to contain the bones of a certain baron, who, after ravaging with cut, and thrust, and plunder, in foreign lands, came back with a penitent and sorrowing heart to die at home, but which had been lately shown by learned antiquaries to be no such thing, as the baron in question (so they contended) had died hard in battle, gnashing his teeth and cursing with his latest breath, the bachelor stoutly maintained that the old tale was the true one ; that the baron, repenting him of the evil, had done great charities, and meekly given up the ghost ; and that, if ever baron went to heaven, that baron was then at peace. In like manner, when the aforesaid antiquaries did argue and contend that a certain secret vault was not the tomb of a gray-haired lady, who had been hanged and drawn and quartered by glorious Queen Bess for succouring a wretched priest, who fainted of thirst and hunger at her door, the bachelor didsolemnly maintain, against all comers, that the church was hallowed by the said poor lady's ashes ; that her remains had been collected in the night from four of the city's gates, and thither in secret brought, and there deposited ; and the bachelor did further (being highly excited at such times) deny the glory of Queen Bess, and assert the immeasurably greater glory of the meanest woman in her realm who had a merciful and tender heart. As to the assertion that the flat stone near the door was not the grave of the miser who had disowned his only child, and left a sum of money to the church to buy a peal of bells, the bachelor did readily admit the same, and that the place had given birth to no such man. In a word, he would have had every stone and plate of brass, the monument only of deeds whose memory should survive. All others he was willing to forget. They might be buried in consecrated ground, but he would have had them buried deep, and never brought to light again.

It was from the lips of such a tutor that the child learned her easy task. Already impressed, beyond all telling, by the silent building and the peaceful beauty of the spot in which it stood—majestic age surrounded by perpetual youth—it seemed to her, when she heard these things, sacred to all goodness and virtue. It was another world, where sin and sorrow never came ; a tranquil place of rest, where nothing evil entered.

When the bachelor had given her, in connection with almost every tomb and flat gravestone, some history of its own, he took her down into the old crypt, now a mere dull vault, and showed her how it had been lighted up in the time of the monks, and how, amid lamps depending from the roof, and swinging censers exhaling scented odours, and habits glittering with gold and silver, and pictures, and precious stuffs, and jewels all flashing and glistening through the low arches, the chant of aged voices had been many a time heard there, at midnight, in old days, while hooded figures kneeled and prayed around, and told their rosaries of beads. Thence, he took her above ground again, and showed her, high up in the old walls, small galleries, where the nuns had been wont to glide along—dimly seen in their dark dresses so far off—or to pause like gloomy shadows, listening to the prayers. He showed her, too, how the warriors, whose figures rested on the tombs, had worn those rotting scraps of armour up above—how this had been a helmet, and that a shield, and that a gauntlet—and how they had wielded the great two-handed swords, and beaten men down with yonder iron mace. All that he told the child she treasured in her mind ; and sometimes, when she awoke at night from dreams of those old times, and, rising from her bed, looked out at the dark church, she almost hoped to see the windows lighted up, and hear the organ's swell and sound of voices on the rushing wind.

The old sexton soon got better, and was about again. From him the child

learned many other things, though of a different kind. He was not able to work, but one day there was a grave to be made, and he came to overlook the man who dug it. He was in a talkative mood, and the child, at first standing by his side, and afterwards sitting on the grass at his feet, with her thoughtful face raised towards his, began to converse with him.

Now, the man who did the sexton's duty was a little older than he, though much more active. But he was deaf; and when the sexton (who, peradventure, on a pinch, might have walked a mile with great difficulty in half a dozen hours) exchanged a remark with him about his work, the child could not help noticing that he did so with an impatient kind of pity for his infirmity, as if he were himself the strongest and heartiest man alive.

"I'm sorry to see there is this to do," said the child, when she approached. "I heard of no one having died."

"She lived in another hamlet, my dear," returned the sexton. "Three mile away."

"Was she young?"

"Ye—yes," said the sexton; "no more than sixty-four, I think. David, was she more than sixty-four?"

David, who was digging hard, heard nothing of the question. The sexton, as he could not reach to touch him with his crutch, and was too infirm to rise without assistance, called his attention by throwing a little mould upon his red nightcap.

"What's the matter now?" said David, looking up.

"How old was Becky Morgan?" asked the sexton.

"Becky Morgan?" repeated David.

"Yes," replied the sexton; adding in a half-compassionate, half-irritable tone, which the old man couldn't hear, "you're getting very deaf, Davy, very deaf, to be sure!"

The old man stopped in his work, and cleansing his spade with a piece of slate he had by him for the purpose—and scraping off, in the process, the essence of Heaven knows how many Becky Morgans—set himself to consider the subject.

"Let me think," quoth he. "I saw last night what they had put upon the coffin—was it seventy-nine?"

"No, no," said the sexton.

"Ah, yes, it was though," returned the old man, with a sigh. "For I remember thinking she was very near our age. Yes, it was seventy-nine."

"Are you sure you didn't mistake a figure, Davy?" asked the sexton, with signs of some emotion.

"What?" said the old man. "Say that again."

"He's very deaf. He's very deaf, indeed," cried the sexton petulantly. "Are you sure you're right about the figures?"

"Oh, quite," replied the old man. "Why not?"

"He's exceedingly deaf," muttered the sexton to himself. "I think he's getting foolish."

The child rather wondered what had led him to this belief, as, to say the truth, the old man seemed quite as sharp as he, and was infinitely more robust. As the sexton said nothing more just then, however, she forgot it for the time, and spoke again.

"You were telling me," she said, "about your gardening. Do you ever plant things here?"

"In the churchyard?" returned the sexton. "Not I."

"I have seen some flowers and little shrubs about," the child rejoined; "there are some over there, you see. I thought they were of your rearing, though indeed they grow but poorly."

"They grow as Heaven wills," said the old man; "and it kindly ordains that they shall never flourish here."

"I do not understand you."

"Why, this it is," said the sexton. "They mark the graves of those who had very tender, loving friends."

"I was sure they did!" the child exclaimed. "I am very glad to know they do!"

"Ay," returned the old man, "but stay. Look at them. See how they hang their heads, and droop, and wither. Do you guess the reason?"

"No," the child replied.

"Because the memory of those who lie below passes away so soon. At first they tend them, morning, noon, and night; they soon begin to come

less frequently — from once a day to once a week, from once a week to once a month; then, at long and uncertain intervals; then, not at all. Such tokens seldom flourish long. I have known the briefest summer flowers outlive them."

"I grieve to hear it," said the child.

"Ah! so say the gentlefolks who come down here to look about them," returned the old man, shaking his head; "but I say otherwise. 'It's a pretty custom you have in this part of the country,' they say to me sometimes, 'to plant the graves; but it's melancholy to see these things all withering or dead.' I crave their pardon and tell them that, as I take it, 'tis a good sign for the happiness of the living. And so it is. It's nature."

"Perhaps the mourners learn to look to the blue sky by day, and to the stars by night, and to think that the dead are there, and not in graves," said the child, in an earnest voice.

"Perhaps so," replied the old man doubtfully. "It may be."

"Whether it be as I believe it is, or no," thought the child, within herself, "I'll make this place *my* garden. It will be no harm at least to work here day by day, and pleasant thoughts will come of it, I am sure."

Her glowing cheek and moistened eye passed unnoticed by the sexton, who turned towards old David, and called him by his name. It was plain that Becky Morgan's age still troubled him; though why, the child could scarcely understand.

The second or third repetition of his name attracted the old man's attention. Pausing from his work, he leaned on his spade, and put his hand to his dull ear.

"Did you call?" he said.

"I have been thinking, Davy," replied the sexton, "that she," he pointed to the grave, "must have been a deal older than you or me."

"Seventy-nine," answered the old man, with a shake of the head; "I tell you that I saw it."

"Saw it?" replied the sexton; "ay, but, Davy, women don't always tell the truth about their age."

"That's true, indeed," said the other old man, with a sudden sparkle in his eye. "She might have been older."

"I'm sure she must have been. Why, only think how old she looked. You and I seemed but boys to her."

"She did look old," rejoined David. "You're right. She did look old."

"Call to mind how old she looked for many a long, long year, and say if she could be but seventy-nine at last—only our age," said the sexton.

"Five year older at the very least!" cried the other.

"Five!" retorted the sexton. "Ten. Good eighty-nine. I call to mind the time her daughter died. She was eighty-nine if she was a day, and tries to pass upon us now for ten year younger. Oh, human vanity!"

The other old man was not behindhand with some moral reflections on this fruitful theme, and both adduced a mass of evidence of such weight as to render it doubtful, not whether the deceased was of the age suggested, but whether she had not almost reached the patriarchal term of a hundred. When they had settled this question to their mutual satisfaction, the sexton, with his friend's assistance, rose to go.

"It's chilly, sitting here, and I must be careful—till the summer," he said, as he prepared to limp away.

"What?" asked old David.

"He's very deaf, poor fellow!" cried the sexton. "Good-bye!"

"Ah!" said old David, looking after him. "He's failing very fast. He ages every day."

And so they parted, each persuaded that the other had less life in him than himself, and both greatly consoled and comforted by the little fiction they had agreed upon respecting Becky Morgan, whose decease was no longer a precedent of uncomfortable application, and would be no business of theirs for half a score of years to come.

The child remained for some minutes watching the deaf old man as he threw out the earth with his shovel, and, often stopping to cough and fetch his breath, still muttered to himself, with a kind of sober chuckle, that the sexton was wearing fast. At length she turned away, and, walking thoughtfully through the churchyard, came

unexpectedly upon the schoolmaster, who was sitting on a green grave in the sun, reading.

"Nell here?" he said cheerfully, as he closed his book. "It does me good to see you in the air and light. I feared you were again in the church, where you so often are."

"Feared!" replied the child, sitting down beside him. "Is it not a good place?"

"Yes, yes," said the schoolmaster. "But you must be gay sometimes—nay, don't shake your head and smile so sadly."

"Not sadly, if you knew my heart. Do not look at me as if you thought me sorrowful. There is not a happier creature on earth than I am now."

Full of grateful tenderness, the child took his hand, and folded it between her own. "It's God's will!" she said, when they had been silent for some time.

"What?"

"All this," she rejoined; "all this about us. But which of us is sad now? You see that *I* am smiling."

"And so am I," said the schoolmaster; "smiling to think how often we shall laugh in the same place. Were you not talking yonder?"

"Yes," the child rejoined.

"Of something that has made you sorrowful?"

There was a long pause.

"What was it?" said the schoolmaster tenderly. "Come. Tell me what it was."

"I rather grieve—I *do* rather grieve to think," said the child, bursting into tears, "that those who die about us are so soon forgotten."

"And do you think," said the schoolmaster, marking the glance she had thrown around, "that an unvisited grave, a withered tree, a faded flower or two, are tokens of forgetfulness or cold neglect? Do you think there are no deeds, far away from here, in which these dead may be best remembered? Nell, Nell, there may be people busy in the world, at this instant, in whose good actions and good thoughts these very graves—neglected as they look to us—are the chief instruments."

"Tell me no more," said the child quickly. "Tell me no more. I feel I know it. How could *I* be unmindful of it, when I thought of you?"

"There is nothing," cried her friend, "no, nothing innocent or good, that dies, and is forgotten. Let us hold to that faith or none. An infant, a prattling child, dying in its cradle, will live again in the better thoughts of those who loved it, and will play its part through them in the redeeming actions of the world, though its body be burned to ashes or drowned in the deepest sea. There is not an angel added to the host of heaven but does its blessed work on earth in those that loved it here. Forgotten! oh, if the good deeds of human creatures could be traced to their source, how beautiful would even death appear; for how much charity, mercy, and purified affection would be seen to have their growth in dusty graves."

"Yes," said the child, "it is the truth; I know it is. Who should feel its force so much as I, in whom your little scholar lives again! Dear, dear, good friend, if you knew the comfort you have given me!"

The poor schoolmaster made her no answer, but bent over her in silence; for his heart was full.

They were yet seated in the same place, when the grandfather approached. Before they had spoken many words together, the church clock struck the hour of school, and their friend withdrew.

"A good man," said the grandfather, looking after him; "a kind man. Surely *he* will never harm us, Nell. We are safe here, at last, eh? We will never go away from here?"

The child shook her head and smiled.

"She needs rest," said the old man, patting her cheek; "too pale—too pale. She is not like what she was."

"When?" asked the child.

"Ha!" said the old man, "to be sure—when? How many weeks ago? Could I count them on my fingers? Let them rest though; they're better gone."

"Much better, dear," replied the child. "We will forget them; or, if we ever call them to mind, it shall be only as some uneasy dream that has passed away."

"Hush!" said the old man, motioning hastily to her with his hand and looking over his shoulder; "no more talk of the dream, and all the miseries it brought. There are no dreams here. 'Tis a quiet place, and they keep away. Let us never think about them, lest they should pursue us again. Sunken eyes and hollow cheeks — wet, cold, and famine—and horrors, before them all, that were even worse—we must forget such things if we would be tranquil here."

"Thank Heaven!" inwardly exclaimed the child, "for this most happy change!"

"I will be patient," said the old man, "humble, very thankful, and obedient, if you will let me stay. But do not hide from me; do not steal away alone; let me keep beside you. Indeed, I will be very true and faithful, Nell."

"I steal away alone! why, that," replied the child, with assumed gaiety, "would be a pleasant jest indeed. See here, dear grandfather, we'll make this place our garden — why not? It is a very good one—and to-morrow we'll begin, and work together, side by side."

"It is a brave thought!" cried her grandfather. "Mind, darling—we begin to-morrow!"

Who so delighted as the old man, when they next day began their labour? Who so unconscious of all associations connected with the spot as he? They plucked the long grass and nettles from the tombs, thinned the poor shrubs and roots, made the turf smooth, and cleared it of the leaves and weeds. They were yet in the ardour of their work when the child, raising her head from the ground over which she bent, observed that the bachelor was sitting on the stile close by, watching them in silence.

"A kind office," said the little gentleman, nodding to Nell as she curtsied to him. "Have you done all that this morning?"

"It is very little, sir," returned the child, with downcast eyes, "to what we mean to do."

"Good work, good work," said the bachelor. "But do you only labour at the graves of children and young people?"

"We shall come to the others in good time, sir," replied Nell, turning her head aside, and speaking softly.

It was a slight incident, and might have been design or accident, or the child's unconscious sympathy with youth. But it seemed to strike upon her grandfather, though he had not noticed it before. He looked in a hurried manner at the graves, then anxiously at the child, then pressed her to his side, and bade her stop to rest. Something he had long forgotten appeared to struggle faintly in his mind. It did not pass away, as weightier things had done; but came uppermost again, and yet again, and many times that day, and often afterwards. Once, while they were yet at work, the child, seeing that he often turned and looked uneasily at her, as though he were trying to resolve some painful doubts, or collect some scattered thoughts, urged him to tell the reason. But he said it was nothing — nothing — and, laying her head upon his arm, patted her fair cheek with his hand, and muttered that she grew stronger every day, and would be a woman soon.

CHAPTER LV.

From that time, there sprang up in the old man's mind a solicitude about the child which never slept or left him. There are chords in the human heart—strange, varying strings—which are only struck by accident; which will remain mute and senseless to appeals the most passionate and earnest, and respond at last to the slightest casual touch. In the most insensible or childish minds there is some train of reflection which art can seldom lead, or skill assist, but which will reveal itself, as great truths have done, by chance, and when the discoverer has the plainest end in view. From that time, the old man never for a moment forgot the weakness and devotion of the child; from the time of that slight incident, he, who had seen her toiling by his side through

so much difficulty and suffering, and had scarcely thought of her otherwise than as the partner of miseries which he felt severely in his own person, and deplored for his own sake at least as much as hers, awoke to a sense of what he owed her, and what those miseries had made her. Never, no, never once, in one unguarded moment from that time to the end, did any care for himself, any thought of his own comfort, any selfish consideration or regard, distract his thoughts from the gentle object of his love.

He would follow her up and down, waiting till she should tire and lean upon his arm—he would sit opposite to her in the chimney-corner, content to watch, and look, until she raised her head and smiled upon him as of old—he would discharge by stealth those household duties which tasked her powers too heavily—he would rise, in the cold dark nights, to listen to her breathing in her sleep, and sometimes crouch for hours by her bedside only to touch her hand. He who knows all can only know what hopes, and fears, and thoughts of deep affection were in that one disordered brain, and what a change had fallen on the poor old man.

Sometimes—weeks had crept on, then—the child, exhausted, though with little fatigue, would pass whole evenings on a couch beside the fire. At such times, the schoolmaster would bring in books, and read to her aloud; and seldom an evening passed but the bachelor came in, and took his turn of reading. The old man sat and listened—with little understanding for the words, but with his eyes fixed upon the child; and if she smiled or brightened with the story, he would say it was a good one, and conceive a fondness for the very book. When, in their evening talk, the bachelor told some tale that pleased her (as his tales were sure to do), the old man would painfully try to store it in his mind; nay, when the bachelor left them, he would sometimes slip out after him, and humbly beg that he would tell him such a part again, that he might learn to win a smile from Nell.

But these were rare occasions, happily; for the child yearned to be out of doors, and walking in her solemn garden. Parties, too, would come to see the church; and those who came, speaking to others of the child, sent more; so even at that season of the year they had visitors almost daily. The old man would follow them at a little distance through the building, listening to the voice he loved so well; and when the strangers left, and parted from Nell, he would mingle with them to catch up fragments of their conversation, or he would stand for the same purpose, with his gray head uncovered, at the gate as they passed through.

They always praised the child, her sense and beauty, and he was proud to hear them! But what was that, so often added, which wrung his heart, and made him sob and weep alone, in some dull corner? Alas! even careless strangers—they who had no feeling for her but the interest of the moment—they who would go away, and forget next week that such a being lived—even they saw it—even they pitied her—even they bade him good-day compassionately, and whispered as they passed.

The people of the village, too, of whom there was not one but grew to have a fondness for poor Nell; even among them there was the same feeling; a tenderness towards her—a compassionate regard for her, increasing every day. The very schoolboys, light-hearted and thoughtless as they were, even they cared for her. The roughest among them was sorry if he missed her in the usual place upon his way to school, and would turn out of the path to ask for her at the latticed window. If she were sitting in the church they perhaps might peep in softly at the open door; but they never spoke to her unless she rose and went to speak to them. Some feeling was abroad which raised the child above them all.

So, when Sunday came. They were all poor country people in the church, for the castle in which the old family had lived was an empty ruin, and there were none but humble folks for

seven miles around. There, as elsewhere, they had an interest in Nell. They would gather round her in the porch, before and after service; young children would cluster at her skirts; and aged men and women forsake their gossips, to give her kindly greeting. None of them, young or old, thought of passing the child without a friendly word. Many who came from three or four miles distant brought her little presents; the humblest and rudest had good wishes to bestow.

She had sought out the young children whom she first saw playing in the churchyard. One of these—he who had spoken of his brother—was her little favourite and friend, and often sat by her side in the church, or climbed with her to the tower-top. It was his delight to help her, or to fancy that he did so, and they soon became close companions.

It happened that, as she was reading in the old spot by herself one day, this child came running in with his eyes full of tears, and after holding her from him, and looking at her eagerly for a moment, clasped his little arms passionately about her neck.

"What now?" said Nell, soothing him. "What is the matter?"

"She is not one yet!" cried the boy, embracing her still more closely. "No, no. Not yet."

She looked at him wonderingly, and putting his hair back from his face, and kissing him, asked what he meant.

"You must not be one, dear Nell," cried the boy. "We can't see them. They never come to play with us, or talk to us. Be what you are. You are better so."

"I do not understand you," said the child. "Tell me what you mean?"

"Why, they say," replied the boy, looking up into her face, "that you will be an angel before the birds sing again. But you won't be, will you? Don't leave us, Nell, though the sky *is* bright. Do not leave us!"

The child dropped her head, and put her hands before her face.

"She cannot bear the thought!" cried the boy, exulting through his tears. "You will not go. You know how sorry we should be. Dear Nell, tell me that you'll stay amongst us. Oh! Pray, pray, tell me that you will."

The little creature folded his hands, and kneeled down at her feet.

"Only look at me, Nell," said the boy, "and tell me that you'll stop, and then I shall know that they are wrong, and will cry no more. Won't you say yes, Nell?"

Still the drooping head and hidden face, and the child quite silent—save for the sobs.

"After a time," pursued the boy, trying to draw away her hand, "the kind angels will be glad to think that you are not among them, and that you stayed here to be with us. Willy went away to join them; but if he had known how I should miss him in our little bed at night, he never would have left me, I am sure."

Yet the child could make him no answer, and sobbed as though her heart were bursting.

"Why would you go, dear Nell? I know you would not be happy when you heard that we were crying for your loss. They say that Willy is in heaven now, and that it's always summer there, and yet I'm sure he grieves when I lie down upon his garden bed, and he cannot turn to kiss me. But if you do go, Nell," said the boy, caressing her, and pressing his face to hers, "be fond of him for my sake. Tell him how I love him still, and how much I loved you; and when I think that you two are together, and are happy, I'll try to bear it, and never give you pain by doing wrong—indeed I never will!"

The child suffered him to move her hands, and put them round his neck. There was a tearful silence, but it was not long before she looked upon him with a smile, and promised him, in a very gentle, quiet voice, that she would stay, and be his friend, as long as Heaven would let her. He clapped his hands for joy, and thanked her many times; and, being charged to tell no person what had passed between them, gave her an earnest promise that he never would.

Nor did he, so far as the child could learn; but was her quiet companion in all her walks and musings, and

never again adverted to the theme, which he felt had given her pain, although he was unconscious of its cause. Something of distrust lingered about him still; for he would often come, even in the dark evenings, and call in a timid voice outside the door to know if she were safe within; and being answered yes, and bade to enter, would take his station on the low stool at her feet, and sit there patiently until they came to seek and take him home. Sure as the morning came, it found him lingering near the house to ask if she were well; and, morning, noon, or night, go where she would, he would forsake his playmates and his sports to bear her company.

"And a good little friend he is, too," said the old sexton to her once. "When the elder brother died—elder seems a strange word, for he was only seven years old—I remember this one took it sorely to heart."

The child thought of what the schoolmaster had told her, and felt how its truth was shadowed out even in this infant.

"It has given him something of a quiet way, I think," said the old man, "though for that he is merry enough at times. I'd wager now that you and he have been listening by the old well."

"Indeed we have not," the child replied. "I have been afraid to go near it; for I am not often down in that part of the church, and do not know the ground."

"Come down with me," said the old man. "I have known it from a boy. Come!"

They descended the narrow steps which led into the crypt, and paused among the gloomy arches, in a dim and murky spot.

"This is the place," said the old man. "Give me your hand while you throw back the cover, lest you should stumble and fall in. I am too old—I mean rheumatic—to stoop myself."

"A black and dreadful place!" exclaimed the child.

"Look in," said the old man, pointing downwards with his finger.

The child complied, and gazed down into the pit.

"It looks like a grave itself," said the old man.

"It does," replied the child.

"I have often had the fancy," said the sexton, "that it might have been dug at first to make the old place more gloomy, and the old monks more religious. It's to be closed up and built over."

The child still stood looking thoughtfully into the vault.

"We shall see," said the sexton, "on what gay heads other earth will have closed, when the light is shut out from here. God knows! They'll close it up next spring."

"The birds sing again in spring," thought the child, as she leaned at her casement window, and gazed at the declining sun. "Spring! a beautiful and happy time!"

CHAPTER LVI.

A DAY or two after the Quilp tea-party at the Wilderness, Mr. Swiveller walked into Sampson Brass's office at the usual hour, and being alone in that Temple of Probity, placed his hat upon the desk, and taking from his pocket a small parcel of black crape, applied himself to folding and pinning the same upon it, after the manner of a hatband. Having completed the construction of this appendage, he surveyed his work with great complacency, and put his hat on again—very much over one eye, to increase the mournfulness of the effect. These arrangements perfected to his entire satisfaction, he thrust his hands into his pockets, and walked up and down the office with measured steps.

"It has always been the same with me," said Mr. Swiveller, "always. 'Twas ever thus, from childhood's hour I've seen my fondest hopes decay; I never loved a tree or flower but 'twas the first to fade away; I never nursed a dear gazelle, to glad me with its soft black eye, but when it came to know me well, and love me, it was sure to marry a market-gardener."

Overpowered by these reflections, Mr. Swiveller stopped short at the

clients' chair, and flung himself into its open arms.

"And this," said Mr. Swiveller, with a kind of bantering composure, "is life, I believe. Oh, certainly. Why not! I'm quite satisfied. I shall wear," added Richard, taking off his hat again and looking hard at it, as if he were only deterred by pecuniary considerations from spurning it with his foot, "I shall wear this emblem of woman's perfidy, in remembrance of her with whom I shall never again thread the windings of the mazy; whom I shall never more pledge in the rosy; who, during the short remainder of my existence, will murder the balmy. Ha, ha, ha!"

It may be necessary to observe, lest there should appear any incongruity in the close of this soliloquy, that Mr. Swiveller did not wind up with a cheerful, hilarious laugh, which would have been undoubtedly at variance with his solemn reflections, but that, being in a theatrical mood, he merely achieved that performance which is designated in melodramas "laughing like a fiend"—for it seems that your fiends always laugh in syllables, and always in three syllables, never more nor less, which is a remarkable property in such gentry, and one worthy of remembrance.

The baleful sounds had hardly died away, and Mr. Swiveller was still sitting in a very grim state in the clients' chair, when there came a ring—or, if we may adopt the sound to his then humour, a knell—at the office bell. Opening the door with all speed, he beheld the expressive countenance of Mr. Chuckster, between whom and himself a fraternal greeting ensued.

"You're devilish early at this pestiferous old slaughter-house," said that gentleman, poising himself on one leg, and shaking the other in an easy manner.

"Rather," returned Dick.

"Rather!" retorted Mr. Chuckster, with that air of graceful trifling which so well became him. "*I* should think so. Why, my good feller, do you know what o'clock it is—half-past nine a.m. in the morning?"

"Won't you come in?" said Dick.

"All alone. Swiveller solus. 'Tis now the witching——'"

"'Hour of night!'"

"'When churchyards yawn,'"

"'And graves give up their dead.'"

At the end of this quotation in dialogue, each gentleman struck an attitude, and immediately subsiding into prose, walked into the office. Such morsels of enthusiasm are common among the Glorious Apollos, and were, indeed, the links that bound them together, and raised them above the cold, dull earth.

"Well, and how are you, my buck?" said Mr. Chuckster, taking a stool. "I was forced to come into the city upon some little private matters of my own, and couldn't pass the corner of the street without looking in; but upon my soul I didn't expect to find you. It is so everlastingly early."

Mr. Swiveller expressed his acknowledgments; and it appearing on further conversation that he was in good health, and that Mr. Chuckster was in the like enviable condition, both gentlemen, in compliance with a solemn custom of the ancient Brotherhood to which they belonged, joined in a fragment of the popular duet of "All's Well," with a long shake at the end.

"And what's the news?" said Richard.

"The town's as flat, my dear feller," replied Mr. Chuckster, "as the surface of a Dutch oven. There's no news. By the bye, that lodger of yours is a most extraordinary person. He quite eludes the most vigorous comprehension, you know. Never was such a feller!"

"What has he been doing now?" said Dick.

"By Jove, sir," returned Mr. Chuckster, taking out an oblong snuff-box, the lid whereof was ornamented with a fox's head curiously carved in brass, "that man is an unfathomable. Sir, that man has made friends with our articled clerk. There's no harm in him, but he is so amazingly slow and soft. Now, if he wanted a friend, why couldn't he have one that knew a thing or two, and could do him some good by his manners and conversation? I have my faults, sir——" said Mr. Chuckster.

"No, no," interposed Mr. Swiveller.

"Oh, yes, I have. I have my faults; no man knows his faults better than I know mine. But," said Mr. Chuckster, "I'm not meek. My worst enemies—every man has his enemies, sir, and I have mine—never accused me of being meek. And I tell you what, sir, if I hadn't more of these qualities that commonly endear man to man than our articled clerk has, I'd steal a Cheshire cheese, tie it round my neck, and drown myself. I'd die degraded, as I had lived. I would, upon my honour."

Mr. Chuckster paused, rapped the fox's head exactly on the nose with the knuckle of his forefinger, took a pinch of snuff, and looked steadily at Mr. Swiveller, as much as to say that if he thought he was going to sneeze, he would find himself mistaken.

"Not contented, sir," said Mr. Chuckster, "with making friends with Abel, he has cultivated the acquaintance of his father and mother. Since he came home from that wild-goose chase, he has been there—actually been there. He patronises young Snobby besides; you'll find, sir, that he'll be constantly coming backwards and forwards to this place; yet I don't suppose that beyond the common forms of civility, he has ever exchanged half a dozen words with *me*. Now, upon my soul, you know," said Mr. Chuckster, shaking his head gravely, as men are wont to do when they consider things are going a little too far, "this is altogether such a low-minded affair, that if I didn't feel for the governor, and know that he could never get on without me, I should be obliged to cut the connection. I should have no alternative."

Mr. Swiveller, who sat on another stool opposite to his friend, stirred the fire in an excess of sympathy, but said nothing.

"As to young Snob, sir," pursued Mr. Chuckster, with a prophetic look, "you'll find he'll turn out bad. In our profession we know something of human nature, and, take my word for it, that the feller that came back to work out that shilling will show himself one of these days in his true colours. He's a low thief, sir. He must be."

Mr. Chuckster being roused, would probably have pursued this subject further, and in more emphatic language, but for a tap at the door, which seeming to announce the arrival of somebody on business, caused him to assume a greater appearance of meekness than was perhaps quite consistent with his late declaration. Mr. Swiveller, hearing the same sound, caused his stool to revolve rapidly on one leg until it brought him to his desk, into which, having forgotten in the sudden flurry of his spirits to part with the poker, he thrust it, as he cried, "Come in!"

Who should present himself but that very Kit who had been the theme of Mr. Chuckster's wrath! Never did man pluck up his courage so quickly, or look so fierce, as Mr. Chuckster when he found it was he. Mr. Swiveller stared at him for a moment, and then leaping from his stool, and drawing out the poker from its place of concealment, performed the broadsword exercise with all the cuts and guards complete, in a species of frenzy.

"Is the gentleman at home?" said Kit, rather astonished by this uncommon reception.

Before Mr. Swiveller could make any reply, Mr. Chuckster took occasion to enter his indignant protest against this form of inquiry, which he held to be of a disrespectful and snobbish tendency, inasmuch as the inquirer, seeing two gentlemen then and there present, should have spoken of the other gentleman; or rather (for it was not impossible that the object of his search might be of inferior quality) should have mentioned his name, leaving it to his hearers to determine his degree as they thought proper. Mr. Chuckster likewise remarked that he had some reason to believe this form of address was personal to himself, and that he was not a man to be trifled with—as certain snobs (whom he did not more particularly mention or describe) might find to their cost.

"I mean the gentleman upstairs," said Kit, turning to Richard Swiveller. "Is he at home?"

"Why?" rejoined Dick.

"Because if he is, I have a letter for him."

"From whom?" said Dick.

"From Mr. Garland."

"Oh!" said Dick, with extreme politeness. "Then you may hand it over, sir. And if you're to wait for an answer, sir, you may wait in the passage, sir, which is an airy and well-ventilated apartment, sir."

"Thank you," returned Kit. "But I am to give it to himself, if you please."

The excessive audacity of this retort so overpowered Mr. Chuckster, and so moved his tender regard for his friend's honour, that he declared if he were not restrained by official considerations, he must certainly have annihilated Kit upon the spot; a resentment of the affront which he did consider, under the extraordinary circumstances of aggravation attending it, could not but have met with the proper sanction and approval of a jury of Englishmen, who, he had no doubt, would have returned a verdict of Justifiable Homicide, coupled with a high testimony to the morals and character of the Avenger. Mr. Swiveller, without being quite so hot upon the matter, was rather shamed by his friend's excitement, and not a little puzzled how to act (Kit being quite cool and good-humoured), when the single gentleman was heard to call violently down the stairs.

"Didn't I see somebody for me come in?" cried the lodger.

"Yes, sir," replied Dick. "Certainly, sir."

"Then where is he?" roared the single gentleman.

"He's here, sir," rejoined Mr. Swiveller. "Now, young man, don't you hear you're to go upstairs? Are you deaf?"

Kit did not appear to think it worth his while to enter into any altercation, but hurried off, and left the Glorious Apollos gazing at each other in silence.

"Didn't I tell you so?" said Mr. Chuckster. "What do you think of that?"

Mr. Swiveller being in the main a good-natured fellow, and not perceiving in the conduct of Kit any villainy of enormous magnitude, scarcely knew what answer to return. He was relieved from his perplexity, however, by the entrance of Mr. Sampson and his sister Sally, at sight of whom Mr. Chuckster precipitately retired.

Mr. Brass and his lovely companion appeared to have been holding a consultation over their temperate breakfast, upon some matter of great interest and importance. On the occasion of such conferences they generally appeared in the office some half an hour after their usual time, and in a very smiling state, as though their late plots and designs had tranquillised their minds, and shed a light upon their toilsome way. In the present instance, they seemed particularly gay; Miss Sally's aspect being of a most oily kind, and Mr. Brass rubbing his hands in an exceedingly jocose and light-hearted manner.

"Well, Mr. Richard," said Brass, "how are we this morning? Are we pretty fresh and cheerful, sir—eh, Mr. Richard?"

"Pretty well, sir," replied Dick.

"That's well," said Brass. "Ha, ha! We should be as gay as larks, Mr. Richard—why not? It's a pleasant world we live in, sir, a very pleasant world. There are bad people in it, Mr. Richard, but if there were no bad people there would be no good lawyers. Ha, ha! Any letters by the post this morning, Mr. Richard?"

Mr. Swiveller answered in the negative.

"Ha!" said Brass, "no matter. It there's little business to-day, there'll be more to-morrow. A contented spirit, Mr. Richard, is the sweetness of existence. Anybody been here, sir?"

"Only my friend," replied Dick. "'"May we ne'er want a——'"

"'"Friend,'" Brass chimed in quickly, "'"or a bottle to give him.' Ha, ha! That's the way the song runs, isn't it? A very good song, Mr. Richard, very good. I like the sentiment of it. Ha, ha! Your friend's the young man from Witherden's office, I think—yes—'May we ne'er want a——' Nobody else at all been, Mr. Richard?"

"Only somebody to the lodger," replied Mr. Swiveller.

"Oh, indeed!" cried Brass. "Somebody to the lodger, eh? Ha, ha! 'May we ne'er want a friend, or a——' Somebody to the lodger, eh, Mr. Richard?"

"Yes," said Dick, a little disconcerted by the excessive buoyancy of spirits