Nesbit Edith

Harding's luck

Эдит Несбит

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
TINKLER AND THE MOONFLOWER

Dickie lived at New Cross. At least the address was New Cross, but really the house where he lived was one of a row of horrid little houses built on the slope where once green fields ran down the hill to the river, and the old houses of the Deptford merchants stood stately in their pleasant gardens and fruitful orchards. All those good fields and happy gardens are built over now. It is as though some wicked giant had taken a big brush full of yellow ochre paint, and another full of mud color, and had painted out the green in streaks of dull yellow and filthy brown; and the brown is the roads and the yellow is the houses. Miles and miles and miles of them, and not a green thing to be seen except the cabbages in the greengrocers' shops, and here and there some poor trails of creeping-jenny drooping from a dirty window-sill. There is a little yard at the back of each house; this is called "the garden," and some of these show green – but they only show it to the houses' back windows. You cannot see it from the street. These gardens are green, because green is the color that most pleases and soothes men's eyes; and however you may shut people up between bars of yellow and mud color, and however hard you may make them work, and however little wage you may pay them for working, there will always be found among those people some men who are willing to work a little longer, and for no wages at all, so that they may have green things growing near them.

But there were no green things growing in the garden at the back of the house where Dickie lived with his aunt. There were stones and bones, and bits of brick, and dirty old dish-cloths matted together with grease and mud, worn-out broom-heads and broken shovels, a bottomless pail, and the mouldy remains of a hutch where once rabbits had lived. But that was a very long time ago, and Dickie had never seen the rabbits. A boy had brought a brown rabbit to school once, buttoned up inside his jacket, and he had let Dickie hold it in his hands for several minutes before the teacher detected its presence and shut it up in a locker till school should be over. So Dickie knew what rabbits were like. And he was fond of the hutch for the sake of what had once lived there.

And when his aunt sold the poor remains of the hutch to a man with a barrow who was ready to buy anything, and who took also the pails and the shovels, giving threepence for the lot, Dickie was almost as unhappy as though the hutch had really held a furry friend. And he hated the man who took the hutch away, all the more because there were empty rabbit-skins hanging sadly from the back of the barrow.

It is really with the going of that rabbit-hutch that this story begins. Because it was then that Dickie, having called his aunt a Beast, and hit at her with his little dirty fist, was well slapped and put out into the bereaved yard to "come to himself," as his aunt said. He threw himself down on the ground and cried and wriggled with misery and pain, and wished – ah, many things.

"Wot's the bloomin' row now?" the Man Next Door suddenly asked; "been hittin' of you?"

"They've took away the 'utch," said Dickie.

"Well, there warn't nothin' in it."

"I diden want it took away," wailed Dickie.

"Leaves more room," said the Man Next Door, leaning on his spade. It was Saturday afternoon and the next-door garden was one of the green ones. There were small grubby daffodils in it, and dirty-faced little primroses, and an arbor beside the water-butt, bare at this time of the year, but still a real arbor. And an elder-tree that in the hot weather had flat, white flowers on it big as tea-plates.

And a lilac-tree with brown buds on it. Beautiful. "Say, matey, just you chuck it! Chuck it, I say! How in thunder can I get on with my digging with you 'owlin' yer 'ead off?" inquired the Man Next Door. "You get up and peg along in an' arst your aunt if she'd be agreeable for me to do up her garden a bit. I could do it odd times. You'd like that."

"Not 'arf!" said Dickie, getting up.

"Come to yourself, eh?" sneered the aunt. "You mind, and let it be the last time you come your games with me, my beauty. You and your tantrums!"

Dickie said what it was necessary to say, and got back to the "garden."

"She says she ain't got no time to waste, an' if you 'ave she don't care what you does with it."

"There's a dirty mug you've got on you," said the Man Next Door, leaning over to give Dickie's face a rub with a handkerchief hardly cleaner. "Now I'll come over and make a start." He threw his leg over the fence. "You just peg about an' be busy pickin' up all them fancy articles, and nex' time your aunt goes to Buckingham Palace for the day we'll have a bonfire."

"Fifth o' November?" said Dickie, sitting down and beginning to draw to himself the rubbish that covered the ground.

"Fifth of anything you like, so long as *she* ain't about," said he, driving in the spade. "'Ard as any old door-step it is. Never mind, we'll turn it over, and we'll get some little seedses and some little plantses and we shan't know ourselves."

"I got a 'apenny," said Dickie.

"Well, I'll put one to it, and you leg 'long and buy seedses. That's wot you do."

Dickie went. He went slowly, because he was lame. And he was lame because his "aunt" had dropped him when he was a baby. She was not a nice woman, and I am glad to say that she goes out of this story almost at once. But she did keep Dickie when his father died, and she might have sent him to the work-house. For she was not really his aunt, but just the woman of the house where his father had lodged. It was good of her to keep Dickie, even if she wasn't very kind to him. And as that is all the good I can find to say about her, I will say no more. With his little crutch, made out of a worn-out broom cut down to his little height, he could manage quite well in spite of his lameness.

He found the corn-chandler's – a really charming shop that smelled like stables and had deep dusty bins where he would have liked to play. Above the bins were delightful little square-fronted drawers, labelled Rape, Hemp, Canary, Millet, Mustard, and so on; and above the drawers pictures of the kind of animals that were fed on the kind of things that the shop sold. Fat, oblong cows that had eaten Burley's Cattle Food, stout pillows of wool that Ovis's Sheep Spice had fed, and, brightest and best of all, an incredibly smooth-plumaged parrot, rainbow-colored, cocking a black eye bright with the intoxicating qualities of Perrokett's Artistic Bird Seed.

"Gimme," said Dickie, leaning against the counter and pointing a grimy thumb at the wonder – "gimme a penn'orth o' that there!"

"Got the penny?" the shopman asked carefully.

Dickie displayed it, parted with it, and came home nursing a paper bag full of rustling promises.

"Why," said the Man Next Door, "that ain't seeds. It's parrot food, that is."

"It said the Ar-something Bird Seed," said Dickie, downcast; "I thought it 'ud come into flowers like birds – same colors as wot the poll parrot was, dontcherknow?"

"And so it will like as not," said the Man Next Door comfortably. "I'll set it along this end soon's I've got it turned over. I lay it'll come up something pretty."

So the seed was sown. And the Man Next Door promised two more pennies later for *real* seed. Also he transplanted two of the primroses whose faces wanted washing.

It was a grand day for Dickie. He told the whole story of it that night when he went to bed to his only confidant, from whom he hid nothing. The confidant made no reply, but Dickie was sure this was not because the confidant didn't care about the story. The confidant was a blackened stick about five inches long, with little blackened bells to it like the bells on dogs' collars. Also a rather crooked

bit of something whitish and very hard, good to suck, or to stroke with your fingers, or to dig holes in the soap with. Dickie had no idea what it was. His father had given it to him in the hospital where Dickie was taken to say good-bye to him. Good-bye had to be said because of father having fallen off the scaffolding where he was at work and not getting better. "You stick to that," father had said, looking dreadfully clean in the strange bed among all those other clean beds; "it's yourn, your very own. My dad give it to me, and it belonged to his dad. Don't you let any one take it away. Some old lady told the old man it 'ud bring us luck. So long, old chap."

Dickie remembered every word of that speech, and he kept the treasure. There had been another thing with it, tied on with string. But Aunt Maud had found that, and taken it away "to take care of," and he had never seen it again. It was brassy, with a white stone and some sort of pattern on it. He had the treasure, and he had not the least idea what it was, with its bells that jangled such pretty music, and its white spike so hard and smooth. He did not know – but I know. It was a rattle – a baby's old-fashioned rattle – or, if you would rather call it that, a "coral and bells."

"And we shall 'ave the fairest flowers of hill and dale," said Dickie, whispering comfortably in his dirty sheets, "and greensward. Oh! Tinkler dear, 'twill indeed be a fair scene. The gayest colors of the rainbow amid the Ague Able green of fresh leaves. I do love the Man Next Door. He has indeed a 'art of gold."

That was how Dickie talked to his friend Tinkler. You know how he talked to his aunt and the Man Next Door. I wonder whether you know that most children can speak at least two languages, even if they have never had a foreign nurse or been to foreign climes – or whether you think that you are the only child who can do this.

Believe me, you are not. Parents and guardians would be surprised to learn that dear little Charlie has a language quite different from the one he uses to them – a language in which he talks to the cook and the housemaid. And yet another language – spoken with the real accent too – in which he converses with the boot-boy and the grooms.

Dickie, however, had learned his second language from books. The teacher at his school had given him six – "Children of the New Forest," "Quentin Durward," "Hereward the Wake," and three others – all paper-backed. They made a new world for Dickie. And since the people in books talked in this nice, if odd, way, he saw no reason why he should not – to a friend whom he could trust.

I hope you're not getting bored with all this.

You see, I must tell you a little about the kind of boy Dickie was and the kind of way he lived, or you won't understand his adventures. And he had adventures – no end of adventures – as you will see presently.

Dickie woke, gay as the spring sun that was trying to look in at him through his grimy windows.

"Perhaps he'll do some more to the garden to-day!" he said, and got up very quickly.

He got up in the dirty, comfortless room and dressed himself. But in the evening he was undressed by kind, clean hands, and washed in a big bath half-full of hot, silvery water, with soap that smelled like the timber-yard at the end of the street. Because, going along to school, with his silly little head full of Artistic Bird Seeds and flowers rainbow-colored, he had let his crutch slip on a banana-skin and had tumbled down, and a butcher's cart had gone over his poor lame foot. So they took the hurt foot to the hospital, and of course he had to go with it, and the hospital was much more like the heaven he read of in his books than anything he had ever come across before.

He noticed that the nurses and the doctors spoke in the kind of words that he had found in his books, and in a voice that he had not found anywhere; so when on the second day a round-faced, smiling lady in a white cap said, "Well, Tommy, and how are we to-day?" he replied —

"My name is far from being Tommy, and I am in Lux Ury and Af Fluence, I thank you, gracious lady."

At which the lady laughed and pinched his cheek.

When she grew to know him better, and found out where he had learned to talk like that, she produced more books. And from them he learned more new words. They were very nice to him at the hospital, but when they sent him home they put his lame foot into a thick boot with a horrid, clumpy sole and iron things that went up his leg.

His aunt and her friends said, "How kind!" but Dickie hated it. The boys at school made game of it – they had got used to the crutch – and that was worse than being called "Old Dot-and-go-one," which was what Dickie had got used to – so used that it seemed almost like a pet name.

And on that first night of his return he found that he had been robbed. They had taken his Tinkler from the safe corner in his bed where the ticking was broken, and there was a soft flock nest for a boy's best friend.

He knew better than to ask what had become of it. Instead he searched and searched the house in all its five rooms. But he never found Tinkler.

Instead he found next day, when his aunt had gone out shopping, a little square of cardboard at the back of the dresser drawer, among the dirty dusters and clothes pegs and string and corks and novelettes.

It was a pawn-ticket – "Rattle. One shilling."

Dickie knew all about pawn-tickets. You, of course, don't. Well, ask some grown-up person to explain; I haven't time. I want to get on with the story.

Until he had found that ticket he had not been able to think of anything else. He had not even cared to think about his garden and wonder whether the Artistic Bird Seeds had come up parrot-colored. He had been a very long time in the hospital, and it was August now. And the nurses had assured him that the seeds must be up long ago – he would find everything flowering, you see if he didn't.

And now he went out to look. There was a tangle of green growth at the end of the garden, and the next garden was full of weeds. For the Man Next Door had gone off to look for work down Ashford way, where the hop-gardens are, and the house was to let.

A few poor little pink and yellow flowers showed stunted among the green where he had sowed the Artistic Bird Seed. And, towering high above everything else – oh, three times as high as Dickie himself – there was a flower – a great flower like a sunflower, only white.

"Why," said Dickie, "it's as big as a dinner-plate."

It was.

It stood up, beautiful and stately, and turned its cream-white face towards the sun.

"The stalk's like a little tree," said Dickie; and so it was.

It had great drooping leaves, and a dozen smaller white flowers stood out below it on long stalks, thinner than that needed to support the moonflower itself.

"It *is* a moonflower, of course," he said, "if the other kind's sunflowers. I love it! I love it! I love it!"

He did not allow himself much time for loving it, however; for he had business in hand. He had, somehow or other, to get a shilling. Because without a shilling he could not exchange that square of cardboard with "Rattle" on it for his one friend, Tinkler. And with the shilling he could. (This is part of the dismal magic of pawn-tickets which some grown-up will kindly explain to you.)

"I can't get money by the sweat of my brow," said Dickie to himself; "nobody would let me run their errands when they could get a boy with both legs to do them. Not likely. I wish I'd got something I could sell."

He looked round the yard – dirtier and nastier than ever now in the parts that the Man Next Door had not had time to dig. There was certainly nothing there that any one would want to buy, especially now the rabbit-hutch was gone. Except.. why, of course – the moonflowers!

He got the old worn-down knife out of the bowl on the back kitchen sink, where it nestled among potato peelings like a flower among foliage, and carefully cut half a dozen of the smaller

flowers. Then he limped up to New Cross Station, and stood outside, leaning on his crutch, and holding out the flowers to the people who came crowding out of the station after the arrival of each train – thick, black crowds of tired people, in too great a hurry to get home to their teas to care much about him or his flowers. Everybody glanced at them, for they were wonderful flowers, as white as water-lilies, only flat – the real sunflower shape – and their centres were of the purest yellow gold color.

"Pretty, ain't they?" one black-coated person would say to another. And the other would reply —

"No. Yes. I dunno! Hurry up, can't you?"

It was no good. Dickie was tired, and the flowers were beginning to droop. He turned to go home, when a sudden thought brought the blood to his face. He turned again quickly and went straight to the pawnbroker's. You may be quite sure he had learned the address on the card by heart.

He went boldly into the shop, which had three handsome gold balls hanging out above its door, and in its window all sorts of pretty things – rings, and chains, and brooches, and watches, and china, and silk handkerchiefs, and concertinas.

"Well, young man," said the stout gentleman behind the counter, "what can we do for you?"

"I want to pawn my moonflowers," said Dickie.

The stout gentleman roared with laughter, and slapped a stout leg with a stout hand.

"Well, that's a good 'un!" he said, "as good a one as ever I heard. Why, you little duffer, they'd be dead long before you came back to redeem them, that's certain."

"You'd have them while they were alive, you know," said Dickie gently.

"What are they? Don't seem up to much. Though I don't know that I ever saw a flower just like them, come to think of it," said the pawnbroker, who lived in a neat villa at Brockley and went in for gardening in a gentlemanly, you-needn't-suppose-I-can't-afford-a-real-gardener-if-I-like sort of way.

"They're moonflowers," said Dickie, "and I want to pawn them and then get something else out with the money."

"Got the ticket?" said the gentleman, cleverly seeing that he meant "get out of pawn."

"Yes," said Dickie; "and it's my own Tinkler that my daddy gave me before he died, and my aunt Missa propagated it when I was in hospital."

The man looked carefully at the card.

"All right," he said at last; "hand over the flowers. They are not so bad," he added, more willing to prize them now that they were his (things do look different when they are your own, don't they?). "Here, Humphreys, put these in a jug of water till I go home. And get this out."

A pale young man in spectacles appeared from a sort of dark cave at the back of the shop, took flowers and ticket, and was swallowed up again in the darkness of the cave.

"Oh, thank you!" said Dickie fervently. "I shall live but to repay your bounteous gen'rosity."

"None of your cheek," said the pawnbroker, reddening, and there was an awkward pause.

"It's not cheek; I meant it," said Dickie at last, speaking very earnestly. "You'll see, some of these days. I read an interesting Nar Rataive about a Lion the King of Beasts and a Mouse, that small and Ty Morous animal, which if you have not heard it I will now Pur seed to relite."

"You're a rum little kid, I don't think," said the man. "Where do you learn such talk?"

"It's the wye they talk in books," said Dickie, suddenly returning to the language of his aunt. "You bein' a toff I thought you'd unnerstand. My mistike. No 'fense."

"Mean to say you can talk like a book when you like, and cut it off short like that?"

"I can Con-vers like Lords and Lydies," said Dickie, in the accents of the gutter, "and your noble benefacteriness made me seek to express my feelinks with the best words at me Command."

"Fond of books?"

"I believe you," said Dickie, and there were no more awkward pauses.

When the pale young man came back with something wrapped in a bit of clean rag, he said a whispered word or two to the pawnbroker, who unrolled the rag and looked closely at the rattle.

"So it is," he said, "and it's a beauty too, let alone anything else."

"Isn't he?" said Dickie, touched by this praise of his treasured Tinkler.

"I've got something else here that's got the same crest as your rattle."

"Crest?" said Dickie; "isn't that what you wear on your helmet in the heat and press of the Tower Nament?"

The pawnbroker explained that crests no longer live exclusively on helmets, but on all sorts of odd things. And the queer little animal, drawn in fine scratches on the side of the rattle, was, it seemed, a crest.

"Here, Humphreys," he added, "give it a rub up and bring that seal here."

The pale young man did something to Tinkler with some pinky powder and a brush and a wash-leather, while his master fitted together the two halves of a broken white cornelian.

"It came out of a seal," he said, "and I don't mind making you a present of it."

"Oh!" said Dickie, "you are a real rightern." And he rested his crutch against the counter expressly to clasp his hands in ecstasy as boys in books did.

"My young man shall stick it together with cement," the pawnbroker went on, "and put it in a little box. Don't you take it out till to-morrow and it'll be stuck fast. Only don't go trying to seal with it, or the sealing-wax will melt the cement. It'll bring you luck, I shouldn't wonder."

(It did; and such luck as the kind pawnbroker never dreamed of. But that comes further on in the story.)

Dickie left the shop without his moonflowers, indeed, but with his Tinkler now whitely shining, and declared to be "real silver, and mind you take care of it, my lad," his white cornelian seal carefully packed in a strong little cardboard box with metal corners. Also a broken-backed copy of "Ingoldsby Legends" and one of "Mrs. Markham's English History," which had no back at all. "You must go on trying to improve your mind," said the pawnbroker fussily. He was very pleased with himself for having been so kind. "And come back and see me – say next month."

"I will," said Dickie. "A thousand blessings from a grateful heart. I will come back. I say, you are good! Thank you, thank you – I will come back next month, and tell you everything I have learned from the Perru Sal of your books."

"Perusal," said the pawnbroker – "that's the way to pernounce it. Good-bye, my man, and next month."

But next month found Dickie in a very different place from the pawnbroker's shop, and with a very different person from the pawnbroker who in his rural retirement at Brockley gardened in such a gentlemanly way.

Dickie went home – his aunt was still out. His books told him that treasure is best hidden under loose boards, unless of course your house has a secret panel, which his had not. There was a loose board in his room, where the man "saw to" the gas. He got it up, and pushed his treasures as far in as he could – along the rough, crumbly surface of the lath and plaster.

Not a moment too soon. For before the board was coaxed quite back into its place the voice of the aunt screamed up.

"Come along down, can't you? I can hear you pounding about up there. Come along down and fetch me a ha'porth o' wood – I can't get the kettle to boil without a fire, can I?"

When Dickie came down his aunt slightly slapped him, and he took the halfpenny and limped off obediently.

It was a very long time indeed before he came back. Because before he got to the shop with no window to it, but only shutters that were put up at night, where the wood and coal were sold, he saw a Punch and Judy show. He had never seen one before, and it interested him extremely. He longed to see it unpack itself and display its wonders, and he followed it through more streets than he knew;

and when he found that it was not going to unpack at all, but was just going home to its bed in an old coach-house, he remembered the fire-wood; and the halfpenny clutched tight and close in his hand seemed to reproach him warmly.

He looked about him, and knew that he did not at all know where he was. There was a tall, thin, ragged man lounging against a stable door in the yard where the Punch and Judy show lived. He took his clay pipe out of his mouth to say —

"What's up, matey? Lost your way?"

Dickie explained.

"It's Lavender Terrace where I live," he ended – "Lavender Terrace, Rosemary Street, Deptford."

"I'm going that way myself," said the man, getting away from the wall. "We'll go back by the boat if you like. Ever been on the boat?"

"No," said Dickie.

"Like to?"

"Don't mind if I do," said Dickie.

It was very pleasant with the steamboat going along in such a hurry, pushing the water out of the way, and puffing and blowing, and something beating inside it like a giant's heart. The wind blew freshly, and the ragged man found a sheltered corner behind the funnel. It was so sheltered, and the wind had been so strong that Dickie felt sleepy. When he said, "'Ave I bin asleep?" the steamer was stopping at a pier at a strange place with trees.

"Here we are!" said the man. "'Ave you been asleep? Not 'alf! Stir yourself, my man; we get off here."

"Is this Deptford?" Dickie asked. And the people shoving and crushing to get off the steamer laughed when he said it.

"Not exackly," said the man, "but it's all right. This 'ere's where we get off. You ain't had yer tea yet, my boy."

It was the most glorious tea Dickie had ever imagined. Fried eggs and bacon – he had one egg and the man had three – bread and butter – and if the bread was thick, so was the butter – and as many cups of tea as you liked to say thank you for. When it was over the man asked Dickie if he could walk a little way, and when Dickie said he could they set out in the most friendly way side by side.

"I like it very much, and thank you kindly," said Dickie presently. "And the tea and all. An' the egg. And this is the prettiest place ever I see. But I ought to be getting 'ome. I shall catch it a fair treat as it is. She was waitin' for the wood to boil the kettle when I come out."

"Mother?"

"Aunt. Not me real aunt. Only I calls her that."

"She any good?"

"Ain't bad when she's in a good temper."

"That ain't what she'll be in when you gets back. Seems to me you've gone and done it, mate. Why, it's hours and hours since you and me got acquainted. Look! the sun's just going."

It was, over trees more beautiful than anything Dickie had ever seen, for they were now in a country road, with green hedges and green grass growing beside it, in which little round-faced flowers grew – daisies they were – even Dickie knew that.

"I got to stick it," said Dickie sadly. "I'd best be getting home."

"I wouldn't go 'ome, not if I was you," said the man. "I'd go out and see the world a bit, I would."

"What – me?" said Dickie.

"Why not? Come, I'll make you a fair offer. Ye come alonger me an' see life! I'm a-goin' to tramp as far as Brighton and back, all alongside the sea. Ever seed the sea?"

"No," said Dickie. "Oh, no – no, I never."

"Well, you come alonger me. I ain't 'it yer, have I, like what yer aunt do? I give yer a ride in a pleasure boat, only you went to sleep, and I give you a tea fit for a hemperor. Ain't I?"

"You 'ave that," said Dickie.

"Well, that'll show you the sort of man I am. So now I make you a fair offer. You come longer me, and be my little 'un, and I'll be your daddy, and a better dad, I lay, nor if I'd been born so. What do you say, matey?"

The man's manner was so kind and hearty, the whole adventure was so wonderful and new..

"Is it country where you going?" said Dickie, looking at the green hedge.

"All the way, pretty near," said the man. "We'll tramp it, taking it easy, all round the coast, where gents go for their outings. They've always got a bit to spare then. I lay you'll get some color in them cheeks o' yours. They're like putty now. Come, now. What you say? Is it a bargain?"

"It's very kind of you," said Dickie, "but what call you got to do it? It'll cost a lot – my victuals, I mean. What call you got to do it?"

The man scratched his head and hesitated. Then he looked up at the sky and then down at the road – they were resting on a heap of stones.

At last he said, "You're a sharp lad, you are – bloomin' sharp. Well, I won't deceive you, matey. I want company. Tramping alone ain't no beano to me. An' as I gets my living by the sweat of charitable ladies an' gents it don't do no harm to 'ave a little nipper alongside. They comes down 'andsomer if there's a nipper. An' I like nippers. Some blokes don't, but I do."

Dickie felt that this was true. But – "We'll be beggars, you mean?" he said doubtfully.

"Oh, don't call names," said the man; "we'll take the road, and if kind people gives us a helping hand, well, so much the better for all parties, if wot they learned me at Sunday-school's any good. Well, there it is. Take it or leave it."

The sun shot long golden beams through the gaps in the hedge. A bird paused in its flight on a branch quite close and clung there swaying. A real live bird. Dickie thought of the kitchen at home, the lamp that smoked, the dirty table, the fender full of ashes and dirty paper, the dry bread that tasted of mice, and the water out of the broken earthenware cup. That would be his breakfast, when he had gone to bed crying after his aunt had slapped him.

"I'll come," said he, "and thank you kindly."

"Mind you," said the man carefully, "this ain't no kidnapping. I ain't 'ticed you away. You come on your own free wish, eh?"

"Oh, yes."

"Can you write?"

"Yes," said Dickie, "if I got a pen."

"I got a pencil – hold on a bit." He took out of his pocket a new envelope, a new sheet of paper, and a new pencil ready sharpened by machinery. It almost looked, Dickie thought, as though he had brought them out for some special purpose. Perhaps he had.

"Now," said the man, "you take an' write – make it flat agin the sole of me boot." He lay face downward on the road and turned up his boot, as though boots were the most natural writing-desks in the world.

"Now write what I say: 'Mr. Beale. Dear Sir. Will you please take me on tramp with you? I 'ave no father nor yet mother to be uneasy' (Can you spell 'uneasy'? That's right – you *are* a scholar!), 'an' I asks you let me come alonger you.' (Got that? All right, I'll stop a bit till you catch up. Then you say) 'If you take me along I promise to give you all what I earns or gets anyhow, and be a good boy, and do what you say. And I shall be very glad if you will. Your obedient servant – ' What's your name, eh?"

"Dickie Harding."

"Get it wrote down, then. Done? I'm glad I wasn't born a table to be wrote on. Don't it make yer legs stiff, neither!"

He rolled over, took the paper and read it slowly and with difficulty. Then he folded it and put it in his pocket.

"Now we're square," he said. "That'll stand true and legal in any police-court in England, that will. And don't you forget it."

To the people who live in Rosemary Terrace the words "police-court" are very alarming indeed. Dickie turned a little paler and said, "Why police? I ain't done nothing wrong writin' what you telled me?"

"No, my boy," said the man, "you ain't done no wrong; you done right. But there's bad people in the world – police and such – as might lay it up to me as I took you away against your will. They could put a man away for less than that."

"But it ain't agin my will," said Dickie; "I want to!"

"That's what *I* say," said the man cheerfully. "So now we're agreed upon it, if you'll step it we'll see about a doss for to-night; and to-morrow we'll sleep in the bed with the green curtains."

"I see that there in a book," said Dickie, charmed. "He Reward the Wake, the last of the English, and I wunnered what it stood for."

"It stands for laying out," said the man (and so it does, though that's not at all what the author of "Hereward" meant it to mean) – "laying out under a 'edge or a 'aystack or such and lookin' up at the stars till you goes by-by. An' jolly good business, too, fine weather. An' then you 'oofs it a bit and resties a bit, and some one gives you something to 'elp you along the road, and in the evening you 'as a glass of ale at the Publy Kows, and finds another set o' green bed curtains. An' on Saturday you gets in a extra lot of prog, and a Sunday you stays where you be and washes of your shirt."

"Do you have adventures?" asked Dick, recognizing in this description a rough sketch of the life of a modern knight-errant.

"'Ventures? I believe you!" said the man. "Why, only last month a brute of a dog bit me in the leg, at a back door Sutton way. An' once I see a elephant."

"Wild?" asked Dickie, thrilling.

"Not azackly wild – with a circus 'e was. But big! Wild ones ain't 'alf the size, I lay! And you meets soldiers, and parties in red coats ridin' on horses, with spotted dawgs, and motors as run you down and take your 'ead off afore you know you're dead if you don't look alive. Adventures? I should think so!"

"Ah!" said Dickie, and a full silence fell between them.

"Tired?" asked Mr. Beale presently.

"Just a tiddy bit, p'raps," said Dickie bravely, "but I can stick it."

"We'll get summat with wheels for you to-morrow," said the man, "if it's only a sugar-box; an' I can tie that leg of yours up to make it look like as if it was cut off."

"It's this 'ere nasty boot as makes me tired," said Dickie.

"Hoff with it," said the man obligingly; "down you sets on them stones and hoff with it! T'other too if you like. You can keep to the grass."

The dewy grass felt pleasantly cool and clean to Dickie's tired little foot, and when they crossed the road where a water-cart had dripped it was delicious to feel the cool mud squeeze up between your toes. That was charming; but it was pleasant, too, to wash the mud off on the wet grass. Dickie always remembered that moment. It was the first time in his life that he really enjoyed being clean. In the hospital you were almost too clean; and you didn't do it yourself. That made all the difference. Yet it was the memory of the hospital that made him say, "I wish I could 'ave a bath."

"So you shall," said Mr. Beale; "a reg'ler wash all over – this very night. I always like a wash meself. Some blokes think it pays to be dirty. But it don't. If you're clean they say 'Honest Poverty,' an' if you're dirty they say 'Serve you right.' We'll get a pail or something this very night."

"You *are* good," said Dickie. "I do like you."

Mr. Beale looked at him through the deepening twilight – rather queerly, Dickie thought. Also he sighed heavily.

"Oh, well – all's well as has no turning; and things don't always – What I mean to say, you be a good boy and I'll do the right thing by you."

"I know you will," said Dickie, with enthusiasm. "*I* know 'ow good you are!"

"Bless me!" said Mr. Beale uncomfortably. "Well, there. Step out, sonny, or we'll never get there this side Christmas."

Now you see that Mr. Beale may be a cruel, wicked man who only wanted to get hold of Dickie so as to make money out of him; and he may be going to be very unkind indeed to Dickie when once he gets him away into the country, and is all alone with him – and his having that paper and envelope and pencil all ready looks odd, doesn't it? Or he may be a really benevolent person. Well, you'll know all about it presently.

"And – here we are," said Mr. Beale, stopping in a side-street at an open door from which yellow light streamed welcomingly. "Now mind you don't contradict anything wot I say to people. And don't you forget you're my nipper, and you got to call me daddy."

"I'll call you farver," said Dickie. "I got a daddy of my own, you know."

"Why," said Mr. Beale, stopping suddenly, "you said he was dead."

"So he is," said Dickie; "but 'e's my daddy all the same."

"Oh, come on," said Mr. Beale impatiently. And they went in.

CHAPTER II
BURGLARS

Dickie fell asleep between clean, coarse sheets in a hard, narrow bed, for which fourpence had been paid.

"Put yer clobber under yer bolster, likewise yer boots," was the last instruction of his new friend and "father."

There had been a bath – or something equally cleansing – in a pail near a fire where ragged but agreeable people were cooking herrings, sausages, and other delicacies on little gridirons or pans that they unrolled from the strange bundles that were their luggage. One man who had no gridiron cooked a piece of steak on the kitchen tongs. Dickie thought him very clever. A very fat woman asked Dickie to toast a herring for her on a bit of wood; and when he had done it she gave him two green apples.

He laid in bed and heard jolly voices talking and singing in the kitchen below. And he thought how pleasant it was to be a tramp, and what jolly fellows the tramps were; for it seemed that all these nice people were "on the road," and this place where the kitchen was, and the good company and the clean bed for fourpence, was a Tramps' Hotel – one of many that are scattered over the country and called "Common Lodging-Houses."

The singing and laughing went on long after he had fallen asleep, and if, later in the evening, there were loud-voiced arguments, or quarrels even, Dickie did not hear them.

Next morning, quite early, they took the road. From some mysterious source Mr. Beale had obtained an old double perambulator, which must have been made, Dickie thought, for very fat twins, it was so broad and roomy. Artfully piled on the front part was all the furniture needed by travellers who mean to sleep every night at the Inn of the Silver Moon. (That is the inn where they have the beds with the green curtains.)

"What's all that there?" Dickie asked, pointing to the odd knobbly bundles of all sorts and shapes tied on to the perambulator's front.

"All our truck what we'll want on the road," said Beale.

"And that pillowy bundle on the seat."

"That's our clothes. I've bought you a little jacket to put on o' nights if it's cold or wet. An' when you want a lift – why, here's your carriage, and you can sit up 'ere and ride like the Lord Mayor, and I'll be yer horse; the bundles'll set on yer knee like a fat babby. Tell yer what, mate – looks to me as if I'd took a fancy to you."

"I 'ave to you, I know that," said Dickie, settling his crutch firmly and putting his hand into Mr. Beale's. Mr. Beale looked down at the touch.

"Swelp me!" he said helplessly. Then, "Does it hurt you – walking?"

"Not like it did 'fore I went to the orspittle. They said I'd be able to walk to rights if I wore that there beastly boot. But that 'urts worsen anythink."

"Well," said Mr. Beale, "you sing out when you get tired and I'll give yer a ride."

"Oh, look," said Dickie – "the flowers!"

"They're only weeds," said Beale. They were, in fact, convolvuluses, little pink ones with their tendrils and leaves laid flat to the dry earth by the wayside, and in a water-meadow below the road level big white ones twining among thick-growing osiers and willows.

Dickie filled his hands with the pink ones, and Mr. Beale let him.

"They'll die directly," he said.

"But I shall have them while they're alive," said Dickie, as he had said to the pawnbroker about the moonflowers.

It was a wonderful day. All the country sights and sounds, that you hardly notice because you have known them every year as long as you can remember, were wonderful magic to the little boy from Deptford. The green hedge, the cows looking over them; the tinkle of sheep-bells; the "baa" of the sheep; the black pigs in a sty close to the road, their breathless rooting and grunting and the shiny, blackleaded cylinders that were their bodies; the stubbly fields where barley stood in sheaves – real barley, like the people next door but three gave to their hens; the woodland shadows and the lights of sudden water; shoulders of brown upland pressed against the open sky; the shrill thrill of the skylark's song, "like canary birds got loose"; the splendor of distance – you never see distance in Deptford; the magpie that perched on a stump and cocked a bright eye at the travellers; the thing that rustled a long length through dead leaves in a beech coppice, and was, it appeared, a real live snake – all these made the journey a royal progress to Dickie of Deptford. He forgot that he was lame, forgot that he had run away – a fact that had cost him a twinge or two of fear or conscience earlier in the morning. He was happy as a prince is happy, new-come to his inheritance, and it was Mr. Beale, after all, who was the first to remember that there was a carriage in which a tired little boy might ride.

"In you gets," he said suddenly; "you'll be fair knocked. You can look about you just as well a-sittin' down," he added, laying the crutch across the front of the perambulator. "Never see such a nipper for noticing, neither. Hi! there goes a rabbit. See 'im? Crost the road there? See him?"

Dickie saw, and the crown was set on his happiness. A rabbit. Like the ones that his fancy had put in the mouldering hutch at home.

"It's got loose," said Dickie, trying to scramble out of the perambulator; "let's catch 'im and take 'im along."

"'E ain't loose – 'e's wild," Mr. Beale explained; "'e ain't never bin caught. Lives out 'ere with 'is little friendses," he added after a violent effort of imagination – "in 'oles in the ground. Gets 'is own meals and larks about on 'is own."

"How beautiful!" said Dickie, wriggling with delight. This life of the rabbit, as described by Mr. Beale, was the child's first glimpse of freedom. "I'd like to be a rabbit."

"You much better be my little nipper," said Beale. "Steady on, mate. 'Ow'm I to wheel the bloomin' pram if you goes on like as if you was a bag of eels?"

They camped by a copse for the midday meal, sat on the grass, made a fire of sticks, and cooked herrings in a frying-pan, produced from one of the knobbly bundles.

"It's better'n Fiff of November," said Dickie; "and I do like you. I like you nexter my own daddy and Mr. Baxter next door."

"That's all right," said Mr. Beale awkwardly.

It was in the afternoon that, half-way up a hill, they saw coming over the crest a lady and a little girl.

"Hout yer gets," said Mr. Beale quickly; "walk as 'oppy as you can, and if they arsts you you say you ain't 'ad nothing to eat since las' night and then it was a bit o' dry bread."

"Right you are," said Dickie, enjoying the game.

"An' mind you call me father."

"Yuss," said Dickie, exaggerating his lameness in the most spirited way. It was acting, you see, and all children love acting.

Mr. Beale went more and more slowly, and as the lady and the little girl drew near he stopped altogether and touched his cap. Dickie, quick to imitate, touched his.

"Could you spare a trifle, mum," said Beale, very gently and humbly, "to 'elp us along the road? My little chap, 'e's lame like wot you see. It's a 'ard life for the likes of 'im, mum."

"He ought to be at home with his mother," said the lady.

Beale drew his coat sleeve across his eyes.

"'E ain't got no mother," he said; "she was took bad sudden – a chill it was, and struck to her innards. She died in the infirmary. Three months ago it was, mum. And us not able even to get a bit of black for her."

Dickie sniffed.

"Poor little man!" said the lady; "you miss your mother, don't you?"

"Yuss," said Dickie sadly; "but farver, 'e's very good to me. I couldn't get on if it wasn't for farver."

"Oh, well done, little 'un!" said Mr. Beale to himself.

"We lay under a 'aystack last night," he said aloud, "and where we'll lie to-night gracious only knows, without some kind soul lends us a 'elping 'and."

The lady fumbled in her pocket, and the little girl said to Dickie —

"Where are all your toys?"

"I ain't got but two," said Dickie, "and they're at 'ome; one of them's silver – real silver – my grandfarver 'ad it when 'e was a little boy."

"But if you've got silver you oughtn't to be begging," said the lady, shutting up her purse. Beale frowned.

"It only pawns for a shilling," said Dickie, "and farver knows what store I sets by it."

"A shillin's a lot, I grant you that," said Beale eagerly; "but I wouldn't go to take away the nipper's little bit o' pleasure, not for no shilling I wouldn't," he ended nobly, with a fond look at Dickie.

"You're a kind father," said the lady.

"Yes, isn't he, mother?" said the little girl. "May I give the little boy my penny?"

The two travellers were left facing each other, the richer by a penny, and oh – wonderful good fortune – a whole half-crown. They exchanged such glances as might pass between two actors as the curtain goes down on a successful dramatic performance.

"You did that bit fine," said Beale – "fine, you did. You been there before, ain't ye?"

"No, I never," said Dickie; "'ere's the steever."

"You stick to that," said Beale, radiant with delight; "you're a fair masterpiece, you are; you earned it honest if ever a kid done. Pats you on the napper, she does, and out with 'arf a dollar! A bit of all right, I call it!"

They went on up the hill as happy as any one need wish to be.

They had told lies, you observe, and had by these lies managed to get half a crown and a penny out of the charitable; and far from being ashamed of their acts, they were bubbling over with merriment and delight at their own cleverness. Please do not be too shocked. Remember that neither of them knew any better. To the elder tramp lies and begging were natural means of livelihood. To the little tramp the whole thing was a new and entrancing game of make-believe.

By evening they had seven-and-sixpence.

"Us'll 'ave a fourpenny doss outer this," said Beale. "Swelp me Bob, we'll be ridin' in our own moty afore we know where we are at this rate."

"But you said the bed with the green curtains," urged Dickie.

"Well, p'rhaps you're right. Lay up for a rainy day, eh? Which this ain't, not by no means. There's a 'aystack a bit out of the town, if I remember right. Come on, mate."

And Dickie for the first time slept out-of-doors. Have you ever slept out-of-doors? The night is full of interesting little sounds that will not, at first, let you sleep – the rustle of little wild things in the hedges, the barking of dogs in distant farms, the chirp of crickets and the croaking of frogs. And in the morning the birds wake you, and you curl down warm among the hay and look up at the sky that is growing lighter and lighter, and breathe the chill, sweet air, and go to sleep again wondering how you have ever been able to lie of nights in one of those shut-up boxes with holes in them which we call houses.

The new game of begging and inventing stories to interest the people from whom it was worth while to beg went on gaily, day by day and week by week; and Dickie, by constant practice, grew so clever at taking his part in the acting that Mr. Beale was quite dazed with admiration.

"Blessed if I ever see such a nipper," he said, over and over again.

And when they got nearly to Hythe, and met with the red-whiskered man who got up suddenly out of the hedge and said he'd been hanging off and on expecting them for nigh on a week, Mr. Beale sent Dickie into a field to look for mushrooms – which didn't grow there – expressly that he might have a private conversation with the red-whiskered man – a conversation which began thus —

"Couldn't get 'ere afore. Couldn't get a nipper."

"'E's 'oppy, 'e is; 'e ain't no good."

"No good?" said Beale. "That's all you know! 'E's a wunner, and no bloomin' error. Turns the ladies round 'is finger as easy as kiss yer 'and. Clever as a traindawg 'e is – an' all outer 'is own 'ead. And to 'ear the way 'e does the patter to me on the road. It's as good as a gaff any day to 'ear 'im. My word! I ain't sure as I 'adn't better stick to the road, and keep away from old 'ands like you, Jim."

"Doin' well, eh?" said Jim.

"Not so dusty," said Mr. Beale cautiously; "we mugger along some'ow. An' 'e's got so red in the face, and plumped out so, they'll soon say 'e doesn't want their dibs."

"Starve 'im a bit," said the red-whiskered man cheerfully.

Mr. Beale laughed. Then he spat thoughtfully. Then he said —

"It's rum – I likes to see the little beggar stokin' up, for all it spoils the market. If 'e gets a bit fat 'e makes it up in cleverness. You should 'ear 'im!" and so forth and so on, till the red-whiskered man said quite crossly —

"Seems to me you're a bit dotty about this 'ere extry double nipper. I never knew you took like it afore."

"Fact is," said Beale, with an air of great candor, "it's 'is cleverness does me. It ain't as I'm silly about 'im – but 'e's that clever."

"I 'ope 'e's clever enough to do wot 'e's told. Keep 'is mug shut – that's all."

"He's clever enough for hanythink," said Beale, "and close as wax. 'E's got a silver toy 'idden away somewhere – it only pops for a bob – and d'you think 'e'll tell me where it's stowed? Not 'im, and us such pals as never was, and 'is jaw wagging all day long. But 'e's never let it out."

"Oh, stow it!" said the other impatiently; "I don't want to 'ear no more about 'im. If 'e's straight 'e'll do for me, and if he ain't I'll do for 'im. See? An' now you and me'll have a word or two particler, and settle up about this 'ere job. I got the plan drawed out. It's a easy job as ever I see. Seems to me Tuesday's as good a day as any. Tip-topper – Sir Edward Talbot, that's 'im – 'e's in furrin parts for 'is 'ealth, 'e is. Comes 'ome end o' next month. Little surprise for 'im, eh? You'll 'ave to train it. Abrams 'e'll be there Monday. And see 'ere." He sank his voice to a whisper.

When Dickie came back, without mushrooms, the red-whiskered man was gone.

"See that bloke just now?" said Mr. Beale.

"Yuss," said Dickie.

"Well, you never see 'im. If any one arsts you if you ever see 'im, you never set eyes on 'im in all your born – not to remember 'im. Might a passed 'im in a crowd – see?"

"Yuss," said Dickie again.

"'Tasn't been 'arf a panto neither! Us two on the road," Mr. Beale went on.

"Not 'arf!"

"Well, now we're a-goin' in the train like dooks – an' after that we're a-goin' to 'ave a rare old beano. I give you *my* word!"

Dickie was full of questions, but Mr. Beale had no answers for them. "You jes' wait;" "hold on a bit;" "them as lives longest sees most" – these were the sort of remarks which were all that Dickie could get out of him.

It was not the next day, which was a Saturday, that they took the train like dukes. Nor was it Sunday, on which they took a rest and washed their shirts, according to Mr. Beale's rule of life.

They took the train on Monday, and it landed them in a very bright town by the sea. Its pavements were of red brick and its houses of white stone, and its bow-windows and balconies were green, and Dickie thought it was the prettiest town in the world. They did not stay there, but walked out across the downs, where the skylarks were singing, and on a dip of the downs came upon great stone walls and towers very strong and gray.

"What's that there?" said Dickie.

"It's a carstle – like wot the King's got at Windsor."

"Is it a king as lives 'ere, then?" Dickie asked.

"No! Nobody don't live 'ere, mate," said Mr. Beale. "It's a ruin, this is. Only howls and rats lives in ruins."

"Did any one ever live in it?"

"I shouldn't wonder," said Mr. Beale indifferently. "Yes, course they must 'ave, come to think of it. But you learned all that at school. It's what they call 'ist'ry."

Dickie, after some reflection, said, "D'jever 'ear of Here Ward?"

"I knowed a Jake Ward wunst."

"Here Ward the Wake. He ain't a bloke you'd know —*'e's* in 'istry. Tell you if you like."

The tale of Hereward the Wake lasted till the jolting perambulator came to anchor in a hollow place among thick furze bushes. The bare, thick stems of the furze held it up like a roof over their heads as they sat. It was like a little furze house.

Next morning Mr. Beale shaved, a thing he had not done since they left London. Dickie held the mug and the soap. It was great fun, and, afterwards, Mr. Beale looked quite different. That was great fun too. And he got quite a different set of clothes out of his bundles, and put them on. And that was the greatest fun of all.

"Now, then," he said, "we're a-goin' to lay low 'ere all d'y, we are. And then come evening we're a-goin' to 'ave our beano. That red'eaded chap wot you never see 'e'll lift you up to a window what's got bars to it, and you'll creep through, you being so little, and you'll go soft's a mouse the way I'll show you, and undo the side-door. There's a key and a chain and a bottom bolt. The top bolt's cut through, and all the others is oiled. That won't frighten you, will it?"

"No," said Dickie. "What should it frighten me for?"

"Well, it's like this," said Mr. Beale a little embarrassed. "Suppose you was to get pinched?"

"What 'ud pinch me? A dawg?"

"There won't be no dawg. A man, or a lady, or somebody in the 'ouse. Supposen they was to nab you – what 'ud you say?"

Dickie was watching his face carefully.

"Whatever you tells me to say," he said.

The man slapped his leg gently.

"If that ain't the nipper all over! Well, if they was to nab you, you just say what I tells you to. And then, first chance you get, you slip away from 'em and go to the station. An' if they comes arter you, you say you're a-goin' to your father at Dover. And first chance you get you slip off, and you come to that 'ouse where you and me slep' at Gravesend. I've got the dibs for yer ticket done up in this 'ere belt I'm a-goin' to put on you. But don't you let on to any one it's Gravesend you're a-coming to. See?"

"An' if I don't get pinched?"

"Then you just opens the door and me and that redheaded bloke we comes in."

"What for?" asked Dickie.

"To look for some tools 'e mislaid there a year ago when 'e was on a plumbing job – and they won't let 'im 'ave them back, not by fair means, they won't. That's what for."

"Rats!" said Dickie briefly. "I ain't a baby. It's burgling, that's what it is."

"You'll a jolly sight too fond of calling names," said Beale anxiously. "Never mind what it is. You be a good boy, matey, and do what you're told. That's what you do. You know 'ow to stick it on if you're pinched. If you ain't you just lay low till we comes out with the.. the plumber's tools. See?"

"And if I'm nabbed, what is it I am to say?"

"You must let on as a strange chap collared you on the road, a strange chap with a black beard and a red 'ankercher, and give you a licking if you didn't go and climb in at the window. Say you lost your father in the town, and this chap said he knew where 'e was, and if you see me you don't know me. Nor yet that redheaded chap wot you never see." He looked down at the small, earnest face turned up to his own. "You *are* a little nipper," he said affectionately. "I don't know as I ever noticed before quite wot a little 'un you was. Think you can stick it? You shan't go without you wants to, matey. There!"

"It's splendid!" said Dickie; "it is an adventure for a bold knight. I shall feel like Here Ward when he dressed in the potter's clothes and went to see King William."

He spoke in the book voice.

"There you go," said Mr. Beale, "but don't you go and talk to 'em like that if they pinches you; they'd never let you loose again. Think they'd got a marquis in disguise, so they would."

Dickie thought all day about this great adventure. He did not tell Mr. Beale so, but he was very proud of being so trusted. If you come to think of it, burgling must be a very exciting profession. And Dickie had no idea that it was wrong. It seemed to him a wholly delightful and sporting amusement.

While he was exploring the fox-runs among the thick stems of the grass Mr. Beale lay at full length and pondered.

"I don't more'n 'arf like it," he said to himself. "Ho yuss. I know that's wot I got him for – all right. But 'e's such a jolly little nipper. I wouldn't like anything to 'appen to 'im, so I wouldn't."

Dickie took his boots off and went to sleep as usual, and in the middle of the night Mr. Beale woke him up and said, "It's time."

There was no moon that night, and it was very, very dark. Mr. Beale carried Dickie on his back for what seemed a very long way along dark roads, under dark trees, and over dark meadows. A dark bush divided itself into two parts and one part came surprisingly towards them. It turned out to be the red-whiskered man, and presently from a ditch another man came. And they all climbed a chill, damp park-fence, and crept along among trees and shrubs along the inside of a high park wall. Dickie, still on Mr. Beale's shoulders, was astonished to find how quietly this big, clumsy-looking man could move.

Through openings in the trees and bushes Dickie could see the wide park, like a spread shadow, dotted with trees that were like shadows too. And on the other side of it the white face of a great house showed only a little paler than the trees about it. There were no lights in the house.

They got quite close to it before the shelter of the trees ended, for a little wood lay between the wall and the house.

Dickie's heart was beating very fast. Quite soon, now, his part in the adventure would begin.

"'Ere – catch 'old," Mr. Beale was saying, and the red-whiskered man took Dickie in his arms, and went forward. The other two crouched in the wood.

Dickie felt himself lifted, and caught at the window-sill with his hands. It was a damp night and smelled of earth and dead leaves. The window-sill was of stone, very cold. Dickie knew exactly what to do. Mr. Beale had explained it over and over again all day. He settled himself on the broad window-ledge and held on to the iron window-bars while the red-whiskered man took out a pane of glass, with treacle and a handkerchief, so that there should be no noise of breaking or falling glass. Then Dickie put his hand through and unfastened the window, which opened like a cupboard door. Then he put his feet through the narrow space between two bars and slid through. He hung inside

with his hands holding the bars, till his foot found the table that he had been told to expect just below, and he got from that to the floor.

"Now I must remember exactly which way to go," he told himself. But he did not need to remember what he had been told. For quite certainly, and most oddly, he *knew* exactly where the door was, and when he had crept to it and got it open he found that he now knew quite well which way to turn and what passages to go along to get to that little side-door that he was to open for the three men. It was exactly as though he had been there before, in a dream. He went as quietly as a mouse, creeping on hands and knee, the lame foot dragging quietly behind him.

I will not pretend that he was not frightened. He was, very. But he was more brave than he was frightened, which is the essence of bravery, after all. He found it difficult to breathe quietly, and his heart beat so loudly that he felt almost sure that if any people were awake in the house they would hear it, even up-stairs in their beds. But he got to the little side-door, and feeling with sensitive, quick fingers found the well-oiled bolt, and shot it back. Then the chain – holding the loose loop of it in his hand so that it should not rattle, he slipped its ball from the socket. Only the turning of the key remained, and Dickie accomplished that with both hands, for it was a big key, kneeling on his one sound knee. Then very gently he turned the handle, and pulled – and the door opened, and he crept from behind it and felt the cool, sweet air of the night on his face.

It seemed to him that he had never known what silence was before – or darkness. For the door opened into a close box arbor, and no sky could be seen, or any shapes of things. Dickie felt himself almost bursting with pride. What an adventure! And he had carried out his part of it perfectly. He had done exactly what he had been told to do, and he had done it well. He stood there, on his one useful foot, clinging to the edge of the door, and it was not until something touched him that he knew that Mr. Beale and the other men were creeping through the door that he had opened.

And at that touch a most odd feeling came to Dickie – the last feeling he would have expected – a feeling of pride mixed with a feeling of shame. Pride in his own cleverness, and another kind of pride that made that cleverness seem shameful. He had a feeling, very queer and very strong, that he, Dickie, was not the sort of person to open doors for the letting in of burglars. He felt as you would feel if you suddenly found your hands covered with filth, not good honest dirt, but slimy filth, and would not understand how you could have let it get there.

He caught at the third shape that brushed by him.

"Father," he whispered, "don't do it. Go back, and I'll fasten it all up again. Oh! don't, father."

"Shut your mug!" whispered the red-whiskered man. Dickie knew his voice even in that velvet-black darkness. "Shut your mug, or I'll give you what for!"

"Don't, father," said Dickie, and said it all the more for that threat.

"I can't go back on my pals, matey," said Mr. Beale; "you see that, don't yer?"

Dickie did see. The adventure was begun: it was impossible to stop. It was helped and had to be eaten, as they say in Norfolk. He crouched behind the open door, and heard the soft pad-pad of the three men's feet on the stones of the passage grow fainter and fainter. They had woolen socks over their boots, which made their footsteps sound no louder than those of padded pussy-feet. Then the soft rustle-pad died away, and it was perfectly quiet, perfectly dark. Dickie was tired; it was long past his proper bedtime, and the exertion of being so extra clever had been very tiring. He was almost asleep when a crack like thunder brought him stark, staring awake – there was a noise of feet on the stairs, boots, a blundering, hurried rush. People came rushing past him. There was another sharp thunder sound and a flash like lightning, only much smaller. Some one tripped and fell; there was a clatter like pails, and something hard and smooth hit him on the knee. Then another hurried presence dashed past him into the quiet night. Another – No! there was a woman's voice.

"Edward, you shan't! Let them go! You shan't – no!"

And suddenly there was a light that made one wink and blink. A tall lady in white, carrying a lamp, swept down the stairs and caught at a man who sprang into being out of the darkness into the lamplight.

"Take the lamp," she said, and thrust it on him. Then with unbelievable quickness she bolted and chained the door, locked it, and, turning, saw Dickie.

"What's this?" she said. "Oh, Edward, quick – here's one of them!.. Why – it's a child – "

Some more people were coming down the stairs, with candles and excited voices. Their clothes were oddly bright. Dickie had never seen dressing-gowns before. They moved in a very odd way, and then began to go round and round like tops.

The next thing that Dickie remembers is being in a room that seemed full of people and lights and wonderful furniture, with some one holding a glass to his lips, a little glass, that smelled of public-houses, very nasty.

"No!" said Dickie, turning away his head.

"Better?" asked a lady; and Dickie was astonished to find that he was on her lap.

"Yes, thank you," he said, and tried to sit up, but lay back again because that was so much more pleasant. He had had no idea that any one's lap could be so comfortable.

"Now, young man," said a stern voice that was not a lady's, "just you tell us how you came here, and who put you up to it."

"I got in," said Dickie feebly, "through the butler's pantry window," and as he said it he wondered how he had known that it was the butler's pantry. It is certain that no one had told him.

"What for?" asked the voice, which Dickie now perceived came from a gentleman in rumpled hair and a very loose pink flannel suit, with cordy things on it such as soldiers have.

"To let – " Dickie stopped. This was the moment he had been so carefully prepared for. He must think what he was saying.

"Yes," said the lady gently, "it's all right – poor little chap, don't be frightened – nobody wants to hurt you!"

"I'm not frightened," said Dickie – "not now."

"To let – ?" reminded the lady, persuasively.

"To let the man in."

"What man?"

"I dunno."

"There were three or four of them," said the gentleman in pink; "four or five – "

"What man, dear?" the lady asked again.

"The man as said 'e knew w'ere my farver was," said Dickie, remembering what he had been told to say; "so I went along of 'im, an' then in the wood 'e said 'e'd give me a dressing down if I didn't get through the winder and open the door; 'e said 'e'd left some tools 'ere and you wouldn't let 'im 'ave them."

"You see," said the lady, "the child didn't know. He's perfectly innocent." And she kissed Dickie's hair very softly and kindly.

Dickie did not understand then why he suddenly felt as though he were going to choke. His head felt as though it were going to burst. His ears grew very hot, and his hands and feet very cold.

"I know'd right enough," he said suddenly and hoarsely; "an' I needn't a-gone if I 'adn't wanted to."

"He's feverish," said the lady, "he doesn't know what he's saying. Look how flushed he is."

"I wanted to," said Dickie; "I thought it 'ud be a lark. And it was too."

He expected to be shaken and put down. He wondered where his crutch was. Mr. Beale had had it under his arm. How could he get to Gravesend without a crutch? But he wasn't shaken or put down; instead, the lady gathered him up in her arms and stood up, holding him.

"I shall put him to bed," she said; "you shan't ask him any more questions to-night. There's time enough in the morning."

She carried Dickie out of the drawing-room and away from the other people to a big room with blue walls and blue and gray curtains and beautiful furniture. There was a high four-post bed with blue silk curtains and more pillows than Dickie had ever seen before. The lady washed him with sweet-smelling water in a big basin with blue and gold flowers on it, dressed him in a lace-trimmed nightgown, which must have been her own, for it was much too big for any little boy.

Then she put him into the soft, warm bed that was like a giant's pillow, tucked him up and kissed him. Dickie put thin arms round her neck.

"I do like you," he said, "but I want farver."

"Where is he? No, you must tell me that in the morning. Drink up this milk" – she had it ready in a glass that sparkled in a pattern – "and then go sound asleep. Everything will be all right, dear."

"May Heavens," said Dickie, sleepily, "bless you, generous Bean Factress!"

"A most extraordinary child," said the lady, returning to her husband. "I can't think who it is that he reminds me of. Where are the others?"

"I packed them off to bed. There's nothing to be done," said her husband. "We ought to have gone after those men."

"They didn't get anything," she said.

"No – dropped it all when I fired. Come on, let's turn in. Poor Eleanor, you must be worn out."

"Edward," said the lady, "I wish we could adopt that little boy. I'm sure he comes of good people – he's been kidnapped or something."

"Don't be a dear silly one!" said Sir Edward.

That night Dickie slept in sheets of the finest linen, scented with lavender. He was sunk downily among pillows, and over him lay a down quilt covered with blue-flowered satin. On the foot-board of the great bed was carved a shield and a great dog on it.

Dickie's clothes lay, a dusty, forlorn little heap, in a stately tapestry-covered chair. And he slept, and dreamed of Mr. Beale, and the little house among the furze, and the bed with the green curtains.

CHAPTER III
THE ESCAPE

When Lady Talbot leaned over the side of the big bed to awaken Dickie Harding she wished with all her heart that she had just such a little boy of her own; and when Dickie awoke and looked in her kind eyes he felt quite sure that if he had had a mother she would have been like this lady.

"Only about the face," he told himself, "not the way she's got up; nor yet her hair nor nuffink of that sort."

"Did you sleep well?" she asked him, stroking his hair with extraordinary gentleness.

"A fair treat," said he.

"Was your bed comfortable?"

"Ain't it soft, neither," he answered. "I don't know as ever I felt of anythink quite as soft without it was the geese as 'angs up along the Broadway Christmas-time."

"Why, the bed's made of goose-feathers," she said, and Dickie was delighted by the coincidence.

"'Ave you got e'er a little boy?" he asked, pursuing his first waking thought.

"No, dear; if I had I could lend you some of his clothes. As it is, we shall have to put you into your own." She spoke as though she were sorry.

Dickie saw no matter for regret. "My father 'e bought me a little coat for when it was cold of a night lying out."

"Lying out? Where?"

"In the bed with the green curtains," said Dickie. This led to Here Ward, and Dickie would willingly have told the whole story of that hero in full detail, but the lady said after breakfast, and now it was time for our bath. And sure enough there was a bath of steaming water before the fireplace, which was in quite another part of the room, so that Dickie had not noticed the cans being brought in by a maid in a pink print dress and white cap and apron.

"Come," said the lady, turning back the bed-clothes.

Somehow Dickie could not bear to let that lady see him crawl clumsily across the floor, as he had to do when he moved without his crutch. It was not because he thought she would make fun of him; perhaps it was because he knew she would not. And yet without his crutch, how else was he to get to that bath? And for no reason that he could have given he began to cry.

The lady's arms were round him in an instant.

"What is it, dear? Whatever is it?" she asked; and Dickie sobbed out —

"I ain't got my crutch, and I can't go to that there barf without I got it. Anything 'ud do – if 'twas only an old broom cut down to me 'eighth. I'm a cripple, they call it, you see. I can't walk like wot you can."

She carried him to the bath. There was scented soap, there was a sponge, and a warm, fluffy towel.

"I ain't had a barf since Gravesend," said Dickie, and flushed at the indiscretion.

"Since *when*, dear?"

"Since Wednesday," said Dickie anxiously.

He and the lady had breakfast together in a big room with long windows that the sun shone in at, and, outside, a green garden. There were a lot of things to eat in silver dishes, and the very eggs had silver cups to sit in, and all the spoons and forks had dogs scratched on them like the one that was carved on the foot-board of the bed up-stairs. All except the little slender spoon that Dickie had to eat his egg with. And on that there was no dog, but something quite different.

"Why," said he, his face brightening with joyous recognition, "my Tinkler's got this on it – just the very moral of it, so 'e 'as."

Then he had to tell all about Tinkler, and the lady looked thoughtful and interested; and when the gentleman came in and kissed her, and said, How were we this morning, Dickie had to tell about Tinkler all over again; and then the lady said several things very quickly, beginning with, "I told you so, Edward," and ending with "I knew he wasn't a common child."

Dickie missed the middle part of what she said because of the way his egg behaved, suddenly bursting all down one side and running over into the salt, which, of course, had to be stopped at all costs by some means or other. The tongue was the easiest.

The gentleman laughed. "Weh! don't eat the egg-cup," he said. "We shall want it again. Have another egg."

But Dickie's pride was hurt, and he wouldn't. The gentleman must be very stupid, he thought, not to know the difference between licking and eating. And as if anybody could eat an egg-cup, anyhow! He was glad when the gentleman went away.

After breakfast Dickie was measured for a crutch – that is to say, a broom was held up beside him and a piece cut off its handle. Then the lady wrapped flannel around the hairy part of the broom and sewed black velvet over that. It was a beautiful crutch, and Dickie said so. Also he showed his gratitude by inviting the lady to look "'ow spry 'e was on 'is pins," but she only looked a very little while, and then turned and gazed out of the window. So Dickie had a good look at the room and the furniture – it was all different from anything he ever remembered seeing, and yet he couldn't help thinking he had seen them before, these high-backed chairs covered with flowers, like on carpets; the carved bookcases with rows on rows of golden-beaded books; the bow-fronted, shining sideboard, with handles that shone like gold, and the corner cupboard with glass doors and china inside, red and blue and goldy. It was a very odd feeling. I don't think that I can describe it better than by saying that he looked at all these things with a double pleasure – the pleasure of looking at new and beautiful things, and the pleasure of seeing again things old and beautiful which he had not seen for a very long time.

His limping survey of the room ended at the windows, when the lady turned suddenly, knelt down, put her hand under his chin and looked into his eyes.

"Dickie," she said, "how would you like to stay here and be *my* little boy?"

"I'd like it right enough," said he, "only I got to go back to father."

"But if father says you may?"

"'E won't," said Dickie, with certainty, "an' besides, there's Tinkler."

"Well, you're to stay here and be my little boy till we find out where father is. We shall let the police know. They're sure to find him."

"The pleece!" Dickie cried in horror. "Why, father, 'e ain't done nothing."

"No, no, of course not," said the lady in a hurry; "but the police know all sorts of things – about where people are, I know, and what they're doing – even when they haven't *done* anything."

"The pleece knows a jolly sight too much," said Dickie, in gloom.

And now all Dickie's little soul was filled with one longing; all his little brain awake to one only thought: the police were to be set on the track of Beale, the man whom he called father; the man who had been kind to him, had wheeled him in a perambulator for miles and miles through enchanted country; the man who had bought him a little coat "to put on o' nights if it was cold or wet"; the man who had shown him the wonderful world to which he awakens who has slept in the bed with the green curtains.

The lady's house was more beautiful than anything he had ever imagined – yet not more beautiful than certain things that he almost imagined that he remembered. The lady was better than beautiful, she was dear. Her eyes were the eyes to which it is good to laugh – her arms were the arms in which it is good to cry. The tree-dotted parkland was to Dickie the Land of Heart's Desire.

But father – Beale – who had been kind, whom Dickie loved!..

The lady left him alone with a book, beautiful beyond his dreams – three great volumes with pictures of things that had happened and been since the days of Hereward himself. The author's charming name was Green, and recalled curtains and nights under the stars.

But even those beautiful pictures could not keep Dickie's thoughts from Mr. Beale: "father" by adoption and love. If the police were set to find out "where he was and what he was doing?".. Somehow or other Dickie must get to Gravesend, to that house where there had been a bath, or something like it, in a pail, and where kindly tramp-people had toasted herrings and given apples to little boys who helped.

He had helped then. And by all the laws of fair play there ought to be some one now to help him.

The beautiful book lay on the table before him, but he no longer saw it. He no longer cared for it. All he cared for was to find a friend who would help him. And he found one. And the friend who helped him was an enemy.

The smart, pink-frocked, white-capped, white-aproned maid, who, unseen by Dickie, had brought the bath-water and the bath, came in with a duster. She looked malevolently at Dickie.

"Shovin' yourself in," she said rudely.

"I ain't," said he.

"If she wants to make a fool of a kid, ain't I got clever brothers and sisters?" inquired the maid, her chin in the air.

"Nobody says you ain't, and nobody ain't makin' a fool of me," said Dickie.

"Ho no. Course they ain't," the maid rejoined. "People comes 'ere without e'er a shirt to their backs and makes fools of their betters. That's the way it is, ain't it? Ain't she arst you to stay and be 'er little boy?"

"Yes," said Dickie.

"Ah, I thought she 'ad," said the maid triumphantly; "and you'll stay. But if I'm expected to call you Master Whatever-your-silly-name-is, I gives a month's warning, so I tell you straight."

"I don't want to stay," said Dickie – "at least – "

"Oh, tell me another," said the girl impatiently, and left him, without having made the slightest use of the duster.

Dickie was taken for a drive in a little carriage drawn by a cream-colored pony with a long tail – a perfect dream of a pony, and the lady allowed him to hold the reins. But even amid this delight he remembered to ask whether she had put the police on to father yet, and was relieved to hear that she had not.

It was Markham who was told to wash Dickie's hands when the drive was over, and Markham was the enemy with the clever brothers and sisters.

"Wash 'em yourself," she said among the soap and silver and marble and sponges. "It ain't my work."

"You'd better," said Dickie, "or the lady'll know the difference. It ain't my work neither, and I ain't so used to washing as what you are, and that's the truth."

So she washed him, not very gently.

"It's no use your getting your knife into me," he said as the towel was plied. "I didn't *arst* to come 'ere, did I?"

"No, you little thief!"

"Stow that!" said Dickie, and after a quick glance at his set lips she said, "Well, next door to, anyhow. I should be ashamed to show my face 'ere, if I was you, after last night. There, you're dry now. Cut along down to the dining-room. The servants' hall's good enough for honest people as don't break into houses."

All through that day of wonder, which included real roses that you could pick and smell and real gooseberries that you could gather and eat, as well as picture-books, a clockwork bear, a musical

box, and a doll's house almost as big as a small villa, an idea kept on hammering at the other side of a locked door in Dickie's mind, and when he was in bed it got the door open and came out and looked at him. And he recognized it at once as a really useful idea.

"Markham will bring you some warm milk. Drink it up and sleep well, darling," said the lady; and with the idea very near and plain he put his arms round her neck and hugged her.

"Good-bye," he said; "you *are* good. I do love you." The lady went away very pleased.

When Markham came with the milk Dickie said, "You want me gone, don't you?"

Markham said she didn't care.

"Well, but how am I to get away – with my crutch?"

"Mean to say you'd cut and run if you was the same as me – about the legs, I mean?"

"Yes," said Dickie.

"And not nick anything?"

"Not a bloomin' thing," said he.

"Well," said Markham, "you've got a spirit, I will say that."

"You see," said Dickie, "I wants to get back to farver."

"Bless the child," said Markham, quite affected by this.

"Why don't you help me get out? Once I was outside the park I'd do all right."

"Much as my place is worth," said Markham; "don't you say another word getting me into trouble."

But Dickie said a good many other words, and fell asleep quite satisfied with the last words that had fallen from Markham. These words were: "We'll see."

It was only just daylight when Markham woke him. She dressed him hurriedly, and carried him and his crutch down the back stairs and into that very butler's pantry through whose window he had crept at the bidding of the red-haired man. No one else seemed to be about.

"Now," she said, "the gardener he has got a few hampers ready – fruit and flowers and the like – and he drives 'em to the station 'fore any one's up. They'd only go to waste if 'e wasn't to sell 'em. See? An' he's a particular friend of mine; and he won't mind an extry hamper more or less. So out with you. Joe," she whispered, "you there?"

Joe, outside, whispered that he was. And Markham lifted Dickie to the window. As she did so she kissed him.

"Cheer-oh, old chap!" she said. "I'm sorry I was so short. An' you do want to get out of it, don't you?"

"No error," said Dickie; "an' I'll never split about him selling the vegetables and things."

"You're too sharp to live," Markham declared; and next moment he was through the window, and Joe was laying him in a long hamper half-filled with straw that stood waiting.

"I'll put you in the van along with the other hampers," whispered Joe as he shut the lid. "Then when you're in the train you just cut the string with this 'ere little knife I'll make you a present of and out you gets. I'll make it all right with the guard. He knows me. And he'll put you down at whatever station you say."

"Here, don't forget 'is breakfast," said Markham, reaching her arm through the window. It was a wonderful breakfast. Five cold rissoles, a lot of bread and butter, two slices of cake, and a bottle of milk. And it was fun eating agreeable and unusual things, lying down in the roomy hamper among the smooth straw. The jolting of the cart did not worry Dickie at all. He was used to the perambulator; and he ate as much as he wanted to eat, and when that was done he put the rest in his pocket and curled up comfortably in the straw, for there was still quite a lot left of what ordinary people consider night, and also there was quite a lot left of the sleepiness with which he had gone to bed at the end of the wonderful day. It was not only just body-sleepiness: the kind you get after a long walk or a long play day. It was mind-sleepiness – Dickie had gone through so much in the last thirty-six hours that

his poor little brain felt quite worn out. He fell asleep among the straw, fingering the clasp-knife in his pocket, and thinking how smartly he would cut the string when the time came.

And he slept for a very long time. Such a long time that when he did wake up there was no longer any need to cut the string of the hamper. Some one else had done that, and the lid of the basket was open, and three or four faces looked down at Dickie, and a girl's voice said —

"Why, it's a little boy! And a crutch – oh, dear!" Dickie sat up. The little crutch, which was lying corner-wise above him in the hamper, jerked out and rattled on the floor.

"Well, I never did – never!" said another voice. "Come out, dearie; don't be frightened."

"How kind people are!" Dickie thought, and reached his hands to slender white hands that were held out to him. A lady in black – her figure was as slender as her hands – drew him up, put her arms round him, and lifted him on to a black bentwood chair.

His eyes, turning swiftly here and there, showed him that he was in a shop – a shop full of flowers and fruit.

"Mr. Rosenberg," said the slender lady – "oh, do come here, please! This extra hamper – "

A dark, handsome, big-nosed man came towards them.

"It's a dear little boy," said the slender lady, who had a pale, kind face, dark eyes, and very red lips.

"It'th a practical joke, I shuppothe," said the dark man. "Our gardening friend wanth a liththon: and I'll thee he getth it."

"It wasn't his fault," said Dickie, wriggling earnestly in his high chair; "it was my fault. I fell asleep."

The girls crowded round him with questions and caresses.

"I ought to have cut the string in the train and told the guard – he's a friend of the gardener's," he said, "but I was asleep. I don't know as ever I slep' so sound afore. Like as if I'd had sleepy-stuff – you know. Like they give me at the orspittle."

I should not like to think that Markham had gone so far as to put "sleepy-stuff" in that bottle of milk; but I am afraid she was not very particular, and she may have thought it best to send Dickie to sleep so that he could not betray her or her gardener friend until he was very far away from both of them.

"But why," asked the long-nosed gentleman – "why put boyth in bathketth? Upthetting everybody like thith," he added crossly.

"It was," said Dickie slowly, "a sort of joke. I don't want to go upsetting of people. If you'll lift me down and give me me crutch I'll 'ook it."

But the young ladies would not hear of his hooking it.

"We may keep him, mayn't we, Mr. Rosenberg?" they said; and he judged that Mr. Rosenberg was a kind man or they would not have dared to speak so to him; "let's keep him till closing-time, and then one of us will see him home. He lives in London. He says so."

Dickie had indeed murmured "words to this effect," as policemen call it when they are not quite sure what people really *have* said.

"Ath you like," said Mr. Rosenberg, "only you muthn't let him interfere with bithneth; thath all."

They took him away to the back of the shop. They were dear girls, and they were very nice to Dickie. They gave him grapes, and a banana, and some Marie biscuits, and they folded sacks for him to lie on.

And Dickie liked them and was grateful to them – and watched his opportunity. Because, however kind people were, there was one thing he had to do – to get back to the Gravesend lodging-house, as his "father" had told him to do.

The opportunity did not come till late in the afternoon, when one of the girls was boiling a kettle on a spirit-lamp, and one had gone out to get cakes in Dickie's honor, which made him uncomfortable, but duty is duty, and over the Gravesend lodging-house the star of duty shone and beckoned. The third

young lady and Mr. Rosenberg were engaged in animated explanations with a fair young gentleman about a basket of roses that had been ordered, and had not been sent.

"Cath," Mr. Rosenberg was saying – "cath down enthureth thpeedy delivery."

And the young lady was saying, "I am extremely sorry, sir; it was a misunderstanding."

And to the music of their two voices Dickie edged along close to the grapes and melons, holding on to the shelf on which they lay so as not to attract attention by the tap-tapping of his crutch.

He passed silently and slowly between the rose-filled window and the heap of bananas that adorned the other side of the doorway, turned the corner, threw his arm over his crutch, and legged away for dear life down a sort of covered Arcade; turned its corner and found himself in a wilderness of baskets and carts and vegetables, threaded his way through them, in and out among the baskets, over fallen cabbage-leaves, under horses' noses, found a quiet street, a still quieter archway, pulled out the knife – however his adventure ended he was that knife to the good – and prepared to cut the money out of the belt Mr. Beale had buckled round him.

And the belt was not there! Had he dropped it somewhere? Or had he and Markham, in the hurry of that twilight dressing, forgotten to put it on? He did not know. All he knew was that the belt was not on him, and that he was alone in London, without money, and that at Gravesend his father was waiting for him – waiting, waiting. Dickie knew what it meant to wait.

He went out into the street, and asked the first good-natured-looking loafer he saw the way to Gravesend.

"Way to your grandmother," said the loafer; "don't you come saucing of me."

"But which is the way?" said Dickie.

The man looked hard at him and then pointed with a grimy thumb over his shoulder.

"It's thirty mile if it's a yard," he said. "Got any chink?"

"I lost it," said Dickie. "My farver's there awaitin' for me."

"Garn!" said the man; "you don't kid me so easy."

"I ain't arstin' you for anything except the way," said Dickie.

"More you ain't," said the man, hesitated, and pulled his hand out of his pocket. "Ain't kiddin'? Sure? Father at Gravesend? Take your Bible?"

"Yuss," said Dickie.

"Then you take the first to the right and the first to the left, and you'll get a blue 'bus as'll take you to the 'Elephant.' That's a bit of the way. Then you arst again. And 'ere – this'll pay for the 'bus." He held out coppers.

This practical kindness went to Dickie's heart more than all the kisses of the young ladies in the flower-shop. The tears came into his eyes.

"Well, you *are* a pal, and no error," he said. "Do the same for you some day," he added.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.