

Dickens Charles

# Oliver Twist. Volume 2 of 3



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**Oliver Twist. Volume 2 of 3**

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## Содержание

CHAPTER XX.	5
CHAPTER XXI.	10
CHAPTER XXII.	14
CHAPTER XXIII.	18
CHAPTER XXIV.	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	25

# Charles Dickens

## Oliver Twist, Vol. 2 (of 3)

### CHAPTER XX. WHEREIN OLIVER IS DELIVERED OVER TO MR. WILLIAM SIKES

When Oliver awoke in the morning he was a good deal surprised to find that a new pair of shoes with strong thick soles had been placed at his bedside, and that his old ones had been removed. At first he was pleased with the discovery, hoping that it might be the forerunner of his release; but such thoughts were quickly dispelled on his sitting down to breakfast alone with the Jew, who told him, in a tone and manner which increased his alarm, that he was to be taken to the residence of Bill Sikes that night.

“To – to – stop there, sir?” asked Oliver, anxiously.

“No, no, my dear, not to stop there,” replied the Jew. “We shouldn’t like to lose you. Don’t be afraid, Oliver, you shall come back to us again. Ha! ha! ha! We wont be so cruel as to send you away, my dear. Oh no, no!”

The old man, who was stooping over the fire toasting a piece of bread, looked round as he bantered Oliver thus, and chuckled as if to shew that he knew he would still be very glad to get away if he could.

“I suppose,” said the Jew, fixing his eyes on Oliver, “you want to know what you’re going to Bill’s for – eh, my dear?”

Oliver coloured involuntarily to find that the old thief had been reading his thoughts; but boldly said, “Yes, he did want to know.”

“Why, do you think?” inquired Fagin, parrying the question.

“Indeed I don’t know, sir,” replied Oliver.

“Bah!” said the Jew, turning away with a disappointed countenance from a close perusal of the boy’s face. “Wait till Bill tells you, then.”

The Jew seemed much vexed by Oliver’s not expressing any greater curiosity on the subject; but the truth is, that, although he felt very anxious, he was too much confused by the earnest cunning of Fagin’s looks, and his own speculations, to make any further inquiries just then. He had no other opportunity; for the Jew remained very surly and silent till night, when he prepared to go abroad.

“You may burn a candle,” said the Jew, putting one upon the table; “and here’s a book for you to read till they come to fetch you. Good night!”

“Good night, sir!” replied Oliver, softly.

The Jew walked to the door, looking over his shoulder at the boy as he went, and, suddenly stopping, called him by his name.

Oliver looked up; the Jew, pointing to the candle, motioned him to light it. He did so; and, as he placed the candlestick upon the table, saw that the Jew was gazing fixedly at him with lowering and contracted brows from the dark end of the room.

“Take heed, Oliver! take heed!” said the old man, shaking his right hand before him in a warning manner. “He’s a rough man, and thinks nothing of blood when his own is up. Whatever falls out, say nothing, and do what he bids you. Mind!” Placing a strong emphasis on the last word, he suffered his features gradually to resolve themselves into a ghastly grin; and, nodding his head, left the room.

Oliver leant his head upon his hand when the old man disappeared, and pondered with a trembling heart on the words he had just heard. The more he thought of the Jew’s admonition, the

more he was at a loss to divine its real purpose and meaning. He could think of no bad object to be attained by sending him to Sikes which would not be equally well answered by his remaining with Fagin; and after meditating for a long time, concluded that he had been selected to perform some ordinary menial offices for the housebreaker, until another boy better suited for his purpose could be engaged. He was too well accustomed to suffering, and had suffered too much where he was, to bewail the prospect of a change very severely. He remained lost in thought for some minutes, and then with a heavy sigh snuffed the candle, and taking up the book which the Jew had left with him, began to read.

He turned over the leaves carelessly at first, but, lighting on a passage which attracted his attention, soon became intent upon the volume. It was a history of the lives and trials of great criminals, and the pages were soiled and thumbed with use. Here, he read of dreadful crimes that make the blood run cold; of secret murders that had been committed by the lonely wayside, and bodies hidden from the eye of man in deep pits and wells, which would not keep them down, deep as they were, but had yielded them up at last, after many years, and so maddened the murderers with the sight, that in their horror they had confessed their guilt, and yelled for the gibbet to end their agony. Here, too, he read of men who, lying in their beds at dead of night, had been tempted and led on by their own bad thoughts to such dreadful bloodshed as it made the flesh creep and the limbs quail to think of. The terrible descriptions were so real and vivid, that the sallow pages seemed to turn red with gore, and the words upon them to be sounded in his ears as if they were whispered in hollow murmurs by the spirits of the dead.

In a paroxysm of fear the boy closed the book and thrust it from him. Then, falling upon his knees, he prayed Heaven to spare him from such deeds, and rather to will that he should die at once, than be reserved for crimes so fearful and appalling. By degrees he grew more calm, and besought in a low and broken voice that he might be rescued from his present dangers, and that if any aid were to be raised up for a poor outcast boy, who had never known the love of friends or kindred, it might come to him now, when, desolate and deserted, he stood alone in the midst of wickedness and guilt.

He had concluded his prayer, but still remained with his head buried in his hands, when a rustling noise aroused him.

“What’s that!” he cried, starting up, and catching sight of a figure standing by the door. “Who’s there?”

“Me – only me,” replied a tremulous voice.

Oliver raised the candle above his head, and looked towards the door. It was Nancy.

“Put down the light,” said the girl, turning away her head; “it hurts my eyes.”

Oliver saw that she was very pale, and gently inquired if she were ill. The girl threw herself into a chair, with her back towards him, and wrung her hands; but made no reply.

“God forgive me!” she cried after a while, “I never thought of all this.”

“Has anything happened?” asked Oliver, “Can I help you? I will if I can; I will, indeed.”

She rocked herself to and fro, caught her throat, and, uttering a gurgling sound, struggled and gasped for breath.

“Nancy!” cried Oliver, greatly alarmed, “What is it?”

The girl beat her hands upon her knees, and her feet upon the ground, and, suddenly stopping, drew her shawl close round her, and shivered with cold.

Oliver stirred the fire. Drawing her chair close to it, she sat there for a little time without speaking, but at length she raised her head, and looked round.

“I don’t know what comes over me sometimes,” said the girl, affecting to busy herself in arranging her dress; “it’s this damp, dirty room, I think. Now, Nolly, dear, are you ready?”

“Am I to go with you?” asked Oliver.

“Yes; I have come from Bill,” replied the girl. “You are to go with me.”

“What for?” said Oliver, recoiling.

“What for!” echoed the girl, raising her eyes, and averting them again the moment they encountered the boy’s face. “Oh! for no harm.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Oliver, who had watched her closely.

“Have it your own way,” rejoined the girl, affecting to laugh. “For no good, then.”

Oliver could see that he had some power over the girl’s better feelings, and for an instant thought of appealing to her compassion on his helpless state. But then the thought darted across his mind that it was barely eleven o’clock, and that many people were still in the streets, of whom surely some might be found to give credence to his tale. As the reflection occurred to him, he stepped forward, and said somewhat hastily that he was ready.

Neither his brief consideration nor its purport were lost upon his companion. She eyed him narrowly while he spoke, and cast upon him a look of intelligence which sufficiently shewed that she guessed what had been passing in his thoughts.

“Hush!” said the girl, stooping over him, and pointing to the door as she looked cautiously round. “You can’t help yourself. I have tried hard for you, but all to no purpose. You are hedged round and round, and if ever you are to get loose from here, this is not the time.”

Struck by the energy of her manner, Oliver looked up in her face with great surprise. She seemed to speak the truth; her countenance was white and agitated, and she trembled with very earnestness.

“I have saved you from being ill-used once, and I will again, and I do now,” continued the girl aloud; “for those who would have fetched you, if I had not, would have been far more rough than me. I have promised for your being quiet and silent; if you are not, you will only do harm to yourself and me too, and perhaps be my death. See here! I have borne all this for you already, as true as God sees me shew it.”

She pointed hastily to some livid bruises upon her neck and arms, and continued with great rapidity.

“Remember this, and don’t let me suffer more for you just now. If I could help you I would, but I have not the power. They don’t mean to harm you, and whatever they make you do, is no fault of yours. Hush! every word from you is a blow for me. Give me your hand – make haste, your hand!”

She caught the hand which Oliver instinctively placed in hers, and, blowing out the light, drew him after her up the stairs. The door was opened quickly by some one shrouded in the darkness, and as quickly closed when they had passed out. A hackney-cabriolet was in waiting; and, with the same vehemence which she had exhibited in addressing Oliver, the girl pulled him in with her, and drew the curtains close. The driver wanted no directions, but lashed his horse into full speed without the delay of an instant.

The girl still held Oliver fast by the hand, and continued to pour into his ear the warnings and assurances she had already imparted. All was so quick and hurried that he had scarcely time to recollect where he was, or how he came there, when the carriage stopped at the same house to which the Jew’s steps had been directed on the previous evening.

For one brief moment Oliver cast a hurried glance along the empty street, and a cry for help hung upon his lips. But the girl’s voice was in his ear, beseeching him in such tones of agony to remember her, that he had not the heart to utter it; while he hesitated, the opportunity was gone, for he was already in the house, and the door was shut.

“This way,” said the girl, releasing her hold for the first time. “Bill!”

“Hallo!” replied Sikes, appearing at the head of the stairs with a candle. “Oh! that’s the time of day. Come on!”

This was a very strong expression of approbation, and an uncommonly hearty welcome from a person of Mr. Sikes’s temperament. Nancy, appearing much gratified thereby, saluted him cordially.

“Bullseye’s gone home with Tom,” observed Sikes, as he lighted them up. “He’d have been in the way.”

“That’s right,” rejoined Nancy.

“So you’ve got the kid,” said Sikes, when they had all reached the room: closing the door as he spoke.

“Yes, here he is,” replied Nancy.

“Did he come quiet?” inquired Sikes.

“Like a lamb,” rejoined Nancy.

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Sikes, looking grimly at Oliver, “for the sake of his young carcass, as would otherways have suffered for it. Come here, young un, and let me read you a lectur’, which is as well got over at once.”

Thus addressing his new *protégé*, Mr. Sikes pulled off his cap and threw it into a corner; and then, taking him by the shoulder, sat himself down by the table, and stood Oliver in front of him.

“Now first, do you know wot this is?” inquired Sikes, taking up a pocket-pistol which lay on the table.

Oliver replied in the affirmative.

“Well then, look here,” continued Sikes. “This is powder, that ’ere’s a bullet, and this is a little bit of a old hat for waddin’.”

Oliver murmured his comprehension of the different bodies referred to, and Mr. Sikes proceeded to load the pistol with great nicety and deliberation.

“Now it’s loaded,” said Mr. Sikes, when he had finished.

“Yes, I see it is, sir,” replied Oliver, trembling.

“Well,” said the robber, grasping Oliver’s wrist tightly, and putting the barrel so close to his temple that they touched, at which moment the boy could not repress a shriek; “if you speak a word when you’re out o’doors with me, except when I speak to you, that loading will be in your head without notice – so, if you *do* make up your mind to speak without leave, say your prayers first.”

Having bestowed a scowl upon the object of this warning, to increase its effect, Mr. Sikes continued, —

“As near as I know, there is’nt anybody as would be asking very partickler arter you, if you *was* disposed of; so I needn’t take this devil-and-all of trouble to explain matters to you if it warn’t for your own good. D’ye hear me?”

“The short and the long of what you mean,” said Nancy, speaking very emphatically, and slightly frowning at Oliver as if to bespeak his serious attention to her words, “is, that if you’re crossed by him in this job you have on hand, you’ll prevent his ever telling tales afterwards by shooting him through the head, and take your chance of swinging for it as you do for a great many other things in the way of business every month of your life.”

“That’s it!” observed Mr. Sikes, approvingly; “women can always put things in fewest words, except when it’s blowing up, and then they lengthens it out. And now that he’s thoroughly up to it, let’s have some supper, and get a snooze afore starting.”

In pursuance of this request, Nancy quickly laid the cloth, and, disappearing for a few minutes, presently returned with a pot of porter and a dish of sheep’s heads, which gave occasion to several pleasant witticisms on the part of Mr. Sikes, founded upon the singular coincidence of “jemmies” being a cant name common to them and an ingenious implement much used in his profession. Indeed, the worthy gentleman, stimulated perhaps by the immediate prospect of being in active service, was in great spirits and good humour; in proof whereof it may be here remarked that he humorously drank all the beer at a draught, and did not utter, on a rough calculation, more than fourscore oaths during the whole progress of the meal.

Supper being ended – it may be easily conceived that Oliver had no great appetite for it – Mr. Sikes disposed of a couple of glasses of spirits and water, and threw himself upon the bed, ordering Nancy, with many imprecations in case of failure, to call him at five precisely. Oliver stretched himself

in his clothes, by command of the same authority, on a mattress upon the floor; and the girl mending the fire, sat before it, in readiness to rouse them at the appointed time.

For a long time Oliver lay awake, thinking it not impossible that Nancy might seek that opportunity of whispering some further advice; but the girl sat brooding over the fire without moving, save now and then to trim the light. Weary with watching and anxiety, he at length fell asleep.

When he awoke, the table was covered with tea-things, and Sikes was thrusting various articles into the pockets of his great-coat, which hung over the back of a chair, while Nancy was busily engaged in preparing breakfast. It was not yet daylight, for the candle was still burning, and it was quite dark outside. A sharp rain, too, was beating against the window-panes, and the sky looked black and cloudy.

“Now, then!” growled Sikes, as Oliver started up; “half-past five! Look sharp, or you’ll get no breakfast, for it’s late as it is.”

Oliver was not long in making his toilet; and, having taken some breakfast, replied to a surly inquiry from Sikes, by saying that he was quite ready.

Nancy, scarcely looking at the boy, threw him a handkerchief to tie round his throat, and Sikes gave him a large rough cape to button over his shoulders. Thus attired, he gave his hand to the robber, who, merely pausing to shew him, with a menacing gesture, that he had the pistol in a side pocket of his great-coat, clasped it firmly in his, and, exchanging a farewell with Nancy, led him away.

Oliver turned for an instant when they reached the door, in the hope of meeting a look from the girl. But she had resumed her old seat in front of the fire, and sat perfectly motionless before it.

## CHAPTER XXI. THE EXPEDITION

It was a cheerless morning when they got into the street, blowing and raining hard, and the clouds looking dull and stormy. The night had been very wet, for large pools of water had collected in the road and the kennels were overflowing. There was a faint glimmering of the coming day in the sky, but it rather aggravated than relieved the gloom of the scene, the sombre light only serving to pale that which the street-lamps afforded, without shedding any warmer or brighter tints upon the wet housetops and dreary streets. There appeared to be nobody stirring in that quarter of the town, for the windows of the houses were all closely shut, and the streets through which they passed were noiseless and empty.

By the time they had turned into the Bethnal Green road, the day had fairly begun to break. Many of the lamps were already extinguished; a few country waggons were slowly toiling on towards London; and now and then a stagecoach, covered with mud, rattled briskly by, the driver bestowing, as he passed, an admonitory lash upon the heavy waggoner who, by keeping on the wrong side of the road, had endangered his arriving at the office a quarter of a minute after his time. The public-houses, with gas-lights burning inside, were already open. By degrees other shops began to be unclosed, and a few scattered people were met with. Then came straggling groups of labourers going to their work; then men and women with fish-baskets on their heads; donkey-carts laden with vegetables, chaise-carts filled with live-stock or whole carcasses of meat; milkwomen with pails; and an unbroken concourse of people trudging out with various supplies to the eastern suburbs of the town. As they approached the City, the noise and traffic gradually increased; and when they threaded the streets between Shoreditch and Smithfield, it had swelled into a roar of sound and bustle. It was as light as it was likely to be till night came on again, and the busy morning of half the London population had begun.

Turning down Sun-street and Crown-street, and crossing Finsbury-square, Mr. Sikes struck, by way of Chiswell-street, into Barbican, thence into Long-lane, and so into Smithfield, from which latter place arose a tumult of discordant sounds that filled Oliver Twist with surprise and amazement.

It was market-morning. The ground was covered nearly ankle-deep with filth and mire; and a thick steam perpetually rising from the reeking bodies of the cattle, and mingling with the fog, which seemed to rest upon the chimney-tops, hung heavily above. All the pens in the centre of the large area, and as many temporary ones as could be crowded into the vacant space, were filled with sheep; and tied up to posts by the gutter side were long lines of beasts and oxen three or four deep. Countrymen, butchers, drovers, hawkers, boys, thieves, idlers, and vagabonds of every low grade, were mingled together in a dense mass; the whistling of drovers, the barking of dogs, the bellowing and plunging of beasts, the bleating of sheep, and grunting and squeaking of pigs; the cries of hawkers, the shouts, oaths, and quarrelling on all sides; the ringing of bells and roar of voices that issued from every public-house; the crowding, pushing, driving, beating, whooping, and yelling; the hideous and discordant din that resounded from every corner of the market; and the unwashed, unshaven, squalid, and dirty figures constantly running to and fro, and bursting in and out of the throng, rendered it a stunning and bewildering scene, which quite confounded the senses.

Mr. Sikes, dragging Oliver after him, elbowed his way through the thickest of the crowd, and bestowed very little attention upon the numerous sights and sounds which so astonished the boy. He nodded twice or thrice to a passing friend, and, resisting as many invitations to take a morning dram, pressed steadily onward until they were clear of the turmoil, and had made their way through Hosier-lane into Holborn.

“Now, young un!” said Sikes surlily, looking up at the clock of St. Andrew’s church, “hard upon seven! you must step out. Come, don’t lag behind already, Lazy-legs!”

Mr. Sikes accompanied this speech with a fierce jerk at his little companion’s wrist; and Oliver, quickening his pace into a kind of trot, between a fast walk and a run, kept up with the rapid strides of the housebreaker as well as he could.

They kept on their course at this rate until they had passed Hyde Park corner, and were on their way to Kensington, when Sikes relaxed his pace until an empty cart which was at some little distance behind, came up: when, seeing “Hounslow” written upon it, he asked the driver, with as much civility as he could assume, if he would give them a lift as far as Isleworth.

“Jump up,” said the man. “Is that your boy?”

“Yes; he’s my boy,” replied Sikes, looking hard at Oliver, and putting his hand abstractedly into the pocket where the pistol was.

“Your father walks rather too quick for you, don’t he, my man?” inquired the driver, seeing that Oliver was out of breath.

“Not a bit of it,” replied Sikes, interposing. “He’s used to it. Here, take hold of my hand, Ned. In with you!”

Thus addressing Oliver, he helped him into the cart; and the driver, pointing to a heap of sacks, told him to lie down there, and rest himself.

As they passed the different milestones, Oliver wondered more and more where his companion meant to take him. Kensington, Hammersmith, Chiswick, Kew Bridge, Brentford, were all passed; and yet they kept on as steadily as if they had only begun their journey. At length they came to a public-house called the Coach and Horses, a little way beyond which another road appeared to turn off. And here the cart stopped.

Sikes dismounted with great precipitation, holding Oliver by the hand all the while; and, lifting him down directly, bestowed a furious look upon him, and rapped the side-pocket with his fist in a very significant manner.

“Good-bye, boy,” said the man.

“He’s sulky,” replied Sikes, giving him a shake; “he’s sulky, – a young dog! Don’t mind him.”

“Not I!” rejoined the other, getting into his cart. “It’s a fine day, after all.” And he drove away.

Sikes waited till he had fairly gone, and then, telling Oliver he might look about him if he wanted, once again led him forward on his journey.

They turned round to the left a short way past the public-house, and then, taking a right-hand road, walked on for a long time, passing many large gardens and gentlemen’s houses on both sides of the way, and stopping for nothing but a little beer, until they reached a town, in which, against the wall of a house, Oliver saw written up in pretty large letters, “Hampton.” Here they lingered about in the fields for some hours. At length, they came back into the town, and keeping on, past a public-house which bore the sign of the Red Lion, and by the river-side for a short distance, they came to an old public-house with a defaced sign-board, and ordered some dinner by the kitchen fire.

The kitchen was an old, low-roofed room, with a great beam across the middle of the ceiling, and benches with high backs to them by the fire, on which were seated several rough men in smock-frocks, drinking and smoking. They took no notice of Oliver, and very little of Sikes; and, as Sikes took very little notice of them, he and his young comrade sat in a corner by themselves, without being much troubled by the company.

They had some cold meat for dinner, and sat here so long after it, while Mr. Sikes indulged himself with three or four pipes, that Oliver began to feel quite certain they were not going any further. Being much tired with the walk and getting up so early, he dozed a little at first, and then, quite overpowered by fatigue and the fumes of the tobacco, fell fast asleep.

It was quite dark when he was awakened by a push from Sikes. Rousing himself sufficiently to sit up and look about him, he found that worthy in close fellowship and communication with a labouring man, over a pint of ale.

“So, you’re going on to Lower Halliford, are you?” inquired Sikes.

“Yes, I am,” replied the man, who seemed a little the worse – or better, as the case might be – for drinking; “and not slow about it neither. My horse hasn’t got a load behind him going back, as he had coming up in the mornin’, and he wont be long a-doing of it. Here’s luck to him! Ecod! he’s a good un!”

“Could you give my boy and me a lift as far as there?” demanded Sikes, pushing the ale towards his new friend.

“If you’re going directly, I can,” replied the man, looking out of the pot. “Are you going to Halliford?”

“Going on to Shepperton,” replied Sikes.

“I’m your man as far as I go,” replied the other. “Is all paid, Becky?”

“Yes, the other gentleman’s paid,” replied the girl.

“I say!” said the man, with tipsy gravity, “that wont do, you know.”

“Why not?” rejoined Sikes. “You’re a-going to accommodate us, and wot’s to prevent my standing treat for a pint or so, in return?”

The stranger reflected upon this argument with a very profound face, and having done so, seized Sikes by the hand, and declared he was a real good fellow. To which Mr. Sikes replied, he was joking; – as if he had been sober, there would have been strong reason to suppose he was.

After the exchange of a few more compliments, they bade the company good night, and went out, the girl gathering up the pots and glasses as they did so, and lounging out to the door, with her hands full, to see the party start.

The horse, whose health had been drunk in his absence, was standing outside, ready harnessed to the cart. Oliver and Sikes got in without any further ceremony, and the man, to whom he belonged, having lingered a minute or two “to bear him up,” and to defy the hostler and the world to produce his equal, mounted also. Then the hostler was told to give the horse his head, and, his head being given him, he made a very unpleasant use of it, tossing it into the air with great disdain, and running into the parlour windows over the way; after performing which feats, and supporting himself for a short time on his hind-legs, he started off at great speed, and rattled out of the town right gallantly.

The night was very dark. A damp mist rose from the river and the marshy ground about, and spread itself over the dreary fields. It was piercing cold, too; all was gloomy and black. Not a word was spoken, for the driver had grown sleepy, and Sikes was in no mood to lead him into conversation. Oliver sat huddled together in a corner of the cart, bewildered with alarm and apprehension, and figuring strange objects in the gaunt trees, whose branches waved grimly to and fro, as if in some fantastic joy at the desolation of the scene.

As they passed Sunbury church, the clock struck seven. There was a light in the ferry-house window opposite, which streamed across the road, and threw into more sombre shadow a dark yew-tree with graves beneath it. There was a dull sound of falling water not far off, and the leaves of the old tree stirred gently in the night wind. It seemed like quiet music for the repose of the dead.

Sunbury was passed through, and they came again into the lonely road. Two or three miles more, and the cart stopped. Sikes alighted, and, taking Oliver by the hand, they once again walked on.

They turned into no house at Shepperton, as the weary boy had expected, but still kept walking on, in mud and darkness, through gloomy lanes and over cold open wastes, until they came within sight of the lights of a town at no great distance. On looking intently forward, Oliver saw that the water was just below them, and that they were coming to the foot of a bridge.

Sikes kept straight on till they were close upon the bridge, and then turned suddenly down a bank upon the left. “The water!” thought Oliver, turning sick with fear. “He has brought me to this lonely place to murder me!”

He was about to throw himself on the ground, and make one struggle for his young life, when he saw that they stood before a solitary house, all ruinous and decayed. There was a window on each side of the dilapidated entrance, and one story above; but no light was visible. It was dark, dismantled, and, to all appearance, uninhabited.

Sikes, with Oliver’s hand still in his, softly approached the low porch, and raised the latch. The door yielded to the pressure, and they passed in together.

## CHAPTER XXII. THE BURGLARY

“Hallo!” cried a loud, hoarse voice, directly they had set foot in the passage.

“Don’t make such a row,” said Sikes, bolting the door. “Shew a glim, Toby.”

“Aha! my pal,” cried the same voice; “a glim, Barney, a glim! Shew the gentleman in, Barney; and wake up first, if convenient.”

The speaker appeared to throw a boot-jack, or some such article, at the person he addressed, to rouse him from his slumbers; for the noise of a wooden body falling violently was heard, and then an indistinct muttering, as of a man between asleep and awake.

“Do you hear?” cried the same voice. “There’s Bill Sikes in the passage with nobody to do the civil to him; and you sleeping there, as if you took laudanum with your meals, and nothing stronger. Are you any fresher now, or do you want the iron candlestick to wake you thoroughly?”

A pair of slipshod feet shuffled hastily across the bare floor of the room as this interrogatory was put; and there issued from a door on the right hand, first a feeble candle, and next, the form of the same individual who has been heretofore described as labouring under the infirmity of speaking through his nose, and officiating as waiter at the public-house on Saffron Hill.

“Bister Sikes!” exclaimed Barney, with real or counterfeit joy; “cub id, sir; cub id.”

“Here! you get on first,” said Sikes, putting Oliver in front of him. “Quicker! or I shall tread upon your heels.”

Muttering a curse upon his tardiness, Sikes pushed Oliver before him, and they entered a low dark room with a smoky fire, two or three broken chairs, a table, and a very old couch, on which, with his legs much higher than his head, a man was reposing at full length, smoking a long clay pipe. He was dressed in a smartly-cut snuff-coloured coat, with large brass buttons, an orange neckerchief, a coarse, staring, shawl-pattern waistcoat, and drab breeches. Mr. Crackit (for he it was) had no very great quantity of hair, either upon his head or face, but what he had was of a reddish dye, and tortured into long corkscrew curls, through which he occasionally thrust some very dirty fingers, ornamented with large common rings. He was a trifle above the middle size, and apparently rather weak in the legs; but this circumstance by no means detracted from his own admiration of his top-boots, which he contemplated in their elevated situation with lively satisfaction.

“Bill, my boy!” said this figure, turning his head towards the door, “I’m glad to see you. I was almost afraid you’d given it up, in which case I should have made a personal wentur. Hallo!”

Uttering this exclamation in a tone of great surprise, as his eyes rested on Oliver, Mr. Toby Crackit brought himself into a sitting posture and demanded who that was.

“The boy – only the boy!” replied Sikes, drawing a chair towards the fire.

“Wud of Bister Fagid’s lads,” exclaimed Barney, with a grin.

“Fagin’s, eh!” exclaimed Toby, looking at Oliver. “Wot an inwalable boy that’ll make for the old ladies’ pockets in chapels. His mug is a fortun’ to him.”

“There – there’s enough of that,” interposed Sikes, impatiently, and stooping over his recumbent friend he whispered a few words in his ear, at which Mr. Crackit laughed immensely, and honoured Oliver with a long stare of astonishment.

“Now,” said Sikes, as he resumed his seat, “if you’ll give us something to eat and drink while we’re waiting, you’ll put some heart in us, – or in me, at all events. Sit down by the fire, younker, and rest yourself; for you’ll have to go out with us again to-night, though not very far off.”

Oliver looked at Sikes in mute and timid wonder, and drawing a stool to the fire, sat with his aching head upon his hands, scarcely knowing where he was, or what was passing around him.

“Here,” said Toby, as the young Jew placed some fragments of food and a bottle upon the table, “Success to the crack!” He rose to honour the toast, and, carefully depositing his empty pipe in a corner, advanced to the table, filled a glass with spirits, and drank off its contents. Mr. Sikes did the same.

“A drain for the boy,” said Toby, half filling a wine-glass. “Down with it, innocence.”

“Indeed,” said Oliver, looking piteously up into the man’s face; “indeed, I – ”

“Down with it!” echoed Toby. “Do you think I don’t know what’s good for you? Tell him to drink it, Bill.”

“He had better,” said Sikes, clapping his hand upon his pocket. “Burn my body, if he isn’t more trouble than a whole family of Dodgers. Drink it, you perverse imp; drink it!”

Frightened by the menacing gestures of the two men, Oliver hastily swallowed the contents of the glass, and immediately fell into a violent fit of coughing, which delighted Toby Crackit and Barney, and even drew a smile from the surly Mr. Sikes.

This done, and Sikes having satisfied his appetite (Oliver could eat nothing but a small crust of bread which they made him swallow), the two men laid themselves down on chairs for a short nap. Oliver retained his stool by the fire; and Barney, wrapped in a blanket, stretched himself on the floor, close outside the fender.

They slept, or appeared to sleep, for some time; nobody stirring but Barney, who rose once or twice to throw coals upon the fire. Oliver fell into a heavy doze, imagining himself straying along through the gloomy lanes, or wandering about the dark churchyard, or retracing some one or other of the scenes of the past day, when he was roused by Toby Crackit jumping up and declaring it was half-past one.

In an instant the other two were on their legs, and all were actively engaged in busy preparation. Sikes and his companion enveloped their necks and chins in large dark shawls, and drew on their great-coats, while Barney, opening a cupboard, brought forth several articles, which he hastily crammed into the pockets.

“Barkers for me, Barney,” said Toby Crackit.

“Here they are,” replied Barney, producing a pair of pistols. “You loaded them yourself.”

“All right!” replied Toby, stowing them away. “The persuaders?”

“I’ve got ’em,” replied Sikes.

“Crape, keys, centre-bits, darkies – nothing forgotten?” inquired Toby, fastening a small crowbar to a loop inside the skirt of his coat.

“All right,” rejoined his companion. “Bring them bits of timber, Barney: that’s the time of day.”

With these words he took a thick stick from Barney’s hands, who, having delivered another to Toby, busied himself in fastening on Oliver’s cape.

“Now then!” said Sikes, holding out his hand.

Oliver, who was completely stupified by the unwonted exercise, and the air, and the drink which had been forced upon him, put his hand mechanically into that which Sikes extended for the purpose.

“Take his other hand, Toby,” said Sikes. “Look out, Barney.”

The man went to the door, and returned to announce that all was quiet. The two robbers issued forth with Oliver between them; and Barney, having made all fast, rolled himself up as before, and was soon asleep again.

It was now intensely dark. The fog was much heavier than it had been in the early part of the night, and the atmosphere was so damp that, although no rain fell, Oliver’s hair and eyebrows, within a few minutes after leaving the house, had become stiff with the half-frozen moisture that was floating about. They crossed the bridge, and kept on towards the lights which he had seen before. They were at no great distance off; and, as they walked pretty briskly, they soon arrived at Chertsey.

“Slap through the town,” whispered Sikes; “there’ll be nobody in the way to-night to see us.”

Toby acquiesced; and they hurried through the main street of the little town, which at that late hour was wholly deserted. A dim light shone at intervals from some bedroom-window, and the hoarse barking of dogs occasionally broke the silence of the night; but there was nobody abroad, and they had cleared the town as the church bell struck two.

Quickening their pace, they turned up a road upon the left hand. After walking about a quarter of a mile, they stopped before a detached house surrounded by a wall, to the top of which Toby Crackit, scarcely pausing to take breath, climbed in a twinkling.

“The boy next,” said Toby. “Hoist him up: I’ll catch hold of him.”

Before Oliver had time to look round, Sikes had caught him under the arms, and in three or four seconds he and Toby were lying on the grass on the other side. Sikes followed directly, and they stole cautiously towards the house.

And now, for the first time, Oliver, well nigh mad with grief and terror, saw that housebreaking and robbery, if not murder, were the objects of the expedition. He clasped his hands together, and involuntarily uttered a subdued exclamation of horror. A mist came before his eyes, the cold sweat stood upon his ashy face, his limbs failed him, and he sunk upon his knees.

“Get up!” murmured Sikes, trembling with rage, and drawing the pistol from his pocket; “get up, or I’ll strew your brains upon the grass.”

“Oh! for God’s sake let me go!” cried Oliver; “let me run away and die in the fields. I will never come near London; never, never! Oh! pray have mercy upon me, and do not make me steal. For the love of all the bright angels that rest in heaven, have mercy upon me!”

The man to whom this appeal was made swore a dreadful oath, and had cocked the pistol, when Toby, striking it from his grasp, placed his hand upon the boy’s mouth and dragged him to the house.

“Hush!” cried the man; “it wont answer here. Say another word, and I’ll do your business myself with a crack on the head that makes no noise, and is quite as certain and more genteel. Here, Bill, wrench the shutter open. He’s game enough, now, I’ll engage. I’ve seen older hands of his age took the same way for a minute or two on a cold night.”

Sikes, invoking terrific imprecations upon Fagin’s head for sending Oliver on such an errand, plied the crowbar vigorously, but with little noise; after some delay, and some assistance from Toby, the shutter to which he had referred swung open on its hinges.

It was a little lattice window, about five feet and a half above the ground, at the back of the house, which belonged to a scullery, or small brewing-place, at the end of the passage: the aperture was so small that the inmates had probably not thought it worth while to defend it more securely; but it was large enough to admit a boy of Oliver’s size nevertheless. A very brief exercise of Mr. Sikes’s art sufficed to overcome the fastening of the lattice, and it soon stood wide open also.

“Now listen, you young limb,” whispered Sikes, drawing a dark lantern from his pocket, and throwing the glare full on Oliver’s face; “I’m a going to put you through there. Take this light, go softly up the steps straight afore you, and along the little hall to the street-door: unfasten it, and let us in.”

“There’s a bolt at the top you wont be able to reach,” interposed Toby. “Stand upon one of the hall chairs. There are three there, Bill, with a jolly large blue unicorn and a gold pitchfork on ’em, which is the old lady’s arms.”

“Keep quiet, can’t you?” replied Sikes, with a threatening look. “The room-door is open, is it?”

“Wide,” replied Toby, after peeping in to satisfy himself. “The game of that is that they always leave it open with a catch, so that the dog, who’s got a bed in here, may walk up and down the passage when he feels wakeful. Ha! ha! Barney ’ticed him away to-night, so neat.”

Although Mr. Crackit spoke in a scarcely audible whisper, and laughed without noise, Sikes imperiously commanded him to be silent, and to get to work. Toby complied by first producing his lantern, and placing it on the ground; and then planting himself firmly with his head against the wall beneath the window, and his hands upon his knees, so as to make a step of his back. This was no

sooner done than Sikes, mounting upon him, put Oliver gently through the window with his feet first; and, without leaving hold of his collar, planted him safely on the floor inside.

“Take this lantern,” said Sikes, looking into the room. “You see the stairs afore you?”

Oliver, more dead than alive, gasped out, “Yes;” and Sikes, pointing to the street-door with the pistol-barrel, briefly advised him to take notice that he was within shot all the way, and that if he faltered he would fall dead that instant.

“It’s done in a minute,” said Sikes, in the same low whisper. “Directly I leave go of you, do your work. Hark!”

“What’s that?” whispered the other man.

They listened intently.

“Nothing,” said Sikes, releasing his hold of Oliver. “Now!”

In the short time he had had to collect his senses, the boy had firmly resolved that, whether he died in the attempt or not, he would make one effort to dart up stairs from the hall and alarm the family. Filled with this idea, he advanced at once, but stealthily.

“Come back!” suddenly cried Sikes aloud. “Back! back!”

Scared by the sudden breaking of the dead stillness of the place, and a loud cry which followed it, Oliver let his lantern fall, and knew not whether to advance or fly.

The cry was repeated – a light appeared – a vision of two terrified half-dressed men at the top of the stairs swam before his eyes – a flash – a loud noise – a smoke – a crash somewhere, but where he knew not, – and he staggered back.

Sikes had disappeared for an instant; but he was up again, and had him by the collar before the smoke had cleared away. He fired his own pistol after the men who were already retreating, and dragged the boy up.

“Clasp your arm tighter,” said Sikes, as he drew him through the window. “Give me a shawl here. They’ve hit him. Quick! Damnation, how the boy bleeds!”

Then came the loud ringing of a bell, mingled with the noise of fire-arms and the shouts of men, and the sensation of being carried over uneven ground at a rapid pace. And then the noises grew confused in the distance, and a cold deadly feeling crept over the boy’s heart, and he saw or heard no more.

## CHAPTER XXIII. WHICH CONTAINS THE SUBSTANCE OF A PLEASANT CONVERSATION BETWEEN MR. BUMBLE AND A LADY; AND SHEWS THAT EVEN A BEADLE MAY BE SUSCEPTIBLE ON SOME POINTS

The night was bitter cold. The snow lay upon the ground frozen into a hard thick crust, so that only the heaps that had drifted into byways and corners were affected by the sharp wind that howled abroad, which, as if expending increased fury on such prey as it found, caught it savagely up in clouds, and, whirling it into a thousand misty eddies, scattered it in air. Bleak, dark, and piercing cold, it was a night for the well-housed and fed to draw round the bright fire and thank God they were at home, and for the homeless starving wretch to lay him down and die. Many hunger-worn outcasts close their eyes in our bare streets at such times, who, let their crimes have been what they may, can hardly open them in a more bitter world.

Such was the aspect of out-of-doors affairs when Mrs. Corney, the matron of the workhouse, to which our readers have been already introduced as the birthplace of Oliver Twist, sat herself down before a cheerful fire in her own little room, and glanced with no small degree of complacency at a small round table, on which stood a tray of corresponding size, furnished with all necessary materials for the most grateful meal that matrons enjoy. In fact, Mrs. Corney was about to solace herself with a cup of tea: and as she glanced from the table to the fireplace, where the smallest of all possible kettles was singing a small song in a small voice, her inward satisfaction evidently increased, – so much so, indeed, that Mrs. Corney smiled.

“Well,” said the matron, leaning her elbow on the table, and looking reflectively at the fire, “I’m sure we have all on us a great deal to be grateful for – a great deal, if we did but know it. Ah!”

Mrs. Corney shook her head mournfully, as if deploring the mental blindness of those paupers who did not know it, and thrusting a silver spoon (private property) into the inmost recesses of a two-ounce tin tea-caddy, proceeded to make the tea.

How slight a thing will disturb the equanimity of our frail minds! The black teapot, being very small and easily filled, ran over while Mrs. Corney was moralizing, and the water slightly scalded Mrs. Corney’s hand.

“Drat the pot!” said the worthy matron, setting it down very hastily on the hob; “a little stupid thing, that only holds a couple of cups! What use is it of to any body? – except,” said Mrs. Corney, pausing, – “except to a poor desolate creature like me. Oh dear!”

With these words the matron dropped into her chair, and, once more resting her elbow on the table, thought of her solitary fate. The small teapot and the single cup had awakened in her mind sad recollections of Mr. Corney (who had not been dead more than five-and-twenty years), and she was overpowered.

“I shall never get another!” said Mrs. Corney, pettishly; “I shall never get another – like him.”

Whether this remark bore reference to the husband or the teapot is uncertain. It might have been the latter; for Mrs. Corney looked at it as she spoke, and took it up afterwards. She had just tasted her first cup, when she was disturbed by a soft tap at the room-door.

“Oh, come in with you!” said Mrs. Corney, sharply. “Some of the old women dying, I suppose; – they always die when I’m at meals. Don’t stand there, letting the cold air in, don’t. What’s amiss now, eh?”

“Nothing, ma’am, nothing,” replied a man’s voice.

“Dear me!” exclaimed the matron, in a much sweeter tone, “is that Mr. Bumble?”

“At your service, ma’am,” said Mr. Bumble, who had been stopping outside to rub his shoes clean, and shake the snow off his coat, and who now made his appearance, bearing the cocked-hat in one hand and a bundle in the other. “Shall I shut the door, ma’am?”

The lady modestly hesitated to reply, lest there should be any impropriety in holding an interview with Mr. Bumble with closed doors. Mr. Bumble, taking advantage of the hesitation, and being very cold himself, shut it without farther permission.

“Hard weather, Mr. Bumble,” said the matron.

“Hard, indeed, ma’am,” replied the beadle. “Anti-porochial weather this, ma’am. We have given away, Mrs. Corney, – we have given away a matter of twenty quartern loaves and a cheese and a half this very blessed afternoon; and yet them paupers are not contented.”

“Of course not. When would they be, Mr. Bumble?” said the matron, sipping her tea.

“When, indeed, ma’am!” rejoined Mr. Bumble. “Why, here’s one man that, in consideration of his wife and large family, has a quartern loaf and a good pound of cheese, full weight. Is he grateful, ma’am, – is he grateful? Not a copper farthing’s worth of it! What does he do, ma’am, but ask for a few coals, if it’s only a pocket-handkerchief full, he says! Coals! – what would he do with coals? – Toast his cheese with ’em, and then come back for more. That’s the way with these people, ma’am; – give ’em a apron full of coals to-day, and they’ll come back for another the day after to-morrow, as brazen as alabaster.”

The matron expressed her entire concurrence in this intelligible simile, and the beadle went on.

“I never,” said Mr. Bumble, “see anything like the pitch it’s got to. The day afore yesterday, a man – you have been a married woman, ma’am, and I may mention it to you – a man, with hardly a rag upon his back (here Mrs. Corney looked at the floor), goes to our overseer’s door when he has got company coming to dinner, and says, he must be relieved, Mrs. Corney. As he wouldn’t go away, and shocked the company very much, our overseer sent him out a pound of potatoes and half a pint of oatmeal. ‘My God!’ says the ungrateful villain, ‘what’s the use of *this* to me? You might as well give me a pair of iron spectacles ‘Very good,’ says our overseer, taking ’em away again, ‘you wont get anything else here.’ – ‘Then I’ll die in the streets!’ says the vagrant. – ‘Oh no, you wont,’ says our overseer.”

“Ha! ha! – that was very good! – so like Mr. Grannet, wasn’t it?” interposed the matron. “Well, Mr. Bumble?”

“Well, ma’am,” rejoined the beadle, “he went away and *did* die in the streets. There’s a obstinate pauper for you!”

“It beats anything I could have believed,” observed the matron, emphatically. “But don’t you think out-of-door relief a very bad thing any way, Mr. Bumble? You’re a gentleman of experience, and ought to know. Come.”

“Mrs. Corney,” said the beadle, smiling as men smile who are conscious of superior information, “out-of-door relief, properly managed, – properly managed, ma’am, – is the porochial safeguard. The great principle of out-of-door relief is to give the paupers exactly what they don’t want, and then they get tired of coming.”

“Dear me!” exclaimed Mrs. Corney. “Well, that is a good one, too!”

“Yes. Betwixt you and me, ma’am,” returned Mr. Bumble, “that’s the great principle; and that’s the reason why, if you look at any cases that get into them owdacious newspapers, you’ll always observe that sick families have been relieved with slices of cheese. That’s the rule now, Mrs. Corney, all over the country. – But, however,” said the beadle, stooping to unpack his bundle, “these are official secrets, ma’am; not to be spoken of except, as I may say, among the porochial officers, such as ourselves. This is the port wine, ma’am, that the board ordered for the infirmary, – real, fresh, genuine port wine, only out of the cask this afternoon, – clear as a bell, and no sediment.”

Having held the first bottle up to the light, and shaken it well to test its excellence, Mr. Bumble placed them both on the top of a chest of drawers, folded the handkerchief in which they had been wrapped, put it carefully in his pocket, and took up his hat as if to go.

“You’ll have a very cold walk, Mr. Bumble,” said the matron.

“It blows, ma’am,” replied Mr. Bumble, turning up his coat-collar, “enough to cut one’s ears off.”

The matron looked from the little kettle to the beadle who was moving towards the door, and as the beadle coughed, preparatory to bidding her good night, bashfully inquired whether – whether he wouldn’t take a cup of tea?

Mr. Bumble instantaneously turned back his collar again, laid his hat and stick upon a chair, and drew another chair up to the table. As he slowly seated himself, he looked at the lady. She fixed her eyes upon the little teapot. Mr. Bumble coughed again, and slightly smiled.

Mrs. Corney rose to get another cup and saucer from the closet. As she sat down, her eyes once again encountered those of the gallant beadle; she coloured, and applied herself to the task of making his tea. Again Mr. Bumble coughed, – louder this time than he had coughed yet.

“Sweet? Mr. Bumble,” inquired the matron, taking up the sugar-basin.

“Very sweet, indeed, ma’am,” replied Mr. Bumble. He fixed his eyes on Mrs. Corney as he said this; and if ever a beadle looked tender, Mr. Bumble was that beadle at that moment.

The tea was made, and handed in silence. Mr. Bumble, having spread a handkerchief over his knees to prevent the crumbs from sullyng the splendour of his shorts, began to eat and drink; varying these amusements occasionally by fetching a deep sigh, which, however, had no injurious effect upon his appetite, but, on the contrary, rather seemed to facilitate his operations in the tea and toast department.

“You have a cat, ma’am, I see,” said Mr. Bumble, glancing at one, who, in the centre of her family, was basking before the fire; “and kittens too, I declare!”

“I am so fond of them, Mr. Bumble, you can’t think,” replied the matron. “They’re *so* happy, *so* frolicsome, and *so* cheerful, that they are quite companions for me.”

“Very nice animals, ma’am,” replied Mr. Bumble, approvingly; “so very domestic.”

“Oh, yes!” rejoined the matron, with enthusiasm; “so fond of their home too, that it’s quite a pleasure, I’m sure.”

“Mrs. Corney, ma’am,” said Mr. Bumble, slowly, and marking the time with his teaspoon, “I mean to say this, ma’am, that any cat or kitten that could live with you, ma’am, and *not* be fond of its home, must be a ass, ma’am.”

“Oh, Mr. Bumble!” remonstrated Mrs. Corney.

“It’s no use disguising facts, ma’am,” said Mr. Bumble, slowly flourishing the teaspoon with a kind of amorous dignity that made him doubly impressive; “I would drown it myself with pleasure.”

“Then you’re a cruel man,” said the matron vivaciously, as she held out her hand for the beadle’s cup, “and a very hard-hearted man besides.”

“Hard-hearted, ma’am,” said Mr. Bumble, “hard!” Mr. Bumble resigned his cup without another word, squeezed Mrs. Corney’s little finger as she took it, and inflicting two open-handed slaps upon his laced waistcoat, gave a mighty sigh, and hitched his chair a very little morsel farther from the fire.

It was a round table; and as Mrs. Corney and Mr. Bumble had been sitting opposite each other, with no great space between them, and fronting the fire, it will be seen that Mr. Bumble, in receding from the fire, and still keeping at the table, increased the distance between himself and Mrs. Corney; which proceeding some prudent readers will doubtless be disposed to admire, and to consider an act of great heroism on Mr. Bumble’s part, he being in some sort tempted by time, place, and opportunity, to give utterance to certain soft nothings, which, however well they may become the lips of the light and thoughtless, do seem immeasurably beneath the dignity of judges of the land, members of parliament, ministers of state, lord-mayors, and other great public functionaries, but more particularly beneath the stateliness and gravity of a beadle, who (as is well known) should be the sternest and most inflexible among them all.

Whatever were Mr. Bumble's intentions, however, – and no doubt they were of the best, – whatever they were, it unfortunately, happened, as has been twice before remarked, that the table was a round one; consequently, Mr. Bumble, moving his chair by little and little, soon began to diminish the distance between himself and the matron, and, continuing to travel round the outer edge of the circle, brought his chair in time close to that in which the matron was seated. Indeed, the two chairs touched; and when they did so, Mr. Bumble stopped.

Now, if the matron had moved her chair to the right, she would have been scorched by the fire, and if to the left, she must have fallen into Mr. Bumble's arms; so (being a discreet matron, and no doubt foreseeing these consequences at a glance) she remained where she was, and handed Mr. Bumble another cup of tea.

“Hard-hearted, Mrs. Corney?” said Mr. Bumble, stirring his tea, and looking up into the matron's face; “are *you* hard-hearted, Mrs. Corney?”

“Dear me!” exclaimed the matron, “what a very curious question from a single man. What can you want to know for, Mr. Bumble?”

The beadle drank his tea to the last drop, finished a piece of toast, whisked the crumbs off his knees, wiped his lips, and deliberately kissed the matron.

“Mr. Bumble,” cried that discreet lady in a whisper, for the fright was so great that she had quite lost her voice, “Mr. Bumble, I shall scream!” Mr. Bumble made no reply, but in a slow and dignified manner put his arm round the matron's waist.

As the lady had stated her intention of screaming, of course she would have screamed at this additional boldness, but that the exertion was rendered unnecessary by a hasty knocking at the door, which was no sooner heard than Mr. Bumble darted with much agility to the wine-bottles, and began dusting them with great violence, while the matron sharply demanded who was there. It is worthy of remark, as a curious physical instance of the efficacy of a sudden surprise in counteracting the effects of extreme fear, that her voice had quite recovered all its official asperity.

“If you please, mistress,” said a withered old female pauper, hideously ugly, putting her head in at the door, “Old Sally is a-going fast.”

“Well, what's that to me?” angrily demanded the matron. “I can't keep her alive, can I?”

“No, no, mistress,” replied the old woman; “nobody can; she's far beyond the reach of help. I've seen a many people die, little babes and great strong men, and I know when death's a-coming well enough. But she's troubled in her mind; and when the fits are not on her, – and that's not often, for she is dying very hard, – she says she has got something to tell which you must hear. She'll never die quiet till you come, mistress.”

At this intelligence the worthy Mrs. Corney muttered a variety of invectives against old women who couldn't even die without purposely annoying their betters; and, muffling herself in a thick shawl which she hastily caught up, briefly requested Mr. Bumble to stop till she came back, lest anything particular should occur, and bidding the messenger walk fast, and not be all night hobbling up the stairs, followed her from the room with a very ill grace, scolding all the way.

Mr. Bumble's conduct on being left to himself was rather inexplicable. He opened the closet, counted the tea-spoons, weighed the sugar-tongs, closely inspected a silver milk-pot to ascertain that it was of the genuine metal; and, having satisfied his curiosity upon these points, put on his cocked-hat corner-wise, and danced with much gravity four distinct times round the table. Having gone through this very extraordinary performance, he took off the cocked-hat again, and, spreading himself before the fire with his back towards it, seemed to be mentally engaged in taking an exact inventory of the furniture.

## CHAPTER XXIV. TREATS OF A VERY POOR SUBJECT, BUT IS A SHORT ONE, AND MAY BE FOUND OF IMPORTANCE IN THIS HISTORY

It was no unfit messenger of death that had disturbed the quiet of the matron's room. Her body was bent by age, her limbs trembled with palsy, and her face, distorted into a mumbling leer, resembled more the grotesque shaping of some wild pencil than the work of Nature's hand.

Alas! how few of Nature's faces there are to gladden us with their beauty! The cares, and sorrows, and hungerings of the world change them as they change hearts, and it is only when those passions sleep, and have lost their hold for ever, that the troubled clouds pass off, and leave heaven's surface clear. It is a common thing for the countenances of the dead, even in that fixed and rigid state, to subside into the long-forgotten expression of sleeping infancy, and settle into the very look of early life; so calm, so peaceful do they grow again, that those who knew them in their happy childhood kneel by the coffin's side in awe, and see the angel even upon earth.

The old crone tottered along the passages and up the stairs, muttering some indistinct answers to the chidings of her companion; and being at length compelled to pause for breath, gave the light into her hand, and remained behind to follow as she might, while the more nimble superior made her way to the room where the sick woman lay.

It was a bare garret-room, with a dim light burning at the farther end. There was another old woman watching by the bed, and the parish apothecary's apprentice was standing by the fire, making a toothpick out of a quill.

"Cold night, Mrs. Corney," said this young gentleman, as the matron entered.

"Very cold indeed, sir," replied the mistress, in her most civil tones, and dropping a curtsy as she spoke.

"You should get better coals out of your contractors," said the apothecary's deputy, breaking a lump on the top of the fire with the rusty poker; "these are not at all the sort of thing for a cold night."

"They're the board's choosing, sir," returned the matron. "The least they could do would be to keep us pretty warm, for our places are hard enough."

The conversation was here interrupted by a moan from the sick woman.

"Oh!" said the young man, turning his face towards the bed, as if he had previously quite forgotten the patient, "it's all U. P. there, Mrs. Corney."

"It is, is it, sir?" asked the matron.

"If she lasts a couple of hours, I shall be surprised," said the apothecary's apprentice, intent upon the toothpick's point. "It's a break-up of the system altogether. Is she dozing, old lady?"

The attendant stooped over the bed to ascertain, and nodded in the affirmative.

"Then perhaps she'll go off in that way, if you don't make a row," said the young man. "Put the light on the floor, – she wont see it there."

The attendant did as she was bidden, shaking her head meanwhile to intimate that the woman would not die so easily; and having done so, resumed her seat by the side of the other nurse, who had by this time returned. The mistress, with an expression of impatience, wrapped herself in her shawl and sat at the foot of the bed.

The apothecary's apprentice, having completed the manufacture of the toothpick, planted himself in front of the fire and made good use of it for ten minutes or so, when, apparently growing rather dull, he wished Mrs. Corney joy of her job, and took himself off on tiptoe.

When they had sat in silence for some time the two old women rose from the bed, and crouching over the fire, held out their withered hands to catch the heat. The flame threw a ghastly light on their shrivelled faces, and made their ugliness appear perfectly terrible, as in this position they began to converse in a low voice.

“Did she say any more, Anny dear, while I was gone?” inquired the messenger.

“Not a word,” replied the other. “She plucked and tore at her arms for a little time; but I held her hands, and she soon dropped off. She hasn’t much strength in her, so I easily kept her quiet. I ain’t so weak for an old woman, although I am on parish allowance; – no, no!”

“Did she drink the hot wine the doctor said she was to have?” demanded the first.

“I tried to get it down,” rejoined the other; “but her teeth were tight set, and she clenched the mug so hard that it was as much as I could do to get it back again. So *I* drank it, and it did me good.”

Looking cautiously round to ascertain that they were not overheard, the two hags cowered nearer to the fire, and chuckled heartily.

“I mind the time,” said the first speaker, “when she would have done the same, and made rare fun of it afterwards.”

“Ay, that she would,” rejoined the other; “she had a merry heart. A many many beautiful corpses she laid out, as nice and neat as wax-work. My old eyes have seen them – ay, and these old hands touched them too; for I have helped her scores of times.”

Stretching forth her trembling fingers as she spoke, the old creature shook them exultingly before her face, and fumbling in her pocket brought out an old time-discoloured tin snuff-box, from which she shook a few grains into the outstretched palm of her companion, and a few more into her own. While they were thus employed, the matron, who had been impatiently watching until the dying woman should awaken from her stupor, joined them by the fire, and sharply asked how long she was to wait.

“Not long, mistress,” replied the second woman, looking up into her face. “We have none of us long to wait for Death. Patience, patience! he’ll be here soon enough for us all.”

“Hold your tongue, you doting idiot!” said the matron, sternly. “You, Martha, tell me; has she been in this way before?”

“Often,” answered the first woman.

“But will never be again,” added the second one; “that is, she’ll never wake again but once – and mind, mistress, that wont be for long.”

“Long or short,” said the matron, snappishly, “she wont find me here when she does, and take care, both of you, how you worry me again for nothing. It’s no part of my duty to see all the old women in the house die, and I wont – that’s more. Mind that, you impudent old harridans. If you make a fool of me again, I’ll soon cure you, I warrant you!”

She was bouncing away, when a cry from the two women, who had turned towards the bed, caused her to look round. The sick woman had raised herself upright, and was stretching her arms towards them.

“Who’s that?” she cried, in a hollow voice.

“Hush, hush!” said one of the women, stooping over her – “lie down, lie down!”

“I’ll never lie down again alive!” said the woman, struggling. “I *will* tell her! Come here – nearer. Let me whisper in your ear.”

She clutched the matron by the arm, and forcing her into a chair by the bedside was about to speak, when looking round, she caught sight of the two old women bending forward in the attitude of eager listeners.

“Turn them away,” said the woman, drowsily; “make haste – make haste!”

The two old crones, chiming in together, began pouring out many piteous lamentations that the poor dear was too far gone to know her best friends, and uttering sundry protestations that they would never leave her, when the superior pushed them from the room, closed the door, and returned

to the bedside. On being excluded, the old ladies changed their tone, and cried through the keyhole that old Sally was drunk; which, indeed, was not unlikely, since, in addition to a moderate dose of opium prescribed by the apothecary, she was labouring under the effects of a final taste of gin and water which had been privily administered in the openness of their hearts by the worthy old ladies themselves.

“Now listen to me,” said the dying woman, aloud, as if making a great effort to revive one latent spark of energy. “In this very room – in this very bed – I once nursed a pretty young creetur’, that was brought into the house with her feet cut and bruised with walking, and all soiled with dust and blood. She gave birth to a boy, and died. Let me think – what was the year again?”

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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