

NELL AND HER GRANDFATHER

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Told from Charles Dickens's "The Old Curiosity Shop"

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NELL AND HER GRAND-
FATHER ***

Produced by Al Haines.

[image]

When the wagon came Nell was placed inside (page 138)

NELL AND HER GRANDFATHER

Told from Charles Dickens's
"The Old Curiosity Shop"

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NELL AND HER GRANDFATHER.

Chapter I.

THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP.

One evening an Old Gentleman was taking a walk in the city of London, when some one spoke to him in a soft, sweet voice that fell pleasantly upon his ears.

He turned hastily round, and found at his elbow a pretty little girl of some thirteen summers, who begged to be directed to a certain street which was in quite another part of London.

"It is a very long way from here, my child," said the Old Gentleman.

"I know that, sir," she replied timidly. "I am afraid it is a very long way, for I came from there to-night."

"Alone?" said the Old Gentleman.

"Oh yes; I don't mind that. But I am a little afraid now, for I have lost my road."

"And what made you ask it of me? Suppose I should tell you wrong?"

"I am sure you will not do that," said the little maiden. "You are such a very old gentleman, and walk so slow yourself."

As the child spoke these words a tear came into her clear eye, and her slight figure trembled as she looked up into the Old Gentleman's face.

"Come," said he, "I'll take you there."

She put her hand in his as if she had known him from her cradle; and they trudged away together, the little creature rather seeming to lead and take care of the Old Gentleman than he to be protecting her.

"Who has sent you so far by yourself?" said he.

"Somebody who is very kind to me, sir."

"And what have you been doing?"

"That I must not tell," said the child.

The Old Gentleman looked at the little creature with surprise, for he wondered what kind of errand it might be that made her unwilling to answer the question. Her quick eye seemed to read his thoughts. As it met his she added that there was no harm in what she had been doing, but it was a great secret—a secret which she did not even know herself.

This was said with perfect frankness. She now walked on as before, talking cheerfully by the way; but she said no more about her home, beyond remarking that they were going quite a new road, and asking if it were a short one.

At length, clapping her hands with pleasure and running on before her new friend for a short distance, the little girl stopped at a door, and remaining on the step till the Old Gentleman came up, knocked at it when he joined her. When she had knocked twice or thrice there was a noise as if some person were moving inside, and at length a faint light was seen through the glass of the upper part of the door. As this light approached very slowly it showed clearly both what kind of person it was who advanced and what kind of apartment it was through which he came.

He was a little old man, with long gray hair, whose face and figure, as he held the light above his head and looked before him, could be plainly seen. The

place through which he made his way was one of those found in odd corners of the town, and known as "curiosity shops." There were suits of mail standing like ghosts in armour here and there; rusty weapons of various kinds; twisted figures in china, and wood, and iron, and ivory; curtains, and strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams.

The thin, worn face of the little old man was suited to the place. He might have groped among old churches, and tombs, and deserted houses, and gathered all the spoils with his own hands. As he turned the key in the lock he looked at the Old Gentleman with some surprise. The door being opened, the child addressed him as her grandfather, and in a few words told him the little story of her meeting with her new friend.

"Why, bless thee, child," said the old man, patting her on the head, "how couldst thou miss thy way? What if I had lost thee, Nell!"

"I would have found my way back to you, grandfather," said the child boldly. "Never fear."

The old man kissed her, then turned to the stranger, and begged him to walk in. He did so. The door was closed and locked. Going first with the light, the old man led the way into a small sitting-room behind the shop. From this apartment another door opened into a kind of closet, in which stood a little bed that a fairy might have slept in, it looked so very small and was so prettily draped. The child took a candle and tripped into this little room, leaving the two old men together.

In a few moments, however, the door of the closet opened and the child came back, her light-brown hair hanging loose about her neck, and her face flushed with the haste she had made to return. She at once set about preparing supper. The Old Gentleman was surprised to see that everything was done by the child, and that there appeared to be no other persons in the house. When she left the room for a moment he expressed his surprise, and the old man replied that there were few grown persons as careful and useful as she.

"It always grieves me," said the visitor, "to see children entering on the duties of life when they are scarcely more than infants."

"It will do her no harm," said the old man, looking steadily at his guest. "The children of the poor know but few pleasures. Even the cheap delights of childhood must be bought and paid for."

"But—forgive me for saying this—you are surely not so very poor," said the Old Gentleman.

"She is not my child, sir," returned the old man. "Her mother was my daughter, and she was poor. I save nothing, not a penny, though I live as you see; but"—he leaned forward to whisper—"she shall be rich one of these days and a fine lady. Don't you think ill of me because I use her help. She gives it cheerfully,

as you see, and it would break her heart if she knew that I suffered anybody else to do for me what her own little hands can do so well."

At this moment the child again returned, and the old man, motioning his visitor to come to the table, broke off and said no more.

They had scarcely begun their repast when there was a knock at the door, and Nell, bursting into a hearty laugh, said it was no doubt dear old Kit come back at last.

"Foolish Nell," said her grandfather, fondling with her hair. "She always laughs at poor Kit." Then he took up a candle, and went to open the door. When he came back Kit was at his heels.

Kit was a shock-headed, clumsy lad, with a very wide mouth, very red cheeks, a turned-up nose, and a very comical look on his face. He at once carried a large slice of bread and meat into a corner, and began to eat greedily.

"Ah!" said the old man, turning to his guest with a sigh, as if he had spoken to him at that very moment, "you don't know what you say when you tell me that I don't consider her."

"You must not think too much of what I said, my friend," said the other.

"No," returned the old man thoughtfully, "no.—Come hither, Nell."

The little girl hastened from her seat, and put her arm round his neck.

"Do I love thee, Nell?" said he. "Say, do I love thee, Nell, or no?"

The child only answered by her caresses, and laid her head upon his breast.

"Why dost thou sob?" said the grandfather, pressing her closer to him. "Is it because thou know'st that I love thee, and dost not like that I should seem to doubt it? Well, well; then let us say I love thee dearly."

"Indeed, indeed you do," replied the child. "Kit knows you do."

Kit, who in eating his bread and meat had been swallowing two-thirds of his knife at every mouthful with the coolness of a juggler, stopped short and bawled, "Nobody isn't such a fool as to say he doesn't," after which he took a huge sandwich at one bite.

"She is poor now," said the old man, patting the child's cheek, "but, I say again, the time is coming when she shall be rich. It has been a long time coming, but it must come at last. A very long time, but it surely must come. It has come to other men, who do nothing but waste time and money. When will it come to me?"

"I am very happy as I am, grandfather," said the child.

"Tush, tush!" returned the old man, "thou dost not know; how shouldst thou?" Then he muttered again between his teeth, "The time *must* come—I am very sure it must. It will be all the better for coming late;" and then he sighed, and still holding the child between his knees, appeared to be insensible to everything around him. By this time it was very near midnight, and the Old Gentleman rose

to go, a movement which recalled his host to himself.

"One moment, sir," he said.—"Now, Kit—near midnight, boy, and you still here! Get home, get home, and be true to your time in the morning, for there's work to do. Good-night!—There, bid him good-night, Nell, and let him be gone."

"Good-night, Kit," said the child, her eyes lighting up with merriment and kindness.

"Good-night, Miss Nell," returned the boy.

"And thank this gentleman," said the old man, "but for whose care I might have lost my little girl to-night."

"No, no, master," said Kit; "that won't do, that won't."

"What do you mean?" cried the old man.

"I'd have found her, master," said Kit; "I'd have found her if she was above ground. I would, as quick as anybody, master. Ha, ha, ha!"

Once more opening his mouth and shutting his eyes and laughing loudly, Kit gradually backed to the door and roared himself out.

When he had gone, and the child was busily clearing the table, the old man said,—

"I haven't seemed to thank you enough, sir, for what you have done to-night, but I do thank you, humbly and heartily; and so does she, and her thanks are worth more than mine. I should be sorry that you went away and thought I was unmindful of your goodness, or careless of her; I am not, indeed."

The Old Gentleman said he was sure of that from what he had seen. "But," he added, "may I ask you a question?"

"Ay, sir," replied the old man; "what is it?"

"This delicate child," said the other, "with so much beauty and brightness—has she nobody to care for her but you?"

"No," he returned, looking anxiously into the other's face, "no, and she wants no other."

Seeing that he seemed excited and impatient, the visitor turned to put on an outer coat which he had thrown off on entering the room, meaning to say no more. He was surprised to see the child standing by with a cloak upon her arm, and in her hand a hat and stick.

"Those are not mine, my dear," said the visitor.

"No," returned the child quietly, "they are grandfather's."

"But he is not going out to-night."

"Oh yes, he is," said the child with a smile.

"And what becomes of you, my pretty one?"

"Me! I stay here, of course. I always do."

The stranger looked towards the old man, but he had turned away his head. Then he looked back to the slight, gentle figure of the child. Alone! In that

gloomy place all the long, dreary night!

Nell, however, seemed to have no thought for herself, but cheerfully helped her grandfather with his cloak, and when he was ready, took a candle to light the way to the street door.

When they reached the door, the child, setting down the candle, turned to say good-night, and raised her face to kiss the visitor. Then she ran to her grandfather, who folded her in his arms and bade God bless her.

"Sleep soundly, Nell," he said in a low voice, "and angels guard thy bed! Do not forget thy prayers, my sweet."

"No, indeed," said the child; "they make me feel so happy."

"That's well; I know they do—they should," said the old man. "Bless thee a hundred times! Early in the morning I shall be home."

"You'll not ring twice," returned the child. "The bell wakes me, even in the middle of a dream."

With this they parted. The child opened the door (now guarded by a shutter which the boy had put up before he left the house), and with another farewell, held it until the two men had passed out. Her grandfather paused a moment while it was gently closed and fastened on the inside, and then walked on at a slow pace.

At the street corner he stopped. Looking at his guest with a troubled face, he said that their ways were widely different, and that he must here take his leave. The Old Gentleman would have spoken, but the other hurried quickly away, and was soon lost in the darkness.

Chapter II. DRIVEN FROM HOME.

The Old Gentleman lingered about the street for two long hours; for he could not tear himself away from the place. Nor could he help thinking of all the harm that might come to the child shut up alone in the old gloomy shop; and he wondered what it was that took the old man from his home so late at night.

The child had told him that she *always* stayed there quite alone; so that it was clearly the usual thing for the old man to spend the night away from his home.

At last, quite tired out with watching and thinking, the Old Gentleman

hired a coach and drove to his own home. A week later, however, he paid a second visit to the Old Curiosity Shop to learn something more of the strange old man and his beautiful grandchild.

He found that the old dealer had a visitor, a young man of about twenty-one, with a bold but handsome face and a careless, impudent manner. "I tell you again," the young fellow was saying as the Old Gentleman entered, "that I want to see Nell my sister."

The old man gave an angry reply, and the visitor soon gathered that what the young fellow really wanted was not so much to see Little Nell as to wring from her grandfather some of his money, which he said was being hoarded to no purpose.

[image]

The old man gave an angry reply

While the quarrel was at its height the door opened, and Little Nell herself came in. She was followed by an elderly man with a hard, forbidding face, and so small that he was quite a dwarf. His black eyes were restless, sly, and cunning; his upper lip and chin were bristly with a coarse, hard beard; and his face bore a smile in which there was neither mirth nor pleasure.

For a few moments he stood listening to the angry voices of the two men; and when Nell's brother had flung himself out of the house in a fierce rage, the dwarf, whose name was Quilp, came forward, put his hand into his breast, and took out a bag of money. This he handed to the old man with the words, "I brought it myself, as, being in gold, it was too heavy for Nell to carry in her bag. She ought to get used to such loads though, for she will have gold enough when you are dead."

"I hope so," said the old man, with something like a frown.

"Hope so!" echoed the dwarf. "Neighbour, I wish I knew in what safe place you have placed all I have given you from time to time. But you keep your secret very close."

"My secret!" said the other, with a haggard look. "Yes, you are right. I—I—keep it close—very close."

The old man said no more, but taking the bag in his hand, turned away with a slow, uncertain step. The dwarf then took his leave, wondering as he went what the old man did with the money he had borrowed. After some days, however, he was able by means best known to himself to find out the truth of the matter.

Nell's grandfather was a gambler. The money Quilp lent him was gambled

away night after night in the vain hope of winning a fortune for his grandchild. When the dwarf learnt the truth, he refused to give the old man any more money.

This made Nell's grandfather very unhappy, and the girl, seeing his misery, begged him to let her go and ask for the dwarf's help once more. He gave her leave, and the child brought a note in reply, to the effect that Quilp would visit the old man shortly.

One night, the third after Nell's visit to Quilp's house, the old man, who had been weak and ill all day, said he should not leave home. The child's eyes sparkled at the news, but her joy departed when she looked at his worn and sickly face.

"Two days," he said, "two whole clear days have passed, and there is no reply. What did he tell thee, Nell?"

"Just what I have told you, dear grandfather, indeed."

"True," said the old man faintly. "Yes. But tell me again, Nell. My head fails me. What was it that he told thee? Nothing more than that he would see me to-morrow or next day? That was in the note."

"Nothing more," said the child. "Shall I go to him again to-morrow, dear grandfather? Very early. I will be there and back before breakfast."

The old man shook his head, and drew her towards him.

"'Twould be of no use, my dear. But if he deserts me, Nell, at this moment, if he deserts me now, I am ruined; and worse—far worse than that—have ruined thee. If we are beggars—"

"What if we are?" cried the child boldly. "Let us be beggars, and be happy."

"Beggars—and happy!" said the old man. "Poor child!"

"Dear grandfather," cried the girl, with flushed face and trembling voice, "I am not a child, I think; but even if I am, oh, hear me pray that we may beg, or work in open roads or fields, to earn a scanty living, rather than live as we do now."

"Nelly!" said the old man.

"Yes, yes, rather than live as we do now," said the child. "If you are sad, let me know why, and be sad too; if you waste away, and are paler and weaker every day, let me be your nurse and try to comfort you. If you are poor, let us be poor together; but let me be with you, do let me be with you. Do not let me see such change and not know why, or I shall break my heart and die. Dear grandfather, let us leave this sad place to-morrow, and beg our way from door to door."

The old man covered his face with his hands, and hid it in the pillow of the couch on which he lay.

"Let us be beggars," said the child, passing an arm round his neck. "I have no fear but we shall have enough. I am sure we shall. Let us walk through country places, and sleep in fields and under trees, and never think of money again, or

anything that can make you sad, but rest at nights, and have the sun and wind upon our faces in the day, and thank God together. Let us never set foot in dark rooms or houses any more, but wander up and down wherever we like to go; and when you are tired you shall stop and rest in the pleasantest place that we can find, and I will go and beg for both."

The child's voice was lost in sobs as she dropped upon the old man's neck; nor did she weep alone.

Meanwhile Quilp had entered the room unseen, and skipping upon a chair, placed himself upon the back with his feet on the seat. Then he looked at the two with a leer upon his face. Turning, the old man saw him, and asked how he came there.

"Through the door," said the dwarf. "I wish to have some words with you alone."

Nell looked at her grandfather, who nodded, and she left the room.

"Have you brought me any money?" asked the old man.

"No," said Quilp; "and, neighbour, you have no secret from me now. To think that I should have been blinded by a mere gambler!"

"I am no gambler," said the old man. "I played to win a fortune for Nell. Do not desert me. I only need a few pounds to make good my losses and to win wealth in plenty."

But the dwarf would not listen to the old man's pleading. He had come, he said, to claim his own. The shop and its contents were his, and he meant to take them over at once.

He was as good as his word. Before long he had taken up his abode in the parlour, where he plainly meant to stay; and the old man was in his bed raving with fever.

Nell nursed her grandfather with tender care, and after a weary time saw him come slowly back to life again; but his mind was now very weak, and he spent each day in moody thought brooding over his troubles.

The dwarf was not slow to hint that he would be glad to see the last of Nell and her grandfather, and at length the old man said he would move out in a couple of days. "Very good," said Quilp; "but mind, I can't go beyond that time."

When the dwarf had left them to themselves the old man's tears fell fast, and making as though he would fall upon his knees, he begged his tender little nurse to forgive him.

"Forgive you—what?" said Nell. "O grandfather, what should I forgive?"

"All that is past, all that has come upon thee, Nell; all that was done in that uneasy dream," returned the old man.

"Do not talk so," said the child. "Pray do not. Let us speak of something else."

"Yes, yes, we will," he said. "And it shall be of what we talked of long ago—many months—months is it, or weeks, or days? Which is it, Nell?"

"I do not understand you," said the child.

"It has come back upon me to-day; it has all come back since we have been sitting here. I bless thee for it, Nell."

"For what, dear grandfather?"

"For what you said when we were first made beggars, Nell. Let us speak softly. Hush! for if they knew downstairs they would say that I was mad, and take thee away from me. We will not stop here another day. We will go far away from here."

"Yes, let us go," said the child. "Let us be gone from this place, and never turn back or think of it again. Let us wander barefoot through the world rather than linger here."

"We will," answered the old man. "We will travel afoot through the woods and fields, and by the side of rivers, and trust ourselves to God in the places where He dwells. It is far better to lie down at night beneath an open sky like that yonder—see how bright it is!—than to rest in close rooms, which are always full of care and weary dreams. Thou and I together, Nell, may be cheerful and happy yet, and learn to forget this time as if it had never been."

"We will be happy!" cried the child, "We never can be here."

"No, we never can again—never again—that's truly said," replied the old man. "Let us steal away to-morrow morning, early and softly, that we may not be seen or heard, and leave no trace or track for them to follow by. Poor Nell! Thy cheek is pale, and thy eyes are heavy with watching and weeping for me—I know—for me; but thou wilt be well again, and merry too, when we are far away. To-morrow morning, dear, we'll turn our faces from this scene of sorrow, and be as free and happy as the birds."

And then the old man clasped his hands above her head and said, in a few broken words, that from that time forth they would wander up and down together, and never part again.

The child's heart beat high with hope and joy. She had no thought of hunger, or cold, or thirst. They would be happy together as they had been before. This was all she cared for.

While the old man slept soundly in his bed, she set herself to prepare for their flight. There were a few articles of clothing for herself to carry, as well as a few for him; and a staff to support his feeble steps was put ready for his use.

When she had finished the old man was yet asleep, and as she was unwilling to disturb him, she left him to slumber on until the sun rose. He was then very anxious that they should leave the house without a minute's loss of time, and was soon ready.

The child took him by the hand, and they trod lightly down the stairs, trembling whenever a board creaked, and often stopping to listen.

At last they reached the passage on the ground floor, where the snoring of Quilp sounded more terrible in their ears than the roaring of lions.

They opened the door without noise, and passing into the street, stood still. "Which way?" said the child.

The old man looked first at her, then to the right and left, then at her again, and shook his head. It was plain that she was now his guide. The child knew it, and putting her hand in his, led him gently away.

It was the beginning of a day in June, the deep blue sky unbroken by a cloud, and full of brilliant light. The streets were, as yet, almost empty. The houses and shops were closed, and the sweet air of morning fell like breath from angels on the sleeping town.

Forth from the city, while it yet slept, went the two poor wanderers, they knew not whither.

Chapter III. IN THE OPEN COUNTRY.

The two pilgrims, often pressing each other's hands, or looking at each other with a smile, went on their way in silence. After walking a long, long way they left the city behind, and came in sight of fields, tiny cottages, and large mansions with lawns and porters' lodges.

Then came a turnpike, then fields again with trees and haystacks, then a hill; and on top of that the traveller might stop, and looking back at old St. Paul's looming through the smoke, might feel at last that he was clear of London.

Near such a spot as this, and in a pleasant field, the old man and his little guide sat down to rest. Nell had brought in her basket some slices of bread and meat, and here they made their simple breakfast.

The freshness of the day, the singing of the birds, the beauty of the waving grass, the deep-green leaves, the wild flowers, and the scents and sounds that floated in the air, filled them with gladness. The child had said her simple prayers once that morning, but now in her deep thankfulness they rose to her lips again. The old man took off his hat; he had no memory for the words, but he said *Amen*, for he knew that they were very good.

There had been an old copy of the "Pilgrim's Progress," with pictures, upon a shelf at home, over which Nell had often pored in wonder. As she looked back upon the place they had left, one part of it came strongly into her mind.

"Dear grandfather," she said, "I feel as if we were both pilgrims like Christian, and had laid down on this grass all the cares and troubles we brought with us, never to take them up again."

"No, never to return, never to return," replied the old man, waving his hands towards the city. "Thou and I are free of it now, Nell. They shall never lure us back."

"Are you tired?" said the child. "Are you sure you don't feel ill from this long walk?"

"I shall never feel ill again, now that we are once away," was his reply. "Let us be stirring, Nell. We must be farther away—a long, long way farther. We are too near to stop and be at rest. Come."

There was a pool of clear water in the field, in which the child now laved her hands and face, and cooled her feet. She would have the old man refresh himself in this way too; and making him sit down upon the grass, cast the water on him with her hands, and dried it with her dress.

"I can do nothing for myself, my darling," said the old man. "I don't know how it is; I could once, but the time's gone. Don't leave me, Nell; say that thou'lt not leave me. I loved thee all the while, indeed I did. If I lose thee too, my dear, I must die!"

He laid his head upon her shoulder, and Nell soothed him with gentle and tender words, and smiled at his thinking they could ever part. He was soon calmed, and fell asleep, singing to himself in a low voice like a little child.

He awoke refreshed, and they went on their way once more. The road was pleasant, lying between beautiful pastures and fields of corn, above which the lark trilled out its happy song. The air came laden with the fragrance it caught upon its way, and the bees hummed forth their drowsy song as they floated by.

They were now in the open country; the houses were very few, and often miles apart. Now and again they came upon a cluster of poor cottages, some with a chair or low board put across the open door, to keep the children from the road, others shut up close while all the family were working in the fields.

They walked all day, and slept at night at a small cottage where beds were let to travellers. Next morning they were afoot again, and though at first they were very tired, recovered before long and went briskly forward.

They often stopped to rest, but only for a short space at a time, and then went on, having had but little food since the morning. It was nearly five o'clock in the afternoon when, drawing near another cluster of huts, the child looked into each, doubtful at which to ask for leave to rest awhile and buy a drink of

milk.

It was not easy to choose, for she was very timid. Here was a crying child, and there a noisy wife. In this, the people seemed too poor, in that too many. At length she stopped at one where the family were seated round the table. She chose this cottage because there was an old man sitting in a chair beside the hearth, and she thought he was a grandfather, and would be kind to hers.

There were, besides, the cottager, his wife, and three little children, brown as berries. As soon as Nell had made known her wants she was invited within. The eldest boy ran out to fetch some milk, the second dragged two stools towards the door, while the youngest crept to his mother's gown, and looked at the strangers from beneath his sunburnt hand.

"You are welcome, master," said the old cottager, in a thin, piping voice. "Are you travelling far?"

"Yes, sir; a long way," replied the child, for her grandfather had turned to her for an answer.

"From London?" asked the old man

The child said yes.

The milk arrived, and Nell having opened her little basket and selected the best pieces for her grandfather, they made a hearty meal.

"How far is it to a town or village?" she asked of the husband.

"A matter of a good five mile, my dear," was the reply; "but you're not going on to-night?"

"Yes, yes, Nell," said the old man hastily. "Farther on, farther on, darling; farther away, if we walk till midnight."

"There's a good barn hard by, master," said the man. "Excuse me, but you do seem a little tired, and unless you wish to get on—"

"Yes, yes, we do," said the old man fretfully.—"Farther away, dear Nell; pray, farther away."

"We must go on, indeed," said the child. "We thank you very much, but we cannot stop so soon.—I'm quite ready, grandfather."

But the woman had seen that one of Nell's little feet was blistered and sore, and she would not let her go until she had washed the place, which she did so carefully and with such a gentle hand that the child's heart was too full for her to say more than a fervent "God bless you!"

When they had left the cottage some distance behind Nell turned her head and saw that the whole family, even the old grandfather, were standing in the road, watching them as they went on their way; and so, with many waves of the hand and cheering nods, and on one side at least not without tears, they parted company.

They now walked more slowly and painfully than they had done yet for

about a mile, when they heard the sound of wheels behind them, and looking round saw an empty cart drawing near to them. The driver on coming up to them stopped his horse and looked hard at Nell.

"Didn't you stop to rest at a cottage yonder?" he said.

"Yes, sir," replied the child.

"Ah! they asked me to look out for you," said the man. "I'm going your way. Give me your hand; jump up, master."

This was a great relief, for they were so very tired that they could scarcely crawl along. To them the jolting cart was a comfortable carriage, and the ride the finest in the world. Nell had scarcely settled herself on a little heap of straw in one corner, when she fell fast asleep.

She was awakened by the stopping of the cart, which was about to turn up a by-lane. The driver kindly got down to help her out. Then he pointed to some trees at a very short distance before them, said that the town lay in that direction, and that they had better take the path through the churchyard. So towards this spot they bent their weary steps.

As they crossed the churchyard they saw two men seated upon the grass, and so busily at work that at first they did not notice the little girl and the old man. Nell saw at a glance that they were Punch and Judy men, for she noticed Punch himself, smiling as usual, perched upon a tombstone. Here and there on the ground were other parts of the show, and the two men were mending the wooden frame with glue and tacks.

As Nell and her grandfather drew near they looked up. One was a little merry man with a bright eye and a red nose. The other seemed to be of a graver character. Both greeted the newcomers heartily, and after a few moments Nell's grandfather, pointing to Punch and Judy, asked, "Are you going to show them to-night?"

"Yes," said the merry man. "Look here," he went on, turning to his partner, "here's Judy's clothes falling to pieces again. Much good *you* do at sewing things."

Nell saw at once that help such as she could give was badly needed, and said timidly, "I have a needle, sir, in my basket, and thread too. Let me try to mend the clothes for you."

The showman was much pleased, and in a few moments Nell had done the work very neatly, to his great delight. When she had finished he asked whether she and the old man were going on again. "No farther to-night," said Nell.

"If you want a place to stop at," said the showman, "come with us to the tavern. It's very cheap." This they did, and in the evening saw the Punch and Judy show in the tavern kitchen; but Nell was so tired that she fell asleep before the play was half over.

Next day the showman asked the two travellers to go with them to some

aces that were being held not far away; and the old man, who had been as pleased as a child with the performance, at once said that they would be much pleased to go. So they set off together, and for the next few days travelled in company.

[image]

So they set off together

But after a while Nell noticed that the two men were often whispering together, and that they took great care to keep them always in sight.

"Grandfather," she whispered, when they were alone for a moment, "these men think that we have secretly left our friends, and mean to have us sent back."

The old man was very much frightened, and began to shake. After soothing him she said, "I shall find a time when we can steal away. When I do, mind you come with me, and do not stop or speak a word." So at the close of a long day, when the men were setting up the show in a suitable spot, Nell touched the old man's arm, and turning with him fled along the nearest road. They never once stopped to look behind, and creeping under the brow of a bill at a quick pace, made for the open fields.

Chapter IV. THE VILLAGE SCHOOL.

It was not until they were quite tired out and could no longer keep up the pace at which they had fled from the race-ground that the old man and the child stopped to rest upon the borders of a little wood. Here, though the race-ground could not be seen, they could yet hear the noise of the distant shouts, the hum of the voices, and the beating of the drums.

Some time passed before Nell could bring the trembling old man to a state of quiet.

"We are quite safe now, and have nothing to fear indeed, dear grandfather," she said.

After a while they rose up from the ground, and took the shady track which led them through the wood. Passing along it for a short distance they came to a

lane, completely shaded by the trees on either hand which met together overhead. A broken finger-post told them that this lane led to a village three miles off, and thither they bent their steps.

It was a very small place. The men and boys were playing at cricket on the green; and as the other folks were looking on, they wandered up and down, uncertain where to seek a humble lodging. There was but one old man in the little garden before his cottage, and him they were too timid to approach, for he was the schoolmaster, and had "School" written up over his window in black letters on a white board. He was a pale, simple-looking man, and sat smoking his pipe in the little porch before his cottage door.

"Speak to him, dear," the old man whispered.

"I am almost afraid to disturb him," said the child timidly. "He does not seem to see us. Perhaps if we wait a little he may look this way."

The slight noise they made in raising the latch caught his ear. He looked at them kindly, but gently shook his head.

Nell dropped a curtsy, and told him they were poor travellers, who sought a shelter for the night, for which they would gladly pay. The schoolmaster looked at her as she spoke, laid aside his pipe, and rose to his feet.

"If you could direct us anywhere, sir," said the child, "we should take it very kindly."

"You have been walking a long way," said the schoolmaster.

"A long way, sir," the child replied.

"You're a young traveller, my child," he said, laying his hand gently on her head.—"Your grandchild, friend?"

"Ay, sir," cried the old man, "and the stay and comfort of my life."

"Come in," said the schoolmaster. Then he led them into his little school-room, which was parlour and kitchen also, and told them that they were welcome to stay under his roof till morning. Before they had done thanking him, he spread a coarse white cloth upon the table, with knives and plates, and bringing out some bread and cold meat besought them to eat.

The child looked round the room as she took her seat. There were a couple of forms, notched and cut and inked all over; a small deal desk perched on four legs, at which no doubt the master sat; a few dog's-eared books upon a high shelf; and beside them a collection of peg-tops, balls, kites, fishing-lines, marbles, half-eaten apples, and other things taken from idle urchins. Hanging on hooks upon the wall were the cane and ruler; and near them, on a small shelf of its own, the dunce's cap, made of old newspapers. But the great ornaments of the wall were certain sentences fairly copied in good round text, and well-worked sums in simple addition and multiplication, which were pasted all round the room.

"Yes," said the old schoolmaster, following Nell's eyes with his own; "that's

beautiful writing, my dear?"

"Very, sir," replied the child modestly; "is it yours?"

"Mine!" he returned, taking out his spectacles and putting them on; "I couldn't write like that nowadays. No, they're all done by one hand; a little hand it is, not so old as yours, but a very clever one."

As the schoolmaster said this he saw that a small blot of ink had been thrown on one of the copies; so he took a penknife from his pocket, and going up to the wall carefully scraped it out.

"A little hand, indeed," said the poor schoolmaster. "Far beyond all his mates in his learning and his sports too, how did he ever come to be so fond of me? That I should love him is no wonder, but that he should love me!" And here the schoolmaster stopped, and took off his spectacles to wipe them, as though they had grown dim.

"I hope there is nothing the matter, sir," said Nell anxiously.

"Not much, my dear," said the schoolmaster. "I hoped to have seen him on the green to-night. But he'll be there to-morrow."

Then after a pause he turned to her, and speaking very gently, hoped she would say a prayer that night for a sick child.

After a sound night's rest the child rose early in the morning and went down to the room where she had supped last night. As the schoolmaster had already left his bed and gone out, she began herself to make the room neat and tidy, and had just finished when her kind host returned.

He thanked her many times, and said that the old dame who did such work for him had gone out to nurse the little scholar of whom he had told her. The child asked how he was, and hoped he was better.

"No," said the schoolmaster, shaking his head sorrowfully. "No better. They even say he is worse."

"I am very sorry for that, sir," said the child.

She then asked his leave to prepare breakfast; and her grandfather coming downstairs after a while, they all three sat down together. While they were eating, their host said that the old man seemed much tired, and stood in need of rest.

"If the journey you have before you is a long one," he said, "you are very welcome to pass another night here. I should really be glad if you would, friend."

He saw that the old man looked at Nell, and added,—

"I shall be glad to have your young companion with me for one day. If you can do a charity to a lone man, and rest yourself at the same time, do so. But if you must go again upon your journey, I wish you well through it, and will walk a little way with you before school begins."

"What are we to do, Nell?" said the old man in great doubt. "Say what we're

to do, dear.”

Nell was only too glad to stay. She was happy to show how thankful she was to the kind schoolmaster by doing such household duties as his little cottage stood in need of. When these were done she took some needlework from her basket and sat down upon a stool beside the window. Her grandfather was resting in the sun outside, and idly watching the clouds as they floated on before the light summer wind.

As the schoolmaster took his seat behind his desk to begin the day’s work, the child was afraid that she might be in the way, and offered to go to her little bedroom. But this he would not allow; and as he seemed pleased to have her there, she stayed, busying herself with her work.

”Have you many scholars, sir?” she asked.

The poor schoolmaster shook his head, and said that they barely filled the two forms.

”Are the others clever, sir?” asked the child, glancing at the wall.

”Good boys,” returned the schoolmaster. ”good boys enough, my dear; but they’ll never do like that.”

At the top of the first form—the post of honour in the school—was the empty place of the little sick scholar, and at the head of the row of pegs on which hats or caps were hung, one was empty.

Soon began the hum of learning lessons, the whispered jest, and all the noise and drawl of school; and in the midst of the din sat the poor schoolmaster, trying in vain to fix his mind upon the duties of the day, and to forget his little friend. But the work only reminded him more strongly of the willing scholar.

”I think, boys,” said the schoolmaster, when the clock struck twelve, ”that I shall give a half-holiday this afternoon.”

Upon this the boys, led on by the tallest among them, raised a great shout.

”You must promise me first,” said the schoolmaster, ”that you’ll not be noisy, or at least, if you are, that you’ll go away and be so—away out of the village, I mean. I’m sure you wouldn’t disturb your old playmate.”

”No, sir! no, sir!” said the boys in a chorus.

”Then pray don’t forget—there’s my dear scholars,” said the schoolmaster—”what I have asked you, and do it as a favour to me. Good-bye all.”

”Thank’ee, sir,” and ”Good-bye, sir,” were said a great many times, and the boys went out very slowly and softly. But there was the sun shining, and there were the birds singing, as the sun only shines and the birds only sing on holidays and half-holidays; there were the trees waving for all free boys to climb and nestle among their leafy branches; the hay begging them to come and scatter it to the pure air; the smooth ground, inviting to runs and leaps and long walks. It was more than boy could bear, and with a joyous whoop the whole band took to their

heels and spread themselves about, shouting and laughing as they went.

"It's natural, thank Heaven!" said the poor schoolmaster, looking after them. "I'm very glad they didn't mind me."

Towards night an old woman came up the garden, and meeting the schoolmaster at the door, said he was to go to Dame West's directly. He and Nell were at the moment on the point of going out for a walk, and they hurried away together at once.

They stopped at a cottage door, and the schoolmaster knocked softly at it with his hand. It was opened without loss of time, and they entered a room where a little group of women were gathered about one older than the rest, who was crying and rocking herself to and fro.

"O dame!" said the schoolmaster, drawing near her chair, "is it so bad as this?"

"He's going fast," cried the old woman; "my grandson's dying."

Without saying a word in reply the schoolmaster went into another room, where he found his little scholar, and stayed with him till he passed gently away.

Almost broken-hearted, Nell returned with her kind friend to his cottage. She stole away to bed as quickly as she could, and when she was alone gave free vent to her sorrow in a flood of tears. But she felt through her grief a feeling of thankfulness that she herself was spared to the one relative and friend she loved so well.

The sun darting his cheerful rays into she room awoke her next morning; and now they must take leave of the poor schoolmaster, and wander forth once more. By the time they were ready to go school had begun. But the schoolmaster rose from his desk and walked with them to the gate.

It was with a trembling hand that the child held out to him the money which a lady had given her at the race-meeting for some wild flowers, faltering in her thanks as she thought how small the sum was, and blushing as she offered it. But he bade her put it up again, and, stooping, kissed her cheek.

They bade him good-bye very many times, and turned away, walking slowly and often looking back, until they could see him no more. At length they left the village far behind, and even lost sight of the smoke above the trees. They walked onward now at a quicker pace, keeping to the main road, meaning to go wherever it might lead them.

Chapter V.

THE CARAVAN.

The afternoon had worn away into a beautiful evening when the travellers came to a point where the road made a sharp turn and struck across a common. On the border of this common, and close to the hedge which divided it from the fields, a caravan was drawn up to rest, upon which they came so suddenly that they could not have passed it by even if they had wished to do so.

It was not a shabby, dingy, dusty cart, but a smart little house upon wheels, with white curtains to the windows, and window shutters of green with bright panels of red. Neither was it a poor caravan drawn by a single donkey or horse, for a pair of fine horses were grazing on the grass. Near it at the open door (graced with a bright brass knocker) sat a stout lady taking tea. The tea-things, as well as a cold knuckle of ham, were set forth upon a drum covered with a white napkin.

It happened that at that moment the lady of the caravan had her large cup to her lips, and having her eyes also lifted to the sky in her enjoyment of the tea, she did not see the travellers when they first came up. It was not until she was setting down the cup, and drawing a long breath of contentment, that she beheld an old man and a young child walking slowly by, and glancing at her with hungry eyes.

"Hey!" cried the lady, scooping the crumbs out of her lap, and swallowing the same before wiping her lips. "Yes, to be sure. Who won the second day's race, child?"

"Won what, ma'am?" asked Nell.

"The race that was run on the second day."

"I don't know, ma'am."

"Don't know!" said the lady of the caravan; "why, you were there. I saw you with my own eyes."

Nell was not a little alarmed to hear this, supposing that the lady might be a friend of the Punch and Judy men, but what followed calmed her fears.

"And very sorry I was," said the lady of the caravan, "to see you in company with a Punch—a low wretch, that people should scorn to look at."

"I was not there by choice," returned the child; "we didn't know our way, and the two men were very kind to us, and let us travel with them. Do you—do you know them, ma'am?"

"Know them, child!" cried the lady of the caravan in a sort of shriek. "Know them! But you're young and know very little, and that's your excuse for asking such a question. Do I look as if I knowed 'em?"

"No, ma'am, no," said the child. "I beg your pardon."

It was granted at once, though the lady still appeared much ruffled by the question. The child then said that they had left the races on the first day, and were travelling to the next town on that road, where they meant to spend the night. As the face of the stout lady began to brighten, she asked how far it was. The reply was that the town was eight miles off.

The child could scarcely keep back a tear as she glanced along the darkening road. Her grandfather made no complaint, but he sighed heavily, and peered forward into the dusky distance.

The lady of the caravan was about to gather her tea-things together, but noting the child's look, she stopped. Nell curtsied, thanked her, and giving her hand to the old man, had already got some fifty yards or so away, when the lady of the caravan called to her to return.

"Come nearer, nearer still," said she. "Are you hungry, child?"

"Not very; but we are tired, and it's—it *is* a long way—"

"Well, hungry or not, you had better have some tea," said the lady.—"I suppose you are agreeable to that, old gentleman?"

The grandfather humbly pulled off his hat, and thanked her. The lady of the caravan then bade him come up the steps also; but the drum proving an unsuitable table for two, they came down again, and sat upon the grass. The lady then handed down to them the tea-tray, the bread-and-butter, and the ham.

"Set 'em out near the hind wheels, child—that's the best place," said their friend from above. "Now, hand up the teapot for a little more hot water and a pinch of fresh tea, and then both of you eat and drink as much as you can, and don't spare anything; that's all I ask of you."

While they were eating, the lady of the caravan came down the steps, and with her hands clasped behind her, walked up and down in a very stately manner. She looked at the caravan from time to time with an air of calm delight, and seemed to be much pleased with the red panels and the brass knocker.

When she had taken this exercise for some time, she sat down upon the steps and called "George," whereupon a man in a carter's frock, who had been hidden in a hedge up to this time, parted the twigs and looked out. He was seated on the ground, and had on his legs a baking-dish and a stone bottle, in his right hand a knife, and in his left a fork.

"Yes, missus," said George.

"How did you find the cold pie, George?"

"It warn't amiss, mum."

"We are not a heavy load, George?"

"That's always what the ladies say," replied the man. "If you see a woman a-driving, you'll always see she never will keep her whip still; the horse can't go

fast enough for her. If horses have got their proper load, a woman always thinks that they can bear something more. What is the cause of this here?"

"Would these two travellers make much difference to the horses if we took them with us?" asked his mistress, pointing to Nell and the old man, who were now ready to go on their way on foot.

"They'd make a difference, in course," said George slowly.

"Would they make *much* difference?" repeated his mistress. "They can't be very heavy."

"The weight o' the pair, mum," said George, eyeing them carefully, "would be a trifle under that of Oliver Cromwell."

Nell was very much surprised that the man should know the weight of one whom she had read of in books as having lived long before their time; but she soon forgot the subject in the joy of hearing that they were to go forward in the caravan, for which she thanked its lady earnestly.

She now helped to put away the tea-things, and the horses being by that time harnessed, mounted into the van, followed by her delighted grandfather.

Their kind friend then shut the door, and sat herself down by her drum at an open window; and the steps being put up by George, and stowed under the carriage, away they went, with a great noise of flapping, and creaking, and straining, the bright brass knocker, which nobody ever knocked at, knocking every moment a double knock of its own accord, as they jolted heavily along.

Chapter VI. THE WAX-WORK SHOW.

When they had travelled slowly forward for some short distance, Nell looked timidly round the caravan. One half of it was carpeted, and so cut off at the farther end as to form a sleeping-place, which was shaded, like the little windows, with fair white curtains, though it was very small.

The other half served for a kitchen, and was fitted up with a stove, whose small chimney passed through the roof. It also held a larder, several chests, a great pitcher of water, a few cooking utensils and pieces of crockery.

The lady of the caravan sat at one window and little Nell and her grandfather sat at the other, while the machine jogged slowly onward. At first the two

travellers spoke little, and only in whispers; but as they grew more used to the place they began to talk about the country through which they were passing, until the old man fell asleep. The lady of the caravan then asked Nell to come and sit beside her.

"Well, child," she said, "how do you like this way of travelling?"

Nell replied that she thought it was very pleasant indeed. The lady of the caravan sat looking at the child for a long time in silence. Then, getting up, she brought out from a corner a large roll of canvas, about a yard in width, which she laid upon the floor, and spread open with her foot until it nearly reached from one end of the caravan to the other.

"There, child," she said, "read that."

Nell walked down it, and read aloud, in huge black letters, the words "JARLEY'S WAX-WORK."

"Read it again," said the lady.

"Jarley's Wax-work," repeated Nell.

"That's me," said the lady. "I am Mrs. Jarley."

Giving the child a pleasant look, the lady of the caravan unfolded another scroll, on which were the words "One hundred figures the full size of life;" and then another, on which was written, "The only real wax-work in the world."

When she had shown these to the astonished child, she brought forth several handbills used to announce the show, one of which ran:—

"If I knowed a donkey wot wouldn't go
To see Mrs. Jarley's wax-work show,
Do you think I'd acknowledge him?
Oh; no, no!
Then run to Jarley's."

When she had shown all these treasures to her young companion, Mrs. Jarley rolled them up, and having put them carefully away, sat down again, and looked at the child in triumph.

"Never go into the company of a Punch any more," said Mrs. Jarley, "after this."

"I never saw any wax-work, ma'am," said Nell. "Is it funnier than Punch?"

"Funnier!" said Mrs. Jarley in a shrill voice. "It is not funny at all."

"Oh!" said Nell very humbly.

"It isn't funny at all," repeated Mrs. Jarley. "It's calm and—classical. No low beatings and knockings about, no jokings and squeakings, like your precious Punches, but always the same, and so like life that if wax-work only spoke and

walked about, you'd hardly know the difference. I won't go so far as to say that, as it is, I've seen wax-work quite like life, but I've certainly seen some life that was exactly like wax-work."

"Is it here, ma'am?" asked Nell.

"Is what here, child?"

"The wax-work, ma'am."

"Why, bless you, child, what are you thinking of? How could it be here, where you see everything except the inside of one little cupboard and a few boxes? It's gone on in the other vans to the next town, and there it'll be shown the day after to-morrow. You are going to the same town, and you'll see it, I dare say. I suppose you couldn't stop away if you was to try ever so much."

"I shall not be in the town, I think, ma'am," said the child.

"Not there!" cried Mrs. Jarley. "Then where will you be?"

"I—I—don't quite know. I am not certain."

"You don't mean to say that you don't know where you're going to!" said the lady of the caravan. "What line are you in? You looked to me at the races, child, as if you were quite out of your place."

"We were there quite by accident," returned Nell; "we are poor people, ma'am, and are only wandering about. We have nothing to do; I wish we had."

"You amaze me more and more," said Mrs. Jarley after a while. "Why, what do you call yourselves? Not beggars?"

"Indeed, ma'am, I don't know what else we are," returned the child.

"Lord bless me!" said the lady of the caravan. "I never heard of such a thing. Who'd have thought it?"

She remained so long silent after this that Nell feared she was vexed. At length she said,—

"And yet you can read. And write too, I shouldn't wonder?"

"Yes, ma'am," said the child timidly.

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

Nell said, "Indeed!" in a tone of surprise and doubt. Mrs. Jarley said no more, and after a while Nell withdrew to the other window and sat down near her grandfather, who was now awake.

After a while the lady of the caravan roused herself, and calling the driver to come under the window at which she was seated, spoke to him in a low tone of voice, as if she were asking his advice. This talk at length ended, she drew in her head again, and bade Nell come near.

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

"I can't leave her," answered the old man. "What would become of me

without her?"

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

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

Mrs. Jarley was a little taken aback at this, and looked somewhat crossly at the old man, who took Nell's hand and kept it in his own. After a pause, she thrust her head out of the window again, and spoke once more to the driver.

Then she said to the old man, "If you work for yourself, there would be plenty for you to do in the way of helping to dust the figures, taking the checks, and so forth. What I want your grandchild for, is to point 'em out to the company.

"That would soon be learnt," the lady went on, "and she has a way with her that people would like, though she does come after me; for I've always been used to go round with visitors myself, which I should keep on doing now, only that I do need a little ease."

Then Mrs. Jarley said that as for salary she could not pledge herself until she had tested Nell's fitness for the work. But board and lodging, both for her and her grandfather, she *would* give; and she also passed her word that the food should be always good and plentiful.

Nell and her grandfather talked it over; and while they were doing so Mrs. Jarley, with her hands behind her, walked up and down the caravan, as she had walked after tea on the green, with great dignity.

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

"We are very much obliged to you, ma'am," said Nell, "and will do as you wish."

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

In the meantime the caravan rolled on, and came at last upon the paved streets of a town, which were very quiet; for it was by this time near midnight, and the people were all abed. As it was too late to go to the exhibition room, they turned aside into a piece of waste ground that lay just within the old town gate, and drew up there for the night, near to another caravan in which part of the famous wax-work show had travelled.

This caravan, being now empty, was given to the old man as his sleeping-place; and within its wooden walls Nell made him up the best bed she could. For herself, she was to sleep in Mrs. Jarley's own van as a special mark of that lady's

favour.

Chapter VIII.

NELL THE BREAD-WINNER.

Nell slept so long that when she awoke, Mrs. Jarley, wearing her large bonnet, was already preparing breakfast. She heard Nell's excuses for being late with great good-humour, and said that she should not have roused her if she had slept on until noon.

"Because it does you good," said the lady of the caravan, "when you're tired, to sleep as long as ever you can; and that's another blessing of your time of life—you can sleep so very sound; *I can't, I'm sorry to say.*"

Shortly afterwards the child sat down with her grandfather and Mrs. Jarley to breakfast. The meal finished, Nell helped to wash the cups and saucers, and put them in their proper places; and these duties done, Mrs. Jarley dressed herself in a very bright shawl for the purpose of passing through the streets of the town.

"The van will come on to bring the boxes," said Mrs. Jarley, "and you had better come in it, child. I must walk, very much against my will; but the people expect it of me. How do I look, child?"

Nell at once said that she looked very nice, and Mrs. Jarley went forth with her head in the air.

The caravan followed at no great distance. As it went jolting through the streets, Nell peeped through the window to see in what kind of place they were. It was a pretty large town with an open square, in the middle of which was the town hall, with a clock-tower and a weather-cock.

The streets were very clean, very sunny, very empty, and very dull. Nothing seemed to be going on but the clocks, and they had such drowsy faces, such heavy, lazy hands, that they surely must have been too slow. The very dogs were all asleep; and the flies, drunk with the moist sugar in the grocer's shop, forgot their wings, and baked to death in dusty corners of the window.

Rumbling along with a great noise, the caravan stopped at last at the place of exhibition. Nell got down amidst a group of children, who clearly thought that her grandfather was one of the wax figures. The chests were quickly taken out and unlocked by Mrs. Jarley, who, with George and another man, was waiting to decorate the room with the hangings from them.

When the festoons were all put up as tastily as might be, the wax-work figures were uncovered and set out on a platform running round the room some two feet from the floor. There they stood more or less unsteadily upon their legs, with their eyes and nostrils very wide open, and their faces bearing a look of great surprise.

When Nell had looked at them all with great delight, Mrs. Jarley ordered the room to be cleared of all but herself and the child. Then sitting herself down in an armchair in the centre, she handed Nell a willow wand, long used by herself for pointing out the characters, and was at great pains to teach her what to do and say.

"That," said Mrs. Jarley in her grandest tone, as Nell touched a figure at the beginning of the platform, "is a maid-of-honour in the time of Queen Elizabeth, who died from pricking her finger while sewing upon a Sunday. See how the blood is trickling from her finger; also the gold-eyed needle of the time with which she is at work."

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

When Nell knew all about that and could say it without a mistake, Mrs. Jarley passed on to the fat man, and then to the thin man, the tall man, the short man, the old lady who died of dancing at a hundred and thirty-two, the wild boy of the woods, and many another. And so well did Nell do her duty that by the time they had been shut up together for a couple of hours she knew quite well the history of the whole show.

Mrs. Jarley was much pleased with her, and now carried her off to see what was going on within doors.

The preparations outside had not been forgotten either. A nun was telling her beads on the little portico over the door; and a brigand, with the blackest possible head of hair, was at that moment being made ready to be taken round the town in a cart.

In the midst of the plans for drawing visitors, little Nell was not forgotten. The light cart in which the brigand was carried being gaily dressed with flags and streamers, the child was placed in a seat beside him, and rode slowly through the town, giving away handbills from a basket to the sound of drum and trumpet. This was done each morning for a few days.

The beauty of the child caused a great stir in the little country place. Grown-up folks began to be interested in the bright-eyed girl, and some score of little boys fell in love with her, and left nuts and apples for her at the wax-work door.

This was not lost on Mrs. Jarley, who, lest Nell should become too cheap, soon sent the brigand out alone again and kept the child in the room, where she

showed the figures every half-hour.

Although her work was hard, Nell found the lady of the caravan very kind and thoughtful for her little helper's comfort. The child soon began to receive little fees from the visitors for herself, and as her grandfather, too, was well treated and useful, she was very happy and contented.

But she often thought of the old house and the window at which she used to sit alone in far-off London; and then she would think of poor Kit and all his kindness, until the tears came into her eyes, and she would weep and smile together.

Often, too, her thoughts turned to her grandfather, and she would wonder how much he remembered of their former life. When they were wandering about she seldom thought of this, but now she could not help wondering what would become of them if he fell sick or her own strength were to fail her. The old man was very patient and willing, and glad to be of use; but he was a mere child—a poor, thoughtless, vacant creature. It made her very sad to see him thus, and she would often burst into tears, and going to some secret place, fall down upon her knees, and pray that he might be restored.

Chapter VIII. TROUBLE FOR NELL.

One evening when the show was not open, Nell and her grandfather went out for a walk. As soon as they were clear of the town they took a foot-path which ran through some pleasant fields, and wandered on till sunset, when they stopped to rest.

The sky was dark and lowering. Large drops of rain soon began to fall, and before long the storm clouds came sailing onward, and spread over all the sky. Soon was heard the low rumbling of distant thunder, and the lightning quivered through the darkness.

Fearful of taking shelter beneath a tree or hedge, the old man and the child hurried along the highroad. They hoped to find some house in which to seek a refuge from the storm. Drenched by the pelting rain, and blinded by the lightning, they would have passed a house without noticing it had not a man, who was standing at the door, called out to them to enter.

"What were you going past for, eh?" he added, as he closed the door and led the way along a passage to a room behind.

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

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

The night being warm, there was a large screen drawn across the room to keep in the heat of the fire. From the other side of this screen came the sound of voices. Nell and her grandfather listened to them for a few moments. Then the old man said hastily in a whisper,—

"Nell, they're—they're playing cards. Don't you hear them?"

"Look sharp with that candle," said a voice; "it's as much as I can do to see the cards as it is. Game! Seven-and-sixpence to me, old Isaac. Hand over."

"Do you hear, Nell—do you hear them?" whispered the old man again, as the money chinked upon the table.

The child looked at the old man with alarm. His face was red and eager, his eyes were strained, his teeth set, his breath came short and thick, and the hand he laid upon her arm shook like a leaf.

"What money have we, Nell? Come, I saw you with money yesterday. What money have we? Give it to me."

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

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

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

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

She took from her pocket a little purse. The old man caught it from her hand and hastily made his way to the other side of the screen, Nell keeping close behind him.

The landlord had placed a light upon the table and was drawing the curtain of the window. The speakers whom they had heard were two men, who had a pack of cards and some silver money between them.

The man with the rough voice was a big fellow of middle age, with large black whiskers, broad cheeks, a coarse, wide mouth, and bull neck. The other

man, whom his companion had called Isaac, was of a more slender figure—stooping, and high in the shoulders—with a very evil face.

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

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

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

The child, in a perfect agony, drew her grandfather aside, and begged him, even then, to come away.

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

"We will be happy," replied the old man. "Let me go, Nell. I shall but win back my own; and it's all for thee, my darling."

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

"Hush!" said the old man, laying his hand upon her mouth. "We must not blame fortune, or she shuns us; I have found that out."

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

The child sat by and watched it with a troubled mind. Losses and gains were to her alike. She only knew that the cards were evil things, and that now her quiet, happy life was at an end.

The storm had raged for full three hours, and now began to lull; but still the game went on, and still the poor child was forgotten.

The players sat for a long time at their game, and when it was over Isaac was the only winner, and Nell's little purse was quite empty.

"Do you know what the time is?" said Mr. Groves, who was smoking with his friends. "Past twelve o'clock."—"And a rainy night," added the stout man.

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

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

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

Now, Nell had still a piece of gold sewn in her dress, and when she thought of the lateness of the hour she made up her mind to remain. She therefore took

her grandfather aside, and telling him that she had still enough left to pay for their lodging, said that they ought to stay there for the night.

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

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

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

Very early the next morning they set out on their return journey, as Nell wished to reach home before Mrs. Jarley was up. The child's heart was very sore when she thought of all that had happened, but she could not forget that the old man wished to win wealth only for her sake.

So she spoke to him very gently, trying to show him as clearly as she could that she had no desire to become rich, and least of all by such evil means.

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

"Have we been worse off," she went on, "since you forgot these cares and we have been travelling on together? Have we not been much better and happier without a home to shelter us than ever we were in that unhappy house, when thoughts of winning wealth were on your mind?"

"She speaks the truth," murmured the old man. "It must not turn me; but it is the truth—no doubt it is."

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

The old man stopped her with a motion of his hand, and bade her talk to him no more just then, for he was busy. After a time he kissed her cheek, without a word, and walked on, looking far before him, as if he were trying to collect his thoughts. Once she saw tears in his eyes.

When they reached the wax-work show they found that Mrs. Jarley was not yet out of bed. Nell at once set herself to the work of preparing the room, and had finished her task and dressed herself neatly before her mistress came down to breakfast.

That evening, as she feared, her grandfather stole away, and did not come back until the night was far spent. Worn out as she was in mind and body, she sat up alone, counting the minutes until he returned—penniless, broken-spirited, and wretched.

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

What could poor Nell do but give him every penny that came into her hands? If she told the truth (so thought the child) he would be treated as a madman; if she did not supply him with money he would try to steal it. Worn out by these thoughts, the colour forsook her cheek, her eye grew dim, and her heart was very heavy. All her old sorrows had come back upon her; by day they were ever present to her mind; by night they haunted her in dreams.

Chapter IX. FLYING FROM TEMPTATION.

Between Nell and her grandfather there was now a feeling of restraint and separation. Every evening, and often in the daytime too, the old man was absent alone; and although she well knew where he went, he never spoke of it, and kept carefully out of her way.

One evening the child went for a walk alone. She sat down beneath a tree, thinking sorrowfully upon this change, when the distant church-clock bell struck nine. Rising at the sound she set out to return towards the town.

She was crossing a meadow, when she came upon an encampment of gipsies, who had made a fire in one corner at no great distance from the path, and were sitting or lying round it. As she was too poor to have any fear of them she did not alter her course, but kept straight on.

But as she passed the spot Nell glanced towards the fire, and saw to her surprise that her grandfather made one of the party. Her first thought was to call him; her next to wonder who his new friends could be, and for what purpose they were there together.

After a few moments she moved nearer to the group, not across the open fields, however, but creeping along towards the men by the foot of the hedge. In this way she came at length within a few feet of the fire, and standing behind a low bush could see and hear without much danger of being seen herself.

Near the fire were three men, of whom her grandfather was one; the others

[image]

After a few moments she moved nearer to the group

were the card-players at the public-house on the night of the storm—Isaac and his rough friend, whom Nell now heard spoken to as Jowl.

"I go on then," the latter was saying to Nell's grandfather, "where I left off when you said you were going home. If you're sure that it's time for you to win money, and find that you haven't enough to try it, borrow, I say, and when you're able pay it back again."

"Certainly," Isaac List struck in. "If this good lady as keeps the wax-works has money, and *does* keep it in a tin box when she goes to bed, and *doesn't* lock her door for fear of fire, it seems an easy thing."

"You see, Isaac," said his friend, growing more eager, and drawing himself closer to the old man—"you see, Isaac, strangers are going in and out every hour of the day; nothing would be more likely than for one of these strangers to get under the good lady's bed, or lock himself in the cupboard. I'd give him his revenge to the last farthing he brought, whatever the sum was."

"Ah," cried Isaac, "the pleasures of winning! The delight of picking up the money—the bright, shining yellow-boys—and sweeping 'em into one's pocket! The—but you're not going, old gentleman?"

"I'll do it," said the old man, who had risen and taken two or three steps away, and now quickly came back. "I'll have it, every penny."

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

She crept slowly away, keeping in the shadow of the hedges until she could come out upon the road at a point where she would not be seen. Then she fled homeward as quickly as she could, and threw herself upon her bed, almost wild with grief.

The first idea that flashed upon her was flight. She would drag the old man from that place, and rather die of want upon the roadside than let him stay near such danger. Then she was torn with a fear that he might be at that moment robbing Mrs. Jarley; with a dread of cries in the silence of the night; with fearful thoughts of what he might do if he were detected in the act. She stole to the room where the money was, opened the door, and looked in. He was not there, and Mrs. Jarley was sleeping soundly.

She went back to her own room, and tried to prepare herself for bed. But how could she hope to rest? Half undressed, she flew to the old man's bedside,

took him by the wrist, and roused him from his sleep.

"What's this?" he cried, starting up in bed, and fixing his eyes upon her white face.

"I have had a dreadful dream," said the child. "I have had it once before. It is a dream of gray-haired men like you robbing sleepers of their gold. Up, up!"

The old man shook in every joint, and folded his hands like one who prays.

"Not to me," said the child, "do not pray to me—to our Father in heaven to save us from such deeds. This dream is too real. I cannot sleep, I cannot stay here, I cannot leave you alone under the roof where such dreams come. Up! We must fly."

He looked at her as if she were a spirit—she might have been one for all the look of earth she had—and shook more and more.

"There is no time to lose; I will not lose one minute," said the child. "Up, and away with me!"

"To-night?" cried the old man.

"Yes, to-night," replied the child. "To-morrow night will be too late. The dream will have come again. Nothing but flight can save us. Up!"

The old man rose from his bed, his brow bedewed with the cold sweat of fear, and, bending before the child as if she had been an angel sent to lead him where she would, made ready to follow her.

She took him by the hand and led him on. As they passed the door of Mrs. Jarley's room she shivered, and looked up into his face. What a white face was that, and with what a look did he meet hers!

She took him to her own room, and, still holding him by the hand, gathered together the little stock of clothes she had, and hung her basket on her arm. The old man took his wallet from her hands, and strapped it on his shoulders—his staff, too, she had brought away—and then she led him forth.

Through the narrow streets their feet passed quickly. Up the steep hill, too, they toiled with rapid steps, and not once did they look behind. But as they drew nearer the walls of the old castle the child looked back upon the sleeping town, and as she did so she clasped the hand she held less firmly, and then, bursting into tears, fell upon the old man's neck. Her moment of weakness past, the child urged him onward and looked back no more.

"I have saved him," she thought. "In all dangers and distresses I will remember that."

They walked on all that night, and when the morning broke they laid themselves down to sleep upon a bank close to a canal. Nell was roused by a sound of voices mingling with her dreams, and when she awoke she found that a rough-looking man was standing over them, while two others were looking on from a long, heavy boat which had come close to the bank while they were sleeping.

"Halloa!" said the man roughly, "what's the matter here?"

"We were only asleep, sir," said Nell. "We have been walking all night."

"A pair of queer travellers to be walking all night," said the man. "One of you is too old for that sort of work, and the other too young. Where are you going?"

Nell pointed at hazard towards the west, upon which the man asked if she meant a certain town which he named. Nell, to avoid more questions, said, "Yes, that was the place."

"Where have you come from?" was the next question; and Nell named the village in which their friend the schoolmaster dwelt, as being less likely to be known to the men.

"I thought somebody had been ill-using you, might be," said the man. "That's all. Good-day."

"Good-day," Nell said, and looked after him as he mounted one of the horses which were used to draw the boat. It had not gone very far when it stopped again, and she saw the men waving to her.

"Did you call me?" said Nell, running up to them.

"You may go with us if you like," replied one of those in the boat. "We're going to the same place."

Thinking that if they went with the men all traces of them would be lost, Nell thanked him, and in another moment she and her grandfather were on board, gliding smoothly down the canal. After a long journey the boat floated up to the wharf of a great town, where tall chimneys sent forth a dense, black vapour, and the clang of hammers mingled with the roar of busy streets and noisy crowds.

It was raining heavily. The child and her grandfather passed through a dirty lane into a crowded street, where they stood for a few moments. The throng of people hurried by, while the two poor strangers, stunned by the bustle and noise, looked sadly on.

Evening came on; they were still wandering up and down. The lights in the streets and shops made them feel yet more lonely. Shivering with the cold and damp, and sick at heart, the child found it very hard to creep along at all.

Chapter X.

A BED OF ASHES.

"We must sleep in the open air to-night, dear," said Nell, in a weak voice, "and to-morrow we will beg our way to some quiet part of the country and try to earn our bread in very humble work."

"Ah! poor, houseless, motherless child," cried the old man, clasping his hands, and gazing as if for the first time upon her white face, her torn dress, and swollen feet; "has all my care brought her to this at last? Was I a happy man once, and have I lost happiness and all I had for this?"

"If we were in the country now," said the child, as cheerfully as she could, "we should find some good old tree, stretching out his green arms as if he loved us, and nodding as if he would have us fall asleep; thinking of him while he watched.

"Please God," she went on, "we shall be there soon—to-morrow, or the next day at the farthest; and in the meantime let us think, dear, that it was a good thing we came here; for we are lost in the crowd and hurry of this place, and if any cruel people should pursue us, they could surely never trace us farther. There's comfort in that. And here's a deep old doorway—very dark, but quite dry, and warm too, for the wind does not blow in here. What's that?"

Uttering a half shriek, she fell back before a black figure which came out of the door-way where they were about to take refuge, and stood still, looking at them.

"Speak again," it said; "do I know that voice?"

"No," replied the child; "we are strangers, and having no money for a night's lodging, we were going to rest here."

There was a lamp at no great distance—the only one in the place, which was a kind of square yard, but sufficient to show how poor and mean it was. To this the man beckoned them, and soon they stood looking at each other in the light of its rays.

The stranger was poorly clad and very dirty. His voice was harsh, but though his face was half hidden with long, dark hair, it was neither unkind nor bad.

"How came you to think of resting here?" he said. "Or how," he added, looking closely at the child, "do you come to want a place of rest at this time of night?"

"Our misfortunes," the old man said, "are the cause."

"Do you know," said the man, looking still more closely at Nell, "how wet she is, and that the damp streets are not a place for her?"

"I know it well, God help me," he replied.

"What can I do?"

The man looked at Nell again, and gently touched her dress, from which the rain was running off in little streams.

"I can give you warmth," he said, after a pause, "nothing else. Such lodging as I have is in that house"—pointing to the doorway from which he had come—"but she is safer and better there than here. The fire is in a rough place, but you can pass the night beside it safely, if you'll trust yourselves to me. You see that red light yonder?"

They raised their eyes, and saw in the dark sky the dull light of some distant fire.

"It's not far," said the man. "Shall I take you there? You were going to sleep upon cold bricks; I can give you a bed of warm ashes, nothing better."

Without waiting for any reply he took Nell in his arms, and bade the old man follow.

"This is the place," he said, after a long walk, pausing at a door to put Nell down and take her hand. "Don't be afraid; there's nobody here will harm you."

With some fear and alarm they entered a large and lofty building, echoing to the roof with the beating of hammers and roar of furnaces, mingled with the hissing of red-hot metal plunged in water. In this gloomy place, moving like demons among the flame and smoke, a number of men worked like giants. Others, lying upon heaps of coals or ashes, slept or rested from their toil. Others again, opening the white-hot furnace doors, cast fuel on the flames, which came rushing forth to meet it, and licked it up like oil. Others drew forth, upon the ground, great sheets of glowing, red-hot steel.

Through this strange place their new friend led them to where one furnace burnt by night and day. The man who had been watching this fire, and whose task was ended for the present, gladly withdrew, and left them with their friend. He at once spread Nell's little cloak upon a heap of ashes, and showing her where she could hang her outer clothes to dry, signed to her and the old man to lie down and sleep. Then he took his station on a ragged mat before the furnace door, and resting his chin upon his hands, watched the flame as it shone through the iron chinks, and the white ashes as they fell into their bright, hot grave below.

The warmth of her bed, hard and humble as it was, soon caused the noise of the place to fall with a gentler sound upon the child's tired ears, and was not long in lulling her to sleep. The old man was stretched beside her, and with her hand upon his neck she lay and dreamed.

It was yet night when she awoke, nor did she know for how long or how short a time she had slept. But she found herself protected, both from any cold air that might find its way into the building and from the heat, by some of the workmen's clothes; and glancing at their friend, saw that he still sat looking towards the fire, and keeping so very quiet that he did not even seem to breathe.

Nell lay in the state between sleeping and waking, looking so long at him that at length she almost feared he had died as he sat there; and softly rising and

drawing close to him, she whispered in his ear.

He moved at once, and looked into her face.

"I feared you were ill," she said. "The other men are all moving, and you are so very quiet."

"They leave me to myself," he replied. "They know my way. They laugh at me, but don't harm me in it. See yonder, there—that's my friend."

"The fire?" said the child.

"It has been alive for as long as I have," the man made answer. "We talk and think together all night long."

The child glanced quickly at him in her surprise, but he had turned his eyes away and was musing as before.

"It's like a book to me," he said—"the only book I ever learned to read; and many an old story it tells me. It's music; for I should know its voice among a thousand, and there are other voices in its roar. It has its pictures too. You don't know how many strange faces and different scenes I trace in the red-hot coals. But you should be sleeping now. Lie down again, poor child, lie down again!"

With that, he led her to her rude couch, and covering her with the clothes once more, returned to his seat. The child watched him for a little time, but soon gave way to the drowsiness that came upon her, and in the dark, strange place and on the heap of ashes slept as peacefully as if the room had been a palace and her resting-place a bed of down.

When she woke again, broad day was shining through the openings in the walls. The noise was still going on, and the fires were burning fiercely as before; for few changes of night and day brought rest or quiet there.

Her friend shared his breakfast—coffee, and some coarse bread—with the child and her grandfather, and asked where they were going. She told him that they sought some distant country place, and asked what road they would do best to take.

"I know little of the country," he said, shaking his head; "but there are such places yonder."

"And far from here?" said Nell.

"Ay, surely. How could they be near us, and be green and fresh? The road lies, too, through miles and miles all lighted up by fires like ours—a strange, black road, and one that would frighten you by night."

"We are here, and must go on," said the child boldly.

"Rough people—paths never made for little feet like yours—a dismal way—is there no turning back, my child?"

"There is none," cried Nell, pressing forward. "If you can direct us, do. If not, pray do not seek to stop us. Indeed, you do not know the danger that we shun, and how right and true we are in flying from it, or you would not try to

stop us; I am sure you would not.”

”God forbid, if it is so!” said the man, glancing from the child to her grandfather, who hung his head and bent his eyes upon the ground. ”I’ll show you from the door, the best I can. I wish I could do more.”

He showed them, then, by which road they must leave the town, and what course they should take when they had gained it. Then the child, with heartfelt thanks, tore herself away, and stayed to hear no more.

In all their wanderings they had never longed so much as now for the pure air of the open country; no, not even on that morning when, deserting their old home, they gave themselves up to the mercies of a strange world.

”Two days and nights!” thought the child. ”He said two days and nights we should have to spend among such scenes as these. Oh, if we live to reach the country once again, if we get clear of these dreadful places, though it is only to lie down and die, with what a grateful heart I shall thank God for so much mercy!”

”We shall be very slow to-day, dear,” she said as they went wearily through the streets; ”my feet are so sore, and I have pains in all my limbs from the wet of yesterday. I saw that our friend looked at us and thought of that when he said how long we should be upon the road.”

That night she lay down with nothing between her and the sky, and, with no fear for herself, for she was past it now, put up a prayer for the poor old man.

A penny loaf was all they had eaten that day. It was very little, but even hunger was forgotten in the peaceful feeling that crept over Nell. She lay down very gently, and with a quiet smile upon her face, fell into a light slumber.

The next morning came, and with it came to Nell a dull feeling that she was very ill. She had no wish to eat. Her grandfather ate greedily, which she was glad to see.

Their way lay through the same scenes as on the previous day. There was the same thick air, the same blighted ground, the same misery and poverty.

Evening was drawing on, but had not closed in, when they came to another busy town. After humbly asking for help at some few doors, and having been refused, they agreed to make their way out of the place as speedily as they could.

They were dragging themselves along through the last street, and the child now felt that the time was close at hand when she could bear no more. There appeared before them at this moment, going in the same direction as themselves, a traveller on foot, who, with a bag on his back, leaned upon a stout stick as he walked and read from a book which he held in his other hand.

It was not an easy matter to come up with him and ask his aid, for he walked fast, and was some little distance before them. But soon he stopped to look more closely at his book. Then the child shot on before her grandfather, and, going close to the stranger, began in a few faint words to beg his help. He turned his

head. The child clapped her hands together, gave a wild shriek, and fell senseless at his feet.

Chapter XI. A FRIEND IN NEED.

It was the poor schoolmaster—no other than the poor schoolmaster. Scarcely less surprised by the sight of the child than she herself had been at the sight of him, he stood for a moment without even trying to raise her from the ground.

Then he threw down his stick and book, and dropping on one knee beside her, tried to restore her, while her grandfather, standing idly by, wrung his hands and begged her to speak to him, were it only a single word.

"She is quite worn out," said the schoolmaster, glancing upward into his face. "You have tried her too far, friend."

"She is dying of want," rejoined the old man, "I never thought how weak and ill she was till now."

Without another word the schoolmaster took the child in his arms, and bidding the old man gather up her little basket and follow him, bore her away at his utmost speed.

There was a small inn within sight, towards which he hurried with his burden, and rushing into the kitchen, placed it on a chair before the fire.

The landlady soon came running in, followed by her servant girl, carrying vinegar, hartshorn, and smelling-salts; and under their treatment the child came to herself after a while, and was able to thank them in a faint voice.

Without suffering her to speak another word, the women carried her off to bed; and having covered her up warm, bathed her cold feet, and wrapped them in flannel, they sent for the doctor.

He came with all speed, and taking his seat by the bedside of poor Nell, drew out his watch and felt her pulse. Next he looked at her tongue, then he felt her pulse again. At last he said very gravely, "Put her feet in hot water, and wrap them up in flannel. I should likewise," he went on, "give her something light for supper—say the wing of a roasted fowl."

"Why, goodness gracious me, sir, it's cooking at the kitchen fire this instant!" cried the landlady. And so, indeed, it was; for the schoolmaster had ordered it to be put down, and it was getting on so well that the doctor might have

smelt it if he had tried—perhaps he did.

While her supper was preparing, the child fell into a deep sleep, from which they were forced to rouse her when it was ready. As she was greatly troubled at the thought of being parted from her grandfather, the old man took his supper with her.

Finding her still very restless about him, they made him up a bed in an inner room. The key of this chamber was on that side of the door which was in Nell's room; the poor child turned it on him when the landlady had gone, and crept to bed again with a thankful heart.

In the morning the child was better, but she was very weak, and would need at least a day's rest and careful nursing before she could go on her journey. The schoolmaster at once said that he had a day to spare—two days for that matter—and could well afford to wait. As the patient was to sit up in the evening, he said he would visit her in her room at a certain hour, and going out with his book, he did not return until that hour arrived.

Nell could not help weeping when they were left alone; whereat, and at the sight of her pale face and wasted figure, the simple schoolmaster shed a few tears himself.

"It makes me unhappy, even in the midst of all this kindness," said the child, "to think that we should be a burden upon you. How can I ever thank you? If I had not met you so far from home I must have died, and he would have been left alone."

"We'll not talk about dying," said the schoolmaster; "and as to burdens, I have made my fortune since you slept at my cottage."

"Indeed!" cried the child joyfully.

"Oh yes," returned her friend. "I have been chosen as clerk and schoolmaster to a village a long way from here, and a long way from the old one, as you may suppose, at five-and-thirty pounds a year. Five-and-thirty pounds!"

"I am very glad," said the child—"so very, very glad."

"I am on my way there now," the schoolmaster went on. "They gave me the stage-coach hire—outside stage-coach hire all the way. Bless you, they grudge me nothing. But as I have plenty of time, I made up my mind to walk. How glad I am to think I did so!"

"How glad should we be!" said the child.

"Yes, yes," said the schoolmaster, "certainly—that's very true. But you—where are you going, where are you coming from, what have you been doing since you left me, what had you been doing before? Now, tell me—do tell me. I know very little of the world, but I have a reason for loving you. I have felt since the time you visited me in my home as if my love for the boy who died had been given to you."

The kindness of the honest man gave the child a great trust in him. She told him all—that they had no friends or relations; that she had fled with the old man to save him from misery; that she was flying now to save him from himself; and that she sought a home where he would not be tempted again.

For some time the schoolmaster sat deep in thought; then he said that Nell and her grandfather should go with him to the village whither he was bound; and that he would try to find them some work by which they could make a living. "We shall be sure to get on," said the schoolmaster; "the cause is too good a one to fail."

They soon found that a stage-wagon would stop at the inn the next night to change horses. When the wagon came Nell was placed inside, and in due time it rolled away, the two men walking on beside the driver, and the landlady and all the good folks of the inn shouting out their good wishes and farewells.

What a soothing, drowsy way of travelling, to lie inside that slowly moving mountain, listening to the tinkling of the horses' bells, the smacking of the carter's whip, the smooth rolling of the great broad wheels, the rattle of the harness, the cheery good-nights of passing travellers, all falling lightly upon the ear!

Now and again Nell would walk for a mile or two while her grandfather rode inside, and sometimes even the schoolmaster would take her place and lie down to rest. So they went on very happily until they came to a large town, where the wagon stopped, and they spent the night.

When they had passed through this town they came into the open country, and after a long ride began to draw near the schoolmaster's new home.

"See—here's the church!" cried the delighted schoolmaster in a low voice; "and that old building close beside it is the school-house, I'm sure. Five-and-thirty pounds a year in this lovely place!"

They admired everything—the old gray porch, the fine old windows, the gravestones in the green churchyard, the old tower, the very weather-cock, the brown thatched roofs of cottage barns peeping from among the trees, the stream that ran by the distant water-mill, the blue mountains far away.

"I must leave you somewhere for a few minutes," said the schoolmaster at length. "I have a letter to present, you know. Where shall I take you? To the little inn yonder?"

"Let us wait here," said Nell. "The gate is open. We will sit in the church porch till you come back."

"A good place, too," said the schoolmaster, leading the way towards it, and placing his bag on the stone seat. "Be sure that I will come back with good news, and will not be long gone."

So the happy schoolmaster put on a pair of new gloves which he had carried in a little parcel in his pocket all the way, and hurried off, full of pleasant

excitement.

Chapter XII.

PEACE AFTER STORM.

After a long time the schoolmaster appeared at the wicket-gate of the church-yard, and hurried towards them, jingling in his hand, as he came along, a bundle of rusty keys. He was quite breathless with pleasure.

"You see those two old houses?" he said at last.

"Yes, surely," replied Nell. "I have been looking at them nearly all the time you have been away."

"And you would have looked at them still more if you could have guessed what I have to tell you," said her friend. "One of those houses is mine."

Without saying any more, or giving the child time to reply, the schoolmaster took her hand, and his honest face shining with pleasure, led her to the place of which he spoke.

They stopped before its low, arched door. After trying several of the keys in vain, the schoolmaster found one to fit the huge lock, which turned back creaking, and they stepped within.

The room which they entered was large and lofty, with a finely decorated roof. "It is a very beautiful place!" said the child in a low voice.

"A peaceful place to live in; don't you think so?" said her friend.

"Oh yes!" said the child, clasping her hands earnestly; "a quiet, happy place."

"A place to live and gather health of mind and body in," said the schoolmaster; "and this old house is yours."

"Ours!" cried the child.

"Ay," said the schoolmaster gaily, "for many a merry year to come, I hope. I shall be a close neighbour—only next door; but this house is yours."

Having now told his great news, the schoolmaster sat down, and drawing Nell to his side, told her how he had learned that that house had been occupied for a very long time by an old person, who kept the keys of the church, opened and closed it for the services, and showed it to strangers; how she had died not many weeks ago, and nobody had yet been found to fill the office; how, learning all this, he had been bold enough to mention his friends to the clergyman. In

a word, the result was that Nell and her grandfather were to go before the last-named gentleman next day, and if they pleased him they were to be given the charge of the church.

"There's a small allowance of money," said the schoolmaster. "It is not much, but still enough to live upon. By clubbing our funds together we shall do well; no fear of that."

"Heaven bless you!" sobbed the child.

"Amen, my dear," returned her friend cheerfully; "and all of us, as it will, and has, in leading us through sorrow and trouble to this peaceful life. But we must look at my house now. Come!"

They went to the other door, tried the rusty keys as before, and at length found the right one. Like the first house, it held such pieces of furniture as were needful, and had its stack of firewood.

To make these houses as tidy and comfortable as they could was now their pleasant care. In a short time each had its cheerful fire glowing and crackling on the hearth. Nell, busily plying her needle, mended the torn window-hangings, drew together the rents which time had worn in the scraps of carpet, and made them whole and decent.

The schoolmaster swept and smoothed the ground before the door, trimmed the long grass, trained the ivy and creeping plants, and gave to the outer walls a cheery air of home. The old man, sometimes by his side and sometimes with the child, lent his aid to both, went here and there on little, useful services, and was happy.

Neighbours, too, as they came from work, offered their help or sent their children with such small presents or loans as the strangers needed most. It was a busy day, and night came on and found them wondering that there was yet so much to do, and that it should be dark so soon.

They took their supper together in the house which may henceforth be called the child's; and when they had finished their meal, drew round the fire, and almost in whispers—their hearts were too quiet and glad for loud talking—talked over their future plans. Before they separated the schoolmaster read some prayers aloud, and then they parted for the night.

Next day they all worked gaily in arranging their houses until noon, and then went to visit the clergyman.

He received them very kindly, and at once showed an interest in Nell, asking her name and age, her birthplace, why she left her home, and so forth. The schoolmaster had already told her story. They had no other friends or home to leave, he said, and had come to share his life. He loved the child as though she were his own.

"Well, well," said the clergyman, "let it be as you wish. She is very young."

"Old in troubles and trials, sir," replied the schoolmaster.

"God help her. Let her rest and forget them," said the old gentleman, laying his hand upon her head, and smiling at her. "Your request is granted, friend."

After more kind words they went to the child's house, where they were talking over their happy fortune when another friend appeared.

This was a little old gentleman who had lived in the parsonage house ever since the death of the clergyman's wife, which had happened fifteen years before. He had been his college friend and always his close companion.

The little old gentleman was the friend of every one in the place. None of the simple villagers had cared to ask his name, or, when they knew it, to store it in their memory, and he was known simply as the Bachelor. The name pleased him, or suited him as well as any other, and the Bachelor he had ever since remained. And the Bachelor it was, it may be added, who with his own hands had laid in the stock of fuel which the wanderers had found in their new home.

The Bachelor, then, lifted the latch, showed his little, round, mild face for a moment at the door, and stepped into the room like one who was no stranger to it.

"You are Mr. Marton, the new schoolmaster?" he said, greeting Nell's kind friend.

"I am, sir."

"I am glad to see you. I should have come to greet you yesterday, but I rode across the country to carry a message from a sick mother to her daughter in service some miles off, and have but just now returned. This is our young church-keeper? You are not the less welcome, friend, for her sake or for this old man's."

"She has been ill, sir, very lately," said the schoolmaster.

"Yes, yes; I know she has," he said. "There have been suffering and heartache here."

"Indeed there have, sir."

The little old gentleman glanced at the grandfather, and back again at the child, whose hand he took tenderly in his and held.

"You will be happier here," he said, "We will try, at least, to make you so. You have made great changes here already. Are they the work of your hands?"

"Yes, sir," said Nell.

"We will make some others—not better in themselves, but with better means, perhaps," said the Bachelor. "Let us see now, let us see."

Nell went with him into the other little rooms, and over both the houses, in which he found various small comforts wanting, which he said he would supply, and then went away. After some five or ten minutes he came back laden with old shelves, rugs, and blankets, and followed by a boy bearing another load. These

being cast on the floor in a heap, Nell and her new friend spent a happy time in sorting and arranging them.

When nothing more was left to be done, the Bachelor told the boy to run off and bring all his schoolmates before their new master.

"As good a set of fellows, Marton, as you'd wish to see," he said, turning to the schoolmaster when the boy was gone; "but I don't let 'em know I think so. That wouldn't do at all."

The boy soon returned at the head of a long row of others, great and small, who stood shyly before the little group of which the Bachelor was the centre.

"This first boy, schoolmaster," said the little gentleman, "is John Owen; a lad of good parts, sir, and frank, honest temper, but too thoughtless, too playful, too light-headed by far. That boy, my good sir, would break his neck with pleasure; and between ourselves, when you come to see him at hare-and-hounds, taking the fence and ditch by the finger-post, and sliding down the face of the little quarry, you'll never forget it. It's beautiful!"

John Owen having been thus rebuked, the Bachelor singled out another boy.

"Now, look at that lad, sir," said the Bachelor. "You see that fellow? Richard Evans his name is, sir. An amazing boy to learn, blessed with a good memory; and moreover, with a good voice and ear for psalm-singing, at which he is the best among us. Yet, sir, that boy will come to a bad end; he'll never die in his bed; he's always falling asleep in sermon time—and to tell you the truth, Mr. Marton, I always did the same at his age, and feel quite certain that I couldn't help it."

This hopeful pupil having been thus described, the Bachelor turned to another.

"But if," said he, "we come to a boy that should be a warning to all his fellows, here's the one, and I hope you won't spare him. This is the lad, sir—this one with the blue eyes and light hair. This is a swimmer, sir—this fellow—a diver.

"This is a boy, sir," he went on, "who had a fancy for plunging into eighteen feet of water with his clothes on, and bringing up a blind man's dog that was being drowned by the weight of its chain and collar, while its master stood wringing his hands upon the bank. I sent the boy two guineas, sir," added the Bachelor in a whisper, "directly I heard of it; but never mention it, for he hasn't the least idea that it came from me."

The Bachelor now turned to another boy, and from him to another, and so on through the whole line. Feeling quite sure in the end that he had made them miserable by his severity, he sent them away with a small present and a severe warning to walk quietly home without any leaping, scufflings, or turnings out of the way.

After a few moments the schoolmaster parted from him with a light heart

and joyous spirits, and thought himself one of the happiest men on earth. The windows of the two old houses were ruddy again that night with the warm light of the cheerful fires that burnt within; and the Bachelor and his old friend, the clergyman, pausing to look upon them as they returned from their evening walk, spoke softly together of the beautiful child who had at last found a haven of rest in the village they both loved so well.

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