

a full stop, and sounds of many voices in eager conversation, mingled with laughter, fell upon my ear, at first faintly and afterwards more forcibly, and, as it seemed, from the ground beneath our feet.

'This way,' said my guide, once more putting himself in motion, ten steps down, steepish, Roley: don't fall on yer precious nose.'

'Stop,' said I, my apprehensions once more getting uppermost; 'I have come with you blindfold long enough, and I will not go a step further till you tell me what you mean, and where you are taking me.'

'I reckon,' he replied, unmoved, 'that you have come a'most two far to cut it short now. Long enough I say, and too long if you bea'n't comfortable, Roley. As to where I am taking you, wait till you sees them as sent me to look out for you, and they'll tell you fast enough. I thought as how you wanted to see old Peggy,' he added, finding that I still held back.

'Very well,' I said, 'go and fetch Mrs. Magrath here: bring a light, and I shall know then that you mean honestly by me.'

'No, no,' said he; 'that's agin all rules.'

'Then I intend to return by the way I came,' said I.

'Do you though?' demanded a strangely familiar voice, close by my ears, and at the same moment I felt a stronger grasp than that of the old man laid on my disengaging arm. 'On with him, old Pinotar, and we'll see what he's made of,' and at the same moment I felt myself irresistably impelled down the steep stone steps, the din from below increasing as we descended. then a door was thrown open, and by the light of a blazing fire and some half-dozen guttering candles stuck into tin sconces on the damp walls, I found myself in the presence of a large party of roysters seated at a long table spread with provisions, the steam and pleasant odours of which filled the large vaulted chamber into which I was thus unceremoniously introduced.

CHAPTER XXVI.

I FIND MYSELF IN VERY EQUIVOCAL SOCIETY AND CANNOT GET OUT OF IT

IT was not difficult for me to understand or conjecture into what kind of company I had been deceitfully drawn. I knew that there were at that time, as there are now, secret places of rendezvous, to which professed mendicants resorted at night to squander in luxury and sensual excess the ill-gotten gains of their miserable trade. This my Whiskers' Rents

education had taught me. It had taught me more than this. I had, at least, heard of other retreats, more jealously guarded, into which only proficients in crime were admitted, and it needed scarcely more than a glance at the countenances of the crew by which I was surrounded, to ripen into certainty the suspicion that I had been betrayed by my treacherous old guide, and to raise in my mind a strong desire to escape.

Probably he read this in my countenance, for before I could utter a word of remonstrance, he closed the door by which we had entered, while his accomplice, who still held my arm, whispered in my ear: 'There's no use trying it on, Roley, you can't do it, you see, and you had better hold your tongue till you are spoken to.'

I turned to the speaker and encountered the coarse and repulsive features of Sloppy Stevens.

My readers will remember that nearly two years had elapsed since my last interview with my boyhood's tormentor, and they will believe that his unexpected appearance gave me little relief now. There was, indeed, a gleam of malignant satisfaction on his countenance, which augured ill for my personal safety, though why I had been thus entrapped was not easy to conjecture. Self-possession, however, did not entirely forsake me.

You told me, I said, addressing the old patterer, 'that I should find Mrs. Magrath

Is poor old Peggy ye're wishing to converse wid?' interposed Sloppy Stevens, in a mocking, mirthful tone mimicking the well remembered dialect of my poor old nurse.

'I told you nothink of the sort, Roley,' added the old man. 'Didn't I tell you, now, that there was somebody as wanted to see you most precious? and didn't you come along with me, talking as I meant old Peggy, when I hadn't made mention of her name, Roley?'

This was very true; and probably my own eagerness in jumping at a conclusion had accelerated my doom, whatever that might be.

Until now, my involuntary intrusion had not been observed; and amidst the clamour of voices and the clatter of eating and drinking utensils and vessels, I might yet have remained unnoticed, but from the desperate effort I made to escape from the hands of my two Whiskers' Rents acquaintance, which drew upon me the sharp scrutinizing glance of a man near the door, who cried out, 'A spy! a spy!' and whose sudden exclamation caused an equally sudden

cessation from the business of the table, and an ominous silence, in the midst of which I was hurried to the upper end of the vault, and presented to the president of the feast, in whom I recognized the stranger who, two years before, had commended me for my industry and honesty, and given me five shillings in Smithfield market.

'No spy, no spy!' said he, starting from his seat, and compelling me to sit by his side.

'It is all right if the Captain answers for him,' said a voice from the further end of the table; 'but, howsoever, it isn't regular—'

'Gentlemen,' said my new protector, haughtily, 'I am not accustomed—'

'Hear him! hear, hear!' shouted two or three voices, as a loud muttering arose from different parts of the table, in which the words 'regular' and 'order' were the most prominent.

'Gentlemen,' resumed the president, 'I am not accustomed—that is, I am not partial to being brought to the bar—'

'Hear! hear!' once more was shouted amidst much laughter from the company.

'—to the bar,' he repeated, 'of even your superior and acute judgements. At a fitting time, and in a more regular manner, I shall be happy to introduce to you the young gentleman who honours us this evening with his presence; at this time, I have only to say that I shall presently propose his health, and that we inaugurate his admission into our—'

Club,' suggested one of the company.

I will not prolong this description of a scene which I have sufficient reason to remember. Let me only add that confounded as I was by the events of that evening, and startled with the evident perils into which I had been drawn, I made a feeble effort to win the ear of the stranger who had vindicated me from the character of a spy, so as to induce him to favour my retreat, but I had scarcely uttered a word before he whispered to me, sternly, to be silent as I valued my safety.

I obeyed, for prudence told me that the advice was not to be despised. I even joined; though sparingly, in the rich and abundant supper that was provided, and drank a small glassful of wine, offered me by the mysterious stranger. Of what followed I have a painful and confused remembrance, for I found afterwards that the wine was drugged. I was conscious, however, that the supper was but a prelude to more serious business; and I heard, though almost without the power of comprehension, the details of recent exploits, and plans laid for future operations. I saw—but I will