

JOE UNDERWOOD;
OR, WORTH MORE THAN THE
SPARROWS.
(By Grace Stebbing.)
CHAPTER I.

Joe Underwood was as good-hearted and handsome a young fellow as one would wish to see; but two years of London life had harmed him, as it does many a country lad who comes up to get high wages and see something of the world. Mrs. Underwood had wept and wrung her hands when her boy told her he was too good a workman to stay longer at the quiet little country shop, and was about to seek his fortune in London. At the time of which our story commences, her fears seemed more likely to be realized than her prayers for his guidance to be answered. He had, however, obtained abundant well-paid employment at a first-rate cabinet maker's and a tidy attic in a respectable house, the landlady of which began by praising him as a model lodger to her "drawing-room," as she styled the quiet mother and daughter who rented those apartments. But time passed. The landlady grew more sparing of her praises, while Mary's face only responded with a weary look of disappointment, even when they were spoken. Joe Underwood had become intimate with his fellow workmen, and they had not been long in prevailing on his fear of ridicule and easy good nature to yield up his conscience to their keeping. They were a thoughtless, wild set, very fond of the senseless motto, "A short life and a merry one;" and as the months passed, Joe grew as reckless as they could wish. His face was fast losing its fearless look of honest independence when the second Christmas since his departure from his country home drew near.

It was the 23rd December, and Joe's countenance showed both sullenness and vexation as he sat in his attic between six and seven in the evening. He had sent his mother a letter that afternoon to say that he could not spend Christmas with her, as she had expected. He did not tell her, also, that her disappointment was caused by his having flung away the fifteen shillings his return ticket would have cost in "standing treat," the previous night, to a dozen or so of half-tipsy men. Then again, as he had mounted to his attic, with a half penitent determination not to leave it again that night, he had met Mary Williams, and she

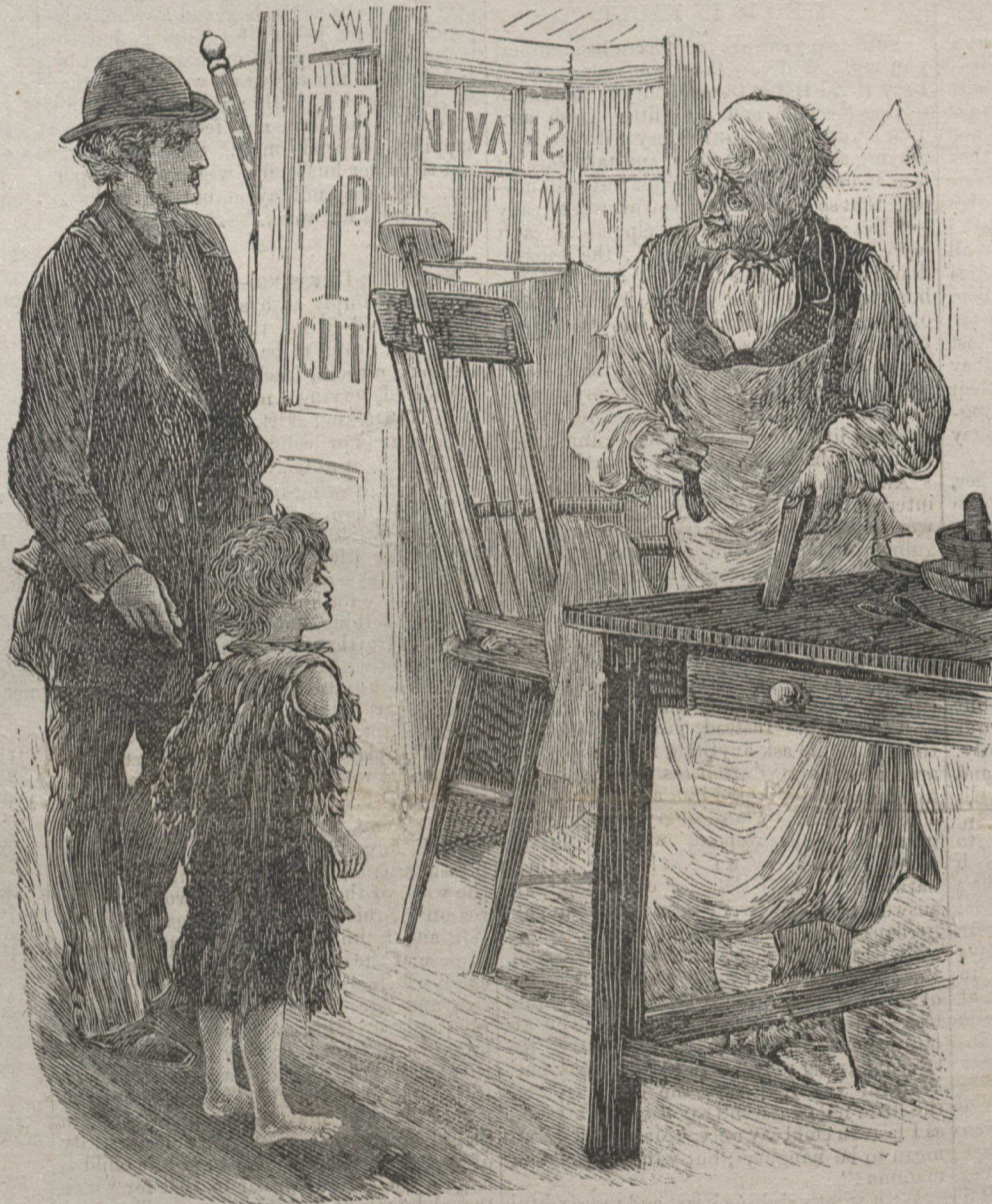
had hastened into her own room without giving him even a glance. He little knew, as he sat scowling and fuming, that Mary had seen him the night before when he staggered in with eyes too bleared to know her. She had avoided him of late as one wholly unworthy of her interest; but her mother being taken suddenly ill at night, Mary with some effort and trepidation determined she would ask "That Mr. Underwood" to fetch some medicine for her when he returned home. It was past twelve when she heard him come in, and she ran down stairs just in time to see him stumble toward

with the absurd exclamation that, "If other folks didn't care if he went to the dogs, he didn't see why he should care himself," he put on his hat again and went out as usual to join some of his mis-called friends.

It was a dark cold night, and Joe Underwood's natural kindness of heart was not yet too deadened for him to feel pity for some of the scantily clad, shivering women and children he passed on his road. Happily for him, it was destined to be called yet more fully into play. Just as he was about to push open the door of the public-house he generally

was repeated, with the addition, "A drink of gin, or anyfin hot. The contrast was painfully horrible between the beautiful child face and the unchildlike craving. With a sudden impulse toward the almost forgotten "right way," young Underwood stooped, and taking the boy by the shoulders raised him to his feet, whispering, "Come along with me, and I'll give you a bun; that's better than drink." The child looked half irresolute. "Buns is good, I know, cos I had one once, and I ain't had noffin to eat since yesterday; but then I'm that cold! and gin warms you up, you know, above a bit," he said, after a pause, with a knowing look that was terrible to see, and made Joe answer bitterly, "Ay, and kills you too, body and soul. But come. A good meal will warm you, and you shall see if a bright fire and a bit of meat aren't better than gin."

"Well, you don't look a bad sort, so I'll come and see if you mean true," said the boy, after giving him a keen scrutiny. And the two sudden acquaintances walked off together, Joe getting away from the public-house as quickly as possible, for the sake both of himself and his companion. It was not quite an easy matter to give little Tom the promised meal. At the nearest chop-house Joe feared to find some of his associates, and the next they came to was too fine in its appearance to be likely to look with favor on a ragged, dirty customer. At length, however, Underwood had the satisfaction of watching his small guest as he almost visibly thawed in a warm room, and demolished a savory plateful of a-la-mode beef with wonderful rapidity. And as he watched, thoughts crowded into the young man's mind of his own well-cared-for childhood, and the way in which he had of late disgraced it. Conversation just then



"I WANT THIS LAD'S HEAD SHAVED."

the stairs with his lighted candle held as if he were bent on setting fire to himself. An irrepressible exclamation that burst from her only roused him to sufficient consciousness to attempt a verse of some hideous song, and clasping her hands tightly over her ears, Mary had fled back to her mother, whose pain, happily, soon subsided; but Mary's memory of the sad sight she had seen remained, and seemed to have killed all her growing love with abhorrence. Meanwhile Joe worked himself up into an unreasoning state of anger against the world in general, and her in particular, and ending

frequented, his foot pushed against something, and a quivering child's voice said, "Take us in, and give us a drop of sumfin. Yer ought, for you've hurt my toes cruel."

Joe looked down, and saw a flaxen-haired, grimy mite of a boy crouched up in a corner of the doorway, and with a pair of big blue eyes, full of eager hope that his request might be granted, raised to his. History tells us that the Saxons' beauty led to their rescue from slavery of mind and body, and it is certain that little Tom Thornton's fair face stood him in good stead now. Joe shuddered as the request

would have been superfluous. But when the food had nearly disappeared, Joe put aside his private meditations, and said earnestly, "You'll not loiter about any more to-night, but go home, like a good little chap, when you've finished your supper, won't you?"

"Can't," said the child, as he swallowed the last mouthful, and threw himself back in his chair with a sigh of content. "Ain't got none to go to. Haven't had no home since father was drowned, and mother and the new baby died, just after all the leaves had gone off the trees in the park."

"Then where are you going,