

Jew, clasping his hands, as if in supplication, and heaving a heavy sigh.

Reserving my much or little faith in this assertion to be proved, or not, according to circumstances, I reflected that by taking advantage of this man's evident greediness for gain, I might attain my object, when my own unassisted efforts would probably fail. I therefore told him after a moment's consideration, that if he would assist me, and successfully, in finding my old nurse, I should be willing to give him ten guineas for his trouble.

I could see, by the lightning up of his countenance, that the offer would be accepted, and that I had found a willing and zealous assistant; nevertheless it would not have been in accordance with the man's nature not to have attempted to screw an additional guinea or two out of me, 'considering,' as he said, 'that a great deal of trouble may be thrown away for nothing my fear.'

I saw there would be nothing so effectual as a retaining fee, and I put a golden guinea in his hand. He eagerly clutched it, with a profusion of thanks and protestations, but still he was not entirely satisfied. His caution suggested that an engagement in black and white would not be so easily evaded as a verbal promise. This was reasonable enough, and being speedily provided with the materials, I placed the document in his hands.

'And now,' I said, 'we will begin our inquiries at once, and we cannot do better than set to work on the spot here, in this house of yours.'

'But,' affirmed the Jew, earnestly, 'the woman is not here, and I know nothing of her.'

'I quite believe you,' said I; 'but some of your lodgers may have met with her elsewhere.'

This was true, he admitted; and so, without further hesitation, he led the way and I followed.

#### CHAPTER XLVIII.

I AM AT WHISKERS' RENTS SEEKING WHAT I DO NOT FIND, AND FINDING WHAT I DO NOT SEEK.

I SHALL not detain my readers with a description of all the scenes which met my eye, and the replies which our questions elicited, in this tour of inspection and search. The cracked and dilapidated house was crowded, as I had known it many years before, with temporary tenants. Filth there was in rich abundance; dissipation, reeking in its sites; vice, flaunting and shameless in the light of day; brutality, covered, but

not hidden, beneath a thin veil of civility, exorted perhaps by fear; and poverty in its many

hidden shapes. It was well that I had retained the service of a guide who held over the people with whom we came in contact the wholesome terror of a despotic landlord, and who had besides a pecuniary interest in the success of my researches. As it was, we met but little encouragement, and no satisfactory solution to our inquiries. In most cases we were met with a distinct and positive denial of any knowledge of such a person as Peggy Magrath, varied occasionally by blustering and oathful demands as to why they (the lodgers) should be bothered with such questions! Evidently, I was looked upon as a spy, perhaps a police officer in disguise, in search of some criminal in hiding; and it was believed that my questions and expressed anxiety about Peggy Magrath were merely a blind to conceal some dangerous purpose—dangerous, because probably almost every inmate of 'Whiskers' was, more or less, at variance with the law, or had been. At any rate, 'the world was not their friend, nor the world's law'; and they would, to a man or a woman, have been ready to take up arms against the law, and in favour of any hapless, law-persecuted victim.

Faithful to me (and himself), however, the landlord conducted me from room to room, and from floor to floor, up the broken and banisterless stairs, until we reached the attic which had been my boyhood's home. It had become even a more wretched abode than I had known it. Some of the rotten rafters had crumbled away, crushed beneath the weight of superincumbent tiles; leaving the roof to bulge fearfully inwards, with great gaps, exposed to the light of day and to every descending shower. At this time the broken floor was sodden with moisture, and a thick fall of sleety snow, which had commenced since my entrance into the miserable house already covered it, drifting indeed to every part of the vile loft; while the keen wind whistled through innumerable crevices in roof and wall.

And yet the room was not without its occupant. On a damp and hard mattress, in one corner—my old corner—and covered only with the thinnest of coverlets, without blanket above or beneath his emaciated body, lay a fair-haired boy, evidently in the last stage of consumption. He was alone; and his preternaturally bright, full, glistening eyes looked up inquiringly as we entered.

I believe that I started with horror at the sight; I knew that I felt horror-stricken; and

my guide seemed to think an explanation needed.

'The poor boy's mother, he said, was a very poor woman who earned what little she had by needlework, when she could get it; and she was gone out now, he supposed, to look for work or take some home. He only knew that she had the room 'scheep, very scheep'; and he shrugged his shoulders.

'And can you reconcile it to your conscience,' I said, 'to allow a poor child to lie in a hole like this and hastened to the grave by starvation, cold, and destitute of even the most needful comforts?'

'What should I do?' asked the landlord, sharply. 'Why need they come to the poor Jew to ask for a scheep lodging? Yet indeed,' he added, however, with a touch of natural feeling, 'I did not know they were so badly off. The woman pays her rent always—always.'

'Look you,' I said, 'we will not talk about it, but leave me here; and go, beg or borrow a blanket—two, three, the more the better—to wrap this child in; and then see if cannot find a better place than this—go, go.'

'And what should I do the better for that?' demanded the landlord, suspiciously.

I put money in his hand, and he disappeared, while I went and stooped over the boy. Hitherto he had not spoken, only following me with his sparkling eye, and apparently watching the movement of my lips. But now his own lips moved, and he spake very faintly: 'You are very kind, sir; but it does not matter you know.'

'What does not matter, my poor boy?' I asked.

'About feeling cold and achy and faint-like. It won't last long.'

'Indeed, I fear not,' I said, with a choking sensation in my throat; for the scene too vividly called to remembrance my dying mother.

'Oh, but I do not fear,' he said, quietly, and fixing his eyes upon me.

'No! how is this? But stop, your mouth is very parched; you are not hungry?'

No, oh no; he was not hungry, he said.

'Thirsty?'

Yes, a little thirsty: he would like a drink of water; only he did not think there was any.

I remembered that I had an orange in my pocket. I had provided myself with it in anticipation of the foulness of Whiskers' Rents, and of needing some purifying and invigorating refreshment. In another moment the orange was