

gained by his coming back here. He's best away, if it was only for your sake.'

'I—suppose so,' answered Oliver at last, half sullenly. 'It's no use talking about it. Let's do what there is to be done and get off to bed!'

Oliver had certainly good excuse for being tired, for he had done a hard day's work in his vehement energetic fashion, before the labours and excitements of the school-feast began. But when he found himself alone at last, in his little chamber in the high-pitched roof, he seemed in no hurry either for bed or sleep. He sat with his elbows on his table, and the little books of devotion, all of which Mr. Wilmet had either given or recommended, spread out before him, doggedly trying to read the appointed portions. However tired he might be, he had never allowed himself to miss the reading since the day he was confirmed—that day when a new ideal of life had been presented to him, and he had seized upon and embraced it with a vivid interest—an almost fierce delight.

The little books were an odd selection for a lad of his age and bringing up, but they had been a help to him in leading a more consistent life than many would have expected of him, and none the less perhaps because they set up a standard of saintliness that would seem to be utterly out of his reach.

It was from no fault in them that their precepts could not reach his brain that night. Between his eyes and the printed page there floated another pair of eyes: dark, like his own, but with lines and wrinkles of care around them; eyes that seemed to change their expression as they looked into his.

Tender, malignant, wistful, threatening; but always reproachful, as if they said, 'What! you too? Have you no more heart than the rest?'

Recollections, so vague that they were like fragments of dreams, hovered through his mind. He was sitting on someone's knee, his own hands clasped in two great strong ones, and those eyes laughing kindly into his. He was riding on someone's shoulders,

steadying himself with one hand grasping a mass of dark tangled curls, like his own. Someone was calling him, in a voice that came back to him now, after being for years forgotten—'*Daddy's boy.*'

And gradually all the visions took shape, and drew into one: the figure of the dark silent stranger, standing there below upon the hearthstone, with hungry eyes fixed upon that picture in his hand.

Was it his own hearthstone, untouched by his wandering feet for fourteen weary years? Was it the portrait of his own dead wife, and the son whom he had fondled as a baby and since seen no more?

Oliver started, and pushed the books from him, so carelessly that some of them fell on the floor and the candlestick tottered. To have paced the room would have been a relief, but one does not do that sort of thing when one inhabits a low-ceiled attic, with only boards to separate it from the room below. Life in a little house teaches everyone a kind of self-control; and Oliver kept his restlessness within bounds, though he gave up all pretence of reading, and only stared blankly through the smoke of the candle at the whitewashed wall.

'It can't be!' he was saying to himself. 'Everyone said that he would never come back. The disgrace was pretty well forgotten and done with; he would never think of coming back to rake it all up now. They only said that they knew him. But, if it was not my father, *who* was it?'

He gathered up the books hastily and put them on one side, without having read a word; took up his Bible, and fluttered over the leaves impatiently.

'If it *was* my father!' his thoughts went on. 'Suppose it was—none of us knew him! Perhaps—it was a good thing—that none of us knew him. He will go away, and say no more, and no one need ever know that he was here, to set them talking of all *that* again. How soon will he go away, and where will he sleep to-night? My uncle thinks so too—no good could come of his coming back here, where we are known. But he is out yonder somewhere, homeless and maybe penniless; and