

'What do you want with me?' said I, cutting him short.

'There's somebody as you knows,' he replied, in a mysterious whisper, 'as wants to clap their eyes on you most precious.'

'Ha! Mrs. Magrath? It must be. Where?—where?'

The old man gave me a cunning look of intelligence, and winked his bleared and watery eyes, as he nodded what I took for granted to be an affirmative to my question.

'Whore,' I repeated, 'is she? Poor Peggy, I'll go to her at once.'

'Fair and softly,' said the old man. 'I reckon you'll be out of your reckoning if you goes without me; and you see, I've got all these to sell afore I can stir my stumps,' and he held out his sheaf of broad-sheets.

'I'll pay you for them all,' I said impatiently; and I put my day's earnings into his hand, and relieved him of his flimsy wares which I tossed into the middle of the crowd. 'There,' I added, 'now that is done, and let us lose no more time.'

'Well,' said he, counting the money I had given him, 'if you bean't a plucky young feller!'

'Never mind,' I said; 'show me where I can find poor Peggy, and I'll make it a good day's work for you;' and retaining my hold of the old man's arm, which I had grasped in my feverish anxiety and impatience, I extricated him from the crowd, who were staring with amazement at my proceedings.

'Don't hurry an old feller so,' said he, panting, and, as I remembered afterwards, silently laughing at the same time, while with difficulty he kept up with me: 'I bean't so young as I was once, Roley, and my bellers (bellows) be got shakky.'

I felt the force of the old man's remonstrance, and slackened my pace, taking care, however, to keep close by his side.

'Where is she?' I once more asked, but could get no other reply than that 'every time the ship (sheep) blates (bleats) it loses a nibble,' which I was fain to interpret to mean that my old acquaintance could not walk and talk at the same instant; so we went on in silence.

I thought I was acquainted with most of the byways as well as the highways of London, and, indeed, in some time I was familiar with the streets and lanes through which my guide was conducting me. But after half an hour's devious wanderings, I began to lose my course, and became bewildered in a mazo of obscure passages, rendered doubly dark by the increas-

ing gloom of night, and a thick watery mist which mingled with the polluted atmosphere.

'We are close upon the river,' I said stopping short.

'You have found that out, have you?' said the old man; 'but what's the odds?' he wanted to know.

'I must know more about it before I go any further,' I said; 'I don't want any pressgang work.'

It was not without reason that I came to a sudden stand, and almost turned and fled, as those who know anything of the infamous practices of crimps and kidnapers and the brutality of pressgangs, in those and later times will well understand. My aged guide understood me also, and again he laughed cunningly. 'Onner bright,' he said; 'you need not be afraid, Roley; hawks docan't pick out hawks' eyes.'

'That may be,' said I; 'but for all that, I don't go any further with you till I know—'

'You give old Peggy up then?' said he with a sneer.

'No, I will not do that either,' I replied, with a sudden accession of resolution. 'Lead on, and I will follow.'

How long I should have maintained my courage I cannot tell, for the dark, narrow, and filthy passages and courts through which the old man conducted me, and which surpassed even Whiskers' Rents in wretchedness, began once more to awake my suspicions of intended foul play. We had now arrived at a narrow street abutting upon the river, and just as I had determined once more to question my guide, he exclaimed, 'Here we are at last,' and gliding up a small entry, he tapped gently and in a peculiar manner at a low door, which was not opened to him until an interchange of signals assured those within that the visitor was privileged to enter.

'Keep close to me, Roley,' whispered the ballad singer, or whatever else he might be; and I obeyed mechanically. Retreat now, indeed, would have been, if not impossible, more dangerous than advance.

'You are late to-night,' said the man who officiated as doorkeeper, in a low tone; and then for the first time perceiving me he added in a still lower tone, the words of which escaped my ears, what appeared to be an angry and quick interrogation. The reply, which was given in an equally guarded tone, seemed to be satisfactory; and on our being admitted, the door was carefully closed and fastened, and we were in darkness.

To my guide, however, this seemed no inconvenience. Grasping me rather tightly by the arm, he proceeded steadily along what was distinctly enough a long, narrow, irregular, and crooked passage, cautioning me of impediments which lay in our unseen course.

'Five steps down, Roley, and a wall right afore us—turn sharp round to the right, lad. Keep close to the wall, this side, Roley, or down you goes, and is bait for cels afore to-morrow morning.'

I could easily understand this; for as we cautiously passed what must have been a yawning gulf in the passage, leaving a narrow causeway of about two feet, as near as I could judge, between it and the slimy wall, a strong gust of air ascended bringing with it a sickening effluvia of sewerage and mud, while the dashing and rolling of water also struck upon my ears from the depths below. We were manifestly passing over a creek of the river, on which the house into which we had been admitted must have been built.

'Up we goes agin, Roley—three steps, and a broken one at the top. Stoop now, stoop; bring yer nose to yer knees a'most, if yo Jon't want to let daylight into yer brains, Roley; count twelve steps, and up agin.'

Silently I followed the directions I received for I felt that then I was in his hands, and that questioning and remonstrance would be alike in vain. In truth, after the first surpriso was over, I felt less apprehension than might be imagined. Remember that I had not cast off even the slough, much less the experiences of my vagabond life; and though I did not place unlimited reliance on my old guide's assurance that 'hawks did not pick out hawks' eyes,' I was conscious of not presenting any strong inducement for plunder, especially having so recently lost my two years' savings. The greater probability of danger was that to which I have already referred, namely, of being inveigled to this lonely spot as a preliminary to being sold to kidnapers, or betrayed to a pressgang. But, on reflection, I dismissed this fear, and reverted to the probability that the old man was acting towards me in good faith, and that his sole intention was to bring me and my old nurse together.

I trust my readers will believe that I did not forget at this time that I had a heavenly Protector, who was able to deliver me from snares and dangers, if any were laid for me, and to whom my heart was lifted up for help in this time of need.

At length, after many turnings, we came to