

## RAG AND TAG.

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(Author of "Hilda and Hildebrand," "The  
Return from India," "Little Nellie," &c.)

## CHAPTER I.—Continued.

"Well, never mind, Rag, it can't be 'elp'd; ye did yer best, that I know, and we shall 'ave it bad enough soon without my grumblin' at yer, an' I prom'sed to take care on yer when ye was littler than ye are now—so you may think you was small—and I'll stick to my promise; but take my a'vice, Rag: get their supper ready, an' then lie down in yer corner, an' go asleep or purtend."

"What will you do, Tag?—go asleep too?"

"No, I must be ready for 'squarin' up.' We'll 'ave no more 'squarin' up' after to-night, Rag; we'll leave this 'ere 'orrible place to-morrer an' work for ourselves."

"Tag!" and Rag turned down, with the end of a candle she had taken off the board, lighted and stuck into a bottle. "Is that yer secrit—hooray!—but what ever shall we do?"

"Lots an' lots o' things—beg, black boots, run messages, and get on somehow; other chil'ren get on, and so can we. Why should we stay 'ere; they're not our parens; they only makes use on us, an' beats an' starves us; it's yer soldgers, Rag, as 'as done it—I can't abear to look on 'em;" and with a sob he could not restrain Tag bent his head down on his knees and said no more.

In a moment Rag's arms were round his neck, whilst she tried to comfort him in her poor imperfect little way.

"My soldgers is nothin,' Tag; lor! it's rather nice to be slapped when they don't do it too much and too quick; it makes one's blood run back'ards and forrards, an' up and down, an' keeps one warm like. Don't think too much on me, Tag; lor! I'm 'customed to it, an' scarce feels it; there, give us a kiss, Tag, an' don't you cry."

"I'se not cryin,' Rag. I'se only restin' my head; be quick an' get their supper, and we'll get into our corners."

Rag peered into the old box where the "dreadful ones" food was kept.

"There's not much for 'em to-night—only a piece of cheese, some bread, and this 'alf of a bottle full. I wonders why they like this stuff so much; it burns my lips so dreadful bad, and makes my throat tickle an' my eyes cry. Oh, it's just like burnin' flames—it's 'orrid,"

cried Rag, as she put the bottle down.

Tag started to his feet. "What are you doin,' Rag?" he cried in a voice so loud and unlike himself that Rag was quite surprised. "Never, never as long as you live, do sich a trick agin; that's pison, that stuff as you've been tastin'; 'twill burn an' burn, and go on burnin' an' kill yer. Oh, Rag, what 'ave you done?"

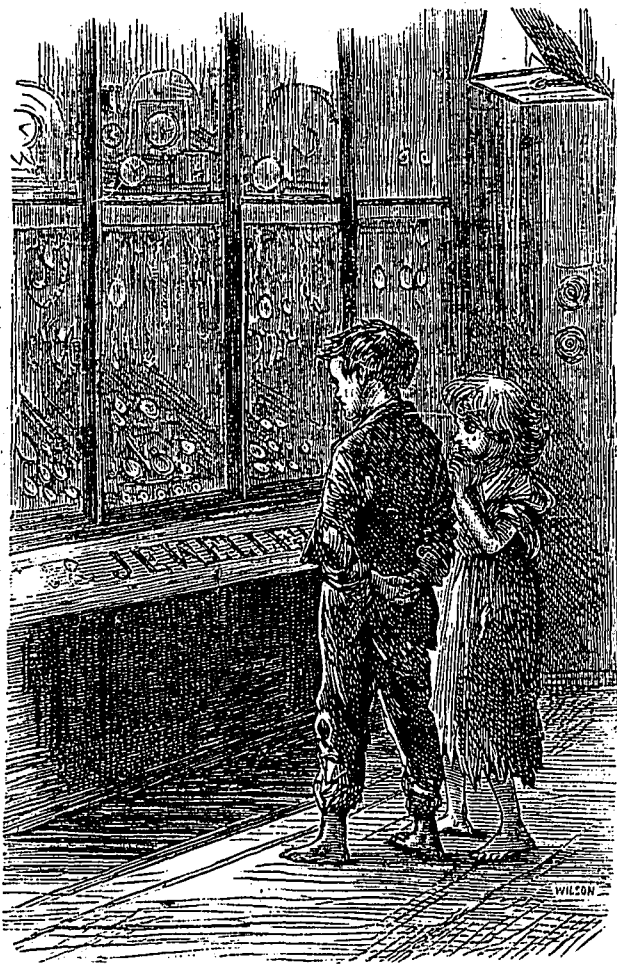
"Will it kill me straight off, Tag? I only took a little, an' it's burnin' me fearful bad."

"How much did ye get in yer mouth, Rag—show me quick!"

"Ever so little, it wor so hot; it a'most took my breathin' away, so I stopt."

on that, an' mother an' us got nothin'; and after he wor dead, she worked an' worked with her needle till she wor dead too, an' then we got here with the 'dreadful ones.' They kept lodgin's once, an' a betterer shop than this; but times got hard, an' they com'd here and we comed with 'em, an' they get crosserer and crosserer an' wickeder an' wickeder ev'ry day."

"An' we get hungrier an' hungrier, an' tireder an' tireder ev'ry day. Oh, Tag, I wish as I was the little gel who's sick an' you the man as wanted the oranges for her: she'll be 'spinted arter all; she'll not get 'em to-night, Tag, an' I promis-ed," added Rag, sadly.



RAG AND TAG GAZING IN THE JEWELLER'S SHOP.

"Well, it won't kill yer this once, but never do it once more; it killed father an' it killed mother—and if it killed my little Rag, what should I do? I should die too." And Tag's white face quivered, and a look came all over it as though he would cry if he had time and dared, but he had not, and it passed off, leaving him whiter than before.

"I didn't know all that, Tag; I didn't know as mother died of that;" and Rag pushed the bottle further away.

"Not of that, Rag; mother wouldn't a-touched a drop, not for anythin'; but it killed father, an' that killed her, for she got ill, an' he spendd all the money

Tramp! tramp! tramp! along the street above them, and suddenly down came the two large sacks into the cellar, followed by their owners.

"Into your corners directly, you young dogs; what are you wasting candles for?" growled out the hard, savage voice of the "dreadful one." "You've been up to some tricks, I'll be bound. Where's the board, and what 'ave you sold?"

"Everythin'," replied Rag, boldly.

"'Everythin'!' what d'ye mean?"

"'Everythin' off the board is sold," answered Tag.

"Where's the money?"

"'Ere in the bag," and Tag handed it over to him. Out poured the money into the palm—the hard, horny, dirt-begrimed palm of the "dreadful one." Rag bent forward eagerly: her heart nearly stopped beating in her anxiety to see whether amongst the shillings, sixpences, three-penny-pieces, fourpences, and coppers, which came out, the beautiful large half-crown should make its appearance.

"Is this all you got for all the goods?" asked the "dreadful one" fiercely, after he had with the aid of his companion counted the money. "Five an' sixpence—an' you should have got eight shillin's at the very least!"

"That's all as we got," replied Tag, doggedly; "an' we did our best."

"Then bad's yer best, Tag, and what's more I don't believe yer;" so saying he undid the leather strap which fastened the sack to his shoulders, and taking hold of Tag gave him several severe blows across his bare arms and legs.

"Will you hand it over now, or will you have some more of the leather?"

"I've no more for you," and Tag turned towards his corner.

"That won't do, my young friend Tag," and the "dreadful one" caught hold of him this time. "You know you've more coppers stowed away somewhere; you had better bring 'em out without the help of this," and he pointed to the strap.

"I've no more money—you've got all, and I'm goin' to sleep."

"Then come here—you will have it, and it's yer own fault;" so saying the "dreadful one" brought down the strap so savagely over Tag's poor thin little back that it took his breath away and brought him down on the hard brick floor.

"Give it 'im, Tag—do give it 'im," screamed out Rag; "he'll kill you, he will—I knows 'im;" but Tag silenced her with a look, and she lay down again in her corner trembling; but her unfortunate speech was heard.

"So you knows somethin' of it, do you? Come here," and the "dreadful one" seized her and brought her forward to the light. "Now hand it over, and quickly; you know you've got it hid somewhere."

"I ain't got one penny. Tag's guv it all. Don'te bet me, don't!" she cried piercingly, as the strap was raised in the cruel

## CHAPTER II.