

I had no further observations to make, and should probably have abandoned myself to vague anticipations of coming evil, if I had not remembered that God was above all, and that His ear was open to my cry. I often now think of the flush of joy this thought produced in my mind then, and with what entire and happy confidence I knelt down and cast myself on the protection of my Maker and Saviour. It was while I was thus engaged that I heard the lock of the door turned, and the door itself gently opened. In a moment I was on my feet, and, looking round, I saw that the mysterious stranger who had presided at the midnight carousal and had taken charge of me in the boat now stood before me.

'So you are awake,' he said, in the same soft voice of which I have before spoken. I hope you have slept well, Roland?'

'I want to know where I am, sir,' I said, without replying to his question, 'and why I have been brought here. And I want my clothes, too; I hope I am not to be robbed of them, sir, though they are not worth much.'

'No, not much,' said he, 'though I am glad to see you in better trim than when I first saw you in Smithfield. You see I have not forgotten you,' he added with a sort of smile, but not a pleasant one, I thought.

'It doesn't matter,' I said. 'I am much obliged to you for what you gave me then, but I don't want to have any more to do with you, and if you will please to let me go—'

'I do not know what I may please to do yet,' replied the stranger, coldly, 'and if you do not want to have anything to do with me, I may want to have something to do with you. I should not else have taken the trouble about you that I have done.'

I began to exclaim afresh about the deception which had been practised upon me, and the illegal detention to which I was then subjected, when my goaler, as I may term him, cut short what I was saying.

'You had better keep your temper and be quiet,' he said, still in the same gentle soothing tone, 'and you will find that I do not mean any harm to you, but if you begin to be rebellious, you will find that you have an old hand to deal with. You want to know where you are,' he added. 'I can tell you that you are where you are about yourself hoarse, and no one will be the wiser, and any attempt to escape will only make it worse for yourself. Why have you been brought here? I will tell you that, too,' he went on. 'You have been brought here because I have taken a fancy to have you here.'

Perhaps you may be useful to me if I make it worth your while. You are not so well off in the world as not to be glad of an opportunity of rising in it, I suppose?' he said, with another smile.

He fixed his eyes upon me as he spoke. I have before said that they were sharp and penetrating, and it seemed as though he would, if possible, have looked into my very soul.

'Who are you? and what do you want with me?' I asked, shrinking from his gaze with a feeling of terror which I strove against in vain.

'We will speak of that another day,' said he, 'and as you are getting reasonable, you shall find that you have nothing to complain of.' And saying this, he left the room to return almost immediately with a bundle of garments.

'These are not mine,' I said, turning them over, and perceiving that they were different in cut and texture from, and very superior to, the rough every-day clothes of which I had been deprived.

'Exchange is no robbery,' replied he, laughing, 'and you will lose nothing in good looks by being better dressed. You see I deal fairly with you,' he added showing me the contents of my old pockets, and the little bag of money (Fanny's), which till then I had not thought of. And before I had time to reply, he again vanished, closing and locking the door after him leaving me in a state of perplexity which I need not attempt to describe.

For several days I remained in this state of imprisonment, and saw only my mysterious keeper who regularly brought me my food, but only smiled when I either implored him to release me, or to tell me why I had been thus kidnapped. He took care to compliment me, however, on the improvement of my appearance (for I had, though reluctantly, dressed myself in the borrowed clothes), and to hint at the great things he intended to do for me.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SLOPPY STEVENS AGAIN MAKES HIS APPEARANCE, AND I FIND MYSELF IN THIEVES' CASTLE.

If I had any doubt as to the nefarious character of the designs of the man who had constituted himself my goaler, or any hope that his intentions towards me were honest, the doubt and hope alike vanished with the entrance of Sloppe Stevens into my prison room, about a week after my night adventure.

'So here you are, Roley,' said he, seating

himself on the foot of the bed, and surveying me from head to foot with a critical air. 'Well on my word of honour, the Captain has done the thing tidily, though, and you'll be an honour to his bringing up. I told you you'd be a gentleman one of these days, eh? and, you see, my word is come to pass.'

If there had been the slightest shadow of a hope of moving my visitor to compunction—if I had not known by past experience that he and compassion were utter strangers, and that he would have gloated over my sufferings—I could have cast myself at his feet, and besought him to intercede for me, but I felt how unavailing this would be, and I adopted another tone.

'I have been used in a shameful manner,' I said, 'and you know it, and I don't want to be a gentleman—not the sort of a gentleman that you mean, and, another thing, I won't be.'

My old persecutor burst into a loud and brutal laugh. 'Pretty well for Whiskers' Rents that,' said he; 'and pray, Mr. Roland Leigh what sort of a gentleman is it that I do mean?' he asked, when his laugh had subsided.

'Such a one as you are,' I said; 'and I tell you at once, and you may tell the man that sent you, that I would rather be poor all my life—I would rather sweep the streets, beg, starve, or die, than get rich by being a rogue and a thief. That's what I have been brought here for, I know,' I continued; 'and you want to make me as bad as you are, but you won't. The man that has got me here may kill me if he likes; but he shan't make me what he is and what you are.'

I believe that I spoke this very angrily and in desperation, perhaps unadvisedly also, but, at all events, I said it honestly, and I felt at the time that if my rashness brought upon me instant cruelty, or even death, it would be better than being gradually drawn aside from rectitude. It brought upon me, however, nothing more than a broad stare and a sneering chuckle.

'So you have found out what you are here for, have you?' said Sloppe Stevens, grinning. 'Well, so much the better; it will save me the trouble of telling you. And you won't be a prig, eh? Pretty well this! Why, you airy (aria) sneak! pretty chink you are to pretend to be honest! Ha, ha! When was you in the jug last? Tell me that, Roley-Poley, and who was it saw you there? And old Peggy too, she never showed you the tricks—oh, no!'