

the same tone. 'Come in with you; but whatever comes of it don't say it was *my* doing. There's two friends of mine, but you needn't ask 'em their names.'

The two looked up and nodded, and Oliver looked at them both and wished them away. Ignorant as he was, he felt instinctively that they were 'no good.'

'Will he take a hand with us?' asked the elder of them, glancing at Martin Haythorn and shuffling the dirty cards.

'You may ask him, if you like; I shan't,' said the other pointedly. And the man looked at Oliver and suggested that he should join them, but in a careless, doubtful tone, as if somehow the zest of the game was gone with his entrance.

Oliver declined as civilly as he could. He had promised Mr. Wilmot that he would never play for money, and these men did not seem very likely to play 'for love.' And after a moment or two they signed to Martin Haythorn to sit down again, and the game went on, while Oliver took a rickety seat in the corner and watched them.

He did not even know what game it was that they were playing, but perhaps his attentive eyes disconcerted them, for after a while they began to dispute in a sulky way instead of going on with it. One thing Oliver noticed: that both of the strangers seemed to be afraid of his father, in spite of a show of friendliness between them. Small disputes there were over the chances of the game, but the instant Haythorn's voice rose and his eyes began to flash the other two seemed prepared to give up their own opinions—or at any rate to say nothing more about them—rather than have any disagreement.

It was strange enough to Oliver to be thus gathering hints as to his own father's character from the behaviour of strangers; and he watched and listened to them with some foreboding as well as curiosity.

'Could I learn to be afraid of him too? And, if I did, would it make me—hate him?' he was saying to himself when the men rose and took their leave, and he was left alone with his father.

'Well, you've frightened *them* away, and no great loss either!' said Martin Haythorn. 'Now you must just make yourself agreeable instead, since you are here. Pull that chair out, and sit you down, and tell me all about the old place, and what's become of them all.'

He spoke with a kind of bitter good humour; and Oliver sat down as he was bid and answered question after question, feeling sometimes as though he had been away almost as long as his father, and as if all of which he spoke might be changed by now.

It was as a banished man, though banished by his own fault, that Martin Haythorn spoke of his old home; and there was a good deal of sadness in the tone of some of his questions—questions that showed a pathetically clear recollection of all the little ins and outs of the life of the village. Some news he had gathered during his own short visit to Staneslow—hints of changes and chances that seemed surprising enough to him, and that needed a good many words from Oliver to explain them. And, as the talk went on, his face softened now and then, till his son would hardly have known it, but that it seemed to bring back dim recollections of childish days that looked more like dreams than realities.

That gentler look made him bold at last to ask a question on his own account.

'What's the name of that sailor that was up yonder with you?'

'Hutchins—Joe Hutchins,' answered his father, his face darkening suddenly.

'Does he live here?'

'Ay! worse luck!'

'Don't you think well of him, then?'

'I don't think about him at all—when I can help it.'

Oliver paused a moment, and then resolved to go through with it. 'What made him come all the way to Staneslow with you?'

Martin Haythorn knocked his empty pipe on the bars of the empty grate, and frowned till his black brows nearly met.