

THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP

Scene I.

Characters:

Miss Monflather

Nell

Teachers

Girls

Stage set to represent Miss Monflather's Boarding and Day Establishment. Little Nell, with a bundle of handbills, advertising Mrs. Jarley's wax works, in her hand, approaches the door just as it opens and out comes a long file of young ladies, two and two, all with open books in their hands, and some with parasols. Miss Monflather and two teachers come at the end of the line. The girls pass Nell; Miss Monflather approaches her; Nell curtesies and presents her the package of handbills, Miss Monflather commands the procession to halt.

Miss Monflather: You are the wax-work child, are you not?

Nell: Yes, ma'am.

Miss Monflather: And don't you think you must be a very wicked little child, to be a wax-work child at all? Don't you know that it's very naughty and unfeminine, and a perversion of the properties wisely and benignantly transmitted to us with expansive powers to be roused from their dormant state through the medium of cultivation?

(Teachers smile at Miss Monflather and then glare angrily at each other.)

Miss Monflather: Don't you feel how naughty it is of you to be a wax-work child, when you might have the proud consciousness of assisting to the extent of your infant powers, the manufactures of your country, of improving your mind, by the constant contemplation of the steam engine; and of earning a comfortable and independent subsistence of from two-and-ninepence to three shillings per week? Don't you know that the harder you are at work, the happier you are?

Teacher: How doth the little busy —

Miss Monflather: Eh! Who said that? (One teacher points to the other.)

Miss Monflather: Hold your peace. The little busy bee is applicable only to genteel children. "In books, or work, or healthful play," is quite right as far as they are concerned; and the work means painting on velvet, fancy needle-work, or embroidery. In such cases as these (she points with parasol to Nell) and in the case of all poor people's children, we should read it thus:

"In work, work, work—in work alway
Let my first years be past,
That I may give for every day,
Some good account at last."

(Hum of applause follows from pupils and teachers. Nell begins to weep. She drops her handkerchief, which is picked up by one of the pupils.)

Miss Monflather: It was Miss Edwards who did that, I know. Now I am sure that was Miss Edwards.

(All the girls say "It was Miss Edwards.")

Miss Monflather (puts down parasol): Is it not a most remarkable thing. Miss Edwards, that you have an attachment to the lower classes which always draws you to their sides; or rather, is it not a most extraordinary thing that all I say and do will not wean you from propensities which your original station in life have unhappily rendered habitual to you, you extremely vulgar-minded girl?

Miss Edwards: I really intended no harm, ma'am. It was a momentary impulse, indeed.

Miss Monflather: An impulse! I wonder that you presume to speak of impulses to me. I am astonished! I suppose it is an impulse which induces you to take the part of every groveling and debased person that comes in your way. But I would have you know, Miss Edwards, that you cannot be permitted—if it be only for the sake of preserving a proper example and decorum in this establishment that you cannot be permitted to fly in the face of your superiors in this exceedingly gross manner. If you have no reason to feel a becoming pride before wax