

weakness, and saw in it a prospect of gain.

So that suddenly I, who a moment before had only one companion, found myself joined by a second; suddenly discovered myself to be the centre one of three, and we three were doing King Street together.

I was conscious of this third without looking directly at her. An instinctive presentiment of impending evil kept my eyes averted. But a third was there; who it was I did not know. I know now, too well.

It was Clinker.

It was, of course, necessary to ignore this third, and my conversation at once grew astonishingly animated. I talked frantically, perhaps wildly; at the same time, I kept my eyes with most unholy dread away from the third, whom I did not know.

I knew only a dead chill was creeping over my heart. The high gods sometimes warn men thus—and in dreams when that fatal moment has arrived when the gates of peace are past forever.

A cold chill was creeping over my heart; why, I could not tell. I can tell now. It was a warning the high gods had sent to tell of those gates of peace closing behind me.

At the same time, in my inner soul, I felt that presently there would come a horrible pause in the conversation, and then—

The pause came, I shuddered involuntarily. Then the pause was filled—not by me, not by my friend, but by Clinker.

‘Please sir, Pa died yesterday.’

I did not hear of course, and renewed or tried to renew the conversation. At the same time I knew that it was no use.

‘And please sir, Ma is sick in bed.’

I could not help hearing this, and calmly turned my gaze full upon the little girl, as if for the first time conscious of her existence.

The day came when I paid for that attempt to ignore Clinker.

But as it was I went on talking. In vain, as my sinking heart told me. Fate hung over me.

‘And I have nine little brothers, sir, an’ five on ’em with measles.’

I paused in my talk. The picture of those nine little brothers rose up involuntarily before me. I wondered many things of them. I wondered if they had all snub noses, and a vision of those nine little brothers engaged in deadly conflict for the possession of the one pocket-handkerchief belonging to the Clinker family filled me with delight.

‘Please sir, we have no money to bury Pa.’

This recalled me from my wondering, and reminded me that I must get rid of this pertinacious young woman. Perchance, if I had been alone, I might have sworn. Nay, who knows I might even have told this little girl that I did not believe her. Not being alone, I fumbled in my pocket.

Clinker observed my uneasiness.

‘And there is nothin’ in th’ house sir, t’ eat.

Clinker, you see, was a shameless little girl. For Clinker’s Pa wasn’t just dead, and her Ma wasn’t sick, and she had no little brothers. At least, this was my opinion.

‘Please sir,’ and here Clinker began to cry, ‘aven’t had nothin’ t’ eat three days.’

Worse and worse Clinker.

‘And Pa will lick me if I go home an’ no money.’

Then Clinker’s Pa must have the art of reviving with rapidity.

‘And Ma ’ll whale me.’

Which it is to be hoped she does, if only to show how a really moral invalid can triumph in an emergency over any amount of physical prostration.

‘And please sir, won’t you pity a poor orphan who is alone in the world?’

Really this is very contradictory, Clinker. How can I believe you? Worse, how am I to get rid of you?