

The child took Roger's offered hand, and trotted beside him for a few yards, looking up trustfully into the old man's tender and pitying face.

'I've got three fathers,' he said, 'and this one lives in Cain an' Abel Yard. There's two more on 'em; but this one aint as bad to me as the others. He gives me a copper sometimes, he does.'

He pointed to a low-browed, rakish-looking fellow, who was lolling against the walls of a tavern, well in sight of the child's crossing. As he saw him coming towards him holding Roger Chippendell's hand, he advanced to meet them with a scowl upon his red and bloated face.

'This little lad o' yours,' said Roger pleasantly; 'it seems as if it were bad times for him and you. Wouldn't you be willing to part with him to a mate that has got no children of his own, and could do well by him?'

'Part with him!' repeated the vagabond; 'why you can't know nothin' of the feelin's of a father, or you'd never ask sech a question. Part with him! he's worth more than all the money you've got.'

'Well, I'm only a country carpenter,' he replied gently, 'but I'm well off, and a rich friend of mine has given me fifty pounds to lay out for him. I could do well by the lad, and teach him a trade. How old is he?'

'Jest risin' six,' answered the man. 'I'd be willing to give you something to part with him,' went on Roger with increasing earnestness; 'how much would it be worth your while to let him go for?'

'You stand here 'arf a hour, and judge what he's worth for yourself,' said the fellow.

He sent the shivering child back to his crossing, and Roger Chippendell stood watching as the busy stream of people flowed incessantly by, never pausing, and at this hour never slackening its speed. The little fellow, with his bare feet, on the pavement, and his skin showing through the holes in his ragged clothes, did his utmost to attract attention to himself and arouse the pity of the busy passers-by. He looked up piteously into their faces, and shrill his young voice could be heard amid all the din. In sixteen minutes alms had been dropped into his beseeching little hands thirteen times. The scampish man at Roger's side gave a low whistle, and the child came running towards them. He took a little bag from him, which was concealed amid his rags, and carefully felt all over him lest he should have secreted a halfpenny. There was only a halfpenny less than a shilling; collected in sixteen minutes from the well fed and well clad citizens of the richest Christian city in the world, who did what they could to perpetuate the sin and shame of having almost naked children to sweep their crossings.

'Now, mate,' said the man, 'how much is this lad worth to me?'

Roger Chippendell shook his gray head sadly. 'There was no chance of making the bargain he had set his heart on.'

'If you'll make me a offer when he's ten years old, said the drunken,

father, 'I might say yes. I've a lad risen' eleven you'd be welcome to when he comes out o' jail next week; but this one is too vallyble.'

He tells me he has three fathers,' remarked Roger in an inquiring tone.

'Well, mate,' he replied, 'there's three of us as go shares in his earnin's; but which on us 'ill be father when he gets into trouble I don't know. He's such a wheedlin' little chap, he's worth his weight in gold. It's not the first time he's been offered for; nor the second; no, nor the third. He is sech a favorite with the ladies.'

'Where's his mother?' asked Roger

'In there,' he answered, pointing his thumb backward to the tavern; 'one on us always keeps an eye on the lad, and it's my turn now.'

Roger opened the easily swinging door, and looked round on the group assembled within. There were two or three old hags, and a young girl, but only one woman who could be the miserable child's mother. She stood leaning against the counter, with a glass of gin in her hand a strong, vigorous woman in the first prime of life, but with a brutal and profligate face, which gave no promise of pity even for her own child. Roger turned away without uttering a word to her.

'My God! my God!' he cried in his inmost soul, 'Why hast Thou forsaken these poor lost creatures? Has not thy Son, our Lord, given a ransom for them? And yet they are going down by thousands into the pit, and the devil leads them captive at his will! is not this great city like unto Sodom and Gomorrah, which were an abomination unto thee because the sin of them was very grievous? O my God! I cannot bear it.'

A storm of horror and abhorrence swept across the old man's tranquil spirit. But even in the midst of it he remembered his promise to the little crossing-sweeper, and stopped to fulfil it. The child's eyes sparkled with delight as he gave the cake in to his hand.

'God have pity on thee!' murmured Roger, 'for all the pity shown thee here is nought but a curse and a millstone about thy neck. It's the devil's money we drop into thy hands, and it goes to the devil's work. Lord, help us!'

(To be continued.)

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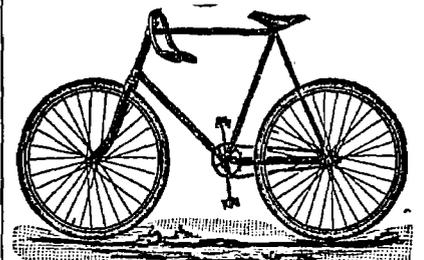
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