

report, seeing that the old hypocrite, getting next door to light-headed at the golden prospect before her, took such liberties with un-earthly names and persons which ought never to have approached her lips, and rained down such an awful shower of blessings on Trottle's head, that his hair almost stood on end to hear her. He went on down-stairs as fast as his feet would carry him, till he was brought up all standing, as the sailors say, on the last flight, by agravating Benjamin, lying right across the stair, and fallen off, as might have been expected, into a heavy drunken sleep.

The sight of him instantly reminded Trottle of the curious half likeness which he had already detected between the face of Benjamin and the face of another man, whom he had seen at a past time in very different circumstances. He determined, before leaving the House, to have one more look at the wretched muddled creature; and accordingly shook him up smartly, and propped him against the staircase wall, before his mother could interfere.

"Leave him to me; I'll freshen him up," says Trottle to the old woman, looking hard in Benjamin's face, while he spoke.

The fright and surprise of being suddenly woke up, seemed, for about a quarter of a minute, to sober the creature. When he first opened his eyes, there was a new look in them for a moment, which struck home to Trottle's memory as quick and as clear as a flash of light. The old maudlin sleepy expression came back again in another instant, and blurred out all further signs and tokens of the past. But Trottle had seen enough in the moment before it came; and he troubled Benjamin's face with no more inquiries.

"Next Monday, at dusk," says he, cutting short some more of the old woman's palaver about Benjamin's indigestion. "I've got no more time to spare, ma'am, to-night: please to let me out."

With a few last blessings, a few last dutiful messages to good Mr. Forley, and a few last friendly hints not to forget next Monday at dusk, Trottle contrived to struggle through the sickening business of leave-taking; to get the door opened; and to find himself, to his own indescribable relief, once more on the outer side of the House To Let.

LET AT LAST.

"THERE, ma'am!" said Trottle, folding up the manuscript from which he had been reading, and setting it down with a smart tap of triumph on the table. "May I venture to ask what you think of that plain statement, as a guess on my part (and not on Mr. Jarber's) at the riddle of the empty House?"

For a minute or two I was unable to say a word. When I recovered a little, my first question referred to the poor forlorn little boy.

"To-day is Monday the twentieth," I said.

"Surely you have not let a whole week go by without trying to find out something more?"

"Except at bed-time, and meals, ma'am," answered Trottle, "I have not let an hour go by. Please to understand that I have only come to an end of what I have written, and not to an end of what I have done. I wrote down those first particulars, ma'am, because they are of great importance, and also because I was determined to come forward with my written documents, seeing that Mr. Jarber chose to come forward, in the first instance, with his. I am now ready to go on with the second part of my story as shortly and plainly as possible, by word of mouth. The first thing I must clear up, if you please, is the matter of Mr. Forley's family affairs. I have heard you speak of them, ma'am, at various times; and I have understood that Mr. Forley had two children only by his deceased wife, both daughters. The eldest daughter married, to her father's entire satisfaction, one Mr. Bayne, a rich man, holding a high government situation in Canada. She is now living there with her husband, and her only child, a little girl of eight or nine years old. Right so far, I think, ma'am?"

"Quite right," I said.

"The second daughter," Trottle went on, "and Mr. Forley's favourite, set her father's wishes and the opinions of the world at flat defiance, by running away with a man of low origin—a mate of a merchant-vessel, named Kirkland. Mr. Forley not only never forgave that marriage, but vowed that he would visit the scandal of it heavily in the future on husband and wife. Both escaped his vengeance, whatever he meant it to be. The husband was drowned on his first voyage after his marriage, and the wife died in child-bed. Right again, I believe, ma'am?"

"Again quite right."

"Having got the family matter all right, we will now go back, ma'am, to me and my doings. Last Monday, I asked you for leave of absence for two days; I employed the time in clearing up the matter of Benjamin's face. Last Saturday I was out of the way when you wanted me. I played truant, ma'am, on that occasion, in company with a friend of mine, who is managing clerk in a lawyer's office; and we both spent the morning at Doctors' Commons, over the last will and testament of Mr. Forley's father. Leaving the will-business for a moment, please to follow me first, if you have no objection, into the ugly subject of Benjamin's face. About six or seven years ago (thanks to your kindness) I had a week's holiday with some friends of mine who live in the town of Pendlebury. One of those friends (the only one now left in the place) kept a chemist's shop, and in that shop I was made acquainted with one of the two doctors in the town, named Barsham. This Barsham was a first-rate surgeon, and might have got

to the top of his profession, if he had not been a first-rate blackguard. As it was, he both drank and gambled; nobody would have anything to do with him in Pendlebury; and, at the time when I was made known to him in the chemist's shop, the other doctor, Mr. Dix, who was not to be compared with him for surgical skill, but who was a respectable man, had got all the practice; and Barsham and his old mother were living together in such a condition of utter poverty, that it was a marvel to everybody how they kept out of the parish workhouse."

"Benjamin and Benjamin's mother!"

"Exactly, ma'am. Last Thursday morning (thanks to your kindness, again) I went to Pendlebury to my friend the chemist, to ask a few questions about Barsham and his mother. I was told that they had both left the town about five years since. When I inquired into the circumstances, some strange particulars came out in the course of the chemist's answer. You know I have no doubt, ma'am, that poor Mrs. Kirkland was confined while her husband was at sea, in lodgings at a village called Flatfield, and that she died and was buried there. But what you may not know is, that Flatfield is only three miles from Pendlebury; that the doctor who attended on Mrs. Kirkland was Barsham; that the nurse who took care of her was Barsham's mother; and that the person who called them both in, was Mr. Forley. Whether his daughter wrote to him, or whether he heard of it in some other way, I don't know; but he was with her (though he had sworn never to see her again when she married) a month or more before her confinement, and was backwards and forwards a good deal between Flatfield and Pendlebury. How he managed matters with the Barshams cannot at present be discovered; but it is a fact that he contrived to keep the drunken doctor sober, to everybody's amazement. It is a fact that Barsham went to the poor woman with all his wits about him. It is a fact that he and his mother came back from Flatfield after Mrs. Kirkland's death, packed up what few things they had, and left the town mysteriously by night. And, lastly, it is also a fact that the other doctor, Mr. Dix, was not called in to help, till a week after the birth *and burial* of the child, when the mother was sinking from exhaustion—exhaustion (to give the vagabond, Barsham, his due) not produced, in Mr. Dix's opinion, by improper medical treatment, but by the bodily weakness of the poor woman herself—"

"Burial of the child?" I interrupted, trembling all over. "Trottle! you spoke that word 'burial,' in a very strange way—you are fixing your eyes on me now with a very strange look—"

Trottle leaned over close to me, and pointed through the window to the empty house.

"The child's death is registered, at Pendle-

bury," he said, "on Barsham's certificate, under the head of Male Infant, Still-Born. The child's coffin lies in the mother's grave, in Flatfield churchyard. The child himself—as surely as I live and breathe, is living and breathing now—a castaway and a prisoner in that villainous house!"

I sank back in my chair.

"It's guess-work, so far, but it is borne in on my mind, for all that, as truth. Rouse yourself, ma'am, and think a little. The last I hear of Barsham, he is attending Mr. Forley's disobedient daughter. The next I see of Barsham, he is in Mr. Forley's house, trusted with a secret. He and his mother leave Pendlebury suddenly and suspiciously five years back; and he and his mother have got a child of five years old, hidden away in the house. Wait! please to wait—I have not done yet. The will left by Mr. Forley's father, strengthens the suspicion. The friend I took with me to Doctors' Commons, made himself master of the contents of that will; and when he had done so, I put these two questions to him. 'Can Mr. Forley leave his money at his own discretion to anybody he pleases?' 'No,' my friend says, 'his father has left him with only a life interest in it.' 'Suppose one of Mr. Forley's married daughters has a girl, and the other a boy, how would the money go?' 'It would all go,' my friend says, 'to the boy, and it would be charged with the payment of a certain annual income to his female cousin. After her death, it would go back to the male descendant, and to his heirs.' Consider that, ma'am! The child of the daughter whom Mr. Forley hates, whose husband has been snatched away from his vengeance by death, takes his whole property in defiance of him; and the child of the daughter whom he loves, is left a pensioner on her low-born boy-cousin for life! There was good—too good reason—why that child of Mrs. Kirkland's should be registered still-born. And if, as I believe, the register is founded on a false certificate, there is better, still better reason, why the existence of the child should be hidden, and all trace of his parentage blotted out, in the garret of that empty house."

He stopped, and pointed for the second time to the dim, dust-covered garret-windows opposite. As he did so, I was startled—a very slight matter sufficed to frighten me now—by a knock at the door of the room in which we were sitting.

My maid came in, with a letter in her hand. I took it from her. The mourning card, which was all the envelope enclosed, dropped from my hands.

George Forley was no more. He had departed this life three days since, on the evening of Friday.

"Did our last chance of discovering the truth," I asked, "rest with *him*? Has it died with *his* death?"

"Courage, ma'am! I think not. Our chance rests on our power to make Barsham and his mother confess; and Mr. Forley's death, by leaving them helpless, seems to put that power into our hands. With your permission, I will not wait till dusk to-day, as I at first intended, but will make sure of those two people at once. With a policeman in plain clothes to watch the house, in case they try to leave it; with this card to vouch for the fact of Mr. Forley's death; and with a bold acknowledgment on my part of having got possession of their secret, and of being ready to use it against them in case of need, I think there is little doubt of bringing Barsham and his mother to terms. In case I find it impossible to get back here before dusk, please to sit near the window, ma'am, and watch the house, a little before they light the street-lamps. If you see the front-door open and close again, will you be good enough to put on your bonnet, and come across to me immediately? Mr. Forley's death may, or may not, prevent his messenger from coming as arranged. But, if the person does come, it is of importance that you, as a relative of Mr. Forley's, should be present to see him, and to have that proper influence over him which I cannot pretend to exercise."

The only words I could say to Trottle as he opened the door and left me, were words charging him to take care that no harm happened to the poor forlorn little boy.

Left alone, I drew my chair to the window; and looked out with a beating heart at the guilty house. I waited and waited through what appeared to me to be an endless time, until I heard the wheels of a cab stop at the end of the street. I looked in that direction, and saw Trottle get out of the cab alone, walk up to the House, and knock at the door. He was let in by Barsham's mother. A minute or two later, a decently-dressed man sauntered past the house, looked up at it for a moment, and sauntered on to the corner of the street close by. Here he leant against the post, and lighted a cigar, and stopped there smoking in an idle way, but keeping his face always turned in the direction of the house-door.

I waited and waited still. I waited and waited, with my eyes riveted to the door of the house. At last I thought I saw it open in the dusk, and then felt sure I heard it shut again softly. Though I tried hard to compose myself, I trembled so that I was obliged to call for Peggy to help me on with my bonnet and cloak, and was forced to take her arm to lean on, in crossing the street.

Trottle opened the door to us, before we could knock. Peggy went back, and I went in. He had a lighted candle in his hand.

"It has happened, ma'am, as I thought it would," he whispered, leading me into the bare, comfortless, empty parlour. "Barsham and his mother have consulted their own

interests, and have come to terms. My guess-work is guess-work no longer. It is now what I felt it was—Truth!"

Something strange to me—something which women who are mothers must often know—trembled suddenly in my heart, and brought the warm tears of my youthful days thronging back into my eyes. I took my faithful old servant by the hand, and asked him to let me see Mrs. Kirkland's child, for his mother's sake.

"If you desire it, ma'am," said Trottle, with a gentleness of manner that I had never noticed in him before. "But pray don't think me wanting in duty and right feeling, if I beg you to try and wait a little. You are agitated already, and a first meeting with the child will not help to make you so calm, as you would wish to be, if Mr. Forley's messenger comes. The little boy is safe upstairs. Pray think first of trying to compose yourself for a meeting with a stranger; and believe me you shall not leave the house afterwards without the child."

I felt that Trottle was right, and sat down as patiently as I could in a chair he had thoughtfully placed ready for me. I was so horrified at the discovery of my own relation's wickedness that when Trottle proposed to make me acquainted with the confession wrung from Barsham and his mother, I begged him to spare me all details, and only to tell me what was necessary about George Forley.

"All that can be said for Mr. Forley, ma'am, is, that he was just scrupulous enough to hide the child's existence and blot out its parentage here, instead of consenting, at the first, to its death, or afterwards, when the boy grew up, to turning him adrift, absolutely helpless in the world. The fraud has been managed, ma'am, with the cunning of Satan himself. Mr. Forley had the hold over the Barshams, that they had helped him in his villany, and that they were dependent on him for the bread they eat. He brought them up to London to keep them securely under his own eye. He put them into this empty house (taking it out of the agent's hands previously, on pretence that he meant to manage the letting of it himself); and by keeping the house empty, made it the surest of all hiding places for the child. Here, Mr. Forley could come, whenever he pleased, to see that the poor lonely child was not absolutely starved; sure that his visits would only appear like looking after his own property. Here the child was to have been trained to believe himself Barsham's child, till he should be old enough to be provided for in some situation, as low and as poor as Mr. Forley's uneasy conscience would let him pick out. He may have thought of atonement on his death-bed; but not before—I am only too certain of it—not before!"

A low, double knock startled us.

"The messenger!" said Trottle, under his

breath. He went out instantly to answer the knock; and returned, leading in a respectable-looking elderly man, dressed like Trottle, all in black, with a white cravat, but otherwise not at all resembling him.

"I am afraid I have made some mistake," said the stranger.

Trottle, considerably taking the office of explanation into his own hands, assured the gentleman that there was no mistake; mentioned to him who I was; and asked him if he had not come on business connected with the late Mr. Forley. Looking greatly astonished, the gentleman answered, "Yes." There was an awkward moment of silence, after that. The stranger seemed to be not only startled and amazed, but rather distrustful and fearful of committing himself as well. Noticing this, I thought it best to request Trottle to put an end to further embarrassment, by stating all particulars truthfully, as he had stated them to me; and I begged the gentleman to listen patiently for the late Mr. Forley's sake. He bowed to me very respectfully, and said he was prepared to listen with the greatest interest.

It was evident to me—and, I could see, to Trottle also—that we were not dealing, to say the least, with a dishonest man.

"Before I offer any opinion on what I have heard," he said, earnestly and anxiously, after Trottle had done, "I must be allowed, in justice to myself, to explain my own apparent connection with this very strange and very shocking business. I was the confidential legal adviser of the late Mr. Forley, and I am left his executor. Rather more than a fortnight back, when Mr. Forley was confined to his room by illness, he sent for me, and charged me to call and pay a certain sum of money here, to a man and woman whom I should find taking charge of the house. He said he had reasons for wishing the affair to be kept a secret. He begged me so to arrange my engagements that I could call at this place either on Monday last, or to-day, at dusk; and he mentioned that he would write to warn the people of my coming, without mentioning my name (Dalcott is my name) as he did not wish to expose me to any future importunities on the part of the man and woman. I need hardly tell you that this commission struck me as being a strange one; but, in my position with Mr. Forley, I had no resource but to accept it without asking questions, or to break off my long and friendly connection with my client. I chose the first alternative. Business prevented me from doing my errand on Monday last—and if I am here to-day, notwithstanding Mr. Forley's unexpected death, it is emphatically because I understood nothing of the matter, on knocking at this door; and therefore felt myself bound, as executor, to clear it up. That, on my word of honour, is the whole truth, so far as I am personally concerned."

"I feel quite sure of it, sir," I answered. "You mentioned Mr. Forley's death, just now, as unexpected. May I inquire if you were present, and if he has left any last instructions?"

"Three hours before Mr. Forley's death," said Mr. Dalcott, "his medical attendant left him apparently in a fair way of recovery. The change for the worse took place so suddenly, and was accompanied by such severe suffering, as entirely to prevent him from communicating his last wishes to any one. When I reached his house, he was insensible. I have since examined his papers. Not one of them refers to the present time, or to the serious matter which now occupies us. In the absence of instructions, I must act cautiously on what you have told me; but I will be rigidly fair and just at the same time. The first thing to be done," he continued, addressing himself to Trottle, "is to hear what the man and woman, down-stairs, have to say. If you can supply me with writing-materials, I will take their declarations separately on the spot, in your presence, and in the presence of the policeman who is watching the house. Tomorrow I will send copies of those declarations, accompanied by a full statement of the case, to Mr. and Mrs. Bayne in Canada (both of whom know me well as the late Mr. Forley's legal adviser); and I will suspend all proceedings, on my part, until I hear from them, or from their solicitor in London. In the present posture of affairs this is all I can safely do."

We could do no less than agree with him, and thank him for his frank and honest manner of meeting us. It was arranged that I should send over the writing materials from my lodgings; and, to my unutterable joy and relief, it was also readily acknowledged that the poor little orphan boy could find no fitter refuge than my old arms were longing to offer him, and no safer protection for the night than my roof could give. Trottle hastened away up-stairs, as actively as if he had been a young man, to fetch the child down.

And he brought him down to me without another moment of delay, and I went on my knees before the poor little Mite, and embraced him, and asked him if he would go with me to where I lived? He held me away for a moment, and his wan, shrewd little eyes looked sharp at me. Then he clung close to me all at once, and said:

"I'm a-going along with you, I am—and so I tell you!"

For inspiring the poor neglected child with this trust in my old self, I thanked Heaven, then, with all my heart and soul, and I thank it now!

I bundled the poor darling up in my own cloak, and I carried him in my own arms across the road. Peggy was lost in speechless amazement to behold me trudging out of

breath up-stairs, with a strange pair of poor little legs under my arm ; but, she began to cry over the child the moment she saw him, like a sensible woman as she always was, and she still cried her eyes out over him in a comfortable manner, when he at last lay fast asleep, tucked up by my hands in Trottle's bed.

"And Trottle, bless you, my dear man," said I, kissing his hand, as he looked on : "the forlorn baby came to this refuge through you, and he will help you on your way to Heaven."

Trottle answered that I was his dear mistress, and immediately went and put his head out at an open window on the landing, and looked into the back street for a quarter of an hour.

That very night, as I sat thinking of the poor child, and of another poor child who is never to be thought about enough at Christmas-time, the idea came into my mind which I have lived to execute, and in the realisation of which I am the happiest of women this day.

"The executor will sell that House, Trottle ?" said I.

"Not a doubt of it, ma'am, if he can find a purchaser."

"I'll buy it."

I have often seen Trottle pleased ; but, I never saw him so perfectly enchanted as he was when I confided to him, which I did, then and there, the purpose that I had in view.

To make short of a long story—and what story would not be long, coming from the lips of an old woman like me, unless it was made short by main force !—I bought the House. Mrs. Bayne had her father's blood in her ; she evaded the opportunity of forgiving and generous reparation that was offered her, and disowned the child ; but, I was prepared for that, and, loved him all the more for having no one in the world to look to, but me.

I am getting into a flurry by being over-pleased, and I dare say I am as incoherent as need be. I bought the House, and I altered

it from the basement to the roof, and I turned it into a Hospital for Sick Children.

Never mind by what degrees my little adopted boy came to the knowledge of all the sights and sounds in the streets, so familiar to other children and so strange to him ; never mind by what degrees he came to be pretty, and childish, and winning, and companionable, and to have pictures and toys about him, and suitable playmates. As I write, I look across the road to my Hospital, and there is the darling (who has gone over to play) nodding at me out of one of the once lonely windows, with his dear chubby face backed up by Trottle's waistcoat as he lifts my pet for "Grandma" to see.

Many an Eye I see in that House now, but it is never in solitude, never in neglect. Many an Eye I see in that House now, that is more and more radiant every day with the light of returning health. As my precious darling has changed beyond description for the brighter and the better, so do the not less precious darlings of poor women change in that House every day in the year. For which I humbly thank that Gracious Being whom the restorer of the Widow's son and of the Ruler's daughter, instructed all mankind to call their Father.

THREE CHRISTMAS READINGS,

BY

MR. CHARLES DICKENS,

Will take place at ST. MARTIN'S HALL, LONG ACRE. On CHRISTMAS EVE, Friday, December 24th ; on the evening of BOXING-DAY, Monday, December 27th ; and on the evening of TWELFTH NIGHT, Thursday, January 6th. Each evening, THE CHRISTMAS CAROL, and THE TRIAL FROM PICKWICK.

Number 458 of HOUSEHOLD WORDS will be

A

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