

Chapter 40

She received me very civilly, and with her usual obliging manner told me she would not have the less respect for me for my being reduced; that she had taken care my boy was very well looked after, though I could not pay for him, and that the woman that had him was easy, so that I needed not to trouble myself about him till I might be better able to do it effectually.

I told her that I had not much money left, but that I had some things that were money's worth, if she could tell me how I might turn them into money. She asked me what it was I had. I pulled out the string of gold beads, and told her it was one of my husband's presents to me; then I showed her the two parcels of silk, which I told her I had from Ireland, and brought up to town with me; and the little diamond ring. As to the small parcel of plate and spoons, I had found means to dispose of them myself before; and as for the childbed-linen I had, she offered me to take it herself, believing it to have been my own. She told me that she was turned pawnbroker, and that she would sell those things for me as pawn to her; and so she sent presently for proper agents that bought them, being in her hands, without any scruple, and gave good prices too.

I now began to think this necessary woman might help me a little in my low condition to some business, for I would gladly have turned my hand to any honest employment if I could have got it. But here she was deficient; honest business did not come within her reach. If I had been younger, perhaps she

might have helped me to a spark, but my thoughts were off that kind of livelihood, as being quite out of the way after fifty, which was my case, and so I told her.

She invited me at last to come, and be at her house till I could find something to do, and it should cost me very little, and this I gladly accepted of. And now living a little easier, I entered into some measures to have my little son by my last husband taken off; and this she made easy too, reserving a payment only of #5 a year, if I could pay it. This was such a help to me, that for a good while I left off the wicked trade that I had so newly taken up; and gladly I would have got my bread by the help of my needle if I could have got work, but that was very hard to do for one that had no manner of acquaintance in the world.

However, at last I got some quilting work for ladies' beds, petticoats, and the like; and this I liked very well, and worked very hard, and with this I began to live; but the diligent devil, who resolved I should continue in his service, continually prompted me to go out and take a walk, that is to say, to see if anything would offer in the old way.

One evening I blindly obeyed his summons, and fetched a long circuit through the streets, but met with no purchase, and came home very weary and empty; but not content with that, I went out the next evening too, when going by an alehouse I saw the door of a little room open, next the very

street, and on the table a silver tankard, things much in use in public-houses at that time. It seems some company had been drinking there, and the careless boys had forgot to take it away.

I went into the box frankly, and setting the silver tankard on the corner of the bench, I sat down before it, and knocked with my foot; a boy came presently, and I bade him fetch me a pint of warm ale, for it was cold weather; the boy ran, and I heard him go down the cellar to draw the ale. While the boy was gone, another boy came into the room, and cried, 'D' ye call?' I spoke with a melancholy air, and said, 'No, child; the boy is gone for a pint of ale for me.'

While I sat here, I heard the woman in the bar say, 'Are they all gone in the five?' which was the box I sat in, and the boy said, 'Yes.' 'Who fetched the tankard away?' says the woman. 'I did,' says another boy; 'that's it,' pointing, it seems, to another tankard, which he had fetched from another box by mistake; or else it must be, that the rogue forgot that he had not brought it in, which certainly he had not.

I heard all this, much to my satisfaction, for I found plainly that the tankard was not missed, and yet they concluded it was fetched away; so I drank my ale, called to pay, and as I went away I said, 'Take care of your plate, child,' meaning a silver pint mug, which he brought me drink in. The boy said, 'Yes, madam, very welcome,' and away I came.

I came home to my governess, and now I thought it was a time to try her, that if I might be put to the necessity of being exposed, she might offer me some assistance. When I had been at home some time, and had an opportunity of talking to her, I told her I had a secret of the greatest consequence in the world to commit to her, if she had respect enough for me to keep it a secret. She told me she had kept one of my secrets faithfully; why should I doubt her keeping another? I told her the strangest thing in the world had befallen me, and that it had made a thief of me, even without any design, and so told her the whole story of the tankard. 'And have you brought it away with you, my dear?' says she. 'To be sure I have,' says I, and showed it her. 'But what shall I do now,' says I; 'must not carry it again?'

'Carry it again!' says she. 'Ay, if you are minded to be sent to Newgate for stealing it.' 'Why,' says I, 'they can't be so base to stop me, when I carry it to them again?' 'You don't know those sort of people, child,' says she; 'they'll not only carry you to Newgate, but hang you too, without any regard to the honesty of returning it; or bring in an account of all the other tankards they have lost, for you to pay for.' 'What must I do, then?' says I. 'Nay,' says she, 'as you have played the cunning part and stole it, you must e'en keep it; there's no going back now. Besides, child,' says she, 'don't you want it more than they do? I wish you could light of such a bargain once a week.'

This gave me a new notion of my governess, and that since she was turned

pawnbroker, she had a sort of people about her that were none of the honest ones that I had met with there before.

I had not been long there but I discovered it more plainly than before, for every now and then I saw hilts of swords, spoons, forks, tankards, and all such kind of ware brought in, not to be pawned, but to be sold downright; and she bought everything that came without asking any questions, but had very good bargains, as I found by her discourse.

I found also that in following this trade she always melted down the plate she bought, that it might not be challenged; and she came to me and told me one morning that she was going to melt, and if I would, she would put my tankard in, that it might not be seen by anybody. I told her, with all my heart; so she weighed it, and allowed me the full value in silver again; but I found she did not do the same to the rest of her customers.

Some time after this, as I was at work, and very melancholy, she begins to ask me what the matter was, as she was used to do. I told her my heart was heavy; I had little work, and nothing to live on, and knew not what course to take. She laughed, and told me I must go out again and try my fortune; it might be that I might meet with another piece of plate. 'O mother!' says I, 'that is a trade I have no skill in, and if I should be taken I am undone at once.' Says she, 'I could help you to a schoolmistress that shall make you as dexterous as herself.' I trembled at that proposal, for hitherto I had had no

confederates, nor any acquaintance among that tribe. But she conquered all my modesty, and all my fears; and in a little time, by the help of this confederate, I grew as impudent a thief, and as dexterous as ever Moll Cutpurse was, though, if fame does not belie her, not half so handsome.

The comrade she helped me to dealt in three sorts of craft, viz. shoplifting, stealing of shop-books and pocket-books, and taking off gold watches from the ladies' sides; and this last she did so dexterously that no woman ever arrived to the performance of that art so as to do it like her. I liked the first and the last of these things very well, and I attended her some time in the practice, just as a deputy attends a midwife, without any pay.

At length she put me to practice. She had shown me her art, and I had several times unhooked a watch from her own side with great dexterity. At last she showed me a prize, and this was a young lady big with child, who had a charming watch. The thing was to be done as she came out of church. She goes on one side of the lady, and pretends, just as she came to the steps, to fall, and fell against the lady with so much violence as put her into a great fright, and both cried out terribly. In the very moment that she jostled the lady, I had hold of the watch, and holding it the right way, the start she gave drew the hook out, and she never felt it. I made off immediately, and left my schoolmistress to come out of her pretended fright gradually, and the lady too; and presently the watch was missed. 'Ay,' says my comrade, 'then it was those rogues that thrust me down, I warrant ye; I

wonder the gentlewoman did not miss her watch before, then we might have taken them.'

She humoured the thing so well that nobody suspected her, and I was got home a full hour before her. This was my first adventure in company. The watch was indeed a very fine one, and had a great many trinkets about it, and my governess allowed us #20 for it, of which I had half. And thus I was entered a complete thief, hardened to the pitch above all the reflections of conscience or modesty, and to a degree which I must acknowledge I never thought possible in me.

Thus the devil, who began, by the help of an irresistible poverty, to push me into this wickedness, brought me on to a height beyond the common rate, even when my necessities were not so great, or the prospect of my misery so terrifying; for I had now got into a little vein of work, and as I was not at a loss to handle my needle, it was very probable, as acquaintance came in, I might have got my bread honestly enough.