

Chapter 41

I must say, that if such a prospect of work had presented itself at first, when I began to feel the approach of my miserable circumstances--I say, had such a prospect of getting my bread by working presented itself then, I had never fallen into this wicked trade, or into such a wicked gang as I was now embarked with; but practice had hardened me, and I grew audacious to the last degree; and the more so because I had carried it on so long, and had never been taken; for, in a word, my new partner in wickedness and I went on together so long, without being ever detected, that we not only grew bold, but we grew rich, and we had at one time one-and-twenty gold watches in our hands.

I remember that one day being a little more serious than ordinary, and finding I had so good a stock beforehand as I had, for I had near #200 in money for my share, it came strongly into my mind, no doubt from some kind spirit, if such there be, that at first poverty excited me, and my distresses drove me to these dreadful shifts; so seeing those distresses were now relieved, and I could also get something towards a maintenance by working, and had so good a bank to support me, why should I now not leave off, as they say, while I was well? that I could not expect to go always free; and if I was once surprised, and miscarried, I was undone.

This was doubtless the happy minute, when, if I had hearkened to the blessed hint, from whatsoever had it came, I had still a cast for an easy life. But my fate was otherwise determined; the busy devil that so industriously drew me in had too fast hold of me to let me go back; but as poverty brought me into the mire, so avarice kept me in, till there was no going back. As to the arguments which my reason dictated for persuading me to lay down, avarice stepped in and said, 'Go on, go on; you have had very good luck; go on till you have gotten four or five hundred pounds, and then you shall leave off, and then you may live easy without working at all.'

Thus I, that was once in the devil's clutches, was held fast there as with a charm, and had no power to go without the circle, till I was engulfed in labyrinths of trouble too great to get out at all.

However, these thoughts left some impression upon me, and made me act with some more caution than before, and more than my directors used for themselves. My comrade, as I called her, but rather she should have been called my teacher,

with another of her scholars, was the first in the misfortune; for, happening to be upon the hunt for purchase, they made an attempt upon a linen-drafter in Cheapside, but were snapped by a hawk's-eyed journeyman, and seized with two pieces of cambric, which were taken also upon them.

This was enough to lodge them both in Newgate, where they had the misfortune to have some of their former sins brought to remembrance. Two other indictments being brought against them, and the facts being proved upon them, they were both condemned to die. They both pleaded their bellies, and were both voted quick with child; though my tutoress was no more with child than I was.

I went frequently to see them, and condole with them, expecting that it would be my turn next; but the place gave me so much horror, reflecting that it was the place of my unhappy birth, and of my mother's misfortunes, and that I could not bear it, so I was forced to leave off going to see them.

And oh! could I have but taken warning by their disasters, I had been happy still, for I was yet free, and had nothing brought against me; but it could not be, my measure was not yet filled up.

My comrade, having the brand of an old offender, was executed; the young offender was spared, having obtained a reprieve, but lay starving a long while in prison, till at last she got her name into what they call a circuit pardon, and so came off.

This terrible example of my comrade frightened me heartily, and for a good while I made no excursions; but one night, in the neighbourhood of my governess's house, they cried "Fire." My governess looked out, for we were all

up, and cried immediately that such a gentlewoman's house was all of a light fire atop, and so indeed it was. Here she gives me a job. 'Now, child,' says she, 'there is a rare opportunity, for the fire being so near that you may go to it before the street is blocked up with the crowd.' She presently gave me my cue. 'Go, child,' says she, 'to the house, and run in and tell the lady, or anybody you see, that you come to help them, and that you came from such a gentlewoman (that is, one of her acquaintance farther up the street).' She gave me the like cue to the next house, naming another name that was also an acquaintance of the gentlewoman of the house.

Away I went, and, coming to the house, I found them all in confusion, you may be sure. I ran in, and finding one of the maids, 'Lord! sweetheart,' says I, 'how came this dismal accident? Where is your mistress? Any how does she do? Is she safe? And where are the children? I come from Madam ---- to help you.' Away runs the maid. 'Madam, madam,' says she, screaming as loud as she could yell, 'here is a gentlewoman come from Madam ---- to help us.' The poor woman, half out of her wits, with a bundle under her arm, and two little children, comes toward me. 'Lord! madam,' says I, 'let me carry the poor children to Madam ----,' she desires you to send them; she'll take care of the poor lambs;' and

immediately I takes one of them out of her hand, and she lifts the other up into my arms. 'Ay, do, for God's sake,' says she, 'carry them to her. Oh! thank her for her kindness.' 'Have you anything else to secure, madam?'

says I; 'she will take care of it.' 'Oh dear! ay,' says she, 'God bless her, and thank her. Take this bundle of plate and carry it to her too. Oh, she is a good woman. Oh Lord! we are utterly ruined, utterly undone!' And away she runs from me out of her wits, and the maids after her; and away comes I with the two children and the bundle.

I was no sooner got into the street but I saw another woman come to me. 'Oh!' says she, 'mistress,' in a piteous tone, 'you will let fall the child. Come, this is a sad time; let me help you'; and immediately lays hold of my bundle to carry it for me. 'No,' says I; 'if you will help me, take the child by the hand, and lead it for me but to the upper end of the street; I'll go with you and satisfy you for your pains.'

She could not avoid going, after what I said; but the creature, in short, was one of the same business with me, and wanted nothing but the bundle; however, she went with me to the door, for she could not help it. When we were come there I whispered her, 'Go, child,' said I, 'I understand your trade; you may meet with purchase enough.'

She understood me and walked off. I thundered at the door with the children, and as the people were raised before by the noise of the fire, I was soon let in, and I said, 'Is madam awake? Pray tell her Mrs. ---- desires the favour of her to take the two children in; poor lady, she will be undone, their house is all of a flame,' They took the children in very civilly, pitied the

family in distress, and away came I with my bundle. One of the maids asked me if I was not to leave the bundle too. I said, 'No, sweetheart, 'tis to go to another place; it does not belong to them.'

I was a great way out of the hurry now, and so I went on, clear of anybody's inquiry, and brought the bundle of plate, which was very considerable, straight home, and gave it to my old governess. She told me she would not look into it, but bade me go out again to look for more.

She gave me the like cue to the gentlewoman of the next house to that which was on fire, and I did my endeavour to go, but by this time the alarm of fire was so great, and so many engines playing, and the street so thronged with people, that I could not get near the house whatever I would do; so I came back again to my governess's, and taking the bundle up into my chamber, I began to examine it. It is with horror that I tell what a treasure I found there; 'tis enough to say, that besides most of the family plate, which was considerable, I found a gold chain, an old-fashioned thing, the locket of which was broken, so that I suppose it had not been used some years, but the gold was not the worse for that; also a little box of burying-rings, the lady's wedding-ring, and some broken bits of old locketts of gold, a gold watch, and a purse with about #24 value in old pieces of gold coin, and several other things of value.

This was the greatest and the worst prize that ever I was concerned in; for

indeed, though, as I have said above, I was hardened now beyond the power of all reflection in other cases, yet it really touched me to the very soul when I looked into this treasure, to think of the poor disconsolate gentlewoman who had lost so much by the fire besides; and who would think, to be sure, that she had saved her plate and best things; how she would be surprised and afflicted when she should find that she had been deceived, and should find that the person that took her children and her goods, had not come, as was pretended, from the gentlewoman in the next street, but that the children had been put upon her without her own knowledge.

I say, I confess the inhumanity of this action moved me very much, and made me relent exceedingly, and tears stood in my eyes upon that subject; but with all my sense of its being cruel and inhuman, I could never find in my heart to make any restitution. The reflection wore off, and I began quickly to forget the circumstances that attended the taking them.

Now was this all; for though by this job I was become considerably richer than before, yet the resolution I had formerly taken, of leaving off this horrid trade when I had gotten a little more, did not return, but I must still get farther, and more; and the avarice joined so with the success, that I had no more thought of coming to a timely alteration of life, though without it I could expect no safety, no tranquillity in the possession of what I had so wickedly gained; but a little more, and a little more, was the case still.