

## **BOOK THE SECOND - BIRDS OF A FEATHER**

### **Chapter 1 - Of An Educational Character**

The school at which young Charley Hexam had first learned from a book - the streets being, for pupils of his degree, the great Preparatory Establishment in which very much that is never unlearned is learned without and before book - was a miserable loft in an unsavoury yard. Its atmosphere was oppressive and disagreeable; it was crowded, noisy, and confusing; half the pupils dropped asleep, or fell into a state of waking stupefaction; the other half kept them in either condition by maintaining a monotonous droning noise, as if they were performing, out of time and tune, on a ruder sort of bagpipe. The teachers, animated solely by good intentions, had no idea of execution, and a lamentable jumble was the upshot of their kind endeavours.

It was a school for all ages, and for both sexes. The latter were kept apart, and the former were partitioned off into square assortments. But, all the place was pervaded by a grimly ludicrous pretence that every pupil was childish and innocent. This pretence, much favoured by the lady-visitors, led to the ghastliest absurdities. Young women old in the vices of the commonest and worst life, were expected to profess themselves enthralled by the good child's book, the Adventures of Little Margery, who resided in the village cottage by the mill; severely reproved and morally squashed the miller, when she was five and he was fifty; divided her porridge with singing birds; denied herself a new nankeen bonnet, on the ground that the turnips did not wear nankeen bonnets, neither did the sheep who ate them; who plaited straw and delivered the dreariest orations to all comers, at all sorts of unseasonable times. So, unwieldy young dredgers and hulking mudlarks were referred to the experiences of Thomas Twopence, who, having resolved not to rob (under circumstances of uncommon atrocity) his particular friend and benefactor, of eighteenpence, presently came into supernatural possession of three and sixpence, and lived a shining light ever afterwards. (Note, that the benefactor came to no good.) Several swaggering sinners had written their own biographies in the same strain; it always appearing from the lessons of those very boastful persons, that you were to do good, not because it WAS good, but because you were to make a good thing of it. Contrariwise, the adult pupils were taught to read (if they could learn) out of the New Testament; and by dint of stumbling over the syllables and keeping their bewildered eyes on the particular syllables coming round to their turn, were as absolutely ignorant of the sublime history, as if they had never seen or heard of it. An exceedingly and confoundingly perplexing jumble of a school, in fact, where black spirits and grey, red spirits and white, jumbled jumbled jumbled jumbled, jumbled every night. And particularly every Sunday night.

For then, an inclined plane of unfortunate infants would be handed over to the prosiest and worst of all the teachers with good intentions, whom nobody older would endure. Who, taking his stand on the floor before them as chief executioner, would be attended by a conventional volunteer boy as executioner's assistant. When and where it first became the conventional system that a weary or inattentive infant in a class must have its face smoothed downward with a hot hand, or when and where the conventional volunteer boy first beheld such system in operation, and became inflamed with a sacred zeal to administer it, matters not. It was the function of the chief executioner to hold forth, and it was the function of the acolyte to dart at sleeping infants, yawning infants, restless infants, whimpering infants, and smooth their wretched faces; sometimes with one hand, as if he were anointing them for a whisker; sometimes with both hands, applied after the fashion of blinkers. And so the jumble would be in action in this department for a mortal hour; the exponent drawing on to My Dearert Childerrenerr, let us say, for example, about the beautiful coming to the Sepulchre; and repeating the word Sepulchre (commonly used among infants) five hundred times, and never once hinting what it meant; the conventional boy smoothing away right and left, as an infallible commentary; the whole hot-bed of flushed and exhausted infants exchanging measles, rashes, whooping-cough, fever, and stomach disorders, as if they were assembled in High Market for the purpose.

Even in this temple of good intentions, an exceptionally sharp boy exceptionally determined to learn, could learn something, and, having learned it, could impart it much better than the teachers; as being more knowing than they, and not at the disadvantage in which they stood towards the shrewder pupils. In this way it had come about that Charley Hexam had risen in the jumble, taught in the jumble, and been received from the jumble into a better school.

'So you want to go and see your sister, Hexam?'

'If you please, Mr Headstone.'

'I have half a mind to go with you. Where does your sister live?'

'Why, she is not settled yet, Mr Headstone. I'd rather you didn't see her till she is settled, if it was all the same to you.'

'Look here, Hexam.' Mr Bradley Headstone, highly certificated stipendiary schoolmaster, drew his right forefinger through one of the buttonholes of the boy's coat, and looked at it attentively. 'I hope your sister may be good company for you?'

'Why do you doubt it, Mr Headstone?'

'I did not say I doubted it.'

'No, sir; you didn't say so.'

Bradley Headstone looked at his finger again, took it out of the buttonhole and looked at it closer, bit the side of it and looked at it again.

'You see, Hexam, you will be one of us. In good time you are sure to pass a creditable examination and become one of us. Then the question is - '

The boy waited so long for the question, while the schoolmaster looked at a new side of his finger, and bit it, and looked at it again, that at length the boy repeated:

'The question is, sir - ?'

'Whether you had not better leave well alone.'

'Is it well to leave my sister alone, Mr Headstone?'

'I do not say so, because I do not know. I put it to you. I ask you to think of it. I want you to consider. You know how well you are doing here.'

'After all, she got me here,' said the boy, with a struggle.

'Perceiving the necessity of it,' acquiesced the schoolmaster, 'and making up her mind fully to the separation. Yes.'

The boy, with a return of that former reluctance or struggle or whatever it was, seemed to debate with himself. At length he said, raising his eyes to the master's face:

'I wish you'd come with me and see her, Mr Headstone, though she is not settled. I wish you'd come with me, and take her in the rough, and judge her for yourself.'

'You are sure you would not like,' asked the schoolmaster, 'to prepare her?'

'My sister Lizzie,' said the boy, proudly, 'wants no preparing, Mr Headstone. What she is, she is, and shows herself to be. There's no pretending about my sister.'

His confidence in her, sat more easily upon him than the indecision with which he had twice contended. It was his better nature to be true

to her, if it were his worse nature to be wholly selfish. And as yet the better nature had the stronger hold.

'Well, I can spare the evening,' said the schoolmaster. 'I am ready to walk with you.'

'Thank you, Mr Headstone. And I am ready to go.'

Bradley Headstone, in his decent black coat and waistcoat, and decent white shirt, and decent formal black tie, and decent pantaloons of pepper and salt, with his decent silver watch in his pocket and its decent hair-guard round his neck, looked a thoroughly decent young man of six-and-twenty. He was never seen in any other dress, and yet there was a certain stiffness in his manner of wearing this, as if there were a want of adaptation between him and it, recalling some mechanics in their holiday clothes. He had acquired mechanically a great store of teacher's knowledge. He could do mental arithmetic mechanically, sing at sight mechanically, blow various wind instruments mechanically, even play the great church organ mechanically. From his early childhood up, his mind had been a place of mechanical stowage. The arrangement of his wholesale warehouse, so that it might be always ready to meet the demands of retail dealers history here, geography there, astronomy to the right, political economy to the left - natural history, the physical sciences, figures, music, the lower mathematics, and what not, all in their several places - this care had imparted to his countenance a look of care; while the habit of questioning and being questioned had given him a suspicious manner, or a manner that would be better described as one of lying in wait. There was a kind of settled trouble in the face. It was the face belonging to a naturally slow or inattentive intellect that had toiled hard to get what it had won, and that had to hold it now that it was gotten. He always seemed to be uneasy lest anything should be missing from his mental warehouse, and taking stock to assure himself.

Suppression of so much to make room for so much, had given him a constrained manner, over and above. Yet there was enough of what was animal, and of what was fiery (though smouldering), still visible in him, to suggest that if young Bradley Headstone, when a pauper lad, had chanced to be told off for the sea, he would not have been the last man in a ship's crew. Regarding that origin of his, he was proud, moody, and sullen, desiring it to be forgotten. And few people knew of it.

In some visits to the Jumble his attention had been attracted to this boy Hexam. An undeniable boy for a pupil-teacher; an undeniable boy to do credit to the master who should bring him on. Combined with this consideration, there may have been some thought of the pauper

lad now never to be mentioned. Be that how it might, he had with pains gradually worked the boy into his own school, and procured him some offices to discharge there, which were repaid with food and lodging. Such were the circumstances that had brought together, Bradley Headstone and young Charley Hexam that autumn evening. Autumn, because full half a year had come and gone since the bird of prey lay dead upon the river-shore.

The schools - for they were twofold, as the sexes - were down in that district of the flat country tending to the Thames, where Kent and Surrey meet, and where the railways still bestride the market-gardens that will soon die under them. The schools were newly built, and there were so many like them all over the country, that one might have thought the whole were but one restless edifice with the locomotive gift of Aladdin's palace. They were in a neighbourhood which looked like a toy neighbourhood taken in blocks out of a box by a child of particularly incoherent mind, and set up anyhow; here, one side of a new street; there, a large solitary public-house facing nowhere; here, another unfinished street already in ruins; there, a church; here, an immense new warehouse; there, a dilapidated old country villa; then, a medley of black ditch, sparkling cucumber-frame, rank field, richly cultivated kitchen-garden, brick viaduct, arch-spanned canal, and disorder of frowziness and fog. As if the child had given the table a kick, and gone to sleep.

But, even among school-buildings, school-teachers, and school-pupils, all according to pattern and all engendered in the light of the latest Gospel according to Monotony, the older pattern into which so many fortunes have been shaped for good and evil, comes out. It came out in Miss Peecher the schoolmistress, watering her flowers, as Mr Bradley Headstone walked forth. It came out in Miss Peecher the schoolmistress, watering the flowers in the little dusty bit of garden attached to her small official residence, with little windows like the eyes in needles, and little doors like the covers of school-books.

Small, shining, neat, methodical, and buxom was Miss Peecher; cherry-cheeked and tuneful of voice. A little pincushion, a little housewife, a little book, a little workbox, a little set of tables and weights and measures, and a little woman, all in one. She could write a little essay on any subject, exactly a slate long, beginning at the left-hand top of one side and ending at the right-hand bottom of the other, and the essay should be strictly according to rule. If Mr Bradley Headstone had addressed a written proposal of marriage to her, she would probably have replied in a complete little essay on the theme exactly a slate long, but would certainly have replied Yes. For she loved him. The decent hair-guard that went round his neck and took care of his decent silver watch was an object of envy to her. So would

Miss Peecher have gone round his neck and taken care of him. Of him, insensible. Because he did not love Miss Peecher.

Miss Peecher's favourite pupil, who assisted her in her little household, was in attendance with a can of water to replenish her little watering-pot, and sufficiently divined the state of Miss Peecher's affections to feel it necessary that she herself should love young Charley Hexam. So, there was a double palpitation among the double stocks and double wall-flowers, when the master and the boy looked over the little gate.

'A fine evening, Miss Peecher,' said the Master.

'A very fine evening, Mr Headstone,' said Miss Peecher. 'Are you taking a walk?'

'Hexam and I are going to take a long walk.'

'Charming weather,' remarked Miss Peecher, FOR a long walk.'

'Ours is rather on business than mere pleasure,' said the Master. Miss Peecher inverting her watering-pot, and very carefully shaking out the few last drops over a flower, as if there were some special virtue in them which would make it a Jack's beanstalk before morning, called for replenishment to her pupil, who had been speaking to the boy.

'Good-night, Miss Peecher,' said the Master.

'Good-night, Mr Headstone,' said the Mistress.

The pupil had been, in her state of pupilage, so imbued with the class-custom of stretching out an arm, as if to hail a cab or omnibus, whenever she found she had an observation on hand to offer to Miss Peecher, that she often did it in their domestic relations; and she did it now.

'Well, Mary Anne?' said Miss Peecher.

'If you please, ma'am, Hexam said they were going to see his sister.'

'But that can't be, I think,' returned Miss Peecher: 'because Mr Headstone can have no business with HER.'

Mary Anne again hailed.

'Well, Mary Anne?'

'If you please, ma'am, perhaps it's Hexam's business?'

'That may be,' said Miss Peecher. 'I didn't think of that. Not that it matters at all.'

Mary Anne again hailed.

'Well, Mary Anne?'

'They say she's very handsome.'

'Oh, Mary Anne, Mary Anne!' returned Miss Peecher, slightly colouring and shaking her head, a little out of humour; 'how often have I told you not to use that vague expression, not to speak in that general way? When you say THEY say, what do you mean? Part of speech They?'

Mary Anne hooked her right arm behind her in her left hand, as being under examination, and replied:

'Personal pronoun.'

'Person, They?'

'Third person.'

'Number, They?'

'Plural number.'

'Then how many do you mean, Mary Anne? Two? Or more?'

'I beg your pardon, ma'am,' said Mary Anne, disconcerted now she came to think of it; 'but I don't know that I mean more than her brother himself.' As she said it, she unhooked her arm.

'I felt convinced of it,' returned Miss Peecher, smiling again. 'Now pray, Mary Anne, be careful another time. He says is very different from they say, remember. Difference between he says and they say? Give it me.'

Mary Anne immediately hooked her right arm behind her in her left hand - an attitude absolutely necessary to the situation - and replied: 'One is indicative mood, present tense, third person singular, verb active to say. Other is indicative mood, present tense, third person plural, verb active to say.'

'Why verb active, Mary Anne?'

'Because it takes a pronoun after it in the objective case, Miss Peecher.'

'Very good indeed,' remarked Miss Peecher, with encouragement. 'In fact, could not be better. Don't forget to apply it, another time, Mary Anne.' This said, Miss Peecher finished the watering of her flowers, and went into her little official residence, and took a refresher of the principal rivers and mountains of the world, their breadths, depths, and heights, before settling the measurements of the body of a dress for her own personal occupation.

Bradley Headstone and Charley Hexam duly got to the Surrey side of Westminster Bridge, and crossed the bridge, and made along the Middlesex shore towards Millbank. In this region are a certain little street called Church Street, and a certain little blind square, called Smith Square, in the centre of which last retreat is a very hideous church with four towers at the four corners, generally resembling some petrified monster, frightful and gigantic, on its back with its legs in the air. They found a tree near by in a corner, and a blacksmith's forge, and a timber yard, and a dealer's in old iron. What a rusty portion of a boiler and a great iron wheel or so meant by lying half-buried in the dealer's fore-court, nobody seemed to know or to want to know. Like the Miller of questionable jollity in the song, They cared for Nobody, no not they, and Nobody cared for them.

After making the round of this place, and noting that there was a deadly kind of repose on it, more as though it had taken laudanum than fallen into a natural rest, they stopped at the point where the street and the square joined, and where there were some little quiet houses in a row. To these Charley Hexam finally led the way, and at one of these stopped.

'This must be where my sister lives, sir. This is where she came for a temporary lodging, soon after father's death.'

'How often have you seen her since?'

'Why, only twice, sir,' returned the boy, with his former reluctance; 'but that's as much her doing as mine.'

'How does she support herself?'

'She was always a fair needlewoman, and she keeps the stockroom of a seaman's outfitter.'

'Does she ever work at her own lodging here?'



'Sometimes; but her regular hours and regular occupation are at their place of business, I believe, sir. This is the number.'

The boy knocked at a door, and the door promptly opened with a spring and a click. A parlour door within a small entry stood open, and disclosed a child - a dwarf - a girl - a something - sitting on a little low old-fashioned arm-chair, which had a kind of little working bench before it.

'I can't get up,' said the child, 'because my back's bad, and my legs are queer. But I'm the person of the house.'

'Who else is at home?' asked Charley Hexam, staring.

'Nobody's at home at present,' returned the child, with a glib assertion of her dignity, 'except the person of the house. What did you want, young man?'

'I wanted to see my sister.'

'Many young men have sisters,' returned the child. 'Give me your name, young man?'

The queer little figure, and the queer but not ugly little face, with its bright grey eyes, were so sharp, that the sharpness of the manner seemed unavoidable. As if, being turned out of that mould, it must be sharp.

'Hexam is my name.'

'Ah, indeed?' said the person of the house. 'I thought it might be. Your sister will be in, in about a quarter of an hour. I am very fond of your sister. She's my particular friend. Take a seat. And this gentleman's name?'

'Mr Headstone, my schoolmaster.'

'Take a seat. And would you please to shut the street door first? I can't very well do it myself; because my back's so bad, and my legs are so queer.'

They complied in silence, and the little figure went on with its work of gumming or gluing together with a camel's-hair brush certain pieces of cardboard and thin wood, previously cut into various shapes. The scissors and knives upon the bench showed that the child herself had cut them; and the bright scraps of velvet and silk and ribbon also strewn upon the bench showed that when duly stuffed (and stuffing too was there), she was to cover them smartly. The dexterity of her

nimble fingers was remarkable, and, as she brought two thin edges accurately together by giving them a little bite, she would glance at the visitors out of the corners of her grey eyes with a look that out-sharpened all her other sharpness.

'You can't tell me the name of my trade, I'll be bound,' she said, after taking several of these observations.

'You make pincushions,' said Charley.

'What else do I make?'

'Pen-wipers,' said Bradley Headstone.

'Ha! ha! What else do I make? You're a schoolmaster, but you can't tell me.'

'You do something,' he returned, pointing to a corner of the little bench, 'with straw; but I don't know what.'

'Well done you!' cried the person of the house. 'I only make pincushions and pen-wipers, to use up my waste. But my straw really does belong to my business. Try again. What do I make with my straw?'

'Dinner-mats?'

'A schoolmaster, and says dinner-mats! I'll give you a clue to my trade, in a game of forfeits. I love my love with a B because she's Beautiful; I hate my love with a B because she is Brazen; I took her to the sign of the Blue Boar, and I treated her with Bonnets; her name's Bouncer, and she lives in Bedlam. - Now, what do I make with my straw?'

'Ladies' bonnets?'

'Fine ladies',' said the person of the house, nodding assent. 'Dolls'. I'm a Doll's Dressmaker.'

'I hope it's a good business?'

The person of the house shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. 'No. Poorly paid. And I'm often so pressed for time! I had a doll married, last week, and was obliged to work all night. And it's not good for me, on account of my back being so bad and my legs so queer.'

They looked at the little creature with a wonder that did not diminish, and the schoolmaster said: 'I am sorry your fine ladies are so inconsiderate.'

'It's the way with them,' said the person of the house, shrugging her shoulders again. 'And they take no care of their clothes, and they never keep to the same fashions a month. I work for a doll with three daughters. Bless you, she's enough to ruin her husband!' The person of the house gave a weird little laugh here, and gave them another look out of the corners of her eyes. She had an elfin chin that was capable of great expression; and whenever she gave this look, she hitched this chin up. As if her eyes and her chin worked together on the same wires.

'Are you always as busy as you are now?'

'Busier. I'm slack just now. I finished a large mourning order the day before yesterday. Doll I work for, lost a canary-bird.' The person of the house gave another little laugh, and then nodded her head several times, as who should moralize, 'Oh this world, this world!'

'Are you alone all day?' asked Bradley Headstone. 'Don't any of the neighbouring children - ?'

'Ah, lud!' cried the person of the house, with a little scream, as if the word had pricked her. 'Don't talk of children. I can't bear children. I know their tricks and their manners.' She said this with an angry little shake of her tight fist close before her eyes.

Perhaps it scarcely required the teacher-habit, to perceive that the doll's dressmaker was inclined to be bitter on the difference between herself and other children. But both master and pupil understood it so.

'Always running about and screeching, always playing and fighting, always skip-skip-skipping on the pavement and chalking it for their games! Oh! I know their tricks and their manners!' Shaking the little fist as before. 'And that's not all. Ever so often calling names in through a person's keyhole, and imitating a person's back and legs. Oh! I know their tricks and their manners. And I'll tell you what I'd do, to punish 'em. There's doors under the church in the Square - black doors, leading into black vaults. Well! I'd open one of those doors, and I'd cram 'em all in, and then I'd lock the door and through the keyhole I'd blow in pepper.'

'What would be the good of blowing in pepper?' asked Charley Hexam.

'To set 'em sneezing,' said the person of the house, 'and make their eyes water. And when they were all sneezing and inflamed, I'd mock 'em through the keyhole. Just as they, with their tricks and their manners, mock a person through a person's keyhole!'

An uncommonly emphatic shake of her little fist close before her eyes, seemed to ease the mind of the person of the house; for she added with recovered composure, 'No, no, no. No children for me. Give me grown-ups.'

It was difficult to guess the age of this strange creature, for her poor figure furnished no clue to it, and her face was at once so young and so old. Twelve, or at the most thirteen, might be near the mark.

'I always did like grown-ups,' she went on, 'and always kept company with them. So sensible. Sit so quiet. Don't go prancing and capering about! And I mean always to keep among none but grown-ups till I marry. I suppose I must make up my mind to marry, one of these days.'

She listened to a step outside that caught her ear, and there was a soft knock at the door. Pulling at a handle within her reach, she said, with a pleased laugh: 'Now here, for instance, is a grown-up that's my particular friend!' and Lizzie Hexam in a black dress entered the room.

'Charley! You!'

Taking him to her arms in the old way - of which he seemed a little ashamed - she saw no one else.

'There, there, there, Liz, all right my dear. See! Here's Mr Headstone come with me.'

Her eyes met those of the schoolmaster, who had evidently expected to see a very different sort of person, and a murmured word or two of salutation passed between them. She was a little flurried by the unexpected visit, and the schoolmaster was not at his ease. But he never was, quite.

'I told Mr Headstone you were not settled, Liz, but he was so kind as to take an interest in coming, and so I brought him. How well you look!'

Bradley seemed to think so.

'Ah! Don't she, don't she?' cried the person of the house, resuming her occupation, though the twilight was falling fast. 'I believe you she does! But go on with your chat, one and all:

You one two three, My com-pa-nie, And don't mind me.'

- pointing this impromptu rhyme with three points of her thin fore-finger.

'I didn't expect a visit from you, Charley,' said his sister. 'I supposed that if you wanted to see me you would have sent to me, appointing me to come somewhere near the school, as I did last time. I saw my brother near the school, sir,' to Bradley Headstone, 'because it's easier for me to go there, than for him to come here. I work about midway between the two places.'

'You don't see much of one another,' said Bradley, not improving in respect of ease.

'No.' With a rather sad shake of her head. 'Charley always does well, Mr Headstone?'

'He could not do better. I regard his course as quite plain before him.'

'I hoped so. I am so thankful. So well done of you, Charley dear! It is better for me not to come (except when he wants me) between him and his prospects. You think so, Mr Headstone?'

Conscious that his pupil-teacher was looking for his answer, that he himself had suggested the boy's keeping aloof from this sister, now seen for the first time face to face, Bradley Headstone stammered:

'Your brother is very much occupied, you know. He has to work hard. One cannot but say that the less his attention is diverted from his work, the better for his future. When he shall have established himself, why then - it will be another thing then.'

Lizzie shook her head again, and returned, with a quiet smile: 'I always advised him as you advise him. Did I not, Charley?'

'Well, never mind that now,' said the boy. 'How are you getting on?'

'Very well, Charley. I want for nothing.'

'You have your own room here?'

'Oh yes. Upstairs. And it's quiet, and pleasant, and airy.'

'And she always has the use of this room for visitors,' said the person of the house, screwing up one of her little bony fists, like an opera-glass, and looking through it, with her eyes and her chin in that

quaint accordance. 'Always this room for visitors; haven't you, Lizzie dear?'

It happened that Bradley Headstone noticed a very slight action of Lizzie Hexam's hand, as though it checked the doll's dressmaker. And it happened that the latter noticed him in the same instant; for she made a double eyeglass of her two hands, looked at him through it, and cried, with a waggish shake of her head: 'Aha! Caught you spying, did I?'

It might have fallen out so, any way; but Bradley Headstone also noticed that immediately after this, Lizzie, who had not taken off her bonnet, rather hurriedly proposed that as the room was getting dark they should go out into the air. They went out; the visitors saying good-night to the doll's dressmaker, whom they left, leaning back in her chair with her arms crossed, singing to herself in a sweet thoughtful little voice.

'I'll saunter on by the river,' said Bradley. 'You will be glad to talk together.'

As his uneasy figure went on before them among the evening shadows, the boy said to his sister, petulantly:

'When are you going to settle yourself in some Christian sort of place, Liz? I thought you were going to do it before now.'

'I am very well where I am, Charley.'

'Very well where you are! I am ashamed to have brought Mr Headstone with me. How came you to get into such company as that little witch's?'

'By chance at first, as it seemed, Charley. But I think it must have been by something more than chance, for that child - You remember the bills upon the walls at home?'

'Confound the bills upon the walls at home! I want to forget the bills upon the walls at home, and it would be better for you to do the same,' grumbled the boy. 'Well; what of them?'

'This child is the grandchild of the old man.'

'What old man?'

'The terrible drunken old man, in the list slippers and the night-cap.'

The boy asked, rubbing his nose in a manner that half expressed vexation at hearing so much, and half curiosity to hear more: 'How came you to make that out? What a girl you are!'

'The child's father is employed by the house that employs me; that's how I came to know it, Charley. The father is like his own father, a weak wretched trembling creature, falling to pieces, never sober. But a good workman too, at the work he does. The mother is dead. This poor ailing little creature has come to be what she is, surrounded by drunken people from her cradle - if she ever had one, Charley.'

'I don't see what you have to do with her, for all that,' said the boy.

'Don't you, Charley?'

The boy looked doggedly at the river. They were at Millbank, and the river rolled on their left. His sister gently touched him on the shoulder, and pointed to it.

'Any compensation - restitution - never mind the word, you know my meaning. Father's grave.'

But he did not respond with any tenderness. After a moody silence he broke out in an ill-used tone:

'It'll be a very hard thing, Liz, if, when I am trying my best to get up in the world, you pull me back.'

'I, Charley?'

'Yes, you, Liz. Why can't you let bygones be bygones? Why can't you, as Mr Headstone said to me this very evening about another matter, leave well alone? What we have got to do, is, to turn our faces full in our new direction, and keep straight on.'

'And never look back? Not even to try to make some amends?'

'You are such a dreamer,' said the boy, with his former petulance. 'It was all very well when we sat before the fire - when we looked into the hollow down by the flare - but we are looking into the real world, now.'

'Ah, we were looking into the real world then, Charley!'

'I understand what you mean by that, but you are not justified in it. I don't want, as I raise myself to shake you off, Liz. I want to carry you up with me. That's what I want to do, and mean to do. I know what I owe you. I said to Mr Headstone this very evening, 'After all, my sister

got me here.' Well, then. Don't pull me back, and hold me down. That's all I ask, and surely that's not unconscionable.'

She had kept a steadfast look upon him, and she answered with composure:

'I am not here selfishly, Charley. To please myself I could not be too far from that river.'

'Nor could you be too far from it to please me. Let us get quit of it equally. Why should you linger about it any more than I? I give it a wide berth.'

'I can't get away from it, I think,' said Lizzie, passing her hand across her forehead. 'It's no purpose of mine that I live by it still.'

'There you go, Liz! Dreaming again! You lodge yourself of your own accord in a house with a drunken - tailor, I suppose - or something of the sort, and a little crooked antic of a child, or old person, or whatever it is, and then you talk as if you were drawn or driven there. Now, do be more practical.'

She had been practical enough with him, in suffering and striving for him; but she only laid her hand upon his shoulder - not reproachfully - and tapped it twice or thrice. She had been used to do so, to soothe him when she carried him about, a child as heavy as herself. Tears started to his eyes.

'Upon my word, Liz,' drawing the back of his hand across them, 'I mean to be a good brother to you, and to prove that I know what I owe you. All I say is, that I hope you'll control your fancies a little, on my account. I'll get a school, and then you must come and live with me, and you'll have to control your fancies then, so why not now? Now, say I haven't vexed you.'

'You haven't, Charley, you haven't.'

'And say I haven't hurt you.'

'You haven't, Charley.' But this answer was less ready.

'Say you are sure I didn't mean to. Come! There's Mr Headstone stopping and looking over the wall at the tide, to hint that it's time to go. Kiss me, and tell me that you know I didn't mean to hurt you.'

She told him so, and they embraced, and walked on and came up with the schoolmaster.



'But we go your sister's way,' he remarked, when the boy told him he was ready. And with his cumbrous and uneasy action he stiffly offered her his arm. Her hand was just within it, when she drew it back. He looked round with a start, as if he thought she had detected something that repelled her, in the momentary touch.

'I will not go in just yet,' said Lizzie. 'And you have a distance before you, and will walk faster without me.'

Being by this time close to Vauxhall Bridge, they resolved, in consequence, to take that way over the Thames, and they left her; Bradley Headstone giving her his hand at parting, and she thanking him for his care of her brother.

The master and the pupil walked on, rapidly and silently. They had nearly crossed the bridge, when a gentleman came coolly sauntering towards them, with a cigar in his mouth, his coat thrown back, and his hands behind him. Something in the careless manner of this person, and in a certain lazily arrogant air with which he approached, holding possession of twice as much pavement as another would have claimed, instantly caught the boy's attention. As the gentleman passed the boy looked at him narrowly, and then stood still, looking after him.

'Who is it that you stare after?' asked Bradley.

'Why!' said the boy, with a confused and pondering frown upon his face, 'It IS that Wrayburn one!'

Bradley Headstone scrutinized the boy as closely as the boy had scrutinized the gentleman.

'I beg your pardon, Mr Headstone, but I couldn't help wondering what in the world brought HIM here!'

Though he said it as if his wonder were past - at the same time resuming the walk - it was not lost upon the master that he looked over his shoulder after speaking, and that the same perplexed and pondering frown was heavy on his face.

'You don't appear to like your friend, Hexam?'

'I DON'T like him,' said the boy.

'Why not?'

'He took hold of me by the chin in a precious impertinent way, the first time I ever saw him,' said the boy.

'Again, why?'

'For nothing. Or - it's much the same - because something I happened to say about my sister didn't happen to please him.'

'Then he knows your sister?'

'He didn't at that time,' said the boy, still moodily pondering.

'Does now?'

The boy had so lost himself that he looked at Mr Bradley Headstone as they walked on side by side, without attempting to reply until the question had been repeated; then he nodded and answered, 'Yes, sir.'

'Going to see her, I dare say.'

'It can't be!' said the boy, quickly. 'He doesn't know her well enough. I should like to catch him at it!'

When they had walked on for a time, more rapidly than before, the master said, clasping the pupil's arm between the elbow and the shoulder with his hand:

'You were going to tell me something about that person. What did you say his name was?'

'Wrayburn. Mr Eugene Wrayburn. He is what they call a barrister, with nothing to do. The first time he came to our old place was when my father was alive. He came on business; not that it was HIS business - HE never had any business - he was brought by a friend of his.'

'And the other times?'

'There was only one other time that I know of. When my father was killed by accident, he chanced to be one of the finders. He was mooning about, I suppose, taking liberties with people's chins; but there he was, somehow. He brought the news home to my sister early in the morning, and brought Miss Abbey Potterson, a neighbour, to help break it to her. He was mooning about the house when I was fetched home in the afternoon - they didn't know where to find me till my sister could be brought round sufficiently to tell them - and then he mooned away.'

'And is that all?'

'That's all, sir.'

Bradley Headstone gradually released the boy's arm, as if he were thoughtful, and they walked on side by side as before. After a long silence between them, Bradley resumed the talk.

'I suppose - your sister - ' with a curious break both before and after the words, 'has received hardly any teaching, Hexam?'

'Hardly any, sir.'

'Sacrificed, no doubt, to her father's objections. I remember them in your case. Yet - your sister - scarcely looks or speaks like an ignorant person.'

'Lizzie has as much thought as the best, Mr Headstone. Too much, perhaps, without teaching. I used to call the fire at home, her books, for she was always full of fancies - sometimes quite wise fancies, considering - when she sat looking at it.'

'I don't like that,' said Bradley Headstone.

His pupil was a little surprised by this striking in with so sudden and decided and emotional an objection, but took it as a proof of the master's interest in himself. It emboldened him to say:

'I have never brought myself to mention it openly to you, Mr Headstone, and you're my witness that I couldn't even make up my mind to take it from you before we came out to-night; but it's a painful thing to think that if I get on as well as you hope, I shall be - I won't say disgraced, because I don't mean disgraced-but - rather put to the blush if it was known - by a sister who has been very good to me.'

'Yes,' said Bradley Headstone in a slurring way, for his mind scarcely seemed to touch that point, so smoothly did it glide to another, 'and there is this possibility to consider. Some man who had worked his way might come to admire - your sister - and might even in time bring himself to think of marrying - your sister - and it would be a sad drawback and a heavy penalty upon him, if; overcoming in his mind other inequalities of condition and other considerations against it, this inequality and this consideration remained in full force.'

'That's much my own meaning, sir.'

'Ay, ay,' said Bradley Headstone, 'but you spoke of a mere brother. Now, the case I have supposed would be a much stronger case; because an admirer, a husband, would form the connexion voluntarily, besides being obliged to proclaim it: which a brother is not. After all, you know, it must be said of you that you couldn't help

yourself: while it would be said of him, with equal reason, that he could.'

'That's true, sir. Sometimes since Lizzie was left free by father's death, I have thought that such a young woman might soon acquire more than enough to pass muster. And sometimes I have even thought that perhaps Miss Peecher - '

'For the purpose, I would advise Not Miss Peecher,' Bradley Headstone struck in with a recurrence of his late decision of manner.

'Would you be so kind as to think of it for me, Mr Headstone?'

'Yes, Hexam, yes. I'll think of it. I'll think maturely of it. I'll think well of it.'

Their walk was almost a silent one afterwards, until it ended at the school-house. There, one of neat Miss Peecher's little windows, like the eyes in needles, was illuminated, and in a corner near it sat Mary Anne watching, while Miss Peecher at the table stitched at the neat little body she was making up by brown paper pattern for her own wearing. N.B. Miss Peecher and Miss Peecher's pupils were not much encouraged in the unscholastic art of needlework, by Government.

Mary Anne with her face to the window, held her arm up.

'Well, Mary Anne?'

'Mr Headstone coming home, ma'am.'

In about a minute, Mary Anne again hailed.

'Yes, Mary Anne?'

'Gone in and locked his door, ma'am.'

Miss Peecher repressed a sigh as she gathered her work together for bed, and transfixed that part of her dress where her heart would have been if she had had the dress on, with a sharp, sharp needle.