

OUR MUTUAL FRIEND.

BY CHARLES DICKENS.

IN FOUR BOOKS.—BOOK THE THIRD. A LONG LANE.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE DARK.

THERE was no sleep for Bradley Headstone on that night when Eugene Wrayburn turned so easily in his bed; there was no sleep for little Miss Peecher. Bradley consumed the lonely hours, and consumed himself, in haunting the spot where his careless rival lay a dreaming; little Miss Peecher wore them away in listening for the return home of the master of her heart, and in sorrowfully presaging that much was amiss with him. Yet more was amiss with him than Miss Peecher's simply-arranged little work-box of thoughts, fitted with no gloomy and dark recesses, could hold. For the state of the man was murderous.

The state of the man was murderous, and he knew it. More: he irritated it with a kind of perverse pleasure akin to that which a sick man sometimes has in irritating a wound upon his body. Tied up all day with his disciplined show upon him, subdued to the performance of his routine of educational tricks, encircled by a gabbling crowd, he broke loose at night like an ill-tamed wild animal. Under his daily restraint it was his compensation, not his trouble, to give a glance toward his state at night, and to the freedom of its being indulged. If great criminals told the truth—which, being great criminals, they do not—they would very rarely tell of their struggles against the crime. Their struggles are toward it. They buffet with opposing waves to gain the bloody shore, not to recede from it. This man perfectly comprehended that he hated his rival with his strongest and worst forces, and that if he tracked him to Lizzie Hexam his so doing would never serve himself with her, or serve her. All his pains were taken to the end that he might incense himself with the sight of the detested figure in her company and favor in her place of concealment. And he knew as well what act of his would follow if he did, as he knew that his mother had borne him. Granted, that he may not have held it necessary to make express mention to himself of the one familiar truth any more than of the other.

He knew equally well that he fed his wrath and hatred, and that he accumulated provocation and self-justification by being made the nightly sport of the reckless and insolent Eugene. Knowing all this, and still always going on with infinite endurance, pains, and perseverance, could his dark soul doubt whither he went?

Baffled, exasperated, and weary, he lingered opposite the Temple gate when it closed on Wrayburn and Lightwood, debating with himself should he go home for that time or should he watch longer. Possessed in his jealousy by

the fixed idea that Wrayburn was in the secret, if it were not altogether of his contriving, Bradley was as confident of getting the better of him at last by sullenly sticking to him, as he would have been—and often had been—of mastering any piece of study in the way of his vocation by the like slow, persistent process. A man of rapid passions and sluggish intelligence, it had served him often, and should serve him again.

The suspicion crossed him as he rested in a doorway, with his eyes upon the Temple gate, that perhaps she was even concealed in that set of Chambers. It would furnish another reason for Wrayburn's purposeless walks, and it might be. He thought of it and thought of it, until he resolved to steal up the stairs, if the gate-keeper would let him through, and listen. So, the haggard head suspended in the air flitted across the road, like the spectre of one of the many heads erst hoisted upon neighboring Temple Bar, and stopped before the watchman.

The watchman looked at it, and asked: "Who for?"

"Mr. Wrayburn."

"It's very late."

"He came back with Mr. Lightwood, I know, near upon two hours ago. But if he has gone to bed I'll put a paper in his letter-box. I am expected."

The watchman said no more, but opened the gate, though rather doubtfully. Seeing, however, that the visitor went straight and fast in the right direction, he seemed satisfied.

The haggard head floated up the dark staircase, and softly descended nearer to the floor outside the outer door of the chambers. The doors of the rooms within appeared to be standing open. There were rays of candlelight from one of them, and there was the sound of a footstep going about. There were two voices. The words they uttered were not distinguishable, but they were both the voices of men. In a few moments the voices were silent, and there was no sound of footstep, and the inner light went out. If Lightwood could have seen the face which kept him awake, staring and listening in the darkness outside the door as he spoke of it, he might have been less disposed to sleep through the remainder of the night.

"Not there," said Bradley; "but she might have been." The head arose to its former height from the ground, floated down the staircase again, and passed on to the gate. A man was standing there in parley with the watchman.

"Oh!" said the watchman. "Here he is!"

Perceiving himself to be the antecedent, Bradley looked from the watchman to the man.

"This man is leaving a letter for Mr. Lightwood," the watchman explained, showing it in

his hand; "and I was mentioning that a person had just gone up to Mr. Lightwood's chambers. It might be the same business perhaps?"

"No," said Bradley, glancing at the man, who was a stranger to him.

"No," the man assented in a surly way; "my letter—it's wrote by my daughter, but it's mine—is about my business, and my business ain't nobody else's business."

As Bradley passed out at the gate with an undecided foot he heard it shut behind him, and heard the footstep of the man coming after him.

"Scuse me," said the man, who appeared to have been drinking, and rather stumbled at him than touched him, to attract his attention; "but might you be acquainted with the T'other Governor?"

"With whom?" asked Bradley.

"With," returned the man, pointing backward over his right shoulder with his right thumb, "the T'other Governor?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Why look here," hooking his proposition on his left-hand fingers with the forefinger of his right. "There's two Governors, ain't there? One and one, two—Lawyer Lightwood, my first finger, he's one, ain't he? Well; might you be acquainted with my middle finger, the T'other?"

"I know quite as much of him," said Bradley, with a frown and a distant look before him, "as I want to know."

"Hooroar!" cried the man. "Hooroar T'other t'other Governor. Hooroar T'otherest Governor! I am of your way of thinkin'."

"Don't make such a noise at this dead hour of the night. What are you talking about?"

"Look here, T'otherest Governor," replied the man, becoming hoarsely confidential. "The T'other Governor he's always joked his jokes agin me, owing, as I believe, to my being a honest man as gets my living by the sweat of my brow. Which he ain't, and he don't."

"What is that to me?"

"T'otherest Governor," returned the man in a tone of injured innocence, "if you don't care to hear no more, don't hear no more. You begun it. You said, and likeways showed pretty plain, as you warn't by no means friendly to him. But I don't seek to force my company nor yet my opinions on no man. I am a honest man, that's what I am. Put me in the dock any where—I don't care where—and I says, 'My Lord, I am a honest man.' Put me in the witness-box any where—I don't care where—and I says the same to his lordship, and I kisses the book. I don't kiss my coat-cuff; I kisses the book."

It was not so much in deference to these strong testimonials to character, as in his restless casting about for any way or help toward the discovery on which he was concentrated, that Bradley Headstone replied: "You needn't take offense. I didn't mean to stop you. You were too loud in the open street; that was all."

"T'otherest Governor," replied Mr. Rider-

hood, mollified and mysterious, "I know wot it is to be loud, and I know wot it is to be soft. Nat'rally I do. It would be a wonder if I did not, being by the Chris'en name of Roger, which took it arter my own father, which took it from his own father, though which of our fam'ly fust took it nat'ral I will not in any ways mislead you by undertakin' to say. And wishing that your elth may be better than your looks, which your inside must be bad indeed if it's on the footing of your out."

Startled by the implication that his face revealed too much of his mind, Bradley made an effort to clear his brow. It might be worth knowing what this strange man's business was with Lightwood, or Wrayburn, or both, at such an unseasonable hour. He set himself to find out, for the man might prove to be a messenger between those two.

"You call at the Temple late," he remarked, with a lumbering show of ease.

"Wish I may die," cried Mr. Riderhood, with a hoarse laugh, "if I warn't a goin' to say the self-same words to you, T'otherest Governor!"

"It chanced so with me," said Bradley, looking disconcertedly about him.

"And it chanced so with me," said Riderhood. "But I don't mind telling you how. Why should I mind telling you? I'm a Deputy Lock-keeper up the river, and I was off duty yes'day, and I shall be on to-morrow."

"Yes?"

"Yes, and I come to London to look arter my private affairs. My private affairs is to get appointed to the Lock as reg'lar keeper at fust hand, and to have the law of a busted B'low-Bridge steamer which drowneded of me. I ain't a goin' to be drowneded and not paid for it!"

Bradley looked at him, as though he were claiming to be a ghost.

"The steamer," said Mr. Riderhood, obstinately, "run me down and drowneded of me. Interference on the part of other parties brought me round; but I never asked 'em to bring me round, nor yet the steamer never asked 'em to it. I mean to be paid for the life as the steamer took."

"Was that your business at Mr. Lightwood's chambers in the middle of the night?" asked Bradley, eying him with distrust.

"That and to get a writing to be fust-hand Lock-keeper. A recommendation in writing being looked for, who else ought to give it to me? As I says in the letter in my daughter's hand, with my mark put to it to make it good in law, Who but you, Lawyer Lightwood, ought to hand over this here stificate, and who but you ought to go in for damages on my account agin the Steamer? For (as I says under my mark) I have had trouble enough along of you and your friend. If you, Lawyer Lightwood, had backed me good and true, and if the T'other Governor had took me down correct (I says under my mark), I should have been worth money at the present time, instead of having a

barge-load of bad names chucked at me, and being forced to eat my words, which is a unsatisfying sort of food wotever a man's appetite! And when you mention the middle of the night, T'otherest Governor," growled Mr. Riderhood, winding up his monotonous summary of his wrongs, "throw your eye on this here bundle under my arm, and bear in mind that I'm a walking back to my Lock, and that the Temple laid upon my line of road."

Bradley Headstone's face had changed during this latter recital, and he had observed the speaker with a more sustained attention.

"Do you know," said he, after a pause, during which they walked on side by side, "that I believe I could tell you your name, if I tried?"

"Prove your opinion," was the answer, accompanied with a stop and a stare. "Try."

"Your name is Riderhood."

"I'm blest if it ain't," returned that gentleman. "But I don't know your'n."

"That's quite another thing," said Bradley. "I never supposed you did."

As Bradley walked on meditating, the Rogue walked on at his side muttering. The purport of the muttering was: "that Rogue Riderhood, by George! seemed to be made public property on, now, and that every man seemed to think himself free to handle his name as if it was a Street Pump." The purport of the meditating was: "Here is an instrument. Can I use it?"

They had walked along the Strand, and into Pall Mall, and had turned up-hill toward Hyde Park Corner; Bradley Headstone waiting on the pace and lead of Riderhood, and leaving him to indicate the course. So slow were the schoolmaster's thoughts, and so indistinct his purposes when they were but tributary to the one absorbing purpose—or rather when, like dark trees under a stormy sky, they only lined the long vista at the end of which he saw those two figures of Wrayburn and Lizzie on which his eyes were fixed—that at least a good half-mile was traversed before he spoke again. Even then, it was only to ask:

"Where is your Lock?"

"Twenty mile and odd—call it five-and-twenty mile and odd, if you like—up stream," was the sullen reply.

"How is it called?"

"Plashwater Weir Mill Lock."

"Suppose I was to offer you five shillings; what then?"

"Why, then, I'd take it," said Mr. Riderhood.

The schoolmaster put his hand in his pocket, and produced two half-crowns, and placed them in Mr. Riderhood's palm: who stopped at a convenient door-step to ring them both, before acknowledging their receipt.

"There's one thing about you, T'otherest Governor," said Riderhood, faring on again, "as looks well and goes fur. You're a ready-money man. Now;" when he had carefully pocketed the coins on that side of himself which

was furthest from his new friend; "what's this for?"

"For you."

"Why, o' course I know *that*," said Riderhood, as arguing something that was self-evident. "O' course I know very well as no man in his right senses would suppose as any think would make me give it up agin when I'd once got it. But what do you want for it?"

"I don't know that I want any thing for it. Or if I do want any thing for it, I don't know what it is." Bradley gave this answer in a stolid, vacant, and self-communing manner, which Mr. Riderhood found very extraordinary.

"You have no good-will toward this Wrayburn," said Bradley, coming to the name in a reluctant and forced way, as if he were dragged to it.

"No."

"Neither have I."

Riderhood nodded, and asked: "Is it for that?"

"It's as much for that as any thing else. It's something to be agreed with, on a subject that occupies so much of one's thoughts."

"It don't agree with *you*," returned Mr. Riderhood, bluntly. "No! It don't, T'otherest Governor, and it's no use a lookin' as if you wanted to make out that it did. I tell you it rankles in you. It rankles in you, rusts in you, and poisons you."

"Say that it does so," returned Bradley, with quivering lips; "is there no cause for it?"

"Cause enough, I'll bet a pound!" said Mr. Riderhood.

"Haven't you yourself declared that the fellow has heaped provocations, insults, and affronts on you, or something to that effect? He has done the same by me. He is made of venomous insults and affronts, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. Are you so hopeful or so stupid as not to know that he and the other will treat your application with contempt, and light their cigars with it?"

"I shouldn't wonder if they did, by George!" said Riderhood, turning angrily.

"If they did! They will. Let me ask you a question. I know something more than your name about you; I knew something about Gaffer Hexam. When did you last set eyes upon his daughter?"

"When did I last set eyes upon his daughter, T'otherest Governor?" repeated Mr. Riderhood, growing intentionally slower of comprehension as the other quickened in his speech.

"Yes. Not to speak to her. To see her—any where?"

The Rogue had got the clew he wanted, though he held it with a clumsy hand. Looking perplexedly at the passionate face, as if he were trying to work out a sum in his mind, he slowly answered: "I ain't set eyes upon her—never once—not since the day of Gaffer's death."

"You know her well, by sight?"

"I should think I did! No one better."

"And you know him as well?"

"Who's him?" asked Riderhood, taking off his hat and rubbing his forehead, as he directed a dull look at his questioner.

"Curse the name! Is it so agreeable to you that you want to hear it again?"

"Oh! *Him?*" said Riderhood, who had craftily worked the schoolmaster into this corner, that he might again take note of his face under its evil possession. "I'd know *him* among a thousand."

"Did you—" Bradley tried to ask it quietly; but, do what he might with his voice, he could not subdue his face;—"did you ever see them together?"

(The Rogue had got the clew in both hands now.)

"I see 'em together, T'otherest Governor, on the very day when Gaffer was towed ashore."

Bradley could have hidden a reserved piece of information from the sharp eyes of a whole inquisitive class, but he could not veil from the eyes of the ignorant Riderhood the withheld question next in his breast. "You shall put it plain if you want it answered," thought the Rogue, doggedly; "I ain't a-going a wolunteering."

"Well! was he insolent to her too?" asked Bradley, after a struggle. "Or did he make a show of being kind to her?"

"He made a show of being most uncommon kind to her," said Riderhood. "By George! now I—"

His flying off at a tangent was indisputably natural. Bradley looked at him for the reason.

"Now I think of it," said Mr. Riderhood, evasively, for he was substituting those words for "Now I see you so jealous," which was the phrase really in his mind; "P'raps he went and took me down wrong, a purpose, on account o' being sweet upon her!"

The baseness of confirming him in this suspicion or pretense of one (for he could not have really entertained it), was a line's breadth beyond the mark the schoolmaster had reached. The baseness of communing and intriguing with the fellow who would have set that stain upon her, and upon her brother too, was attained. The line's breadth further lay beyond. He made no reply, but walked on with a lowering face.

What he might gain by this acquaintance he could not work out in his slow and cumbrous thoughts. The man had an injury against the object of his hatred, and that was something; though it was less than he supposed, for there dwelt in the man no such deadly rage and resentment as burned in his own breast. The man knew her, and might by a fortunate chance see her, or hear of her; that was something, as enlisting one pair of eyes and ears the more. The man was a bad man, and willing enough to be in his pay. That was something, for his own state and purpose were as bad as bad could be, and he seemed to derive a vague support from

the possession of a congenial instrument, though it might never be used.

Suddenly he stood still and asked Riderhood point-blank if he knew where she was? Clearly, he did not know. He asked Riderhood if he would be willing, in case any intelligence of her, or of Wrayburn as seeking her or associating with her, should fall in his way, to communicate it if it were paid for? He would be very willing indeed. He was "agin 'em both," he said, with an oath, and for why? 'Cause they had both stood betwixt him and his getting his living by the sweat of his brow.

"It will not be long then," said Bradley Headstone, after some more discourse to this effect, "before we see one another again. Here is the country road, and here is the day. Both have come upon me by surprise."

"But, T'otherest Governor," urged Mr. Riderhood, "I don't know where to find you."

"It is of no consequence. I know where to find you, and I'll come to your Lock."

"But, T'otherest Governor," urged Mr. Riderhood again, "no luck never come yet of a dry acquaintance. Let's wet it, in a mouthful of rum and milk, T'otherest Governor."

Bradley assenting, went with him into an early public house, haunted by unsavory smells of musty hay and stale straw, where returning carts, farmers' men, gaunt dogs, fowls of a beery breed, and certain human night-birds fluttering home to roost, were solacing themselves after their several manners; and where not one of the night-birds hovering about the sloppy bar failed to discern at a glance in the passion-wasted night-bird with respectable feathers, the worst night-bird of all.

An inspiration of affection for a half-drunken carter going his way led to Mr. Riderhood's being elevated on a high heap of baskets on a wagon, and pursuing his journey recumbent on his back with his head on his bundle. Bradley then turned to retrace his steps, and by-and-by struck off through little-traversed ways, and by-and-by reached school and home. Up came the sun to find him washed and brushed, methodically dressed in decent black coat and waistcoat, decent formal black tie, and pepper-and-salt pantaloons, with his decent silver watch in its pocket, and its decent hair-guard round his neck; a scholastic huntsman clad for the field, with his fresh pack yelping and barking around him.

Yet more really bewitched than the miserable creatures of the much-lamented times, who accused themselves of impossibilities under a contagion of horror and the strongly suggestive influences of Torture, he had been ridden hard by Evil Spirits in the night that was newly gone. He had been spurred and whipped and heavily sweated. If a record of the sport had usurped the places of the peaceful texts from Scripture on the wall, the most advanced of the scholars might have taken fright and run away from their master.