Part One

1.

My name, in those days, was Susan Trinder. People called me Sue. I know the year I was born in, but for many years I did not know the date, and took my birthday at Christmas. I believe I am an orphan. My mother I know is dead. But I never saw her, she was nothing to me. I was Mrs Sucksby's child, if I was anyone's; and for father I had Mr Ibbs, who kept the locksmith's shop, at Lant Street, in the Borough, near to the Thames.

This is the first time I remember thinking about the world and my place in it.

There was a girl named Flora, who paid Mrs Sucksby a penny to take me begging at a play. People used to like to take me begging then, for the sake of my bright hair; and Flora being also very fair, she would pass me off as her sister. The theatre she took me to, on the night I am thinking of now, was the Surrey, St George's Circus. The play was Oliver Twist. I remember it as very terrible. I remember the tilt of the gallery, and the drop to the pit. I remember a drunken woman catching at the ribbons of my dress. I remember the flares, that made the stage very lurid; and the roaring of the actors, the shrieking of the crowd. They had one of the characters in a red wig and whiskers: I was certain he was a monkey in a coat, he capered so. Worse still was the snarling, pink-eyed dog; worst of all was that dog's master—Bill Sykes, the fancy-man. When he struck the poor girl Nancy with his club, the people all down our row got up. There was a boot thrown at the stage. A woman beside me cried out,

'Oh, you beast! You villain! And her worth forty of a bully like you!'

I don't know if it was the people getting up—which made the gallery seem to heave about; or the shrieking woman; or the sight of Nancy, lying perfectly pale and still at Bill Sykes's feet; but I became gripped by an awful terror. I thought we should all be killed. I began to scream, and Flora could not quiet me. And when the woman who had called out put her arms to me and smiled, I screamed out louder. Then Flora began to weep—she was only twelve or thirteen, I suppose. She took me home, and Mrs Sucksby slapped her.

'What was you thinking of, taking her to such a thing?' she said. 'You was to sit with her upon the steps. I don't hire my infants out to have them brought back like this, turned blue with screaming. What was you playing at?'

She took me upon her lap, and I wept again. 'There now, my lamb,' she said. Flora stood before her, saying nothing, pulling a strand of hair across her scarlet cheek. Mrs Sucksby was a devil with her dander up. She looked at Flora and tapped her slippered foot upon the rug, all the time rocking in her chair—that was a great creaking wooden chair, that no-one sat in save her—and beating her thick, hard hand upon my shaking back. Then,

'I know your little rig,' she said quietly. She knew everybody's rig. 'What you get? A couple of wipers, was it? A couple of wipers, and a lady's purse?'

Flora pulled the strand of hair to her mouth, and bit it. 'A purse,' she said, after a second. 'And a bottle of scent.'

'Show,' said Mrs Sucksby, holding out her hand. Flora's face grew darker. But she put her fingers to a tear at the waist of her skirt, and reached inside it; and you might imagine my surprise when the tear turned out to be not a tear at all, but the neck of a little silk pocket that was sewn inside her gown. She brought out a black cloth bag, and a bottle with a stopper on a silver chain. The bag had threepence in it, and half a nutmeg. Perhaps she got it from the drunken woman who plucked at my dress. The bottle, with its stopper off, smelt of roses. Mrs Sucksby sniffed.

'Pretty poor poke,' she said, 'ain't it?'

Flora tossed her head. 'I should have had more,' she said, with a look at me, 'if she hadn't started up with the sterics.'

Mrs Sucksby leaned and hit her again.

'If I had known what you was about,' she said, 'you shouldn't have had none of it at all. Let me tell you this now: you want an infant for prigging with, you take one of my other babies. You don't take Sue. Do you hear me?'

Flora sulked, but said she did. Mrs Sucksby said, 'Good. Now hook it. And leave that poke behind you, else I shall tell your mother you've been going with gentlemen.'

Then she took me to her bed—first, rubbing at the sheets with her hands, to warm them; then stooping to breathe upon my fingers, to warm me. I was the only one, of all her infants, she would do that for. She said, 'You ain't afraid now, Sue?'
But I was, and said so. I said I was afraid the fancy-man would find me out and hit me with his stick. She said she had heard of that particular fancy-man: he was all bounce. She said,
'It was Bill Sykes, wasn't it? Why, he's a Clerkenwell man. He don't trouble with the Borough. The Borough boys are too hard for him.'
I said, 'But, oh, Mrs Sucksby! You never saw the poor girl Nancy, and how he knocked her down and murdered her!'
'Murdered her?' she said then. 'Nancy? Why, I had her here an hour ago. She was only beat a bit about the face. She has her hair curled different now, you wouldn't know he ever laid his hand upon her.'
I said, 'Won't he beat her again, though?'
She told me then that Nancy had come to her senses at last, and left Bill Sykes entirely; that she had met a nice chap from Wapping, who had set her up in a little shop selling sugar mice and tobacco.
She lifted my hair from about my neck and smoothed it across the pillow. My hair, as I have said, was very fair then—though it grew plain brown, as I got older—and Mrs Sucksby used to wash it with vinegar and comb it till it sparked. Now she smoothed it flat, then lifted a tress of it and touched it to her lips. She said, 'That Flora tries to take you on the prig again, you tell me—will you?'
I said I would. 'Good girl,' she said. Then she went. She took her candle with her, but the door she left half-open, and the cloth at the window was of lace and let the street-lamps show. It was never quite dark there, and never quite still. On the floor above were a couple of rooms where girls and boys would now and then come to stay: they laughed and thumped about, dropped coins, and sometimes danced. Beyond the wall lay Mr Ibbs's sister, who was kept to her bed: she often woke with the horrors on her, shrieking. And all about the house—laid top-to-toe in cradles, like sprats in boxes of salt—were Mrs Sucksby's infants. They might start up whimpering or weeping any hour of the night, any little thing might set them off. Then Mrs Sucksby would go among them, dosing them from a bottle of gin, with a little silver spoon you could hear chink against the glass.
On this night, though, I think the rooms upstairs must have been empty, and Mr Ibbs's sister stayed quiet; and perhaps because of the quiet, the babies kept asleep. Being used to the noise, I lay awake. I lay and thought again of cruel Bill Sykes; and of Nancy, dead at his feet. From some house nearby there sounded a man's voice, cursing. Then a church bell struck the hour—the chimes came queerly across the windy streets. I wondered if Flora's slapped cheek still hurt her. I wondered how near to the Borough was Clerkenwell; and how quick the way would seem, to a man with a stick.
I had a warm imagination, even then. When there came footsteps in Lant Street, that stopped outside the window; and when the footsteps were followed by the whining of a dog, the scratching of the dog's claws, the careful turning of the handle of our shop door, I started up off my pillow and might have screamed—except that before I could the dog gave a bark, and the bark had a catch to it, that I thought I knew: it was not the pink-eyed monster from the theatre, but our own dog, Jack. He could fight like a brick. Then there came a whistle. Bill Sykes never whistled so sweet. The lips were Mr Ibbs's. He had been out for a hot meat pudding for his and Mrs Sucksby's supper.
'All right?' I heard him say. 'Smell the gravy on this . . .'
Then his voice became a murmur, and I fell back. I should say I was five or six years old. I remember it clear as anything, though. I remember lying, and hearing the sound of knives and forks and china, Mrs Sucksby's sighs, the creaking of her chair, the beat of her slipper on the floor. And I remember seeing—what I had never seen before—how the world was made up: that it had bad Bill Sykeses in it, and good Mr Ibbses; and Nancys, that might go either way. I thought how glad I was that I was already on the side that Nancy got to at last.—I mean, the good side, with sugar mice in.
It was only many years later, when I saw Oliver Twist a second time, that I understood that Nancy of course got murdered after all. By then, Flora was quite the fingersmith: the

Surrey was nothing to her, she was working the West End theatres and halls—she could go through the crowds like salts. She never took me with her again, though. She was like everyone, too scared of Mrs Sucksby.
She was caught at last, poor thing, with her hands on a lady's bracelet; and was sent for transportation as a thief.

We were all more or less thieves, at Lant Street. But we were that kind of thief that rather eased the dodgy deed along, than did it. If I had stared to see Flora put her hand to a tear in her skirt and bring out a purse and perfume, I was never so surprised again: for it was a very dull day with us, when no-one came to Mr Ibbs's shop with a bag or a packet in the lining of his coat, in his hat, in his sleeve or stocking.
'All right, Mr Ibbs?' he'd say.
'All right, my son,' Mr Ibbs would answer. He talked rather through his nose, like that.
'What you know?'
'Not much.'
'Got something for me?'
The man would wink. 'Got something, Mr Ibbs, very hot and uncommon... '
They always said that, or something like it. Mr Ibbs would nod, then pull the blind upon the shop-door and turn the key—for he was a cautious man, and never saw poke near a window. At the back of his counter was a green baize curtain, and behind that was a passage, leading straight to our kitchen. If the thief was one he knew he would bring him to the table. 'Come on, my son,' he would say. 'I don't do this for everyone. But you are such an old hand that—well, you might be family.' And he would have the man lay out his stuff between the cups and crusts and tea-spoons.
Mrs Sucksby might be there, feeding pap to a baby. The thief would see her and take off his hat.
'All right, Mrs Sucksby?'
'All right, my dear.'
'All right, Sue? Ain't you growed!'
I thought them better than magicians. For out from their coats and sleeves would come pocket-books, silk handkerchiefs and watches; or else jewellery, silver plate, brass candlesticks, petticoats—whole suits of clothes, sometimes. 'This is quality stuff, this is,' they would say, as they set it all out; and Mr Ibbs would rub his hands and look expectant. But then he would study their poke, and his face would fall. He was a very mild-looking man, very honest-seeming—very pale in the cheek, with neat lips and whiskers. His face would fall, it would just about break your heart.
'Rag,' he might say, shaking his head, fingering a piece of paper money. 'Very hard to push along.' Or, 'Candlesticks. I had a dozen top-quality candlesticks come just last week, from a crib at Whitehall. Couldn't do nothing with them. Couldn't give them away.'
He would stand, making a show of reckoning up a price, but looking like he hardly dare name it to the man for fear of insulting him. Then he'd make his offer, and the thief would look disgusted.
'Mr Ibbs,' he would say, 'that won't pay me for the trouble of walking from London Bridge. Be fair, now.'
But by then Mr Ibbs would have gone to his box and be counting out shillings on the table: one, two, three—He might pause, with the fourth in his hand. The thief would see the shine of the silver—Mr Ibbs always kept his coins rubbed very bright, for just that reason—and it was like hares to a grey-hound.
'Couldn't you make it five, Mr Ibbs?'
Mr Ibbs would lift his honest face, and shrug.
'I should like to, my son. I should like nothing better. And if you was to bring me something out of the way, I would make my money answer. This, however'—with a wave of his hand above the pile of silks or notes or gleaming brass—'this is so much gingerbread. I should be robbing myself. I should be stealing the food from the mouths of Mrs Sucksby's babies.'
And he would hand the thief his shillings, and the thief would pocket them and button his jacket, and cough or wipe his nose.

And then Mr Ibbs would seem to have a change of heart. He would step to his box again and, ‘You eaten anything this morning, my son?’ he would say. The thief would always answer, ‘Not a crust.’ Then Mr Ibbs would give him sixpence, and tell him to be sure and spend it on a breakfast and not on a horse; and the thief would say something like, ‘You’re a jewel, Mr Ibbs, a regular jewel.’

Mr Ibbs might make ten or twelve shillings’ profit with a man like that: all through seeming to be honest, and fair. For, of course, what he had said about the rag or the candlesticks would be so much puff: he knew brass from onions, all right. When the thief had gone, he’d catch my eye and wink. He’d rub his hands again and grow quite lively.

‘Now, Sue,’ he’d say, ‘what would you say to taking a cloth to these, and bringing up the shine? And then you might—if you’ve a moment, dear, if Mrs Sucksby don’t need you—you might have a little go at the fancy work upon these wipers. Only a very little, gentle sort of go, with your little scissors and perhaps a pin: for this is lawn—do you see, my dear?—and will tear, if you tug too hard . . .’

I believe I learned my alphabet, like that: not by putting letters down, but by taking them out. I know I learned the look of my own name, from handkerchiefs that came, marked Susan. As for regular reading, we never troubled with it. Mrs Sucksby could do it, if she had to; Mr Ibbs could read, and even write; but, for the rest of us, it was an idea—well, I should say, like speaking Hebrew or throwing somersaults: you could see the use of it, for Jews and tumblers; but while it was their lay, why make it yours?

So I thought then, anyway. I learned to cipher, though. I learned it, from handling coins. Good coins we kept, of course. Bad ones come up too bright, and must be slummed, with blacking and grease, before you pass them on. I learned that, too. Silks and linens there are ways of washing and pressing, to make them seem new. Gems I would shine, with ordinary vinegar. Silver plate we ate our suppers off—but only the once, because of the crests and stampings; and when we had finished, Mr Ibbs would take the cups and bowls and melt them into bars. He did the same with gold and pewter. He never took chances: that’s what made him so good. Everything that came into our kitchen looking like one sort of thing, was made to leave it again looking quite another. And though it had come in the front way—the shop way, the Lant Street way—it left by another way, too. It left by the back. There was no street there. What there was, was a little covered passage and a small dark court. You might stand in that and think yourself baffled; there was a path, however, if you knew how to look. It took you to an alley, and that met a winding black lane, which ran to the arches of the railway line; and from one of those arches—I won’t say quite which, though I could—led another, darker, lane that would take you, very quick and inconspicuous, to the river. We knew two or three men who kept boats there. All along that crooked way, indeed, lived pals of ours—Mr Ibbs’s nephews, say, that I called cousins. We could send poke from our kitchen, through any of them, to all the parts of London. We could pass anything, anything at all, at speeds which would astonish you. We could pass ice, in August, before a quarter of the block should have had a chance to turn to water. We could pass sunshine in summer—Mr Ibbs would find a buyer for it.

In short, there was not much that was brought to our house that was not moved out of it again, rather sharpish. There was only one thing, in fact, that had come and got stuck—one thing that had somehow withstood the tremendous pull of that passage of poke—one thing that Mr Ibbs and Mrs Sucksby seemed never to think to put a price to.

I mean of course, Me.

I had my mother to thank for that. Her story was a tragic one. She had come to Lant Street on a certain night in 1844. She had come, ‘very large, dear girl, with you,’ Mrs Sucksby said—by which, until I learned better, I took her to mean that my mother had brought me, perhaps tucked in a pocket behind her skirt, or sewn into the lining of her coat. For I knew she was a thief.—‘What a thief!’ Mrs Sucksby would say. ‘So bold! And handsome?’

‘Was she, Mrs Sucksby? Was she fair?’

‘Fairer than you; but sharp, like you, about the face; and thin as paper. We put her upstairs. No-one knew she was here, save me and Mr Ibbs—for she was wanted, she said, by the police of four divisions, and if they had got her, she’d swing. What was her lay? She said it was only prigging. I think it must have been worse. I know she was hard

as a nut, for she had you and, I swear, she never murmured—never called out once. She only looked at you, and put a kiss on your little head; then she gave me six pounds for the keeping of you—all of it in sovereigns, and all of 'em good. She said she had one last job to do, that would make her fortune. She meant to come back for you, when her way was clear . . .'

So Mrs Sucksby told it; and every time, though her voice would start off steady it would end up trembling, and her eyes would fill with tears. For she had waited for my mother, and my mother had not come. What came, instead, was awful news. The job that was meant to make her fortune, had gone badly. A man had been killed trying to save his plate. It was my mother's knife that killed him. Her own pal peached on her. The police caught up with her at last. She was a month in prison. Then they hanged her.

They hanged her, as they did murderesses then, on the roof of the Horsemonger Lane Gaol. Mrs Sucksby stood and watched the drop, from the window of the room that I was born in.

You got a marvellous view of it from there—the best view in South London, everybody said. People were prepared to pay very handsomely for a spot at that window, on hanging days. And though some girls shrieked when the trap went rattling down, I never did. I never once shuddered or winked.

'That's Susan Trinder,' someone might whisper then. 'Her mother was hanged as a murderess. Ain't she brave?'

I liked to hear them say it. Who wouldn't? But the fact is—and I don't care who knows it, now—the fact is, I was not brave at all. For to be brave about a thing like that, you must first be sorry. And how could I be sorry, for someone I never knew? I supposed it was a pity my mother had ended up hanged; but, since she was hanged, I was glad it was for something game, like murdering a miser over his plate, and not for something very wicked, like throttling a child. I supposed it was a pity she had made an orphan of me—but then, some girls I knew had mothers who were drunkards, or mothers who were mad: mothers they hated and could never rub along with. I should rather a dead mother, over one like that!

I should rather Mrs Sucksby. She was better by chalks. She had been paid to keep me a month; she kept me seventeen years. What's love, if that ain't? She might have passed me on to the poorhouse. She might have left me crying in a draughty crib. Instead she prized me so, she would not let me on the prig for fear a policeman should have got me. She let me sleep beside her, in her own bed. She shined my hair with vinegar. You treat jewels like that.

And I was not a jewel; nor even a pearl. My hair, after all, turned out quite ordinary. My face was a commonplace face. I could pick a plain lock, I could cut a plain key; I could bounce a coin and say, from the ring, if the coin were good or bad.—But anyone can do those things, who is taught them. All about me other infants came, and stayed a little, then were claimed by their mothers, or found new mothers, or perished; and of course, no-one claimed me, I did not perish, instead I grew up, until at last I was old enough to go among the cradles with the bottle of gin and the silver spoon myself. Mr Ibbs I would seem sometimes to catch gazing at me with a certain light in his eye—as if, I thought, he was seeing me suddenly for the piece of poke I was, and wondering how I had come to stay so long, and who he could pass me on to. But when people talked—as they now and then did—about blood, and its being thicker than water, Mrs Sucksby looked dark.

'Come here, dear girl,' she'd say. 'Let me look at you.' And she'd put her hands upon my head and stroke my cheeks with her thumbs, brooding over my face. 'I see her in you,' she'd say. 'She is looking at me, as she looked at me that night. She is thinking that she'll come back and make your fortune. How could she know? Poor girl, she'll never come back! Your fortune's still to be made. Your fortune, Sue, and ours along with it . . .'

So she said, many times. Whenever she grumbled or sighed—whenever she rose from a cradle, rubbing her sore back—her eyes would find me out, and her look would clear, she'd grow contented.

But here is Sue, she might as well have said. Things is hard for us, now. But here is Sue. She'll fix 'em . . .

I let her think it; but thought I knew better. I'd heard once that she'd had a child of her

own, many years before, that had been born dead. I thought it was her face she supposed she saw, when she gazed so hard at mine. The idea made me shiver, rather; for it was queer to think of being loved, not just for my own sake, but for someone's I never knew . . .

I thought I knew all about love, in those days. I thought I knew all about everything. If you had asked me how I supposed I should go on, I dare say I would have said that I should like to farm infants. I might like to be married, to a thief or a fencing-man. There was a boy, when I was fifteen, that stole a clasp for me, and said he should like to kiss me. There was another a little later, who used to stand at our back door and whistle 'The Locksmith's Daughter', expressly to see me blush. Mrs Sucksby chased them both away. She was as careful of me in that department, as in all others.

'Who's she keeping you for, then?' the boys would say. 'Prince Eddie?'

I think the people who came to Lant Street thought me slow.—Slow I mean, as opposed to fast. Perhaps I was, by Borough standards. But it seemed to me that I was sharp enough. You could not have grown up in such a house, that had such businesses in it, without having a pretty good idea of what was what—of what could go into what; and what could come out.

Do you follow?

You are waiting for me to start my story. Perhaps I was waiting, then. But my story had already started—I was only like you, and didn't know it.

This is when I thought it really began.

A night in winter, a few weeks after the Christmas that marked my seventeenth birthday. A dark night—a hard night, full of a fog that was more or less a rain, and a rain that was more or less snow. Dark nights are good to thieves and fencing-men; dark nights in winter are the best nights of all, for then regular people keep close to their homes, and the swells all keep to the country, and the grand houses of London are shut up and empty and pleading to be cracked. We got lots of stuff on nights like those, and Mr Ibbs's profits were higher than ever. The cold makes thieves come to a bargain very quick.

We did not feel the cold too much at Lant Street, for besides our ordinary kitchen fire there was Mr Ibbs's locksmith's brazier: he always kept a flame beneath the coals of it, you could never say what might not turn up that would need making up or melting down. On this night there were three or four boys at it, sweating the gold off sovereigns. Besides them was Mrs Sucksby in her great chair, a couple of babies in a cradle at her side; and a boy and a girl who were rooming with us then—John Vroom, and Dainty Warren.

John was a thin, dark, knifish boy of about fourteen. He was always eating. I believe he had the worm. This night he was cracking peanuts, and throwing their shells on the floor. Mrs Sucksby saw him do it. 'Will you watch your manners?' she said. 'You make a mess, and Sue shall have to tidy it.'

John said, 'Poor Sue, ain't my heart bleeding.'

He never cared for me. I think he was jealous. He had come to our house as a baby, like me; and like mine, his mother had died and made an orphan of him. But he was such a queer-looking child, no-one would take him off Mrs Sucksby's hands. She had kept him till he was four or five, then put him on the parish—even then, however, he was a devil to get rid of, always running back from the workhouse: we were forever opening the shop-door and finding him sleeping on the step. She had got the master of a ship to take him at last, and he sailed as far as China; when he came back to the Borough after that, he did it with money, to brag. The money had lasted a month. Now he kept handy at Lant Street by doing jobs for Mr Ibbs; and besides them, ran mean little dodges of his own, with Dainty to help him.

She was a great red-haired girl of three-and-twenty, and more or less a simpleton. She had neat white hands, though, and could sew like anything. John had her at this time stitching dog-skins onto stolen dogs, to make them seem handsomer breeds than what they really were.

He was doing a deal with a dog-thief. This man had a couple of bitches: when the bitches

came on heat he would walk the streets with them, tempting dogs away from their owners, then charging a ten pounds' ransom before he'd give them back. That works best with sporting dogs, and dogs with sentimental mistresses; some owners, however, will never pay up—you could cut off their little dog's tail and post it to them and never see a bean, they are that heartless—and the dogs that John's pal was landed with he would throttle, then sell to him at a knocked-down price. I can't say what John did with the meat—passed it off as rabbit, perhaps, or ate it himself. But the skins, as I have said, he had Dainty stitching to plain street-dogs, which he was selling as quality breeds at the Whitechapel Market.

The bits of fur left over she was sewing together to cover him a greatcoat. She was sewing it, this night. She had the collar done and the shoulders and half the sleeves, and there were about forty different sorts of dog in it already. The smell of it was powerful, before a fire, and drove our own dog—which was not the old fighter, Jack, but another, brown dog we called Charley Wag, after the thief in the story—into a perfect fever.

Now and then Dainty would hold the coat up for us all to see how well it looked.

'It's a good job for Dainty that you ain't a deal taller, John,' I said, one time she did this.

'It's a good job for you that you ain't dead,' he answered. He was short, and felt it.

'Though a shame for the rest of us. I should like a bit of your skin upon the sleeves of my coat—perhaps upon the cuffs of it, where I wipes my nose. You should look right at home, beside a bulldog or a boxer.'

He took up his knife, that he always kept by him, and tested the edge with his thumb. 'I ain't quite decided yet,' he said, 'but what I shan't come one night, and take a bit of skin off while you are sleeping. What should you say, Dainty, if I was to make you sew up that?'

Dainty put her hand to her mouth and screamed. She wore a ring, too large for her hand; she had wound a bit of thread about the finger beneath, and the thread was quite black.

'You tickler!' she said.

John smiled, and tapped with the point of his knife against a broken tooth. Mrs Sucksby said,

'That's enough from you, or I'll knock your bloody head off. I won't have Sue made nervous.'

I said at once, that if I thought I should be made nervous by an infant like John Vroom, I should cut my throat. John said he should like to cut it for me. Then Mrs Sucksby leaned from her chair and hit him—just as she had once leaned, on that other night, all that time before, and hit poor Flora; and as she had leaned and hit others, in the years in between—all for my sake.

John looked for a second as if he should like to strike her back; then he looked at me, as if he should like to strike me harder. Then Dainty shifted in her seat, and he turned and struck her.

'Beats me,' he said when he had done it, 'why everyone is so down on me.'

Dainty had started to cry. She reached for his sleeve. 'Never mind their hard words, Johnny,' she said. 'I sticks to you, don't I?'

'You sticks, all right,' he answered. 'Like shit to a shovel.' He pushed her hand away, and she sat rocking in her chair, huddled over the dog-skin coat and weeping into her stitches.

'Hush now, Dainty,' said Mrs Sucksby. 'You are spoiling your nice work.'

She cried for a minute. Then one of the boys at the brazier burned his finger on a hot coin, and started off swearing; and she screamed with laughter. John put another peanut to his mouth and spat the shell upon the floor.

Then we sat quiet, for perhaps a quarter of an hour. Charley Wag lay before the fire and twitched, chasing hansoms in his sleep—his tail was kinked where a cab-wheel had caught it. I got out cards, for a game of Patience. Dainty sewed. Mrs Sucksby dozed. John sat perfectly idle; but would now and then look over at the cards I dealt, to tell me where to place them.

'Jack of Diggers on the Bitch of Hearts,' he would say. Or, 'Lor! Ain't you slow?'

'Ain't you hateful?' I would answer, keeping on with my own game. The pack was an old one, the cards as limp as rags. A man had been killed once, in a fight over a crooked

game that was played with those cards. I set them out a final time and turned my chair a little, so that John might not see how they fell.
And then, all at once, one of the babies started out of its slumber and began to cry, and Charley Wag woke up and gave a bark. There was a sudden gust of wind that made the fire leap high in the chimney, and the rain came harder upon the coals and made them hiss. Mrs Sucksby opened her eyes. 'What's that?' she said.
'What's what?' said John.
Then we heard it: a thump, in the passage that led to the back of the house. Then another thump came. Then the thumps became footsteps. The footsteps stopped at the kitchen door—there was a second of silence—and then, slow and heavy, a knock. Knock—knock—knock. Like that. Like the knocking on a door in a play, when the dead man's ghost comes back. Not a thief's knock, anyway: that is quick and light. You knew what sort of business it was, when you heard that. This business, however, might be anything, anything at all. This business might be bad.
So we all thought. We looked at one another, and Mrs Sucksby reached into the cradle to draw the baby from it and stop its cries against her bosom; and John took hold of Charley Wag and held his jaws shut. The boys at the brazier fell silent as mice. Mr Ibbs said quietly, 'Anyone expected? Boys, put this lot away. Never mind your burning fingers. If it's the blues, we're done for.'
They began picking at the sovereigns and the gold they had sweated from them, wrapping them in handkerchiefs, putting the handkerchiefs beneath their hats or in their trouser pockets. One of them—it was Mr Ibbs's oldest nephew, Phil—went quickly to the door and stood beside it, his back flat to the wall, his hand in his coat. He had passed two terms in prison, and always swore he would not pass a third.
The knock came again. Mr Ibbs said, 'All tidy? Now, be steady, boys, be steady. What do you say, Sue my dear, to opening that door?'
I looked again at Mrs Sucksby, and when she nodded, went and drew back the bolt; the door was flung so quick and hard against me, Phil thought it had been shouldered—I saw him brace himself against the wall, bring out his knife and lift it. But it was only the wind that made the door swing: it came in a rush into the kitchen, blowing half the candles out, making the brazier spark, and sending all my playing-cards flying. In the passage stood a man, dressed dark, wet through and dripping, and with a leather bag at his feet. The dim light showed his pale cheeks, his whiskers, but his eyes were quite hidden in the shadow of his hat. I should not have known him if he had not spoken. He said,
'Sue! Is it Sue? Thank God! I have come forty miles to see you. Will you keep me standing here? I am afraid the cold will kill me!'
Then I knew him, though I had not seen him for more than a year. Not one man in a hundred came to Lant Street speaking like him. His name was Richard Rivers, or Dick Rivers, or sometimes Richard Wells. We called him by another name, however; and it was that name I said now, when Mrs Sucksby saw me staring and called, 'Who is it, then?'
'It's Gentleman,' I said.
That is how we said it, of course: not how a proper gent would say it, using all his teeth on it; but as if the word were a fish and we had filleted it—Ge'mun.
'It's Gentleman,' I said; and Phil at once put his knife away, and spat, and went back to the brazier. Mrs Sucksby, however, turned in her chair, the baby twisting its scarlet face from her bosom and opening its mouth.
'Gentleman!' she cried. The baby started shrieking, and Charley Wag, let free by John, dashed barking to Gentleman and put his paws upon his coat. 'What a turn you gave us! Dainty, take a taper to them candles. Put the water on the fire, for a pot.'
'We thought you was the blues,' I said, as Gentleman came into the kitchen.
'I believe I am turned blue,' he answered. He set down his bag, and shivered, and took off his sodden hat and gloves and then his dripping greatcoat, which at once began to steam. He rubbed his hands together, then passed them over his head. He kept his hair and whiskers long and now, the rain having taken the kink from them, they seemed longer than ever, and dark, and sleek. There were rings at his fingers, and a watch, with a jewel on the chain, at his waistcoat. I knew without studying them that the rings and the

watch were snide, and the jewel a paste one; but they were damn fine counterfeits.
The room grew brighter as Dainty saw to the lights. Gentleman looked about him, still rubbing his hands together and nodding.
'How do you do, Mr Ibbs?' he called easily. 'How do you do, lads?'
Mr Ibbs said, 'Very well, my tulip.' The boys did not answer. Phil said, to no-one, 'Come in the back way, did he?'—and another boy laughed.
Boys like that always think that men like Gentleman are nancies.
John laughed too, but louder than the others. Gentleman looked at him. 'Hallo, you little tick,' he said. 'Lost your monkey?'
John's cheek being so sallow, everyone always took him for an Italian. Now, hearing Gentleman, he put his finger to his nose. 'You can kiss my arse,' he said.
'Can I?' said Gentleman, smiling. He winked at Dainty, and she ducked her head. 'Hallo, charmer,' he said. Then he stooped to Charley Wag, and pulled his ears. 'Hallo, you Wagster. Where's police? Hey? Where's police? See 'em off!' Charley Wag went wild.
'Good boy,' said Gentleman, rising, brushing off hairs. 'Good boy. That will do.'
Then he went and stood at Mrs Sucksby's chair.
'Hallo, Mrs S,' he said.
The baby, now, had had a dose of gin, and had cried itself quiet. Mrs Sucksby held out her hand. Gentleman caught it up and kissed it—first at the knuckles, and then at the tips. Mrs Sucksby said,
'Get up out of that chair, John, and let Gentleman sit down.'
John looked like thunder for a minute, then rose and took Dainty's stool. Gentleman sat, and spread his legs towards the fire. He was tall, and his legs were long. He was seven- or eight-and-twenty. Beside him, John looked about six.
Mrs Sucksby kept her eyes upon him while he yawned and rubbed his face. Then he met her gaze, and smiled.
'Well, well,' he said. 'How's business?'
'Pretty sweet,' she answered. The baby lay still, and she patted it as she had used to pat me. Gentleman nodded to it.
'And this little bud,' he said: 'is it farm, or is it family?'
'Farm, of course,' she said.
'A he-bud, or a she-bud?'
'A he-bud, bless his gums! Another poor motherless infant what I shall be bringing up by hand.'
Gentleman leaned towards her.
'Lucky boy!' he said, and winked.
Mrs Sucksby cried, 'Oh!' and turned pink as a rose. 'You sauce-box!'
Nancy or not, he could certainly make a lady blush.

We called him Gentleman, because he really was a gent—had been, he said, to a real gent's school, and had a father and a mother and a sister—all swells—whose heart he had just about broke. He had had money once, and lost it all gambling; his pa said he should never have another cent of the family fortune; and so he was obliged to get money the old-fashioned way, by thievery and dodging. He took to the life so well, however, we all said there must have been bad blood way back in that family, that had all come out in him.
He could be quite the painter when he chose, and had done a little work in the forgery line, at Paris; when that fell through, I think he spent a year putting French books into English—or English books into French—anyway, putting them slightly different each time, and pinning different titles on them, and so making one old story pass as twenty brand-new ones. Mostly, however, he worked as a confidence-man, and as a sharper at the grand casinos—for of course, he could mix with Society, and seem honest as the rest. The ladies especially would go quite wild for him. He had three times been nearly married to some rich heiress, but every time the father in the case had grown suspicious and the deal had fallen through. He had ruined many people by selling them stock from counterfeit banks. He was handsome as a plum, and Mrs Sucksby fairly doted on him. He came to Lant Street about once a year, bringing poke to Mr Ibbs, and picking up bad

coin, cautions, and tips.
I supposed he had come bringing poke with him, now; and so, it seemed, did Mrs Sucksby, for once he had grown warm again before the fire and Dainty had given him tea, with rum in it, she placed the sleeping baby back in its cradle and smoothed her skirt across her lap and said,
'Well now, Gentleman, this is a pleasure all right. We didn't look for you for another month or two. Have you something with you, as Mr Ibbs will like the look of?'
Gentleman shook his head. 'Nothing for Mr Ibbs, I am afraid.'
'What, nothing? Do you hear that, Mr Ibbs?'
'Very sad,' said Mr Ibbs, from his place at the brazier.
Mrs Sucksby grew confidential. 'Have you something, then, for me?'
But Gentleman shook his head again.
'Not for you, either, Mrs S,' he said. 'Not for you; not for Garibaldi here' (meaning John); 'not for Dainty, nor for Phil and the boys; nor even for Charley Wag.'
He said this, going all about the room with his eyes; and finally looking at me, and then saying nothing. I had taken up the scattered playing-cards, and was sorting them back into their suits. When I saw him gazing—and, besides him, John and Dainty, and Mrs Sucksby, still quite pink in the face, also looking my way—I put the cards down. He at once reached over and picked them up, and started shuffling. He was that kind of man, whose hands must always be busy.
'Well, Sue,' he said, his eyes still upon me. His eyes were a very clear blue.
'Well, what?' I answered.
'What do you say to this? It's you I've come for.'
'Her!' said John, in disgust.
Gentleman nodded. 'I have something for you. A proposal.'
'A proposal!' said Phil. He had overheard it. 'Look out, Sue, he only wants to marry you!'
Dainty screamed, and the boys all sniggered. Gentleman blinked, then took his eyes from me at last, and leaned to Mrs Sucksby to say,
'Get rid of our friends at the brazier, would you? But keep John and Dainty: I shall want their help.'
Mrs Sucksby hesitated, then glanced at Mr Ibbs; and Mr Ibbs said at once, 'Right, lads, these sovs is sweated so hard, the poor queen's quite a shadder. Any more of it, we shall be done for treason.' He took up a pail, and began to drop the hot coins into the water, one by one. 'Listen to them yellow boys cry hush!' he said. 'The gold knows best. Now, what does the gold know?'
'Go on, Uncle Humphry,' said Phil. He drew on his coat and turned up his collar. The other boys did the same. 'So long,' they said, with a nod to me, to John and Dainty and Mrs Sucksby. To Gentleman they said nothing. He watched them go by.
'Watch your back, lads!' he called, as the door was closed behind them. We heard Phil spit again.
Mr Ibbs turned the key in the lock. Then he came and poured himself a cup of tea—splashing rum in it, as Dainty had for Gentleman. The scent of the rum rose on the steam, to mix with the smell of the fire, the sweated gold, the dog-skins, the wet and steaming greatcoat. The rain fell softer upon the grate. John chewed on a peanut, picking shell from his tongue. Mr Ibbs had moved lamps. The table, our faces and hands, showed bright; but the rest of the room was in shadow.
For a minute, no-one spoke. Gentleman still worried the cards, and we sat and watched him. Mr Ibbs watched him hardest of all: his eye grew narrow, and he tilted his head—he might have been lining him up along the barrel of a gun.
'So, my son,' he said. 'What's the story?'
Gentleman looked up.
'The story,' he said. 'The story is this.' He took out a card, and laid it, face-up, on the table. It was the King of Diamonds. 'Imagine a man,' he said, as he did it. 'An old man—a wise man, in his own way—a gentleman scholar, in fact; but with curious habits. He lives in a certain out-of-the-way sort of house, near a certain out-of-the-way kind of village, some miles from London—never mind quite where, just now. He has a great room filled with books and prints, and cares for nothing but for them and for a work he is compiling—

let's call it, a dictionary. It is a dictionary of all his books; but he has hopes for the pictures, too—has taken a mind to having them bound in fancy albums. The handling of that, however, is more than he can manage. He places a notice in a newspaper: he needs the services of'—here he put down another card, next to the first: Jack of Spades—'a smart young man, to help him mount the collection; and one particular smart young man—being at that time rather too well known at the London gaming-houses, and highly desirous of a little light out-of-the-way sort of employment, bed and board provided—replies to the advertisement, is examined, and found fit.'
'The smart young man being yourself,' said Mr Ibbs.
'The smart young man being me. How you catch on!'
'And the crib in the country,' said John, taken up in Gentleman's story despite his sulks, 'let's say it's busting with treasure. And you mean to force the locks, on all the cabinets and chests. You have come to Mr Ibbs for a loan of nippers and a jilt; and you want Sue—with her innocent eyes, what looks like they ain't seen butter—for your canary.'
Gentleman tilted his head, drew in his breath and raised a finger, in a teasing sort of way. Then:
'Cold as ice!' he said. 'The crib in the country is a damnable place: two hundred years old, and dark, and draughty, and mortgaged to the roof—which is leaky, by the by. Not a rug or a vase or piece of plate worth forcing so much as a fart for, I'm afraid. The gent eats his supper off china, just like us.'
'The old hunks!' said John. 'But, tight-wads like that, they stash their money in the bank, don't they? And you have made him write a paper leaving all of it to you; and now you are here for a bottle of poison—'
Gentleman shook his head.
'Not a ounce of poison?' said John, looking hopeful.
'Not an ounce. Not a scruple. And no money in the bank—not in the old man's name, at least. He lives so quietly and so queerly, he scarcely knows what money's for. But there, do you see, he doesn't live alone. Look here, who he keeps for his companion . . .'
The Queen of Hearts.
'Heh, heh,' said John, growing sly. 'A wife, very game.'
But Gentleman shook his head again.
'A daughter, ditto?' said John.
'Not a wife. Not a daughter,' said Gentleman, with his eyes and his fingers on the Queen's unhappy face. 'A niece. In years,' he glanced at me, 'say Sue's years. In looks, say handsome. Of sense, understanding and knowledge,' he smiled, 'why, let's say perfectly shy.'
'A flat!' said John with relish. 'Tell me she's rich, at least.'
'She's rich, oh yes,' said Gentleman, nodding. 'But only as a caterpillar is rich in wings, or clover rich in honey. She's an heiress, Johnny: her fortune is certain, the uncle can't touch it; but it comes with a queer condition attached. She won't see a penny till the day she marries. If she dies a spinster, the money goes to a cousin. If she takes a husband,' he stroked the card with one white finger—'she's rich as a queen.'
'How rich?' said Mr Ibbs. He had not spoken, all this time. Gentleman heard him now, looked up, and held his gaze.
'Ten thousand in ready,' he said quietly. 'Five thousand in the funds.'
A coal in the fire went pop. John gave a whistle through his broken tooth, and Charley Wag barked. I glanced at Mrs Sucksby, but her head was bent and her look was dark. Mr Ibbs took a sip from his tea, in a considering way.
'I'll bet the old man keeps her close, don't he?' he said, when the tea was swallowed.
'Close enough,' said Gentleman, nodding, moving back. 'He's made a secretary of her, all these years—has her reading to him for hours at a stretch. I think he hardly knows she has grown up and turned into a lady.' He gave a secret sort of smile. 'I think she knows it, though. No sooner do I start work on the pictures than she discovers in herself a passion for painting. She wants lessons, with me as her master. Now, I know enough in that line to fake my way; and she, in her innocence, can't tell a pastel from a pig. But she takes to her instruction—oh, like anything. We have a week of lessons: I teach her lines, I teach her shadows. The second week goes by: we move from shadows to design. Third

week—blushing watercolours. Next, the blending of the oils. Fifth week—'
'Fifth week, you jiggles her!' said John.
Gentleman closed his eyes.
'Fifth week, our lessons are cancelled,' he said. 'Do you think a girl like that may sit in a room, with a gentleman tutor, alone? We have had her Irish maid sit with us, all this time—coughing and turning red in the face, every time my fingers stray too near her lady's, or my breath comes too warm upon her little white cheek. I thought her a marvellous prude; it turns out she had the scarlet fever—is at this moment dying of it, poor bitch. Now my lady has no chaperon but the housekeeper—and the housekeeper is too busy to sit at lessons. The lessons, therefore, must end, the paints are left to dry upon their palette. Now I only see Miss at supper, at her uncle's side; and sometimes, if I pass her chamber door, I hear her sighing.'
'And just,' said Mr Ibbs, 'as you was getting on so nicely.'
'Just so,' said Gentleman. 'Just so.'
'Poor lady!' said Dainty. Her eyes had tears in them. She could cry at anything. 'And her quite a peach, you say? About the figure and the face?'
Gentleman looked careless. 'She can fill a man's eye, I suppose,' he said, with a shrug.
John laughed. 'I should like to fill her eye!'
'I should like to fill yours,' said Gentleman, steadily. Then he blinked. 'With my fist, I mean.'
John's cheek grew dark, and he jumped to his feet. 'I should like to see you try it!'
Mr Ibbs lifted his hands. 'Boys! Boys! That's enough! I won't have it, before ladies and kids! John, sit down and stop fucking about. Gentleman, you promised us your story; what we've had so far has been so much pastry. Where's the meat, son? Where's the meat? And, more to our point, how is Susie to help cook it?'
John kicked the leg of his stool, then sat. Gentleman had taken out a packet of cigarettes. We waited, while he found a match and struck it. We watched the flare of the sulphur in his eyes. Then he leaned to the table again and touched the three cards he had laid there, putting straight their edges.
'You want the meat,' he said. 'Very well, here it is.' He tapped the Queen of Hearts. 'I aim to marry this girl and take her fortune. I aim to steal her'—he slid the card to one side—'from under her uncle's nose. I am in a fair way to doing it already, as you have heard; but she's a queer sort of girl, and can't be trusted to herself—and should she take some clever, hard woman for her new servant, why then I'm ruined. I have come to London to collect a set of bindings for the old man's albums. I want to send Sue back before me. I want to set her up there as the lady's maid, so that she might help me woo her.'
He caught my eye. He still played idly with the card, with one pale hand. Now he lowered his voice.
'And there's something else,' he said, 'that I shall need Sue's help with. Once I have married this girl, I shan't want her about me. I know a man who will take her off my hands. He has a house, where he'll keep her. It's a madhouse. He'll keep her close. So close, perhaps . . .' He did not finish, but turned the card face down, and kept his fingers on its back. 'I must only marry her,' he said, 'and—as Johnny would say—I must jiggle her, once, for the sake of the cash. Then I'll take her, unsuspecting, to the madhouse gates. Where's the harm? Haven't I said, she's half-simple already? But I want to be sure. I shall need Sue by her to keep her simple; and to persuade her, in her simpleness, into the plot.'
He drew again upon his cigarette and, as they had before, everyone turned their eyes on me. Everyone that is, save Mrs Sucksby. She had listened, saying nothing, while Gentleman spoke. I had watched her pour a little of her tea out of her cup into her saucer, then swill it about the china and finally raise it to her mouth, while the story went on. She could never bear hot tea, she said it hardened the lips. And certainly, I don't believe I ever knew a grown-up woman with lips as soft as hers.
Now, in the silence, she put her cup and saucer down, then drew out her handkerchief and wiped her mouth. She looked at Gentleman, and finally spoke.
'Why Sue,' she said, 'of all the girls in England? Why my Sue?'
'Because she is yours, Mrs S,' he answered. 'Because I trust her; because she's a good

girl—which is to say, a bad girl, not too nice about the fine points of the law.'
She nodded. 'And how do you mean,' she asked next, 'to cut the shine?'
Again he looked at me; but he still spoke to her.
'She shall have two thousand pounds,' he said, smoothing his whiskers; 'and shall take any of the little lady's bits and frocks and jewels that she likes.'
That was the deal.
We thought it over.
'What do you say?' he said at last—to me, this time. And then, when I did not answer: 'I am sorry,' he said, 'to spring this upon you; but you can see the little time I have had to act in. I must get a girl soon. I should like it to be you, Sue. I should like it to be you, more than anyone. But if it is not to be, then tell me quickly, will you?—so I might find out another.'
'Dainty will do it,' said John, when he heard that. 'Dainty was a maid once—wasn't you, Daint?—for a lady in a great house at Peckham.'
'As I recall,' said Mr Ibbs, drinking his tea, 'Dainty lost that place through putting a hat-pin to the lady's arm.'
'She was a bitch to me,' said Dainty, 'and got my dander up. This girl don't sound like a bitch. She's a flat, you said so. I could maid for a flat.'
'It was Sue that was asked,' said Mrs Sucksby quietly. 'And she still ain't said.'
Then, again they all looked at me; and their eyes made me nervous. I turned my head. 'I don't know,' I said. 'It seems a rum sort of plot to me. Set me up, as maid to a lady? How shall I know what to do?'
'We can teach you,' said Gentleman. 'Dainty can teach you, since she knows the business. How hard can it be? You must only sit and simper, and hold the lady's salts.'
I said, 'Suppose the lady won't want me for her maid? Why should she want me?'
But he had thought of that. He had thought of everything. He said he meant to pass me off as his old nurse's sister's child—a city girl come on hard times. He said he thought the lady would take me then, for his sake.
He said, 'We'll write you a character—sign it Lady Fanny of Bum Street, something like that—she won't know any better. She never saw Society, doesn't know London from Jerusalem. Who can she ask?'
'I don't know,' I said again. 'Suppose she don't care for you, so much as you are hoping?'
He grew modest. 'Well,' he said, 'I think I might be permitted by now, to know when a green girl likes me.'
'Suppose,' said Mrs Sucksby then, 'she don't like you quite enough? Suppose she turns out another Miss Bamber or Miss Finch?'
Miss Bamber and Miss Finch were two of the other heiresses he had almost netted. But he heard their names, and snorted. 'She won't,' he said, 'turn out like them, I know it. Those girls had fathers—ambitious fathers, with lawyers on every side. This girl's uncle can see no further than the last page of his book. As to her not liking me enough—well, I can only say this: I think she will.'
'Enough to do a flit, from her uncle's house?'
'It's a grim house,' he answered, 'for a girl of her years.'
'But it's the years that will work against you,' said Mr Ibbs. You picked up bits and pieces of Law, of course, in a line like his. 'Till she is one-and-twenty, she shall need her uncle's say. Take her as fast and as quiet as you like: he shall come and take her back again. You being her husband won't count for buttons, then.'
'But her being my wife, will.—If you understand me,' said Gentleman slyly.
Dainty looked blank. John saw her face. 'The jiggling,' he said.
'She shall be ruined,' said Mrs Sucksby. 'No other gent will want her, then.'
Dainty gaped more than ever.
'Never mind it,' said Mr Ibbs, lifting his hand. Then, to Gentleman: 'It's tricky. Uncommonly tricky.'
'I don't say it's not. But we must take our chances. What have we to lose? If nothing else, it will be a holiday for Sue.'
John laughed. 'A holiday,' he said, 'it will be. A fucking long one, if you get caught.'
I bit my lip. He was right. But it wasn't so much the risk that troubled me. You cannot be a

thief and always troubling over hazards, you should go mad. It was only that, I was not sure I wanted any kind of holiday. I was not sure I cared for it away from the Borough. I had once gone with Mrs Sucksby to visit her cousin in Bromley; I had come home with hives. I remembered the country as quiet and queer, and the people in it either simpletons or gipsies.
How would I like living with a simpleton girl? She would not be like Dainty, who was only slightly touched and only sometimes violent. She might be really mad. She might try and throttle me; and there would be no-one about, for miles and miles, to hear me calling. Gipsies would be no use, they were all for themselves. Everyone knows a gipsy would not cross the street to spit on you, if you were on fire.
I said, 'This girl—what's she like? You said she's queer in her head.'
'Not queer,' said Gentleman. 'Only what I should call fey. She's an innocent, a natural. She has been kept from the world. She's an orphan, like you are; but where you had Mrs Sucksby to sharpen you up, she had—no-one.'
Dainty looked at him then. Her mother had been a drunkard, and got drowned in the river. Her father had used to beat her. He beat her sister till she died. She said, in a whisper:
'Ain't it terribly wicked, Gentleman, what you mean to do?'
I don't believe any of us had thought it, before that moment. Now Dainty said it, and I gazed about me, and nobody would catch my eye.
Then Gentleman laughed.
'Wicked?' he said. 'Why, bless you, Dainty, of course it's wicked! But it's wicked to the tune of fifteen thousand pounds—and oh! but that's a sweet tune, hum it how you will. Then again, do you suppose that when that money was first got, it was got honestly? Don't think it! Money never is. It is got, by families like hers, from the backs of the poor—twenty backs broken for every shilling made. You have heard, have you, of Robin Hood?'
'Have I!' she said.
'Well, Sue and I shall be like him: taking gold from the rich and passing it back to the people it was got from.'
John curled his lip. 'You ponce,' he said. 'Robin Hood was a hero, a man of wax. Pass the money to the people? What people are yours! You want to rob a lady, go and rob your own mother.'
'My mother?' answered Gentleman, colouring up. 'What's my mother to do with anything? Hang my mother!' Then he caught Mrs Sucksby's eye, and turned to me. 'Oh, Sue,' he said. 'I do beg your pardon.'
'It's all right,' I said quickly. And I gazed at the table, and again everyone grew quiet. Perhaps they were all thinking, as they did on hanging days, 'Ain't she brave?' I hoped they were. Then again, I hoped they weren't: for, as I have said, I never was brave, but had got away with people supposing I was, for seventeen years. Now here was Gentleman, needing a bold girl and coming—forty miles, he had said, in all that cold and slippery weather—to me.
I raised my eyes to his.
'Two thousand pounds, Sue,' he said quietly.
'That'll shine very bright, all right,' said Mr Ibbs.
'And all them frocks and jewels!' said Dainty. 'Oh, Sue! Shouldn't you look handsome, in them!'
'You should look like a lady,' said Mrs Sucksby; and I heard her, and caught her gaze, and knew she was looking at me—as she had, so many times before—and was seeing, behind my face, my mother's. Your fortune's still to be made.—I could almost hear her saying it. Your fortune's still to be made; and ours, Sue, along with it . . .
And after all, she had been right. Here was my fortune, come from nowhere—come, at last. What could I say? I looked again at Gentleman. My heart beat hard, like hammers in my breast. I said:
'All right. I'll do it. But for three thousand pounds, not two. And if the lady don't care for me and sends me home, I shall want a hundred anyway, for the trouble of trying.'
He hesitated, thinking it over. Of course, that was all a show. After a second he smiled, then he held his hand to me and I gave him mine. He pressed my fingers, and laughed.

John scowled. ‘I’ll give you ten to one she comes back crying in a week,’ he said.
‘I’ll come back dressed in a velvet gown,’ I answered. ‘With gloves up to here, and a hat with a veil on, and a bag full of silver coin. And you shall have to call me miss. Won’t he, Mrs Sucksby?’
He spat. ‘I’ll tear my own tongue out, before I do that!’
‘I’ll tear it out first!’ I said.
I sound like a child. I was a child! Perhaps Mrs Sucksby was thinking that, too. For she said nothing, only sat, still gazing at me, with her hand at her soft lip. She smiled; but her face seemed troubled. I could almost have said, she was afraid.
Perhaps she was.
Or perhaps I only think that now, when I know what dark and fearful things were to follow.
2.
The bookish old man, it turned out, was called Christopher Lilly. The niece’s name was Maud. They lived west of London, out Maidenhead-way, near a village named Marlow, and in a house they called Briar. Gentleman’s plan was to send me there alone, by train, in two days’ time. He himself, he said, must stay in London for another week at least, to do the old man’s business over the bindings of his books.
I didn’t care much for the detail of my travelling down there, and arriving at the house, all on my own. I had never been much further west before than the Cremorne Gardens, where I sometimes went with Mr Ibbs’s nephews, to watch the dancing on a Saturday night. I saw the French girl cross the river on a wire from there, and almost drop—that was something. They say she wore stockings; her legs looked bare enough to me, though. But I recall standing on Battersea Bridge as she walked her rope, and looking out, past Hammersmith, to all the countryside beyond it, that was just trees and hills and not a chimney or the spire of a church in sight—and oh! that was a very chilling thing to see. If you had said to me then, that I would one day leave the Borough, with all my pals in it, and Mrs Sucksby and Mr Ibbs, and go quite alone, to a maid’s place in a house the other side of those dark hills, I should have laughed in your face.
But Gentleman said I must go soon, in case the lady—Miss Lilly—should spoil our plot, by accidentally taking another girl to be her servant. The day after he came to Lant Street he sat and wrote her out a letter. He said he hoped she would pardon the liberty of his writing, but he had been on a visit to his old nurse—that had been like a mother to him, when he was a boy—and he had found her quite demented with grief, over the fate of her dead sister’s daughter. Of course, the dead sister’s daughter was meant to be me: the story was, that I had been maiding for a lady who was marrying and heading off for India, and had lost my place; that I was looking out for another mistress, but was meanwhile being tempted on every side to go to the bad; and that if only some soft-hearted lady would give me the chance of a situation far away from the evils of the city—and so on.
I said, ‘If she’ll believe bouncers like those, Gentleman, she must be even sillier than you first told us.’
But he answered, that there were about a hundred girls between the Strand and Piccadilly, who dined very handsomely off that story, five nights a week; and if the hard swells of London could be separated from their shillings by it, then how much kinder wasn’t Miss Maud Lilly likely to be, all alone and unknowing and sad as she was, and with no-one to tell her any better?
‘You’ll see,’ he said. And he sealed the letter and wrote the direction, and had one of our neighbours’ boys run with it to the post.
Then, so sure was he of the success of his plan, he said they must begin at once to teach me how a proper lady’s maid should be.
First, they washed my hair. I wore my hair then, like lots of the Borough girls wore theirs, divided in three, with a comb at the back and, at the sides, a few fat curls. If you turned the curls with a very hot iron, having first made the hair wet with sugar-and-water, you could make them hard as anything; they would last for a week like that, or longer.
Gentleman, however, said he thought the style too fast for a country lady: he made me wash my hair till it was perfectly smooth, then had me divide it once—just the once—then pin it in a plain knot at the back of my head. He had Dainty wash her hair, too, and when I had combed and re-combed mine, and pinned and re-pinned it, until he was satisfied, he

made me comb and pin hers in a matching style, as if hers was the lady's, Miss Lilly's. He fussed about us like a regular girl. When we had finished, Dainty and I looked that plain and bacon-faced, we might have been trying for places in a nunnery. John said if they would only put pictures of us in the dairies, it would be a new way of curdling milk. When Dainty heard that she pulled the pins from her hair and threw them at the fire. Some had hair still clinging to them, and the flames set it hissing.

'Can't you do anything to that girl of yours,' said Mr Ibbs to John, 'but make her cry?'

John laughed. 'I likes to see her cry,' he said. 'It makes her sweat the less.'

He was an evil boy, all right.

But he was quite caught up in Gentleman's plot, despite himself. We all were. For the first time I ever knew, Mr Ibbs kept the blind pulled down on his shop door and let his brazier go cold. When people came knocking with keys to be cut, he sent them away. To the two or three thieves that brought poke, he shook his head.

'Can't do it, my son. Not to-day. Got a little something cooking.'

He only had Phil come, early in the morning. He sat him down and ran him through the points of a list that Gentleman had drawn up the night before; then Phil pulled his cap down over his eyes, and left. When he came back two hours later it was with a bag and a canvas-covered trunk, that he had got from a man he knew, who ran a crooked warehouse at the river.

The trunk was for me to take to the country. In the bag was a brown stuff dress, more or less my size; and a cloak, and shoes, and black silk stockings; and on top of it all, a heap of lady's real white underthings.

Mr Ibbs only undid the string at the neck of the bag, peeped in, and saw the linen; then he went and sat at the far side of the kitchen, where he had a Bramah lock he liked sometimes to take apart, and powder, and put back together. He made John go with him and hold the screws. Gentleman, however, took out the lady's items one by one, and placed them flat upon the table. Beside the table he set a kitchen chair.

'Now, Sue,' he said, 'suppose this chair's Miss Lilly. How shall you dress her? Let's say you start with the stockings and drawers.'

'The drawers?' I said. 'You don't mean, she's naked?'

Dainty put her hand to her mouth and tittered. She was sitting at Mrs Sucksby's feet, having her hair re-curled.

'Naked?' said Gentleman. 'Why, as a nail. What else? She must take off her clothes when they grow foul; she must take them off to bathe. It will be your job to receive them when she does. It will be your job to pass her her fresh ones.'

I had not thought of this. I wondered how it would be to have to stand and hand a pair of drawers to a strange bare girl. A strange bare girl had once run, shrieking, down Lant Street, with a policeman and a nurse behind her. Suppose Miss Lilly took fright like that, and I had to grab her? I blushed, and Gentleman saw. 'Come now,' he said, almost smiling. 'Don't say you're squeamish?'

I tossed my head, to show I wasn't. He nodded, then took up a pair of the stockings, and then a pair of drawers. He placed them, dangling, over the seat of the kitchen chair.

'What next?' he asked me.

I shrugged. 'Her shimmy, I suppose.'

'Her chemise, you must call it,' he said. 'And you must make sure to warm it, before she puts it on.'

He took the shimmy up and held it close to the kitchen fire. Then he put it carefully above the drawers, over the back of the chair, as if the chair was wearing it.

'Now, her corset,' he said next. 'She will want you to tie this for her, tight as you like. Come on, let's see you do it.'

He put the corset about the shimmy, with the laces at the back; and while he leaned upon the chair to hold it fast, he made me pull the laces and knot them in a bow. They left lines of red and white upon my palms, as if I had been whipped.

'Why don't she wear the kind of stays that fasten at the front, like a regular girl?' said Dainty, watching.

'Because then,' said Gentleman, 'she shouldn't need a maid. And if she didn't need a maid, she shouldn't know she was a lady. Hey?' He winked.

After the corset came a camisole, and after that a dicky; then came a nine-hoop crinoline, and then more petticoats, this time of silk. Then Gentleman had Dainty run upstairs for a bottle of Mrs Sucksby's scent, and he had me spray it where the splintered wood of the chair-back showed between the ribbons of the shimmy, that he said would be Miss Lilly's throat.
And all the time I must say:
'Will you raise your arms, miss, for me to straighten this frill?' and,
'Do you care for it, miss, with a ruffle or a flounce?' and,
'Are you ready for it now, miss?'
'Do you like it drawn tight?'
'Should you like it to be tighter?'
'Oh! Forgive me if I pinch.'

At last, with all the bending and the fussing, I grew hot as a pig. Miss Lilly sat before us with her corset tied hard, her petticoats spread out about the floor, smelling fresh as a rose; but rather wanting, of course, about the shoulders and the neck.
John said, 'Don't say much, do she?' He had been sneaking glances at us all this time, while Mr Ibbs put the powder to his Bramah.
'She's a lady,' said Gentleman, stroking his beard, 'and naturally shy. But she'll pick up like anything, with Sue and me to teach her. Won't you, darling?'
He squatted at the side of the chair and smoothed his fingers over the bulging skirts; then he dipped his hand beneath them, reaching high into the layers of silk. He did it so neatly, it looked to me as if he knew his way, all right; and as he reached higher his cheek grew pink, the silk gave a rustle, the crinoline bucked, the chair quivered hard upon the kitchen floor, the joints of its legs faintly shrieking. Then it was still.
'There, you sweet little bitch,' he said softly. He drew out his hand and held up a stocking. He passed it to me, and yawned. 'Now, let's say it's bed-time.'
John still watched us, saying nothing, only blinking and jiggling his leg. Dainty rubbed her eye, her hair half curled, smelling powerfully of toffee.
I began at the ribbons at the waist of the dickies, then let loose the laces of the corset and eased it free.
'Will you just lift your foot, miss, for me to take this from you?'
'Will you breathe a little softer, miss-and then it will come.'

He kept me working like that for an hour or more. Then he warmed up a flat-iron.
'Spit on this, will you, Dainty?' he said, holding it to her. She did; and when the spit gave a sizzle he took out a cigarette, and lit it on the iron's hot base. Then, while he stood by and smoked, Mrs Sucksby—who had once, long ago, in the days before she ever thought of farming infants, been a mangling-woman in a laundry—showed me how a lady's linen should be pressed and folded; and that, I should say, took about another hour.
Then Gentleman sent me upstairs, to put on the dress that Phil had got for me. It was a plain brown dress, more or less the colour of my hair; and the walls of our kitchen being also brown, when I came downstairs again I could hardly be seen. I should have rathered a blue gown, or a violet one; but Gentleman said it was the perfect dress for a sneak or for a servant—and so all the more perfect for me, who was going to Briar to be both.
We laughed at that; and then, when I had walked about the room to grow used to the skirt (which was narrow), and to let Dainty see where the cut was too large and needed stitching, he had me stand and try a curtsey. This was harder than it sounds. Say what you like about the kind of life I was used to, it was a life without masters: I had never curtseyed before to anyone. Now Gentleman had me dipping up and down until I thought I should be sick. He said curtseying came as natural to ladies' maids, as passing wind. He said if I would only get the trick, I should never forget it—and he was right about that, at least, for I can still dip a proper curtsey, even now.—Or could, if I cared to.
Well. When we had finished with the curtseys he had me learn my story. Then, to test me, he made me stand before him and repeat my part, like a girl saying a catechism.
'Now then,' he said. 'What is your name?'

‘Ain’t it Susan?’ I said.
‘Ain’t it Susan, what?’
‘Ain’t it Susan Trinder?’
‘Ain’t it Susan, sir. You must remember, I shan’t be Gentleman to you at Briar. I shall be Mr Richard Rivers. You must call me sir; and you must call Mr Lilly sir; and the lady you must call miss or Miss Lilly or Miss Maud, as she directs you. And we shall all call you Susan.’ He frowned. ‘But, not Susan Trinder. That may lead them back to Lant Street if things go wrong. We must find you a better second name—’
‘Valentine,’ I said, straight off. What can I tell you? I was only seventeen. I had a weakness for hearts. Gentleman heard me, and curled his lip.
‘Perfect,’ he said; ‘—if we were about to put you on the stage.’
‘I know real girls named Valentine!’ I said.
‘That’s true,’ said Dainty. ‘Floy Valentine, and her two sisters. Lord, I hates those girls though. You don’t want to be named for them, Sue.’
I bit my finger. ‘Maybe not.’
‘Certainly not,’ said Gentleman. ‘A fanciful name might ruin us. This is a life-and-death business. We need a name that will hide you, not bring you to everyone’s notice. We need a name’—he thought it over—‘an untraceable name, yet one we shall remember . . . Brown? To match your dress? Or—yes, why not? Let’s make it, Smith. Susan Smith.’
He smiled. ‘You are to be a sort of smith, after all. This sort, I mean.’
He let his hand drop, and turned it, and crooked his middle finger; and the sign, and the word he meant—fingersmith—being Borough code for thief, we laughed again.
At last he coughed, and wiped his eyes. ‘Dear me, what fun,’ he said. ‘Now, where had we got to? Ah, yes. Tell me again. What is your name?’
I said it, with the sir after.
‘Very good. And what is your home?’
‘My home is at London, sir,’ I said. ‘My mother being dead, I live with my old aunty; which is the lady what used to be your nurse when you was a boy, sir.’
He nodded. ‘Very good as to detail. Not so good, however, as to style. Come now: I know Mrs Sucksby raised you better than that. You’re not selling violets. Say it again.’
I pulled a face; but then said, more carefully,
‘The lady that used to be your nurse when you were a boy, sir.’
‘Better, better. And what was your situation, before this?’
‘With a kind lady, sir, in Mayfair; who, being lately married and about to go to India, will have a native girl to dress her, and so won’t need me.’
‘Dear me. You are to be pitied, Sue.’
‘I believe so, sir.’
‘And are you grateful to Miss Lilly, for having you at Briar?’
‘Oh, sir! Gratitude ain’t in it!’
‘Violets again!’ He waved his hand. ‘Never mind, that will do. But don’t hold my gaze so boldly, will you? Look, rather, at my shoe. That’s good. Now, tell me this. This is important. What are your duties while attending your new mistress?’
‘I must wake her in the mornings,’ I said, ‘and pour out her tea. I must wash her, and dress her, and brush her hair. I must keep her jewellery neat, and not steal it. I must walk with her when she has a fancy to walk, and sit when she fancies sitting. I must carry her fan for when she grows too hot, her wrap for when she feels nippy, her eau-de-Cologne for if she gets the head-ache, and her salts for when she comes over queer. I must be her chaperon for her drawing-lessons, and not see when she blushes.’
‘Splendid! And what is your character?’
‘Honest as the day.’
‘And what is your object, that no-one but we must know?’
‘That she will love you, and leave her uncle for your sake. That she will make your fortune; and that you, Mr Rivers, will make mine.’
I took hold of my skirts and showed him one of those smooth curtseys, my eyes all the time on the toe of his boot.
Dainty clapped me. Mrs Sucksby rubbed her hands together and said,
‘Three thousand pounds, Sue. Oh, my crikey! Dainty, pass me an infant, I want

something to squeeze.'
Gentleman stepped aside and lit a cigarette. 'Not bad,' he said. 'Not bad, at all. A little fining down, I think, is all that's needed now. We shall try again later.'
'Later?' I said. 'Oh, Gentleman, ain't you finished with me yet? If Miss Lilly will have me as her maid for the sake of pleasing you, why should she care how fined down I am?'
'She may not mind,' he answered. 'I think we might put an apron on Charley Wag and send him, for all she will mind or wonder. But it is not only her that you will have to fool. There is the old man, her uncle; and besides him, all his staff.'
I said, 'His staff?' I had not thought of this.
'Of course,' he said. 'Do you think a great house runs itself? First of all there's the steward, Mr Way—'
'Mr Way!' said John with a snort. 'Do they call him Milky?'
'No,' said Gentleman. He turned back to me. 'Mr Way,' he said again. 'I should say he won't trouble you much, though. But there is also Mrs Stiles, the housekeeper—she may study you a little harder, you must be careful with her. And then there is Mr Way's boy Charles, and I suppose one or two girls, for the kitchen work; and one or two parlourmaids; and grooms and stable-boys and gardeners—but you shan't see much of them, don't think of them.'
I looked at him in horror. I said, 'You never said about them before. Mrs Sucksby, did he say about them? Did he say, there will be about a hundred servants, that I shall have to play the maid for?'
Mrs Sucksby had a baby and was rolling it like dough. 'Be fair now, Gentleman, ' she said, not looking over. 'You did keep very dark about the servants last night.'
He shrugged. 'A detail,' he said.
A detail? That was like him. Telling you half of a story and making out you had it all.
But it was too late now, for a change of heart. The next day Gentleman worked me hard again; and the day after that he got a letter, from Miss Lilly.
He got it at the post-office in the City. Our neighbours would have wondered what was up, if we'd had a letter come to the house. He got it, and brought it back, and opened it while we looked on; then we sat in silence, to hear it—Mr Ibbs only drumming his fingers a little on the table-top, by which I knew that he was nervous; and so grew more nervous myself.
The letter was a short one. Miss Lilly said, first, what a pleasure it was, to have received Mr Rivers's note; and how thoughtful he was, and how kind to his old nurse. She was sure, she wished more gentlemen were as kind and as thoughtful as him!
Her uncle got on very badly, she said, now his assistant was gone. The house seemed very changed and quiet and dull; perhaps this was the weather, which seemed to have turned. As for her maid—Here Gentleman tilted the letter, the better to catch the light.—As for her maid, poor Agnes: she was pleased to be able to tell him that Agnes looked set not to die after all—
We heard that and drew in our breaths. Mrs Sucksby closed her eyes, and I saw Mr Ibbs give a glance at his cold brazier and reckon up the business he had lost in the past two days. But then Gentleman smiled. The maid was not about to die; but her health was so ruined and her spirits so low, they were sending her back to Cork.
'God bless the Irish!' said Mr Ibbs, taking out his handkerchief and wiping his head.
Gentleman read on.
'I shall be glad to see the girl you speak of,' Miss Lilly wrote. 'I should be glad if you would send her to me, at once. I am grateful to anyone for remembering me. I am not over-used to people thinking of my comforts. If she be only a good and willing girl, then I am sure I shall love her. And she will be the dearer to me, Mr Rivers, because she will have come to me from London, that has you in it.'
He smiled again, raised the letter to his mouth, and passed it back and forth across his lips. His snide ring glittered in the light of the lamps.
It had all turned out, of course, just as the clever devil had promised.
That night—that was to be my last night at Lant Street, and the first night of all the nights that were meant to lead to Gentleman's securing of Miss Lilly's fortune—that night Mr Ibbs sent out for a hot roast supper, and put irons to heat in the fire, for making flip, in

celebration.
The supper was a pig's head, stuffed at the ears—a favourite of mine, and got in my honour. Mr Ibbs took the carving-knife to the back-door step, put up his sleeves, and stooped to sharpen the blade. He leaned with his hand on the door-post, and I watched him do it with a queer sensation at the roots of my hair: for all up the post were cuts from where, each Christmas Day when I was a girl, he had laid the knife upon my head to see how high I'd grown. Now he drew the blade back and forth across the stone, until it sang; then he handed it to Mrs Sucksby and she dished out the meat. She always carved, in our house. An ear apiece, for Mr Ibbs and Gentleman; the snout for John and Dainty; and the cheeks, that were the tenderest parts, for herself and for me.
It was all got, as I've said, in my honour. But, I don't know—perhaps it was seeing the marks on the door-post; perhaps it was thinking of the soup that Mrs Sucksby would make, when I wouldn't be there to eat it, with the bones of the roast pig's head; perhaps it was the head itself—which seemed to me to be grimacing, rather, the lashes of its eyes and the bristles of its snout gummed brown with treacly tears—but as we sat about the table, I grew sad. John and Dainty wolfed their dinner down, laughing and quarrelling, now and then firing up when Gentleman teased, and now and then sulking. Mr Ibbs went neatly to work on his plate, and Mrs Sucksby went neatly to work on hers; and I picked over my bit of pork and had no appetite.
I gave half to Dainty. She gave it to John. He snapped his jaws and howled, like a dog.
And then, when the plates were cleared away Mr Ibbs beat the eggs and the sugar and the rum, to make flip. He filled seven glasses, took the irons from the brazier, waved them for a second to take the sting of the heat off, then plunged them in. Heating the flip was like setting fire to the brandy on a plum pudding—everyone liked to see it done and hear the drinks go hiss. John said, 'Can I do one, Mr Ibbs?'—his face red from the supper, and shiny like paint, like the face of a boy in a picture in a toy-shop window.
We sat, and everyone talked and laughed, saying what a fine thing it would be when Gentleman was made rich, and I came home with my cool three thousand; and still I kept rather quiet, and no-one seemed to notice. At last Mrs Sucksby patted her stomach and said,
'Won't you give us a tune, Mr Ibbs, to put the baby to bed by?'
Mr Ibbs could whistle like a kettle, for an hour at a go. He put his glass aside and wiped the flip from his moustache, and started up with 'The Tarpaulin Jacket'. Mrs Sucksby hummed along until her eyes grew damp, and then the hum got broken. Her husband had been a sailor, and been lost at sea.—Lost to her, I mean. He lived in the Bermudas.
'Handsome,' she said, when the song was finished. 'But let's have a lively one next, for heaven's sake!—else I shall be drove quite maudlin. Let's see the youngsters have a bit of a dance.'
Mr Ibbs struck up with a quick tune then, and Mrs Sucksby clapped, and John and Dainty got up and pushed the chairs back. 'Will you hold my earrings for me, Mrs Sucksby?' said Dainty. They danced the polka until the china ornaments upon the mantelpiece jumped and the dust rose inches high about their thumping feet. Gentleman stood and leaned and watched them, smoking a cigarette, calling 'Hup!' and 'Go it, Johnny!', as he might call, laughing, to a terrier in a fight he had no bet on.
When they asked me to join them, I said I would not. The dust made me sneeze and, after all, the iron that had warmed my flip had been heated too hard, and the egg had curdled. Mrs Sucksby had put by a glass and a plate of morsels of meat for Mr Ibbs's sister, and I said I would carry them up.—'All right, dear girl,' she said, still clapping out the beat. I took the plate and the glass and a candle, and slipped upstairs.
It was like stepping out of heaven, I always thought, to leave our kitchen on a winter's night. Even so, when I had left the food beside Mr Ibbs's sleeping sister and seen to one or two of the babies, that had woken with the sounds of the dancing below, I did not go back to join the others. I walked the little way along the landing, to the door of the room I shared with Mrs Sucksby; and then I went up the next pair of stairs, to the little attic I had been born in.
This room was always cold. Tonight there was a breeze up, the window was loose, and it was colder than ever. The floor was plain boards, with strips of drugget on it. The walls

were bare, but for a bit of blue oil-cloth that had been tacked to catch the splashes from a wash-stand. The stand, at the moment, was draped with a waistcoat and a shirt, of Gentleman's, and one or two collars. He always slept here, when he came to visit; though he might have made a bed with Mr Ibbs, down in the kitchen. I know which place I would have chosen. On the floor sagged his high leather boots, that he had scraped the mud from and shined. Beside them was his bag, with more white linen spilling from it. On the seat of a chair were some coins from his pocket, a packet of cigarettes, and sealing-wax. The coins were light. The wax was brittle, like toffee.

The bed was roughly made. There was a red velvet curtain upon it, with the rings taken off, for a counterpane: it had been got from a burning house, and still smelt of cinders. I took it up and put it about my shoulders, like a cloak. Then I pinched out the flame of my candle and stood at the window, shivering, looking out at the roofs and chimneys, and at the Horsemonger Lane Gaol where my mother was hanged.

The glass of the window had the first few blooms of a new frost upon it, and I held my finger to it, to make the ice turn to dirty water. I could still catch Mr Ibbs's whistle and the bounce of Dainty's feet, but before me the streets of the Borough were dark. There was only here and there a feeble light at a window like mine, and then the lantern of a coach, throwing shadows; and then a person, running hard against the cold, quick and dark as the shadows, and as quickly come and gone. I thought of all the thieves that must be there, and all the thieves' children; and then of all the regular men and women who lived their lives—their strange and ordinary lives—in other houses, other streets, in the brighter parts of London. I thought of Maud Lilly, in her great house. She did not know my name—I had not known hers, three days before. She did not know that I was standing, plotting her ruin, while Dainty Warren and John Vroom danced a polka in my kitchen.

What was she like? I knew a girl named Maud once, she had half a lip. She used to like to make out that the other half had been lost in a fight; I knew for a fact, however, she had been born like that, she couldn't fight putty. She died in the end—not from fighting, but through eating bad meat. Just one bit of bad meat killed her, just like that.

But, she was very dark. Gentleman had said that the other Maud, his Maud, was fair and rather handsome. But when I thought of her, I could picture her only as thin and brown and straight, like the kitchen chair that I had tied the corset to.

I tried another curtsey. The velvet curtain made me clumsy. I tried again. I began to sweat, in sudden fear.

Then there came the opening of the kitchen door and the sound of footsteps on the stair, and then Mrs Sucksby's voice, calling for me. I didn't answer. I heard her walk to the bedrooms below, and look for me there; then there was a silence, then her feet again, upon the attic stairs, and then came the light of her candle. The climb made her sigh a little—only a little, for she was very nimble, for all that she was rather stout.

'Are you here then, Sue?' she said quietly. 'And all on your own, in the dark?'

She looked about her, at all that I had looked at—at the coins and the sealing-wax, and Gentleman's boots and leather bag. Then she came to me, and put her warm, dry hand to my cheek, and I said—just as if she had tickled or pinched me, and the words were a chuckle or a cry I could not stop—I said:

'What if I ain't up to it, Mrs Sucksby? What if I can't do it? Suppose I lose my nerve and let you down? Hadn't we ought to send Dainty, after all?'

She shook her head and smiled. 'Now, then,' she said. She led me to the bed, and we sat and she drew down my head until it rested in her lap, and she put back the curtain from my cheek and stroked my hair. 'Now, then.'

'Ain't it a long way to go?' I said, looking up at her face.

'Not so far,' she answered.

'Shall you think of me, while I am there?'

She drew free a strand of hair that was caught about my ear.

'Every minute,' she said, quietly. 'Ain't you my own girl? And won't I worry? But you shall have Gentleman by you. I should never have let you go, for any ordinary villain.'

That was true, at least. But still my heart beat fast. I thought again of Maud Lilly, sitting sighing in her room, waiting for me to come and unlace her stays and hold her nightgown before the fire. Poor lady, Dainty had said.

I chewed at the inside of my lip. Then: ‘Ought I to do it, though, Mrs Sucksby?’ I said. ‘Ain’t it a very mean trick, and shabby?’
She held my gaze, then raised her eyes and nodded to the view beyond the window. She said, ‘I know she would have done it, and not given it a thought. And I know what she would feel in her heart—what dread, but also what pride, and the pride part winning—to see you doing it now.’
That made me thoughtful. For a minute, we sat and said nothing. And what I asked her next was something I had never asked before—something which, in all my years at Lant Street, amongst all those dodgers and thieves, I had never heard anyone ask, not ever. I said, in a whisper,
‘Do you think it hurts, Mrs Sucksby, when they drop you?’
Her hand, that was smoothing my hair, grew still. Then it started up stroking, sure as before. She said,
‘I should say you don’t feel nothing but the rope about your neck. Rather ticklish, I should think it.’
‘Ticklish?’
‘Say then, pricklish.’
Still her hand kept smoothing.
‘But when the drop is opened?’ I said. ‘Wouldn’t you say you felt it then?’
She shifted her leg. ‘Perhaps a twitch,’ she admitted, ‘when the drop is opened.’
I thought of the men I had seen fall at Horsemonger Lane. They twitched, all right. They twitched and kicked about, like monkeys on sticks.
‘But it comes that quick at the last,’ she went on then, ‘that I rather think the quickness must take the pain clean out of it. And when it comes to dropping a lady—well, you know they place the knot in such a way, Sue, that the end comes all the quicker?’
I looked up at her again. She had set her candle on the floor, and the light striking her face all from beneath, it made her cheeks seem swollen and her eyes seem old. I shivered, and she moved her hand to my shoulder and rubbed me, hard, through the velvet.
Then she tilted her head. ‘There’s Mr Ibbs’s sister, quite bewildered again,’ she said, ‘and calling on her mother. She has been calling on her, poor soul, these fifteen years. I shouldn’t like to come to that, Sue. I should say that, of all the ways a body might go, the quick and the neat way might, after all, be best.’
She said it; and then she winked.
She said it, and seemed to mean it.
I do sometimes wonder, however, whether she mightn’t only have said it to be kind.
But I didn’t think that then. I only rose and kissed her, and made my hair neat where she had stroked it loose; and then came the thud of the kitchen door again, and this time heavier feet upon the stairs, and then Dainty’s voice.
‘Where are you, Sue? Ain’t you coming for a dance? Mr Ibbs has got his wind up, we’re having a right old laugh down here.’
Her shout woke half the babies, and that half woke the other. But Mrs Sucksby said that she would see to them, and I went back down, and this time I did dance, with Gentleman as my partner. He held me in a waltz-step. He was drunk and held me tight. John danced again with Dainty, and we bumped about the kitchen for a half-an-hour—Gentleman all the time still calling, ‘Go it, Johnny!’ and ‘Come up, boy! Come up!’, and Mr Ibbs stopping once to rub a bit of butter on his lips, to keep the whistle sweet.

Next day, at midday, was when I left them. I packed all my bits of stuff into the canvas-covered trunk and wore the plain brown dress and the cloak and, over my flat hair, a bonnet. I had learned as much as Gentleman could teach me after three days’ work. I knew my story and my new name—Susan Smith. There was only one more thing that needed to be done, and as I sat taking my last meal in that kitchen—which was bread and dried meat, the meat rather too dried, and clinging to my gums—Gentleman did it. He brought from his bag a piece of paper and a pen and some ink, and wrote me out a character.
He wrote it off in a moment. Of course, he was used to faking papers. He held it up for

the ink to dry, then read it out. It began:
‘To whom it might concern. Lady Alice Dunraven, of Whelk Street, Mayfair, recommends Miss Susan Smith’—and it went on like that, I forget the rest of it, but it sounded all right to me. He placed it flat again and signed it in a lady’s curling hand. Then he held it to Mrs Sucksby.
‘What do you think, Mrs S?’ he said, smiling. ‘Will that get Sue her situation? ’
But Mrs Sucksby said she couldn’t hope to judge it.
‘You know best, dear boy,’ she said, looking away.
Of course, if we ever took help at Lant Street, it wasn’t character we looked for so much as lack of it. There was a little dwarfish girl that used to come sometimes, to boil the babies’ napkins and to wash the floors; but she was a thief. We couldn’t have had honest girls come. They would have seen enough in three minutes of the business of the house to do for us all. We couldn’t have had that.
So Mrs Sucksby waved the paper away, and Gentleman read it through a second time, then winked at me, then folded it and sealed it and put it in my trunk. I swallowed the last of my dried meat and bread, and fastened my cloak. There was only Mrs Sucksby to say good-bye to. John Vroom and Dainty never got up before one. Mr Ibbs was gone to crack a safe at Bow: he had kissed my cheek an hour before, and given me a shilling. I put my hat on. It was a dull brown thing, like my dress. Mrs Sucksby set it straight. Then she put her hands to my face and smiled.
‘God bless you, Sue!’ she said. ‘You are making us rich!’
But then her smile grew awful. I had never been parted from her before, for more than a day. She turned away, to hide her falling tears.
‘Take her quick,’ she said to Gentleman. ‘Take her quick, and don’t let me see it!’

And so he put his arm about my shoulders and led me from the house. He found a boy to walk behind us, carrying my trunk. He meant to take me to a cab-stand and drive me to the station at Paddington, and see me on my train.
The day was a miserable one. Even so, it was not so often I got to cross the water, and I said I should like to walk as far as Southwark Bridge, to look at the view. I had thought I should see all of London from there; but the fog grew thicker the further we went. At the bridge it seemed worst of all. You could see the black dome of St Paul’s, the barges on the water; you could see all the dark things of the city, but not the fair—the fair were lost or made like shadows.
‘Queer thing, to think of the river down there,’ said Gentleman, peering over the edge. He leaned, and spat.
We had not bargained on the fog. It made the traffic slow to a crawl, and though we found a cab, after twenty minutes we paid the driver off and walked again. I had been meant to catch the one o’clock train; now, stepping fast across some great square, we heard that hour struck out, and then the quarter, and then the half—all maddeningly damp and half-hearted, they sounded, as if the clappers and the bells that rung them had been wound about with flannel.
‘Had we not rather turn around,’ I said, ‘and try again tomorrow?’
But Gentleman said there would be a driver and a trap sent out to Marlow, to meet my train there; and I had better be late, he thought, than not arrive at all.
But after all, when we got to Paddington at last we found the trains all delayed and made slow, just like the traffic: we had to wait another hour then, until the guard should raise the signal that the Bristol train—which was to be my train as far as Maidenhead, where I must get off and join another—was ready to be boarded. We stood beneath the ticking clock, fidgeting and blowing on our hands. They had lit the great lamps there, but the fog having come in and mixed with the steam, it drifted from arch to arch and made the light very poor. The walls were hung with black, from the death of Prince Albert; the crape had got streaked by birds. I thought it very gloomy, for so grand a place. And of course, there was a vast press of people beside us, all waiting and cursing, or jostling by, or letting their children and their dogs run into our legs.
‘Fuck this,’ said Gentleman in a hard peevish voice, when the wheel of a bath-chair ran over his toe. He stooped to wipe the dust from his boot, then straightened and lit up a

cigarette, then coughed. He had his collar turned high and wore a black slouch hat. His eyes were yellow at the whites, as if stained with flip. He did not, at that moment, look like a man a girl would go silly over.
He coughed again. ‘Fuck this cheap tobacco, too,’ he said, pulling free a strand that had come loose on his tongue. Then he caught my eye and his face changed. ‘Fuck this cheap life, in all its forms—eh, Suky? No more of that for you and me, soon.’
I looked away from him, saying nothing. I had danced a fast waltz with him the night before; now, away from Lant Street and Mrs Sucksby and Mr Ibbs, amongst all the men and women that were gathered grumbling about us, he seemed just another stranger, and I was shy of him. I thought, You’re nothing to me. And again I almost said that we ought to turn round and go home; but I knew that if I did he would grow more peevish and show his temper; and so, I did not.
He finished his smoke, then smoked another. He went off for a piddle, and I went off for a piddle of my own. I heard a whistle blown as I was tidying my skirts; and when I got back, I found the guard had sent out the word and half the crowd had started up and was making in a great sweating rush for the waiting train. We went with them, Gentleman leading me to a second-class coach, then handing up my trunk to the man who was fixing the bags and boxes on the roof. I took a place beside a white-faced woman with a baby on her arm; across from her were two stout farmer-types. I think she was glad to see me get on, for of course, me being dressed so neat and comely, she couldn’t tell—ha ha!—that I was a thieving Borough girl. Behind me came a boy and his old dad, with a canary in a cage. The boy sat beside the farmers. The old dad sat by me. The coach tilted and creaked, and we all put back our heads and stared at the bits of dust and varnish that tumbled from the ceiling where the luggage thumped and slithered about above.
The door hung open another minute and then was closed. In all the fuss of getting aboard I had hardly looked at Gentleman. He had handed me on, then turned to talk with the guard. Now he came to the open window and said,
‘I’m afraid you may be very late, Sue. But I think the trap will wait for you at Marlow. I am sure it will wait. You must hope that it will.’
I knew at once that it would not, and felt a rush of misery and fear. I said quickly,
‘Come with me, can’t you? And see me to the house?’
But how could he do that? He shook his head and looked sorry. The two farmer-types, the woman, the boy and the old dad all watched us—wondering I suppose what house we meant, and what a man in a slouch hat, with a voice like that, was doing talking to a girl like me about it.
Then the porter climbed down from the roof, there came another whistle, the train gave a horrible lurch and began to move off. Gentleman lifted up his hat and followed until the engine got up its speed; then he gave it up—I saw him turn, put his hat back on, twist up his collar. Then he was gone. The coach creaked harder and began to sway. The woman and the men put their hands to the leather straps; the boy put his face to the window. The canary put its beak to the bars of its cage. The baby began to cry. It cried for half an hour.
‘Ain’t you got any gin?’ I said to the woman at last.
‘Gin?’ she said—like I might have said, poison. Then she made a mouth, and showed me her shoulder—not so pleased to have me sitting by her, the uppity bitch, after all.
What with her and the baby, and the fluttering bird; and the old dad—who fell asleep and snorted; and the boy—who made paper pellets; and the farmer-types—who smoked and grew bilious; and the fog—that made the train jerk and halt and arrive at Maidenhead two hours later than its time, so that I missed one Marlow train and must wait for the next one—what with all that, my journey was very wretched. I had not brought any food with me, for we had all supposed I should arrive at Briar in time to take a servant’s tea there. I had not had a morsel since that dinner of bread and dried meat, at noon: it had stuck to my gums then, but I should have called it wonderful at Maidenhead, seven hours later. The station there was not like Paddington, where there were coffee-stalls and milk-stalls and a pastry-cook’s shop. There was only one place for vittles, and that was shut up and closed. I sat on my trunk. My eyes stung, from the fog. When I blew my nose, I turned a handkerchief black. A man saw me do it. ‘Don’t cry,’ he said, smiling.

‘I ain’t crying!’ I said.
He winked, then asked me my name.
It was one thing to flirt in town, however. But I wasn’t in town now. I wouldn’t answer.
When the train came for Marlow I sat at the back of a coach, and he sat at the front, but with his face my way—he tried for an hour to catch my eye. I remembered Dainty saying that she had sat on a train once, with a gentleman near, and he had opened his trousers and showed her his cock, and asked her to hold it; and she had held it, and he had given her a pound. I wondered what I would do, if this man asked me to touch his cock—whether I would scream, or look the other way, or touch it, or what.
But then, I hardly needed the pound, where I was headed!
Anyway, money like that was hard to move on. Dainty had never been able to spend hers for fear her father should see it and know she’d been gay. She hid it behind a loose brick in the wall of the starch works, and put a special mark on the brick, that only she would know. She said she would tell it on her death-bed, and we could use the pound to bury her.
Well, the man on my train watched me very hard, but if he had his trousers open I never saw; and at last he tilted his hat to me and got off. There were more stops after that, and at every one someone else got off, from further down along the train; and no-one got on. The stations grew smaller and darker, until finally there was nothing at them but a tree—there was nothing to see anywhere, but trees, and beyond them bushes, and beyond them fog—grey fog, not brown—with the black night sky above it. And when the trees and the bushes seemed just about at their thickest, and the sky was blacker than I should have thought a sky naturally could be, the train stopped a final time; and that was Marlow.
Here no-one got off save me. I was the last passenger of all. The guard called the stop, and came to lift down my trunk. He said,
‘You’ll want that carrying. Is there no-one come to meet you?’
I told him there was supposed to be a man with a trap, to take me up to Briar. He said, Did I mean the trap that came to fetch the post? That would have been and gone, three hours before. He looked me over.
‘Come down from London, have you?’ he said. Then he called to the driver, who was looking from his cab. ‘She’ve come down from London, meant for Briar. I told her, the Briar trap will have come and gone.’
‘That’ll have come and gone, that will,’ called the driver. ‘That’ll have come and gone, I should say three hours back.’
I stood and shivered. It was colder here than at home. It was colder and darker and the air smelt queer, and the people—didn’t I say it?—the people were howling simpletons.
I said, ‘Ain’t there a cab-man could take me?’
‘A cab-man?’ said the guard. He shouted it to the driver. ‘Wants a cab-man!’
‘A cab-man!’
They laughed until they coughed. The guard took out a handkerchief and wiped his mouth, saying, ‘Dearie me, oh! dearie, dearie me. A cab-man, at Marlow!’
‘Oh, fuck off,’ I said. ‘Fuck off, the pair of you.’
And I caught up my trunk and walked with it to where I could see one or two lights shining, that I thought must be the houses of the village. The guard said, ‘Why, you hussy—! I shall let Mr Way know about you. See what he thinks—you bringing your London tongue down here—!’
I can’t say what I meant to do next. I did not know how far it was to Briar. I did not even know which road I ought to take. London was forty miles away, and I was afraid of cows and bulls.
But after all, country roads aren’t like city ones. There are only about four of them, and they all go to the same place in the end. I started to walk, and had walked a minute when there came, behind me, the sound of hooves and creaking wheels. And then a cart drew alongside me, and the driver pulled up and lifted up a lantern, to look at my face.
‘You’ll be Susan Smith,’ he said, ‘come down from London. Miss Maud’ve been fretting after you all day.’

He was an oldish man and his name was William Inker. He was Mr Lilly's groom. He took my trunk and helped me into the seat beside his own, and geed up the horse; and when—being struck by the breeze as we drove—he felt me shiver, he reached for a tartan blanket for me to put about my legs.
It was six or seven miles to Briar, and he took it at an easy sort of trot, smoking a pipe. I told him about the fog—there was still something of a mist, even now, even there—and the slow trains.
He said, 'That's London. Known for its fogs, ain't it? Been much down to the country before?'
'Not much,' I said.
'Been maiding in the city, have you? Good place, your last one?'
'Pretty good,' I said.
'Rum way of speaking you've got, for a lady's maid,' he said then. 'Been to France ever?'
I took a second, smoothing the blanket out over my lap.
'Once or twice,' I said.
'Short kind of chaps, the French chaps, I expect? In the leg, I mean.'
Now, I only knew one Frenchman—a housebreaker, they called him Jack the German, I don't know why. He was tall enough; but I said, to please William Inker,
'Shortish, I suppose.'
'I expect so,' he said.
The road was perfectly quiet and perfectly dark, and I imagined the sound of the horse, and the wheels, and our voices, carrying far across the fields. Then I heard, from rather near, the slow tolling of a bell—a very mournful sound, it seemed to me at that moment, not like the cheerful bells of London. It tolled nine times.
'That's the Briar bell, sounding the hour,' said William Inker.
We sat in silence after that, and in a little time we reached a high stone wall and took a road that ran beside it. Soon the wall became a great arch, and then I saw behind it the roof and the pointed windows of a greyish house, half-covered with ivy. I thought it a grand enough crib, but not so grand nor so grim perhaps as Gentleman had painted it. But when William Inker slowed the horse and I put the blanket from me and reached for my trunk, he said,
'Wait up, sweetheart, we've half a mile yet!' And then, to a man who had appeared with a lantern at the door of the house, he called: 'Good night, Mr Mack. You may shut the gate behind us. Here is Miss Smith, look, safe at last.'
The building I had thought was Briar was only the lodge! I stared, saying nothing, and we drove on past it, between two rows of bare dark trees, that curved as the road curved, then dipped into a kind of hollow, where the air—that had seemed to clear a little, on the open country lanes—grew thick again. So thick it grew, I felt it, damp, upon my face, upon my lashes and lips; and closed my eyes. Then the dampness passed away. I looked, and stared again. The road had risen, we had broken out from between the lines of trees into a gravel clearing, and here—rising vast and straight and stark out of the woolly fog, with all its windows black or shuttered, and its walls with a dead kind of ivy clinging to them, and a couple of its chimneys sending up threads of a feeble-looking grey smoke—here was Briar, Maud Lilly's great house, that I must now call my home.
We did not cross before the face of it, but kept well to the side, then took up a lane that swung round behind it, where there was a muddle of yards and out-houses and porches, and more dark walls and shuttered windows and the sound of barking dogs. High in one of the buildings was the round white face and great black hands of the clock I had heard striking across the fields. Beneath it, William Inker pulled the horse up, then helped me down. A door was opened in one of the walls and a woman stood gazing at us, her arms folded against the cold.