GREAT EXPECTATIONS.
BY CHARLES DICKENS.

CHAPTER LIV.

It was one of those March days when the sun shines hot and the wind blows cold; when it is summer in the light, and winter in the shade. We had our pea-coats with us, and I took a bag. Of all my worldly possessions I took no more than the few necessaries that filled the bag. Of all my clothes I left behind me. I had been a few hours before. The crisp air, the sunlight, the movement on the river, and the moving river itself—the road that ran with us, seeming to sympathize with us, animate us, and encourage us on—dashed me with new hope. I felt mortified to be of so little use in the boat; but, there were few better oarsmen than my two friends, and they rowed with a steady stroke that was to last all day.

At that time, the steam-traffic on the Thames was far below its present extent, and watermen's boats were far more numerous. Of barges, sailing colliers, and coaster-traders, there were perhaps as many as now; but, of steam-ships, great and small, not a tithe or a twentieth part so many. Early as it was, there were plenty of scullers going here and there that morning, and plenty of barges dropping down with the tide; the navigation of the river between bridges, in an open boat, was much easier and commoner matter in those days than it is in these; and we went ahead among many skiffs and wherries, briskly.

Of London Bridge was soon passed, and old Billingsgate market with its oyster-boats and Dutchmen, and the White Tower and Traitors' Gate, and we were among the tiers of slips. Here, were the Leith, Aberdeen, and Glasgow steamers, loading and unloading goods, and looking immensely high out of the water as we passed alongside; here, were colliers by the score and score, with the coal-whippers plunging off stages on dock, as counterweights to measures of coal swinging up, which were then rattled over the side into barges; here, at her moorings was to-morrow's steamer for Rotterdam, of which we took good notice; and here to-morrow's for Hamburg, under whose bowsprit I stood loitering there, as if we were not quite ready and everything in order. After a little show of indecision, which there were none to see but the two or three amphibious creatures belonging to our Temple stairs, we went on board and cast off; for! forward in the bow, I steered. It was then about high-water—half-past eight.

Our plan was this. The tide, beginning to move, and the sun shining hot and the wind blowing cold, made it necessary for us to leave the river at four. Of all the rich variety of topics we had heard of and seen in the chase, we had found but one in which we had any interest in the chase. It was that of the salmon. The relic of being at last engaged in the execution of the purpose, was so great to me that I felt it difficult to realize the condition in which I stood. From the deck, with a faster beating heart, I looked at the ramp of the Old London Bridge, and the town of Southwark, and the river which was far below its present extent, and the moving river itself—the road that ran with us, seeming to sympathize with us, animate us, and encourage us on—dashed me with new hope. I felt mortified to be of so little use in the boat; but, there were few better oarsmen than my two friends, and they rowed with a steady stroke that was to last all day.
black canvas bag, and he looked as like a river-pilot as my heart could have wished.

"Dear boy!" he said, putting his arm on my shoulder as he took his seat. "Faithful dear boy, well done. Thank ye, thank ye!"

Again among the tiers of shipping, in and out, avoiding rusty chain-cables frayed hempen bawses and bobbing buoys, skating for the moment floating broken baskets, scattering floating ships of wood and shivering, cleaving floating scum of coal, in and out, under the figure-head of the John of Sunderland making a speech to the winds (as is done by many Johns), and the Betsy of Yarmouth with a firm formatio of bosom and her knobby eyes starting two inches apart from all the habit of his existence to be adapted for the water, i.e., to make her purpose evident. But, it's a flowing so soft and pleasant through the water, props as makes me think it—I was a thinking through my smoke out at last before we can no more see to the bottom of the river than we can see to the bottom of the river what I catches hold of. Nor yet we can't no more hold their tide than I can hold this. And it's run through my fingers and gone, you see? holding up his dripping hands.

"But for your face, I should think you were a little despondent," said I.

"Not a bit on it, dear boy! It comes of flowing so quiet, and of that there rippling at the boat's head making a sort of a Sunday tune. Maybe I'm a growing a trifle old beside.

He put his pipe back in his mouth with an undisturbed expression of face, and sat as composed and contented as if he had been in constant terror, and under the bows of a large transport with the Custom House, and so out to sea. As our charge was wrapped in his cloak, I put my sea-going, we were already out of England. Yet he was as submissive to a word of advice as if he had been in constant terror, for, when we came ashore to get a bottle of beer into the boat, he was stopping out, I hinted that I thought he would be safest where he was, and he said, "Do you, dear boy? and quietly sat down again.

The sun felt cold upon the river, but it was a bright day, and the sunshine was very cheer ing. The tide ran strong, I took care to lose none of it, and our steady stroke carried us on thoroughly well. By imperceptible degrees, as the tide ran out, we lost more and more of the nearer woods and hills, and dropped lower and lower between the muddy banks, but the tide was yet with us when we were off Gravesend. As our charge was wrapped in his cloak, I purposely passed within a boat or two's length of the floating Custom House, and so out to catch the stream, alongside of two emigrant ships, and under the bows of a large transport with troops on the forecastle looking down at us. And soon the tide began to slacken, and the craft lying at anchor to swing, and presently they had all swung round, and the ships that were taking advantage of the new tide to get up

was not far out, since he said, after smoking a little.

"You see, dear boy, when I was over yonder, tother side the world, I was always a looking to this side; and it come fit to be there, for all I was a growing rich. Everybody knew Magwitch, and Magwitch could come, and Magwitch could go, and nobody's head would be troubled about him. They ain't so easy concerning me here, dear boy—wouldn't, leastwise, if they knew where I was."

"If all goes well," said I, "you will be perfectly free and safe again, within a few hours."

"Well," he returned, drawing a long breath, "I hope so."

"And think so?"

He dipped his hand in the water over the boat's gunwale, and said, smiling with that softened air upon which was not new to me:

"Ay, I 'pose I think so, dear boy. W'd be puzzled to be more quiet and easy-going than we are at present. But—it's a flowing so soft and pleasant through the water, props as makes me think it—I was a thinking through my smoke out at last before we can no more see to the bottom of the river than we can see to the bottom of the river what I catches hold of. Nor yet we can't no more hold their tide than I can hold this. And it's run through my fingers and gone, you see? holding up his dripping hands.

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to the Pool, began to crowd upon us in a fleet, and we kept under the shore, as much out of the strength of the tide now as we could, standing carefully off from low shallows and mud-banks.

Our oarsmen were so fresh, by dint of having occasionally let her drive with the tide for a minute or two, that a quarter of an hour's rest proved full as much as they wanted. We got ashore among some slipperly stones while we ate and drank what we had with us, and looked about. It was like my own marsh country, flat and monotonous, and with a dim horizon, while the winding river turned and turned, and the great floating buoys upon it turned and turned, and everything else seemed stranded and still. For, now, the last of the fleet of ships was round the last low point we had headed; and the last green barge, straw-colored, had followed; and some ballast-lighters, shaped like a child's first rude imitation of a boat, lay low in the mud; and a little squat shoal-house on open piles, stood cruppled in the mud on stilts and crutches; and slimy stakes stuck out of the mud, and slimy stones stuck out of the mud, and red landmarks and tidemarks stuck out of the mud, and an old landing-stage and an old roofless building slipped into the mud, and all about was stagnation and mud.

We pushed off again, and made what way we could. It was much harder work now, but Herbert and Startop persevered, and rowed, and rowed, and rowed, until the sun went down. By that time the river had lifted us a little, so that we could see above the bank. There was the red sun, on the low level of the shore, in a purple haze, fast deepening into black; and there was the solitary flat marsh; and far away there were the rising grounds, between which and us there seemed to be no life, save here and there in the foreground a melancholy gull.

As the night was fast falling, and as the moon, being past the full, would not rise early, we held a little council: a short one, for clearly our course was to lie by at the first lonely tavern we could find. So, they piled their cars once more, and I looked out for anything like a house. Thus we held on, speaking little, for clearly we should have thought the family possessed. But we considered ourselves well off, notwithstanding, for a more solitary place could we not have found.

While we were comforting ourselves by the fire after our meal, the Jack—who was sitting in a corner, and who had a blasted pair of shoes on, which he had exhibited while we were eating our eggs and bacon, as interesting relics that he had taken a few days ago from the feet of a drowned seaman washed ashore—asked me if we had seen a four-oared galley going up with the tide? When I told him No, he said she must have gone down then, and yet she "took up too," when she left there.

"They must ha' thought better of it, for some reason, or another," said the Jack, "and gone down."

"A four-oared galley, did you say?" I replied.

"A four," said the Jack, "and two sitters."

"Did they come ashore here?"

"They put in with a stone two-gallon jar, for some beer. I'd be glad to pawn the beer myself," said the Jack. "Or put some rattling physic in it."

"Why?"

"I know why," said the Jack. He spoke in a slushy voice, as if much mud had washed into his throat. He thinks," said the landlord; a weakbeady man with a pale eye, who seemed to rely greatly on his Jack: "he thinks they were, what they want."

"I knows what I thinks," observed the Jack.
"Yes, thinks Custum 'Us, Jack?" said the landlord.
"I do," said the Jack.
"Then you're wrong, Jack." "Ask the landlord.

In the infinite meaning of his reply, and his boundless confidence in his views, the Jack took one of his bloated shoes off, looked into it, knocked a few stones out of it on the kitchen floor, and put it on again. He did this, with the air of a Jack who was so right that he could afford to do nothing.

"Why, what do you make out that they done with their buttons then, Jack?" asked the landlord, vacillating wistfully.

"Done with their buttons?" returned the Jack. "Chuck 'em overboard. Swallowed 'em. Sowed 'em, to come up small salad. Done with their buttons?"

"Don't be cheeky, Jack," remonstrated the landlord, in a melancholy and pathetic way.

"A Custum 'Us officer knows what to do with his Buttons," said the Jack, repeating the obnoxious word with the greatest contempt, "when they come between him and his own light. A Few and two sisters don't go hanging and hovering, up with one tide and down with another, and both with and against another, without there being Custum 'Us at the bottom of it."

Saying which, he went out in disdain; and the landlord, having no one to rely upon, found it impracticable to pursue the subject.

This dialogue made us all uneasy, and me very uneasy. The dismal wind was muttering round the house, the tide was flapping at the shore, and I had a feeling that we were caged and threatened. A four-oared galley hovering about in so unusual a way as to attract this notice, was an ugly circumstance that I could not get rid of. When I had induced Provis to go up to bed, I went outside with my two companions (Startop by this time knew the state of the case), and held another council. Whether we should remain at the house until near the steamer's time, which would be about one in the afternoon; or whether we should put off early in the morning; was the question we discussed. On the whole we deemed it the better course to lie where we were, until within an hour or so of the steamer's time, and then to get out in her track, and drift easily with the tide. Having settled to do this, we returned into the house and went to bed.

I lay down, with the greater part of my clothes on, and slept well for a few hours. When I awoke, the wind had risen, and the sign of the house (the Ship) was ebbing and hanging about, with noises that startled me. Rising softly, for my charge lay fast asleep, I looked out of the window. It commanded the causeway where we had landed up our boat, and, as my eyes adapted themselves to the light of the clouded moon, I saw two men looking into her. They passed by under the window, looking at nothing else, and did not go down to the landing-place which I could discern to be empty, but struck across the marsh in the direction of the Nore.

My first impulse was to call up Herbert, and show him the two men going away. But, reflecting before I got into his room, which was at the back of the house and adjoined mine, that he and Startop had had a harder day than I, and were fatigued, I forbore. Going back to my window, I could still see the two men moving over the marsh. In that light, however, I soon lost them, and, feeling very cold, lay down to think of the matter, and fell asleep again.

We were up early. As we walked to and fro, all four together, before breakfast, I deemed it right to recount what I had seen. Again, our charge was the least anxious of the party.

It was very likely that the men belonged to the Custom House, he said quietly, and that they had no thought of us. I tried to persuade myself that it was so—as, indeed, it might easily be. However, I proposed that he and I should walk away together to a distant point we could see, and that the boat should take us aboard there, or as near there as might prove feasible, at about noon. This being considered a good precaution, soon after breakfast he and I set forth, without saying anything at the tavern.

He smoked his pipe as we went along, and sometimes stopped to clap me on the shoulder. One would have supposed that it was I who was in danger, not he, and that he was reassuring me. We spoke very little. As we approached the point, I begged him to remain in a sheltered place, while I went on to reconnoitrep; for, it was towards it that the men had passed in the night. He complied, and I went on alone. There was no boat off the point, nor drawn up anywhere near it, nor were there any signs of the men having embarked there. But, to be sure the tide was high, and there might have been some footprints under water.

When he looked out from his shelter in the distance, and saw that I waved my hat to him to come up, he rejoined me, and there we waited: sometimes lying on the bank wrapped in our coats, and sometimes moving about to warm ourselves; until we saw our boat coming round. We got aboard easily, and rowed out into the track of the steamer. By that time it wanted but ten minutes of one o'clock, and we began to look out for her smoke.

But, it was half-past one before we saw her smoke, and soon afterwards we saw behind it the smoke of another steamer. As they were coming on at full speed, we got the two bugs ready, and took that opportunity of saying goodbye to Herbert and Startop. We had all shaken hands cordially, and neither Herbert's eyes nor mine were quite dry, when I saw a four-oared galley shoot out from under the bank but a little way ahead of us, and row out into the same track.

A stretch of shore had been as yet between us and the steamer's smoke, by reason of the bend and wind of the river; but now she was visible, coming head on. I called to Herbert..."
and Startop to keep before the tide, that she might see us lying by for her, and adjured Provis to sit quite still, wrapped in his cloak. He answered cheerily, "Trust to me, dear boy," and sat like a statue. Meanwhile the galley, which was very skillfully handled, had crossed us, and was now even with us, and fallen alongside. Leaving just enough room for the play of the oars, she kept alongside, drifting when we drifted, and pulling a stroke or two when we pulled. Of the two sitters, one held the rudder latch, and looked at us attentively—as did all the rowers; the other sitter was wrapped up, much as Provis was, and seemed to shrink, and whisper some instruction to the steersman as he looked at us. Not a word was spoken in either boat.

Startop could make out, after a few minutes, which steamer was first, and gave me the word "Hamburg," in a low voice as we sat face to face. She was nearing us very fast, and the beating of her paddles grew louder and louder. I felt as if her shadow were absolutely upon us, when the galley hailed me. I answered.

"You have a returned Transport there," said the man wrapped in the cloak. His name is Abel Magwitch, otherwise Provis. I apprehend that man, and call upon him to surrender, and you to seize him."

At the same moment, without giving my audible direction to his crew, he ran the galley aboard of us. They had pulled one sudden stroke ahead, had got their oars in, had run the steamer, and were holding on to our gunwale, before we knew what they were doing. This caused great confusion on board the steamer, and I heard them exclaiming, and heard the order given to stop the paddles, and heard them stop, but felt her driving down upon us irresistibly. In the same moment, I saw the steersman of the galley lay his hand on his prisoner's shoulder, and saw that both boats were swinging round with the force of the tide, and saw that all hands on board the steamer were running forward quite frantically. Still in the same moment, I saw the prisoner start up, lean across his captor, and pull the cloak from the neck of the shrinking sitter in the galley. Still in the same moment, I saw that the face disclosed, was the face of the other convict of long ago. Still in the same moment tell her toward with a white terror on it that I shall never forget, and heard a great cry on board the steamer and a loud splash in the water, and felt the boat sink from under me.

It was but for an instant that I seemed to struggle with a thousand mill-viores and a thousand flashes of light; that instant past, I was taken on board the galley. Herbert was there, and Startop was there; but our boat was gone, and the two convicts were gone.

What with the cries aboard the steamer, and the furious blowing-off of her steam, and her driving on, and our racing, I could not see who held the deck from water or shore from shore; but, the crew of the galley righted her with great speed, and, pulling certain swift strong strokes ahead, lay upon their oars, every man looking silently and eagerly at the water astern.

Presently a dark object was seen in it, bowling towards us on the tide. No man spoke, but the steersman held up his hand, and all softly backed water, and kept the boat straight and true before it. As it came nearer, I saw it to be Magwitch, swimming, but not swimming freely. He was taken on board, and instantly manacled at the wrists and ankles.

The galley was then steady, and the silent eager look-out at the water was resumed. But, the Rotterdam steamer now came up, and apparently not understanding what had happened, came on at speed. By the time she had been hailed and stopped, both steamers were drifting away from us and we were rising and falling in a troubled wake of water. The look-out was kept, long after all was still again and the two steamers were gone; but, everybody knew that it was hopeless now.

At length we gave it up, and pulled under the shore towards the tavern we had lately left, where we were received with no little surprise. Here, I was able to get some comforts for Magwitch—Provis no longer—who had received some very severe injury in the chest and a deep cut in the head.

He told me that he believed himself to have gone under the keel of the steamer, and to have been struck on the head in rising. The injury to his chest (which rendered his breathing extremely painful) he thought he had received against the side of the galley. He added that he did not pretend to say what he might or might not have done to Compeyson, but, that in the moment of his laying his hand on his cloak to identify him, that villain had staggered up and staggered back, and they had both gone overboard together; when the sudden wrenching of him (Magwitch) out of our boat, and the endeavour of his captor to keep him in it, had capsized us. He told me in a whisper that they had gone down, fiercely locked in each other's arms, and that there had been a struggle under water, and that he had disengaged himself, struck out, and swam away.

I never had any reason to doubt the exact truth of what he thus told me. The officer who steered the galley gave the same accounts of their going overboard.

When I asked this officer's permission to change the prisoner's wet clothes by purchasing any spare garments I could get at the public-house, he gave it readily, merely observing that he must take charge of everything his prisoner had about him. So the pocket-book which had once been in my hands, passed into the officer's. He further gave me leave to accompany the prisoner to London; but, declined to accord that grace to my two friends.

The Jack at the Ship was instructed where the drowned man had gone down, and undertook to search for the body in the place where it was likeliest to come ashore. His interest in its recovery seemed to me to be much heightened when he heard that it had stockings on.
Probably, it took about a dozen drowned men to fit him out completely; and that may have been the reason why the different articles of his dress were in various stages of decay.

We remained at the public-house until the tide turned, and then Magwitch was carried down to the galley and put on board. Herbert and Startop were to get to London by land, as soon as they could. We had a doleful parting, and when I took my place by Magwitch's side, I felt that that was my place henceforth while he lived.

For now, my repugnance to him had all melted away, and in the hunted mound where I can see you when I am sworn to, for it put into my mind what I might otherwise have thought of until too late: That he need never know how his hopes of enriching me had perished.

HEAR THE POSTMAN!

Yes; hear him by all means. He has a grievance to complain of; he has borne his injuries with remarkable patience; he is a servant of the public, whose accurate performance of his duties is of daily and hourly importance to all of us; and he now asks us civilly for a few minutes' hearing. Let us grant his request. If we must drive somebody into a corner, don’t let it be the postman, for he works hard, and we should all feel some interest in him.

What does he want? What we all want—a little more money.

How much does he get now? He begins at eighteen or nineteen shillings a week; he may rise in the course of years, if he is lucky, to twenty-six shillings a week; and, if he has not walked himself off his legs, or starved himself in trying to provide for his wife and children on his existing salary, he may make his fortune, and then he is an old man by getting thirty shillings a week. The promotions through which he derives these rates of increase, are regulated purely by seniority; so that he may have to wait—and is in many cases now hopelessly waiting—until hundreds of older men die or leave the service, before he can even get his six-and-twenty shillings. As for the thirty shillings which reward the strenuous struggles of the patriot-postman, that distant competence lies, in the vast majority of cases, altogether beyond his horizon—the less he wastes his present time in looking after it, the better.

So much for the past. Now, what does he want for the future?

He wants a scale of wages which begins at twenty-three shillings and ends at forty shillings a week. He will undertake to spend fifteen years of his life in delivering your letters, before he gets that maximum sum. And he asks, plainly and respectfully, what you think of his demand. Considering the serious responsibilities which you commit to his pair of hands every day of your life, how much more is that forty shillings a week too much for him, after he has served you honestly for fifteen years?

Before we answer the question, perhaps we ought to hear what the authorities have to say to it. By all means. Let not the postman have it all their own way. Hear the authorities.

"You are dissatisfied with your present wages, my man? Just so! Now, this is an official matter. You must memorialise. First, try the controller of the Circulation Department. Secondly, if you are not satisfied with him, try the Postmaster-General. Thirdly, if you are not satisfied with the Postmaster-General—wait till you are; for, beyond him, you go no further. If you venture to say one word about your grievances in the hearing of the public who employ you; if your official senses leave you altogether;