

The Orphans

by Thomas Waters

ENTERING Worship Street from Shoreditch, nearly opposite the Eastern Counties Terminus, there is, or at least there was, five-and-twenty years ago, a yard or court about a hundred yards onwards on the left-hand side. I think it was called Bell and Dragon Court; but of this I am not quite sure. The place itself is distinctly visible to my mind's eye. On the right of the court, or yard, were stables; on the left three small cottages, having green shutters and green doors, and a tiny brass knocker to each door.

In the parlor-window of No. 1 was a neatly-written paper, fitted nicely to one of the panes, which announced that mangling was done there, also plain work. The same advertisement was, by the landlord's kindness, posted on the corner public house, with this addition, "At Mrs. Mason's, No. 1, round the corner."

My acquaintance with the singularly interesting family dwelling at "No. 1, round the corner," commenced in quite an accidental way. I was returning by coach from Enfield, to which picturesque village I had paid a professional visit to no useful result, when, passing Shoreditch Church, I caught sight of the very man I "wanted." To stop the coach and spring off the roof was the work of less than a minute; yet, quick as I was, Jabez Martin was quicker, and before my feet touched the ground had doubled the distance between us, and was speeding away at a tremendous pace. I followed shouting "Stop thief! Stop thief!" Several persons essayed to stop him, and though fiercely thrust aside (for he was a fellow of Herculean strength), their efforts greatly impeded his progress, and I was coming up with him hand over hand when he ran full tilt against a girl as she turned out of Worship Street into Shoreditch, knocking her down with great violence. The force of the concussion staggered Jabez Martin, and before he could recover himself he was my prisoner. Two officers came up, and handing over Martin to their custody, I attended to the girl. A woman had raised her from the pavement, and was holding her up by sheer strength. The girl was stunned, and there was blood upon her face. I bore her into a pastry-cook's shop hard by, and ran off for Richards—Michael Richards, the apothecary, then living about twenty doors away. We were soon back again, and I was rejoiced by his assurance that the girl had sustained no serious injury. The blood was from her nose, and whilst the simple restoratives necessary in such a case were being administered I had an opportunity of closely observing her. Her years could scarcely be more than seventeen, and a more *engaging* face I have seldom seen. Her figure, though slight, was elegance itself; and spite of a poor, washed-out cotton frock, coarse and patched shoes, and the rough abrasion caused by sedulous needlework upon the forefinger of her left hand, I felt, when she opened her sweet, soft eyes and a faint smile and blush changeably lit up her countenance, that a "gem of purest ray serene," fresh from the divinest mint of nature, was before me. The soft, sweet eyes were, nevertheless, swollen with weeping, and an air of inexpressibly mournful sadness clouded the natural sunshine of her face.

Mr. Richards knew her, and asked in a kindly tone if her mother was better.

A burst of tears was the reply, followed by a timid explanation, to the effect that she was on her way to his house when knocked down. It was necessary he should see her mother without delay. She was worse—much worse.

Mr. Richards said he would go at once. The girl, Frances Mason, being sufficiently recovered to walk home, led the way; and I, at a gesture from the apothecary, whom I knew very well, followed. Richards, as we walked along, intimated, in his brief curt way, that my police-officer experience might be needed by the Mason family. A fire had broken out in their dwelling in the dead of night, and in the endeavor to save her daughters Mrs. Mason had been so terribly burned, that not the slightest hope could be entertained of her recovery.

“A fellow lodged with the Masons,” said Richards, “for whom at first sight I felt an instinctive dislike, an invincible repugnance. He is a working jeweller, and his name is Mark Lopes. I think it quite likely that you may have known him professionally.”

“He is a Jew.”

“An unmistakable one. Hook-nose, dark, gross eyes, flashy waistcoat, pinchbeck chains, pins, and rings complete. His age may be about thirty.”

“I know a Jew by sight, and something more, of about that age, whose name is Lopes, or Lopez. He limps slightly, and has a scar on his left cheek.”

“The very man! Hush! Here we are.”

I followed Richards into the abode of desolation, soon to be that of death. The tenement had been gutted by the fire. Every article of furniture had been destroyed, and Mrs. Mason was dying upon a mattress, lent by the landlord of the Bell and Dragon public-house.

On the floor, by their mother’s side knelt her daughters, Frances and Rosamond, and close by them a minister of the Baptist persuasion. He was praying with closed eyes and upraised hands in a measured, monotonous tone, which strangely contrasted with the daughters’ wild sobs and broken cries to God for help and mercy.

Unspeakable anxiety was expressed by the dying woman’s face, which I was afterwards told had been once scarcely inferior in comeliness to her daughter’s. Not anxiety for herself; for the sepulchral, tolling tones of the parson were not heeded by the mother, whose fluttering spirit was looking its last through swiftly darkening eyes upon her children, with an intensity of yearning solicitude, which only maternal love, stronger than the fear of death, could have inspired.

Her lips moved as she caught sight of Mr. Richards, and a feeble uplifting of her fingers, which were playing with the coverlet, was sufficient sign that she wished to speak with him. He stepped gently towards her, and bent down his head. The tones were too feeble. He could not distinctly hear a word, and he said to me in a quick whisper,

“I am a little deaf. “Will you, Mr. Waters, act for me?”

Of course I readily complied. The white lips moved again, and I heard the words, “Lopes—silver—watch.”

This was all I could make out; and the meaning was obscure enough. Still, seeing that Mrs. Mason was going fast, I pressed her hand in token that she was comprehended. The response was a faint, pale smile, which, as her gaze turned again upon her children, brightened into transient sunlight, fading swiftly into the cold, calm pallor of death.

I turned to leave, for my presence there, if not intrusive, could be of no service, and as I did so caught a glimpse of Mark Lopes, who, with the charred, partly-opened door in his hand, was gazing with unquiet eyes upon the scene within. A start of surprise showed that he had also recognized me, and the bushy-haired head and dingy-saffron face vanished in a twinkling. I was downstairs nearly as soon as he, and was up with him before he could open the street door. His perspiring hand I noticed slipped round, instead of turning the latch-knob.

“I wish to speak with you, Mr. Mark Lopes.”

“With me—me! What about? What for?”

“Well, I want information about the origin of the fire here two nights ago; and as I know you have had much experience in fires, I shall be glad of any hint you may be able to give me upon the case.”

“What do you mean by that?” exclaimed Lopes, with a sort of indecisive fierceness. “Do you dare insinuate—that—that—”

“Dare insinuate what? Out with it, Mr. Mark Lopes. What is it that a man of your clear conscience could imagine I meant to *insinuate*?”

He did not answer, and turned savagely away. I was not, however, disposed to part with him; and as we were by then close to the Bell and Dragon, I said, in a half civil, half-menacing tone.

“Come, come, Mr. Mark Lopes, I must and will know all about this fire. You were a lodger in the house, and, I have no doubt, up and doing as soon, if not sooner, than any other inmate. We will just step in here, and over a friendly glass you will tell me all about it.”

The fellow hesitated, but having mentally reckoned up the risks and advantages of telling his own story, or of peremptorily refusing to do so, accepted my invitation.

My knowledge of Mark Lopes, I must here premise, was but slight and incidental. He had carried on business in Bermondsey, and twice a fire broke out in his premises, consuming his amply-insured stock in trade. The first time he was paid the amount claimed without demur. On the second occasion a rigid investigation took place, which led to the apprehension of Mark Lopes

upon a charge of arson. The evidence proved technically insufficient to establish his guilt, and he brought an action against the Sun Office, which resulted in a verdict for the defendants. I had since lost sight of him.

The particulars I contrived to elicit from Mark Lopes, relative to the Mason family and the catastrophe that had befallen them, were mainly these: Mrs. Mason was before marriage a Miss Curzon, the daughter of a gentleman by birth and position, but of scanty means, who died insolvent. About a year after his death Frances Curzon married Mason, then a jeweller and silversmith in prosperous business at the West End of London. For about twelve years after the union, Mason continued to prosper, or appeared to do so. Then disasters came upon him, and he ultimately broke down, not in business only, but in character; sank lower and lower in the gulf of poverty and sliming self-abasement, till he died in utterly desperate circumstances, and by his own hand.

Lopes had worked for him, and knew that his family—his sister especially, who had married extremely well herself—never forgave her brother for marrying a “pretty pauper.” Whether Mrs. Mason, after her husband’s death, had applied to her rich sister-in-law for help, he (Lopes) did not know—in fact, he did not know, or, if he ever had known, had forgotten that lady’s name; but if she had applied, help was refused, and the widow and her daughters had no means left of independent life but the poorly-paid labor of their own hands. Mrs. Mason finally *hid* herself and children, so to speak, from those with whom she had associated in better days, in the cheap obscurity of Bell and Dragon Court. The fire had broken out between one and two in the morning—how caused no one could make out. The two girls had been really in no danger, as they slept in the front room on the ground floor, and could easily, at the first alarm, have got out of the window into the court. In fact, they had done so, when Mrs. Mason, who slept in the front room upstairs, awakened by the furious knocking at the street door and the shouts of people in the court, rushed in frenzied terror down the flaming stairs in her night-dress to the rescue, as she supposed, of her children.

“The poor lady was delirious till she died,” added Mark Lopes, “and talked terrible nonsense.”

“You occupied the back room on the upper floor, and were, I suppose, in bed und asleep when the fire broke out?”

“No; I was kept awake by the toothache, and at the first alarm hurried on my clothes, rushed downstairs, and thundered at the girls’ door. They quickly awoke, huddled on their things, opened the door, and I helped them through the window.”

“Why not out by the street door?”

“Because the passage was in flames, and their thin dresses would have been ablaze in a moment. The fire burst out in the back room on the ground floor.”

“The girls were in safety, then, when the mother reached their sleeping-room?”

“Yes; and I was just going to follow through the window when Mrs. Mason rushed in all afire.”

“Is your own loss considerable?”

“No; not at all so. It has been low water with me for a long time. The Masons have lost all, as nothing was insured: not much in amount,” added Lopes; “in fact, nothing to speak of—nothing of any value.”

“I should suppose so: a family circumstanced as they were could have nothing of much value in their possession. Well, I am obliged to you, Mr. Lopes, for your information, scanty as it is.”

This I said in a tone and manner intended to persuade him that any vague suspicion which his antecedents might have suggested had been dismissed from my mind; and I was pleased to observe that I succeeded in conveying that impression.

The Worship Street Police Office was not far off, and as, on leaving the public-house, I ordered an additional glass of brandy-and-water to be taken to the gentleman in the parlor, I was pretty confident that I should be able to set some one personally unknown to him upon his track before he left.

I was to a certain extent disappointed. The only men I would have trusted were known to Lopes, and I was fain to engage the services of a young man living in Chiswell Street, whose familiar cognomen was “Humpy Jim.” He was the sharp-witted hunchback who at that period sometimes attended the weekly horse and second-hand carriage sales at the repository in Barbican. I should not, perhaps, have thought of, though I had twice before employed him, had I not, in traversing Finsbury Square, found him in hot dispute with a much bigger youngster than himself for the privileges and profits of a crossing there. Humpy Jim—his real name was James Cotterell—was evidently out of luck just then, and as the business in hand required to be done upon economical principles, it struck me that he was just my man, or boy, his age being not more, I should think, than nineteen at most. He jumped at my proposal—comprehended what was required with wonderful readiness. We got back to the Bell and Dragon before the last tumbler of grog had been imbibed by Lopes, and I went my way with the full conviction that I should be informed of all the Jew’s doings, and many of his sayings too, up to such time as the sleuth hound I had placed upon the scent should be called off.

It may be asked what, except the unintelligible words gasped forth by the dying mother, could induce me to suspect Mr. Mark Lopes of felony in the case of the Mason family. Well, the motive for my conduct is to be found in the, at first view, inconsequent conversation between me and Lopes already given.

By that I knew that he was awake and busy when the fire at No. 1, Bell and Dragon Court, broke out. That he did not attempt to rouse Mrs. Mason, who slept in the next room to his, but that he was zealous to aid the exit through the window of the daughters. That Mrs. Mason, “rushing all afire” into her children’s chamber, found him there. *What had she found him doing there?* Then his eagerness to assure me that she had been delirious since the fire, had “talked terrible nonsense,” and that there was nothing of *any value* in the house. All that, viewed in conjunction with his furtive looks and changing color as we talked together,

suggested to the practiced ken of a detective-officer matter of grave suspicion. Moreover the daughters interested me greatly. Rosamond, the younger, was not unlike one of my own girls.

Mr. Richards, the apothecary, a man of large and active benevolence, as hundreds still alive can testify, provided for the immediate physical needs of Frances and Rosamond Mason; and a true Sister of Mercy—one of that noble sisterhood, though not conventionally disciplined and ruled, with whom London abounds, exerted herself to procure the orphans means of independent support. No. 1, Bell and Dragon Court, was plainly furnished anew, and better-paid-for work was obtained for them. Time only could bring balm to their hurt minds.

I, meanwhile, was not idle in my vocation. Upon questioning the daughters, I found that their mother had a considerable quantity of valuables—heir-looms that had belonged to her father, which were kept in a stout box, locked up in a cupboard in the front ground-floor room, their sleeping apartment. The box had been consumed in the fire, and the contents, old silver plate and a massive gold watch, had, they supposed, been stolen during the confusion, as no trace of gold or silver could be found in the ashes and crumbled rubbish.

Amidst the greatest privations, their mother had refused to part with those mementos of a happier life, except upon one occasion of sore need, when she pawned the watch for five pounds. Frances, the elder daughter, her mother being ill in bed, had been sent to redeem it on the day when the right to do so would have expired; but she could give no description of the watch, except that it was a large, heavy one. Upon application to the pawnbroker, that deficiency was supplied. Mr. Morris, of Norton Folgate, had entered the name of the maker in his books—that of Leah, a celebrated name—no doubt as a memorandum for his own guidance in the event of the watch being sold by auction, as the law, in such cases, requires. I had now a pretty distinct notion of what the dying lady meant by “Mark Lopes—silver—watch.”

Humpy Jim, supplied with funds by Richards, who was vehemently anxious that Lopes should be hanged, clung to the Jew like his shadow. All in vain, however, for a long time, was that ceaseless vigilance. Lopes neither pawned nor sold silver plate or a gold watch, and was exceedingly kind and respectful to the Misses Mason; brought them work, and paid for it liberally.

He himself was getting into remarkably good case: wore fine clothes, frequented theatres and expensive taverns, without visible means for indulgence in such luxuries. Cotterell informed me that one morning Lopes received a letter, which he eagerly opened at the door, took a slip of paper from it, immediately stopped a cab which happened to be passing, and was driven off so rapidly that he, Cotterell, could not possibly keep the cab in sight. Cotterell suggested that the slip of paper must have been a check, which Lopes had hastened to get cashed. I thought so too; and when, after about a week's absence I returned from Scotland, where I had been engaged in an affair that will form the subject of the next paper, the lad informed me that Lopes had received another letter, had shortly afterwards come out of the house in which he lodged, called a cab, and ordered the driver to take him to Hoare and Co., Fleet Street.

I called at Hoare's, and was informed that a banker's order for one hundred pounds, being the second for that amount drawn in favor of Mark Lopes, Esquire, by a Bath banking house, had

been paid two days previously to the person that presented and indorsed it. At my request the manager said he would write to Bath, and ask the name of the person that had obtained the order from the bank. The answer received was, "Mrs. Barfield, a lady of fortune, residing in the vicinity of Bath, who keeps an account with us."

Who was Mrs. Barfield, and how the deuce came it that a lady of fortune should send drafts for two hundred pounds to Mark Lopes? It utterly confounded me, till Mr. Richards suggested that Mrs. Barfield *might* be the wonderfully well-married sister-in-law of Mrs. Mason, whose name or residence Lopes professed to be ignorant of, but with whom, nevertheless, he had perhaps contrived to open a correspondence, pretendedly on behalf of the bereaved desolate orphans.

This was a shrewd guess at all events, and Mr. Richards undertook to write by that evening's post to Mrs. Barfield.

I had left Mr. Richards's shop, when it occurred to me that there was a very easy way of ascertaining whether Mrs. Barfield was the Misses Mason's aunt, by simply asking that question of the young ladies themselves. I accordingly turned up Worship Street, and into Bell and Dragon Court, but was stopped before I reached No. 1 by young Cotterell.

"Lopes is in there," said the hunchback, who was much excited. "Lopes is in there with Miss Frances. Miss Rosamond has been sent out with work."

"Well, what of that?"

"I don't know exactly what of that," replied Cotterell fiercely; "but if I heard the least slightest scream in the world I *would* know. D—n his heart!" continued the lad, opening and closing his fists in a manner unconsciously, and as if preparing to clutch and grapple with some hated thing. "D—n his heart! I guess what he's after; I ain't a fool. This is the fourth time he has been here and sent Miss Rosamond away upon some pretence or other; but I'd be down upon him like a breeze. I could throttle him," added Cotterell, with a savage snap of his teeth, "I could throttle him as easy as I could a sparrow, and I would too!"

I was amazed at the lad's vehemence; at the bitter rage revealed by his burning eyes, and pale, death-pale face. A few questions sufficed to discover the source of his emotion. He had taken messages to the sisters from Mr. Richards, had been kindly noticed by them, and had become affected, or infected, by the beauty and sweetness of the elder to an extraordinary degree—a feeling not the less real and poignant for being ridiculously absurd. And I could not help thinking, as I looked upon his sinewy though stunted form, his stout arms and hardened hands, that he might prove at need a better champion of Miss Frances than many a six feet grenadier.

"Go in," he went on to say: "go in quietly yourself at once. He has been there more than half an hour. Here," added the hunchback with some hesitation, "here is a latch-key which fits the door."

"I could not rest," said the excited lad, in reply to my stare of surprise, "I could not rest till I had it. How without could I get in if I wanted to?"

I availed myself of the key, entered the house quietly, and listened to the conversation going on in the back room between Lopez and Frances Mason. Conversation it could hardly be called, her share therein being confined to ejaculations of surprise and alarm in reply to the Jew's ardent solicitation that she would become his wife. The fellow was positively proposing marriage to the distressed and astonished girl, though her mother was scarcely cold in her grave! I soon, moreover, comprehended that remembrance of the kindnesses which he had thrust upon the sisters greatly mitigated the manifestation of terror and disgust which the proposition excited. Completely mistaking the cause of the maiden's tremulous civility, Lopes waxed bolder, and seemed about to offer her some personal indignity, when I suddenly entered the room. He seemed to literally collapse with surprise and consternation, whilst a slight scream of joy, followed by a burst of hysterical tears, interpreted the feelings with which Frances Mason greeted my appearance.

I thought it unwise to let it appear that I had been listening outside, and after a few words of apology for my unannounced intrusion, I said abruptly, having first so placed myself that I could see Lopes' face in the tiny chimney-glass.—

“Is a Mrs. Barfield, who lives near Bath, an aunt of yours, Miss Mason?”

The question was an electric shock to Lopes, and his livid face turned rapidly from me to Frances Mason, from her to me, his wild, flaming glance betokening, as he did so, intensest alarm and astonishment.

“I have never heard of a Mrs. Barfield,” said Frances Mason. “Our aunt's name is Dalton, and she lives at Brighton.”

“The Mrs. Barfield I am speaking of,” said I, turning sharply upon Lopes, “is the lady who has lately sent you two drafts, amounting to two hundred pounds, upon Hoare's, the bankers.”

The fellow blanched visibly, but Frances Mason's reply to my question had so far restored his self-possession that he surlily retorted with,

“What the devil right have you to ask who sends me checks?”

“Well, no precise right at present. But come, let us begone. This young lady does not, it is quite evident, like our company, and I have a word or two for your private ear.”

Lopes sullenly acquiesced, and we left the house together. Cotterell was in the court, seemingly intent upon the grooming of a horse. Lopes did not notice him; but a sly, swift, round the corner squint shot at me showed that Cotterell did us, and that his eyes were quite sufficiently wide open to see the latch-key, which I managed to drop unobserved by Mr. Lopes.

I invited the Jew to take a glass at the Bell and Dragon; he complied, but was so sullenly incommunicative that I soon left him. It was then about four o'clock, and the winter evening was already closing in.

Five hours afterwards, just upon the stroke of nine, and whilst I was at supper, a note was brought me by an officer attached to the Worship Street Police Office. I copy it verbatim:—

“SIR,—I ave kild the Jew; lest wais I hope so. Piched him clene over staires. Upon is cussed hed. All rite with Miss Frances. Jist in time. Hoping to see you and quite hapy, JAMES COTL’ERELL.”

The officer’s report, supplemented by subsequent inquiry, gave the following particulars of what had occurred since I left Bell and Dragon Court:

Mark Lopes, warned by the discovery of his correspondence with Mrs. Barfield, determined, at any hazard, to make Frances Mason glad to become his wife. With that view, he at about half-past six in the evening returned to No. 1, Bell and Dragon Court, and sent Rosamond Mason away under pretence that a lady in Gracechurch Street for whom they worked wished to see her immediately. Frances was in the back room upstairs, and did not know that her sister had left the house, or that Lopes had returned till he presented himself before her. A vehement altercation ensued, and finally Lopes, drunk with excitement and liquor, had seized the terrified, helpless girl, and partially stifled her frenzied screams, when Cotterell burst into the room.

“The strength of twenty men was in me,” said the hunchback, with proud, glistening eyes. “The strength of twenty men was in me. I seized the scoundrel by the throat, dragged, whirled him out of the room, and pitched him as easy as a skittle-ball over the staircase. I glory in it. Miss Frances is an angel still, and I don’t care what comes of me.”

Mark Lopes, though frightfully injured, recovered after about six weeks’ medical discipline in St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, and was then transferred to Newgate. The next session he was indicted for stealing from No. 1, Bell and Dragon Court, a quantity of silver plate and a gold watch. Also with obtaining, nominally from Mrs. Barfield, but really from Mrs. Dalton, who was ill at the time, and staying at the former lady’s house, two hundred pounds, under the pretext that he was the legal guardian of Mrs. Dalton’s nieces, and that he was anxious, in fulfillment of their mother’s last wishes, to discharge various debts that had been incurred during her long illness, as well as to befittingly equip the Misses Mason for appearing at their aunt’s mansion at Brighton. He was convicted upon both charges, and sentenced to fourteen years’ transportation.

Frances and Rosamond Mason were adopted by their wealthy childless aunt; and both, I have heard, have married happily.

Mr. Richards, with Mrs. Dalton’s money, purchased a capital green grocery business for James Cotterell; but he had no heart to it, and withering gradually away, died, poor fellow, within six months of the day when he furtively watched, from round the corner of an adjacent street, the departure of Frances Mason from London.

Waters, Thomas. [Pseud.] [Attrib. William Russell.] *The Diary of a Detective Police Officer*. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1864