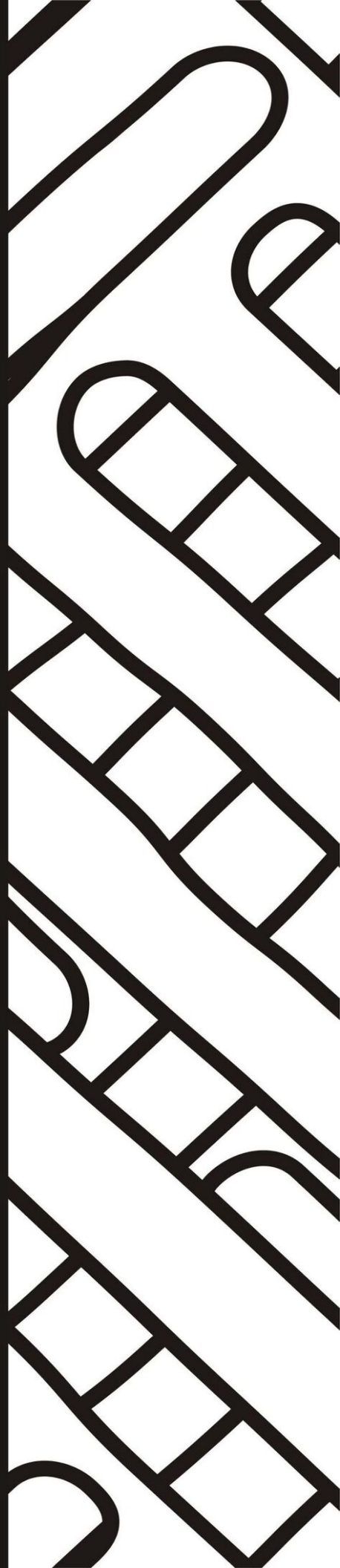


Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

ROGUE'S LIFE

Wilkie Collins



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WILKIE COLLINS

A Rogue's Life

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Wilkie Collins asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

2288 Crossrail Dr

Atlanta, GA 30349

support@shebablake.com

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Preface

The following pages were written more than twenty years since, and were then published periodically in *Household Words*.

In the original form of publication the Rogue was very favorably received. Year after year, I delayed the republication, proposing, at the suggestion of my old friend, Mr. Charles Reade, to enlarge the present sketch of the hero's adventures in Australia. But the opportunity of carrying out this project has proved to be one of the lost opportunities of my life. I republish the story with its original conclusion unaltered, but with such occasional additions and improvements as will, I hope, render it more worthy of attention at the present time.

The critical reader may possibly notice a tone of almost boisterous gayety in certain parts of these imaginary Confessions. I can only plead, in defense, that the story offers the faithful reflection of a very happy time in my past life. It was written at Paris, when I had Charles Dickens for a near neighbor and a daily companion, and when my leisure hours were joyously passed with many other friends, all associated with literature and art, of whom the admirable comedian, Regnier, is now the only survivor. The revising of these pages has been to me a melancholy task. I can only hope that they may cheer the sad moments of others. The Rogue may surely claim two merits, at least, in the eyes of the new generation—he is never serious for two moments together; and he “doesn't take long to read.” W. C.

GLOUCESTER PLACE, LONDON, *March 6th*, 1879.

Chapter I



I AM going to try if I can't write something about myself. My life has been rather a strange one. It may not seem particularly useful or respectable; but it has been, in some respects, adventurous; and that may give it claims to be read, even in the most prejudiced circles. I am an example of some of the workings of the social system of this illustrious country on the individual native, during the early part of the present century; and, if I may say so without unbecoming vanity, I should like to quote myself for the edification of my countrymen.

Who am I.

I am remarkably well connected, I can tell you. I came into this world with the great advantage of having Lady Malkinshaw for a grandmother, her ladyship's daughter for a mother, and Francis James Softly, Esq., M. D. (commonly called Doctor Softly), for a father. I put my father last, because he was not so well connected as my mother, and my grandmother first, because she was the most nobly-born person of the three. I have been, am still, and may continue to be, a Rogue; but I hope I am not abandoned enough yet to forget the respect that is due to rank. On this account, I trust, nobody will show such want of regard for my feelings as to expect me to say much about my mother's brother. That inhuman person committed an outrage on his family by making a fortune in the soap and candle trade. I apologize for mentioning him, even in an accidental way. The fact is, he left my sister, Annabella, a legacy of rather a

peculiar kind, saddled with certain conditions which indirectly affected me; but this passage of family history need not be produced just yet. I apologize a second time for alluding to money matters before it was absolutely necessary. Let me get back to a pleasing and reputable subject, by saying a word or two more about my father.

I am rather afraid that Doctor Softly was not a clever medical man; for in spite of his great connections, he did not get a very magnificent practice as a physician.

As a general practitioner, he might have bought a comfortable business, with a house and snug surgery-shop attached; but the son-in-law of Lady Malkinshaw was obliged to hold up his head, and set up his carriage, and live in a street near a fashionable square, and keep an expensive and clumsy footman to answer the door, instead of a cheap and tidy housemaid. How he managed to “maintain his position” (that is the right phrase, I think), I never could tell. His wife did not bring him a farthing. When the honorable and gallant baronet, her father, died, he left the widowed Lady Malkinshaw with her worldly affairs in a curiously involved state. Her son (of whom I feel truly ashamed to be obliged to speak again so soon) made an effort to extricate his mother—involved himself in a series of pecuniary disasters, which commercial people call, I believe, transactions—struggled for a little while to get out of them in the character of an independent gentleman—failed—and then spiritlessly availed himself of the oleaginous refuge of the soap and candle trade. His mother always looked down upon him after this; but borrowed money of him also—in order to show, I suppose, that her maternal interest in her son was not quite extinct. My father tried to follow her example—in his wife’s interests, of course; but the soap-boiler brutally buttoned up his pockets, and told my father to go into business for himself. Thus it happened that we

were certainly a poor family, in spite of the fine appearance we made, the fashionable street we lived in, the neat brougham we kept, and the clumsy and expensive footman who answered our door.

What was to be done with me in the way of education?

If my father had consulted his means, I should have been sent to a cheap commercial academy; but he had to consult his relationship to Lady Malkinshaw; so I was sent to one of the most fashionable and famous of the great public schools. I will not mention it by name, because I don't think the masters would be proud of my connection with it. I ran away three times, and was flogged three times. I made four aristocratic connections, and had four pitched battles with them: three thrashed me, and one I thrashed. I learned to play at cricket, to hate rich people, to cure warts, to write Latin verses, to swim, to recite speeches, to cook kidneys on toast, to draw caricatures of the masters, to construe Greek plays, to black boots, and to receive kicks and serious advice resignedly. Who will say that the fashionable public school was of no use to me after that?

After I left school, I had the narrowest escape possible of intruding myself into another place of accommodation for distinguished people; in other words, I was very nearly being sent to college. Fortunately for me, my father lost a lawsuit just in the nick of time, and was obliged to scrape together every farthing of available money that he possessed to pay for the luxury of going to law. If he could have saved his seven shillings, he would certainly have sent me to scramble for a place in the pit of the great university theater; but his purse was empty, and his son was not eligible therefore for admission, in a gentlemanly capacity, at the doors.

The next thing was to choose a profession.

Here the Doctor was liberality itself, in leaving me to my own devices. I was of a roving adventurous temperament, and I should have liked to go into the army. But where was the money to come from, to pay for my commission? As to enlisting in the ranks, and working my way up, the social institutions of my country obliged the grandson of Lady Malkinshaw to begin military life as an officer and gentleman, or not to begin it at all. The army, therefore, was out of the question. The Church? Equally out of the question: since I could not pay for admission to the prepared place of accommodation for distinguished people, and could not accept a charitable free pass, in consequence of my high connections. The Bar? I should be five years getting to it, and should have to spend two hundred a year in going circuit before I had earned a farthing. Physic? This really seemed the only gentlemanly refuge left; and yet, with the knowledge of my father's experience before me, I was ungrateful enough to feel a secret dislike for it. It is a degrading confession to make; but I remember wishing I was not so highly connected, and absolutely thinking that the life of a commercial traveler would have suited me exactly, if I had not been a poor gentleman. Driving about from place to place, living jovially at inns, seeing fresh faces constantly, and getting money by all this enjoyment, instead of spending it—what a life for me, if I had been the son of a haberdasher and the grandson of a groom's widow!

While my father was uncertain what to do with me, a new profession was suggested by a friend, which I shall repent not having been allowed to adopt, to the last day of my life. This friend was an eccentric old gentleman of large property, much respected in our family. One day, my father, in my presence, asked his advice about the best manner of starting me in life, with due credit to my connections and sufficient advantage to myself.

“Listen to my experience,” said our eccentric friend, “and, if you are a wise man, you will make up your mind as soon as you have heard me. I have three sons. I brought my eldest son up to the Church; he is said to be getting on admirably, and he costs me three hundred a year. I brought my second son up to the Bar; he is said to be getting on admirably, and he costs me four hundred a year. I brought my third son up to *Quadrilles*—he has married an heiress, and he costs me nothing.”

Ah, me! if that worthy sage’s advice had only been followed—if I had been brought up to *Quadrilles*!—if I had only been cast loose on the ballrooms of London, to qualify under Hymen, for a golden degree! Oh! you young ladies with money, I was five feet ten in my stockings; I was great at small-talk and dancing; I had glossy whiskers, curling locks, and a rich voice! Ye girls with golden guineas, ye nymphs with crisp bank-notes, mourn over the husband you have lost among you—over the Rogue who has broken the laws which, as the partner of a landed or fund-holding woman, he might have helped to make on the benches of the British Parliament! Oh! ye hearths and homes sung about in so many songs—written about in so many books—shouted about in so many speeches, with accompaniment of so much loud cheering: what a settler on the hearth-rug; what a possessor of property; what a bringer-up of a family, was snatched away from you, when the son of Dr. Softly was lost to the profession of *Quadrilles*!

It ended in my resigning myself to the misfortune of being a doctor.

If I was a very good boy and took pains, and carefully mixed in the best society, I might hope in the course of years to succeed to my father’s brougham, fashionably-situated house, and clumsy and expensive footman. There was a prospect for a lad of spirit, with the blood of the early Malkinshaws (who were Rogues of great capacity and distinction in the feudal

times) coursing adventurous through every vein! I look back on my career, and when I remember the patience with which I accepted a medical destiny, I appear to myself in the light of a hero. Nay, I even went beyond the passive virtue of accepting my destiny—I actually studied, I made the acquaintance of the skeleton, I was on friendly terms with the muscular system, and the mysteries of Physiology dropped in on me in the kindest manner whenever they had an evening to spare.

Even this was not the worst of it. I disliked the abstruse studies of my new profession; but I absolutely hated the diurnal slavery of qualifying myself, in a social point of view, for future success in it. My fond medical parent insisted on introducing me to his whole connection. I went round visiting in the neat brougham—with a stethoscope and medical review in the front-pocket, with Doctor Softly by my side, keeping his face well in view at the window—to canvass for patients, in the character of my father's hopeful successor. Never have I been so ill at ease in prison, as I was in that carriage. I have felt more at home in the dock (such is the natural depravity and perversity of my disposition) than ever I felt in the drawing-rooms of my father's distinguished patrons and respectable friends. Nor did my miseries end with the morning calls. I was commanded to attend all dinner-parties, and to make myself agreeable at all balls. The dinners were the worst trial. Sometimes, indeed, we contrived to get ourselves asked to the houses of high and mighty entertainers, where we ate the finest French dishes and drank the oldest vintages, and fortified ourselves sensibly and snugly in that way against the frigidity of the company. Of these repasts I have no hard words to say; it is of the dinners we gave ourselves, and of the dinners which people in our rank of life gave to us, that I now bitterly complain.

Have you ever observed the remarkable adherence to set forms of speech which characterizes the talkers of arrant nonsense! Precisely the same sheepish following of one given example distinguishes the ordering of genteel dinners.

When we gave a dinner at home, we had gravy soup, turbot and lobster-sauce, haunch of mutton, boiled fowls and tongue, lukewarm oyster-patties and sticky curry for side-dishes; wild duck, cabinet-pudding, jelly, cream and tartlets. All excellent things, except when you have to eat them continually. We lived upon them entirely in the season. Every one of our hospitable friends gave us a return dinner, which was a perfect copy of ours—just as ours was a perfect copy of theirs, last year. They boiled what we boiled, and we roasted what they roasted. We none of us ever changed the succession of the courses—or made more or less of them—or altered the position of the fowls opposite the mistress and the haunch opposite the master. My stomach used to quail within me, in those times, when the tureen was taken off and the inevitable gravy-soup smell renewed its daily acquaintance with my nostrils, and warned me of the persistent eatable formalities that were certain to follow. I suppose that honest people, who have known what it is to get no dinner (being a Rogue, I have myself never wanted for one), have gone through some very acute suffering under that privation. It may be some consolation to them to know that, next to absolute starvation, the same company-dinner, every day, is one of the hardest trials that assail human endurance. I date my first serious determination to throw over the medical profession at the earliest convenient opportunity, from the second season's series of dinners at which my aspirations, as a rising physician, unavoidably and regularly condemned me to be present.

Chapter II



THE opportunity I wanted presented itself in a curious way, and led, unexpectedly enough, to some rather important consequences.

I have already stated, among the other branches of human attainment which I acquired at the public school, that I learned to draw caricatures of the masters who were so obliging as to educate me. I had a natural faculty for this useful department of art. I improved it greatly by practice in secret after I left school, and I ended by making it a source of profit and pocket money to me when I entered the medical profession. What was I to do? I could not expect for years to make a halfpenny, as a physician. My genteel walk in life led me away from all immediate sources of emolument, and my father could only afford to give me an allowance which was too preposterously small to be mentioned. I had helped myself surreptitiously to pocket-money at school, by selling my caricatures, and I was obliged to repeat the process at home!

At the time of which I write, the Art of Caricature was just approaching the close of its colored and most extravagant stage of development. The subtlety and truth to Nature required for the pursuit of it now, had hardly begun to be thought of then. Sheer farce and coarse burlesque, with plenty of color for the money, still made up the sum of what the public of those days wanted. I was first assured of my capacity for the production of these requisites, by a medical friend of the ripe critical age of nineteen. He knew a print-publisher, and enthusiastically showed him a portfolio full of my