

Not Twist, Not Copperfield, Not Fagin Himself

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An Excerpt from *Water Music*

NOT TWIST, not Copperfield, not Fagin himself had a childhood to compare with Ned Rise's. He was unwashed, untutored, unloved, battered, abused, harassed, deprived, starved, mutilated and orphaned, a victim of poverty, ignorance, ill-luck, class-prejudice, lack of opportunity, malicious fate and gin. His was a childhood so totally depraved even a Zola would shudder to think of it.

He was born out back of a two penny flophouse in what the wags called "The Holy Land"—cribs of straw that went for a penny a night. The year was 1771, the month February. His mother didn't have the price of a bed, and so she crept into the out-building, the labor pains coming like blows to the groin, a bottle of clear white Knock-Me-Down clutched in her fist. The straw was dirty. Pigeons dropped excrement from the rafters. It was so cold even the lice were sluggish. She selected a crib in the rear because of its proximity to the horses and what little warmth they generated. Then she settled down with her bottle.

She was a souse, Ned's mother. A sister in the great sorority of the sorrows of gin. At this time in British history, the sorority—and its brother fraternity—was flourishing. When gin was first introduced in England at the close of the 17th Century (some claim it was brought over from Holland by William III, others say it was distilled from bone and marrow by the Devil himself), it became an overnight sensation among the lower classes. It was cheap as piss, potent as a kick in the head. They went mad for it: after all, why swill beer all night when you can get yourself crazed in half an hour—for a penny? By 1710 the streets were littered with drunks, some stripped naked, others stiff as tombstones. When Sir Joseph Jekyll, Master of the Rolls, introduced legislation to curb the pernicious influence of gin through licensing and taxation, a mob gathered to stone his house and chew the wheels from his carriage. There was no stopping it. Gin was an anodyne for hard times, it was sleep and poetry, it was life itself. *Aqua vitae*. Ned's mother was a second-generation ginsoak. Her father was a tanner. He drank two pints a day and flayed hides. He sold her into service at nine, she was out on the streets at thirteen, a mother at fourteen. She died of cirrhosis, brain fever, consumption and green sickness before she reached twenty.

There were three other lodgers in the Holy Land that dreary winter's night. The first was a tribeless patriarch who coughed like dice in a box and died before first light. The landlord discovered him next morning: clots of blood frozen to his lips, his neck, buried deep in the sere white nest of his beard. Then there was the stone mason—granite monuments and markers—on the tail end of a three-day drunk. He retched in the straw and lay down to sleep in it. Lastly, there was the old woman wrapped up in tattered skirts like a dressmaker's dummy, who scraped in after midnight and pitched headlong into the next crib over from the pregnant girl. She lay there, the old woman, her breathing like the friction of rusted gears, listening to the moans of Ned's mother. Moans. They were nothing new. She closed her eyes. But then there was a cry, and then another. The old woman sat up. In the next crib lay a girl of fourteen or fifteen. Her brow was wet. The neck of a bottle peeked out from her jacket. She was in labor.

The harridan crept closer, snatched up the bottle and held it to her lips. "Ere," she keaked. "What's the trouble, little cheese: birfin' a babe, is it?"

The girl looked up, heart in mouth.

"Ee-eeeeee!" screeched the old woman, scattering the pigeons in the rafters. "I've done it meself, done it meself, oh yes. There was a time the babbies dropped from these old loins like pippins from a tree." Her face was a shed snakeskin, ageless. Who could say how much flesh she'd molded within her? Or count the years she'd languished in a Turkish seraglio or a Berber hut? Who could guess what twisted paths and dark alleys she'd been down, or what she was thinking when that ring of hammered gold was struck through her lip?

"Help me," the girl whispered.

It was a breech birth. First the wrinkled legs and buttocks, then the shoulders and chin, the smooth slick dome of the head. The hour of the wolf came and went, and the old woman yanked Ned from his mother's womb. Her fingers were dry and crabbed. She tied off the cord and slapped him. He wailed. Then she wiped the blood and mucus from his body with the hem of her skirt and tucked him inside her coat. She glanced round, sly and secretive, then made for the door. Babysnatch!

Ned's mother sat up and felt round her first for the child and then for the bottle. Both were gone. She focused on the pinched shoulders of the old woman receding into the gloom at the far end of the barn

and then she began to scream, scream like sandstorms in the desert, like the death of the universe. The crone hurried for the door, the girl's screams at her back, the horses kicking blindly in their stalls. The bearded patriarch did not wake. But the stonecutter did. He was in his mid-twenties. He flung slabs of granite about as if they were newsprint. Routinely. "Stop her!" the girl cried. "She's got my baby!"

He vaulted the railing and jogged the length of the stable just as the harridan was squeezing through the door. She spun round on him, a rusted scissor in hand. "Get back!" she hissed. The blow came like a seizure, secretive and brutal. He caught her in the shoulder and she collapsed like a bundle of twigs. Beneath her, there was the sound of shattering glass. And the keen of an infant.

The stonecutter's name was Edward Pin. They called him Ned for short. He took the girl to his lodgings in Wapping, a fierce hangover raging behind his eyes. She'd washed him in tears and he felt like a hero, no matter how much his head ached. The infant, it seemed, had been gashed across the chest when the bottle broke. Pin lit a few sticks of wood and a handful of coal to take the chill off the room. The girl's hair hung loose as she bent over the baby to dress his wounds. Her name was Sarah Colquhoun. She was drunk. "I'm going to name him 'Ned,' " she slurred. "After his deliverer." Pin beamed. But then a change came over his face and he took hold of her hair. "Don't you go callin' 'im Pin, you slut. Ee's none of mine."

"'Rise' I'm callin' him!" she shouted back. "'Ned Rise,' you son of a bitch." It was the metaphoric expression of a hope. "You know why? . . . Cause he's going to rise above all this shit his mother has had to eat since I could barely say my own name."

"Ha!" he sneered. "Baptized in blood. And gin. And with a ginswill of a whorin' mother. I bleedin' doubt it."

Ned's memories of his mother are sketchy. A drawn face, all cheek-bone and brow, the skin stretched tight as leather on a last. A persistent hacking in the night. Phthisic pallor. Too much green round the gills. She was dead before he was six. Pin, needless to say, was a violent drunkard with the temperament of a cat set afire. When he worked, he came home white with stonedust, his eyes bleeding alcohol. Then he would settle down to torture the boy for the sheer joy of it, like a ten-year-old with a frog or rat. He tied Ned's feet together and hung

him out the third-story window like a pair of wet pants. He clamped the chamberpot over the boy's ears, stropped a razor on his back, submerged his head in a tub of water for sixty seconds at a time. "Drown you like a rat, I will!" he growled. DeSade could mate with all the baboons in the world and brand women like steers—it didn't matter a whit. Big Ned had his own pincushion.

When the boy was seven the stonecutter decided it was time he earned his keep. He appeared in the doorway one night with a fistfull of baling twine, caught the boy round the neck, pinned him down and trussed up his leg at the knee. Then he cut Ned's trousers high up the shin, fashioned a crutch from a broomstick, and set him out on the street to beg. It was cold in the wind, and the bindings chewed at the boy's flesh. No matter. Seven years old, shrink-bellied and filth-faced, he teetered like a drunken stork and pleaded for pennies in Russell Square, Drury Lane, Covent Garden. But mendicity was a popular profession in those days and the competition was fierce. An army of amputees, lepers, pinheads, paralytics, gibberers, slaverers and whiners lined the streets shoulder to shoulder. There was the legless man planted in a chamberpot who hopped round on his knuckles like an ape; the limbless woman who polished boots with her tongue; the man-dog with a withered tail and spiked yellow teeth hanging over his lip. Ned didn't have a chance.

There were twenty shillings in a pound, twelve pence in a shilling, four farthings in a penny. When Ned came home with two farthings the first day, Pin thrashed him. The following day, after sixteen hours of entreating, imploring and beseeching, Ned had nothing to show but a bit of string, three chestnuts and a brass button. Pin drubbed him again, this time giving special consideration to the eyes, mouth and ears. As a result, Ned's face took on the color and consistency of a fermenting plum. This development improved the take somewhat, but then there was always the necessity of raising fresh welts each day. After a month of it, Pin pulled something in his thrashing arm. There's got to be a better way, he thought. Then he hit on it. "Ned," he called. "Come over 'ere." Pin was sitting at the table with a tumbler of gin. The floor was ankle-deep in rags and papers, the bones of chops and chickens, scraps of wood, fragments of glass, smashed earthenware, feathers. Ned was in the corner, feigning invisibility. Pin jerked his head round. "Come over 'ere, I said." Ned came. A meat cleaver lay on the table. When Ned saw it he began to blubber. "Shet yer 'ole!" roared Pin, forcing the boy's left hand down on the table. His own grimy hand covered it like a hood.

He jammed Ned's fist up against the lip of the table, pinching back the thumb, middle and ring fingers. The two outside fingers lay on the block, pale as sacrificial lambs. There were black semicircles under the nails. The cleaver fell.

With his arm in a sling to display the mutilated hand to advantage, Ned's take began to improve. In a month or two he was pulling in five or six shillings a day: a small fortune. Pin gave up the lapidary profession to sit through the long afternoons in taverns and coffee houses, bolting duck with orange sauce, swilling wine and laying his broad callused palms across the bosoms and backsides of women of pleasure. Ned froze his ass off on the street, choked on crusts and cabbage soup, the loss of his fingers an ongoing horror to him, a waking nightmare. He wanted to run off. He wanted to die. But Pin kept him tractable with blows to the back of the head and threats of further mutilation. "Like to lose the rest of them nubbins? Or the 'and maybe? Or 'ow bout the 'ole arm, eh?" Then he would laugh. "Ha-haar!"

One grim afternoon, as the ex-stonecutter was reeling across the street from The Magpie and Stump to inspect his ward's pockets, a landau drawn by four horses dashed him to the pavement. He became involved in the rear spring mechanism and was dragged about a hundred yards up the street. A woman screamed. He was dead.

For the next several years Ned lived on the streets: begging, filching, eating garbage, occasionally finding shelter with a loon or pederast or axe murderer. It was a tough life. No hand to comfort, no voice to praise. He grew up like an aborigine.

Then, when he was twelve, his luck turned. He was at Kensington Gardens one morning, picking pockets and stripping bark from the trees, when he was arrested by a sound trembling on the hot still air, an unearthly fluting like something out of a dream. It seemed to be coming from beyond the fountain, near the flowerbeds. When he got there he found a scattering of parkgoers—rakes and gallants, ladies and tarts, nurses with infants, fops, cutpurses, itinerant hawkers—all gathered round a man blowing into a wooden instrument. The man was bald, his face and crown red as a ham, his cheeks puffed. Jollops of flesh hung over his collar and quivered in sympathetic response to the keening vibrato of the instrument. He was dressed like a gentleman.

Ned watched the clean athletic fingers lick up and down the keys, lighting here, pausing there, lifting, darting and pouncing like young

animals at play in the fields of the lord. The snapdragons and marigolds were in bloom. Forget-me-nots and peonies. He sat in the grass and listened, the music reedy and sweet, like birds gargling with honey. The man's foot tapped as he played. Some of the listeners began to tap along with him, the buckled pumps and slippers and wooden clogs rising and falling in unison, as if manipulated by a string. One woman swayed her head in a soft glowing arc, almost imperceptible, the sun firing an aureole of curls round her face. Ned's foot began to tap. He couldn't remember a happier moment.

When the musician took a break, the crowd dispersed. Ned lingered to watch him. The man twisted the mouthpiece from his instrument, unfastened the reed and balanced it like a wafer on the tip of his tongue. From a leather-bound case he produced a brush, with which he swabbed first the mouthpiece and then the hollowed body of the instrument itself. The keys flashed in the sun. "You find all this stimulating, do you?" the man said. He was addressing Ned.

Ned sat there, chewing at a blade of grass, ragged as a field gone to seed. He'd lived his life in the muck of the streets, pissed in the Thames, scavenged his clothes from dustbins, comatose drunks, the stiffened corpses stacked like firewood beneath the bridges. He couldn't have been wilder and filthier had he been raised by wolves. "What of it?" he spat.

The man drew the reed from his mouth, examined it, then slipped it back between his lips. There were ten thousand shit-faced orphans like this one out on the streets. They were at his elbows everywhere he went, insinuating themselves, offering their mouths and bodies, whining for coppers, bread and beer. But something in this one appealed to him: what it was he couldn't say. He made an effort. "I don't know—it just seemed like you appreciated my little performance . . . the tunes, I mean."

Ned softened. "I did," he admitted.

The man held up the instrument. "You know what this is?"

"A fife?"

"Clarinet," said the man.

Ned wanted to know how the sound was made. The man showed him. Could he learn to play? Ned asked. The man stared down at Ned's hand, then asked him if he was hungry.

Prentiss Barrenboyne owned a block of houses in Mayfair. He was in his mid-fifties. He'd never been married. His mother, a fierce and acerbic empiricist with whom he'd lived all his life, had died a month

earlier. He brought the boy home that night and let him sleep in the coal cellar. In the morning he instructed his housekeeper to wash and feed him. It was a foot in the door. By the end of the week Ned Rise had become a habit. Officially he was established in the house as a servant, but Barrenboyne, won over by the lad's ingenuous and consuming enthusiasm for the clarinet, came to treat him more like a member of the family. He bought him clothes, gave him milk and chops and drippings, taught him to read and how to balance a teacup on his knee. There were trips to the concert hall, the theatre, the seaside and the zoo. A tutor was engaged. Ned acquired the rudiments of orthography, geometry, piscatology, a phrase or two of French, and a profound loathing for the Classics. No Eliza Doolittle, he. His progress—if the bimonthly absorption of a date or sum merits the appellation—was as leisurely as the drift of continents. The tutor was beside himself. He looked at Ned's face and saw the face of a wiseacre. He accused him of drinking ink and flogged his backside as he flogged his memory. Ned bore it with patience and humility. There were no tantrums, no fits, no funks. He did what was expected of him, sang hosannas to his redeemer and polished his prospects. He knew a good thing when he saw one.

Seven years passed. In France they were sending out invitations to a beheading, across the Atlantic they were knocking down forests and bludgeoning Indians, in the East End they nabbed the misogynist known as "The Monster" who for two years had been goring women's backsides in the street, and in Mayfair Ned Rise was eating three meals a day, sleeping in a bed, bathing at least once a fortnight, and stepping into clean underwear *each and every* morning. Seven years. The memory of the streets had begun to fade. He'd never eaten offal, witnessed perversion, theft, arson and worse, never huddled round ash pits with ice crusting his lashes and a cold fist clenching at his lungs—not Ned Rise, pride of the Barrenboyne.

Over the years Ned and his guardian had grown as close as palate and reed, wedded by their love for music. A week after the old man took him in the music lessons began. His face and crown suffused with blood, the hoary mutton chops bristling, Barrenboyne grinned his way into the room one night, a wooden case in hand. Inside was an ancient C clarinet, the one he himself had played as a boy. He handed it to Ned. Within the year Ned was playing passably in spite of his handicap, capable of sightreading practically anything by the following summer, and in five years' time proficient enough to accompany his mentor to the park for

his public debut. They sat there on the very bench on which Ned had first seen the old man, he with his C clarinet, Barrenboyne with his B-flat, and played airs from Estienne Roger's tunebook. People gathered round, tapped their feet, swayed their bodies, while Mozart, dying in Vienna, composed his great clarinet concerto. Ned rose to the occasion.

One morning, just before dawn, Barrenboyne stepped into Ned's room and shook him by the shoulder. "Get up, Ned," he whispered. "I need you." His voice trembled. His face and jowls were redder than Ned had ever seen them, red as tomatoes, flags, the jackets of the King's Hussars. Ned was nineteen. "What's the matter?" he asked. No answer. Birds began to whistle from beyond the windows. The old man was breathing like a locomotive. "Get dressed and meet me out front," he said.

Barrenboyne was waiting at the gate. He was dressed in the suit he'd bought for his mother's funeral, beaver top hat, silk surtout. Under his arm, a leather case, the rippled skin of some exotic reptile. A new clarinet? thought Ned. He'd never seen it before. They walked at a brisk pace: through Grosvenor Square, down Brook Street, across Park Lane and then into the soft green demesne of the park itself. The place was deserted. Fog, like milk in an atomizer, hung low over the wet grass. A crow jeered from a tree branch. "You know what a second is?" Barrenboyne said.

It was a slap in the face. "A second? You're not—?"

The old man took hold of his sleeve. "Just take it easy now," he said. "You're a grown man, Ned Rise. Prove it."

Two men—figures out of the gloom—were waiting for them by the edge of the Serpentine. One of them was a black man, short, fat as a sow. He wore a feather in his hat, doeskin breeches, lisle hose and an iridescent waistcoat. A real buck. Barrenboyne strode up to them, bowed, and presented the leather case. It was seventy degrees at least, but the Negro was shivering. His second, who kept inhaling snuff from an enamel box and sneezing into his handkerchief, took the leather case and opened it, between sneezes, for the Negro. The Negro selected a pistol. There was liquor on his breath. Then the sneezer presented the case to Barrenboyne. The old man lifted the weapon from its case as gently as if he were unpacking his clarinet for a breezy concert on the green. It began to drizzle.

The sneezer was snuffing snuff in a paroxysm of nervous energy,

snapping open the box, pinching a nostril, gasping and slobbering into his handkerchief, all the while jerking his limbs and shuddering like an epileptic. The Negro dropped his gun. The drizzle turned to rain. Barrenboyne's wattles began to vibrate as if he were exploring the upper register of the clarinet, and Ned found himself trembling in sympathetic response. Finally the sneezer managed to walk off twenty paces and set the principals on their marks. "Ready!" he bawled. Two harsh metallic clicks echoed over the field, one in imitation of the other. "Take aim!" Barrenboyne and the Negro slowly raised their arms, as if saluting one another or taking part in the opening movement of a revolutionary new dance routine. Ned could picture them, jetéing over the greensward to leap through one another's arms. "Ffff—" came the command, tailed by a septum-wrenching sneeze. There was a flash and a snap. Birds cried out at the far end of the field. The Negro's pistol was smoking and his eyes were still buried in the crook of his elbow. Barrenboyne lay on the ground. Dead as a pharaoh.