

MACMILLAN READERS

INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

CHARLES DICKENS

The Old Curiosity Shop

Retold by Helen Holwill



MACMILLAN

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The Old Curiosity Shop

It was a dark, rainy night in the city of London and the light from a lamp could be seen through the front window of The Old Curiosity Shop. The room that was lit by the lamp was full of old and curious things for sale of all shapes and sizes.

In a small sitting room at the back of the building sat a man with long grey hair, whose face looked old and tired. Nearby a pretty girl with bright blue eyes was carefully preparing dinner for them both.

‘Oh, Nell,’ said the old man, smiling warmly at the child. ‘You are such a good girl and you look after us both so well. You know that I love you, don’t you, Nell?’

The child went to the old man and put her arms around him.

‘Grandfather,’ she replied, ‘of course I know that you love me!’

The old man’s face was full of worry and sadness as he spoke. ‘You have spent most of your life living alone with me here and looking after me. I am sometimes afraid that you have a difficult, lonely and unhappy life.’

‘Grandfather!’ cried the child in surprise.

‘You are poor now,’ the old man continued, ‘but you are a sweet and innocent girl, just like your mother was, and I won’t let you be poor and die young like she did. The time is coming when you will be rich. It has been a very long time coming, but it must come at last. Yes, it must certainly come. It has come to other men who do nothing but waste¹⁰ their lives, so why wouldn’t it come to me? When *will* it come to me?’

‘I am very happy as I am,’ said the child, who could see that her grandfather was becoming upset.

At that moment there was a knock at the front door and Nell said cheerfully, 'Kit must have come back at last!'

The old man picked up a lit candle¹¹ and went to open the door. When he came back, Kit was following him. Kit was a shy boy with an unusually wide mouth, very red cheeks, a turned-up nose and untidy hair. He stopped suddenly in the doorway to the sitting room, resting himself now on one leg, then nervously moving to the other and then back again, all the while turning his old hat on his hand. Nell laughed out loud at the sight of him and Kit laughed in return.

'It was a long way I sent you, wasn't it, Kit? Did you deliver the letter to Mr Quilp?' asked the old man.

'Yes, master¹². I did,' replied Kit.

'You must be hungry,' said the old man, and he gave Kit a slice of bread and meat and a drink. Kit went to a corner of the room and began to eat quickly.

Soon, the old man said, 'Now, Kit – it's nearly midnight. Go home, but be here on time in the morning because there's work to do. Say goodbye to him, Nell, and then get me my hat and cloak¹³.'

'Goodnight, Kit,' said the child, her eyes full of happiness and kindness.

'Goodnight, Miss Nell,' replied the boy, and he left the room.

Nell helped her grandfather with his cloak and followed him to the front door. When they reached the door the old man put his arms around his granddaughter and kissed her on the forehead. A tear¹⁴ came to Nell's eye. She hated being alone in that big, dark place all night long, not able to sleep because she was worried about her grandfather. Every night he would go out and leave her on her own, and yet he never told her where he went or what he did. Then he would return early the next day, tired, worried and sad.

'Sleep well,' he said in a low voice. 'Be safe, my sweet. I will be home early in the morning.'

The child opened the door for him to leave. The old man waited outside the door for a moment while it was closed and locked from the inside. When he was certain that the door had been locked, he walked away. At the corner of the street he stopped and looked around, perhaps to make sure that no one had seen him leaving the house, and then he disappeared into the darkness.

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