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Opening extract from

Smith

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Published by

Puffin Classics, an Imprint of Penguin Books Ltd.

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CHAPTER ONE

HE WAS called Smith and was twelve years old. Which, in itself, was a marvel; for it seemed as if the smallpox, the consumption, brain-fever, gaol-fever and even the hangman's rope had given him a wide berth for fear of catching something. Or else they weren't quick enough.

Smith had a turn of speed that was remarkable, and a neatness in nipping down an alley or vanishing in a court that had to be seen to be believed. Not that it was often seen, for Smith was rather a sooty spirit of the violent and ramshackle Town, and inhabited the tumbledown mazes about fat St Paul's like the subtle air itself. A rat was like a snail beside Smith, and the most

his thousand victims ever got of him was the powerful whiff of his passing and a cold draught in their dexterously emptied pockets.

Only the sanctimonious birds that perched on the church's dome ever saw Smith's progress entire, and as their beady eyes followed him, they chattered savagely, '*Pick*-pocket! *Pick*-pocket! Jug him! Jug-jug-jug him!' as if they'd been appointed by the Town to save it from such as Smith.

His favourite spot was Ludgate Hill, where the world's coaches, chairs and curricles were met and locked, from morning to night, in a horrible, blasphemous confusion. And here, in one or other of the ancient doorways, he leaned and grinned while the shouting and cursing and scraping and raging went endlessly, hopelessly on – till, sooner or later, something prosperous would come his way.

At about half past ten of a cold December morning an old gentleman got furiously out of his carriage, in which he'd been trapped for an hour, shook his red fist at his helpless coachman and the roaring but motionless world, and began to stump up Ludgate Hill.

'*Pick*-pocket! *Pick*-pocket!' shrieked the cathedral birds in a fury.

A country gentleman – judging by his complexion, his clean old-fashioned coat and his broad-legged, lumbering walk which bumped out his pockets in a manner most provoking.

Smith twitched his nose and nipped neatly along like a shadow . . .

The old man's pace was variable: sometimes it was brisk for his years, then he'd slow down, hesitate, look about him – as if the Town had changed much since last he'd visited and he was now no longer confident of his way. He took one turning, then another; stopped, scratched the crisp edge of his wig, then eyed the sallow, seedy city gentry as if to ask the way, till he spied another turn, nodded, briskly took it – and came straight back into Ludgate Hill . . .

A dingy fellow creaked out of a doorway, like he was hinged on it, and made to accost the old man: but he did not. He'd glimpsed Smith. Looks had been exchanged, shoulders shrugged – and the old villain gave way to the young one.

On went the old gentleman, confident now in his bearings, deeper and deeper into the musty, tottering forest of the Town where Smith hunted fastest and best.

Now a sharpish wind sprang up, and the

cathedral birds eyed the leaden sky (which looked too thick and heavy to admit them), screeched, and flew to the lower eminence of Old Bailey. Here, they set up a terrific commotion with their legal brethren, till both Church and Law became absorbed in watching the progress of Smith.

'*Pick*-pocket! *Pick*-pocket! Jug-jug-jug him!'

The old gentleman was very deep in Smith's country now, and paused many a time to peer down the shambling lanes and alleys. Then he'd shake his head vaguely and touch at his coat pocket – as if a queer, deep sense had warned him of a pair of sharp eyes fairly cutting into the cloth like scissors. At last he saw something familiar – some landmark he'd remembered – Godliman Street. Yes: he was in Godliman Street . . .

As suddenly as it had sprung up, the wind died – and the cathedral birds flew back to their dome.

'*Pick*-pocket! *Pick*-pocket!'

The old gentleman began to stump very particularly down Godliman Street, eyeing the old, crumbly houses that were lived in by God knew how many quiet, mysterious souls. And, as he went, he seemed to have two shadows – his

own and another, a thin cautious shadow that was not so much seen as sensed . . .

This was the deepest heart of Smith's forest, hidden even from the cathedral birds. Here, the houses reared and clustered as if to shut out the sky, and so promoted the growth of the flat, pale and unhealthy moon-faces of the clerks and scriveners, glimpsed in their dark caves through dusty windows, silent and intent.

Now came a slit between two such properties, a quiet way roofed over at first-floor level: Curtis Alley, leading to Curtis Court.

Framed by the darkness of its alley, Curtis Court presented a grey and peaceful brightness – a neglected clearing in the forest of the Town, where nothing grew, and all save one of the enclosed houses had had their eyes put out with bricks (on account of the tax).

As the old gentleman's steps echoed in the alley, a solitary, dusty raven flew up out of the court with a bitter croak.

Suddenly, the old gentleman gave an involuntary shudder, as if someone – something – had swiftly passed him by and made a draught.

'Someone's walked over me grave!' he muttered, shook his head and entered Curtis Court.

'Beg pardon, sir! Beg pardon –'

Out of a doorway on the left of the court came Smith. Which was the first time the old man had ever laid eyes on him; though all the way from Ludgate Hill there'd never been more than two yards between them.

He stopped, flustered, about six paces from the end of the alley. Which way was the damned urchin going? This way? That way? Angrily he shifted, and Smith, with a quaint clumsiness, brushed against him, and – it was done! In an instant! Smith had emptied the old gentleman's pocket of –

He halted. His eyes glittered sharply. Footsteps in the alley! It would be blocked! He changed direction as briefly as a speck in the wind – and vanished back into his doorway. But so quickly that, seconds after he'd disappeared, the old gentleman was still staggering and bewildered.

Out of the alley came two men in brown. Curious fellows of a very particular aspect – which Smith knew well. Uneasily, he scowled – and wished he might vanish through the crumbling bricks.

The old gentleman had recovered himself. He stared round angrily – till courtesy got the better of him.

'Good day to ye, gentlemen!' he said, with an apologetic smile.

The newcomers glanced quickly across the court towards the house that had kept one window, and grinned.

'And good day to *you*!'

They moved very neat, and with no commotion. They were proficient in their trade. The taller came at the old man from the front; the other took on his back – and slid a knife into it.

The old gentleman's face was fatefully towards a certain dark doorway. He seemed to peer very anxiously round the heavy shoulder of the man who was holding him – as if for a better view. His eyes flickered with pain at the knife's quick prick. Then he looked surprised – amazed, even – as he felt the cold blade slip into his warm heart.

'Oh! Oh! Oh my –' he murmured, gave a long sigh – and died.

His last sight on this earth had been of a small, wild and despairing face whose flooded eyes shone out of the shadows with all the dread and pity they were capable of.

(Smith was only twelve and, hangings apart, had seen no more than three men murdered in all his life.)

They say that murdered men's eyes keep the image of their last sight for – for how long? Do they take it, hereafter, up to the Seat of Judgement? Smith shivered. He'd no wish for his face to be shown in any place of judgement – in this world or the next!

In a terror as violent as his dislike, he watched the two men in brown. They were dragging the luckless old gentleman towards the darkness of the alley. (Why hadn't he stayed in the country where he'd belonged? What business had he to come stumping – so stupid and defenceless – into Smith's secret forest?)

Now Smith could hear the quick, fumbling sounds of searching; methodical gentry. Still no commotion. Oh, they knew what they were at! But the sounds grew harsh and hasty. Even irritable. Muttered one, 'God rot the old fool! He ain't got it!'

Came a new sound. A very queer one. A tapping, limping scraping sound – as of a lame man's footsteps on the cobbles. Then a soft, gentlemanly voice.

'Well?'

'Nothing – nothing, yer honour!'

'Liars! Fools! Look again!'

Again the sounds of searching – accompanied by strained, indrawn breath.

'Told you so. Nothing.'

A groan: a very dreadful affair.

'Again! Again! It *must* be there!'

'Well, it ain't, yer honour! And if we stays much longer, we'll be on our way to join 'im . . . on the end of a rope! Come – let's be off.'

'Again! Search once more!'

'With respect – do it yerself, sir.'

'No!'

'Then we're off! Quick! Quick! There's someone coming –'

There was a scuffling and scraping, then the alley and court were momentarily quiet. A shadow crossed the broken, moss-piped paving. It was the raven, making ready to return.

But Smith did not move yet. Voices and clustering footsteps could be heard coming from the far side of the alley. The pale-faced clerks and scriveners and thin-necked attorneys had caught the scent of spilt blood. They'd come out of their rooms and chambers to congregate solemnly and stare.

(But no one came out from the houses within the court; not even from the house with the single window.)

Now the crowd had grown and oozed into the court itself. The raven flapped sourly up to a gable and croaked with a sardonic air; Smith had invisibly joined the outskirts of the crowd, muttering away with the best of them; then he was through, like a needle through shoddy, to Godliman Street and beyond.

As he went, a door opened in the court, and someone came quietly out . . .

A quarter mile off, on the other side of St Paul's, Smith stopped running. He sat on some steps and fumbled in his ragged, ancient coat. What had he got this time? Something valuable. Something that had been worth the old gentleman's life.

He fished it out. A document. *A document?* Smith stood up, swore, spat and cursed. For, though he was quicker than a rat, sharper than a stoat, foxier than a fox, though he knew the Town's corners and alleys and courts and by-ways better than he knew his own heart, and though he could vanish into the thick air in the twinkling of an eye, he lacked one necessary quality for the circumstance in hand. He could not read. Not so much as a word!