

**THE MASTER  
CRAFTSMAN;  
VOL. I**

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The master craftsman; Vol. I by Walter Besant

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**WALTER BESANT**

**THE MASTER  
CRAFTSMAN;  
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THE  
MASTER CRAFTSMAN

BY

WALTER BESANT

AUTHOR OF

'BEYOND THE DREAMS OF AVARICE,' 'ARMOREL OF LYONESSE,'  
'ALL SORTS AND CONDITIONS OF MEN,' ETC.



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# THE MASTER CRAFTSMAN

## PROLOGUE.

ON a certain evening of July, in the year of grace 1804, old John Burnikel sat in his own chair—that with arms and a high back—his own chair in his own place during the summer—not his winter place—on the terrace outside the Long Room of the Red Lion Tavern. This old tavern, which, they say, was once visited by King Charles the First, when he hunted a deer across the Whitechapel meadows, and afterwards took a drink on the steps of this hostelry, was built of wood, like most of the houses on the River Wall. It had a tumble-down and rickety appearance; the upper windows projected, and were either aslant or askew; the gables stood out high above the red-tiled roof, which had sunk down in the middle, and for a hundred years had threatened to fall down; there were odds and ends of buildings pro-

jecting over the river, which also had looked for a hundred years as if they were falling into it; the place had never got as much painting as it should have; the half-obliterated sign hung creaking on rusty iron hinges. As it was in 1704, so it was in 1804, tottering, but never falling; ready to drop to pieces, but never actually dropping to pieces.

The red blinds in the window looked warm and comforting on a cold winter's night: and from many a ship homeward bound making its slow way up the river there were wafted signs of satisfaction that Wapping and the Red Lion Tavern and old John Burnikel could be seen once more.

The Long Room was on the first-floor, a room running right through the whole depth of the house, with one great window on the north, and another opening from floor to ceiling on the south. From the window on the north side could be seen in spring a lovely view of the trees and hedges of Love Lane and the broad orchards, all white and pink with blossoms of apple, pear and plum, which stretched away to the ponds and fields of Whitechapel, and to the tall buildings of the London Hospital.

The tavern, from that window, seemed to be some rural retreat far from the noisy town. In the winter, when the company was gathered round the roaring fire,

with shutters close, drawn blinds, and candles lit, there was no pleasanter place for the relaxation of the better sort, nor any place where one could look for older rum or neater brandy, not to speak of choice Hollands, which some prefer to rum. For summer enjoyment there was a broad balcony or terrace overhanging the river where the company might sit and enjoy the spectacle of the homeward-bound ships sailing up, and the outward-bound sailing down, and the loading and unloading, with lighters and barges innumerable, in midstream.

The tavern stood beside Execution Dock, and the company of drinkers might sometimes, if they pleased, witness a moving spectacle of justice done on the body of some poor sailor wretch—murderer, mutineer, or pirate—who was tied to a stake at low tide and was then left to expect slow Death: for the grim Finisher dragged cruel feet and lingered, while the tide slowly rose, and little by little washed over the chin of the patient and gently lapped over his lips, and so crept higher and higher till, with relentless advance, it flowed over his nostrils, and then, with starting eyes of agony and horror, the dying man was dead. Then the tide rose higher still, and presently flowed quite over his head, and left no sign of the dreadful Thing below.

There had been, however, no execution on this day. John Burnikel sat on the terrace, the time being eight