LITTLE DORRIT

By Charles Dickens

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PREFACE TO THE 1857 EDITION

I have been occupied with this story, during many working hours of two

years. I must have been very ill employed, if I could not leave its

merits and demerits as a whole, to express themselves on its being read

as a whole. But, as it is not unreasonable to suppose that I may have

held its threads with a more continuous attention than anyone else can

have given them during its desultory publication, it is not unreasonable

to ask that the weaving may be looked at in its completed state, and

with the pattern finished.

If I might offer any apology for so exaggerated a fiction as the

Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office, I would seek it in the

common experience of an Englishman, without presuming to mention the

unimportant fact of my having done that violence to good manners, in the

days of a Russian war, and of a Court of Inquiry at Chelsea. If I might

make so bold as to defend that extravagant conception, Mr Merdle, I

would hint that it originated after the Railroad-share epoch, in the

times of a certain Irish bank, and of one or two other equally

laudable enterprises. If I were to plead anything in mitigation of the

preposterous fancy that a bad design will sometimes claim to be a good

and an expressly religious design, it would be the curious coincidence

that it has been brought to its climax in these pages, in the days of

the public examination of late Directors of a Royal British Bank. But,

I submit myself to suffer judgment to go by default on all these counts,

if need be, and to accept the assurance (on good authority) that nothing

like them was ever known in this land. Some of my readers may have an

interest in being informed whether or no any portions of the Marshalsea

Prison are yet standing. I did not know, myself, until the sixth of this

present month, when I went to look. I found the outer front courtyard,

often mentioned here, metamorphosed into a butter shop; and I then

almost gave up every brick of the jail for lost. Wandering, however,

down a certain adjacent 'Angel Court, leading to Bermondsey', I came to

'Marshalsea Place:' the houses in which I recognised, not only as the

great block of the former prison, but as preserving the rooms that arose

in my mind's-eye when I became Little Dorrit's biographer. The smallest

boy I ever conversed with, carrying the largest baby I ever saw, offered

a supernaturally intelligent explanation of the locality in its old

uses, and was very nearly correct. How this young Newton (for such I

judge him to be) came by his information, I don't know; he was a quarter

of a century too young to know anything about it of himself. I pointed

to the window of the room where Little Dorrit was born, and where her

father lived so long, and asked him what was the name of the lodger who

tenanted that apartment at present? He said, 'Tom Pythick.' I asked him

who was Tom Pythick? and he said, 'Joe Pythick's uncle.'

A little further on, I found the older and smaller wall, which used

to enclose the pent-up inner prison where nobody was put, except for

ceremony. But, whosoever goes into Marshalsea Place, turning out of

Angel Court, leading to Bermondsey, will find his feet on the very

paving-stones of the extinct Marshalsea jail; will see its narrow yard

to the right and to the left, very little altered if at all, except that

the walls were lowered when the place got free; will look upon rooms

in which the debtors lived; and will stand among the crowding ghosts of

many miserable years.

In the Preface to Bleak House I remarked that I had never had so many

readers. In the Preface to its next successor, Little Dorrit, I have

still to repeat the same words. Deeply sensible of the affection and

confidence that have grown up between us, I add to this Preface, as I

added to that, May we meet again!

London May 1857

BOOK THE FIRST: POVERTY

CHAPTER 1. Sun and Shadow

Thirty years ago, Marseilles lay burning in the sun, one day.

A blazing sun upon a fierce August day was no greater rarity in southern

France then, than at any other time, before or since. Everything in

Marseilles, and about Marseilles, had stared at the fervid sky, and been

stared at in return, until a staring habit had become universal there.

Strangers were stared out of countenance by staring white houses,

staring white walls, staring white streets, staring tracts of arid road,

staring hills from which verdure was burnt away. The only things to be

seen not fixedly staring and glaring were the vines drooping under their

load of grapes. These did occasionally wink a little, as the hot air

barely moved their faint leaves.

There was no wind to make a ripple on the foul water within the harbour,

or on the beautiful sea without. The line of demarcation between the two

colours, black and blue, showed the point which the pure sea would not

pass; but it lay as quiet as the abominable pool, with which it never

mixed. Boats without awnings were too hot to touch; ships blistered at

their moorings; the stones of the quays had not cooled, night or

day, for months. Hindoos, Russians, Chinese, Spaniards, Portuguese,

Englishmen, Frenchmen, Genoese, Neapolitans, Venetians, Greeks, Turks,

descendants from all the builders of Babel, come to trade at Marseilles,

sought the shade alike--taking refuge in any hiding-place from a sea too

intensely blue to be looked at, and a sky of purple, set with one great

flaming jewel of fire.

The universal stare made the eyes ache. Towards the distant line of

Italian coast, indeed, it was a little relieved by light clouds of mist,

slowly rising from the evaporation of the sea, but it softened nowhere

else. Far away the staring roads, deep in dust, stared from the

hill-side, stared from the hollow, stared from the interminable

plain. Far away the dusty vines overhanging wayside cottages, and the

monotonous wayside avenues of parched trees without shade, drooped

beneath the stare of earth and sky. So did the horses with drowsy bells,

in long files of carts, creeping slowly towards the interior; so did

their recumbent drivers, when they were awake, which rarely happened;

so did the exhausted labourers in the fields. Everything that lived or

grew, was oppressed by the glare; except the lizard, passing swiftly

over rough stone walls, and the cicala, chirping his dry hot chirp, like

a rattle. The very dust was scorched brown, and something quivered in

the atmosphere as if the air itself were panting.

Blinds, shutters, curtains, awnings, were all closed and drawn to keep

out the stare. Grant it but a chink or keyhole, and it shot in like a

white-hot arrow. The churches were the freest from it. To come out of

the twilight of pillars and arches--dreamily dotted with winking lamps,

dreamily peopled with ugly old shadows piously dozing, spitting, and

begging--was to plunge into a fiery river, and swim for life to the

nearest strip of shade. So, with people lounging and lying wherever

shade was, with but little hum of tongues or barking of dogs, with

occasional jangling of discordant church bells and rattling of vicious

drums, Marseilles, a fact to be strongly smelt and tasted, lay broiling

in the sun one day. In Marseilles that day there was a villainous

prison. In one of its chambers, so repulsive a place that even the

obtrusive stare blinked at it, and left it to such refuse of reflected

light as it could find for itself, were two men. Besides the two men,

a notched and disfigured bench, immovable from the wall, with a

draught-board rudely hacked upon it with a knife, a set of draughts,

made of old buttons and soup bones, a set of dominoes, two mats, and two

or three wine bottles. That was all the chamber held, exclusive of rats

and other unseen vermin, in addition to the seen vermin, the two men.

It received such light as it got through a grating of iron bars

fashioned like a pretty large window, by means of which it could be

always inspected from the gloomy staircase on which the grating gave.

There was a broad strong ledge of stone to this grating where the bottom

of it was let into the masonry, three or four feet above the ground.

Upon it, one of the two men lolled, half sitting and half lying, with

his knees drawn up, and his feet and shoulders planted against the

opposite sides of the aperture. The bars were wide enough apart to

admit of his thrusting his arm through to the elbow; and so he held on

negligently, for his greater ease.

A prison taint was on everything there. The imprisoned air, the

imprisoned light, the imprisoned damps, the imprisoned men, were all

deteriorated by confinement. As the captive men were faded and haggard,

so the iron was rusty, the stone was slimy, the wood was rotten, the air

was faint, the light was dim. Like a well, like a vault, like a tomb,

the prison had no knowledge of the brightness outside, and would have

kept its polluted atmosphere intact in one of the spice islands of the

Indian ocean.

The man who lay on the ledge of the grating was even chilled. He jerked

his great cloak more heavily upon him by an impatient movement of one

shoulder, and growled, 'To the devil with this Brigand of a Sun that

never shines in here!'

He was waiting to be fed, looking sideways through the bars that he

might see the further down the stairs, with much of the expression of

a wild beast in similar expectation. But his eyes, too close together,

were not so nobly set in his head as those of the king of beasts are in

his, and they were sharp rather than bright--pointed weapons with little

surface to betray them. They had no depth or change; they glittered,

and they opened and shut. So far, and waiving their use to himself, a

clockmaker could have made a better pair. He had a hook nose, handsome

after its kind, but too high between the eyes by probably just as much

as his eyes were too near to one another. For the rest, he was large and

tall in frame, had thin lips, where his thick moustache showed them at

all, and a quantity of dry hair, of no definable colour, in its shaggy

state, but shot with red. The hand with which he held the grating

(seamed all over the back with ugly scratches newly healed), was

unusually small and plump; would have been unusually white but for the

prison grime. The other man was lying on the stone floor, covered with a

coarse brown coat.

'Get up, pig!' growled the first. 'Don't sleep when I am hungry.'

'It's all one, master,' said the pig, in a submissive manner, and not

without cheerfulness; 'I can wake when I will, I can sleep when I will.

It's all the same.'

As he said it, he rose, shook himself, scratched himself, tied his brown

coat loosely round his neck by the sleeves (he had previously used it

as a coverlet), and sat down upon the pavement yawning, with his back

against the wall opposite to the grating.

'Say what the hour is,' grumbled the first man.

'The mid-day bells will ring--in forty minutes.' When he made the

little pause, he had looked round the prison-room, as if for certain

information.

'You are a clock. How is it that you always know?'

'How can I say? I always know what the hour is, and where I am. I was

brought in here at night, and out of a boat, but I know where I am. See

here! Marseilles harbour;' on his knees on the pavement, mapping it all

out with a swarthy forefinger; 'Toulon (where the galleys are), Spain

over there, Algiers over there. Creeping away to the left here, Nice.

Round by the Cornice to Genoa. Genoa Mole and Harbour. Quarantine

Ground. City there; terrace gardens blushing with the bella donna. Here,

Porto Fino. Stand out for Leghorn. Out again for Civita Vecchia, so away

to--hey! there's no room for Naples;' he had got to the wall by this

time; 'but it's all one; it's in there!'

He remained on his knees, looking up at his fellow-prisoner with a

lively look for a prison. A sunburnt, quick, lithe, little man, though

rather thickset. Earrings in his brown ears, white teeth lighting up his

grotesque brown face, intensely black hair clustering about his brown

throat, a ragged red shirt open at his brown breast. Loose, seaman-like

trousers, decent shoes, a long red cap, a red sash round his waist, and

a knife in it.

'Judge if I come back from Naples as I went! See here, my master! Civita

Vecchia, Leghorn, Porto Fino, Genoa, Cornice, Off Nice (which is in

there), Marseilles, you and me. The apartment of the jailer and his keys

is where I put this thumb; and here at my wrist they keep the national

razor in its case--the guillotine locked up.'

The other man spat suddenly on the pavement, and gurgled in his throat.

Some lock below gurgled in its throat immediately afterwards, and then

a door crashed. Slow steps began ascending the stairs; the prattle of

a sweet little voice mingled with the noise they made; and the

prison-keeper appeared carrying his daughter, three or four years old,

and a basket.

'How goes the world this forenoon, gentlemen? My little one, you see,

going round with me to have a peep at her father's birds. Fie, then!

Look at the birds, my pretty, look at the birds.'

He looked sharply at the birds himself, as he held the child up at

the grate, especially at the little bird, whose activity he seemed to

mistrust. 'I have brought your bread, Signor John Baptist,' said he

(they all spoke in French, but the little man was an Italian); 'and if I

might recommend you not to game--'

'You don't recommend the master!' said John Baptist, showing his teeth

as he smiled.

'Oh! but the master wins,' returned the jailer, with a passing look of

no particular liking at the other man, 'and you lose. It's quite another

thing. You get husky bread and sour drink by it; and he gets sausage of

Lyons, veal in savoury jelly, white bread, strachino cheese, and good

wine by it. Look at the birds, my pretty!'

'Poor birds!' said the child.

The fair little face, touched with divine compassion, as it peeped

shrinkingly through the grate, was like an angel's in the prison. John

Baptist rose and moved towards it, as if it had a good attraction for

him. The other bird remained as before, except for an impatient glance

at the basket.

'Stay!' said the jailer, putting his little daughter on the outer ledge

of the grate, 'she shall feed the birds. This big loaf is for Signor

John Baptist. We must break it to get it through into the cage. So,

there's a tame bird to kiss the little hand! This sausage in a vine

leaf is for Monsieur Rigaud. Again--this veal in savoury jelly is for

Monsieur Rigaud. Again--these three white little loaves are for Monsieur

Rigaud. Again, this cheese--again, this wine--again, this tobacco--all

for Monsieur Rigaud. Lucky bird!'

The child put all these things between the bars into the soft, Smooth,

well-shaped hand, with evident dread--more than once drawing back

her own and looking at the man with her fair brow roughened into an

expression half of fright and half of anger. Whereas she had put the

lump of coarse bread into the swart, scaled, knotted hands of John

Baptist (who had scarcely as much nail on his eight fingers and two

thumbs as would have made out one for Monsieur Rigaud), with ready

confidence; and, when he kissed her hand, had herself passed it

caressingly over his face. Monsieur Rigaud, indifferent to this

distinction, propitiated the father by laughing and nodding at the

daughter as often as she gave him anything; and, so soon as he had

all his viands about him in convenient nooks of the ledge on which he

rested, began to eat with an appetite.

When Monsieur Rigaud laughed, a change took place in his face, that

was more remarkable than prepossessing. His moustache went up under his

nose, and his nose came down over his moustache, in a very sinister and

cruel manner.

'There!' said the jailer, turning his basket upside down to beat the

crumbs out, 'I have expended all the money I received; here is the note

of it, and that's a thing accomplished. Monsieur Rigaud, as I expected

yesterday, the President will look for the pleasure of your society at

an hour after mid-day, to-day.'

'To try me, eh?' said Rigaud, pausing, knife in hand and morsel in

mouth.

'You have said it. To try you.'

'There is no news for me?' asked John Baptist, who had begun,

contentedly, to munch his bread.

The jailer shrugged his shoulders.

'Lady of mine! Am I to lie here all my life, my father?'

'What do I know!' cried the jailer, turning upon him with southern

quickness, and gesticulating with both his hands and all his fingers,

as if he were threatening to tear him to pieces. 'My friend, how is it

possible for me to tell how long you are to lie here? What do I know,

John Baptist Cavalletto? Death of my life! There are prisoners here

sometimes, who are not in such a devil of a hurry to be tried.' He

seemed to glance obliquely at Monsieur Rigaud in this remark; but

Monsieur Rigaud had already resumed his meal, though not with quite so

quick an appetite as before.

'Adieu, my birds!' said the keeper of the prison, taking his pretty

child in his arms, and dictating the words with a kiss.

'Adieu, my birds!' the pretty child repeated.

Her innocent face looked back so brightly over his shoulder, as he

walked away with her, singing her the song of the child's game:

'Who passes by this road so late?

Compagnon de la Majolaine!

Who passes by this road so late?

Always gay!'

that John Baptist felt it a point of honour to reply at the grate, and

in good time and tune, though a little hoarsely:

'Of all the king's knights 'tis the flower,

Compagnon de la Majolaine!

Of all the king's knights 'tis the flower,

Always gay!'

which accompanied them so far down the few steep stairs, that the

prison-keeper had to stop at last for his little daughter to hear the

song out, and repeat the Refrain while they were yet in sight. Then the

child's head disappeared, and the prison-keeper's head disappeared, but

the little voice prolonged the strain until the door clashed.

Monsieur Rigaud, finding the listening John Baptist in his way before

the echoes had ceased (even the echoes were the weaker for imprisonment,

and seemed to lag), reminded him with a push of his foot that he had

better resume his own darker place. The little man sat down again

upon the pavement with the negligent ease of one who was thoroughly

accustomed to pavements; and placing three hunks of coarse bread before

himself, and falling to upon a fourth, began contentedly to work his way

through them as if to clear them off were a sort of game.

Perhaps he glanced at the Lyons sausage, and perhaps he glanced at the

veal in savoury jelly, but they were not there long, to make his mouth

water; Monsieur Rigaud soon dispatched them, in spite of the president

and tribunal, and proceeded to suck his fingers as clean as he could,

and to wipe them on his vine leaves. Then, as he paused in his drink

to contemplate his fellow-prisoner, his moustache went up, and his nose

came down.

'How do you find the bread?'

'A little dry, but I have my old sauce here,' returned John Baptist,

holding up his knife. 'How sauce?'

'I can cut my bread so--like a melon. Or so--like an omelette. Or

so--like a fried fish. Or so--like Lyons sausage,' said John Baptist,

demonstrating the various cuts on the bread he held, and soberly chewing

what he had in his mouth.

'Here!' cried Monsieur Rigaud. 'You may drink. You may finish this.'

It was no great gift, for there was mighty little wine left; but Signor

Cavalletto, jumping to his feet, received the bottle gratefully, turned

it upside down at his mouth, and smacked his lips.

'Put the bottle by with the rest,' said Rigaud.

The little man obeyed his orders, and stood ready to give him a lighted

match; for he was now rolling his tobacco into cigarettes by the aid of

little squares of paper which had been brought in with it.

'Here! You may have one.'

'A thousand thanks, my master!' John Baptist said in his own language,

and with the quick conciliatory manner of his own countrymen.

Monsieur Rigaud arose, lighted a cigarette, put the rest of his stock

into a breast-pocket, and stretched himself out at full length upon the

bench. Cavalletto sat down on the pavement, holding one of his ankles in

each hand, and smoking peacefully. There seemed to be some uncomfortable

attraction of Monsieur Rigaud's eyes to the immediate neighbourhood of

that part of the pavement where the thumb had been in the plan. They

were so drawn in that direction, that the Italian more than once

followed them to and back from the pavement in some surprise.

'What an infernal hole this is!' said Monsieur Rigaud, breaking a long

pause. 'Look at the light of day. Day? the light of yesterday week, the

light of six months ago, the light of six years ago. So slack and dead!'

It came languishing down a square funnel that blinded a window in the

staircase wall, through which the sky was never seen--nor anything else.

'Cavalletto,' said Monsieur Rigaud, suddenly withdrawing his gaze from

this funnel to which they had both involuntarily turned their eyes, 'you

know me for a gentleman?'

'Surely, surely!'

'How long have we been here?' 'I, eleven weeks, to-morrow night at

midnight. You, nine weeks and three days, at five this afternoon.'

'Have I ever done anything here? Ever touched the broom, or spread

the mats, or rolled them up, or found the draughts, or collected the

dominoes, or put my hand to any kind of work?'

'Never!'

'Have you ever thought of looking to me to do any kind of work?'

John Baptist answered with that peculiar back-handed shake of the

right forefinger which is the most expressive negative in the Italian

language.

'No! You knew from the first moment when you saw me here, that I was a

gentleman?'

'ALTRO!' returned John Baptist, closing his eyes and giving his head a

most vehement toss. The word being, according to its Genoese emphasis,

a confirmation, a contradiction, an assertion, a denial, a taunt,

a compliment, a joke, and fifty other things, became in the present

instance, with a significance beyond all power of written expression,

our familiar English 'I believe you!'

'Haha! You are right! A gentleman I am! And a gentleman I'll live, and

a gentleman I'll die! It's my intent to be a gentleman. It's my game.

Death of my soul, I play it out wherever I go!'

He changed his posture to a sitting one, crying with a triumphant air:

'Here I am! See me! Shaken out of destiny's dice-box into the company

of a mere smuggler;--shut up with a poor little contraband trader, whose

papers are wrong, and whom the police lay hold of besides, for placing

his boat (as a means of getting beyond the frontier) at the disposition

of other little people whose papers are wrong; and he instinctively

recognises my position, even by this light and in this place. It's well

done! By Heaven! I win, however the game goes.'

Again his moustache went up, and his nose came down.

'What's the hour now?' he asked, with a dry hot pallor upon him, rather

difficult of association with merriment.

'A little half-hour after mid-day.'

'Good! The President will have a gentleman before him soon. Come!

Shall I tell you on what accusation? It must be now, or never, for I

shall not return here. Either I shall go free, or I shall go to be made

ready for shaving. You know where they keep the razor.'

Signor Cavalletto took his cigarette from between his parted lips, and

showed more momentary discomfiture than might have been expected.

'I am a'--Monsieur Rigaud stood up to say it--'I am a cosmopolitan

gentleman. I own no particular country. My father was Swiss--Canton de

Vaud. My mother was French by blood, English by birth. I myself was born

in Belgium. I am a citizen of the world.'

His theatrical air, as he stood with one arm on his hip within the folds

of his cloak, together with his manner of disregarding his companion

and addressing the opposite wall instead, seemed to intimate that he

was rehearsing for the President, whose examination he was shortly to

undergo, rather than troubling himself merely to enlighten so small a

person as John Baptist Cavalletto.

'Call me five-and-thirty years of age. I have seen the world. I have

lived here, and lived there, and lived like a gentleman everywhere. I

have been treated and respected as a gentleman universally. If you try

to prejudice me by making out that I have lived by my wits--how do

your lawyers live--your politicians--your intriguers--your men of the

Exchange?'

He kept his small smooth hand in constant requisition, as if it were a

witness to his gentility that had often done him good service before.

'Two years ago I came to Marseilles. I admit that I was poor; I had been

ill. When your lawyers, your politicians, your intriguers, your men of

the Exchange fall ill, and have not scraped money together, they become

poor. I put up at the Cross of Gold,--kept then by Monsieur Henri

Barronneau--sixty-five at least, and in a failing state of health. I had

lived in the house some four months when Monsieur Henri Barronneau had

the misfortune to die;--at any rate, not a rare misfortune, that. It

happens without any aid of mine, pretty often.'

John Baptist having smoked his cigarette down to his fingers' ends,

Monsieur Rigaud had the magnanimity to throw him another. He lighted the

second at the ashes of the first, and smoked on, looking sideways at his

companion, who, preoccupied with his own case, hardly looked at him.

'Monsieur Barronneau left a widow. She was two-and-twenty. She had

gained a reputation for beauty, and (which is often another thing) was

beautiful. I continued to live at the Cross of Gold. I married Madame

Barronneau. It is not for me to say whether there was any great

disparity in such a match. Here I stand, with the contamination of a

jail upon me; but it is possible that you may think me better suited to

her than her former husband was.'

He had a certain air of being a handsome man--which he was not; and

a certain air of being a well-bred man--which he was not. It was mere

swagger and challenge; but in this particular, as in many others,

blustering assertion goes for proof, half over the world.

'Be it as it may, Madame Barronneau approved of me. That is not to

prejudice me, I hope?'

His eye happening to light upon John Baptist with this inquiry, that

little man briskly shook his head in the negative, and repeated in an

argumentative tone under his breath, altro, altro, altro, altro--an

infinite number of times.

'Now came the difficulties of our position. I am proud. I say nothing

in defence of pride, but I am proud. It is also my character to govern.

I can't submit; I must govern. Unfortunately, the property of Madame

Rigaud was settled upon herself. Such was the insane act of her late

husband. More unfortunately still, she had relations. When a wife's

relations interpose against a husband who is a gentleman, who is proud,

and who must govern, the consequences are inimical to peace. There

was yet another source of difference between us. Madame Rigaud was

unfortunately a little vulgar. I sought to improve her manners and

ameliorate her general tone; she (supported in this likewise by her

relations) resented my endeavours. Quarrels began to arise between us;

and, propagated and exaggerated by the slanders of the relations of

Madame Rigaud, to become notorious to the neighbours. It has been said

that I treated Madame Rigaud with cruelty. I may have been seen to slap

her face--nothing more. I have a light hand; and if I have been seen

apparently to correct Madame Rigaud in that manner, I have done it

almost playfully.'

If the playfulness of Monsieur Rigaud were at all expressed by his smile

at this point, the relations of Madame Rigaud might have said that

they would have much preferred his correcting that unfortunate woman

seriously.

'I am sensitive and brave. I do not advance it as a merit to be

sensitive and brave, but it is my character. If the male relations of

Madame Rigaud had put themselves forward openly, I should have known how

to deal with them. They knew that, and their machinations were conducted

in secret; consequently, Madame Rigaud and I were brought into frequent

and unfortunate collision. Even when I wanted any little sum of money

for my personal expenses, I could not obtain it without collision--and

I, too, a man whose character it is to govern! One night, Madame Rigaud

and myself were walking amicably--I may say like lovers--on a height

overhanging the sea. An evil star occasioned Madame Rigaud to advert to

her relations; I reasoned with her on that subject, and remonstrated on

the want of duty and devotion manifested in her allowing herself to be

influenced by their jealous animosity towards her husband. Madame Rigaud

retorted; I retorted; Madame Rigaud grew warm; I grew warm, and provoked

her. I admit it. Frankness is a part of my character. At length, Madame

Rigaud, in an access of fury that I must ever deplore, threw herself

upon me with screams of passion (no doubt those that were overheard

at some distance), tore my clothes, tore my hair, lacerated my hands,

trampled and trod the dust, and finally leaped over, dashing herself to

death upon the rocks below. Such is the train of incidents which

malice has perverted into my endeavouring to force from Madame Rigaud

a relinquishment of her rights; and, on her persistence in a refusal to

make the concession I required, struggling with her--assassinating her!'

He stepped aside to the ledge where the vine leaves yet lay strewn

about, collected two or three, and stood wiping his hands upon them,

with his back to the light.

'Well,' he demanded after a silence, 'have you nothing to say to all

that?'

'It's ugly,' returned the little man, who had risen, and was brightening

his knife upon his shoe, as he leaned an arm against the wall.

'What do you mean?' John Baptist polished his knife in silence.

'Do you mean that I have not represented the case correctly?'

'Al-tro!' returned John Baptist. The word was an apology now, and stood

for 'Oh, by no means!'

'What then?'

'Presidents and tribunals are so prejudiced.'

'Well,' cried the other, uneasily flinging the end of his cloak over his

shoulder with an oath, 'let them do their worst!'

'Truly I think they will,' murmured John Baptist to himself, as he bent

his head to put his knife in his sash.

Nothing more was said on either side, though they both began walking

to and fro, and necessarily crossed at every turn. Monsieur Rigaud

sometimes stopped, as if he were going to put his case in a new light,

or make some irate remonstrance; but Signor Cavalletto continuing to

go slowly to and fro at a grotesque kind of jog-trot pace with his eyes

turned downward, nothing came of these inclinings.

By-and-by the noise of the key in the lock arrested them both. The sound

of voices succeeded, and the tread of feet. The door clashed, the voices

and the feet came on, and the prison-keeper slowly ascended the stairs,

followed by a guard of soldiers.

'Now, Monsieur Rigaud,' said he, pausing for a moment at the grate, with

his keys in his hands, 'have the goodness to come out.'

'I am to depart in state, I see?' 'Why, unless you did,' returned the

jailer, 'you might depart in so many pieces that it would be difficult

to get you together again. There's a crowd, Monsieur Rigaud, and it

doesn't love you.'

He passed on out of sight, and unlocked and unbarred a low door in the

corner of the chamber. 'Now,' said he, as he opened it and appeared

within, 'come out.'

There is no sort of whiteness in all the hues under the sun at all like

the whiteness of Monsieur Rigaud's face as it was then. Neither is there

any expression of the human countenance at all like that expression in

every little line of which the frightened heart is seen to beat. Both

are conventionally compared with death; but the difference is the whole

deep gulf between the struggle done, and the fight at its most desperate

extremity.

He lighted another of his paper cigars at his companion's; put it

tightly between his teeth; covered his head with a soft slouched hat;

threw the end of his cloak over his shoulder again; and walked out into

the side gallery on which the door opened, without taking any further

notice of Signor Cavalletto. As to that little man himself, his whole

attention had become absorbed in getting near the door and looking out

at it. Precisely as a beast might approach the opened gate of his den

and eye the freedom beyond, he passed those few moments in watching and

peering, until the door was closed upon him.

There was an officer in command of the soldiers; a stout, serviceable,

profoundly calm man, with his drawn sword in his hand, smoking a cigar.

He very briefly directed the placing of Monsieur Rigaud in the midst of

the party, put himself with consummate indifference at their head, gave

the word 'march!' and so they all went jingling down the staircase. The

door clashed--the key turned--and a ray of unusual light, and a breath

of unusual air, seemed to have passed through the jail, vanishing in a

tiny wreath of smoke from the cigar.

Still, in his captivity, like a lower animal--like some impatient ape,

or roused bear of the smaller species--the prisoner, now left solitary,

had jumped upon the ledge, to lose no glimpse of this departure. As he

yet stood clasping the grate with both hands, an uproar broke upon his

hearing; yells, shrieks, oaths, threats, execrations, all comprehended

in it, though (as in a storm) nothing but a raging swell of sound

distinctly heard.

Excited into a still greater resemblance to a caged wild animal by his

anxiety to know more, the prisoner leaped nimbly down, ran round the

chamber, leaped nimbly up again, clasped the grate and tried to shake

it, leaped down and ran, leaped up and listened, and never rested until

the noise, becoming more and more distant, had died away. How many

better prisoners have worn their noble hearts out so; no man thinking

of it; not even the beloved of their souls realising it; great kings

and governors, who had made them captive, careering in the sunlight

jauntily, and men cheering them on. Even the said great personages dying

in bed, making exemplary ends and sounding speeches; and polite history,

more servile than their instruments, embalming them!

At last, John Baptist, now able to choose his own spot within the

compass of those walls for the exercise of his faculty of going to sleep

when he would, lay down upon the bench, with his face turned over on his

crossed arms, and slumbered. In his submission, in his lightness, in his

good humour, in his short-lived passion, in his easy contentment with

hard bread and hard stones, in his ready sleep, in his fits and starts,

altogether a true son of the land that gave him birth.

The wide stare stared itself out for one while; the Sun went down in

a red, green, golden glory; the stars came out in the heavens, and the

fire-flies mimicked them in the lower air, as men may feebly imitate

the goodness of a better order of beings; the long dusty roads and the

interminable plains were in repose--and so deep a hush was on the sea,

that it scarcely whispered of the time when it shall give up its dead.

CHAPTER 2 Fellow Travellers

'No more of yesterday's howling over yonder to-day, Sir; is there?'

'I have heard none.'

'Then you may be sure there is none. When these people howl, they howl

to be heard.'

'Most people do, I suppose.'

'Ah! but these people are always howling. Never happy otherwise.'

'Do you mean the Marseilles people?'

'I mean the French people. They're always at it. As to Marseilles, we

know what Marseilles is. It sent the most insurrectionary tune into the

world that was ever composed. It couldn't exist without allonging and

marshonging to something or other--victory or death, or blazes, or

something.'

The speaker, with a whimsical good humour upon him all the time, looked

over the parapet-wall with the greatest disparagement of Marseilles; and

taking up a determined position by putting his hands in his pockets and

rattling his money at it, apostrophised it with a short laugh.

'Allong and marshong, indeed. It would be more creditable to you,

I think, to let other people allong and marshong about their lawful

business, instead of shutting 'em up in quarantine!'

'Tiresome enough,' said the other. 'But we shall be out to-day.'

'Out to-day!' repeated the first. 'It's almost an aggravation of the

enormity, that we shall be out to-day. Out! What have we ever been in

for?'

'For no very strong reason, I must say. But as we come from the East,

and as the East is the country of the plague--'

'The plague!' repeated the other. 'That's my grievance. I have had the

plague continually, ever since I have been here. I am like a sane man

shut up in a madhouse; I can't stand the suspicion of the thing. I came

here as well as ever I was in my life; but to suspect me of the plague

is to give me the plague. And I have had it--and I have got it.'

'You bear it very well, Mr Meagles,' said the second speaker, smiling.

'No. If you knew the real state of the case, that's the last observation

you would think of making. I have been waking up night after night, and

saying, NOW I have got it, NOW it has developed itself, NOW I am in for

it, NOW these fellows are making out their case for their precautions.

Why, I'd as soon have a spit put through me, and be stuck upon a card in

a collection of beetles, as lead the life I have been leading here.'

'Well, Mr Meagles, say no more about it now it's over,' urged a cheerful

feminine voice.

'Over!' repeated Mr Meagles, who appeared (though without any

ill-nature) to be in that peculiar state of mind in which the last word

spoken by anybody else is a new injury. 'Over! and why should I say no

more about it because it's over?'

It was Mrs Meagles who had spoken to Mr Meagles; and Mrs Meagles was,

like Mr Meagles, comely and healthy, with a pleasant English face which

had been looking at homely things for five-and-fifty years or more, and

shone with a bright reflection of them.

'There! Never mind, Father, never mind!' said Mrs Meagles. 'For goodness

sake content yourself with Pet.'

'With Pet?' repeated Mr Meagles in his injured vein. Pet, however,

being close behind him, touched him on the shoulder, and Mr Meagles

immediately forgave Marseilles from the bottom of his heart.

Pet was about twenty. A fair girl with rich brown hair hanging free in

natural ringlets. A lovely girl, with a frank face, and wonderful eyes;

so large, so soft, so bright, set to such perfection in her kind good

head. She was round and fresh and dimpled and spoilt, and there was in

Pet an air of timidity and dependence which was the best weakness in

the world, and gave her the only crowning charm a girl so pretty and

pleasant could have been without.

'Now, I ask you,' said Mr Meagles in the blandest confidence, falling

back a step himself, and handing his daughter a step forward to

illustrate his question: 'I ask you simply, as between man and man,

you know, DID you ever hear of such damned nonsense as putting Pet in

quarantine?'

'It has had the result of making even quarantine enjoyable.' 'Come!'

said Mr Meagles, 'that's something to be sure. I am obliged to you for

that remark. Now, Pet, my darling, you had better go along with Mother

and get ready for the boat. The officer of health, and a variety of

humbugs in cocked hats, are coming off to let us out of this at last:

and all we jail-birds are to breakfast together in something approaching

to a Christian style again, before we take wing for our different

destinations. Tattycoram, stick you close to your young mistress.'

He spoke to a handsome girl with lustrous dark hair and eyes, and very

neatly dressed, who replied with a half curtsey as she passed off in the

train of Mrs Meagles and Pet. They crossed the bare scorched terrace

all three together, and disappeared through a staring white archway.

Mr Meagles's companion, a grave dark man of forty, still stood looking

towards this archway after they were gone; until Mr Meagles tapped him

on the arm.

'I beg your pardon,' said he, starting.

'Not at all,' said Mr Meagles.

They took one silent turn backward and forward in the shade of the wall,

getting, at the height on which the quarantine barracks are placed, what

cool refreshment of sea breeze there was at seven in the morning. Mr

Meagles's companion resumed the conversation.

'May I ask you,' he said, 'what is the name of--'

'Tattycoram?' Mr Meagles struck in. 'I have not the least idea.'

'I thought,' said the other, 'that--'

'Tattycoram?' suggested Mr Meagles again.

'Thank you--that Tattycoram was a name; and I have several times

wondered at the oddity of it.'

'Why, the fact is,' said Mr Meagles, 'Mrs Meagles and myself are, you

see, practical people.'

'That you have frequently mentioned in the course of the agreeable and

interesting conversations we have had together, walking up and down on

these stones,' said the other, with a half smile breaking through the

gravity of his dark face.

'Practical people. So one day, five or six years ago now, when we took

Pet to church at the Foundling--you have heard of the Foundling Hospital

in London? Similar to the Institution for the Found Children in Paris?'

'I have seen it.'

'Well! One day when we took Pet to church there to hear the

music--because, as practical people, it is the business of our lives to

show her everything that we think can please her--Mother (my usual name

for Mrs Meagles) began to cry so, that it was necessary to take her out.

"What's the matter, Mother?" said I, when we had brought her a little

round: "you are frightening Pet, my dear." "Yes, I know that, Father,"

says Mother, "but I think it's through my loving her so much, that it

ever came into my head." "That ever what came into your head, Mother?"

"O dear, dear!" cried Mother, breaking out again, "when I saw all those

children ranged tier above tier, and appealing from the father none of

them has ever known on earth, to the great Father of us all in Heaven,

I thought, does any wretched mother ever come here, and look among those

young faces, wondering which is the poor child she brought into this

forlorn world, never through all its life to know her love, her kiss,

her face, her voice, even her name!" Now that was practical in Mother,

and I told her so. I said, "Mother, that's what I call practical in you,

my dear."'

The other, not unmoved, assented.

'So I said next day: Now, Mother, I have a proposition to make that I

think you'll approve of. Let us take one of those same little children

to be a little maid to Pet. We are practical people. So if we should

find her temper a little defective, or any of her ways a little wide

of ours, we shall know what we have to take into account. We shall

know what an immense deduction must be made from all the influences and

experiences that have formed us--no parents, no child-brother or sister,

no individuality of home, no Glass Slipper, or Fairy Godmother. And

that's the way we came by Tattycoram.'

'And the name itself--'

'By George!' said Mr Meagles, 'I was forgetting the name itself. Why,

she was called in the Institution, Harriet Beadle--an arbitrary name,

of course. Now, Harriet we changed into Hattey, and then into Tatty,

because, as practical people, we thought even a playful name might be

a new thing to her, and might have a softening and affectionate kind of

effect, don't you see? As to Beadle, that I needn't say was wholly out

of the question. If there is anything that is not to be tolerated on

any terms, anything that is a type of Jack-in-office insolence and

absurdity, anything that represents in coats, waistcoats, and big sticks

our English holding on by nonsense after every one has found it out, it

is a beadle. You haven't seen a beadle lately?'

'As an Englishman who has been more than twenty years in China, no.'

'Then,' said Mr Meagles, laying his forefinger on his companion's breast

with great animation, 'don't you see a beadle, now, if you can help it.

Whenever I see a beadle in full fig, coming down a street on a Sunday

at the head of a charity school, I am obliged to turn and run away, or

I should hit him. The name of Beadle being out of the question, and the

originator of the Institution for these poor foundlings having been a

blessed creature of the name of Coram, we gave that name to Pet's little

maid. At one time she was Tatty, and at one time she was Coram, until we

got into a way of mixing the two names together, and now she is always

Tattycoram.'

'Your daughter,' said the other, when they had taken another silent turn

to and fro, and, after standing for a moment at the wall glancing down

at the sea, had resumed their walk, 'is your only child, I know, Mr

Meagles. May I ask you--in no impertinent curiosity, but because I have

had so much pleasure in your society, may never in this labyrinth of

a world exchange a quiet word with you again, and wish to preserve an

accurate remembrance of you and yours--may I ask you, if I have not

gathered from your good wife that you have had other children?'

'No. No,' said Mr Meagles. 'Not exactly other children. One other

child.'

'I am afraid I have inadvertently touched upon a tender theme.'

'Never mind,' said Mr Meagles. 'If I am grave about it, I am not at all

sorrowful. It quiets me for a moment, but does not make me unhappy. Pet

had a twin sister who died when we could just see her eyes--exactly like

Pet's--above the table, as she stood on tiptoe holding by it.'

'Ah! indeed, indeed!'

'Yes, and being practical people, a result has gradually sprung up in

the minds of Mrs Meagles and myself which perhaps you may--or perhaps

you may not--understand. Pet and her baby sister were so exactly alike,

and so completely one, that in our thoughts we have never been able

to separate them since. It would be of no use to tell us that our dead

child was a mere infant. We have changed that child according to the

changes in the child spared to us and always with us. As Pet has grown,

that child has grown; as Pet has become more sensible and womanly, her

sister has become more sensible and womanly by just the same degrees.

It would be as hard to convince me that if I was to pass into the other

world to-morrow, I should not, through the mercy of God, be received

there by a daughter, just like Pet, as to persuade me that Pet herself

is not a reality at my side.' 'I understand you,' said the other,

gently.

'As to her,' pursued her father, 'the sudden loss of her little picture

and playfellow, and her early association with that mystery in which we

all have our equal share, but which is not often so forcibly presented

to a child, has necessarily had some influence on her character. Then,

her mother and I were not young when we married, and Pet has always had

a sort of grown-up life with us, though we have tried to adapt ourselves

to her. We have been advised more than once when she has been a

little ailing, to change climate and air for her as often as we

could--especially at about this time of her life--and to keep her

amused. So, as I have no need to stick at a bank-desk now (though I have

been poor enough in my time I assure you, or I should have married Mrs

Meagles long before), we go trotting about the world. This is how you

found us staring at the Nile, and the Pyramids, and the Sphinxes, and

the Desert, and all the rest of it; and this is how Tattycoram will be a

greater traveller in course of time than Captain Cook.'

'I thank you,' said the other, 'very heartily for your confidence.'

'Don't mention it,' returned Mr Meagles, 'I am sure you are quite

welcome. And now, Mr Clennam, perhaps I may ask you whether you have yet

come to a decision where to go next?'

'Indeed, no. I am such a waif and stray everywhere, that I am liable to

be drifted where any current may set.'

'It's extraordinary to me--if you'll excuse my freedom in saying

so--that you don't go straight to London,' said Mr Meagles, in the tone

of a confidential adviser.

'Perhaps I shall.'

'Ay! But I mean with a will.'

'I have no will. That is to say,'--he coloured a little,--'next to none

that I can put in action now. Trained by main force; broken, not bent;

heavily ironed with an object on which I was never consulted and which

was never mine; shipped away to the other end of the world before I

was of age, and exiled there until my father's death there, a year ago;

always grinding in a mill I always hated; what is to be expected from me

in middle life? Will, purpose, hope? All those lights were extinguished

before I could sound the words.'

'Light 'em up again!' said Mr Meagles.

'Ah! Easily said. I am the son, Mr Meagles, of a hard father and

mother. I am the only child of parents who weighed, measured, and priced

everything; for whom what could not be weighed, measured, and priced,

had no existence. Strict people as the phrase is, professors of a stern

religion, their very religion was a gloomy sacrifice of tastes and

sympathies that were never their own, offered up as a part of a bargain

for the security of their possessions. Austere faces, inexorable

discipline, penance in this world and terror in the next--nothing

graceful or gentle anywhere, and the void in my cowed heart

everywhere--this was my childhood, if I may so misuse the word as to

apply it to such a beginning of life.'

'Really though?' said Mr Meagles, made very uncomfortable by the picture

offered to his imagination. 'That was a tough commencement. But come!

You must now study, and profit by, all that lies beyond it, like a

practical man.'

'If the people who are usually called practical, were practical in your

direction--'

'Why, so they are!' said Mr Meagles.

'Are they indeed?'

'Well, I suppose so,' returned Mr Meagles, thinking about it. 'Eh?

One can but be practical, and Mrs Meagles and myself are nothing else.'

'My unknown course is easier and more helpful than I had expected to

find it, then,' said Clennam, shaking his head with his grave smile.

'Enough of me. Here is the boat.'

The boat was filled with the cocked hats to which Mr Meagles entertained

a national objection; and the wearers of those cocked hats landed

and came up the steps, and all the impounded travellers congregated

together. There was then a mighty production of papers on the part of

the cocked hats, and a calling over of names, and great work of signing,

sealing, stamping, inking, and sanding, with exceedingly blurred,

gritty, and undecipherable results. Finally, everything was done

according to rule, and the travellers were at liberty to depart

whithersoever they would.

They made little account of stare and glare, in the new pleasure of

recovering their freedom, but flitted across the harbour in gay boats,

and reassembled at a great hotel, whence the sun was excluded by closed

lattices, and where bare paved floors, lofty ceilings, and resounding

corridors tempered the intense heat. There, a great table in a great

room was soon profusely covered with a superb repast; and the quarantine

quarters became bare indeed, remembered among dainty dishes, southern

fruits, cooled wines, flowers from Genoa, snow from the mountain tops,

and all the colours of the rainbow flashing in the mirrors.

'But I bear those monotonous walls no ill-will now,' said Mr Meagles.

'One always begins to forgive a place as soon as it's left behind; I

dare say a prisoner begins to relent towards his prison, after he is let

out.'

They were about thirty in company, and all talking; but necessarily in

groups. Father and Mother Meagles sat with their daughter between them,

the last three on one side of the table: on the opposite side sat Mr

Clennam; a tall French gentleman with raven hair and beard, of a swart

and terrible, not to say genteelly diabolical aspect, but who had

shown himself the mildest of men; and a handsome young Englishwoman,

travelling quite alone, who had a proud observant face, and had either

withdrawn herself from the rest or been avoided by the rest--nobody,

herself excepted perhaps, could have quite decided which. The rest

of the party were of the usual materials: travellers on business, and

travellers for pleasure; officers from India on leave; merchants in

the Greek and Turkey trades; a clerical English husband in a meek

strait-waistcoat, on a wedding trip with his young wife; a majestic

English mama and papa, of the patrician order, with a family of three

growing-up daughters, who were keeping a journal for the confusion of

their fellow-creatures; and a deaf old English mother, tough in travel,

with a very decidedly grown-up daughter indeed, which daughter went

sketching about the universe in the expectation of ultimately toning

herself off into the married state.

The reserved Englishwoman took up Mr Meagles in his last remark. 'Do

you mean that a prisoner forgives his prison?' said she, slowly and with

emphasis.

'That was my speculation, Miss Wade. I don't pretend to know positively

how a prisoner might feel. I never was one before.'

'Mademoiselle doubts,' said the French gentleman in his own language,

'it's being so easy to forgive?'

'I do.'

Pet had to translate this passage to Mr Meagles, who never by any

accident acquired any knowledge whatever of the language of any country

into which he travelled. 'Oh!' said he. 'Dear me! But that's a pity,

isn't it?'

'That I am not credulous?' said Miss Wade.

'Not exactly that. Put it another way. That you can't believe it easy to

forgive.'

'My experience,' she quietly returned, 'has been correcting my belief

in many respects, for some years. It is our natural progress, I have

heard.'

'Well, well! But it's not natural to bear malice, I hope?' said Mr

Meagles, cheerily.

'If I had been shut up in any place to pine and suffer, I should always

hate that place and wish to burn it down, or raze it to the ground. I

know no more.' 'Strong, sir?' said Mr Meagles to the Frenchman; it being

another of his habits to address individuals of all nations in idiomatic

English, with a perfect conviction that they were bound to understand

it somehow. 'Rather forcible in our fair friend, you'll agree with me, I

think?'

The French gentleman courteously replied, 'Plait-il?' To which Mr

Meagles returned with much satisfaction, 'You are right. My opinion.'

The breakfast beginning by-and-by to languish, Mr Meagles made the

company a speech. It was short enough and sensible enough, considering

that it was a speech at all, and hearty. It merely went to the effect

that as they had all been thrown together by chance, and had all

preserved a good understanding together, and were now about to disperse,

and were not likely ever to find themselves all together again, what

could they do better than bid farewell to one another, and give one

another good-speed in a simultaneous glass of cool champagne all round

the table? It was done, and with a general shaking of hands the assembly

broke up for ever.

The solitary young lady all this time had said no more. She rose with

the rest, and silently withdrew to a remote corner of the great room,

where she sat herself on a couch in a window, seeming to watch the

reflection of the water as it made a silver quivering on the bars of the

lattice. She sat, turned away from the whole length of the apartment, as

if she were lonely of her own haughty choice. And yet it would have been

as difficult as ever to say, positively, whether she avoided the rest,

or was avoided.

The shadow in which she sat, falling like a gloomy veil across her

forehead, accorded very well with the character of her beauty. One could

hardly see the face, so still and scornful, set off by the arched

dark eyebrows, and the folds of dark hair, without wondering what its

expression would be if a change came over it. That it could soften or

relent, appeared next to impossible. That it could deepen into anger or

any extreme of defiance, and that it must change in that direction when

it changed at all, would have been its peculiar impression upon most

observers. It was dressed and trimmed into no ceremony of expression.

Although not an open face, there was no pretence in it. 'I am

self-contained and self-reliant; your opinion is nothing to me; I have

no interest in you, care nothing for you, and see and hear you with

indifference'--this it said plainly. It said so in the proud eyes, in

the lifted nostril, in the handsome but compressed and even cruel mouth.

Cover either two of those channels of expression, and the third would

have said so still. Mask them all, and the mere turn of the head would

have shown an unsubduable nature.

Pet had moved up to her (she had been the subject of remark among her

family and Mr Clennam, who were now the only other occupants of the

room), and was standing at her side.

'Are you'--she turned her eyes, and Pet faltered--'expecting any one to

meet you here, Miss Wade?'

'I? No.'

'Father is sending to the Poste Restante. Shall he have the pleasure of

directing the messenger to ask if there are any letters for you?'

'I thank him, but I know there can be none.'

'We are afraid,' said Pet, sitting down beside her, shyly and half

tenderly, 'that you will feel quite deserted when we are all gone.'

'Indeed!'

'Not,' said Pet, apologetically and embarrassed by her eyes, 'not, of

course, that we are any company to you, or that we have been able to be

so, or that we thought you wished it.'

'I have not intended to make it understood that I did wish it.'

'No. Of course. But--in short,' said Pet, timidly touching her hand as

it lay impassive on the sofa between them, 'will you not allow Father to

tender you any slight assistance or service? He will be very glad.'

'Very glad,' said Mr Meagles, coming forward with his wife and Clennam.

'Anything short of speaking the language, I shall be delighted to

undertake, I am sure.'

'I am obliged to you,' she returned, 'but my arrangements are made, and

I prefer to go my own way in my own manner.'

'Do you?' said Mr Meagles to himself, as he surveyed her with a puzzled

look. 'Well! There's character in that, too.'

'I am not much used to the society of young ladies, and I am afraid I

may not show my appreciation of it as others might. A pleasant journey

to you. Good-bye!'

She would not have put out her hand, it seemed, but that Mr Meagles put

out his so straight before her that she could not pass it. She put hers

in it, and it lay there just as it had lain upon the couch.

'Good-bye!' said Mr Meagles. 'This is the last good-bye upon the list,

for Mother and I have just said it to Mr Clennam here, and he only waits

to say it to Pet. Good-bye! We may never meet again.'

'In our course through life we shall meet the people who are coming to

meet us, from many strange places and by many strange roads,' was the

composed reply; 'and what it is set to us to do to them, and what it is

set to them to do to us, will all be done.' There was something in the

manner of these words that jarred upon Pet's ear. It implied that what

was to be done was necessarily evil, and it caused her to say in a

whisper, 'O Father!' and to shrink childishly, in her spoilt way, a

little closer to him. This was not lost on the speaker.

'Your pretty daughter,' she said, 'starts to think of such things. Yet,'

looking full upon her, 'you may be sure that there are men and women

already on their road, who have their business to do with YOU, and who

will do it. Of a certainty they will do it. They may be coming hundreds,

thousands, of miles over the sea there; they may be close at hand now;

they may be coming, for anything you know or anything you can do to

prevent it, from the vilest sweepings of this very town.'

With the coldest of farewells, and with a certain worn expression on her

beauty that gave it, though scarcely yet in its prime, a wasted look,

she left the room.

Now, there were many stairs and passages that she had to traverse in

passing from that part of the spacious house to the chamber she had

secured for her own occupation. When she had almost completed the

journey, and was passing along the gallery in which her room was, she

heard an angry sound of muttering and sobbing. A door stood open, and

within she saw the attendant upon the girl she had just left; the maid

with the curious name.

She stood still, to look at this maid. A sullen, passionate girl! Her

rich black hair was all about her face, her face was flushed and hot,

and as she sobbed and raged, she plucked at her lips with an unsparing

hand.

'Selfish brutes!' said the girl, sobbing and heaving between whiles.

'Not caring what becomes of me! Leaving me here hungry and thirsty and

tired, to starve, for anything they care! Beasts! Devils! Wretches!'

'My poor girl, what is the matter?'

She looked up suddenly, with reddened eyes, and with her hands

suspended, in the act of pinching her neck, freshly disfigured with

great scarlet blots. 'It's nothing to you what's the matter. It don't

signify to any one.'

'O yes it does; I am sorry to see you so.'

'You are not sorry,' said the girl. 'You are glad. You know you are

glad. I never was like this but twice over in the quarantine yonder; and

both times you found me. I am afraid of you.'

'Afraid of me?'

'Yes. You seem to come like my own anger, my own malice, my

own--whatever it is--I don't know what it is. But I am ill-used, I am

ill-used, I am ill-used!' Here the sobs and the tears, and the tearing

hand, which had all been suspended together since the first surprise,

went on together anew.

The visitor stood looking at her with a strange attentive smile. It was

wonderful to see the fury of the contest in the girl, and the bodily

struggle she made as if she were rent by the Demons of old.

'I am younger than she is by two or three years, and yet it's me that

looks after her, as if I was old, and it's she that's always petted and

called Baby! I detest the name. I hate her! They make a fool of her,

they spoil her. She thinks of nothing but herself, she thinks no more of

me than if I was a stock and a stone!' So the girl went on.

'You must have patience.'

'I WON'T have patience!'

'If they take much care of themselves, and little or none of you, you

must not mind it.'

I WILL mind it.'

'Hush! Be more prudent. You forget your dependent position.'

'I don't care for that. I'll run away. I'll do some mischief. I won't

bear it; I can't bear it; I shall die if I try to bear it!'

The observer stood with her hand upon her own bosom, looking at the

girl, as one afflicted with a diseased part might curiously watch the

dissection and exposition of an analogous case.

The girl raged and battled with all the force of her youth and fulness

of life, until by little and little her passionate exclamations trailed

off into broken murmurs as if she were in pain. By corresponding degrees

she sank into a chair, then upon her knees, then upon the ground beside

the bed, drawing the coverlet with her, half to hide her shamed head and

wet hair in it, and half, as it seemed, to embrace it, rather than have

nothing to take to her repentant breast.

'Go away from me, go away from me! When my temper comes upon me, I

am mad. I know I might keep it off if I only tried hard enough, and

sometimes I do try hard enough, and at other times I don't and won't.

What have I said! I knew when I said it, it was all lies. They think I

am being taken care of somewhere, and have all I want.

They are nothing but good to me. I love them dearly; no people could

ever be kinder to a thankless creature than they always are to me. Do,

do go away, for I am afraid of you. I am afraid of myself when I feel my

temper coming, and I am as much afraid of you. Go away from me, and let

me pray and cry myself better!' The day passed on; and again the wide

stare stared itself out; and the hot night was on Marseilles; and

through it the caravan of the morning, all dispersed, went their

appointed ways. And thus ever by day and night, under the sun and under

the stars, climbing the dusty hills and toiling along the weary plains,

journeying by land and journeying by sea, coming and going so strangely,

to meet and to act and react on one another, move all we restless

travellers through the pilgrimage of life.

CHAPTER 3. Home

It was a Sunday evening in London, gloomy, close, and stale. Maddening

church bells of all degrees of dissonance, sharp and flat, cracked

and clear, fast and slow, made the brick-and-mortar echoes hideous.

Melancholy streets, in a penitential garb of soot, steeped the souls of

the people who were condemned to look at them out of windows, in dire

despondency. In every thoroughfare, up almost every alley, and down

almost every turning, some doleful bell was throbbing, jerking, tolling,

as if the Plague were in the city and the dead-carts were going round.

Everything was bolted and barred that could by possibility furnish

relief to an overworked people. No pictures, no unfamiliar animals, no

rare plants or flowers, no natural or artificial wonders of the ancient

world--all TABOO with that enlightened strictness, that the ugly South

Sea gods in the British Museum might have supposed themselves at home

again. Nothing to see but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to breathe

but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to change the brooding mind,

or raise it up. Nothing for the spent toiler to do, but to compare the

monotony of his seventh day with the monotony of his six days, think

what a weary life he led, and make the best of it--or the worst,

according to the probabilities.

At such a happy time, so propitious to the interests of religion and

morality, Mr Arthur Clennam, newly arrived from Marseilles by way of

Dover, and by Dover coach the Blue-eyed Maid, sat in the window of a

coffee-house on Ludgate Hill. Ten thousand responsible houses surrounded

him, frowning as heavily on the streets they composed, as if they were

every one inhabited by the ten young men of the Calender's story, who

blackened their faces and bemoaned their miseries every night. Fifty

thousand lairs surrounded him where people lived so unwholesomely that

fair water put into their crowded rooms on Saturday night, would be

corrupt on Sunday morning; albeit my lord, their county member, was

amazed that they failed to sleep in company with their butcher's meat.

Miles of close wells and pits of houses, where the inhabitants gasped

for air, stretched far away towards every point of the compass. Through

the heart of the town a deadly sewer ebbed and flowed, in the place of

a fine fresh river. What secular want could the million or so of

human beings whose daily labour, six days in the week, lay among these

Arcadian objects, from the sweet sameness of which they had no escape

between the cradle and the grave--what secular want could they possibly

have upon their seventh day? Clearly they could want nothing but a

stringent policeman.

Mr Arthur Clennam sat in the window of the coffee-house on Ludgate Hill,

counting one of the neighbouring bells, making sentences and burdens of

songs out of it in spite of himself, and wondering how many sick

people it might be the death of in the course of the year. As the hour

approached, its changes of measure made it more and more exasperating.

At the quarter, it went off into a condition of deadly-lively

importunity, urging the populace in a voluble manner to Come to church,

Come to church, Come to church! At the ten minutes, it became aware

that the congregation would be scanty, and slowly hammered out in low

spirits, They WON'T come, they WON'T come, they WON'T come! At the five

minutes, it abandoned hope, and shook every house in the neighbourhood

for three hundred seconds, with one dismal swing per second, as a groan

of despair.

'Thank Heaven!' said Clennam, when the hour struck, and the bell

stopped.

But its sound had revived a long train of miserable Sundays, and the

procession would not stop with the bell, but continued to march on.

'Heaven forgive me,' said he, 'and those who trained me. How I have

hated this day!'

There was the dreary Sunday of his childhood, when he sat with his hands

before him, scared out of his senses by a horrible tract which commenced

business with the poor child by asking him in its title, why he was

going to Perdition?--a piece of curiosity that he really, in a frock and

drawers, was not in a condition to satisfy--and which, for the further

attraction of his infant mind, had a parenthesis in every other line

with some such hiccupping reference as 2 Ep. Thess. c. iii, v. 6 &

7. There was the sleepy Sunday of his boyhood, when, like a military

deserter, he was marched to chapel by a picquet of teachers three times

a day, morally handcuffed to another boy; and when he would willingly

have bartered two meals of indigestible sermon for another ounce or

two of inferior mutton at his scanty dinner in the flesh. There was the

interminable Sunday of his nonage; when his mother, stern of face and

unrelenting of heart, would sit all day behind a Bible--bound, like her

own construction of it, in the hardest, barest, and straitest boards,

with one dinted ornament on the cover like the drag of a chain, and a

wrathful sprinkling of red upon the edges of the leaves--as if it, of

all books! were a fortification against sweetness of temper, natural

affection, and gentle intercourse. There was the resentful Sunday of a

little later, when he sat down glowering and glooming through the tardy

length of the day, with a sullen sense of injury in his heart, and no

more real knowledge of the beneficent history of the New Testament than

if he had been bred among idolaters. There was a legion of Sundays,

all days of unserviceable bitterness and mortification, slowly passing

before him. 'Beg pardon, sir,' said a brisk waiter, rubbing the table.

'Wish see bed-room?'

'Yes. I have just made up my mind to do it.'

'Chaymaid!' cried the waiter. 'Gelen box num seven wish see room!'

'Stay!' said Clennam, rousing himself. 'I was not thinking of what I

said; I answered mechanically. I am not going to sleep here. I am going

home.'

'Deed, sir? Chaymaid! Gelen box num seven, not go sleep here, gome.'

He sat in the same place as the day died, looking at the dull houses

opposite, and thinking, if the disembodied spirits of former inhabitants

were ever conscious of them, how they must pity themselves for their old

places of imprisonment. Sometimes a face would appear behind the dingy

glass of a window, and would fade away into the gloom as if it had seen

enough of life and had vanished out of it. Presently the rain began to

fall in slanting lines between him and those houses, and people began

to collect under cover of the public passage opposite, and to look out

hopelessly at the sky as the rain dropped thicker and faster. Then wet

umbrellas began to appear, draggled skirts, and mud. What the mud had

been doing with itself, or where it came from, who could say? But it

seemed to collect in a moment, as a crowd will, and in five minutes to

have splashed all the sons and daughters of Adam. The lamplighter was

going his rounds now; and as the fiery jets sprang up under his touch,

one might have fancied them astonished at being suffered to introduce

any show of brightness into such a dismal scene.

Mr Arthur Clennam took up his hat and buttoned his coat, and walked out.

In the country, the rain would have developed a thousand fresh scents,

and every drop would have had its bright association with some beautiful

form of growth or life. In the city, it developed only foul stale

smells, and was a sickly, lukewarm, dirt-stained, wretched addition to

the gutters.

He crossed by St Paul's and went down, at a long angle, almost to the

water's edge, through some of the crooked and descending streets which

lie (and lay more crookedly and closely then) between the river and

Cheapside. Passing, now the mouldy hall of some obsolete Worshipful

Company, now the illuminated windows of a Congregationless Church that

seemed to be waiting for some adventurous Belzoni to dig it out and

discover its history; passing silent warehouses and wharves, and here

and there a narrow alley leading to the river, where a wretched little

bill, FOUND DROWNED, was weeping on the wet wall; he came at last to the

house he sought. An old brick house, so dingy as to be all but black,

standing by itself within a gateway. Before it, a square court-yard

where a shrub or two and a patch of grass were as rank (which is saying

much) as the iron railings enclosing them were rusty; behind it,

a jumble of roots. It was a double house, with long, narrow,

heavily-framed windows. Many years ago, it had had it in its mind to

slide down sideways; it had been propped up, however, and was leaning on

some half-dozen gigantic crutches: which gymnasium for the neighbouring

cats, weather-stained, smoke-blackened, and overgrown with weeds,

appeared in these latter days to be no very sure reliance.

'Nothing changed,' said the traveller, stopping to look round. 'Dark and

miserable as ever. A light in my mother's window, which seems never to

have been extinguished since I came home twice a year from school, and

dragged my box over this pavement. Well, well, well!'

He went up to the door, which had a projecting canopy in carved work

of festooned jack-towels and children's heads with water on the brain,

designed after a once-popular monumental pattern, and knocked. A

shuffling step was soon heard on the stone floor of the hall, and the

door was opened by an old man, bent and dried, but with keen eyes.

He had a candle in his hand, and he held it up for a moment to assist

his keen eyes. 'Ah, Mr Arthur?' he said, without any emotion, 'you are

come at last? Step in.'

Mr Arthur stepped in and shut the door.

'Your figure is filled out, and set,' said the old man, turning to look

at him with the light raised again, and shaking his head; 'but you don't

come up to your father in my opinion. Nor yet your mother.'

'How is my mother?'

'She is as she always is now. Keeps her room when not actually

bedridden, and hasn't been out of it fifteen times in as many years,

Arthur.' They had walked into a spare, meagre dining-room. The old man

had put the candlestick upon the table, and, supporting his right elbow

with his left hand, was smoothing his leathern jaws while he looked at

the visitor. The visitor offered his hand. The old man took it coldly

enough, and seemed to prefer his jaws, to which he returned as soon as

he could.

'I doubt if your mother will approve of your coming home on the Sabbath,

Arthur,' he said, shaking his head warily.

'You wouldn't have me go away again?'

'Oh! I? I? I am not the master. It's not what \_I\_ would have. I have

stood between your father and mother for a number of years. I don't

pretend to stand between your mother and you.'

'Will you tell her that I have come home?'

'Yes, Arthur, yes. Oh, to be sure! I'll tell her that you have come

home. Please to wait here. You won't find the room changed.'

He took another candle from a cupboard, lighted it, left the first on

the table, and went upon his errand. He was a short, bald old man, in a

high-shouldered black coat and waistcoat, drab breeches, and long drab

gaiters. He might, from his dress, have been either clerk or servant,

and in fact had long been both. There was nothing about him in the way

of decoration but a watch, which was lowered into the depths of its

proper pocket by an old black ribbon, and had a tarnished copper key

moored above it, to show where it was sunk. His head was awry, and

he had a one-sided, crab-like way with him, as if his foundations had

yielded at about the same time as those of the house, and he ought to

have been propped up in a similar manner.

'How weak am I,' said Arthur Clennam, when he was gone, 'that I could

shed tears at this reception! I, who have never experienced anything

else; who have never expected anything else.' He not only could,

but did. It was the momentary yielding of a nature that had been

disappointed from the dawn of its perceptions, but had not quite given

up all its hopeful yearnings yet. He subdued it, took up the candle,

and examined the room. The old articles of furniture were in their old

places; the Plagues of Egypt, much the dimmer for the fly and smoke

plagues of London, were framed and glazed upon the walls. There was the

old cellaret with nothing in it, lined with lead, like a sort of coffin

in compartments; there was the old dark closet, also with nothing in

it, of which he had been many a time the sole contents, in days of

punishment, when he had regarded it as the veritable entrance to that

bourne to which the tract had found him galloping. There was the large,

hard-featured clock on the sideboard, which he used to see bending its

figured brows upon him with a savage joy when he was behind-hand with

his lessons, and which, when it was wound up once a week with an iron

handle, used to sound as if it were growling in ferocious anticipation

of the miseries into which it would bring him. But here was the old man

come back, saying, 'Arthur, I'll go before and light you.'

Arthur followed him up the staircase, which was panelled off into spaces

like so many mourning tablets, into a dim bed-chamber, the floor of

which had gradually so sunk and settled, that the fire-place was in a

dell. On a black bier-like sofa in this hollow, propped up behind with

one great angular black bolster like the block at a state execution in

the good old times, sat his mother in a widow's dress.

She and his father had been at variance from his earliest remembrance.

To sit speechless himself in the midst of rigid silence, glancing in

dread from the one averted face to the other, had been the peacefullest

occupation of his childhood. She gave him one glassy kiss, and four

stiff fingers muffled in worsted. This embrace concluded, he sat down on

the opposite side of her little table. There was a fire in the grate,

as there had been night and day for fifteen years. There was a kettle on

the hob, as there had been night and day for fifteen years. There was a

little mound of damped ashes on the top of the fire, and another little

mound swept together under the grate, as there had been night and day

for fifteen years. There was a smell of black dye in the airless room,

which the fire had been drawing out of the crape and stuff of the

widow's dress for fifteen months, and out of the bier-like sofa for

fifteen years.

'Mother, this is a change from your old active habits.'

'The world has narrowed to these dimensions, Arthur,' she rep lied,

glancing round the room. 'It is well for me that I never set my heart

upon its hollow vanities.'

The old influence of her presence and her stern strong voice, so

gathered about her son, that he felt conscious of a renewal of the timid

chill and reserve of his childhood.

'Do you never leave your room, mother?'

'What with my rheumatic affection, and what with its attendant debility

or nervous weakness--names are of no matter now--I have lost the use

of my limbs. I never leave my room. I have not been outside this door

for--tell him for how long,' she said, speaking over her shoulder.

'A dozen year next Christmas,' returned a cracked voice out of the

dimness behind.

'Is that Affery?' said Arthur, looking towards it.

The cracked voice replied that it was Affery: and an old woman came

forward into what doubtful light there was, and kissed her hand once;

then subsided again into the dimness.

'I am able,' said Mrs Clennam, with a slight motion of her

worsted-muffled right hand toward a chair on wheels, standing before a

tall writing cabinet close shut up, 'I am able to attend to my business

duties, and I am thankful for the privilege. It is a great privilege.

But no more of business on this day. It is a bad night, is it not?'

'Yes, mother.'

'Does it snow?'

'Snow, mother? And we only yet in September?'

'All seasons are alike to me,' she returned, with a grim kind of

luxuriousness. 'I know nothing of summer and winter, shut up here.

The Lord has been pleased to put me beyond all that.' With her cold grey

eyes and her cold grey hair, and her immovable face, as stiff as the

folds of her stony head-dress,--her being beyond the reach of the

seasons seemed but a fit sequence to her being beyond the reach of all

changing emotions.

On her little table lay two or three books, her handkerchief, a pair of

steel spectacles newly taken off, and an old-fashioned gold watch in a

heavy double case. Upon this last object her son's eyes and her own now

rested together.

'I see that you received the packet I sent you on my father's death,

safely, mother.'

'You see.'

'I never knew my father to show so much anxiety on any subject, as that

his watch should be sent straight to you.'

'I keep it here as a remembrance of your father.'

'It was not until the last, that he expressed the wish; when he could

only put his hand upon it, and very indistinctly say to me "your

mother." A moment before, I thought him wandering in his mind, as he

had been for many hours--I think he had no consciousness of pain in his

short illness--when I saw him turn himself in his bed and try to open

it.'

'Was your father, then, not wandering in his mind when he tried to open

it?'

'No. He was quite sensible at that time.'

Mrs Clennam shook her head; whether in dismissal of the deceased or

opposing herself to her son's opinion, was not clearly expressed.

'After my father's death I opened it myself, thinking there might be,

for anything I knew, some memorandum there. However, as I need not tell

you, mother, there was nothing but the old silk watch-paper worked in

beads, which you found (no doubt) in its place between the cases, where

I found and left it.'

Mrs Clennam signified assent; then added, 'No more of business on this

day,' and then added, 'Affery, it is nine o'clock.'

Upon this, the old woman cleared the little table, went out of the room,

and quickly returned with a tray on which was a dish of little rusks and

a small precise pat of butter, cool, symmetrical, white, and plump. The

old man who had been standing by the door in one attitude during the

whole interview, looking at the mother up-stairs as he had looked at the

son down-stairs, went out at the same time, and, after a longer absence,

returned with another tray on which was the greater part of a bottle

of port wine (which, to judge by his panting, he had brought from the

cellar), a lemon, a sugar-basin, and a spice box. With these materials

and the aid of the kettle, he filled a tumbler with a hot and

odorous mixture, measured out and compounded with as much nicety as a

physician's prescription. Into this mixture Mrs Clennam dipped certain

of the rusks, and ate them; while the old woman buttered certain other

of the rusks, which were to be eaten alone. When the invalid had eaten

all the rusks and drunk all the mixture, the two trays were removed;

and the books and the candle, watch, handkerchief, and spectacles were

replaced upon the table. She then put on the spectacles and read certain

passages aloud from a book--sternly, fiercely, wrathfully--praying that

her enemies (she made them by her tone and manner expressly hers) might

be put to the edge of the sword, consumed by fire, smitten by plagues

and leprosy, that their bones might be ground to dust, and that they

might be utterly exterminated. As she read on, years seemed to fall

away from her son like the imaginings of a dream, and all the old dark

horrors of his usual preparation for the sleep of an innocent child to

overshadow him.

She shut the book and remained for a little time with her face shaded by

her hand. So did the old man, otherwise still unchanged in attitude; so,

probably, did the old woman in her dimmer part of the room. Then the

sick woman was ready for bed.

'Good night, Arthur. Affery will see to your accommodation. Only touch

me, for my hand is tender.' He touched the worsted muffling of her

hand--that was nothing; if his mother had been sheathed in brass there

would have been no new barrier between them--and followed the old man

and woman down-stairs.

The latter asked him, when they were alone together among the heavy

shadows of the dining-room, would he have some supper?

'No, Affery, no supper.'

'You shall if you like,' said Affery. 'There's her tomorrow's partridge

in the larder--her first this year; say the word and I'll cook it.'

No, he had not long dined, and could eat nothing.

'Have something to drink, then,' said Affery; 'you shall have some of

her bottle of port, if you like. I'll tell Jeremiah that you ordered me

to bring it you.'

No; nor would he have that, either.

'It's no reason, Arthur,' said the old woman, bending over him to

whisper, 'that because I am afeared of my life of 'em, you should be.

You've got half the property, haven't you?'

'Yes, yes.'

'Well then, don't you be cowed. You're clever, Arthur, an't you?' He

nodded, as she seemed to expect an answer in the affirmative. 'Then

stand up against them! She's awful clever, and none but a clever one

durst say a word to her. HE'S a clever one--oh, he's a clever one!--and

he gives it her when he has a mind to't, he does!'

'Your husband does?'

'Does? It makes me shake from head to foot, to hear him give it her. My

husband, Jeremiah Flintwinch, can conquer even your mother. What can he

be but a clever one to do that!'

His shuffling footstep coming towards them caused her to retreat to the

other end of the room. Though a tall, hard-favoured, sinewy old woman,

who in her youth might have enlisted in the Foot Guards without much

fear of discovery, she collapsed before the little keen-eyed crab-like

old man.

'Now, Affery,' said he, 'now, woman, what are you doing? Can't you find

Master Arthur something or another to pick at?'

Master Arthur repeated his recent refusal to pick at anything.

'Very well, then,' said the old man; 'make his bed. Stir yourself.' His

neck was so twisted that the knotted ends of his white cravat usually

dangled under one ear; his natural acerbity and energy, always

contending with a second nature of habitual repression, gave his

features a swollen and suffused look; and altogether, he had a weird

appearance of having hanged himself at one time or other, and of having

gone about ever since, halter and all, exactly as some timely hand had

cut him down.

'You'll have bitter words together to-morrow, Arthur; you and your

mother,' said Jeremiah. 'Your having given up the business on your

father's death--which she suspects, though we have left it to you to

tell her--won't go off smoothly.'

'I have given up everything in life for the business, and the time came

for me to give up that.'

'Good!' cried Jeremiah, evidently meaning Bad. 'Very good! only don't

expect me to stand between your mother and you, Arthur. I stood between

your mother and your father, fending off this, and fending off that, and

getting crushed and pounded betwixt em; and I've done with such work.'

'You will never be asked to begin it again for me, Jeremiah.'

'Good. I'm glad to hear it; because I should have had to decline it, if

I had been. That's enough--as your mother says--and more than enough of

such matters on a Sabbath night. Affery, woman, have you found what you

want yet?'

She had been collecting sheets and blankets from a press, and hastened

to gather them up, and to reply, 'Yes, Jeremiah.' Arthur Clennam helped

her by carrying the load himself, wished the old man good night, and

went up-stairs with her to the top of the house.

They mounted up and up, through the musty smell of an old close house,

little used, to a large garret bed-room. Meagre and spare, like all the

other rooms, it was even uglier and grimmer than the rest, by being the

place of banishment for the worn-out furniture. Its movables were ugly

old chairs with worn-out seats, and ugly old chairs without any seats;

a threadbare patternless carpet, a maimed table, a crippled wardrobe,

a lean set of fire-irons like the skeleton of a set deceased, a

washing-stand that looked as if it had stood for ages in a hail of

dirty soapsuds, and a bedstead with four bare atomies of posts, each

terminating in a spike, as if for the dismal accommodation of lodgers

who might prefer to impale themselves. Arthur opened the long low

window, and looked out upon the old blasted and blackened forest of

chimneys, and the old red glare in the sky, which had seemed to him once

upon a time but a nightly reflection of the fiery environment that was

presented to his childish fancy in all directions, let it look where it

would.

He drew in his head again, sat down at the bedside, and looked on at

Affery Flintwinch making the bed.

'Affery, you were not married when I went away.'

She screwed her mouth into the form of saying 'No,' shook her head, and

proceeded to get a pillow into its case.

'How did it happen?'

'Why, Jeremiah, o' course,' said Affery, with an end of the pillow-case

between her teeth.

'Of course he proposed it, but how did it all come about? I should have

thought that neither of you would have married; least of all should I

have thought of your marrying each other.'

'No more should I,' said Mrs Flintwinch, tying the pillow tightly in its

case.

'That's what I mean. When did you begin to think otherwise?'

'Never begun to think otherwise at all,' said Mrs Flintwinch.

Seeing, as she patted the pillow into its place on the bolster, that he

was still looking at her as if waiting for the rest of her reply,

she gave it a great poke in the middle, and asked, 'How could I help

myself?'

'How could you help yourself from being married!'

'O' course,' said Mrs Flintwinch. 'It was no doing o' mine. I'D never

thought of it. I'd got something to do, without thinking, indeed! She

kept me to it (as well as he) when she could go about, and she could go

about then.' 'Well?'

'Well?' echoed Mrs Flintwinch. 'That's what I said myself. Well! What's

the use of considering? If them two clever ones have made up their minds

to it, what's left for me to do? Nothing.'

'Was it my mother's project, then?'

'The Lord bless you, Arthur, and forgive me the wish!' cried Affery,

speaking always in a low tone. 'If they hadn't been both of a mind in

it, how could it ever have been? Jeremiah never courted me; t'ant likely

that he would, after living in the house with me and ordering me

about for as many years as he'd done. He said to me one day, he said,

"Affery," he said, "now I am going to tell you something. What do you

think of the name of Flintwinch?" "What do I think of it?" I says.

"Yes," he said, "because you're going to take it," he said. "Take it?" I

says. "Jere-MI-ah?" Oh! he's a clever one!'

Mrs Flintwinch went on to spread the upper sheet over the bed, and the

blanket over that, and the counterpane over that, as if she had quite

concluded her story. 'Well?' said Arthur again.

'Well?' echoed Mrs Flintwinch again. 'How could I help myself? He said

to me, "Affery, you and me must be married, and I'll tell you why. She's

failing in health, and she'll want pretty constant attendance up in

her room, and we shall have to be much with her, and there'll be nobody

about now but ourselves when we're away from her, and altogether it will

be more convenient. She's of my opinion," he said, "so if you'll put

your bonnet on next Monday morning at eight, we'll get it over."' Mrs

Flintwinch tucked up the bed.

'Well?'

'Well?' repeated Mrs Flintwinch, 'I think so! I sits me down and says

it. Well!--Jeremiah then says to me, "As to banns, next Sunday being the

third time of asking (for I've put 'em up a fortnight), is my reason for

naming Monday. She'll speak to you about it herself, and now she'll find

you prepared, Affery." That same day she spoke to me, and she said, "So,

Affery, I understand that you and Jeremiah are going to be married. I

am glad of it, and so are you, with reason. It is a very good thing for

you, and very welcome under the circumstances to me. He is a sensible

man, and a trustworthy man, and a persevering man, and a pious man."

What could I say when it had come to that? Why, if it had been--a

smothering instead of a wedding,' Mrs Flintwinch cast about in her mind

with great pains for this form of expression, 'I couldn't have said a

word upon it, against them two clever ones.'

'In good faith, I believe so.' 'And so you may, Arthur.'

'Affery, what girl was that in my mother's room just now?'

'Girl?' said Mrs Flintwinch in a rather sharp key.

'It was a girl, surely, whom I saw near you--almost hidden in the dark

corner?'

'Oh! She? Little Dorrit? She's nothing; she's a whim of--hers.' It was a

peculiarity of Affery Flintwinch that she never spoke of Mrs Clennam

by name. 'But there's another sort of girls than that about. Have you

forgot your old sweetheart? Long and long ago, I'll be bound.'

'I suffered enough from my mother's separating us, to remember her.

I recollect her very well.'

'Have you got another?'

'No.'

'Here's news for you, then. She's well to do now, and a widow. And if

you like to have her, why you can.'

'And how do you know that, Affery?'

'Them two clever ones have been speaking about it.--There's Jeremiah on

the stairs!' She was gone in a moment.

Mrs Flintwinch had introduced into the web that his mind was busily

weaving, in that old workshop where the loom of his youth had stood, the

last thread wanting to the pattern. The airy folly of a boy's love had

found its way even into that house, and he had been as wretched under

its hopelessness as if the house had been a castle of romance. Little

more than a week ago at Marseilles, the face of the pretty girl from

whom he had parted with regret, had had an unusual interest for him, and

a tender hold upon him, because of some resemblance, real or imagined,

to this first face that had soared out of his gloomy life into the

bright glories of fancy. He leaned upon the sill of the long low window,

and looking out upon the blackened forest of chimneys again, began to

dream; for it had been the uniform tendency of this man's life--so much

was wanting in it to think about, so much that might have been better

directed and happier to speculate upon--to make him a dreamer, after

all.

CHAPTER 4. Mrs Flintwinch has a Dream

When Mrs Flintwinch dreamed, she usually dreamed, unlike the son of her

old mistress, with her eyes shut. She had a curiously vivid dream that

night, and before she had left the son of her old mistress many hours.

In fact it was not at all like a dream; it was so very real in every

respect. It happened in this wise.

The bed-chamber occupied by Mr and Mrs Flintwinch was within a few paces

of that to which Mrs Clennam had been so long confined. It was not on

the same floor, for it was a room at the side of the house, which was

approached by a steep descent of a few odd steps, diverging from the

main staircase nearly opposite to Mrs Clennam's door. It could scarcely

be said to be within call, the walls, doors, and panelling of the old

place were so cumbrous; but it was within easy reach, in any undress,

at any hour of the night, in any temperature. At the head of the bed

and within a foot of Mrs Flintwinch's ear, was a bell, the line of which

hung ready to Mrs Clennam's hand. Whenever this bell rang, up started

Affery, and was in the sick room before she was awake.

Having got her mistress into bed, lighted her lamp, and given her good

night, Mrs Flintwinch went to roost as usual, saving that her lord had

not yet appeared. It was her lord himself who became--unlike the

last theme in the mind, according to the observation of most

philosophers--the subject of Mrs Flintwinch's dream. It seemed to her

that she awoke after sleeping some hours, and found Jeremiah not yet

abed. That she looked at the candle she had left burning, and, measuring

the time like King Alfred the Great, was confirmed by its wasted state

in her belief that she had been asleep for some considerable period.

That she arose thereupon, muffled herself up in a wrapper, put on

her shoes, and went out on the staircase, much surprised, to look for

Jeremiah.

The staircase was as wooden and solid as need be, and Affery went

straight down it without any of those deviations peculiar to dreams.

She did not skim over it, but walked down it, and guided herself by the

banisters on account of her candle having died out. In one corner of

the hall, behind the house-door, there was a little waiting-room, like a

well-shaft, with a long narrow window in it as if it had been ripped up.

In this room, which was never used, a light was burning.

Mrs Flintwinch crossed the hall, feeling its pavement cold to her

stockingless feet, and peeped in between the rusty hinges on the door,

which stood a little open. She expected to see Jeremiah fast asleep or

in a fit, but he was calmly seated in a chair, awake, and in his usual

health. But what--hey?--Lord forgive us!--Mrs Flintwinch muttered some

ejaculation to this effect, and turned giddy.

For, Mr Flintwinch awake, was watching Mr Flintwinch asleep. He sat on

one side of the small table, looking keenly at himself on the other side

with his chin sunk on his breast, snoring. The waking Flintwinch had his

full front face presented to his wife; the sleeping Flintwinch was

in profile. The waking Flintwinch was the old original; the sleeping

Flintwinch was the double, just as she might have distinguished between

a tangible object and its reflection in a glass, Affery made out this

difference with her head going round and round.

If she had had any doubt which was her own Jeremiah, it would have been

resolved by his impatience. He looked about him for an offensive weapon,

caught up the snuffers, and, before applying them to the cabbage-headed

candle, lunged at the sleeper as though he would have run him through

the body.

'Who's that? What's the matter?' cried the sleeper, starting.

Mr Flintwinch made a movement with the snuffers, as if he would have

enforced silence on his companion by putting them down his throat; the

companion, coming to himself, said, rubbing his eyes, 'I forgot where I

was.'

'You have been asleep,' snarled Jeremiah, referring to his watch, 'two

hours. You said you would be rested enough if you had a short nap.'

'I have had a short nap,' said Double.

'Half-past two o'clock in the morning,' muttered Jeremiah. 'Where's your

hat? Where's your coat? Where's the box?'

'All here,' said Double, tying up his throat with sleepy carefulness in

a shawl. 'Stop a minute. Now give me the sleeve--not that sleeve, the

other one. Ha! I'm not as young as I was.' Mr Flintwinch had pulled

him into his coat with vehement energy. 'You promised me a second glass

after I was rested.'

'Drink it!' returned Jeremiah, 'and--choke yourself, I was going

to say--but go, I mean.'At the same time he produced the identical

port-wine bottle, and filled a wine-glass.

'Her port-wine, I believe?' said Double, tasting it as if he were in the

Docks, with hours to spare. 'Her health.'

He took a sip.

'Your health!'

He took another sip.

'His health!'

He took another sip.

'And all friends round St Paul's.' He emptied and put down the

wine-glass half-way through this ancient civic toast, and took up the

box. It was an iron box some two feet square, which he carried under his

arms pretty easily. Jeremiah watched his manner of adjusting it, with

jealous eyes; tried it with his hands, to be sure that he had a firm

hold of it; bade him for his life be careful what he was about; and then

stole out on tiptoe to open the door for him. Affery, anticipating

the last movement, was on the staircase. The sequence of things was

so ordinary and natural, that, standing there, she could hear the door

open, feel the night air, and see the stars outside.

But now came the most remarkable part of the dream. She felt so afraid

of her husband, that being on the staircase, she had not the power to

retreat to her room (which she might easily have done before he had

fastened the door), but stood there staring. Consequently when he came

up the staircase to bed, candle in hand, he came full upon her. He

looked astonished, but said not a word. He kept his eyes upon her, and

kept advancing; and she, completely under his influence, kept retiring

before him. Thus, she walking backward and he walking forward, they

came into their own room. They were no sooner shut in there, than Mr

Flintwinch took her by the throat, and shook her until she was black in

the face.

'Why, Affery, woman--Affery!' said Mr Flintwinch. 'What have you been

dreaming of? Wake up, wake up! What's the matter?'

'The--the matter, Jeremiah?' gasped Mrs Flintwinch, rolling her eyes.

'Why, Affery, woman--Affery! You have been getting out of bed in your

sleep, my dear! I come up, after having fallen asleep myself, below, and

find you in your wrapper here, with the nightmare. Affery, woman,' said

Mr Flintwinch, with a friendly grin on his expressive countenance, 'if

you ever have a dream of this sort again, it'll be a sign of your being

in want of physic. And I'll give you such a dose, old woman--such a

dose!'

Mrs Flintwinch thanked him and crept into bed.

CHAPTER 5. Family Affairs

As the city clocks struck nine on Monday morning, Mrs Clennam was

wheeled by Jeremiah Flintwinch of the cut-down aspect to her tall

cabinet. When she had unlocked and opened it, and had settled herself

at its desk, Jeremiah withdrew--as it might be, to hang himself more

effectually--and her son appeared.

'Are you any better this morning, mother?'

She shook her head, with the same austere air of luxuriousness that she

had shown over-night when speaking of the weather.

'I shall never be better any more. It is well for me, Arthur, that I

know it and can bear it.'

Sitting with her hands laid separately upon the desk, and the tall

cabinet towering before her, she looked as if she were performing on a

dumb church organ. Her son thought so (it was an old thought with him),

while he took his seat beside it.

She opened a drawer or two, looked over some business papers, and put

them back again. Her severe face had no thread of relaxation in it, by

which any explorer could have been guided to the gloomy labyrinth of her

thoughts.

'Shall I speak of our affairs, mother? Are you inclined to enter upon

business?'

'Am I inclined, Arthur? Rather, are you? Your father has been dead a

year and more. I have been at your disposal, and waiting your pleasure,

ever since.'

'There was much to arrange before I could leave; and when I did leave, I

travelled a little for rest and relief.'

She turned her face towards him, as not having heard or understood his

last words. 'For rest and relief.'

She glanced round the sombre room, and appeared from the motion of her

lips to repeat the words to herself, as calling it to witness how little

of either it afforded her.

'Besides, mother, you being sole executrix, and having the direction and

management of the estate, there remained little business, or I might say

none, that I could transact, until you had had time to arrange matters

to your satisfaction.'

'The accounts are made out,' she returned. 'I have them here. The

vouchers have all been examined and passed. You can inspect them when

you like, Arthur; now, if you please.'

'It is quite enough, mother, to know that the business is completed.

Shall I proceed then?'

'Why not?' she said, in her frozen way.

'Mother, our House has done less and less for some years past, and our

dealings have been progressively on the decline. We have never shown

much confidence, or invited much; we have attached no people to us; the

track we have kept is not the track of the time; and we have been

left far behind. I need not dwell on this to you, mother. You know it

necessarily.'

'I know what you mean,' she answered, in a qualified tone. 'Even this

old house in which we speak,' pursued her son, 'is an instance of what I

say. In my father's earlier time, and in his uncle's time before him,

it was a place of business--really a place of business, and business

resort. Now, it is a mere anomaly and incongruity here, out of date and

out of purpose. All our consignments have long been made to Rovinghams'

the commission-merchants; and although, as a check upon them, and in

the stewardship of my father's resources, your judgment and watchfulness

have been actively exerted, still those qualities would have influenced

my father's fortunes equally, if you had lived in any private dwelling:

would they not?'

'Do you consider,' she returned, without answering his question, 'that

a house serves no purpose, Arthur, in sheltering your infirm and

afflicted--justly infirm and righteously afflicted--mother?'

'I was speaking only of business purposes.'

'With what object?'

'I am coming to it.'

'I foresee,' she returned, fixing her eyes upon him, 'what it is.

But the Lord forbid that I should repine under any visitation. In my

sinfulness I merit bitter disappointment, and I accept it.'

'Mother, I grieve to hear you speak like this, though I have had my

apprehensions that you would--'

'You knew I would. You knew ME,' she interrupted.

Her son paused for a moment. He had struck fire out of her, and was

surprised.

'Well!' she said, relapsing into stone. 'Go on. Let me hear.'

'You have anticipated, mother, that I decide for my part, to abandon

the business. I have done with it. I will not take upon myself to advise

you; you will continue it, I see. If I had any influence with you, I

would simply use it to soften your judgment of me in causing you this

disappointment: to represent to you that I have lived the half of a long

term of life, and have never before set my own will against yours. I

cannot say that I have been able to conform myself, in heart and spirit,

to your rules; I cannot say that I believe my forty years have been

profitable or pleasant to myself, or any one; but I have habitually

submitted, and I only ask you to remember it.'

Woe to the suppliant, if such a one there were or ever had been, who had

any concession to look for in the inexorable face at the cabinet. Woe to

the defaulter whose appeal lay to the tribunal where those severe eyes

presided. Great need had the rigid woman of her mystical religion,

veiled in gloom and darkness, with lightnings of cursing, vengeance, and

destruction, flashing through the sable clouds. Forgive us our debts as

we forgive our debtors, was a prayer too poor in spirit for her. Smite

Thou my debtors, Lord, wither them, crush them; do Thou as I would do,

and Thou shalt have my worship: this was the impious tower of stone she

built up to scale Heaven.

'Have you finished, Arthur, or have you anything more to say to me?

I think there can be nothing else. You have been short, but full of

matter!'

'Mother, I have yet something more to say. It has been upon my mind,

night and day, this long time. It is far more difficult to say than what

I have said. That concerned myself; this concerns us all.'

'Us all! Who are us all?'

'Yourself, myself, my dead father.'

She took her hands from the desk; folded them in her lap; and sat

looking towards the fire, with the impenetrability of an old Egyptian

sculpture.

'You knew my father infinitely better than I ever knew him; and his

reserve with me yielded to you. You were much the stronger, mother, and

directed him. As a child, I knew it as well as I know it now. I knew

that your ascendancy over him was the cause of his going to China to

take care of the business there, while you took care of it here (though

I do not even now know whether these were really terms of separation

that you agreed upon); and that it was your will that I should remain

with you until I was twenty, and then go to him as I did. You will not

be offended by my recalling this, after twenty years?'

'I am waiting to hear why you recall it.'

He lowered his voice, and said, with manifest reluctance, and against

his will:

'I want to ask you, mother, whether it ever occurred to you to

suspect--'

At the word Suspect, she turned her eyes momentarily upon her son, with

a dark frown. She then suffered them to seek the fire, as before; but

with the frown fixed above them, as if the sculptor of old Egypt had

indented it in the hard granite face, to frown for ages.

'--that he had any secret remembrance which caused him trouble of

mind--remorse? Whether you ever observed anything in his conduct

suggesting that; or ever spoke to him upon it, or ever heard him hint at

such a thing?'

'I do not understand what kind of secret remembrance you mean to infer

that your father was a prey to,' she returned, after a silence. 'You

speak so mysteriously.'

'Is it possible, mother,' her son leaned forward to be the nearer to her

while he whispered it, and laid his hand nervously upon her desk, 'is

it possible, mother, that he had unhappily wronged any one, and made no

reparation?'

Looking at him wrathfully, she bent herself back in her chair to keep

him further off, but gave him no reply.

'I am deeply sensible, mother, that if this thought has never at any

time flashed upon you, it must seem cruel and unnatural in me, even in

this confidence, to breathe it. But I cannot shake it off.

Time and change (I have tried both before breaking silence) do nothing

to wear it out. Remember, I was with my father. Remember, I saw his face

when he gave the watch into my keeping, and struggled to express that he

sent it as a token you would understand, to you. Remember, I saw him at

the last with the pencil in his failing hand, trying to write some word

for you to read, but to which he could give no shape. The more

remote and cruel this vague suspicion that I have, the stronger the

circumstances that could give it any semblance of probability to me.

For Heaven's sake, let us examine sacredly whether there is any wrong

entrusted to us to set right. No one can help towards it, mother, but

you.'

Still so recoiling in her chair that her overpoised weight moved it,

from time to time, a little on its wheels, and gave her the appearance

of a phantom of fierce aspect gliding away from him, she interposed her

left arm, bent at the elbow with the back of her hand towards her face,

between herself and him, and looked at him in a fixed silence.

'In grasping at money and in driving hard bargains--I have begun, and I

must speak of such things now, mother--some one may have been grievously

deceived, injured, ruined. You were the moving power of all this

machinery before my birth; your stronger spirit has been infused into

all my father's dealings for more than two score years. You can set

these doubts at rest, I think, if you will really help me to discover

the truth. Will you, mother?'

He stopped in the hope that she would speak. But her grey hair was not

more immovable in its two folds, than were her firm lips.

'If reparation can be made to any one, if restitution can be made to any

one, let us know it and make it. Nay, mother, if within my means, let ME

make it. I have seen so little happiness come of money; it has brought

within my knowledge so little peace to this house, or to any one

belonging to it, that it is worth less to me than to another. It can buy

me nothing that will not be a reproach and misery to me, if I am haunted

by a suspicion that it darkened my father's last hours with remorse, and

that it is not honestly and justly mine.' There was a bell-rope hanging

on the panelled wall, some two or three yards from the cabinet. By a

swift and sudden action of her foot, she drove her wheeled chair rapidly

back to it and pulled it violently--still holding her arm up in its

shield-like posture, as if he were striking at her, and she warding off

the blow.

A girl came hurrying in, frightened.

'Send Flintwinch here!'

In a moment the girl had withdrawn, and the old man stood within the

door. 'What! You're hammer and tongs, already, you two?' he said, coolly

stroking his face. 'I thought you would be. I was pretty sure of it.'

'Flintwinch!' said the mother, 'look at my son. Look at him!'

'Well, I AM looking at him,' said Flintwinch.

She stretched out the arm with which she had shielded herself, and as

she went on, pointed at the object of her anger.

'In the very hour of his return almost--before the shoe upon his foot is

dry--he asperses his father's memory to his mother! Asks his mother

to become, with him, a spy upon his father's transactions through a

lifetime! Has misgivings that the goods of this world which we have

painfully got together early and late, with wear and tear and toil and

self-denial, are so much plunder; and asks to whom they shall be given

up, as reparation and restitution!'

Although she said this raging, she said it in a voice so far from being

beyond her control that it was even lower than her usual tone. She also

spoke with great distinctness.

'Reparation!' said she. 'Yes, truly! It is easy for him to talk of

reparation, fresh from journeying and junketing in foreign lands, and

living a life of vanity and pleasure. But let him look at me, in prison,

and in bonds here. I endure without murmuring, because it is appointed

that I shall so make reparation for my sins. Reparation! Is there none

in this room? Has there been none here this fifteen years?'

Thus was she always balancing her bargains with the Majesty of heaven,

posting up the entries to her credit, strictly keeping her set-off, and

claiming her due. She was only remarkable in this, for the force

and emphasis with which she did it. Thousands upon thousands do it,

according to their varying manner, every day.

'Flintwinch, give me that book!'

The old man handed it to her from the table. She put two fingers between

the leaves, closed the book upon them, and held it up to her son in

a threatening way. 'In the days of old, Arthur, treated of in this

commentary, there were pious men, beloved of the Lord, who would have

cursed their sons for less than this: who would have sent them forth,

and sent whole nations forth, if such had supported them, to be avoided

of God and man, and perish, down to the baby at the breast. But I only

tell you that if you ever renew that theme with me, I will renounce you;

I will so dismiss you through that doorway, that you had better have

been motherless from your cradle. I will never see or know you more. And

if, after all, you were to come into this darkened room to look upon me

lying dead, my body should bleed, if I could make it, when you came near

me.'

In part relieved by the intensity of this threat, and in part (monstrous

as the fact is) by a general impression that it was in some sort a

religious proceeding, she handed back the book to the old man, and was

silent.

'Now,' said Jeremiah; 'premising that I'm not going to stand between you

two, will you let me ask (as I have been called in, and made a third)

what is all this about?'

'Take your version of it,' returned Arthur, finding it left to him to

speak, 'from my mother. Let it rest there. What I have said, was said to

my mother only.' 'Oh!' returned the old man. 'From your mother? Take

it from your mother? Well! But your mother mentioned that you had been

suspecting your father. That's not dutiful, Mr Arthur. Who will you be

suspecting next?'

'Enough,' said Mrs Clennam, turning her face so that it was addressed

for the moment to the old man only. 'Let no more be said about this.'

'Yes, but stop a bit, stop a bit,' the old man persisted. 'Let us see

how we stand. Have you told Mr Arthur that he mustn't lay offences at

his father's door? That he has no right to do it? That he has no ground

to go upon?'

'I tell him so now.'

'Ah! Exactly,' said the old man. 'You tell him so now. You hadn't told

him so before, and you tell him so now. Ay, ay! That's right! You know I

stood between you and his father so long, that it seems as if death had

made no difference, and I was still standing between you. So I will, and

so in fairness I require to have that plainly put forward. Arthur, you

please to hear that you have no right to mistrust your father, and have

no ground to go upon.'

He put his hands to the back of the wheeled chair, and muttering to

himself, slowly wheeled his mistress back to her cabinet. 'Now,' he

resumed, standing behind her: 'in case I should go away leaving things

half done, and so should be wanted again when you come to the other half

and get into one of your flights, has Arthur told you what he means to

do about the business?'

'He has relinquished it.'

'In favour of nobody, I suppose?'

Mrs Clennam glanced at her son, leaning against one of the windows.

He observed the look and said, 'To my mother, of course. She does what

she pleases.'

'And if any pleasure,' she said after a short pause, 'could arise for me

out of the disappointment of my expectations that my son, in the prime

of his life, would infuse new youth and strength into it, and make it

of great profit and power, it would be in advancing an old and faithful

servant. Jeremiah, the captain deserts the ship, but you and I will sink

or float with it.'

Jeremiah, whose eyes glistened as if they saw money, darted a sudden

look at the son, which seemed to say, 'I owe YOU no thanks for this; YOU

have done nothing towards it!' and then told the mother that he thanked

her, and that Affery thanked her, and that he would never desert her,

and that Affery would never desert her. Finally, he hauled up his watch

from its depths, and said, 'Eleven. Time for your oysters!' and with

that change of subject, which involved no change of expression or

manner, rang the bell.

But Mrs Clennam, resolved to treat herself with the greater rigour for

having been supposed to be unacquainted with reparation, refused to

eat her oysters when they were brought. They looked tempting; eight in

number, circularly set out on a white plate on a tray covered with a

white napkin, flanked by a slice of buttered French roll, and a little

compact glass of cool wine and water; but she resisted all persuasions,

and sent them down again--placing the act to her credit, no doubt, in

her Eternal Day-Book.

This refection of oysters was not presided over by Affery, but by the

girl who had appeared when the bell was rung; the same who had been in

the dimly-lighted room last night. Now that he had an opportunity of

observing her, Arthur found that her diminutive figure, small features,

and slight spare dress, gave her the appearance of being much younger

than she was. A woman, probably of not less than two-and-twenty, she

might have been passed in the street for little more than half that

age. Not that her face was very youthful, for in truth there was more

consideration and care in it than naturally belonged to her utmost

years; but she was so little and light, so noiseless and shy, and

appeared so conscious of being out of place among the three hard elders,

that she had all the manner and much of the appearance of a subdued

child.

In a hard way, and in an uncertain way that fluctuated between patronage

and putting down, the sprinkling from a watering-pot and hydraulic

pressure, Mrs Clennam showed an interest in this dependent. Even in the

moment of her entrance, upon the violent ringing of the bell, when the

mother shielded herself with that singular action from the son, Mrs

Clennam's eyes had had some individual recognition in them, which seemed

reserved for her. As there are degrees of hardness in the hardest metal,

and shades of colour in black itself, so, even in the asperity of Mrs

Clennam's demeanour towards all the rest of humanity and towards Little

Dorrit, there was a fine gradation.

Little Dorrit let herself out to do needlework. At so much a day--or at

so little--from eight to eight, Little Dorrit was to be hired. Punctual

to the moment, Little Dorrit appeared; punctual to the moment, Little

Dorrit vanished. What became of Little Dorrit between the two eights was

a mystery.

Another of the moral phenomena of Little Dorrit. Besides her

consideration money, her daily contract included meals. She had an

extraordinary repugnance to dining in company; would never do so, if

it were possible to escape. Would always plead that she had this bit of

work to begin first, or that bit of work to finish first; and would, of

a certainty, scheme and plan--not very cunningly, it would seem, for she

deceived no one--to dine alone. Successful in this, happy in carrying

off her plate anywhere, to make a table of her lap, or a box, or the

ground, or even as was supposed, to stand on tip-toe, dining moderately

at a mantel-shelf; the great anxiety of Little Dorrit's day was set at

rest.

It was not easy to make out Little Dorrit's face; she was so retiring,

plied her needle in such removed corners, and started away so scared if

encountered on the stairs. But it seemed to be a pale transparent face,

quick in expression, though not beautiful in feature, its soft hazel

eyes excepted. A delicately bent head, a tiny form, a quick little pair

of busy hands, and a shabby dress--it must needs have been very shabby

to look at all so, being so neat--were Little Dorrit as she sat at work.

For these particulars or generalities concerning Little Dorrit, Mr

Arthur was indebted in the course of the day to his own eyes and to Mrs

Affery's tongue. If Mrs Affery had had any will or way of her own, it

would probably have been unfavourable to Little Dorrit. But as 'them two

clever ones'--Mrs Affery's perpetual reference, in whom her personality

was swallowed up--were agreed to accept Little Dorrit as a matter of

course, she had nothing for it but to follow suit. Similarly, if the

two clever ones had agreed to murder Little Dorrit by candlelight, Mrs

Affery, being required to hold the candle, would no doubt have done it.

In the intervals of roasting the partridge for the invalid chamber, and

preparing a baking-dish of beef and pudding for the dining-room, Mrs

Affery made the communications above set forth; invariably putting

her head in at the door again after she had taken it out, to enforce

resistance to the two clever ones. It appeared to have become a perfect

passion with Mrs Flintwinch, that the only son should be pitted against

them.

In the course of the day, too, Arthur looked through the whole house.

Dull and dark he found it. The gaunt rooms, deserted for years upon

years, seemed to have settled down into a gloomy lethargy from which

nothing could rouse them again. The furniture, at once spare and

lumbering, hid in the rooms rather than furnished them, and there was

no colour in all the house; such colour as had ever been there, had long

ago started away on lost sunbeams--got itself absorbed, perhaps, into

flowers, butterflies, plumage of birds, precious stones, what not. There

was not one straight floor from the foundation to the roof; the ceilings

were so fantastically clouded by smoke and dust, that old women might

have told fortunes in them better than in grouts of tea; the dead-cold

hearths showed no traces of having ever been warmed but in heaps of soot

that had tumbled down the chimneys, and eddied about in little

dusky whirlwinds when the doors were opened. In what had once been

a drawing-room, there were a pair of meagre mirrors, with dismal

processions of black figures carrying black garlands, walking round

the frames; but even these were short of heads and legs, and one

undertaker-like Cupid had swung round on its own axis and got upside

down, and another had fallen off altogether. The room Arthur Clennam's

deceased father had occupied for business purposes, when he first

remembered him, was so unaltered that he might have been imagined still

to keep it invisibly, as his visible relict kept her room up-stairs;

Jeremiah Flintwinch still going between them negotiating. His picture,

dark and gloomy, earnestly speechless on the wall, with the eyes

intently looking at his son as they had looked when life departed from

them, seemed to urge him awfully to the task he had attempted; but as

to any yielding on the part of his mother, he had now no hope, and as to

any other means of setting his distrust at rest, he had abandoned hope a

long time.

Down in the cellars, as up in the bed-chambers, old objects that he well

remembered were changed by age and decay, but were still in their

old places; even to empty beer-casks hoary with cobwebs, and empty

wine-bottles with fur and fungus choking up their throats. There, too,

among unusual bottle-racks and pale slants of light from the yard above,

was the strong room stored with old ledgers, which had as musty and

corrupt a smell as if they were regularly balanced, in the dead small

hours, by a nightly resurrection of old book-keepers.

The baking-dish was served up in a penitential manner on a shrunken

cloth at an end of the dining-table, at two o'clock, when he dined with

Mr Flintwinch, the new partner. Mr Flintwinch informed him that his

mother had recovered her equanimity now, and that he need not fear her

again alluding to what had passed in the morning. 'And don't you lay

offences at your father's door, Mr Arthur,' added Jeremiah, 'once for

all, don't do it! Now, we have done with the subject.'

Mr Flintwinch had been already rearranging and dusting his own

particular little office, as if to do honour to his accession to new

dignity. He resumed this occupation when he was replete with beef, had

sucked up all the gravy in the baking-dish with the flat of his knife,

and had drawn liberally on a barrel of small beer in the scullery. Thus

refreshed, he tucked up his shirt-sleeves and went to work again; and Mr

Arthur, watching him as he set about it, plainly saw that his father's

picture, or his father's grave, would be as communicative with him as

this old man.

'Now, Affery, woman,' said Mr Flintwinch, as she crossed the hall. 'You

hadn't made Mr Arthur's bed when I was up there last. Stir yourself.

Bustle.'

But Mr Arthur found the house so blank and dreary, and was so unwilling

to assist at another implacable consignment of his mother's enemies

(perhaps himself among them) to mortal disfigurement and immortal ruin,

that he announced his intention of lodging at the coffee-house where he

had left his luggage. Mr Flintwinch taking kindly to the idea of getting

rid of him, and his mother being indifferent, beyond considerations of

saving, to most domestic arrangements that were not bounded by the walls

of her own chamber, he easily carried this point without new offence.

Daily business hours were agreed upon, which his mother, Mr Flintwinch,

and he, were to devote together to a necessary checking of books and

papers; and he left the home he had so lately found, with depressed

heart.

But Little Dorrit?

The business hours, allowing for intervals of invalid regimen of oysters

and partridges, during which Clennam refreshed himself with a walk,

were from ten to six for about a fortnight. Sometimes Little Dorrit was

employed at her needle, sometimes not, sometimes appeared as a humble

visitor: which must have been her character on the occasion of his

arrival. His original curiosity augmented every day, as he watched for

her, saw or did not see her, and speculated about her. Influenced by his

predominant idea, he even fell into a habit of discussing with himself

the possibility of her being in some way associated with it. At last he

resolved to watch Little Dorrit and know more of her story.

CHAPTER 6. The Father of the Marshalsea

Thirty years ago there stood, a few doors short of the church of Saint

George, in the borough of Southwark, on the left-hand side of the way

going southward, the Marshalsea Prison. It had stood there many years

before, and it remained there some years afterwards; but it is gone now,

and the world is none the worse without it.

It was an oblong pile of barrack building, partitioned into squalid

houses standing back to back, so that there were no back rooms;

environed by a narrow paved yard, hemmed in by high walls duly spiked at

top. Itself a close and confined prison for debtors, it contained within

it a much closer and more confined jail for smugglers. Offenders against

the revenue laws, and defaulters to excise or customs who had incurred

fines which they were unable to pay, were supposed to be incarcerated

behind an iron-plated door closing up a second prison, consisting of a

strong cell or two, and a blind alley some yard and a half wide, which

formed the mysterious termination of the very limited skittle-ground in

which the Marshalsea debtors bowled down their troubles.

Supposed to be incarcerated there, because the time had rather outgrown

the strong cells and the blind alley. In practice they had come to be

considered a little too bad, though in theory they were quite as good as

ever; which may be observed to be the case at the present day with other

cells that are not at all strong, and with other blind alleys that are

stone-blind. Hence the smugglers habitually consorted with the debtors

(who received them with open arms), except at certain constitutional

moments when somebody came from some Office, to go through some form of

overlooking something which neither he nor anybody else knew anything

about. On these truly British occasions, the smugglers, if any, made a

feint of walking into the strong cells and the blind alley, while this

somebody pretended to do his something: and made a reality of walking

out again as soon as he hadn't done it--neatly epitomising the

administration of most of the public affairs in our right little, tight

little, island.

There had been taken to the Marshalsea Prison, long before the day when

the sun shone on Marseilles and on the opening of this narrative, a

debtor with whom this narrative has some concern.

He was, at that time, a very amiable and very helpless middle-aged

gentleman, who was going out again directly. Necessarily, he was going

out again directly, because the Marshalsea lock never turned upon a

debtor who was not. He brought in a portmanteau with him, which he

doubted its being worth while to unpack; he was so perfectly clear--like

all the rest of them, the turnkey on the lock said--that he was going

out again directly.

He was a shy, retiring man; well-looking, though in an effeminate style;

with a mild voice, curling hair, and irresolute hands--rings upon the

fingers in those days--which nervously wandered to his trembling lip a

hundred times in the first half-hour of his acquaintance with the jail.

His principal anxiety was about his wife.

'Do you think, sir,' he asked the turnkey, 'that she will be very much

shocked, if she should come to the gate to-morrow morning?'

The turnkey gave it as the result of his experience that some of 'em was

and some of 'em wasn't. In general, more no than yes. 'What like is she,

you see?' he philosophically asked: 'that's what it hinges on.'

'She is very delicate and inexperienced indeed.'

'That,' said the turnkey, 'is agen her.'

'She is so little used to go out alone,' said the debtor, 'that I am at

a loss to think how she will ever make her way here, if she walks.'

'P'raps,' quoth the turnkey, 'she'll take a ackney coach.'

'Perhaps.' The irresolute fingers went to the trembling lip. 'I hope she

will. She may not think of it.'

'Or p'raps,' said the turnkey, offering his suggestions from the the top

of his well-worn wooden stool, as he might have offered them to a child

for whose weakness he felt a compassion, 'p'raps she'll get her brother,

or her sister, to come along with her.'

'She has no brother or sister.'

'Niece, nevy, cousin, serwant, young 'ooman, greengrocer.--Dash it!

One or another on 'em,' said the turnkey, repudiating beforehand the

refusal of all his suggestions.

'I fear--I hope it is not against the rules--that she will bring the

children.'

'The children?' said the turnkey. 'And the rules? Why, lord set you

up like a corner pin, we've a reg'lar playground o' children here.

Children! Why we swarm with 'em. How many a you got?'

'Two,' said the debtor, lifting his irresolute hand to his lip again,

and turning into the prison.

The turnkey followed him with his eyes. 'And you another,' he observed

to himself, 'which makes three on you. And your wife another, I'll lay

a crown. Which makes four on you. And another coming, I'll lay

half-a-crown. Which'll make five on you. And I'll go another seven and

sixpence to name which is the helplessest, the unborn baby or you!'

He was right in all his particulars. She came next day with a little

boy of three years old, and a little girl of two, and he stood entirely

corroborated.

'Got a room now; haven't you?' the turnkey asked the debtor after a week

or two.

'Yes, I have got a very good room.'

'Any little sticks a coming to furnish it?' said the turnkey.

'I expect a few necessary articles of furniture to be delivered by the

carrier, this afternoon.'

'Missis and little 'uns a coming to keep you company?' asked the

turnkey.

'Why, yes, we think it better that we should not be scattered, even for

a few weeks.'

'Even for a few weeks, OF course,' replied the turnkey. And he followed

him again with his eyes, and nodded his head seven times when he was

gone.

The affairs of this debtor were perplexed by a partnership, of which he

knew no more than that he had invested money in it; by legal matters

of assignment and settlement, conveyance here and conveyance there,

suspicion of unlawful preference of creditors in this direction, and of

mysterious spiriting away of property in that; and as nobody on the face

of the earth could be more incapable of explaining any single item in

the heap of confusion than the debtor himself, nothing comprehensible

could be made of his case. To question him in detail, and endeavour

to reconcile his answers; to closet him with accountants and sharp

practitioners, learned in the wiles of insolvency and bankruptcy; was

only to put the case out at compound interest and incomprehensibility.

The irresolute fingers fluttered more and more ineffectually about the

trembling lip on every such occasion, and the sharpest practitioners

gave him up as a hopeless job.

'Out?' said the turnkey, 'he'll never get out, unless his creditors take

him by the shoulders and shove him out.'

He had been there five or six months, when he came running to this

turnkey one forenoon to tell him, breathless and pale, that his wife was

ill.

'As anybody might a known she would be,' said the turnkey.

'We intended,' he returned, 'that she should go to a country lodging

only to-morrow. What am I to do! Oh, good heaven, what am I to do!'

'Don't waste your time in clasping your hands and biting your fingers,'

responded the practical turnkey, taking him by the elbow, 'but come

along with me.'

The turnkey conducted him--trembling from head to foot, and constantly

crying under his breath, What was he to do! while his irresolute fingers

bedabbled the tears upon his face--up one of the common staircases in

the prison to a door on the garret story. Upon which door the turnkey

knocked with the handle of his key.

'Come in!' cried a voice inside.

The turnkey, opening the door, disclosed in a wretched, ill-smelling

little room, two hoarse, puffy, red-faced personages seated at a

rickety table, playing at all-fours, smoking pipes, and drinking brandy.

'Doctor,' said the turnkey, 'here's a gentleman's wife in want of you

without a minute's loss of time!'

The doctor's friend was in the positive degree of hoarseness, puffiness,

red-facedness, all-fours, tobacco, dirt, and brandy; the doctor in

the comparative--hoarser, puffier, more red-faced, more all-fourey,

tobaccoer, dirtier, and brandier. The doctor was amazingly shabby, in

a torn and darned rough-weather sea-jacket, out at elbows and eminently

short of buttons (he had been in his time the experienced surgeon

carried by a passenger ship), the dirtiest white trousers conceivable by

mortal man, carpet slippers, and no visible linen. 'Childbed?' said

the doctor. 'I'm the boy!' With that the doctor took a comb from the

chimney-piece and stuck his hair upright--which appeared to be his

way of washing himself--produced a professional chest or case, of most

abject appearance, from the cupboard where his cup and saucer and coals

were, settled his chin in the frowsy wrapper round his neck, and became

a ghastly medical scarecrow.

The doctor and the debtor ran down-stairs, leaving the turnkey to return

to the lock, and made for the debtor's room. All the ladies in the

prison had got hold of the news, and were in the yard. Some of them

had already taken possession of the two children, and were hospitably

carrying them off; others were offering loans of little comforts from

their own scanty store; others were sympathising with the greatest

volubility. The gentlemen prisoners, feeling themselves at a

disadvantage, had for the most part retired, not to say sneaked,

to their rooms; from the open windows of which some of them now

complimented the doctor with whistles as he passed below, while others,

with several stories between them, interchanged sarcastic references to

the prevalent excitement.

It was a hot summer day, and the prison rooms were baking between the

high walls. In the debtor's confined chamber, Mrs Bangham, charwoman and

messenger, who was not a prisoner (though she had been once), but

was the popular medium of communication with the outer world, had

volunteered her services as fly-catcher and general attendant. The walls

and ceiling were blackened with flies. Mrs Bangham, expert in sudden

device, with one hand fanned the patient with a cabbage leaf, and with

the other set traps of vinegar and sugar in gallipots; at the same time

enunciating sentiments of an encouraging and congratulatory nature,

adapted to the occasion.

'The flies trouble you, don't they, my dear?' said Mrs Bangham. 'But

p'raps they'll take your mind off of it, and do you good. What between

the buryin ground, the grocer's, the waggon-stables, and the paunch

trade, the Marshalsea flies gets very large. P'raps they're sent as a

consolation, if we only know'd it. How are you now, my dear? No better?

No, my dear, it ain't to be expected; you'll be worse before you're

better, and you know it, don't you? Yes. That's right! And to think of

a sweet little cherub being born inside the lock! Now ain't it pretty,

ain't THAT something to carry you through it pleasant? Why, we ain't

had such a thing happen here, my dear, not for I couldn't name the time

when. And you a crying too?' said Mrs Bangham, to rally the patient more

and more. 'You! Making yourself so famous! With the flies a falling into

the gallipots by fifties! And everything a going on so well! And here if

there ain't,' said Mrs Bangham as the door opened, 'if there ain't your

dear gentleman along with Dr Haggage! And now indeed we ARE complete, I

THINK!'

The doctor was scarcely the kind of apparition to inspire a patient

with a sense of absolute completeness, but as he presently delivered the

opinion, 'We are as right as we can be, Mrs Bangham, and we shall

come out of this like a house afire;' and as he and Mrs Bangham took

possession of the poor helpless pair, as everybody else and anybody else

had always done, the means at hand were as good on the whole as better

would have been. The special feature in Dr Haggage's treatment of the

case, was his determination to keep Mrs Bangham up to the mark. As thus:

'Mrs Bangham,' said the doctor, before he had been there twenty minutes,

'go outside and fetch a little brandy, or we shall have you giving in.'

'Thank you, sir. But none on my accounts,' said Mrs Bangham.

'Mrs Bangham,' returned the doctor, 'I am in professional attendance

on this lady, and don't choose to allow any discussion on your part. Go

outside and fetch a little brandy, or I foresee that you'll break down.'

'You're to be obeyed, sir,' said Mrs Bangham, rising. 'If you was to put

your own lips to it, I think you wouldn't be the worse, for you look but

poorly, sir.'

'Mrs Bangham,' returned the doctor, 'I am not your business, thank you,

but you are mine. Never you mind ME, if you please. What you have got to

do, is, to do as you are told, and to go and get what I bid you.'

Mrs Bangham submitted; and the doctor, having administered her

potion, took his own. He repeated the treatment every hour, being very

determined with Mrs Bangham. Three or four hours passed; the flies

fell into the traps by hundreds; and at length one little life, hardly

stronger than theirs, appeared among the multitude of lesser deaths.

'A very nice little girl indeed,' said the doctor; 'little, but

well-formed. Halloa, Mrs Bangham! You're looking queer! You be off,

ma'am, this minute, and fetch a little more brandy, or we shall have you

in hysterics.'

By this time, the rings had begun to fall from the debtor's irresolute

hands, like leaves from a wintry tree. Not one was left upon them that

night, when he put something that chinked into the doctor's greasy palm.

In the meantime Mrs Bangham had been out on an errand to a neighbouring

establishment decorated with three golden balls, where she was very well

known.

'Thank you,' said the doctor, 'thank you. Your good lady is quite

composed. Doing charmingly.'

'I am very happy and very thankful to know it,' said the debtor, 'though

I little thought once, that--'

'That a child would be born to you in a place like this?' said the

doctor. 'Bah, bah, sir, what does it signify? A little more elbow-room

is all we want here. We are quiet here; we don't get badgered here;

there's no knocker here, sir, to be hammered at by creditors and bring a

man's heart into his mouth. Nobody comes here to ask if a man's at

home, and to say he'll stand on the door mat till he is. Nobody writes

threatening letters about money to this place. It's freedom, sir, it's

freedom! I have had to-day's practice at home and abroad, on a march,

and aboard ship, and I'll tell you this: I don't know that I have ever

pursued it under such quiet circumstances as here this day. Elsewhere,

people are restless, worried, hurried about, anxious respecting one

thing, anxious respecting another. Nothing of the kind here, sir. We

have done all that--we know the worst of it; we have got to the bottom,

we can't fall, and what have we found? Peace. That's the word for

it. Peace.' With this profession of faith, the doctor, who was an old

jail-bird, and was more sodden than usual, and had the additional and

unusual stimulus of money in his pocket, returned to his associate and

chum in hoarseness, puffiness, red-facedness, all-fours, tobacco, dirt,

and brandy.

Now, the debtor was a very different man from the doctor, but he had

already begun to travel, by his opposite segment of the circle, to the

same point. Crushed at first by his imprisonment, he had soon found a

dull relief in it. He was under lock and key; but the lock and key that

kept him in, kept numbers of his troubles out. If he had been a man with

strength of purpose to face those troubles and fight them, he might have

broken the net that held him, or broken his heart; but being what he

was, he languidly slipped into this smooth descent, and never more took

one step upward.

When he was relieved of the perplexed affairs that nothing would make

plain, through having them returned upon his hands by a dozen agents in

succession who could make neither beginning, middle, nor end of them or

him, he found his miserable place of refuge a quieter refuge than it

had been before. He had unpacked the portmanteau long ago; and his elder

children now played regularly about the yard, and everybody knew the

baby, and claimed a kind of proprietorship in her.

'Why, I'm getting proud of you,' said his friend the turnkey, one day.

'You'll be the oldest inhabitant soon. The Marshalsea wouldn't be like

the Marshalsea now, without you and your family.'

The turnkey really was proud of him. He would mention him in laudatory

terms to new-comers, when his back was turned. 'You took notice of him,'

he would say, 'that went out of the lodge just now?'

New-comer would probably answer Yes.

'Brought up as a gentleman, he was, if ever a man was. Ed'cated at no

end of expense. Went into the Marshal's house once to try a new piano

for him. Played it, I understand, like one o'clock--beautiful! As to

languages--speaks anything. We've had a Frenchman here in his time, and

it's my opinion he knowed more French than the Frenchman did. We've had

an Italian here in his time, and he shut him up in about half a minute.

You'll find some characters behind other locks, I don't say you won't;

but if you want the top sawyer in such respects as I've mentioned, you

must come to the Marshalsea.'

When his youngest child was eight years old, his wife, who had long been

languishing away--of her own inherent weakness, not that she retained

any greater sensitiveness as to her place of abode than he did--went

upon a visit to a poor friend and old nurse in the country, and died

there. He remained shut up in his room for a fortnight afterwards;

and an attorney's clerk, who was going through the Insolvent Court,

engrossed an address of condolence to him, which looked like a Lease,

and which all the prisoners signed.

When he appeared again he was greyer (he had soon begun to turn grey);

and the turnkey noticed that his hands went often to his trembling lips

again, as they had used to do when he first came in.

But he got pretty well over it in a month or two; and in the meantime

the children played about the yard as regularly as ever, but in black.

Then Mrs Bangham, long popular medium of communication with the outer

world, began to be infirm, and to be found oftener than usual comatose

on pavements, with her basket of purchases spilt, and the change of her

clients ninepence short. His son began to supersede Mrs Bangham, and

to execute commissions in a knowing manner, and to be of the prison

prisonous, of the streets streety.

Time went on, and the turnkey began to fail. His chest swelled, and his

legs got weak, and he was short of breath. The well-worn wooden stool

was 'beyond him,' he complained. He sat in an arm-chair with a cushion,

and sometimes wheezed so, for minutes together, that he couldn't turn

the key. When he was overpowered by these fits, the debtor often turned

it for him. 'You and me,' said the turnkey, one snowy winter's night

when the lodge, with a bright fire in it, was pretty full of company,

'is the oldest inhabitants. I wasn't here myself above seven year before

you. I shan't last long. When I'm off the lock for good and all, you'll

be the Father of the Marshalsea.'

The turnkey went off the lock of this world next day. His words were

remembered and repeated; and tradition afterwards handed down from

generation to generation--a Marshalsea generation might be calculated as

about three months--that the shabby old debtor with the soft manner and

the white hair, was the Father of the Marshalsea.

And he grew to be proud of the title. If any impostor had arisen to

claim it, he would have shed tears in resentment of the attempt to

deprive him of his rights. A disposition began to be perceived in him

to exaggerate the number of years he had been there; it was generally

understood that you must deduct a few from his account; he was vain, the

fleeting generations of debtors said.

All new-comers were presented to him. He was punctilious in the exaction

of this ceremony. The wits would perform the office of introduction with

overcharged pomp and politeness, but they could not easily overstep his

sense of its gravity. He received them in his poor room (he disliked an

introduction in the mere yard, as informal--a thing that might happen

to anybody), with a kind of bowed-down beneficence. They were welcome to

the Marshalsea, he would tell them. Yes, he was the Father of the place.

So the world was kind enough to call him; and so he was, if more than

twenty years of residence gave him a claim to the title. It looked

small at first, but there was very good company there--among a

mixture--necessarily a mixture--and very good air.

It became a not unusual circumstance for letters to be put under his

door at night, enclosing half-a-crown, two half-crowns, now and then at

long intervals even half-a-sovereign, for the Father of the Marshalsea.

'With the compliments of a collegian taking leave.' He received the

gifts as tributes, from admirers, to a public character. Sometimes

these correspondents assumed facetious names, as the Brick, Bellows, Old

Gooseberry, Wideawake, Snooks, Mops, Cutaway, the Dogs-meat Man; but he

considered this in bad taste, and was always a little hurt by it.

In the fulness of time, this correspondence showing signs of wearing

out, and seeming to require an effort on the part of the correspondents

to which in the hurried circumstances of departure many of them might

not be equal, he established the custom of attending collegians of

a certain standing, to the gate, and taking leave of them there. The

collegian under treatment, after shaking hands, would occasionally

stop to wrap up something in a bit of paper, and would come back again

calling 'Hi!'

He would look round surprised.'Me?' he would say, with a smile. By

this time the collegian would be up with him, and he would paternally

add,'What have you forgotten? What can I do for you?'

'I forgot to leave this,' the collegian would usually return, 'for the

Father of the Marshalsea.'

'My good sir,' he would rejoin, 'he is infinitely obliged to you.' But,

to the last, the irresolute hand of old would remain in the pocket into

which he had slipped the money during two or three turns about the yard,

lest the transaction should be too conspicuous to the general body of

collegians.

One afternoon he had been doing the honours of the place to a rather

large party of collegians, who happened to be going out, when, as he was

coming back, he encountered one from the poor side who had been taken in

execution for a small sum a week before, had 'settled' in the course of

that afternoon, and was going out too. The man was a mere Plasterer in

his working dress; had his wife with him, and a bundle; and was in high

spirits.

'God bless you, sir,' he said in passing.

'And you,' benignantly returned the Father of the Marshalsea.

They were pretty far divided, going their several ways, when the

Plasterer called out, 'I say!--sir!' and came back to him.

'It ain't much,' said the Plasterer, putting a little pile of halfpence

in his hand, 'but it's well meant.'

The Father of the Marshalsea had never been offered tribute in copper

yet. His children often had, and with his perfect acquiescence it had

gone into the common purse to buy meat that he had eaten, and drink that

he had drunk; but fustian splashed with white lime, bestowing halfpence

on him, front to front, was new.

'How dare you!' he said to the man, and feebly burst into tears.

The Plasterer turned him towards the wall, that his face might not be

seen; and the action was so delicate, and the man was so penetrated with

repentance, and asked pardon so honestly, that he could make him no less

acknowledgment than, 'I know you meant it kindly. Say no more.'

'Bless your soul, sir,' urged the Plasterer, 'I did indeed. I'd do more

by you than the rest of 'em do, I fancy.'

'What would you do?' he asked.

'I'd come back to see you, after I was let out.'

'Give me the money again,' said the other, eagerly, 'and I'll keep it,

and never spend it. Thank you for it, thank you! I shall see you again?'

'If I live a week you shall.'

They shook hands and parted. The collegians, assembled in Symposium in

the Snuggery that night, marvelled what had happened to their Father; he

walked so late in the shadows of the yard, and seemed so downcast.

CHAPTER 7. The Child of the Marshalsea

The baby whose first draught of air had been tinctured with Doctor

Haggage's brandy, was handed down among the generations of collegians,

like the tradition of their common parent. In the earlier stages of her

existence, she was handed down in a literal and prosaic sense; it being

almost a part of the entrance footing of every new collegian to nurse

the child who had been born in the college.

'By rights,' remarked the turnkey when she was first shown to him, 'I

ought to be her godfather.'

The debtor irresolutely thought of it for a minute, and said, 'Perhaps

you wouldn't object to really being her godfather?'

'Oh! \_I\_ don't object,' replied the turnkey, 'if you don't.'

Thus it came to pass that she was christened one Sunday afternoon, when

the turnkey, being relieved, was off the lock; and that the turnkey

went up to the font of Saint George's Church, and promised and vowed and

renounced on her behalf, as he himself related when he came back, 'like

a good 'un.'

This invested the turnkey with a new proprietary share in the child,

over and above his former official one. When she began to walk and talk,

he became fond of her; bought a little arm-chair and stood it by the

high fender of the lodge fire-place; liked to have her company when he

was on the lock; and used to bribe her with cheap toys to come and talk

to him. The child, for her part, soon grew so fond of the turnkey that

she would come climbing up the lodge-steps of her own accord at all

hours of the day. When she fell asleep in the little armchair by the

high fender, the turnkey would cover her with his pocket-handkerchief;

and when she sat in it dressing and undressing a doll which soon came

to be unlike dolls on the other side of the lock, and to bear a horrible

family resemblance to Mrs Bangham--he would contemplate her from the

top of his stool with exceeding gentleness. Witnessing these things,

the collegians would express an opinion that the turnkey, who was a

bachelor, had been cut out by nature for a family man. But the turnkey

thanked them, and said, 'No, on the whole it was enough to see other

people's children there.' At what period of her early life the little

creature began to perceive that it was not the habit of all the world to

live locked up in narrow yards surrounded by high walls with spikes at

the top, would be a difficult question to settle. But she was a very,

very little creature indeed, when she had somehow gained the knowledge

that her clasp of her father's hand was to be always loosened at the

door which the great key opened; and that while her own light steps were

free to pass beyond it, his feet must never cross that line. A pitiful

and plaintive look, with which she had begun to regard him when she was

still extremely young, was perhaps a part of this discovery.

With a pitiful and plaintive look for everything, indeed, but with

something in it for only him that was like protection, this Child of

the Marshalsea and the child of the Father of the Marshalsea, sat by her

friend the turnkey in the lodge, kept the family room, or wandered about

the prison-yard, for the first eight years of her life. With a pitiful

and plaintive look for her wayward sister; for her idle brother; for the

high blank walls; for the faded crowd they shut in; for the games of the

prison children as they whooped and ran, and played at hide-and-seek,

and made the iron bars of the inner gateway 'Home.'

Wistful and wondering, she would sit in summer weather by the high

fender in the lodge, looking up at the sky through the barred window,

until, when she turned her eyes away, bars of light would arise between

her and her friend, and she would see him through a grating, too.

'Thinking of the fields,' the turnkey said once, after watching her,

'ain't you?'

'Where are they?' she inquired.

'Why, they're--over there, my dear,' said the turnkey, with a vague

flourish of his key. 'Just about there.'

'Does anybody open them, and shut them? Are they locked?'

The turnkey was discomfited. 'Well,' he said. 'Not in general.'

'Are they very pretty, Bob?' She called him Bob, by his own particular

request and instruction.

'Lovely. Full of flowers. There's buttercups, and there's daisies,

and there's'--the turnkey hesitated, being short of floral

nomenclature--'there's dandelions, and all manner of games.'

'Is it very pleasant to be there, Bob?'

'Prime,' said the turnkey.

'Was father ever there?'

'Hem!' coughed the turnkey. 'O yes, he was there, sometimes.'

'Is he sorry not to be there now?'

'N-not particular,' said the turnkey.

'Nor any of the people?' she asked, glancing at the listless crowd

within. 'O are you quite sure and certain, Bob?'

At this difficult point of the conversation Bob gave in, and changed the

subject to hard-bake: always his last resource when he found his little

friend getting him into a political, social, or theological corner.

But this was the origin of a series of Sunday excursions that these two

curious companions made together. They used to issue from the lodge on

alternate Sunday afternoons with great gravity, bound for some meadows

or green lanes that had been elaborately appointed by the turnkey in

the course of the week; and there she picked grass and flowers to bring

home, while he smoked his pipe. Afterwards, there were tea-gardens,

shrimps, ale, and other delicacies; and then they would come back hand

in hand, unless she was more than usually tired, and had fallen asleep

on his shoulder.

In those early days, the turnkey first began profoundly to consider

a question which cost him so much mental labour, that it remained

undetermined on the day of his death. He decided to will and bequeath

his little property of savings to his godchild, and the point arose how

could it be so 'tied up' as that only she should have the benefit of

it? His experience on the lock gave him such an acute perception of the

enormous difficulty of 'tying up' money with any approach to tightness,

and contrariwise of the remarkable ease with which it got loose, that

through a series of years he regularly propounded this knotty point to

every new insolvent agent and other professional gentleman who passed in

and out.

'Supposing,' he would say, stating the case with his key on the

professional gentleman's waistcoat; 'supposing a man wanted to leave his

property to a young female, and wanted to tie it up so that nobody else

should ever be able to make a grab at it; how would you tie up that

property?'

'Settle it strictly on herself,' the professional gentleman would

complacently answer.

'But look here,' quoth the turnkey. 'Supposing she had, say a brother,

say a father, say a husband, who would be likely to make a grab at that

property when she came into it--how about that?'

'It would be settled on herself, and they would have no more legal claim

on it than you,' would be the professional answer.

'Stop a bit,' said the turnkey. 'Supposing she was tender-hearted, and

they came over her. Where's your law for tying it up then?'

The deepest character whom the turnkey sounded, was unable to produce

his law for tying such a knot as that. So, the turnkey thought about it

all his life, and died intestate after all.

But that was long afterwards, when his god-daughter was past sixteen.

The first half of that space of her life was only just accomplished,

when her pitiful and plaintive look saw her father a widower. From that

time the protection that her wondering eyes had expressed towards him,

became embodied in action, and the Child of the Marshalsea took upon

herself a new relation towards the Father.

At first, such a baby could do little more than sit with him, deserting

her livelier place by the high fender, and quietly watching him. But

this made her so far necessary to him that he became accustomed to her,

and began to be sensible of missing her when she was not there. Through

this little gate, she passed out of childhood into the care-laden world.

What her pitiful look saw, at that early time, in her father, in her

sister, in her brother, in the jail; how much, or how little of the

wretched truth it pleased God to make visible to her; lies hidden with

many mysteries. It is enough that she was inspired to be something which

was not what the rest were, and to be that something, different and

laborious, for the sake of the rest. Inspired? Yes. Shall we speak of

the inspiration of a poet or a priest, and not of the heart impelled by

love and self-devotion to the lowliest work in the lowliest way of life!

With no earthly friend to help her, or so much as to see her, but the

one so strangely assorted; with no knowledge even of the common daily

tone and habits of the common members of the free community who are not

shut up in prisons; born and bred in a social condition, false even with

a reference to the falsest condition outside the walls; drinking from

infancy of a well whose waters had their own peculiar stain, their own

unwholesome and unnatural taste; the Child of the Marshalsea began her

womanly life.

No matter through what mistakes and discouragements, what ridicule (not

unkindly meant, but deeply felt) of her youth and little figure, what

humble consciousness of her own babyhood and want of strength, even

in the matter of lifting and carrying; through how much weariness

and hopelessness, and how many secret tears; she drudged on, until

recognised as useful, even indispensable. That time came. She took the

place of eldest of the three, in all things but precedence; was the

head of the fallen family; and bore, in her own heart, its anxieties and

shames.

At thirteen, she could read and keep accounts, that is, could put down

in words and figures how much the bare necessaries that they wanted

would cost, and how much less they had to buy them with. She had been,

by snatches of a few weeks at a time, to an evening school outside,

and got her sister and brother sent to day-schools by desultory starts,

during three or four years. There was no instruction for any of them at

home; but she knew well--no one better--that a man so broken as to be

the Father of the Marshalsea, could be no father to his own children.

To these scanty means of improvement, she added another of her own

contriving. Once, among the heterogeneous crowd of inmates there

appeared a dancing-master. Her sister had a great desire to learn the

dancing-master's art, and seemed to have a taste that way. At thirteen

years old, the Child of the Marshalsea presented herself to the

dancing-master, with a little bag in her hand, and preferred her humble

petition.

'If you please, I was born here, sir.'

'Oh! You are the young lady, are you?' said the dancing-master,

surveying the small figure and uplifted face.

'Yes, sir.'

'And what can I do for you?' said the dancing-master.

'Nothing for me, sir, thank you,' anxiously undrawing the strings of

the little bag; 'but if, while you stay here, you could be so kind as to

teach my sister cheap--'

'My child, I'll teach her for nothing,' said the dancing-master,

shutting up the bag. He was as good-natured a dancing-master as ever

danced to the Insolvent Court, and he kept his word. The sister was so

apt a pupil, and the dancing-master had such abundant leisure to bestow

upon her (for it took him a matter of ten weeks to set to his creditors,

lead off, turn the Commissioners, and right and left back to his

professional pursuits), that wonderful progress was made. Indeed the

dancing-master was so proud of it, and so wishful to display it before

he left to a few select friends among the collegians, that at six

o'clock on a certain fine morning, a minuet de la cour came off in

the yard--the college-rooms being of too confined proportions for the

purpose--in which so much ground was covered, and the steps were so

conscientiously executed, that the dancing-master, having to play the

kit besides, was thoroughly blown.

The success of this beginning, which led to the dancing-master's

continuing his instruction after his release, emboldened the poor child

to try again. She watched and waited months for a seamstress. In the

fulness of time a milliner came in, and to her she repaired on her own

behalf.

'I beg your pardon, ma'am,' she said, looking timidly round the door of

the milliner, whom she found in tears and in bed: 'but I was born here.'

Everybody seemed to hear of her as soon as they arrived; for the

milliner sat up in bed, drying her eyes, and said, just as the

dancing-master had said:

'Oh! You are the child, are you?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'I am sorry I haven't got anything for you,' said the milliner, shaking

her head.

'It's not that, ma'am. If you please I want to learn needle-work.'

'Why should you do that,' returned the milliner, 'with me before you? It

has not done me much good.'

'Nothing--whatever it is--seems to have done anybody much good who comes

here,' she returned in all simplicity; 'but I want to learn just the

same.'

'I am afraid you are so weak, you see,' the milliner objected.

'I don't think I am weak, ma'am.'

'And you are so very, very little, you see,' the milliner objected.

'Yes, I am afraid I am very little indeed,' returned the Child of the

Marshalsea; and so began to sob over that unfortunate defect of hers,

which came so often in her way. The milliner--who was not morose or

hard-hearted, only newly insolvent--was touched, took her in hand with

goodwill, found her the most patient and earnest of pupils, and made her

a cunning work-woman in course of time.

In course of time, and in the very self-same course of time, the Father

of the Marshalsea gradually developed a new flower of character. The

more Fatherly he grew as to the Marshalsea, and the more dependent he

became on the contributions of his changing family, the greater stand

he made by his forlorn gentility. With the same hand that he pocketed

a collegian's half-crown half an hour ago, he would wipe away the

tears that streamed over his cheeks if any reference were made to his

daughters' earning their bread. So, over and above other daily cares,

the Child of the Marshalsea had always upon her the care of preserving

the genteel fiction that they were all idle beggars together.

The sister became a dancer. There was a ruined uncle in the family

group--ruined by his brother, the Father of the Marshalsea, and knowing

no more how than his ruiner did, but accepting the fact as an inevitable

certainty--on whom her protection devolved. Naturally a retired and

simple man, he had shown no particular sense of being ruined at the time

when that calamity fell upon him, further than that he left off washing

himself when the shock was announced, and never took to that luxury any

more. He had been a very indifferent musical amateur in his better days;

and when he fell with his brother, resorted for support to playing a

clarionet as dirty as himself in a small Theatre Orchestra. It was the

theatre in which his niece became a dancer; he had been a fixture there

a long time when she took her poor station in it; and he accepted

the task of serving as her escort and guardian, just as he would have

accepted an illness, a legacy, a feast, starvation--anything but soap.

To enable this girl to earn her few weekly shillings, it was necessary

for the Child of the Marshalsea to go through an elaborate form with the

Father.

'Fanny is not going to live with us just now, father. She will be here a

good deal in the day, but she is going to live outside with uncle.'

'You surprise me. Why?'

'I think uncle wants a companion, father. He should be attended to, and

looked after.'

'A companion? He passes much of his time here. And you attend to him and

look after him, Amy, a great deal more than ever your sister will. You

all go out so much; you all go out so much.'

This was to keep up the ceremony and pretence of his having no idea that

Amy herself went out by the day to work.

'But we are always glad to come home, father; now, are we not? And as to

Fanny, perhaps besides keeping uncle company and taking care of him, it

may be as well for her not quite to live here, always. She was not born

here as I was, you know, father.'

'Well, Amy, well. I don't quite follow you, but it's natural I suppose

that Fanny should prefer to be outside, and even that you often should,

too. So, you and Fanny and your uncle, my dear, shall have your own way.

Good, good. I'll not meddle; don't mind me.'

To get her brother out of the prison; out of the succession to Mrs

Bangham in executing commissions, and out of the slang interchange with

very doubtful companions consequent upon both; was her hardest task. At

eighteen he would have dragged on from hand to mouth, from hour to hour,

from penny to penny, until eighty. Nobody got into the prison from whom

he derived anything useful or good, and she could find no patron for him

but her old friend and godfather.

'Dear Bob,' said she, 'what is to become of poor Tip?' His name was

Edward, and Ted had been transformed into Tip, within the walls.

The turnkey had strong private opinions as to what would become of

poor Tip, and had even gone so far with the view of averting their

fulfilment, as to sound Tip in reference to the expediency of running

away and going to serve his country. But Tip had thanked him, and said

he didn't seem to care for his country.

'Well, my dear,' said the turnkey, 'something ought to be done with him.

Suppose I try and get him into the law?'

'That would be so good of you, Bob!'

The turnkey had now two points to put to the professional gentlemen as

they passed in and out. He put this second one so perseveringly that

a stool and twelve shillings a week were at last found for Tip in the

office of an attorney in a great National Palladium called the Palace

Court; at that time one of a considerable list of everlasting bulwarks

to the dignity and safety of Albion, whose places know them no more.

Tip languished in Clifford's Inns for six months, and at the expiration

of that term sauntered back one evening with his hands in his pockets,

and incidentally observed to his sister that he was not going back

again.

'Not going back again?' said the poor little anxious Child of the

Marshalsea, always calculating and planning for Tip, in the front rank

of her charges.

'I am so tired of it,' said Tip, 'that I have cut it.'

Tip tired of everything. With intervals of Marshalsea lounging, and Mrs

Bangham succession, his small second mother, aided by her trusty friend,

got him into a warehouse, into a market garden, into the hop trade,

into the law again, into an auctioneers, into a brewery, into a

stockbroker's, into the law again, into a coach office, into a waggon

office, into the law again, into a general dealer's, into a distillery,

into the law again, into a wool house, into a dry goods house, into the

Billingsgate trade, into the foreign fruit trade, and into the docks.

But whatever Tip went into, he came out of tired, announcing that he

had cut it. Wherever he went, this foredoomed Tip appeared to take the

prison walls with him, and to set them up in such trade or calling;

and to prowl about within their narrow limits in the old slip-shod,

purposeless, down-at-heel way; until the real immovable Marshalsea walls

asserted their fascination over him, and brought him back.

Nevertheless, the brave little creature did so fix her heart on her

brother's rescue, that while he was ringing out these doleful changes,

she pinched and scraped enough together to ship him for Canada. When he

was tired of nothing to do, and disposed in its turn to cut even that,

he graciously consented to go to Canada. And there was grief in her

bosom over parting with him, and joy in the hope of his being put in a

straight course at last.

'God bless you, dear Tip. Don't be too proud to come and see us, when

you have made your fortune.'

'All right!' said Tip, and went.

But not all the way to Canada; in fact, not further than Liverpool.

After making the voyage to that port from London, he found himself

so strongly impelled to cut the vessel, that he resolved to walk back

again. Carrying out which intention, he presented himself before her at

the expiration of a month, in rags, without shoes, and much more tired

than ever. At length, after another interval of successorship to Mrs

Bangham, he found a pursuit for himself, and announced it.

'Amy, I have got a situation.'

'Have you really and truly, Tip?'

'All right. I shall do now. You needn't look anxious about me any more,

old girl.'

'What is it, Tip?'

'Why, you know Slingo by sight?'

'Not the man they call the dealer?'

'That's the chap. He'll be out on Monday, and he's going to give me a

berth.'

'What is he a dealer in, Tip?'

'Horses. All right! I shall do now, Amy.'

She lost sight of him for months afterwards, and only heard from him

once. A whisper passed among the elder collegians that he had been seen

at a mock auction in Moorfields, pretending to buy plated articles for

massive silver, and paying for them with the greatest liberality in

bank notes; but it never reached her ears. One evening she was alone at

work--standing up at the window, to save the twilight lingering above

the wall--when he opened the door and walked in.

She kissed and welcomed him; but was afraid to ask him any questions. He

saw how anxious and timid she was, and appeared sorry.

'I am afraid, Amy, you'll be vexed this time. Upon my life I am!'

'I am very sorry to hear you say so, Tip. Have you come back?'

'Why--yes.'

'Not expecting this time that what you had found would answer very well,

I am less surprised and sorry than I might have been, Tip.'

'Ah! But that's not the worst of it.'

'Not the worst of it?'

'Don't look so startled. No, Amy, not the worst of it. I have come back,

you see; but--DON'T look so startled--I have come back in what I may

call a new way. I am off the volunteer list altogether. I am in now, as

one of the regulars.'

'Oh! Don't say you are a prisoner, Tip! Don't, don't!'

'Well, I don't want to say it,' he returned in a reluctant tone; 'but if

you can't understand me without my saying it, what am I to do? I am in

for forty pound odd.'

For the first time in all those years, she sunk under her cares. She

cried, with her clasped hands lifted above her head, that it would kill

their father if he ever knew it; and fell down at Tip's graceless feet.

It was easier for Tip to bring her to her senses than for her to bring

him to understand that the Father of the Marshalsea would be beside

himself if he knew the truth. The thing was incomprehensible to Tip, and

altogether a fanciful notion. He yielded to it in that light only, when

he submitted to her entreaties, backed by those of his uncle and sister.

There was no want of precedent for his return; it was accounted for

to the father in the usual way; and the collegians, with a better

comprehension of the pious fraud than Tip, supported it loyally.

This was the life, and this the history, of the child of the Marshalsea

at twenty-two. With a still surviving attachment to the one miserable

yard and block of houses as her birthplace and home, she passed to and

fro in it shrinkingly now, with a womanly consciousness that she was

pointed out to every one. Since she had begun to work beyond the walls,

she had found it necessary to conceal where she lived, and to come and

go as secretly as she could, between the free city and the iron gates,

outside of which she had never slept in her life. Her original timidity

had grown with this concealment, and her light step and her little

figure shunned the thronged streets while they passed along them.

Worldly wise in hard and poor necessities, she was innocent in all

things else. Innocent, in the mist through which she saw her father,

and the prison, and the turbid living river that flowed through it and

flowed on.

This was the life, and this the history, of Little Dorrit; now going

home upon a dull September evening, observed at a distance by Arthur

Clennam. This was the life, and this the history, of Little Dorrit;

turning at the end of London Bridge, recrossing it, going back again,

passing on to Saint George's Church, turning back suddenly once more,

and flitting in at the open outer gate and little court-yard of the

Marshalsea.

CHAPTER 8. The Lock

Arthur Clennam stood in the street, waiting to ask some passer-by what

place that was. He suffered a few people to pass him in whose face there

was no encouragement to make the inquiry, and still stood pausing in the

street, when an old man came up and turned into the courtyard.

He stooped a good deal, and plodded along in a slow pre-occupied manner,

which made the bustling London thoroughfares no very safe resort for

him. He was dirtily and meanly dressed, in a threadbare coat, once blue,

reaching to his ankles and buttoned to his chin, where it vanished in

the pale ghost of a velvet collar. A piece of red cloth with which that

phantom had been stiffened in its lifetime was now laid bare, and poked

itself up, at the back of the old man's neck, into a confusion of grey

hair and rusty stock and buckle which altogether nearly poked his

hat off. A greasy hat it was, and a napless; impending over his eyes,

cracked and crumpled at the brim, and with a wisp of pocket-handkerchief

dangling out below it. His trousers were so long and loose, and his

shoes so clumsy and large, that he shuffled like an elephant; though how

much of this was gait, and how much trailing cloth and leather, no one

could have told. Under one arm he carried a limp and worn-out case,

containing some wind instrument; in the same hand he had a pennyworth

of snuff in a little packet of whitey-brown paper, from which he slowly

comforted his poor blue old nose with a lengthened-out pinch, as Arthur

Clennam looked at him. To this old man crossing the court-yard, he

preferred his inquiry, touching him on the shoulder. The old man stopped

and looked round, with the expression in his weak grey eyes of one whose

thoughts had been far off, and who was a little dull of hearing also.

'Pray, sir,' said Arthur, repeating his question, 'what is this place?'

'Ay! This place?' returned the old man, staying his pinch of snuff on

its road, and pointing at the place without looking at it. 'This is the

Marshalsea, sir.'

'The debtors' prison?'

'Sir,' said the old man, with the air of deeming it not quite necessary

to insist upon that designation, 'the debtors' prison.'

He turned himself about, and went on.

'I beg your pardon,' said Arthur, stopping him once more, 'but will you

allow me to ask you another question? Can any one go in here?'

'Any one can go IN,' replied the old man; plainly adding by the

significance of his emphasis, 'but it is not every one who can go out.'

'Pardon me once more. Are you familiar with the place?'

'Sir,' returned the old man, squeezing his little packet of snuff in his

hand, and turning upon his interrogator as if such questions hurt him.

'I am.'

'I beg you to excuse me. I am not impertinently curious, but have a good

object. Do you know the name of Dorrit here?'

'My name, sir,' replied the old man most unexpectedly, 'is Dorrit.'

Arthur pulled off his hat to him. 'Grant me the favour of half-a-dozen

words. I was wholly unprepared for your announcement, and hope that

assurance is my sufficient apology for having taken the liberty of

addressing you. I have recently come home to England after a long

absence. I have seen at my mother's--Mrs Clennam in the city--a young

woman working at her needle, whom I have only heard addressed or spoken

of as Little Dorrit. I have felt sincerely interested in her, and have

had a great desire to know something more about her. I saw her, not a

minute before you came up, pass in at that door.'

The old man looked at him attentively. 'Are you a sailor, sir?' he

asked. He seemed a little disappointed by the shake of the head that

replied to him. 'Not a sailor? I judged from your sunburnt face that you

might be. Are you in earnest, sir?'

'I do assure you that I am, and do entreat you to believe that I am, in

plain earnest.'

'I know very little of the world, sir,' returned the other, who had a

weak and quavering voice. 'I am merely passing on, like the shadow over

the sun-dial. It would be worth no man's while to mislead me; it would

really be too easy--too poor a success, to yield any satisfaction. The

young woman whom you saw go in here is my brother's child. My brother

is William Dorrit; I am Frederick. You say you have seen her at your

mother's (I know your mother befriends her), you have felt an interest

in her, and you wish to know what she does here. Come and see.'

He went on again, and Arthur accompanied him.

'My brother,' said the old man, pausing on the step and slowly facing

round again, 'has been here many years; and much that happens even among

ourselves, out of doors, is kept from him for reasons that I needn't

enter upon now. Be so good as to say nothing of my niece's working at

her needle. Be so good as to say nothing that goes beyond what is said

among us. If you keep within our bounds, you cannot well be wrong. Now!

Come and see.'

Arthur followed him down a narrow entry, at the end of which a key was

turned, and a strong door was opened from within. It admitted them into

a lodge or lobby, across which they passed, and so through another door

and a grating into the prison. The old man always plodding on before,

turned round, in his slow, stiff, stooping manner, when they came to the

turnkey on duty, as if to present his companion. The turnkey nodded; and

the companion passed in without being asked whom he wanted.

The night was dark; and the prison lamps in the yard, and the candles in

the prison windows faintly shining behind many sorts of wry old curtain

and blind, had not the air of making it lighter. A few people loitered

about, but the greater part of the population was within doors. The old

man, taking the right-hand side of the yard, turned in at the third or

fourth doorway, and began to ascend the stairs. 'They are rather dark,

sir, but you will not find anything in the way.'

He paused for a moment before opening a door on the second story. He had

no sooner turned the handle than the visitor saw Little Dorrit, and saw

the reason of her setting so much store by dining alone.

She had brought the meat home that she should have eaten herself, and

was already warming it on a gridiron over the fire for her father, clad

in an old grey gown and a black cap, awaiting his supper at the table.

A clean cloth was spread before him, with knife, fork, and spoon,

salt-cellar, pepper-box, glass, and pewter ale-pot. Such zests as his

particular little phial of cayenne pepper and his pennyworth of pickles

in a saucer, were not wanting.

She started, coloured deeply, and turned white. The visitor, more with

his eyes than by the slight impulsive motion of his hand, entreated her

to be reassured and to trust him.

'I found this gentleman,' said the uncle--'Mr Clennam, William, son of

Amy's friend--at the outer gate, wishful, as he was going by, of paying

his respects, but hesitating whether to come in or not. This is my

brother William, sir.'

'I hope,' said Arthur, very doubtful what to say, 'that my respect for

your daughter may explain and justify my desire to be presented to you,

sir.'

'Mr Clennam,' returned the other, rising, taking his cap off in the

flat of his hand, and so holding it, ready to put on again, 'you do me

honour. You are welcome, sir;' with a low bow. 'Frederick, a chair. Pray

sit down, Mr Clennam.'

He put his black cap on again as he had taken it off, and resumed his

own seat. There was a wonderful air of benignity and patronage in his

manner. These were the ceremonies with which he received the collegians.

'You are welcome to the Marshalsea, sir. I have welcomed many gentlemen

to these walls. Perhaps you are aware--my daughter Amy may have

mentioned that I am the Father of this place.'

'I--so I have understood,' said Arthur, dashing at the assertion.

'You know, I dare say, that my daughter Amy was born here. A good girl,

sir, a dear girl, and long a comfort and support to me. Amy, my dear,

put this dish on; Mr Clennam will excuse the primitive customs to which

we are reduced here. Is it a compliment to ask you if you would do me

the honour, sir, to--'

'Thank you,' returned Arthur. 'Not a morsel.'

He felt himself quite lost in wonder at the manner of the man, and that

the probability of his daughter's having had a reserve as to her family

history, should be so far out of his mind.

She filled his glass, put all the little matters on the table ready to

his hand, and then sat beside him while he ate his supper. Evidently in

observance of their nightly custom, she put some bread before herself,

and touched his glass with her lips; but Arthur saw she was troubled

and took nothing. Her look at her father, half admiring him and proud

of him, half ashamed for him, all devoted and loving, went to his inmost

heart.

The Father of the Marshalsea condescended towards his brother as an

amiable, well-meaning man; a private character, who had not arrived at

distinction. 'Frederick,' said he, 'you and Fanny sup at your lodgings

to-night, I know. What have you done with Fanny, Frederick?' 'She is

walking with Tip.'

'Tip--as you may know--is my son, Mr Clennam. He has been a little

wild, and difficult to settle, but his introduction to the world was

rather'--he shrugged his shoulders with a faint sigh, and looked round

the room--'a little adverse. Your first visit here, sir?'

'My first.'

'You could hardly have been here since your boyhood without my

knowledge. It very seldom happens that anybody--of any pretensions-any

pretensions--comes here without being presented to me.'

'As many as forty or fifty in a day have been introduced to my brother,'

said Frederick, faintly lighting up with a ray of pride.

'Yes!' the Father of the Marshalsea assented. 'We have even exceeded

that number. On a fine Sunday in term time, it is quite a Levee--quite

a Levee. Amy, my dear, I have been trying half the day to remember the

name of the gentleman from Camberwell who was introduced to me last

Christmas week by that agreeable coal-merchant who was remanded for six

months.'

'I don't remember his name, father.'

'Frederick, do you remember his name?' Frederick doubted if he had ever

heard it. No one could doubt that Frederick was the last person upon

earth to put such a question to, with any hope of information.

'I mean,' said his brother, 'the gentleman who did that handsome action

with so much delicacy. Ha! Tush! The name has quite escaped me. Mr

Clennam, as I have happened to mention handsome and delicate action, you

may like, perhaps, to know what it was.'

'Very much,' said Arthur, withdrawing his eyes from the delicate head

beginning to droop and the pale face with a new solicitude stealing over

it.

'It is so generous, and shows so much fine feeling, that it is almost a

duty to mention it. I said at the time that I always would mention it

on every suitable occasion, without regard to personal sensitiveness.

A--well--a--it's of no use to disguise the fact--you must know, Mr

Clennam, that it does sometimes occur that people who come here desire

to offer some little--Testimonial--to the Father of the place.'

To see her hand upon his arm in mute entreaty half-repressed, and her

timid little shrinking figure turning away, was to see a sad, sad sight.

'Sometimes,' he went on in a low, soft voice, agitated, and clearing

his throat every now and then; 'sometimes--hem--it takes one shape and

sometimes another; but it is generally--ha--Money. And it is, I cannot

but confess it, it is too often--hem--acceptable. This gentleman that I

refer to, was presented to me, Mr Clennam, in a manner highly gratifying

to my feelings, and conversed not only with great politeness, but with

great--ahem--information.' All this time, though he had finished his

supper, he was nervously going about his plate with his knife and

fork, as if some of it were still before him. 'It appeared from his

conversation that he had a garden, though he was delicate of mentioning

it at first, as gardens are--hem--are not accessible to me. But it came

out, through my admiring a very fine cluster of geranium--beautiful

cluster of geranium to be sure--which he had brought from his

conservatory. On my taking notice of its rich colour, he showed me a

piece of paper round it, on which was written, "For the Father of the

Marshalsea," and presented it to me. But this was--hem--not all. He made

a particular request, on taking leave, that I would remove the paper in

half an hour. I--ha--I did so; and I found that it contained--ahem--two

guineas. I assure you, Mr Clennam, I have received--hem--Testimonials

in many ways, and of many degrees of value, and they have always

been--ha--unfortunately acceptable; but I never was more pleased than

with this--ahem--this particular Testimonial.' Arthur was in the act

of saying the little he could say on such a theme, when a bell began to

ring, and footsteps approached the door. A pretty girl of a far better

figure and much more developed than Little Dorrit, though looking much

younger in the face when the two were observed together, stopped in the

doorway on seeing a stranger; and a young man who was with her, stopped

too.

'Mr Clennam, Fanny. My eldest daughter and my son, Mr Clennam. The bell

is a signal for visitors to retire, and so they have come to say good

night; but there is plenty of time, plenty of time. Girls, Mr Clennam

will excuse any household business you may have together. He knows, I

dare say, that I have but one room here.'

'I only want my clean dress from Amy, father,' said the second girl.

'And I my clothes,' said Tip.

Amy opened a drawer in an old piece of furniture that was a chest of

drawers above and a bedstead below, and produced two little bundles,

which she handed to her brother and sister. 'Mended and made up?'

Clennam heard the sister ask in a whisper. To which Amy answered 'Yes.'

He had risen now, and took the opportunity of glancing round the room.

The bare walls had been coloured green, evidently by an unskilled hand,

and were poorly decorated with a few prints. The window was curtained,

and the floor carpeted; and there were shelves and pegs, and other such

conveniences, that had accumulated in the course of years. It was a

close, confined room, poorly furnished; and the chimney smoked to boot,

or the tin screen at the top of the fireplace was superfluous; but

constant pains and care had made it neat, and even, after its kind,

comfortable. All the while the bell was ringing, and the uncle was

anxious to go. 'Come, Fanny, come, Fanny,' he said, with his ragged

clarionet case under his arm; 'the lock, child, the lock!'

Fanny bade her father good night, and whisked off airily. Tip had

already clattered down-stairs. 'Now, Mr Clennam,' said the uncle,

looking back as he shuffled out after them, 'the lock, sir, the lock.'

Mr Clennam had two things to do before he followed; one, to offer his

testimonial to the Father of the Marshalsea, without giving pain to his

child; the other to say something to that child, though it were but a

word, in explanation of his having come there.

'Allow me,' said the Father, 'to see you down-stairs.'

She had slipped out after the rest, and they were alone. 'Not on any

account,' said the visitor, hurriedly. 'Pray allow me to--' chink,

chink, chink.

'Mr Clennam,' said the Father, 'I am deeply, deeply--' But his visitor

had shut up his hand to stop the clinking, and had gone down-stairs with

great speed.

He saw no Little Dorrit on his way down, or in the yard. The last two or

three stragglers were hurrying to the lodge, and he was following,

when he caught sight of her in the doorway of the first house from the

entrance. He turned back hastily.

'Pray forgive me,' he said, 'for speaking to you here; pray forgive me

for coming here at all! I followed you to-night. I did so, that I might

endeavour to render you and your family some service. You know the

terms on which I and my mother are, and may not be surprised that I

have preserved our distant relations at her house, lest I should

unintentionally make her jealous, or resentful, or do you any injury in

her estimation. What I have seen here, in this short time, has greatly

increased my heartfelt wish to be a friend to you. It would recompense

me for much disappointment if I could hope to gain your confidence.'

She was scared at first, but seemed to take courage while he spoke to

her.

'You are very good, sir. You speak very earnestly to me. But I--but I

wish you had not watched me.'

He understood the emotion with which she said it, to arise in her

father's behalf; and he respected it, and was silent.

'Mrs Clennam has been of great service to me; I don't know what we

should have done without the employment she has given me; I am afraid

it may not be a good return to become secret with her; I can say no more

to-night, sir. I am sure you mean to be kind to us. Thank you, thank

you.' 'Let me ask you one question before I leave. Have you known my

mother long?'

'I think two years, sir,--The bell has stopped.'

'How did you know her first? Did she send here for you?'

'No. She does not even know that I live here. We have a friend, father

and I--a poor labouring man, but the best of friends--and I wrote out

that I wished to do needlework, and gave his address. And he got what

I wrote out displayed at a few places where it cost nothing, and Mrs

Clennam found me that way, and sent for me. The gate will be locked,

sir!'

She was so tremulous and agitated, and he was so moved by compassion for

her, and by deep interest in her story as it dawned upon him, that he

could scarcely tear himself away. But the stoppage of the bell, and the

quiet in the prison, were a warning to depart; and with a few hurried

words of kindness he left her gliding back to her father.

But he remained too late. The inner gate was locked, and the lodge

closed. After a little fruitless knocking with his hand, he was standing

there with the disagreeable conviction upon him that he had got to get

through the night, when a voice accosted him from behind.

'Caught, eh?' said the voice. 'You won't go home till morning. Oh! It's

you, is it, Mr Clennam?'

The voice was Tip's; and they stood looking at one another in the

prison-yard, as it began to rain.

'You've done it,' observed Tip; 'you must be sharper than that next

time.'

'But you are locked in too,' said Arthur.

'I believe I am!' said Tip, sarcastically. 'About! But not in your way.

I belong to the shop, only my sister has a theory that our governor must

never know it. I don't see why, myself.'

'Can I get any shelter?' asked Arthur. 'What had I better do?'

'We had better get hold of Amy first of all,' said Tip, referring any

difficulty to her as a matter of course.

'I would rather walk about all night--it's not much to do--than give

that trouble.'

'You needn't do that, if you don't mind paying for a bed. If you don't

mind paying, they'll make you up one on the Snuggery table, under the

circumstances. If you'll come along, I'll introduce you there.'

As they passed down the yard, Arthur looked up at the window of the room

he had lately left, where the light was still burning. 'Yes, sir,' said

Tip, following his glance. 'That's the governor's. She'll sit with him

for another hour reading yesterday's paper to him, or something of that

sort; and then she'll come out like a little ghost, and vanish away

without a sound.'

'I don't understand you.'

'The governor sleeps up in the room, and she has a lodging at the

turnkey's. First house there,' said Tip, pointing out the doorway into

which she had retired. 'First house, sky parlour. She pays twice as much

for it as she would for one twice as good outside. But she stands by the

governor, poor dear girl, day and night.'

This brought them to the tavern-establishment at the upper end of the

prison, where the collegians had just vacated their social evening club.

The apartment on the ground-floor in which it was held, was the Snuggery

in question; the presidential tribune of the chairman, the pewter-pots,

glasses, pipes, tobacco-ashes, and general flavour of members, were

still as that convivial institution had left them on its adjournment.

The Snuggery had two of the qualities popularly held to be essential to

grog for ladies, in respect that it was hot and strong; but in the third

point of analogy, requiring plenty of it, the Snuggery was defective;

being but a cooped-up apartment.

The unaccustomed visitor from outside, naturally assumed everybody here

to be prisoners--landlord, waiter, barmaid, potboy, and all. Whether

they were or not, did not appear; but they all had a weedy look. The

keeper of a chandler's shop in a front parlour, who took in gentlemen

boarders, lent his assistance in making the bed. He had been a tailor in

his time, and had kept a phaeton, he said. He boasted that he stood up

litigiously for the interests of the college; and he had undefined and

undefinable ideas that the marshal intercepted a 'Fund,' which ought to

come to the collegians. He liked to believe this, and always impressed

the shadowy grievance on new-comers and strangers; though he could not,

for his life, have explained what Fund he meant, or how the notion had

got rooted in his soul. He had fully convinced himself, notwithstanding,

that his own proper share of the Fund was three and ninepence a week;

and that in this amount he, as an individual collegian, was swindled by

the marshal, regularly every Monday. Apparently, he helped to make the

bed, that he might not lose an opportunity of stating this case; after

which unloading of his mind, and after announcing (as it seemed he

always did, without anything coming of it) that he was going to write a

letter to the papers and show the marshal up, he fell into miscellaneous

conversation with the rest. It was evident from the general tone of the

whole party, that they had come to regard insolvency as the normal state

of mankind, and the payment of debts as a disease that occasionally

broke out. In this strange scene, and with these strange spectres

flitting about him, Arthur Clennam looked on at the preparations as if

they were part of a dream. Pending which, the long-initiated Tip, with

an awful enjoyment of the Snuggery's resources, pointed out the common

kitchen fire maintained by subscription of collegians, the boiler for

hot water supported in like manner, and other premises generally tending

to the deduction that the way to be healthy, wealthy, and wise, was to

come to the Marshalsea.

The two tables put together in a corner, were, at length, converted into

a very fair bed; and the stranger was left to the Windsor chairs,

the presidential tribune, the beery atmosphere, sawdust, pipe-lights,

spittoons and repose. But the last item was long, long, long, in linking

itself to the rest. The novelty of the place, the coming upon it without

preparation, the sense of being locked up, the remembrance of that room

up-stairs, of the two brothers, and above all of the retiring childish

form, and the face in which he now saw years of insufficient food, if

not of want, kept him waking and unhappy.

Speculations, too, bearing the strangest relations towards the prison,

but always concerning the prison, ran like nightmares through his mind

while he lay awake. Whether coffins were kept ready for people who might

die there, where they were kept, how they were kept, where people who

died in the prison were buried, how they were taken out, what forms were

observed, whether an implacable creditor could arrest the dead? As to

escaping, what chances there were of escape? Whether a prisoner could

scale the walls with a cord and grapple, how he would descend upon

the other side? whether he could alight on a housetop, steal down a

staircase, let himself out at a door, and get lost in the crowd? As to

Fire in the prison, if one were to break out while he lay there?

And these involuntary starts of fancy were, after all, but the setting

of a picture in which three people kept before him. His father, with the

steadfast look with which he had died, prophetically darkened forth in

the portrait; his mother, with her arm up, warding off his suspicion;

Little Dorrit, with her hand on the degraded arm, and her drooping head

turned away.

What if his mother had an old reason she well knew for softening to

this poor girl! What if the prisoner now sleeping quietly--Heaven grant

it!--by the light of the great Day of judgment should trace back his

fall to her. What if any act of hers and of his father's, should have

even remotely brought the grey heads of those two brothers so low!

A swift thought shot into his mind. In that long imprisonment here, and

in her own long confinement to her room, did his mother find a balance

to be struck? 'I admit that I was accessory to that man's captivity. I

have suffered for it in kind. He has decayed in his prison: I in mine. I

have paid the penalty.'

When all the other thoughts had faded out, this one held possession

of him. When he fell asleep, she came before him in her wheeled chair,

warding him off with this justification. When he awoke, and sprang up

causelessly frightened, the words were in his ears, as if her voice had

slowly spoken them at his pillow, to break his rest: 'He withers away in

his prison; I wither away in mine; inexorable justice is done; what do I

owe on this score!'

CHAPTER 9. Little Mother

The morning light was in no hurry to climb the prison wall and look in

at the Snuggery windows; and when it did come, it would have been more

welcome if it had come alone, instead of bringing a rush of rain with

it. But the equinoctial gales were blowing out at sea, and the impartial

south-west wind, in its flight, would not neglect even the narrow

Marshalsea. While it roared through the steeple of St George's Church,

and twirled all the cowls in the neighbourhood, it made a swoop to beat

the Southwark smoke into the jail; and, plunging down the chimneys

of the few early collegians who were yet lighting their fires, half

suffocated them. Arthur Clennam would have been little disposed to

linger in bed, though his bed had been in a more private situation, and

less affected by the raking out of yesterday's fire, the kindling of

to-day's under the collegiate boiler, the filling of that Spartan vessel

at the pump, the sweeping and sawdusting of the common room, and other

such preparations. Heartily glad to see the morning, though little

rested by the night, he turned out as soon as he could distinguish

objects about him, and paced the yard for two heavy hours before the

gate was opened.

The walls were so near to one another, and the wild clouds hurried

over them so fast, that it gave him a sensation like the beginning of

sea-sickness to look up at the gusty sky. The rain, carried aslant by

flaws of wind, blackened that side of the central building which he had

visited last night, but left a narrow dry trough under the lee of the

wall, where he walked up and down among the waits of straw and dust

and paper, the waste droppings of the pump, and the stray leaves of

yesterday's greens. It was as haggard a view of life as a man need look

upon.

Nor was it relieved by any glimpse of the little creature who had

brought him there. Perhaps she glided out of her doorway and in at that

where her father lived, while his face was turned from both; but he saw

nothing of her. It was too early for her brother; to have seen him once,

was to have seen enough of him to know that he would be sluggish to

leave whatever frowsy bed he occupied at night; so, as Arthur Clennam

walked up and down, waiting for the gate to open, he cast about in

his mind for future rather than for present means of pursuing his

discoveries.

At last the lodge-gate turned, and the turnkey, standing on the step,

taking an early comb at his hair, was ready to let him out. With a

joyful sense of release he passed through the lodge, and found himself

again in the little outer court-yard where he had spoken to the brother

last night.

There was a string of people already straggling in, whom it was not

difficult to identify as the nondescript messengers, go-betweens, and

errand-bearers of the place. Some of them had been lounging in the rain

until the gate should open; others, who had timed their arrival

with greater nicety, were coming up now, and passing in with damp

whitey-brown paper bags from the grocers, loaves of bread, lumps of

butter, eggs, milk, and the like. The shabbiness of these attendants

upon shabbiness, the poverty of these insolvent waiters upon insolvency,

was a sight to see. Such threadbare coats and trousers, such fusty gowns

and shawls, such squashed hats and bonnets, such boots and shoes, such

umbrellas and walking-sticks, never were seen in Rag Fair. All of

them wore the cast-off clothes of other men and women, were made up of

patches and pieces of other people's individuality, and had no sartorial

existence of their own proper. Their walk was the walk of a race apart.

They had a peculiar way of doggedly slinking round the corner, as if

they were eternally going to the pawnbroker's. When they coughed, they

coughed like people accustomed to be forgotten on doorsteps and in

draughty passages, waiting for answers to letters in faded ink, which

gave the recipients of those manuscripts great mental disturbance and no

satisfaction. As they eyed the stranger in passing, they eyed him with

borrowing eyes--hungry, sharp, speculative as to his softness if they

were accredited to him, and the likelihood of his standing something

handsome. Mendicity on commission stooped in their high shoulders,

shambled in their unsteady legs, buttoned and pinned and darned and

dragged their clothes, frayed their button-holes, leaked out of their

figures in dirty little ends of tape, and issued from their mouths in

alcoholic breathings.

As these people passed him standing still in the court-yard, and one of

them turned back to inquire if he could assist him with his services,

it came into Arthur Clennam's mind that he would speak to Little Dorrit

again before he went away. She would have recovered her first surprise,

and might feel easier with him. He asked this member of the fraternity

(who had two red herrings in his hand, and a loaf and a blacking brush

under his arm), where was the nearest place to get a cup of coffee

at. The nondescript replied in encouraging terms, and brought him to a

coffee-shop in the street within a stone's throw.

'Do you know Miss Dorrit?' asked the new client.

The nondescript knew two Miss Dorrits; one who was born inside--That was

the one! That was the one? The nondescript had known her many years.

In regard of the other Miss Dorrit, the nondescript lodged in the same

house with herself and uncle.

This changed the client's half-formed design of remaining at the

coffee-shop until the nondescript should bring him word that Dorrit

had issued forth into the street. He entrusted the nondescript with a

confidential message to her, importing that the visitor who had waited

on her father last night, begged the favour of a few words with her at

her uncle's lodging; he obtained from the same source full directions to

the house, which was very near; dismissed the nondescript gratified with

half-a-crown; and having hastily refreshed himself at the coffee-shop,

repaired with all speed to the clarionet-player's dwelling.

There were so many lodgers in this house that the doorpost seemed to be

as full of bell-handles as a cathedral organ is of stops. Doubtful

which might be the clarionet-stop, he was considering the point, when a

shuttlecock flew out of the parlour window, and alighted on his hat.

He then observed that in the parlour window was a blind with the

inscription, MR CRIPPLES's ACADEMY; also in another line, EVENING

TUITION; and behind the blind was a little white-faced boy, with a slice

of bread-and-butter and a battledore.

The window being accessible from the footway, he looked in over the

blind, returned the shuttlecock, and put his question.

'Dorrit?' said the little white-faced boy (Master Cripples in fact). 'Mr

Dorrit? Third bell and one knock.' The pupils of Mr Cripples appeared to

have been making a copy-book of the street-door, it was so extensively

scribbled over in pencil.

The frequency of the inscriptions, 'Old Dorrit,' and 'Dirty Dick,'

in combination, suggested intentions of personality on the part Of

Mr Cripples's pupils. There was ample time to make these observations

before the door was opened by the poor old man himself.

'Ha!' said he, very slowly remembering Arthur, 'you were shut in last

night?'

'Yes, Mr Dorrit. I hope to meet your niece here presently.'

'Oh!' said he, pondering. 'Out of my brother's way? True. Would you come

up-stairs and wait for her?'

'Thank you.'

Turning himself as slowly as he turned in his mind whatever he heard or

said, he led the way up the narrow stairs. The house was very close, and

had an unwholesome smell. The little staircase windows looked in at the

back windows of other houses as unwholesome as itself, with poles and

lines thrust out of them, on which unsightly linen hung; as if the

inhabitants were angling for clothes, and had had some wretched bites

not worth attending to. In the back garret--a sickly room, with a

turn-up bedstead in it, so hastily and recently turned up that the

blankets were boiling over, as it were, and keeping the lid open--a

half-finished breakfast of coffee and toast for two persons was jumbled

down anyhow on a rickety table.

There was no one there. The old man mumbling to himself, after some

consideration, that Fanny had run away, went to the next room to fetch

her back. The visitor, observing that she held the door on the inside,

and that, when the uncle tried to open it, there was a sharp adjuration

of 'Don't, stupid!' and an appearance of loose stocking and flannel,

concluded that the young lady was in an undress. The uncle, without

appearing to come to any conclusion, shuffled in again, sat down in his

chair, and began warming his hands at the fire; not that it was cold, or

that he had any waking idea whether it was or not.

'What did you think of my brother, sir?' he asked, when he by-and-by

discovered what he was doing, left off, reached over to the

chimney-piece, and took his clarionet case down.

'I was glad,' said Arthur, very much at a loss, for his thoughts were

on the brother before him; 'to find him so well and cheerful.' 'Ha!'

muttered the old man, 'yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!'

Arthur wondered what he could possibly want with the clarionet case. He

did not want it at all. He discovered, in due time, that it was not the

little paper of snuff (which was also on the chimney-piece), put it back

again, took down the snuff instead, and solaced himself with a pinch. He

was as feeble, spare, and slow in his pinches as in everything else, but

a certain little trickling of enjoyment of them played in the poor worn

nerves about the corners of his eyes and mouth.

'Amy, Mr Clennam. What do you think of her?'

'I am much impressed, Mr Dorrit, by all that I have seen of her and

thought of her.'

'My brother would have been quite lost without Amy,' he returned. 'We

should all have been lost without Amy. She is a very good girl, Amy. She

does her duty.'

Arthur fancied that he heard in these praises a certain tone of custom,

which he had heard from the father last night with an inward protest and

feeling of antagonism. It was not that they stinted her praises, or

were insensible to what she did for them; but that they were lazily

habituated to her, as they were to all the rest of their condition.

He fancied that although they had before them, every day, the means of

comparison between her and one another and themselves, they regarded her

as being in her necessary place; as holding a position towards them all

which belonged to her, like her name or her age. He fancied that they

viewed her, not as having risen away from the prison atmosphere, but as

appertaining to it; as being vaguely what they had a right to expect,

and nothing more.

Her uncle resumed his breakfast, and was munching toast sopped in

coffee, oblivious of his guest, when the third bell rang. That was Amy,

he said, and went down to let her in; leaving the visitor with as vivid

a picture on his mind of his begrimed hands, dirt-worn face, and decayed

figure, as if he were still drooping in his chair.

She came up after him, in the usual plain dress, and with the usual

timid manner. Her lips were a little parted, as if her heart beat faster

than usual.

'Mr Clennam, Amy,' said her uncle, 'has been expecting you some time.'

'I took the liberty of sending you a message.'

'I received the message, sir.'

'Are you going to my mother's this morning? I think not, for it is past

your usual hour.' 'Not to-day, sir. I am not wanted to-day.'

'Will you allow Me to walk a little way in whatever direction you may

be going? I can then speak to you as we walk, both without detaining you

here, and without intruding longer here myself.'

She looked embarrassed, but said, if he pleased. He made a pretence of

having mislaid his walking-stick, to give her time to set the bedstead

right, to answer her sister's impatient knock at the wall, and to say a

word softly to her uncle. Then he found it, and they went down-stairs;

she first, he following; the uncle standing at the stair-head, and

probably forgetting them before they had reached the ground floor.

Mr Cripples's pupils, who were by this time coming to school, desisted

from their morning recreation of cuffing one another with bags and

books, to stare with all the eyes they had at a stranger who had been

to see Dirty Dick. They bore the trying spectacle in silence, until the

mysterious visitor was at a safe distance; when they burst into pebbles

and yells, and likewise into reviling dances, and in all respects buried

the pipe of peace with so many savage ceremonies, that, if Mr Cripples

had been the chief of the Cripplewayboo tribe with his war-paint on,

they could scarcely have done greater justice to their education.

In the midst of this homage, Mr Arthur Clennam offered his arm to Little

Dorrit, and Little Dorrit took it. 'Will you go by the Iron Bridge,'

said he, 'where there is an escape from the noise of the street?' Little

Dorrit answered, if he pleased, and presently ventured to hope that he

would 'not mind' Mr Cripples's boys, for she had herself received

her education, such as it was, in Mr Cripples's evening academy. He

returned, with the best will in the world, that Mr Cripples's boys were

forgiven out of the bottom of his soul. Thus did Cripples unconsciously

become a master of the ceremonies between them, and bring them more

naturally together than Beau Nash might have done if they had lived

in his golden days, and he had alighted from his coach and six for the

purpose.

The morning remained squally, and the streets were miserably muddy, but

no rain fell as they walked towards the Iron Bridge. The little creature

seemed so young in his eyes, that there were moments when he found

himself thinking of her, if not speaking to her, as if she were a child.

Perhaps he seemed as old in her eyes as she seemed young in his.

'I am sorry to hear you were so inconvenienced last night, sir, as to be

locked in. It was very unfortunate.'

It was nothing, he returned. He had had a very good bed.

'Oh yes!' she said quickly; 'she believed there were excellent beds at

the coffee-house.' He noticed that the coffee-house was quite a majestic

hotel to her, and that she treasured its reputation. 'I believe it is

very expensive,' said Little Dorrit, 'but MY father has told me that

quite beautiful dinners may be got there. And wine,' she added timidly.

'Were you ever there?'

'Oh no! Only into the kitchen to fetch hot water.'

To think of growing up with a kind of awe upon one as to the luxuries of

that superb establishment, the Marshalsea Hotel!

'I asked you last night,' said Clennam, 'how you had become acquainted

with my mother. Did you ever hear her name before she sent for you?'

'No, sir.'

'Do you think your father ever did?'

'No, sir.'

He met her eyes raised to his with so much wonder in them (she was

scared when the encounter took place, and shrunk away again), that he

felt it necessary to say:

'I have a reason for asking, which I cannot very well explain; but you

must, on no account, suppose it to be of a nature to cause you the least

alarm or anxiety. Quite the reverse. And you think that at no time of

your father's life was my name of Clennam ever familiar to him?'

'No, sir.'

He felt, from the tone in which she spoke, that she was glancing up at

him with those parted lips; therefore he looked before him, rather than

make her heart beat quicker still by embarrassing her afresh.

Thus they emerged upon the Iron Bridge, which was as quiet after the

roaring streets as though it had been open country. The wind blew

roughly, the wet squalls came rattling past them, skimming the pools on

the road and pavement, and raining them down into the river. The clouds

raced on furiously in the lead-Coloured sky, the smoke and mist raced

after them, the dark tide ran fierce and strong in the same direction.

Little Dorrit seemed the least, the quietest, and weakest of Heaven's

creatures.

'Let me put you in a coach,' said Clennam, very nearly adding 'my poor

child.'

She hurriedly declined, saying that wet or dry made little difference to

her; she was used to go about in all weathers. He knew it to be so, and

was touched with more pity; thinking of the slight figure at his side,

making its nightly way through the damp dark boisterous streets to such

a place of rest. 'You spoke so feelingly to me last night, sir, and

I found afterwards that you had been so generous to my father, that I

could not resist your message, if it was only to thank you; especially

as I wished very much to say to you--' she hesitated and trembled, and

tears rose in her eyes, but did not fall.

'To say to me--?'

'That I hope you will not misunderstand my father. Don't judge him, sir,

as you would judge others outside the gates. He has been there so long!

I never saw him outside, but I can understand that he must have grown

different in some things since.'

'My thoughts will never be unjust or harsh towards him, believe me.'

'Not,' she said, with a prouder air, as the misgiving evidently crept

upon her that she might seem to be abandoning him, 'not that he has

anything to be ashamed of for himself, or that I have anything to be

ashamed of for him. He only requires to be understood. I only ask for

him that his life may be fairly remembered. All that he said was quite

true. It all happened just as he related it. He is very much respected.

Everybody who comes in, is glad to know him. He is more courted than

anyone else. He is far more thought of than the Marshal is.'

If ever pride were innocent, it was innocent in Little Dorrit when she

grew boastful of her father.

'It is often said that his manners are a true gentleman's, and quite

a study. I see none like them in that place, but he is admitted to

be superior to all the rest. This is quite as much why they make him

presents, as because they know him to be needy. He is not to be blamed

for being in need, poor love. Who could be in prison a quarter of a

century, and be prosperous!'

What affection in her words, what compassion in her repressed tears,

what a great soul of fidelity within her, how true the light that shed

false brightness round him!

'If I have found it best to conceal where my home is, it is not because

I am ashamed of him. God forbid! Nor am I so much ashamed of the place

itself as might be supposed. People are not bad because they come there.

I have known numbers of good, persevering, honest people come there

through misfortune. They are almost all kind-hearted to one another.

And it would be ungrateful indeed in me, to forget that I have had many

quiet, comfortable hours there; that I had an excellent friend there

when I was quite a baby, who was very very fond of me; that I have been

taught there, and have worked there, and have slept soundly there. I

think it would be almost cowardly and cruel not to have some little

attachment for it, after all this.'

She had relieved the faithful fulness of her heart, and modestly said,

raising her eyes appealingly to her new friend's, 'I did not mean to say

so much, nor have I ever but once spoken about this before. But it seems

to set it more right than it was last night. I said I wished you had

not followed me, sir. I don't wish it so much now, unless you should

think--indeed I don't wish it at all, unless I should have spoken so

confusedly, that--that you can scarcely understand me, which I am afraid

may be the case.'

He told her with perfect truth that it was not the case; and putting

himself between her and the sharp wind and rain, sheltered her as well

as he could.

'I feel permitted now,' he said, 'to ask you a little more concerning

your father. Has he many creditors?'

'Oh! a great number.'

'I mean detaining creditors, who keep him where he is?'

'Oh yes! a great number.'

'Can you tell me--I can get the information, no doubt, elsewhere, if you

cannot--who is the most influential of them?'

Little Dorrit said, after considering a little, that she used to

hear long ago of Mr Tite Barnacle as a man of great power. He was a

commissioner, or a board, or a trustee, 'or something.' He lived

in Grosvenor Square, she thought, or very near it. He was under

Government--high in the Circumlocution Office. She appeared to have

acquired, in her infancy, some awful impression of the might of this

formidable Mr Tite Barnacle of Grosvenor Square, or very near it, and

the Circumlocution Office, which quite crushed her when she mentioned

him.

'It can do no harm,' thought Arthur, 'if I see this Mr Tite Barnacle.'

The thought did not present itself so quietly but that her quickness

intercepted it. 'Ah!' said Little Dorrit, shaking her head with the mild

despair of a lifetime. 'Many people used to think once of getting my

poor father out, but you don't know how hopeless it is.'

She forgot to be shy at the moment, in honestly warning him away from

the sunken wreck he had a dream of raising; and looked at him with

eyes which assuredly, in association with her patient face, her fragile

figure, her spare dress, and the wind and rain, did not turn him from

his purpose of helping her.

'Even if it could be done,' said she--'and it never can be done

now--where could father live, or how could he live? I have often thought

that if such a change could come, it might be anything but a service to

him now. People might not think so well of him outside as they do there.

He might not be so gently dealt with outside as he is there. He might

not be so fit himself for the life outside as he is for that.' Here for

the first time she could not restrain her tears from falling; and the

little thin hands he had watched when they were so busy, trembled as

they clasped each other.

'It would be a new distress to him even to know that I earn a little

money, and that Fanny earns a little money. He is so anxious about us,

you see, feeling helplessly shut up there. Such a good, good father!'

He let the little burst of feeling go by before he spoke. It was soon

gone. She was not accustomed to think of herself, or to trouble any one

with her emotions. He had but glanced away at the piles of city roofs

and chimneys among which the smoke was rolling heavily, and at the

wilderness of masts on the river, and the wilderness of steeples on

the shore, indistinctly mixed together in the stormy haze, when she

was again as quiet as if she had been plying her needle in his mother's

room.

'You would be glad to have your brother set at liberty?'

'Oh very, very glad, sir!'

'Well, we will hope for him at least. You told me last night of a friend

you had?'

His name was Plornish, Little Dorrit said.

And where did Plornish live? Plornish lived in Bleeding Heart Yard. He

was 'only a plasterer,' Little Dorrit said, as a caution to him not to

form high social expectations of Plornish. He lived at the last house in

Bleeding Heart Yard, and his name was over a little gateway. Arthur took

down the address and gave her his. He had now done all he sought to do

for the present, except that he wished to leave her with a reliance

upon him, and to have something like a promise from her that she would

cherish it.

'There is one friend!' he said, putting up his pocketbook. 'As I take

you back--you are going back?'

'Oh yes! going straight home.'

'As I take you back,' the word home jarred upon him, 'let me ask you to

persuade yourself that you have another friend. I make no professions,

and say no more.'

'You are truly kind to me, sir. I am sure I need no more.'

They walked back through the miserable muddy streets, and among the

poor, mean shops, and were jostled by the crowds of dirty hucksters

usual to a poor neighbourhood. There was nothing, by the short way, that

was pleasant to any of the five senses. Yet it was not a common passage

through common rain, and mire, and noise, to Clennam, having this

little, slender, careful creature on his arm. How young she seemed to

him, or how old he to her; or what a secret either to the other, in that

beginning of the destined interweaving of their stories, matters not

here. He thought of her having been born and bred among these scenes,

and shrinking through them now, familiar yet misplaced; he thought

of her long acquaintance with the squalid needs of life, and of her

innocence; of her solicitude for others, and her few years, and her

childish aspect.

They were come into the High Street, where the prison stood, when a

voice cried, 'Little mother, little mother!' Little Dorrit stopping and

looking back, an excited figure of a strange kind bounced against them

(still crying 'little mother'), fell down, and scattered the contents of

a large basket, filled with potatoes, in the mud.

'Oh, Maggy,' said Little Dorrit, 'what a clumsy child you are!'

Maggy was not hurt, but picked herself up immediately, and then began

to pick up the potatoes, in which both Little Dorrit and Arthur Clennam

helped. Maggy picked up very few potatoes and a great quantity of mud;

but they were all recovered, and deposited in the basket. Maggy then

smeared her muddy face with her shawl, and presenting it to Mr Clennam

as a type of purity, enabled him to see what she was like.

She was about eight-and-twenty, with large bones, large features, large

feet and hands, large eyes and no hair. Her large eyes were limpid and

almost colourless; they seemed to be very little affected by light,

and to stand unnaturally still. There was also that attentive listening

expression in her face, which is seen in the faces of the blind; but she

was not blind, having one tolerably serviceable eye. Her face was not

exceedingly ugly, though it was only redeemed from being so by a smile;

a good-humoured smile, and pleasant in itself, but rendered pitiable

by being constantly there. A great white cap, with a quantity of

opaque frilling that was always flapping about, apologised for Maggy's

baldness, and made it so very difficult for her old black bonnet to

retain its place upon her head, that it held on round her neck like a

gipsy's baby. A commission of haberdashers could alone have reported

what the rest of her poor dress was made of, but it had a strong general

resemblance to seaweed, with here and there a gigantic tea-leaf. Her

shawl looked particularly like a tea-leaf after long infusion.

Arthur Clennam looked at Little Dorrit with the expression of one

saying, 'May I ask who this is?' Little Dorrit, whose hand this Maggy,

still calling her little mother, had begun to fondle, answered in words

(they were under a gateway into which the majority of the potatoes had

rolled).

'This is Maggy, sir.'

'Maggy, sir,' echoed the personage presented. 'Little mother!'

'She is the grand-daughter--' said Little Dorrit.

'Grand-daughter,' echoed Maggy.

'Of my old nurse, who has been dead a long time. Maggy, how old are

you?'

'Ten, mother,' said Maggy.

'You can't think how good she is, sir,' said Little Dorrit, with

infinite tenderness.

'Good SHE is,' echoed Maggy, transferring the pronoun in a most

expressive way from herself to her little mother.

'Or how clever,' said Little Dorrit. 'She goes on errands as well as

any one.' Maggy laughed. 'And is as trustworthy as the Bank of England.'

Maggy laughed. 'She earns her own living entirely. Entirely, sir!' said

Little Dorrit, in a lower and triumphant tone.

'Really does!'

'What is her history?' asked Clennam.

'Think of that, Maggy?' said Little Dorrit, taking her two large hands

and clapping them together. 'A gentleman from thousands of miles away,

wanting to know your history!'

'My history?' cried Maggy. 'Little mother.'

'She means me,' said Little Dorrit, rather confused; 'she is very much

attached to me. Her old grandmother was not so kind to her as she should

have been; was she, Maggy?' Maggy shook her head, made a drinking vessel

of her clenched left hand, drank out of it, and said, 'Gin.' Then beat

an imaginary child, and said, 'Broom-handles and pokers.'

'When Maggy was ten years old,' said Little Dorrit, watching her face

while she spoke, 'she had a bad fever, sir, and she has never grown any

older ever since.'

'Ten years old,' said Maggy, nodding her head. 'But what a nice

hospital! So comfortable, wasn't it? Oh so nice it was. Such a Ev'nly

place!'

'She had never been at peace before, sir,' said Little Dorrit, turning

towards Arthur for an instant and speaking low, 'and she always runs off

upon that.'

'Such beds there is there!' cried Maggy. 'Such lemonades! Such oranges!

Such d'licious broth and wine! Such Chicking! Oh, AIN'T it a delightful

place to go and stop at!'

'So Maggy stopped there as long as she could,' said Little Dorrit,

in her former tone of telling a child's story; the tone designed for

Maggy's ear, 'and at last, when she could stop there no longer, she came

out. Then, because she was never to be more than ten years old, however

long she lived--'

'However long she lived,' echoed Maggy.

'And because she was very weak; indeed was so weak that when she began

to laugh she couldn't stop herself--which was a great pity--'

(Maggy mighty grave of a sudden.)

'Her grandmother did not know what to do with her, and for some years

was very unkind to her indeed. At length, in course of time, Maggy began

to take pains to improve herself, and to be very attentive and very

industrious; and by degrees was allowed to come in and out as often as

she liked, and got enough to do to support herself, and does support

herself. And that,' said Little Dorrit, clapping the two great hands

together again, 'is Maggy's history, as Maggy knows!'

Ah! But Arthur would have known what was wanting to its completeness,

though he had never heard of the words Little mother; though he had

never seen the fondling of the small spare hand; though he had had no

sight for the tears now standing in the colourless eyes; though he had

had no hearing for the sob that checked the clumsy laugh. The dirty

gateway with the wind and rain whistling through it, and the basket of

muddy potatoes waiting to be spilt again or taken up, never seemed the

common hole it really was, when he looked back to it by these lights.

Never, never!

They were very near the end of their walk, and they now came out of the

gateway to finish it. Nothing would serve Maggy but that they must stop

at a grocer's window, short of their destination, for her to show her

learning. She could read after a sort; and picked out the fat figures in

the tickets of prices, for the most part correctly. She also stumbled,

with a large balance of success against her failures, through various

philanthropic recommendations to Try our Mixture, Try our Family Black,

Try our Orange-flavoured Pekoe, challenging competition at the head

of Flowery Teas; and various cautions to the public against spurious

establishments and adulterated articles. When he saw how pleasure

brought a rosy tint into Little Dorrit's face when Maggy made a hit,

he felt that he could have stood there making a library of the grocer's

window until the rain and wind were tired.

The court-yard received them at last, and there he said goodbye to

Little Dorrit. Little as she had always looked, she looked less than

ever when he saw her going into the Marshalsea lodge passage, the little

mother attended by her big child. The cage door opened, and when the

small bird, reared in captivity, had tamely fluttered in, he saw it shut

again; and then he came away.

CHAPTER 10. Containing the whole Science of Government

The Circumlocution Office was (as everybody knows without being told)

the most important Department under Government. No public business of

any kind could possibly be done at any time without the acquiescence of

the Circumlocution Office. Its finger was in the largest public pie,

and in the smallest public tart. It was equally impossible to do the

plainest right and to undo the plainest wrong without the express

authority of the Circumlocution Office. If another Gunpowder Plot had

been discovered half an hour before the lighting of the match, nobody

would have been justified in saving the parliament until there had

been half a score of boards, half a bushel of minutes, several sacks

of official memoranda, and a family-vault full of ungrammatical

correspondence, on the part of the Circumlocution Office.

This glorious establishment had been early in the field, when the one

sublime principle involving the difficult art of governing a country,

was first distinctly revealed to statesmen. It had been foremost to

study that bright revelation and to carry its shining influence through

the whole of the official proceedings. Whatever was required to be done,

the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments

in the art of perceiving--HOW NOT TO DO IT.

Through this delicate perception, through the tact with which it

invariably seized it, and through the genius with which it always acted

on it, the Circumlocution Office had risen to overtop all the public

departments; and the public condition had risen to be--what it was.

It is true that How not to do it was the great study and object of

all public departments and professional politicians all round the

Circumlocution Office. It is true that every new premier and every

new government, coming in because they had upheld a certain thing as

necessary to be done, were no sooner come in than they applied their

utmost faculties to discovering How not to do it. It is true that from

the moment when a general election was over, every returned man who had

been raving on hustings because it hadn't been done, and who had been

asking the friends of the honourable gentleman in the opposite interest

on pain of impeachment to tell him why it hadn't been done, and who had

been asserting that it must be done, and who had been pledging himself

that it should be done, began to devise, How it was not to be done. It

is true that the debates of both Houses of Parliament the whole session

through, uniformly tended to the protracted deliberation, How not to

do it. It is true that the royal speech at the opening of such session

virtually said, My lords and gentlemen, you have a considerable

stroke of work to do, and you will please to retire to your respective

chambers, and discuss, How not to do it. It is true that the royal

speech, at the close of such session, virtually said, My lords and

gentlemen, you have through several laborious months been considering

with great loyalty and patriotism, How not to do it, and you have found

out; and with the blessing of Providence upon the harvest (natural, not

political), I now dismiss you. All this is true, but the Circumlocution

Office went beyond it.

Because the Circumlocution Office went on mechanically, every day,

keeping this wonderful, all-sufficient wheel of statesmanship, How not

to do it, in motion. Because the Circumlocution Office was down upon any

ill-advised public servant who was going to do it, or who appeared to be

by any surprising accident in remote danger of doing it, with a minute,

and a memorandum, and a letter of instructions that extinguished him. It

was this spirit of national efficiency in the Circumlocution Office

that had gradually led to its having something to do with everything.

Mechanicians, natural philosophers, soldiers, sailors, petitioners,

memorialists, people with grievances, people who wanted to prevent

grievances, people who wanted to redress grievances, jobbing people,

jobbed people, people who couldn't get rewarded for merit, and people

who couldn't get punished for demerit, were all indiscriminately tucked

up under the foolscap paper of the Circumlocution Office.

Numbers of people were lost in the Circumlocution Office. Unfortunates

with wrongs, or with projects for the general welfare (and they had

better have had wrongs at first, than have taken that bitter English

recipe for certainly getting them), who in slow lapse of time and agony

had passed safely through other public departments; who, according to

rule, had been bullied in this, over-reached by that, and evaded by

the other; got referred at last to the Circumlocution Office, and

never reappeared in the light of day. Boards sat upon them, secretaries

minuted upon them, commissioners gabbled about them, clerks registered,

entered, checked, and ticked them off, and they melted away. In short,

all the business of the country went through the Circumlocution Office,

except the business that never came out of it; and its name was Legion.

Sometimes, angry spirits attacked the Circumlocution Office. Sometimes,

parliamentary questions were asked about it, and even parliamentary

motions made or threatened about it by demagogues so low and ignorant as

to hold that the real recipe of government was, How to do it. Then would

the noble lord, or right honourable gentleman, in whose department it

was to defend the Circumlocution Office, put an orange in his pocket,

and make a regular field-day of the occasion. Then would he come down to

that house with a slap upon the table, and meet the honourable gentleman

foot to foot. Then would he be there to tell that honourable gentleman

that the Circumlocution Office not only was blameless in this matter,

but was commendable in this matter, was extollable to the skies in this

matter. Then would he be there to tell that honourable gentleman that,

although the Circumlocution Office was invariably right and wholly

right, it never was so right as in this matter. Then would he be there

to tell that honourable gentleman that it would have been more to his

honour, more to his credit, more to his good taste, more to his good

sense, more to half the dictionary of commonplaces, if he had left the

Circumlocution Office alone, and never approached this matter. Then

would he keep one eye upon a coach or crammer from the Circumlocution

Office sitting below the bar, and smash the honourable gentleman with

the Circumlocution Office account of this matter. And although one

of two things always happened; namely, either that the Circumlocution

Office had nothing to say and said it, or that it had something to say

of which the noble lord, or right honourable gentleman, blundered one

half and forgot the other; the Circumlocution Office was always voted

immaculate by an accommodating majority.

Such a nursery of statesmen had the Department become in virtue of a

long career of this nature, that several solemn lords had attained the

reputation of being quite unearthly prodigies of business, solely from

having practised, How not to do it, as the head of the Circumlocution

Office. As to the minor priests and acolytes of that temple, the result

of all this was that they stood divided into two classes, and, down to

the junior messenger, either believed in the Circumlocution Office as

a heaven-born institution that had an absolute right to do whatever it

liked; or took refuge in total infidelity, and considered it a flagrant

nuisance.

The Barnacle family had for some time helped to administer the

Circumlocution Office. The Tite Barnacle Branch, indeed, considered

themselves in a general way as having vested rights in that direction,

and took it ill if any other family had much to say to it. The Barnacles

were a very high family, and a very large family. They were dispersed

all over the public offices, and held all sorts of public places. Either

the nation was under a load of obligation to the Barnacles, or the

Barnacles were under a load of obligation to the nation. It was not

quite unanimously settled which; the Barnacles having their opinion, the

nation theirs.

The Mr Tite Barnacle who at the period now in question usually coached

or crammed the statesman at the head of the Circumlocution Office, when

that noble or right honourable individual sat a little uneasily in his

saddle by reason of some vagabond making a tilt at him in a newspaper,

was more flush of blood than money. As a Barnacle he had his place,

which was a snug thing enough; and as a Barnacle he had of course put

in his son Barnacle Junior in the office. But he had intermarried with

a branch of the Stiltstalkings, who were also better endowed in a

sanguineous point of view than with real or personal property, and of

this marriage there had been issue, Barnacle junior and three young

ladies. What with the patrician requirements of Barnacle junior, the

three young ladies, Mrs Tite Barnacle nee Stiltstalking, and himself,

Mr Tite Barnacle found the intervals between quarter day and quarter day

rather longer than he could have desired; a circumstance which he always

attributed to the country's parsimony. For Mr Tite Barnacle, Mr Arthur

Clennam made his fifth inquiry one day at the Circumlocution Office;

having on previous occasions awaited that gentleman successively in a

hall, a glass case, a waiting room, and a fire-proof passage where the

Department seemed to keep its wind. On this occasion Mr Barnacle was not

engaged, as he had been before, with the noble prodigy at the head of

the Department; but was absent. Barnacle Junior, however, was announced

as a lesser star, yet visible above the office horizon.

With Barnacle junior, he signified his desire to confer; and found that

young gentleman singeing the calves of his legs at the parental fire,

and supporting his spine against the mantel-shelf. It was a comfortable

room, handsomely furnished in the higher official manner; an presenting

stately suggestions of the absent Barnacle, in the thick carpet, the

leather-covered desk to sit at, the leather-covered desk to stand at,

the formidable easy-chair and hearth-rug, the interposed screen, the

torn-up papers, the dispatch-boxes with little labels sticking out of

them, like medicine bottles or dead game, the pervading smell of leather

and mahogany, and a general bamboozling air of How not to do it.

The present Barnacle, holding Mr Clennam's card in his hand, had a

youthful aspect, and the fluffiest little whisker, perhaps, that ever

was seen. Such a downy tip was on his callow chin, that he seemed half

fledged like a young bird; and a compassionate observer might have urged

that, if he had not singed the calves of his legs, he would have died

of cold. He had a superior eye-glass dangling round his neck, but

unfortunately had such flat orbits to his eyes and such limp little

eyelids that it wouldn't stick in when he put it up, but kept tumbling

out against his waistcoat buttons with a click that discomposed him very

much.

'Oh, I say. Look here! My father's not in the way, and won't be in the

way to-day,' said Barnacle Junior. 'Is this anything that I can do?'

(Click! Eye-glass down. Barnacle Junior quite frightened and feeling all

round himself, but not able to find it.)

'You are very good,' said Arthur Clennam. 'I wish however to see Mr

Barnacle.'

'But I say. Look here! You haven't got any appointment, you know,' said

Barnacle Junior.

(By this time he had found the eye-glass, and put it up again.)

'No,' said Arthur Clennam. 'That is what I wish to have.'

'But I say. Look here! Is this public business?' asked Barnacle junior.

(Click! Eye-glass down again. Barnacle Junior in that state of search

after it that Mr Clennam felt it useless to reply at present.)

'Is it,' said Barnacle junior, taking heed of his visitor's brown face,

'anything about--Tonnage--or that sort of thing?'

(Pausing for a reply, he opened his right eye with his hand, and stuck

his glass in it, in that inflammatory manner that his eye began watering

dreadfully.)

'No,' said Arthur, 'it is nothing about tonnage.'

'Then look here. Is it private business?'

'I really am not sure. It relates to a Mr Dorrit.'

'Look here, I tell you what! You had better call at our house, if you

are going that way. Twenty-four, Mews Street, Grosvenor Square. My

father's got a slight touch of the gout, and is kept at home by it.'

(The misguided young Barnacle evidently going blind on his eye-glass

side, but ashamed to make any further alteration in his painful

arrangements.)

'Thank you. I will call there now. Good morning.' Young Barnacle seemed

discomfited at this, as not having at all expected him to go.

'You are quite sure,' said Barnacle junior, calling after him when he

got to the door, unwilling wholly to relinquish the bright business idea

he had conceived; 'that it's nothing about Tonnage?'

'Quite sure.'

With such assurance, and rather wondering what might have taken place

if it HAD been anything about tonnage, Mr Clennam withdrew to pursue his

inquiries.

Mews Street, Grosvenor Square, was not absolutely Grosvenor Square

itself, but it was very near it. It was a hideous little street of dead

wall, stables, and dunghills, with lofts over coach-houses inhabited by

coachmen's families, who had a passion for drying clothes and decorating

their window-sills with miniature turnpike-gates. The principal

chimney-sweep of that fashionable quarter lived at the blind end of Mews

Street; and the same corner contained an establishment much frequented

about early morning and twilight for the purchase of wine-bottles and

kitchen-stuff. Punch's shows used to lean against the dead wall in Mews

Street, while their proprietors were dining elsewhere; and the dogs of

the neighbourhood made appointments to meet in the same locality. Yet

there were two or three small airless houses at the entrance end of Mews

Street, which went at enormous rents on account of their being abject

hangers-on to a fashionable situation; and whenever one of these fearful

little coops was to be let (which seldom happened, for they were in

great request), the house agent advertised it as a gentlemanly residence

in the most aristocratic part of town, inhabited solely by the elite of

the beau monde.

If a gentlemanly residence coming strictly within this narrow margin had

not been essential to the blood of the Barnacles, this particular branch

would have had a pretty wide selection among, let us say, ten thousand

houses, offering fifty times the accommodation for a third of the money.

As it was, Mr Barnacle, finding his gentlemanly residence extremely

inconvenient and extremely dear, always laid it, as a public servant,

at the door of the country, and adduced it as another instance of the

country's parsimony.

Arthur Clennam came to a squeezed house, with a ramshackle bowed

front, little dingy windows, and a little dark area like a damp

waistcoat-pocket, which he found to be number twenty-four, Mews Street,

Grosvenor Square. To the sense of smell the house was like a sort of

bottle filled with a strong distillation of Mews; and when the footman

opened the door, he seemed to take the stopper out.

The footman was to the Grosvenor Square footmen, what the house was to

the Grosvenor Square houses. Admirable in his way, his way was a back

and a bye way. His gorgeousness was not unmixed with dirt; and both in

complexion and consistency he had suffered from the closeness of his

pantry. A sallow flabbiness was upon him when he took the stopper out,

and presented the bottle to Mr Clennam's nose.

'Be so good as to give that card to Mr Tite Barnacle, and to say that I

have just now seen the younger Mr Barnacle, who recommended me to call

here.'

The footman (who had as many large buttons with the Barnacle crest upon

them on the flaps of his pockets, as if he were the family strong box,

and carried the plate and jewels about with him buttoned up) pondered

over the card a little; then said, 'Walk in.'

It required some judgment to do it without butting the inner hall-door

open, and in the consequent mental confusion and physical darkness

slipping down the kitchen stairs. The visitor, however, brought himself

up safely on the door-mat.

Still the footman said 'Walk in,' so the visitor followed him. At the

inner hall-door, another bottle seemed to be presented and another

stopper taken out. This second vial appeared to be filled with

concentrated provisions and extract of Sink from the pantry. After a

skirmish in the narrow passage, occasioned by the footman's opening the

door of the dismal dining-room with confidence, finding some one there

with consternation, and backing on the visitor with disorder, the

visitor was shut up, pending his announcement, in a close back parlour.

There he had an opportunity of refreshing himself with both the

bottles at once, looking out at a low blinding wall three feet off,

and speculating on the number of Barnacle families within the bills of

mortality who lived in such hutches of their own free flunkey choice.

Mr Barnacle would see him. Would he walk up-stairs? He would, and

he did; and in the drawing-room, with his leg on a rest, he found Mr

Barnacle himself, the express image and presentment of How not to do it.

Mr Barnacle dated from a better time, when the country was not so

parsimonious and the Circumlocution Office was not so badgered. He wound

and wound folds of white cravat round his neck, as he wound and wound

folds of tape and paper round the neck of the country. His wristbands

and collar were oppressive; his voice and manner were oppressive. He

had a large watch-chain and bunch of seals, a coat buttoned up to

inconvenience, a waistcoat buttoned up to inconvenience, an unwrinkled

pair of trousers, a stiff pair of boots. He was altogether splendid,

massive, overpowering, and impracticable. He seemed to have been sitting

for his portrait to Sir Thomas Lawrence all the days of his life.

'Mr Clennam?' said Mr Barnacle. 'Be seated.'

Mr Clennam became seated.

'You have called on me, I believe,' said Mr Barnacle, 'at the

Circumlocution--' giving it the air of a word of about five-and-twenty

syllables--'Office.'

'I have taken that liberty.'

Mr Barnacle solemnly bent his head as who should say, 'I do not deny

that it is a liberty; proceed to take another liberty, and let me know

your business.'

'Allow me to observe that I have been for some years in China, am quite

a stranger at home, and have no personal motive or interest in the

inquiry I am about to make.'

Mr Barnacle tapped his fingers on the table, and, as if he were now

sitting for his portrait to a new and strange artist, appeared to say

to his visitor, 'If you will be good enough to take me with my present

lofty expression, I shall feel obliged.'

'I have found a debtor in the Marshalsea Prison of the name of Dorrit,

who has been there many years. I wish to investigate his confused

affairs so far as to ascertain whether it may not be possible, after

this lapse of time, to ameliorate his unhappy condition. The name of

Mr Tite Barnacle has been mentioned to me as representing some highly

influential interest among his creditors. Am I correctly informed?'

It being one of the principles of the Circumlocution Office never, on

any account whatever, to give a straightforward answer, Mr Barnacle

said, 'Possibly.'

'On behalf of the Crown, may I ask, or as private individual?'

'The Circumlocution Department, sir,' Mr Barnacle replied, 'may have

possibly recommended--possibly--I cannot say--that some public claim

against the insolvent estate of a firm or copartnership to which this

person may have belonged, should be enforced. The question may have

been, in the course of official business, referred to the Circumlocution

Department for its consideration. The Department may have either

originated, or confirmed, a Minute making that recommendation.'

'I assume this to be the case, then.'

'The Circumlocution Department,' said Mr Barnacle, 'is not responsible

for any gentleman's assumptions.'

'May I inquire how I can obtain official information as to the real

state of the case?'

'It is competent,' said Mr Barnacle, 'to any member of the--Public,'

mentioning that obscure body with reluctance, as his natural enemy,

'to memorialise the Circumlocution Department. Such formalities as are

required to be observed in so doing, may be known on application to the

proper branch of that Department.'

'Which is the proper branch?'

'I must refer you,' returned Mr Barnacle, ringing the bell, 'to the

Department itself for a formal answer to that inquiry.'

'Excuse my mentioning--'

'The Department is accessible to the--Public,' Mr Barnacle was always

checked a little by that word of impertinent signification, 'if

the--Public approaches it according to the official forms; if

the--Public does not approach it according to the official forms,

the--Public has itself to blame.'

Mr Barnacle made him a severe bow, as a wounded man of family, a wounded

man of place, and a wounded man of a gentlemanly residence, all rolled

into one; and he made Mr Barnacle a bow, and was shut out into Mews

Street by the flabby footman.

Having got to this pass, he resolved as an exercise in perseverance,

to betake himself again to the Circumlocution Office, and try what

satisfaction he could get there. So he went back to the Circumlocution

Office, and once more sent up his card to Barnacle junior by a messenger

who took it very ill indeed that he should come back again, and who was

eating mashed potatoes and gravy behind a partition by the hall fire.

He was readmitted to the presence of Barnacle junior, and found that

young gentleman singeing his knees now, and gaping his weary way on

to four o'clock. 'I say. Look here. You stick to us in a devil of a

manner,' Said Barnacle junior, looking over his shoulder.

'I want to know--'

'Look here. Upon my soul you mustn't come into the place saying you

want to know, you know,' remonstrated Barnacle junior, turning about and

putting up the eye-glass.

'I want to know,' said Arthur Clennam, who had made up his mind to

persistence in one short form of words, 'the precise nature of the claim

of the Crown against a prisoner for debt, named Dorrit.'

'I say. Look here. You really are going it at a great pace, you know.

Egad, you haven't got an appointment,' said Barnacle junior, as if the

thing were growing serious.

'I want to know,' said Arthur, and repeated his case.

Barnacle junior stared at him until his eye-glass fell out, and then

put it in again and stared at him until it fell out again. 'You have

no right to come this sort of move,' he then observed with the greatest

weakness. 'Look here. What do you mean? You told me you didn't know

whether it was public business or not.'

'I have now ascertained that it is public business,' returned the

suitor, 'and I want to know'--and again repeated his monotonous inquiry.

Its effect upon young Barnacle was to make him repeat in a defenceless

way, 'Look here! Upon my SOUL you mustn't come into the place saying you

want to know, you know!' The effect of that upon Arthur Clennam was

to make him repeat his inquiry in exactly the same words and tone

as before. The effect of that upon young Barnacle was to make him a

wonderful spectacle of failure and helplessness.

'Well, I tell you what. Look here. You had better try the Secretarial

Department,' he said at last, sidling to the bell and ringing it.

'Jenkinson,' to the mashed potatoes messenger, 'Mr Wobbler!'

Arthur Clennam, who now felt that he had devoted himself to the storming

of the Circumlocution Office, and must go through with it, accompanied

the messenger to another floor of the building, where that functionary

pointed out Mr Wobbler's room. He entered that apartment, and found two

gentlemen sitting face to face at a large and easy desk, one of whom was

polishing a gun-barrel on his pocket-handkerchief, while the other was

spreading marmalade on bread with a paper-knife.

'Mr Wobbler?' inquired the suitor.

Both gentlemen glanced at him, and seemed surprised at his assurance.

'So he went,' said the gentleman with the gun-barrel, who was an

extremely deliberate speaker, 'down to his cousin's place, and took the

Dog with him by rail. Inestimable Dog. Flew at the porter fellow when he

was put into the dog-box, and flew at the guard when he was taken out.

He got half-a-dozen fellows into a Barn, and a good supply of Rats, and

timed the Dog. Finding the Dog able to do it immensely, made the match,

and heavily backed the Dog. When the match came off, some devil of

a fellow was bought over, Sir, Dog was made drunk, Dog's master was

cleaned out.'

'Mr Wobbler?' inquired the suitor.

The gentleman who was spreading the marmalade returned, without looking

up from that occupation, 'What did he call the Dog?'

'Called him Lovely,' said the other gentleman. 'Said the Dog was the

perfect picture of the old aunt from whom he had expectations. Found him

particularly like her when hocussed.'

'Mr Wobbler?' said the suitor.

Both gentlemen laughed for some time. The gentleman with the gun-barrel,

considering it, on inspection, in a satisfactory state, referred it to

the other; receiving confirmation of his views, he fitted it into its

place in the case before him, and took out the stock and polished that,

softly whistling.

'Mr Wobbler?' said the suitor.

'What's the matter?' then said Mr Wobbler, with his mouth full.

'I want to know--' and Arthur Clennam again mechanically set forth what

he wanted to know.

'Can't inform you,' observed Mr Wobbler, apparently to his lunch. 'Never

heard of it. Nothing at all to do with it. Better try Mr Clive, second

door on the left in the next passage.'

'Perhaps he will give me the same answer.'

'Very likely. Don't know anything about it,' said Mr Wobbler.

The suitor turned away and had left the room, when the gentleman with

the gun called out 'Mister! Hallo!'

He looked in again.

'Shut the door after you. You're letting in a devil of a draught here!'

A few steps brought him to the second door on the left in the next

passage. In that room he found three gentlemen; number one doing nothing

particular, number two doing nothing particular, number three doing

nothing particular. They seemed, however, to be more directly concerned

than the others had been in the effective execution of the great

principle of the office, as there was an awful inner apartment with a

double door, in which the Circumlocution Sages appeared to be assembled

in council, and out of which there was an imposing coming of papers,

and into which there was an imposing going of papers, almost constantly;

wherein another gentleman, number four, was the active instrument.

'I want to know,' said Arthur Clennam,--and again stated his case in the

same barrel-organ way. As number one referred him to number two, and

as number two referred him to number three, he had occasion to state

it three times before they all referred him to number four, to whom he

stated it again.

Number four was a vivacious, well-looking, well-dressed, agreeable

young fellow--he was a Barnacle, but on the more sprightly side of

the family--and he said in an easy way, 'Oh! you had better not bother

yourself about it, I think.'

'Not bother myself about it?'

'No! I recommend you not to bother yourself about it.'

This was such a new point of view that Arthur Clennam found himself at a

loss how to receive it.

'You can if you like. I can give you plenty of forms to fill up. Lots of

'em here. You can have a dozen if you like. But you'll never go on with

it,' said number four.

'Would it be such hopeless work? Excuse me; I am a stranger in England.'

'I don't say it would be hopeless,' returned number four, with a frank

smile. 'I don't express an opinion about that; I only express an opinion

about you. I don't think you'd go on with it. However, of course, you

can do as you like. I suppose there was a failure in the performance of

a contract, or something of that kind, was there?'

'I really don't know.'

'Well! That you can find out. Then you'll find out what Department the

contract was in, and then you'll find out all about it there.'

'I beg your pardon. How shall I find out?'

'Why, you'll--you'll ask till they tell you. Then you'll memorialise

that Department (according to regular forms which you'll find out) for

leave to memorialise this Department. If you get it (which you may after

a time), that memorial must be entered in that Department, sent to

be registered in this Department, sent back to be signed by that

Department, sent back to be countersigned by this Department, and then

it will begin to be regularly before that Department. You'll find out

when the business passes through each of these stages by asking at both

Departments till they tell you.'

'But surely this is not the way to do the business,' Arthur Clennam

could not help saying.

This airy young Barnacle was quite entertained by his simplicity in

supposing for a moment that it was. This light in hand young Barnacle

knew perfectly that it was not. This touch and go young Barnacle had

'got up' the Department in a private secretaryship, that he might

be ready for any little bit of fat that came to hand; and he fully

understood the Department to be a politico-diplomatic hocus pocus piece

of machinery for the assistance of the nobs in keeping off the

snobs. This dashing young Barnacle, in a word, was likely to become a

statesman, and to make a figure.

'When the business is regularly before that Department, whatever it is,'

pursued this bright young Barnacle, 'then you can watch it from time

to time through that Department. When it comes regularly before this

Department, then you must watch it from time to time through this

Department. We shall have to refer it right and left; and when we refer

it anywhere, then you'll have to look it up. When it comes back to us

at any time, then you had better look US up. When it sticks anywhere,

you'll have to try to give it a jog. When you write to another

Department about it, and then to this Department about it, and don't

hear anything satisfactory about it, why then you had better--keep on

writing.'

Arthur Clennam looked very doubtful indeed. 'But I am obliged to you at

any rate,' said he, 'for your politeness.'

'Not at all,' replied this engaging young Barnacle. 'Try the thing, and

see how you like it. It will be in your power to give it up at any time,

if you don't like it. You had better take a lot of forms away with you.

Give him a lot of forms!' With which instruction to number two, this

sparkling young Barnacle took a fresh handful of papers from numbers one

and three, and carried them into the sanctuary to offer to the presiding

Idol of the Circumlocution Office.

Arthur Clennam put his forms in his pocket gloomily enough, and went

his way down the long stone passage and the long stone staircase. He had

come to the swing doors leading into the street, and was waiting, not

over patiently, for two people who were between him and them to pass out

and let him follow, when the voice of one of them struck familiarly on

his ear. He looked at the speaker and recognised Mr Meagles. Mr Meagles

was very red in the face--redder than travel could have made him--and

collaring a short man who was with him, said, 'come out, you rascal,

come Out!'

It was such an unexpected hearing, and it was also such an unexpected

sight to see Mr Meagles burst the swing doors open, and emerge into the

street with the short man, who was of an unoffending appearance, that

Clennam stood still for the moment exchanging looks of surprise with the

porter. He followed, however, quickly; and saw Mr Meagles going down

the street with his enemy at his side. He soon came up with his old

travelling companion, and touched him on the back. The choleric face

which Mr Meagles turned upon him smoothed when he saw who it was, and he

put out his friendly hand.

'How are you?' said Mr Meagles. 'How d'ye do? I have only just come over

from abroad. I am glad to see you.'

'And I am rejoiced to see you.'

'Thank'ee. Thank'ee!'

'Mrs Meagles and your daughter--?'

'Are as well as possible,' said Mr Meagles. 'I only wish you had come

upon me in a more prepossessing condition as to coolness.'

Though it was anything but a hot day, Mr Meagles was in a heated state

that attracted the attention of the passersby; more particularly as

he leaned his back against a railing, took off his hat and cravat, and

heartily rubbed his steaming head and face, and his reddened ears and

neck, without the least regard for public opinion.

'Whew!' said Mr Meagles, dressing again. 'That's comfortable. Now I am

cooler.'

'You have been ruffled, Mr Meagles. What is the matter?'

'Wait a bit, and I'll tell you. Have you leisure for a turn in the

Park?'

'As much as you please.'

'Come along then. Ah! you may well look at him.' He happened to have

turned his eyes towards the offender whom Mr Meagles had so angrily

collared. 'He's something to look at, that fellow is.'

He was not much to look at, either in point of size or in point of

dress; being merely a short, square, practical looking man, whose hair

had turned grey, and in whose face and forehead there were deep lines of

cogitation, which looked as though they were carved in hard wood. He

was dressed in decent black, a little rusty, and had the appearance of

a sagacious master in some handicraft. He had a spectacle-case in his

hand, which he turned over and over while he was thus in question,

with a certain free use of the thumb that is never seen but in a hand

accustomed to tools.

'You keep with us,' said Mr Meagles, in a threatening kind of Way, 'and

I'll introduce you presently. Now then!'

Clennam wondered within himself, as they took the nearest way to the

Park, what this unknown (who complied in the gentlest manner) could have

been doing. His appearance did not at all justify the suspicion that he

had been detected in designs on Mr Meagles's pocket-handkerchief; nor

had he any appearance of being quarrelsome or violent. He was a quiet,

plain, steady man; made no attempt to escape; and seemed a little

depressed, but neither ashamed nor repentant. If he were a criminal

offender, he must surely be an incorrigible hypocrite; and if he were no

offender, why should Mr Meagles have collared him in the Circumlocution

Office? He perceived that the man was not a difficulty in his own

mind alone, but in Mr Meagles's too; for such conversation as they had

together on the short way to the Park was by no means well sustained,

and Mr Meagles's eye always wandered back to the man, even when he spoke

of something very different.

At length they being among the trees, Mr Meagles stopped short, and

said:

'Mr Clennam, will you do me the favour to look at this man? His name

is Doyce, Daniel Doyce. You wouldn't suppose this man to be a notorious

rascal; would you?'

'I certainly should not.' It was really a disconcerting question, with

the man there.

'No. You would not. I know you would not. You wouldn't suppose him to be

a public offender; would you?'

'No.'

'No. But he is. He is a public offender. What has he been guilty of?

Murder, manslaughter, arson, forgery, swindling, house-breaking, highway

robbery, larceny, conspiracy, fraud? Which should you say, now?'

'I should say,' returned Arthur Clennam, observing a faint smile in

Daniel Doyce's face, 'not one of them.'

'You are right,' said Mr Meagles. 'But he has been ingenious, and he has

been trying to turn his ingenuity to his country's service. That makes

him a public offender directly, sir.'

Arthur looked at the man himself, who only shook his head.

'This Doyce,' said Mr Meagles, 'is a smith and engineer. He is not in a

large way, but he is well known as a very ingenious man. A dozen years

ago, he perfects an invention (involving a very curious secret process)

of great importance to his country and his fellow-creatures. I won't say

how much money it cost him, or how many years of his life he had been

about it, but he brought it to perfection a dozen years ago. Wasn't it a

dozen?' said Mr Meagles, addressing Doyce. 'He is the most exasperating

man in the world; he never complains!'

'Yes. Rather better than twelve years ago.'

'Rather better?' said Mr Meagles, 'you mean rather worse. Well, Mr

Clennam, he addresses himself to the Government. The moment he addresses

himself to the Government, he becomes a public offender! Sir,' said Mr

Meagles, in danger of making himself excessively hot again, 'he ceases

to be an innocent citizen, and becomes a culprit.

He is treated from that instant as a man who has done some infernal

action. He is a man to be shirked, put off, brow-beaten, sneered at,

handed over by this highly-connected young or old gentleman, to that

highly-connected young or old gentleman, and dodged back again; he is a

man with no rights in his own time, or his own property; a mere outlaw,

whom it is justifiable to get rid of anyhow; a man to be worn out by all

possible means.'

It was not so difficult to believe, after the morning's experience, as

Mr Meagles supposed.

'Don't stand there, Doyce, turning your spectacle-case over and over,'

cried Mr Meagles, 'but tell Mr Clennam what you confessed to me.'

'I undoubtedly was made to feel,' said the inventor, 'as if I had

committed an offence. In dancing attendance at the various offices, I

was always treated, more or less, as if it was a very bad offence. I

have frequently found it necessary to reflect, for my own self-support,

that I really had not done anything to bring myself into the Newgate

Calendar, but only wanted to effect a great saving and a great

improvement.'

'There!' said Mr Meagles. 'Judge whether I exaggerate. Now you'll be

able to believe me when I tell you the rest of the case.'

With this prelude, Mr Meagles went through the narrative; the

established narrative, which has become tiresome; the matter-of-course

narrative which we all know by heart. How, after interminable attendance

and correspondence, after infinite impertinences, ignorances, and

insults, my lords made a Minute, number three thousand four hundred

and seventy-two, allowing the culprit to make certain trials of his

invention at his own expense.

How the trials were made in the presence of a board of six, of whom two

ancient members were too blind to see it, two other ancient members were

too deaf to hear it, one other ancient member was too lame to get near

it, and the final ancient member was too pig-headed to look at it. How

there were more years; more impertinences, ignorances, and insults. How

my lords then made a Minute, number five thousand one hundred and three,

whereby they resigned the business to the Circumlocution Office. How the

Circumlocution Office, in course of time, took up the business as if

it were a bran new thing of yesterday, which had never been heard of

before; muddled the business, addled the business, tossed the business

in a wet blanket. How the impertinences, ignorances, and insults went

through the multiplication table. How there was a reference of the

invention to three Barnacles and a Stiltstalking, who knew nothing about

it; into whose heads nothing could be hammered about it; who got bored

about it, and reported physical impossibilities about it. How the

Circumlocution Office, in a Minute, number eight thousand seven hundred

and forty, 'saw no reason to reverse the decision at which my lords had

arrived.' How the Circumlocution Office, being reminded that my lords

had arrived at no decision, shelved the business. How there had been

a final interview with the head of the Circumlocution Office that very

morning, and how the Brazen Head had spoken, and had been, upon the

whole, and under all the circumstances, and looking at it from the

various points of view, of opinion that one of two courses was to be

pursued in respect of the business: that was to say, either to leave it

alone for evermore, or to begin it all over again.

'Upon which,' said Mr Meagles, 'as a practical man, I then and there, in

that presence, took Doyce by the collar, and told him it was plain to

me that he was an infamous rascal and treasonable disturber of the

government peace, and took him away. I brought him out of the office

door by the collar, that the very porter might know I was a practical

man who appreciated the official estimate of such characters; and here

we are!'

If that airy young Barnacle had been there, he would have frankly told

them perhaps that the Circumlocution Office had achieved its function.

That what the Barnacles had to do, was to stick on to the national ship

as long as they could. That to trim the ship, lighten the ship, clean

the ship, would be to knock them off; that they could but be knocked off

once; and that if the ship went down with them yet sticking to it, that

was the ship's look out, and not theirs.

'There!' said Mr Meagles, 'now you know all about Doyce. Except, which I

own does not improve my state of mind, that even now you don't hear him

complain.'

'You must have great patience,' said Arthur Clennam, looking at him with

some wonder, 'great forbearance.'

'No,' he returned, 'I don't know that I have more than another man.'

'By the Lord, you have more than I have, though!' cried Mr Meagles.

Doyce smiled, as he said to Clennam, 'You see, my experience of these

things does not begin with myself. It has been in my way to know a

little about them from time to time. Mine is not a particular case. I am

not worse used than a hundred others who have put themselves in the same

position--than all the others, I was going to say.'

'I don't know that I should find that a consolation, if it were my case;

but I am very glad that you do.'

'Understand me! I don't say,' he replied in his steady, planning

way, and looking into the distance before him as if his grey eye were

measuring it, 'that it's recompense for a man's toil and hope; but it's

a certain sort of relief to know that I might have counted on this.'

He spoke in that quiet deliberate manner, and in that undertone, which

is often observable in mechanics who consider and adjust with great

nicety. It belonged to him like his suppleness of thumb, or his peculiar

way of tilting up his hat at the back every now and then, as if he were

contemplating some half-finished work of his hand and thinking about it.

'Disappointed?' he went on, as he walked between them under the trees.

'Yes. No doubt I am disappointed. Hurt? Yes. No doubt I am hurt. That's

only natural. But what I mean when I say that people who put themselves

in the same position are mostly used in the same way--'

'In England,' said Mr Meagles.

'Oh! of course I mean in England. When they take their inventions into

foreign countries, that's quite different. And that's the reason why so

many go there.'

Mr Meagles very hot indeed again.

'What I mean is, that however this comes to be the regular way of our

government, it is its regular way. Have you ever heard of any projector

or inventor who failed to find it all but inaccessible, and whom it did

not discourage and ill-treat?'

'I cannot say that I ever have.'

'Have you ever known it to be beforehand in the adoption of any useful

thing? Ever known it to set an example of any useful kind?'

'I am a good deal older than my friend here,' said Mr Meagles, 'and I'll

answer that. Never.'

'But we all three have known, I expect,' said the inventor, 'a pretty

many cases of its fixed determination to be miles upon miles, and years

upon years, behind the rest of us; and of its being found out persisting

in the use of things long superseded, even after the better things were

well known and generally taken up?'

They all agreed upon that.

'Well then,' said Doyce, with a sigh, 'as I know what such a metal will

do at such a temperature, and such a body under such a pressure, so I

may know (if I will only consider), how these great lords and gentlemen

will certainly deal with such a matter as mine.

I have no right to be surprised, with a head upon my shoulders, and

memory in it, that I fall into the ranks with all who came before me. I

ought to have let it alone. I have had warning enough, I am sure.'

With that he put up his spectacle-case, and said to Arthur, 'If I don't

complain, Mr Clennam, I can feel gratitude; and I assure you that I

feel it towards our mutual friend. Many's the day, and many's the way in

which he has backed me.'

'Stuff and nonsense,' said Mr Meagles.

Arthur could not but glance at Daniel Doyce in the ensuing silence.

Though it was evidently in the grain of his character, and of his

respect for his own case, that he should abstain from idle murmuring,

it was evident that he had grown the older, the sterner, and the poorer,

for his long endeavour. He could not but think what a blessed thing

it would have been for this man, if he had taken a lesson from the

gentlemen who were so kind as to take a nation's affairs in charge, and

had learnt How not to do it.

Mr Meagles was hot and despondent for about five minutes, and then began

to cool and clear up.

'Come, come!' said he. 'We shall not make this the better by being grim.

Where do you think of going, Dan?'

'I shall go back to the factory,' said Dan. 'Why then, we'll all go

back to the factory, or walk in that direction,' returned Mr Meagles

cheerfully. 'Mr Clennam won't be deterred by its being in Bleeding Heart

Yard.'

'Bleeding Heart Yard?' said Clennam. 'I want to go there.'

'So much the better,' cried Mr Meagles. 'Come along!'

As they went along, certainly one of the party, and probably more than

one, thought that Bleeding Heart Yard was no inappropriate destination

for a man who had been in official correspondence with my lords and the

Barnacles--and perhaps had a misgiving also that Britannia herself might

come to look for lodgings in Bleeding Heart Yard some ugly day or other,

if she over-did the Circumlocution Office.

CHAPTER 11. Let Loose

A late, dull autumn night was closing in upon the river Saone. The

stream, like a sullied looking-glass in a gloomy place, reflected the

clouds heavily; and the low banks leaned over here and there, as if they

were half curious, and half afraid, to see their darkening pictures in

the water. The flat expanse of country about Chalons lay a long heavy

streak, occasionally made a little ragged by a row of poplar trees

against the wrathful sunset. On the banks of the river Saone it was wet,

depressing, solitary; and the night deepened fast.

One man slowly moving on towards Chalons was the only visible figure in

the landscape. Cain might have looked as lonely and avoided. With an old

sheepskin knapsack at his back, and a rough, unbarked stick cut out of

some wood in his hand; miry, footsore, his shoes and gaiters trodden

out, his hair and beard untrimmed; the cloak he carried over his

shoulder, and the clothes he wore, sodden with wet; limping along in

pain and difficulty; he looked as if the clouds were hurrying from him,

as if the wail of the wind and the shuddering of the grass were directed

against him, as if the low mysterious plashing of the water murmured at

him, as if the fitful autumn night were disturbed by him.

He glanced here, and he glanced there, sullenly but shrinkingly; and

sometimes stopped and turned about, and looked all round him. Then he

limped on again, toiling and muttering.

'To the devil with this plain that has no end! To the devil with these

stones that cut like knives! To the devil with this dismal darkness,

wrapping itself about one with a chill! I hate you!'

And he would have visited his hatred upon it all with the scowl he threw

about him, if he could. He trudged a little further; and looking into

the distance before him, stopped again. 'I, hungry, thirsty, weary. You,

imbeciles, where the lights are yonder, eating and drinking, and warming

yourselves at fires! I wish I had the sacking of your town; I would

repay you, my children!'

But the teeth he set at the town, and the hand he shook at the town,

brought the town no nearer; and the man was yet hungrier, and thirstier,

and wearier, when his feet were on its jagged pavement, and he stood

looking about him.

There was the hotel with its gateway, and its savoury smell of cooking;

there was the cafe with its bright windows, and its rattling of

dominoes; there was the dyer's with its strips of red cloth on the

doorposts; there was the silversmith's with its earrings, and its

offerings for altars; there was the tobacco dealer's with its lively

group of soldier customers coming out pipe in mouth; there were the bad

odours of the town, and the rain and the refuse in the kennels, and

the faint lamps slung across the road, and the huge Diligence, and its

mountain of luggage, and its six grey horses with their tails tied up,

getting under weigh at the coach office. But no small cabaret for a

straitened traveller being within sight, he had to seek one round the

dark corner, where the cabbage leaves lay thickest, trodden about the

public cistern at which women had not yet left off drawing water. There,

in the back street he found one, the Break of Day. The curtained windows

clouded the Break of Day, but it seemed light and warm, and it announced

in legible inscriptions with appropriate pictorial embellishment

of billiard cue and ball, that at the Break of Day one could play

billiards; that there one could find meat, drink, and lodgings, whether

one came on horseback, or came on foot; and that it kept good wines,

liqueurs, and brandy. The man turned the handle of the Break of Day

door, and limped in.

He touched his discoloured slouched hat, as he came in at the door, to

a few men who occupied the room. Two were playing dominoes at one of the

little tables; three or four were seated round the stove, conversing

as they smoked; the billiard-table in the centre was left alone for the

time; the landlady of the Daybreak sat behind her little counter among

her cloudy bottles of syrups, baskets of cakes, and leaden drainage for

glasses, working at her needle.

Making his way to an empty little table in a corner of the room behind

the stove, he put down his knapsack and his cloak upon the ground. As

he raised his head from stooping to do so, he found the landlady beside

him.

'One can lodge here to-night, madame?'

'Perfectly!' said the landlady in a high, sing-song, cheery voice.

'Good. One can dine--sup--what you please to call it?'

'Ah, perfectly!' cried the landlady as before. 'Dispatch then, madame,

if you please. Something to eat, as quickly as you can; and some wine at

once. I am exhausted.'

'It is very bad weather, monsieur,' said the landlady.

'Cursed weather.'

'And a very long road.'

'A cursed road.'

His hoarse voice failed him, and he rested his head upon his hands until

a bottle of wine was brought from the counter. Having filled and emptied

his little tumbler twice, and having broken off an end from the great

loaf that was set before him with his cloth and napkin, soup-plate,

salt, pepper, and oil, he rested his back against the corner of the

wall, made a couch of the bench on which he sat, and began to chew

crust, until such time as his repast should be ready. There had been

that momentary interruption of the talk about the stove, and that

temporary inattention to and distraction from one another, which is

usually inseparable in such a company from the arrival of a stranger. It

had passed over by this time; and the men had done glancing at him, and

were talking again.

'That's the true reason,' said one of them, bringing a story he had

been telling, to a close, 'that's the true reason why they said that the

devil was let loose.' The speaker was the tall Swiss belonging to the

church, and he brought something of the authority of the church into the

discussion--especially as the devil was in question.

The landlady having given her directions for the new guest's

entertainment to her husband, who acted as cook to the Break of Day, had

resumed her needlework behind her counter. She was a smart, neat, bright

little woman, with a good deal of cap and a good deal of stocking, and

she struck into the conversation with several laughing nods of her head,

but without looking up from her work.

'Ah Heaven, then,' said she. 'When the boat came up from Lyons, and

brought the news that the devil was actually let loose at Marseilles,

some fly-catchers swallowed it. But I? No, not I.'

'Madame, you are always right,' returned the tall Swiss. 'Doubtless you

were enraged against that man, madame?'

'Ay, yes, then!' cried the landlady, raising her eyes from her work,

opening them very wide, and tossing her head on one side. 'Naturally,

yes.'

'He was a bad subject.'

'He was a wicked wretch,' said the landlady, 'and well merited what he

had the good fortune to escape. So much the worse.'

'Stay, madame! Let us see,' returned the Swiss, argumentatively turning

his cigar between his lips. 'It may have been his unfortunate destiny.

He may have been the child of circumstances. It is always possible that

he had, and has, good in him if one did but know how to find it out.

Philosophical philanthropy teaches--'

The rest of the little knot about the stove murmured an objection to

the introduction of that threatening expression. Even the two players

at dominoes glanced up from their game, as if to protest against

philosophical philanthropy being brought by name into the Break of Day.

'Hold there, you and your philanthropy,' cried the smiling landlady,

nodding her head more than ever. 'Listen then. I am a woman, I. I know

nothing of philosophical philanthropy. But I know what I have seen, and

what I have looked in the face in this world here, where I find myself.

And I tell you this, my friend, that there are people (men and women

both, unfortunately) who have no good in them--none. That there are

people whom it is necessary to detest without compromise. That there are

people who must be dealt with as enemies of the human race. That there

are people who have no human heart, and who must be crushed like savage

beasts and cleared out of the way. They are but few, I hope; but I have

seen (in this world here where I find myself, and even at the little

Break of Day) that there are such people. And I do not doubt that this

man--whatever they call him, I forget his name--is one of them.'

The landlady's lively speech was received with greater favour at

the Break of Day, than it would have elicited from certain amiable

whitewashers of the class she so unreasonably objected to, nearer Great

Britain.

'My faith! If your philosophical philanthropy,' said the landlady,

putting down her work, and rising to take the stranger's soup from her

husband, who appeared with it at a side door, 'puts anybody at the mercy

of such people by holding terms with them at all, in words or deeds, or

both, take it away from the Break of Day, for it isn't worth a sou.'

As she placed the soup before the guest, who changed his attitude to a

sitting one, he looked her full in the face, and his moustache went up

under his nose, and his nose came down over his moustache.

'Well!' said the previous speaker, 'let us come back to our subject.

Leaving all that aside, gentlemen, it was because the man was acquitted

on his trial that people said at Marseilles that the devil was let

loose. That was how the phrase began to circulate, and what it meant;

nothing more.'

'How do they call him?' said the landlady. 'Biraud, is it not?'

'Rigaud, madame,' returned the tall Swiss.

'Rigaud! To be sure.'

The traveller's soup was succeeded by a dish of meat, and that by a dish

of vegetables. He ate all that was placed before him, emptied his bottle

of wine, called for a glass of rum, and smoked his cigarette with

his cup of coffee. As he became refreshed, he became overbearing; and

patronised the company at the Daybreak in certain small talk at which he

assisted, as if his condition were far above his appearance.

The company might have had other engagements, or they might have felt

their inferiority, but in any case they dispersed by degrees, and not

being replaced by other company, left their new patron in possession of

the Break of Day. The landlord was clinking about in his kitchen; the

landlady was quiet at her work; and the refreshed traveller sat smoking

by the stove, warming his ragged feet.

'Pardon me, madame--that Biraud.'

'Rigaud, monsieur.'

'Rigaud. Pardon me again--has contracted your displeasure, how?'

The landlady, who had been at one moment thinking within herself that

this was a handsome man, at another moment that this was an ill-looking

man, observed the nose coming down and the moustache going up, and

strongly inclined to the latter decision. Rigaud was a criminal, she

said, who had killed his wife.

'Ay, ay? Death of my life, that's a criminal indeed. But how do you know

it?'

'All the world knows it.'

'Hah! And yet he escaped justice?'

'Monsieur, the law could not prove it against him to its satisfaction.

So the law says. Nevertheless, all the world knows he did it. The people

knew it so well, that they tried to tear him to pieces.'

'Being all in perfect accord with their own wives?' said the guest.

'Haha!'

The landlady of the Break of Day looked at him again, and felt almost

confirmed in her last decision. He had a fine hand, though, and he

turned it with a great show. She began once more to think that he was

not ill-looking after all.

'Did you mention, madame--or was it mentioned among the gentlemen--what

became of him?' The landlady shook her head; it being the first

conversational stage at which her vivacious earnestness had ceased to

nod it, keeping time to what she said. It had been mentioned at the

Daybreak, she remarked, on the authority of the journals, that he had

been kept in prison for his own safety. However that might be, he had

escaped his deserts; so much the worse.

The guest sat looking at her as he smoked out his final cigarette, and

as she sat with her head bent over her work, with an expression that

might have resolved her doubts, and brought her to a lasting conclusion

on the subject of his good or bad looks if she had seen it. When she did

look up, the expression was not there. The hand was smoothing his shaggy

moustache. 'May one ask to be shown to bed, madame?'

Very willingly, monsieur. Hola, my husband! My husband would conduct him

up-stairs. There was one traveller there, asleep, who had gone to bed

very early indeed, being overpowered by fatigue; but it was a large

chamber with two beds in it, and space enough for twenty. This the

landlady of the Break of Day chirpingly explained, calling between

whiles, 'Hola, my husband!' out at the side door.

My husband answered at length, 'It is I, my wife!' and presenting

himself in his cook's cap, lighted the traveller up a steep and narrow

staircase; the traveller carrying his own cloak and knapsack, and

bidding the landlady good night with a complimentary reference to the

pleasure of seeing her again to-morrow. It was a large room, with a

rough splintery floor, unplastered rafters overhead, and two bedsteads

on opposite sides. Here 'my husband' put down the candle he carried, and

with a sidelong look at his guest stooping over his knapsack, gruffly

gave him the instruction, 'The bed to the right!' and left him to his

repose. The landlord, whether he was a good or a bad physiognomist, had

fully made up his mind that the guest was an ill-looking fellow.

The guest looked contemptuously at the clean coarse bedding prepared for

him, and, sitting down on the rush chair at the bedside, drew his money

out of his pocket, and told it over in his hand. 'One must eat,' he

muttered to himself, 'but by Heaven I must eat at the cost of some other

man to-morrow!'

As he sat pondering, and mechanically weighing his money in his palm,

the deep breathing of the traveller in the other bed fell so regularly

upon his hearing that it attracted his eyes in that direction. The man

was covered up warm, and had drawn the white curtain at his head, so

that he could be only heard, not seen. But the deep regular breathing,

still going on while the other was taking off his worn shoes and

gaiters, and still continuing when he had laid aside his coat and

cravat, became at length a strong provocative to curiosity, and

incentive to get a glimpse of the sleeper's face.

The waking traveller, therefore, stole a little nearer, and yet a little

nearer, and a little nearer to the sleeping traveller's bed, until he

stood close beside it. Even then he could not see his face, for he had

drawn the sheet over it. The regular breathing still continuing, he put

his smooth white hand (such a treacherous hand it looked, as it went

creeping from him!) to the sheet, and gently lifted it away.

'Death of my soul!' he whispered, falling back, 'here's Cavalletto!'

The little Italian, previously influenced in his sleep, perhaps, by the

stealthy presence at his bedside, stopped in his regular breathing, and

with a long deep respiration opened his eyes. At first they were not

awake, though open. He lay for some seconds looking placidly at his

old prison companion, and then, all at once, with a cry of surprise and

alarm, sprang out of bed.

'Hush! What's the matter? Keep quiet! It's I. You know me?' cried the

other, in a suppressed voice.

But John Baptist, widely staring, muttering a number of invocations

and ejaculations, tremblingly backing into a corner, slipping on

his trousers, and tying his coat by the two sleeves round his neck,

manifested an unmistakable desire to escape by the door rather than

renew the acquaintance. Seeing this, his old prison comrade fell back

upon the door, and set his shoulders against it.

'Cavalletto! Wake, boy! Rub your eyes and look at me. Not the name you

used to call me--don't use that--Lagnier, say Lagnier!'

John Baptist, staring at him with eyes opened to their utmost width,

made a number of those national, backhanded shakes of the right

forefinger in the air, as if he were resolved on negativing beforehand

everything that the other could possibly advance during the whole term

of his life.

'Cavalletto! Give me your hand. You know Lagnier, the gentleman. Touch

the hand of a gentleman!'

Submitting himself to the old tone of condescending authority, John

Baptist, not at all steady on his legs as yet, advanced and put his

hand in his patron's. Monsieur Lagnier laughed; and having given it a

squeeze, tossed it up and let it go.

'Then you were--' faltered John Baptist.

'Not shaved? No. See here!' cried Lagnier, giving his head a twirl; 'as

tight on as your own.'

John Baptist, with a slight shiver, looked all round the room as if to

recall where he was. His patron took that opportunity of turning the key

in the door, and then sat down upon his bed.

'Look!' he said, holding up his shoes and gaiters. 'That's a poor trim

for a gentleman, you'll say. No matter, you shall see how Soon I'll mend

it. Come and sit down. Take your old place!'

John Baptist, looking anything but reassured, sat down on the floor at

the bedside, keeping his eyes upon his patron all the time.

'That's well!' cried Lagnier. 'Now we might be in the old infernal hole

again, hey? How long have you been out?'

'Two days after you, my master.'

'How do you come here?'

'I was cautioned not to stay there, and so I left the town at once,

and since then I have changed about. I have been doing odds and ends at

Avignon, at Pont Esprit, at Lyons; upon the Rhone, upon the Saone.' As

he spoke, he rapidly mapped the places out with his sunburnt hand upon

the floor. 'And where are you going?'

'Going, my master?'

'Ay!'

John Baptist seemed to desire to evade the question without knowing how.

'By Bacchus!' he said at last, as if he were forced to the admission, 'I

have sometimes had a thought of going to Paris, and perhaps to England.'

'Cavalletto. This is in confidence. I also am going to Paris and perhaps

to England. We'll go together.'

The little man nodded his head, and showed his teeth; and yet seemed not

quite convinced that it was a surpassingly desirable arrangement.

'We'll go together,' repeated Lagnier. 'You shall see how soon I will

force myself to be recognised as a gentleman, and you shall profit by

it. It is agreed? Are we one?'

'Oh, surely, surely!' said the little man.

'Then you shall hear before I sleep--and in six words, for I want

sleep--how I appear before you, I, Lagnier. Remember that. Not the

other.'

'Altro, altro! Not Ri--' Before John Baptist could finish the name, his

comrade had got his hand under his chin and fiercely shut up his mouth.

'Death! what are you doing? Do you want me to be trampled upon and

stoned? Do YOU want to be trampled upon and stoned? You would be. You

don't imagine that they would set upon me, and let my prison chum go?

Don't think it!' There was an expression in his face as he released his

grip of his friend's jaw, from which his friend inferred that if the

course of events really came to any stoning and trampling, Monsieur

Lagnier would so distinguish him with his notice as to ensure his

having his full share of it. He remembered what a cosmopolitan gentleman

Monsieur Lagnier was, and how few weak distinctions he made.

'I am a man,' said Monsieur Lagnier, 'whom society has deeply wronged

since you last saw me. You know that I am sensitive and brave, and that

it is my character to govern. How has society respected those qualities

in me? I have been shrieked at through the streets. I have been guarded

through the streets against men, and especially women, running at me

armed with any weapons they could lay their hands on. I have lain in

prison for security, with the place of my confinement kept a secret,

lest I should be torn out of it and felled by a hundred blows. I have

been carted out of Marseilles in the dead of night, and carried leagues

away from it packed in straw. It has not been safe for me to go near my

house; and, with a beggar's pittance in my pocket, I have walked through

vile mud and weather ever since, until my feet are crippled--look at

them! Such are the humiliations that society has inflicted upon me,

possessing the qualities I have mentioned, and which you know me to

possess. But society shall pay for it.'

All this he said in his companion's ear, and with his hand before his

lips.

'Even here,' he went on in the same way, 'even in this mean

drinking-shop, society pursues me. Madame defames me, and her guests

defame me. I, too, a gentleman with manners and accomplishments

to strike them dead! But the wrongs society has heaped upon me are

treasured in this breast.'

To all of which John Baptist, listening attentively to the suppressed

hoarse voice, said from time to time, 'Surely, surely!' tossing his

head and shutting his eyes, as if there were the clearest case against

society that perfect candour could make out.

'Put my shoes there,' continued Lagnier. 'Hang my cloak to dry there

by the door. Take my hat.' He obeyed each instruction, as it was given.

'And this is the bed to which society consigns me, is it? Hah. Very

well!'

As he stretched out his length upon it, with a ragged handkerchief

bound round his wicked head, and only his wicked head showing above the

bedclothes, John Baptist was rather strongly reminded of what had so

very nearly happened to prevent the moustache from any more going up as

it did, and the nose from any more coming down as it did.

'Shaken out of destiny's dice-box again into your company, eh? By

Heaven! So much the better for you. You'll profit by it. I shall need a

long rest. Let me sleep in the morning.'

John Baptist replied that he should sleep as long as he would, and

wishing him a happy night, put out the candle. One might have Supposed

that the next proceeding of the Italian would have been to undress;

but he did exactly the reverse, and dressed himself from head to foot,

saving his shoes. When he had so done, he lay down upon his bed with

some of its coverings over him, and his coat still tied round his neck,

to get through the night.

When he started up, the Godfather Break of Day was peeping at its

namesake. He rose, took his shoes in his hand, turned the key in the

door with great caution, and crept downstairs. Nothing was astir there

but the smell of coffee, wine, tobacco, and syrups; and madame's little

counter looked ghastly enough. But he had paid madame his little note

at it over night, and wanted to see nobody--wanted nothing but to get on

his shoes and his knapsack, open the door, and run away.

He prospered in his object. No movement or voice was heard when he

opened the door; no wicked head tied up in a ragged handkerchief looked

out of the upper window. When the sun had raised his full disc above the

flat line of the horizon, and was striking fire out of the long muddy

vista of paved road with its weary avenue of little trees, a black speck

moved along the road and splashed among the flaming pools of rain-water,

which black speck was John Baptist Cavalletto running away from his

patron.

CHAPTER 12. Bleeding Heart Yard

In London itself, though in the old rustic road towards a suburb of note

where in the days of William Shakespeare, author and stage-player, there

were Royal hunting-seats--howbeit no sport is left there now but for

hunters of men--Bleeding Heart Yard was to be found; a place much

changed in feature and in fortune, yet with some relish of ancient

greatness about it. Two or three mighty stacks of chimneys, and a few

large dark rooms which had escaped being walled and subdivided out of

the recognition of their old proportions, gave the Yard a character.

It was inhabited by poor people, who set up their rest among its faded

glories, as Arabs of the desert pitch their tents among the fallen

stones of the Pyramids; but there was a family sentimental feeling

prevalent in the Yard, that it had a character.

As if the aspiring city had become puffed up in the very ground on which

it stood, the ground had so risen about Bleeding Heart Yard that you

got into it down a flight of steps which formed no part of the original

approach, and got out of it by a low gateway into a maze of shabby

streets, which went about and about, tortuously ascending to the level

again. At this end of the Yard and over the gateway, was the factory of

Daniel Doyce, often heavily beating like a bleeding heart of iron,

with the clink of metal upon metal. The opinion of the Yard was divided

respecting the derivation of its name. The more practical of its inmates

abided by the tradition of a murder; the gentler and more imaginative

inhabitants, including the whole of the tender sex, were loyal to the

legend of a young lady of former times closely imprisoned in her chamber

by a cruel father for remaining true to her own true love, and refusing

to marry the suitor he chose for her. The legend related how that the

young lady used to be seen up at her window behind the bars, murmuring a

love-lorn song of which the burden was, 'Bleeding Heart, Bleeding Heart,

bleeding away,' until she died. It was objected by the murderous party

that this Refrain was notoriously the invention of a tambour-worker, a

spinster and romantic, still lodging in the Yard. But, forasmuch as all

favourite legends must be associated with the affections, and as many

more people fall in love than commit murder--which it may be hoped,

howsoever bad we are, will continue until the end of the world to be

the dispensation under which we shall live--the Bleeding Heart, Bleeding

Heart, bleeding away story, carried the day by a great majority. Neither

party would listen to the antiquaries who delivered learned lectures in

the neighbourhood, showing the Bleeding Heart to have been the heraldic

cognisance of the old family to whom the property had once belonged.

And, considering that the hour-glass they turned from year to year was

filled with the earthiest and coarsest sand, the Bleeding Heart Yarders

had reason enough for objecting to be despoiled of the one little golden

grain of poetry that sparkled in it.

Down in to the Yard, by way of the steps, came Daniel Doyce, Mr Meagles,

and Clennam. Passing along the Yard, and between the open doors on

either hand, all abundantly garnished with light children nursing heavy

ones, they arrived at its opposite boundary, the gateway. Here Arthur

Clennam stopped to look about him for the domicile of Plornish,

plasterer, whose name, according to the custom of Londoners, Daniel

Doyce had never seen or heard of to that hour.

It was plain enough, nevertheless, as Little Dorrit had said; over a

lime-splashed gateway in the corner, within which Plornish kept a ladder

and a barrel or two. The last house in Bleeding Heart Yard which she

had described as his place of habitation, was a large house, let off to

various tenants; but Plornish ingeniously hinted that he lived in the

parlour, by means of a painted hand under his name, the forefinger of

which hand (on which the artist had depicted a ring and a most elaborate

nail of the genteelest form) referred all inquirers to that apartment.

Parting from his companions, after arranging another meeting with

Mr Meagles, Clennam went alone into the entry, and knocked with his

knuckles at the parlour-door. It was opened presently by a woman with

a child in her arms, whose unoccupied hand was hastily rearranging the

upper part of her dress. This was Mrs Plornish, and this maternal

action was the action of Mrs Plornish during a large part of her waking

existence.

Was Mr Plornish at home? 'Well, sir,' said Mrs Plornish, a civil woman,

'not to deceive you, he's gone to look for a job.'

'Not to deceive you' was a method of speech with Mrs Plornish. She would

deceive you, under any circumstances, as little as might be; but she had

a trick of answering in this provisional form.

'Do you think he will be back soon, if I wait for him?'

'I have been expecting him,' said Mrs Plornish, 'this half an hour, at

any minute of time. Walk in, sir.' Arthur entered the rather dark and

close parlour (though it was lofty too), and sat down in the chair she

placed for him.

'Not to deceive you, sir, I notice it,' said Mrs Plornish, 'and I take

it kind of you.'

He was at a loss to understand what she meant; and by expressing as much

in his looks, elicited her explanation.

'It ain't many that comes into a poor place, that deems it worth their

while to move their hats,' said Mrs Plornish. 'But people think more of

it than people think.'

Clennam returned, with an uncomfortable feeling in so very slight a

courtesy being unusual, Was that all! And stooping down to pinch the

cheek of another young child who was sitting on the floor, staring at

him, asked Mrs Plornish how old that fine boy was?

'Four year just turned, sir,' said Mrs Plornish. 'He IS a fine little

fellow, ain't he, sir? But this one is rather sickly.' She tenderly

hushed the baby in her arms, as she said it. 'You wouldn't mind my

asking if it happened to be a job as you was come about, sir, would

you?' asked Mrs Plornish wistfully.

She asked it so anxiously, that if he had been in possession of any

kind of tenement, he would have had it plastered a foot deep rather

than answer No. But he was obliged to answer No; and he saw a shade of

disappointment on her face, as she checked a sigh, and looked at the

low fire. Then he saw, also, that Mrs Plornish was a young woman, made

somewhat slatternly in herself and her belongings by poverty; and so

dragged at by poverty and the children together, that their united

forces had already dragged her face into wrinkles.

'All such things as jobs,' said Mrs Plornish, 'seems to me to have gone

underground, they do indeed.' (Herein Mrs Plornish limited her remark to

the plastering trade, and spoke without reference to the Circumlocution

Office and the Barnacle Family.)

'Is it so difficult to get work?' asked Arthur Clennam.

'Plornish finds it so,' she returned. 'He is quite unfortunate. Really

he is.' Really he was. He was one of those many wayfarers on the road

of life, who seem to be afflicted with supernatural corns, rendering it

impossible for them to keep up even with their lame competitors.

A willing, working, soft hearted, not hard-headed fellow, Plornish took

his fortune as smoothly as could be expected; but it was a rough one.

It so rarely happened that anybody seemed to want him, it was such an

exceptional case when his powers were in any request, that his misty

mind could not make out how it happened. He took it as it came,

therefore; he tumbled into all kinds of difficulties, and tumbled out of

them; and, by tumbling through life, got himself considerably bruised.

'It's not for want of looking after jobs, I am sure,' said Mrs Plornish,

lifting up her eyebrows, and searching for a solution of the problem

between the bars of the grate; 'nor yet for want of working at them when

they are to be got. No one ever heard my husband complain of work.'

Somehow or other, this was the general misfortune of Bleeding Heart

Yard. From time to time there were public complaints, pathetically

going about, of labour being scarce--which certain people seemed to take

extraordinarily ill, as though they had an absolute right to it on their

own terms--but Bleeding Heart Yard, though as willing a Yard as any in

Britain, was never the better for the demand. That high old family, the

Barnacles, had long been too busy with their great principle to look

into the matter; and indeed the matter had nothing to do with their

watchfulness in out-generalling all other high old families except the

Stiltstalkings.

While Mrs Plornish spoke in these words of her absent lord, her lord

returned. A smooth-cheeked, fresh-coloured, sandy-whiskered man of

thirty. Long in the legs, yielding at the knees, foolish in the face,

flannel-jacketed, lime-whitened.

'This is Plornish, sir.'

'I came,' said Clennam, rising, 'to beg the favour of a little

conversation with you on the subject of the Dorrit family.'

Plornish became suspicious. Seemed to scent a creditor. Said, 'Ah, yes.

Well. He didn't know what satisfaction he could give any gentleman,

respecting that family. What might it be about, now?'

'I know you better,' said Clennam, smiling, 'than you suppose.'

Plornish observed, not Smiling in return, And yet he hadn't the pleasure

of being acquainted with the gentleman, neither.

'No,' said Arthur, 'I know your kind offices at second hand, but on the

best authority; through Little Dorrit.--I mean,' he explained, 'Miss

Dorrit.'

'Mr Clennam, is it? Oh! I've heard of you, Sir.'

'And I of you,' said Arthur.

'Please to sit down again, Sir, and consider yourself welcome.--Why,

yes,' said Plornish, taking a chair, and lifting the elder child upon

his knee, that he might have the moral support of speaking to a stranger

over his head, 'I have been on the wrong side of the Lock myself, and

in that way we come to know Miss Dorrit. Me and my wife, we are well

acquainted with Miss Dorrit.' 'Intimate!' cried Mrs Plornish. Indeed,

she was so proud of the acquaintance, that she had awakened some

bitterness of spirit in the Yard by magnifying to an enormous amount the

sum for which Miss Dorrit's father had become insolvent. The Bleeding

Hearts resented her claiming to know people of such distinction.

'It was her father that I got acquainted with first. And through getting

acquainted with him, you see--why--I got acquainted with her,' said

Plornish tautologically.

'I see.'

'Ah! And there's manners! There's polish! There's a gentleman to have

run to seed in the Marshalsea jail! Why, perhaps you are not aware,'

said Plornish, lowering his voice, and speaking with a perverse

admiration of what he ought to have pitied or despised, 'not aware that

Miss Dorrit and her sister dursn't let him know that they work for a

living. No!' said Plornish, looking with a ridiculous triumph first at

his wife, and then all round the room. 'Dursn't let him know it, they

dursn't!'

'Without admiring him for that,' Clennam quietly observed, 'I am very

sorry for him.' The remark appeared to suggest to Plornish, for the

first time, that it might not be a very fine trait of character after

all. He pondered about it for a moment, and gave it up.

'As to me,' he resumed, 'certainly Mr Dorrit is as affable with me, I

am sure, as I can possibly expect. Considering the differences and

distances betwixt us, more so. But it's Miss Dorrit that we were

speaking of.'

'True. Pray how did you introduce her at my mother's!'

Mr Plornish picked a bit of lime out of his whisker, put it between his

lips, turned it with his tongue like a sugar-plum, considered, found

himself unequal to the task of lucid explanation, and appealing to his

wife, said, 'Sally, you may as well mention how it was, old woman.'

'Miss Dorrit,' said Sally, hushing the baby from side to side, and

laying her chin upon the little hand as it tried to disarrange the gown

again, 'came here one afternoon with a bit of writing, telling that

how she wished for needlework, and asked if it would be considered any

ill-conwenience in case she was to give her address here.' (Plornish

repeated, her address here, in a low voice, as if he were making

responses at church.) 'Me and Plornish says, No, Miss Dorrit, no

ill-conwenience,' (Plornish repeated, no ill-conwenience,) 'and she

wrote it in, according. Which then me and Plornish says, Ho Miss

Dorrit!' (Plornish repeated, Ho Miss Dorrit.) 'Have you thought of

copying it three or four times, as the way to make it known in more

places than one? No, says Miss Dorrit, I have not, but I will. She

copied it out according, on this table, in a sweet writing, and

Plornish, he took it where he worked, having a job just then,' (Plornish

repeated job just then,) 'and likewise to the landlord of the Yard;

through which it was that Mrs Clennam first happened to employ Miss

Dorrit.' Plornish repeated, employ Miss Dorrit; and Mrs Plornish having

come to an end, feigned to bite the fingers of the little hand as she

kissed it.

'The landlord of the Yard,' said Arthur Clennam, 'is--'

'He is Mr Casby, by name, he is,' said Plornish, 'and Pancks, he

collects the rents. That,' added Mr Plornish, dwelling on the subject

with a slow thoughtfulness that appeared to have no connection with any

specific object, and to lead him nowhere, 'that is about what they are,

you may believe me or not, as you think proper.'

'Ay?' returned Clennam, thoughtful in his turn. 'Mr Casby, too! An old

acquaintance of mine, long ago!'

Mr Plornish did not see his road to any comment on this fact, and made

none. As there truly was no reason why he should have the least interest

in it, Arthur Clennam went on to the present purport of his visit;

namely, to make Plornish the instrument of effecting Tip's release,

with as little detriment as possible to the self-reliance and

self-helpfulness of the young man, supposing him to possess any remnant

of those qualities: without doubt a very wide stretch of supposition.

Plornish, having been made acquainted with the cause of action from the

Defendant's own mouth, gave Arthur to understand that the Plaintiff

was a 'Chaunter'--meaning, not a singer of anthems, but a seller of

horses--and that he (Plornish) considered that ten shillings in the

pound 'would settle handsome,' and that more would be a waste of money.

The Principal and instrument soon drove off together to a stable-yard in

High Holborn, where a remarkably fine grey gelding, worth, at the lowest

figure, seventy-five guineas (not taking into account the value of the

shot he had been made to swallow for the improvement of his form), was

to be parted with for a twenty-pound note, in consequence of his having

run away last week with Mrs Captain Barbary of Cheltenham, who wasn't up

to a horse of his courage, and who, in mere spite, insisted on selling

him for that ridiculous sum: or, in other words, on giving him away.

Plornish, going up this yard alone and leaving his Principal outside,

found a gentleman with tight drab legs, a rather old hat, a little

hooked stick, and a blue neckerchief (Captain Maroon of Gloucestershire,

a private friend of Captain Barbary); who happened to be there, in

a friendly way, to mention these little circumstances concerning the

remarkably fine grey gelding to any real judge of a horse and quick

snapper-up of a good thing, who might look in at that address as per

advertisement. This gentleman, happening also to be the Plaintiff in the

Tip case, referred Mr Plornish to his solicitor, and declined to treat

with Mr Plornish, or even to endure his presence in the yard, unless

he appeared there with a twenty-pound note: in which case only, the

gentleman would augur from appearances that he meant business, and

might be induced to talk to him. On this hint, Mr Plornish retired

to communicate with his Principal, and presently came back with the

required credentials. Then said Captain Maroon, 'Now, how much time do

you want to make the other twenty in? Now, I'll give you a month.' Then

said Captain Maroon, when that wouldn't suit, 'Now, I'll tell what I'll

do with you. You shall get me a good bill at four months, made payable

at a banking-house, for the other twenty!' Then said Captain Maroon,

when THAT wouldn't suit, 'Now, come; Here's the last I've got to say

to you. You shall give me another ten down, and I'll run my pen clean

through it.' Then said Captain Maroon when THAT wouldn't suit, 'Now,

I'll tell you what it is, and this shuts it up; he has used me bad, but

I'll let him off for another five down and a bottle of wine; and if you

mean done, say done, and if you don't like it, leave it.' Finally said

Captain Maroon, when THAT wouldn't suit either, 'Hand over, then!'--And

in consideration of the first offer, gave a receipt in full and

discharged the prisoner.

'Mr Plornish,' said Arthur, 'I trust to you, if you please, to keep my

secret. If you will undertake to let the young man know that he is free,

and to tell him that you were employed to compound for the debt by

some one whom you are not at liberty to name, you will not only do me a

service, but may do him one, and his sister also.'

'The last reason, sir,' said Plornish, 'would be quite sufficient. Your

wishes shall be attended to.'

'A Friend has obtained his discharge, you can say if you please. A

Friend who hopes that for his sister's sake, if for no one else's, he

will make good use of his liberty.'

'Your wishes, sir, shall be attended to.'

'And if you will be so good, in your better knowledge of the family, as

to communicate freely with me, and to point out to me any means by which

you think I may be delicately and really useful to Little Dorrit, I

shall feel under an obligation to you.'

'Don't name it, sir,' returned Plornish, 'it'll be ekally a pleasure an

a--it'l be ekally a pleasure and a--' Finding himself unable to balance

his sentence after two efforts, Mr Plornish wisely dropped it. He took

Clennam's card and appropriate pecuniary compliment.

He was earnest to finish his commission at once, and his Principal

was in the same mind. So his Principal offered to set him down at the

Marshalsea Gate, and they drove in that direction over Blackfriars

Bridge. On the way, Arthur elicited from his new friend a confused

summary of the interior life of Bleeding Heart Yard. They was all hard

up there, Mr Plornish said, uncommon hard up, to be sure. Well, he

couldn't say how it was; he didn't know as anybody could say how it was;

all he know'd was, that so it was.

When a man felt, on his own back and in his own belly, that poor he was,

that man (Mr Plornish gave it as his decided belief) know'd well that

he was poor somehow or another, and you couldn't talk it out of him, no

more than you could talk Beef into him. Then you see, some people as was

better off said, and a good many such people lived pretty close up

to the mark themselves if not beyond it so he'd heerd, that they was

'improvident' (that was the favourite word) down the Yard. For instance,

if they see a man with his wife and children going to Hampton Court in a

Wan, perhaps once in a year, they says, 'Hallo! I thought you was poor,

my improvident friend!' Why, Lord, how hard it was upon a man! What was

a man to do? He couldn't go mollancholy mad, and even if he did, you

wouldn't be the better for it. In Mr Plornish's judgment you would be

the worse for it. Yet you seemed to want to make a man mollancholy mad.

You was always at it--if not with your right hand, with your left. What

was they a doing in the Yard? Why, take a look at 'em and see. There

was the girls and their mothers a working at their sewing, or their

shoe-binding, or their trimming, or their waistcoat making, day and

night and night and day, and not more than able to keep body and soul

together after all--often not so much. There was people of pretty well

all sorts of trades you could name, all wanting to work, and yet not

able to get it. There was old people, after working all their lives,

going and being shut up in the workhouse, much worse fed and lodged and

treated altogether, than--Mr Plornish said manufacturers, but appeared

to mean malefactors. Why, a man didn't know where to turn himself for a

crumb of comfort. As to who was to blame for it, Mr Plornish didn't know

who was to blame for it. He could tell you who suffered, but he couldn't

tell you whose fault it was. It wasn't HIS place to find out, and who'd

mind what he said, if he did find out? He only know'd that it wasn't put

right by them what undertook that line of business, and that it didn't

come right of itself. And, in brief, his illogical opinion was, that if

you couldn't do nothing for him, you had better take nothing from him

for doing of it; so far as he could make out, that was about what it

come to. Thus, in a prolix, gently-growling, foolish way, did Plornish

turn the tangled skein of his estate about and about, like a blind man

who was trying to find some beginning or end to it; until they reached

the prison gate. There, he left his Principal alone; to wonder, as he

rode away, how many thousand Plornishes there might be within a day

or two's journey of the Circumlocution Office, playing sundry curious

variations on the same tune, which were not known by ear in that

glorious institution.

CHAPTER 13. Patriarchal

The mention of Mr Casby again revived in Clennam's memory the

smouldering embers of curiosity and interest which Mrs Flintwinch had

fanned on the night of his arrival. Flora Casby had been the beloved of

his boyhood; and Flora was the daughter and only child of wooden-headed

old Christopher (so he was still occasionally spoken of by some

irreverent spirits who had had dealings with him, and in whom

familiarity had bred its proverbial result perhaps), who was reputed to

be rich in weekly tenants, and to get a good quantity of blood out of

the stones of several unpromising courts and alleys. After some days of

inquiry and research, Arthur Clennam became convinced that the case of

the Father of the Marshalsea was indeed a hopeless one, and sorrowfully

resigned the idea of helping him to freedom again. He had no hopeful

inquiry to make at present, concerning Little Dorrit either; but he

argued with himself that it might--for anything he knew--it might be

serviceable to the poor child, if he renewed this acquaintance. It is

hardly necessary to add that beyond all doubt he would have presented

himself at Mr Casby's door, if there had been no Little Dorrit in

existence; for we all know how we all deceive ourselves--that is to

say, how people in general, our profounder selves excepted, deceive

themselves--as to motives of action.

With a comfortable impression upon him, and quite an honest one in its

way, that he was still patronising Little Dorrit in doing what had no

reference to her, he found himself one afternoon at the corner of Mr

Casby's street. Mr Casby lived in a street in the Gray's Inn Road, which

had set off from that thoroughfare with the intention of running at one

heat down into the valley, and up again to the top of Pentonville Hill;

but which had run itself out of breath in twenty yards, and had stood

still ever since. There is no such place in that part now; but it

remained there for many years, looking with a baulked countenance at

the wilderness patched with unfruitful gardens and pimpled with eruptive

summerhouses, that it had meant to run over in no time.

'The house,' thought Clennam, as he crossed to the door, 'is as little

changed as my mother's, and looks almost as gloomy. But the likeness

ends outside. I know its staid repose within. The smell of its jars of

old rose-leaves and lavender seems to come upon me even here.'

When his knock at the bright brass knocker of obsolete shape brought a

woman-servant to the door, those faded scents in truth saluted him like

wintry breath that had a faint remembrance in it of the bygone spring.

He stepped into the sober, silent, air-tight house--one might have

fancied it to have been stifled by Mutes in the Eastern manner--and the

door, closing again, seemed to shut out sound and motion. The

furniture was formal, grave, and quaker-like, but well-kept; and had as

prepossessing an aspect as anything, from a human creature to a wooden

stool, that is meant for much use and is preserved for little, can ever

wear. There was a grave clock, ticking somewhere up the staircase; and

there was a songless bird in the same direction, pecking at his cage, as

if he were ticking too. The parlour-fire ticked in the grate. There was

only one person on the parlour-hearth, and the loud watch in his pocket

ticked audibly.

The servant-maid had ticked the two words 'Mr Clennam' so softly that

she had not been heard; and he consequently stood, within the door

she had closed, unnoticed. The figure of a man advanced in life, whose

smooth grey eyebrows seemed to move to the ticking as the fire-light

flickered on them, sat in an arm-chair, with his list shoes on the

rug, and his thumbs slowly revolving over one another. This was old

Christopher Casby--recognisable at a glance--as unchanged in twenty

years and upward as his own solid furniture--as little touched by the

influence of the varying seasons as the old rose-leaves and old lavender

in his porcelain jars.

Perhaps there never was a man, in this troublesome world, so troublesome

for the imagination to picture as a boy. And yet he had changed very

little in his progress through life. Confronting him, in the room in

which he sat, was a boy's portrait, which anybody seeing him would have

identified as Master Christopher Casby, aged ten: though disguised with

a haymaking rake, for which he had had, at any time, as much taste or

use as for a diving-bell; and sitting (on one of his own legs) upon a

bank of violets, moved to precocious contemplation by the spire of a

village church. There was the same smooth face and forehead, the same

calm blue eye, the same placid air. The shining bald head, which looked

so very large because it shone so much; and the long grey hair at its

sides and back, like floss silk or spun glass, which looked so very

benevolent because it was never cut; were not, of course, to be seen in

the boy as in the old man. Nevertheless, in the Seraphic creature with

the haymaking rake, were clearly to be discerned the rudiments of the

Patriarch with the list shoes.

Patriarch was the name which many people delighted to give him.

Various old ladies in the neighbourhood spoke of him as The Last of the

Patriarchs. So grey, so slow, so quiet, so impassionate, so very bumpy

in the head, Patriarch was the word for him. He had been accosted in the

streets, and respectfully solicited to become a Patriarch for painters

and for sculptors; with so much importunity, in sooth, that it would

appear to be beyond the Fine Arts to remember the points of a Patriarch,

or to invent one. Philanthropists of both sexes had asked who he was,

and on being informed, 'Old Christopher Casby, formerly Town-agent to

Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle,' had cried in a rapture of disappointment,

'Oh! why, with that head, is he not a benefactor to his species! Oh!

why, with that head, is he not a father to the orphan and a friend to

the friendless!' With that head, however, he remained old Christopher

Casby, proclaimed by common report rich in house property; and with that

head, he now sat in his silent parlour. Indeed it would be the height of

unreason to expect him to be sitting there without that head.

Arthur Clennam moved to attract his attention, and the grey eyebrows

turned towards him.

'I beg your pardon,' said Clennam, 'I fear you did not hear me

announced?'

'No, sir, I did not. Did you wish to see me, sir?'

'I wished to pay my respects.'

Mr Casby seemed a feather's weight disappointed by the last words,

having perhaps prepared himself for the visitor's wishing to pay

something else. 'Have I the pleasure, sir,' he proceeded--'take a chair,

if you please--have I the pleasure of knowing--? Ah! truly, yes, I think

I have! I believe I am not mistaken in supposing that I am acquainted

with those features? I think I address a gentleman of whose return to

this country I was informed by Mr Flintwinch?'

'That is your present visitor.'

'Really! Mr Clennam?'

'No other, Mr Casby.'

'Mr Clennam, I am glad to see you. How have you been since we met?'

Without thinking it worth while to explain that in the course of some

quarter of a century he had experienced occasional slight fluctuations

in his health and spirits, Clennam answered generally that he had never

been better, or something equally to the purpose; and shook hands with

the possessor of 'that head' as it shed its patriarchal light upon him.

'We are older, Mr Clennam,' said Christopher Casby.

'We are--not younger,' said Clennam. After this wise remark he felt that

he was scarcely shining with brilliancy, and became aware that he was

nervous.

'And your respected father,' said Mr Casby, 'is no more! I was grieved

to hear it, Mr Clennam, I was grieved.'

Arthur replied in the usual way that he felt infinitely obliged to him.

'There was a time,' said Mr Casby, 'when your parents and myself were

not on friendly terms. There was a little family misunderstanding among

us. Your respected mother was rather jealous of her son, maybe; when I

say her son, I mean your worthy self, your worthy self.'

His smooth face had a bloom upon it like ripe wall-fruit. What with

his blooming face, and that head, and his blue eyes, he seemed to be

delivering sentiments of rare wisdom and virtue. In like manner, his

physiognomical expression seemed to teem with benignity. Nobody could

have said where the wisdom was, or where the virtue was, or where the

benignity was; but they all seemed to be somewhere about him. 'Those

times, however,' pursued Mr Casby, 'are past and gone, past and gone.

I do myself the pleasure of making a visit to your respected mother

occasionally, and of admiring the fortitude and strength of mind with

which she bears her trials, bears her trials.' When he made one of these

little repetitions, sitting with his hands crossed before him, he did it

with his head on one side, and a gentle smile, as if he had something in

his thoughts too sweetly profound to be put into words. As if he denied

himself the pleasure of uttering it, lest he should soar too high; and

his meekness therefore preferred to be unmeaning.

'I have heard that you were kind enough on one of those occasions,' said

Arthur, catching at the opportunity as it drifted past him, 'to mention

Little Dorrit to my mother.'

'Little--Dorrit? That's the seamstress who was mentioned to me by a

small tenant of mine? Yes, yes. Dorrit? That's the name. Ah, yes, yes!

You call her Little Dorrit?'

No road in that direction. Nothing came of the cross-cut. It led no

further.

'My daughter Flora,' said Mr Casby, 'as you may have heard probably, Mr

Clennam, was married and established in life, several years ago. She

had the misfortune to lose her husband when she had been married a few

months. She resides with me again. She will be glad to see you, if you

will permit me to let her know that you are here.'

'By all means,' returned Clennam. 'I should have preferred the request,

if your kindness had not anticipated me.'

Upon this Mr Casby rose up in his list shoes, and with a slow, heavy

step (he was of an elephantine build), made for the door. He had a long

wide-skirted bottle-green coat on, and a bottle-green pair of trousers,

and a bottle-green waistcoat. The Patriarchs were not dressed in

bottle-green broadcloth, and yet his clothes looked patriarchal.

He had scarcely left the room, and allowed the ticking to become audible

again, when a quick hand turned a latchkey in the house-door, opened it,

and shut it. Immediately afterwards, a quick and eager short dark man

came into the room with so much way upon him that he was within a foot

of Clennam before he could stop.

'Halloa!' he said.

Clennam saw no reason why he should not say 'Halloa!' too.

'What's the matter?' said the short dark man.

'I have not heard that anything is the matter,' returned Clennam.

'Where's Mr Casby?' asked the short dark man, looking about. 'He will be

here directly, if you want him.'

'\_I\_ want him?' said the short dark man. 'Don't you?' This elicited a

word or two of explanation from Clennam, during the delivery of which

the short dark man held his breath and looked at him. He was dressed in

black and rusty iron grey; had jet black beads of eyes; a scrubby little

black chin; wiry black hair striking out from his head in prongs, like

forks or hair-pins; and a complexion that was very dingy by nature, or

very dirty by art, or a compound of nature and art. He had dirty hands

and dirty broken nails, and looked as if he had been in the coals; he

was in a perspiration, and snorted and sniffed and puffed and blew, like

a little labouring steam-engine.

'Oh!' said he, when Arthur told him how he came to be there. 'Very well.

That's right. If he should ask for Pancks, will you be so good as to say

that Pancks is come in?' And so, with a snort and a puff, he worked out

by another door.

Now, in the old days at home, certain audacious doubts respecting the

last of the Patriarchs, which were afloat in the air, had, by some

forgotten means, come in contact with Arthur's sensorium. He was aware

of motes and specks of suspicion in the atmosphere of that time; seen

through which medium, Christopher Casby was a mere Inn signpost, without

any Inn--an invitation to rest and be thankful, when there was no place

to put up at, and nothing whatever to be thankful for. He knew that some

of these specks even represented Christopher as capable of harbouring

designs in 'that head,' and as being a crafty impostor. Other motes

there were which showed him as a heavy, selfish, drifting Booby, who,

having stumbled, in the course of his unwieldy jostlings against other

men, on the discovery that to get through life with ease and credit,

he had but to hold his tongue, keep the bald part of his head well

polished, and leave his hair alone, had had just cunning enough to seize

the idea and stick to it. It was said that his being town-agent to

Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle was referable, not to his having the least

business capacity, but to his looking so supremely benignant that nobody

could suppose the property screwed or jobbed under such a man; also,

that for similar reasons he now got more money out of his own wretched

lettings, unquestioned, than anybody with a less nobby and less shining

crown could possibly have done. In a word, it was represented (Clennam

called to mind, alone in the ticking parlour) that many people select

their models, much as the painters, just now mentioned, select theirs;

and that, whereas in the Royal Academy some evil old ruffian of a

Dog-stealer will annually be found embodying all the cardinal virtues,

on account of his eyelashes, or his chin, or his legs (thereby planting

thorns of confusion in the breasts of the more observant students of

nature), so, in the great social Exhibition, accessories are often

accepted in lieu of the internal character.

Calling these things to mind, and ranging Mr Pancks in a row with them,

Arthur Clennam leaned this day to the opinion, without quite deciding

on it, that the last of the Patriarchs was the drifting Booby aforesaid,

with the one idea of keeping the bald part of his head highly polished:

and that, much as an unwieldy ship in the Thames river may sometimes be

seen heavily driving with the tide, broadside on, stern first, in its

own way and in the way of everything else, though making a great show

of navigation, when all of a sudden, a little coaly steam-tug will bear

down upon it, take it in tow, and bustle off with it; similarly the

cumbrous Patriarch had been taken in tow by the snorting Pancks, and was

now following in the wake of that dingy little craft.

The return of Mr Casby with his daughter Flora, put an end to these

meditations. Clennam's eyes no sooner fell upon the subject of his old

passion than it shivered and broke to pieces.

Most men will be found sufficiently true to themselves to be true to

an old idea. It is no proof of an inconstant mind, but exactly the

opposite, when the idea will not bear close comparison with the reality,

and the contrast is a fatal shock to it. Such was Clennam's case. In his

youth he had ardently loved this woman, and had heaped upon her all the

locked-up wealth of his affection and imagination. That wealth had been,

in his desert home, like Robinson Crusoe's money; exchangeable with no

one, lying idle in the dark to rust, until he poured it out for her.

Ever since that memorable time, though he had, until the night of his

arrival, as completely dismissed her from any association with his

Present or Future as if she had been dead (which she might easily

have been for anything he knew), he had kept the old fancy of the Past

unchanged, in its old sacred place. And now, after all, the last of the

Patriarchs coolly walked into the parlour, saying in effect, 'Be good

enough to throw it down and dance upon it. This is Flora.'

Flora, always tall, had grown to be very broad too, and short of breath;

but that was not much. Flora, whom he had left a lily, had become a

peony; but that was not much. Flora, who had seemed enchanting in all

she said and thought, was diffuse and silly. That was much. Flora, who

had been spoiled and artless long ago, was determined to be spoiled and

artless now. That was a fatal blow.

This is Flora!

'I am sure,' giggled Flora, tossing her head with a caricature of

her girlish manner, such as a mummer might have presented at her own

funeral, if she had lived and died in classical antiquity, 'I am ashamed

to see Mr Clennam, I am a mere fright, I know he'll find me fearfully

changed, I am actually an old woman, it's shocking to be found out, it's

really shocking!'

He assured her that she was just what he had expected and that time had

not stood still with himself.

'Oh! But with a gentleman it's so different and really you look so

amazingly well that you have no right to say anything of the kind,

while, as to me, you know--oh!' cried Flora with a little scream, 'I am

dreadful!'

The Patriarch, apparently not yet understanding his own part in the

drama under representation, glowed with vacant serenity.

'But if we talk of not having changed,' said Flora, who, whatever

she said, never once came to a full stop, 'look at Papa, is not Papa

precisely what he was when you went away, isn't it cruel and unnatural

of Papa to be such a reproach to his own child, if we go on in this way

much longer people who don't know us will begin to suppose that I am

Papa's Mama!'

That must be a long time hence, Arthur considered.

'Oh Mr Clennam you insincerest of creatures,' said Flora, 'I perceive

already you have not lost your old way of paying compliments, your old

way when you used to pretend to be so sentimentally struck you know--at

least I don't mean that, I--oh I don't know what I mean!' Here Flora

tittered confusedly, and gave him one of her old glances.

The Patriarch, as if he now began to perceive that his part in the piece

was to get off the stage as soon as might be, rose, and went to the door

by which Pancks had worked out, hailing that Tug by name. He received

an answer from some little Dock beyond, and was towed out of sight

directly.

'You mustn't think of going yet,' said Flora--Arthur had looked at his

hat, being in a ludicrous dismay, and not knowing what to do: 'you could

never be so unkind as to think of going, Arthur--I mean Mr Arthur--or I

suppose Mr Clennam would be far more proper--but I am sure I don't know

what I am saying--without a word about the dear old days gone for ever,

when I come to think of it I dare say it would be much better not to

speak of them and it's highly probable that you have some much more

agreeable engagement and pray let Me be the last person in the world

to interfere with it though there was a time, but I am running into

nonsense again.'

Was it possible that Flora could have been such a chatterer in the

days she referred to? Could there have been anything like her present

disjointed volubility in the fascinations that had captivated him?

'Indeed I have little doubt,' said Flora, running on with astonishing

speed, and pointing her conversation with nothing but commas, and very

few of them, 'that you are married to some Chinese lady, being in China

so long and being in business and naturally desirous to settle and

extend your connection nothing was more likely than that you should

propose to a Chinese lady and nothing was more natural I am sure than

that the Chinese lady should accept you and think herself very well off

too, I only hope she's not a Pagodian dissenter.'

'I am not,' returned Arthur, smiling in spite of himself, 'married to

any lady, Flora.'

'Oh good gracious me I hope you never kept yourself a bachelor so long

on my account!' tittered Flora; 'but of course you never did why should

you, pray don't answer, I don't know where I'm running to, oh do tell me

something about the Chinese ladies whether their eyes are really so long

and narrow always putting me in mind of mother-of-pearl fish at cards

and do they really wear tails down their back and plaited too or is

it only the men, and when they pull their hair so very tight off their

foreheads don't they hurt themselves, and why do they stick little bells

all over their bridges and temples and hats and things or don't they

really do it?' Flora gave him another of her old glances. Instantly she

went on again, as if he had spoken in reply for some time.

'Then it's all true and they really do! good gracious Arthur!--pray

excuse me--old habit--Mr Clennam far more proper--what a country to live

in for so long a time, and with so many lanterns and umbrellas too how

very dark and wet the climate ought to be and no doubt actually is, and

the sums of money that must be made by those two trades where everybody

carries them and hangs them everywhere, the little shoes too and the

feet screwed back in infancy is quite surprising, what a traveller you

are!'

In his ridiculous distress, Clennam received another of the old glances

without in the least knowing what to do with it.

'Dear dear,' said Flora, 'only to think of the changes at home

Arthur--cannot overcome it, and seems so natural, Mr Clennam far more

proper--since you became familiar with the Chinese customs and language

which I am persuaded you speak like a Native if not better for you were

always quick and clever though immensely difficult no doubt, I am sure

the tea chests alone would kill me if I tried, such changes Arthur--I

am doing it again, seems so natural, most improper--as no one could have

believed, who could have ever imagined Mrs Finching when I can't imagine

it myself!'

'Is that your married name?' asked Arthur, struck, in the midst of all

this, by a certain warmth of heart that expressed itself in her tone

when she referred, however oddly, to the youthful relation in which they

had stood to one another. 'Finching?'

'Finching oh yes isn't it a dreadful name, but as Mr F. said when he

proposed to me which he did seven times and handsomely consented I must

say to be what he used to call on liking twelve months, after all, he

wasn't answerable for it and couldn't help it could he, Excellent man,

not at all like you but excellent man!'

Flora had at last talked herself out of breath for one moment. One

moment; for she recovered breath in the act of raising a minute corner

of her pocket-handkerchief to her eye, as a tribute to the ghost of the

departed Mr F., and began again.

'No one could dispute, Arthur--Mr Clennam--that it's quite right you

should be formally friendly to me under the altered circumstances and

indeed you couldn't be anything else, at least I suppose not you ought

to know, but I can't help recalling that there was a time when things

were very different.'

'My dear Mrs Finching,' Arthur began, struck by the good tone again.

'Oh not that nasty ugly name, say Flora!'

'Flora. I assure you, Flora, I am happy in seeing you once more, and in

finding that, like me, you have not forgotten the old foolish dreams,

when we saw all before us in the light of our youth and hope.'

'You don't seem so,' pouted Flora, 'you take it very coolly, but

however I know you are disappointed in me, I suppose the Chinese

ladies--Mandarinesses if you call them so--are the cause or perhaps I am

the cause myself, it's just as likely.'

'No, no,' Clennam entreated, 'don't say that.'

'Oh I must you know,' said Flora, in a positive tone, 'what nonsense not

to, I know I am not what you expected, I know that very well.'

In the midst of her rapidity, she had found that out with the quick

perception of a cleverer woman. The inconsistent and profoundly

unreasonable way in which she instantly went on, nevertheless, to

interweave their long-abandoned boy and girl relations with their

present interview, made Clennam feel as if he were light-headed.

'One remark,' said Flora, giving their conversation, without the

slightest notice and to the great terror of Clennam, the tone of a

love-quarrel, 'I wish to make, one explanation I wish to offer, when

your Mama came and made a scene of it with my Papa and when I was called

down into the little breakfast-room where they were looking at one

another with your Mama's parasol between them seated on two chairs like

mad bulls what was I to do?'

'My dear Mrs Finching,' urged Clennam--'all so long ago and so long

concluded, is it worth while seriously to--'

'I can't Arthur,' returned Flora, 'be denounced as heartless by the

whole society of China without setting myself right when I have the

opportunity of doing so, and you must be very well aware that there

was Paul and Virginia which had to be returned and which was returned

without note or comment, not that I mean to say you could have written

to me watched as I was but if it had only come back with a red wafer on

the cover I should have known that it meant Come to Pekin Nankeen and

What's the third place, barefoot.'

'My dear Mrs Finching, you were not to blame, and I never blamed you.

We were both too young, too dependent and helpless, to do anything but

accept our separation.--Pray think how long ago,' gently remonstrated

Arthur. 'One more remark,' proceeded Flora with unslackened volubility,

'I wish to make, one more explanation I wish to offer, for five days I

had a cold in the head from crying which I passed entirely in the back

drawing-room--there is the back drawing-room still on the first floor

and still at the back of the house to confirm my words--when that dreary

period had passed a lull succeeded years rolled on and Mr F. became

acquainted with us at a mutual friend's, he was all attention he called

next day he soon began to call three evenings a week and to send

in little things for supper it was not love on Mr F.'s part it was

adoration, Mr F. proposed with the full approval of Papa and what could

I do?'

'Nothing whatever,' said Arthur, with the cheerfulest readiness, 'but

what you did. Let an old friend assure you of his full conviction that

you did quite right.'

'One last remark,' proceeded Flora, rejecting commonplace life with a

wave of her hand, 'I wish to make, one last explanation I wish to offer,

there was a time ere Mr F. first paid attentions incapable of being

mistaken, but that is past and was not to be, dear Mr Clennam you no

longer wear a golden chain you are free I trust you may be happy, here

is Papa who is always tiresome and putting in his nose everywhere where

he is not wanted.'

With these words, and with a hasty gesture fraught with timid

caution--such a gesture had Clennam's eyes been familiar with in the old

time--poor Flora left herself at eighteen years of age, a long long way

behind again; and came to a full stop at last.

Or rather, she left about half of herself at eighteen years of age

behind, and grafted the rest on to the relict of the late Mr F.; thus

making a moral mermaid of herself, which her once boy-lover contemplated

with feelings wherein his sense of the sorrowful and his sense of the

comical were curiously blended.

For example. As if there were a secret understanding between herself

and Clennam of the most thrilling nature; as if the first of a train of

post-chaises and four, extending all the way to Scotland, were at that

moment round the corner; and as if she couldn't (and wouldn't) have

walked into the Parish Church with him, under the shade of the family

umbrella, with the Patriarchal blessing on her head, and the perfect

concurrence of all mankind; Flora comforted her soul with agonies of

mysterious signalling, expressing dread of discovery. With the sensation

of becoming more and more light-headed every minute, Clennam saw the

relict of the late Mr F. enjoying herself in the most wonderful manner,

by putting herself and him in their old places, and going through all

the old performances--now, when the stage was dusty, when the scenery

was faded, when the youthful actors were dead, when the orchestra was

empty, when the lights were out. And still, through all this grotesque

revival of what he remembered as having once been prettily natural to

her, he could not but feel that it revived at sight of him, and that

there was a tender memory in it.

The Patriarch insisted on his staying to dinner, and Flora signalled

'Yes!' Clennam so wished he could have done more than stay to dinner--so

heartily wished he could have found the Flora that had been, or that

never had been--that he thought the least atonement he could make for

the disappointment he almost felt ashamed of, was to give himself up to

the family desire. Therefore, he stayed to dinner.

Pancks dined with them. Pancks steamed out of his little dock at a

quarter before six, and bore straight down for the Patriarch, who

happened to be then driving, in an inane manner, through a stagnant

account of Bleeding Heart Yard. Pancks instantly made fast to him and

hauled him out.

'Bleeding Heart Yard?' said Pancks, with a puff and a snort. 'It's a

troublesome property. Don't pay you badly, but rents are very hard to

get there. You have more trouble with that one place than with all the

places belonging to you.'

Just as the big ship in tow gets the credit, with most spectators, of

being the powerful object, so the Patriarch usually seemed to have said

himself whatever Pancks said for him.

'Indeed?' returned Clennam, upon whom this impression was so efficiently

made by a mere gleam of the polished head that he spoke the ship instead

of the Tug. 'The people are so poor there?'

'You can't say, you know,' snorted Pancks, taking one of his dirty hands

out of his rusty iron-grey pockets to bite his nails, if he could find

any, and turning his beads of eyes upon his employer, 'whether they're

poor or not. They say they are, but they all say that. When a man says

he's rich, you're generally sure he isn't. Besides, if they ARE poor,

you can't help it. You'd be poor yourself if you didn't get your rents.'

'True enough,' said Arthur.

'You're not going to keep open house for all the poor of London,'

pursued Pancks. 'You're not going to lodge 'em for nothing. You're not

going to open your gates wide and let 'em come free. Not if you know it,

you ain't.'

Mr Casby shook his head, in Placid and benignant generality.

'If a man takes a room of you at half-a-crown a week, and when the week

comes round hasn't got the half-crown, you say to that man, Why have you

got the room, then? If you haven't got the one thing, why have you got

the other? What have you been and done with your money? What do you mean

by it? What are you up to? That's what YOU say to a man of that sort;

and if you didn't say it, more shame for you!' Mr Pancks here made a

singular and startling noise, produced by a strong blowing effort in the

region of the nose, unattended by any result but that acoustic one.

'You have some extent of such property about the east and north-east

here, I believe?' said Clennam, doubtful which of the two to address.

'Oh, pretty well,' said Pancks. 'You're not particular to east or

north-east, any point of the compass will do for you. What you want is

a good investment and a quick return. You take it where you can find it.

You ain't nice as to situation--not you.'

There was a fourth and most original figure in the Patriarchal tent, who

also appeared before dinner. This was an amazing little old woman, with

a face like a staring wooden doll too cheap for expression, and a stiff

yellow wig perched unevenly on the top of her head, as if the child who

owned the doll had driven a tack through it anywhere, so that it only

got fastened on. Another remarkable thing in this little old woman was,

that the same child seemed to have damaged her face in two or three

places with some blunt instrument in the nature of a spoon; her

countenance, and particularly the tip of her nose, presenting the

phenomena of several dints, generally answering to the bowl of that

article. A further remarkable thing in this little old woman was, that

she had no name but Mr F.'s Aunt.

She broke upon the visitor's view under the following circumstances:

Flora said when the first dish was being put on the table, perhaps Mr

Clennam might not have heard that Mr F. had left her a legacy? Clennam

in return implied his hope that Mr F. had endowed the wife whom he

adored, with the greater part of his worldly substance, if not with all.

Flora said, oh yes, she didn't mean that, Mr F. had made a beautiful

will, but he had left her as a separate legacy, his Aunt. She then

went out of the room to fetch the legacy, and, on her return, rather

triumphantly presented 'Mr F.'s Aunt.'

The major characteristics discoverable by the stranger in Mr F.'s Aunt,

were extreme severity and grim taciturnity; sometimes interrupted by

a propensity to offer remarks in a deep warning voice, which, being

totally uncalled for by anything said by anybody, and traceable to no

association of ideas, confounded and terrified the Mind. Mr F.'s Aunt

may have thrown in these observations on some system of her own, and it

may have been ingenious, or even subtle: but the key to it was wanted.

The neatly-served and well-cooked dinner (for everything about the

Patriarchal household promoted quiet digestion) began with some soup,

some fried soles, a butter-boat of shrimp sauce, and a dish of potatoes.

The conversation still turned on the receipt of rents. Mr F.'s Aunt,

after regarding the company for ten minutes with a malevolent gaze,

delivered the following fearful remark:

'When we lived at Henley, Barnes's gander was stole by tinkers.' Mr

Pancks courageously nodded his head and said, 'All right, ma'am.' But

the effect of this mysterious communication upon Clennam was absolutely

to frighten him. And another circumstance invested this old lady with

peculiar terrors. Though she was always staring, she never acknowledged

that she saw any individual.

The polite and attentive stranger would desire, say, to consult her

inclinations on the subject of potatoes. His expressive action would be

hopelessly lost upon her, and what could he do? No man could say, 'Mr

F.'s Aunt, will you permit me?' Every man retired from the spoon, as

Clennam did, cowed and baffled.

There was mutton, a steak, and an apple-pie--nothing in the remotest

way connected with ganders--and the dinner went on like a disenchanted

feast, as it truly was. Once upon a time Clennam had sat at that table

taking no heed of anything but Flora; now the principal heed he took

of Flora was to observe, against his will, that she was very fond of

porter, that she combined a great deal of sherry with sentiment, and

that if she were a little overgrown, it was upon substantial grounds.

The last of the Patriarchs had always been a mighty eater, and he

disposed of an immense quantity of solid food with the benignity of a

good soul who was feeding some one else. Mr Pancks, who was always in a

hurry, and who referred at intervals to a little dirty notebook which he

kept beside him (perhaps containing the names of the defaulters he meant

to look up by way of dessert), took in his victuals much as if he were

coaling; with a good deal of noise, a good deal of dropping about, and a

puff and a snort occasionally, as if he were nearly ready to steam away.

All through dinner, Flora combined her present appetite for eating and

drinking with her past appetite for romantic love, in a way that made

Clennam afraid to lift his eyes from his plate; since he could not

look towards her without receiving some glance of mysterious meaning or

warning, as if they were engaged in a plot. Mr F.'s Aunt sat silently

defying him with an aspect of the greatest bitterness, until the removal

of the cloth and the appearance of the decanters, when she originated

another observation--struck into the conversation like a clock, without

consulting anybody.

Flora had just said, 'Mr Clennam, will you give me a glass of port for

Mr F.'s Aunt?'

'The Monument near London Bridge,' that lady instantly proclaimed, 'was

put up arter the Great Fire of London; and the Great Fire of London was

not the fire in which your uncle George's workshops was burned down.'

Mr Pancks, with his former courage, said, 'Indeed, ma'am? All right!'

But appearing to be incensed by imaginary contradiction, or other

ill-usage, Mr F.'s Aunt, instead of relapsing into silence, made the

following additional proclamation:

'I hate a fool!'

She imparted to this sentiment, in itself almost Solomonic, so extremely

injurious and personal a character by levelling it straight at the

visitor's head, that it became necessary to lead Mr F.'s Aunt from

the room. This was quietly done by Flora; Mr F.'s Aunt offering no

resistance, but inquiring on her way out, 'What he come there for,

then?' with implacable animosity.

When Flora returned, she explained that her legacy was a clever

old lady, but was sometimes a little singular, and 'took

dislikes'--peculiarities of which Flora seemed to be proud rather than

otherwise. As Flora's good nature shone in the case, Clennam had no

fault to find with the old lady for eliciting it, now that he was

relieved from the terrors of her presence; and they took a glass or

two of wine in peace. Foreseeing then that the Pancks would shortly get

under weigh, and that the Patriarch would go to sleep, he pleaded the

necessity of visiting his mother, and asked Mr Pancks in which direction

he was going?

'Citywards, sir,' said Pancks. 'Shall we walk together?' said Arthur.

'Quite agreeable,' said Pancks.

Meanwhile Flora was murmuring in rapid snatches for his ear, that there

was a time and that the past was a yawning gulf however and that a

golden chain no longer bound him and that she revered the memory of the

late Mr F. and that she should be at home to-morrow at half-past one

and that the decrees of Fate were beyond recall and that she considered

nothing so improbable as that he ever walked on the north-west side of

Gray's-Inn Gardens at exactly four o'clock in the afternoon. He tried

at parting to give his hand in frankness to the existing Flora--not the

vanished Flora, or the mermaid--but Flora wouldn't have it, couldn't

have it, was wholly destitute of the power of separating herself and him

from their bygone characters. He left the house miserably enough; and

so much more light-headed than ever, that if it had not been his good

fortune to be towed away, he might, for the first quarter of an hour,

have drifted anywhere.

When he began to come to himself, in the cooler air and the absence of

Flora, he found Pancks at full speed, cropping such scanty pasturage of

nails as he could find, and snorting at intervals. These, in conjunction

with one hand in his pocket and his roughened hat hind side before, were

evidently the conditions under which he reflected.

'A fresh night!' said Arthur.

'Yes, it's pretty fresh,' assented Pancks. 'As a stranger you feel the

climate more than I do, I dare say. Indeed I haven't got time to feel

it.'

'You lead such a busy life?'

'Yes, I have always some of 'em to look up, or something to look after.

But I like business,' said Pancks, getting on a little faster. 'What's a

man made for?'

'For nothing else?' said Clennam.

Pancks put the counter question, 'What else?' It packed up, in the

smallest compass, a weight that had rested on Clennam's life; and he

made no answer.

'That's what I ask our weekly tenants,' said Pancks. 'Some of 'em will

pull long faces to me, and say, Poor as you see us, master, we're always

grinding, drudging, toiling, every minute we're awake.

I say to them, What else are you made for? It shuts them up. They

haven't a word to answer. What else are you made for? That clinches it.'

'Ah dear, dear, dear!' sighed Clennam.

'Here am I,' said Pancks, pursuing his argument with the weekly tenant.

'What else do you suppose I think I am made for? Nothing.

Rattle me out of bed early, set me going, give me as short a time as you

like to bolt my meals in, and keep me at it. Keep me always at it, and

I'll keep you always at it, you keep somebody else always at it. There

you are with the Whole Duty of Man in a commercial country.'

When they had walked a little further in silence, Clennam said: 'Have

you no taste for anything, Mr Pancks?'

'What's taste?' drily retorted Pancks.

'Let us say inclination.'

'I have an inclination to get money, sir,' said Pancks, 'if you will

show me how.' He blew off that sound again, and it occurred to his

companion for the first time that it was his way of laughing. He was a

singular man in all respects; he might not have been quite in earnest,

but that the short, hard, rapid manner in which he shot out these

cinders of principles, as if it were done by mechanical revolvency,

seemed irreconcilable with banter.

'You are no great reader, I suppose?' said Clennam.

'Never read anything but letters and accounts. Never collect anything

but advertisements relative to next of kin. If that's a taste, I have

got that. You're not of the Clennams of Cornwall, Mr Clennam?'

'Not that I ever heard of.' 'I know you're not. I asked your mother,

sir. She has too much character to let a chance escape her.'

'Supposing I had been of the Clennams of Cornwall?' 'You'd have heard of

something to your advantage.'

'Indeed! I have heard of little enough to my advantage for some time.'

'There's a Cornish property going a begging, sir, and not a Cornish

Clennam to have it for the asking,' said Pancks, taking his note-book

from his breast pocket and putting it in again. 'I turn off here. I wish

you good night.'

'Good night!' said Clennam. But the Tug, suddenly lightened, and

untrammelled by having any weight in tow, was already puffing away into

the distance.

They had crossed Smithfield together, and Clennam was left alone at the

corner of Barbican. He had no intention of presenting himself in his

mother's dismal room that night, and could not have felt more depressed

and cast away if he had been in a wilderness. He turned slowly down

Aldersgate Street, and was pondering his way along towards Saint Paul's,

purposing to come into one of the great thoroughfares for the sake of

their light and life, when a crowd of people flocked towards him on the

same pavement, and he stood aside against a shop to let them pass. As

they came up, he made out that they were gathered around a something

that was carried on men's shoulders. He soon saw that it was a litter,

hastily made of a shutter or some such thing; and a recumbent figure

upon it, and the scraps of conversation in the crowd, and a muddy bundle

carried by one man, and a muddy hat carried by another, informed him

that an accident had occurred. The litter stopped under a lamp before it

had passed him half-a-dozen paces, for some readjustment of the burden;

and, the crowd stopping too, he found himself in the midst of the array.

'An accident going to the Hospital?' he asked an old man beside him, who

stood shaking his head, inviting conversation.

'Yes,' said the man, 'along of them Mails. They ought to be prosecuted

and fined, them Mails. They come a racing out of Lad Lane and Wood

Street at twelve or fourteen mile a hour, them Mails do. The only wonder

is, that people ain't killed oftener by them Mails.'

'This person is not killed, I hope?'

'I don't know!' said the man, 'it an't for the want of a will in them

Mails, if he an't.' The speaker having folded his arms, and set in

comfortably to address his depreciation of them Mails to any of the

bystanders who would listen, several voices, out of pure sympathy with

the sufferer, confirmed him; one voice saying to Clennam, 'They're a

public nuisance, them Mails, sir;' another, 'I see one on 'em pull up

within half a inch of a boy, last night;' another, 'I see one on 'em

go over a cat, sir--and it might have been your own mother;' and all

representing, by implication, that if he happened to possess any public

influence, he could not use it better than against them Mails.

'Why, a native Englishman is put to it every night of his life, to save

his life from them Mails,' argued the first old man; 'and he knows when

they're a coming round the corner, to tear him limb from limb. What can

you expect from a poor foreigner who don't know nothing about 'em!'

'Is this a foreigner?' said Clennam, leaning forward to look.

In the midst of such replies as 'Frenchman, sir,' 'Porteghee, sir,'

'Dutchman, sir,' 'Prooshan, sir,' and other conflicting testimony, he

now heard a feeble voice asking, both in Italian and in French, for

water. A general remark going round, in reply, of 'Ah, poor fellow,

he says he'll never get over it; and no wonder!' Clennam begged to be

allowed to pass, as he understood the poor creature. He was immediately

handed to the front, to speak to him.

'First, he wants some water,' said he, looking round. (A dozen good

fellows dispersed to get it.) 'Are you badly hurt, my friend?' he asked

the man on the litter, in Italian.

'Yes, sir; yes, yes, yes. It's my leg, it's my leg. But it pleases me to

hear the old music, though I am very bad.'

'You are a traveller! Stay! See, the water! Let me give you some.' They

had rested the litter on a pile of paving stones. It was at a convenient

height from the ground, and by stooping he could lightly raise the head

with one hand and hold the glass to his lips with the other. A little,

muscular, brown man, with black hair and white teeth. A lively face,

apparently. Earrings in his ears.

'That's well. You are a traveller?'

'Surely, sir.'

'A stranger in this city?'

'Surely, surely, altogether. I am arrived this unhappy evening.'

'From what country?' 'Marseilles.'

'Why, see there! I also! Almost as much a stranger here as you, though

born here, I came from Marseilles a little while ago. Don't be cast

down.' The face looked up at him imploringly, as he rose from wiping it,

and gently replaced the coat that covered the writhing figure. 'I won't

leave you till you shall be well taken care of. Courage! You will be

very much better half an hour hence.'

'Ah! Altro, Altro!' cried the poor little man, in a faintly incredulous

tone; and as they took him up, hung out his right hand to give the

forefinger a back-handed shake in the air.

Arthur Clennam turned; and walking beside the litter, and saying an

encouraging word now and then, accompanied it to the neighbouring

hospital of Saint Bartholomew. None of the crowd but the bearers and

he being admitted, the disabled man was soon laid on a table in a cool,

methodical way, and carefully examined by a surgeon who was as near at

hand, and as ready to appear as Calamity herself. 'He hardly knows an

English word,' said Clennam; 'is he badly hurt?'

'Let us know all about it first,' said the surgeon, continuing his

examination with a businesslike delight in it, 'before we pronounce.'

After trying the leg with a finger, and two fingers, and one hand and

two hands, and over and under, and up and down, and in this direction

and in that, and approvingly remarking on the points of interest to

another gentleman who joined him, the surgeon at last clapped the

patient on the shoulder, and said, 'He won't hurt. He'll do very well.

It's difficult enough, but we shall not want him to part with his leg

this time.' Which Clennam interpreted to the patient, who was full of

gratitude, and, in his demonstrative way, kissed both the interpreter's

hand and the surgeon's several times.

'It's a serious injury, I suppose?' said Clennam.

'Ye-es,' replied the surgeon, with the thoughtful pleasure of an artist

contemplating the work upon his easel. 'Yes, it's enough. There's a

compound fracture above the knee, and a dislocation below. They are

both of a beautiful kind.' He gave the patient a friendly clap on the

shoulder again, as if he really felt that he was a very good fellow

indeed, and worthy of all commendation for having broken his leg in a

manner interesting to science.

'He speaks French?' said the surgeon.

'Oh yes, he speaks French.'

'He'll be at no loss here, then.--You have only to bear a little pain

like a brave fellow, my friend, and to be thankful that all goes as

well as it does,' he added, in that tongue, 'and you'll walk again to

a marvel. Now, let us see whether there's anything else the matter, and

how our ribs are?'

There was nothing else the matter, and our ribs were sound. Clennam

remained until everything possible to be done had been skilfully and

promptly done--the poor belated wanderer in a strange land movingly

besought that favour of him--and lingered by the bed to which he was in

due time removed, until he had fallen into a doze. Even then he wrote a

few words for him on his card, with a promise to return to-morrow, and

left it to be given to him when he should awake. All these proceedings

occupied so long that it struck eleven o'clock at night as he came out

at the Hospital Gate. He had hired a lodging for the present in Covent

Garden, and he took the nearest way to that quarter, by Snow Hill and

Holborn.

Left to himself again, after the solicitude and compassion of his last

adventure, he was naturally in a thoughtful mood. As naturally, he

could not walk on thinking for ten minutes without recalling Flora.

She necessarily recalled to him his life, with all its misdirection and

little happiness.

When he got to his lodging, he sat down before the dying fire, as he

had stood at the window of his old room looking out upon the blackened

forest of chimneys, and turned his gaze back upon the gloomy vista by

which he had come to that stage in his existence. So long, so bare,

so blank. No childhood; no youth, except for one remembrance; that one

remembrance proved, only that day, to be a piece of folly.

It was a misfortune to him, trifle as it might have been to another.

For, while all that was hard and stern in his recollection, remained

Reality on being proved--was obdurate to the sight and touch, and

relaxed nothing of its old indomitable grimness--the one tender

recollection of his experience would not bear the same test, and melted

away. He had foreseen this, on the former night, when he had dreamed

with waking eyes, but he had not felt it then; and he had now.

He was a dreamer in such wise, because he was a man who had, deep-rooted

in his nature, a belief in all the gentle and good things his life had

been without. Bred in meanness and hard dealing, this had rescued him

to be a man of honourable mind and open hand. Bred in coldness and

severity, this had rescued him to have a warm and sympathetic heart.

Bred in a creed too darkly audacious to pursue, through its process of

reserving the making of man in the image of his Creator to the making of

his Creator in the image of an erring man, this had rescued him to judge

not, and in humility to be merciful, and have hope and charity.

And this saved him still from the whimpering weakness and cruel

selfishness of holding that because such a happiness or such a virtue

had not come into his little path, or worked well for him, therefore

it was not in the great scheme, but was reducible, when found in

appearance, to the basest elements. A disappointed mind he had, but a

mind too firm and healthy for such unwholesome air. Leaving himself in

the dark, it could rise into the light, seeing it shine on others and

hailing it.

Therefore, he sat before his dying fire, sorrowful to think upon the way

by which he had come to that night, yet not strewing poison on the way

by which other men had come to it. That he should have missed so much,

and at his time of life should look so far about him for any staff to

bear him company upon his downward journey and cheer it, was a just

regret. He looked at the fire from which the blaze departed, from which

the afterglow subsided, in which the ashes turned grey, from which they

dropped to dust, and thought, 'How soon I too shall pass through such

changes, and be gone!'

To review his life was like descending a green tree in fruit and flower,

and seeing all the branches wither and drop off, one by one, as he came

down towards them.

'From the unhappy suppression of my youngest days, through the rigid and

unloving home that followed them, through my departure, my long exile,

my return, my mother's welcome, my intercourse with her since, down to

the afternoon of this day with poor Flora,' said Arthur Clennam, 'what

have I found!'

His door was softly opened, and these spoken words startled him, and

came as if they were an answer:

'Little Dorrit.'

CHAPTER 14. Little Dorrit's Party

Arthur Clennam rose hastily, and saw her standing at the door. This

history must sometimes see with Little Dorrit's eyes, and shall begin

that course by seeing him.

Little Dorrit looked into a dim room, which seemed a spacious one to

her, and grandly furnished. Courtly ideas of Covent Garden, as a place

with famous coffee-houses, where gentlemen wearing gold-laced coats and

swords had quarrelled and fought duels; costly ideas of Covent Garden,

as a place where there were flowers in winter at guineas a-piece,

pine-apples at guineas a pound, and peas at guineas a pint; picturesque

ideas of Covent Garden, as a place where there was a mighty theatre,

showing wonderful and beautiful sights to richly-dressed ladies and

gentlemen, and which was for ever far beyond the reach of poor Fanny or

poor uncle; desolate ideas of Covent Garden, as having all those arches

in it, where the miserable children in rags among whom she had just now

passed, like young rats, slunk and hid, fed on offal, huddled together

for warmth, and were hunted about (look to the rats young and old, all

ye Barnacles, for before God they are eating away our foundations, and

will bring the roofs on our heads!); teeming ideas of Covent Garden, as

a place of past and present mystery, romance, abundance, want, beauty,

ugliness, fair country gardens, and foul street gutters; all confused

together,--made the room dimmer than it was in Little Dorrit's eyes, as

they timidly saw it from the door.

At first in the chair before the gone-out fire, and then turned round

wondering to see her, was the gentleman whom she sought. The brown,

grave gentleman, who smiled so pleasantly, who was so frank and

considerate in his manner, and yet in whose earnestness there was

something that reminded her of his mother, with the great difference

that she was earnest in asperity and he in gentleness. Now he regarded

her with that attentive and inquiring look before which Little Dorrit's

eyes had always fallen, and before which they fell still.

'My poor child! Here at midnight?'

'I said Little Dorrit, sir, on purpose to prepare you. I knew you must

be very much surprised.'

'Are you alone?'

'No sir, I have got Maggy with me.'

Considering her entrance sufficiently prepared for by this mention of

her name, Maggy appeared from the landing outside, on the broad grin.

She instantly suppressed that manifestation, however, and became fixedly

solemn.

'And I have no fire,' said Clennam. 'And you are--' He was going to say

so lightly clad, but stopped himself in what would have been a reference

to her poverty, saying instead, 'And it is so cold.'

Putting the chair from which he had risen nearer to the grate, he made

her sit down in it; and hurriedly bringing wood and coal, heaped them

together and got a blaze.

'Your foot is like marble, my child;' he had happened to touch it, while

stooping on one knee at his work of kindling the fire; 'put it nearer

the warmth.' Little Dorrit thanked him hastily. It was quite warm, it

was very warm! It smote upon his heart to feel that she hid her thin,

worn shoe.

Little Dorrit was not ashamed of her poor shoes. He knew her story, and

it was not that. Little Dorrit had a misgiving that he might blame her

father, if he saw them; that he might think, 'why did he dine to-day,

and leave this little creature to the mercy of the cold stones!' She had

no belief that it would have been a just reflection; she simply knew,

by experience, that such delusions did sometimes present themselves to

people. It was a part of her father's misfortunes that they did.

'Before I say anything else,' Little Dorrit began, sitting before

the pale fire, and raising her eyes again to the face which in its

harmonious look of interest, and pity, and protection, she felt to be a

mystery far above her in degree, and almost removed beyond her guessing

at; 'may I tell you something, sir?'

'Yes, my child.' A slight shade of distress fell upon her, at his so

often calling her a child. She was surprised that he should see it, or

think of such a slight thing; but he said directly: 'I wanted a tender

word, and could think of no other. As you just now gave yourself the

name they give you at my mother's, and as that is the name by which I

always think of you, let me call you Little Dorrit.'

'Thank you, sir, I should like it better than any name.'

'Little Dorrit.'

'Little mother,' Maggy (who had been falling asleep) put in, as a

correction.

'It's all the same, Maggy,' returned Little Dorrit, 'all the same.'

'Is it all the same, mother?'

'Just the same.'

Maggy laughed, and immediately snored. In Little Dorrit's eyes and ears,

the uncouth figure and the uncouth sound were as pleasant as could be.

There was a glow of pride in her big child, overspreading her face, when

it again met the eyes of the grave brown gentleman. She wondered what he

was thinking of, as he looked at Maggy and her. She thought what a

good father he would be. How, with some such look, he would counsel and

cherish his daughter.

'What I was going to tell you, sir,' said Little Dorrit, 'is, that MY

brother is at large.'

Arthur was rejoiced to hear it, and hoped he would do well.

'And what I was going to tell you, sir,' said Little Dorrit, trembling

in all her little figure and in her voice, 'is, that I am not to know

whose generosity released him--am never to ask, and am never to be told,

and am never to thank that gentleman with all MY grateful heart!'

He would probably need no thanks, Clennam said. Very likely he would be

thankful himself (and with reason), that he had had the means and chance

of doing a little service to her, who well deserved a great one.

'And what I was going to say, sir, is,' said Little Dorrit, trembling

more and more, 'that if I knew him, and I might, I would tell him that

he can never, never know how I feel his goodness, and how my good father

would feel it. And what I was going to say, sir, is, that if I knew him,

and I might--but I don't know him and I must not--I know that!--I would

tell him that I shall never any more lie down to sleep without having

prayed to Heaven to bless him and reward him. And if I knew him, and I

might, I would go down on my knees to him, and take his hand and kiss

it and ask him not to draw it away, but to leave it--O to leave it for a

moment--and let my thankful tears fall on it; for I have no other thanks

to give him!'

Little Dorrit had put his hand to her lips, and would have kneeled to

him, but he gently prevented her, and replaced her in her chair.

Her eyes, and the tones of her voice, had thanked him far better than

she thought. He was not able to say, quite as composedly as usual,

'There, Little Dorrit, there, there, there! We will suppose that you did

know this person, and that you might do all this, and that it was all

done. And now tell me, Who am quite another person--who am nothing

more than the friend who begged you to trust him--why you are out at

midnight, and what it is that brings you so far through the streets

at this late hour, my slight, delicate,' child was on his lips again,

'Little Dorrit!'

'Maggy and I have been to-night,' she answered, subduing herself with

the quiet effort that had long been natural to her, 'to the theatre

where my sister is engaged.'

'And oh ain't it a Ev'nly place,' suddenly interrupted Maggy, who seemed

to have the power of going to sleep and waking up whenever she chose.

'Almost as good as a hospital. Only there ain't no Chicking in it.'

Here she shook herself, and fell asleep again.

'We went there,' said Little Dorrit, glancing at her charge, 'because

I like sometimes to know, of my own knowledge, that my sister is doing

well; and like to see her there, with my own eyes, when neither she nor

Uncle is aware. It is very seldom indeed that I can do that, because

when I am not out at work, I am with my father, and even when I am out

at work, I hurry home to him. But I pretend to-night that I am at a

party.'

As she made the confession, timidly hesitating, she raised her eyes to

the face, and read its expression so plainly that she answered it. 'Oh

no, certainly! I never was at a party in my life.' She paused a little

under his attentive look, and then said, 'I hope there is no harm in it.

I could never have been of any use, if I had not pretended a little.'

She feared that he was blaming her in his mind for so devising to

contrive for them, think for them, and watch over them, without their

knowledge or gratitude; perhaps even with their reproaches for supposed

neglect. But what was really in his mind, was the weak figure with its

strong purpose, the thin worn shoes, the insufficient dress, and the

pretence of recreation and enjoyment. He asked where the suppositious

party was? At a place where she worked, answered Little Dorrit,

blushing. She had said very little about it; only a few words to

make her father easy. Her father did not believe it to be a grand

party--indeed he might suppose that. And she glanced for an instant at

the shawl she wore.

'It is the first night,' said Little Dorrit, 'that I have ever been away

from home. And London looks so large, so barren, and so wild.' In Little

Dorrit's eyes, its vastness under the black sky was awful; a tremor

passed over her as she said the words.

'But this is not,' she added, with the quiet effort again, 'what I have

come to trouble you with, sir. My sister's having found a friend, a lady

she has told me of and made me rather anxious about, was the first cause

of my coming away from home. And being away, and coming (on purpose)

round by where you lived and seeing a light in the window--'

Not for the first time. No, not for the first time. In Little Dorrit's

eyes, the outside of that window had been a distant star on other nights

than this. She had toiled out of her way, tired and troubled, to look up

at it, and wonder about the grave, brown gentleman from so far off, who

had spoken to her as a friend and protector.

'There were three things,' said Little Dorrit, 'that I thought I would

like to say, if you were alone and I might come up-stairs. First, what I

have tried to say, but never can--never shall--'

'Hush, hush! That is done with, and disposed of. Let us pass to the

second,' said Clennam, smiling her agitation away, making the blaze

shine upon her, and putting wine and cake and fruit towards her on the

table.

'I think,' said Little Dorrit--'this is the second thing, sir--I think

Mrs Clennam must have found out my secret, and must know where I come

from and where I go to. Where I live, I mean.'

'Indeed!' returned Clennam quickly. He asked her, after short

consideration, why she supposed so.

'I think,' replied Little Dorrit, 'that Mr Flintwinch must have watched

me.'

And why, Clennam asked, as he turned his eyes upon the fire, bent his

brows, and considered again; why did she suppose that?

'I have met him twice. Both times near home. Both times at night, when

I was going back. Both times I thought (though that may easily be my

mistake), that he hardly looked as if he had met me by accident.' 'Did

he say anything?'

'No; he only nodded and put his head on one side.'

'The devil take his head!' mused Clennam, still looking at the fire;

'it's always on one side.' He roused himself to persuade her to put some

wine to her lips, and to touch something to eat--it was very difficult,

she was so timid and shy--and then said, musing again: 'Is my mother at

all changed to you?'

'Oh, not at all. She is just the same. I wondered whether I had better

tell her my history. I wondered whether I might--I mean, whether you

would like me to tell her. I wondered,' said Little Dorrit, looking at

him in a suppliant way, and gradually withdrawing her eyes as he looked

at her, 'whether you would advise me what I ought to do.'

'Little Dorrit,' said Clennam; and the phrase had already begun, between

these two, to stand for a hundred gentle phrases, according to the

varying tone and connection in which it was used; 'do nothing. I will

have some talk with my old friend, Mrs Affery. Do nothing, Little

Dorrit--except refresh yourself with such means as there are here. I

entreat you to do that.'

'Thank you, I am not hungry. Nor,' said Little Dorrit, as he softly

put her glass towards her, 'nor thirsty.--I think Maggy might like

something, perhaps.'

'We will make her find pockets presently for all there is here,' said

Clennam: 'but before we awake her, there was a third thing to say.'

'Yes. You will not be offended, sir?'

'I promise that, unreservedly.'

'It will sound strange. I hardly know how to say it. Don't think it

unreasonable or ungrateful in me,' said Little Dorrit, with returning

and increasing agitation.

'No, no, no. I am sure it will be natural and right. I am not afraid

that I shall put a wrong construction on it, whatever it is.'

'Thank you. You are coming back to see my father again?'

'Yes.'

'You have been so good and thoughtful as to write him a note, saying

that you are coming to-morrow?'

'Oh, that was nothing! Yes.'

'Can you guess,' said Little Dorrit, folding her small hands tight in

one another, and looking at him with all the earnestness of her soul

looking steadily out of her eyes, 'what I am going to ask you not to

do?'

'I think I can. But I may be wrong.' 'No, you are not wrong,' said

Little Dorrit, shaking her head. 'If we should want it so very, very

badly that we cannot do without it, let me ask you for it.'

'I Will,--I Will.'

'Don't encourage him to ask. Don't understand him if he does ask. Don't

give it to him. Save him and spare him that, and you will be able to

think better of him!'

Clennam said--not very plainly, seeing those tears glistening in her

anxious eyes--that her wish should be sacred with him.

'You don't know what he is,' she said; 'you don't know what he really

is. How can you, seeing him there all at once, dear love, and not

gradually, as I have done! You have been so good to us, so delicately

and truly good, that I want him to be better in your eyes than in

anybody's. And I cannot bear to think,' cried Little Dorrit, covering

her tears with her hands, 'I cannot bear to think that you of all the

world should see him in his only moments of degradation.'

'Pray,' said Clennam, 'do not be so distressed. Pray, pray, Little

Dorrit! This is quite understood now.'

'Thank you, sir. Thank you! I have tried very much to keep myself from

saying this; I have thought about it, days and nights; but when I knew

for certain you were coming again, I made up my mind to speak to you.

Not because I am ashamed of him,' she dried her tears quickly, 'but

because I know him better than any one does, and love him, and am proud

of him.'

Relieved of this weight, Little Dorrit was nervously anxious to be gone.

Maggy being broad awake, and in the act of distantly gloating over the

fruit and cakes with chuckles of anticipation, Clennam made the best

diversion in his power by pouring her out a glass of wine, which she

drank in a series of loud smacks; putting her hand upon her windpipe

after every one, and saying, breathless, with her eyes in a prominent

state, 'Oh, ain't it d'licious! Ain't it hospitally!' When she had

finished the wine and these encomiums, he charged her to load her basket

(she was never without her basket) with every eatable thing upon the

table, and to take especial care to leave no scrap behind. Maggy's

pleasure in doing this and her little mother's pleasure in seeing Maggy

pleased, was as good a turn as circumstances could have given to the

late conversation.

'But the gates will have been locked long ago,' said Clennam, suddenly

remembering it. 'Where are you going?'

'I am going to Maggy's lodging,' answered Little Dorrit. 'I shall be

quite safe, quite well taken care of.'

'I must accompany you there,' said Clennam, 'I cannot let you go alone.'

'Yes, pray leave us to go there by ourselves. Pray do!' begged Little

Dorrit.

She was so earnest in the petition, that Clennam felt a delicacy in

obtruding himself upon her: the rather, because he could well understand

that Maggy's lodging was of the obscurest sort. 'Come, Maggy,' said

Little Dorrit cheerily, 'we shall do very well; we know the way by this

time, Maggy?'

'Yes, yes, little mother; we know the way,' chuckled Maggy. And away

they went. Little Dorrit turned at the door to say, 'God bless you!' She

said it very softly, but perhaps she may have been as audible above--who

knows!--as a whole cathedral choir.

Arthur Clennam suffered them to pass the corner of the street before he

followed at a distance; not with any idea of encroaching a second time

on Little Dorrit's privacy, but to satisfy his mind by seeing her secure

in the neighbourhood to which she was accustomed. So diminutive she

looked, so fragile and defenceless against the bleak damp weather,

flitting along in the shuffling shadow of her charge, that he felt, in

his compassion, and in his habit of considering her a child apart from

the rest of the rough world, as if he would have been glad to take her

up in his arms and carry her to her journey's end.

In course of time she came into the leading thoroughfare where the

Marshalsea was, and then he saw them slacken their pace, and soon turn

down a by-street. He stopped, felt that he had no right to go further,

and slowly left them. He had no suspicion that they ran any risk of

being houseless until morning; had no idea of the truth until long, long

afterwards.

But, said Little Dorrit, when they stopped at a poor dwelling all in

darkness, and heard no sound on listening at the door, 'Now, this is a

good lodging for you, Maggy, and we must not give offence. Consequently,

we will only knock twice, and not very loud; and if we cannot wake them

so, we must walk about till day.'

Once, Little Dorrit knocked with a careful hand, and listened. Twice,

Little Dorrit knocked with a careful hand, and listened. All was close

and still. 'Maggy, we must do the best we can, my dear. We must be

patient, and wait for day.'

It was a chill dark night, with a damp wind blowing, when they came out

into the leading street again, and heard the clocks strike half-past

one. 'In only five hours and a half,' said Little Dorrit, 'we shall be

able to go home.' To speak of home, and to go and look at it, it being

so near, was a natural sequence. They went to the closed gate, and

peeped through into the court-yard. 'I hope he is sound asleep,' said

Little Dorrit, kissing one of the bars, 'and does not miss me.'

The gate was so familiar, and so like a companion, that they put down

Maggy's basket in a corner to serve for a seat, and keeping close

together, rested there for some time. While the street was empty and

silent, Little Dorrit was not afraid; but when she heard a footstep at

a distance, or saw a moving shadow among the street lamps, she was

startled, and whispered, 'Maggy, I see some one. Come away!' Maggy

would then wake up more or less fretfully, and they would wander about a

little, and come back again.

As long as eating was a novelty and an amusement, Maggy kept up pretty

well. But that period going by, she became querulous about the cold, and

shivered and whimpered. 'It will soon be over, dear,' said Little Dorrit

patiently. 'Oh it's all very fine for you, little mother,' returned

Maggy, 'but I'm a poor thing, only ten years old.' At last, in the dead

of the night, when the street was very still indeed, Little Dorrit laid

the heavy head upon her bosom, and soothed her to sleep. And thus she

sat at the gate, as it were alone; looking up at the stars, and seeing

the clouds pass over them in their wild flight--which was the dance at

Little Dorrit's party.

'If it really was a party!' she thought once, as she sat there. 'If it

was light and warm and beautiful, and it was our house, and my poor dear

was its master, and had never been inside these walls.

And if Mr Clennam was one of our visitors, and we were dancing to

delightful music, and were all as gay and light-hearted as ever we could

be! I wonder--' Such a vista of wonder opened out before her, that

she sat looking up at the stars, quite lost, until Maggy was querulous

again, and wanted to get up and walk.

Three o'clock, and half-past three, and they had passed over London

Bridge. They had heard the rush of the tide against obstacles; and

looked down, awed, through the dark vapour on the river; had seen little

spots of lighted water where the bridge lamps were reflected, shining

like demon eyes, with a terrible fascination in them for guilt and

misery. They had shrunk past homeless people, lying coiled up in

nooks. They had run from drunkards. They had started from slinking men,

whistling and signing to one another at bye corners, or running away at

full speed. Though everywhere the leader and the guide, Little Dorrit,

happy for once in her youthful appearance, feigned to cling to and rely

upon Maggy. And more than once some voice, from among a knot of brawling

or prowling figures in their path, had called out to the rest to 'let

the woman and the child go by!'

So, the woman and the child had gone by, and gone on, and five had

sounded from the steeples. They were walking slowly towards the east,

already looking for the first pale streak of day, when a woman came

after them.

'What are you doing with the child?' she said to Maggy.

She was young--far too young to be there, Heaven knows!--and neither

ugly nor wicked-looking. She spoke coarsely, but with no naturally

coarse voice; there was even something musical in its sound. 'What are

you doing with yourself?' retorted Maggy, for want Of a better answer.

'Can't you see, without my telling you?'

'I don't know as I can,' said Maggy.

'Killing myself! Now I have answered you, answer me. What are you doing

with the child?'

The supposed child kept her head drooped down, and kept her form close

at Maggy's side.

'Poor thing!' said the woman. 'Have you no feeling, that you keep her

out in the cruel streets at such a time as this? Have you no eyes, that

you don't see how delicate and slender she is? Have you no sense (you

don't look as if you had much) that you don't take more pity on this

cold and trembling little hand?'

She had stepped across to that side, and held the hand between her own

two, chafing it. 'Kiss a poor lost creature, dear,' she said, bending

her face, 'and tell me where's she taking you.'

Little Dorrit turned towards her.

'Why, my God!' she said, recoiling, 'you're a woman!'

'Don't mind that!' said Little Dorrit, clasping one of her hands that

had suddenly released hers. 'I am not afraid of you.'

'Then you had better be,' she answered. 'Have you no mother?'

'No.'

'No father?'

'Yes, a very dear one.'

'Go home to him, and be afraid of me. Let me go. Good night!'

'I must thank you first; let me speak to you as if I really were a

child.'

'You can't do it,' said the woman. 'You are kind and innocent; but you

can't look at me out of a child's eyes. I never should have touched you,

but I thought that you were a child.' And with a strange, wild cry, she

went away.

No day yet in the sky, but there was day in the resounding stones of

the streets; in the waggons, carts, and coaches; in the workers going

to various occupations; in the opening of early shops; in the traffic

at markets; in the stir of the riverside. There was coming day in the

flaring lights, with a feebler colour in them than they would have had

at another time; coming day in the increased sharpness of the air, and

the ghastly dying of the night.

They went back again to the gate, intending to wait there now until it

should be opened; but the air was so raw and cold that Little Dorrit,

leading Maggy about in her sleep, kept in motion. Going round by the

Church, she saw lights there, and the door open; and went up the steps

and looked in.

'Who's that?' cried a stout old man, who was putting on a nightcap as if

he were going to bed in a vault.

'It's no one particular, sir,' said Little Dorrit.

'Stop!' cried the man. 'Let's have a look at you!'

This caused her to turn back again in the act of going out, and to

present herself and her charge before him.

'I thought so!' said he. 'I know YOU.'

'We have often seen each other,' said Little Dorrit, recognising the

sexton, or the beadle, or the verger, or whatever he was, 'when I have

been at church here.'

'More than that, we've got your birth in our Register, you know; you're

one of our curiosities.'

'Indeed!' said Little Dorrit.

'To be sure. As the child of the--by-the-bye, how did you get out so

early?'

'We were shut out last night, and are waiting to get in.'

'You don't mean it? And there's another hour good yet! Come into the

vestry. You'll find a fire in the vestry, on account of the painters.

I'm waiting for the painters, or I shouldn't be here, you may depend

upon it. One of our curiosities mustn't be cold when we have it in our

power to warm her up comfortable. Come along.'

He was a very good old fellow, in his familiar way; and having stirred

the vestry fire, he looked round the shelves of registers for a

particular volume. 'Here you are, you see,' he said, taking it down and

turning the leaves. 'Here you'll find yourself, as large as life. Amy,

daughter of William and Fanny Dorrit. Born, Marshalsea Prison, Parish of

St George. And we tell people that you have lived there, without so much

as a day's or a night's absence, ever since. Is it true?'

'Quite true, till last night.' 'Lord!' But his surveying her with an

admiring gaze suggested Something else to him, to wit: 'I am sorry to

see, though, that you are faint and tired. Stay a bit. I'll get some

cushions out of the church, and you and your friend shall lie down

before the fire.

Don't be afraid of not going in to join your father when the gate opens.

I'll call you.'

He soon brought in the cushions, and strewed them on the ground.

'There you are, you see. Again as large as life. Oh, never mind

thanking. I've daughters of my own. And though they weren't born in the

Marshalsea Prison, they might have been, if I had been, in my ways of

carrying on, of your father's breed. Stop a bit. I must put something

under the cushion for your head. Here's a burial volume, just the

thing! We have got Mrs Bangham in this book. But what makes these books

interesting to most people is--not who's in 'em, but who isn't--who's

coming, you know, and when. That's the interesting question.'

Commendingly looking back at the pillow he had improvised, he left them

to their hour's repose. Maggy was snoring already, and Little Dorrit

was soon fast asleep with her head resting on that sealed book of Fate,

untroubled by its mysterious blank leaves.

This was Little Dorrit's party. The shame, desertion, wretchedness, and

exposure of the great capital; the wet, the cold, the slow hours, and

the swift clouds of the dismal night. This was the party from which

Little Dorrit went home, jaded, in the first grey mist of a rainy

morning.

CHAPTER 15. Mrs Flintwinch has another Dream

The debilitated old house in the city, wrapped in its mantle of soot,

and leaning heavily on the crutches that had partaken of its decay and

worn out with it, never knew a healthy or a cheerful interval, let what

would betide. If the sun ever touched it, it was but with a ray, and

that was gone in half an hour; if the moonlight ever fell upon it, it

was only to put a few patches on its doleful cloak, and make it look

more wretched. The stars, to be sure, coldly watched it when the nights

and the smoke were clear enough; and all bad weather stood by it with

a rare fidelity. You should alike find rain, hail, frost, and thaw

lingering in that dismal enclosure when they had vanished from other

places; and as to snow, you should see it there for weeks, long after

it had changed from yellow to black, slowly weeping away its grimy life.

The place had no other adherents. As to street noises, the rumbling of

wheels in the lane merely rushed in at the gateway in going past, and

rushed out again: making the listening Mistress Affery feel as if she

were deaf, and recovered the sense of hearing by instantaneous flashes.

So with whistling, singing, talking, laughing, and all pleasant human

sounds. They leaped the gap in a moment, and went upon their way. The

varying light of fire and candle in Mrs Clennam's room made the greatest

change that ever broke the dead monotony of the spot. In her two long

narrow windows, the fire shone sullenly all day, and sullenly all night.

On rare occasions it flashed up passionately, as she did; but for the

most part it was suppressed, like her, and preyed upon itself evenly and

slowly. During many hours of the short winter days, however, when it was

dusk there early in the afternoon, changing distortions of herself

in her wheeled chair, of Mr Flintwinch with his wry neck, of Mistress

Affery coming and going, would be thrown upon the house wall that was

over the gateway, and would hover there like shadows from a great magic

lantern. As the room-ridden invalid settled for the night, these would

gradually disappear: Mistress Affery's magnified shadow always flitting

about, last, until it finally glided away into the air, as though she

were off upon a witch excursion. Then the solitary light would burn

unchangingly, until it burned pale before the dawn, and at last died

under the breath of Mrs Affery, as her shadow descended on it from the

witch-region of sleep.

Strange, if the little sick-room fire were in effect a beacon fire,

summoning some one, and that the most unlikely some one in the world,

to the spot that MUST be come to. Strange, if the little sick-room light

were in effect a watch-light, burning in that place every night until

an appointed event should be watched out! Which of the vast multitude

of travellers, under the sun and the stars, climbing the dusty hills

and toiling along the weary plains, journeying by land and journeying by

sea, coming and going so strangely, to meet and to act and react on one

another; which of the host may, with no suspicion of the journey's end,

be travelling surely hither?

Time shall show us. The post of honour and the post of shame, the

general's station and the drummer's, a peer's statue in Westminster

Abbey and a seaman's hammock in the bosom of the deep, the mitre and

the workhouse, the woolsack and the gallows, the throne and the

guillotine--the travellers to all are on the great high road, but it

has wonderful divergencies, and only Time shall show us whither each

traveller is bound.

On a wintry afternoon at twilight, Mrs Flintwinch, having been heavy all

day, dreamed this dream:

She thought she was in the kitchen getting the kettle ready for tea, and

was warming herself with her feet upon the fender and the skirt of her

gown tucked up, before the collapsed fire in the middle of the grate,

bordered on either hand by a deep cold black ravine. She thought that

as she sat thus, musing upon the question whether life was not for some

people a rather dull invention, she was frightened by a sudden noise

behind her. She thought that she had been similarly frightened once last

week, and that the noise was of a mysterious kind--a sound of rustling

and of three or four quick beats like a rapid step; while a shock or

tremble was communicated to her heart, as if the step had shaken the

floor, or even as if she had been touched by some awful hand. She

thought that this revived within her certain old fears of hers that

the house was haunted; and that she flew up the kitchen stairs without

knowing how she got up, to be nearer company.

Mistress Affery thought that on reaching the hall, she saw the door of

her liege lord's office standing open, and the room empty. That she went

to the ripped-up window in the little room by the street door to connect

her palpitating heart, through the glass, with living things beyond

and outside the haunted house. That she then saw, on the wall over the

gateway, the shadows of the two clever ones in conversation above. That

she then went upstairs with her shoes in her hand, partly to be near

the clever ones as a match for most ghosts, and partly to hear what they

were talking about.

'None of your nonsense with me,' said Mr Flintwinch. 'I won't take it

from you.'

Mrs Flintwinch dreamed that she stood behind the door, which was just

ajar, and most distinctly heard her husband say these bold words.

'Flintwinch,' returned Mrs Clennam, in her usual strong low voice,

'there is a demon of anger in you. Guard against it.'

'I don't care whether there's one or a dozen,' said Mr Flintwinch,

forcibly suggesting in his tone that the higher number was nearer the

mark. 'If there was fifty, they should all say, None of your nonsense

with me, I won't take it from you--I'd make 'em say it, whether they

liked it or not.'

'What have I done, you wrathful man?' her strong voice asked.

'Done?' said Mr Flintwinch. 'Dropped down upon me.'

'If you mean, remonstrated with you--'

'Don't put words into my mouth that I don't mean,' said Jeremiah,

sticking to his figurative expression with tenacious and impenetrable

obstinacy: 'I mean dropped down upon me.'

'I remonstrated with you,' she began again, 'because--'

'I won't have it!' cried Jeremiah. 'You dropped down upon me.'

'I dropped down upon you, then, you ill-conditioned man,' (Jeremiah

chuckled at having forced her to adopt his phrase,) 'for having been

needlessly significant to Arthur that morning. I have a right to

complain of it as almost a breach of confidence. You did not mean it--'

'I won't have it!' interposed the contradictory Jeremiah, flinging back

the concession. 'I did mean it.'

'I suppose I must leave you to speak in soliloquy if you choose,' she

replied, after a pause that seemed an angry one. 'It is useless my

addressing myself to a rash and headstrong old man who has a set purpose

not to hear me.'

'Now, I won't take that from you either,' said Jeremiah. 'I have no such

purpose. I have told you I did mean it. Do you wish to know why I meant

it, you rash and headstrong old woman?'

'After all, you only restore me my own words,' she said, struggling with

her indignation. 'Yes.'

'This is why, then. Because you hadn't cleared his father to him, and

you ought to have done it. Because, before you went into any tantrum

about yourself, who are--'

'Hold there, Flintwinch!' she cried out in a changed voice: 'you may go

a word too far.'

The old man seemed to think so. There was another pause, and he had

altered his position in the room, when he spoke again more mildly:

'I was going to tell you why it was. Because, before you took your own

part, I thought you ought to have taken the part of Arthur's father.

Arthur's father! I had no particular love for Arthur's father. I served

Arthur's father's uncle, in this house, when Arthur's father was not

much above me--was poorer as far as his pocket went--and when his uncle

might as soon have left me his heir as have left him. He starved in the

parlour, and I starved in the kitchen; that was the principal difference

in our positions; there was not much more than a flight of breakneck

stairs between us. I never took to him in those times; I don't know that

I ever took to him greatly at any time. He was an undecided, irresolute

chap, who had everything but his orphan life scared out of him when he

was young. And when he brought you home here, the wife his uncle

had named for him, I didn't need to look at you twice (you were a

good-looking woman at that time) to know who'd be master. You have stood

of your own strength ever since. Stand of your own strength now. Don't

lean against the dead.'

'I do not--as you call it--lean against the dead.'

'But you had a mind to do it, if I had submitted,' growled Jeremiah,

'and that's why you drop down upon me. You can't forget that I didn't

submit. I suppose you are astonished that I should consider it worth my

while to have justice done to Arthur's father?

Hey? It doesn't matter whether you answer or not, because I know you

are, and you know you are. Come, then, I'll tell you how it is. I may

be a bit of an oddity in point of temper, but this is my temper--I can't

let anybody have entirely their own way. You are a determined woman, and

a clever woman; and when you see your purpose before you, nothing will

turn you from it. Who knows that better than I do?'

'Nothing will turn me from it, Flintwinch, when I have justified it to

myself. Add that.'

'Justified it to yourself? I said you were the most determined woman on

the face of the earth (or I meant to say so), and if you are determined

to justify any object you entertain, of course you'll do it.'

'Man! I justify myself by the authority of these Books,' she cried, with

stern emphasis, and appearing from the sound that followed to strike the

dead-weight of her arm upon the table.

'Never mind that,' returned Jeremiah calmly, 'we won't enter into that

question at present. However that may be, you carry out your purposes,

and you make everything go down before them. Now, I won't go down before

them. I have been faithful to you, and useful to you, and I am attached

to you. But I can't consent, and I won't consent, and I never did

consent, and I never will consent to be lost in you. Swallow up

everybody else, and welcome. The peculiarity of my temper is, ma'am,

that I won't be swallowed up alive.'

Perhaps this had Originally been the mainspring of the understanding

between them. Descrying thus much of force of character in Mr

Flintwinch, perhaps Mrs Clennam had deemed alliance with him worth her

while.

'Enough and more than enough of the subject,' said she gloomily.

'Unless you drop down upon me again,' returned the persistent

Flintwinch, 'and then you must expect to hear of it again.'

Mistress Affery dreamed that the figure of her lord here began walking

up and down the room, as if to cool his spleen, and that she ran away;

but that, as he did not issue forth when she had stood listening and

trembling in the shadowy hall a little time, she crept up-stairs again,

impelled as before by ghosts and curiosity, and once more cowered

outside the door.

'Please to light the candle, Flintwinch,' Mrs Clennam was saying,

apparently wishing to draw him back into their usual tone. 'It is nearly

time for tea. Little Dorrit is coming, and will find me in the dark.'

Mr Flintwinch lighted the candle briskly, and said as he put it down

upon the table:

'What are you going to do with Little Dorrit? Is she to come to work

here for ever? To come to tea here for ever? To come backwards and

forwards here, in the same way, for ever?' 'How can you talk about "for

ever" to a maimed creature like me? Are we not all cut down like the

grass of the field, and was not I shorn by the scythe many years ago:

since when I have been lying here, waiting to be gathered into the

barn?'

'Ay, ay! But since you have been lying here--not near dead--nothing like

it--numbers of children and young people, blooming women, strong men,

and what not, have been cut down and carried; and still here are you,

you see, not much changed after all. Your time and mine may be a long

one yet. When I say for ever, I mean (though I am not poetical) through

all our time.' Mr Flintwinch gave this explanation with great calmness,

and calmly waited for an answer.

'So long as Little Dorrit is quiet and industrious, and stands in need

of the slight help I can give her, and deserves it; so long, I suppose,

unless she withdraws of her own act, she will continue to come here, I

being spared.'

'Nothing more than that?' said Flintwinch, stroking his mouth and chin.

'What should there be more than that! What could there be more than

that!' she ejaculated in her sternly wondering way.

Mrs Flintwinch dreamed, that, for the space of a minute or two, they

remained looking at each other with the candle between them, and

that she somehow derived an impression that they looked at each other

fixedly.

'Do you happen to know, Mrs Clennam,' Affery's liege lord then demanded

in a much lower voice, and with an amount of expression that seemed

quite out of proportion to the simple purpose of his words, 'where she

lives?'

'No.'

'Would you--now, would you like to know?' said Jeremiah with a pounce as

if he had sprung upon her.

'If I cared to know, I should know already. Could I not have asked her

any day?'

'Then you don't care to know?'

'I do not.'

Mr Flintwinch, having expelled a long significant breath said, with his

former emphasis, 'For I have accidentally--mind!--found out.'

'Wherever she lives,' said Mrs Clennam, speaking in one unmodulated hard

voice, and separating her words as distinctly as if she were reading

them off from separate bits of metal that she took up one by one, 'she

has made a secret of it, and she shall always keep her secret from me.'

'After all, perhaps you would rather not have known the fact, any how?'

said Jeremiah; and he said it with a twist, as if his words had come out

of him in his own wry shape.

'Flintwinch,' said his mistress and partner, flashing into a sudden

energy that made Affery start, 'why do you goad me? Look round this

room. If it is any compensation for my long confinement within these

narrow limits--not that I complain of being afflicted; you know I never

complain of that--if it is any compensation to me for long confinement

to this room, that while I am shut up from all pleasant change I am also

shut up from the knowledge of some things that I may prefer to avoid

knowing, why should you, of all men, grudge me that belief?'

'I don't grudge it to you,' returned Jeremiah.

'Then say no more. Say no more. Let Little Dorrit keep her secret from

me, and do you keep it from me also. Let her come and go, unobserved and

unquestioned. Let me suffer, and let me have what alleviation belongs to

my condition. Is it so much, that you torment me like an evil spirit?'

'I asked you a question. That's all.'

'I have answered it. So, say no more. Say no more.' Here the sound of

the wheeled chair was heard upon the floor, and Affery's bell rang with

a hasty jerk.

More afraid of her husband at the moment than of the mysterious sound in

the kitchen, Affery crept away as lightly and as quickly as she could,

descended the kitchen stairs almost as rapidly as she had ascended them,

resumed her seat before the fire, tucked up her skirt again, and finally

threw her apron over her head. Then the bell rang once more, and then

once more, and then kept on ringing; in despite of which importunate

summons, Affery still sat behind her apron, recovering her breath.

At last Mr Flintwinch came shuffling down the staircase into the

hall, muttering and calling 'Affery woman!' all the way. Affery still

remaining behind her apron, he came stumbling down the kitchen stairs,

candle in hand, sidled up to her, twitched her apron off, and roused

her.

'Oh Jeremiah!' cried Affery, waking. 'What a start you gave me!'

'What have you been doing, woman?' inquired Jeremiah. 'You've been rung

for fifty times.'

'Oh Jeremiah,' said Mistress Affery, 'I have been a-dreaming!'

Reminded of her former achievement in that way, Mr Flintwinch held the

candle to her head, as if he had some idea of lighting her up for the

illumination of the kitchen.

'Don't you know it's her tea-time?' he demanded with a vicious grin, and

giving one of the legs of Mistress Affery's chair a kick.

'Jeremiah? Tea-time? I don't know what's come to me. But I got such a

dreadful turn, Jeremiah, before I went--off a-dreaming, that I think it

must be that.'

'Yoogh! Sleepy-Head!' said Mr Flintwinch, 'what are you talking about?'

'Such a strange noise, Jeremiah, and such a curious movement. In the

kitchen here--just here.'

Jeremiah held up his light and looked at the blackened ceiling, held

down his light and looked at the damp stone floor, turned round with his

light and looked about at the spotted and blotched walls.

'Rats, cats, water, drains,' said Jeremiah.

Mistress Affery negatived each with a shake of her head. 'No, Jeremiah;

I have felt it before. I have felt it up-stairs, and once on the

staircase as I was going from her room to ours in the night--a rustle

and a sort of trembling touch behind me.'

'Affery, my woman,' said Mr Flintwinch grimly, after advancing his nose

to that lady's lips as a test for the detection of spirituous liquors,

'if you don't get tea pretty quick, old woman, you'll become sensible

of a rustle and a touch that'll send you flying to the other end of the

kitchen.'

This prediction stimulated Mrs Flintwinch to bestir herself, and to

hasten up-stairs to Mrs Clennam's chamber. But, for all that, she now

began to entertain a settled conviction that there was something wrong

in the gloomy house. Henceforth, she was never at peace in it after

daylight departed; and never went up or down stairs in the dark without

having her apron over her head, lest she should see something.

What with these ghostly apprehensions and her singular dreams, Mrs

Flintwinch fell that evening into a haunted state of mind, from which

it may be long before this present narrative descries any trace of her

recovery. In the vagueness and indistinctness of all her new experiences

and perceptions, as everything about her was mysterious to herself she

began to be mysterious to others: and became as difficult to be made out

to anybody's satisfaction as she found the house and everything in it

difficult to make out to her own.

She had not yet finished preparing Mrs Clennam's tea, when the soft

knock came to the door which always announced Little Dorrit. Mistress

Affery looked on at Little Dorrit taking off her homely bonnet in the

hall, and at Mr Flintwinch scraping his jaws and contemplating her in

silence, as expecting some wonderful consequence to ensue which would

frighten her out of her five wits or blow them all three to pieces.

After tea there came another knock at the door, announcing Arthur.

Mistress Affery went down to let him in, and he said on entering,

'Affery, I am glad it's you. I want to ask you a question.' Affery

immediately replied, 'For goodness sake don't ask me nothing, Arthur! I

am frightened out of one half of my life, and dreamed out of the

other. Don't ask me nothing! I don't know which is which, or what is

what!'--and immediately started away from him, and came near him no

more.

Mistress Affery having no taste for reading, and no sufficient light for

needlework in the subdued room, supposing her to have the inclination,

now sat every night in the dimness from which she had momentarily

emerged on the evening of Arthur Clennam's return, occupied with crowds

of wild speculations and suspicions respecting her mistress and her

husband and the noises in the house. When the ferocious devotional

exercises were engaged in, these speculations would distract Mistress

Affery's eyes towards the door, as if she expected some dark form to

appear at those propitious moments, and make the party one too many.

Otherwise, Affery never said or did anything to attract the attention of

the two clever ones towards her in any marked degree, except on certain

occasions, generally at about the quiet hour towards bed-time, when she

would suddenly dart out of her dim corner, and whisper with a face of

terror to Mr Flintwinch, reading the paper near Mrs Clennam's little

table: 'There, jeremiah! Now! What's that noise?'

Then the noise, if there were any, would have ceased, and Mr Flintwinch

would snarl, turning upon her as if she had cut him down that moment

against his will, 'Affery, old woman, you shall have a dose, old woman,

such a dose! You have been dreaming again!'

CHAPTER 16. Nobody's Weakness

The time being come for the renewal of his acquaintance with the Meagles

family, Clennam, pursuant to contract made between himself and Mr

Meagles within the precincts of Bleeding Heart Yard, turned his face

on a certain Saturday towards Twickenham, where Mr Meagles had a

cottage-residence of his own. The weather being fine and dry, and any

English road abounding in interest for him who had been so long away,

he sent his valise on by the coach, and set out to walk. A walk was in

itself a new enjoyment to him, and one that had rarely diversified his

life afar off.

He went by Fulham and Putney, for the pleasure of strolling over the

heath. It was bright and shining there; and when he found himself so far

on his road to Twickenham, he found himself a long way on his road to

a number of airier and less substantial destinations. They had risen

before him fast, in the healthful exercise and the pleasant road. It is

not easy to walk alone in the country without musing upon something. And

he had plenty of unsettled subjects to meditate upon, though he had been

walking to the Land's End.

First, there was the subject seldom absent from his mind, the question,

what he was to do henceforth in life; to what occupation he should

devote himself, and in what direction he had best seek it. He was far

from rich, and every day of indecision and inaction made his inheritance

a source of greater anxiety to him. As often as he began to consider how

to increase this inheritance, or to lay it by, so often his misgiving

that there was some one with an unsatisfied claim upon his justice,

returned; and that alone was a subject to outlast the longest walk.

Again, there was the subject of his relations with his mother, which

were now upon an equable and peaceful but never confidential footing,

and whom he saw several times a week. Little Dorrit was a leading and a

constant subject: for the circumstances of his life, united to those of

her own story, presented the little creature to him as the only person

between whom and himself there were ties of innocent reliance on one

hand, and affectionate protection on the other; ties of compassion,

respect, unselfish interest, gratitude, and pity. Thinking of her, and

of the possibility of her father's release from prison by the unbarring

hand of death--the only change of circumstance he could foresee that

might enable him to be such a friend to her as he wished to be, by

altering her whole manner of life, smoothing her rough road, and

giving her a home--he regarded her, in that perspective, as his adopted

daughter, his poor child of the Marshalsea hushed to rest. If there were

a last subject in his thoughts, and it lay towards Twickenham, its form

was so indefinite that it was little more than the pervading atmosphere

in which these other subjects floated before him.

He had crossed the heath and was leaving it behind when he gained upon a

figure which had been in advance of him for some time, and which, as

he gained upon it, he thought he knew. He derived this impression

from something in the turn of the head, and in the figure's action of

consideration, as it went on at a sufficiently sturdy walk. But when

the man--for it was a man's figure--pushed his hat up at the back of his

head, and stopped to consider some object before him, he knew it to be

Daniel Doyce.

'How do you do, Mr Doyce?' said Clennam, overtaking him. 'I am glad to

see you again, and in a healthier place than the Circumlocution Office.'

'Ha! Mr Meagles's friend!' exclaimed that public criminal, coming out of

some mental combinations he had been making, and offering his hand. 'I

am glad to see you, sir. Will you excuse me if I forget your name?'

'Readily. It's not a celebrated name. It's not Barnacle.' 'No, no,' said

Daniel, laughing. 'And now I know what it is. It's Clennam. How do you

do, Mr Clennam?'

'I have some hope,' said Arthur, as they walked on together, 'that we

may be going to the same place, Mr Doyce.'

'Meaning Twickenham?' returned Daniel. 'I am glad to hear it.'

They were soon quite intimate, and lightened the way with a variety of

conversation. The ingenious culprit was a man of great modesty and good

sense; and, though a plain man, had been too much accustomed to combine

what was original and daring in conception with what was patient and

minute in execution, to be by any means an ordinary man. It was at first

difficult to lead him to speak about himself, and he put off Arthur's

advances in that direction by admitting slightly, oh yes, he had done

this, and he had done that, and such a thing was of his making, and

such another thing was his discovery, but it was his trade, you see, his

trade; until, as he gradually became assured that his companion had a

real interest in his account of himself, he frankly yielded to it. Then

it appeared that he was the son of a north-country blacksmith, and had

originally been apprenticed by his widowed mother to a lock-maker; that

he had 'struck out a few little things' at the lock-maker's, which had

led to his being released from his indentures with a present, which

present had enabled him to gratify his ardent wish to bind himself to

a working engineer, under whom he had laboured hard, learned hard, and

lived hard, seven years. His time being out, he had 'worked in the shop'

at weekly wages seven or eight years more; and had then betaken

himself to the banks of the Clyde, where he had studied, and filed, and

hammered, and improved his knowledge, theoretical and practical, for six

or seven years more. There he had had an offer to go to Lyons, which he

had accepted; and from Lyons had been engaged to go to Germany, and in

Germany had had an offer to go to St Petersburg, and there had done very

well indeed--never better. However, he had naturally felt a preference

for his own country, and a wish to gain distinction there, and to do

whatever service he could do, there rather than elsewhere. And so he had

come home. And so at home he had established himself in business, and

had invented and executed, and worked his way on, until, after a dozen

years of constant suit and service, he had been enrolled in the

Great British Legion of Honour, the Legion of the Rebuffed of the

Circumlocution Office, and had been decorated with the Great British

Order of Merit, the Order of the Disorder of the Barnacles and

Stiltstalkings.

'It is much to be regretted,' said Clennam, 'that you ever turned your

thoughts that way, Mr Doyce.'

'True, sir, true to a certain extent. But what is a man to do? if he

has the misfortune to strike out something serviceable to the nation,

he must follow where it leads him.' 'Hadn't he better let it go?' said

Clennam.

'He can't do it,' said Doyce, shaking his head with a thoughtful smile.

'It's not put into his head to be buried. It's put into his head to be

made useful. You hold your life on the condition that to the last you

shall struggle hard for it. Every man holds a discovery on the same

terms.'

'That is to say,' said Arthur, with a growing admiration of his quiet

companion, 'you are not finally discouraged even now?'

'I have no right to be, if I am,' returned the other. 'The thing is as

true as it ever was.'

When they had walked a little way in silence, Clennam, at once to

change the direct point of their conversation and not to change it

too abruptly, asked Mr Doyce if he had any partner in his business to

relieve him of a portion of its anxieties?

'No,' he returned, 'not at present. I had when I first entered on it,

and a good man he was. But he has been dead some years; and as I could

not easily take to the notion of another when I lost him, I bought

his share for myself and have gone on by myself ever since. And here's

another thing,' he said, stopping for a moment with a good-humoured

laugh in his eyes, and laying his closed right hand, with its peculiar

suppleness of thumb, on Clennam's arm, 'no inventor can be a man of

business, you know.'

'No?' said Clennam.

'Why, so the men of business say,' he answered, resuming the walk and

laughing outright. 'I don't know why we unfortunate creatures should

be supposed to want common sense, but it is generally taken for granted

that we do. Even the best friend I have in the world, our excellent

friend over yonder,' said Doyce, nodding towards Twickenham, 'extends

a sort of protection to me, don't you know, as a man not quite able to

take care of himself?'

Arthur Clennam could not help joining in the good-humoured laugh, for he

recognised the truth of the description.

'So I find that I must have a partner who is a man of business and not

guilty of any inventions,' said Daniel Doyce, taking off his hat to pass

his hand over his forehead, 'if it's only in deference to the current

opinion, and to uphold the credit of the Works. I don't think he'll find

that I have been very remiss or confused in my way of conducting them;

but that's for him to say--whoever he is--not for me.' 'You have not

chosen him yet, then?'

'No, sir, no. I have only just come to a decision to take one. The fact

is, there's more to do than there used to be, and the Works are enough

for me as I grow older. What with the books and correspondence, and

foreign journeys for which a Principal is necessary, I can't do all. I

am going to talk over the best way of negotiating the matter, if I find

a spare half-hour between this and Monday morning, with my--my Nurse and

protector,' said Doyce, with laughing eyes again. 'He is a sagacious man

in business, and has had a good apprenticeship to it.'

After this, they conversed on different subjects until they arrived at

their journey's end. A composed and unobtrusive self-sustainment was

noticeable in Daniel Doyce--a calm knowledge that what was true must

remain true, in spite of all the Barnacles in the family ocean, and

would be just the truth, and neither more nor less when even that sea

had run dry--which had a kind of greatness in it, though not of the

official quality.

As he knew the house well, he conducted Arthur to it by the way that

showed it to the best advantage. It was a charming place (none the worse

for being a little eccentric), on the road by the river, and just what

the residence of the Meagles family ought to be. It stood in a garden,

no doubt as fresh and beautiful in the May of the Year as Pet now was

in the May of her life; and it was defended by a goodly show of handsome

trees and spreading evergreens, as Pet was by Mr and Mrs Meagles. It

was made out of an old brick house, of which a part had been altogether

pulled down, and another part had been changed into the present cottage;

so there was a hale elderly portion, to represent Mr and Mrs Meagles,

and a young picturesque, very pretty portion to represent Pet. There was

even the later addition of a conservatory sheltering itself against it,

uncertain of hue in its deep-stained glass, and in its more transparent

portions flashing to the sun's rays, now like fire and now like harmless

water drops; which might have stood for Tattycoram. Within view was

the peaceful river and the ferry-boat, to moralise to all the inmates

saying: Young or old, passionate or tranquil, chafing or content, you,

thus runs the current always. Let the heart swell into what discord it

will, thus plays the rippling water on the prow of the ferry-boat ever

the same tune. Year after year, so much allowance for the drifting of

the boat, so many miles an hour the flowing of the stream, here the

rushes, there the lilies, nothing uncertain or unquiet, upon this road

that steadily runs away; while you, upon your flowing road of time, are

so capricious and distracted.

The bell at the gate had scarcely sounded when Mr Meagles came out to

receive them. Mr Meagles had scarcely come out, when Mrs Meagles came

out. Mrs Meagles had scarcely come out, when Pet came out. Pet scarcely

had come out, when Tattycoram came out. Never had visitors a more

hospitable reception.

'Here we are, you see,' said Mr Meagles, 'boxed up, Mr Clennam, within

our own home-limits, as if we were never going to expand--that is,

travel--again. Not like Marseilles, eh? No allonging and marshonging

here!'

'A different kind of beauty, indeed!' said Clennam, looking about him.

'But, Lord bless me!' cried Mr Meagles, rubbing his hands with a relish,

'it was an uncommonly pleasant thing being in quarantine, wasn't it?

Do you know, I have often wished myself back again? We were a capital

party.'

This was Mr Meagles's invariable habit. Always to object to everything

while he was travelling, and always to want to get back to it when he

was not travelling.

'If it was summer-time,' said Mr Meagles, 'which I wish it was on your

account, and in order that you might see the place at its best, you

would hardly be able to hear yourself speak for birds. Being practical

people, we never allow anybody to scare the birds; and the birds, being

practical people too, come about us in myriads. We are delighted to see

you, Clennam (if you'll allow me, I shall drop the Mister); I heartily

assure you, we are delighted.'

'I have not had so pleasant a greeting,' said Clennam--then he recalled

what Little Dorrit had said to him in his own room, and faithfully

added 'except once--since we last walked to and fro, looking down at the

Mediterranean.'

'Ah!' returned Mr Meagles. 'Something like a look out, that was, wasn't

it? I don't want a military government, but I shouldn't mind a little

allonging and marshonging--just a dash of it--in this neighbourhood

sometimes. It's Devilish still.'

Bestowing this eulogium on the retired character of his retreat with a

dubious shake of the head, Mr Meagles led the way into the house. It was

just large enough, and no more; was as pretty within as it was without,

and was perfectly well-arranged and comfortable.

Some traces of the migratory habits of the family were to be observed

in the covered frames and furniture, and wrapped-up hangings; but it was

easy to see that it was one of Mr Meagles's whims to have the cottage

always kept, in their absence, as if they were always coming back the

day after to-morrow. Of articles collected on his various expeditions,

there was such a vast miscellany that it was like the dwelling of an

amiable Corsair. There were antiquities from Central Italy, made by the

best modern houses in that department of industry; bits of mummy from

Egypt (and perhaps Birmingham); model gondolas from Venice; model

villages from Switzerland; morsels of tesselated pavement from

Herculaneum and Pompeii, like petrified minced veal; ashes out of tombs,

and lava out of Vesuvius; Spanish fans, Spezzian straw hats, Moorish

slippers, Tuscan hairpins, Carrara sculpture, Trastaverini scarves,

Genoese velvets and filigree, Neapolitan coral, Roman cameos, Geneva

jewellery, Arab lanterns, rosaries blest all round by the Pope himself,

and an infinite variety of lumber. There were views, like and unlike, of

a multitude of places; and there was one little picture-room devoted to

a few of the regular sticky old Saints, with sinews like whipcord, hair

like Neptune's, wrinkles like tattooing, and such coats of varnish

that every holy personage served for a fly-trap, and became what is

now called in the vulgar tongue a Catch-em-alive O. Of these pictorial

acquisitions Mr Meagles spoke in the usual manner. He was no judge, he

said, except of what pleased himself; he had picked them up, dirt-cheap,

and people had considered them rather fine. One man, who at any rate

ought to know something of the subject, had declared that 'Sage,

Reading' (a specially oily old gentleman in a blanket, with a

swan's-down tippet for a beard, and a web of cracks all over him like

rich pie-crust), to be a fine Guercino. As for Sebastian del Piombo

there, you would judge for yourself; if it were not his later

manner, the question was, Who was it? Titian, that might or might not

be--perhaps he had only touched it. Daniel Doyce said perhaps he hadn't

touched it, but Mr Meagles rather declined to overhear the remark.

When he had shown all his spoils, Mr Meagles took them into his own

snug room overlooking the lawn, which was fitted up in part like a

dressing-room and in part like an office, and in which, upon a kind of

counter-desk, were a pair of brass scales for weighing gold, and a scoop

for shovelling out money.

'Here they are, you see,' said Mr Meagles. 'I stood behind these two

articles five-and-thirty years running, when I no more thought of

gadding about than I now think of--staying at home. When I left the Bank

for good, I asked for them, and brought them away with me.

I mention it at once, or you might suppose that I sit in my

counting-house (as Pet says I do), like the king in the poem of the

four-and-twenty blackbirds, counting out my money.'

Clennam's eyes had strayed to a natural picture on the wall, of two

pretty little girls with their arms entwined. 'Yes, Clennam,' said

Mr Meagles, in a lower voice. 'There they both are. It was taken some

seventeen years ago. As I often say to Mother, they were babies then.'

'Their names?' said Arthur.

'Ah, to be sure! You have never heard any name but Pet. Pet's name is

Minnie; her sister's Lillie.'

'Should you have known, Mr Clennam, that one of them was meant for me?'

asked Pet herself, now standing in the doorway.

'I might have thought that both of them were meant for you, both

are still so like you. Indeed,' said Clennam, glancing from the fair

original to the picture and back, 'I cannot even now say which is not

your portrait.' 'D'ye hear that, Mother?' cried Mr Meagles to his wife,

who had followed her daughter. 'It's always the same, Clennam; nobody

can decide. The child to your left is Pet.'

The picture happened to be near a looking-glass. As Arthur looked at

it again, he saw, by the reflection of the mirror, Tattycoram stop in

passing outside the door, listen to what was going on, and pass away

with an angry and contemptuous frown upon her face, that changed its

beauty into ugliness.

'But come!' said Mr Meagles. 'You have had a long walk, and will be glad

to get your boots off. As to Daniel here, I suppose he'd never think of

taking his boots off, unless we showed him a boot-jack.'

'Why not?' asked Daniel, with a significant smile at Clennam.

'Oh! You have so many things to think about,' returned Mr Meagles,

clapping him on the shoulder, as if his weakness must not be left to

itself on any account. 'Figures, and wheels, and cogs, and levers, and

screws, and cylinders, and a thousand things.'

'In my calling,' said Daniel, amused, 'the greater usually includes the

less. But never mind, never mind! Whatever pleases you, pleases me.'

Clennam could not help speculating, as he seated himself in his room

by the fire, whether there might be in the breast of this honest,

affectionate, and cordial Mr Meagles, any microscopic portion of

the mustard-seed that had sprung up into the great tree of the

Circumlocution Office. His curious sense of a general superiority to

Daniel Doyce, which seemed to be founded, not so much on anything

in Doyce's personal character as on the mere fact of his being an

originator and a man out of the beaten track of other men, suggested the

idea. It might have occupied him until he went down to dinner an hour

afterwards, if he had not had another question to consider, which

had been in his mind so long ago as before he was in quarantine at

Marseilles, and which had now returned to it, and was very urgent with

it. No less a question than this: Whether he should allow himself to

fall in love with Pet?

He was twice her age. (He changed the leg he had crossed over the other,

and tried the calculation again, but could not bring out the total at

less.) He was twice her age. Well! He was young in appearance, young

in health and strength, young in heart. A man was certainly not old

at forty; and many men were not in circumstances to marry, or did not

marry, until they had attained that time of life. On the other hand, the

question was, not what he thought of the point, but what she thought of

it.

He believed that Mr Meagles was disposed to entertain a ripe regard for

him, and he knew that he had a sincere regard for Mr Meagles and his

good wife. He could foresee that to relinquish this beautiful only

child, of whom they were so fond, to any husband, would be a trial

of their love which perhaps they never yet had had the fortitude to

contemplate. But the more beautiful and winning and charming she, the

nearer they must always be to the necessity of approaching it. And why

not in his favour, as well as in another's?

When he had got so far, it came again into his head that the question

was, not what they thought of it, but what she thought of it.

Arthur Clennam was a retiring man, with a sense of many deficiencies;

and he so exalted the merits of the beautiful Minnie in his mind, and

depressed his own, that when he pinned himself to this point, his hopes

began to fail him. He came to the final resolution, as he made himself

ready for dinner, that he would not allow himself to fall in love with

Pet.

There were only five, at a round table, and it was very pleasant indeed.

They had so many places and people to recall, and they were all so easy

and cheerful together (Daniel Doyce either sitting out like an amused

spectator at cards, or coming in with some shrewd little experiences of

his own, when it happened to be to the purpose), that they might have

been together twenty times, and not have known so much of one another.

'And Miss Wade,' said Mr Meagles, after they had recalled a number of

fellow-travellers. 'Has anybody seen Miss Wade?'

'I have,' said Tattycoram.

She had brought a little mantle which her young mistress had sent for,

and was bending over her, putting it on, when she lifted up her dark

eyes and made this unexpected answer.

'Tatty!' her young mistress exclaimed. 'You seen Miss Wade?--where?'

'Here, miss,' said Tattycoram.

'How?'

An impatient glance from Tattycoram seemed, as Clennam saw it, to answer

'With my eyes!' But her only answer in words was: 'I met her near the

church.'

'What was she doing there I wonder!' said Mr Meagles. 'Not going to it,

I should think.'

'She had written to me first,' said Tattycoram.

'Oh, Tatty!' murmured her mistress, 'take your hands away. I feel as if

some one else was touching me!'

She said it in a quick involuntary way, but half playfully, and not more

petulantly or disagreeably than a favourite child might have done, who

laughed next moment. Tattycoram set her full red lips together, and

crossed her arms upon her bosom. 'Did you wish to know, sir,' she said,

looking at Mr Meagles, 'what Miss Wade wrote to me about?'

'Well, Tattycoram,' returned Mr Meagles, 'since you ask the question,

and we are all friends here, perhaps you may as well mention it, if you

are so inclined.'

'She knew, when we were travelling, where you lived,' said Tattycoram,

'and she had seen me not quite--not quite--'

'Not quite in a good temper, Tattycoram?' suggested Mr Meagles,

shaking his head at the dark eyes with a quiet caution. 'Take a little

time--count five-and-twenty, Tattycoram.'

She pressed her lips together again, and took a long deep breath.

'So she wrote to me to say that if I ever felt myself hurt,' she looked

down at her young mistress, 'or found myself worried,' she looked down

at her again, 'I might go to her, and be considerately treated. I was

to think of it, and could speak to her by the church. So I went there to

thank her.'

'Tatty,' said her young mistress, putting her hand up over her shoulder

that the other might take it, 'Miss Wade almost frightened me when we

parted, and I scarcely like to think of her just now as having been so

near me without my knowing it. Tatty dear!'

Tatty stood for a moment, immovable.

'Hey?' cried Mr Meagles. 'Count another five-and-twenty, Tattycoram.'

She might have counted a dozen, when she bent and put her lips to the

caressing hand. It patted her cheek, as it touched the owner's beautiful

curls, and Tattycoram went away.

'Now there,' said Mr Meagles softly, as he gave a turn to the

dumb-waiter on his right hand to twirl the sugar towards himself.

'There's a girl who might be lost and ruined, if she wasn't among

practical people. Mother and I know, solely from being practical, that

there are times when that girl's whole nature seems to roughen itself

against seeing us so bound up in Pet. No father and mother were bound

up in her, poor soul. I don't like to think of the way in which that

unfortunate child, with all that passion and protest in her, feels when

she hears the Fifth Commandment on a Sunday. I am always inclined to

call out, Church, Count five-and-twenty, Tattycoram.'

Besides his dumb-waiter, Mr Meagles had two other not dumb waiters in

the persons of two parlour-maids with rosy faces and bright eyes, who

were a highly ornamental part of the table decoration. 'And why not, you

see?' said Mr Meagles on this head. 'As I always say to Mother, why

not have something pretty to look at, if you have anything at all?' A

certain Mrs Tickit, who was Cook and Housekeeper when the family were

at home, and Housekeeper only when the family were away, completed the

establishment. Mr Meagles regretted that the nature of the duties in

which she was engaged, rendered Mrs Tickit unpresentable at present,

but hoped to introduce her to the new visitor to-morrow. She was an

important part of the Cottage, he said, and all his friends knew her.

That was her picture up in the corner. When they went away, she always

put on the silk-gown and the jet-black row of curls represented in that

portrait (her hair was reddish-grey in the kitchen), established herself

in the breakfast-room, put her spectacles between two particular leaves

of Doctor Buchan's Domestic Medicine, and sat looking over the blind all

day until they came back again. It was supposed that no persuasion could

be invented which would induce Mrs Tickit to abandon her post at the

blind, however long their absence, or to dispense with the attendance

of Dr Buchan; the lucubrations of which learned practitioner, Mr Meagles

implicitly believed she had never yet consulted to the extent of one

word in her life.

In the evening they played an old-fashioned rubber; and Pet sat looking

over her father's hand, or singing to herself by fits and starts at the

piano. She was a spoilt child; but how could she be otherwise? Who could

be much with so pliable and beautiful a creature, and not yield to her

endearing influence? Who could pass an evening in the house, and not

love her for the grace and charm of her very presence in the room? This

was Clennam's reflection, notwithstanding the final conclusion at which

he had arrived up-stairs.

In making it, he revoked. 'Why, what are you thinking of, my good sir?'

asked the astonished Mr Meagles, who was his partner.

'I beg your pardon. Nothing,' returned Clennam.

'Think of something, next time; that's a dear fellow,' said Mr Meagles.

Pet laughingly believed he had been thinking of Miss Wade.

'Why of Miss Wade, Pet?' asked her father.

'Why, indeed!' said Arthur Clennam.

Pet coloured a little, and went to the piano again.

As they broke up for the night, Arthur overheard Doyce ask his host if

he could give him half an hour's conversation before breakfast in the

morning? The host replying willingly, Arthur lingered behind a moment,

having his own word to add to that topic.

'Mr Meagles,' he said, on their being left alone, 'do you remember when

you advised me to go straight to London?'

'Perfectly well.' 'And when you gave me some other good advice which I

needed at that time?'

'I won't say what it was worth,' answered Mr Meagles: 'but of course I

remember our being very pleasant and confidential together.'

'I have acted on your advice; and having disembarrassed myself of an

occupation that was painful to me for many reasons, wish to devote

myself and what means I have, to another pursuit.'

'Right! You can't do it too soon,' said Mr Meagles.

'Now, as I came down to-day, I found that your friend, Mr Doyce, is

looking for a partner in his business--not a partner in his mechanical

knowledge, but in the ways and means of turning the business arising

from it to the best account.'

'Just so,' said Mr Meagles, with his hands in his pockets, and with

the old business expression of face that had belonged to the scales and

scoop.

'Mr Doyce mentioned incidentally, in the course of our conversation,

that he was going to take your valuable advice on the subject of finding

such a partner. If you should think our views and opportunities at all

likely to coincide, perhaps you will let him know my available position.

I speak, of course, in ignorance of the details, and they may be

unsuitable on both sides.'

'No doubt, no doubt,' said Mr Meagles, with the caution belonging to the

scales and scoop.

'But they will be a question of figures and accounts--'

'Just so, just so,' said Mr Meagles, with arithmetical solidity

belonging to the scales and scoop.

'--And I shall be glad to enter into the subject, provided Mr Doyce

responds, and you think well of it. If you will at present, therefore,

allow me to place it in your hands, you will much oblige me.'

'Clennam, I accept the trust with readiness,' said Mr Meagles. 'And

without anticipating any of the points which you, as a man of business,

have of course reserved, I am free to say to you that I think something

may come of this. Of one thing you may be perfectly certain. Daniel is

an honest man.'

'I am so sure of it that I have promptly made up my mind to speak to

you.' 'You must guide him, you know; you must steer him; you must direct

him; he is one of a crotchety sort,' said Mr Meagles, evidently meaning

nothing more than that he did new things and went new ways; 'but he is

as honest as the sun, and so good night!' Clennam went back to his room,

sat down again before his fire, and made up his mind that he was glad

he had resolved not to fall in love with Pet. She was so beautiful,

so amiable, so apt to receive any true impression given to her gentle

nature and her innocent heart, and make the man who should be so happy

as to communicate it, the most fortunate and enviable of all men, that

he was very glad indeed he had come to that conclusion.

But, as this might have been a reason for coming to the opposite

conclusion, he followed out the theme again a little way in his mind; to

justify himself, perhaps.

'Suppose that a man,' so his thoughts ran, 'who had been of age some

twenty years or so; who was a diffident man, from the circumstances of

his youth; who was rather a grave man, from the tenor of his life; who

knew himself to be deficient in many little engaging qualities which

he admired in others, from having been long in a distant region, with

nothing softening near him; who had no kind sisters to present to her;

who had no congenial home to make her known in; who was a stranger in

the land; who had not a fortune to compensate, in any measure, for

these defects; who had nothing in his favour but his honest love and his

general wish to do right--suppose such a man were to come to this house,

and were to yield to the captivation of this charming girl, and were to

persuade himself that he could hope to win her; what a weakness it would

be!'

He softly opened his window, and looked out upon the serene river. Year

after year so much allowance for the drifting of the ferry-boat, so

many miles an hour the flowing of the stream, here the rushes, there the

lilies, nothing uncertain or unquiet.

Why should he be vexed or sore at heart? It was not his weakness that he

had imagined. It was nobody's, nobody's within his knowledge; why should

it trouble him? And yet it did trouble him. And he thought--who has not

thought for a moment, sometimes?--that it might be better to flow away

monotonously, like the river, and to compound for its insensibility to

happiness with its insensibility to pain.

CHAPTER 17. Nobody's Rival

Before breakfast in the morning, Arthur walked out to look about him.

As the morning was fine and he had an hour on his hands, he crossed the

river by the ferry, and strolled along a footpath through some meadows.

When he came back to the towing-path, he found the ferry-boat on the

opposite side, and a gentleman hailing it and waiting to be taken over.

This gentleman looked barely thirty. He was well dressed, of a sprightly

and gay appearance, a well-knit figure, and a rich dark complexion. As

Arthur came over the stile and down to the water's edge, the lounger

glanced at him for a moment, and then resumed his occupation of idly

tossing stones into the water with his foot. There was something in his

way of spurning them out of their places with his heel, and getting them

into the required position, that Clennam thought had an air of cruelty

in it. Most of us have more or less frequently derived a similar

impression from a man's manner of doing some very little thing: plucking

a flower, clearing away an obstacle, or even destroying an insentient

object.

The gentleman's thoughts were preoccupied, as his face showed, and he

took no notice of a fine Newfoundland dog, who watched him attentively,

and watched every stone too, in its turn, eager to spring into the

river on receiving his master's sign. The ferry-boat came over, however,

without his receiving any sign, and when it grounded his master took him

by the collar and walked him into it.

'Not this morning,' he said to the dog. 'You won't do for ladies'

company, dripping wet. Lie down.'

Clennam followed the man and the dog into the boat, and took his seat.

The dog did as he was ordered. The man remained standing, with his hands

in his pockets, and towered between Clennam and the prospect. Man and

dog both jumped lightly out as soon as they touched the other side, and

went away. Clennam was glad to be rid of them.

The church clock struck the breakfast hour as he walked up the little

lane by which the garden-gate was approached. The moment he pulled the

bell a deep loud barking assailed him from within the wall.

'I heard no dog last night,' thought Clennam. The gate was opened by

one of the rosy maids, and on the lawn were the Newfoundland dog and the

man.

'Miss Minnie is not down yet, gentlemen,' said the blushing portress, as

they all came together in the garden. Then she said to the master of the

dog, 'Mr Clennam, sir,' and tripped away.

'Odd enough, Mr Clennam, that we should have met just now,' said

the man. Upon which the dog became mute. 'Allow me to introduce

myself--Henry Gowan. A pretty place this, and looks wonderfully well

this morning!'

The manner was easy, and the voice agreeable; but still Clennam thought,

that if he had not made that decided resolution to avoid falling in love

with Pet, he would have taken a dislike to this Henry Gowan.

'It's new to you, I believe?' said this Gowan, when Arthur had extolled

the place. 'Quite new. I made acquaintance with it only yesterday

afternoon.'

'Ah! Of course this is not its best aspect. It used to look charming in

the spring, before they went away last time. I should like you to have

seen it then.'

But for that resolution so often recalled, Clennam might have wished him

in the crater of Mount Etna, in return for this civility.

'I have had the pleasure of seeing it under many circumstances during

the last three years, and it's--a Paradise.'

It was (at least it might have been, always excepting for that wise

resolution) like his dexterous impudence to call it a Paradise. He only

called it a Paradise because he first saw her coming, and so made her

out within her hearing to be an angel, Confusion to him! And ah! how

beaming she looked, and how glad! How she caressed the dog, and how the

dog knew her! How expressive that heightened colour in her face, that

fluttered manner, her downcast eyes, her irresolute happiness! When had

Clennam seen her look like this? Not that there was any reason why he

might, could, would, or should have ever seen her look like this,

or that he had ever hoped for himself to see her look like this; but

still--when had he ever known her do it!

He stood at a little distance from them. This Gowan when he had talked

about a Paradise, had gone up to her and taken her hand. The dog had put

his great paws on her arm and laid his head against her dear bosom. She

had laughed and welcomed them, and made far too much of the dog, far,

far, too much--that is to say, supposing there had been any third person

looking on who loved her.

She disengaged herself now, and came to Clennam, and put her hand in his

and wished him good morning, and gracefully made as if she would take

his arm and be escorted into the house. To this Gowan had no objection.

No, he knew he was too safe.

There was a passing cloud on Mr Meagles's good-humoured face when they

all three (four, counting the dog, and he was the most objectionable

but one of the party) came in to breakfast. Neither it, nor the touch

of uneasiness on Mrs Meagles as she directed her eyes towards it, was

unobserved by Clennam.

'Well, Gowan,' said Mr Meagles, even suppressing a sigh; 'how goes the

world with you this morning?'

'Much as usual, sir. Lion and I being determined not to waste anything

of our weekly visit, turned out early, and came over from Kingston, my

present headquarters, where I am making a sketch or two.' Then he told

how he had met Mr Clennam at the ferry, and they had come over together.

'Mrs Gowan is well, Henry?' said Mrs Meagles. (Clennam became

attentive.)

'My mother is quite well, thank you.' (Clennam became inattentive.) 'I

have taken the liberty of making an addition to your family dinner-party

to-day, which I hope will not be inconvenient to you or to Mr Meagles. I

couldn't very well get out of it,' he explained, turning to the latter.

'The young fellow wrote to propose himself to me; and as he is well

connected, I thought you would not object to my transferring him here.'

'Who is the young fellow?' asked Mr Meagles with peculiar complacency.

'He is one of the Barnacles. Tite Barnacle's son, Clarence Barnacle, who

is in his father's Department. I can at least guarantee that the river

shall not suffer from his visit. He won't set it on fire.'

'Aye, aye?' said Meagles. 'A Barnacle is he? We know something of that

family, eh, Dan? By George, they are at the top of the tree, though! Let

me see. What relation will this young fellow be to Lord Decimus now? His

Lordship married, in seventeen ninety-seven, Lady Jemima Bilberry, who

was the second daughter by the third marriage--no! There I am wrong!

That was Lady Seraphina--Lady Jemima was the first daughter by the

second marriage of the fifteenth Earl of Stiltstalking with the

Honourable Clementina Toozellem. Very well. Now this young fellow's

father married a Stiltstalking and his father married his cousin who was

a Barnacle.

The father of that father who married a Barnacle, married a Joddleby.--I

am getting a little too far back, Gowan; I want to make out what

relation this young fellow is to Lord Decimus.'

'That's easily stated. His father is nephew to Lord Decimus.'

'Nephew--to--Lord--Decimus,' Mr Meagles luxuriously repeated with his

eyes shut, that he might have nothing to distract him from the full

flavour of the genealogical tree. 'By George, you are right, Gowan. So

he is.'

'Consequently, Lord Decimus is his great uncle.'

'But stop a bit!' said Mr Meagles, opening his eyes with a fresh

discovery. 'Then on the mother's side, Lady Stiltstalking is his great

aunt.'

'Of course she is.'

'Aye, aye, aye?' said Mr Meagles with much interest. 'Indeed, indeed? We

shall be glad to see him. We'll entertain him as well as we can, in our

humble way; and we shall not starve him, I hope, at all events.'

In the beginning of this dialogue, Clennam had expected some great

harmless outburst from Mr Meagles, like that which had made him burst

out of the Circumlocution Office, holding Doyce by the collar. But his

good friend had a weakness which none of us need go into the next street

to find, and which no amount of Circumlocution experience could long

subdue in him. Clennam looked at Doyce; but Doyce knew all about it

beforehand, and looked at his plate, and made no sign, and said no word.

'I am much obliged to you,' said Gowan, to conclude the subject.

'Clarence is a great ass, but he is one of the dearest and best fellows

that ever lived!'

It appeared, before the breakfast was over, that everybody whom this

Gowan knew was either more or less of an ass, or more or less of a

knave; but was, notwithstanding, the most lovable, the most engaging,

the simplest, truest, kindest, dearest, best fellow that ever lived.

The process by which this unvarying result was attained, whatever the

premises, might have been stated by Mr Henry Gowan thus: 'I claim to be

always book-keeping, with a peculiar nicety, in every man's case, and

posting up a careful little account of Good and Evil with him. I do

this so conscientiously, that I am happy to tell you I find the most

worthless of men to be the dearest old fellow too: and am in a condition

to make the gratifying report, that there is much less difference than

you are inclined to suppose between an honest man and a scoundrel.' The

effect of this cheering discovery happened to be, that while he seemed

to be scrupulously finding good in most men, he did in reality lower

it where it was, and set it up where it was not; but that was its only

disagreeable or dangerous feature.

It scarcely seemed, however, to afford Mr Meagles as much satisfaction

as the Barnacle genealogy had done. The cloud that Clennam had never

seen upon his face before that morning, frequently overcast it again;

and there was the same shadow of uneasy observation of him on the comely

face of his wife. More than once or twice when Pet caressed the dog,

it appeared to Clennam that her father was unhappy in seeing her do it;

and, in one particular instance when Gowan stood on the other side of

the dog, and bent his head at the same time, Arthur fancied that he saw

tears rise to Mr Meagles's eyes as he hurried out of the room. It was

either the fact too, or he fancied further, that Pet herself was not

insensible to these little incidents; that she tried, with a more

delicate affection than usual, to express to her good father how much

she loved him; that it was on this account that she fell behind the

rest, both as they went to church and as they returned from it, and

took his arm. He could not have sworn but that as he walked alone in

the garden afterwards, he had an instantaneous glimpse of her in

her father's room, clinging to both her parents with the greatest

tenderness, and weeping on her father's shoulder.

The latter part of the day turning out wet, they were fain to keep the

house, look over Mr Meagles's collection, and beguile the time with

conversation. This Gowan had plenty to say for himself, and said it

in an off-hand and amusing manner. He appeared to be an artist by

profession, and to have been at Rome some time; yet he had a slight,

careless, amateur way with him--a perceptible limp, both in his devotion

to art and his attainments--which Clennam could scarcely understand.

He applied to Daniel Doyce for help, as they stood together, looking out

of window.

'You know Mr Gowan?' he said in a low voice.

'I have seen him here. Comes here every Sunday when they are at home.'

'An artist, I infer from what he says?'

'A sort of a one,' said Daniel Doyce, in a surly tone.

'What sort of a one?' asked Clennam, with a smile.

'Why, he has sauntered into the Arts at a leisurely Pall-Mall pace,'

said Doyce, 'and I doubt if they care to be taken quite so coolly.'

Pursuing his inquiries, Clennam found that the Gowan family were a very

distant ramification of the Barnacles; and that the paternal Gowan,

originally attached to a legation abroad, had been pensioned off as a

Commissioner of nothing particular somewhere or other, and had died at

his post with his drawn salary in his hand, nobly defending it to the

last extremity. In consideration of this eminent public service, the

Barnacle then in power had recommended the Crown to bestow a pension of

two or three hundred a-year on his widow; to which the next Barnacle in

power had added certain shady and sedate apartments in the Palaces at

Hampton Court, where the old lady still lived, deploring the degeneracy

of the times in company with several other old ladies of both sexes. Her

son, Mr Henry Gowan, inheriting from his father, the Commissioner, that

very questionable help in life, a very small independence, had been

difficult to settle; the rather, as public appointments chanced to

be scarce, and his genius, during his earlier manhood, was of that

exclusively agricultural character which applies itself to the

cultivation of wild oats. At last he had declared that he would become

a Painter; partly because he had always had an idle knack that way,

and partly to grieve the souls of the Barnacles-in-chief who had not

provided for him. So it had come to pass successively, first, that

several distinguished ladies had been frightfully shocked; then, that

portfolios of his performances had been handed about o' nights, and

declared with ecstasy to be perfect Claudes, perfect Cuyps, perfect

phaenomena; then, that Lord Decimus had bought his picture, and had

asked the President and Council to dinner at a blow, and had said, with

his own magnificent gravity, 'Do you know, there appears to me to

be really immense merit in that work?' and, in short, that people of

condition had absolutely taken pains to bring him into fashion. But,

somehow, it had all failed. The prejudiced public had stood out against

it obstinately. They had determined not to admire Lord Decimus's

picture. They had determined to believe that in every service, except

their own, a man must qualify himself, by striving early and late, and

by working heart and soul, might and main. So now Mr Gowan, like that

worn-out old coffin which never was Mahomet's nor anybody else's, hung

midway between two points: jaundiced and jealous as to the one he had

left: jaundiced and jealous as to the other that he couldn't reach.

Such was the substance of Clennam's discoveries concerning him, made

that rainy Sunday afternoon and afterwards.

About an hour or so after dinner time, Young Barnacle appeared, attended

by his eye-glass; in honour of whose family connections, Mr Meagles had

cashiered the pretty parlour-maids for the day, and had placed on duty

in their stead two dingy men. Young Barnacle was in the last

degree amazed and disconcerted at sight of Arthur, and had murmured

involuntarily, 'Look here! upon my soul, you know!' before his presence

of mind returned.

Even then, he was obliged to embrace the earliest opportunity of taking

his friend into a window, and saying, in a nasal way that was a part of

his general debility:

'I want to speak to you, Gowan. I say. Look here. Who is that fellow?'

'A friend of our host's. None of mine.'

'He's a most ferocious Radical, you know,' said Young Barnacle.

'Is he? How do you know?'

'Ecod, sir, he was Pitching into our people the other day in the most

tremendous manner. Went up to our place and Pitched into my father to

that extent that it was necessary to order him out. Came back to

our Department, and Pitched into me. Look here. You never saw such a

fellow.'

'What did he want?'

'Ecod, sir,' returned Young Barnacle, 'he said he wanted to know, you

know! Pervaded our Department--without an appointment--and said he

wanted to know!'

The stare of indignant wonder with which Young Barnacle accompanied

this disclosure, would have strained his eyes injuriously but for

the opportune relief of dinner. Mr Meagles (who had been extremely

solicitous to know how his uncle and aunt were) begged him to conduct

Mrs Meagles to the dining-room. And when he sat on Mrs Meagles's right

hand, Mr Meagles looked as gratified as if his whole family were there.

All the natural charm of the previous day was gone. The eaters of the

dinner, like the dinner itself, were lukewarm, insipid, overdone--and

all owing to this poor little dull Young Barnacle. Conversationless at

any time, he was now the victim of a weakness special to the occasion,

and solely referable to Clennam. He was under a pressing and continual

necessity of looking at that gentleman, which occasioned his eye-glass

to get into his soup, into his wine-glass, into Mrs Meagles's plate, to

hang down his back like a bell-rope, and be several times disgracefully

restored to his bosom by one of the dingy men. Weakened in mind by his

frequent losses of this instrument, and its determination not to stick

in his eye, and more and more enfeebled in intellect every time he

looked at the mysterious Clennam, he applied spoons to his eyes,

forks, and other foreign matters connected with the furniture of the

dinner-table. His discovery of these mistakes greatly increased his

difficulties, but never released him from the necessity of looking at

Clennam. And whenever Clennam spoke, this ill-starred young man was

clearly seized with a dread that he was coming, by some artful device,

round to that point of wanting to know, you know.

It may be questioned, therefore, whether any one but Mr Meagles had much

enjoyment of the time. Mr Meagles, however, thoroughly enjoyed Young

Barnacle. As a mere flask of the golden water in the tale became a full

fountain when it was poured out, so Mr Meagles seemed to feel that this

small spice of Barnacle imparted to his table the flavour of the whole

family-tree. In its presence, his frank, fine, genuine qualities

paled; he was not so easy, he was not so natural, he was striving after

something that did not belong to him, he was not himself. What a strange

peculiarity on the part of Mr Meagles, and where should we find another

such case!

At last the wet Sunday wore itself out in a wet night; and Young

Barnacle went home in a cab, feebly smoking; and the objectionable Gowan

went away on foot, accompanied by the objectionable dog. Pet had taken

the most amiable pains all day to be friendly with Clennam, but Clennam

had been a little reserved since breakfast--that is to say, would have

been, if he had loved her.

When he had gone to his own room, and had again thrown himself into the

chair by the fire, Mr Doyce knocked at the door, candle in hand, to

ask him how and at what hour he proposed returning on the morrow? After

settling this question, he said a word to Mr Doyce about this Gowan--who

would have run in his head a good deal, if he had been his rival.

'Those are not good prospects for a painter,' said Clennam.

'No,' returned Doyce.

Mr Doyce stood, chamber-candlestick in hand, the other hand in his

pocket, looking hard at the flame of his candle, with a certain quiet

perception in his face that they were going to say something more. 'I

thought our good friend a little changed, and out of spirits, after he

came this morning?' said Clennam.

'Yes,' returned Doyce.

'But not his daughter?' said Clennam.

'No,' said Doyce.

There was a pause on both sides. Mr Doyce, still looking at the flame of

his candle, slowly resumed:

'The truth is, he has twice taken his daughter abroad in the hope of

separating her from Mr Gowan. He rather thinks she is disposed to like

him, and he has painful doubts (I quite agree with him, as I dare say

you do) of the hopefulness of such a marriage.'

'There--' Clennam choked, and coughed, and stopped.

'Yes, you have taken cold,' said Daniel Doyce. But without looking at

him.

'There is an engagement between them, of course?' said Clennam airily.

'No. As I am told, certainly not. It has been solicited on the

gentleman's part, but none has been made. Since their recent return,

our friend has yielded to a weekly visit, but that is the utmost. Minnie

would not deceive her father and mother. You have travelled with them,

and I believe you know what a bond there is among them, extending even

beyond this present life. All that there is between Miss Minnie and Mr

Gowan, I have no doubt we see.'

'Ah! We see enough!' cried Arthur.

Mr Doyce wished him Good Night in the tone of a man who had heard a

mournful, not to say despairing, exclamation, and who sought to infuse

some encouragement and hope into the mind of the person by whom it had

been uttered. Such tone was probably a part of his oddity, as one of

a crotchety band; for how could he have heard anything of that kind,

without Clennam's hearing it too?

The rain fell heavily on the roof, and pattered on the ground, and

dripped among the evergreens and the leafless branches of the trees. The

rain fell heavily, drearily. It was a night of tears.

If Clennam had not decided against falling in love with Pet; if he

had had the weakness to do it; if he had, little by little, persuaded

himself to set all the earnestness of his nature, all the might of his

hope, and all the wealth of his matured character, on that cast; if

he had done this and found that all was lost; he would have been,

that night, unutterably miserable. As it was--As it was, the rain fell

heavily, drearily.

CHAPTER 18. Little Dorrit's Lover

Little Dorrit had not attained her twenty-second birthday without

finding a lover. Even in the shallow Marshalsea, the ever young Archer

shot off a few featherless arrows now and then from a mouldy bow, and

winged a Collegian or two.

Little Dorrit's lover, however, was not a Collegian. He was the

sentimental son of a turnkey. His father hoped, in the fulness of time,

to leave him the inheritance of an unstained key; and had from his

early youth familiarised him with the duties of his office, and with an

ambition to retain the prison-lock in the family. While the succession

was yet in abeyance, he assisted his mother in the conduct of a snug

tobacco business round the corner of Horsemonger Lane (his father being

a non-resident turnkey), which could usually command a neat connection

within the College walls.

Years agone, when the object of his affections was wont to sit in her

little arm-chair by the high Lodge-fender, Young John (family name,

Chivery), a year older than herself, had eyed her with admiring wonder.

When he had played with her in the yard, his favourite game had been to

counterfeit locking her up in corners, and to counterfeit letting

her out for real kisses. When he grew tall enough to peep through the

keyhole of the great lock of the main door, he had divers times set down

his father's dinner, or supper, to get on as it might on the outer side

thereof, while he stood taking cold in one eye by dint of peeping at her

through that airy perspective.

If Young John had ever slackened in his truth in the less penetrable

days of his boyhood, when youth is prone to wear its boots unlaced and

is happily unconscious of digestive organs, he had soon strung it up

again and screwed it tight. At nineteen, his hand had inscribed in chalk

on that part of the wall which fronted her lodgings, on the occasion of

her birthday, 'Welcome sweet nursling of the Fairies!' At twenty-three,

the same hand falteringly presented cigars on Sundays to the Father of

the Marshalsea, and Father of the queen of his soul.

Young John was small of stature, with rather weak legs and very weak

light hair. One of his eyes (perhaps the eye that used to peep through

the keyhole) was also weak, and looked larger than the other, as if

it couldn't collect itself. Young John was gentle likewise. But he was

great of soul. Poetical, expansive, faithful.

Though too humble before the ruler of his heart to be sanguine, Young

John had considered the object of his attachment in all its lights and

shades. Following it out to blissful results, he had descried, without

self-commendation, a fitness in it. Say things prospered, and they were

united. She, the child of the Marshalsea; he, the lock-keeper. There

was a fitness in that. Say he became a resident turnkey. She would

officially succeed to the chamber she had rented so long. There was a

beautiful propriety in that. It looked over the wall, if you stood on

tip-toe; and, with a trellis-work of scarlet beans and a canary or so,

would become a very Arbour. There was a charming idea in that. Then,

being all in all to one another, there was even an appropriate grace in

the lock. With the world shut out (except that part of it which would

be shut in); with its troubles and disturbances only known to them by

hearsay, as they would be described by the pilgrims tarrying with them

on their way to the Insolvent Shrine; with the Arbour above, and the

Lodge below; they would glide down the stream of time, in pastoral

domestic happiness. Young John drew tears from his eyes by finishing the

picture with a tombstone in the adjoining churchyard, close against the

prison wall, bearing the following touching inscription: 'Sacred to

the Memory Of JOHN CHIVERY, Sixty years Turnkey, and fifty years

Head Turnkey, Of the neighbouring Marshalsea, Who departed this life,

universally respected, on the thirty-first of December, One thousand

eight hundred and eighty-six, Aged eighty-three years. Also of his truly

beloved and truly loving wife, AMY, whose maiden name was DORRIT, Who

survived his loss not quite forty-eight hours, And who breathed her last

in the Marshalsea aforesaid. There she was born, There she lived, There

she died.'

The Chivery parents were not ignorant of their son's attachment--indeed

it had, on some exceptional occasions, thrown him into a state of mind

that had impelled him to conduct himself with irascibility towards the

customers, and damage the business--but they, in their turns, had worked

it out to desirable conclusions. Mrs Chivery, a prudent woman, had

desired her husband to take notice that their john's prospects of the

Lock would certainly be strengthened by an alliance with Miss Dorrit,

who had herself a kind of claim upon the College and was much respected

there. Mrs Chivery had desired her husband to take notice that if, on

the one hand, their John had means and a post of trust, on the other

hand, Miss Dorrit had family; and that her (Mrs Chivery's) sentiment

was, that two halves made a whole. Mrs Chivery, speaking as a mother and

not as a diplomatist, had then, from a different point of view, desired

her husband to recollect that their John had never been strong, and

that his love had fretted and worrited him enough as it was, without

his being driven to do himself a mischief, as nobody couldn't say

he wouldn't be if he was crossed. These arguments had so powerfully

influenced the mind of Mr Chivery, who was a man of few words, that he

had on sundry Sunday mornings, given his boy what he termed 'a lucky

touch,' signifying that he considered such commendation of him to Good

Fortune, preparatory to his that day declaring his passion and

becoming triumphant. But Young John had never taken courage to make

the declaration; and it was principally on these occasions that he had

returned excited to the tobacco shop, and flown at the customers. In

this affair, as in every other, Little Dorrit herself was the last

person considered. Her brother and sister were aware of it, and attained

a sort of station by making a peg of it on which to air the miserably

ragged old fiction of the family gentility. Her sister asserted the

family gentility by flouting the poor swain as he loitered about the

prison for glimpses of his dear. Tip asserted the family gentility, and

his own, by coming out in the character of the aristocratic brother, and

loftily swaggering in the little skittle ground respecting seizures by

the scruff of the neck, which there were looming probabilities of some

gentleman unknown executing on some little puppy not mentioned. These

were not the only members of the Dorrit family who turned it to account.

No, no. The Father of the Marshalsea was supposed to know nothing about

the matter, of course: his poor dignity could not see so low.

But he took the cigars, on Sundays, and was glad to get them; and

sometimes even condescended to walk up and down the yard with the donor

(who was proud and hopeful then), and benignantly to smoke one in

his society. With no less readiness and condescension did he receive

attentions from Chivery Senior, who always relinquished his arm-chair

and newspaper to him, when he came into the Lodge during one of his

spells of duty; and who had even mentioned to him, that, if he would

like at any time after dusk quietly to step out into the fore-court and

take a look at the street, there was not much to prevent him. If he did

not avail himself of this latter civility, it was only because he had

lost the relish for it; inasmuch as he took everything else he could

get, and would say at times, 'Extremely civil person, Chivery; very

attentive man and very respectful. Young Chivery, too; really almost

with a delicate perception of one's position here. A very well conducted

family indeed, the Chiveries. Their behaviour gratifies me.'

The devoted Young John all this time regarded the family with reverence.

He never dreamed of disputing their pretensions, but did homage to the

miserable Mumbo jumbo they paraded. As to resenting any affront from her

brother, he would have felt, even if he had not naturally been of a most

pacific disposition, that to wag his tongue or lift his hand against

that sacred gentleman would be an unhallowed act. He was sorry that

his noble mind should take offence; still, he felt the fact to be not

incompatible with its nobility, and sought to propitiate and conciliate

that gallant soul. Her father, a gentleman in misfortune--a gentleman of

a fine spirit and courtly manners, who always bore with him--he deeply

honoured. Her sister he considered somewhat vain and proud, but a young

lady of infinite accomplishments, who could not forget the past. It was

an instinctive testimony to Little Dorrit's worth and difference from

all the rest, that the poor young fellow honoured and loved her for

being simply what she was.

The tobacco business round the corner of Horsemonger Lane was carried

out in a rural establishment one story high, which had the benefit of

the air from the yards of Horsemonger Lane jail, and the advantage of a

retired walk under the wall of that pleasant establishment. The business

was of too modest a character to support a life-size Highlander, but it

maintained a little one on a bracket on the door-post, who looked like

a fallen Cherub that had found it necessary to take to a kilt. From the

portal thus decorated, one Sunday after an early dinner of baked viands,

Young John issued forth on his usual Sunday errand; not empty-handed,

but with his offering of cigars. He was neatly attired in a

plum-coloured coat, with as large a collar of black velvet as his figure

could carry; a silken waistcoat, bedecked with golden sprigs; a chaste

neckerchief much in vogue at that day, representing a preserve of

lilac pheasants on a buff ground; pantaloons so highly decorated with

side-stripes that each leg was a three-stringed lute; and a hat of

state very high and hard. When the prudent Mrs Chivery perceived that

in addition to these adornments her John carried a pair of white kid

gloves, and a cane like a little finger-post, surmounted by an ivory

hand marshalling him the way that he should go; and when she saw him, in

this heavy marching order, turn the corner to the right; she remarked to

Mr Chivery, who was at home at the time, that she thought she knew which

way the wind blew.

The Collegians were entertaining a considerable number of visitors that

Sunday afternoon, and their Father kept his room for the purpose of

receiving presentations. After making the tour of the yard, Little

Dorrit's lover with a hurried heart went up-stairs, and knocked with his

knuckles at the Father's door.

'Come in, come in!' said a gracious voice. The Father's voice, her

father's, the Marshalsea's father's. He was seated in his black velvet

cap, with his newspaper, three-and-sixpence accidentally left on the

table, and two chairs arranged. Everything prepared for holding his

Court.

'Ah, Young John! How do you do, how do you do!'

'Pretty well, I thank you, sir. I hope you are the same.'

'Yes, John Chivery; yes. Nothing to complain of.'

'I have taken the liberty, sir, of--'

'Eh?' The Father of the Marshalsea always lifted up his eyebrows at this

point, and became amiably distraught and smilingly absent in mind.

'--A few cigars, sir.'

'Oh!' (For the moment, excessively surprised.) 'Thank you, Young John,

thank you. But really, I am afraid I am too--No? Well then, I will say

no more about it. Put them on the mantelshelf, if you please, Young

John. And sit down, sit down. You are not a stranger, John.'

'Thank you, sir, I am sure--Miss;' here Young John turned the great hat

round and round upon his left-hand, like a slowly twirling mouse-cage;

'Miss Amy quite well, sir?' 'Yes, John, yes; very well. She is out.'

'Indeed, sir?'

'Yes, John. Miss Amy is gone for an airing. My young people all go out a

good deal. But at their time of life, it's natural, John.'

'Very much so, I am sure, sir.'

'An airing. An airing. Yes.' He was blandly tapping his fingers on

the table, and casting his eyes up at the window. 'Amy has gone for

an airing on the Iron Bridge. She has become quite partial to the Iron

Bridge of late, and seems to like to walk there better than anywhere.'

He returned to conversation. 'Your father is not on duty at present, I

think, John?'

'No, sir, he comes on later in the afternoon.' Another twirl of the

great hat, and then Young John said, rising, 'I am afraid I must wish

you good day, sir.'

'So soon? Good day, Young John. Nay, nay,' with the utmost

condescension, 'never mind your glove, John. Shake hands with it on. You

are no stranger here, you know.'

Highly gratified by the kindness of his reception, Young John descended

the staircase. On his way down he met some Collegians bringing up

visitors to be presented, and at that moment Mr Dorrit happened to call

over the banisters with particular distinctness, 'Much obliged to you

for your little testimonial, John!'

Little Dorrit's lover very soon laid down his penny on the tollplate of

the Iron Bridge, and came upon it looking about him for the well-known

and well-beloved figure. At first he feared she was not there; but as he

walked on towards the Middlesex side, he saw her standing still, looking

at the water. She was absorbed in thought, and he wondered what

she might be thinking about. There were the piles of city roofs and

chimneys, more free from smoke than on week-days; and there were the

distant masts and steeples. Perhaps she was thinking about them.

Little Dorrit mused so long, and was so entirely preoccupied, that

although her lover stood quiet for what he thought was a long time, and

twice or thrice retired and came back again to the former spot, still

she did not move. So, in the end, he made up his mind to go on, and seem

to come upon her casually in passing, and speak to her. The place was

quiet, and now or never was the time to speak to her.

He walked on, and she did not appear to hear his steps until he was

close upon her. When he said 'Miss Dorrit!' she started and fell back

from him, with an expression in her face of fright and something like

dislike that caused him unutterable dismay. She had often avoided him

before--always, indeed, for a long, long while. She had turned away and

glided off so often when she had seen him coming toward her, that the

unfortunate Young John could not think it accidental. But he had hoped

that it might be shyness, her retiring character, her foreknowledge of

the state of his heart, anything short of aversion. Now, that momentary

look had said, 'You, of all people! I would rather have seen any one on

earth than you!'

It was but a momentary look, inasmuch as she checked it, and said in her

soft little voice, 'Oh, Mr John! Is it you?' But she felt what it had

been, as he felt what it had been; and they stood looking at one another

equally confused.

'Miss Amy, I am afraid I disturbed you by speaking to you.'

'Yes, rather. I--I came here to be alone, and I thought I was.'

'Miss Amy, I took the liberty of walking this way, because Mr Dorrit

chanced to mention, when I called upon him just now, that you--'

She caused him more dismay than before by suddenly murmuring, 'O father,

father!' in a heartrending tone, and turning her face away.

'Miss Amy, I hope I don't give you any uneasiness by naming Mr Dorrit.

I assure you I found him very well and in the best of Spirits, and he

showed me even more than his usual kindness; being so very kind as to

say that I was not a stranger there, and in all ways gratifying me very

much.'

To the inexpressible consternation of her lover, Little Dorrit, with her

hands to her averted face, and rocking herself where she stood as if she

were in pain, murmured, 'O father, how can you! O dear, dear father, how

can you, can you, do it!'

The poor fellow stood gazing at her, overflowing with sympathy, but not

knowing what to make of this, until, having taken out her handkerchief

and put it to her still averted face, she hurried away. At first he

remained stock still; then hurried after her.

'Miss Amy, pray! Will you have the goodness to stop a moment? Miss Amy,

if it comes to that, let ME go. I shall go out of my senses, if I have

to think that I have driven you away like this.'

His trembling voice and unfeigned earnestness brought Little Dorrit to

a stop. 'Oh, I don't know what to do,' she cried, 'I don't know what to

do!'

To Young John, who had never seen her bereft of her quiet self-command,

who had seen her from her infancy ever so reliable and self-suppressed,

there was a shock in her distress, and in having to associate himself

with it as its cause, that shook him from his great hat to the

pavement. He felt it necessary to explain himself. He might be

misunderstood--supposed to mean something, or to have done something,

that had never entered into his imagination. He begged her to hear him

explain himself, as the greatest favour she could show him.

'Miss Amy, I know very well that your family is far above mine. It were

vain to conceal it. There never was a Chivery a gentleman that ever

I heard of, and I will not commit the meanness of making a false

representation on a subject so momentous. Miss Amy, I know very well

that your high-souled brother, and likewise your spirited sister, spurn

me from a height. What I have to do is to respect them, to wish to be

admitted to their friendship, to look up at the eminence on which they

are placed from my lowlier station--for, whether viewed as tobacco or

viewed as the lock, I well know it is lowly--and ever wish them well and

happy.'

There really was a genuineness in the poor fellow, and a contrast

between the hardness of his hat and the softness of his heart (albeit,

perhaps, of his head, too), that was moving. Little Dorrit entreated him

to disparage neither himself nor his station, and, above all things, to

divest himself of any idea that she supposed hers to be superior. This

gave him a little comfort.

'Miss Amy,' he then stammered, 'I have had for a long time--ages they

seem to me--Revolving ages--a heart-cherished wish to say something to

you. May I say it?'

Little Dorrit involuntarily started from his side again, with the

faintest shadow of her former look; conquering that, she went on at

great speed half across the Bridge without replying!

'May I--Miss Amy, I but ask the question humbly--may I say it? I have

been so unlucky already in giving you pain without having any such

intentions, before the holy Heavens! that there is no fear of my saying

it unless I have your leave. I can be miserable alone, I can be cut up

by myself, why should I also make miserable and cut up one that I would

fling myself off that parapet to give half a moment's joy to! Not that

that's much to do, for I'd do it for twopence.'

The mournfulness of his spirits, and the gorgeousness of his appearance,

might have made him ridiculous, but that his delicacy made him

respectable. Little Dorrit learnt from it what to do.

'If you please, John Chivery,' she returned, trembling, but in a quiet

way, 'since you are so considerate as to ask me whether you shall say

any more--if you please, no.'

'Never, Miss Amy?'

'No, if you please. Never.'

'O Lord!' gasped Young John.

'But perhaps you will let me, instead, say something to you. I want

to say it earnestly, and with as plain a meaning as it is possible to

express. When you think of us, John--I mean my brother, and sister,

and me--don't think of us as being any different from the rest; for,

whatever we once were (which I hardly know) we ceased to be long ago,

and never can be any more. It will be much better for you, and much

better for others, if you will do that instead of what you are doing

now.'

Young John dolefully protested that he would try to bear it in mind, and

would be heartily glad to do anything she wished.

'As to me,' said Little Dorrit, 'think as little of me as you can; the

less, the better. When you think of me at all, John, let it only be as

the child you have seen grow up in the prison with one set of duties

always occupying her; as a weak, retired, contented, unprotected girl. I

particularly want you to remember, that when I come outside the gate, I

am unprotected and solitary.'

He would try to do anything she wished. But why did Miss Amy so much

want him to remember that?

'Because,' returned Little Dorrit, 'I know I can then quite trust you

not to forget to-day, and not to say any more to me. You are so generous

that I know I can trust to you for that; and I do and I always will. I

am going to show you, at once, that I fully trust you. I like this place

where we are speaking better than any place I know;' her slight colour

had faded, but her lover thought he saw it coming back just then; 'and I

may be often here. I know it is only necessary for me to tell you so, to

be quite sure that you will never come here again in search of me. And I

am--quite sure!'

She might rely upon it, said Young John. He was a miserable wretch, but

her word was more than a law for him.

'And good-bye, John,' said Little Dorrit. 'And I hope you will have a

good wife one day, and be a happy man. I am sure you will deserve to be

happy, and you will be, John.'

As she held out her hand to him with these words, the heart that was

under the waistcoat of sprigs--mere slop-work, if the truth must be

known--swelled to the size of the heart of a gentleman; and the poor

common little fellow, having no room to hold it, burst into tears.

'Oh, don't cry,' said Little Dorrit piteously. 'Don't, don't! Good-bye,

John. God bless you!'

'Good-bye, Miss Amy. Good-bye!'

And so he left her: first observing that she sat down on the corner of a

seat, and not only rested her little hand upon the rough wall, but laid

her face against it too, as if her head were heavy, and her mind were

sad. It was an affecting illustration of the fallacy of human projects,

to behold her lover, with the great hat pulled over his eyes, the velvet

collar turned up as if it rained, the plum-coloured coat buttoned

to conceal the silken waistcoat of golden sprigs, and the little

direction-post pointing inexorably home, creeping along by the worst

back-streets, and composing, as he went, the following new inscription

for a tombstone in St George's Churchyard:

'Here lie the mortal remains Of JOHN CHIVERY, Never anything worth

mentioning, Who died about the end of the year one thousand eight

hundred and twenty-six, Of a broken heart, Requesting with his last

breath that the word AMY might be inscribed over his ashes, which was

accordingly directed to be done, By his afflicted Parents.'

CHAPTER 19. The Father of the Marshalsea in two or three Relations

The brothers William and Frederick Dorrit, walking up and down the

College-yard--of course on the aristocratic or Pump side, for the Father

made it a point of his state to be chary of going among his children

on the Poor side, except on Sunday mornings, Christmas Days, and other

occasions of ceremony, in the observance whereof he was very punctual,

and at which times he laid his hand upon the heads of their infants,

and blessed those young insolvents with a benignity that was highly

edifying--the brothers, walking up and down the College-yard together,

were a memorable sight. Frederick the free, was so humbled, bowed,

withered, and faded; William the bond, was so courtly, condescending,

and benevolently conscious of a position; that in this regard only, if

in no other, the brothers were a spectacle to wonder at.

They walked up and down the yard on the evening of Little Dorrit's

Sunday interview with her lover on the Iron Bridge. The cares of state

were over for that day, the Drawing Room had been well attended, several

new presentations had taken place, the three-and-sixpence accidentally

left on the table had accidentally increased to twelve shillings, and

the Father of the Marshalsea refreshed himself with a whiff of cigar. As

he walked up and down, affably accommodating his step to the shuffle of

his brother, not proud in his superiority, but considerate of that poor

creature, bearing with him, and breathing toleration of his infirmities

in every little puff of smoke that issued from his lips and aspired to

get over the spiked wall, he was a sight to wonder at.

His brother Frederick of the dim eye, palsied hand, bent form, and

groping mind, submissively shuffled at his side, accepting his patronage

as he accepted every incident of the labyrinthian world in which he had

got lost. He held the usual screwed bit of whitey-brown paper in his

hand, from which he ever and again unscrewed a spare pinch of snuff.

That falteringly taken, he would glance at his brother not unadmiringly,

put his hands behind him, and shuffle on so at his side until he took

another pinch, or stood still to look about him--perchance suddenly

missing his clarionet. The College visitors were melting away as

the shades of night drew on, but the yard was still pretty full, the

Collegians being mostly out, seeing their friends to the Lodge. As the

brothers paced the yard, William the bond looked about him to receive

salutes, returned them by graciously lifting off his hat, and, with

an engaging air, prevented Frederick the free from running against the

company, or being jostled against the wall. The Collegians as a body

were not easily impressible, but even they, according to their various

ways of wondering, appeared to find in the two brothers a sight to

wonder at.

'You are a little low this evening, Frederick,' said the Father of the

Marshalsea. 'Anything the matter?'

'The matter?' He stared for a moment, and then dropped his head and eyes

again. 'No, William, no. Nothing is the matter.'

'If you could be persuaded to smarten yourself up a little, Frederick--'

'Aye, aye!' said the old man hurriedly. 'But I can't be. I can't be.

Don't talk so. That's all over.'

The Father of the Marshalsea glanced at a passing Collegian with whom he

was on friendly terms, as who should say, 'An enfeebled old man, this;

but he is my brother, sir, my brother, and the voice of Nature is

potent!' and steered his brother clear of the handle of the pump by the

threadbare sleeve. Nothing would have been wanting to the perfection of

his character as a fraternal guide, philosopher and friend, if he had

only steered his brother clear of ruin, instead of bringing it upon him.

'I think, William,' said the object of his affectionate consideration,

'that I am tired, and will go home to bed.'

'My dear Frederick,' returned the other, 'don't let me detain you; don't

sacrifice your inclination to me.'

'Late hours, and a heated atmosphere, and years, I suppose,' said

Frederick, 'weaken me.'

'My dear Frederick,' returned the Father of the Marshalsea, 'do you

think you are sufficiently careful of yourself? Do you think your habits

are as precise and methodical as--shall I say as mine are? Not to revert

again to that little eccentricity which I mentioned just now, I doubt if

you take air and exercise enough, Frederick. Here is the parade, always

at your service. Why not use it more regularly than you do?'

'Hah!' sighed the other. 'Yes, yes, yes, yes.'

'But it is of no use saying yes, yes, my dear Frederick,' the Father

of the Marshalsea in his mild wisdom persisted, 'unless you act on that

assent. Consider my case, Frederick. I am a kind of example. Necessity

and time have taught me what to do. At certain stated hours of the day,

you will find me on the parade, in my room, in the Lodge, reading the

paper, receiving company, eating and drinking. I have impressed upon Amy

during many years, that I must have my meals (for instance) punctually.

Amy has grown up in a sense of the importance of these arrangements, and

you know what a good girl she is.'

The brother only sighed again, as he plodded dreamily along, 'Hah! Yes,

yes, yes, yes.'

'My dear fellow,' said the Father of the Marshalsea, laying his hand

upon his shoulder, and mildly rallying him--mildly, because of his

weakness, poor dear soul; 'you said that before, and it does not express

much, Frederick, even if it means much. I wish I could rouse you, my

good Frederick; you want to be roused.'

'Yes, William, yes. No doubt,' returned the other, lifting his dim eyes

to his face. 'But I am not like you.'

The Father of the Marshalsea said, with a shrug of modest

self-depreciation, 'Oh! You might be like me, my dear Frederick;

you might be, if you chose!' and forbore, in the magnanimity of his

strength, to press his fallen brother further.

There was a great deal of leave-taking going on in corners, as was usual

on Sunday nights; and here and there in the dark, some poor woman, wife

or mother, was weeping with a new Collegian. The time had been when the

Father himself had wept, in the shades of that yard, as his own

poor wife had wept. But it was many years ago; and now he was like

a passenger aboard ship in a long voyage, who has recovered from

sea-sickness, and is impatient of that weakness in the fresher

passengers taken aboard at the last port. He was inclined to

remonstrate, and to express his opinion that people who couldn't get on

without crying, had no business there. In manner, if not in words, he

always testified his displeasure at these interruptions of the general

harmony; and it was so well understood, that delinquents usually

withdrew if they were aware of him.

On this Sunday evening, he accompanied his brother to the gate with an

air of endurance and clemency; being in a bland temper and graciously

disposed to overlook the tears. In the flaring gaslight of the Lodge,

several Collegians were basking; some taking leave of visitors, and

some who had no visitors, watching the frequent turning of the key, and

conversing with one another and with Mr Chivery. The paternal entrance

made a sensation of course; and Mr Chivery, touching his hat (in a short

manner though) with his key, hoped he found himself tolerable.

'Thank you, Chivery, quite well. And you?'

Mr Chivery said in a low growl, 'Oh! he was all right.' Which was his

general way of acknowledging inquiries after his health when a little

sullen.

'I had a visit from Young John to-day, Chivery. And very smart he

looked, I assure you.'

So Mr Chivery had heard. Mr Chivery must confess, however, that his wish

was that the boy didn't lay out so much money upon it. For what did it

bring him in? It only brought him in wexation. And he could get that

anywhere for nothing.

'How vexation, Chivery?' asked the benignant father.

'No odds,' returned Mr Chivery. 'Never mind. Mr Frederick going out?'

'Yes, Chivery, my brother is going home to bed. He is tired, and

not quite well. Take care, Frederick, take care. Good night, my dear

Frederick!'

Shaking hands with his brother, and touching his greasy hat to the

company in the Lodge, Frederick slowly shuffled out of the door which

Mr Chivery unlocked for him. The Father of the Marshalsea showed the

amiable solicitude of a superior being that he should come to no harm.

'Be so kind as to keep the door open a moment, Chivery, that I may see

him go along the passage and down the steps. Take care, Frederick! (He

is very infirm.) Mind the steps! (He is so very absent.) Be careful

how you cross, Frederick. (I really don't like the notion of his going

wandering at large, he is so extremely liable to be run over.)'

With these words, and with a face expressive of many uneasy doubts and

much anxious guardianship, he turned his regards upon the assembled

company in the Lodge: so plainly indicating that his brother was to be

pitied for not being under lock and key, that an opinion to that effect

went round among the Collegians assembled.

But he did not receive it with unqualified assent; on the contrary, he

said, No, gentlemen, no; let them not misunderstand him. His brother

Frederick was much broken, no doubt, and it might be more comfortable to

himself (the Father of the Marshalsea) to know that he was safe within

the walls. Still, it must be remembered that to support an existence

there during many years, required a certain combination of qualities--he

did not say high qualities, but qualities--moral qualities. Now, had his

brother Frederick that peculiar union of qualities? Gentlemen, he was a

most excellent man, a most gentle, tender, and estimable man, with the

simplicity of a child; but would he, though unsuited for most other

places, do for that place? No; he said confidently, no! And, he said,

Heaven forbid that Frederick should be there in any other character

than in his present voluntary character! Gentlemen, whoever came to

that College, to remain there a length of time, must have strength of

character to go through a good deal and to come out of a good deal. Was

his beloved brother Frederick that man? No. They saw him, even as it

was, crushed. Misfortune crushed him. He had not power of recoil enough,

not elasticity enough, to be a long time in such a place, and yet

preserve his self-respect and feel conscious that he was a gentleman.

Frederick had not (if he might use the expression) Power enough to see

in any delicate little attentions and--and--Testimonials that he might

under such circumstances receive, the goodness of human nature, the fine

spirit animating the Collegians as a community, and at the same time

no degradation to himself, and no depreciation of his claims as a

gentleman. Gentlemen, God bless you!

Such was the homily with which he improved and pointed the occasion to

the company in the Lodge before turning into the sallow yard again,

and going with his own poor shabby dignity past the Collegian in the

dressing-gown who had no coat, and past the Collegian in the sea-side

slippers who had no shoes, and past the stout greengrocer Collegian in

the corduroy knee-breeches who had no cares, and past the lean clerk

Collegian in buttonless black who had no hopes, up his own poor shabby

staircase to his own poor shabby room.

There, the table was laid for his supper, and his old grey gown was

ready for him on his chair-back at the fire. His daughter put her

little prayer-book in her pocket--had she been praying for pity on all

prisoners and captives!--and rose to welcome him.

Uncle had gone home, then? she asked @ as she changed his coat and

gave him his black velvet cap. Yes, uncle had gone home. Had her father

enjoyed his walk? Why, not much, Amy; not much. No! Did he not feel

quite well?

As she stood behind him, leaning over his chair so lovingly, he looked

with downcast eyes at the fire. An uneasiness stole over him that was

like a touch of shame; and when he spoke, as he presently did, it was in

an unconnected and embarrassed manner.

'Something, I--hem!--I don't know what, has gone wrong with Chivery.

He is not--ha!--not nearly so obliging and attentive as usual to-night.

It--hem!--it's a little thing, but it puts me out, my love. It's

impossible to forget,' turning his hands over and over and looking

closely at them, 'that--hem!--that in such a life as mine, I am

unfortunately dependent on these men for something every hour in the

day.'

Her arm was on his shoulder, but she did not look in his face while he

spoke. Bending her head she looked another way.

'I--hem!--I can't think, Amy, what has given Chivery offence. He is

generally so--so very attentive and respectful. And to-night he was

quite--quite short with me. Other people there too! Why, good Heaven!

if I was to lose the support and recognition of Chivery and his brother

officers, I might starve to death here.' While he spoke, he was opening

and shutting his hands like valves; so conscious all the time of that

touch of shame, that he shrunk before his own knowledge of his meaning.

'I--ha!--I can't think what it's owing to. I am sure I cannot imagine

what the cause of it is. There was a certain Jackson here once, a

turnkey of the name of Jackson (I don't think you can remember him,

my dear, you were very young), and--hem!--and he had a--brother, and

this--young brother paid his addresses to--at least, did not go so far

as to pay his addresses to--but admired--respectfully admired--the--not

daughter, the sister--of one of us; a rather distinguished Collegian; I

may say, very much so. His name was Captain Martin; and he

consulted me on the question whether It was necessary that his

daughter--sister--should hazard offending the turnkey brother by

being too--ha!--too plain with the other brother. Captain Martin was

a gentleman and a man of honour, and I put it to him first to give me

his--his own opinion. Captain Martin (highly respected in the army) then

unhesitatingly said that it appeared to him that his--hem!--sister was

not called upon to understand the young man too distinctly, and that

she might lead him on--I am doubtful whether "lead him on" was Captain

Martin's exact expression: indeed I think he said tolerate him--on her

father's--I should say, brother's--account. I hardly know how I have

strayed into this story. I suppose it has been through being unable to

account for Chivery; but as to the connection between the two, I don't

see--'

His voice died away, as if she could not bear the pain of hearing him,

and her hand had gradually crept to his lips. For a little while there

was a dead silence and stillness; and he remained shrunk in his chair,

and she remained with her arm round his neck and her head bowed down

upon his shoulder.

His supper was cooking in a saucepan on the fire, and, when she moved,

it was to make it ready for him on the table. He took his usual seat,

she took hers, and he began his meal. They did not, as yet, look at one

another. By little and little he began; laying down his knife and fork

with a noise, taking things up sharply, biting at his bread as if he

were offended with it, and in other similar ways showing that he was out

of sorts. At length he pushed his plate from him, and spoke aloud; with

the strangest inconsistency.

'What does it matter whether I eat or starve? What does it matter

whether such a blighted life as mine comes to an end, now, next week, or

next year? What am I worth to anyone? A poor prisoner, fed on alms and

broken victuals; a squalid, disgraced wretch!'

'Father, father!' As he rose she went on her knees to him, and held up

her hands to him.

'Amy,' he went on in a suppressed voice, trembling violently, and

looking at her as wildly as if he had gone mad. 'I tell you, if you

could see me as your mother saw me, you wouldn't believe it to be the

creature you have only looked at through the bars of this cage. I was

young, I was accomplished, I was good-looking, I was independent--by God

I was, child!--and people sought me out, and envied me. Envied me!'

'Dear father!' She tried to take down the shaking arm that he flourished

in the air, but he resisted, and put her hand away.

'If I had but a picture of myself in those days, though it was ever so

ill done, you would be proud of it, you would be proud of it. But I have

no such thing. Now, let me be a warning! Let no man,' he cried, looking

haggardly about, 'fail to preserve at least that little of the times of

his prosperity and respect. Let his children have that clue to what he

was. Unless my face, when I am dead, subsides into the long departed

look--they say such things happen, I don't know--my children will have

never seen me.'

'Father, father!'

'O despise me, despise me! Look away from me, don't listen to me, stop

me, blush for me, cry for me--even you, Amy! Do it, do it! I do it to

myself! I am hardened now, I have sunk too low to care long even for

that.'

'Dear father, loved father, darling of my heart!' She was clinging to

him with her arms, and she got him to drop into his chair again, and

caught at the raised arm, and tried to put it round her neck.

'Let it lie there, father. Look at me, father, kiss me, father! Only

think of me, father, for one little moment!'

Still he went on in the same wild way, though it was gradually breaking

down into a miserable whining.

'And yet I have some respect here. I have made some stand against it. I

am not quite trodden down. Go out and ask who is the chief person in the

place. They'll tell you it's your father. Go out and ask who is never

trifled with, and who is always treated with some delicacy. They'll say,

your father. Go out and ask what funeral here (it must be here, I know

it can be nowhere else) will make more talk, and perhaps more grief,

than any that has ever gone out at the gate. They'll say your father's.

Well then. Amy! Amy! Is your father so universally despised? Is there

nothing to redeem him? Will you have nothing to remember him by but his

ruin and decay? Will you be able to have no affection for him when he is

gone, poor castaway, gone?'

He burst into tears of maudlin pity for himself, and at length suffering

her to embrace him and take charge of him, let his grey head rest

against her cheek, and bewailed his wretchedness. Presently he changed

the subject of his lamentations, and clasping his hands about her as she

embraced him, cried, O Amy, his motherless, forlorn child! O the days

that he had seen her careful and laborious for him! Then he reverted to

himself, and weakly told her how much better she would have loved him

if she had known him in his vanished character, and how he would have

married her to a gentleman who should have been proud of her as his

daughter, and how (at which he cried again) she should first have ridden

at his fatherly side on her own horse, and how the crowd (by which he

meant in effect the people who had given him the twelve shillings

he then had in his pocket) should have trudged the dusty roads

respectfully.

Thus, now boasting, now despairing, in either fit a captive with the

jail-rot upon him, and the impurity of his prison worn into the grain of

his soul, he revealed his degenerate state to his affectionate child.

No one else ever beheld him in the details of his humiliation. Little

recked the Collegians who were laughing in their rooms over his late

address in the Lodge, what a serious picture they had in their obscure

gallery of the Marshalsea that Sunday night.

There was a classical daughter once--perhaps--who ministered to her

father in his prison as her mother had ministered to her. Little Dorrit,

though of the unheroic modern stock and mere English, did much more,

in comforting her father's wasted heart upon her innocent breast, and

turning to it a fountain of love and fidelity that never ran dry or

waned through all his years of famine.

She soothed him; asked him for his forgiveness if she had been, or

seemed to have been, undutiful; told him, Heaven knows truly, that she

could not honour him more if he were the favourite of Fortune and the

whole world acknowledged him. When his tears were dried, and he sobbed

in his weakness no longer, and was free from that touch of shame, and

had recovered his usual bearing, she prepared the remains of his supper

afresh, and, sitting by his side, rejoiced to see him eat and drink. For

now he sat in his black velvet cap and old grey gown, magnanimous again;

and would have comported himself towards any Collegian who might have

looked in to ask his advice, like a great moral Lord Chesterfield, or

Master of the ethical ceremonies of the Marshalsea.

To keep his attention engaged, she talked with him about his wardrobe;

when he was pleased to say, that Yes, indeed, those shirts she proposed

would be exceedingly acceptable, for those he had were worn out, and,

being ready-made, had never fitted him. Being conversational, and in a

reasonable flow of spirits, he then invited her attention to his coat

as it hung behind the door: remarking that the Father of the place

would set an indifferent example to his children, already disposed to be

slovenly, if he went among them out at elbows. He was jocular, too,

as to the heeling of his shoes; but became grave on the subject of his

cravat, and promised her that, when she could afford it, she should buy

him a new one.

While he smoked out his cigar in peace, she made his bed, and put the

small room in order for his repose. Being weary then, owing to the

advanced hour and his emotions, he came out of his chair to bless her

and wish her Good night. All this time he had never once thought of HER

dress, her shoes, her need of anything. No other person upon earth, save

herself, could have been so unmindful of her wants.

He kissed her many times with 'Bless you, my love. Good night, MY dear!'

But her gentle breast had been so deeply wounded by what she had seen of

him that she was unwilling to leave him alone, lest he should lament

and despair again. 'Father, dear, I am not tired; let me come back

presently, when you are in bed, and sit by you.'

He asked her, with an air of protection, if she felt solitary?

'Yes, father.'

'Then come back by all means, my love.'

'I shall be very quiet, father.'

'Don't think of me, my dear,' he said, giving her his kind permission

fully. 'Come back by all means.'

He seemed to be dozing when she returned, and she put the low fire

together very softly lest she should awake him. But he overheard her,

and called out who was that?

'Only Amy, father.'

'Amy, my child, come here. I want to say a word to you.' He raised

himself a little in his low bed, as she kneeled beside it to bring her

face near him; and put his hand between hers. O! Both the private father

and the Father of the Marshalsea were strong within him then.

'My love, you have had a life of hardship here. No companions, no

recreations, many cares I am afraid?'

'Don't think of that, dear. I never do.'

'You know my position, Amy. I have not been able to do much for you; but

all I have been able to do, I have done.'

'Yes, my dear father,' she rejoined, kissing him. 'I know, I know.'

'I am in the twenty-third year of my life here,' he said, with a catch

in his breath that was not so much a sob as an irrepressible sound of

self-approval, the momentary outburst of a noble consciousness. 'It is

all I could do for my children--I have done it. Amy, my love, you are

by far the best loved of the three; I have had you principally in my

mind--whatever I have done for your sake, my dear child, I have done

freely and without murmuring.'

Only the wisdom that holds the clue to all hearts and all mysteries, can

surely know to what extent a man, especially a man brought down as this

man had been, can impose upon himself. Enough, for the present place,

that he lay down with wet eyelashes, serene, in a manner majestic, after

bestowing his life of degradation as a sort of portion on the devoted

child upon whom its miseries had fallen so heavily, and whose love alone

had saved him to be even what he was.

That child had no doubts, asked herself no question, for she was but too

content to see him with a lustre round his head. Poor dear, good dear,

truest, kindest, dearest, were the only words she had for him, as she

hushed him to rest.

She never left him all that night. As if she had done him a wrong which

her tenderness could hardly repair, she sat by him in his sleep, at

times softly kissing him with suspended breath, and calling him in a

whisper by some endearing name. At times she stood aside so as not to

intercept the low fire-light, and, watching him when it fell upon his

sleeping face, wondered did he look now at all as he had looked when he

was prosperous and happy; as he had so touched her by imagining that he

might look once more in that awful time. At the thought of that time,

she kneeled beside his bed again, and prayed, 'O spare his life! O

save him to me! O look down upon my dear, long-suffering, unfortunate,

much-changed, dear dear father!'

Not until the morning came to protect him and encourage him, did she

give him a last kiss and leave the small room. When she had stolen

down-stairs, and along the empty yard, and had crept up to her own

high garret, the smokeless housetops and the distant country hills were

discernible over the wall in the clear morning. As she gently opened the

window, and looked eastward down the prison yard, the spikes upon the

wall were tipped with red, then made a sullen purple pattern on the sun

as it came flaming up into the heavens. The spikes had never looked so

sharp and cruel, nor the bars so heavy, nor the prison space so gloomy

and contracted. She thought of the sunrise on rolling rivers, of the

sunrise on wide seas, of the sunrise on rich landscapes, of the

sunrise on great forests where the birds were waking and the trees were

rustling; and she looked down into the living grave on which the sun

had risen, with her father in it three-and-twenty years, and said, in

a burst of sorrow and compassion, 'No, no, I have never seen him in my

life!'

CHAPTER 20. Moving in Society

If Young John Chivery had had the inclination and the power to write a

satire on family pride, he would have had no need to go for an avenging

illustration out of the family of his beloved. He would have found it

amply in that gallant brother and that dainty sister, so steeped in mean

experiences, and so loftily conscious of the family name; so ready

to beg or borrow from the poorest, to eat of anybody's bread, spend

anybody's money, drink from anybody's cup and break it afterwards.

To have painted the sordid facts of their lives, and they throughout

invoking the death's head apparition of the family gentility to come and

scare their benefactors, would have made Young John a satirist of the

first water.

Tip had turned his liberty to hopeful account by becoming a

billiard-marker. He had troubled himself so little as to the means of

his release, that Clennam scarcely needed to have been at the pains of

impressing the mind of Mr Plornish on that subject. Whoever had paid

him the compliment, he very readily accepted the compliment with HIS

compliments, and there was an end of it. Issuing forth from the gate

on these easy terms, he became a billiard-marker; and now occasionally

looked in at the little skittle-ground in a green Newmarket coat

(second-hand), with a shining collar and bright buttons (new), and drank

the beer of the Collegians.

One solid stationary point in the looseness of this gentleman's

character was, that he respected and admired his sister Amy. The feeling

had never induced him to spare her a moment's uneasiness, or to put

himself to any restraint or inconvenience on her account; but with that

Marshalsea taint upon his love, he loved her. The same rank Marshalsea

flavour was to be recognised in his distinctly perceiving that she

sacrificed her life to her father, and in his having no idea that she

had done anything for himself.

When this spirited young man and his sister had begun systematically

to produce the family skeleton for the overawing of the College, this

narrative cannot precisely state. Probably at about the period when

they began to dine on the College charity. It is certain that the more

reduced and necessitous they were, the more pompously the skeleton

emerged from its tomb; and that when there was anything particularly

shabby in the wind, the skeleton always came out with the ghastliest

flourish.

Little Dorrit was late on the Monday morning, for her father slept

late, and afterwards there was his breakfast to prepare and his room to

arrange. She had no engagement to go out to work, however, and therefore

stayed with him until, with Maggy's help, she had put everything right

about him, and had seen him off upon his morning walk (of twenty yards

or so) to the coffee-house to read the paper.

She then got on her bonnet and went out, having been anxious to get out

much sooner. There was, as usual, a cessation of the small-talk in

the Lodge as she passed through it; and a Collegian who had come in

on Saturday night, received the intimation from the elbow of a more

seasoned Collegian, 'Look out. Here she is!' She wanted to see her

sister, but when she got round to Mr Cripples's, she found that both her

sister and her uncle had gone to the theatre where they were engaged.

Having taken thought of this probability by the way, and having settled

that in such case she would follow them, she set off afresh for the

theatre, which was on that side of the river, and not very far away.

Little Dorrit was almost as ignorant of the ways of theatres as of the

ways of gold mines, and when she was directed to a furtive sort of door,

with a curious up-all-night air about it, that appeared to be ashamed of

itself and to be hiding in an alley, she hesitated to approach it; being

further deterred by the sight of some half-dozen close-shaved gentlemen

with their hats very strangely on, who were lounging about the door,

looking not at all unlike Collegians. On her applying to them, reassured

by this resemblance, for a direction to Miss Dorrit, they made way for

her to enter a dark hall--it was more like a great grim lamp gone out

than anything else--where she could hear the distant playing of music

and the sound of dancing feet. A man so much in want of airing that he

had a blue mould upon him, sat watching this dark place from a hole in

a corner, like a spider; and he told her that he would send a message

up to Miss Dorrit by the first lady or gentleman who went through. The

first lady who went through had a roll of music, half in her muff and

half out of it, and was in such a tumbled condition altogether, that it

seemed as if it would be an act of kindness to iron her. But as she was

very good-natured, and said, 'Come with me; I'll soon find Miss Dorrit

for you,' Miss Dorrit's sister went with her, drawing nearer and nearer

at every step she took in the darkness to the sound of music and the

sound of dancing feet.

At last they came into a maze of dust, where a quantity of people were

tumbling over one another, and where there was such a confusion of

unaccountable shapes of beams, bulkheads, brick walls, ropes, and

rollers, and such a mixing of gaslight and daylight, that they seemed

to have got on the wrong side of the pattern of the universe. Little

Dorrit, left to herself, and knocked against by somebody every moment,

was quite bewildered, when she heard her sister's voice.

'Why, good gracious, Amy, what ever brought you here?'

'I wanted to see you, Fanny dear; and as I am going out all day

to-morrow, and knew you might be engaged all day to-day, I thought--'

'But the idea, Amy, of YOU coming behind! I never did!' As her sister

said this in no very cordial tone of welcome, she conducted her to a

more open part of the maze, where various golden chairs and tables were

heaped together, and where a number of young ladies were sitting on

anything they could find, chattering. All these young ladies wanted

ironing, and all had a curious way of looking everywhere while they

chattered.

Just as the sisters arrived here, a monotonous boy in a Scotch cap put

his head round a beam on the left, and said, 'Less noise there, ladies!'

and disappeared. Immediately after which, a sprightly gentleman with a

quantity of long black hair looked round a beam on the right, and said,

'Less noise there, darlings!' and also disappeared.

'The notion of you among professionals, Amy, is really the last thing

I could have conceived!' said her sister. 'Why, how did you ever get

here?'

'I don't know. The lady who told you I was here, was so good as to bring

me in.'

'Like you quiet little things! You can make your way anywhere, I

believe. I couldn't have managed it, Amy, though I know so much more of

the world.'

It was the family custom to lay it down as family law, that she was a

plain domestic little creature, without the great and sage experience of

the rest. This family fiction was the family assertion of itself against

her services. Not to make too much of them.

'Well! And what have you got on your mind, Amy? Of course you have

got something on your mind about me?' said Fanny. She spoke as if her

sister, between two and three years her junior, were her prejudiced

grandmother.

'It is not much; but since you told me of the lady who gave you the

bracelet, Fanny--'

The monotonous boy put his head round the beam on the left, and said,

'Look out there, ladies!' and disappeared. The sprightly gentleman with

the black hair as suddenly put his head round the beam on the right, and

said, 'Look out there, darlings!' and also disappeared. Thereupon all

the young ladies rose and began shaking their skirts out behind.

'Well, Amy?' said Fanny, doing as the rest did; 'what were you going to

say?'

'Since you told me a lady had given you the bracelet you showed me,

Fanny, I have not been quite easy on your account, and indeed want to

know a little more if you will confide more to me.'

'Now, ladies!' said the boy in the Scotch cap. 'Now, darlings!' said the

gentleman with the black hair. They were every one gone in a moment, and

the music and the dancing feet were heard again.

Little Dorrit sat down in a golden chair, made quite giddy by these

rapid interruptions. Her sister and the rest were a long time gone; and

during their absence a voice (it appeared to be that of the gentleman

with the black hair) was continually calling out through the music,

'One, two, three, four, five, six--go! One, two, three, four, five,

six--go! Steady, darlings! One, two, three, four, five, six--go!'

Ultimately the voice stopped, and they all came back again, more or less

out of breath, folding themselves in their shawls, and making ready

for the streets. 'Stop a moment, Amy, and let them get away before

us,' whispered Fanny. They were soon left alone; nothing more important

happening, in the meantime, than the boy looking round his old beam, and

saying, 'Everybody at eleven to-morrow, ladies!' and the gentleman with

the black hair looking round his old beam, and saying, 'Everybody at

eleven to-morrow, darlings!' each in his own accustomed manner.

When they were alone, something was rolled up or by other means got out

of the way, and there was a great empty well before them, looking down

into the depths of which Fanny said, 'Now, uncle!' Little Dorrit, as her

eyes became used to the darkness, faintly made him out at the bottom of

the well, in an obscure corner by himself, with his instrument in its

ragged case under his arm.

The old man looked as if the remote high gallery windows, with their

little strip of sky, might have been the point of his better fortunes,

from which he had descended, until he had gradually sunk down below

there to the bottom. He had been in that place six nights a week for

many years, but had never been observed to raise his eyes above his

music-book, and was confidently believed to have never seen a play.

There were legends in the place that he did not so much as know the

popular heroes and heroines by sight, and that the low comedian had

'mugged' at him in his richest manner fifty nights for a wager, and he

had shown no trace of consciousness. The carpenters had a joke to the

effect that he was dead without being aware of it; and the frequenters

of the pit supposed him to pass his whole life, night and day, and

Sunday and all, in the orchestra. They had tried him a few times with

pinches of snuff offered over the rails, and he had always responded to

this attention with a momentary waking up of manner that had the pale

phantom of a gentleman in it: beyond this he never, on any occasion, had

any other part in what was going on than the part written out for the

clarionet; in private life, where there was no part for the clarionet,

he had no part at all. Some said he was poor, some said he was a wealthy

miser; but he said nothing, never lifted up his bowed head, never varied

his shuffling gait by getting his springless foot from the ground.

Though expecting now to be summoned by his niece, he did not hear her

until she had spoken to him three or four times; nor was he at all

surprised by the presence of two nieces instead of one, but merely said

in his tremulous voice, 'I am coming, I am coming!' and crept forth by

some underground way which emitted a cellarous smell.

'And so, Amy,' said her sister, when the three together passed out at

the door that had such a shame-faced consciousness of being different

from other doors: the uncle instinctively taking Amy's arm as the arm to

be relied on: 'so, Amy, you are curious about me?'

She was pretty, and conscious, and rather flaunting; and the

condescension with which she put aside the superiority of her charms,

and of her worldly experience, and addressed her sister on almost equal

terms, had a vast deal of the family in it.

'I am interested, Fanny, and concerned in anything that concerns you.'

'So you are, so you are, and you are the best of Amys. If I am ever a

little provoking, I am sure you'll consider what a thing it is to

occupy my position and feel a consciousness of being superior to it. I

shouldn't care,' said the Daughter of the Father of the Marshalsea, 'if

the others were not so common. None of them have come down in the world

as we have. They are all on their own level. Common.'

Little Dorrit mildly looked at the speaker, but did not interrupt her.

Fanny took out her handkerchief, and rather angrily wiped her eyes. 'I

was not born where you were, you know, Amy, and perhaps that makes a

difference. My dear child, when we get rid of Uncle, you shall know all

about it. We'll drop him at the cook's shop where he is going to dine.'

They walked on with him until they came to a dirty shop window in a

dirty street, which was made almost opaque by the steam of hot meats,

vegetables, and puddings. But glimpses were to be caught of a roast leg

of pork bursting into tears of sage and onion in a metal reservoir full

of gravy, of an unctuous piece of roast beef and blisterous Yorkshire

pudding, bubbling hot in a similar receptacle, of a stuffed fillet of

veal in rapid cut, of a ham in a perspiration with the pace it was going

at, of a shallow tank of baked potatoes glued together by their own

richness, of a truss or two of boiled greens, and other substantial

delicacies. Within, were a few wooden partitions, behind which such

customers as found it more convenient to take away their dinners in

stomachs than in their hands, Packed their purchases in solitude. Fanny

opening her reticule, as they surveyed these things, produced from that

repository a shilling and handed it to Uncle. Uncle, after not looking

at it a little while, divined its object, and muttering 'Dinner? Ha!

Yes, yes, yes!' slowly vanished from them into the mist.

'Now, Amy,' said her sister, 'come with me, if you are not too tired to

walk to Harley Street, Cavendish Square.'

The air with which she threw off this distinguished address and the toss

she gave to her new bonnet (which was more gauzy than serviceable), made

her sister wonder; however, she expressed her readiness to go to Harley

Street, and thither they directed their steps. Arrived at that grand

destination, Fanny singled out the handsomest house, and knocking at the

door, inquired for Mrs Merdle. The footman who opened the door, although

he had powder on his head and was backed up by two other footmen

likewise powdered, not only admitted Mrs Merdle to be at home, but asked

Fanny to walk in. Fanny walked in, taking her sister with her; and they

went up-stairs with powder going before and powder stopping behind,

and were left in a spacious semicircular drawing-room, one of several

drawing-rooms, where there was a parrot on the outside of a golden cage

holding on by its beak, with its scaly legs in the air, and putting

itself into many strange upside-down postures. This peculiarity has been

observed in birds of quite another feather, climbing upon golden wires.

The room was far more splendid than anything Little Dorrit had ever

imagined, and would have been splendid and costly in any eyes. She

looked in amazement at her sister and would have asked a question,

but that Fanny with a warning frown pointed to a curtained doorway of

communication with another room. The curtain shook next moment, and a

lady, raising it with a heavily ringed hand, dropped it behind her again

as she entered.

The lady was not young and fresh from the hand of Nature, but was young

and fresh from the hand of her maid. She had large unfeeling handsome

eyes, and dark unfeeling handsome hair, and a broad unfeeling handsome

bosom, and was made the most of in every particular. Either because she

had a cold, or because it suited her face, she wore a rich white

fillet tied over her head and under her chin. And if ever there were

an unfeeling handsome chin that looked as if, for certain, it had never

been, in familiar parlance, 'chucked' by the hand of man, it was the

chin curbed up so tight and close by that laced bridle.

'Mrs Merdle,' said Fanny. 'My sister, ma'am.'

'I am glad to see your sister, Miss Dorrit. I did not remember that you

had a sister.'

'I did not mention that I had,' said Fanny.

'Ah!' Mrs Merdle curled the little finger of her left hand as who should

say, 'I have caught you. I know you didn't!' All her action was usually

with her left hand because her hands were not a pair; and left being

much the whiter and plumper of the two. Then she added: 'Sit down,' and

composed herself voluptuously, in a nest of crimson and gold cushions,

on an ottoman near the parrot.

'Also professional?' said Mrs Merdle, looking at Little Dorrit through

an eye-glass.

Fanny answered No. 'No,' said Mrs Merdle, dropping her glass. 'Has not a

professional air. Very pleasant; but not professional.'

'My sister, ma'am,' said Fanny, in whom there was a singular mixture

of deference and hardihood, 'has been asking me to tell her, as between

sisters, how I came to have the honour of knowing you. And as I had

engaged to call upon you once more, I thought I might take the liberty

of bringing her with me, when perhaps you would tell her. I wish her to

know, and perhaps you will tell her?' 'Do you think, at your sister's

age--' hinted Mrs Merdle.

'She is much older than she looks,' said Fanny; 'almost as old as I am.'

'Society,' said Mrs Merdle, with another curve of her little finger,

'is so difficult to explain to young persons (indeed is so difficult to

explain to most persons), that I am glad to hear that.

I wish Society was not so arbitrary, I wish it was not so

exacting--Bird, be quiet!'

The parrot had given a most piercing shriek, as if its name were Society

and it asserted its right to its exactions.

'But,' resumed Mrs Merdle, 'we must take it as we find it. We know it is

hollow and conventional and worldly and very shocking, but unless we

are Savages in the Tropical seas (I should have been charmed to be one

myself--most delightful life and perfect climate, I am told), we

must consult it. It is the common lot. Mr Merdle is a most extensive

merchant, his transactions are on the vastest scale, his wealth and

influence are very great, but even he--Bird, be quiet!'

The parrot had shrieked another shriek; and it filled up the sentence so

expressively that Mrs Merdle was under no necessity to end it.

'Since your sister begs that I would terminate our personal

acquaintance,' she began again, addressing Little Dorrit, 'by relating

the circumstances that are much to her credit, I cannot object to comply

with her request, I am sure. I have a son (I was first married extremely

young) of two or three-and-twenty.'

Fanny set her lips, and her eyes looked half triumphantly at her sister.

'A son of two or three-and-twenty. He is a little gay, a thing Society

is accustomed to in young men, and he is very impressible. Perhaps he

inherits that misfortune. I am very impressible myself, by nature. The

weakest of creatures--my feelings are touched in a moment.'

She said all this, and everything else, as coldly as a woman of snow;

quite forgetting the sisters except at odd times, and apparently

addressing some abstraction of Society; for whose behoof, too, she

occasionally arranged her dress, or the composition of her figure upon

the ottoman.

'So he is very impressible. Not a misfortune in our natural state I dare

say, but we are not in a natural state. Much to be lamented, no doubt,

particularly by myself, who am a child of nature if I could but show it;

but so it is. Society suppresses us and dominates us--Bird, be quiet!'

The parrot had broken into a violent fit of laughter, after twisting

divers bars of his cage with his crooked bill, and licking them with his

black tongue.

'It is quite unnecessary to say to a person of your good sense, wide

range of experience, and cultivated feeling,' said Mrs Merdle from her

nest of crimson and gold--and there put up her glass to refresh her

memory as to whom she was addressing,--'that the stage sometimes has

a fascination for young men of that class of character. In saying the

stage, I mean the people on it of the female sex. Therefore, when I

heard that my son was supposed to be fascinated by a dancer, I knew what

that usually meant in Society, and confided in her being a dancer at the

Opera, where young men moving in Society are usually fascinated.'

She passed her white hands over one another, observant of the sisters

now; and the rings upon her fingers grated against each other with a

hard sound.

'As your sister will tell you, when I found what the theatre was I was

much surprised and much distressed. But when I found that your sister,

by rejecting my son's advances (I must add, in an unexpected manner),

had brought him to the point of proposing marriage, my feelings were

of the profoundest anguish--acute.' She traced the outline of her left

eyebrow, and put it right.

'In a distracted condition, which only a mother--moving in Society--can

be susceptible of, I determined to go myself to the theatre, and

represent my state of mind to the dancer. I made myself known to your

sister. I found her, to my surprise, in many respects different from

my expectations; and certainly in none more so, than in meeting me

with--what shall I say--a sort of family assertion on her own part?' Mrs

Merdle smiled.

'I told you, ma'am,' said Fanny, with a heightening colour, 'that

although you found me in that situation, I was so far above the rest,

that I considered my family as good as your son's; and that I had a

brother who, knowing the circumstances, would be of the same opinion,

and would not consider such a connection any honour.'

'Miss Dorrit,' said Mrs Merdle, after frostily looking at her through

her glass, 'precisely what I was on the point of telling your sister,

in pursuance of your request. Much obliged to you for recalling it

so accurately and anticipating me. I immediately,' addressing Little

Dorrit, '(for I am the creature of impulse), took a bracelet from my

arm, and begged your sister to let me clasp it on hers, in token of

the delight I had in our being able to approach the subject so far on

a common footing.' (This was perfectly true, the lady having bought a

cheap and showy article on her way to the interview, with a general eye

to bribery.)

'And I told you, Mrs Merdle,' said Fanny, 'that we might be unfortunate,

but we are not common.'

'I think, the very words, Miss Dorrit,' assented Mrs Merdle.

'And I told you, Mrs Merdle,' said Fanny, 'that if you spoke to me

of the superiority of your son's standing in Society, it was barely

possible that you rather deceived yourself in your suppositions about my

origin; and that my father's standing, even in the Society in which

he now moved (what that was, was best known to myself), was eminently

superior, and was acknowledged by every one.'

'Quite accurate,' rejoined Mrs Merdle. 'A most admirable memory.'

'Thank you, ma'am. Perhaps you will be so kind as to tell my sister the

rest.'

'There is very little to tell,' said Mrs Merdle, reviewing the breadth

of bosom which seemed essential to her having room enough to be

unfeeling in, 'but it is to your sister's credit. I pointed out to your

sister the plain state of the case; the impossibility of the Society

in which we moved recognising the Society in which she moved--though

charming, I have no doubt; the immense disadvantage at which she would

consequently place the family she had so high an opinion of, upon which

we should find ourselves compelled to look down with contempt, and

from which (socially speaking) we should feel obliged to recoil with

abhorrence. In short, I made an appeal to that laudable pride in your

sister.'

'Let my sister know, if you please, Mrs Merdle,' Fanny pouted, with a

toss of her gauzy bonnet, 'that I had already had the honour of telling

your son that I wished to have nothing whatever to say to him.'

'Well, Miss Dorrit,' assented Mrs Merdle, 'perhaps I might have

mentioned that before. If I did not think of it, perhaps it was because

my mind reverted to the apprehensions I had at the time that he might

persevere and you might have something to say to him.

I also mentioned to your sister--I again address the non-professional

Miss Dorrit--that my son would have nothing in the event of such a

marriage, and would be an absolute beggar. (I mention that merely as

a fact which is part of the narrative, and not as supposing it to have

influenced your sister, except in the prudent and legitimate way

in which, constituted as our artificial system is, we must all be

influenced by such considerations.) Finally, after some high words

and high spirit on the part of your sister, we came to the complete

understanding that there was no danger; and your sister was so obliging

as to allow me to present her with a mark or two of my appreciation at

my dressmaker's.'

Little Dorrit looked sorry, and glanced at Fanny with a troubled face.

'Also,' said Mrs Merdle, 'as to promise to give me the present pleasure

of a closing interview, and of parting with her on the best of terms.

On which occasion,' added Mrs Merdle, quitting her nest, and putting

something in Fanny's hand, 'Miss Dorrit will permit me to say Farewell

with best wishes in my own dull manner.'

The sisters rose at the same time, and they all stood near the cage of

the parrot, as he tore at a claw-full of biscuit and spat it out, seemed

to mock them with a pompous dance of his body without moving his feet,

and suddenly turned himself upside down and trailed himself all over

the outside of his golden cage, with the aid of his cruel beak and black

tongue.

'Adieu, Miss Dorrit, with best wishes,' said Mrs Merdle. 'If we could

only come to a Millennium, or something of that sort, I for one might

have the pleasure of knowing a number of charming and talented persons

from whom I am at present excluded. A more primitive state of society

would be delicious to me. There used to be a poem when I learnt lessons,

something about Lo the poor Indians whose something mind! If a few

thousand persons moving in Society, could only go and be Indians, I

would put my name down directly; but as, moving in Society, we can't be

Indians, unfortunately--Good morning!'

They came down-stairs with powder before them and powder behind, the

elder sister haughty and the younger sister humbled, and were shut out

into unpowdered Harley Street, Cavendish Square.

'Well?' said Fanny, when they had gone a little way without speaking.

'Have you nothing to say, Amy?'

'Oh, I don't know what to say!' she answered, distressed. 'You didn't

like this young man, Fanny?'

'Like him? He is almost an idiot.'

'I am so sorry--don't be hurt--but, since you ask me what I have to

say, I am so very sorry, Fanny, that you suffered this lady to give you

anything.'

'You little Fool!' returned her sister, shaking her with the sharp pull

she gave her arm. 'Have you no spirit at all? But that's just the way!

You have no self-respect, you have no becoming pride, just as you allow

yourself to be followed about by a contemptible little Chivery of a

thing,' with the scornfullest emphasis, 'you would let your family be

trodden on, and never turn.'

'Don't say that, dear Fanny. I do what I can for them.'

'You do what you can for them!' repeated Fanny, walking her on very

fast. 'Would you let a woman like this, whom you could see, if you had

any experience of anything, to be as false and insolent as a woman can

be--would you let her put her foot upon your family, and thank her for

it?'

'No, Fanny, I am sure.' 'Then make her pay for it, you mean little

thing. What else can you make her do? Make her pay for it, you stupid

child; and do your family some credit with the money!'

They spoke no more all the way back to the lodging where Fanny and her

uncle lived. When they arrived there, they found the old man practising

his clarionet in the dolefullest manner in a corner of the room.

Fanny had a composite meal to make, of chops, and porter, and tea; and

indignantly pretended to prepare it for herself, though her sister did

all that in quiet reality. When at last Fanny sat down to eat and drink,

she threw the table implements about and was angry with her bread, much

as her father had been last night.

'If you despise me,' she said, bursting into vehement tears, 'because I

am a dancer, why did you put me in the way of being one?

It was your doing. You would have me stoop as low as the ground before

this Mrs Merdle, and let her say what she liked and do what she liked,

and hold us all in contempt, and tell me so to my face. Because I am a

dancer!'

'O Fanny!'

'And Tip, too, poor fellow. She is to disparage him just as much as she

likes, without any check--I suppose because he has been in the law, and

the docks, and different things. Why, it was your doing, Amy. You might

at least approve of his being defended.'

All this time the uncle was dolefully blowing his clarionet in the

corner, sometimes taking it an inch or so from his mouth for a moment

while he stopped to gaze at them, with a vague impression that somebody

had said something.

'And your father, your poor father, Amy. Because he is not free to show

himself and to speak for himself, you would let such people insult him

with impunity. If you don't feel for yourself because you go out to

work, you might at least feel for him, I should think, knowing what he

has undergone so long.'

Poor Little Dorrit felt the injustice of this taunt rather sharply.

The remembrance of last night added a barbed point to it. She said

nothing in reply, but turned her chair from the table towards the fire.

Uncle, after making one more pause, blew a dismal wail and went on

again.

Fanny was passionate with the tea-cups and the bread as long as her

passion lasted, and then protested that she was the wretchedest girl in

the world, and she wished she was dead. After that, her crying became

remorseful, and she got up and put her arms round her sister. Little

Dorrit tried to stop her from saying anything, but she answered that

she would, she must! Thereupon she said again, and again, 'I beg your

pardon, Amy,' and 'Forgive me, Amy,' almost as passionately as she had

said what she regretted.

'But indeed, indeed, Amy,' she resumed when they were seated in sisterly

accord side by side, 'I hope and I think you would have seen this

differently, if you had known a little more of Society.'

'Perhaps I might, Fanny,' said the mild Little Dorrit.

'You see, while you have been domestic and resignedly shut up there,

Amy,' pursued her sister, gradually beginning to patronise, 'I have

been out, moving more in Society, and may have been getting proud and

spirited--more than I ought to be, perhaps?'

Little Dorrit answered 'Yes. O yes!'

'And while you have been thinking of the dinner or the clothes, I may

have been thinking, you know, of the family. Now, may it not be so,

Amy?'

Little Dorrit again nodded 'Yes,' with a more cheerful face than heart.

'Especially as we know,' said Fanny, 'that there certainly is a tone in

the place to which you have been so true, which does belong to it, and

which does make it different from other aspects of Society. So kiss me

once again, Amy dear, and we will agree that we may both be right, and

that you are a tranquil, domestic, home-loving, good girl.'

The clarionet had been lamenting most pathetically during this dialogue,

but was cut short now by Fanny's announcement that it was time to go;

which she conveyed to her uncle by shutting up his scrap of music, and

taking the clarionet out of his mouth.

Little Dorrit parted from them at the door, and hastened back to the

Marshalsea. It fell dark there sooner than elsewhere, and going into it

that evening was like going into a deep trench. The shadow of the wall

was on every object. Not least upon the figure in the old grey gown and

the black velvet cap, as it turned towards her when she opened the door

of the dim room.

'Why not upon me too!' thought Little Dorrit, with the door Yet in her

hand. 'It was not unreasonable in Fanny.'

CHAPTER 21. Mr Merdle's Complaint

Upon that establishment of state, the Merdle establishment in Harley

Street, Cavendish Square, there was the shadow of no more common wall

than the fronts of other establishments of state on the opposite side of

the street. Like unexceptionable Society, the opposing rows of houses in

Harley Street were very grim with one another. Indeed, the mansions and

their inhabitants were so much alike in that respect, that the people

were often to be found drawn up on opposite sides of dinner-tables, in

the shade of their own loftiness, staring at the other side of the way

with the dullness of the houses.

Everybody knows how like the street the two dinner-rows of people who

take their stand by the street will be. The expressionless uniform

twenty houses, all to be knocked at and rung at in the same form, all

approachable by the same dull steps, all fended off by the same pattern

of railing, all with the same impracticable fire-escapes, the same

inconvenient fixtures in their heads, and everything without exception

to be taken at a high valuation--who has not dined with these? The

house so drearily out of repair, the occasional bow-window, the stuccoed

house, the newly-fronted house, the corner house with nothing but

angular rooms, the house with the blinds always down, the house with the

hatchment always up, the house where the collector has called for one

quarter of an Idea, and found nobody at home--who has not dined with

these? The house that nobody will take, and is to be had a bargain--who

does not know her? The showy house that was taken for life by the

disappointed gentleman, and which does not suit him at all--who is

unacquainted with that haunted habitation?

Harley Street, Cavendish Square, was more than aware of Mr and Mrs

Merdle. Intruders there were in Harley Street, of whom it was not aware;

but Mr and Mrs Merdle it delighted to honour. Society was aware of

Mr and Mrs Merdle. Society had said 'Let us license them; let us know

them.'

Mr Merdle was immensely rich; a man of prodigious enterprise; a

Midas without the ears, who turned all he touched to gold. He was in

everything good, from banking to building. He was in Parliament, of

course. He was in the City, necessarily. He was Chairman of this,

Trustee of that, President of the other. The weightiest of men had said

to projectors, 'Now, what name have you got? Have you got Merdle?' And,

the reply being in the negative, had said, 'Then I won't look at you.'

This great and fortunate man had provided that extensive bosom which

required so much room to be unfeeling enough in, with a nest of crimson

and gold some fifteen years before. It was not a bosom to repose

upon, but it was a capital bosom to hang jewels upon. Mr Merdle wanted

something to hang jewels upon, and he bought it for the purpose. Storr

and Mortimer might have married on the same speculation.

Like all his other speculations, it was sound and successful. The jewels

showed to the richest advantage. The bosom moving in Society with

the jewels displayed upon it, attracted general admiration. Society

approving, Mr Merdle was satisfied. He was the most disinterested of

men,--did everything for Society, and got as little for himself out of

all his gain and care, as a man might.

That is to say, it may be supposed that he got all he wanted, otherwise

with unlimited wealth he would have got it. But his desire was to the

utmost to satisfy Society (whatever that was), and take up all its

drafts upon him for tribute. He did not shine in company; he had not

very much to say for himself; he was a reserved man, with a broad,

overhanging, watchful head, that particular kind of dull red colour

in his cheeks which is rather stale than fresh, and a somewhat uneasy

expression about his coat-cuffs, as if they were in his confidence, and

had reasons for being anxious to hide his hands. In the little he said,

he was a pleasant man enough; plain, emphatic about public and private

confidence, and tenacious of the utmost deference being shown by every

one, in all things, to Society. In this same Society (if that were it

which came to his dinners, and to Mrs Merdle's receptions and concerts),

he hardly seemed to enjoy himself much, and was mostly to be found

against walls and behind doors. Also when he went out to it, instead of

its coming home to him, he seemed a little fatigued, and upon the

whole rather more disposed for bed; but he was always cultivating it

nevertheless, and always moving in it--and always laying out money on it

with the greatest liberality.

Mrs Merdle's first husband had been a colonel, under whose auspices the

bosom had entered into competition with the snows of North America, and

had come off at little disadvantage in point of whiteness, and at none

in point of coldness. The colonel's son was Mrs Merdle's only child. He

was of a chuckle-headed, high-shouldered make, with a general appearance

of being, not so much a young man as a swelled boy. He had given so few

signs of reason, that a by-word went among his companions that his brain

had been frozen up in a mighty frost which prevailed at St john's, New

Brunswick, at the period of his birth there, and had never thawed from

that hour. Another by-word represented him as having in his infancy,

through the negligence of a nurse, fallen out of a high window on his

head, which had been heard by responsible witnesses to crack. It is

probable that both these representations were of ex post facto

origin; the young gentleman (whose expressive name was Sparkler) being

monomaniacal in offering marriage to all manner of undesirable young

ladies, and in remarking of every successive young lady to whom he

tendered a matrimonial proposal that she was 'a doosed fine gal--well

educated too--with no biggodd nonsense about her.'

A son-in-law with these limited talents, might have been a clog upon

another man; but Mr Merdle did not want a son-in-law for himself; he

wanted a son-in-law for Society. Mr Sparkler having been in the Guards,

and being in the habit of frequenting all the races, and all the

lounges, and all the parties, and being well known, Society was

satisfied with its son-in-law. This happy result Mr Merdle would have

considered well attained, though Mr Sparkler had been a more expensive

article. And he did not get Mr Sparkler by any means cheap for

Society, even as it was. There was a dinner giving in the Harley Street

establishment, while Little Dorrit was stitching at her father's new

shirts by his side that night; and there were magnates from the Court

and magnates from the City, magnates from the Commons and magnates from

the Lords, magnates from the bench and magnates from the bar,

Bishop magnates, Treasury magnates, Horse Guard magnates, Admiralty

magnates,--all the magnates that keep us going, and sometimes trip us

up.

'I am told,' said Bishop magnate to Horse Guards, 'that Mr Merdle has

made another enormous hit. They say a hundred thousand pounds.'

Horse Guards had heard two.

Treasury had heard three.

Bar, handling his persuasive double eye-glass, was by no means clear but

that it might be four. It was one of those happy strokes of calculation

and combination, the result of which it was difficult to estimate. It

was one of those instances of a comprehensive grasp, associated with

habitual luck and characteristic boldness, of which an age presented us

but few. But here was Brother Bellows, who had been in the great Bank

case, and who could probably tell us more. What did Brother Bellows put

this new success at?

Brother Bellows was on his way to make his bow to the bosom, and could

only tell them in passing that he had heard it stated, with great

appearance of truth, as being worth, from first to last, half-a-million

of money.

Admiralty said Mr Merdle was a wonderful man, Treasury said he was a

new power in the country, and would be able to buy up the whole House of

Commons. Bishop said he was glad to think that this wealth flowed into

the coffers of a gentleman who was always disposed to maintain the best

interests of Society.

Mr Merdle himself was usually late on these occasions, as a man still

detained in the clutch of giant enterprises when other men had shaken

off their dwarfs for the day. On this occasion, he was the last arrival.

Treasury said Merdle's work punished him a little. Bishop said he was

glad to think that this wealth flowed into the coffers of a gentleman

who accepted it with meekness.

Powder! There was so much Powder in waiting, that it flavoured the

dinner. Pulverous particles got into the dishes, and Society's meats had

a seasoning of first-rate footmen. Mr Merdle took down a countess who

was secluded somewhere in the core of an immense dress, to which she

was in the proportion of the heart to the overgrown cabbage. If so low a

simile may be admitted, the dress went down the staircase like a richly

brocaded Jack in the Green, and nobody knew what sort of small person

carried it.

Society had everything it could want, and could not want, for dinner.

It had everything to look at, and everything to eat, and everything to

drink. It is to be hoped it enjoyed itself; for Mr Merdle's own share of

the repast might have been paid for with eighteenpence. Mrs Merdle was

magnificent. The chief butler was the next magnificent institution of

the day. He was the stateliest man in the company. He did nothing, but

he looked on as few other men could have done. He was Mr Merdle's

last gift to Society. Mr Merdle didn't want him, and was put out of

countenance when the great creature looked at him; but inappeasable

Society would have him--and had got him.

The invisible countess carried out the Green at the usual stage of

the entertainment, and the file of beauty was closed up by the bosom.

Treasury said, Juno. Bishop said, Judith.

Bar fell into discussion with Horse Guards concerning courts-martial.

Brothers Bellows and Bench struck in. Other magnates paired off. Mr

Merdle sat silent, and looked at the table-cloth. Sometimes a magnate

addressed him, to turn the stream of his own particular discussion

towards him; but Mr Merdle seldom gave much attention to it, or did more

than rouse himself from his calculations and pass the wine.

When they rose, so many of the magnates had something to say to Mr

Merdle individually that he held little levees by the sideboard, and

checked them off as they went out at the door.

Treasury hoped he might venture to congratulate one of England's

world-famed capitalists and merchant-princes (he had turned that

original sentiment in the house a few times, and it came easy to him) on

a new achievement. To extend the triumphs of such men was to extend

the triumphs and resources of the nation; and Treasury felt--he gave Mr

Merdle to understand--patriotic on the subject.

'Thank you, my lord,' said Mr Merdle; 'thank you. I accept your

congratulations with pride, and I am glad you approve.'

'Why, I don't unreservedly approve, my dear Mr Merdle. Because,'

smiling Treasury turned him by the arm towards the sideboard and spoke

banteringly, 'it never can be worth your while to come among us and help

us.'

Mr Merdle felt honoured by the--

'No, no,' said Treasury, 'that is not the light in which one so

distinguished for practical knowledge and great foresight, can be

expected to regard it. If we should ever be happily enabled, by

accidentally possessing the control over circumstances, to propose

to one so eminent to--to come among us, and give us the weight of his

influence, knowledge, and character, we could only propose it to him as

a duty. In fact, as a duty that he owed to Society.'

Mr Merdle intimated that Society was the apple of his eye, and that its

claims were paramount to every other consideration. Treasury moved

on, and Bar came up. Bar, with his little insinuating jury droop, and

fingering his persuasive double eye-glass, hoped he might be excused if

he mentioned to one of the greatest converters of the root of all evil

into the root of all good, who had for a long time reflected a shining

lustre on the annals even of our commercial country--if he mentioned,

disinterestedly, and as, what we lawyers called in our pedantic way,

amicus curiae, a fact that had come by accident within his knowledge. He

had been required to look over the title of a very considerable estate

in one of the eastern counties--lying, in fact, for Mr Merdle knew we

lawyers loved to be particular, on the borders of two of the eastern

counties. Now, the title was perfectly sound, and the estate was to

be purchased by one who had the command of--Money (jury droop and

persuasive eye-glass), on remarkably advantageous terms. This had come

to Bar's knowledge only that day, and it had occurred to him, 'I

shall have the honour of dining with my esteemed friend Mr Merdle

this evening, and, strictly between ourselves, I will mention the

opportunity.' Such a purchase would involve not only a great legitimate

political influence, but some half-dozen church presentations of

considerable annual value. Now, that Mr Merdle was already at no loss

to discover means of occupying even his capital, and of fully employing

even his active and vigorous intellect, Bar well knew: but he would

venture to suggest that the question arose in his mind, whether one who

had deservedly gained so high a position and so European a reputation

did not owe it--we would not say to himself, but we would say to

Society, to possess himself of such influences as these; and to exercise

them--we would not say for his own, or for his party's, but we would say

for Society's--benefit.

Mr Merdle again expressed himself as wholly devoted to that object of

his constant consideration, and Bar took his persuasive eye-glass up the

grand staircase. Bishop then came undesignedly sidling in the direction

of the sideboard.

Surely the goods of this world, it occurred in an accidental way to

Bishop to remark, could scarcely be directed into happier channels than

when they accumulated under the magic touch of the wise and sagacious,

who, while they knew the just value of riches (Bishop tried here to

look as if he were rather poor himself), were aware of their importance,

judiciously governed and rightly distributed, to the welfare of our

brethren at large.

Mr Merdle with humility expressed his conviction that Bishop couldn't

mean him, and with inconsistency expressed his high gratification in

Bishop's good opinion.

Bishop then--jauntily stepping out a little with his well-shaped right

leg, as though he said to Mr Merdle 'don't mind the apron; a mere form!'

put this case to his good friend:

Whether it had occurred to his good friend, that Society might not

unreasonably hope that one so blest in his undertakings, and whose

example on his pedestal was so influential with it, would shed a little

money in the direction of a mission or so to Africa?

Mr Merdle signifying that the idea should have his best attention,

Bishop put another case:

Whether his good friend had at all interested himself in the proceedings

of our Combined Additional Endowed Dignitaries Committee, and whether it

had occurred to him that to shed a little money in that direction might

be a great conception finely executed?

Mr Merdle made a similar reply, and Bishop explained his reason for

inquiring.

Society looked to such men as his good friend to do such things. It was

not that HE looked to them, but that Society looked to them.

Just as it was not Our Committee who wanted the Additional Endowed

Dignitaries, but it was Society that was in a state of the most

agonising uneasiness of mind until it got them. He begged to assure his

good friend that he was extremely sensible of his good friend's regard

on all occasions for the best interests of Society; and he considered

that he was at once consulting those interests and expressing the

feeling of Society, when he wished him continued prosperity, continued

increase of riches, and continued things in general.

Bishop then betook himself up-stairs, and the other magnates gradually

floated up after him until there was no one left below but Mr Merdle.

That gentleman, after looking at the table-cloth until the soul of the

chief butler glowed with a noble resentment, went slowly up after the

rest, and became of no account in the stream of people on the grand

staircase. Mrs Merdle was at home, the best of the jewels were hung out

to be seen, Society got what it came for, Mr Merdle drank twopennyworth

of tea in a corner and got more than he wanted.

Among the evening magnates was a famous physician, who knew everybody,

and whom everybody knew. On entering at the door, he came upon Mr Merdle

drinking his tea in a corner, and touched him on the arm.

Mr Merdle started. 'Oh! It's you!'

'Any better to-day?'

'No,' said Mr Merdle, 'I am no better.'

'A pity I didn't see you this morning. Pray come to me to-morrow, or let

me come to you.'

'Well!' he replied. 'I will come to-morrow as I drive by.' Bar and

Bishop had both been bystanders during this short dialogue, and as Mr

Merdle was swept away by the crowd, they made their remarks upon it

to the Physician. Bar said, there was a certain point of mental strain

beyond which no man could go; that the point varied with various

textures of brain and peculiarities of constitution, as he had had

occasion to notice in several of his learned brothers; but the point of

endurance passed by a line's breadth, depression and dyspepsia ensued.

Not to intrude on the sacred mysteries of medicine, he took it, now

(with the jury droop and persuasive eye-glass), that this was Merdle's

case? Bishop said that when he was a young man, and had fallen for a

brief space into the habit of writing sermons on Saturdays, a habit

which all young sons of the church should sedulously avoid, he had

frequently been sensible of a depression, arising as he supposed from an

over-taxed intellect, upon which the yolk of a new-laid egg, beaten up

by the good woman in whose house he at that time lodged, with a glass

of sound sherry, nutmeg, and powdered sugar acted like a charm. Without

presuming to offer so simple a remedy to the consideration of so

profound a professor of the great healing art, he would venture to

inquire whether the strain, being by way of intricate calculations,

the spirits might not (humanly speaking) be restored to their tone by a

gentle and yet generous stimulant?

'Yes,' said the physician, 'yes, you are both right. But I may as well

tell you that I can find nothing the matter with Mr Merdle. He has

the constitution of a rhinoceros, the digestion of an ostrich, and

the concentration of an oyster. As to nerves, Mr Merdle is of a cool

temperament, and not a sensitive man: is about as invulnerable, I should

say, as Achilles. How such a man should suppose himself unwell without

reason, you may think strange. But I have found nothing the matter with

him. He may have some deep-seated recondite complaint. I can't say. I

only say, that at present I have not found it out.'

There was no shadow of Mr Merdle's complaint on the bosom now displaying

precious stones in rivalry with many similar superb jewel-stands; there

was no shadow of Mr Merdle's complaint on young Sparkler hovering about

the rooms, monomaniacally seeking any sufficiently ineligible young lady

with no nonsense about her; there was no shadow of Mr Merdle's complaint

on the Barnacles and Stiltstalkings, of whom whole colonies were

present; or on any of the company. Even on himself, its shadow was faint

enough as he moved about among the throng, receiving homage.

Mr Merdle's complaint. Society and he had so much to do with one another

in all things else, that it is hard to imagine his complaint, if he

had one, being solely his own affair. Had he that deep-seated recondite

complaint, and did any doctor find it out? Patience, in the meantime,

the shadow of the Marshalsea wall was a real darkening influence, and

could be seen on the Dorrit Family at any stage of the sun's course.

CHAPTER 22. A Puzzle

Mr Clennam did not increase in favour with the Father of the Marshalsea

in the ratio of his increasing visits. His obtuseness on the great

Testimonial question was not calculated to awaken admiration in the

paternal breast, but had rather a tendency to give offence in that

sensitive quarter, and to be regarded as a positive shortcoming in point

of gentlemanly feeling. An impression of disappointment, occasioned

by the discovery that Mr Clennam scarcely possessed that delicacy for

which, in the confidence of his nature, he had been inclined to give

him credit, began to darken the fatherly mind in connection with that

gentleman. The father went so far as to say, in his private family

circle, that he feared Mr Clennam was not a man of high instincts.

He was happy, he observed, in his public capacity as leader and

representative of the College, to receive Mr Clennam when he called to

pay his respects; but he didn't find that he got on with him personally.

There appeared to be something (he didn't know what it was) wanting in

him. Howbeit, the father did not fail in any outward show of politeness,

but, on the contrary, honoured him with much attention; perhaps

cherishing the hope that, although not a man of a sufficiently

brilliant and spontaneous turn of mind to repeat his former testimonial

unsolicited, it might still be within the compass of his nature to

bear the part of a responsive gentleman, in any correspondence that way

tending.

In the threefold capacity, of the gentleman from outside who had been

accidentally locked in on the night of his first appearance, of the

gentleman from outside who had inquired into the affairs of the Father

of the Marshalsea with the stupendous idea of getting him out, and of

the gentleman from outside who took an interest in the child of the

Marshalsea, Clennam soon became a visitor of mark.

He was not surprised by the attentions he received from Mr Chivery when

that officer was on the lock, for he made little distinction between

Mr Chivery's politeness and that of the other turnkeys. It was on one

particular afternoon that Mr Chivery surprised him all at once, and

stood forth from his companions in bold relief.

Mr Chivery, by some artful exercise of his power of clearing the Lodge,

had contrived to rid it of all sauntering Collegians; so that Clennam,

coming out of the prison, should find him on duty alone.

'(Private) I ask your pardon, sir,' said Mr Chivery in a secret manner;

'but which way might you be going?'

'I am going over the Bridge.' He saw in Mr Chivery, with some

astonishment, quite an Allegory of Silence, as he stood with his key on

his lips.

'(Private) I ask your pardon again,' said Mr Chivery, 'but could you go

round by Horsemonger Lane? Could you by any means find time to look in

at that address?' handing him a little card, printed for circulation

among the connection of Chivery and Co., Tobacconists, Importers of pure

Havannah Cigars, Bengal Cheroots, and fine-flavoured Cubas, Dealers in

Fancy Snuffs, &C. &C.

'(Private) It an't tobacco business,' said Mr Chivery. 'The truth is,

it's my wife. She's wishful to say a word to you, sir, upon a point

respecting--yes,' said Mr Chivery, answering Clennam's look of

apprehension with a nod, 'respecting her.'

'I will make a point of seeing your wife directly.'

'Thank you, sir. Much obliged. It an't above ten minutes out of your

way. Please to ask for Mrs Chivery!' These instructions, Mr Chivery, who

had already let him out, cautiously called through a little slide in the

outer door, which he could draw back from within for the inspection of

visitors when it pleased him.

Arthur Clennam, with the card in his hand, betook himself to the address

set forth upon it, and speedily arrived there. It was a very small

establishment, wherein a decent woman sat behind the counter working

at her needle. Little jars of tobacco, little boxes of cigars, a

little assortment of pipes, a little jar or two of snuff, and a little

instrument like a shoeing horn for serving it out, composed the retail

stock in trade.

Arthur mentioned his name, and his having promised to call, on the

solicitation of Mr Chivery. About something relating to Miss Dorrit, he

believed. Mrs Chivery at once laid aside her work, rose up from her seat

behind the counter, and deploringly shook her head.

'You may see him now,' said she, 'if you'll condescend to take a peep.'

With these mysterious words, she preceded the visitor into a little

parlour behind the shop, with a little window in it commanding a very

little dull back-yard. In this yard a wash of sheets and table-cloths

tried (in vain, for want of air) to get itself dried on a line or two;

and among those flapping articles was sitting in a chair, like the

last mariner left alive on the deck of a damp ship without the power of

furling the sails, a little woe-begone young man.

'Our John,' said Mrs Chivery.

Not to be deficient in interest, Clennam asked what he might be doing

there?

'It's the only change he takes,' said Mrs Chivery, shaking her head

afresh. 'He won't go out, even in the back-yard, when there's no linen;

but when there's linen to keep the neighbours' eyes off, he'll sit

there, hours. Hours he will. Says he feels as if it was groves!' Mrs

Chivery shook her head again, put her apron in a motherly way to her

eyes, and reconducted her visitor into the regions of the business.

'Please to take a seat, sir,' said Mrs Chivery. 'Miss Dorrit is the

matter with Our John, sir; he's a breaking his heart for her, and I

would wish to take the liberty to ask how it's to be made good to his

parents when bust?'

Mrs Chivery, who was a comfortable-looking woman much respected about

Horsemonger Lane for her feelings and her conversation, uttered this

speech with fell composure, and immediately afterwards began again to

shake her head and dry her eyes.

'Sir,' said she in continuation, 'you are acquainted with the family,

and have interested yourself with the family, and are influential with

the family. If you can promote views calculated to make two young people

happy, let me, for Our john's sake, and for both their sakes, implore

you so to do!'

'I have been so habituated,' returned Arthur, at a loss, 'during

the short time I have known her, to consider Little--I have been so

habituated to consider Miss Dorrit in a light altogether removed from

that in which you present her to me, that you quite take me by surprise.

Does she know your son?'

'Brought up together, sir,' said Mrs Chivery. 'Played together.'

'Does she know your son as her admirer?'

'Oh! bless you, sir,' said Mrs Chivery, with a sort of triumphant

shiver, 'she never could have seen him on a Sunday without knowing he

was that. His cane alone would have told it long ago, if nothing else

had. Young men like John don't take to ivory hands a pinting, for

nothing. How did I first know it myself? Similarly.'

'Perhaps Miss Dorrit may not be so ready as you, you see.'

'Then she knows it, sir,' said Mrs Chivery, 'by word of mouth.'

'Are you sure?'

'Sir,' said Mrs Chivery, 'sure and certain as in this house I am. I see

my son go out with my own eyes when in this house I was, and I see my

son come in with my own eyes when in this house I was, and I know he

done it!' Mrs Chivery derived a surprising force of emphasis from the

foregoing circumstantiality and repetition.

'May I ask you how he came to fall into the desponding state which

causes you so much uneasiness?'

'That,' said Mrs Chivery, 'took place on that same day when to this

house I see that John with these eyes return. Never been himself in this

house since. Never was like what he has been since, not from the hour

when to this house seven year ago me and his father, as tenants by the

quarter, came!' An effect in the nature of an affidavit was gained from

this speech by Mrs Chivery's peculiar power of construction. 'May I

venture to inquire what is your version of the matter?'

'You may,' said Mrs Chivery, 'and I will give it to you in honour and in

word as true as in this shop I stand. Our John has every one's good word

and every one's good wish. He played with her as a child when in that

yard a child she played. He has known her ever since. He went out upon

the Sunday afternoon when in this very parlour he had dined, and met

her, with appointment or without appointment; which, I do not pretend to

say. He made his offer to her. Her brother and sister is high in their

views, and against Our John. Her father is all for himself in his views

and against sharing her with any one. Under which circumstances she

has answered Our John, "No, John, I cannot have you, I cannot have

any husband, it is not my intentions ever to become a wife, it is my

intentions to be always a sacrifice, farewell, find another worthy of

you, and forget me!" This is the way in which she is doomed to be a

constant slave to them that are not worthy that a constant slave she

unto them should be. This is the way in which Our John has come to find

no pleasure but in taking cold among the linen, and in showing in that

yard, as in that yard I have myself shown you, a broken-down ruin that

goes home to his mother's heart!' Here the good woman pointed to the

little window, whence her son might be seen sitting disconsolate in

the tuneless groves; and again shook her head and wiped her eyes, and

besought him, for the united sakes of both the young people, to exercise

his influence towards the bright reversal of these dismal events.

She was so confident in her exposition of the case, and it was so

undeniably founded on correct premises in so far as the relative

positions of Little Dorrit and her family were concerned, that Clennam

could not feel positive on the other side. He had come to attach to

Little Dorrit an interest so peculiar--an interest that removed her

from, while it grew out of, the common and coarse things surrounding

her--that he found it disappointing, disagreeable, almost painful, to

suppose her in love with young Mr Chivery in the back-yard, or any such

person. On the other hand, he reasoned with himself that she was just

as good and just as true in love with him, as not in love with him;

and that to make a kind of domesticated fairy of her, on the penalty

of isolation at heart from the only people she knew, would be but a

weakness of his own fancy, and not a kind one. Still, her youthful and

ethereal appearance, her timid manner, the charm of her sensitive voice

and eyes, the very many respects in which she had interested him out

of her own individuality, and the strong difference between herself and

those about her, were not in unison, and were determined not to be in

unison, with this newly presented idea.

He told the worthy Mrs Chivery, after turning these things over in his

mind--he did that, indeed, while she was yet speaking--that he might be

relied upon to do his utmost at all times to promote the happiness of

Miss Dorrit, and to further the wishes of her heart if it were in his

power to do so, and if he could discover what they were. At the same

time he cautioned her against assumptions and appearances; enjoined

strict silence and secrecy, lest Miss Dorrit should be made unhappy; and

particularly advised her to endeavour to win her son's confidence and so

to make quite sure of the state of the case. Mrs Chivery considered the

latter precaution superfluous, but said she would try. She shook her

head as if she had not derived all the comfort she had fondly expected

from this interview, but thanked him nevertheless for the trouble he had

kindly taken. They then parted good friends, and Arthur walked away.

The crowd in the street jostling the crowd in his mind, and the two

crowds making a confusion, he avoided London Bridge, and turned off in

the quieter direction of the Iron Bridge. He had scarcely set foot upon

it, when he saw Little Dorrit walking on before him. It was a pleasant

day, with a light breeze blowing, and she seemed to have that minute

come there for air. He had left her in her father's room within an hour.

It was a timely chance, favourable to his wish of observing her face

and manner when no one else was by. He quickened his pace; but before he

reached her, she turned her head.

'Have I startled you?' he asked.

'I thought I knew the step,' she answered, hesitating.

'And did you know it, Little Dorrit? You could hardly have expected

mine.'

'I did not expect any. But when I heard a step, I thought it--sounded

like yours.'

'Are you going further?'

'No, sir, I am only walking her for a little change.'

They walked together, and she recovered her confiding manner with him,

and looked up in his face as she said, after glancing around:

'It is so strange. Perhaps you can hardly understand it. I sometimes

have a sensation as if it was almost unfeeling to walk here.'

'Unfeeling?'

'To see the river, and so much sky, and so many objects, and such change

and motion. Then to go back, you know, and find him in the same cramped

place.'

'Ah yes! But going back, you must remember that you take with you the

spirit and influence of such things to cheer him.'

'Do I? I hope I may! I am afraid you fancy too much, sir, and make me

out too powerful. If you were in prison, could I bring such comfort to

you?' 'Yes, Little Dorrit, I am sure of it.'

He gathered from a tremor on her lip, and a passing shadow of great

agitation on her face, that her mind was with her father. He remained

silent for a few moments, that she might regain her composure. The

Little Dorrit, trembling on his arm, was less in unison than ever with

Mrs Chivery's theory, and yet was not irreconcilable with a new fancy

which sprung up within him, that there might be some one else in the

hopeless--newer fancy still--in the hopeless unattainable distance.

They turned, and Clennam said, Here was Maggy coming! Little Dorrit

looked up, surprised, and they confronted Maggy, who brought herself

at sight of them to a dead stop. She had been trotting along, so

preoccupied and busy that she had not recognised them until they turned

upon her. She was now in a moment so conscience-stricken that her very

basket partook of the change.

'Maggy, you promised me to stop near father.'

'So I would, Little Mother, only he wouldn't let me. If he takes and

sends me out I must go. If he takes and says, "Maggy, you hurry away and

back with that letter, and you shall have a sixpence if the answer's a

good 'un," I must take it. Lor, Little Mother, what's a poor thing of

ten year old to do? And if Mr Tip--if he happens to be a coming in as

I come out, and if he says "Where are you going, Maggy?" and if I says,

"I'm a going So and So," and if he says, "I'll have a Try too," and if

he goes into the George and writes a letter and if he gives it me and

says, "Take that one to the same place, and if the answer's a good 'un

I'll give you a shilling," it ain't my fault, mother!'

Arthur read, in Little Dorrit's downcast eyes, to whom she foresaw that

the letters were addressed.

'I'm a going So and So. There! That's where I am a going to,' said

Maggy. 'I'm a going So and So. It ain't you, Little Mother, that's got

anything to do with it--it's you, you know,' said Maggy, addressing

Arthur. 'You'd better come, So and So, and let me take and give 'em to

you.'

'We will not be so particular as that, Maggy. Give them me here,' said

Clennam in a low voice.

'Well, then, come across the road,' answered Maggy in a very loud

whisper. 'Little Mother wasn't to know nothing of it, and she would

never have known nothing of it if you had only gone So and So, instead

of bothering and loitering about. It ain't my fault. I must do what I am

told. They ought to be ashamed of themselves for telling me.'

Clennam crossed to the other side, and hurriedly opened the letters.

That from the father mentioned that most unexpectedly finding himself in

the novel position of having been disappointed of a remittance from

the City on which he had confidently counted, he took up his pen, being

restrained by the unhappy circumstance of his incarceration during

three-and-twenty years (doubly underlined), from coming himself, as

he would otherwise certainly have done--took up his pen to entreat Mr

Clennam to advance him the sum of Three Pounds Ten Shillings upon his

I.O.U., which he begged to enclose. That from the son set forth that

Mr Clennam would, he knew, be gratified to hear that he had at

length obtained permanent employment of a highly satisfactory nature,

accompanied with every prospect of complete success in life; but that

the temporary inability of his employer to pay him his arrears of salary

to that date (in which condition said employer had appealed to that

generous forbearance in which he trusted he should never be wanting

towards a fellow-creature), combined with the fraudulent conduct of a

false friend and the present high price of provisions, had reduced

him to the verge of ruin, unless he could by a quarter before six that

evening raise the sum of eight pounds. This sum, Mr Clennam would be

happy to learn, he had, through the promptitude of several friends

who had a lively confidence in his probity, already raised, with the

exception of a trifling balance of one pound seventeen and fourpence;

the loan of which balance, for the period of one month, would be fraught

with the usual beneficent consequences.

These letters Clennam answered with the aid of his pencil and

pocket-book, on the spot; sending the father what he asked for, and

excusing himself from compliance with the demand of the son. He then

commissioned Maggy to return with his replies, and gave her the

shilling of which the failure of her supplemental enterprise would have

disappointed her otherwise.

When he rejoined Little Dorrit, and they had begun walking as before,

she said all at once:

'I think I had better go. I had better go home.'

'Don't be distressed,' said Clennam, 'I have answered the letters. They

were nothing. You know what they were. They were nothing.'

'But I am afraid,' she returned, 'to leave him, I am afraid to leave

any of them. When I am gone, they pervert--but they don't mean it--even

Maggy.'

'It was a very innocent commission that she undertook, poor thing. And

in keeping it secret from you, she supposed, no doubt, that she was only

saving you uneasiness.'

'Yes, I hope so, I hope so. But I had better go home! It was but the

other day that my sister told me I had become so used to the prison that

I had its tone and character. It must be so. I am sure it must be when I

see these things. My place is there. I am better there, it is unfeeling

in me to be here, when I can do the least thing there. Good-bye. I had

far better stay at home!'

The agonised way in which she poured this out, as if it burst of itself

from her suppressed heart, made it difficult for Clennam to keep the

tears from his eyes as he saw and heard her.

'Don't call it home, my child!' he entreated. 'It is always painful to

me to hear you call it home.'

'But it is home! What else can I call home? Why should I ever forget it

for a single moment?'

'You never do, dear Little Dorrit, in any good and true service.'

'I hope not, O I hope not! But it is better for me to stay there; much

better, much more dutiful, much happier. Please don't go with me, let me

go by myself. Good-bye, God bless you. Thank you, thank you.'

He felt that it was better to respect her entreaty, and did not move

while her slight form went quickly away from him. When it had fluttered

out of sight, he turned his face towards the water and stood thinking.

She would have been distressed at any time by this discovery of the

letters; but so much so, and in that unrestrainable way?

No.

When she had seen her father begging with his threadbare disguise on,

when she had entreated him not to give her father money, she had

been distressed, but not like this. Something had made her keenly and

additionally sensitive just now. Now, was there some one in the hopeless

unattainable distance? Or had the suspicion been brought into his mind,

by his own associations of the troubled river running beneath the bridge

with the same river higher up, its changeless tune upon the prow of the

ferry-boat, so many miles an hour the peaceful flowing of the stream,

here the rushes, there the lilies, nothing uncertain or unquiet?

He thought of his poor child, Little Dorrit, for a long time there; he

thought of her going home; he thought of her in the night; he thought

of her when the day came round again. And the poor child Little Dorrit

thought of him--too faithfully, ah, too faithfully!--in the shadow of

the Marshalsea wall.

CHAPTER 23. Machinery in Motion

Mr Meagles bestirred himself with such prompt activity in the matter of

the negotiation with Daniel Doyce which Clennam had entrusted to him,

that he soon brought it into business train, and called on Clennam at

nine o'clock one morning to make his report. 'Doyce is highly gratified

by your good opinion,' he opened the business by saying, 'and desires

nothing so much as that you should examine the affairs of the Works for

yourself, and entirely understand them. He has handed me the keys of

all his books and papers--here they are jingling in this pocket--and the

only charge he has given me is "Let Mr Clennam have the means of putting

himself on a perfect equality with me as to knowing whatever I know.

If it should come to nothing after all, he will respect my confidence.

Unless I was sure of that to begin with, I should have nothing to do

with him." And there, you see,' said Mr Meagles, 'you have Daniel Doyce

all over.'

'A very honourable character.'

'Oh, yes, to be sure. Not a doubt of it. Odd, but very honourable. Very

odd though. Now, would you believe, Clennam,' said Mr Meagles, with

a hearty enjoyment of his friend's eccentricity, 'that I had a whole

morning in What's-his-name Yard--'

'Bleeding Heart?'

'A whole morning in Bleeding Heart Yard, before I could induce him to

pursue the subject at all?'

'How was that?'

'How was that, my friend? I no sooner mentioned your name in connection

with it than he declared off.'

'Declared off on my account?'

'I no sooner mentioned your name, Clennam, than he said, "That will

never do!" What did he mean by that? I asked him. No matter, Meagles;

that would never do. Why would it never do? You'll hardly believe it,

Clennam,' said Mr Meagles, laughing within himself, 'but it came out

that it would never do, because you and he, walking down to Twickenham

together, had glided into a friendly conversation in the course of which

he had referred to his intention of taking a partner, supposing at the

time that you were as firmly and finally settled as St Paul's Cathedral.

"Whereas," says he, "Mr Clennam might now believe, if I entertained his

proposition, that I had a sinister and designing motive in what was open

free speech. Which I can't bear," says he, "which I really am too proud

to bear."'

'I should as soon suspect--'

'Of course you would,' interrupted Mr Meagles, 'and so I told him. But

it took a morning to scale that wall; and I doubt if any other man

than myself (he likes me of old) could have got his leg over it. Well,

Clennam. This business-like obstacle surmounted, he then stipulated that

before resuming with you I should look over the books and form my own

opinion. I looked over the books, and formed my own opinion. "Is it, on

the whole, for, or against?" says he. "For," says I. "Then," says he,

"you may now, my good friend, give Mr Clennam the means of forming

his opinion. To enable him to do which, without bias and with perfect

freedom, I shall go out of town for a week." And he's gone,' said Mr

Meagles; that's the rich conclusion of the thing.'

'Leaving me,' said Clennam, 'with a high sense, I must say, of his

candour and his--'

'Oddity,' Mr Meagles struck in. 'I should think so!'

It was not exactly the word on Clennam's lips, but he forbore to

interrupt his good-humoured friend.

'And now,' added Mr Meagles, 'you can begin to look into matters as soon

as you think proper. I have undertaken to explain where you may want

explanation, but to be strictly impartial, and to do nothing more.'

They began their perquisitions in Bleeding Heart Yard that same

forenoon. Little peculiarities were easily to be detected by experienced

eyes in Mr Doyce's way of managing his affairs, but they almost always

involved some ingenious simplification of a difficulty, and some plain

road to the desired end. That his papers were in arrear, and that he

stood in need of assistance to develop the capacity of his business, was

clear enough; but all the results of his undertakings during many years

were distinctly set forth, and were ascertainable with ease. Nothing had

been done for the purposes of the pending investigation; everything was

in its genuine working dress, and in a certain honest rugged order. The

calculations and entries, in his own hand, of which there were many,

were bluntly written, and with no very neat precision; but were always

plain and directed straight to the purpose. It occurred to Arthur that

a far more elaborate and taking show of business--such as the records of

the Circumlocution Office made perhaps--might be far less serviceable,

as being meant to be far less intelligible.

Three or four days of steady application tendered him master of all the

facts it was essential to become acquainted with. Mr Meagles was at hand

the whole time, always ready to illuminate any dim place with the bright

little safety-lamp belonging to the scales and scoop. Between them they

agreed upon the sum it would be fair to offer for the purchase of a

half-share in the business, and then Mr Meagles unsealed a paper in

which Daniel Doyce had noted the amount at which he valued it; which was

even something less. Thus, when Daniel came back, he found the affair as

good as concluded.

'And I may now avow, Mr Clennam,' said he, with a cordial shake of the

hand, 'that if I had looked high and low for a partner, I believe I

could not have found one more to my mind.'

'I say the same,' said Clennam.

'And I say of both of you,' added Mr Meagles, 'that you are well

matched. You keep him in check, Clennam, with your common sense, and you

stick to the Works, Dan, with your--'

'Uncommon sense?' suggested Daniel, with his quiet smile.

'You may call it so, if you like--and each of you will be a right hand

to the other. Here's my own right hand upon it, as a practical man, to

both of you.'

The purchase was completed within a month. It left Arthur in possession

of private personal means not exceeding a few hundred pounds; but it

opened to him an active and promising career. The three friends dined

together on the auspicious occasion; the factory and the factory wives

and children made holiday and dined too; even Bleeding Heart Yard

dined and was full of meat. Two months had barely gone by in all, when

Bleeding Heart Yard had become so familiar with short-commons again,

that the treat was forgotten there; when nothing seemed new in the

partnership but the paint of the inscription on the door-posts, DOYCE

AND CLENNAM; when it appeared even to Clennam himself, that he had had

the affairs of the firm in his mind for years.

The little counting-house reserved for his own occupation, was a room of

wood and glass at the end of a long low workshop, filled with benches,

and vices, and tools, and straps, and wheels; which, when they were

in gear with the steam-engine, went tearing round as though they had a

suicidal mission to grind the business to dust and tear the factory to

pieces. A communication of great trap-doors in the floor and roof with

the workshop above and the workshop below, made a shaft of light in

this perspective, which brought to Clennam's mind the child's old

picture-book, where similar rays were the witnesses of Abel's

murder. The noises were sufficiently removed and shut out from the

counting-house to blend into a busy hum, interspersed with periodical

clinks and thumps. The patient figures at work were swarthy with the

filings of iron and steel that danced on every bench and bubbled up

through every chink in the planking. The workshop was arrived at by a

step-ladder from the outer yard below, where it served as a shelter for

the large grindstone where tools were sharpened. The whole had at once

a fanciful and practical air in Clennam's eyes, which was a welcome

change; and, as often as he raised them from his first work of getting

the array of business documents into perfect order, he glanced at these

things with a feeling of pleasure in his pursuit that was new to him.

Raising his eyes thus one day, he was surprised to see a bonnet

labouring up the step-ladder. The unusual apparition was followed by

another bonnet. He then perceived that the first bonnet was on the head

of Mr F.'s Aunt, and that the second bonnet was on the head of Flora,

who seemed to have propelled her legacy up the steep ascent with

considerable difficulty. Though not altogether enraptured at the sight

of these visitors, Clennam lost no time in opening the counting-house

door, and extricating them from the workshop; a rescue which was

rendered the more necessary by Mr F.'s Aunt already stumbling over some

impediment, and menacing steam power as an Institution with a stony

reticule she carried.

'Good gracious, Arthur,--I should say Mr Clennam, far more proper--the

climb we have had to get up here and how ever to get down again without

a fire-escape and Mr F.'s Aunt slipping through the steps and bruised

all over and you in the machinery and foundry way too only think, and

never told us!'

Thus, Flora, out of breath. Meanwhile, Mr F.'s Aunt rubbed her esteemed

insteps with her umbrella, and vindictively glared.

'Most unkind never to have come back to see us since that day, though

naturally it was not to be expected that there should be any attraction

at our house and you were much more pleasantly engaged, that's pretty

certain, and is she fair or dark blue eyes or black I wonder, not that

I expect that she should be anything but a perfect contrast to me in all

particulars for I am a disappointment as I very well know and you are

quite right to be devoted no doubt though what I am saying Arthur never

mind I hardly know myself Good gracious!'

By this time he had placed chairs for them in the counting-house. As

Flora dropped into hers, she bestowed the old look upon him.

'And to think of Doyce and Clennam, and who Doyce can be,' said Flora;

'delightful man no doubt and married perhaps or perhaps a daughter, now

has he really? then one understands the partnership and sees it all,

don't tell me anything about it for I know I have no claim to ask the

question the golden chain that once was forged being snapped and very

proper.'

Flora put her hand tenderly on his, and gave him another of the youthful

glances.

'Dear Arthur--force of habit, Mr Clennam every way more delicate and

adapted to existing circumstances--I must beg to be excused for taking

the liberty of this intrusion but I thought I might so far presume upon

old times for ever faded never more to bloom as to call with Mr F.'s

Aunt to congratulate and offer best wishes, A great deal superior to

China not to be denied and much nearer though higher up!'

'I am very happy to see you,' said Clennam, 'and I thank you, Flora,

very much for your kind remembrance.'

'More than I can say myself at any rate,' returned Flora, 'for I might

have been dead and buried twenty distinct times over and no doubt

whatever should have been before you had genuinely remembered Me or

anything like it in spite of which one last remark I wish to make, one

last explanation I wish to offer--'

'My dear Mrs Finching,' Arthur remonstrated in alarm.

'Oh not that disagreeable name, say Flora!'

'Flora, is it worth troubling yourself afresh to enter into

explanations? I assure you none are needed. I am satisfied--I am

perfectly satisfied.'

A diversion was occasioned here, by Mr F.'s Aunt making the following

inexorable and awful statement:

'There's mile-stones on the Dover road!'

With such mortal hostility towards the human race did she discharge this

missile, that Clennam was quite at a loss how to defend himself; the

rather as he had been already perplexed in his mind by the honour of a

visit from this venerable lady, when it was plain she held him in the

utmost abhorrence. He could not but look at her with disconcertment, as

she sat breathing bitterness and scorn, and staring leagues away. Flora,

however, received the remark as if it had been of a most apposite and

agreeable nature; approvingly observing aloud that Mr F.'s Aunt had a

great deal of spirit. Stimulated either by this compliment, or by her

burning indignation, that illustrious woman then added, 'Let him meet

it if he can!' And, with a rigid movement of her stony reticule (an

appendage of great size and of a fossil appearance), indicated that

Clennam was the unfortunate person at whom the challenge was hurled.

'One last remark,' resumed Flora, 'I was going to say I wish to make one

last explanation I wish to offer, Mr F.'s Aunt and myself would not have

intruded on business hours Mr F. having been in business and though the

wine trade still business is equally business call it what you will and

business habits are just the same as witness Mr F. himself who had his

slippers always on the mat at ten minutes before six in the afternoon

and his boots inside the fender at ten minutes before eight in the

morning to the moment in all weathers light or dark--would not therefore

have intruded without a motive which being kindly meant it may be hoped

will be kindly taken Arthur, Mr Clennam far more proper, even Doyce and

Clennam probably more business-like.'

'Pray say nothing in the way of apology,' Arthur entreated. 'You are

always welcome.'

'Very polite of you to say so Arthur--cannot remember Mr Clennam until

the word is out, such is the habit of times for ever fled, and so true

it is that oft in the stilly night ere slumber's chain has bound people,

fond memory brings the light of other days around people--very polite

but more polite than true I am afraid, for to go into the machinery

business without so much as sending a line or a card to papa--I don't

say me though there was a time but that is past and stern reality has

now my gracious never mind--does not look like it you must confess.'

Even Flora's commas seemed to have fled on this occasion; she was so

much more disjointed and voluble than in the preceding interview.

'Though indeed,' she hurried on, 'nothing else is to be expected and why

should it be expected and if it's not to be expected why should it be,

and I am far from blaming you or any one, When your mama and my papa

worried us to death and severed the golden bowl--I mean bond but I dare

say you know what I mean and if you don't you don't lose much and care

just as little I will venture to add--when they severed the golden bond

that bound us and threw us into fits of crying on the sofa nearly choked

at least myself everything was changed and in giving my hand to Mr F. I

know I did so with my eyes open but he was so very unsettled and in such

low spirits that he had distractedly alluded to the river if not oil of

something from the chemist's and I did it for the best.'

'My good Flora, we settled that before. It was all quite right.'

'It's perfectly clear you think so,' returned Flora, 'for you take it

very coolly, if I hadn't known it to be China I should have guessed

myself the Polar regions, dear Mr Clennam you are right however and I

cannot blame you but as to Doyce and Clennam papa's property being about

here we heard it from Pancks and but for him we never should have heard

one word about it I am satisfied.'

'No, no, don't say that.'

'What nonsense not to say it Arthur--Doyce and Clennam--easier and less

trying to me than Mr Clennam--when I know it and you know it too and

can't deny it.'

'But I do deny it, Flora. I should soon have made you a friendly visit.'

'Ah!' said Flora, tossing her head. 'I dare say!' and she gave him

another of the old looks. 'However when Pancks told us I made up my mind

that Mr F.'s Aunt and I would come and call because when papa--which was

before that--happened to mention her name to me and to say that you were

interested in her I said at the moment Good gracious why not have her

here then when there's anything to do instead of putting it out.'

'When you say Her,' observed Clennam, by this time pretty well

bewildered, 'do you mean Mr F.'s--'

'My goodness, Arthur--Doyce and Clennam really easier to me with old

remembrances--who ever heard of Mr F.'s Aunt doing needlework and going

out by the day?'

'Going out by the day! Do you speak of Little Dorrit?' 'Why yes of

course,' returned Flora; 'and of all the strangest names I ever heard

the strangest, like a place down in the country with a turnpike, or a

favourite pony or a puppy or a bird or something from a seed-shop to be

put in a garden or a flower-pot and come up speckled.'

'Then, Flora,' said Arthur, with a sudden interest in the conversation,

'Mr Casby was so kind as to mention Little Dorrit to you, was he? What

did he say?'

'Oh you know what papa is,' rejoined Flora, 'and how aggravatingly he

sits looking beautiful and turning his thumbs over and over one another

till he makes one giddy if one keeps one's eyes upon him, he said when

we were talking of you--I don't know who began the subject Arthur (Doyce

and Clennam) but I am sure it wasn't me, at least I hope not but you

really must excuse my confessing more on that point.'

'Certainly,' said Arthur. 'By all means.'

'You are very ready,' pouted Flora, coming to a sudden stop in a

captivating bashfulness, 'that I must admit, Papa said you had spoken of

her in an earnest way and I said what I have told you and that's all.'

'That's all?' said Arthur, a little disappointed.

'Except that when Pancks told us of your having embarked in this

business and with difficulty persuaded us that it was really you I said

to Mr F.'s Aunt then we would come and ask you if it would be agreeable

to all parties that she should be engaged at our house when required

for I know she often goes to your mama's and I know that your mama has

a very touchy temper Arthur--Doyce and Clennam--or I never might have

married Mr F. and might have been at this hour but I am running into

nonsense.'

'It was very kind of you, Flora, to think of this.'

Poor Flora rejoined with a plain sincerity which became her better than

her youngest glances, that she was glad he thought so. She said it with

so much heart that Clennam would have given a great deal to buy his

old character of her on the spot, and throw it and the mermaid away for

ever.

'I think, Flora,' he said, 'that the employment you can give Little

Dorrit, and the kindness you can show her--'

'Yes and I will,' said Flora, quickly.

'I am sure of it--will be a great assistance and support to her. I do

not feel that I have the right to tell you what I know of her, for I

acquired the knowledge confidentially, and under circumstances that

bind me to silence. But I have an interest in the little creature, and

a respect for her that I cannot express to you. Her life has been one

of such trial and devotion, and such quiet goodness, as you can scarcely

imagine. I can hardly think of her, far less speak of her, without

feeling moved. Let that feeling represent what I could tell you, and

commit her to your friendliness with my thanks.'

Once more he put out his hand frankly to poor Flora; once more poor

Flora couldn't accept it frankly, found it worth nothing openly, must

make the old intrigue and mystery of it. As much to her own enjoyment as

to his dismay, she covered it with a corner of her shawl as she took it.

Then, looking towards the glass front of the counting-house, and seeing

two figures approaching, she cried with infinite relish, 'Papa! Hush,

Arthur, for Mercy's sake!' and tottered back to her chair with an

amazing imitation of being in danger of swooning, in the dread surprise

and maidenly flutter of her spirits.

The Patriarch, meanwhile, came inanely beaming towards the

counting-house in the wake of Pancks. Pancks opened the door for him,

towed him in, and retired to his own moorings in a corner.

'I heard from Flora,' said the Patriarch with his benevolent smile,

'that she was coming to call, coming to call. And being out, I thought

I'd come also, thought I'd come also.'

The benign wisdom he infused into this declaration (not of itself

profound), by means of his blue eyes, his shining head, and his long

white hair, was most impressive. It seemed worth putting down among the

noblest sentiments enunciated by the best of men. Also, when he said to

Clennam, seating himself in the proffered chair, 'And you are in a new

business, Mr Clennam? I wish you well, sir, I wish you well!' he seemed

to have done benevolent wonders.

'Mrs Finching has been telling me, sir,' said Arthur, after making his

acknowledgments; the relict of the late Mr F. meanwhile protesting, with

a gesture, against his use of that respectable name; 'that she hopes

occasionally to employ the young needlewoman you recommended to my

mother. For which I have been thanking her.'

The Patriarch turning his head in a lumbering way towards Pancks, that

assistant put up the note-book in which he had been absorbed, and took

him in tow.

'You didn't recommend her, you know,' said Pancks; 'how could you? You

knew nothing about her, you didn't. The name was mentioned to you, and

you passed it on. That's what YOU did.'

'Well!' said Clennam. 'As she justifies any recommendation, it is much

the same thing.'

'You are glad she turns out well,' said Pancks, 'but it wouldn't have

been your fault if she had turned out ill. The credit's not yours as it

is, and the blame wouldn't have been yours as it might have been. You

gave no guarantee. You knew nothing about her.' 'You are not acquainted,

then,' said Arthur, hazarding a random question, 'with any of her

family?'

'Acquainted with any of her family?' returned Pancks. 'How should you be

acquainted with any of her family? You never heard of 'em. You can't

be acquainted with people you never heard of, can you? You should think

not!'

All this time the Patriarch sat serenely smiling; nodding or shaking his

head benevolently, as the case required.

'As to being a reference,' said Pancks, 'you know, in a general way,

what being a reference means. It's all your eye, that is! Look at your

tenants down the Yard here. They'd all be references for one another,

if you'd let 'em. What would be the good of letting 'em? It's no

satisfaction to be done by two men instead of one. One's enough. A

person who can't pay, gets another person who can't pay, to guarantee

that he can pay. Like a person with two wooden legs getting another

person with two wooden legs, to guarantee that he has got two natural

legs. It don't make either of them able to do a walking match. And four

wooden legs are more troublesome to you than two, when you don't want

any.' Mr Pancks concluded by blowing off that steam of his.

A momentary silence that ensued was broken by Mr F.'s Aunt, who had been

sitting upright in a cataleptic state since her last public remark. She

now underwent a violent twitch, calculated to produce a startling effect

on the nerves of the uninitiated, and with the deadliest animosity

observed:

'You can't make a head and brains out of a brass knob with nothing in

it. You couldn't do it when your Uncle George was living; much less when

he's dead.'

Mr Pancks was not slow to reply, with his usual calmness, 'Indeed,

ma'am! Bless my soul! I'm surprised to hear it.' Despite his presence of

mind, however, the speech of Mr F.'s Aunt produced a depressing effect

on the little assembly; firstly, because it was impossible to disguise

that Clennam's unoffending head was the particular temple of reason

depreciated; and secondly, because nobody ever knew on these occasions

whose Uncle George was referred to, or what spectral presence might be

invoked under that appellation.

Therefore Flora said, though still not without a certain boastfulness

and triumph in her legacy, that Mr F.'s Aunt was 'very lively to-day,

and she thought they had better go.' But Mr F.'s Aunt proved so lively

as to take the suggestion in unexpected dudgeon and declare that she

would not go; adding, with several injurious expressions, that if

'He'--too evidently meaning Clennam--wanted to get rid of her, 'let

him chuck her out of winder;' and urgently expressing her desire to see

'Him' perform that ceremony.

In this dilemma, Mr Pancks, whose resources appeared equal to any

emergency in the Patriarchal waters, slipped on his hat, slipped out at

the counting-house door, and slipped in again a moment afterwards with

an artificial freshness upon him, as if he had been in the country for

some weeks. 'Why, bless my heart, ma'am!' said Mr Pancks, rubbing up his

hair in great astonishment, 'is that you?

How do you do, ma'am? You are looking charming to-day! I am delighted

to see you. Favour me with your arm, ma'am; we'll have a little walk

together, you and me, if you'll honour me with your company.' And so

escorted Mr F.'s Aunt down the private staircase of the counting-house

with great gallantry and success. The patriarchal Mr Casby then rose

with the air of having done it himself, and blandly followed: leaving

his daughter, as she followed in her turn, to remark to her former lover

in a distracted whisper (which she very much enjoyed), that they had

drained the cup of life to the dregs; and further to hint mysteriously

that the late Mr F. was at the bottom of it.

Alone again, Clennam became a prey to his old doubts in reference to his

mother and Little Dorrit, and revolved the old thoughts and suspicions.

They were all in his mind, blending themselves with the duties he was

mechanically discharging, when a shadow on his papers caused him to look

up for the cause. The cause was Mr Pancks. With his hat thrown back upon

his ears as if his wiry prongs of hair had darted up like springs and

cast it off, with his jet-black beads of eyes inquisitively sharp, with

the fingers of his right hand in his mouth that he might bite the nails,

and with the fingers of his left hand in reserve in his pocket for

another course, Mr Pancks cast his shadow through the glass upon the

books and papers.

Mr Pancks asked, with a little inquiring twist of his head, if he

might come in again? Clennam replied with a nod of his head in the

affirmative. Mr Pancks worked his way in, came alongside the desk, made

himself fast by leaning his arms upon it, and started conversation with

a puff and a snort.

'Mr F.'s Aunt is appeased, I hope?' said Clennam.

'All right, sir,' said Pancks.

'I am so unfortunate as to have awakened a strong animosity in the

breast of that lady,' said Clennam. 'Do you know why?'

'Does SHE know why?' said Pancks.

'I suppose not.'

'\_I\_ suppose not,' said Pancks.

He took out his note-book, opened it, shut it, dropped it into his hat,

which was beside him on the desk, and looked in at it as it lay at the

bottom of the hat: all with a great appearance of consideration.

'Mr Clennam,' he then began, 'I am in want of information, sir.'

'Connected with this firm?' asked Clennam.

'No,' said Pancks.

'With what then, Mr Pancks? That is to say, assuming that you want it of

me.'

'Yes, sir; yes, I want it of you,' said Pancks, 'if I can persuade you

to furnish it. A, B, C, D. DA, DE, DI, DO. Dictionary order.

Dorrit. That's the name, sir?'

Mr Pancks blew off his peculiar noise again, and fell to at his

right-hand nails. Arthur looked searchingly at him; he returned the

look.

'I don't understand you, Mr Pancks.'

'That's the name that I want to know about.'

'And what do you want to know?'

'Whatever you can and will tell me.' This comprehensive summary of his

desires was not discharged without some heavy labouring on the part of

Mr Pancks's machinery.

'This is a singular visit, Mr Pancks. It strikes me as rather

extraordinary that you should come, with such an object, to me.'

'It may be all extraordinary together,' returned Pancks. 'It may be out

of the ordinary course, and yet be business. In short, it is business. I

am a man of business. What business have I in this present world, except

to stick to business? No business.'

With his former doubt whether this dry hard personage were quite in

earnest, Clennam again turned his eyes attentively upon his face. It

was as scrubby and dingy as ever, and as eager and quick as ever, and he

could see nothing lurking in it that was at all expressive of a latent

mockery that had seemed to strike upon his ear in the voice.

'Now,' said Pancks, 'to put this business on its own footing, it's not

my proprietor's.'

'Do you refer to Mr Casby as your proprietor?'

Pancks nodded. 'My proprietor. Put a case. Say, at my proprietor's I

hear name--name of young person Mr Clennam wants to serve. Say, name

first mentioned to my proprietor by Plornish in the Yard. Say, I go to

Plornish. Say, I ask Plornish as a matter of business for information.

Say, Plornish, though six weeks in arrear to my proprietor, declines.

Say, Mrs Plornish declines. Say, both refer to Mr Clennam. Put the

case.' 'Well?'

'Well, sir,' returned Pancks, 'say, I come to him. Say, here I am.'

With those prongs of hair sticking up all over his head, and his breath

coming and going very hard and short, the busy Pancks fell back a step

(in Tug metaphor, took half a turn astern) as if to show his dingy hull

complete, then forged a-head again, and directed his quick glance by

turns into his hat where his note-book was, and into Clennam's face.

'Mr Pancks, not to trespass on your grounds of mystery, I will be as

plain with you as I can. Let me ask two questions. First--'

'All right!' said Pancks, holding up his dirty forefinger with his

broken nail. 'I see! "What's your motive?"'

'Exactly.'

'Motive,' said Pancks, 'good. Nothing to do with my proprietor; not

stateable at present, ridiculous to state at present; but good.

Desiring to serve young person, name of Dorrit,' said Pancks, with his

forefinger still up as a caution. 'Better admit motive to be good.'

'Secondly, and lastly, what do you want to know?'

Mr Pancks fished up his note-book before the question was put, and

buttoning it with care in an inner breast-pocket, and looking straight

at Clennam all the time, replied with a pause and a puff, 'I want

supplementary information of any sort.'

Clennam could not withhold a smile, as the panting little steam-tug, so

useful to that unwieldy ship, the Casby, waited on and watched him as if

it were seeking an opportunity of running in and rifling him of all he

wanted before he could resist its manoeuvres; though there was that in

Mr Pancks's eagerness, too, which awakened many wondering speculations

in his mind. After a little consideration, he resolved to supply Mr

Pancks with such leading information as it was in his power to impart

him; well knowing that Mr Pancks, if he failed in his present research,

was pretty sure to find other means of getting it.

He, therefore, first requesting Mr Pancks to remember his voluntary

declaration that his proprietor had no part in the disclosure, and that

his own intentions were good (two declarations which that coaly little

gentleman with the greatest ardour repeated), openly told him that as to

the Dorrit lineage or former place of habitation, he had no information

to communicate, and that his knowledge of the family did not extend

beyond the fact that it appeared to be now reduced to five members;

namely, to two brothers, of whom one was single, and one a widower with

three children. The ages of the whole family he made known to Mr Pancks,

as nearly as he could guess at them; and finally he described to him

the position of the Father of the Marshalsea, and the course of time and

events through which he had become invested with that character. To

all this, Mr Pancks, snorting and blowing in a more and more portentous

manner as he became more interested, listened with great attention;

appearing to derive the most agreeable sensations from the painfullest

parts of the narrative, and particularly to be quite charmed by the

account of William Dorrit's long imprisonment.

'In conclusion, Mr Pancks,' said Arthur, 'I have but to say this. I have

reasons beyond a personal regard for speaking as little as I can of the

Dorrit family, particularly at my mother's house' (Mr Pancks nodded),

'and for knowing as much as I can. So devoted a man of business as you

are--eh?'

For Mr Pancks had suddenly made that blowing effort with unusual force.

'It's nothing,' said Pancks.

'So devoted a man of business as yourself has a perfect understanding of

a fair bargain. I wish to make a fair bargain with you, that you shall

enlighten me concerning the Dorrit family when you have it in your

power, as I have enlightened you. It may not give you a very flattering

idea of my business habits, that I failed to make my terms beforehand,'

continued Clennam; 'but I prefer to make them a point of honour. I have

seen so much business done on sharp principles that, to tell you the

truth, Mr Pancks, I am tired of them.'

Mr Pancks laughed. 'It's a bargain, sir,' said he. 'You shall find me

stick to it.'

After that, he stood a little while looking at Clennam, and biting his

ten nails all round; evidently while he fixed in his mind what he had

been told, and went over it carefully, before the means of supplying a

gap in his memory should be no longer at hand. 'It's all right,' he said

at last, 'and now I'll wish you good day, as it's collecting day in the

Yard. By-the-bye, though. A lame foreigner with a stick.'

'Ay, ay. You do take a reference sometimes, I see?' said Clennam.

'When he can pay, sir,' replied Pancks. 'Take all you can get, and

keep back all you can't be forced to give up. That's business. The lame

foreigner with the stick wants a top room down the Yard. Is he good for

it?'

'I am,' said Clennam, 'and I will answer for him.'

'That's enough. What I must have of Bleeding Heart Yard,' said Pancks,

making a note of the case in his book, 'is my bond. I want my bond, you

see. Pay up, or produce your property! That's the watchword down the

Yard. The lame foreigner with the stick represented that you sent him;

but he could represent (as far as that goes) that the Great Mogul sent

him. He has been in the hospital, I believe?'

'Yes. Through having met with an accident. He is only just now

discharged.'

'It's pauperising a man, sir, I have been shown, to let him into a

hospital?' said Pancks. And again blew off that remarkable sound.

'I have been shown so too,' said Clennam, coldly.

Mr Pancks, being by that time quite ready for a start, got under steam

in a moment, and, without any other signal or ceremony, was snorting

down the step-ladder and working into Bleeding Heart Yard, before he

seemed to be well out of the counting-house.

Throughout the remainder of the day, Bleeding Heart Yard was in

consternation, as the grim Pancks cruised in it; haranguing the

inhabitants on their backslidings in respect of payment, demanding his

bond, breathing notices to quit and executions, running down defaulters,

sending a swell of terror on before him, and leaving it in his wake.

Knots of people, impelled by a fatal attraction, lurked outside any

house in which he was known to be, listening for fragments of his

discourses to the inmates; and, when he was rumoured to be coming down

the stairs, often could not disperse so quickly but that he would be

prematurely in among them, demanding their own arrears, and rooting them

to the spot. Throughout the remainder of the day, Mr Pancks's What were

they up to? and What did they mean by it? sounded all over the Yard. Mr

Pancks wouldn't hear of excuses, wouldn't hear of complaints, wouldn't

hear of repairs, wouldn't hear of anything but unconditional money down.

Perspiring and puffing and darting about in eccentric directions, and

becoming hotter and dingier every moment, he lashed the tide of the yard

into a most agitated and turbid state. It had not settled down into calm

water again full two hours after he had been seen fuming away on the

horizon at the top of the steps.

There were several small assemblages of the Bleeding Hearts at the

popular points of meeting in the Yard that night, among whom it was

universally agreed that Mr Pancks was a hard man to have to do with; and

that it was much to be regretted, so it was, that a gentleman like Mr

Casby should put his rents in his hands, and never know him in his true

light. For (said the Bleeding Hearts), if a gentleman with that head of

hair and them eyes took his rents into his own hands, ma'am, there

would be none of this worriting and wearing, and things would be very

different.

At which identical evening hour and minute, the Patriarch--who had

floated serenely through the Yard in the forenoon before the harrying

began, with the express design of getting up this trustfulness in his

shining bumps and silken locks--at which identical hour and minute,

that first-rate humbug of a thousand guns was heavily floundering in the

little Dock of his exhausted Tug at home, and was saying, as he turned

his thumbs:

'A very bad day's work, Pancks, very bad day's work. It seems to me,

sir, and I must insist on making this observation forcibly in justice to

myself, that you ought to have got much more money, much more money.'

CHAPTER 24. Fortune-Telling

Little Dorrit received a call that same evening from Mr Plornish, who,

having intimated that he wished to speak to her privately, in a series

of coughs so very noticeable as to favour the idea that her father, as

regarded her seamstress occupation, was an illustration of the axiom

that there are no such stone-blind men as those who will not see,

obtained an audience with her on the common staircase outside the door.

'There's been a lady at our place to-day, Miss Dorrit,' Plornish

growled, 'and another one along with her as is a old wixen if ever I met

with such. The way she snapped a person's head off, dear me!'

The mild Plornish was at first quite unable to get his mind away from Mr

F.'s Aunt. 'For,' said he, to excuse himself, 'she is, I do assure you,

the winegariest party.'

At length, by a great effort, he detached himself from the subject

sufficiently to observe:

'But she's neither here nor there just at present. The other lady, she's

Mr Casby's daughter; and if Mr Casby an't well off, none better, it an't

through any fault of Pancks. For, as to Pancks, he does, he really does,

he does indeed!'

Mr Plornish, after his usual manner, was a little obscure, but

conscientiously emphatic.

'And what she come to our place for,' he pursued, 'was to leave word

that if Miss Dorrit would step up to that card--which it's Mr Casby's

house that is, and Pancks he has a office at the back, where he really

does, beyond belief--she would be glad for to engage her. She was a old

and a dear friend, she said particular, of Mr Clennam, and hoped for to

prove herself a useful friend to his friend. Them was her words. Wishing

to know whether Miss Dorrit could come to-morrow morning, I said I would

see you, Miss, and inquire, and look round there to-night, to say yes,

or, if you was engaged to-morrow, when?'

'I can go to-morrow, thank you,' said Little Dorrit. 'This is very kind

of you, but you are always kind.'

Mr Plornish, with a modest disavowal of his merits, opened the room door

for her readmission, and followed her in with such an exceedingly bald

pretence of not having been out at all, that her father might

have observed it without being very suspicious. In his affable

unconsciousness, however, he took no heed. Plornish, after a little

conversation, in which he blended his former duty as a Collegian with

his present privilege as a humble outside friend, qualified again by his

low estate as a plasterer, took his leave; making the tour of the prison

before he left, and looking on at a game of skittles with the mixed

feelings of an old inhabitant who had his private reasons for believing

that it might be his destiny to come back again.

Early in the morning, Little Dorrit, leaving Maggy in high domestic

trust, set off for the Patriarchal tent. She went by the Iron Bridge,

though it cost her a penny, and walked more slowly in that part of her

journey than in any other. At five minutes before eight her hand was on

the Patriarchal knocker, which was quite as high as she could reach.

She gave Mrs Finching's card to the young woman who opened the door, and

the young woman told her that 'Miss Flora'--Flora having, on her return

to the parental roof, reinvested herself with the title under which she

had lived there--was not yet out of her bedroom, but she was to please

to walk up into Miss Flora's sitting-room. She walked up into

Miss Flora's sitting-room, as in duty bound, and there found a

breakfast-table comfortably laid for two, with a supplementary tray

upon it laid for one. The young woman, disappearing for a few moments,

returned to say that she was to please to take a chair by the fire,

and to take off her bonnet and make herself at home. But Little Dorrit,

being bashful, and not used to make herself at home on such occasions,

felt at a loss how to do it; so she was still sitting near the door with

her bonnet on, when Flora came in in a hurry half an hour afterwards.

Flora was so sorry to have kept her waiting, and good gracious why did

she sit out there in the cold when she had expected to find her by the

fire reading the paper, and hadn't that heedless girl given her the

message then, and had she really been in her bonnet all this time, and

pray for goodness sake let Flora take it off! Flora taking it off in the

best-natured manner in the world, was so struck with the face disclosed,

that she said, 'Why, what a good little thing you are, my dear!' and

pressed her face between her hands like the gentlest of women.

It was the word and the action of a moment. Little Dorrit had hardly

time to think how kind it was, when Flora dashed at the breakfast-table

full of business, and plunged over head and ears into loquacity.

'Really so sorry that I should happen to be late on this morning of all

mornings because my intention and my wish was to be ready to meet you

when you came in and to say that any one that interested Arthur Clennam

half so much must interest me and that I gave you the heartiest welcome

and was so glad, instead of which they never called me and there I

still am snoring I dare say if the truth was known and if you don't like

either cold fowl or hot boiled ham which many people don't I dare say

besides Jews and theirs are scruples of conscience which we must all

respect though I must say I wish they had them equally strong when they

sell us false articles for real that certainly ain't worth the money I

shall be quite vexed,' said Flora.

Little Dorrit thanked her, and said, shyly, bread-and-butter and tea was

all she usually--

'Oh nonsense my dear child I can never hear of that,' said Flora,

turning on the urn in the most reckless manner, and making herself wink

by splashing hot water into her eyes as she bent down to look into the

teapot. 'You are coming here on the footing of a friend and companion

you know if you will let me take that liberty and I should be ashamed

of myself indeed if you could come here upon any other, besides which

Arthur Clennam spoke in such terms--you are tired my dear.'

'No, ma'am.'

'You turn so pale you have walked too far before breakfast and I dare

say live a great way off and ought to have had a ride,' said Flora,

'dear dear is there anything that would do you good?'

'Indeed I am quite well, ma'am. I thank you again and again, but I am

quite well.'

'Then take your tea at once I beg,' said Flora, 'and this wing of fowl

and bit of ham, don't mind me or wait for me, because I always carry in

this tray myself to Mr F.'s Aunt who breakfasts in bed and a charming

old lady too and very clever, Portrait of Mr F. behind the door and very

like though too much forehead and as to a pillar with a marble pavement

and balustrades and a mountain, I never saw him near it nor not likely

in the wine trade, excellent man but not at all in that way.'

Little Dorrit glanced at the portrait, very imperfectly following the

references to that work of art.

'Mr F. was so devoted to me that he never could bear me out of his

sight,' said Flora, 'though of course I am unable to say how long that

might have lasted if he hadn't been cut short while I was a new broom,

worthy man but not poetical manly prose but not romance.'

Little Dorrit glanced at the portrait again. The artist had given it a

head that would have been, in an intellectual point of view, top-heavy

for Shakespeare. 'Romance, however,' Flora went on, busily arranging Mr

F.'s Aunt's toast, 'as I openly said to Mr F. when he proposed to me

and you will be surprised to hear that he proposed seven times once in a

hackney-coach once in a boat once in a pew once on a donkey at Tunbridge

Wells and the rest on his knees, Romance was fled with the early days of

Arthur Clennam, our parents tore us asunder we became marble and stern

reality usurped the throne, Mr F. said very much to his credit that

he was perfectly aware of it and even preferred that state of things

accordingly the word was spoken the fiat went forth and such is life you

see my dear and yet we do not break but bend, pray make a good breakfast

while I go in with the tray.'

She disappeared, leaving Little Dorrit to ponder over the meaning of her

scattered words. She soon came back again; and at last began to take her

own breakfast, talking all the while.

'You see, my dear,' said Flora, measuring out a spoonful or two of some

brown liquid that smelt like brandy, and putting it into her tea, 'I am

obliged to be careful to follow the directions of my medical man though

the flavour is anything but agreeable being a poor creature and it may

be have never recovered the shock received in youth from too much giving

way to crying in the next room when separated from Arthur, have you

known him long?'

As soon as Little Dorrit comprehended that she had been asked this

question--for which time was necessary, the galloping pace of her new

patroness having left her far behind--she answered that she had known Mr

Clennam ever since his return.

'To be sure you couldn't have known him before unless you had been in

China or had corresponded neither of which is likely,' returned Flora,

'for travelling-people usually get more or less mahogany and you are not

at all so and as to corresponding what about? that's very true unless

tea, so it was at his mother's was it really that you knew him first,

highly sensible and firm but dreadfully severe--ought to be the mother

of the man in the iron mask.'

'Mrs Clennam has been kind to me,' said Little Dorrit.

'Really? I am sure I am glad to hear it because as Arthur's mother it's

naturally pleasant to my feelings to have a better opinion of her than

I had before, though what she thinks of me when I run on as I am certain

to do and she sits glowering at me like Fate in a go-cart--shocking

comparison really--invalid and not her fault--I never know or can

imagine.'

'Shall I find my work anywhere, ma'am?' asked Little Dorrit, looking

timidly about; 'can I get it?'

'You industrious little fairy,' returned Flora, taking, in another cup

of tea, another of the doses prescribed by her medical man, 'there's

not the slightest hurry and it's better that we should begin by being

confidential about our mutual friend--too cold a word for me at least

I don't mean that, very proper expression mutual friend--than become

through mere formalities not you but me like the Spartan boy with the

fox biting him, which I hope you'll excuse my bringing up for of all

the tiresome boys that will go tumbling into every sort of company that

boy's the tiresomest.'

Little Dorrit, her face very pale, sat down again to listen. 'Hadn't I

better work the while?' she asked. 'I can work and attend too. I would

rather, if I may.'

Her earnestness was so expressive of her being uneasy without her work,

that Flora answered, 'Well my dear whatever you like best,' and produced

a basket of white handkerchiefs. Little Dorrit gladly put it by her

side, took out her little pocket-housewife, threaded the needle, and

began to hem.

'What nimble fingers you have,' said Flora, 'but are you sure you are

well?'

'Oh yes, indeed!'

Flora put her feet upon the fender, and settled herself for a thorough

good romantic disclosure. She started off at score, tossing her head,

sighing in the most demonstrative manner, making a great deal of use

of her eyebrows, and occasionally, but not often, glancing at the quiet

face that bent over the work.

'You must know my dear,' said Flora, 'but that I have no doubt you know

already not only because I have already thrown it out in a general way

but because I feel I carry it stamped in burning what's his names

upon my brow that before I was introduced to the late Mr F. I had

been engaged to Arthur Clennam--Mr Clennam in public where reserve is

necessary Arthur here--we were all in all to one another it was the

morning of life it was bliss it was frenzy it was everything else of

that sort in the highest degree, when rent asunder we turned to stone in

which capacity Arthur went to China and I became the statue bride of the

late Mr F.'

Flora, uttering these words in a deep voice, enjoyed herself immensely.

'To paint,' said she, 'the emotions of that morning when all was marble

within and Mr F.'s Aunt followed in a glass-coach which it stands to

reason must have been in shameful repair or it never could have broken

down two streets from the house and Mr F.'s Aunt brought home like the

fifth of November in a rush-bottomed chair I will not attempt,

suffice it to say that the hollow form of breakfast took place in the

dining-room downstairs that papa partaking too freely of pickled salmon

was ill for weeks and that Mr F. and myself went upon a continental

tour to Calais where the people fought for us on the pier until they

separated us though not for ever that was not yet to be.'

The statue bride, hardly pausing for breath, went on, with the greatest

complacency, in a rambling manner sometimes incidental to flesh and

blood.

'I will draw a veil over that dreamy life, Mr F. was in good spirits his

appetite was good he liked the cookery he considered the wine weak but

palatable and all was well, we returned to the immediate neighbourhood

of Number Thirty Little Gosling Street London Docks and settled down,

ere we had yet fully detected the housemaid in selling the feathers

out of the spare bed Gout flying upwards soared with Mr F. to another

sphere.'

His relict, with a glance at his portrait, shook her head and wiped her

eyes.

'I revere the memory of Mr F. as an estimable man and most indulgent

husband, only necessary to mention Asparagus and it appeared or to hint

at any little delicate thing to drink and it came like magic in a pint

bottle it was not ecstasy but it was comfort, I returned to papa's roof

and lived secluded if not happy during some years until one day papa

came smoothly blundering in and said that Arthur Clennam awaited me

below, I went below and found him ask me not what I found him except

that he was still unmarried still unchanged!'

The dark mystery with which Flora now enshrouded herself might have

stopped other fingers than the nimble fingers that worked near her.

They worked on without pause, and the busy head bent over them watching

the stitches.

'Ask me not,' said Flora, 'if I love him still or if he still loves me

or what the end is to be or when, we are surrounded by watchful eyes and

it may be that we are destined to pine asunder it may be never more to

be reunited not a word not a breath not a look to betray us all must

be secret as the tomb wonder not therefore that even if I should seem

comparatively cold to Arthur or Arthur should seem comparatively cold to

me we have fatal reasons it is enough if we understand them hush!'

All of which Flora said with so much headlong vehemence as if she really

believed it. There is not much doubt that when she worked herself into

full mermaid condition, she did actually believe whatever she said in

it.

'Hush!' repeated Flora, 'I have now told you all, confidence is

established between us hush, for Arthur's sake I will always be a friend

to you my dear girl and in Arthur's name you may always rely upon me.'

The nimble fingers laid aside the work, and the little figure rose and

kissed her hand. 'You are very cold,' said Flora, changing to her own

natural kind-hearted manner, and gaining greatly by the change. 'Don't

work to-day. I am sure you are not well I am sure you are not strong.'

'It is only that I feel a little overcome by your kindness, and by Mr

Clennam's kindness in confiding me to one he has known and loved so

long.'

'Well really my dear,' said Flora, who had a decided tendency to be

always honest when she gave herself time to think about it, 'it's as

well to leave that alone now, for I couldn't undertake to say after all,

but it doesn't signify lie down a little!'

'I have always been strong enough to do what I want to do, and I shall

be quite well directly,' returned Little Dorrit, with a faint smile.

'You have overpowered me with gratitude, that's all. If I keep near the

window for a moment I shall be quite myself.'

Flora opened a window, sat her in a chair by it, and considerately

retired to her former place. It was a windy day, and the air stirring

on Little Dorrit's face soon brightened it. In a very few minutes she

returned to her basket of work, and her nimble fingers were as nimble as

ever.

Quietly pursuing her task, she asked Flora if Mr Clennam had told her

where she lived? When Flora replied in the negative, Little Dorrit said

that she understood why he had been so delicate, but that she felt sure

he would approve of her confiding her secret to Flora, and that

she would therefore do so now with Flora's permission. Receiving an

encouraging answer, she condensed the narrative of her life into a few

scanty words about herself and a glowing eulogy upon her father; and

Flora took it all in with a natural tenderness that quite understood it,

and in which there was no incoherence.

When dinner-time came, Flora drew the arm of her new charge through

hers, and led her down-stairs, and presented her to the Patriarch and Mr

Pancks, who were already in the dining-room waiting to begin. (Mr F.'s

Aunt was, for the time, laid up in ordinary in her chamber.) By those

gentlemen she was received according to their characters; the Patriarch

appearing to do her some inestimable service in saying that he was glad

to see her, glad to see her; and Mr Pancks blowing off his favourite

sound as a salute.

In that new presence she would have been bashful enough under any

circumstances, and particularly under Flora's insisting on her

drinking a glass of wine and eating of the best that was there; but her

constraint was greatly increased by Mr Pancks. The demeanour of that

gentleman at first suggested to her mind that he might be a taker of

likenesses, so intently did he look at her, and so frequently did he

glance at the little note-book by his side. Observing that he made no

sketch, however, and that he talked about business only, she began to

have suspicions that he represented some creditor of her father's, the

balance due to whom was noted in that pocket volume. Regarded from this

point of view Mr Pancks's puffings expressed injury and impatience, and

each of his louder snorts became a demand for payment.

But here again she was undeceived by anomalous and incongruous conduct

on the part of Mr Pancks himself. She had left the table half an hour,

and was at work alone. Flora had 'gone to lie down' in the next room,

concurrently with which retirement a smell of something to drink

had broken out in the house. The Patriarch was fast asleep, with his

philanthropic mouth open under a yellow pocket-handkerchief in the

dining-room. At this quiet time, Mr Pancks softly appeared before her,

urbanely nodding.

'Find it a little dull, Miss Dorrit?' inquired Pancks in a low voice.

'No, thank you, sir,' said Little Dorrit.

'Busy, I see,' observed Mr Pancks, stealing into the room by inches.

'What are those now, Miss Dorrit?'

'Handkerchiefs.'

'Are they, though!' said Pancks. 'I shouldn't have thought it.' Not in

the least looking at them, but looking at Little Dorrit. 'Perhaps you

wonder who I am. Shall I tell you? I am a fortune-teller.'

Little Dorrit now began to think he was mad.

'I belong body and soul to my proprietor,' said Pancks; 'you saw my

proprietor having his dinner below. But I do a little in the other way,

sometimes; privately, very privately, Miss Dorrit.'

Little Dorrit looked at him doubtfully, and not without alarm.

'I wish you'd show me the palm of your hand,' said Pancks. 'I should

like to have a look at it. Don't let me be troublesome.' He was so far

troublesome that he was not at all wanted there, but she laid her work

in her lap for a moment, and held out her left hand with her thimble on

it.

'Years of toil, eh?' said Pancks, softly, touching it with his blunt

forefinger. 'But what else are we made for? Nothing. Hallo!' looking

into the lines. 'What's this with bars? It's a College! And what's this

with a grey gown and a black velvet cap? it's a father! And what's this

with a clarionet? It's an uncle! And what's this in dancing-shoes? It's

a sister! And what's this straggling about in an idle sort of a way?

It's a brother! And what's this thinking for 'em all? Why, this is you,

Miss Dorrit!' Her eyes met his as she looked up wonderingly into his

face, and she thought that although his were sharp eyes, he was a

brighter and gentler-looking man than she had supposed at dinner. His

eyes were on her hand again directly, and her opportunity of confirming

or correcting the impression was gone.

'Now, the deuce is in it,' muttered Pancks, tracing out a line in her

hand with his clumsy finger, 'if this isn't me in the corner here! What

do I want here? What's behind me?'

He carried his finger slowly down to the wrist, and round the wrist, and

affected to look at the back of the hand for what was behind him.

'Is it any harm?' asked Little Dorrit, smiling.

'Deuce a bit!' said Pancks. 'What do you think it's worth?'

'I ought to ask you that. I am not the fortune-teller.'

'True,' said Pancks. 'What's it worth? You shall live to see, Miss

Dorrit.'

Releasing the hand by slow degrees, he drew all his fingers through his

prongs of hair, so that they stood up in their most portentous manner;

and repeated slowly, 'Remember what I say, Miss Dorrit. You shall live

to see.'

She could not help showing that she was much surprised, if it were only

by his knowing so much about her.

'Ah! That's it!' said Pancks, pointing at her. 'Miss Dorrit, not that,

ever!'

More surprised than before, and a little more frightened, she looked to

him for an explanation of his last words.

'Not that,' said Pancks, making, with great seriousness, an imitation

of a surprised look and manner that appeared to be unintentionally

grotesque. 'Don't do that. Never on seeing me, no matter when, no matter

where. I am nobody. Don't take on to mind me. Don't mention me. Take no

notice. Will you agree, Miss Dorrit?'

'I hardly know what to say,' returned Little Dorrit, quite astounded.

'Why?'

'Because I am a fortune-teller. Pancks the gipsy. I haven't told you so

much of your fortune yet, Miss Dorrit, as to tell you what's behind

me on that little hand. I have told you you shall live to see. Is it

agreed, Miss Dorrit?'

'Agreed that I--am--to--'

'To take no notice of me away from here, unless I take on first. Not

to mind me when I come and go. It's very easy. I am no loss, I am not

handsome, I am not good company, I am only my proprietors grubber.

You need do no more than think, "Ah! Pancks the gipsy at his

fortune-telling--he'll tell the rest of my fortune one day--I shall live

to know it." Is it agreed, Miss Dorrit?'

'Ye-es,' faltered Little Dorrit, whom he greatly confused, 'I suppose

so, while you do no harm.'

'Good!' Mr Pancks glanced at the wall of the adjoining room, and stooped

forward. 'Honest creature, woman of capital points, but heedless and

a loose talker, Miss Dorrit.' With that he rubbed his hands as if the

interview had been very satisfactory to him, panted away to the door,

and urbanely nodded himself out again.

If Little Dorrit were beyond measure perplexed by this curious conduct

on the part of her new acquaintance, and by finding herself involved

in this singular treaty, her perplexity was not diminished by ensuing

circumstances. Besides that Mr Pancks took every opportunity afforded

him in Mr Casby's house of significantly glancing at her and snorting

at her--which was not much, after what he had done already--he began to

pervade her daily life. She saw him in the street, constantly. When she

went to Mr Casby's, he was always there. When she went to Mrs Clennam's,

he came there on any pretence, as if to keep her in his sight. A week

had not gone by, when she found him to her astonishment in the Lodge one

night, conversing with the turnkey on duty, and to all appearance one

of his familiar companions. Her next surprise was to find him equally at

his ease within the prison; to hear of his presenting himself among

the visitors at her father's Sunday levee; to see him arm in arm with

a Collegiate friend about the yard; to learn, from Fame, that he had

greatly distinguished himself one evening at the social club that held

its meetings in the Snuggery, by addressing a speech to the members

of the institution, singing a song, and treating the company to five

gallons of ale--report madly added a bushel of shrimps. The effect on

Mr Plornish of such of these phenomena as he became an eye-witness of in

his faithful visits, made an impression on Little Dorrit only second to

that produced by the phenomena themselves. They seemed to gag and bind

him. He could only stare, and sometimes weakly mutter that it wouldn't

be believed down Bleeding Heart Yard that this was Pancks; but he never

said a word more, or made a sign more, even to Little Dorrit.

Mr Pancks crowned his mysteries by making himself acquainted with Tip

in some unknown manner, and taking a Sunday saunter into the College

on that gentleman's arm. Throughout he never took any notice of Little

Dorrit, save once or twice when he happened to come close to her and

there was no one very near; on which occasions, he said in passing,

with a friendly look and a puff of encouragement, 'Pancks the

gipsy--fortune-telling.'

Little Dorrit worked and strove as usual, wondering at all this, but

keeping her wonder, as she had from her earliest years kept many heavier

loads, in her own breast. A change had stolen, and was stealing yet,

over the patient heart. Every day found her something more retiring

than the day before. To pass in and out of the prison unnoticed, and

elsewhere to be overlooked and forgotten, were, for herself, her chief

desires.

To her own room too, strangely assorted room for her delicate youth

and character, she was glad to retreat as often as she could without

desertion of any duty. There were afternoon times when she was

unemployed, when visitors dropped in to play a hand at cards with her

father, when she could be spared and was better away. Then she would

flit along the yard, climb the scores of stairs that led to her room,

and take her seat at the window. Many combinations did those spikes

upon the wall assume, many light shapes did the strong iron weave itself

into, many golden touches fell upon the rust, while Little Dorrit sat

there musing. New zig-zags sprung into the cruel pattern sometimes, when

she saw it through a burst of tears; but beautified or hardened still,

always over it and under it and through it, she was fain to look in her

solitude, seeing everything with that ineffaceable brand.

A garret, and a Marshalsea garret without compromise, was Little

Dorrit's room. Beautifully kept, it was ugly in itself, and had little

but cleanliness and air to set it off; for what embellishment she had

ever been able to buy, had gone to her father's room. Howbeit, for this

poor place she showed an increasing love; and to sit in it alone became

her favourite rest.

Insomuch, that on a certain afternoon during the Pancks mysteries, when

she was seated at her window, and heard Maggy's well-known step coming

up the stairs, she was very much disturbed by the apprehension of being

summoned away. As Maggy's step came higher up and nearer, she trembled

and faltered; and it was as much as she could do to speak, when Maggy at

length appeared.

'Please, Little Mother,' said Maggy, panting for breath, 'you must come

down and see him. He's here.'

'Who, Maggy?'

'Who, o' course Mr Clennam. He's in your father's room, and he says to

me, Maggy, will you be so kind and go and say it's only me.'

'I am not very well, Maggy. I had better not go. I am going to lie down.

See! I lie down now, to ease my head. Say, with my grateful regard, that

you left me so, or I would have come.'

'Well, it an't very polite though, Little Mother,' said the staring

Maggy, 'to turn your face away, neither!'

Maggy was very susceptible to personal slights, and very ingenious in

inventing them. 'Putting both your hands afore your face too!' she went

on. 'If you can't bear the looks of a poor thing, it would be better to

tell her so at once, and not go and shut her out like that, hurting her

feelings and breaking her heart at ten year old, poor thing!'

'It's to ease my head, Maggy.'

'Well, and if you cry to ease your head, Little Mother, let me cry too.

Don't go and have all the crying to yourself,' expostulated Maggy, 'that

an't not being greedy.' And immediately began to blubber.

It was with some difficulty that she could be induced to go back with

the excuse; but the promise of being told a story--of old her great

delight--on condition that she concentrated her faculties upon the

errand and left her little mistress to herself for an hour longer,

combined with a misgiving on Maggy's part that she had left her good

temper at the bottom of the staircase, prevailed. So away she went,

muttering her message all the way to keep it in her mind, and, at the

appointed time, came back.

'He was very sorry, I can tell you,' she announced, 'and wanted to send

a doctor. And he's coming again to-morrow he is and I don't think he'll

have a good sleep to-night along o' hearing about your head, Little

Mother. Oh my! Ain't you been a-crying!'

'I think I have, a little, Maggy.'

'A little! Oh!'

'But it's all over now--all over for good, Maggy. And my head is much

better and cooler, and I am quite comfortable. I am very glad I did not

go down.'

Her great staring child tenderly embraced her; and having smoothed her

hair, and bathed her forehead and eyes with cold water (offices in which

her awkward hands became skilful), hugged her again, exulted in her

brighter looks, and stationed her in her chair by the window. Over

against this chair, Maggy, with apoplectic exertions that were not

at all required, dragged the box which was her seat on story-telling

occasions, sat down upon it, hugged her own knees, and said, with a

voracious appetite for stories, and with widely-opened eyes:

'Now, Little Mother, let's have a good 'un!'

'What shall it be about, Maggy?'

'Oh, let's have a princess,' said Maggy, 'and let her be a reg'lar one.

Beyond all belief, you know!'

Little Dorrit considered for a moment; and with a rather sad smile upon

her face, which was flushed by the sunset, began:

'Maggy, there was once upon a time a fine King, and he had everything he

could wish for, and a great deal more. He had gold and silver, diamonds

and rubies, riches of every kind. He had palaces, and he had--'

'Hospitals,' interposed Maggy, still nursing her knees. 'Let him have

hospitals, because they're so comfortable. Hospitals with lots of

Chicking.'

'Yes, he had plenty of them, and he had plenty of everything.'

'Plenty of baked potatoes, for instance?' said Maggy.

'Plenty of everything.'

'Lor!' chuckled Maggy, giving her knees a hug. 'Wasn't it prime!'

'This King had a daughter, who was the wisest and most beautiful

Princess that ever was seen. When she was a child she understood all her

lessons before her masters taught them to her; and when she was grown

up, she was the wonder of the world. Now, near the Palace where this

Princess lived, there was a cottage in which there was a poor little

tiny woman, who lived all alone by herself.'

'An old woman,' said Maggy, with an unctuous smack of her lips.

'No, not an old woman. Quite a young one.'

'I wonder she warn't afraid,' said Maggy. 'Go on, please.'

'The Princess passed the cottage nearly every day, and whenever she went

by in her beautiful carriage, she saw the poor tiny woman spinning at

her wheel, and she looked at the tiny woman, and the tiny woman looked

at her. So, one day she stopped the coachman a little way from the

cottage, and got out and walked on and peeped in at the door, and there,

as usual, was the tiny woman spinning at her wheel, and she looked at

the Princess, and the Princess looked at her.'

'Like trying to stare one another out,' said Maggy. 'Please go on,

Little Mother.'

'The Princess was such a wonderful Princess that she had the power of

knowing secrets, and she said to the tiny woman, Why do you keep it

there? This showed her directly that the Princess knew why she lived

all alone by herself spinning at her wheel, and she kneeled down at

the Princess's feet, and asked her never to betray her. So the Princess

said, I never will betray you. Let me see it. So the tiny woman closed

the shutter of the cottage window and fastened the door, and trembling

from head to foot for fear that any one should suspect her, opened a

very secret place and showed the Princess a shadow.'

'Lor!' said Maggy. 'It was the shadow of Some one who had gone by long

before: of Some one who had gone on far away quite out of reach, never,

never to come back. It was bright to look at; and when the tiny woman

showed it to the Princess, she was proud of it with all her heart, as

a great, great treasure. When the Princess had considered it a little

while, she said to the tiny woman, And you keep watch over this every

day? And she cast down her eyes, and whispered, Yes. Then the Princess

said, Remind me why. To which the other replied, that no one so good and

kind had ever passed that way, and that was why in the beginning. She

said, too, that nobody missed it, that nobody was the worse for it, that

Some one had gone on, to those who were expecting him--'

'Some one was a man then?' interposed Maggy.

Little Dorrit timidly said Yes, she believed so; and resumed:

'--Had gone on to those who were expecting him, and that this

remembrance was stolen or kept back from nobody. The Princess made

answer, Ah! But when the cottager died it would be discovered there. The

tiny woman told her No; when that time came, it would sink quietly into

her own grave, and would never be found.'

'Well, to be sure!' said Maggy. 'Go on, please.'

'The Princess was very much astonished to hear this, as you may suppose,

Maggy.' ('And well she might be,' said Maggy.)

'So she resolved to watch the tiny woman, and see what came of it. Every

day she drove in her beautiful carriage by the cottage-door, and there

she saw the tiny woman always alone by herself spinning at her wheel,

and she looked at the tiny woman, and the tiny woman looked at her. At

last one day the wheel was still, and the tiny woman was not to be seen.

When the Princess made inquiries why the wheel had stopped, and where

the tiny woman was, she was informed that the wheel had stopped because

there was nobody to turn it, the tiny woman being dead.'

('They ought to have took her to the Hospital,' said Maggy, and then

she'd have got over it.')

'The Princess, after crying a very little for the loss of the tiny

woman, dried her eyes and got out of her carriage at the place where

she had stopped it before, and went to the cottage and peeped in at the

door. There was nobody to look at her now, and nobody for her to look

at, so she went in at once to search for the treasured shadow. But there

was no sign of it to be found anywhere; and then she knew that the tiny

woman had told her the truth, and that it would never give anybody any

trouble, and that it had sunk quietly into her own grave, and that she

and it were at rest together.

'That's all, Maggy.'

The sunset flush was so bright on Little Dorrit's face when she came

thus to the end of her story, that she interposed her hand to shade it.

'Had she got to be old?' Maggy asked.

'The tiny woman?' 'Ah!'

'I don't know,' said Little Dorrit. 'But it would have been just the

same if she had been ever so old.'

'Would it raly!' said Maggy. 'Well, I suppose it would though.' And sat

staring and ruminating.

She sat so long with her eyes wide open, that at length Little Dorrit,

to entice her from her box, rose and looked out of window. As she

glanced down into the yard, she saw Pancks come in and leer up with the

corner of his eye as he went by.

'Who's he, Little Mother?' said Maggy. She had joined her at the window

and was leaning on her shoulder. 'I see him come in and out often.'

'I have heard him called a fortune-teller,' said Little Dorrit. 'But I

doubt if he could tell many people even their past or present fortunes.'

'Couldn't have told the Princess hers?' said Maggy.

Little Dorrit, looking musingly down into the dark valley of the prison,

shook her head.

'Nor the tiny woman hers?' said Maggy.

'No,' said Little Dorrit, with the sunset very bright upon her. 'But let

us come away from the window.'

CHAPTER 25. Conspirators and Others

The private residence of Mr Pancks was in Pentonville, where he lodged

on the second-floor of a professional gentleman in an extremely small

way, who had an inner-door within the street door, poised on a spring

and starting open with a click like a trap; and who wrote up in the

fan-light, RUGG, GENERAL AGENT, ACCOUNTANT, DEBTS RECOVERED.

This scroll, majestic in its severe simplicity, illuminated a little

slip of front garden abutting on the thirsty high-road, where a few

of the dustiest of leaves hung their dismal heads and led a life of

choking. A professor of writing occupied the first-floor, and enlivened

the garden railings with glass-cases containing choice examples of what

his pupils had been before six lessons and while the whole of his young

family shook the table, and what they had become after six lessons

when the young family was under restraint. The tenancy of Mr Pancks was

limited to one airy bedroom; he covenanting and agreeing with Mr Rugg

his landlord, that in consideration of a certain scale of payments

accurately defined, and on certain verbal notice duly given, he should

be at liberty to elect to share the Sunday breakfast, dinner, tea, or

supper, or each or any or all of those repasts or meals of Mr and Miss

Rugg (his daughter) in the back-parlour.

Miss Rugg was a lady of a little property which she had acquired,

together with much distinction in the neighbourhood, by having her

heart severely lacerated and her feelings mangled by a middle-aged baker

resident in the vicinity, against whom she had, by the agency of Mr

Rugg, found it necessary to proceed at law to recover damages for a

breach of promise of marriage. The baker having been, by the counsel for

Miss Rugg, witheringly denounced on that occasion up to the full amount

of twenty guineas, at the rate of about eighteen-pence an epithet, and

having been cast in corresponding damages, still suffered occasional

persecution from the youth of Pentonville. But Miss Rugg, environed by

the majesty of the law, and having her damages invested in the public

securities, was regarded with consideration.

In the society of Mr Rugg, who had a round white visage, as if all his

blushes had been drawn out of him long ago, and who had a ragged yellow

head like a worn-out hearth broom; and in the society of Miss Rugg, who

had little nankeen spots, like shirt buttons, all over her face, and

whose own yellow tresses were rather scrubby than luxuriant; Mr Pancks

had usually dined on Sundays for some few years, and had twice a week,

or so, enjoyed an evening collation of bread, Dutch cheese, and porter.

Mr Pancks was one of the very few marriageable men for whom Miss Rugg

had no terrors, the argument with which he reassured himself being

twofold; that is to say, firstly, 'that it wouldn't do twice,' and

secondly, 'that he wasn't worth it.' Fortified within this double

armour, Mr Pancks snorted at Miss Rugg on easy terms.

Up to this time, Mr Pancks had transacted little or no business at his

quarters in Pentonville, except in the sleeping line; but now that he

had become a fortune-teller, he was often closeted after midnight

with Mr Rugg in his little front-parlour office, and even after those

untimely hours, burnt tallow in his bed-room. Though his duties as his

proprietor's grubber were in no wise lessened; and though that service

bore no greater resemblance to a bed of roses than was to be discovered

in its many thorns; some new branch of industry made a constant demand

upon him. When he cast off the Patriarch at night, it was only to take

an anonymous craft in tow, and labour away afresh in other waters.

The advance from a personal acquaintance with the elder Mr Chivery to

an introduction to his amiable wife and disconsolate son, may have been

easy; but easy or not, Mr Pancks soon made it. He nestled in the bosom

of the tobacco business within a week or two after his first appearance

in the College, and particularly addressed himself to the cultivation of

a good understanding with Young John. In this endeavour he so prospered

as to lure that pining shepherd forth from the groves, and tempt him

to undertake mysterious missions; on which he began to disappear at

uncertain intervals for as long a space as two or three days together.

The prudent Mrs Chivery, who wondered greatly at this change, would have

protested against it as detrimental to the Highland typification on the

doorpost but for two forcible reasons; one, that her John was roused to

take strong interest in the business which these starts were supposed

to advance--and this she held to be good for his drooping spirits;

the other, that Mr Pancks confidentially agreed to pay her, for the

occupation of her son's time, at the handsome rate of seven and sixpence

per day. The proposal originated with himself, and was couched in the

pithy terms, 'If your John is weak enough, ma'am, not to take it,

that is no reason why you should be, don't you see? So, quite between

ourselves, ma'am, business being business, here it is!'

What Mr Chivery thought of these things, or how much or how little he

knew about them, was never gathered from himself. It has been already

remarked that he was a man of few words; and it may be here observed

that he had imbibed a professional habit of locking everything up. He

locked himself up as carefully as he locked up the Marshalsea debtors.

Even his custom of bolting his meals may have been a part of an uniform

whole; but there is no question, that, as to all other purposes, he kept

his mouth as he kept the Marshalsea door. He never opened it without

occasion. When it was necessary to let anything out, he opened it a

little way, held it open just as long as sufficed for the purpose, and

locked it again.

Even as he would be sparing of his trouble at the Marshalsea door, and

would keep a visitor who wanted to go out, waiting for a few moments if

he saw another visitor coming down the yard, so that one turn of the key

should suffice for both, similarly he would often reserve a remark if he

perceived another on its way to his lips, and would deliver himself of

the two together. As to any key to his inner knowledge being to be

found in his face, the Marshalsea key was as legible as an index to the

individual characters and histories upon which it was turned.

That Mr Pancks should be moved to invite any one to dinner at

Pentonville, was an unprecedented fact in his calendar. But he invited

Young John to dinner, and even brought him within range of the dangerous

(because expensive) fascinations of Miss Rugg. The banquet was appointed

for a Sunday, and Miss Rugg with her own hands stuffed a leg of mutton

with oysters on the occasion, and sent it to the baker's--not THE

baker's but an opposition establishment. Provision of oranges, apples,

and nuts was also made. And rum was brought home by Mr Pancks on

Saturday night, to gladden the visitor's heart. The store of creature

comforts was not the chief part of the visitor's reception. Its special

feature was a foregone family confidence and sympathy. When Young John

appeared at half-past one without the ivory hand and waistcoat of golden

sprigs, the sun shorn of his beams by disastrous clouds, Mr Pancks

presented him to the yellow-haired Ruggs as the young man he had so

often mentioned who loved Miss Dorrit. 'I am glad,' said Mr Rugg,

challenging him specially in that character, 'to have the distinguished

gratification of making your acquaintance, sir. Your feelings do you

honour. You are young; may you never outlive your feelings! If I was

to outlive my own feelings, sir,' said Mr Rugg, who was a man of many

words, and was considered to possess a remarkably good address; 'if I

was to outlive my own feelings, I'd leave fifty pound in my will to the

man who would put me out of existence.'

Miss Rugg heaved a sigh.

'My daughter, sir,' said Mr Rugg. 'Anastatia, you are no stranger to the

state of this young man's affections. My daughter has had her trials,

sir'--Mr Rugg might have used the word more pointedly in the singular

number--'and she can feel for you.'

Young John, almost overwhelmed by the touching nature of this greeting,

professed himself to that effect.

'What I envy you, sir, is,' said Mr Rugg, 'allow me to take your hat--we

are rather short of pegs--I'll put it in the corner, nobody will tread

on it there--What I envy you, sir, is the luxury of your own feelings. I

belong to a profession in which that luxury is sometimes denied us.'

Young John replied, with acknowledgments, that he only hoped he did what

was right, and what showed how entirely he was devoted to Miss Dorrit.

He wished to be unselfish; and he hoped he was. He wished to do anything

as laid in his power to serve Miss Dorrit, altogether putting himself

out of sight; and he hoped he did. It was but little that he could do,

but he hoped he did it.

'Sir,' said Mr Rugg, taking him by the hand, 'you are a young man that

it does one good to come across. You are a young man that I should

like to put in the witness-box, to humanise the minds of the legal

profession. I hope you have brought your appetite with you, and intend

to play a good knife and fork?'

'Thank you, sir,' returned Young John, 'I don't eat much at present.'

Mr Rugg drew him a little apart. 'My daughter's case, sir,' said he, 'at

the time when, in vindication of her outraged feelings and her sex, she

became the plaintiff in Rugg and Bawkins. I suppose I could have put it

in evidence, Mr Chivery, if I had thought it worth my while, that the

amount of solid sustenance my daughter consumed at that period did not

exceed ten ounces per week.' 'I think I go a little beyond that, sir,'

returned the other, hesitating, as if he confessed it with some shame.

'But in your case there's no fiend in human form,' said Mr Rugg, with

argumentative smile and action of hand. 'Observe, Mr Chivery!

No fiend in human form!' 'No, sir, certainly,' Young John added with

simplicity, 'I should be very sorry if there was.'

'The sentiment,' said Mr Rugg, 'is what I should have expected from your

known principles. It would affect my daughter greatly, sir, if she heard

it. As I perceive the mutton, I am glad she didn't hear it. Mr Pancks,

on this occasion, pray face me. My dear, face Mr Chivery. For what we

are going to receive, may we (and Miss Dorrit) be truly thankful!'

But for a grave waggishness in Mr Rugg's manner of delivering this

introduction to the feast, it might have appeared that Miss Dorrit was

expected to be one of the company. Pancks recognised the sally in

his usual way, and took in his provender in his usual way. Miss Rugg,

perhaps making up some of her arrears, likewise took very kindly to

the mutton, and it rapidly diminished to the bone. A bread-and-butter

pudding entirely disappeared, and a considerable amount of cheese and

radishes vanished by the same means. Then came the dessert.

Then also, and before the broaching of the rum and water, came Mr

Pancks's note-book. The ensuing business proceedings were brief but

curious, and rather in the nature of a conspiracy. Mr Pancks looked over

his note-book, which was now getting full, studiously; and picked out

little extracts, which he wrote on separate slips of paper on the table;

Mr Rugg, in the meanwhile, looking at him with close attention, and

Young John losing his uncollected eye in mists of meditation. When Mr

Pancks, who supported the character of chief conspirator, had completed

his extracts, he looked them over, corrected them, put up his note-book,

and held them like a hand at cards.

'Now, there's a churchyard in Bedfordshire,' said Pancks. 'Who takes

it?'

'I'll take it, sir,' returned Mr Rugg, 'if no one bids.'

Mr Pancks dealt him his card, and looked at his hand again.

'Now, there's an Enquiry in York,' said Pancks. 'Who takes it?'

'I'm not good for York,' said Mr Rugg.

'Then perhaps,' pursued Pancks, 'you'll be so obliging, John Chivery?'

Young John assenting, Pancks dealt him his card, and consulted his hand

again.

'There's a Church in London; I may as well take that. And a Family

Bible; I may as well take that, too. That's two to me. Two to me,'

repeated Pancks, breathing hard over his cards. 'Here's a Clerk at

Durham for you, John, and an old seafaring gentleman at Dunstable for

you, Mr Rugg. Two to me, was it? Yes, two to me. Here's a Stone; three

to me. And a Still-born Baby; four to me. And all, for the present,

told.' When he had thus disposed of his cards, all being done very

quietly and in a suppressed tone, Mr Pancks puffed his way into his own

breast-pocket and tugged out a canvas bag; from which, with a sparing

hand, he told forth money for travelling expenses in two little

portions. 'Cash goes out fast,' he said anxiously, as he pushed a

portion to each of his male companions, 'very fast.'

'I can only assure you, Mr Pancks,' said Young John, 'that I deeply

regret my circumstances being such that I can't afford to pay my own

charges, or that it's not advisable to allow me the time necessary for

my doing the distances on foot; because nothing would give me greater

satisfaction than to walk myself off my legs without fee or reward.'

This young man's disinterestedness appeared so very ludicrous in

the eyes of Miss Rugg, that she was obliged to effect a precipitate

retirement from the company, and to sit upon the stairs until she had

had her laugh out. Meanwhile Mr Pancks, looking, not without some pity,

at Young John, slowly and thoughtfully twisted up his canvas bag as if

he were wringing its neck. The lady, returning as he restored it to his

pocket, mixed rum and water for the party, not forgetting her fair self,

and handed to every one his glass. When all were supplied, Mr Rugg rose,

and silently holding out his glass at arm's length above the centre of

the table, by that gesture invited the other three to add theirs, and to

unite in a general conspiratorial clink. The ceremony was effective up

to a certain point, and would have been wholly so throughout, if Miss

Rugg, as she raised her glass to her lips in completion of it, had not

happened to look at Young John; when she was again so overcome by the

contemptible comicality of his disinterestedness as to splutter some

ambrosial drops of rum and water around, and withdraw in confusion.

Such was the dinner without precedent, given by Pancks at Pentonville;

and such was the busy and strange life Pancks led. The only waking

moments at which he appeared to relax from his cares, and to recreate

himself by going anywhere or saying anything without a pervading object,

were when he showed a dawning interest in the lame foreigner with the

stick, down Bleeding Heart Yard.

The foreigner, by name John Baptist Cavalletto--they called him Mr

Baptist in the Yard--was such a chirping, easy, hopeful little fellow,

that his attraction for Pancks was probably in the force of contrast.

Solitary, weak, and scantily acquainted with the most necessary words

of the only language in which he could communicate with the people about

him, he went with the stream of his fortunes, in a brisk way that was

new in those parts. With little to eat, and less to drink, and nothing

to wear but what he wore upon him, or had brought tied up in one of the

smallest bundles that ever were seen, he put as bright a face upon it as

if he were in the most flourishing circumstances when he first hobbled

up and down the Yard, humbly propitiating the general good-will with his

white teeth.

It was uphill work for a foreigner, lame or sound, to make his way with

the Bleeding Hearts. In the first place, they were vaguely persuaded

that every foreigner had a knife about him; in the second, they held it

to be a sound constitutional national axiom that he ought to go home to

his own country. They never thought of inquiring how many of their own

countrymen would be returned upon their hands from divers parts of the

world, if the principle were generally recognised; they considered it

particularly and peculiarly British. In the third place, they had a

notion that it was a sort of Divine visitation upon a foreigner that he

was not an Englishman, and that all kinds of calamities happened to

his country because it did things that England did not, and did not do

things that England did. In this belief, to be sure, they had long been

carefully trained by the Barnacles and Stiltstalkings, who were always

proclaiming to them, officially, that no country which failed to submit

itself to those two large families could possibly hope to be under the

protection of Providence; and who, when they believed it, disparaged

them in private as the most prejudiced people under the sun.

This, therefore, might be called a political position of the Bleeding

Hearts; but they entertained other objections to having foreigners

in the Yard. They believed that foreigners were always badly off; and

though they were as ill off themselves as they could desire to be,

that did not diminish the force of the objection. They believed that

foreigners were dragooned and bayoneted; and though they certainly got

their own skulls promptly fractured if they showed any ill-humour, still

it was with a blunt instrument, and that didn't count. They believed

that foreigners were always immoral; and though they had an occasional

assize at home, and now and then a divorce case or so, that had nothing

to do with it. They believed that foreigners had no independent spirit,

as never being escorted to the poll in droves by Lord Decimus Tite

Barnacle, with colours flying and the tune of Rule Britannia playing.

Not to be tedious, they had many other beliefs of a similar kind.

Against these obstacles, the lame foreigner with the stick had to make

head as well as he could; not absolutely single-handed, because Mr

Arthur Clennam had recommended him to the Plornishes (he lived at the

top of the same house), but still at heavy odds. However, the Bleeding

Hearts were kind hearts; and when they saw the little fellow cheerily

limping about with a good-humoured face, doing no harm, drawing no

knives, committing no outrageous immoralities, living chiefly on

farinaceous and milk diet, and playing with Mrs Plornish's children of

an evening, they began to think that although he could never hope to be

an Englishman, still it would be hard to visit that affliction on his

head. They began to accommodate themselves to his level, calling him 'Mr

Baptist,' but treating him like a baby, and laughing immoderately at his

lively gestures and his childish English--more, because he didn't mind

it, and laughed too. They spoke to him in very loud voices as if he

were stone deaf. They constructed sentences, by way of teaching him the

language in its purity, such as were addressed by the savages to Captain

Cook, or by Friday to Robinson Crusoe. Mrs Plornish was particularly

ingenious in this art; and attained so much celebrity for saying 'Me ope

you leg well soon,' that it was considered in the Yard but a very short

remove indeed from speaking Italian. Even Mrs Plornish herself began to

think that she had a natural call towards that language. As he became

more popular, household objects were brought into requisition for his

instruction in a copious vocabulary; and whenever he appeared in the

Yard ladies would fly out at their doors crying 'Mr Baptist--tea-pot!'

'Mr Baptist--dust-pan!' 'Mr Baptist--flour-dredger!' 'Mr

Baptist--coffee-biggin!' At the same time exhibiting those articles,

and penetrating him with a sense of the appalling difficulties of the

Anglo-Saxon tongue.

It was in this stage of his progress, and in about the third week of his

occupation, that Mr Pancks's fancy became attracted by the little man.

Mounting to his attic, attended by Mrs Plornish as interpreter, he found

Mr Baptist with no furniture but his bed on the ground, a table, and a

chair, carving with the aid of a few simple tools, in the blithest way

possible.

'Now, old chap,' said Mr Pancks, 'pay up!'

He had his money ready, folded in a scrap of paper, and laughingly

handed it in; then with a free action, threw out as many fingers of his

right hand as there were shillings, and made a cut crosswise in the air

for an odd sixpence.

'Oh!' said Mr Pancks, watching him, wonderingly. 'That's it, is it?

You're a quick customer. It's all right. I didn't expect to receive it,

though.'

Mrs Plornish here interposed with great condescension, and explained to

Mr Baptist. 'E please. E glad get money.'

The little man smiled and nodded. His bright face seemed uncommonly

attractive to Mr Pancks. 'How's he getting on in his limb?' he asked Mrs

Plornish.

'Oh, he's a deal better, sir,' said Mrs Plornish. 'We expect next week

he'll be able to leave off his stick entirely.' (The opportunity

being too favourable to be lost, Mrs Plornish displayed her great

accomplishment by explaining with pardonable pride to Mr Baptist, 'E ope

you leg well soon.')

'He's a merry fellow, too,' said Mr Pancks, admiring him as if he were a

mechanical toy. 'How does he live?'

'Why, sir,' rejoined Mrs Plornish, 'he turns out to have quite a power

of carving them flowers that you see him at now.' (Mr Baptist, watching

their faces as they spoke, held up his work. Mrs Plornish interpreted in

her Italian manner, on behalf of Mr Pancks, 'E please. Double good!')

'Can he live by that?' asked Mr Pancks. 'He can live on very little,

sir, and it is expected as he will be able, in time, to make a very good

living. Mr Clennam got it him to do, and gives him odd jobs besides in

at the Works next door--makes 'em for him, in short, when he knows he

wants 'em.'

'And what does he do with himself, now, when he ain't hard at it?' said

Mr Pancks.

'Why, not much as yet, sir, on accounts I suppose of not being able to

walk much; but he goes about the Yard, and he chats without particular

understanding or being understood, and he plays with the children,

and he sits in the sun--he'll sit down anywhere, as if it was an

arm-chair--and he'll sing, and he'll laugh!'

'Laugh!' echoed Mr Pancks. 'He looks to me as if every tooth in his head

was always laughing.'

'But whenever he gets to the top of the steps at t'other end of the

Yard,' said Mrs Plornish, 'he'll peep out in the curiousest way! So that

some of us thinks he's peeping out towards where his own country is, and

some of us thinks he's looking for somebody he don't want to see, and

some of us don't know what to think.'

Mr Baptist seemed to have a general understanding of what she said; or

perhaps his quickness caught and applied her slight action of peeping.

In any case he closed his eyes and tossed his head with the air of a man

who had sufficient reasons for what he did, and said in his own tongue,

it didn't matter. Altro!

'What's Altro?' said Pancks.

'Hem! It's a sort of a general kind of expression, sir,' said Mrs

Plornish.

'Is it?' said Pancks. 'Why, then Altro to you, old chap. Good afternoon.

Altro!'

Mr Baptist in his vivacious way repeating the word several times, Mr

Pancks in his duller way gave it him back once. From that time it became

a frequent custom with Pancks the gipsy, as he went home jaded at night,

to pass round by Bleeding Heart Yard, go quietly up the stairs, look in

at Mr Baptist's door, and, finding him in his room, to say, 'Hallo, old

chap! Altro!' To which Mr Baptist would reply with innumerable bright

nods and smiles, 'Altro, signore, altro, altro, altro!' After this

highly condensed conversation, Mr Pancks would go his way with an

appearance of being lightened and refreshed.

CHAPTER 26. Nobody's State of Mind

If Arthur Clennam had not arrived at that wise decision firmly to

restrain himself from loving Pet, he would have lived on in a state of

much perplexity, involving difficult struggles with his own heart. Not

the least of these would have been a contention, always waging within

it, between a tendency to dislike Mr Henry Gowan, if not to regard

him with positive repugnance, and a whisper that the inclination was

unworthy. A generous nature is not prone to strong aversions, and is

slow to admit them even dispassionately; but when it finds ill-will

gaining upon it, and can discern between-whiles that its origin is not

dispassionate, such a nature becomes distressed.

Therefore Mr Henry Gowan would have clouded Clennam's mind, and would

have been far oftener present to it than more agreeable persons and

subjects but for the great prudence of his decision aforesaid. As it

was, Mr Gowan seemed transferred to Daniel Doyce's mind; at all events,

it so happened that it usually fell to Mr Doyce's turn, rather than

to Clennam's, to speak of him in the friendly conversations they held

together. These were of frequent occurrence now; as the two partners

shared a portion of a roomy house in one of the grave old-fashioned City

streets, lying not far from the Bank of England, by London Wall.

Mr Doyce had been to Twickenham to pass the day. Clennam had excused

himself. Mr Doyce was just come home. He put in his head at the door of

Clennam's sitting-room to say Good night.

'Come in, come in!' said Clennam.

'I saw you were reading,' returned Doyce, as he entered, 'and thought

you might not care to be disturbed.'

But for the notable resolution he had made, Clennam really might not

have known what he had been reading; really might not have had his eyes

upon the book for an hour past, though it lay open before him. He shut

it up, rather quickly.

'Are they well?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Doyce; 'they are well. They are all well.'

Daniel had an old workmanlike habit of carrying his pocket-handkerchief

in his hat. He took it out and wiped his forehead with it, slowly

repeating, 'They are all well. Miss Minnie looking particularly well, I

thought.'

'Any company at the cottage?'

'No, no company.' 'And how did you get on, you four?' asked Clennam

gaily.

'There were five of us,' returned his partner. 'There was

What's-his-name. He was there.' 'Who is he?' said Clennam.

'Mr Henry Gowan.'

'Ah, to be sure!' cried Clennam with unusual vivacity, 'Yes!--I forgot

him.'

'As I mentioned, you may remember,' said Daniel Doyce, 'he is always

there on Sunday.'

'Yes, yes,' returned Clennam; 'I remember now.'

Daniel Doyce, still wiping his forehead, ploddingly repeated. 'Yes. He

was there, he was there. Oh yes, he was there. And his dog. He was there

too.'

'Miss Meagles is quite attached to--the--dog,' observed Clennam.

'Quite so,' assented his partner. 'More attached to the dog than I am to

the man.'

'You mean Mr--?'

'I mean Mr Gowan, most decidedly,' said Daniel Doyce.

There was a gap in the conversation, which Clennam devoted to winding up

his watch.

'Perhaps you are a little hasty in your judgment,' he said. 'Our

judgments--I am supposing a general case--'

'Of course,' said Doyce.

'Are so liable to be influenced by many considerations, which, almost

without our knowing it, are unfair, that it is necessary to keep a guard

upon them. For instance, Mr--'

'Gowan,' quietly said Doyce, upon whom the utterance of the name almost

always devolved.

'Is young and handsome, easy and quick, has talent, and has seen a

good deal of various kinds of life. It might be difficult to give an

unselfish reason for being prepossessed against him.'

'Not difficult for me, I think, Clennam,' returned his partner. 'I see

him bringing present anxiety, and, I fear, future sorrow, into my old

friend's house. I see him wearing deeper lines into my old friend's

face, the nearer he draws to, and the oftener he looks at, the face

of his daughter. In short, I see him with a net about the pretty and

affectionate creature whom he will never make happy.' 'We don't know,'

said Clennam, almost in the tone of a man in pain, 'that he will not

make her happy.'

'We don't know,' returned his partner, 'that the earth will last another

hundred years, but we think it highly probable.'

'Well, well!' said Clennam, 'we must be hopeful, and we must at least

try to be, if not generous (which, in this case, we have no opportunity

of being), just. We will not disparage this gentleman, because he is

successful in his addresses to the beautiful object of his ambition; and

we will not question her natural right to bestow her love on one whom

she finds worthy of it.'

'Maybe, my friend,' said Doyce. 'Maybe also, that she is too young and

petted, too confiding and inexperienced, to discriminate well.'

'That,' said Clennam, 'would be far beyond our power of correction.'

Daniel Doyce shook his head gravely, and rejoined, 'I fear so.'

'Therefore, in a word,' said Clennam, 'we should make up our minds that

it is not worthy of us to say any ill of Mr Gowan. It would be a poor

thing to gratify a prejudice against him. And I resolve, for my part,

not to depreciate him.'

'I am not quite so sure of myself, and therefore I reserve my privilege

of objecting to him,' returned the other. 'But, if I am not sure of

myself, I am sure of you, Clennam, and I know what an upright man you

are, and how much to be respected. Good night, MY friend and partner!'

He shook his hand in saying this, as if there had been something serious

at the bottom of their conversation; and they separated.

By this time they had visited the family on several occasions, and had

always observed that even a passing allusion to Mr Henry Gowan when

he was not among them, brought back the cloud which had obscured Mr

Meagles's sunshine on the morning of the chance encounter at the Ferry.

If Clennam had ever admitted the forbidden passion into his breast,

this period might have been a period of real trial; under the actual

circumstances, doubtless it was nothing--nothing.

Equally, if his heart had given entertainment to that prohibited guest,

his silent fighting of his way through the mental condition of this

period might have been a little meritorious. In the constant effort not

to be betrayed into a new phase of the besetting sin of his experience,

the pursuit of selfish objects by low and small means, and to hold

instead to some high principle of honour and generosity, there might

have been a little merit. In the resolution not even to avoid Mr

Meagles's house, lest, in the selfish sparing of himself, he should

bring any slight distress upon the daughter through making her the cause

of an estrangement which he believed the father would regret, there

might have been a little merit. In the modest truthfulness of always

keeping in view the greater equality of Mr Gowan's years and the greater

attractions of his person and manner, there might have been a little

merit. In doing all this and much more, in a perfectly unaffected way

and with a manful and composed constancy, while the pain within him

(peculiar as his life and history) was very sharp, there might have been

some quiet strength of character. But, after the resolution he had made,

of course he could have no such merits as these; and such a state of

mind was nobody's--nobody's.

Mr Gowan made it no concern of his whether it was nobody's or

somebody's. He preserved his perfect serenity of manner on all

occasions, as if the possibility of Clennam's presuming to have debated

the great question were too distant and ridiculous to be imagined. He

had always an affability to bestow on Clennam and an ease to treat

him with, which might of itself (in the supposititious case of his

not having taken that sagacious course) have been a very uncomfortable

element in his state of mind.

'I quite regret you were not with us yesterday,' said Mr Henry Gowan,

calling on Clennam the next morning. 'We had an agreeable day up the

river there.'

So he had heard, Arthur said.

'From your partner?' returned Henry Gowan. 'What a dear old fellow he

is!'

'I have a great regard for him.'

'By Jove, he is the finest creature!' said Gowan. 'So fresh, so green,

trusts in such wonderful things!'

Here was one of the many little rough points that had a tendency to

grate on Clennam's hearing. He put it aside by merely repeating that he

had a high regard for Mr Doyce.

'He is charming! To see him mooning along to that time of life,

laying down nothing by the way and picking up nothing by the way, is

delightful. It warms a man. So unspoilt, so simple, such a good soul!

Upon my life Mr Clennam, one feels desperately worldly and wicked in

comparison with such an innocent creature. I speak for myself, let me

add, without including you. You are genuine also.'

'Thank you for the compliment,' said Clennam, ill at ease; 'you are too,

I hope?'

'So so,' rejoined the other. 'To be candid with you, tolerably. I am

not a great impostor. Buy one of my pictures, and I assure you,

in confidence, it will not be worth the money. Buy one of another

man's--any great professor who beats me hollow--and the chances are that

the more you give him, the more he'll impose upon you. They all do it.'

'All painters?'

'Painters, writers, patriots, all the rest who have stands in the

market. Give almost any man I know ten pounds, and he will impose upon

you to a corresponding extent; a thousand pounds--to a corresponding

extent; ten thousand pounds--to a corresponding extent. So great the

success, so great the imposition. But what a capital world it is!' cried

Gowan with warm enthusiasm. 'What a jolly, excellent, lovable world it

is!'

'I had rather thought,' said Clennam, 'that the principle you mention

was chiefly acted on by--'

'By the Barnacles?' interrupted Gowan, laughing.

'By the political gentlemen who condescend to keep the Circumlocution

Office.'

'Ah! Don't be hard upon the Barnacles,' said Gowan, laughing afresh,

'they are darling fellows! Even poor little Clarence, the born idiot of

the family, is the most agreeable and most endearing blockhead! And by

Jupiter, with a kind of cleverness in him too that would astonish you!'

'It would. Very much,' said Clennam, drily.

'And after all,' cried Gowan, with that characteristic balancing of his

which reduced everything in the wide world to the same light weight,

'though I can't deny that the Circumlocution Office may ultimately

shipwreck everybody and everything, still, that will probably not be in

our time--and it's a school for gentlemen.'

'It's a very dangerous, unsatisfactory, and expensive school to the

people who pay to keep the pupils there, I am afraid,' said Clennam,

shaking his head.

'Ah! You are a terrible fellow,' returned Gowan, airily. 'I can

understand how you have frightened that little donkey, Clarence, the

most estimable of moon-calves (I really love him) nearly out of his

wits. But enough of him, and of all the rest of them. I want to present

you to my mother, Mr Clennam. Pray do me the favour to give me the

opportunity.'

In nobody's state of mind, there was nothing Clennam would have desired

less, or would have been more at a loss how to avoid.

'My mother lives in a most primitive manner down in that dreary

red-brick dungeon at Hampton Court,' said Gowan. 'If you would make

your own appointment, suggest your own day for permitting me to take

you there to dinner, you would be bored and she would be charmed. Really

that's the state of the case.'

What could Clennam say after this? His retiring character included a

great deal that was simple in the best sense, because unpractised and

unused; and in his simplicity and modesty, he could only say that he was

happy to place himself at Mr Gowan's disposal. Accordingly he said it,

and the day was fixed. And a dreaded day it was on his part, and a very

unwelcome day when it came and they went down to Hampton Court together.

The venerable inhabitants of that venerable pile seemed, in those times,

to be encamped there like a sort of civilised gipsies. There was a

temporary air about their establishments, as if they were going away the

moment they could get anything better; there was also a dissatisfied air

about themselves, as if they took it very ill that they had not already

got something much better. Genteel blinds and makeshifts were more or

less observable as soon as their doors were opened; screens not half

high enough, which made dining-rooms out of arched passages, and warded

off obscure corners where footboys slept at nights with their heads

among the knives and forks; curtains which called upon you to believe

that they didn't hide anything; panes of glass which requested you

not to see them; many objects of various forms, feigning to have no

connection with their guilty secret, a bed; disguised traps in walls,

which were clearly coal-cellars; affectations of no thoroughfares, which

were evidently doors to little kitchens. Mental reservations and artful

mysteries grew out of these things. Callers looking steadily into the

eyes of their receivers, pretended not to smell cooking three feet off;

people, confronting closets accidentally left open, pretended not to see

bottles; visitors with their heads against a partition of thin canvas,

and a page and a young female at high words on the other side, made

believe to be sitting in a primeval silence. There was no end to the

small social accommodation-bills of this nature which the gipsies of

gentility were constantly drawing upon, and accepting for, one another.

Some of these Bohemians were of an irritable temperament, as constantly

soured and vexed by two mental trials: the first, the consciousness

that they had never got enough out of the public; the second, the

consciousness that the public were admitted into the building. Under the

latter great wrong, a few suffered dreadfully--particularly on Sundays,

when they had for some time expected the earth to open and swallow

the public up; but which desirable event had not yet occurred, in

consequence of some reprehensible laxity in the arrangements of the

Universe.

Mrs Gowan's door was attended by a family servant of several years'

standing, who had his own crow to pluck with the public concerning a

situation in the Post-Office which he had been for some time expecting,

and to which he was not yet appointed. He perfectly knew that the public

could never have got him in, but he grimly gratified himself with the

idea that the public kept him out. Under the influence of this injury

(and perhaps of some little straitness and irregularity in the matter

of wages), he had grown neglectful of his person and morose in mind;

and now beholding in Clennam one of the degraded body of his oppressors,

received him with ignominy. Mrs Gowan, however, received him with

condescension. He found her a courtly old lady, formerly a Beauty, and

still sufficiently well-favoured to have dispensed with the powder on

her nose and a certain impossible bloom under each eye. She was a little

lofty with him; so was another old lady, dark-browed and high-nosed,

and who must have had something real about her or she could not have

existed, but it was certainly not her hair or her teeth or her figure

or her complexion; so was a grey old gentleman of dignified and sullen

appearance; both of whom had come to dinner. But, as they had all

been in the British Embassy way in sundry parts of the earth, and as

a British Embassy cannot better establish a character with the

Circumlocution Office than by treating its compatriots with illimitable

contempt (else it would become like the Embassies of other countries),

Clennam felt that on the whole they let him off lightly.

The dignified old gentleman turned out to be Lord Lancaster

Stiltstalking, who had been maintained by the Circumlocution Office for

many years as a representative of the Britannic Majesty abroad.

This noble Refrigerator had iced several European courts in his time,

and had done it with such complete success that the very name of

Englishman yet struck cold to the stomachs of foreigners who had the

distinguished honour of remembering him at a distance of a quarter of a

century.

He was now in retirement, and hence (in a ponderous white cravat, like

a stiff snow-drift) was so obliging as to shade the dinner. There was a

whisper of the pervading Bohemian character in the nomadic nature of

the service and its curious races of plates and dishes; but the noble

Refrigerator, infinitely better than plate or porcelain, made it superb.

He shaded the dinner, cooled the wines, chilled the gravy, and blighted

the vegetables.

There was only one other person in the room: a microscopically small

footboy, who waited on the malevolent man who hadn't got into the

Post-Office. Even this youth, if his jacket could have been unbuttoned

and his heart laid bare, would have been seen, as a distant adherent of

the Barnacle family, already to aspire to a situation under Government.

Mrs Gowan with a gentle melancholy upon her, occasioned by her son's

being reduced to court the swinish public as a follower of the low Arts,

instead of asserting his birthright and putting a ring through its nose

as an acknowledged Barnacle, headed the conversation at dinner on the

evil days. It was then that Clennam learned for the first time what

little pivots this great world goes round upon.

'If John Barnacle,' said Mrs Gowan, after the degeneracy of the times

had been fully ascertained, 'if John Barnacle had but abandoned his most

unfortunate idea of conciliating the mob, all would have been well, and

I think the country would have been preserved.' The old lady with the

high nose assented; but added that if Augustus Stiltstalking had in a

general way ordered the cavalry out with instructions to charge, she

thought the country would have been preserved.

The noble Refrigerator assented; but added that if William Barnacle and

Tudor Stiltstalking, when they came over to one another and formed

their ever-memorable coalition, had boldly muzzled the newspapers,

and rendered it penal for any Editor-person to presume to discuss the

conduct of any appointed authority abroad or at home, he thought the

country would have been preserved.

It was agreed that the country (another word for the Barnacles and

Stiltstalkings) wanted preserving, but how it came to want preserving

was not so clear. It was only clear that the question was all about

John Barnacle, Augustus Stiltstalking, William Barnacle and Tudor

Stiltstalking, Tom, Dick, or Harry Barnacle or Stiltstalking, because

there was nobody else but mob. And this was the feature of the

conversation which impressed Clennam, as a man not used to it, very

disagreeably: making him doubt if it were quite right to sit there,

silently hearing a great nation narrowed to such little bounds.

Remembering, however, that in the Parliamentary debates, whether on the

life of that nation's body or the life of its soul, the question was

usually all about and between John Barnacle, Augustus Stiltstalking,

William Barnacle and Tudor Stiltstalking, Tom, Dick, or Harry Barnacle

or Stiltstalking, and nobody else; he said nothing on the part of mob,

bethinking himself that mob was used to it.

Mr Henry Gowan seemed to have a malicious pleasure in playing off the

three talkers against each other, and in seeing Clennam startled by what

they said. Having as supreme a contempt for the class that had thrown

him off as for the class that had not taken him on, he had no personal

disquiet in anything that passed. His healthy state of mind appeared

even to derive a gratification from Clennam's position of embarrassment

and isolation among the good company; and if Clennam had been in that

condition with which Nobody was incessantly contending, he would have

suspected it, and would have struggled with the suspicion as a meanness,

even while he sat at the table.

In the course of a couple of hours the noble Refrigerator, at no time

less than a hundred years behind the period, got about five centuries

in arrears, and delivered solemn political oracles appropriate to that

epoch. He finished by freezing a cup of tea for his own drinking,

and retiring at his lowest temperature. Then Mrs Gowan, who had been

accustomed in her days of a vacant arm-chair beside her to which

to summon state to retain her devoted slaves, one by one, for short

audiences as marks of her especial favour, invited Clennam with a turn

of her fan to approach the presence. He obeyed, and took the tripod

recently vacated by Lord Lancaster Stiltstalking.

'Mr Clennam,' said Mrs Gowan, 'apart from the happiness I have in

becoming known to you, though in this odiously inconvenient place--a

mere barrack--there is a subject on which I am dying to speak to you. It

is the subject in connection with which my son first had, I believe, the

pleasure of cultivating your acquaintance.'

Clennam inclined his head, as a generally suitable reply to what he did

not yet quite understand.

'First,' said Mrs Gowan, 'now, is she really pretty?'

In nobody's difficulties, he would have found it very difficult to

answer; very difficult indeed to smile, and say 'Who?'

'Oh! You know!' she returned. 'This flame of Henry's. This unfortunate

fancy. There! If it is a point of honour that I should originate the

name--Miss Mickles--Miggles.'

'Miss Meagles,' said Clennam, 'is very beautiful.'

'Men are so often mistaken on those points,' returned Mrs Gowan, shaking

her head, 'that I candidly confess to you I feel anything but sure of

it, even now; though it is something to have Henry corroborated with so

much gravity and emphasis. He picked the people up at Rome, I think?'

The phrase would have given nobody mortal offence. Clennam replied,

'Excuse me, I doubt if I understand your expression.'

'Picked the people up,' said Mrs Gowan, tapping the sticks of her closed

fan (a large green one, which she used as a hand-screen) on her little

table. 'Came upon them. Found them out. Stumbled UP against them.'

'The people?'

'Yes. The Miggles people.'

'I really cannot say,' said Clennam, 'where my friend Mr Meagles first

presented Mr Henry Gowan to his daughter.'

'I am pretty sure he picked her up at Rome; but never mind

where--somewhere. Now (this is entirely between ourselves), is she very

plebeian?'

'Really, ma'am,' returned Clennam, 'I am so undoubtedly plebeian myself,

that I do not feel qualified to judge.'

'Very neat!' said Mrs Gowan, coolly unfurling her screen. 'Very happy!

From which I infer that you secretly think her manner equal to her

looks?'

Clennam, after a moment's stiffness, bowed.

'That's comforting, and I hope you may be right. Did Henry tell me you

had travelled with them?' 'I travelled with my friend Mr Meagles, and

his wife and daughter, during some months.' (Nobody's heart might have

been wrung by the remembrance.)

'Really comforting, because you must have had a large experience of

them. You see, Mr Clennam, this thing has been going on for a long time,

and I find no improvement in it. Therefore to have the opportunity of

speaking to one so well informed about it as yourself, is an immense

relief to me. Quite a boon. Quite a blessing, I am sure.'

'Pardon me,' returned Clennam, 'but I am not in Mr Henry Gowan's

confidence. I am far from being so well informed as you suppose me to

be. Your mistake makes my position a very delicate one. No word on this

topic has ever passed between Mr Henry Gowan and myself.'

Mrs Gowan glanced at the other end of the room, where her son was

playing ecarte on a sofa, with the old lady who was for a charge of

cavalry.

'Not in his confidence? No,' said Mrs Gowan. 'No word has passed between

you? No. That I can imagine. But there are unexpressed confidences, Mr

Clennam; and as you have been together intimately among these people, I

cannot doubt that a confidence of that sort exists in the present case.

Perhaps you have heard that I have suffered the keenest distress of

mind from Henry's having taken to a pursuit which--well!' shrugging her

shoulders, 'a very respectable pursuit, I dare say, and some artists

are, as artists, quite superior persons; still, we never yet in our

family have gone beyond an Amateur, and it is a pardonable weakness to

feel a little--'

As Mrs Gowan broke off to heave a sigh, Clennam, however resolute to

be magnanimous, could not keep down the thought that there was mighty

little danger of the family's ever going beyond an Amateur, even as it

was.

'Henry,' the mother resumed, 'is self-willed and resolute; and as these

people naturally strain every nerve to catch him, I can entertain very

little hope, Mr Clennam, that the thing will be broken off. I apprehend

the girl's fortune will be very small; Henry might have done much

better; there is scarcely anything to compensate for the connection:

still, he acts for himself; and if I find no improvement within a short

time, I see no other course than to resign myself and make the best of

these people. I am infinitely obliged to you for what you have told

me.' As she shrugged her shoulders, Clennam stiffly bowed again. With an

uneasy flush upon his face, and hesitation in his manner, he then said

in a still lower tone than he had adopted yet:

'Mrs Gowan, I scarcely know how to acquit myself of what I feel to be a

duty, and yet I must ask you for your kind consideration in

attempting to discharge it. A misconception on your part, a very great

misconception if I may venture to call it so, seems to require setting

right. You have supposed Mr Meagles and his family to strain every

nerve, I think you said--'

'Every nerve,' repeated Mrs Gowan, looking at him in calm obstinacy,

with her green fan between her face and the fire.

'To secure Mr Henry Gowan?'

The lady placidly assented.

'Now that is so far,' said Arthur, 'from being the case, that I know

Mr Meagles to be unhappy in this matter; and to have interposed all

reasonable obstacles with the hope of putting an end to it.'

Mrs Gowan shut up her great green fan, tapped him on the arm with it,

and tapped her smiling lips. 'Why, of course,' said she. 'Just what I

mean.'

Arthur watched her face for some explanation of what she did mean.

'Are you really serious, Mr Clennam? Don't you see?'

Arthur did not see; and said so.

'Why, don't I know my son, and don't I know that this is exactly the way

to hold him?' said Mrs Gowan, contemptuously; 'and do not these Miggles

people know it, at least as well as I? Oh, shrewd people, Mr Clennam:

evidently people of business! I believe Miggles belonged to a Bank. It

ought to have been a very profitable Bank, if he had much to do with its

management. This is very well done, indeed.'

'I beg and entreat you, ma'am--' Arthur interposed.

'Oh, Mr Clennam, can you really be so credulous?'

It made such a painful impression upon him to hear her talking in this

haughty tone, and to see her patting her contemptuous lips with her

fan, that he said very earnestly, 'Believe me, ma'am, this is unjust, a

perfectly groundless suspicion.'

'Suspicion?' repeated Mrs Gowan. 'Not suspicion, Mr Clennam, Certainty.

It is very knowingly done indeed, and seems to have taken YOU in

completely.' She laughed; and again sat tapping her lips with her fan,

and tossing her head, as if she added, 'Don't tell me. I know such

people will do anything for the honour of such an alliance.'

At this opportune moment, the cards were thrown up, and Mr Henry Gowan

came across the room saying, 'Mother, if you can spare Mr Clennam for

this time, we have a long way to go, and it's getting late.' Mr Clennam

thereupon rose, as he had no choice but to do; and Mrs Gowan showed him,

to the last, the same look and the same tapped contemptuous lips.

'You have had a portentously long audience of my mother,' said Gowan, as

the door closed upon them. 'I fervently hope she has not bored you?'

'Not at all,' said Clennam.

They had a little open phaeton for the journey, and were soon in it on

the road home. Gowan, driving, lighted a cigar; Clennam declined one. Do

what he would, he fell into such a mood of abstraction that Gowan said

again, 'I am very much afraid my mother has bored you?' To which he

roused himself to answer, 'Not at all!' and soon relapsed again.

In that state of mind which rendered nobody uneasy, his thoughtfulness

would have turned principally on the man at his side. He would have

thought of the morning when he first saw him rooting out the stones with

his heel, and would have asked himself, 'Does he jerk me out of the

path in the same careless, cruel way?' He would have thought, had this

introduction to his mother been brought about by him because he knew

what she would say, and that he could thus place his position before

a rival and loftily warn him off, without himself reposing a word of

confidence in him? He would have thought, even if there were no such

design as that, had he brought him there to play with his repressed

emotions, and torment him? The current of these meditations would have

been stayed sometimes by a rush of shame, bearing a remonstrance to

himself from his own open nature, representing that to shelter such

suspicions, even for the passing moment, was not to hold the high,

unenvious course he had resolved to keep. At those times, the striving

within him would have been hardest; and looking up and catching Gowan's

eyes, he would have started as if he had done him an injury.

Then, looking at the dark road and its uncertain objects, he would have

gradually trailed off again into thinking, 'Where are we driving, he

and I, I wonder, on the darker road of life? How will it be with us, and

with her, in the obscure distance?' Thinking of her, he would have been

troubled anew with a reproachful misgiving that it was not even loyal to

her to dislike him, and that in being so easily prejudiced against him

he was less deserving of her than at first.

'You are evidently out of spirits,' said Gowan; 'I am very much afraid

my mother must have bored you dreadfully.' 'Believe me, not at all,'

said Clennam. 'It's nothing--nothing!'

CHAPTER 27. Five-and-Twenty

A frequently recurring doubt, whether Mr Pancks's desire to collect

information relative to the Dorrit family could have any possible

bearing on the misgivings he had imparted to his mother on his return

from his long exile, caused Arthur Clennam much uneasiness at this

period. What Mr Pancks already knew about the Dorrit family, what more

he really wanted to find out, and why he should trouble his busy head

about them at all, were questions that often perplexed him. Mr Pancks

was not a man to waste his time and trouble in researches prompted by

idle curiosity. That he had a specific object Clennam could not doubt.

And whether the attainment of that object by Mr Pancks's industry might

bring to light, in some untimely way, secret reasons which had induced

his mother to take Little Dorrit by the hand, was a serious speculation.

Not that he ever wavered either in his desire or his determination to

repair a wrong that had been done in his father's time, should a

wrong come to light, and be reparable. The shadow of a supposed act

of injustice, which had hung over him since his father's death, was

so vague and formless that it might be the result of a reality widely

remote from his idea of it. But, if his apprehensions should prove to

be well founded, he was ready at any moment to lay down all he had, and

begin the world anew. As the fierce dark teaching of his childhood had

never sunk into his heart, so that first article in his code of morals

was, that he must begin, in practical humility, with looking well to

his feet on Earth, and that he could never mount on wings of words to

Heaven. Duty on earth, restitution on earth, action on earth; these

first, as the first steep steps upward. Strait was the gate and narrow

was the way; far straiter and narrower than the broad high road paved

with vain professions and vain repetitions, motes from other men's eyes

and liberal delivery of others to the judgment--all cheap materials

costing absolutely nothing.

No. It was not a selfish fear or hesitation that rendered him

uneasy, but a mistrust lest Pancks might not observe his part of the

understanding between them, and, making any discovery, might take some

course upon it without imparting it to him. On the other hand, when he

recalled his conversation with Pancks, and the little reason he had to

suppose that there was any likelihood of that strange personage being

on that track at all, there were times when he wondered that he made so

much of it. Labouring in this sea, as all barks labour in cross seas, he

tossed about and came to no haven.

The removal of Little Dorrit herself from their customary association,

did not mend the matter. She was so much out, and so much in her own

room, that he began to miss her and to find a blank in her place. He had

written to her to inquire if she were better, and she had written

back, very gratefully and earnestly telling him not to be uneasy on her

behalf, for she was quite well; but he had not seen her, for what, in

their intercourse, was a long time.

He returned home one evening from an interview with her father, who had

mentioned that she was out visiting--which was what he always said

when she was hard at work to buy his supper--and found Mr Meagles in an

excited state walking up and down his room. On his opening the door, Mr

Meagles stopped, faced round, and said:

'Clennam!--Tattycoram!'

'What's the matter?'

'Lost!'

'Why, bless my heart alive!' cried Clennam in amazement. 'What do you

mean?'

'Wouldn't count five-and-twenty, sir; couldn't be got to do it; stopped

at eight, and took herself off.'

'Left your house?'

'Never to come back,' said Mr Meagles, shaking his head. 'You don't know

that girl's passionate and proud character. A team of horses couldn't

draw her back now; the bolts and bars of the old Bastille couldn't keep

her.'

'How did it happen? Pray sit down and tell me.'

'As to how it happened, it's not so easy to relate: because you must

have the unfortunate temperament of the poor impetuous girl herself,

before you can fully understand it. But it came about in this way. Pet

and Mother and I have been having a good deal of talk together of late.

I'll not disguise from you, Clennam, that those conversations have not

been of as bright a kind as I could wish; they have referred to our

going away again. In proposing to do which, I have had, in fact, an

object.'

Nobody's heart beat quickly.

'An object,' said Mr Meagles, after a moment's pause, 'that I will not

disguise from you, either, Clennam. There's an inclination on the part

of my dear child which I am sorry for. Perhaps you guess the person.

Henry Gowan.'

'I was not unprepared to hear it.'

'Well!' said Mr Meagles, with a heavy sigh, 'I wish to God you had never

had to hear it. However, so it is. Mother and I have done all we could

to get the better of it, Clennam. We have tried tender advice, we

have tried time, we have tried absence. As yet, of no use. Our late

conversations have been upon the subject of going away for another year

at least, in order that there might be an entire separation and breaking

off for that term. Upon that question, Pet has been unhappy, and

therefore Mother and I have been unhappy.' Clennam said that he could

easily believe it.

'Well!' continued Mr Meagles in an apologetic way, 'I admit as a

practical man, and I am sure Mother would admit as a practical woman,

that we do, in families, magnify our troubles and make mountains of our

molehills in a way that is calculated to be rather trying to people who

look on--to mere outsiders, you know, Clennam.

Still, Pet's happiness or unhappiness is quite a life or death question

with us; and we may be excused, I hope, for making much of it. At all

events, it might have been borne by Tattycoram. Now, don't you think

so?'

'I do indeed think so,' returned Clennam, in most emphatic recognition

of this very moderate expectation.

'No, sir,' said Mr Meagles, shaking his head ruefully. 'She couldn't

stand it. The chafing and firing of that girl, the wearing and tearing

of that girl within her own breast, has been such that I have

softly said to her again and again in passing her, "Five-and-twenty,

Tattycoram, five-and-twenty!" I heartily wish she could have gone

on counting five-and-twenty day and night, and then it wouldn't have

happened.'

Mr Meagles with a despondent countenance in which the goodness of his

heart was even more expressed than in his times of cheerfulness and

gaiety, stroked his face down from his forehead to his chin, and shook

his head again.

'I said to Mother (not that it was necessary, for she would have thought

it all for herself), we are practical people, my dear, and we know her

story; we see in this unhappy girl some reflection of what was raging in

her mother's heart before ever such a creature as this poor thing was

in the world; we'll gloss her temper over, Mother, we won't notice it at

present, my dear, we'll take advantage of some better disposition in her

another time. So we said nothing. But, do what we would, it seems as if

it was to be; she broke out violently one night.'

'How, and why?'

'If you ask me Why,' said Mr Meagles, a little disturbed by the

question, for he was far more intent on softening her case than the

family's, 'I can only refer you to what I have just repeated as having

been pretty near my words to Mother. As to How, we had said Good night

to Pet in her presence (very affectionately, I must allow), and she

had attended Pet up-stairs--you remember she was her maid. Perhaps Pet,

having been out of sorts, may have been a little more inconsiderate than

usual in requiring services of her: but I don't know that I have any

right to say so; she was always thoughtful and gentle.'

'The gentlest mistress in the world.'

'Thank you, Clennam,' said Mr Meagles, shaking him by the hand; 'you

have often seen them together. Well! We presently heard this unfortunate

Tattycoram loud and angry, and before we could ask what was the matter,

Pet came back in a tremble, saying she was frightened of her. Close

after her came Tattycoram in a flaming rage. "I hate you all three,"

says she, stamping her foot at us. "I am bursting with hate of the whole

house."'

'Upon which you--?'

'I?' said Mr Meagles, with a plain good faith that might have commanded

the belief of Mrs Gowan herself. 'I said, count five-and-twenty,

Tattycoram.'

Mr Meagles again stroked his face and shook his head, with an air of

profound regret.

'She was so used to do it, Clennam, that even then, such a picture of

passion as you never saw, she stopped short, looked me full in the face,

and counted (as I made out) to eight. But she couldn't control herself

to go any further. There she broke down, poor thing, and gave the other

seventeen to the four winds. Then it all burst out. She detested us, she

was miserable with us, she couldn't bear it, she wouldn't bear it, she

was determined to go away. She was younger than her young mistress, and

would she remain to see her always held up as the only creature who was

young and interesting, and to be cherished and loved? No. She wouldn't,

she wouldn't, she wouldn't! What did we think she, Tattycoram, might

have been if she had been caressed and cared for in her childhood, like

her young mistress? As good as her? Ah! Perhaps fifty times as good.

When we pretended to be so fond of one another, we exulted over her;

that was what we did; we exulted over her and shamed her. And all in

the house did the same. They talked about their fathers and mothers, and

brothers and sisters; they liked to drag them up before her face. There

was Mrs Tickit, only yesterday, when her little grandchild was with her,

had been amused by the child's trying to call her (Tattycoram) by the

wretched name we gave her; and had laughed at the name. Why, who didn't;

and who were we that we should have a right to name her like a dog or a

cat? But she didn't care. She would take no more benefits from us; she

would fling us her name back again, and she would go. She would leave

us that minute, nobody should stop her, and we should never hear of her

again.'

Mr Meagles had recited all this with such a vivid remembrance of his

original, that he was almost as flushed and hot by this time as he

described her to have been.

'Ah, well!' he said, wiping his face. 'It was of no use trying reason

then, with that vehement panting creature (Heaven knows what her

mother's story must have been); so I quietly told her that she should

not go at that late hour of night, and I gave her MY hand and took her

to her room, and locked the house doors. But she was gone this morning.'

'And you know no more of her?'

'No more,' returned Mr Meagles. 'I have been hunting about all day. She

must have gone very early and very silently. I have found no trace of

her down about us.'

'Stay! You want,' said Clennam, after a moment's reflection, 'to see

her? I assume that?'

'Yes, assuredly; I want to give her another chance; Mother and Pet

want to give her another chance; come! You yourself,' said Mr Meagles,

persuasively, as if the provocation to be angry were not his own at all,

'want to give the poor passionate girl another chance, I know, Clennam.'

'It would be strange and hard indeed if I did not,' said Clennam, 'when

you are all so forgiving. What I was going to ask you was, have you

thought of that Miss Wade?'

'I have. I did not think of her until I had pervaded the whole of our

neighbourhood, and I don't know that I should have done so then but

for finding Mother and Pet, when I went home, full of the idea that

Tattycoram must have gone to her. Then, of course, I recalled what she

said that day at dinner when you were first with US.'

'Have you any idea where Miss Wade is to be found?'

'To tell you the truth,' returned Mr Meagles, 'it's because I have an

addled jumble of a notion on that subject that you found me waiting

here. There is one of those odd impressions in my house, which do

mysteriously get into houses sometimes, which nobody seems to have

picked up in a distinct form from anybody, and yet which everybody seems

to have got hold of loosely from somebody and let go again, that she

lives, or was living, thereabouts.' Mr Meagles handed him a slip of

paper, on which was written the name of one of the dull by-streets in

the Grosvenor region, near Park Lane.

'Here is no number,' said Arthur looking over it.

'No number, my dear Clennam?' returned his friend. 'No anything! The

very name of the street may have been floating in the air; for, as I

tell you, none of my people can say where they got it from. However,

it's worth an inquiry; and as I would rather make it in company than

alone, and as you too were a fellow-traveller of that immovable woman's,

I thought perhaps--' Clennam finished the sentence for him by taking up

his hat again, and saying he was ready.

It was now summer-time; a grey, hot, dusty evening. They rode to the top

of Oxford Street, and there alighting, dived in among the great streets

of melancholy stateliness, and the little streets that try to be as

stately and succeed in being more melancholy, of which there is a

labyrinth near Park Lane. Wildernesses of corner houses, with barbarous

old porticoes and appurtenances; horrors that came into existence under

some wrong-headed person in some wrong-headed time, still demanding

the blind admiration of all ensuing generations and determined to do

so until they tumbled down; frowned upon the twilight. Parasite little

tenements, with the cramp in their whole frame, from the dwarf hall-door

on the giant model of His Grace's in the Square to the squeezed window

of the boudoir commanding the dunghills in the Mews, made the evening

doleful. Rickety dwellings of undoubted fashion, but of a capacity to

hold nothing comfortably except a dismal smell, looked like the last

result of the great mansions' breeding in-and-in; and, where their

little supplementary bows and balconies were supported on thin iron

columns, seemed to be scrofulously resting upon crutches.

Here and there a Hatchment, with the whole science of Heraldry in it,

loomed down upon the street, like an Archbishop discoursing on Vanity.

The shops, few in number, made no show; for popular opinion was as

nothing to them. The pastrycook knew who was on his books, and in

that knowledge could be calm, with a few glass cylinders of dowager

peppermint-drops in his window, and half-a-dozen ancient specimens of

currant-jelly. A few oranges formed the greengrocer's whole concession

to the vulgar mind. A single basket made of moss, once containing

plovers' eggs, held all that the poulterer had to say to the rabble.

Everybody in those streets seemed (which is always the case at that hour

and season) to be gone out to dinner, and nobody seemed to be giving the

dinners they had gone to. On the doorsteps there were lounging footmen

with bright parti-coloured plumage and white polls, like an extinct race

of monstrous birds; and butlers, solitary men of recluse demeanour, each

of whom appeared distrustful of all other butlers. The roll of carriages

in the Park was done for the day; the street lamps were lighting; and

wicked little grooms in the tightest fitting garments, with twists in

their legs answering to the twists in their minds, hung about in pairs,

chewing straws and exchanging fraudulent secrets. The spotted dogs who

went out with the carriages, and who were so associated with splendid

equipages that it looked like a condescension in those animals to come

out without them, accompanied helpers to and fro on messages. Here and

there was a retiring public-house which did not require to be supported

on the shoulders of the people, and where gentlemen out of livery were

not much wanted.

This last discovery was made by the two friends in pursuing their

inquiries. Nothing was there, or anywhere, known of such a person as

Miss Wade, in connection with the street they sought. It was one of the

parasite streets; long, regular, narrow, dull and gloomy; like a brick

and mortar funeral. They inquired at several little area gates, where

a dejected youth stood spiking his chin on the summit of a precipitous

little shoot of wooden steps, but could gain no information. They walked

up the street on one side of the way, and down it on the other, what

time two vociferous news-sellers, announcing an extraordinary event that

had never happened and never would happen, pitched their hoarse voices

into the secret chambers; but nothing came of it. At length they stood

at the corner from which they had begun, and it had fallen quite dark,

and they were no wiser.

It happened that in the street they had several times passed a dingy

house, apparently empty, with bills in the windows, announcing that it

was to let. The bills, as a variety in the funeral procession, almost

amounted to a decoration. Perhaps because they kept the house separated

in his mind, or perhaps because Mr Meagles and himself had twice agreed

in passing, 'It is clear she don't live there,' Clennam now proposed

that they should go back and try that house before finally going away.

Mr Meagles agreed, and back they went.

They knocked once, and they rang once, without any response.

'Empty,' said Mr Meagles, listening. 'Once more,' said Clennam, and

knocked again. After that knock they heard a movement below, and

somebody shuffling up towards the door.

The confined entrance was so dark that it was impossible to make out

distinctly what kind of person opened the door; but it appeared to be an

old woman. 'Excuse our troubling you,' said Clennam. 'Pray can you

tell us where Miss Wade lives?' The voice in the darkness unexpectedly

replied, 'Lives here.'

'Is she at home?'

No answer coming, Mr Meagles asked again. 'Pray is she at home?'

After another delay, 'I suppose she is,' said the voice abruptly; 'you

had better come in, and I'll ask.'

They 'were summarily shut into the close black house; and the figure

rustling away, and speaking from a higher level, said, 'Come up, if you

please; you can't tumble over anything.' They groped their way up-stairs

towards a faint light, which proved to be the light of the street

shining through a window; and the figure left them shut in an airless

room.

'This is odd, Clennam,' said Mr Meagles, softly.

'Odd enough,' assented Clennam in the same tone, 'but we have succeeded;

that's the main point. Here's a light coming!'

The light was a lamp, and the bearer was an old woman: very dirty, very

wrinkled and dry. 'She's at home,' she said (and the voice was the same

that had spoken before); 'she'll come directly.' Having set the lamp

down on the table, the old woman dusted her hands on her apron, which

she might have done for ever without cleaning them, looked at the

visitors with a dim pair of eyes, and backed out.

The lady whom they had come to see, if she were the present occupant

of the house, appeared to have taken up her quarters there as she might

have established herself in an Eastern caravanserai. A small square

of carpet in the middle of the room, a few articles of furniture that

evidently did not belong to the room, and a disorder of trunks and

travelling articles, formed the whole of her surroundings. Under some

former regular inhabitant, the stifling little apartment had broken out

into a pier-glass and a gilt table; but the gilding was as faded as last

year's flowers, and the glass was so clouded that it seemed to hold in

magic preservation all the fogs and bad weather it had ever reflected.

The visitors had had a minute or two to look about them, when the door

opened and Miss Wade came in.

She was exactly the same as when they had parted, just as handsome, just

as scornful, just as repressed. She manifested no surprise in seeing

them, nor any other emotion. She requested them to be seated; and

declining to take a seat herself, at once anticipated any introduction

of their business.

'I apprehend,' she said, 'that I know the cause of your favouring me

with this visit. We may come to it at once.'

'The cause then, ma'am,' said Mr Meagles, 'is Tattycoram.'

'So I supposed.'

'Miss Wade,' said Mr Meagles, 'will you be so kind as to say whether you

know anything of her?'

'Surely. I know she is here with me.'

'Then, ma'am,' said Mr Meagles, 'allow me to make known to you that I

shall be happy to have her back, and that my wife and daughter will

be happy to have her back. She has been with us a long time: we don't

forget her claims upon us, and I hope we know how to make allowances.'

'You hope to know how to make allowances?' she returned, in a level,

measured voice. 'For what?'

'I think my friend would say, Miss Wade,' Arthur Clennam interposed,

seeing Mr Meagles rather at a loss, 'for the passionate sense that

sometimes comes upon the poor girl, of being at a disadvantage. Which

occasionally gets the better of better remembrances.'

The lady broke into a smile as she turned her eyes upon him. 'Indeed?'

was all she answered.

She stood by the table so perfectly composed and still after this

acknowledgment of his remark that Mr Meagles stared at her under a sort

of fascination, and could not even look to Clennam to make another move.

After waiting, awkwardly enough, for some moments, Arthur said: 'Perhaps

it would be well if Mr Meagles could see her, Miss Wade?'

'That is easily done,' said she. 'Come here, child.' She had opened a

door while saying this, and now led the girl in by the hand. It was

very curious to see them standing together: the girl with her disengaged

fingers plaiting the bosom of her dress, half irresolutely, half

passionately; Miss Wade with her composed face attentively regarding

her, and suggesting to an observer, with extraordinary force, in her

composure itself (as a veil will suggest the form it covers), the

unquenchable passion of her own nature.

'See here,' she said, in the same level way as before. 'Here is your

patron, your master. He is willing to take you back, my dear, if you are

sensible of the favour and choose to go. You can be, again, a foil to

his pretty daughter, a slave to her pleasant wilfulness, and a toy in

the house showing the goodness of the family. You can have your droll

name again, playfully pointing you out and setting you apart, as it is

right that you should be pointed out and set apart. (Your birth, you

know; you must not forget your birth.) You can again be shown to this

gentleman's daughter, Harriet, and kept before her, as a living reminder

of her own superiority and her gracious condescension. You can recover

all these advantages and many more of the same kind which I dare say

start up in your memory while I speak, and which you lose in taking

refuge with me--you can recover them all by telling these gentlemen how

humbled and penitent you are, and by going back to them to be forgiven.

What do you say, Harriet? Will you go?'

The girl who, under the influence of these words, had gradually risen

in anger and heightened in colour, answered, raising her lustrous black

eyes for the moment, and clenching her hand upon the folds it had been

puckering up, 'I'd die sooner!'

Miss Wade, still standing at her side holding her hand, looked quietly

round and said with a smile, 'Gentlemen! What do you do upon that?'

Poor Mr Meagles's inexpressible consternation in hearing his motives and

actions so perverted, had prevented him from interposing any word until

now; but now he regained the power of speech.

'Tattycoram,' said he, 'for I'll call you by that name still, my good

girl, conscious that I meant nothing but kindness when I gave it to you,

and conscious that you know it--'

'I don't!' said she, looking up again, and almost rending herself with

the same busy hand.

'No, not now, perhaps,' said Mr Meagles; 'not with that lady's eyes so

intent upon you, Tattycoram,' she glanced at them for a moment, 'and

that power over you, which we see she exercises; not now, perhaps, but

at another time. Tattycoram, I'll not ask that lady whether she believes

what she has said, even in the anger and ill blood in which I and my

friend here equally know she has spoken, though she subdues herself,

with a determination that any one who has once seen her is not likely

to forget. I'll not ask you, with your remembrance of my house and all

belonging to it, whether you believe it. I'll only say that you have

no profession to make to me or mine, and no forgiveness to entreat;

and that all in the world that I ask you to do, is, to count

five-and-twenty, Tattycoram.'

She looked at him for an instant, and then said frowningly, 'I won't.

Miss Wade, take me away, please.'

The contention that raged within her had no softening in it now; it

was wholly between passionate defiance and stubborn defiance. Her rich

colour, her quick blood, her rapid breath, were all setting themselves

against the opportunity of retracing their steps. 'I won't. I won't.

I won't!' she repeated in a low, thick voice. 'I'd be torn to pieces

first. I'd tear myself to pieces first!'

Miss Wade, who had released her hold, laid her hand protectingly on the

girl's neck for a moment, and then said, looking round with her former

smile and speaking exactly in her former tone, 'Gentlemen! What do you

do upon that?'

'Oh, Tattycoram, Tattycoram!' cried Mr Meagles, adjuring her besides

with an earnest hand. 'Hear that lady's voice, look at that lady's face,

consider what is in that lady's heart, and think what a future lies

before you. My child, whatever you may think, that lady's influence

over you--astonishing to us, and I should hardly go too far in saying

terrible to us to see--is founded in passion fiercer than yours, and

temper more violent than yours. What can you two be together? What can

come of it?'

'I am alone here, gentlemen,' observed Miss Wade, with no change of

voice or manner. 'Say anything you will.'

'Politeness must yield to this misguided girl, ma'am,' said Mr Meagles,

'at her present pass; though I hope not altogether to dismiss it,

even with the injury you do her so strongly before me. Excuse me for

reminding you in her hearing--I must say it--that you were a mystery

to all of us, and had nothing in common with any of us when she

unfortunately fell in your way. I don't know what you are, but you don't

hide, can't hide, what a dark spirit you have within you. If it should

happen that you are a woman, who, from whatever cause, has a perverted

delight in making a sister-woman as wretched as she is (I am old enough

to have heard of such), I warn her against you, and I warn you against

yourself.'

'Gentlemen!' said Miss Wade, calmly. 'When you have concluded--Mr

Clennam, perhaps you will induce your friend--'

'Not without another effort,' said Mr Meagles, stoutly. 'Tattycoram,

my poor dear girl, count five-and-twenty.' 'Do not reject the hope, the

certainty, this kind man offers you,' said Clennam in a low emphatic

voice. 'Turn to the friends you have not forgotten. Think once more!'

'I won't! Miss Wade,' said the girl, with her bosom swelling high, and

speaking with her hand held to her throat, 'take me away!'

'Tattycoram,' said Mr Meagles. 'Once more yet! The only thing I ask of

you in the world, my child! Count five-and-twenty!'

She put her hands tightly over her ears, confusedly tumbling down her

bright black hair in the vehemence of the action, and turned her face

resolutely to the wall. Miss Wade, who had watched her under this final

appeal with that strange attentive smile, and that repressing hand

upon her own bosom with which she had watched her in her struggle at

Marseilles, then put her arm about her waist as if she took possession

of her for evermore.

And there was a visible triumph in her face when she turned it to

dismiss the visitors.

'As it is the last time I shall have the honour,' she said, 'and as you

have spoken of not knowing what I am, and also of the foundation of my

influence here, you may now know that it is founded in a common cause.

What your broken plaything is as to birth, I am. She has no name, I have

no name. Her wrong is my wrong. I have nothing more to say to you.'

This was addressed to Mr Meagles, who sorrowfully went out. As Clennam

followed, she said to him, with the same external composure and in the

same level voice, but with a smile that is only seen on cruel faces: a

very faint smile, lifting the nostril, scarcely touching the lips, and

not breaking away gradually, but instantly dismissed when done with:

'I hope the wife of your dear friend Mr Gowan, may be happy in the

contrast of her extraction to this girl's and mine, and in the high good

fortune that awaits her.'

CHAPTER 28. Nobody's Disappearance

Not resting satisfied with the endeavours he had made to recover his

lost charge, Mr Meagles addressed a letter of remonstrance, breathing

nothing but goodwill, not only to her, but to Miss Wade too. No answer

coming to these epistles, or to another written to the stubborn girl

by the hand of her late young mistress, which might have melted her

if anything could (all three letters were returned weeks afterwards as

having been refused at the house-door), he deputed Mrs Meagles to make

the experiment of a personal interview. That worthy lady being unable to

obtain one, and being steadfastly denied admission, Mr Meagles besought

Arthur to essay once more what he could do. All that came of his

compliance was, his discovery that the empty house was left in charge

of the old woman, that Miss Wade was gone, that the waifs and strays of

furniture were gone, and that the old woman would accept any number of

half-crowns and thank the donor kindly, but had no information whatever

to exchange for those coins, beyond constantly offering for perusal a

memorandum relative to fixtures, which the house-agent's young man had

left in the hall.

Unwilling, even under this discomfiture, to resign the ingrate and leave

her hopeless, in case of her better dispositions obtaining the mastery

over the darker side of her character, Mr Meagles, for six successive

days, published a discreetly covert advertisement in the morning papers,

to the effect that if a certain young person who had lately left

home without reflection, would at any time apply to his address at

Twickenham, everything would be as it had been before, and no reproaches

need be apprehended. The unexpected consequences of this notification

suggested to the dismayed Mr Meagles for the first time that some

hundreds of young persons must be leaving their homes without reflection

every day; for shoals of wrong young people came down to Twickenham,

who, not finding themselves received with enthusiasm, generally demanded

compensation by way of damages, in addition to coach-hire there and

back. Nor were these the only uninvited clients whom the advertisement

produced. The swarm of begging-letter writers, who would seem to be

always watching eagerly for any hook, however small, to hang a letter

upon, wrote to say that having seen the advertisement, they were induced

to apply with confidence for various sums, ranging from ten shillings to

fifty pounds: not because they knew anything about the young person,

but because they felt that to part with those donations would greatly

relieve the advertiser's mind. Several projectors, likewise, availed

themselves of the same opportunity to correspond with Mr Meagles; as,

for example, to apprise him that their attention having been called to

the advertisement by a friend, they begged to state that if they should

ever hear anything of the young person, they would not fail to make it

known to him immediately, and that in the meantime if he would oblige

them with the funds necessary for bringing to perfection a certain

entirely novel description of Pump, the happiest results would ensue to

mankind.

Mr Meagles and his family, under these combined discouragements, had

begun reluctantly to give up Tattycoram as irrecoverable, when the new

and active firm of Doyce and Clennam, in their private capacities,

went down on a Saturday to stay at the cottage until Monday. The senior

partner took the coach, and the junior partner took his walking-stick.

A tranquil summer sunset shone upon him as he approached the end of

his walk, and passed through the meadows by the river side. He had

that sense of peace, and of being lightened of a weight of care, which

country quiet awakens in the breasts of dwellers in towns. Everything

within his view was lovely and placid. The rich foliage of the trees,

the luxuriant grass diversified with wild flowers, the little green

islands in the river, the beds of rushes, the water-lilies floating on

the surface of the stream, the distant voices in boats borne musically

towards him on the ripple of the water and the evening air, were all

expressive of rest. In the occasional leap of a fish, or dip of an oar,

or twittering of a bird not yet at roost, or distant barking of a dog,

or lowing of a cow--in all such sounds, there was the prevailing breath

of rest, which seemed to encompass him in every scent that sweetened

the fragrant air. The long lines of red and gold in the sky, and the

glorious track of the descending sun, were all divinely calm. Upon the

purple tree-tops far away, and on the green height near at hand up which

the shades were slowly creeping, there was an equal hush. Between the

real landscape and its shadow in the water, there was no division; both

were so untroubled and clear, and, while so fraught with solemn mystery

of life and death, so hopefully reassuring to the gazer's soothed heart,

because so tenderly and mercifully beautiful.

Clennam had stopped, not for the first time by many times, to look about

him and suffer what he saw to sink into his soul, as the shadows, looked

at, seemed to sink deeper and deeper into the water. He was slowly

resuming his way, when he saw a figure in the path before him which he

had, perhaps, already associated with the evening and its impressions.

Minnie was there, alone. She had some roses in her hand, and seemed to

have stood still on seeing him, waiting for him. Her face was towards

him, and she appeared to have been coming from the opposite direction.

There was a flutter in her manner, which Clennam had never seen in it

before; and as he came near her, it entered his mind all at once that

she was there of a set purpose to speak to him.

She gave him her hand, and said, 'You wonder to see me here by myself?

But the evening is so lovely, I have strolled further than I meant

at first. I thought it likely I might meet you, and that made me more

confident. You always come this way, do you not?'

As Clennam said that it was his favourite way, he felt her hand falter

on his arm, and saw the roses shake.

'Will you let me give you one, Mr Clennam? I gathered them as I came out

of the garden. Indeed, I almost gathered them for you, thinking it so

likely I might meet you. Mr Doyce arrived more than an hour ago, and

told us you were walking down.'

His own hand shook, as he accepted a rose or two from hers and thanked

her. They were now by an avenue of trees. Whether they turned into it on

his movement or on hers matters little. He never knew how that was.

'It is very grave here,' said Clennam, 'but very pleasant at this hour.

Passing along this deep shade, and out at that arch of light at the

other end, we come upon the ferry and the cottage by the best approach,

I think.' In her simple garden-hat and her light summer dress, with her

rich brown hair naturally clustering about her, and her wonderful eyes

raised to his for a moment with a look in which regard for him and

trustfulness in him were strikingly blended with a kind of timid sorrow

for him, she was so beautiful that it was well for his peace--or ill for

his peace, he did not quite know which--that he had made that vigorous

resolution he had so often thought about.

She broke a momentary silence by inquiring if he knew that papa had been

thinking of another tour abroad? He said he had heard it mentioned. She

broke another momentary silence by adding, with some hesitation, that

papa had abandoned the idea.

At this, he thought directly, 'they are to be married.'

'Mr Clennam,' she said, hesitating more timidly yet, and speaking so low

that he bent his head to hear her. 'I should very much like to give you

my confidence, if you would not mind having the goodness to receive

it. I should have very much liked to have given it to you long ago,

because--I felt that you were becoming so much our friend.'

'How can I be otherwise than proud of it at any time! Pray give it to

me. Pray trust me.'

'I could never have been afraid of trusting you,' she returned, raising

her eyes frankly to his face. 'I think I would have done so some time

ago, if I had known how. But I scarcely know how, even now.'

'Mr Gowan,' said Arthur Clennam, 'has reason to be very happy. God bless

his wife and him!'

She wept, as she tried to thank him. He reassured her, took her hand

as it lay with the trembling roses in it on his arm, took the remaining

roses from it, and put it to his lips. At that time, it seemed to him,

he first finally resigned the dying hope that had flickered in nobody's

heart so much to its pain and trouble; and from that time he became in

his own eyes, as to any similar hope or prospect, a very much older man

who had done with that part of life.

He put the roses in his breast and they walked on for a little while,

slowly and silently, under the umbrageous trees. Then he asked her, in

a voice of cheerful kindness, was there anything else that she would

say to him as her friend and her father's friend, many years older than

herself; was there any trust she would repose in him, any service she

would ask of him, any little aid to her happiness that she could give

him the lasting gratification of believing it was in his power to

render?

She was going to answer, when she was so touched by some little hidden

sorrow or sympathy--what could it have been?--that she said, bursting

into tears again: 'O Mr Clennam! Good, generous, Mr Clennam, pray tell

me you do not blame me.'

'I blame you?' said Clennam. 'My dearest girl! I blame you? No!'

After clasping both her hands upon his arm, and looking confidentially

up into his face, with some hurried words to the effect that she thanked

him from her heart (as she did, if it be the source of earnestness), she

gradually composed herself, with now and then a word of encouragement

from him, as they walked on slowly and almost silently under the

darkening trees.

'And, now, Minnie Gowan,' at length said Clennam, smiling; 'will you ask

me nothing?'

'Oh! I have very much to ask of you.'

'That's well! I hope so; I am not disappointed.'

'You know how I am loved at home, and how I love home. You can hardly

think it perhaps, dear Mr Clennam,' she spoke with great agitation,

'seeing me going from it of my own free will and choice, but I do so

dearly love it!'

'I am sure of that,' said Clennam. 'Can you suppose I doubt it?'

'No, no. But it is strange, even to me, that loving it so much and

being so much beloved in it, I can bear to cast it away. It seems so

neglectful of it, so unthankful.'

'My dear girl,' said Clennam, 'it is in the natural progress and change

of time. All homes are left so.'

'Yes, I know; but all homes are not left with such a blank in them as

there will be in mine when I am gone. Not that there is any scarcity of

far better and more endearing and more accomplished girls than I am; not

that I am much, but that they have made so much of me!'

Pet's affectionate heart was overcharged, and she sobbed while she

pictured what would happen.

'I know what a change papa will feel at first, and I know that at first

I cannot be to him anything like what I have been these many years.

And it is then, Mr Clennam, then more than at any time, that I beg and

entreat you to remember him, and sometimes to keep him company when you

can spare a little while; and to tell him that you know I was fonder

of him when I left him, than I ever was in all my life. For there is

nobody--he told me so himself when he talked to me this very day--there

is nobody he likes so well as you, or trusts so much.'

A clue to what had passed between the father and daughter dropped like

a heavy stone into the well of Clennam's heart, and swelled the water

to his eyes. He said, cheerily, but not quite so cheerily as he tried to

say, that it should be done--that he gave her his faithful promise.

'If I do not speak of mama,' said Pet, more moved by, and more pretty

in, her innocent grief, than Clennam could trust himself even to

consider--for which reason he counted the trees between them and the

fading light as they slowly diminished in number--'it is because mama

will understand me better in this action, and will feel my loss in a

different way, and will look forward in a different manner. But you know

what a dear, devoted mother she is, and you will remember her too; will

you not?'

Let Minnie trust him, Clennam said, let Minnie trust him to do all she

wished.

'And, dear Mr Clennam,' said Minnie, 'because papa and one whom I need

not name, do not fully appreciate and understand one another yet, as

they will by-and-by; and because it will be the duty, and the pride,

and pleasure of my new life, to draw them to a better knowledge of one

another, and to be a happiness to one another, and to be proud of one

another, and to love one another, both loving me so dearly; oh, as you

are a kind, true man! when I am first separated from home (I am going a

long distance away), try to reconcile papa to him a little more, and use

your great influence to keep him before papa's mind free from

prejudice and in his real form. Will you do this for me, as you are a

noble-hearted friend?'

Poor Pet! Self-deceived, mistaken child! When were such changes

ever made in men's natural relations to one another: when was such

reconcilement of ingrain differences ever effected! It has been tried

many times by other daughters, Minnie; it has never succeeded; nothing

has ever come of it but failure.

So Clennam thought. So he did not say; it was too late. He bound himself

to do all she asked, and she knew full well that he would do it.

They were now at the last tree in the avenue. She stopped, and withdrew

her arm. Speaking to him with her eyes lifted up to his, and with the

hand that had lately rested on his sleeve trembling by touching one of

the roses in his breast as an additional appeal to him, she said:

'Dear Mr Clennam, in my happiness--for I am happy, though you have seen

me crying--I cannot bear to leave any cloud between us. If you have

anything to forgive me (not anything that I have wilfully done, but any

trouble I may have caused you without meaning it, or having it in my

power to help it), forgive me to-night out of your noble heart!'

He stooped to meet the guileless face that met his without shrinking. He

kissed it, and answered, Heaven knew that he had nothing to forgive.

As he stooped to meet the innocent face once again, she whispered,

'Good-bye!' and he repeated it. It was taking leave of all his old

hopes--all nobody's old restless doubts. They came out of the avenue

next moment, arm-in-arm as they had entered it: and the trees seemed to

close up behind them in the darkness, like their own perspective of the

past.

The voices of Mr and Mrs Meagles and Doyce were audible directly,

speaking near the garden gate. Hearing Pet's name among them, Clennam

called out, 'She is here, with me.' There was some little wondering and

laughing until they came up; but as soon as they had all come together,

it ceased, and Pet glided away.

Mr Meagles, Doyce, and Clennam, without speaking, walked up and down

on the brink of the river, in the light of the rising moon, for a few

minutes; and then Doyce lingered behind, and went into the house. Mr

Meagles and Clennam walked up and down together for a few minutes more

without speaking, until at length the former broke silence.

'Arthur,' said he, using that familiar address for the first time in

their communication, 'do you remember my telling you, as we walked up

and down one hot morning, looking over the harbour at Marseilles, that

Pet's baby sister who was dead seemed to Mother and me to have grown as

she had grown, and changed as she had changed?'

'Very well.'

'You remember my saying that our thoughts had never been able to

separate those twin sisters, and that, in our fancy, whatever Pet was,

the other was?'

'Yes, very well.'

'Arthur,' said Mr Meagles, much subdued, 'I carry that fancy further

to-night. I feel to-night, my dear fellow, as if you had loved my dead

child very tenderly, and had lost her when she was like what Pet is

now.'

'Thank you!' murmured Clennam, 'thank you!' And pressed his hand.

'Will you come in?' said Mr Meagles, presently.

'In a little while.'

Mr Meagles fell away, and he was left alone. When he had walked on the

river's brink in the peaceful moonlight for some half an hour, he put

his hand in his breast and tenderly took out the handful of roses.

Perhaps he put them to his heart, perhaps he put them to his lips, but

certainly he bent down on the shore and gently launched them on the

flowing river. Pale and unreal in the moonlight, the river floated them

away. The lights were bright within doors when he entered, and the

faces on which they shone, his own face not excepted, were soon quietly

cheerful. They talked of many subjects (his partner never had had such a

ready store to draw upon for the beguiling of the time), and so to

bed, and to sleep. While the flowers, pale and unreal in the moonlight,

floated away upon the river; and thus do greater things that once were

in our breasts, and near our hearts, flow from us to the eternal seas.

CHAPTER 29. Mrs Flintwinch goes on Dreaming

The house in the city preserved its heavy dulness through all these

transactions, and the invalid within it turned the same unvarying

round of life. Morning, noon, and night, morning, noon, and night, each

recurring with its accompanying monotony, always the same reluctant

return of the same sequences of machinery, like a dragging piece of

clockwork.

The wheeled chair had its associated remembrances and reveries, one may

suppose, as every place that is made the station of a human being has.

Pictures of demolished streets and altered houses, as they formerly were

when the occupant of the chair was familiar with them, images of people

as they too used to be, with little or no allowance made for the lapse

of time since they were seen; of these, there must have been many in the

long routine of gloomy days. To stop the clock of busy existence at the

hour when we were personally sequestered from it, to suppose mankind

stricken motionless when we were brought to a stand-still, to be unable

to measure the changes beyond our view by any larger standard than

the shrunken one of our own uniform and contracted existence, is the

infirmity of many invalids, and the mental unhealthiness of almost all

recluses.

What scenes and actors the stern woman most reviewed, as she sat

from season to season in her one dark room, none knew but herself. Mr

Flintwinch, with his wry presence brought to bear upon her daily like

some eccentric mechanical force, would perhaps have screwed it out of

her, if there had been less resistance in her; but she was too strong

for him. So far as Mistress Affery was concerned, to regard her

liege-lord and her disabled mistress with a face of blank wonder, to

go about the house after dark with her apron over her head, always to

listen for the strange noises and sometimes to hear them, and never

to emerge from her ghostly, dreamy, sleep-waking state, was occupation

enough for her.

There was a fair stroke of business doing, as Mistress Affery made out,

for her husband had abundant occupation in his little office, and saw

more people than had been used to come there for some years. This might

easily be, the house having been long deserted; but he did receive

letters, and comers, and keep books, and correspond. Moreover, he went

about to other counting-houses, and to wharves, and docks, and to the

Custom House,' and to Garraway's Coffee House, and the Jerusalem Coffee

House, and on 'Change; so that he was much in and out. He began, too,

sometimes of an evening, when Mrs Clennam expressed no particular wish

for his society, to resort to a tavern in the neighbourhood to look at

the shipping news and closing prices in the evening paper, and even to

exchange Small socialities with mercantile Sea Captains who frequented

that establishment. At some period of every day, he and Mrs Clennam held

a council on matters of business; and it appeared to Affery, who was

always groping about, listening and watching, that the two clever ones

were making money.

The state of mind into which Mr Flintwinch's dazed lady had fallen, had

now begun to be so expressed in all her looks and actions that she was

held in very low account by the two clever ones, as a person, never

of strong intellect, who was becoming foolish. Perhaps because her

appearance was not of a commercial cast, or perhaps because it occurred

to him that his having taken her to wife might expose his judgment to

doubt in the minds of customers, Mr Flintwinch laid his commands upon

her that she should hold her peace on the subject of her conjugal

relations, and should no longer call him Jeremiah out of the domestic

trio. Her frequent forgetfulness of this admonition intensified her

startled manner, since Mr Flintwinch's habit of avenging himself on her

remissness by making springs after her on the staircase, and shaking

her, occasioned her to be always nervously uncertain when she might be

thus waylaid next.

Little Dorrit had finished a long day's work in Mrs Clennam's room, and

was neatly gathering up her shreds and odds and ends before going home.

Mr Pancks, whom Affery had just shown in, was addressing an inquiry to

Mrs Clennam on the subject of her health, coupled with the remark that,

'happening to find himself in that direction,' he had looked in to

inquire, on behalf of his proprietor, how she found herself. Mrs

Clennam, with a deep contraction of her brows, was looking at him.

'Mr Casby knows,' said she, 'that I am not subject to changes. The

change that I await here is the great change.'

'Indeed, ma'am?' returned Mr Pancks, with a wandering eye towards the

figure of the little seamstress on her knee picking threads and fraying

of her work from the carpet. 'You look nicely, ma'am.'

'I bear what I have to bear,' she answered. 'Do you what you have to

do.' 'Thank you, ma'am,' said Mr Pancks, 'such is my endeavour.'

'You are often in this direction, are you not?' asked Mrs Clennam.

'Why, yes, ma'am,' said Pancks, 'rather so lately; I have lately been

round this way a good deal, owing to one thing and another.' 'Beg Mr

Casby and his daughter not to trouble themselves, by deputy, about me.

When they wish to see me, they know I am here to see them. They have no

need to trouble themselves to send. You have no need to trouble yourself

to come.' 'Not the least trouble, ma'am,' said Mr Pancks. 'You really

are looking uncommonly nicely, ma'am.'

'Thank you. Good evening.'

The dismissal, and its accompanying finger pointed straight at the door,

was so curt and direct that Mr Pancks did not see his way to prolong his

visit. He stirred up his hair with his sprightliest expression, glanced

at the little figure again, said 'Good evening, ma 'am; don't come down,

Mrs Affery, I know the road to the door,' and steamed out. Mrs Clennam,

her chin resting on her hand, followed him with attentive and darkly

distrustful eyes; and Affery stood looking at her as if she were

spell-bound.

Slowly and thoughtfully, Mrs Clennam's eyes turned from the door by

which Pancks had gone out, to Little Dorrit, rising from the carpet.

With her chin drooping more heavily on her hand, and her eyes vigilant

and lowering, the sick woman sat looking at her until she attracted her

attention. Little Dorrit coloured under such a gaze, and looked down.

Mrs Clennam still sat intent.

'Little Dorrit,' she said, when she at last broke silence, 'what do you

know of that man?'

'I don't know anything of him, ma'am, except that I have seen him about,

and that he has spoken to me.'

'What has he said to you?'

'I don't understand what he has said, he is so strange. But nothing

rough or disagreeable.'

'Why does he come here to see you?'

'I don't know, ma'am,' said Little Dorrit, with perfect frankness.

'You know that he does come here to see you?'

'I have fancied so,' said Little Dorrit. 'But why he should come here or

anywhere for that, ma'am, I can't think.'

Mrs Clennam cast her eyes towards the ground, and with her strong, set

face, as intent upon a subject in her mind as it had lately been upon

the form that seemed to pass out of her view, sat absorbed. Some minutes

elapsed before she came out of this thoughtfulness, and resumed her hard

composure.

Little Dorrit in the meanwhile had been waiting to go, but afraid to

disturb her by moving. She now ventured to leave the spot where she

had been standing since she had risen, and to pass gently round by the

wheeled chair. She stopped at its side to say 'Good night, ma'am.'

Mrs Clennam put out her hand, and laid it on her arm. Little Dorrit,

confused under the touch, stood faltering. Perhaps some momentary

recollection of the story of the Princess may have been in her mind.

'Tell me, Little Dorrit,' said Mrs Clennam, 'have you many friends now?'

'Very few, ma'am. Besides you, only Miss Flora and--one more.'

'Meaning,' said Mrs Clennam, with her unbent finger again pointing to

the door, 'that man?'

'Oh no, ma'am!'

'Some friend of his, perhaps?'

'No ma'am.' Little Dorrit earnestly shook her head. 'Oh no! No one at

all like him, or belonging to him.'

'Well!' said Mrs Clennam, almost smiling. 'It is no affair of mine. I

ask, because I take an interest in you; and because I believe I was your

friend when you had no other who could serve you. Is that so?'

'Yes, ma'am; indeed it is. I have been here many a time when, but for

you and the work you gave me, we should have wanted everything.'

'We,' repeated Mrs Clennam, looking towards the watch, once her dead

husband's, which always lay upon her table. 'Are there many of you?'

'Only father and I, now. I mean, only father and I to keep regularly out

of what we get.'

'Have you undergone many privations? You and your father and who else

there may be of you?' asked Mrs Clennam, speaking deliberately, and

meditatively turning the watch over and over.

'Sometimes it has been rather hard to live,' said Little Dorrit, in her

soft voice, and timid uncomplaining way; 'but I think not harder--as to

that--than many people find it.'

'That's well said!' Mrs Clennam quickly returned. 'That's the truth!

You are a good, thoughtful girl. You are a grateful girl too, or I much

mistake you.'

'It is only natural to be that. There is no merit in being that,' said

Little Dorrit. 'I am indeed.' Mrs Clennam, with a gentleness of which

the dreaming Affery had never dreamed her to be capable, drew down the

face of her little seamstress, and kissed her on the forehead. 'Now go,

Little Dorrit,' said she,'or you will be late, poor child!'

In all the dreams Mistress Affery had been piling up since she first

became devoted to the pursuit, she had dreamed nothing more astonishing

than this. Her head ached with the idea that she would find the other

clever one kissing Little Dorrit next, and then the two clever ones

embracing each other and dissolving into tears of tenderness for all

mankind. The idea quite stunned her, as she attended the light footsteps

down the stairs, that the house door might be safely shut.

On opening it to let Little Dorrit out, she found Mr Pancks, instead

of having gone his way, as in any less wonderful place and among less

wonderful phenomena he might have been reasonably expected to do,

fluttering up and down the court outside the house.

The moment he saw Little Dorrit, he passed her briskly, said with his

finger to his nose (as Mrs Affery distinctly heard), 'Pancks the gipsy,

fortune-telling,' and went away. 'Lord save us, here's a gipsy and a

fortune-teller in it now!' cried Mistress Affery. 'What next! She stood

at the open door, staggering herself with this enigma, on a rainy,

thundery evening. The clouds were flying fast, and the wind was coming

up in gusts, banging some neighbouring shutters that had broken loose,

twirling the rusty chimney-cowls and weather-cocks, and rushing round

and round a confined adjacent churchyard as if it had a mind to blow

the dead citizens out of their graves. The low thunder, muttering in

all quarters of the sky at once, seemed to threaten vengeance for this

attempted desecration, and to mutter, 'Let them rest! Let them rest!'

Mistress Affery, whose fear of thunder and lightning was only to

be equalled by her dread of the haunted house with a premature and

preternatural darkness in it, stood undecided whether to go in or not,

until the question was settled for her by the door blowing upon her in

a violent gust of wind and shutting her out. 'What's to be done now,

what's to be done now!' cried Mistress Affery, wringing her hands in

this last uneasy dream of all; 'when she's all alone by herself

inside, and can no more come down to open it than the churchyard dead

themselves!'

In this dilemma, Mistress Affery, with her apron as a hood to keep the

rain off, ran crying up and down the solitary paved enclosure several

times. Why she should then stoop down and look in at the keyhole of the

door as if an eye would open it, it would be difficult to say; but it

is none the less what most people would have done in the same situation,

and it is what she did.

From this posture she started up suddenly, with a half scream, feeling

something on her shoulder. It was the touch of a hand; of a man's hand.

The man was dressed like a traveller, in a foraging cap with fur about

it, and a heap of cloak. He looked like a foreigner. He had a quantity

of hair and moustache--jet black, except at the shaggy ends, where

it had a tinge of red--and a high hook nose. He laughed at Mistress

Affery's start and cry; and as he laughed, his moustache went up under

his nose, and his nose came down over his moustache.

'What's the matter?' he asked in plain English. 'What are you frightened

at?'

'At you,' panted Affery.

'Me, madam?'

'And the dismal evening, and--and everything,' said Affery. 'And here!

The wind has been and blown the door to, and I can't get in.'

'Hah!' said the gentleman, who took that very coolly. 'Indeed! Do you

know such a name as Clennam about here?'

'Lord bless us, I should think I did, I should think I did!' cried

Affery, exasperated into a new wringing of hands by the inquiry.

'Where about here?'

'Where!' cried Affery, goaded into another inspection of the keyhole.

'Where but here in this house? And she's all alone in her room, and lost

the use of her limbs and can't stir to help herself or me, and t'other

clever one's out, and Lord forgive me!' cried Affery, driven into a

frantic dance by these accumulated considerations, 'if I ain't a-going

headlong out of my mind!'

Taking a warmer view of the matter now that it concerned himself, the

gentleman stepped back to glance at the house, and his eye soon rested

on the long narrow window of the little room near the hall-door.

'Where may the lady be who has lost the use of her limbs, madam?' he

inquired, with that peculiar smile which Mistress Affery could not

choose but keep her eyes upon.

'Up there!' said Affery. 'Them two windows.'

'Hah! I am of a fair size, but could not have the honour of presenting

myself in that room without a ladder. Now, madam, frankly--frankness is

a part of my character--shall I open the door for you?'

'Yes, bless you, sir, for a dear creetur, and do it at once,' cried

Affery, 'for she may be a-calling to me at this very present minute, or

may be setting herself a fire and burning herself to death, or there's

no knowing what may be happening to her, and me a-going out of my mind

at thinking of it!'

'Stay, my good madam!' He restrained her impatience with a smooth white

hand. 'Business-hours, I apprehend, are over for the day?' 'Yes, yes,

yes,' cried Affery. 'Long ago.'

'Let me make, then, a fair proposal. Fairness is a part of my character.

I am just landed from the packet-boat, as you may see.'

He showed her that his cloak was very wet, and that his boots

were saturated with water; she had previously observed that he was

dishevelled and sallow, as if from a rough voyage, and so chilled that

he could not keep his teeth from chattering. 'I am just landed from the

packet-boat, madam, and have been delayed by the weather: the infernal

weather! In consequence of this, madam, some necessary business that

I should otherwise have transacted here within the regular hours

(necessary business because money-business), still remains to be done.

Now, if you will fetch any authorised neighbouring somebody to do it in

return for my opening the door, I'll open the door. If this arrangement

should be objectionable, I'll--' and with the same smile he made a

significant feint of backing away.

Mistress Affery, heartily glad to effect the proposed compromise, gave

in her willing adhesion to it. The gentleman at once requested her to

do him the favour of holding his cloak, took a short run at the narrow

window, made a leap at the sill, clung his way up the bricks, and in

a moment had his hand at the sash, raising it. His eyes looked so very

sinister, as he put his leg into the room and glanced round at Mistress

Affery, that she thought with a sudden coldness, if he were to go

straight up-stairs to murder the invalid, what could she do to prevent

him?

Happily he had no such purpose; for he reappeared, in a moment, at the

house door. 'Now, my dear madam,' he said, as he took back his cloak and

threw it on, 'if you have the goodness to--what the Devil's that!'

The strangest of sounds. Evidently close at hand from the peculiar

shock it communicated to the air, yet subdued as if it were far off. A

tremble, a rumble, and a fall of some light dry matter.

'What the Devil is it?'

'I don't know what it is, but I've heard the like of it over and over

again,' said Affery, who had caught his arm. He could hardly be a very

brave man, even she thought in her dreamy start and fright, for his

trembling lips had turned colourless. After listening a few moments, he

made light of it.

'Bah! Nothing! Now, my dear madam, I think you spoke of some clever

personage. Will you be so good as to confront me with that genius?' He

held the door in his hand, as though he were quite ready to shut her out

again if she failed.

'Don't you say anything about the door and me, then,' whispered Affery.

'Not a word.'

'And don't you stir from here, or speak if she calls, while I run round

the corner.'

'Madam, I am a statue.'

Affery had so vivid a fear of his going stealthily up-stairs the moment

her back was turned, that after hurrying out of sight, she returned to

the gateway to peep at him. Seeing him still on the threshold, more out

of the house than in it, as if he had no love for darkness and no

desire to probe its mysteries, she flew into the next street, and sent a

message into the tavern to Mr Flintwinch, who came out directly. The

two returning together--the lady in advance, and Mr Flintwinch coming up

briskly behind, animated with the hope of shaking her before she could

get housed--saw the gentleman standing in the same place in the dark,

and heard the strong voice of Mrs Clennam calling from her room, 'Who is

it? What is it? Why does no one answer? Who is that, down there?'

CHAPTER 30. The Word of a Gentleman

When Mr and Mrs Flintwinch panted up to the door of the old house in the

twilight, Jeremiah within a second of Affery, the stranger started back.

'Death of my soul!' he exclaimed. 'Why, how did you get here?'

Mr Flintwinch, to whom these words were spoken, repaid the stranger's

wonder in full. He gazed at him with blank astonishment; he looked over

his own shoulder, as expecting to see some one he had not been aware of

standing behind him; he gazed at the stranger again, speechlessly, at

a loss to know what he meant; he looked to his wife for explanation;

receiving none, he pounced upon her, and shook her with such heartiness

that he shook her cap off her head, saying between his teeth, with grim

raillery, as he did it, 'Affery, my woman, you must have a dose, my

woman! This is some of your tricks! You have been dreaming again,

mistress. What's it about? Who is it? What does it mean! Speak out or be

choked! It's the only choice I'll give you.'

Supposing Mistress Affery to have any power of election at the moment,

her choice was decidedly to be choked; for she answered not a syllable

to this adjuration, but, with her bare head wagging violently backwards

and forwards, resigned herself to her punishment. The stranger, however,

picking up her cap with an air of gallantry, interposed.

'Permit me,' said he, laying his hand on the shoulder of Jeremiah, who

stopped and released his victim. 'Thank you. Excuse me. Husband and

wife I know, from this playfulness. Haha! Always agreeable to see that

relation playfully maintained. Listen! May I suggest that somebody

up-stairs, in the dark, is becoming energetically curious to know what

is going on here?'

This reference to Mrs Clennam's voice reminded Mr Flintwinch to step

into the hall and call up the staircase. 'It's all right, I am here,

Affery is coming with your light.' Then he said to the latter

flustered woman, who was putting her cap on, 'Get out with you, and get

up-stairs!' and then turned to the stranger and said to him, 'Now, sir,

what might you please to want?'

'I am afraid,' said the stranger, 'I must be so troublesome as to

propose a candle.'

'True,' assented Jeremiah. 'I was going to do so. Please to stand where

you are while I get one.'

The visitor was standing in the doorway, but turned a little into the

gloom of the house as Mr Flintwinch turned, and pursued him with his

eyes into the little room, where he groped about for a phosphorus box.

When he found it, it was damp, or otherwise out of order; and match

after match that he struck into it lighted sufficiently to throw a dull

glare about his groping face, and to sprinkle his hands with pale little

spots of fire, but not sufficiently to light the candle. The stranger,

taking advantage of this fitful illumination of his visage, looked

intently and wonderingly at him. Jeremiah, when he at last lighted

the candle, knew he had been doing this, by seeing the last shade of

a lowering watchfulness clear away from his face, as it broke into the

doubtful smile that was a large ingredient in its expression.

'Be so good,' said Jeremiah, closing the house door, and taking a pretty

sharp survey of the smiling visitor in his turn, 'as to step into my

counting-house.--It's all right, I tell you!' petulantly breaking off to

answer the voice up-stairs, still unsatisfied, though Affery was there,

speaking in persuasive tones. 'Don't I tell you it's all right? Preserve

the woman, has she no reason at all in her!'

'Timorous,' remarked the stranger.

'Timorous?' said Mr Flintwinch, turning his head to retort, as he went

before with the candle. 'More courageous than ninety men in a hundred,

sir, let me tell you.'

'Though an invalid?'

'Many years an invalid. Mrs Clennam. The only one of that name left

in the House now. My partner.' Saying something apologetically as he

crossed the hall, to the effect that at that time of night they were

not in the habit of receiving any one, and were always shut up,

Mr Flintwinch led the way into his own office, which presented a

sufficiently business-like appearance. Here he put the light on his

desk, and said to the stranger, with his wryest twist upon him, 'Your

commands.'

'MY name is Blandois.'

'Blandois. I don't know it,' said Jeremiah.

'I thought it possible,' resumed the other, 'that you might have been

advised from Paris--'

'We have had no advice from Paris respecting anybody of the name of

Blandois,' said Jeremiah.

'No?'

'No.'

Jeremiah stood in his favourite attitude. The smiling Mr Blandois,

opening his cloak to get his hand to a breast-pocket, paused to say,

with a laugh in his glittering eyes, which it occurred to Mr Flintwinch

were too near together:

'You are so like a friend of mine! Not so identically the same as I

supposed when I really did for the moment take you to be the same in the

dusk--for which I ought to apologise; permit me to do so; a readiness

to confess my errors is, I hope, a part of the frankness of my

character--still, however, uncommonly like.'

'Indeed?' said Jeremiah, perversely. 'But I have not received any letter

of advice from anywhere respecting anybody of the name of Blandois.'

'Just so,' said the stranger.

'JUST so,' said Jeremiah.

Mr Blandois, not at all put out by this omission on the part of the

correspondents of the house of Clennam and Co., took his pocket-book

from his breast-pocket, selected a letter from that receptacle, and

handed it to Mr Flintwinch. 'No doubt you are well acquainted with the

writing. Perhaps the letter speaks for itself, and requires no advice.

You are a far more competent judge of such affairs than I am. It is my

misfortune to be, not so much a man of business, as what the world calls

(arbitrarily) a gentleman.'

Mr Flintwinch took the letter, and read, under date of Paris, 'We have

to present to you, on behalf of a highly esteemed correspondent of our

Firm, M. Blandois, of this city,' &c. &c. 'Such facilities as he may

require and such attentions as may lie in your power,' &c. &c. 'Also

have to add that if you will honour M. Blandois' drafts at sight to the

extent of, say Fifty Pounds sterling (150),' &c. &c.

'Very good, sir,' said Mr Flintwinch. 'Take a chair. To the extent of

anything that our House can do--we are in a retired, old-fashioned,

steady way of business, sir--we shall be happy to render you our best

assistance. I observe, from the date of this, that we could not yet be

advised of it. Probably you came over with the delayed mail that brings

the advice.'

'That I came over with the delayed mail, sir,' returned Mr Blandois,

passing his white hand down his high-hooked nose, 'I know to the cost

of my head and stomach: the detestable and intolerable weather having

racked them both. You see me in the plight in which I came out of the

packet within this half-hour. I ought to have been here hours ago,

and then I should not have to apologise--permit me to apologise--for

presenting myself so unreasonably, and frightening--no, by-the-bye, you

said not frightening; permit me to apologise again--the esteemed lady,

Mrs Clennam, in her invalid chamber above stairs.'

Swagger and an air of authorised condescension do so much, that

Mr Flintwinch had already begun to think this a highly gentlemanly

personage. Not the less unyielding with him on that account, he scraped

his chin and said, what could he have the honour of doing for Mr

Blandois to-night, out of business hours?

'Faith!' returned that gentleman, shrugging his cloaked shoulders,

'I must change, and eat and drink, and be lodged somewhere. Have the

kindness to advise me, a total stranger, where, and money is a matter of

perfect indifference until to-morrow. The nearer the place, the better.

Next door, if that's all.'

Mr Flintwinch was slowly beginning, 'For a gentleman of your habits,

there is not in this immediate neighbourhood any hotel--' when Mr

Blandois took him up.

'So much for my habits! my dear sir,' snapping his fingers. 'A citizen

of the world has no habits. That I am, in my poor way, a gentleman,

by Heaven! I will not deny, but I have no unaccommodating prejudiced

habits. A clean room, a hot dish for dinner, and a bottle of not

absolutely poisonous wine, are all I want tonight. But I want that much

without the trouble of going one unnecessary inch to get it.'

'There is,' said Mr Flintwinch, with more than his usual deliberation,

as he met, for a moment, Mr Blandois' shining eyes, which were restless;

'there is a coffee-house and tavern close here, which, so far, I can

recommend; but there's no style about it.'

'I dispense with style!' said Mr Blandois, waving his hand. 'Do me the

honour to show me the house, and introduce me there (if I am not too

troublesome), and I shall be infinitely obliged.' Mr Flintwinch, upon

this, looked up his hat, and lighted Mr Blandois across the hall again.

As he put the candle on a bracket, where the dark old panelling almost

served as an extinguisher for it, he bethought himself of going up to

tell the invalid that he would not be absent five minutes. 'Oblige me,'

said the visitor, on his saying so, 'by presenting my card of visit. Do

me the favour to add that I shall be happy to wait on Mrs Clennam, to

offer my personal compliments, and to apologise for having occasioned

any agitation in this tranquil corner, if it should suit her convenience

to endure the presence of a stranger for a few minutes, after he shall

have changed his wet clothes and fortified himself with something to eat

and drink.'

Jeremiah made all despatch, and said, on his return, 'She'll be glad

to see you, sir; but, being conscious that her sick room has no

attractions, wishes me to say that she won't hold you to your offer, in

case you should think better of it.'

'To think better of it,' returned the gallant Blandois, 'would be to

slight a lady; to slight a lady would be to be deficient in chivalry

towards the sex; and chivalry towards the sex is a part of my

character!' Thus expressing himself, he threw the draggled skirt of his

cloak over his shoulder, and accompanied Mr Flintwinch to the tavern;

taking up on the road a porter who was waiting with his portmanteau on

the outer side of the gateway.

The house was kept in a homely manner, and the condescension of Mr

Blandois was infinite. It seemed to fill to inconvenience the little bar

in which the widow landlady and her two daughters received him; it was

much too big for the narrow wainscoted room with a bagatelle-board in

it, that was first proposed for his reception; it perfectly swamped the

little private holiday sitting-room of the family, which was finally

given up to him. Here, in dry clothes and scented linen, with sleeked

hair, a great ring on each forefinger and a massive show of watch-chain,

Mr Blandois waiting for his dinner, lolling on a window-seat with his

knees drawn up, looked (for all the difference in the setting of the

jewel) fearfully and wonderfully like a certain Monsieur Rigaud who had

once so waited for his breakfast, lying on the stone ledge of the iron

grating of a cell in a villainous dungeon at Marseilles.

His greed at dinner, too, was closely in keeping with the greed of

Monsieur Rigaud at breakfast. His avaricious manner of collecting all

the eatables about him, and devouring some with his eyes while devouring

others with his jaws, was the same manner. His utter disregard of

other people, as shown in his way of tossing the little womanly toys

of furniture about, flinging favourite cushions under his boots for a

softer rest, and crushing delicate coverings with his big body and his

great black head, had the same brute selfishness at the bottom of it.

The softly moving hands that were so busy among the dishes had the old

wicked facility of the hands that had clung to the bars. And when he

could eat no more, and sat sucking his delicate fingers one by one and

wiping them on a cloth, there wanted nothing but the substitution of

vine-leaves to finish the picture.

On this man, with his moustache going up and his nose coming down in

that most evil of smiles, and with his surface eyes looking as if they

belonged to his dyed hair, and had had their natural power of reflecting

light stopped by some similar process, Nature, always true, and never

working in vain, had set the mark, Beware! It was not her fault, if the

warning were fruitless. She is never to blame in any such instance.

Mr Blandois, having finished his repast and cleaned his fingers, took

a cigar from his pocket, and, lying on the window-seat again, smoked it

out at his leisure, occasionally apostrophising the smoke as it parted

from his thin lips in a thin stream:

'Blandois, you shall turn the tables on society, my little child. Haha!

Holy blue, you have begun well, Blandois! At a pinch, an excellent

master in English or French; a man for the bosom of families! You have

a quick perception, you have humour, you have ease, you have insinuating

manners, you have a good appearance; in effect, you are a gentleman! A

gentleman you shall live, my small boy, and a gentleman you shall die.

You shall win, however the game goes. They shall all confess your merit,

Blandois. You shall subdue the society which has grievously wronged

you, to your own high spirit. Death of my soul! You are high spirited by

right and by nature, my Blandois!'

To such soothing murmurs did this gentleman smoke out his cigar and

drink out his bottle of wine. Both being finished, he shook himself into

a sitting attitude; and with the concluding serious apostrophe, 'Hold,

then! Blandois, you ingenious one, have all your wits about you!' arose

and went back to the house of Clennam and Co.

He was received at the door by Mistress Affery, who, under instructions

from her lord, had lighted up two candles in the hall and a third on the

staircase, and who conducted him to Mrs Clennam's room. Tea was prepared

there, and such little company arrangements had been made as usually

attended the reception of expected visitors. They were slight on the

greatest occasion, never extending beyond the production of the China

tea-service, and the covering of the bed with a sober and sad drapery.

For the rest, there was the bier-like sofa with the block upon it, and

the figure in the widow's dress, as if attired for execution; the fire

topped by the mound of damped ashes; the grate with its second little

mound of ashes; the kettle and the smell of black dye; all as they had

been for fifteen years.

Mr Flintwinch presented the gentleman commended to the consideration of

Clennam and Co. Mrs Clennam, who had the letter lying before her, bent

her head and requested him to sit. They looked very closely at one

another. That was but natural curiosity. 'I thank you, sir, for thinking

of a disabled woman like me. Few who come here on business have any

remembrance to bestow on one so removed from observation. It would be

idle to expect that they should have. Out of sight, out of mind. While I

am grateful for the exception, I don't complain of the rule.'

Mr Blandois, in his most gentlemanly manner, was afraid he had disturbed

her by unhappily presenting himself at such an unconscionable time. For

which he had already offered his best apologies to Mr--he begged

pardon--but by name had not the distinguished honour--'Mr Flintwinch

has been connected with the House many years.'

Mr Blandois was Mr Flintwinch's most obedient humble servant. He

entreated Mr Flintwinch to receive the assurance of his profoundest

consideration.

'My husband being dead,' said Mrs Clennam, 'and my son preferring

another pursuit, our old House has no other representative in these days

than Mr Flintwinch.'

'What do you call yourself?' was the surly demand of that gentleman.

'You have the head of two men.'

'My sex disqualifies me,' she proceeded with merely a slight turn of

her eyes in jeremiah's direction, 'from taking a responsible part in

the business, even if I had the ability; and therefore Mr Flintwinch

combines my interest with his own, and conducts it. It is not what it

used to be; but some of our old friends (principally the writers of this

letter) have the kindness not to forget us, and we retain the power

of doing what they entrust to us as efficiently as we ever did. This

however is not interesting to you. You are English, sir?'

'Faith, madam, no; I am neither born nor bred in England. In effect, I

am of no country,' said Mr Blandois, stretching out his leg and smiting

it: 'I descend from half-a-dozen countries.'

'You have been much about the world?'

'It is true. By Heaven, madam, I have been here and there and

everywhere!'

'You have no ties, probably. Are not married?'

'Madam,' said Mr Blandois, with an ugly fall of his eyebrows, 'I adore

your sex, but I am not married--never was.'

Mistress Affery, who stood at the table near him, pouring out the tea,

happened in her dreamy state to look at him as he said these words, and

to fancy that she caught an expression in his eyes which attracted her

own eyes so that she could not get them away. The effect of this fancy

was to keep her staring at him with the tea-pot in her hand, not only to

her own great uneasiness, but manifestly to his, too; and, through them

both, to Mrs Clennam's and Mr Flintwinch's. Thus a few ghostly moments

supervened, when they were all confusedly staring without knowing why.

'Affery,' her mistress was the first to say, 'what is the matter with

you?'

'I don't know,' said Mistress Affery, with her disengaged left hand

extended towards the visitor. 'It ain't me. It's him!'

'What does this good woman mean?' cried Mr Blandois, turning white, hot,

and slowly rising with a look of such deadly wrath that it contrasted

surprisingly with the slight force of his words. 'How is it possible to

understand this good creature?'

'It's NOT possible,' said Mr Flintwinch, screwing himself rapidly

in that direction. 'She don't know what she means. She's an idiot, a

wanderer in her mind. She shall have a dose, she shall have such a dose!

Get along with you, my woman,' he added in her ear, 'get along with you,

while you know you're Affery, and before you're shaken to yeast.'

Mistress Affery, sensible of the danger in which her identity stood,

relinquished the tea-pot as her husband seized it, put her apron over

her head, and in a twinkling vanished. The visitor gradually broke into

a smile, and sat down again.

'You'll excuse her, Mr Blandois,' said Jeremiah, pouring out the tea

himself, 'she's failing and breaking up; that's what she's about. Do you

take sugar, sir?'

'Thank you, no tea for me.--Pardon my observing it, but that's a very

remarkable watch!'

The tea-table was drawn up near the sofa, with a small interval between

it and Mrs Clennam's own particular table. Mr Blandois in his gallantry

had risen to hand that lady her tea (her dish of toast was already

there), and it was in placing the cup conveniently within her reach that

the watch, lying before her as it always did, attracted his attention.

Mrs Clennam looked suddenly up at him.

'May I be permitted? Thank you. A fine old-fashioned watch,' he said,

taking it in his hand. 'Heavy for use, but massive and genuine. I have

a partiality for everything genuine. Such as I am, I am genuine myself.

Hah! A gentleman's watch with two cases in the old fashion. May I remove

it from the outer case? Thank you. Aye? An old silk watch-lining, worked

with beads! I have often seen these among old Dutch people and Belgians.

Quaint things!'

'They are old-fashioned, too,' said Mrs Clennam. 'Very. But this is not

so old as the watch, I think?'

'I think not.'

'Extraordinary how they used to complicate these cyphers!' remarked Mr

Blandois, glancing up with his own smile again. 'Now is this D. N. F.?

It might be almost anything.'

'Those are the letters.'

Mr Flintwinch, who had been observantly pausing all this time with a cup

of tea in his hand, and his mouth open ready to swallow the contents,

began to do so: always entirely filling his mouth before he emptied it

at a gulp; and always deliberating again before he refilled it.

'D. N. F. was some tender, lovely, fascinating fair-creature, I make no

doubt,' observed Mr Blandois, as he snapped on the case again. 'I adore

her memory on the assumption. Unfortunately for my peace of mind,

I adore but too readily. It may be a vice, it may be a virtue, but

adoration of female beauty and merit constitutes three parts of my

character, madam.'

Mr Flintwinch had by this time poured himself out another cup of tea,

which he was swallowing in gulps as before, with his eyes directed to

the invalid.

'You may be heart-free here, sir,' she returned to Mr Blandois. 'Those

letters are not intended, I believe, for the initials of any name.'

'Of a motto, perhaps,' said Mr Blandois, casually.

'Of a sentence. They have always stood, I believe, for Do Not Forget!'

'And naturally,' said Mr Blandois, replacing the watch and stepping

backward to his former chair, 'you do not forget.'

Mr Flintwinch, finishing his tea, not only took a longer gulp than he

had taken yet, but made his succeeding pause under new circumstances:

that is to say, with his head thrown back and his cup held still at his

lips, while his eyes were still directed at the invalid. She had that

force of face, and that concentrated air of collecting her firmness or

obstinacy, which represented in her case what would have been gesture

and action in another, as she replied with her deliberate strength of

speech: 'No, sir, I do not forget. To lead a life as monotonous as mine

has been during many years, is not the way to forget. To lead a life of

self-correction is not the way to forget. To be sensible of having (as

we all have, every one of us, all the children of Adam!) offences

to expiate and peace to make, does not justify the desire to forget.

Therefore I have long dismissed it, and I neither forget nor wish to

forget.'

Mr Flintwinch, who had latterly been shaking the sediment at the bottom

of his tea-cup, round and round, here gulped it down, and putting the

cup in the tea-tray, as done with, turned his eyes upon Mr Blandois as

if to ask him what he thought of that?

'All expressed, madam,' said Mr Blandois, with his smoothest bow and his

white hand on his breast, 'by the word "naturally," which I am proud

to have had sufficient apprehension and appreciation (but without

appreciation I could not be Blandois) to employ.'

'Pardon me, sir,' she returned, 'if I doubt the likelihood of a

gentleman of pleasure, and change, and politeness, accustomed to court

and to be courted--'

'Oh madam! By Heaven!'

'--If I doubt the likelihood of such a character quite comprehending

what belongs to mine in my circumstances. Not to obtrude doctrine upon

you,' she looked at the rigid pile of hard pale books before her, '(for

you go your own way, and the consequences are on your own head), I will

say this much: that I shape my course by pilots, strictly by proved and

tried pilots, under whom I cannot be shipwrecked--can not be--and that

if I were unmindful of the admonition conveyed in those three letters, I

should not be half as chastened as I am.'

It was curious how she seized the occasion to argue with some invisible

opponent. Perhaps with her own better sense, always turning upon herself

and her own deception.

'If I forgot my ignorances in my life of health and freedom, I might

complain of the life to which I am now condemned. I never do; I never

have done. If I forgot that this scene, the Earth, is expressly meant to

be a scene of gloom, and hardship, and dark trial, for the creatures who

are made out of its dust, I might have some tenderness for its vanities.

But I have no such tenderness. If I did not know that we are, every one,

the subject (most justly the subject) of a wrath that must be satisfied,

and against which mere actions are nothing, I might repine at the

difference between me, imprisoned here, and the people who pass that

gateway yonder. But I take it as a grace and favour to be elected to

make the satisfaction I am making here, to know what I know for certain

here, and to work out what I have worked out here. My affliction might

otherwise have had no meaning to me. Hence I would forget, and I do

forget, nothing. Hence I am contented, and say it is better with me

than with millions.' As she spoke these words, she put her hand upon the

watch, and restored it to the precise spot on her little table which

it always occupied. With her touch lingering upon it, she sat for some

moments afterwards, looking at it steadily and half-defiantly.

Mr Blandois, during this exposition, had been strictly attentive,

keeping his eyes fastened on the lady, and thoughtfully stroking his

moustache with his two hands. Mr Flintwinch had been a little fidgety,

and now struck in.

'There, there, there!' said he. 'That is quite understood, Mrs Clennam,

and you have spoken piously and well. Mr Blandois, I suspect, is not

of a pious cast.' 'On the contrary, sir!' that gentleman protested,

snapping his fingers. 'Your pardon! It's a part of my character. I am

sensitive, ardent, conscientious, and imaginative. A sensitive, ardent,

conscientious, and imaginative man, Mr Flintwinch, must be that, or

nothing!'

There was an inkling of suspicion in Mr Flintwinch's face that he might

be nothing, as he swaggered out of his chair (it was characteristic of

this man, as it is of all men similarly marked, that whatever he did,

he overdid, though it were sometimes by only a hairsbreadth), and

approached to take his leave of Mrs Clennam.

'With what will appear to you the egotism of a sick old woman, sir,' she

then said, 'though really through your accidental allusion, I have

been led away into the subject of myself and my infirmities. Being so

considerate as to visit me, I hope you will be likewise so considerate

as to overlook that. Don't compliment me, if you please.' For he was

evidently going to do it. 'Mr Flintwinch will be happy to render you any

service, and I hope your stay in this city may prove agreeable.'

Mr Blandois thanked her, and kissed his hand several times. 'This is an

old room,' he remarked, with a sudden sprightliness of manner, looking

round when he got near the door, 'I have been so interested that I have

not observed it. But it's a genuine old room.'

'It is a genuine old house,' said Mrs Clennam, with her frozen smile. 'A

place of no pretensions, but a piece of antiquity.'

'Faith!' cried the visitor. 'If Mr Flintwinch would do me the favour to

take me through the rooms on my way out, he could hardly oblige me more.

An old house is a weakness with me. I have many weaknesses, but none

greater. I love and study the picturesque in all its varieties. I have

been called picturesque myself. It is no merit to be picturesque--I

have greater merits, perhaps--but I may be, by an accident. Sympathy,

sympathy!'

'I tell you beforehand, Mr Blandois, that you'll find it very dingy and

very bare,' said Jeremiah, taking up the candle. 'It's not worth your

looking at.'But Mr Blandois, smiting him in a friendly manner on the

back, only laughed; so the said Blandois kissed his hand again to Mrs

Clennam, and they went out of the room together.

'You don't care to go up-stairs?' said Jeremiah, on the landing. 'On the

contrary, Mr Flintwinch; if not tiresome to you, I shall be ravished!'

Mr Flintwinch, therefore, wormed himself up the staircase, and Mr

Blandois followed close. They ascended to the great garret bed-room

which Arthur had occupied on the night of his return. 'There, Mr

Blandois!' said Jeremiah, showing it, 'I hope you may think that worth

coming so high to see. I confess I don't.'

Mr Blandois being enraptured, they walked through other garrets and

passages, and came down the staircase again. By this time Mr Flintwinch

had remarked that he never found the visitor looking at any room, after

throwing one quick glance around, but always found the visitor looking

at him, Mr Flintwinch. With this discovery in his thoughts, he turned

about on the staircase for another experiment. He met his eyes directly;

and on the instant of their fixing one another, the visitor, with

that ugly play of nose and moustache, laughed (as he had done at every

similar moment since they left Mrs Clennam's chamber) a diabolically

silent laugh.

As a much shorter man than the visitor, Mr Flintwinch was at the

physical disadvantage of being thus disagreeably leered at from a

height; and as he went first down the staircase, and was usually a

step or two lower than the other, this disadvantage was at the time

increased. He postponed looking at Mr Blandois again until this

accidental inequality was removed by their having entered the late Mr

Clennam's room. But, then twisting himself suddenly round upon him, he

found his look unchanged.

'A most admirable old house,' smiled Mr Blandois. 'So mysterious. Do you

never hear any haunted noises here?'

'Noises,' returned Mr Flintwinch. 'No.'

'Nor see any devils?'

'Not,' said Mr Flintwinch, grimly screwing himself at his questioner,

'not any that introduce themselves under that name and in that

capacity.'

'Haha! A portrait here, I see.'

(Still looking at Mr Flintwinch, as if he were the portrait.)

'It's a portrait, sir, as you observe.'

'May I ask the subject, Mr Flintwinch?'

'Mr Clennam, deceased. Her husband.' 'Former owner of the remarkable

watch, perhaps?' said the visitor.

Mr Flintwinch, who had cast his eyes towards the portrait, twisted

himself about again, and again found himself the subject of the same

look and smile. 'Yes, Mr Blandois,' he replied tartly. 'It was his, and

his uncle's before him, and Lord knows who before him; and that's all I

can tell you of its pedigree.'

'That's a strongly marked character, Mr Flintwinch, our friend

up-stairs.'

'Yes, sir,' said Jeremiah, twisting himself at the visitor again, as he

did during the whole of this dialogue, like some screw-machine that

fell short of its grip; for the other never changed, and he always

felt obliged to retreat a little. 'She is a remarkable woman. Great

fortitude--great strength of mind.'

'They must have been very happy,' said Blandois.

'Who?' demanded Mr Flintwinch, with another screw at him.

Mr Blandois shook his right forefinger towards the sick room, and his

left forefinger towards the portrait, and then, putting his arms akimbo

and striding his legs wide apart, stood smiling down at Mr Flintwinch

with the advancing nose and the retreating moustache.

'As happy as most other married people, I suppose,' returned Mr

Flintwinch. 'I can't say. I don't know. There are secrets in all

families.'

'Secrets!' cried Mr Blandois, quickly. 'Say it again, my son.'

'I say,' replied Mr Flintwinch, upon whom he had swelled himself so

suddenly that Mr Flintwinch found his face almost brushed by the dilated

chest. 'I say there are secrets in all families.'

'So there are,' cried the other, clapping him on both shoulders, and

rolling him backwards and forwards. 'Haha! you are right. So there are!

Secrets! Holy Blue! There are the devil's own secrets in some families,

Mr Flintwinch!' With that, after clapping Mr Flintwinch on both

shoulders several times, as if in a friendly and humorous way he were

rallying him on a joke he had made, he threw up his arms, threw back

his head, hooked his hands together behind it, and burst into a roar of

laughter. It was in vain for Mr Flintwinch to try another screw at him.

He had his laugh out.

'But, favour me with the candle a moment,' he said, when he had done.

'Let us have a look at the husband of the remarkable lady. Hah!' holding

up the light at arm's length. 'A decided expression of face here too,

though not of the same character. Looks as if he were saying, what is

it--Do Not Forget--does he not, Mr Flintwinch?

By Heaven, sir, he does!'

As he returned the candle, he looked at him once more; and then,

leisurely strolling out with him into the hall, declared it to be a

charming old house indeed, and one which had so greatly pleased him that

he would not have missed inspecting it for a hundred pounds. Throughout

these singular freedoms on the part of Mr Blandois, which involved a

general alteration in his demeanour, making it much coarser and rougher,

much more violent and audacious than before, Mr Flintwinch, whose

leathern face was not liable to many changes, preserved its immobility

intact. Beyond now appearing perhaps, to have been left hanging a trifle

too long before that friendly operation of cutting down, he outwardly

maintained an equable composure. They had brought their survey to a

close in the little room at the side of the hall, and he stood there,

eyeing Mr Blandois.

'I am glad you are so well satisfied, sir,' was his calm remark. 'I

didn't expect it. You seem to be quite in good spirits.'

'In admirable spirits,' returned Blandois. 'Word of honour! never more

refreshed in spirits. Do you ever have presentiments, Mr Flintwinch?'

'I am not sure that I know what you mean by the term, sir,' replied that

gentleman.

'Say, in this case, Mr Flintwinch, undefined anticipations of pleasure

to come.'

'I can't say I'm sensible of such a sensation at present,' returned Mr

Flintwinch with the utmost gravity. 'If I should find it coming on, I'll

mention it.'

'Now I,' said Blandois, 'I, my son, have a presentiment to-night that we

shall be well acquainted. Do you find it coming on?'

'N-no,' returned Mr Flintwinch, deliberately inquiring of himself. 'I

can't say I do.'

'I have a strong presentiment that we shall become intimately

acquainted.--You have no feeling of that sort yet?'

'Not yet,' said Mr Flintwinch.

Mr Blandois, taking him by both shoulders again, rolled him about a

little in his former merry way, then drew his arm through his own, and

invited him to come off and drink a bottle of wine like a dear deep old

dog as he was.

Without a moment's indecision, Mr Flintwinch accepted the invitation,

and they went out to the quarters where the traveller was lodged,

through a heavy rain which had rattled on the windows, roofs, and

pavements, ever since nightfall. The thunder and lightning had long ago

passed over, but the rain was furious. On their arrival at Mr Blandois'

room, a bottle of port wine was ordered by that gallant gentleman; who

(crushing every pretty thing he could collect, in the soft disposition

of his dainty figure) coiled himself upon the window-seat, while Mr

Flintwinch took a chair opposite to him, with the table between them. Mr

Blandois proposed having the largest glasses in the house, to which Mr

Flintwinch assented. The bumpers filled, Mr Blandois, with a roystering

gaiety, clinked the top of his glass against the bottom of Mr

Flintwinch's, and the bottom of his glass against the top of Mr

Flintwinch's, and drank to the intimate acquaintance he foresaw.

Mr Flintwinch gravely pledged him, and drank all the wine he could get,

and said nothing. As often as Mr Blandois clinked glasses (which was

at every replenishment), Mr Flintwinch stolidly did his part of the

clinking, and would have stolidly done his companion's part of the wine

as well as his own: being, except in the article of palate, a mere cask.

In short, Mr Blandois found that to pour port wine into the reticent

Flintwinch was, not to open him but to shut him up. Moreover, he had

the appearance of a perfect ability to go on all night; or, if occasion

were, all next day and all next night; whereas Mr Blandois soon grew

indistinctly conscious of swaggering too fiercely and boastfully. He

therefore terminated the entertainment at the end of the third bottle.

'You will draw upon us to-morrow, sir,' said Mr Flintwinch, with a

business-like face at parting.

'My Cabbage,' returned the other, taking him by the collar with both

hands, 'I'll draw upon you; have no fear. Adieu, my Flintwinch. Receive

at parting;' here he gave him a southern embrace, and kissed him soundly

on both cheeks; 'the word of a gentleman! By a thousand Thunders, you

shall see me again!'

He did not present himself next day, though the letter of advice came

duly to hand. Inquiring after him at night, Mr Flintwinch found, with

surprise, that he had paid his bill and gone back to the Continent by

way of Calais. Nevertheless, Jeremiah scraped out of his cogitating

face a lively conviction that Mr Blandois would keep his word on this

occasion, and would be seen again.

CHAPTER 31. Spirit

Anybody may pass, any day, in the thronged thoroughfares of the

metropolis, some meagre, wrinkled, yellow old man (who might be supposed

to have dropped from the stars, if there were any star in the Heavens

dull enough to be suspected of casting off so feeble a spark), creeping

along with a scared air, as though bewildered and a little frightened

by the noise and bustle. This old man is always a little old man. If he

were ever a big old man, he has shrunk into a little old man; if he were

always a little old man, he has dwindled into a less old man. His coat

is a colour, and cut, that never was the mode anywhere, at any period.

Clearly, it was not made for him, or for any individual mortal. Some

wholesale contractor measured Fate for five thousand coats of such

quality, and Fate has lent this old coat to this old man, as one of a

long unfinished line of many old men. It has always large dull metal

buttons, similar to no other buttons. This old man wears a hat, a

thumbed and napless and yet an obdurate hat, which has never adapted

itself to the shape of his poor head. His coarse shirt and his coarse

neckcloth have no more individuality than his coat and hat; they have

the same character of not being his--of not being anybody's. Yet this

old man wears these clothes with a certain unaccustomed air of being

dressed and elaborated for the public ways; as though he passed the

greater part of his time in a nightcap and gown. And so, like the

country mouse in the second year of a famine, come to see the town

mouse, and timidly threading his way to the town-mouse's lodging through

a city of cats, this old man passes in the streets.

Sometimes, on holidays towards evening, he will be seen to walk with a

slightly increased infirmity, and his old eyes will glimmer with a moist

and marshy light. Then the little old man is drunk. A very small

measure will overset him; he may be bowled off his unsteady legs with

a half-pint pot. Some pitying acquaintance--chance acquaintance

very often--has warmed up his weakness with a treat of beer, and the

consequence will be the lapse of a longer time than usual before he

shall pass again. For the little old man is going home to the Workhouse;

and on his good behaviour they do not let him out often (though methinks

they might, considering the few years he has before him to go out in,

under the sun); and on his bad behaviour they shut him up closer than

ever in a grove of two score and nineteen more old men, every one of

whom smells of all the others.

Mrs Plornish's father,--a poor little reedy piping old gentleman, like

a worn-out bird; who had been in what he called the music-binding

business, and met with great misfortunes, and who had seldom been able

to make his way, or to see it or to pay it, or to do anything at all

with it but find it no thoroughfare,--had retired of his own accord to

the Workhouse which was appointed by law to be the Good Samaritan of his

district (without the twopence, which was bad political economy), on

the settlement of that execution which had carried Mr Plornish to the

Marshalsea College. Previous to his son-in-law's difficulties coming to

that head, Old Nandy (he was always so called in his legal Retreat, but

he was Old Mr Nandy among the Bleeding Hearts) had sat in a corner of

the Plornish fireside, and taken his bite and sup out of the Plornish

cupboard. He still hoped to resume that domestic position when Fortune

should smile upon his son-in-law; in the meantime, while she preserved

an immovable countenance, he was, and resolved to remain, one of these

little old men in a grove of little old men with a community of flavour.

But no poverty in him, and no coat on him that never was the mode, and

no Old Men's Ward for his dwelling-place, could quench his daughter's

admiration. Mrs Plornish was as proud of her father's talents as she

could possibly have been if they had made him Lord Chancellor. She had

as firm a belief in the sweetness and propriety of his manners as she

could possibly have had if he had been Lord Chamberlain. The poor little

old man knew some pale and vapid little songs, long out of date, about

Chloe, and Phyllis, and Strephon being wounded by the son of Venus;

and for Mrs Plornish there was no such music at the Opera as the small

internal flutterings and chirpings wherein he would discharge himself

of these ditties, like a weak, little, broken barrel-organ, ground by

a baby. On his 'days out,' those flecks of light in his flat vista of

pollard old men,' it was at once Mrs Plornish's delight and sorrow,

when he was strong with meat, and had taken his full halfpenny-worth of

porter, to say, 'Sing us a song, Father.' Then he would give them Chloe,

and if he were in pretty good spirits, Phyllis also--Strephon he had

hardly been up to since he went into retirement--and then would Mrs

Plornish declare she did believe there never was such a singer as

Father, and wipe her eyes.

If he had come from Court on these occasions, nay, if he had been the

noble Refrigerator come home triumphantly from a foreign court to be

presented and promoted on his last tremendous failure, Mrs Plornish

could not have handed him with greater elevation about Bleeding Heart

Yard. 'Here's Father,' she would say, presenting him to a neighbour.

'Father will soon be home with us for good, now. Ain't Father looking

well? Father's a sweeter singer than ever; you'd never have forgotten

it, if you'd aheard him just now.'

As to Mr Plornish, he had married these articles of belief in marrying

Mr Nandy's daughter, and only wondered how it was that so gifted an

old gentleman had not made a fortune. This he attributed, after much

reflection, to his musical genius not having been scientifically

developed in his youth. 'For why,' argued Mr Plornish, 'why go a-binding

music when you've got it in yourself? That's where it is, I consider.'

Old Nandy had a patron: one patron. He had a patron who in a certain

sumptuous way--an apologetic way, as if he constantly took an admiring

audience to witness that he really could not help being more free

with this old fellow than they might have expected, on account of his

simplicity and poverty--was mightily good to him. Old Nandy had

been several times to the Marshalsea College, communicating with his

son-in-law during his short durance there; and had happily acquired to

himself, and had by degrees and in course of time much improved, the

patronage of the Father of that national institution.

Mr Dorrit was in the habit of receiving this old man as if the old man

held of him in vassalage under some feudal tenure. He made little treats

and teas for him, as if he came in with his homage from some outlying

district where the tenantry were in a primitive state.

It seemed as if there were moments when he could by no means have

sworn but that the old man was an ancient retainer of his, who had been

meritoriously faithful. When he mentioned him, he spoke of him casually

as his old pensioner. He had a wonderful satisfaction in seeing him, and

in commenting on his decayed condition after he was gone. It appeared

to him amazing that he could hold up his head at all, poor creature. 'In

the Workhouse, sir, the Union; no privacy, no visitors, no station, no

respect, no speciality. Most deplorable!'

It was Old Nandy's birthday, and they let him out. He said nothing about

its being his birthday, or they might have kept him in; for such old

men should not be born. He passed along the streets as usual to Bleeding

Heart Yard, and had his dinner with his daughter and son-in-law, and

gave them Phyllis. He had hardly concluded, when Little Dorrit looked in

to see how they all were.

'Miss Dorrit,' said Mrs Plornish, 'here's Father! Ain't he looking nice?

And such voice he's in!'

Little Dorrit gave him her hand, and smilingly said she had not seen him

this long time.

'No, they're rather hard on poor Father,' said Mrs Plornish with a

lengthening face, 'and don't let him have half as much change and fresh

air as would benefit him. But he'll soon be home for good, now. Won't

you, Father?'

'Yes, my dear, I hope so. In good time, please God.'

Here Mr Plornish delivered himself of an oration which he invariably

made, word for word the same, on all such opportunities.

It was couched in the following terms:

'John Edward Nandy. Sir. While there's a ounce of wittles or drink of

any sort in this present roof, you're fully welcome to your share on

it. While there's a handful of fire or a mouthful of bed in this present

roof, you're fully welcome to your share on it.

If so be as there should be nothing in this present roof, you should be

as welcome to your share on it as if it was something, much or little.

And this is what I mean and so I don't deceive you, and consequently

which is to stand out is to entreat of you, and therefore why not do

it?'

To this lucid address, which Mr Plornish always delivered as if he had

composed it (as no doubt he had) with enormous labour, Mrs Plornish's

father pipingly replied:

'I thank you kindly, Thomas, and I know your intentions well, which is

the same I thank you kindly for. But no, Thomas. Until such times as

it's not to take it out of your children's mouths, which take it is, and

call it by what name you will it do remain and equally deprive, though

may they come, and too soon they can not come, no Thomas, no!'

Mrs Plornish, who had been turning her face a little away with a corner

of her apron in her hand, brought herself back to the conversation again

by telling Miss Dorrit that Father was going over the water to pay his

respects, unless she knew of any reason why it might not be agreeable.

Her answer was, 'I am going straight home, and if he will come with me

I shall be so glad to take care of him--so glad,' said Little Dorrit,

always thoughtful of the feelings of the weak, 'of his company.'

'There, Father!' cried Mrs Plornish. 'Ain't you a gay young man to

be going for a walk along with Miss Dorrit! Let me tie your

neck-handkerchief into a regular good bow, for you're a regular beau

yourself, Father, if ever there was one.'

With this filial joke his daughter smartened him up, and gave him a

loving hug, and stood at the door with her weak child in her arms, and

her strong child tumbling down the steps, looking after her little old

father as he toddled away with his arm under Little Dorrit's.

They walked at a slow pace, and Little Dorrit took him by the Iron

Bridge and sat him down there for a rest, and they looked over at the

water and talked about the shipping, and the old man mentioned what he

would do if he had a ship full of gold coming home to him (his plan was

to take a noble lodging for the Plornishes and himself at a Tea Gardens,

and live there all the rest of their lives, attended on by the waiter),

and it was a special birthday of the old man. They were within five

minutes of their destination, when, at the corner of her own street,

they came upon Fanny in her new bonnet bound for the same port.

'Why, good gracious me, Amy!' cried that young lady starting. 'You never

mean it!'

'Mean what, Fanny dear?'

'Well! I could have believed a great deal of you,' returned the young

lady with burning indignation, 'but I don't think even I could have

believed this, of even you!'

'Fanny!' cried Little Dorrit, wounded and astonished.

'Oh! Don't Fanny me, you mean little thing, don't! The idea of coming

along the open streets, in the broad light of day, with a Pauper!'

(firing off the last word as if it were a ball from an air-gun). 'O

Fanny!'

'I tell you not to Fanny me, for I'll not submit to it! I never knew

such a thing. The way in which you are resolved and determined to

disgrace us on all occasions, is really infamous. You bad little thing!'

'Does it disgrace anybody,' said Little Dorrit, very gently, 'to take

care of this poor old man?'

'Yes, miss,' returned her sister, 'and you ought to know it does.

And you do know it does, and you do it because you know it does. The

principal pleasure of your life is to remind your family of their

misfortunes. And the next great pleasure of your existence is to keep

low company. But, however, if you have no sense of decency, I

have. You'll please to allow me to go on the other side of the way,

unmolested.'

With this, she bounced across to the opposite pavement. The old

disgrace, who had been deferentially bowing a pace or two off (for

Little Dorrit had let his arm go in her wonder, when Fanny began), and

who had been hustled and cursed by impatient passengers for stopping the

way, rejoined his companion, rather giddy, and said, 'I hope nothing's

wrong with your honoured father, Miss? I hope there's nothing the matter

in the honoured family?'

'No, no,' returned Little Dorrit. 'No, thank you. Give me your arm

again, Mr Nandy. We shall soon be there now.'

So she talked to him as she had talked before, and they came to the

Lodge and found Mr Chivery on the lock, and went in. Now, it happened

that the Father of the Marshalsea was sauntering towards the Lodge at

the moment when they were coming out of it, entering the prison arm in

arm. As the spectacle of their approach met his view, he displayed the

utmost agitation and despondency of mind; and--altogether regardless of

Old Nandy, who, making his reverence, stood with his hat in his hand, as

he always did in that gracious presence--turned about, and hurried in at

his own doorway and up the staircase.

Leaving the old unfortunate, whom in an evil hour she had taken under

her protection, with a hurried promise to return to him directly, Little

Dorrit hastened after her father, and, on the staircase, found Fanny

following her, and flouncing up with offended dignity. The three came

into the room almost together; and the Father sat down in his chair,

buried his face in his hands, and uttered a groan.

'Of course,' said Fanny. 'Very proper. Poor, afflicted Pa! Now, I hope

you believe me, Miss?'

'What is it, father?' cried Little Dorrit, bending over him. 'Have I

made you unhappy, father? Not I, I hope!'

'You hope, indeed! I dare say! Oh, you'--Fanny paused for a sufficiently

strong expression--'you Common-minded little Amy! You complete

prison-child!'

He stopped these angry reproaches with a wave of his hand, and sobbed

out, raising his face and shaking his melancholy head at his younger

daughter, 'Amy, I know that you are innocent in intention. But you

have cut me to the soul.' 'Innocent in intention!' the implacable Fanny

struck in. 'Stuff in intention! Low in intention! Lowering of the family

in intention!'

'Father!' cried Little Dorrit, pale and trembling. 'I am very sorry.

Pray forgive me. Tell me how it is, that I may not do it again!'

'How it is, you prevaricating little piece of goods!' cried Fanny. 'You

know how it is. I have told you already, so don't fly in the face of

Providence by attempting to deny it!'

'Hush! Amy,' said the father, passing his pocket-handkerchief several

times across his face, and then grasping it convulsively in the hand

that dropped across his knee, 'I have done what I could to keep you

select here; I have done what I could to retain you a position here. I

may have succeeded; I may not. You may know it; you may not. I give no

opinion. I have endured everything here but humiliation. That I have

happily been spared--until this day.'

Here his convulsive grasp unclosed itself, and he put his

pocket-handkerchief to his eyes again. Little Dorrit, on the ground

beside him, with her imploring hand upon his arm, watched him

remorsefully. Coming out of his fit of grief, he clenched his

pocket-handkerchief once more.

'Humiliation I have happily been spared until this day. Through all

my troubles there has been that--Spirit in myself, and that--that

submission to it, if I may use the term, in those about me, which has

spared me--ha--humiliation. But this day, this minute, I have keenly

felt it.'

'Of course! How could it be otherwise?' exclaimed the irrepressible

Fanny. 'Careering and prancing about with a Pauper!' (air-gun again).

'But, dear father,' cried Little Dorrit, 'I don't justify myself for

having wounded your dear heart--no! Heaven knows I don't!' She clasped

her hands in quite an agony of distress. 'I do nothing but beg and pray

you to be comforted and overlook it. But if I had not known that you

were kind to the old man yourself, and took much notice of him, and were

always glad to see him, I would not have come here with him, father, I

would not, indeed. What I have been so unhappy as to do, I have done

in mistake. I would not wilfully bring a tear to your eyes, dear love!'

said Little Dorrit, her heart well-nigh broken, 'for anything the world

could give me, or anything it could take away.'

Fanny, with a partly angry and partly repentant sob, began to cry

herself, and to say--as this young lady always said when she was half in

passion and half out of it, half spiteful with herself and half spiteful

with everybody else--that she wished she were dead.

The Father of the Marshalsea in the meantime took his younger daughter

to his breast, and patted her head. 'There, there! Say no more, Amy,

say no more, my child. I will forget it as soon as I can. I,' with

hysterical cheerfulness, 'I--shall soon be able to dismiss it. It

is perfectly true, my dear, that I am always glad to see my old

pensioner--as such, as such--and that I do--ha--extend as much

protection and kindness to the--hum--the bruised reed--I trust I may so

call him without impropriety--as in my circumstances, I can. It is quite

true that this is the case, my dear child. At the same time, I preserve

in doing this, if I may--ha--if I may use the expression--Spirit.

Becoming Spirit. And there are some things which are,' he stopped to

sob, 'irreconcilable with that, and wound that--wound it deeply.

It is not that I have seen my good Amy attentive, and--ha--condescending

to my old pensioner--it is not that that hurts me. It is, if I am to

close the painful subject by being explicit, that I have seen my child,

my own child, my own daughter, coming into this College out of the

public streets--smiling! smiling!--arm in arm with--O my God, a livery!'

This reference to the coat of no cut and no time, the unfortunate

gentleman gasped forth, in a scarcely audible voice, and with his

clenched pocket-handkerchief raised in the air. His excited feelings

might have found some further painful utterance, but for a knock at the

door, which had been already twice repeated, and to which Fanny (still

wishing herself dead, and indeed now going so far as to add, buried)

cried 'Come in!'

'Ah, Young John!' said the Father, in an altered and calmed voice. 'What

is it, Young John?'

'A letter for you, sir, being left in the Lodge just this minute, and a

message with it, I thought, happening to be there myself, sir, I would

bring it to your room.' The speaker's attention was much distracted by

the piteous spectacle of Little Dorrit at her father's feet, with her

head turned away.

'Indeed, John? Thank you.'

'The letter is from Mr Clennam, sir--it's the answer--and the message

was, sir, that Mr Clennam also sent his compliments, and word that he

would do himself the pleasure of calling this afternoon, hoping to see

you, and likewise,' attention more distracted than before, 'Miss Amy.'

'Oh!' As the Father glanced into the letter (there was a bank-note in

it), he reddened a little, and patted Amy on the head afresh. 'Thank

you, Young John. Quite right. Much obliged to you for your attention. No

one waiting?'

'No, sir, no one waiting.'

'Thank you, John. How is your mother, Young John?'

'Thank you, sir, she's not quite as well as we could wish--in fact, we

none of us are, except father--but she's pretty well, sir.' 'Say we sent

our remembrances, will you? Say kind remembrances, if you please, Young

John.'

'Thank you, sir, I will.' And Mr Chivery junior went his way, having

spontaneously composed on the spot an entirely new epitaph for himself,

to the effect that Here lay the body of John Chivery, Who, Having

at such a date, Beheld the idol of his life, In grief and tears, And

feeling unable to bear the harrowing spectacle, Immediately repaired to

the abode of his inconsolable parents, And terminated his existence by

his own rash act.

'There, there, Amy!' said the Father, when Young John had closed the

door, 'let us say no more about it.' The last few minutes had improved

his spirits remarkably, and he was quite lightsome. 'Where is my old

pensioner all this while? We must not leave him by himself any longer,

or he will begin to suppose he is not welcome, and that would pain me.

Will you fetch him, my child, or shall I?'

'If you wouldn't mind, father,' said Little Dorrit, trying to bring her

sobbing to a close.

'Certainly I will go, my dear. I forgot; your eyes are rather red.

There! Cheer up, Amy. Don't be uneasy about me. I am quite myself again,

my love, quite myself. Go to your room, Amy, and make yourself look

comfortable and pleasant to receive Mr Clennam.'

'I would rather stay in my own room, Father,' returned Little Dorrit,

finding it more difficult than before to regain her composure. 'I would

far rather not see Mr Clennam.'

'Oh, fie, fie, my dear, that's folly. Mr Clennam is a very gentlemanly

man--very gentlemanly. A little reserved at times; but I will say

extremely gentlemanly. I couldn't think of your not being here to

receive Mr Clennam, my dear, especially this afternoon. So go and

freshen yourself up, Amy; go and freshen yourself up, like a good girl.'

Thus directed, Little Dorrit dutifully rose and obeyed: only pausing

for a moment as she went out of the room, to give her sister a kiss of

reconciliation. Upon which, that young lady, feeling much harassed

in her mind, and having for the time worn out the wish with which she

generally relieved it, conceived and executed the brilliant idea of

wishing Old Nandy dead, rather than that he should come bothering there

like a disgusting, tiresome, wicked wretch, and making mischief between

two sisters.

The Father of the Marshalsea, even humming a tune, and wearing his black

velvet cap a little on one side, so much improved were his spirits, went

down into the yard, and found his old pensioner standing there hat in

hand just within the gate, as he had stood all this time. 'Come, Nandy!'

said he, with great suavity. 'Come up-stairs, Nandy; you know the way;

why don't you come up-stairs?' He went the length, on this occasion,

of giving him his hand and saying, 'How are you, Nandy? Are you pretty

well?' To which that vocalist returned, 'I thank you, honoured sir, I am

all the better for seeing your honour.' As they went along the yard, the

Father of the Marshalsea presented him to a Collegian of recent date.

'An old acquaintance of mine, sir, an old pensioner.' And then said, 'Be

covered, my good Nandy; put your hat on,' with great consideration.

His patronage did not stop here; for he charged Maggy to get the tea

ready, and instructed her to buy certain tea-cakes, fresh butter,

eggs, cold ham, and shrimps: to purchase which collation he gave her a

bank-note for ten pounds, laying strict injunctions on her to be careful

of the change. These preparations were in an advanced stage of progress,

and his daughter Amy had come back with her work, when Clennam presented

himself; whom he most graciously received, and besought to join their

meal.

'Amy, my love, you know Mr Clennam even better than I have the happiness

of doing. Fanny, my dear, you are acquainted with Mr Clennam.' Fanny

acknowledged him haughtily; the position she tacitly took up in all such

cases being that there was a vast conspiracy to insult the family by not

understanding it, or sufficiently deferring to it, and here was one of

the conspirators.

'This, Mr Clennam, you must know, is an old pensioner of mine, Old

Nandy, a very faithful old man.' (He always spoke of him as an object

of great antiquity, but he was two or three years younger than himself.)

'Let me see. You know Plornish, I think? I think my daughter Amy has

mentioned to me that you know poor Plornish?'

'O yes!' said Arthur Clennam.

'Well, sir, this is Mrs Plornish's father.'

'Indeed? I am glad to see him.'

'You would be more glad if you knew his many good qualities, Mr

Clennam.'

'I hope I shall come to know them through knowing him,' said Arthur,

secretly pitying the bowed and submissive figure.

'It is a holiday with him, and he comes to see his old friends, who are

always glad to see him,' observed the Father of the Marshalsea.

Then he added behind his hand, ('Union, poor old fellow. Out for the

day.')

By this time Maggy, quietly assisted by her Little Mother, had spread

the board, and the repast was ready. It being hot weather and the prison

very close, the window was as wide open as it could be pushed. 'If Maggy

will spread that newspaper on the window-sill, my dear,' remarked the

Father complacently and in a half whisper to Little Dorrit, 'my old

pensioner can have his tea there, while we are having ours.'

So, with a gulf between him and the good company of about a foot in

width, standard measure, Mrs Plornish's father was handsomely regaled.

Clennam had never seen anything like his magnanimous protection by that

other Father, he of the Marshalsea; and was lost in the contemplation of

its many wonders.

The most striking of these was perhaps the relishing manner in which he

remarked on the pensioner's infirmities and failings, as if he were

a gracious Keeper making a running commentary on the decline of the

harmless animal he exhibited.

'Not ready for more ham yet, Nandy? Why, how slow you are! (His last

teeth,' he explained to the company, 'are going, poor old boy.')

At another time, he said, 'No shrimps, Nandy?' and on his not instantly

replying, observed, ('His hearing is becoming very defective. He'll be

deaf directly.')

At another time he asked him, 'Do you walk much, Nandy, about the yard

within the walls of that place of yours?'

'No, sir; no. I haven't any great liking for that.'

'No, to be sure,' he assented. 'Very natural.' Then he privately

informed the circle ('Legs going.')

Once he asked the pensioner, in that general clemency which asked him

anything to keep him afloat, how old his younger grandchild was?

'John Edward,' said the pensioner, slowly laying down his knife and fork

to consider. 'How old, sir? Let me think now.'

The Father of the Marshalsea tapped his forehead ('Memory weak.')

'John Edward, sir? Well, I really forget. I couldn't say at this minute,

sir, whether it's two and two months, or whether it's two and five

months. It's one or the other.'

'Don't distress yourself by worrying your mind about it,' he returned,

with infinite forbearance. ('Faculties evidently decaying--old man rusts

in the life he leads!')

The more of these discoveries that he persuaded himself he made in the

pensioner, the better he appeared to like him; and when he got out of

his chair after tea to bid the pensioner good-bye, on his intimating

that he feared, honoured sir, his time was running out, he made himself

look as erect and strong as possible.

'We don't call this a shilling, Nandy, you know,' he said, putting one

in his hand. 'We call it tobacco.'

'Honoured sir, I thank you. It shall buy tobacco. My thanks and duty to

Miss Amy and Miss Fanny. I wish you good night, Mr Clennam.'

'And mind you don't forget us, you know, Nandy,' said the Father. 'You

must come again, mind, whenever you have an afternoon. You must not come

out without seeing us, or we shall be jealous. Good night, Nandy. Be

very careful how you descend the stairs, Nandy; they are rather uneven

and worn.' With that he stood on the landing, watching the old man down:

and when he came into the room again, said, with a solemn satisfaction

on him, 'A melancholy sight that, Mr Clennam, though one has the

consolation of knowing that he doesn't feel it himself. The poor old

fellow is a dismal wreck. Spirit broken and gone--pulverised--crushed

out of him, sir, completely!'

As Clennam had a purpose in remaining, he said what he could responsive

to these sentiments, and stood at the window with their enunciator,

while Maggy and her Little Mother washed the tea-service and cleared it

away. He noticed that his companion stood at the window with the air of

an affable and accessible Sovereign, and that, when any of his people in

the yard below looked up, his recognition of their salutes just stopped

short of a blessing.

When Little Dorrit had her work on the table, and Maggy hers on the

bedstead, Fanny fell to tying her bonnet as a preliminary to her

departure. Arthur, still having his purpose, still remained. At this

time the door opened, without any notice, and Mr Tip came in. He kissed

Amy as she started up to meet him, nodded to Fanny, nodded to his

father, gloomed on the visitor without further recognition, and sat

down.

'Tip, dear,' said Little Dorrit, mildly, shocked by this, 'don't you

see--'

'Yes, I see, Amy. If you refer to the presence of any visitor you have

here--I say, if you refer to that,' answered Tip, jerking his head with

emphasis towards his shoulder nearest Clennam, 'I see!'

'Is that all you say?'

'That's all I say. And I suppose,' added the lofty young man, after a

moment's pause, 'that visitor will understand me, when I say that's all

I say. In short, I suppose the visitor will understand that he hasn't

used me like a gentleman.'

'I do not understand that,' observed the obnoxious personage referred to

with tranquillity.

'No? Why, then, to make it clearer to you, sir, I beg to let you know

that when I address what I call a properly-worded appeal, and an urgent

appeal, and a delicate appeal, to an individual, for a small temporary

accommodation, easily within his power--easily within his power,

mind!--and when that individual writes back word to me that he begs to

be excused, I consider that he doesn't treat me like a gentleman.'

The Father of the Marshalsea, who had surveyed his son in silence, no

sooner heard this sentiment, than he began in angry voice:--

'How dare you--' But his son stopped him.

'Now, don't ask me how I dare, father, because that's bosh. As to the

fact of the line of conduct I choose to adopt towards the individual

present, you ought to be proud of my showing a proper spirit.'

'I should think so!' cried Fanny.

'A proper spirit?' said the Father. 'Yes, a proper spirit; a becoming

spirit. Is it come to this that my son teaches me--ME--spirit!'

'Now, don't let us bother about it, father, or have any row on the

subject. I have fully made up my mind that the individual present has

not treated me like a gentleman. And there's an end of it.'

'But there is not an end of it, sir,' returned the Father. 'But there

shall not be an end of it. You have made up your mind? You have made up

your mind?'

'Yes, I have. What's the good of keeping on like that?'

'Because,' returned the Father, in a great heat, 'you had no right to

make up your mind to what is monstrous, to what is--ha--immoral, to what

is--hum--parricidal. No, Mr Clennam, I beg, sir. Don't ask me to desist;

there is a--hum--a general principle involved here, which rises even

above considerations of--ha--hospitality. I object to the assertion made

by my son. I--ha--I personally repel it.'

'Why, what is it to you, father?' returned the son, over his shoulder.

'What is it to me, sir? I have a--hum--a spirit, sir, that will not

endure it. I,' he took out his pocket-handkerchief again and dabbed his

face. 'I am outraged and insulted by it. Let me suppose the case that I

myself may at a certain time--ha--or times, have made a--hum--an appeal,

and a properly-worded appeal, and a delicate appeal, and an urgent

appeal to some individual for a small temporary accommodation. Let me

suppose that that accommodation could have been easily extended, and was

not extended, and that that individual informed me that he begged to

be excused. Am I to be told by my own son, that I therefore received

treatment not due to a gentleman, and that I--ha--I submitted to it?'

His daughter Amy gently tried to calm him, but he would not on any

account be calmed. He said his spirit was up, and wouldn't endure this.

Was he to be told that, he wished to know again, by his own son on his

own hearth, to his own face? Was that humiliation to be put upon him by

his own blood?

'You are putting it on yourself, father, and getting into all this

injury of your own accord!' said the young gentleman morosely. 'What I

have made up my mind about has nothing to do with you. What I said had

nothing to do with you. Why need you go trying on other people's hats?'

'I reply it has everything to do with me,' returned the Father. 'I point

out to you, sir, with indignation, that--hum--the--ha--delicacy and

peculiarity of your father's position should strike you dumb, sir, if

nothing else should, in laying down such--ha--such unnatural principles.

Besides; if you are not filial, sir, if you discard that duty, you

are at least--hum--not a Christian? Are you--ha--an Atheist? And is it

Christian, let me ask you, to stigmatise and denounce an individual

for begging to be excused this time, when the same individual

may--ha--respond with the required accommodation next time? Is it the

part of a Christian not to--hum--not to try him again?' He had worked

himself into quite a religious glow and fervour.

'I see precious well,' said Mr Tip, rising, 'that I shall get no

sensible or fair argument here to-night, and so the best thing I can do

is to cut. Good night, Amy. Don't be vexed. I am very sorry it happens

here, and you here, upon my soul I am; but I can't altogether part with

my spirit, even for your sake, old girl.'

With those words he put on his hat and went out, accompanied by Miss

Fanny; who did not consider it spirited on her part to take leave of

Clennam with any less opposing demonstration than a stare, importing

that she had always known him for one of the large body of conspirators.

When they were gone, the Father of the Marshalsea was at first inclined

to sink into despondency again, and would have done so, but that a

gentleman opportunely came up within a minute or two to attend him to

the Snuggery. It was the gentleman Clennam had seen on the night of his

own accidental detention there, who had that impalpable grievance about

the misappropriated Fund on which the Marshal was supposed to batten.

He presented himself as deputation to escort the Father to the Chair, it

being an occasion on which he had promised to preside over the assembled

Collegians in the enjoyment of a little Harmony.

'Such, you see, Mr Clennam,' said the Father, 'are the incongruities

of my position here. But a public duty! No man, I am sure, would more

readily recognise a public duty than yourself.'

Clennam besought him not to delay a moment. 'Amy, my dear, if you can

persuade Mr Clennam to stay longer, I can leave the honours of our poor

apology for an establishment with confidence in your hands, and

perhaps you may do something towards erasing from Mr Clennam's mind

the--ha--untoward and unpleasant circumstance which has occurred since

tea-time.'

Clennam assured him that it had made no impression on his mind, and

therefore required no erasure.

'My dear sir,' said the Father, with a removal of his black cap and a

grasp of Clennam's hand, combining to express the safe receipt of his

note and enclosure that afternoon, 'Heaven ever bless you!'

So, at last, Clennam's purpose in remaining was attained, and he could

speak to Little Dorrit with nobody by. Maggy counted as nobody, and she

was by.

CHAPTER 32. More Fortune-Telling

Maggy sat at her work in her great white cap with its quantity of opaque

frilling hiding what profile she had (she had none to spare), and her

serviceable eye brought to bear upon her occupation, on the window side

of the room. What with her flapping cap, and what with her unserviceable

eye, she was quite partitioned off from her Little Mother, whose seat

was opposite the window. The tread and shuffle of feet on the pavement

of the yard had much diminished since the taking of the Chair, the tide

of Collegians having set strongly in the direction of Harmony. Some few

who had no music in their souls, or no money in their pockets, dawdled

about; and the old spectacle of the visitor-wife and the depressed

unseasoned prisoner still lingered in corners, as broken cobwebs and

such unsightly discomforts draggle in corners of other places. It was

the quietest time the College knew, saving the night hours when the

Collegians took the benefit of the act of sleep. The occasional rattle

of applause upon the tables of the Snuggery, denoted the successful

termination of a morsel of Harmony; or the responsive acceptance, by

the united children, of some toast or sentiment offered to them by their

Father. Occasionally, a vocal strain more sonorous than the generality

informed the listener that some boastful bass was in blue water, or in

the hunting field, or with the reindeer, or on the mountain, or among

the heather; but the Marshal of the Marshalsea knew better, and had got

him hard and fast.

As Arthur Clennam moved to sit down by the side of Little Dorrit, she

trembled so that she had much ado to hold her needle. Clennam gently

put his hand upon her work, and said, 'Dear Little Dorrit, let me lay it

down.'

She yielded it to him, and he put it aside. Her hands were then

nervously clasping together, but he took one of them. 'How seldom I have

seen you lately, Little Dorrit!'

'I have been busy, sir.'

'But I heard only to-day,' said Clennam, 'by mere accident, of your

having been with those good people close by me. Why not come to me,

then?'

'I--I don't know. Or rather, I thought you might be busy too. You

generally are now, are you not?'

He saw her trembling little form and her downcast face, and the eyes

that drooped the moment they were raised to his--he saw them almost with

as much concern as tenderness.

'My child, your manner is so changed!'

The trembling was now quite beyond her control. Softly withdrawing her

hand, and laying it in her other hand, she sat before him with her head

bent and her whole form trembling.

'My own Little Dorrit,' said Clennam, compassionately.

She burst into tears. Maggy looked round of a sudden, and stared for at

least a minute; but did not interpose. Clennam waited some little while

before he spoke again.

'I cannot bear,' he said then, 'to see you weep; but I hope this is a

relief to an overcharged heart.'

'Yes it is, sir. Nothing but that.'

'Well, well! I feared you would think too much of what passed here just

now. It is of no moment; not the least. I am only unfortunate to have

come in the way. Let it go by with these tears. It is not worth one of

them. One of them? Such an idle thing should be repeated, with my glad

consent, fifty times a day, to save you a moment's heart-ache, Little

Dorrit.'

She had taken courage now, and answered, far more in her usual manner,

'You are so good! But even if there was nothing else in it to be sorry

for and ashamed of, it is such a bad return to you--'

'Hush!' said Clennam, smiling and touching her lips with his hand.

'Forgetfulness in you who remember so many and so much, would be new

indeed. Shall I remind you that I am not, and that I never was, anything

but the friend whom you agreed to trust? No. You remember it, don't

you?'

'I try to do so, or I should have broken the promise just now, when my

mistaken brother was here. You will consider his bringing-up in this

place, and will not judge him hardly, poor fellow, I know!' In raising

her eyes with these words, she observed his face more nearly than she

had done yet, and said, with a quick change of tone, 'You have not been

ill, Mr Clennam?'

'No.'

'Nor tried? Nor hurt?' she asked him, anxiously.

It fell to Clennam now, to be not quite certain how to answer. He said

in reply:

'To speak the truth, I have been a little troubled, but it is over.

Do I show it so plainly? I ought to have more fortitude and self-command

than that. I thought I had. I must learn them of you. Who could teach me

better!'

He never thought that she saw in him what no one else could see. He

never thought that in the whole world there were no other eyes that

looked upon him with the same light and strength as hers.

'But it brings me to something that I wish to say,' he continued, 'and

therefore I will not quarrel even with my own face for telling tales

and being unfaithful to me. Besides, it is a privilege and pleasure to

confide in my Little Dorrit. Let me confess then, that, forgetting how

grave I was, and how old I was, and how the time for such things had

gone by me with the many years of sameness and little happiness that

made up my long life far away, without marking it--that, forgetting all

this, I fancied I loved some one.'

'Do I know her, sir?' asked Little Dorrit.

'No, my child.'

'Not the lady who has been kind to me for your sake?'

'Flora. No, no. Do you think--'

'I never quite thought so,' said Little Dorrit, more to herself than

him. 'I did wonder at it a little.'

'Well!' said Clennam, abiding by the feeling that had fallen on him in

the avenue on the night of the roses, the feeling that he was an

older man, who had done with that tender part of life, 'I found out my

mistake, and I thought about it a little--in short, a good deal--and got

wiser. Being wiser, I counted up my years and considered what I am, and

looked back, and looked forward, and found that I should soon be grey. I

found that I had climbed the hill, and passed the level ground upon the

top, and was descending quickly.'

If he had known the sharpness of the pain he caused the patient heart,

in speaking thus! While doing it, too, with the purpose of easing and

serving her.

'I found that the day when any such thing would have been graceful in

me, or good in me, or hopeful or happy for me or any one in connection

with me, was gone, and would never shine again.'

O! If he had known, if he had known! If he could have seen the dagger in

his hand, and the cruel wounds it struck in the faithful bleeding breast

of his Little Dorrit!

'All that is over, and I have turned my face from it. Why do I speak of

this to Little Dorrit? Why do I show you, my child, the space of years

that there is between us, and recall to you that I have passed, by the

amount of your whole life, the time that is present to you?'

'Because you trust me, I hope. Because you know that nothing can touch

you without touching me; that nothing can make you happy or unhappy, but

it must make me, who am so grateful to you, the same.'

He heard the thrill in her voice, he saw her earnest face, he saw her

clear true eyes, he saw the quickened bosom that would have joyfully

thrown itself before him to receive a mortal wound directed at his

breast, with the dying cry, 'I love him!' and the remotest suspicion

of the truth never dawned upon his mind. No. He saw the devoted little

creature with her worn shoes, in her common dress, in her jail-home; a

slender child in body, a strong heroine in soul; and the light of her

domestic story made all else dark to him.

'For those reasons assuredly, Little Dorrit, but for another too. So

far removed, so different, and so much older, I am the better fitted for

your friend and adviser. I mean, I am the more easily to be trusted;

and any little constraint that you might feel with another, may vanish

before me. Why have you kept so retired from me? Tell me.'

'I am better here. My place and use are here. I am much better here,'

said Little Dorrit, faintly.

'So you said that day upon the bridge. I thought of it much afterwards.

Have you no secret you could entrust to me, with hope and comfort, if

you would!'

'Secret? No, I have no secret,' said Little Dorrit in some trouble.

They had been speaking in low voices; more because it was natural to

what they said to adopt that tone, than with any care to reserve it from

Maggy at her work. All of a sudden Maggy stared again, and this time

spoke:

'I say! Little Mother!'

'Yes, Maggy.'

'If you an't got no secret of your own to tell him, tell him that about

the Princess. She had a secret, you know.'

'The Princess had a secret?' said Clennam, in some surprise. 'What

Princess was that, Maggy?'

'Lor! How you do go and bother a gal of ten,' said Maggy, 'catching the

poor thing up in that way. Whoever said the Princess had a secret? \_I\_

never said so.'

'I beg your pardon. I thought you did.'

'No, I didn't. How could I, when it was her as wanted to find it out? It

was the little woman as had the secret, and she was always a spinning at

her wheel. And so she says to her, why do you keep it there? And so the

t'other one says to her, no I don't; and so the t'other one says to her,

yes you do; and then they both goes to the cupboard, and there it is.

And she wouldn't go into the Hospital, and so she died. You know, Little

Mother; tell him that.

For it was a reg'lar good secret, that was!' cried Maggy, hugging

herself.

Arthur looked at Little Dorrit for help to comprehend this, and was

struck by seeing her so timid and red. But, when she told him that it

was only a Fairy Tale she had one day made up for Maggy, and that there

was nothing in it which she wouldn't be ashamed to tell again to anybody

else, even if she could remember it, he left the subject where it was.

However, he returned to his own subject by first entreating her to see

him oftener, and to remember that it was impossible to have a stronger

interest in her welfare than he had, or to be more set upon promoting it

than he was. When she answered fervently, she well knew that, she never

forgot it, he touched upon his second and more delicate point--the

suspicion he had formed.

'Little Dorrit,' he said, taking her hand again, and speaking lower than

he had spoken yet, so that even Maggy in the small room could not hear

him, 'another word. I have wanted very much to say this to you; I have

tried for opportunities. Don't mind me, who, for the matter of years,

might be your father or your uncle. Always think of me as quite an

old man. I know that all your devotion centres in this room, and

that nothing to the last will ever tempt you away from the duties you

discharge here. If I were not sure of it, I should, before now, have

implored you, and implored your father, to let me make some provision

for you in a more suitable place. But you may have an interest--I will

not say, now, though even that might be--may have, at another time,

an interest in some one else; an interest not incompatible with your

affection here.'

She was very, very pale, and silently shook her head.

'It may be, dear Little Dorrit.'

'No. No. No.' She shook her head, after each slow repetition of

the word, with an air of quiet desolation that he remembered long

afterwards. The time came when he remembered it well, long afterwards,

within those prison walls; within that very room.

'But, if it ever should be, tell me so, my dear child. Entrust the truth

to me, point out the object of such an interest to me, and I will try

with all the zeal, and honour, and friendship and respect that I feel

for you, good Little Dorrit of my heart, to do you a lasting service.'

'O thank you, thank you! But, O no, O no, O no!' She said this, looking

at him with her work-worn hands folded together, and in the same

resigned accents as before.

'I press for no confidence now. I only ask you to repose unhesitating

trust in me.'

'Can I do less than that, when you are so good!'

'Then you will trust me fully? Will have no secret unhappiness, or

anxiety, concealed from me?'

'Almost none.'

'And you have none now?'

She shook her head. But she was very pale.

'When I lie down to-night, and my thoughts come back--as they will, for

they do every night, even when I have not seen you--to this sad place, I

may believe that there is no grief beyond this room, now, and its usual

occupants, which preys on Little Dorrit's mind?'

She seemed to catch at these words--that he remembered, too, long

afterwards--and said, more brightly, 'Yes, Mr Clennam; yes, you may!'

The crazy staircase, usually not slow to give notice when any one was

coming up or down, here creaked under a quick tread, and a further sound

was heard upon it, as if a little steam-engine with more steam than it

knew what to do with, were working towards the room. As it approached,

which it did very rapidly, it laboured with increased energy; and,

after knocking at the door, it sounded as if it were stooping down and

snorting in at the keyhole.

Before Maggy could open the door, Mr Pancks, opening it from without,

stood without a hat and with his bare head in the wildest condition,

looking at Clennam and Little Dorrit, over her shoulder.

He had a lighted cigar in his hand, and brought with him airs of ale and

tobacco smoke.

'Pancks the gipsy,' he observed out of breath, 'fortune-telling.' He

stood dingily smiling, and breathing hard at them, with a most curious

air; as if, instead of being his proprietor's grubber, he were the

triumphant proprietor of the Marshalsea, the Marshal, all the turnkeys,

and all the Collegians. In his great self-satisfaction he put his cigar

to his lips (being evidently no smoker), and took such a pull at it,

with his right eye shut up tight for the purpose, that he underwent

a convulsion of shuddering and choking. But even in the midst of that

paroxysm, he still essayed to repeat his favourite introduction of

himself, 'Pa-ancks the gi-ipsy, fortune-telling.'

'I am spending the evening with the rest of 'em,' said Pancks. 'I've

been singing. I've been taking a part in White sand and grey sand.

I don't know anything about it. Never mind. I'll take any part in

anything. It's all the same, if you're loud enough.'

At first Clennam supposed him to be intoxicated. But he soon perceived

that though he might be a little the worse (or better) for ale, the

staple of his excitement was not brewed from malt, or distilled from any

grain or berry.

'How d'ye do, Miss Dorrit?' said Pancks. 'I thought you wouldn't mind my

running round, and looking in for a moment. Mr Clennam I heard was here,

from Mr Dorrit. How are you, Sir?'

Clennam thanked him, and said he was glad to see him so gay.

'Gay!' said Pancks. 'I'm in wonderful feather, sir. I can't stop a

minute, or I shall be missed, and I don't want 'em to miss me.--Eh, Miss

Dorrit?'

He seemed to have an insatiate delight in appealing to her and looking

at her; excitedly sticking his hair up at the same moment, like a dark

species of cockatoo.

'I haven't been here half an hour. I knew Mr Dorrit was in the chair,

and I said, "I'll go and support him!" I ought to be down in Bleeding

Heart Yard by rights; but I can worry them to-morrow.--Eh, Miss Dorrit?'

His little black eyes sparkled electrically. His very hair seemed to

sparkle as he roughened it. He was in that highly-charged state that one

might have expected to draw sparks and snaps from him by presenting a

knuckle to any part of his figure.

'Capital company here,' said Pancks.--'Eh, Miss Dorrit?'

She was half afraid of him, and irresolute what to say. He laughed, with

a nod towards Clennam.

'Don't mind him, Miss Dorrit. He's one of us. We agreed that you

shouldn't take on to mind me before people, but we didn't mean Mr

Clennam. He's one of us. He's in it. An't you, Mr Clennam?--Eh, Miss

Dorrit?' The excitement of this strange creature was fast communicating

itself to Clennam. Little Dorrit with amazement, saw this, and observed

that they exchanged quick looks.

'I was making a remark,' said Pancks, 'but I declare I forget what

it was. Oh, I know! Capital company here. I've been treating 'em all

round.--Eh, Miss Dorrit?'

'Very generous of you,' she returned, noticing another of the quick

looks between the two.

'Not at all,' said Pancks. 'Don't mention it. I'm coming into my

property, that's the fact. I can afford to be liberal. I think I'll give

'em a treat here. Tables laid in the yard. Bread in stacks. Pipes in

faggots. Tobacco in hayloads. Roast beef and plum-pudding for every one.

Quart of double stout a head. Pint of wine too, if they like it, and the

authorities give permission.--Eh, Miss Dorrit?'

She was thrown into such a confusion by his manner, or rather by

Clennam's growing understanding of his manner (for she looked to him

after every fresh appeal and cockatoo demonstration on the part of Mr

Pancks), that she only moved her lips in answer, without forming any

word.

'And oh, by-the-bye!' said Pancks, 'you were to live to know what was

behind us on that little hand of yours. And so you shall, you shall, my

darling.--Eh, Miss Dorrit?'

He had suddenly checked himself. Where he got all the additional black

prongs from, that now flew up all over his head like the myriads of

points that break out in the large change of a great firework, was a

wonderful mystery.

'But I shall be missed;' he came back to that; 'and I don't want 'em to

miss me. Mr Clennam, you and I made a bargain. I said you should find me

stick to it. You shall find me stick to it now, sir, if you'll step out

of the room a moment. Miss Dorrit, I wish you good night. Miss Dorrit, I

wish you good fortune.'

He rapidly shook her by both hands, and puffed down stairs. Arthur

followed him with such a hurried step, that he had very nearly tumbled

over him on the last landing, and rolled him down into the yard.

'What is it, for Heaven's sake!' Arthur demanded, when they burst out

there both together.

'Stop a moment, sir. Mr Rugg. Let me introduce him.' With those words

he presented another man without a hat, and also with a cigar, and also

surrounded with a halo of ale and tobacco smoke, which man, though not

so excited as himself, was in a state which would have been akin to

lunacy but for its fading into sober method when compared with the

rampancy of Mr Pancks. 'Mr Clennam, Mr Rugg,' said Pancks. 'Stop a

moment. Come to the pump.'

They adjourned to the pump. Mr Pancks, instantly putting his head under

the spout, requested Mr Rugg to take a good strong turn at the handle.

Mr Rugg complying to the letter, Mr Pancks came forth snorting and

blowing to some purpose, and dried himself on his handkerchief.

'I am the clearer for that,' he gasped to Clennam standing astonished.

'But upon my soul, to hear her father making speeches in that chair,

knowing what we know, and to see her up in that room in that dress,

knowing what we know, is enough to--give me a back, Mr Rugg--a little

higher, sir,--that'll do!'

Then and there, on that Marshalsea pavement, in the shades of evening,

did Mr Pancks, of all mankind, fly over the head and shoulders of Mr

Rugg of Pentonville, General Agent, Accountant, and Recoverer of Debts.

Alighting on his feet, he took Clennam by the button-hole, led him

behind the pump, and pantingly produced from his pocket a bundle of

papers. Mr Rugg, also, pantingly produced from his pocket a bundle of

papers.

'Stay!' said Clennam in a whisper.'You have made a discovery.'

Mr Pancks answered, with an unction which there is no language to

convey, 'We rather think so.'

'Does it implicate any one?'

'How implicate, sir?'

'In any suppression or wrong dealing of any kind?'

'Not a bit of it.'

'Thank God!' said Clennam to himself. 'Now show me.' 'You are to

understand'--snorted Pancks, feverishly unfolding papers, and speaking

in short high-pressure blasts of sentences, 'Where's the Pedigree?

Where's Schedule number four, Mr Rugg? Oh! all right! Here we are.--You

are to understand that we are this very day virtually complete. We

shan't be legally for a day or two. Call it at the outside a week. We've

been at it night and day for I don't know how long. Mr Rugg, you know

how long? Never mind. Don't say. You'll only confuse me. You shall tell

her, Mr Clennam. Not till we give you leave. Where's that rough total,

Mr Rugg? Oh! Here we are! There sir! That's what you'll have to break to

her. That man's your Father of the Marshalsea!'

CHAPTER 33. Mrs Merdle's Complaint

Resigning herself to inevitable fate by making the best of those people,

the Miggleses, and submitting her philosophy to the draught upon it, of

which she had foreseen the likelihood in her interview with Arthur,

Mrs Gowan handsomely resolved not to oppose her son's marriage. In her

progress to, and happy arrival at, this resolution, she was possibly

influenced, not only by her maternal affections but by three politic

considerations.

Of these, the first may have been that her son had never signified the

smallest intention to ask her consent, or any mistrust of his ability

to dispense with it; the second, that the pension bestowed upon her by a

grateful country (and a Barnacle) would be freed from any little filial

inroads, when her Henry should be married to the darling only child of

a man in very easy circumstances; the third, that Henry's debts must

clearly be paid down upon the altar-railing by his father-in-law. When,

to these three-fold points of prudence there is added the fact that

Mrs Gowan yielded her consent the moment she knew of Mr Meagles having

yielded his, and that Mr Meagles's objection to the marriage had

been the sole obstacle in its way all along, it becomes the height of

probability that the relict of the deceased Commissioner of nothing

particular, turned these ideas in her sagacious mind.

Among her connections and acquaintances, however, she maintained her

individual dignity and the dignity of the blood of the Barnacles, by

diligently nursing the pretence that it was a most unfortunate business;

that she was sadly cut up by it; that this was a perfect fascination

under which Henry laboured; that she had opposed it for a long time,

but what could a mother do; and the like. She had already called Arthur

Clennam to bear witness to this fable, as a friend of the Meagles

family; and she followed up the move by now impounding the family itself

for the same purpose. In the first interview she accorded to Mr Meagles,

she slided herself into the position of disconsolately but gracefully

yielding to irresistible pressure. With the utmost politeness and

good-breeding, she feigned that it was she--not he--who had made the

difficulty, and who at length gave way; and that the sacrifice was

hers--not his. The same feint, with the same polite dexterity, she

foisted on Mrs Meagles, as a conjuror might have forced a card on that

innocent lady; and, when her future daughter-in-law was presented to her

by her son, she said on embracing her, 'My dear, what have you done to

Henry that has bewitched him so!' at the same time allowing a few tears

to carry before them, in little pills, the cosmetic powder on her nose;

as a delicate but touching signal that she suffered much inwardly for

the show of composure with which she bore her misfortune.

Among the friends of Mrs Gowan (who piqued herself at once on being

Society, and on maintaining intimate and easy relations with that

Power), Mrs Merdle occupied a front row. True, the Hampton Court

Bohemians, without exception, turned up their noses at Merdle as an

upstart; but they turned them down again, by falling flat on their faces

to worship his wealth. In which compensating adjustment of their noses,

they were pretty much like Treasury, Bar, and Bishop, and all the rest

of them.

To Mrs Merdle, Mrs Gowan repaired on a visit of self-condolence, after

having given the gracious consent aforesaid. She drove into town for the

purpose in a one-horse carriage irreverently called at that period of

English history, a pill-box. It belonged to a job-master in a small way,

who drove it himself, and who jobbed it by the day, or hour, to most of

the old ladies in Hampton Court Palace; but it was a point of ceremony,

in that encampment, that the whole equipage should be tacitly regarded

as the private property of the jobber for the time being, and that the

job-master should betray personal knowledge of nobody but the jobber

in possession. So the Circumlocution Barnacles, who were the largest

job-masters in the universe, always pretended to know of no other job

but the job immediately in hand.

Mrs Merdle was at home, and was in her nest of crimson and gold, with

the parrot on a neighbouring stem watching her with his head on one

side, as if he took her for another splendid parrot of a larger species.

To whom entered Mrs Gowan, with her favourite green fan, which softened

the light on the spots of bloom.

'My dear soul,' said Mrs Gowan, tapping the back of her friend's hand

with this fan after a little indifferent conversation, 'you are my only

comfort. That affair of Henry's that I told you of, is to take place.

Now, how does it strike you? I am dying to know, because you represent

and express Society so well.'

Mrs Merdle reviewed the bosom which Society was accustomed to review;

and having ascertained that show-window of Mr Merdle's and the London

jewellers' to be in good order, replied:

'As to marriage on the part of a man, my dear, Society requires that

he should retrieve his fortunes by marriage. Society requires that

he should gain by marriage. Society requires that he should found a

handsome establishment by marriage. Society does not see, otherwise,

what he has to do with marriage. Bird, be quiet!'

For the parrot on his cage above them, presiding over the conference as

if he were a judge (and indeed he looked rather like one), had wound up

the exposition with a shriek.

'Cases there are,' said Mrs Merdle, delicately crooking the little

finger of her favourite hand, and making her remarks neater by that neat

action; 'cases there are where a man is not young or elegant, and is

rich, and has a handsome establishment already. Those are of a different

kind. In such cases--'

Mrs Merdle shrugged her snowy shoulders and put her hand upon the

jewel-stand, checking a little cough, as though to add, 'why, a man

looks out for this sort of thing, my dear.' Then the parrot shrieked

again, and she put up her glass to look at him, and said, 'Bird! Do be

quiet!' 'But, young men,' resumed Mrs Merdle, 'and by young men you know

what I mean, my love--I mean people's sons who have the world before

them--they must place themselves in a better position towards Society by

marriage, or Society really will not have any patience with their making

fools of themselves. Dreadfully worldly all this sounds,' said Mrs

Merdle, leaning back in her nest and putting up her glass again, 'does

it not?'

'But it is true,' said Mrs Gowan, with a highly moral air.

'My dear, it is not to be disputed for a moment,' returned Mrs Merdle;

'because Society has made up its mind on the subject, and there is

nothing more to be said. If we were in a more primitive state, if we

lived under roofs of leaves, and kept cows and sheep and creatures

instead of banker's accounts (which would be delicious; my dear, I am

pastoral to a degree, by nature), well and good. But we don't live

under leaves, and keep cows and sheep and creatures. I perfectly exhaust

myself sometimes, in pointing out the distinction to Edmund Sparkler.'

Mrs Gowan, looking over her green fan when this young gentleman's name

was mentioned, replied as follows:

'My love, you know the wretched state of the country--those unfortunate

concessions of John Barnacle's!--and you therefore know the reasons for

my being as poor as Thingummy.'

'A church mouse?' Mrs Merdle suggested with a smile.

'I was thinking of the other proverbial church person--Job,' said Mrs

Gowan. 'Either will do. It would be idle to disguise, consequently, that

there is a wide difference between the position of your son and mine. I

may add, too, that Henry has talent--'

'Which Edmund certainly has not,' said Mrs Merdle, with the greatest

suavity.

'--and that his talent, combined with disappointment,' Mrs Gowan went

on, 'has led him into a pursuit which--ah dear me! You know, my dear.

Such being Henry's different position, the question is what is the most

inferior class of marriage to which I can reconcile myself.'

Mrs Merdle was so much engaged with the contemplation of her arms

(beautiful-formed arms, and the very thing for bracelets), that she

omitted to reply for a while. Roused at length by the silence, she

folded the arms, and with admirable presence of mind looked her friend

full in the face, and said interrogatively, 'Ye-es? And then?'

'And then, my dear,' said Mrs Gowan not quite so sweetly as before, 'I

should be glad to hear what you have to say to it.'

Here the parrot, who had been standing on one leg since he screamed

last, burst into a fit of laughter, bobbed himself derisively up and

down on both legs, and finished by standing on one leg again, and

pausing for a reply, with his head as much awry as he could possibly

twist it.

'Sounds mercenary to ask what the gentleman is to get with the lady,'

said Mrs Merdle; 'but Society is perhaps a little mercenary, you know,

my dear.'

'From what I can make out,' said Mrs Gowan, 'I believe I may say that

Henry will be relieved from debt--'

'Much in debt?' asked Mrs Merdle through her eyeglass.

'Why tolerably, I should think,' said Mrs Gowan.

'Meaning the usual thing; I understand; just so,' Mrs Merdle observed in

a comfortable sort of way.

'And that the father will make them an allowance of three hundred

a-year, or perhaps altogether something more, which, in Italy-'

'Oh! Going to Italy?' said Mrs Merdle.

'For Henry to study. You need be at no loss to guess why, my dear.

That dreadful Art--'

True. Mrs Merdle hastened to spare the feelings of her afflicted friend.

She understood. Say no more!

'And that,' said Mrs Gowan, shaking her despondent head, 'that's all.

That,' repeated Mrs Gowan, furling her green fan for the moment, and

tapping her chin with it (it was on the way to being a double chin;

might be called a chin and a half at present), 'that's all! On the death

of the old people, I suppose there will be more to come; but how it may

be restricted or locked up, I don't know. And as to that, they may live

for ever. My dear, they are just the kind of people to do it.'

Now, Mrs Merdle, who really knew her friend Society pretty well, and who

knew what Society's mothers were, and what Society's daughters were, and

what Society's matrimonial market was, and how prices ruled in it, and

what scheming and counter-scheming took place for the high buyers, and

what bargaining and huckstering went on, thought in the depths of

her capacious bosom that this was a sufficiently good catch. Knowing,

however, what was expected of her, and perceiving the exact nature of

the fiction to be nursed, she took it delicately in her arms, and put

her required contribution of gloss upon it.

'And that is all, my dear?' said she, heaving a friendly sigh. 'Well,

well! The fault is not yours. You have nothing to reproach yourself

with. You must exercise the strength of mind for which you are renowned,

and make the best of it.' 'The girl's family have made,' said Mrs Gowan,

'of course, the most strenuous endeavours to--as the lawyers say--to

have and to hold Henry.'

'Of course they have, my dear,' said Mrs Merdle.

'I have persisted in every possible objection, and have worried

myself morning, noon, and night, for means to detach Henry from the

connection.'

'No doubt you have, my dear,' said Mrs Merdle.

'And all of no use. All has broken down beneath me. Now tell me, my

love. Am I justified in at last yielding my most reluctant consent to

Henry's marrying among people not in Society; or, have I acted with

inexcusable weakness?'

In answer to this direct appeal, Mrs Merdle assured Mrs Gowan (speaking

as a Priestess of Society) that she was highly to be commended, that

she was much to be sympathised with, that she had taken the highest of

parts, and had come out of the furnace refined. And Mrs Gowan, who of

course saw through her own threadbare blind perfectly, and who knew that

Mrs Merdle saw through it perfectly, and who knew that Society would see

through it perfectly, came out of this form, notwithstanding, as she had

gone into it, with immense complacency and gravity.

The conference was held at four or five o'clock in the afternoon, when

all the region of Harley Street, Cavendish Square, was resonant of

carriage-wheels and double-knocks. It had reached this point when Mr

Merdle came home from his daily occupation of causing the British

name to be more and more respected in all parts of the civilised globe

capable of the appreciation of world-wide commercial enterprise and

gigantic combinations of skill and capital. For, though nobody knew with

the least precision what Mr Merdle's business was, except that it was

to coin money, these were the terms in which everybody defined it on all

ceremonious occasions, and which it was the last new polite reading of

the parable of the camel and the needle's eye to accept without inquiry.

For a gentleman who had this splendid work cut out for him, Mr Merdle

looked a little common, and rather as if, in the course of his vast

transactions, he had accidentally made an interchange of heads with

some inferior spirit. He presented himself before the two ladies in the

course of a dismal stroll through his mansion, which had no apparent

object but escape from the presence of the chief butler.

'I beg your pardon,' he said, stopping short in confusion; 'I didn't

know there was anybody here but the parrot.'

However, as Mrs Merdle said, 'You can come in!' and as Mrs Gowan said

she was just going, and had already risen to take her leave, he came in,

and stood looking out at a distant window, with his hands crossed under

his uneasy coat-cuffs, clasping his wrists as if he were taking himself

into custody. In this attitude he fell directly into a reverie from

which he was only aroused by his wife's calling to him from her ottoman,

when they had been for some quarter of an hour alone.

'Eh? Yes?' said Mr Merdle, turning towards her. 'What is it?'

'What is it?' repeated Mrs Merdle. 'It is, I suppose, that you have not

heard a word of my complaint.'

'Your complaint, Mrs Merdle?' said Mr Merdle. 'I didn't know that you

were suffering from a complaint. What complaint?'

'A complaint of you,' said Mrs Merdle.

'Oh! A complaint of me,' said Mr Merdle. 'What is the--what have I--what

may you have to complain of in me, Mrs Merdle?' In his withdrawing,

abstracted, pondering way, it took him some time to shape this question.

As a kind of faint attempt to convince himself that he was the master of

the house, he concluded by presenting his forefinger to the parrot, who

expressed his opinion on that subject by instantly driving his bill into

it.

'You were saying, Mrs Merdle,' said Mr Merdle, with his wounded finger

in his mouth, 'that you had a complaint against me?'

'A complaint which I could scarcely show the justice of more

emphatically, than by having to repeat it,' said Mrs Merdle. 'I might as

well have stated it to the wall. I had far better have stated it to the

bird. He would at least have screamed.'

'You don't want me to scream, Mrs Merdle, I suppose,' said Mr Merdle,

taking a chair.

'Indeed I don't know,' retorted Mrs Merdle, 'but that you had better do

that, than be so moody and distraught. One would at least know that you

were sensible of what was going on around you.'

'A man might scream, and yet not be that, Mrs Merdle,' said Mr Merdle,

heavily.

'And might be dogged, as you are at present, without screaming,'

returned Mrs Merdle. 'That's very true. If you wish to know the

complaint I make against you, it is, in so many plain words, that you

really ought not to go into Society unless you can accommodate yourself

to Society.'

Mr Merdle, so twisting his hands into what hair he had upon his head

that he seemed to lift himself up by it as he started out of his chair,

cried: 'Why, in the name of all the infernal powers, Mrs Merdle, who

does more for Society than I do? Do you see these premises, Mrs Merdle?

Do you see this furniture, Mrs Merdle? Do you look in the glass and see

yourself, Mrs Merdle? Do you know the cost of all this, and who it's

all provided for? And yet will you tell me that I oughtn't to go into

Society? I, who shower money upon it in this way? I, who might always be

said--to--to--to harness myself to a watering-cart full of money, and go

about saturating Society every day of my life.'

'Pray, don't be violent, Mr Merdle,' said Mrs Merdle.

'Violent?' said Mr Merdle. 'You are enough to make me desperate. You

don't know half of what I do to accommodate Society. You don't know

anything of the sacrifices I make for it.'

'I know,' returned Mrs Merdle, 'that you receive the best in the land. I

know that you move in the whole Society of the country. And I believe

I know (indeed, not to make any ridiculous pretence about it, I know I

know) who sustains you in it, Mr Merdle.'

'Mrs Merdle,' retorted that gentleman, wiping his dull red and yellow

face, 'I know that as well as you do. If you were not an ornament to

Society, and if I was not a benefactor to Society, you and I would never

have come together. When I say a benefactor to it, I mean a person who

provides it with all sorts of expensive things to eat and drink and look

at. But, to tell me that I am not fit for it after all I have done

for it--after all I have done for it,' repeated Mr Merdle, with a wild

emphasis that made his wife lift up her eyelids, 'after all--all!--to

tell me I have no right to mix with it after all, is a pretty reward.'

'I say,' answered Mrs Merdle composedly, 'that you ought to make

yourself fit for it by being more degage, and less preoccupied. There is

a positive vulgarity in carrying your business affairs about with you as

you do.' 'How do I carry them about, Mrs Merdle?' asked Mr Merdle.

'How do you carry them about?' said Mrs Merdle. 'Look at yourself in the

glass.'

Mr Merdle involuntarily turned his eyes in the direction of the nearest

mirror, and asked, with a slow determination of his turbid blood to his

temples, whether a man was to be called to account for his digestion?

'You have a physician,' said Mrs Merdle.

'He does me no good,' said Mr Merdle.

Mrs Merdle changed her ground.

'Besides,' said she, 'your digestion is nonsense. I don't speak of your

digestion. I speak of your manner.' 'Mrs Merdle,' returned her husband,

'I look to you for that. You supply manner, and I supply money.'

'I don't expect you,' said Mrs Merdle, reposing easily among her

cushions, 'to captivate people. I don't want you to take any trouble

upon yourself, or to try to be fascinating. I simply request you to care

about nothing--or seem to care about nothing--as everybody else does.'

'Do I ever say I care about anything?' asked Mr Merdle.

'Say? No! Nobody would attend to you if you did. But you show it.'

'Show what? What do I show?' demanded Mr Merdle hurriedly.

'I have already told you. You show that you carry your business cares

an projects about, instead of leaving them in the City, or wherever else

they belong to,' said Mrs Merdle. 'Or seeming to. Seeming would be quite

enough: I ask no more. Whereas you couldn't be more occupied with your

day's calculations and combinations than you habitually show yourself to

be, if you were a carpenter.'

'A carpenter!' repeated Mr Merdle, checking something like a groan.

'I shouldn't so much mind being a carpenter, Mrs Merdle.'

'And my complaint is,' pursued the lady, disregarding the low remark,

'that it is not the tone of Society, and that you ought to correct

it, Mr Merdle. If you have any doubt of my judgment, ask even Edmund

Sparkler.' The door of the room had opened, and Mrs Merdle now surveyed

the head of her son through her glass. 'Edmund; we want you here.'

Mr Sparkler, who had merely put in his head and looked round the room

without entering (as if he were searching the house for that young lady

with no nonsense about her), upon this followed up his head with his

body, and stood before them. To whom, in a few easy words adapted to his

capacity, Mrs Merdle stated the question at issue.

The young gentleman, after anxiously feeling his shirt-collar as if it

were his pulse and he were hypochondriacal, observed, 'That he had heard

it noticed by fellers.'

'Edmund Sparkler has heard it noticed,' said Mrs Merdle, with languid

triumph. 'Why, no doubt everybody has heard it noticed!' Which in truth

was no unreasonable inference; seeing that Mr Sparkler would probably be

the last person, in any assemblage of the human species, to receive an

impression from anything that passed in his presence.

'And Edmund Sparkler will tell you, I dare say,' said Mrs Merdle, waving

her favourite hand towards her husband, 'how he has heard it noticed.'

'I couldn't,' said Mr Sparkler, after feeling his pulse as before,

'couldn't undertake to say what led to it--'cause memory desperate

loose. But being in company with the brother of a doosed fine gal--well

educated too--with no biggodd nonsense about her--at the period alluded

to--'

'There! Never mind the sister,' remarked Mrs Merdle, a little

impatiently. 'What did the brother say?'

'Didn't say a word, ma'am,' answered Mr Sparkler. 'As silent a feller as

myself. Equally hard up for a remark.'

'Somebody said something,' returned Mrs Merdle. 'Never mind who it was.'

('Assure you I don't in the least,' said Mr Sparkler.)

'But tell us what it was.'

Mr Sparkler referred to his pulse again, and put himself through some

severe mental discipline before he replied:

'Fellers referring to my Governor--expression not my own--occasionally

compliment my Governor in a very handsome way on being immensely rich

and knowing--perfect phenomenon of Buyer and Banker and that--but say

the Shop sits heavily on him. Say he carried the Shop about, on his back

rather--like Jew clothesmen with too much business.'

'Which,' said Mrs Merdle, rising, with her floating drapery about her,

'is exactly my complaint. Edmund, give me your arm up-stairs.'

Mr Merdle, left alone to meditate on a better conformation of himself to

Society, looked out of nine windows in succession, and appeared to

see nine wastes of space. When he had thus entertained himself he went

down-stairs, and looked intently at all the carpets on the ground-floor;

and then came up-stairs again, and looked intently at all the carpets

on the first-floor; as if they were gloomy depths, in unison with his

oppressed soul. Through all the rooms he wandered, as he always did,

like the last person on earth who had any business to approach them. Let

Mrs Merdle announce, with all her might, that she was at Home ever

so many nights in a season, she could not announce more widely and

unmistakably than Mr Merdle did that he was never at home.

At last he met the chief butler, the sight of which splendid retainer

always finished him. Extinguished by this great creature, he sneaked

to his dressing-room, and there remained shut up until he rode out to

dinner, with Mrs Merdle, in her own handsome chariot. At dinner, he was

envied and flattered as a being of might, was Treasuried, Barred, and

Bishoped, as much as he would; and an hour after midnight came home

alone, and being instantly put out again in his own hall, like a

rushlight, by the chief butler, went sighing to bed.

CHAPTER 34. A Shoal of Barnacles

Mr Henry Gowan and the dog were established frequenters of the cottage,

and the day was fixed for the wedding. There was to be a convocation of

Barnacles on the occasion, in order that that very high and very large

family might shed as much lustre on the marriage as so dim an event was

capable of receiving.

To have got the whole Barnacle family together would have been

impossible for two reasons. Firstly, because no building could have held

all the members and connections of that illustrious house. Secondly,

because wherever there was a square yard of ground in British occupation

under the sun or moon, with a public post upon it, sticking to that post

was a Barnacle. No intrepid navigator could plant a flag-staff upon any

spot of earth, and take possession of it in the British name, but

to that spot of earth, so soon as the discovery was known, the

Circumlocution Office sent out a Barnacle and a despatch-box. Thus the

Barnacles were all over the world, in every direction--despatch-boxing

the compass.

But, while the so-potent art of Prospero himself would have failed in

summoning the Barnacles from every speck of ocean and dry land on

which there was nothing (except mischief) to be done and anything to be

pocketed, it was perfectly feasible to assemble a good many Barnacles.

This Mrs Gowan applied herself to do; calling on Mr Meagles frequently

with new additions to the list, and holding conferences with that

gentleman when he was not engaged (as he generally was at this period)

in examining and paying the debts of his future son-in-law, in the

apartment of scales and scoops.

One marriage guest there was, in reference to whose presence Mr Meagles

felt a nearer interest and concern than in the attendance of the most

elevated Barnacle expected; though he was far from insensible of the

honour of having such company. This guest was Clennam. But Clennam had

made a promise he held sacred, among the trees that summer night, and,

in the chivalry of his heart, regarded it as binding him to many implied

obligations. In forgetfulness of himself, and delicate service to her on

all occasions, he was never to fail; to begin it, he answered Mr Meagles

cheerfully, 'I shall come, of course.'

His partner, Daniel Doyce, was something of a stumbling-block in Mr

Meagles's way, the worthy gentleman being not at all clear in his own

anxious mind but that the mingling of Daniel with official Barnacleism

might produce some explosive combination, even at a marriage breakfast.

The national offender, however, lightened him of his uneasiness by

coming down to Twickenham to represent that he begged, with the freedom

of an old friend, and as a favour to one, that he might not be invited.

'For,' said he, 'as my business with this set of gentlemen was to do a

public duty and a public service, and as their business with me was to

prevent it by wearing my soul out, I think we had better not eat and

drink together with a show of being of one mind.' Mr Meagles was much

amused by his friend's oddity; and patronised him with a more protecting

air of allowance than usual, when he rejoined: 'Well, well, Dan, you

shall have your own crotchety way.'

To Mr Henry Gowan, as the time approached, Clennam tried to convey

by all quiet and unpretending means, that he was frankly and

disinterestedly desirous of tendering him any friendship he would

accept. Mr Gowan treated him in return with his usual ease, and with his

usual show of confidence, which was no confidence at all.

'You see, Clennam,' he happened to remark in the course of conversation

one day, when they were walking near the Cottage within a week of the

marriage, 'I am a disappointed man. That you know already.'

'Upon my word,' said Clennam, a little embarrassed, 'I scarcely know

how.'

'Why,' returned Gowan, 'I belong to a clan, or a clique, or a family, or

a connection, or whatever you like to call it, that might have provided

for me in any one of fifty ways, and that took it into its head not to

do it at all. So here I am, a poor devil of an artist.'

Clennam was beginning, 'But on the other hand--' when Gowan took him up.

'Yes, yes, I know. I have the good fortune of being beloved by a

beautiful and charming girl whom I love with all my heart.' ('Is there

much of it?' Clennam thought. And as he thought it, felt ashamed of

himself.)

'And of finding a father-in-law who is a capital fellow and a liberal

good old boy. Still, I had other prospects washed and combed into my

childish head when it was washed and combed for me, and I took them to

a public school when I washed and combed it for myself, and I am here

without them, and thus I am a disappointed man.'

Clennam thought (and as he thought it, again felt ashamed of himself),

was this notion of being disappointed in life, an assertion of station

which the bridegroom brought into the family as his property, having

already carried it detrimentally into his pursuit? And was it a hopeful

or a promising thing anywhere?

'Not bitterly disappointed, I think,' he said aloud. 'Hang it, no; not

bitterly,' laughed Gowan. 'My people are not worth that--though they are

charming fellows, and I have the greatest affection for them. Besides,

it's pleasant to show them that I can do without them, and that they may

all go to the Devil. And besides, again, most men are disappointed in

life, somehow or other, and influenced by their disappointment. But it's

a dear good world, and I love it!'

'It lies fair before you now,' said Arthur.

'Fair as this summer river,' cried the other, with enthusiasm, 'and by

Jove I glow with admiration of it, and with ardour to run a race in it.

It's the best of old worlds! And my calling! The best of old callings,

isn't it?'

'Full of interest and ambition, I conceive,' said Clennam.

'And imposition,' added Gowan, laughing; 'we won't leave out the

imposition. I hope I may not break down in that; but there, my being

a disappointed man may show itself. I may not be able to face it out

gravely enough. Between you and me, I think there is some danger of my

being just enough soured not to be able to do that.'

'To do what?' asked Clennam.

'To keep it up. To help myself in my turn, as the man before me helps

himself in his, and pass the bottle of smoke. To keep up the pretence

as to labour, and study, and patience, and being devoted to my art, and

giving up many solitary days to it, and abandoning many pleasures for

it, and living in it, and all the rest of it--in short, to pass the

bottle of smoke according to rule.'

'But it is well for a man to respect his own vocation, whatever it is;

and to think himself bound to uphold it, and to claim for it the respect

it deserves; is it not?' Arthur reasoned. 'And your vocation, Gowan,

may really demand this suit and service. I confess I should have thought

that all Art did.'

'What a good fellow you are, Clennam!' exclaimed the other, stopping

to look at him, as if with irrepressible admiration. 'What a capital

fellow! You have never been disappointed. That's easy to see.'

It would have been so cruel if he had meant it, that Clennam firmly

resolved to believe he did not mean it. Gowan, without pausing, laid his

hand upon his shoulder, and laughingly and lightly went on:

'Clennam, I don't like to dispel your generous visions, and I would give

any money (if I had any), to live in such a rose-coloured mist. But what

I do in my trade, I do to sell. What all we fellows do, we do to

sell. If we didn't want to sell it for the most we can get for it, we

shouldn't do it. Being work, it has to be done; but it's easily enough

done. All the rest is hocus-pocus.

Now here's one of the advantages, or disadvantages, of knowing a

disappointed man. You hear the truth.'

Whatever he had heard, and whether it deserved that name or another, it

sank into Clennam's mind. It so took root there, that he began to fear

Henry Gowan would always be a trouble to him, and that so far he had

gained little or nothing from the dismissal of Nobody, with all his

inconsistencies, anxieties, and contradictions. He found a contest still

always going on in his breast between his promise to keep Gowan in

none but good aspects before the mind of Mr Meagles, and his enforced

observation of Gowan in aspects that had no good in them. Nor could he

quite support his own conscientious nature against misgivings that he

distorted and discoloured himself, by reminding himself that he never

sought those discoveries, and that he would have avoided them with

willingness and great relief. For he never could forget what he had

been; and he knew that he had once disliked Gowan for no better reason

than that he had come in his way.

Harassed by these thoughts, he now began to wish the marriage over,

Gowan and his young wife gone, and himself left to fulfil his promise,

and discharge the generous function he had accepted. This last week was,

in truth, an uneasy interval for the whole house. Before Pet, or before

Gowan, Mr Meagles was radiant; but Clennam had more than once found him

alone, with his view of the scales and scoop much blurred, and had often

seen him look after the lovers, in the garden or elsewhere when he was

not seen by them, with the old clouded face on which Gowan had fallen

like a shadow. In the arrangement of the house for the great occasion,

many little reminders of the old travels of the father and mother

and daughter had to be disturbed and passed from hand to hand; and

sometimes, in the midst of these mute witnesses, to the life they had

had together, even Pet herself would yield to lamenting and weeping.

Mrs Meagles, the blithest and busiest of mothers, went about singing

and cheering everybody; but she, honest soul, had her flights into store

rooms, where she would cry until her eyes were red, and would then

come out, attributing that appearance to pickled onions and pepper, and

singing clearer than ever. Mrs Tickit, finding no balsam for a wounded

mind in Buchan's Domestic Medicine, suffered greatly from low spirits,

and from moving recollections of Minnie's infancy. When the latter was

powerful with her, she usually sent up secret messages importing

that she was not in parlour condition as to her attire, and that she

solicited a sight of 'her child' in the kitchen; there, she would bless

her child's face, and bless her child's heart, and hug her child, in a

medley of tears and congratulations, chopping-boards, rolling-pins, and

pie-crust, with the tenderness of an old attached servant, which is a

very pretty tenderness indeed.

But all days come that are to be; and the marriage-day was to be, and it

came; and with it came all the Barnacles who were bidden to the feast.

There was Mr Tite Barnacle, from the Circumlocution Office, and Mews

Street, Grosvenor Square, with the expensive Mrs Tite Barnacle NEE

Stiltstalking, who made the Quarter Days so long in coming, and the

three expensive Miss Tite Barnacles, double-loaded with accomplishments

and ready to go off, and yet not going off with the sharpness of flash

and bang that might have been expected, but rather hanging fire. There

was Barnacle junior, also from the Circumlocution Office, leaving the

Tonnage of the country, which he was somehow supposed to take under

his protection, to look after itself, and, sooth to say, not at all

impairing the efficiency of its protection by leaving it alone. There

was the engaging Young Barnacle, deriving from the sprightly side of the

family, also from the Circumlocution Office, gaily and agreeably helping

the occasion along, and treating it, in his sparkling way, as one of the

official forms and fees of the Church Department of How not to do it.

There were three other Young Barnacles from three other offices, insipid

to all the senses, and terribly in want of seasoning, doing the marriage

as they would have 'done' the Nile, Old Rome, the new singer, or

Jerusalem.

But there was greater game than this. There was Lord Decimus Tite

Barnacle himself, in the odour of Circumlocution--with the very smell of

Despatch-Boxes upon him. Yes, there was Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle, who

had risen to official heights on the wings of one indignant idea, and

that was, My Lords, that I am yet to be told that it behoves a Minister

of this free country to set bounds to the philanthropy, to cramp the

charity, to fetter the public spirit, to contract the enterprise, to

damp the independent self-reliance, of its people. That was, in other

words, that this great statesman was always yet to be told that it

behoved the Pilot of the ship to do anything but prosper in the private

loaf and fish trade ashore, the crew being able, by dint of hard

pumping, to keep the ship above water without him. On this sublime

discovery in the great art How not to do it, Lord Decimus had long

sustained the highest glory of the Barnacle family; and let any

ill-advised member of either House but try How to do it by bringing in

a Bill to do it, that Bill was as good as dead and buried when Lord

Decimus Tite Barnacle rose up in his place and solemnly said, soaring

into indignant majesty as the Circumlocution cheering soared around

him, that he was yet to be told, My Lords, that it behoved him as the

Minister of this free country, to set bounds to the philanthropy,

to cramp the charity, to fetter the public spirit, to contract the

enterprise, to damp the independent self-reliance, of its people. The

discovery of this Behoving Machine was the discovery of the political

perpetual motion. It never wore out, though it was always going round

and round in all the State Departments.

And there, with his noble friend and relative Lord Decimus, was

William Barnacle, who had made the ever-famous coalition with Tudor

Stiltstalking, and who always kept ready his own particular recipe for

How not to do it; sometimes tapping the Speaker, and drawing it fresh

out of him, with a 'First, I will beg you, sir, to inform the House what

Precedent we have for the course into which the honourable gentleman

would precipitate us;' sometimes asking the honourable gentleman to

favour him with his own version of the Precedent; sometimes telling

the honourable gentleman that he (William Barnacle) would search for a

Precedent; and oftentimes crushing the honourable gentleman flat on

the spot by telling him there was no Precedent. But Precedent and

Precipitate were, under all circumstances, the well-matched pair of

battle-horses of this able Circumlocutionist. No matter that the unhappy

honourable gentleman had been trying in vain, for twenty-five years, to

precipitate William Barnacle into this--William Barnacle still put it to

the House, and (at second-hand or so) to the country, whether he was to

be precipitated into this. No matter that it was utterly irreconcilable

with the nature of things and course of events that the wretched

honourable gentleman could possibly produce a Precedent for

this--William Barnacle would nevertheless thank the honourable gentleman

for that ironical cheer, and would close with him upon that issue, and

would tell him to his teeth that there Was NO Precedent for this. It

might perhaps have been objected that the William Barnacle wisdom was

not high wisdom or the earth it bamboozled would never have been made,

or, if made in a rash mistake, would have remained blank mud. But

Precedent and Precipitate together frightened all objection out of most

people.

And there, too, was another Barnacle, a lively one, who had leaped

through twenty places in quick succession, and was always in two or

three at once, and who was the much-respected inventor of an art

which he practised with great success and admiration in all Barnacle

Governments. This was, when he was asked a Parliamentary question on

any one topic, to return an answer on any other. It had done immense

service, and brought him into high esteem with the Circumlocution

Office.

And there, too, was a sprinkling of less distinguished Parliamentary

Barnacles, who had not as yet got anything snug, and were going through

their probation to prove their worthiness. These Barnacles perched upon

staircases and hid in passages, waiting their orders to make houses

or not to make houses; and they did all their hearing, and ohing, and

cheering, and barking, under directions from the heads of the family;

and they put dummy motions on the paper in the way of other men's

motions; and they stalled disagreeable subjects off until late in the

night and late in the session, and then with virtuous patriotism cried

out that it was too late; and they went down into the country, whenever

they were sent, and swore that Lord Decimus had revived trade from a

swoon, and commerce from a fit, and had doubled the harvest of corn,

quadrupled the harvest of hay, and prevented no end of gold from flying

out of the Bank. Also these Barnacles were dealt, by the heads of the

family, like so many cards below the court-cards, to public meetings and

dinners; where they bore testimony to all sorts of services on the part

of their noble and honourable relatives, and buttered the Barnacles on

all sorts of toasts. And they stood, under similar orders, at all sorts

of elections; and they turned out of their own seats, on the shortest

notice and the most unreasonable terms, to let in other men; and they

fetched and carried, and toadied and jobbed, and corrupted, and ate

heaps of dirt, and were indefatigable in the public service. And there

was not a list, in all the Circumlocution Office, of places that might

fall vacant anywhere within half a century, from a lord of the Treasury

to a Chinese consul, and up again to a governor-general of India, but as

applicants for such places, the names of some or of every one of these

hungry and adhesive Barnacles were down.

It was necessarily but a sprinkling of any class of Barnacles that

attended the marriage, for there were not two score in all, and what

is that subtracted from Legion! But the sprinkling was a swarm in the

Twickenham cottage, and filled it. A Barnacle (assisted by a Barnacle)

married the happy pair, and it behoved Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle

himself to conduct Mrs Meagles to breakfast.

The entertainment was not as agreeable and natural as it might have

been. Mr Meagles, hove down by his good company while he highly

appreciated it, was not himself. Mrs Gowan was herself, and that did not

improve him. The fiction that it was not Mr Meagles who had stood in the

way, but that it was the Family greatness, and that the Family greatness

had made a concession, and there was now a soothing unanimity, pervaded

the affair, though it was never openly expressed. Then the Barnacles

felt that they for their parts would have done with the Meagleses when

the present patronising occasion was over; and the Meagleses felt the

same for their parts. Then Gowan asserting his rights as a disappointed

man who had his grudge against the family, and who, perhaps, had allowed

his mother to have them there, as much in the hope it might give them

some annoyance as with any other benevolent object, aired his pencil and

his poverty ostentatiously before them, and told them he hoped in time

to settle a crust of bread and cheese on his wife, and that he begged

such of them as (more fortunate than himself) came in for any good

thing, and could buy a picture, to please to remember the poor painter.

Then Lord Decimus, who was a wonder on his own Parliamentary pedestal,

turned out to be the windiest creature here: proposing happiness to the

bride and bridegroom in a series of platitudes that would have made the

hair of any sincere disciple and believer stand on end; and trotting,

with the complacency of an idiotic elephant, among howling labyrinths of

sentences which he seemed to take for high roads, and never so much

as wanted to get out of. Then Mr Tite Barnacle could not but feel that

there was a person in company, who would have disturbed his life-long

sitting to Sir Thomas Lawrence in full official character, if such

disturbance had been possible: while Barnacle junior did, with

indignation, communicate to two vapid gentlemen, his relatives, that

there was a feller here, look here, who had come to our Department

without an appointment and said he wanted to know, you know; and that,

look here, if he was to break out now, as he might you know (for you

never could tell what an ungentlemanly Radical of that sort would be up

to next), and was to say, look here, that he wanted to know this moment,

you know, that would be jolly; wouldn't it?

The pleasantest part of the occasion by far, to Clennam, was the

painfullest. When Mr and Mrs Meagles at last hung about Pet in the room

with the two pictures (where the company were not), before going with

her to the threshold which she could never recross to be the old Pet and

the old delight, nothing could be more natural and simple than the three

were. Gowan himself was touched, and answered Mr Meagles's 'O Gowan,

take care of her, take care of her!' with an earnest 'Don't be so

broken-hearted, sir. By Heaven I will!'

And so, with the last sobs and last loving words, and a last look to

Clennam of confidence in his promise, Pet fell back in the carriage,

and her husband waved his hand, and they were away for Dover; though not

until the faithful Mrs Tickit, in her silk gown and jet black curls, had

rushed out from some hiding-place, and thrown both her shoes after

the carriage: an apparition which occasioned great surprise to the

distinguished company at the windows.

The said company being now relieved from further attendance, and the

chief Barnacles being rather hurried (for they had it in hand just

then to send a mail or two which was in danger of going straight to its

destination, beating about the seas like the Flying Dutchman, and to

arrange with complexity for the stoppage of a good deal of important

business otherwise in peril of being done), went their several ways;

with all affability conveying to Mr and Mrs Meagles that general

assurance that what they had been doing there, they had been doing at a

sacrifice for Mr and Mrs Meagles's good, which they always conveyed to

Mr John Bull in their official condescension to that most unfortunate

creature.

A miserable blank remained in the house and in the hearts of the father

and mother and Clennam. Mr Meagles called only one remembrance to his

aid, that really did him good.

'It's very gratifying, Arthur,' he said, 'after all, to look back upon.'

'The past?' said Clennam.

'Yes--but I mean the company.'

It had made him much more low and unhappy at the time, but now it really

did him good. 'It's very gratifying,' he said, often repeating the

remark in the course of the evening. 'Such high company!'

CHAPTER 35. What was behind Mr Pancks on Little Dorrit's Hand

It was at this time that Mr Pancks, in discharge of his compact with

Clennam, revealed to him the whole of his gipsy story, and told him

Little Dorrit's fortune. Her father was heir-at-law to a great estate

that had long lain unknown of, unclaimed, and accumulating. His right

was now clear, nothing interposed in his way, the Marshalsea gates stood

open, the Marshalsea walls were down, a few flourishes of his pen, and

he was extremely rich.

In his tracking out of the claim to its complete establishment, Mr

Pancks had shown a sagacity that nothing could baffle, and a patience

and secrecy that nothing could tire. 'I little thought, sir,' said

Pancks, 'when you and I crossed Smithfield that night, and I told you

what sort of a Collector I was, that this would come of it. I little

thought, sir, when I told you you were not of the Clennams of

Cornwall, that I was ever going to tell you who were of the Dorrits of

Dorsetshire.' He then went on to detail. How, having that name recorded

in his note-book, he was first attracted by the name alone. How, having

often found two exactly similar names, even belonging to the same place,

to involve no traceable consanguinity, near or distant, he did not at

first give much heed to this, except in the way of speculation as to

what a surprising change would be made in the condition of a little

seamstress, if she could be shown to have any interest in so large a

property. How he rather supposed himself to have pursued the idea into

its next degree, because there was something uncommon in the quiet

little seamstress, which pleased him and provoked his curiosity.

How he had felt his way inch by inch, and 'Moled it out, sir' (that was

Mr Pancks's expression), grain by grain. How, in the beginning of

the labour described by this new verb, and to render which the more

expressive Mr Pancks shut his eyes in pronouncing it and shook his hair

over them, he had alternated from sudden lights and hopes to sudden

darkness and no hopes, and back again, and back again. How he had made

acquaintances in the Prison, expressly that he might come and go there

as all other comers and goers did; and how his first ray of light was

unconsciously given him by Mr Dorrit himself and by his son; to both of

whom he easily became known; with both of whom he talked much, casually

('but always Moleing you'll observe,' said Mr Pancks): and from whom he

derived, without being at all suspected, two or three little points of

family history which, as he began to hold clues of his own, suggested

others. How it had at length become plain to Mr Pancks that he had made

a real discovery of the heir-at-law to a great fortune, and that his

discovery had but to be ripened to legal fulness and perfection. How

he had, thereupon, sworn his landlord, Mr Rugg, to secrecy in a solemn

manner, and taken him into Moleing partnership.

How they had employed John Chivery as their sole clerk and agent,

seeing to whom he was devoted. And how, until the present hour, when

authorities mighty in the Bank and learned in the law declared their

successful labours ended, they had confided in no other human being.

'So if the whole thing had broken down, sir,' concluded Pancks, 'at the

very last, say the day before the other day when I showed you our papers

in the Prison yard, or say that very day, nobody but ourselves would

have been cruelly disappointed, or a penny the worse.'

Clennam, who had been almost incessantly shaking hands with him

throughout the narrative, was reminded by this to say, in an amazement

which even the preparation he had had for the main disclosure smoothed

down, 'My dear Mr Pancks, this must have cost you a great sum of money.'

'Pretty well, sir,' said the triumphant Pancks. 'No trifle, though we

did it as cheap as it could be done. And the outlay was a difficulty,

let me tell you.'

'A difficulty!' repeated Clennam. 'But the difficulties you have so

wonderfully conquered in the whole business!' shaking his hand again.

'I'll tell you how I did it,' said the delighted Pancks, putting his

hair into a condition as elevated as himself. 'First, I spent all I had

of my own. That wasn't much.'

'I am sorry for it,' said Clennam: 'not that it matters now, though.

Then, what did you do?'

'Then,' answered Pancks, 'I borrowed a sum of my proprietor.'

'Of Mr Casby?' said Clennam. 'He's a fine old fellow.'

'Noble old boy; an't he?' said Mr Pancks, entering on a series of the

dryest snorts. 'Generous old buck. Confiding old boy. Philanthropic old

buck. Benevolent old boy! Twenty per cent. I engaged to pay him, sir.

But we never do business for less at our shop.'

Arthur felt an awkward consciousness of having, in his exultant

condition, been a little premature.

'I said to that boiling-over old Christian,' Mr Pancks pursued,

appearing greatly to relish this descriptive epithet, 'that I had got a

little project on hand; a hopeful one; I told him a hopeful one; which

wanted a certain small capital. I proposed to him to lend me the

money on my note. Which he did, at twenty; sticking the twenty on in a

business-like way, and putting it into the note, to look like a part of

the principal. If I had broken down after that, I should have been his

grubber for the next seven years at half wages and double grind. But

he's a perfect Patriarch; and it would do a man good to serve him on

such terms--on any terms.'

Arthur for his life could not have said with confidence whether Pancks

really thought so or not.

'When that was gone, sir,' resumed Pancks, 'and it did go, though I

dribbled it out like so much blood, I had taken Mr Rugg into the secret.

I proposed to borrow of Mr Rugg (or of Miss Rugg; it's the same thing;

she made a little money by a speculation in the Common Pleas once). He

lent it at ten, and thought that pretty high. But Mr Rugg's a red-haired

man, sir, and gets his hair cut. And as to the crown of his hat, it's

high. And as to the brim of his hat, it's narrow. And there's no more

benevolence bubbling out of him, than out of a ninepin.'

'Your own recompense for all this, Mr Pancks,' said Clennam, 'ought to

be a large one.'

'I don't mistrust getting it, sir,' said Pancks. 'I have made no

bargain. I owed you one on that score; now I have paid it. Money out of

pocket made good, time fairly allowed for, and Mr Rugg's bill settled,

a thousand pounds would be a fortune to me. That matter I place in your

hands. I authorize you now to break all this to the family in any way

you think best. Miss Amy Dorrit will be with Mrs Finching this morning.

The sooner done the better. Can't be done too soon.'

This conversation took place in Clennam's bed-room, while he was yet in

bed. For Mr Pancks had knocked up the house and made his way in, very

early in the morning; and, without once sitting down or standing still,

had delivered himself of the whole of his details (illustrated with a

variety of documents) at the bedside. He now said he would 'go and look

up Mr Rugg', from whom his excited state of mind appeared to require

another back; and bundling up his papers, and exchanging one more hearty

shake of the hand with Clennam, he went at full speed down-stairs, and

steamed off.

Clennam, of course, resolved to go direct to Mr Casby's. He dressed

and got out so quickly that he found himself at the corner of the

patriarchal street nearly an hour before her time; but he was not sorry

to have the opportunity of calming himself with a leisurely walk.

When he returned to the street, and had knocked at the bright brass

knocker, he was informed that she had come, and was shown up-stairs to

Flora's breakfast-room. Little Dorrit was not there herself, but Flora

was, and testified the greatest amazement at seeing him.

'Good gracious, Arthur--Doyce and Clennam!' cried that lady, 'who would

have ever thought of seeing such a sight as this and pray excuse a

wrapper for upon my word I really never and a faded check too which

is worse but our little friend is making me, not that I need mind

mentioning it to you for you must know that there are such things a

skirt, and having arranged that a trying on should take place after

breakfast is the reason though I wish not so badly starched.'

'I ought to make an apology,' said Arthur, 'for so early and abrupt a

visit; but you will excuse it when I tell you the cause.'

'In times for ever fled Arthur,' returned Mrs Finching, 'pray excuse

me Doyce and Clennam infinitely more correct and though unquestionably

distant still 'tis distance lends enchantment to the view, at least I

don't mean that and if I did I suppose it would depend considerably on

the nature of the view, but I'm running on again and you put it all out

of my head.'

She glanced at him tenderly, and resumed:

'In times for ever fled I was going to say it would have sounded

strange indeed for Arthur Clennam--Doyce and Clennam naturally quite

different--to make apologies for coming here at any time, but that is

past and what is past can never be recalled except in his own case as

poor Mr F. said when he was in spirits Cucumber and therefore never ate

it.'

She was making the tea when Arthur came in, and now hastily finished

that operation.

'Papa,' she said, all mystery and whisper, as she shut down the tea-pot

lid, 'is sitting prosingly breaking his new laid egg in the back parlour

over the City article exactly like the Woodpecker Tapping and need never

know that you are here, and our little friend you are well aware may be

fully trusted when she comes down from cutting out on the large table

overhead.'

Arthur then told her, in the fewest words, that it was their little

friend he came to see; and what he had to announce to their little

friend. At which astounding intelligence, Flora clasped her hands,

fell into a tremble, and shed tears of sympathy and pleasure, like the

good-natured creature she really was.

'For goodness sake let me get out of the way first,' said Flora, putting

her hands to her ears and moving towards the door, 'or I know I shall

go off dead and screaming and make everybody worse, and the dear little

thing only this morning looking so nice and neat and good and yet so

poor and now a fortune is she really and deserves it too! and might I

mention it to Mr F.'s Aunt Arthur not Doyce and Clennam for this once or

if objectionable not on any account.'

Arthur nodded his free permission, since Flora shut out all verbal

communication. Flora nodded in return to thank him, and hurried out of

the room.

Little Dorrit's step was already on the stairs, and in another moment

she was at the door. Do what he could to compose his face, he could not

convey so much of an ordinary expression into it, but that the moment

she saw it she dropped her work, and cried, 'Mr Clennam! What's the

matter?'

'Nothing, nothing. That is, no misfortune has happened. I have come

to tell you something, but it is a piece of great good-fortune.'

'Good-fortune?'

'Wonderful fortune!'

They stood in a window, and her eyes, full of light, were fixed upon his

face. He put an arm about her, seeing her likely to sink down. She put

a hand upon that arm, partly to rest upon it, and partly so to preserve

their relative positions as that her intent look at him should be shaken

by no change of attitude in either of them. Her lips seemed to repeat

'Wonderful fortune?' He repeated it again, aloud.

'Dear Little Dorrit! Your father.'

The ice of the pale face broke at the word, and little lights and shoots

of expression passed all over it. They were all expressions of pain. Her

breath was faint and hurried. Her heart beat fast. He would have clasped

the little figure closer, but he saw that the eyes appealed to him not

to be moved.

'Your father can be free within this week. He does not know it; we must

go to him from here, to tell him of it. Your father will be free within

a few days. Your father will be free within a few hours. Remember we

must go to him from here, to tell him of it!'

That brought her back. Her eyes were closing, but they opened again.

'This is not all the good-fortune. This is not all the wonderful

good-fortune, my dear Little Dorrit. Shall I tell you more?'

Her lips shaped 'Yes.'

'Your father will be no beggar when he is free. He will want for

nothing. Shall I tell you more? Remember! He knows nothing of it; we

must go to him, from here, to tell him of it!'

She seemed to entreat him for a little time. He held her in his arm,

and, after a pause, bent down his ear to listen.

'Did you ask me to go on?'

'Yes.'

'He will be a rich man. He is a rich man. A great sum of money

is waiting to be paid over to him as his inheritance; you are all

henceforth very wealthy. Bravest and best of children, I thank Heaven

that you are rewarded!'

As he kissed her, she turned her head towards his shoulder, and raised

her arm towards his neck; cried out 'Father! Father! Father!' and

swooned away.

Upon which Flora returned to take care of her, and hovered about her on

a sofa, intermingling kind offices and incoherent scraps of conversation

in a manner so confounding, that whether she pressed the Marshalsea to

take a spoonful of unclaimed dividends, for it would do her good;

or whether she congratulated Little Dorrit's father on coming into

possession of a hundred thousand smelling-bottles; or whether she

explained that she put seventy-five thousand drops of spirits of

lavender on fifty thousand pounds of lump sugar, and that she entreated

Little Dorrit to take that gentle restorative; or whether she bathed the

foreheads of Doyce and Clennam in vinegar, and gave the late Mr F. more

air; no one with any sense of responsibility could have undertaken to

decide. A tributary stream of confusion, moreover, poured in from an

adjoining bedroom, where Mr F.'s Aunt appeared, from the sound of her

voice, to be in a horizontal posture, awaiting her breakfast; and from

which bower that inexorable lady snapped off short taunts, whenever she

could get a hearing, as, 'Don't believe it's his doing!' and 'He needn't

take no credit to himself for it!' and 'It'll be long enough, I expect,

afore he'll give up any of his own money!' all designed to disparage

Clennam's share in the discovery, and to relieve those inveterate

feelings with which Mr F.'s Aunt regarded him.

But Little Dorrit's solicitude to get to her father, and to carry the

joyful tidings to him, and not to leave him in his jail a moment with

this happiness in store for him and still unknown to him, did more for

her speedy restoration than all the skill and attention on earth could

have done. 'Come with me to my dear father. Pray come and tell my dear

father!' were the first words she said. Her father, her father. She

spoke of nothing but him, thought of nothing but him. Kneeling down and

pouring out her thankfulness with uplifted hands, her thanks were for

her father.

Flora's tenderness was quite overcome by this, and she launched out

among the cups and saucers into a wonderful flow of tears and speech.

'I declare,' she sobbed, 'I never was so cut up since your mama and my

papa not Doyce and Clennam for this once but give the precious little

thing a cup of tea and make her put it to her lips at least pray Arthur

do, not even Mr F.'s last illness for that was of another kind and gout

is not a child's affection though very painful for all parties and Mr

F. a martyr with his leg upon a rest and the wine trade in itself

inflammatory for they will do it more or less among themselves and who

can wonder, it seems like a dream I am sure to think of nothing at all

this morning and now Mines of money is it really, but you must know my

darling love because you never will be strong enough to tell him all

about it upon teaspoons, mightn't it be even best to try the directions

of my own medical man for though the flavour is anything but agreeable

still I force myself to do it as a prescription and find the benefit,

you'd rather not why no my dear I'd rather not but still I do it as a

duty, everybody will congratulate you some in earnest and some not and

many will congratulate you with all their hearts but none more so I

do assure you from the bottom of my own I do myself though sensible of

blundering and being stupid, and will be judged by Arthur not Doyce and

Clennam for this once so good-bye darling and God bless you and may you

be very happy and excuse the liberty, vowing that the dress shall never

be finished by anybody else but shall be laid by for a keepsake just

as it is and called Little Dorrit though why that strangest of

denominations at any time I never did myself and now I never shall!'

Thus Flora, in taking leave of her favourite. Little Dorrit thanked her,

and embraced her, over and over again; and finally came out of the house

with Clennam, and took coach for the Marshalsea.

It was a strangely unreal ride through the old squalid streets, with a

sensation of being raised out of them into an airy world of wealth

and grandeur. When Arthur told her that she would soon ride in her

own carriage through very different scenes, when all the familiar

experiences would have vanished away, she looked frightened. But when

he substituted her father for herself, and told her how he would ride in

his carriage, and how great and grand he would be, her tears of joy

and innocent pride fell fast. Seeing that the happiness her mind could

realise was all shining upon him, Arthur kept that single figure before

her; and so they rode brightly through the poor streets in the prison

neighbourhood to carry him the great news.

When Mr Chivery, who was on duty, admitted them into the Lodge, he saw

something in their faces which filled him with astonishment. He stood

looking after them, when they hurried into the prison, as though he

perceived that they had come back accompanied by a ghost a-piece. Two or

three Collegians whom they passed, looked after them too, and presently

joining Mr Chivery, formed a little group on the Lodge steps, in the

midst of which there spontaneously originated a whisper that the Father

was going to get his discharge. Within a few minutes, it was heard in

the remotest room in the College.

Little Dorrit opened the door from without, and they both entered. He

was sitting in his old grey gown and his old black cap, in the sunlight

by the window, reading his newspaper. His glasses were in his hand, and

he had just looked round; surprised at first, no doubt, by her step upon

the stairs, not expecting her until night; surprised again, by seeing

Arthur Clennam in her company. As they came in, the same unwonted look

in both of them which had already caught attention in the yard below,

struck him. He did not rise or speak, but laid down his glasses and his

newspaper on the table beside him, and looked at them with his mouth

a little open and his lips trembling. When Arthur put out his hand,

he touched it, but not with his usual state; and then he turned to his

daughter, who had sat down close beside him with her hands upon his

shoulder, and looked attentively in her face.

'Father! I have been made so happy this morning!'

'You have been made so happy, my dear?'

'By Mr Clennam, father. He brought me such joyful and wonderful

intelligence about you! If he had not with his great kindness and

gentleness, prepared me for it, father--prepared me for it, father--I

think I could not have borne it.'

Her agitation was exceedingly great, and the tears rolled down her face.

He put his hand suddenly to his heart, and looked at Clennam.

'Compose yourself, sir,' said Clennam, 'and take a little time to think.

To think of the brightest and most fortunate accidents of life. We have

all heard of great surprises of joy. They are not at an end, sir. They

are rare, but not at an end.'

'Mr Clennam? Not at an end? Not at an end for--' He touched himself upon

the breast, instead of saying 'me.'

'No,' returned Clennam.

'What surprise,' he asked, keeping his left hand over his heart, and

there stopping in his speech, while with his right hand he put his

glasses exactly level on the table: 'what such surprise can be in store

for me?'

'Let me answer with another question. Tell me, Mr Dorrit, what surprise

would be the most unlooked for and the most acceptable to you. Do not be

afraid to imagine it, or to say what it would be.'

He looked steadfastly at Clennam, and, so looking at him, seemed to

change into a very old haggard man. The sun was bright upon the wall

beyond the window, and on the spikes at top. He slowly stretched out the

hand that had been upon his heart, and pointed at the wall.

'It is down,' said Clennam. 'Gone!'

He remained in the same attitude, looking steadfastly at him.

'And in its place,' said Clennam, slowly and distinctly, 'are the means

to possess and enjoy the utmost that they have so long shut out. Mr

Dorrit, there is not the smallest doubt that within a few days you will

be free, and highly prosperous. I congratulate you with all my soul on

this change of fortune, and on the happy future into which you are soon

to carry the treasure you have been blest with here--the best of all the

riches you can have elsewhere--the treasure at your side.'

With those words, he pressed his hand and released it; and his daughter,

laying her face against his, encircled him in the hour of his prosperity

with her arms, as she had in the long years of his adversity encircled

him with her love and toil and truth; and poured out her full heart in

gratitude, hope, joy, blissful ecstasy, and all for him.

'I shall see him as I never saw him yet. I shall see my dear love, with

the dark cloud cleared away. I shall see him, as my poor mother saw him

long ago. O my dear, my dear! O father, father! O thank God, thank God!'

He yielded himself to her kisses and caresses, but did not return them,

except that he put an arm about her. Neither did he say one word. His

steadfast look was now divided between her and Clennam, and he began to

shake as if he were very cold. Explaining to Little Dorrit that he would

run to the coffee-house for a bottle of wine, Arthur fetched it with all

the haste he could use. While it was being brought from the cellar to

the bar, a number of excited people asked him what had happened; when he

hurriedly informed them that Mr Dorrit had succeeded to a fortune.

On coming back with the wine in his hand, he found that she had placed

her father in his easy chair, and had loosened his shirt and neckcloth.

They filled a tumbler with wine, and held it to his lips. When he had

swallowed a little, he took the glass himself and emptied it. Soon

after that, he leaned back in his chair and cried, with his handkerchief

before his face.

After this had lasted a while Clennam thought it a good season for

diverting his attention from the main surprise, by relating its details.

Slowly, therefore, and in a quiet tone of voice, he explained them as

best he could, and enlarged on the nature of Pancks's service.

'He shall be--ha--he shall be handsomely recompensed, sir,' said

the Father, starting up and moving hurriedly about the room. 'Assure

yourself, Mr Clennam, that everybody concerned shall be--ha--shall

be nobly rewarded. No one, my dear sir, shall say that he has an

unsatisfied claim against me. I shall repay the--hum--the advances I

have had from you, sir, with peculiar pleasure. I beg to be informed at

your earliest convenience, what advances you have made my son.'

He had no purpose in going about the room, but he was not still a

moment.

'Everybody,' he said, 'shall be remembered. I will not go away from

here in anybody's debt. All the people who have been--ha--well behaved

towards myself and my family, shall be rewarded. Chivery shall be

rewarded. Young John shall be rewarded. I particularly wish, and intend,

to act munificently, Mr Clennam.'

'Will you allow me,' said Arthur, laying his purse on the table, 'to

supply any present contingencies, Mr Dorrit? I thought it best to bring

a sum of money for the purpose.'

'Thank you, sir, thank you. I accept with readiness, at the present

moment, what I could not an hour ago have conscientiously taken. I am

obliged to you for the temporary accommodation. Exceedingly temporary,

but well timed--well timed.' His hand had closed upon the money, and

he carried it about with him. 'Be so kind, sir, as to add the amount to

those former advances to which I have already referred; being careful,

if you please, not to omit advances made to my son. A mere verbal

statement of the gross amount is all I shall--ha--all I shall require.'

His eye fell upon his daughter at this point, and he stopped for a

moment to kiss her, and to pat her head.

'It will be necessary to find a milliner, my love, and to make a speedy

and complete change in your very plain dress. Something must be done

with Maggy too, who at present is--ha--barely respectable, barely

respectable. And your sister, Amy, and your brother. And my brother,

your uncle--poor soul, I trust this will rouse him--messengers must be

despatched to fetch them. They must be informed of this. We must break

it to them cautiously, but they must be informed directly. We owe it

as a duty to them and to ourselves, from this moment, not to let

them--hum--not to let them do anything.'

This was the first intimation he had ever given, that he was privy to

the fact that they did something for a livelihood.

He was still jogging about the room, with the purse clutched in his

hand, when a great cheering arose in the yard. 'The news has spread

already,' said Clennam, looking down from the window. 'Will you show

yourself to them, Mr Dorrit? They are very earnest, and they evidently

wish it.'

'I--hum--ha--I confess I could have desired, Amy my dear,' he said,

jogging about in a more feverish flutter than before, 'to have made some

change in my dress first, and to have bought a--hum--a watch and chain.

But if it must be done as it is, it--ha--it must be done. Fasten the

collar of my shirt, my dear. Mr Clennam, would you oblige me--hum--with

a blue neckcloth you will find in that drawer at your elbow. Button

my coat across at the chest, my love. It looks--ha--it looks broader,

buttoned.'

With his trembling hand he pushed his grey hair up, and then, taking

Clennam and his daughter for supporters, appeared at the window leaning

on an arm of each. The Collegians cheered him very heartily, and he

kissed his hand to them with great urbanity and protection. When he

withdrew into the room again, he said 'Poor creatures!' in a tone of

much pity for their miserable condition.

Little Dorrit was deeply anxious that he should lie down to compose

himself. On Arthur's speaking to her of his going to inform Pancks that

he might now appear as soon as he would, and pursue the joyful business

to its close, she entreated him in a whisper to stay with her until her

father should be quite calm and at rest. He needed no second entreaty;

and she prepared her father's bed, and begged him to lie down. For

another half-hour or more he would be persuaded to do nothing but

go about the room, discussing with himself the probabilities for and

against the Marshal's allowing the whole of the prisoners to go to the

windows of the official residence which commanded the street, to see

himself and family depart for ever in a carriage--which, he said, he

thought would be a Sight for them. But gradually he began to droop and

tire, and at last stretched himself upon the bed.

She took her faithful place beside him, fanning him and cooling his

forehead; and he seemed to be falling asleep (always with the money in

his hand), when he unexpectedly sat up and said:

'Mr Clennam, I beg your pardon. Am I to understand, my dear sir, that I

could--ha--could pass through the Lodge at this moment, and--hum--take a

walk?'

'I think not, Mr Dorrit,' was the unwilling reply. 'There are certain

forms to be completed; and although your detention here is now in itself

a form, I fear it is one that for a little longer has to be observed

too.'

At this he shed tears again.

'It is but a few hours, sir,' Clennam cheerfully urged upon him.

'A few hours, sir,' he returned in a sudden passion. 'You talk very

easily of hours, sir! How long do you suppose, sir, that an hour is to a

man who is choking for want of air?'

It was his last demonstration for that time; as, after shedding some

more tears and querulously complaining that he couldn't breathe, he

slowly fell into a slumber. Clennam had abundant occupation for his

thoughts, as he sat in the quiet room watching the father on his bed,

and the daughter fanning his face. Little Dorrit had been thinking too.

After softly putting his grey hair aside, and touching his forehead with

her lips, she looked towards Arthur, who came nearer to her, and pursued

in a low whisper the subject of her thoughts.

'Mr Clennam, will he pay all his debts before he leaves here?'

'No doubt. All.'

'All the debts for which he had been imprisoned here, all my life and

longer?'

'No doubt.'

There was something of uncertainty and remonstrance in her look;

something that was not all satisfaction. He wondered to detect it, and

said:

'You are glad that he should do so?'

'Are you?' asked Little Dorrit, wistfully.

'Am I? Most heartily glad!'

'Then I know I ought to be.'

'And are you not?'

'It seems to me hard,' said Little Dorrit, 'that he should have lost so

many years and suffered so much, and at last pay all the debts as well.

It seems to me hard that he should pay in life and money both.'

'My dear child--' Clennam was beginning.

'Yes, I know I am wrong,' she pleaded timidly, 'don't think any worse of

me; it has grown up with me here.'

The prison, which could spoil so many things, had tainted Little

Dorrit's mind no more than this. Engendered as the confusion was, in

compassion for the poor prisoner, her father, it was the first speck

Clennam had ever seen, it was the last speck Clennam ever saw, of the

prison atmosphere upon her.

He thought this, and forebore to say another word. With the thought, her

purity and goodness came before him in their brightest light. The little

spot made them the more beautiful.

Worn out with her own emotions, and yielding to the silence of the room,

her hand slowly slackened and failed in its fanning movement, and her

head dropped down on the pillow at her father's side. Clennam rose

softly, opened and closed the door without a sound, and passed from the

prison, carrying the quiet with him into the turbulent streets.

CHAPTER 36. The Marshalsea becomes an Orphan

And now the day arrived when Mr Dorrit and his family were to leave the

prison for ever, and the stones of its much-trodden pavement were to

know them no more.

The interval had been short, but he had greatly complained of its

length, and had been imperious with Mr Rugg touching the delay. He had

been high with Mr Rugg, and had threatened to employ some one else. He

had requested Mr Rugg not to presume upon the place in which he found

him, but to do his duty, sir, and to do it with promptitude. He had told

Mr Rugg that he knew what lawyers and agents were, and that he would not

submit to imposition. On that gentleman's humbly representing that

he exerted himself to the utmost, Miss Fanny was very short with him;

desiring to know what less he could do, when he had been told a dozen

times that money was no object, and expressing her suspicion that he

forgot whom he talked to.

Towards the Marshal, who was a Marshal of many years' standing, and

with whom he had never had any previous difference, Mr Dorrit comported

himself with severity. That officer, on personally tendering his

congratulations, offered the free use of two rooms in his house for Mr

Dorrit's occupation until his departure. Mr Dorrit thanked him at the

moment, and replied that he would think of it; but the Marshal was no

sooner gone than he sat down and wrote him a cutting note, in which

he remarked that he had never on any former occasion had the honour of

receiving his congratulations (which was true, though indeed there had

not been anything particular to congratulate him upon), and that he

begged, on behalf of himself and family, to repudiate the Marshal's

offer, with all those thanks which its disinterested character and its

perfect independence of all worldly considerations demanded.

Although his brother showed so dim a glimmering of interest in their

altered fortunes that it was very doubtful whether he understood them,

Mr Dorrit caused him to be measured for new raiment by the hosiers,

tailors, hatters, and bootmakers whom he called in for himself; and

ordered that his old clothes should be taken from him and burned. Miss

Fanny and Mr Tip required no direction in making an appearance of great

fashion and elegance; and the three passed this interval together at the

best hotel in the neighbourhood--though truly, as Miss Fanny said, the

best was very indifferent. In connection with that establishment, Mr

Tip hired a cabriolet, horse, and groom, a very neat turn out, which

was usually to be observed for two or three hours at a time gracing the

Borough High Street, outside the Marshalsea court-yard. A modest

little hired chariot and pair was also frequently to be seen there;

in alighting from and entering which vehicle, Miss Fanny fluttered the

Marshal's daughters by the display of inaccessible bonnets.

A great deal of business was transacted in this short period. Among

other items, Messrs Peddle and Pool, solicitors, of Monument Yard, were

instructed by their client Edward Dorrit, Esquire, to address a letter

to Mr Arthur Clennam, enclosing the sum of twenty-four pounds nine

shillings and eightpence, being the amount of principal and interest

computed at the rate of five per cent. per annum, in which their

client believed himself to be indebted to Mr Clennam. In making this

communication and remittance, Messrs Peddle and Pool were further

instructed by their client to remind Mr Clennam that the favour of the

advance now repaid (including gate-fees) had not been asked of him, and

to inform him that it would not have been accepted if it had been openly

proffered in his name. With which they requested a stamped receipt, and

remained his obedient servants. A great deal of business had likewise to

be done, within the so-soon-to-be-orphaned Marshalsea, by Mr Dorrit

so long its Father, chiefly arising out of applications made to him

by Collegians for small sums of money. To these he responded with the

greatest liberality, and with no lack of formality; always first writing

to appoint a time at which the applicant might wait upon him in his

room, and then receiving him in the midst of a vast accumulation of

documents, and accompanying his donation (for he said in every such

case, 'it is a donation, not a loan') with a great deal of good counsel:

to the effect that he, the expiring Father of the Marshalsea, hoped to

be long remembered, as an example that a man might preserve his own and

the general respect even there.

The Collegians were not envious. Besides that they had a personal and

traditional regard for a Collegian of so many years' standing, the event

was creditable to the College, and made it famous in the newspapers.

Perhaps more of them thought, too, than were quite aware of it, that the

thing might in the lottery of chances have happened to themselves, or

that something of the sort might yet happen to themselves some day or

other. They took it very well. A few were low at the thought of being

left behind, and being left poor; but even these did not grudge the

family their brilliant reverse. There might have been much more envy in

politer places. It seems probable that mediocrity of fortune would have

been disposed to be less magnanimous than the Collegians, who lived from

hand to mouth--from the pawnbroker's hand to the day's dinner.

They got up an address to him, which they presented in a neat frame and

glass (though it was not afterwards displayed in the family mansion or

preserved among the family papers); and to which he returned a gracious

answer. In that document he assured them, in a Royal manner, that he

received the profession of their attachment with a full conviction

of its sincerity; and again generally exhorted them to follow his

example--which, at least in so far as coming into a great property was

concerned, there is no doubt they would have gladly imitated. He took

the same occasion of inviting them to a comprehensive entertainment, to

be given to the whole College in the yard, and at which he signified

he would have the honour of taking a parting glass to the health and

happiness of all those whom he was about to leave behind.

He did not in person dine at this public repast (it took place at two in

the afternoon, and his dinners now came in from the hotel at six), but

his son was so good as to take the head of the principal table, and to

be very free and engaging. He himself went about among the company, and

took notice of individuals, and saw that the viands were of the quality

he had ordered, and that all were served. On the whole, he was like a

baron of the olden time in a rare good humour. At the conclusion of the

repast, he pledged his guests in a bumper of old Madeira; and told them

that he hoped they had enjoyed themselves, and what was more, that they

would enjoy themselves for the rest of the evening; that he wished them

well; and that he bade them welcome.

His health being drunk with acclamations, he was not so baronial after

all but that in trying to return thanks he broke down, in the manner of

a mere serf with a heart in his breast, and wept before them all. After

this great success, which he supposed to be a failure, he gave them 'Mr

Chivery and his brother officers;' whom he had beforehand presented with

ten pounds each, and who were all in attendance. Mr Chivery spoke to the

toast, saying, What you undertake to lock up, lock up; but remember that

you are, in the words of the fettered African, a man and a brother ever.

The list of toasts disposed of, Mr Dorrit urbanely went through the

motions of playing a game of skittles with the Collegian who was the

next oldest inhabitant to himself; and left the tenantry to their

diversions.

But all these occurrences preceded the final day. And now the day

arrived when he and his family were to leave the prison for ever, and

when the stones of its much-trodden pavement were to know them no more.

Noon was the hour appointed for the departure. As it approached, there

was not a Collegian within doors, nor a turnkey absent. The latter class

of gentlemen appeared in their Sunday clothes, and the greater part of

the Collegians were brightened up as much as circumstances allowed. Two

or three flags were even displayed, and the children put on odds and

ends of ribbon. Mr Dorrit himself, at this trying time, preserved a

serious but graceful dignity. Much of his great attention was given to

his brother, as to whose bearing on the great occasion he felt anxious.

'My dear Frederick,' said he, 'if you will give me your arm we will pass

among our friends together. I think it is right that we should go out

arm in arm, my dear Frederick.'

'Hah!' said Frederick. 'Yes, yes, yes, yes.'

'And if, my dear Frederick--if you could, without putting any great

constraint upon yourself, throw a little (pray excuse me, Frederick), a

little Polish into your usual demeanour--'

'William, William,' said the other, shaking his head, 'it's for you to

do all that. I don't know how. All forgotten, forgotten!'

'But, my dear fellow,' returned William, 'for that very reason, if

for no other, you must positively try to rouse yourself. What you

have forgotten you must now begin to recall, my dear Frederick. Your

position--'

'Eh?' said Frederick.

'Your position, my dear Frederick.'

'Mine?' He looked first at his own figure, and then at his brother's,

and then, drawing a long breath, cried, 'Hah, to be sure! Yes, yes,

yes.' 'Your position, my dear Frederick, is now a fine one. Your

position, as my brother, is a very fine one. And I know that it belongs

to your conscientious nature to try to become worthy of it, my dear

Frederick, and to try to adorn it. To be no discredit to it, but to

adorn it.'

'William,' said the other weakly, and with a sigh, 'I will do anything

you wish, my brother, provided it lies in my power. Pray be so kind as

to recollect what a limited power mine is. What would you wish me to do

to-day, brother? Say what it is, only say what it is.'

'My dearest Frederick, nothing. It is not worth troubling so good a

heart as yours with.'

'Pray trouble it,' returned the other. 'It finds it no trouble, William,

to do anything it can for you.'

William passed his hand across his eyes, and murmured with august

satisfaction, 'Blessings on your attachment, my poor dear fellow!' Then

he said aloud, 'Well, my dear Frederick, if you will only try, as we

walk out, to show that you are alive to the occasion--that you think

about it--'

'What would you advise me to think about it?' returned his submissive

brother.

'Oh! my dear Frederick, how can I answer you? I can only say what, in

leaving these good people, I think myself.'

'That's it!' cried his brother. 'That will help me.'

'I find that I think, my dear Frederick, and with mixed emotions in

which a softened compassion predominates, What will they do without me!'

'True,' returned his brother. 'Yes, yes, yes, yes. I'll think that as we

go, What will they do without my brother! Poor things! What will they do

without him!'

Twelve o'clock having just struck, and the carriage being reported ready

in the outer court-yard, the brothers proceeded down-stairs arm-in-arm.

Edward Dorrit, Esquire (once Tip), and his sister Fanny followed,

also arm-in-arm; Mr Plornish and Maggy, to whom had been entrusted the

removal of such of the family effects as were considered worth removing,

followed, bearing bundles and burdens to be packed in a cart.

In the yard, were the Collegians and turnkeys. In the yard, were Mr

Pancks and Mr Rugg, come to see the last touch given to their work.

In the yard, was Young John making a new epitaph for himself, on

the occasion of his dying of a broken heart. In the yard, was the

Patriarchal Casby, looking so tremendously benevolent that many

enthusiastic Collegians grasped him fervently by the hand, and the wives

and female relatives of many more Collegians kissed his hand, nothing

doubting that he had done it all. In the yard, was the man with the

shadowy grievance respecting the Fund which the Marshal embezzled, who

had got up at five in the morning to complete the copying of a perfectly

unintelligible history of that transaction, which he had committed to Mr

Dorrit's care, as a document of the last importance, calculated to stun

the Government and effect the Marshal's downfall. In the yard, was the

insolvent whose utmost energies were always set on getting into debt,

who broke into prison with as much pains as other men have broken out

of it, and who was always being cleared and complimented; while the

insolvent at his elbow--a mere little, snivelling, striving tradesman,

half dead of anxious efforts to keep out of debt--found it a hard

matter, indeed, to get a Commissioner to release him with much reproof

and reproach. In the yard, was the man of many children and many

burdens, whose failure astonished everybody; in the yard, was the man of

no children and large resources, whose failure astonished nobody. There,

were the people who were always going out to-morrow, and always putting

it off; there, were the people who had come in yesterday, and who

were much more jealous and resentful of this freak of fortune than

the seasoned birds. There, were some who, in pure meanness of spirit,

cringed and bowed before the enriched Collegian and his family; there,

were others who did so really because their eyes, accustomed to the

gloom of their imprisonment and poverty, could not support the light of

such bright sunshine. There, were many whose shillings had gone into his

pocket to buy him meat and drink; but none who were now obtrusively Hail

fellow well met! with him, on the strength of that assistance. It was

rather to be remarked of the caged birds, that they were a little shy

of the bird about to be so grandly free, and that they had a tendency to

withdraw themselves towards the bars, and seem a little fluttered as he

passed.

Through these spectators the little procession, headed by the two

brothers, moved slowly to the gate. Mr Dorrit, yielding to the vast

speculation how the poor creatures were to get on without him, was

great, and sad, but not absorbed. He patted children on the head

like Sir Roger de Coverley going to church, he spoke to people in the

background by their Christian names, he condescended to all present, and

seemed for their consolation to walk encircled by the legend in golden

characters, 'Be comforted, my people! Bear it!'

At last three honest cheers announced that he had passed the gate, and

that the Marshalsea was an orphan. Before they had ceased to ring in the

echoes of the prison walls, the family had got into their carriage, and

the attendant had the steps in his hand.

Then, and not before, 'Good Gracious!' cried Miss Fanny all at once,

'Where's Amy!'

Her father had thought she was with her sister. Her sister had thought

she was 'somewhere or other.' They had all trusted to finding her, as

they had always done, quietly in the right place at the right moment.

This going away was perhaps the very first action of their joint lives

that they had got through without her.

A minute might have been consumed in the ascertaining of these points,

when Miss Fanny, who, from her seat in the carriage, commanded the long

narrow passage leading to the Lodge, flushed indignantly.

'Now I do say, Pa,' cried she, 'that this is disgraceful!'

'What is disgraceful, Fanny?'

'I do say,' she repeated, 'this is perfectly infamous! Really almost

enough, even at such a time as this, to make one wish one was dead!

Here is that child Amy, in her ugly old shabby dress, which she was so

obstinate about, Pa, which I over and over again begged and prayed her

to change, and which she over and over again objected to, and promised

to change to-day, saying she wished to wear it as long as ever she

remained in there with you--which was absolutely romantic nonsense of

the lowest kind--here is that child Amy disgracing us to the last moment

and at the last moment, by being carried out in that dress after all.

And by that Mr Clennam too!'

The offence was proved, as she delivered the indictment. Clennam

appeared at the carriage-door, bearing the little insensible figure in

his arms.

'She has been forgotten,' he said, in a tone of pity not free from

reproach. 'I ran up to her room (which Mr Chivery showed me) and found

the door open, and that she had fainted on the floor, dear child.

She appeared to have gone to change her dress, and to have sunk down

overpowered. It may have been the cheering, or it may have happened

sooner. Take care of this poor cold hand, Miss Dorrit. Don't let it

fall.'

'Thank you, sir,' returned Miss Dorrit, bursting into tears. 'I believe

I know what to do, if you will give me leave. Dear Amy, open your eyes,

that's a love! Oh, Amy, Amy, I really am so vexed and ashamed! Do rouse

yourself, darling! Oh, why are they not driving on! Pray, Pa, do drive

on!'

The attendant, getting between Clennam and the carriage-door, with a

sharp 'By your leave, sir!' bundled up the steps, and they drove away.

BOOK THE SECOND: RICHES

CHAPTER 1. Fellow Travellers

In the autumn of the year, Darkness and Night were creeping up to the

highest ridges of the Alps.

It was vintage time in the valleys on the Swiss side of the Pass of the

Great Saint Bernard, and along the banks of the Lake of Geneva.

The air there was charged with the scent of gathered grapes. Baskets,

troughs, and tubs of grapes stood in the dim village doorways, stopped

the steep and narrow village streets, and had been carrying all day

along the roads and lanes. Grapes, split and crushed under foot, lay

about everywhere. The child carried in a sling by the laden peasant

woman toiling home, was quieted with picked-up grapes; the idiot sunning

his big goitre under the leaves of the wooden chalet by the way to the

Waterfall, sat Munching grapes; the breath of the cows and goats was

redolent of leaves and stalks of grapes; the company in every little

cabaret were eating, drinking, talking grapes. A pity that no ripe touch

of this generous abundance could be given to the thin, hard, stony wine,

which after all was made from the grapes!

The air had been warm and transparent through the whole of the bright

day. Shining metal spires and church-roofs, distant and rarely seen, had

sparkled in the view; and the snowy mountain-tops had been so clear that

unaccustomed eyes, cancelling the intervening country, and slighting

their rugged heights for something fabulous, would have measured them as

within a few hours easy reach. Mountain-peaks of great celebrity in the

valleys, whence no trace of their existence was visible sometimes for

months together, had been since morning plain and near in the blue sky.

And now, when it was dark below, though they seemed solemnly to recede,

like spectres who were going to vanish, as the red dye of the sunset

faded out of them and left them coldly white, they were yet distinctly

defined in their loneliness above the mists and shadows. Seen from these

solitudes, and from the Pass of the Great Saint Bernard, which was one

of them, the ascending Night came up the mountain like a rising water.

When it at last rose to the walls of the convent of the Great Saint

Bernard, it was as if that weather-beaten structure were another Ark,

and floated on the shadowy waves.

Darkness, outstripping some visitors on mules, had risen thus to

the rough convent walls, when those travellers were yet climbing the

mountain. As the heat of the glowing day when they had stopped to drink

at the streams of melted ice and snow, was changed to the searching cold

of the frosty rarefied night air at a great height, so the fresh beauty

of the lower journey had yielded to barrenness and desolation. A craggy

track, up which the mules in single file scrambled and turned from

block to block, as though they were ascending the broken staircase of

a gigantic ruin, was their way now. No trees were to be seen, nor any

vegetable growth save a poor brown scrubby moss, freezing in the chinks

of rock. Blackened skeleton arms of wood by the wayside pointed upward

to the convent as if the ghosts of former travellers overwhelmed by the

snow haunted the scene of their distress. Icicle-hung caves and cellars

built for refuges from sudden storms, were like so many whispers of the

perils of the place; never-resting wreaths and mazes of mist wandered

about, hunted by a moaning wind; and snow, the besetting danger of the

mountain, against which all its defences were taken, drifted sharply

down.

The file of mules, jaded by their day's work, turned and wound slowly

up the deep ascent; the foremost led by a guide on foot, in his

broad-brimmed hat and round jacket, carrying a mountain staff or two

upon his shoulder, with whom another guide conversed. There was no

speaking among the string of riders. The sharp cold, the fatigue of the

journey, and a new sensation of a catching in the breath, partly as if

they had just emerged from very clear crisp water, and partly as if they

had been sobbing, kept them silent.

At length, a light on the summit of the rocky staircase gleamed through

the snow and mist. The guides called to the mules, the mules pricked up

their drooping heads, the travellers' tongues were loosened, and in a

sudden burst of slipping, climbing, jingling, clinking, and talking,

they arrived at the convent door.

Other mules had arrived not long before, some with peasant riders and

some with goods, and had trodden the snow about the door into a pool

of mud. Riding-saddles and bridles, pack-saddles and strings of bells,

mules and men, lanterns, torches, sacks, provender, barrels, cheeses,

kegs of honey and butter, straw bundles and packages of many shapes,

were crowded confusedly together in this thawed quagmire and about the

steps. Up here in the clouds, everything was seen through cloud, and

seemed dissolving into cloud. The breath of the men was cloud, the

breath of the mules was cloud, the lights were encircled by cloud,

speakers close at hand were not seen for cloud, though their voices and

all other sounds were surprisingly clear. Of the cloudy line of mules

hastily tied to rings in the wall, one would bite another, or kick

another, and then the whole mist would be disturbed: with men diving

into it, and cries of men and beasts coming out of it, and no bystander

discerning what was wrong. In the midst of this, the great stable of the

convent, occupying the basement story and entered by the basement door,

outside which all the disorder was, poured forth its contribution of

cloud, as if the whole rugged edifice were filled with nothing else,

and would collapse as soon as it had emptied itself, leaving the snow to

fall upon the bare mountain summit.

While all this noise and hurry were rife among the living travellers,

there, too, silently assembled in a grated house half-a-dozen paces

removed, with the same cloud enfolding them and the same snow flakes

drifting in upon them, were the dead travellers found upon the mountain.

The mother, storm-belated many winters ago, still standing in the corner

with her baby at her breast; the man who had frozen with his arm raised

to his mouth in fear or hunger, still pressing it with his dry lips

after years and years. An awful company, mysteriously come together! A

wild destiny for that mother to have foreseen! 'Surrounded by so many

and such companions upon whom I never looked, and never shall look,

I and my child will dwell together inseparable, on the Great Saint

Bernard, outlasting generations who will come to see us, and will never

know our name, or one word of our story but the end.'

The living travellers thought little or nothing of the dead just then.

They thought much more of alighting at the convent door, and warming

themselves at the convent fire. Disengaged from the turmoil, which was

already calming down as the crowd of mules began to be bestowed in the

stable, they hurried shivering up the steps and into the building. There

was a smell within, coming up from the floor, of tethered beasts, like

the smell of a menagerie of wild animals. There were strong arched

galleries within, huge stone piers, great staircases, and thick walls

pierced with small sunken windows--fortifications against the mountain

storms, as if they had been human enemies. There were gloomy vaulted

sleeping-rooms within, intensely cold, but clean and hospitably prepared

for guests. Finally, there was a parlour for guests to sit in and sup

in, where a table was already laid, and where a blazing fire shone red

and high.

In this room, after having had their quarters for the night allotted

to them by two young Fathers, the travellers presently drew round the

hearth. They were in three parties; of whom the first, as the most

numerous and important, was the slowest, and had been overtaken by

one of the others on the way up. It consisted of an elderly lady, two

grey-haired gentlemen, two young ladies, and their brother. These were

attended (not to mention four guides), by a courier, two footmen, and

two waiting-maids: which strong body of inconvenience was accommodated

elsewhere under the same roof. The party that had overtaken them, and

followed in their train, consisted of only three members: one lady and

two gentlemen. The third party, which had ascended from the valley

on the Italian side of the Pass, and had arrived first, were four in

number: a plethoric, hungry, and silent German tutor in spectacles, on

a tour with three young men, his pupils, all plethoric, hungry, and

silent, and all in spectacles.

These three groups sat round the fire eyeing each other drily, and

waiting for supper. Only one among them, one of the gentlemen belonging

to the party of three, made advances towards conversation. Throwing out

his lines for the Chief of the important tribe, while addressing himself

to his own companions, he remarked, in a tone of voice which included

all the company if they chose to be included, that it had been a long

day, and that he felt for the ladies. That he feared one of the

young ladies was not a strong or accustomed traveller, and had been

over-fatigued two or three hours ago. That he had observed, from his

station in the rear, that she sat her mule as if she were exhausted.

That he had, twice or thrice afterwards, done himself the honour of

inquiring of one of the guides, when he fell behind, how the lady did.

That he had been enchanted to learn that she had recovered her spirits,

and that it had been but a passing discomfort. That he trusted (by this

time he had secured the eyes of the Chief, and addressed him) he might

be permitted to express his hope that she was now none the worse, and

that she would not regret having made the journey.

'My daughter, I am obliged to you, sir,' returned the Chief, 'is quite

restored, and has been greatly interested.'

'New to mountains, perhaps?' said the insinuating traveller.

'New to--ha--to mountains,' said the Chief.

'But you are familiar with them, sir?' the insinuating traveller

assumed.

'I am--hum--tolerably familiar. Not of late years. Not of late years,'

replied the Chief, with a flourish of his hand.

The insinuating traveller, acknowledging the flourish with an

inclination of his head, passed from the Chief to the second young lady,

who had not yet been referred to otherwise than as one of the ladies in

whose behalf he felt so sensitive an interest.

He hoped she was not incommoded by the fatigues of the day.

'Incommoded, certainly,' returned the young lady, 'but not tired.'

The insinuating traveller complimented her on the justice of the

distinction. It was what he had meant to say. Every lady must doubtless

be incommoded by having to do with that proverbially unaccommodating

animal, the mule.

'We have had, of course,' said the young lady, who was rather reserved

and haughty, 'to leave the carriages and fourgon at Martigny. And the

impossibility of bringing anything that one wants to this inaccessible

place, and the necessity of leaving every comfort behind, is not

convenient.'

'A savage place indeed,' said the insinuating traveller.

The elderly lady, who was a model of accurate dressing, and whose manner

was perfect, considered as a piece of machinery, here interposed a

remark in a low soft voice.

'But, like other inconvenient places,' she observed, 'it must be seen.

As a place much spoken of, it is necessary to see it.'

'O! I have not the least objection to seeing it, I assure you, Mrs

General,' returned the other, carelessly.

'You, madam,' said the insinuating traveller, 'have visited this spot

before?' 'Yes,' returned Mrs General. 'I have been here before. Let me

commend you, my dear,' to the former young lady, 'to shade your face

from the hot wood, after exposure to the mountain air and snow. You,

too, my dear,' to the other and younger lady, who immediately did so;

while the former merely said, 'Thank you, Mrs General, I am Perfectly

comfortable, and prefer remaining as I am.'

The brother, who had left his chair to open a piano that stood in

the room, and who had whistled into it and shut it up again, now came

strolling back to the fire with his glass in his eye. He was dressed in

the very fullest and completest travelling trim. The world seemed hardly

large enough to yield him an amount of travel proportionate to his

equipment.

'These fellows are an immense time with supper,' he drawled. 'I wonder

what they'll give us! Has anybody any idea?'

'Not roast man, I believe,' replied the voice of the second gentleman of

the party of three.

'I suppose not. What d'ye mean?' he inquired.

'That, as you are not to be served for the general supper, perhaps you

will do us the favour of not cooking yourself at the general fire,'

returned the other.

The young gentleman who was standing in an easy attitude on the hearth,

cocking his glass at the company, with his back to the blaze and his

coat tucked under his arms, something as if he were Of the Poultry

species and were trussed for roasting, lost countenance at this

reply; he seemed about to demand further explanation, when it was

discovered--through all eyes turning on the speaker--that the lady with

him, who was young and beautiful, had not heard what had passed through

having fainted with her head upon his shoulder.

'I think,' said the gentleman in a subdued tone, 'I had best carry

her straight to her room. Will you call to some one to bring a light?'

addressing his companion, 'and to show the way? In this strange rambling

place I don't know that I could find it.'

'Pray, let me call my maid,' cried the taller of the young ladies.

'Pray, let me put this water to her lips,' said the shorter, who had not

spoken yet.

Each doing what she suggested, there was no want of assistance. Indeed,

when the two maids came in (escorted by the courier, lest any one should

strike them dumb by addressing a foreign language to them on the road),

there was a prospect of too much assistance. Seeing this, and saying as

much in a few words to the slighter and younger of the two ladies,

the gentleman put his wife's arm over his shoulder, lifted her up, and

carried her away.

His friend, being left alone with the other visitors, walked slowly up

and down the room without coming to the fire again, pulling his black

moustache in a contemplative manner, as if he felt himself committed

to the late retort. While the subject of it was breathing injury in a

corner, the Chief loftily addressed this gentleman.

'Your friend, sir,' said he, 'is--ha--is a little impatient; and, in

his impatience, is not perhaps fully sensible of what he owes

to--hum--to--but we will waive that, we will waive that. Your friend is

a little impatient, sir.'

'It may be so, sir,' returned the other. 'But having had the honour of

making that gentleman's acquaintance at the hotel at Geneva, where we

and much good company met some time ago, and having had the honour

of exchanging company and conversation with that gentleman on several

subsequent excursions, I can hear nothing--no, not even from one of your

appearance and station, sir--detrimental to that gentleman.'

'You are in no danger, sir, of hearing any such thing from me. In

remarking that your friend has shown impatience, I say no such thing. I

make that remark, because it is not to be doubted that my son, being by

birth and by--ha--by education a--hum--a gentleman, would have readily

adapted himself to any obligingly expressed wish on the subject of the

fire being equally accessible to the whole of the present circle. Which,

in principle, I--ha--for all are--hum--equal on these occasions--I

consider right.'

'Good,' was the reply. 'And there it ends! I am your son's obedient

servant. I beg your son to receive the assurance of my profound

consideration. And now, sir, I may admit, freely admit, that my friend

is sometimes of a sarcastic temper.'

'The lady is your friend's wife, sir?'

'The lady is my friend's wife, sir.' 'She is very handsome.'

'Sir, she is peerless. They are still in the first year of their

marriage. They are still partly on a marriage, and partly on an

artistic, tour.'

'Your friend is an artist, sir?'

The gentleman replied by kissing the fingers of his right hand, and

wafting the kiss the length of his arm towards Heaven. As who should

say, I devote him to the celestial Powers as an immortal artist!

'But he is a man of family,' he added. 'His connections are of the best.

He is more than an artist: he is highly connected. He may, in effect,

have repudiated his connections, proudly, impatiently, sarcastically (I

make the concession of both words); but he has them. Sparks that have

been struck out during our intercourse have shown me this.'

'Well! I hope,' said the lofty gentleman, with the air of finally

disposing of the subject, 'that the lady's indisposition may be only

temporary.'

'Sir, I hope so.'

'Mere fatigue, I dare say.'

'Not altogether mere fatigue, sir, for her mule stumbled to-day, and

she fell from the saddle. She fell lightly, and was up again without

assistance, and rode from us laughing; but she complained towards

evening of a slight bruise in the side. She spoke of it more than once,

as we followed your party up the mountain.'

The head of the large retinue, who was gracious but not familiar,

appeared by this time to think that he had condescended more than

enough. He said no more, and there was silence for some quarter of an

hour until supper appeared.

With the supper came one of the young Fathers (there seemed to be no

old Fathers) to take the head of the table. It was like the supper of

an ordinary Swiss hotel, and good red wine grown by the convent in more

genial air was not wanting. The artist traveller calmly came and took

his place at table when the rest sat down, with no apparent sense upon

him of his late skirmish with the completely dressed traveller.

'Pray,' he inquired of the host, over his soup, 'has your convent many

of its famous dogs now?'

'Monsieur, it has three.'

'I saw three in the gallery below. Doubtless the three in question.' The

host, a slender, bright-eyed, dark young man of polite manners, whose

garment was a black gown with strips of white crossed over it like

braces, and who no more resembled the conventional breed of Saint

Bernard monks than he resembled the conventional breed of Saint Bernard

dogs, replied, doubtless those were the three in question.

'And I think,' said the artist traveller, 'I have seen one of them

before.'

It was possible. He was a dog sufficiently well known. Monsieur might

have easily seen him in the valley or somewhere on the lake, when he

(the dog) had gone down with one of the order to solicit aid for the

convent.

'Which is done in its regular season of the year, I think?'

Monsieur was right.

'And never without a dog. The dog is very important.' Again Monsieur was

right. The dog was very important. People were justly interested in the

dog. As one of the dogs celebrated everywhere, Ma'amselle would observe.

Ma'amselle was a little slow to observe it, as though she were not yet

well accustomed to the French tongue. Mrs General, however, observed it

for her.

'Ask him if he has saved many lives?' said, in his native English, the

young man who had been put out of countenance.

The host needed no translation of the question. He promptly replied in

French, 'No. Not this one.'

'Why not?' the same gentleman asked.

'Pardon,' returned the host composedly, 'give him the opportunity and

he will do it without doubt. For example, I am well convinced,' smiling

sedately, as he cut up the dish of veal to be handed round, on the young

man who had been put out of countenance, 'that if you, Monsieur, would

give him the opportunity, he would hasten with great ardour to fulfil

his duty.'

The artist traveller laughed. The insinuating traveller (who evinced

a provident anxiety to get his full share of the supper), wiping some

drops of wine from his moustache with a piece of bread, joined the

conversation.

'It is becoming late in the year, my Father,' said he, 'for

tourist-travellers, is it not?'

'Yes, it is late. Yet two or three weeks, at most, and we shall be left

to the winter snows.' 'And then,' said the insinuating traveller, 'for

the scratching dogs and the buried children, according to the pictures!'

'Pardon,' said the host, not quite understanding the allusion. 'How,

then the scratching dogs and the buried children according to the

pictures?'

The artist traveller struck in again before an answer could be given.

'Don't you know,' he coldly inquired across the table of his companion,

'that none but smugglers come this way in the winter or can have any

possible business this way?'

'Holy blue! No; never heard of it.'

'So it is, I believe. And as they know the signs of the weather

tolerably well, they don't give much employment to the dogs--who have

consequently died out rather--though this house of entertainment is

conveniently situated for themselves. Their young families, I am told,

they usually leave at home. But it's a grand idea!' cried the artist

traveller, unexpectedly rising into a tone of enthusiasm. 'It's a

sublime idea. It's the finest idea in the world, and brings tears into

a man's eyes, by Jupiter!' He then went on eating his veal with great

composure.

There was enough of mocking inconsistency at the bottom of this speech

to make it rather discordant, though the manner was refined and the

person well-favoured, and though the depreciatory part of it was so

skilfully thrown off as to be very difficult for one not perfectly

acquainted with the English language to understand, or, even

understanding, to take offence at: so simple and dispassionate was its

tone. After finishing his veal in the midst of silence, the speaker

again addressed his friend.

'Look,' said he, in his former tone, 'at this gentleman our host, not

yet in the prime of life, who in so graceful a way and with such courtly

urbanity and modesty presides over us! Manners fit for a crown! Dine

with the Lord Mayor of London (if you can get an invitation) and observe

the contrast. This dear fellow, with the finest cut face I ever saw, a

face in perfect drawing, leaves some laborious life and comes up here

I don't know how many feet above the level of the sea, for no other

purpose on earth (except enjoying himself, I hope, in a capital

refectory) than to keep an hotel for idle poor devils like you and

me, and leave the bill to our consciences! Why, isn't it a beautiful

sacrifice? What do we want more to touch us? Because rescued people of

interesting appearance are not, for eight or nine months out of every

twelve, holding on here round the necks of the most sagacious of dogs

carrying wooden bottles, shall we disparage the place? No! Bless the

place. It's a great place, a glorious place!'

The chest of the grey-haired gentleman who was the Chief of the

important party, had swelled as if with a protest against his being

numbered among poor devils. No sooner had the artist traveller ceased

speaking than he himself spoke with great dignity, as having it

incumbent on him to take the lead in most places, and having deserted

that duty for a little while.

He weightily communicated his opinion to their host, that his life must

be a very dreary life here in the winter.

The host allowed to Monsieur that it was a little monotonous. The air

was difficult to breathe for a length of time consecutively. The cold

was very severe. One needed youth and strength to bear it. However,

having them and the blessing of Heaven--

Yes, that was very good. 'But the confinement,' said the grey-haired

gentleman.

There were many days, even in bad weather, when it was possible to

walk about outside. It was the custom to beat a little track, and take

exercise there.

'But the space,' urged the grey-haired gentleman. 'So small.

So--ha--very limited.'

Monsieur would recall to himself that there were the refuges to visit,

and that tracks had to be made to them also.

Monsieur still urged, on the other hand, that the space was

so--ha--hum--so very contracted. More than that, it was always the same,

always the same.

With a deprecating smile, the host gently raised and gently lowered his

shoulders. That was true, he remarked, but permit him to say that almost

all objects had their various points of view. Monsieur and he did not

see this poor life of his from the same point of view. Monsieur was not

used to confinement.

'I--ha--yes, very true,' said the grey-haired gentleman. He seemed to

receive quite a shock from the force of the argument.

Monsieur, as an English traveller, surrounded by all means of travelling

pleasantly; doubtless possessing fortune, carriages, and servants--

'Perfectly, perfectly. Without doubt,' said the gentleman.

Monsieur could not easily place himself in the position of a person who

had not the power to choose, I will go here to-morrow, or there next

day; I will pass these barriers, I will enlarge those bounds. Monsieur

could not realise, perhaps, how the mind accommodated itself in such

things to the force of necessity.

'It is true,' said Monsieur. 'We will--ha--not pursue the subject.

You are--hum--quite accurate, I have no doubt. We will say no more.'

The supper having come to a close, he drew his chair away as he spoke,

and moved back to his former place by the fire. As it was very cold

at the greater part of the table, the other guests also resumed their

former seats by the fire, designing to toast themselves well before

going to bed. The host, when they rose from the table, bowed to all

present, wished them good night, and withdrew. But first the insinuating

traveller had asked him if they could have some wine made hot; and as

he had answered Yes, and had presently afterwards sent it in, that

traveller, seated in the centre of the group, and in the full heat of

the fire, was soon engaged in serving it out to the rest.

At this time, the younger of the two young ladies, who had been silently

attentive in her dark corner (the fire-light was the chief light in the

sombre room, the lamp being smoky and dull) to what had been said of the

absent lady, glided out. She was at a loss which way to turn when she

had softly closed the door; but, after a little hesitation among the

sounding passages and the many ways, came to a room in a corner of the

main gallery, where the servants were at their supper. From these she

obtained a lamp, and a direction to the lady's room.

It was up the great staircase on the story above. Here and there, the

bare white walls were broken by an iron grate, and she thought as she

went along that the place was something like a prison. The arched door

of the lady's room, or cell, was not quite shut. After knocking at it

two or three times without receiving an answer, she pushed it gently

open, and looked in.

The lady lay with closed eyes on the outside of the bed, protected from

the cold by the blankets and wrappers with which she had been covered

when she revived from her fainting fit. A dull light placed in the deep

recess of the window, made little impression on the arched room. The

visitor timidly stepped to the bed, and said, in a soft whisper, 'Are

you better?'

The lady had fallen into a slumber, and the whisper was too low to awake

her. Her visitor, standing quite still, looked at her attentively.

'She is very pretty,' she said to herself. 'I never saw so beautiful a

face. O how unlike me!'

It was a curious thing to say, but it had some hidden meaning, for it

filled her eyes with tears.

'I know I must be right. I know he spoke of her that evening. I could

very easily be wrong on any other subject, but not on this, not on

this!'

With a quiet and tender hand she put aside a straying fold of the

sleeper's hair, and then touched the hand that lay outside the covering.

'I like to look at her,' she breathed to herself. 'I like to see what

has affected him so much.'

She had not withdrawn her hand, when the sleeper opened her eyes and

started.

'Pray don't be alarmed. I am only one of the travellers from

down-stairs. I came to ask if you were better, and if I could do

anything for you.'

'I think you have already been so kind as to send your servants to my

assistance?'

'No, not I; that was my sister. Are you better?'

'Much better. It is only a slight bruise, and has been well looked to,

and is almost easy now. It made me giddy and faint in a moment. It had

hurt me before; but at last it overpowered me all at once.' 'May I stay

with you until some one comes? Would you like it?'

'I should like it, for it is lonely here; but I am afraid you will feel

the cold too much.'

'I don't mind cold. I am not delicate, if I look so.' She quickly moved

one of the two rough chairs to the bedside, and sat down. The other as

quickly moved a part of some travelling wrapper from herself, and drew

it over her, so that her arm, in keeping it about her, rested on her

shoulder.

'You have so much the air of a kind nurse,' said the lady, smiling on

her, 'that you seem as if you had come to me from home.'

'I am very glad of it.'

'I was dreaming of home when I woke just now. Of my old home, I mean,

before I was married.'

'And before you were so far away from it.'

'I have been much farther away from it than this; but then I took

the best part of it with me, and missed nothing. I felt solitary as I

dropped asleep here, and, missing it a little, wandered back to it.'

There was a sorrowfully affectionate and regretful sound in her voice,

which made her visitor refrain from looking at her for the moment.

'It is a curious chance which at last brings us together, under this

covering in which you have wrapped me,' said the visitor after a

pause;'for do you know, I think I have been looking for you some time.'

'Looking for me?'

'I believe I have a little note here, which I was to give to you

whenever I found you. This is it. Unless I greatly mistake, it is

addressed to you? Is it not?'

The lady took it, and said yes, and read it. Her visitor watched her as

she did so. It was very short. She flushed a little as she put her lips

to her visitor's cheek, and pressed her hand.

'The dear young friend to whom he presents me, may be a comfort to me

at some time, he says. She is truly a comfort to me the first time I see

her.'

'Perhaps you don't,' said the visitor, hesitating--'perhaps you don't

know my story? Perhaps he never told you my story?'

'No.'

'Oh no, why should he! I have scarcely the right to tell it myself at

present, because I have been entreated not to do so. There is not much

in it, but it might account to you for my asking you not to say anything

about the letter here. You saw my family with me, perhaps? Some of

them--I only say this to you--are a little proud, a little prejudiced.'

'You shall take it back again,' said the other; 'and then my husband is

sure not to see it. He might see it and speak of it, otherwise, by some

accident. Will you put it in your bosom again, to be certain?'

She did so with great care. Her small, slight hand was still upon the

letter, when they heard some one in the gallery outside.

'I promised,' said the visitor, rising, 'that I would write to him after

seeing you (I could hardly fail to see you sooner or later), and tell

him if you were well and happy. I had better say you were well and

happy.'

'Yes, yes, yes! Say I was very well and very happy. And that I thanked

him affectionately, and would never forget him.'

'I shall see you in the morning. After that we are sure to meet again

before very long. Good night!'

'Good night. Thank you, thank you. Good night, my dear!'

Both of them were hurried and fluttered as they exchanged this parting,

and as the visitor came out of the door. She had expected to meet the

lady's husband approaching it; but the person in the gallery was not

he: it was the traveller who had wiped the wine-drops from his moustache

with the piece of bread. When he heard the step behind him, he turned

round--for he was walking away in the dark. His politeness, which

was extreme, would not allow of the young lady's lighting herself

down-stairs, or going down alone. He took her lamp, held it so as to

throw the best light on the stone steps, and followed her all the way

to the supper-room. She went down, not easily hiding how much she was

inclined to shrink and tremble; for the appearance of this traveller was

particularly disagreeable to her. She had sat in her quiet corner before

supper imagining what he would have been in the scenes and places within

her experience, until he inspired her with an aversion that made him

little less than terrific.

He followed her down with his smiling politeness, followed her in,

and resumed his seat in the best place in the hearth. There with the

wood-fire, which was beginning to burn low, rising and falling upon him

in the dark room, he sat with his legs thrust out to warm, drinking the

hot wine down to the lees, with a monstrous shadow imitating him on the

wall and ceiling.

The tired company had broken up, and all the rest were gone to bed

except the young lady's father, who dozed in his chair by the fire.

The traveller had been at the pains of going a long way up-stairs to his

sleeping-room to fetch his pocket-flask of brandy. He told them so, as

he poured its contents into what was left of the wine, and drank with a

new relish.

'May I ask, sir, if you are on your way to Italy?'

The grey-haired gentleman had roused himself, and was preparing to

withdraw. He answered in the affirmative.

'I also!' said the traveller. 'I shall hope to have the honour

of offering my compliments in fairer scenes, and under softer

circumstances, than on this dismal mountain.'

The gentleman bowed, distantly enough, and said he was obliged to him.

'We poor gentlemen, sir,' said the traveller, pulling his moustache dry

with his hand, for he had dipped it in the wine and brandy; 'we poor

gentlemen do not travel like princes, but the courtesies and graces of

life are precious to us. To your health, sir!'

'Sir, I thank you.'

'To the health of your distinguished family--of the fair ladies, your

daughters!'

'Sir, I thank you again, I wish you good night. My dear, are

our--ha--our people in attendance?'

'They are close by, father.'

'Permit me!' said the traveller, rising and holding the door open, as

the gentleman crossed the room towards it with his arm drawn through his

daughter's. 'Good repose! To the pleasure of seeing you once more! To

to-morrow!'

As he kissed his hand, with his best manner and his daintiest smile,

the young lady drew a little nearer to her father, and passed him with a

dread of touching him.

'Humph!' said the insinuating traveller, whose manner shrunk, and whose

voice dropped when he was left alone. 'If they all go to bed, why I must

go. They are in a devil of a hurry. One would think the night would be

long enough, in this freezing silence and solitude, if one went to bed

two hours hence.'

Throwing back his head in emptying his glass, he cast his eyes upon the

travellers' book, which lay on the piano, open, with pens and ink beside

it, as if the night's names had been registered when he was absent.

Taking it in his hand, he read these entries.

William Dorrit, Esquire

Frederick Dorrit, Esquire

Edward Dorrit, Esquire

Miss Dorrit

Miss Amy Dorrit

Mrs General

and Suite.

From France to Italy.

Mr and Mrs Henry Gowan.

From France to Italy.

To which he added, in a small complicated hand, ending with a long lean

flourish, not unlike a lasso thrown at all the rest of the names:

Blandois. Paris.

From France to Italy.

And then, with his nose coming down over his moustache and his moustache

going up and under his nose, repaired to his allotted cell.

CHAPTER 2. Mrs General

It is indispensable to present the accomplished lady who was of

sufficient importance in the suite of the Dorrit Family to have a line

to herself in the Travellers' Book.

Mrs General was the daughter of a clerical dignitary in a cathedral

town, where she had led the fashion until she was as near forty-five as

a single lady can be. A stiff commissariat officer of sixty, famous as a

martinet, had then become enamoured of the gravity with which she drove

the proprieties four-in-hand through the cathedral town society, and

had solicited to be taken beside her on the box of the cool coach of

ceremony to which that team was harnessed. His proposal of marriage

being accepted by the lady, the commissary took his seat behind

the proprieties with great decorum, and Mrs General drove until the

commissary died. In the course of their united journey, they ran over

several people who came in the way of the proprieties; but always in a

high style and with composure.

The commissary having been buried with all the decorations suitable to

the service (the whole team of proprieties were harnessed to his hearse,

and they all had feathers and black velvet housings with his coat of

arms in the corner), Mrs General began to inquire what quantity of dust

and ashes was deposited at the bankers'. It then transpired that the

commissary had so far stolen a march on Mrs General as to have bought

himself an annuity some years before his marriage, and to have reserved

that circumstance in mentioning, at the period of his proposal, that

his income was derived from the interest of his money. Mrs General

consequently found her means so much diminished, that, but for the

perfect regulation of her mind, she might have felt disposed to question

the accuracy of that portion of the late service which had declared that

the commissary could take nothing away with him.

In this state of affairs it occurred to Mrs General, that she might

'form the mind,' and eke the manners of some young lady of distinction.

Or, that she might harness the proprieties to the carriage of some rich

young heiress or widow, and become at once the driver and guard of such

vehicle through the social mazes. Mrs General's communication of this

idea to her clerical and commissariat connection was so warmly applauded

that, but for the lady's undoubted merit, it might have appeared as

though they wanted to get rid of her. Testimonials representing Mrs

General as a prodigy of piety, learning, virtue, and gentility, were

lavishly contributed from influential quarters; and one venerable

archdeacon even shed tears in recording his testimony to her perfections

(described to him by persons on whom he could rely), though he had never

had the honour and moral gratification of setting eyes on Mrs General in

all his life.

Thus delegated on her mission, as it were by Church and State, Mrs

General, who had always occupied high ground, felt in a condition to

keep it, and began by putting herself up at a very high figure. An

interval of some duration elapsed, in which there was no bid for Mrs

General. At length a county-widower, with a daughter of fourteen, opened

negotiations with the lady; and as it was a part either of the native

dignity or of the artificial policy of Mrs General (but certainly one

or the other) to comport herself as if she were much more sought than

seeking, the widower pursued Mrs General until he prevailed upon her to

form his daughter's mind and manners.

The execution of this trust occupied Mrs General about seven years, in

the course of which time she made the tour of Europe, and saw most of

that extensive miscellany of objects which it is essential that all

persons of polite cultivation should see with other people's eyes,

and never with their own. When her charge was at length formed, the

marriage, not only of the young lady, but likewise of her father, the

widower, was resolved on. The widower then finding Mrs General both

inconvenient and expensive, became of a sudden almost as much affected

by her merits as the archdeacon had been, and circulated such praises

of her surpassing worth, in all quarters where he thought an opportunity

might arise of transferring the blessing to somebody else, that Mrs

General was a name more honourable than ever.

The phoenix was to let, on this elevated perch, when Mr Dorrit, who

had lately succeeded to his property, mentioned to his bankers that he

wished to discover a lady, well-bred, accomplished, well connected, well

accustomed to good society, who was qualified at once to complete the

education of his daughters, and to be their matron or chaperon. Mr

Dorrit's bankers, as bankers of the county-widower, instantly said, 'Mrs

General.'

Pursuing the light so fortunately hit upon, and finding the concurrent

testimony of the whole of Mrs General's acquaintance to be of the

pathetic nature already recorded, Mr Dorrit took the trouble of going

down to the county of the county-widower to see Mrs General, in whom he

found a lady of a quality superior to his highest expectations.

'Might I be excused,' said Mr Dorrit, 'if I inquired--ha--what remune--'

'Why, indeed,' returned Mrs General, stopping the word, 'it is a subject

on which I prefer to avoid entering. I have never entered on it with my

friends here; and I cannot overcome the delicacy, Mr Dorrit, with

which I have always regarded it. I am not, as I hope you are aware, a

governess--'

'O dear no!' said Mr Dorrit. 'Pray, madam, do not imagine for a moment

that I think so.' He really blushed to be suspected of it.

Mrs General gravely inclined her head. 'I cannot, therefore, put a price

upon services which it is a pleasure to me to render if I can render

them spontaneously, but which I could not render in mere return for any

consideration. Neither do I know how, or where, to find a case parallel

to my own. It is peculiar.'

No doubt. But how then (Mr Dorrit not unnaturally hinted) could the

subject be approached. 'I cannot object,' said Mrs General--'though even

that is disagreeable to me--to Mr Dorrit's inquiring, in confidence of

my friends here, what amount they have been accustomed, at quarterly

intervals, to pay to my credit at my bankers'.'

Mr Dorrit bowed his acknowledgements.

'Permit me to add,' said Mrs General, 'that beyond this, I can never

resume the topic. Also that I can accept no second or inferior position.

If the honour were proposed to me of becoming known to Mr Dorrit's

family--I think two daughters were mentioned?--'

'Two daughters.'

'I could only accept it on terms of perfect equality, as a companion,

protector, Mentor, and friend.'

Mr Dorrit, in spite of his sense of his importance, felt as if it would

be quite a kindness in her to accept it on any conditions. He almost

said as much.

'I think,' repeated Mrs General, 'two daughters were mentioned?'

'Two daughters,' said Mr Dorrit again.

'It would therefore,' said Mrs General, 'be necessary to add a third

more to the payment (whatever its amount may prove to be), which my

friends here have been accustomed to make to my bankers'.'

Mr Dorrit lost no time in referring the delicate question to the

county-widower, and finding that he had been accustomed to pay three

hundred pounds a-year to the credit of Mrs General, arrived, without any

severe strain on his arithmetic, at the conclusion that he himself must

pay four. Mrs General being an article of that lustrous surface which

suggests that it is worth any money, he made a formal proposal to be

allowed to have the honour and pleasure of regarding her as a member of

his family. Mrs General conceded that high privilege, and here she was.

In person, Mrs General, including her skirts which had much to do with

it, was of a dignified and imposing appearance; ample, rustling, gravely

voluminous; always upright behind the proprieties. She might have

been taken--had been taken--to the top of the Alps and the bottom of

Herculaneum, without disarranging a fold in her dress, or displacing

a pin. If her countenance and hair had rather a floury appearance, as

though from living in some transcendently genteel Mill, it was rather

because she was a chalky creation altogether, than because she mended

her complexion with violet powder, or had turned grey. If her eyes had

no expression, it was probably because they had nothing to express. If

she had few wrinkles, it was because her mind had never traced its name

or any other inscription on her face. A cool, waxy, blown-out woman, who

had never lighted well. Mrs General had no opinions. Her way of forming

a mind was to prevent it from forming opinions. She had a little

circular set of mental grooves or rails on which she started little

trains of other people's opinions, which never overtook one another, and

never got anywhere. Even her propriety could not dispute that there was

impropriety in the world; but Mrs General's way of getting rid of it was

to put it out of sight, and make believe that there was no such thing.

This was another of her ways of forming a mind--to cram all articles of

difficulty into cupboards, lock them up, and say they had no existence.

It was the easiest way, and, beyond all comparison, the properest.

Mrs General was not to be told of anything shocking. Accidents,

miseries, and offences, were never to be mentioned before her. Passion

was to go to sleep in the presence of Mrs General, and blood was to

change to milk and water. The little that was left in the world,

when all these deductions were made, it was Mrs General's province to

varnish. In that formation process of hers, she dipped the smallest of

brushes into the largest of pots, and varnished the surface of every

object that came under consideration. The more cracked it was, the more

Mrs General varnished it. There was varnish in Mrs General's voice,

varnish in Mrs General's touch, an atmosphere of varnish round Mrs

General's figure. Mrs General's dreams ought to have been varnished--if

she had any--lying asleep in the arms of the good Saint Bernard, with

the feathery snow falling on his house-top.

CHAPTER 3. On the Road

The bright morning sun dazzled the eyes, the snow had ceased, the mists

had vanished, the mountain air was so clear and light that the

new sensation of breathing it was like the having entered on a new

existence. To help the delusion, the solid ground itself seemed gone,

and the mountain, a shining waste of immense white heaps and masses, to

be a region of cloud floating between the blue sky above and the earth

far below.

Some dark specks in the snow, like knots upon a little thread, beginning

at the convent door and winding away down the descent in broken lengths

which were not yet pieced together, showed where the Brethren were at

work in several places clearing the track. Already the snow had begun to

be foot-thawed again about the door. Mules were busily brought out, tied

to the rings in the wall, and laden; strings of bells were buckled

on, burdens were adjusted, the voices of drivers and riders sounded

musically. Some of the earliest had even already resumed their journey;

and, both on the level summit by the dark water near the convent, and on

the downward way of yesterday's ascent, little moving figures of men and

mules, reduced to miniatures by the immensity around, went with a clear

tinkling of bells and a pleasant harmony of tongues.

In the supper-room of last night, a new fire, piled upon the feathery

ashes of the old one, shone upon a homely breakfast of loaves, butter,

and milk. It also shone on the courier of the Dorrit family, making tea

for his party from a supply he had brought up with him, together with

several other small stores which were chiefly laid in for the use of the

strong body of inconvenience. Mr Gowan and Blandois of Paris had already

breakfasted, and were walking up and down by the lake, smoking their

cigars. 'Gowan, eh?' muttered Tip, otherwise Edward Dorrit, Esquire,

turning over the leaves of the book, when the courier had left them to

breakfast. 'Then Gowan is the name of a puppy, that's all I have got to

say! If it was worth my while, I'd pull his nose. But it isn't worth my

while--fortunately for him. How's his wife, Amy?

I suppose you know. You generally know things of that sort.'

'She is better, Edward. But they are not going to-day.'

'Oh! They are not going to-day! Fortunately for that fellow too,' said

Tip, 'or he and I might have come into collision.'

'It is thought better here that she should lie quiet to-day, and not be

fatigued and shaken by the ride down until to-morrow.'

'With all my heart. But you talk as if you had been nursing her. You

haven't been relapsing into (Mrs General is not here) into old habits,

have you, Amy?'

He asked her the question with a sly glance of observation at Miss

Fanny, and at his father too.

'I have only been in to ask her if I could do anything for her, Tip,'

said Little Dorrit.

'You needn't call me Tip, Amy child,' returned that young gentleman

with a frown; 'because that's an old habit, and one you may as well lay

aside.'

'I didn't mean to say so, Edward dear. I forgot. It was so natural once,

that it seemed at the moment the right word.'

'Oh yes!' Miss Fanny struck in. 'Natural, and right word, and once, and

all the rest of it! Nonsense, you little thing! I know perfectly well

why you have been taking such an interest in this Mrs Gowan. You can't

blind me.'

'I will not try to, Fanny. Don't be angry.'

'Oh! angry!' returned that young lady with a flounce. 'I have no

patience' (which indeed was the truth). 'Pray, Fanny,' said Mr Dorrit,

raising his eyebrows, 'what do you mean? Explain yourself.'

'Oh! Never mind, Pa,' replied Miss Fanny, 'it's no great matter.

Amy will understand me. She knew, or knew of, this Mrs Gowan before

yesterday, and she may as well admit that she did.'

'My child,' said Mr Dorrit, turning to his younger daughter, 'has your

sister--any--ha--authority for this curious statement?'

'However meek we are,' Miss Fanny struck in before she could answer, 'we

don't go creeping into people's rooms on the tops of cold mountains,

and sitting perishing in the frost with people, unless we know something

about them beforehand. It's not very hard to divine whose friend Mrs

Gowan is.'

'Whose friend?' inquired her father.

'Pa, I am sorry to say,' returned Miss Fanny, who had by this time

succeeded in goading herself into a state of much ill-usage and

grievance, which she was often at great pains to do: 'that I believe her

to be a friend of that very objectionable and unpleasant person, who,

with a total absence of all delicacy, which our experience might have

led us to expect from him, insulted us and outraged our feelings in

so public and wilful a manner on an occasion to which it is understood

among us that we will not more pointedly allude.'

'Amy, my child,' said Mr Dorrit, tempering a bland severity with a

dignified affection, 'is this the case?'

Little Dorrit mildly answered, yes it was.

'Yes it is!' cried Miss Fanny. 'Of course! I said so! And now, Pa, I do

declare once for all'--this young lady was in the habit of declaring the

same thing once for all every day of her life, and even several times in

a day--'that this is shameful! I do declare once for all that it ought

to be put a stop to. Is it not enough that we have gone through what

is only known to ourselves, but are we to have it thrown in our faces,

perseveringly and systematically, by the very person who should spare

our feelings most? Are we to be exposed to this unnatural conduct every

moment of our lives? Are we never to be permitted to forget? I say

again, it is absolutely infamous!'

'Well, Amy,' observed her brother, shaking his head, 'you know I stand

by you whenever I can, and on most occasions. But I must say, that, upon

my soul, I do consider it rather an unaccountable mode of showing your

sisterly affection, that you should back up a man who treated me in the

most ungentlemanly way in which one man can treat another. And who,' he

added convincingly, must be a low-minded thief, you know, or he never

could have conducted himself as he did.'

'And see,' said Miss Fanny, 'see what is involved in this! Can we ever

hope to be respected by our servants? Never. Here are our two women, and

Pa's valet, and a footman, and a courier, and all sorts of dependents,

and yet in the midst of these, we are to have one of ourselves rushing

about with tumblers of cold water, like a menial! Why, a policeman,'

said Miss Fanny, 'if a beggar had a fit in the street, could but go

plunging about with tumblers, as this very Amy did in this very room

before our very eyes last night!'

'I don't so much mind that, once in a way,' remarked Mr Edward; 'but

your Clennam, as he thinks proper to call himself, is another thing.'

'He is part of the same thing,' returned Miss Fanny, 'and of a piece

with all the rest. He obtruded himself upon us in the first instance.

We never wanted him. I always showed him, for one, that I could have

dispensed with his company with the greatest pleasure.

He then commits that gross outrage upon our feelings, which he never

could or would have committed but for the delight he took in exposing

us; and then we are to be demeaned for the service of his friends! Why,

I don't wonder at this Mr Gowan's conduct towards you. What else was

to be expected when he was enjoying our past misfortunes--gloating over

them at the moment!' 'Father--Edward--no indeed!' pleaded Little Dorrit.

'Neither Mr nor Mrs Gowan had ever heard our name. They were, and they

are, quite ignorant of our history.'

'So much the worse,' retorted Fanny, determined not to admit anything in

extenuation, 'for then you have no excuse. If they had known about us,

you might have felt yourself called upon to conciliate them. That would

have been a weak and ridiculous mistake, but I can respect a mistake,

whereas I can't respect a wilful and deliberate abasing of those who

should be nearest and dearest to us. No. I can't respect that. I can do

nothing but denounce that.'

'I never offend you wilfully, Fanny,' said Little Dorrit, 'though you

are so hard with me.'

'Then you should be more careful, Amy,' returned her sister. 'If you do

such things by accident, you should be more careful. If I happened to

have been born in a peculiar place, and under peculiar circumstances

that blunted my knowledge of propriety, I fancy I should think myself

bound to consider at every step, "Am I going, ignorantly, to compromise

any near and dear relations?" That is what I fancy I should do, if it

was my case.'

Mr Dorrit now interposed, at once to stop these painful subjects by his

authority, and to point their moral by his wisdom.

'My dear,' said he to his younger daughter, 'I beg you to--ha--to say

no more. Your sister Fanny expresses herself strongly, but not without

considerable reason. You have now a--hum--a great position to support.

That great position is not occupied by yourself alone, but by--ha--by

me, and--ha hum--by us. Us. Now, it is incumbent upon all people in an

exalted position, but it is particularly so on this family, for reasons

which I--ha--will not dwell upon, to make themselves respected. To be

vigilant in making themselves respected. Dependants, to respect us, must

be--ha--kept at a distance and--hum--kept down. Down. Therefore, your

not exposing yourself to the remarks of our attendants by appearing to

have at any time dispensed with their services and performed them for

yourself, is--ha--highly important.'

'Why, who can doubt it?' cried Miss Fanny. 'It's the essence of

everything.' 'Fanny,' returned her father, grandiloquently, 'give me

leave, my dear. We then come to--ha--to Mr Clennam. I am free to say

that I do not, Amy, share your sister's sentiments--that is to say

altogether--hum--altogether--in reference to Mr Clennam. I am content

to regard that individual in the light of--ha--generally--a well-behaved

person. Hum. A well-behaved person. Nor will I inquire whether Mr

Clennam did, at any time, obtrude himself on--ha--my society. He knew my

society to be--hum--sought, and his plea might be that he regarded me in

the light of a public character. But there were circumstances attending

my--ha--slight knowledge of Mr Clennam (it was very slight), which,'

here Mr Dorrit became extremely grave and impressive, 'would render it

highly indelicate in Mr Clennam to--ha--to seek to renew communication

with me or with any member of my family under existing circumstances.

If Mr Clennam has sufficient delicacy to perceive the impropriety of

any such attempt, I am bound as a responsible gentleman to--ha--defer

to that delicacy on his part. If, on the other hand, Mr Clennam has not

that delicacy, I cannot for a moment--ha--hold any correspondence with

so--hum--coarse a mind. In either case, it would appear that Mr Clennam

is put altogether out of the question, and that we have nothing to do

with him or he with us. Ha--Mrs General!'

The entrance of the lady whom he announced, to take her place at the

breakfast-table, terminated the discussion. Shortly afterwards, the

courier announced that the valet, and the footman, and the two maids,

and the four guides, and the fourteen mules, were in readiness; so the

breakfast party went out to the convent door to join the cavalcade.

Mr Gowan stood aloof with his cigar and pencil, but Mr Blandois was on

the spot to pay his respects to the ladies. When he gallantly pulled

off his slouched hat to Little Dorrit, she thought he had even a more

sinister look, standing swart and cloaked in the snow, than he had

in the fire-light over-night. But, as both her father and her sister

received his homage with some favour, she refrained from expressing any

distrust of him, lest it should prove to be a new blemish derived from

her prison birth.

Nevertheless, as they wound down the rugged way while the convent was

yet in sight, she more than once looked round, and descried Mr Blandois,

backed by the convent smoke which rose straight and high from the

chimneys in a golden film, always standing on one jutting point looking

down after them. Long after he was a mere black stick in the snow, she

felt as though she could yet see that smile of his, that high nose, and

those eyes that were too near it. And even after that, when the convent

was gone and some light morning clouds veiled the pass below it, the

ghastly skeleton arms by the wayside seemed to be all pointing up at

him.

More treacherous than snow, perhaps, colder at heart, and harder to

melt, Blandois of Paris by degrees passed out of her mind, as they came

down into the softer regions. Again the sun was warm, again the streams

descending from glaciers and snowy caverns were refreshing to drink at,

again they came among the pine-trees, the rocky rivulets, the verdant

heights and dales, the wooden chalets and rough zigzag fences of Swiss

country. Sometimes the way so widened that she and her father could

ride abreast. And then to look at him, handsomely clothed in his fur and

broadcloths, rich, free, numerously served and attended, his eyes roving

far away among the glories of the landscape, no miserable screen before

them to darken his sight and cast its shadow on him, was enough.

Her uncle was so far rescued from that shadow of old, that he wore the

clothes they gave him, and performed some ablutions as a sacrifice to

the family credit, and went where he was taken, with a certain patient

animal enjoyment, which seemed to express that the air and change did

him good. In all other respects, save one, he shone with no light but

such as was reflected from his brother. His brother's greatness, wealth,

freedom, and grandeur, pleased him without any reference to himself.

Silent and retiring, he had no use for speech when he could hear his

brother speak; no desire to be waited on, so that the servants devoted

themselves to his brother. The only noticeable change he originated in

himself, was an alteration in his manner to his younger niece. Every day

it refined more and more into a marked respect, very rarely shown by age

to youth, and still more rarely susceptible, one would have said, of the

fitness with which he invested it. On those occasions when Miss Fanny

did declare once for all, he would take the next opportunity of baring

his grey head before his younger niece, and of helping her to alight,

or handing her to the carriage, or showing her any other attention, with

the profoundest deference. Yet it never appeared misplaced or forced,

being always heartily simple, spontaneous, and genuine. Neither would he

ever consent, even at his brother's request, to be helped to any place

before her, or to take precedence of her in anything. So jealous was he

of her being respected, that, on this very journey down from the Great

Saint Bernard, he took sudden and violent umbrage at the footman's being

remiss to hold her stirrup, though standing near when she dismounted;

and unspeakably astonished the whole retinue by charging at him on a

hard-headed mule, riding him into a corner, and threatening to trample

him to death.

They were a goodly company, and the Innkeepers all but worshipped them.

Wherever they went, their importance preceded them in the person of the

courier riding before, to see that the rooms of state were ready. He was

the herald of the family procession. The great travelling-carriage came

next: containing, inside, Mr Dorrit, Miss Dorrit, Miss Amy Dorrit,

and Mrs General; outside, some of the retainers, and (in fine weather)

Edward Dorrit, Esquire, for whom the box was reserved. Then came

the chariot containing Frederick Dorrit, Esquire, and an empty place

occupied by Edward Dorrit, Esquire, in wet weather. Then came the

fourgon with the rest of the retainers, the heavy baggage, and as much

as it could carry of the mud and dust which the other vehicles left

behind.

These equipages adorned the yard of the hotel at Martigny, on the return

of the family from their mountain excursion. Other vehicles were there,

much company being on the road, from the patched Italian Vettura--like

the body of a swing from an English fair put upon a wooden tray on

wheels, and having another wooden tray without wheels put atop of it--to

the trim English carriage. But there was another adornment of the

hotel which Mr Dorrit had not bargained for. Two strange travellers

embellished one of his rooms.

The Innkeeper, hat in hand in the yard, swore to the courier that he was

blighted, that he was desolated, that he was profoundly afflicted, that

he was the most miserable and unfortunate of beasts, that he had the

head of a wooden pig. He ought never to have made the concession, he

said, but the very genteel lady had so passionately prayed him for the

accommodation of that room to dine in, only for a little half-hour, that

he had been vanquished. The little half-hour was expired, the lady and

gentleman were taking their little dessert and half-cup of coffee, the

note was paid, the horses were ordered, they would depart immediately;

but, owing to an unhappy destiny and the curse of Heaven, they were not

yet gone.

Nothing could exceed Mr Dorrit's indignation, as he turned at the foot

of the staircase on hearing these apologies. He felt that the family

dignity was struck at by an assassin's hand. He had a sense of his

dignity, which was of the most exquisite nature. He could detect a

design upon it when nobody else had any perception of the fact. His

life was made an agony by the number of fine scalpels that he felt to be

incessantly engaged in dissecting his dignity.

'Is it possible, sir,' said Mr Dorrit, reddening excessively, 'that you

have--ha--had the audacity to place one of my rooms at the disposition

of any other person?'

Thousands of pardons! It was the host's profound misfortune to have been

overcome by that too genteel lady. He besought Monseigneur not to enrage

himself. He threw himself on Monseigneur for clemency. If Monseigneur

would have the distinguished goodness to occupy the other salon

especially reserved for him, for but five minutes, all would go well.

'No, sir,' said Mr Dorrit. 'I will not occupy any salon. I will leave

your house without eating or drinking, or setting foot in it.

How do you dare to act like this? Who am I that you--ha--separate me

from other gentlemen?'

Alas! The host called all the universe to witness that Monseigneur was

the most amiable of the whole body of nobility, the most important,

the most estimable, the most honoured. If he separated Monseigneur from

others, it was only because he was more distinguished, more cherished,

more generous, more renowned.

'Don't tell me so, sir,' returned Mr Dorrit, in a mighty heat. 'You have

affronted me. You have heaped insults upon me. How dare you? Explain

yourself.'

Ah, just Heaven, then, how could the host explain himself when he had

nothing more to explain; when he had only to apologise, and confide

himself to the so well-known magnanimity of Monseigneur!

'I tell you, sir,' said Mr Dorrit, panting with anger, 'that you

separate me--ha--from other gentlemen; that you make distinctions

between me and other gentlemen of fortune and station. I demand of you,

why? I wish to know on--ha--what authority, on whose authority. Reply

sir. Explain. Answer why.'

Permit the landlord humbly to submit to Monsieur the Courier then, that

Monseigneur, ordinarily so gracious, enraged himself without cause.

There was no why. Monsieur the Courier would represent to Monseigneur,

that he deceived himself in suspecting that there was any why, but the

why his devoted servant had already had the honour to present to him.

The very genteel lady--

'Silence!' cried Mr Dorrit. 'Hold your tongue! I will hear no more

of the very genteel lady; I will hear no more of you. Look at this

family--my family--a family more genteel than any lady. You have treated

this family with disrespect; you have been insolent to this family. I'll

ruin you. Ha--send for the horses, pack the carriages, I'll not set foot

in this man's house again!'

No one had interfered in the dispute, which was beyond the French

colloquial powers of Edward Dorrit, Esquire, and scarcely within the

province of the ladies. Miss Fanny, however, now supported her father

with great bitterness; declaring, in her native tongue, that it was

quite clear there was something special in this man's impertinence;

and that she considered it important that he should be, by some means,

forced to give up his authority for making distinctions between that

family and other wealthy families. What the reasons of his presumption

could be, she was at a loss to imagine; but reasons he must have, and

they ought to be torn from him.

All the guides, mule-drivers, and idlers in the yard, had made

themselves parties to the angry conference, and were much impressed by

the courier's now bestirring himself to get the carriages out. With the

aid of some dozen people to each wheel, this was done at a great cost of

noise; and then the loading was proceeded with, pending the arrival of

the horses from the post-house.

But the very genteel lady's English chariot being already horsed and at

the inn-door, the landlord had slipped up-stairs to represent his hard

case. This was notified to the yard by his now coming down the staircase

in attendance on the gentleman and the lady, and by his pointing out the

offended majesty of Mr Dorrit to them with a significant motion of his

hand.

'Beg your pardon,' said the gentleman, detaching himself from the

lady, and coming forward. 'I am a man of few words and a bad hand at an

explanation--but lady here is extremely anxious that there should be no

Row. Lady--a mother of mine, in point of fact--wishes me to say that she

hopes no Row.'

Mr Dorrit, still panting under his injury, saluted the gentleman, and

saluted the lady, in a distant, final, and invincible manner.

'No, but really--here, old feller; you!' This was the gentleman's way of

appealing to Edward Dorrit, Esquire, on whom he pounced as a great and

providential relief. 'Let you and I try to make this all right. Lady so

very much wishes no Row.'

Edward Dorrit, Esquire, led a little apart by the button, assumed a

diplomatic expression of countenance in replying, 'Why you must confess,

that when you bespeak a lot of rooms beforehand, and they belong to you,

it's not pleasant to find other people in 'em.'

'No,' said the other, 'I know it isn't. I admit it. Still, let you and I

try to make it all right, and avoid Row. The fault is not this chap's

at all, but my mother's. Being a remarkably fine woman with no bigodd

nonsense about her--well educated, too--she was too many for this chap.

Regularly pocketed him.'

'If that's the case--' Edward Dorrit, Esquire, began.

'Assure you 'pon my soul 'tis the case. Consequently,' said the other

gentleman, retiring on his main position, 'why Row?'

'Edmund,' said the lady from the doorway, 'I hope you have explained,

or are explaining, to the satisfaction of this gentleman and his family

that the civil landlord is not to blame?'

'Assure you, ma'am,' returned Edmund, 'perfectly paralysing myself with

trying it on.' He then looked steadfastly at Edward Dorrit, Esquire, for

some seconds, and suddenly added, in a burst of confidence, 'Old feller!

Is it all right?'

'I don't know, after all,' said the lady, gracefully advancing a step or

two towards Mr Dorrit, 'but that I had better say myself, at once,

that I assured this good man I took all the consequences on myself of

occupying one of a stranger's suite of rooms during his absence, for

just as much (or as little) time as I could dine in. I had no idea the

rightful owner would come back so soon, nor had I any idea that he

had come back, or I should have hastened to make restoration of my

ill-gotten chamber, and to have offered my explanation and apology. I

trust in saying this--'

For a moment the lady, with a glass at her eye, stood transfixed and

speechless before the two Miss Dorrits. At the same moment, Miss Fanny,

in the foreground of a grand pictorial composition, formed by the

family, the family equipages, and the family servants, held her sister

tight under one arm to detain her on the spot, and with the other arm

fanned herself with a distinguished air, and negligently surveyed the

lady from head to foot.

The lady, recovering herself quickly--for it was Mrs Merdle and she was

not easily dashed--went on to add that she trusted in saying this, she

apologised for her boldness, and restored this well-behaved landlord to

the favour that was so very valuable to him. Mr Dorrit, on the altar of

whose dignity all this was incense, made a gracious reply; and said

that his people should--ha--countermand his horses, and he

would--hum--overlook what he had at first supposed to be an affront,

but now regarded as an honour. Upon this the bosom bent to him; and its

owner, with a wonderful command of feature, addressed a winning smile of

adieu to the two sisters, as young ladies of fortune in whose favour she

was much prepossessed, and whom she had never had the gratification of

seeing before.

Not so, however, Mr Sparkler. This gentleman, becoming transfixed at

the same moment as his lady-mother, could not by any means unfix himself

again, but stood stiffly staring at the whole composition with Miss

Fanny in the Foreground. On his mother saying, 'Edmund, we are quite

ready; will you give me your arm?' he seemed, by the motion of his lips,

to reply with some remark comprehending the form of words in which his

shining talents found the most frequent utterance, but he relaxed no

muscle. So fixed was his figure, that it would have been matter of some

difficulty to bend him sufficiently to get him in the carriage-door,

if he had not received the timely assistance of a maternal pull from

within. He was no sooner within than the pad of the little window in the

back of the chariot disappeared, and his eye usurped its place. There

it remained as long as so small an object was discernible, and probably

much longer, staring (as though something inexpressibly surprising

should happen to a codfish) like an ill-executed eye in a large locket.

This encounter was so highly agreeable to Miss Fanny, and gave her

so much to think of with triumph afterwards, that it softened her

asperities exceedingly. When the procession was again in motion next

day, she occupied her place in it with a new gaiety; and showed such a

flow of spirits indeed, that Mrs General looked rather surprised.

Little Dorrit was glad to be found no fault with, and to see that Fanny

was pleased; but her part in the procession was a musing part, and a

quiet one. Sitting opposite her father in the travelling-carriage, and

recalling the old Marshalsea room, her present existence was a dream.

All that she saw was new and wonderful, but it was not real; it seemed

to her as if those visions of mountains and picturesque countries might

melt away at any moment, and the carriage, turning some abrupt corner,

bring up with a jolt at the old Marshalsea gate.

To have no work to do was strange, but not half so strange as having

glided into a corner where she had no one to think for, nothing to plan

and contrive, no cares of others to load herself with. Strange as that

was, it was far stranger yet to find a space between herself and her

father, where others occupied themselves in taking care of him, and

where she was never expected to be. At first, this was so much more

unlike her old experience than even the mountains themselves, that she

had been unable to resign herself to it, and had tried to retain her

old place about him. But he had spoken to her alone, and had said that

people--ha--people in an exalted position, my dear, must scrupulously

exact respect from their dependents; and that for her, his daughter,

Miss Amy Dorrit, of the sole remaining branch of the Dorrits of

Dorsetshire, to be known to--hum--to occupy herself in fulfilling the

functions of--ha hum--a valet, would be incompatible with that respect.

Therefore, my dear, he--ha--he laid his parental injunctions upon

her, to remember that she was a lady, who had now to conduct herself

with--hum--a proper pride, and to preserve the rank of a lady;

and consequently he requested her to abstain from doing what would

occasion--ha--unpleasant and derogatory remarks. She had obeyed without

a murmur. Thus it had been brought about that she now sat in her corner

of the luxurious carriage with her little patient hands folded before

her, quite displaced even from the last point of the old standing ground

in life on which her feet had lingered.

It was from this position that all she saw appeared unreal; the more

surprising the scenes, the more they resembled the unreality of her

own inner life as she went through its vacant places all day long. The

gorges of the Simplon, its enormous depths and thundering waterfalls,

the wonderful road, the points of danger where a loose wheel or a

faltering horse would have been destruction, the descent into Italy, the

opening of that beautiful land as the rugged mountain-chasm widened and

let them out from a gloomy and dark imprisonment--all a dream--only the

old mean Marshalsea a reality. Nay, even the old mean Marshalsea was

shaken to its foundations when she pictured it without her father. She

could scarcely believe that the prisoners were still lingering in the

close yard, that the mean rooms were still every one tenanted, and that

the turnkey still stood in the Lodge letting people in and out, all just

as she well knew it to be.

With a remembrance of her father's old life in prison hanging about her

like the burden of a sorrowful tune, Little Dorrit would wake from a

dream of her birth-place into a whole day's dream. The painted room in

which she awoke, often a humbled state-chamber in a dilapidated palace,

would begin it; with its wild red autumnal vine-leaves overhanging the

glass, its orange-trees on the cracked white terrace outside the window,

a group of monks and peasants in the little street below, misery and

magnificence wrestling with each other upon every rood of ground in

the prospect, no matter how widely diversified, and misery throwing

magnificence with the strength of fate. To this would succeed a

labyrinth of bare passages and pillared galleries, with the family

procession already preparing in the quadrangle below, through the

carriages and luggage being brought together by the servants for the

day's journey. Then breakfast in another painted chamber, damp-stained

and of desolate proportions; and then the departure, which, to her

timidity and sense of not being grand enough for her place in the

ceremonies, was always an uneasy thing. For then the courier (who

himself would have been a foreign gentleman of high mark in the

Marshalsea) would present himself to report that all was ready; and then

her father's valet would pompously induct him into his travelling-cloak;

and then Fanny's maid, and her own maid (who was a weight on Little

Dorrit's mind--absolutely made her cry at first, she knew so little

what to do with her), would be in attendance; and then her brother's man

would complete his master's equipment; and then her father would give

his arm to Mrs General, and her uncle would give his to her, and,

escorted by the landlord and Inn servants, they would swoop down-stairs.

There, a crowd would be collected to see them enter their carriages,

which, amidst much bowing, and begging, and prancing, and lashing, and

clattering, they would do; and so they would be driven madly through

narrow unsavoury streets, and jerked out at the town gate.

Among the day's unrealities would be roads where the bright red vines

were looped and garlanded together on trees for many miles; woods of

olives; white villages and towns on hill-sides, lovely without, but

frightful in their dirt and poverty within; crosses by the way; deep

blue lakes with fairy islands, and clustering boats with awnings of

bright colours and sails of beautiful forms; vast piles of building

mouldering to dust; hanging-gardens where the weeds had grown so strong

that their stems, like wedges driven home, had split the arch and rent

the wall; stone-terraced lanes, with the lizards running into and out

of every chink; beggars of all sorts everywhere: pitiful, picturesque,

hungry, merry; children beggars and aged beggars. Often at

posting-houses and other halting places, these miserable creatures would

appear to her the only realities of the day; and many a time, when the

money she had brought to give them was all given away, she would sit

with her folded hands, thoughtfully looking after some diminutive girl

leading her grey father, as if the sight reminded her of something in

the days that were gone.

Again, there would be places where they stayed the week together in

splendid rooms, had banquets every day, rode out among heaps of wonders,

walked through miles of palaces, and rested in dark corners of great

churches; where there were winking lamps of gold and silver among

pillars and arches, kneeling figures dotted about at confessionals and

on the pavements; where there was the mist and scent of incense; where

there were pictures, fantastic images, gaudy altars, great heights and

distances, all softly lighted through stained glass, and the massive

curtains that hung in the doorways. From these cities they would go on

again, by the roads of vines and olives, through squalid villages, where

there was not a hovel without a gap in its filthy walls, not a window

with a whole inch of glass or paper; where there seemed to be nothing to

support life, nothing to eat, nothing to make, nothing to grow, nothing

to hope, nothing to do but die.

Again they would come to whole towns of palaces, whose proper inmates

were all banished, and which were all changed into barracks: troops

of idle soldiers leaning out of the state windows, where their

accoutrements hung drying on the marble architecture, and showing to the

mind like hosts of rats who were (happily) eating away the props of the

edifices that supported them, and must soon, with them, be smashed on

the heads of the other swarms of soldiers and the swarms of priests, and

the swarms of spies, who were all the ill-looking population left to be

ruined, in the streets below.

Through such scenes, the family procession moved on to Venice. And here

it dispersed for a time, as they were to live in Venice some few months

in a palace (itself six times as big as the whole Marshalsea) on the

Grand Canal.

In this crowning unreality, where all the streets were paved with water,

and where the deathlike stillness of the days and nights was broken by

no sound but the softened ringing of church-bells, the rippling of

the current, and the cry of the gondoliers turning the corners of the

flowing streets, Little Dorrit, quite lost by her task being done, sat

down to muse. The family began a gay life, went here and there, and

turned night into day; but she was timid of joining in their gaieties,

and only asked leave to be left alone.

Sometimes she would step into one of the gondolas that were always kept

in waiting, moored to painted posts at the door--when she could escape

from the attendance of that oppressive maid, who was her mistress, and

a very hard one--and would be taken all over the strange city. Social

people in other gondolas began to ask each other who the little solitary

girl was whom they passed, sitting in her boat with folded hands,

looking so pensively and wonderingly about her. Never thinking that

it would be worth anybody's while to notice her or her doings, Little

Dorrit, in her quiet, scared, lost manner, went about the city none the

less.

But her favourite station was the balcony of her own room, overhanging

the canal, with other balconies below, and none above. It was of massive

stone darkened by ages, built in a wild fancy which came from the East

to that collection of wild fancies; and Little Dorrit was little indeed,

leaning on the broad-cushioned ledge, and looking over. As she liked no

place of an evening half so well, she soon began to be watched for, and

many eyes in passing gondolas were raised, and many people said, There

was the little figure of the English girl who was always alone.

Such people were not realities to the little figure of the English girl;

such people were all unknown to her. She would watch the sunset, in its

long low lines of purple and red, and its burning flush high up into

the sky: so glowing on the buildings, and so lightening their structure,

that it made them look as if their strong walls were transparent, and

they shone from within. She would watch those glories expire; and then,

after looking at the black gondolas underneath, taking guests to music

and dancing, would raise her eyes to the shining stars. Was there no

party of her own, in other times, on which the stars had shone? To think

of that old gate now! She would think of that old gate, and of herself

sitting at it in the dead of the night, pillowing Maggy's head; and of

other places and of other scenes associated with those different times.

And then she would lean upon her balcony, and look over at the water,

as though they all lay underneath it. When she got to that, she would

musingly watch its running, as if, in the general vision, it might run

dry, and show her the prison again, and herself, and the old room, and

the old inmates, and the old visitors: all lasting realities that had

never changed.

CHAPTER 4. A Letter from Little Dorrit

Dear Mr Clennam,

I write to you from my own room at Venice, thinking you will be glad to

hear from me. But I know you cannot be so glad to hear from me as I am

to write to you; for everything about you is as you have been accustomed

to see it, and you miss nothing--unless it should be me, which can only

be for a very little while together and very seldom--while everything in

my life is so strange, and I miss so much.

When we were in Switzerland, which appears to have been years ago,

though it was only weeks, I met young Mrs Gowan, who was on a mountain

excursion like ourselves. She told me she was very well and very happy.

She sent you the message, by me, that she thanked you affectionately and

would never forget you. She was quite confiding with me, and I loved her

almost as soon as I spoke to her. But there is nothing singular in that;

who could help loving so beautiful and winning a creature! I could not

wonder at any one loving her. No indeed.

It will not make you uneasy on Mrs Gowan's account, I hope--for I

remember that you said you had the interest of a true friend in her--if

I tell you that I wish she could have married some one better suited to

her. Mr Gowan seems fond of her, and of course she is very fond of him,

but I thought he was not earnest enough--I don't mean in that respect--I

mean in anything. I could not keep it out of my mind that if I was Mrs

Gowan (what a change that would be, and how I must alter to become like

her!) I should feel that I was rather lonely and lost, for the want of

some one who was steadfast and firm in purpose. I even thought she felt

this want a little, almost without knowing it. But mind you are not made

uneasy by this, for she was 'very well and very happy.' And she looked

most beautiful.

I expect to meet her again before long, and indeed have been expecting

for some days past to see her here. I will ever be as good a friend to

her as I can for your sake. Dear Mr Clennam, I dare say you think little

of having been a friend to me when I had no other (not that I have any

other now, for I have made no new friends), but I think much of it, and

I never can forget it.

I wish I knew--but it is best for no one to write to me--how Mr and Mrs

Plornish prosper in the business which my dear father bought for them,

and that old Mr Nandy lives happily with them and his two grandchildren,

and sings all his songs over and over again. I cannot quite keep back

the tears from my eyes when I think of my poor Maggy, and of the blank

she must have felt at first, however kind they all are to her, without

her Little Mother. Will you go and tell her, as a strict secret, with my

love, that she never can have regretted our separation more than I have

regretted it? And will you tell them all that I have thought of them

every day, and that my heart is faithful to them everywhere? O, if you

could know how faithful, you would almost pity me for being so far away

and being so grand!

You will be glad, I am sure, to know that my dear father is very well

in health, and that all these changes are highly beneficial to him, and

that he is very different indeed from what he used to be when you used

to see him. There is an improvement in my uncle too, I think, though he

never complained of old, and never exults now. Fanny is very graceful,

quick, and clever. It is natural to her to be a lady; she has adapted

herself to our new fortunes with wonderful ease.

This reminds me that I have not been able to do so, and that I sometimes

almost despair of ever being able to do so. I find that I cannot learn.

Mrs General is always with us, and we speak French and speak Italian,

and she takes pains to form us in many ways. When I say we speak French

and Italian, I mean they do. As for me, I am so slow that I scarcely

get on at all. As soon as I begin to plan, and think, and try, all my

planning, thinking, and trying go in old directions, and I begin to feel

careful again about the expenses of the day, and about my dear father,

and about my work, and then I remember with a start that there are no

such cares left, and that in itself is so new and improbable that it

sets me wandering again. I should not have the courage to mention this

to any one but you.

It is the same with all these new countries and wonderful sights.

They are very beautiful, and they astonish me, but I am not collected

enough--not familiar enough with myself, if you can quite understand

what I mean--to have all the pleasure in them that I might have. What

I knew before them, blends with them, too, so curiously. For instance,

when we were among the mountains, I often felt (I hesitate to tell such

an idle thing, dear Mr Clennam, even to you) as if the Marshalsea must

be behind that great rock; or as if Mrs Clennam's room where I have

worked so many days, and where I first saw you, must be just beyond that

snow. Do you remember one night when I came with Maggy to your lodging

in Covent Garden? That room I have often and often fancied I have seen

before me, travelling along for miles by the side of our carriage, when

I have looked out of the carriage-window after dark. We were shut out

that night, and sat at the iron gate, and walked about till morning.

I often look up at the stars, even from the balcony of this room, and

believe that I am in the street again, shut out with Maggy. It is the

same with people that I left in England.

When I go about here in a gondola, I surprise myself looking into other

gondolas as if I hoped to see them. It would overcome me with joy to

see them, but I don't think it would surprise me much, at first. In my

fanciful times, I fancy that they might be anywhere; and I almost expect

to see their dear faces on the bridges or the quays.

Another difficulty that I have will seem very strange to you. It must

seem very strange to any one but me, and does even to me: I often feel

the old sad pity for--I need not write the word--for him. Changed as he

is, and inexpressibly blest and thankful as I always am to know it, the

old sorrowful feeling of compassion comes upon me sometimes with such

strength that I want to put my arms round his neck, tell him how I love

him, and cry a little on his breast. I should be glad after that, and

proud and happy. But I know that I must not do this; that he would not

like it, that Fanny would be angry, that Mrs General would be amazed;

and so I quiet myself. Yet in doing so, I struggle with the feeling that

I have come to be at a distance from him; and that even in the midst of

all the servants and attendants, he is deserted, and in want of me.

Dear Mr Clennam, I have written a great deal about myself, but I must

write a little more still, or what I wanted most of all to say in this

weak letter would be left out of it. In all these foolish thoughts of

mine, which I have been so hardy as to confess to you because I know you

will understand me if anybody can, and will make more allowance for me

than anybody else would if you cannot--in all these thoughts, there is

one thought scarcely ever--never--out of my memory, and that is that

I hope you sometimes, in a quiet moment, have a thought for me. I must

tell you that as to this, I have felt, ever since I have been away, an

anxiety which I am very anxious to relieve. I have been afraid that you

may think of me in a new light, or a new character. Don't do that, I

could not bear that--it would make me more unhappy than you can suppose.

It would break my heart to believe that you thought of me in any way

that would make me stranger to you than I was when you were so good to

me. What I have to pray and entreat of you is, that you will never think

of me as the daughter of a rich person; that you will never think of me

as dressing any better, or living any better, than when you first

knew me. That you will remember me only as the little shabby girl you

protected with so much tenderness, from whose threadbare dress you have

kept away the rain, and whose wet feet you have dried at your fire.

That you will think of me (when you think of me at all), and of my true

affection and devoted gratitude, always without change, as of your poor

child, LITTLE DORRIT.

P.S.--Particularly remember that you are not to be uneasy about Mrs

Gowan. Her words were, 'Very well and very happy.' And she looked most

beautiful.

CHAPTER 5. Something Wrong Somewhere

The family had been a month or two at Venice, when Mr Dorrit, who was

much among Counts and Marquises, and had but scant leisure, set an hour

of one day apart, beforehand, for the purpose of holding some conference

with Mrs General.

The time he had reserved in his mind arriving, he sent Mr Tinkler, his

valet, to Mrs General's apartment (which would have absorbed about a

third of the area of the Marshalsea), to present his compliments to that

lady, and represent him as desiring the favour of an interview. It being

that period of the forenoon when the various members of the family had

coffee in their own chambers, some couple of hours before assembling at

breakfast in a faded hall which had once been sumptuous, but was now

the prey of watery vapours and a settled melancholy, Mrs General was

accessible to the valet. That envoy found her on a little square of

carpet, so extremely diminutive in reference to the size of her stone

and marble floor that she looked as if she might have had it spread for

the trying on of a ready-made pair of shoes; or as if she had come into

possession of the enchanted piece of carpet, bought for forty purses by

one of the three princes in the Arabian Nights, and had that moment been

transported on it, at a wish, into a palatial saloon with which it had

no connection.

Mrs General, replying to the envoy, as she set down her empty

coffee-cup, that she was willing at once to proceed to Mr Dorrit's

apartment, and spare him the trouble of coming to her (which, in his

gallantry, he had proposed), the envoy threw open the door, and

escorted Mrs General to the presence. It was quite a walk, by mysterious

staircases and corridors, from Mrs General's apartment,--hoodwinked by

a narrow side street with a low gloomy bridge in it, and dungeon-like

opposite tenements, their walls besmeared with a thousand downward

stains and streaks, as if every crazy aperture in them had been weeping

tears of rust into the Adriatic for centuries--to Mr Dorrit's apartment:

with a whole English house-front of window, a prospect of beautiful

church-domes rising into the blue sky sheer out of the water which

reflected them, and a hushed murmur of the Grand Canal laving the

doorways below, where his gondolas and gondoliers attended his pleasure,

drowsily swinging in a little forest of piles.

Mr Dorrit, in a resplendent dressing-gown and cap--the dormant grub that

had so long bided its time among the Collegians had burst into a rare

butterfly--rose to receive Mrs General. A chair to Mrs General. An

easier chair, sir; what are you doing, what are you about, what do you

mean? Now, leave us!

'Mrs General,' said Mr Dorrit, 'I took the liberty--'

'By no means,' Mrs General interposed. 'I was quite at your disposition.

I had had my coffee.'

'--I took the liberty,' said Mr Dorrit again, with the magnificent

placidity of one who was above correction, 'to solicit the favour of

a little private conversation with you, because I feel rather worried

respecting my--ha--my younger daughter. You will have observed a great

difference of temperament, madam, between my two daughters?'

Said Mrs General in response, crossing her gloved hands (she was never

without gloves, and they never creased and always fitted), 'There is a

great difference.'

'May I ask to be favoured with your view of it?' said Mr Dorrit, with a

deference not incompatible with majestic serenity.

'Fanny,' returned Mrs General, 'has force of character and

self-reliance. Amy, none.'

None? O Mrs General, ask the Marshalsea stones and bars. O Mrs General,

ask the milliner who taught her to work, and the dancing-master who

taught her sister to dance. O Mrs General, Mrs General, ask me, her

father, what I owe her; and hear my testimony touching the life of this

slighted little creature from her childhood up!

No such adjuration entered Mr. Dorrit's head. He looked at Mrs

General, seated in her usual erect attitude on her coach-box behind the

proprieties, and he said in a thoughtful manner, 'True, madam.'

'I would not,' said Mrs General, 'be understood to say, observe,

that there is nothing to improve in Fanny. But there is material

there--perhaps, indeed, a little too much.'

'Will you be kind enough, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, 'to be--ha--more

explicit? I do not quite understand my elder daughter's having--hum--too

much material. What material?'

'Fanny,' returned Mrs General, 'at present forms too many opinions.

Perfect breeding forms none, and is never demonstrative.'

Lest he himself should be found deficient in perfect breeding, Mr Dorrit

hastened to reply, 'Unquestionably, madam, you are right.' Mrs General

returned, in her emotionless and expressionless manner, 'I believe so.'

'But you are aware, my dear madam,' said Mr Dorrit, 'that my daughters

had the misfortune to lose their lamented mother when they were very

young; and that, in consequence of my not having been until lately

the recognised heir to my property, they have lived with me as

a comparatively poor, though always proud, gentleman, in--ha

hum--retirement!'

'I do not,' said Mrs General, 'lose sight of the circumstance.'

'Madam,'pursued Mr Dorrit, 'of my daughter Fanny, under her present

guidance and with such an example constantly before her--'

(Mrs General shut her eyes.)--'I have no misgivings. There is

adaptability of character in Fanny. But my younger daughter, Mrs

General, rather worries and vexes my thoughts. I must inform you that

she has always been my favourite.'

'There is no accounting,' said Mrs General, 'for these partialities.'

'Ha--no,' assented Mr Dorrit. 'No. Now, madam, I am troubled by noticing

that Amy is not, so to speak, one of ourselves. She does not Care to go

about with us; she is lost in the society we have here; our tastes

are evidently not her tastes. Which,' said Mr Dorrit, summing up with

judicial gravity, 'is to say, in other words, that there is something

wrong in--ha--Amy.'

'May we incline to the supposition,' said Mrs General, with a little

touch of varnish, 'that something is referable to the novelty of the

position?'

'Excuse me, madam,' observed Mr Dorrit, rather quickly. 'The daughter

of a gentleman, though--ha--himself at one time comparatively far from

affluent--comparatively--and herself reared in--hum--retirement, need

not of necessity find this position so very novel.'

'True,' said Mrs General, 'true.'

'Therefore, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, 'I took the liberty' (he laid an

emphasis on the phrase and repeated it, as though he stipulated, with

urbane firmness, that he must not be contradicted again), 'I took the

liberty of requesting this interview, in order that I might mention the

topic to you, and inquire how you would advise me?'

'Mr Dorrit,' returned Mrs General, 'I have conversed with Amy several

times since we have been residing here, on the general subject of the

formation of a demeanour. She has expressed herself to me as wondering

exceedingly at Venice. I have mentioned to her that it is better not to

wonder. I have pointed out to her that the celebrated Mr Eustace, the

classical tourist, did not think much of it; and that he compared the

Rialto, greatly to its disadvantage, with Westminster and Blackfriars

Bridges. I need not add, after what you have said, that I have not yet

found my arguments successful. You do me the honour to ask me what to

advise. It always appears to me (if this should prove to be a baseless

assumption, I shall be pardoned), that Mr Dorrit has been accustomed to

exercise influence over the minds of others.'

'Hum--madam,' said Mr Dorrit, 'I have been at the head of--ha of

a considerable community. You are right in supposing that I am not

unaccustomed to--an influential position.'

'I am happy,' returned Mrs General, 'to be so corroborated. I would

therefore the more confidently recommend that Mr Dorrit should speak to

Amy himself, and make his observations and wishes known to her. Being

his favourite, besides, and no doubt attached to him, she is all the

more likely to yield to his influence.'

'I had anticipated your suggestion, madam,' said Mr Dorrit,

'but--ha--was not sure that I might--hum--not encroach on--'

'On my province, Mr Dorrit?' said Mrs General, graciously. 'Do not

mention it.'

'Then, with your leave, madam,' resumed Mr Dorrit, ringing his little

bell to summon his valet, 'I will send for her at once.'

'Does Mr Dorrit wish me to remain?'

'Perhaps, if you have no other engagement, you would not object for a

minute or two--'

'Not at all.'

So, Tinkler the valet was instructed to find Miss Amy's maid, and to

request that subordinate to inform Miss Amy that Mr Dorrit wished to

see her in his own room. In delivering this charge to Tinkler, Mr Dorrit

looked severely at him, and also kept a jealous eye upon him until he

went out at the door, mistrusting that he might have something in his

mind prejudicial to the family dignity; that he might have even got wind

of some Collegiate joke before he came into the service, and might be

derisively reviving its remembrance at the present moment. If Tinkler

had happened to smile, however faintly and innocently, nothing would

have persuaded Mr Dorrit, to the hour of his death, but that this was

the case. As Tinkler happened, however, very fortunately for himself, to

be of a serious and composed countenance, he escaped the secret danger

that threatened him. And as on his return--when Mr Dorrit eyed him

again--he announced Miss Amy as if she had come to a funeral, he left a

vague impression on Mr Dorrit's mind that he was a well-conducted young

fellow, who had been brought up in the study of his Catechism by a

widowed mother.

'Amy,' said Mr Dorrit, 'you have just now been the subject of some

conversation between myself and Mrs General. We agree that you scarcely

seem at home here. Ha--how is this?'

A pause.

'I think, father, I require a little time.'

'Papa is a preferable mode of address,' observed Mrs General. 'Father is

rather vulgar, my dear. The word Papa, besides, gives a pretty form to

the lips. Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes, and prism are all very

good words for the lips: especially prunes and prism. You will find it

serviceable, in the formation of a demeanour, if you sometimes say to

yourself in company--on entering a room, for instance--Papa, potatoes,

poultry, prunes and prism, prunes and prism.'

'Pray, my child,' said Mr Dorrit, 'attend to the--hum--precepts of Mrs

General.'

Poor Little Dorrit, with a rather forlorn glance at that eminent

varnisher, promised to try.

'You say, Amy,' pursued Mr Dorrit, 'that you think you require time.

Time for what?'

Another pause.

'To become accustomed to the novelty of my life, was all I meant,' said

Little Dorrit, with her loving eyes upon her father; whom she had very

nearly addressed as poultry, if not prunes and prism too, in her desire

to submit herself to Mrs General and please him.

Mr Dorrit frowned, and looked anything but pleased. 'Amy,' he returned,

'it appears to me, I must say, that you have had abundance of time for

that. Ha--you surprise me. You disappoint me. Fanny has conquered any

such little difficulties, and--hum--why not you?'

'I hope I shall do better soon,' said Little Dorrit.

'I hope so,' returned her father. 'I--ha--I most devoutly hope so, Amy.

I sent for you, in order that I might say--hum--impressively say, in

the presence of Mrs General, to whom we are all so much indebted

for obligingly being present among us, on--ha--on this or any other

occasion,' Mrs General shut her eyes, 'that I--ha hum--am not pleased

with you. You make Mrs General's a thankless task. You--ha--embarrass

me very much. You have always (as I have informed Mrs General) been my

favourite child; I have always made you a--hum--a friend and companion;

in return, I beg--I--ha--I do beg, that you accommodate yourself

better to--hum--circumstances, and dutifully do what becomes your--your

station.'

Mr Dorrit was even a little more fragmentary than usual, being excited

on the subject and anxious to make himself particularly emphatic.

'I do beg,' he repeated, 'that this may be attended to, and that you

will seriously take pains and try to conduct yourself in a manner both

becoming your position as--ha--Miss Amy Dorrit, and satisfactory to

myself and Mrs General.'

That lady shut her eyes again, on being again referred to; then, slowly

opening them and rising, added these words: 'If Miss Amy Dorrit will

direct her own attention to, and will accept of my poor assistance in,

the formation of a surface, Mr. Dorrit will have no further cause of

anxiety. May I take this opportunity of remarking, as an instance

in point, that it is scarcely delicate to look at vagrants with the

attention which I have seen bestowed upon them by a very dear young

friend of mine? They should not be looked at. Nothing disagreeable

should ever be looked at. Apart from such a habit standing in the way

of that graceful equanimity of surface which is so expressive of good

breeding, it hardly seems compatible with refinement of mind. A truly

refined mind will seem to be ignorant of the existence of anything that

is not perfectly proper, placid, and pleasant.' Having delivered this

exalted sentiment, Mrs General made a sweeping obeisance, and retired

with an expression of mouth indicative of Prunes and Prism.

Little Dorrit, whether speaking or silent, had preserved her quiet

earnestness and her loving look. It had not been clouded, except for a

passing moment, until now. But now that she was left alone with him

the fingers of her lightly folded hands were agitated, and there was

repressed emotion in her face.

Not for herself. She might feel a little wounded, but her care was not

for herself. Her thoughts still turned, as they always had turned, to

him. A faint misgiving, which had hung about her since their accession

to fortune, that even now she could never see him as he used to be

before the prison days, had gradually begun to assume form in her mind.

She felt that, in what he had just now said to her and in his whole

bearing towards her, there was the well-known shadow of the Marshalsea

wall. It took a new shape, but it was the old sad shadow. She began

with sorrowful unwillingness to acknowledge to herself that she was

not strong enough to keep off the fear that no space in the life of man

could overcome that quarter of a century behind the prison bars. She had

no blame to bestow upon him, therefore: nothing to reproach him with,

no emotions in her faithful heart but great compassion and unbounded

tenderness.

This is why it was, that, even as he sat before her on his sofa, in the

brilliant light of a bright Italian day, the wonderful city without and

the splendours of an old palace within, she saw him at the moment in the

long-familiar gloom of his Marshalsea lodging, and wished to take her

seat beside him, and comfort him, and be again full of confidence with

him, and of usefulness to him. If he divined what was in her thoughts,

his own were not in tune with it.

After some uneasy moving in his seat, he got up and walked about,

looking very much dissatisfied.

'Is there anything else you wish to say to me, dear father?'

'No, no. Nothing else.'

'I am sorry you have not been pleased with me, dear. I hope you will not

think of me with displeasure now. I am going to try, more than ever, to

adapt myself as you wish to what surrounds me--for indeed I have tried

all along, though I have failed, I know.'

'Amy,' he returned, turning short upon her. 'You--ha--habitually hurt

me.'

'Hurt you, father! I!'

'There is a--hum--a topic,' said Mr Dorrit, looking all about the

ceiling of the room, and never at the attentive, uncomplainingly shocked

face, 'a painful topic, a series of events which I wish--ha--altogether

to obliterate. This is understood by your sister, who has already

remonstrated with you in my presence; it is understood by your brother;

it is understood by--ha hum--by every one of delicacy and sensitiveness

except yourself--ha--I am sorry to say, except yourself. You,

Amy--hum--you alone and only you--constantly revive the topic, though

not in words.'

She laid her hand on his arm. She did nothing more. She gently touched

him. The trembling hand may have said, with some expression, 'Think of

me, think how I have worked, think of my many cares!' But she said not a

syllable herself.

There was a reproach in the touch so addressed to him that she had

not foreseen, or she would have withheld her hand. He began to justify

himself in a heated, stumbling, angry manner, which made nothing of it.

'I was there all those years. I was--ha--universally acknowledged as

the head of the place. I--hum--I caused you to be respected there, Amy.

I--ha hum--I gave my family a position there. I deserve a return. I

claim a return. I say, sweep it off the face of the earth and begin

afresh. Is that much? I ask, is that much?' He did not once look at her,

as he rambled on in this way; but gesticulated at, and appealed to, the

empty air.

'I have suffered. Probably I know how much I have suffered better than

any one--ha--I say than any one! If I can put that aside, if I can

eradicate the marks of what I have endured, and can emerge before the

world--a--ha--gentleman unspoiled, unspotted--is it a great deal to

expect--I say again, is it a great deal to expect--that my children

should--hum--do the same and sweep that accursed experience off the face

of the earth?'

In spite of his flustered state, he made all these exclamations in a

carefully suppressed voice, lest the valet should overhear anything.

'Accordingly, they do it. Your sister does it. Your brother does it. You

alone, my favourite child, whom I made the friend and companion of my

life when you were a mere--hum--Baby, do not do it.

You alone say you can't do it. I provide you with valuable assistance to

do it. I attach an accomplished and highly bred lady--ha--Mrs General,

to you, for the purpose of doing it. Is it surprising that I should be

displeased? Is it necessary that I should defend myself for expressing

my displeasure? No!'

Notwithstanding which, he continued to defend himself, without any

abatement of his flushed mood.

'I am careful to appeal to that lady for confirmation, before I express

any displeasure at all. I--hum--I necessarily make that appeal within

limited bounds, or I--ha--should render legible, by that lady, what I

desire to be blotted out. Am I selfish? Do I complain for my own sake?

No. No. Principally for--ha hum--your sake, Amy.'

This last consideration plainly appeared, from his manner of pursuing

it, to have just that instant come into his head.

'I said I was hurt. So I am. So I--ha--am determined to be, whatever

is advanced to the contrary. I am hurt that my daughter, seated in

the--hum--lap of fortune, should mope and retire and proclaim herself

unequal to her destiny. I am hurt that she should--ha--systematically

reproduce what the rest of us blot out; and seem--hum--I had almost said

positively anxious--to announce to wealthy and distinguished society

that she was born and bred in--ha hum--a place that I myself decline to

name. But there is no inconsistency--ha--not the least, in my feeling

hurt, and yet complaining principally for your sake, Amy. I do; I say

again, I do. It is for your sake that I wish you, under the auspices of

Mrs General, to form a--hum--a surface. It is for your sake that I wish

you to have a--ha--truly refined mind, and (in the striking words of

Mrs General) to be ignorant of everything that is not perfectly proper,

placid, and pleasant.'

He had been running down by jerks, during his last speech, like a

sort of ill-adjusted alarum. The touch was still upon his arm. He fell

silent; and after looking about the ceiling again for a little while,

looked down at her. Her head drooped, and he could not see her face; but

her touch was tender and quiet, and in the expression of her dejected

figure there was no blame--nothing but love. He began to whimper, just

as he had done that night in the prison when she afterwards sat at

his bedside till morning; exclaimed that he was a poor ruin and a poor

wretch in the midst of his wealth; and clasped her in his arms. 'Hush,

hush, my own dear! Kiss me!' was all she said to him. His tears

were soon dried, much sooner than on the former occasion; and he was

presently afterwards very high with his valet, as a way of righting

himself for having shed any.

With one remarkable exception, to be recorded in its place, this was

the only time, in his life of freedom and fortune, when he spoke to his

daughter Amy of the old days.

But, now, the breakfast hour arrived; and with it Miss Fanny from her

apartment, and Mr Edward from his apartment. Both these young persons of

distinction were something the worse for late hours. As to Miss Fanny,

she had become the victim of an insatiate mania for what she called

'going into society;'and would have gone into it head-foremost fifty

times between sunset and sunrise, if so many opportunities had been at

her disposal. As to Mr Edward, he, too, had a large acquaintance, and

was generally engaged (for the most part, in diceing circles, or others

of a kindred nature), during the greater part of every night. For this

gentleman, when his fortunes changed, had stood at the great advantage

of being already prepared for the highest associates, and having little

to learn: so much was he indebted to the happy accidents which had made

him acquainted with horse-dealing and billiard-marking.

At breakfast, Mr Frederick Dorrit likewise appeared. As the old

gentleman inhabited the highest story of the palace, where he might have

practised pistol-shooting without much chance of discovery by the other

inmates, his younger niece had taken courage to propose the restoration

to him of his clarionet, which Mr Dorrit had ordered to be confiscated,

but which she had ventured to preserve. Notwithstanding some objections

from Miss Fanny, that it was a low instrument, and that she detested the

sound of it, the concession had been made. But it was then discovered

that he had had enough of it, and never played it, now that it was no

longer his means of getting bread. He had insensibly acquired a new

habit of shuffling into the picture-galleries, always with his twisted

paper of snuff in his hand (much to the indignation of Miss Fanny, who

had proposed the purchase of a gold box for him that the family might

not be discredited, which he had absolutely refused to carry when it was

bought); and of passing hours and hours before the portraits of renowned

Venetians. It was never made out what his dazed eyes saw in them;

whether he had an interest in them merely as pictures, or whether he

confusedly identified them with a glory that was departed, like the

strength of his own mind. But he paid his court to them with great

exactness, and clearly derived pleasure from the pursuit. After the

first few days, Little Dorrit happened one morning to assist at these

attentions. It so evidently heightened his gratification that she often

accompanied him afterwards, and the greatest delight of which the old

man had shown himself susceptible since his ruin, arose out of these

excursions, when he would carry a chair about for her from picture

to picture, and stand behind it, in spite of all her remonstrances,

silently presenting her to the noble Venetians.

It fell out that, at this family breakfast, he referred to their having

seen in a gallery, on the previous day, the lady and gentleman whom they

had encountered on the Great Saint Bernard, 'I forget the name,' said

he. 'I dare say you remember them, William?

I dare say you do, Edward?'

'\_I\_ remember 'em well enough,' said the latter.

'I should think so,' observed Miss Fanny, with a toss of her head and

a glance at her sister. 'But they would not have been recalled to our

remembrance, I suspect, if Uncle hadn't tumbled over the subject.'

'My dear, what a curious phrase,' said Mrs General. 'Would not

inadvertently lighted upon, or accidentally referred to, be better?'

'Thank you very much, Mrs General,' returned the young lady, 'no, I

think not. On the whole I prefer my own expression.' This was always

Miss Fanny's way of receiving a suggestion from Mrs General. But she

always stored it up in her mind, and adopted it at another time.

'I should have mentioned our having met Mr and Mrs Gowan, Fanny,' said

Little Dorrit, 'even if Uncle had not. I have scarcely seen you since,

you know. I meant to have spoken of it at breakfast; because I should

like to pay a visit to Mrs Gowan, and to become better acquainted with

her, if Papa and Mrs General do not object.'

'Well, Amy,' said Fanny, 'I am sure I am glad to find you at last

expressing a wish to become better acquainted with anybody in Venice.

Though whether Mr and Mrs Gowan are desirable acquaintances, remains to

be determined.'

'Mrs Gowan I spoke of, dear.'

'No doubt,' said Fanny. 'But you can't separate her from her husband, I

believe, without an Act of Parliament.'

'Do you think, Papa,' inquired Little Dorrit, with diffidence and

hesitation, 'there is any objection to my making this visit?'

'Really,' he replied, 'I--ha--what is Mrs General's view?'

Mrs General's view was, that not having the honour of any acquaintance

with the lady and gentleman referred to, she was not in a position

to varnish the present article. She could only remark, as a general

principle observed in the varnishing trade, that much depended on the

quarter from which the lady under consideration was accredited to a

family so conspicuously niched in the social temple as the family of

Dorrit.

At this remark the face of Mr Dorrit gloomed considerably. He was about

(connecting the accrediting with an obtrusive person of the name

of Clennam, whom he imperfectly remembered in some former state of

existence) to black-ball the name of Gowan finally, when Edward Dorrit,

Esquire, came into the conversation, with his glass in his eye, and the

preliminary remark of 'I say--you there! Go out, will you!'--which was

addressed to a couple of men who were handing the dishes round, as a

courteous intimation that their services could be temporarily dispensed

with.

Those menials having obeyed the mandate, Edward Dorrit, Esquire,

proceeded.

'Perhaps it's a matter of policy to let you all know that these

Gowans--in whose favour, or at least the gentleman's, I can't be

supposed to be much prepossessed myself--are known to people of

importance, if that makes any difference.'

'That, I would say,' observed the fair varnisher, 'Makes the greatest

difference. The connection in question, being really people of

importance and consideration--'

'As to that,' said Edward Dorrit, Esquire, 'I'll give you the means of

judging for yourself. You are acquainted, perhaps, with the famous name

of Merdle?'

'The great Merdle!' exclaimed Mrs General.

'THE Merdle,' said Edward Dorrit, Esquire. 'They are known to him.

Mrs Gowan--I mean the dowager, my polite friend's mother--is intimate

with Mrs Merdle, and I know these two to be on their visiting list.'

'If so, a more undeniable guarantee could not be given,' said Mrs

General to Mr Dorrit, raising her gloves and bowing her head, as if she

were doing homage to some visible graven image.

'I beg to ask my son, from motives of--ah--curiosity,' Mr Dorrit

observed, with a decided change in his manner, 'how he becomes possessed

of this--hum--timely information?'

'It's not a long story, sir,' returned Edward Dorrit, Esquire, 'and you

shall have it out of hand. To begin with, Mrs Merdle is the lady you had

the parley with at what's-his-name place.'

'Martigny,' interposed Miss Fanny with an air of infinite languor.

'Martigny,' assented her brother, with a slight nod and a slight wink;

in acknowledgment of which, Miss Fanny looked surprised, and laughed and

reddened.

'How can that be, Edward?' said Mr Dorrit. 'You informed me that the

name of the gentleman with whom you conferred was--ha--Sparkler. Indeed,

you showed me his card. Hum. Sparkler.'

'No doubt of it, father; but it doesn't follow that his mother's name

must be the same. Mrs Merdle was married before, and he is her son. She

is in Rome now; where probably we shall know more of her, as you decide

to winter there. Sparkler is just come here. I passed last evening in

company with Sparkler. Sparkler is a very good fellow on the

whole, though rather a bore on one subject, in consequence of being

tremendously smitten with a certain young lady.' Here Edward Dorrit,

Esquire, eyed Miss Fanny through his glass across the table. 'We

happened last night to compare notes about our travels, and I had the

information I have given you from Sparkler himself.' Here he ceased;

continuing to eye Miss Fanny through his glass, with a face much

twisted, and not ornamentally so, in part by the action of keeping his

glass in his eye, and in part by the great subtlety of his smile.

'Under these circumstances,' said Mr Dorrit, 'I believe I express the

sentiments of--ha--Mrs General, no less than my own, when I say

that there is no objection, but--ha hum--quite the contrary--to your

gratifying your desire, Amy. I trust I may--ha--hail--this desire,' said

Mr Dorrit, in an encouraging and forgiving manner, 'as an auspicious

omen. It is quite right to know these people. It is a very proper

thing. Mr Merdle's is a name of--ha--world-wide repute. Mr Merdle's

undertakings are immense. They bring him in such vast sums of money that

they are regarded as--hum--national benefits. Mr Merdle is the man of

this time. The name of Merdle is the name of the age. Pray do everything

on my behalf that is civil to Mr and Mrs Gowan, for we will--ha--we will

certainly notice them.'

This magnificent accordance of Mr Dorrit's recognition settled the

matter. It was not observed that Uncle had pushed away his plate, and

forgotten his breakfast; but he was not much observed at any time,

except by Little Dorrit. The servants were recalled, and the meal

proceeded to its conclusion. Mrs General rose and left the table.

Little Dorrit rose and left the table. When Edward and Fanny remained

whispering together across it, and when Mr Dorrit remained eating figs

and reading a French newspaper, Uncle suddenly fixed the attention of

all three by rising out of his chair, striking his hand upon the table,

and saying, 'Brother! I protest against it!'

If he had made a proclamation in an unknown tongue, and given up the

ghost immediately afterwards, he could not have astounded his audience

more. The paper fell from Mr Dorrit's hand, and he sat petrified, with a

fig half way to his mouth.

'Brother!' said the old man, conveying a surprising energy into his

trembling voice, 'I protest against it! I love you; you know I love you

dearly. In these many years I have never been untrue to you in a single

thought. Weak as I am, I would at any time have struck any man who spoke

ill of you. But, brother, brother, brother, I protest against it!'

It was extraordinary to see of what a burst of earnestness such a

decrepit man was capable. His eyes became bright, his grey hair rose on

his head, markings of purpose on his brow and face which had faded from

them for five-and-twenty years, started out again, and there was an

energy in his hand that made its action nervous once more.

'My dear Frederick!' exclaimed Mr Dorrit faintly. 'What is wrong? What

is the matter?'

'How dare you,' said the old man, turning round on Fanny, 'how dare you

do it? Have you no memory? Have you no heart?'

'Uncle?' cried Fanny, affrighted and bursting into tears, 'why do you

attack me in this cruel manner? What have I done?'

'Done?' returned the old man, pointing to her sister's place, 'where's

your affectionate invaluable friend? Where's your devoted guardian?

Where's your more than mother? How dare you set up superiorities against

all these characters combined in your sister?

For shame, you false girl, for shame!' 'I love Amy,' cried Miss Fanny,

sobbing and weeping, 'as well as I love my life--better than I love my

life. I don't deserve to be so treated. I am as grateful to Amy, and as

fond of Amy, as it's possible for any human being to be. I wish I was

dead. I never was so wickedly wronged. And only because I am anxious for

the family credit.'

'To the winds with the family credit!' cried the old man, with great

scorn and indignation. 'Brother, I protest against pride. I protest

against ingratitude. I protest against any one of us here who have known

what we have known, and have seen what we have seen, setting up any

pretension that puts Amy at a moment's disadvantage, or to the cost of

a moment's pain. We may know that it's a base pretension by its having

that effect. It ought to bring a judgment on us. Brother, I protest

against it in the sight of God!'

As his hand went up above his head and came down on the table, it might

have been a blacksmith's. After a few moments' silence, it had relaxed

into its usual weak condition. He went round to his brother with his

ordinary shuffling step, put the hand on his shoulder, and said, in a

softened voice, 'William, my dear, I felt obliged to say it; forgive me,

for I felt obliged to say it!' and then went, in his bowed way, out of

the palace hall, just as he might have gone out of the Marshalsea room.

All this time Fanny had been sobbing and crying, and still continued to

do so. Edward, beyond opening his mouth in amazement, had not opened his

lips, and had done nothing but stare. Mr Dorrit also had been utterly

discomfited, and quite unable to assert himself in any way. Fanny was

now the first to speak.

'I never, never, never was so used!' she sobbed. 'There never was

anything so harsh and unjustifiable, so disgracefully violent and cruel!

Dear, kind, quiet little Amy, too, what would she feel if she could know

that she had been innocently the means of exposing me to such treatment!

But I'll never tell her! No, good darling, I'll never tell her!'

This helped Mr Dorrit to break his silence.

'My dear,' said he, 'I--ha--approve of your resolution. It will be--ha

hum--much better not to speak of this to Amy. It might--hum--it

might distress her. Ha. No doubt it would distress her greatly. It

is considerate and right to avoid doing so. We will--ha--keep this to

ourselves.'

'But the cruelty of Uncle!' cried Miss Fanny. 'O, I never can forgive

the wanton cruelty of Uncle!'

'My dear,' said Mr Dorrit, recovering his tone, though he remained

unusually pale, 'I must request you not to say so. You must remember

that your uncle is--ha--not what he formerly was. You must remember

that your uncle's state requires--hum--great forbearance from us, great

forbearance.'

'I am sure,' cried Fanny, piteously, 'it is only charitable to suppose

that there Must be something wrong in him somewhere, or he never could

have so attacked Me, of all the people in the world.'

'Fanny,' returned Mr Dorrit in a deeply fraternal tone, 'you know, with

his innumerable good points, what a--hum--wreck your uncle is; and, I

entreat you by the fondness that I have for him, and by the fidelity

that you know I have always shown him, to--ha--to draw your own

conclusions, and to spare my brotherly feelings.'

This ended the scene; Edward Dorrit, Esquire, saying nothing throughout,

but looking, to the last, perplexed and doubtful. Miss Fanny awakened

much affectionate uneasiness in her sister's mind that day by passing

the greater part of it in violent fits of embracing her, and in

alternately giving her brooches, and wishing herself dead.

CHAPTER 6. Something Right Somewhere

To be in the halting state of Mr Henry Gowan; to have left one of two

powers in disgust; to want the necessary qualifications for finding

promotion with another, and to be loitering moodily about on neutral

ground, cursing both; is to be in a situation unwholesome for the mind,

which time is not likely to improve. The worst class of sum worked in

the every-day world is cyphered by the diseased arithmeticians who are

always in the rule of Subtraction as to the merits and successes of

others, and never in Addition as to their own.

The habit, too, of seeking some sort of recompense in the discontented

boast of being disappointed, is a habit fraught with degeneracy. A

certain idle carelessness and recklessness of consistency soon comes of

it. To bring deserving things down by setting undeserving things up is

one of its perverted delights; and there is no playing fast and loose

with the truth, in any game, without growing the worse for it.

In his expressed opinions of all performances in the Art of painting

that were completely destitute of merit, Gowan was the most liberal

fellow on earth. He would declare such a man to have more power in his

little finger (provided he had none), than such another had (provided he

had much) in his whole mind and body. If the objection were taken that

the thing commended was trash, he would reply, on behalf of his art, 'My

good fellow, what do we all turn out but trash? I turn out nothing else,

and I make you a present of the confession.'

To make a vaunt of being poor was another of the incidents of his

splenetic state, though this may have had the design in it of showing

that he ought to be rich; just as he would publicly laud and decry the

Barnacles, lest it should be forgotten that he belonged to the family.

Howbeit, these two subjects were very often on his lips; and he managed

them so well that he might have praised himself by the month together,

and not have made himself out half so important a man as he did by his

light disparagement of his claims on anybody's consideration.

Out of this same airy talk of his, it always soon came to be understood,

wherever he and his wife went, that he had married against the wishes

of his exalted relations, and had had much ado to prevail on them to

countenance her. He never made the representation, on the contrary

seemed to laugh the idea to scorn; but it did happen that, with all his

pains to depreciate himself, he was always in the superior position.

From the days of their honeymoon, Minnie Gowan felt sensible of being

usually regarded as the wife of a man who had made a descent in marrying

her, but whose chivalrous love for her had cancelled that inequality.

To Venice they had been accompanied by Monsieur Blandois of Paris, and

at Venice Monsieur Blandois of Paris was very much in the society of

Gowan. When they had first met this gallant gentleman at Geneva,

Gowan had been undecided whether to kick him or encourage him; and had

remained for about four-and-twenty hours, so troubled to settle

the point to his satisfaction, that he had thought of tossing up a

five-franc piece on the terms, 'Tails, kick; heads, encourage,' and

abiding by the voice of the oracle. It chanced, however, that his wife

expressed a dislike to the engaging Blandois, and that the balance

of feeling in the hotel was against him. Upon it, Gowan resolved to

encourage him.

Why this perversity, if it were not in a generous fit?--which it was

not. Why should Gowan, very much the superior of Blandois of Paris, and

very well able to pull that prepossessing gentleman to pieces and find

out the stuff he was made of, take up with such a man? In the first

place, he opposed the first separate wish he observed in his wife,

because her father had paid his debts and it was desirable to take an

early opportunity of asserting his independence. In the second place,

he opposed the prevalent feeling, because with many capacities of

being otherwise, he was an ill-conditioned man. He found a pleasure in

declaring that a courtier with the refined manners of Blandois ought

to rise to the greatest distinction in any polished country. He found a

pleasure in setting up Blandois as the type of elegance, and making

him a satire upon others who piqued themselves on personal graces.

He seriously protested that the bow of Blandois was perfect, that the

address of Blandois was irresistible, and that the picturesque ease

of Blandois would be cheaply purchased (if it were not a gift, and

unpurchasable) for a hundred thousand francs. That exaggeration in the

manner of the man which has been noticed as appertaining to him and to

every such man, whatever his original breeding, as certainly as the sun

belongs to this system, was acceptable to Gowan as a caricature, which

he found it a humorous resource to have at hand for the ridiculing of

numbers of people who necessarily did more or less of what Blandois

overdid. Thus he had taken up with him; and thus, negligently

strengthening these inclinations with habit, and idly deriving some

amusement from his talk, he had glided into a way of having him for

a companion. This, though he supposed him to live by his wits at

play-tables and the like; though he suspected him to be a coward, while

he himself was daring and courageous; though he thoroughly knew him to

be disliked by Minnie; and though he cared so little for him, after all,

that if he had given her any tangible personal cause to regard him with

aversion, he would have had no compunction whatever in flinging him out

of the highest window in Venice into the deepest water of the city.

Little Dorrit would have been glad to make her visit to Mrs Gowan,

alone; but as Fanny, who had not yet recovered from her Uncle's protest,

though it was four-and-twenty hours of age, pressingly offered her

company, the two sisters stepped together into one of the gondolas under

Mr Dorrit's window, and, with the courier in attendance, were taken in

high state to Mrs Gowan's lodging. In truth, their state was rather too

high for the lodging, which was, as Fanny complained, 'fearfully out of

the way,' and which took them through a complexity of narrow streets of

water, which the same lady disparaged as 'mere ditches.'

The house, on a little desert island, looked as if it had broken

away from somewhere else, and had floated by chance into its present

anchorage in company with a vine almost as much in want of training as

the poor wretches who were lying under its leaves. The features of the

surrounding picture were, a church with hoarding and scaffolding about

it, which had been under suppositious repair so long that the means of

repair looked a hundred years old, and had themselves fallen into decay;

a quantity of washed linen, spread to dry in the sun; a number of houses

at odds with one another and grotesquely out of the perpendicular, like

rotten pre-Adamite cheeses cut into fantastic shapes and full of mites;

and a feverish bewilderment of windows, with their lattice-blinds all

hanging askew, and something draggled and dirty dangling out of most of

them.

On the first-floor of the house was a Bank--a surprising experience for

any gentleman of commercial pursuits bringing laws for all mankind from

a British city--where two spare clerks, like dried dragoons, in green

velvet caps adorned with golden tassels, stood, bearded, behind a small

counter in a small room, containing no other visible objects than an

empty iron-safe with the door open, a jug of water, and a papering of

garland of roses; but who, on lawful requisition, by merely dipping

their hands out of sight, could produce exhaustless mounds of five-franc

pieces. Below the Bank was a suite of three or four rooms with barred

windows, which had the appearance of a jail for criminal rats. Above the

Bank was Mrs Gowan's residence.

Notwithstanding that its walls were blotched, as if missionary maps were

bursting out of them to impart geographical knowledge; notwithstanding

that its weird furniture was forlornly faded and musty, and that the

prevailing Venetian odour of bilge water and an ebb tide on a weedy

shore was very strong; the place was better within, than it promised.

The door was opened by a smiling man like a reformed assassin--a

temporary servant--who ushered them into the room where Mrs Gowan sat,

with the announcement that two beautiful English ladies were come to see

the mistress.

Mrs Gowan, who was engaged in needlework, put her work aside in a

covered basket, and rose, a little hurriedly. Miss Fanny was excessively

courteous to her, and said the usual nothings with the skill of a

veteran.

'Papa was extremely sorry,' proceeded Fanny, 'to be engaged to-day (he

is so much engaged here, our acquaintance being so wretchedly large!);

and particularly requested me to bring his card for Mr Gowan. That I may

be sure to acquit myself of a commission which he impressed upon me at

least a dozen times, allow me to relieve my conscience by placing it on

the table at once.'

Which she did with veteran ease.

'We have been,' said Fanny, 'charmed to understand that you know the

Merdles. We hope it may be another means of bringing us together.'

'They are friends,' said Mrs Gowan, 'of Mr Gowan's family. I have not

yet had the pleasure of a personal introduction to Mrs Merdle, but I

suppose I shall be presented to her at Rome.'

'Indeed?' returned Fanny, with an appearance of amiably quenching her

own superiority. 'I think you'll like her.'

'You know her very well?'

'Why, you see,' said Fanny, with a frank action of her pretty shoulders,

'in London one knows every one. We met her on our way here, and, to say

the truth, papa was at first rather cross with her for taking one of the

rooms that our people had ordered for us.

However, of course, that soon blew over, and we were all good friends

again.'

Although the visit had as yet given Little Dorrit no opportunity of

conversing with Mrs Gowan, there was a silent understanding between

them, which did as well. She looked at Mrs Gowan with keen and unabated

interest; the sound of her voice was thrilling to her; nothing that was

near her, or about her, or at all concerned her, escaped Little Dorrit.

She was quicker to perceive the slightest matter here, than in any other

case--but one.

'You have been quite well,' she now said, 'since that night?'

'Quite, my dear. And you?' 'Oh! I am always well,' said Little Dorrit,

timidly. 'I--yes, thank you.'

There was no reason for her faltering and breaking off, other than that

Mrs Gowan had touched her hand in speaking to her, and their looks had

met. Something thoughtfully apprehensive in the large, soft eyes, had

checked Little Dorrit in an instant.

'You don't know that you are a favourite of my husband's, and that I am

almost bound to be jealous of you?' said Mrs Gowan.

Little Dorrit, blushing, shook her head.

'He will tell you, if he tells you what he tells me, that you are

quieter and quicker of resource than any one he ever saw.'

'He speaks far too well of me,' said Little Dorrit.

'I doubt that; but I don't at all doubt that I must tell him you

are here. I should never be forgiven, if I were to let you--and Miss

Dorrit--go, without doing so. May I? You can excuse the disorder and

discomfort of a painter's studio?'

The inquiries were addressed to Miss Fanny, who graciously replied that

she would be beyond anything interested and enchanted. Mrs Gowan went to

a door, looked in beyond it, and came back. 'Do Henry the favour to come

in,' said she, 'I knew he would be pleased!'

The first object that confronted Little Dorrit, entering first, was

Blandois of Paris in a great cloak and a furtive slouched hat, standing

on a throne platform in a corner, as he had stood on the Great Saint

Bernard, when the warning arms seemed to be all pointing up at him. She

recoiled from this figure, as it smiled at her.

'Don't be alarmed,' said Gowan, coming from his easel behind the door.

'It's only Blandois. He is doing duty as a model to-day. I am making

a study of him. It saves me money to turn him to some use. We poor

painters have none to spare.'

Blandois of Paris pulled off his slouched hat, and saluted the ladies

without coming out of his corner.

'A thousand pardons!' said he. 'But the Professore here is so inexorable

with me, that I am afraid to stir.'

'Don't stir, then,' said Gowan coolly, as the sisters approached the

easel. 'Let the ladies at least see the original of the daub, that they

may know what it's meant for. There he stands, you see. A bravo waiting

for his prey, a distinguished noble waiting to save his country, the

common enemy waiting to do somebody a bad turn, an angelic messenger

waiting to do somebody a good turn--whatever you think he looks most

like!' 'Say, Professore Mio, a poor gentleman waiting to do homage to

elegance and beauty,' remarked Blandois.

'Or say, Cattivo Soggetto Mio,' returned Gowan, touching the painted

face with his brush in the part where the real face had moved, 'a

murderer after the fact. Show that white hand of yours, Blandois. Put it

outside the cloak. Keep it still.'

Blandois' hand was unsteady; but he laughed, and that would naturally

shake it.

'He was formerly in some scuffle with another murderer, or with a

victim, you observe,' said Gowan, putting in the markings of the hand

with a quick, impatient, unskilful touch, 'and these are the tokens of

it. Outside the cloak, man!--Corpo di San Marco, what are you thinking

of?'

Blandois of Paris shook with a laugh again, so that his hand shook more;

now he raised it to twist his moustache, which had a damp appearance;

and now he stood in the required position, with a little new swagger.

His face was so directed in reference to the spot where Little Dorrit

stood by the easel, that throughout he looked at her. Once attracted by

his peculiar eyes, she could not remove her own, and they had looked

at each other all the time. She trembled now; Gowan, feeling it, and

supposing her to be alarmed by the large dog beside him, whose head she

caressed in her hand, and who had just uttered a low growl, glanced at

her to say, 'He won't hurt you, Miss Dorrit.'

'I am not afraid of him,' she returned in the same breath; 'but will you

look at him?'

In a moment Gowan had thrown down his brush, and seized the dog with

both hands by the collar.

'Blandois! How can you be such a fool as to provoke him! By Heaven, and

the other place too, he'll tear you to bits! Lie down!

Lion! Do you hear my voice, you rebel!

'The great dog, regardless of being half-choked by his collar, was

obdurately pulling with his dead weight against his master, resolved to

get across the room. He had been crouching for a spring at the moment

when his master caught him.

'Lion! Lion!' He was up on his hind legs, and it was a wrestle between

master and dog. 'Get back! Down, Lion! Get out of his sight, Blandois!

What devil have you conjured into the dog?'

'I have done nothing to him.'

'Get out of his sight or I can't hold the wild beast! Get out of the

room! By my soul, he'll kill you!'

The dog, with a ferocious bark, made one other struggle as Blandois

vanished; then, in the moment of the dog's submission, the master,

little less angry than the dog, felled him with a blow on the head, and

standing over him, struck him many times severely with the heel of his

boot, so that his mouth was presently bloody.

'Now get you into that corner and lie down,' said Gowan, 'or I'll take

you out and shoot you.'

Lion did as he was ordered, and lay down licking his mouth and chest.

Lion's master stopped for a moment to take breath, and then, recovering

his usual coolness of manner, turned to speak to his frightened wife

and her visitors. Probably the whole occurrence had not occupied two

minutes.

'Come, come, Minnie! You know he is always good-humoured and tractable.

Blandois must have irritated him,--made faces at him. The dog has his

likings and dislikings, and Blandois is no great favourite of his; but

I am sure you will give him a character, Minnie, for never having been

like this before.'

Minnie was too much disturbed to say anything connected in reply; Little

Dorrit was already occupied in soothing her; Fanny, who had cried out

twice or thrice, held Gowan's arm for protection; Lion, deeply ashamed

of having caused them this alarm, came trailing himself along the ground

to the feet of his mistress.

'You furious brute,' said Gowan, striking him with his foot again. 'You

shall do penance for this.' And he struck him again, and yet again.

'O, pray don't punish him any more,' cried Little Dorrit. 'Don't hurt

him. See how gentle he is!' At her entreaty, Gowan spared him; and he

deserved her intercession, for truly he was as submissive, and as sorry,

and as wretched as a dog could be.

It was not easy to recover this shock and make the visit unrestrained,

even though Fanny had not been, under the best of circumstances, the

least trifle in the way. In such further communication as passed among

them before the sisters took their departure, Little Dorrit fancied it

was revealed to her that Mr Gowan treated his wife, even in his very

fondness, too much like a beautiful child. He seemed so unsuspicious of

the depths of feeling which she knew must lie below that surface, that

she doubted if there could be any such depths in himself. She wondered

whether his want of earnestness might be the natural result of his want

of such qualities, and whether it was with people as with ships, that,

in too shallow and rocky waters, their anchors had no hold, and they

drifted anywhere.

He attended them down the staircase, jocosely apologising for the

poor quarters to which such poor fellows as himself were limited, and

remarking that when the high and mighty Barnacles, his relatives, who

would be dreadfully ashamed of them, presented him with better, he would

live in better to oblige them. At the water's edge they were saluted by

Blandois, who looked white enough after his late adventure, but who made

very light of it notwithstanding,--laughing at the mention of Lion.

Leaving the two together under the scrap of vine upon the causeway,

Gowan idly scattering the leaves from it into the water, and Blandois

lighting a cigarette, the sisters were paddled away in state as they had

come. They had not glided on for many minutes, when Little Dorrit became

aware that Fanny was more showy in manner than the occasion appeared to

require, and, looking about for the cause through the window and through

the open door, saw another gondola evidently in waiting on them.

As this gondola attended their progress in various artful ways;

sometimes shooting on a-head, and stopping to let them pass; sometimes,

when the way was broad enough, skimming along side by side with them;

and sometimes following close astern; and as Fanny gradually made no

disguise that she was playing off graces upon somebody within it, of

whom she at the same time feigned to be unconscious; Little Dorrit at

length asked who it was?

To which Fanny made the short answer, 'That gaby.'

'Who?' said Little Dorrit.

'My dear child,' returned Fanny (in a tone suggesting that before her

Uncle's protest she might have said, You little fool, instead), 'how

slow you are! Young Sparkler.'

She lowered the window on her side, and, leaning back and resting her

elbow on it negligently, fanned herself with a rich Spanish fan of black

and gold. The attendant gondola, having skimmed forward again, with some

swift trace of an eye in the window, Fanny laughed coquettishly and

said, 'Did you ever see such a fool, my love?'

'Do you think he means to follow you all the way?' asked Little Dorrit.

'My precious child,' returned Fanny, 'I can't possibly answer for what

an idiot in a state of desperation may do, but I should think it highly

probable. It's not such an enormous distance. All Venice would scarcely

be that, I imagine, if he's dying for a glimpse of me.'

'And is he?' asked Little Dorrit in perfect simplicity.

'Well, my love, that really is an awkward question for me to answer,'

said her sister. 'I believe he is. You had better ask Edward. He tells

Edward he is, I believe. I understand he makes a perfect spectacle of

himself at the Casino, and that sort of places, by going on about me.

But you had better ask Edward if you want to know.'

'I wonder he doesn't call,' said Little Dorrit after thinking a moment.

'My dear Amy, your wonder will soon cease, if I am rightly informed.

I should not be at all surprised if he called to-day. The creature has

only been waiting to get his courage up, I suspect.'

'Will you see him?'

'Indeed, my darling,' said Fanny, 'that's just as it may happen. Here he

is again. Look at him. O, you simpleton!'

Mr Sparkler had, undeniably, a weak appearance; with his eye in the

window like a knot in the glass, and no reason on earth for stopping his

bark suddenly, except the real reason.

'When you asked me if I will see him, my dear,' said Fanny, almost as

well composed in the graceful indifference of her attitude as Mrs Merdle

herself, 'what do you mean?' 'I mean,' said Little Dorrit--'I think I

rather mean what do you mean, dear Fanny?'

Fanny laughed again, in a manner at once condescending, arch, and

affable; and said, putting her arm round her sister in a playfully

affectionate way:

'Now tell me, my little pet. When we saw that woman at Martigny, how

did you think she carried it off? Did you see what she decided on in a

moment?'

'No, Fanny.'

'Then I'll tell you, Amy. She settled with herself, now I'll never

refer to that meeting under such different circumstances, and I'll never

pretend to have any idea that these are the same girls. That's her way

out of a difficulty. What did I tell you when we came away from Harley

Street that time? She is as insolent and false as any woman in the

world. But in the first capacity, my love, she may find people who can

match her.'

A significant turn of the Spanish fan towards Fanny's bosom, indicated

with great expression where one of these people was to be found.

'Not only that,' pursued Fanny, 'but she gives the same charge to

Young Sparkler; and doesn't let him come after me until she has got it

thoroughly into his most ridiculous of all ridiculous noddles (for one

really can't call it a head), that he is to pretend to have been first

struck with me in that Inn Yard.'

'Why?' asked Little Dorrit.

'Why? Good gracious, my love!' (again very much in the tone of You

stupid little creature) 'how can you ask? Don't you see that I may have

become a rather desirable match for a noddle? And don't you see that she

puts the deception upon us, and makes a pretence, while she shifts it

from her own shoulders (very good shoulders they are too, I must say),'

observed Miss Fanny, glancing complacently at herself, 'of considering

our feelings?'

'But we can always go back to the plain truth.'

'Yes, but if you please we won't,' retorted Fanny. 'No; I am not going

to have that done, Amy. The pretext is none of mine; it's hers, and she

shall have enough of it.'

In the triumphant exaltation of her feelings, Miss Fanny, using her

Spanish fan with one hand, squeezed her sister's waist with the other,

as if she were crushing Mrs Merdle.

'No,' repeated Fanny. 'She shall find me go her way. She took it, and

I'll follow it. And, with the blessing of fate and fortune, I'll go on

improving that woman's acquaintance until I have given her maid,

before her eyes, things from my dressmaker's ten times as handsome and

expensive as she once gave me from hers!'

Little Dorrit was silent; sensible that she was not to be heard on

any question affecting the family dignity, and unwilling to lose to no

purpose her sister's newly and unexpectedly restored favour. She could

not concur, but she was silent. Fanny well knew what she was thinking

of; so well, that she soon asked her.

Her reply was, 'Do you mean to encourage Mr Sparkler, Fanny?'

'Encourage him, my dear?' said her sister, smiling contemptuously, 'that

depends upon what you call encourage. No, I don't mean to encourage him.

But I'll make a slave of him.'

Little Dorrit glanced seriously and doubtfully in her face, but Fanny

was not to be so brought to a check. She furled her fan of black and

gold, and used it to tap her sister's nose; with the air of a proud

beauty and a great spirit, who toyed with and playfully instructed a

homely companion.

'I shall make him fetch and carry, my dear, and I shall make him subject

to me. And if I don't make his mother subject to me, too, it shall not

be my fault.'

'Do you think--dear Fanny, don't be offended, we are so comfortable

together now--that you can quite see the end of that course?'

'I can't say I have so much as looked for it yet, my dear,' answered

Fanny, with supreme indifference; 'all in good time. Such are my

intentions. And really they have taken me so long to develop, that here

we are at home. And Young Sparkler at the door, inquiring who is within.

By the merest accident, of course!'

In effect, the swain was standing up in his gondola, card-case in

hand, affecting to put the question to a servant. This conjunction

of circumstances led to his immediately afterwards presenting himself

before the young ladies in a posture, which in ancient times would not

have been considered one of favourable augury for his suit; since the

gondoliers of the young ladies, having been put to some inconvenience

by the chase, so neatly brought their own boat in the gentlest collision

with the bark of Mr Sparkler, as to tip that gentleman over like a

larger species of ninepin, and cause him to exhibit the soles of his

shoes to the object of his dearest wishes: while the nobler portions of

his anatomy struggled at the bottom of his boat in the arms of one of

his men.

However, as Miss Fanny called out with much concern, Was the gentleman

hurt, Mr Sparkler rose more restored than might have been expected, and

stammered for himself with blushes, 'Not at all so.' Miss Fanny had no

recollection of having ever seen him before, and was passing on, with a

distant inclination of her head, when he announced himself by name. Even

then she was in a difficulty from being unable to call it to mind, until

he explained that he had had the honour of seeing her at Martigny. Then

she remembered him, and hoped his lady-mother was well.

'Thank you,' stammered Mr Sparkler, 'she's uncommonly well--at least,

poorly.'

'In Venice?' said Miss Fanny.

'In Rome,' Mr Sparkler answered. 'I am here by myself, myself. I came to

call upon Mr Edward Dorrit myself. Indeed, upon Mr Dorrit likewise. In

fact, upon the family.'

Turning graciously to the attendants, Miss Fanny inquired whether her

papa or brother was within? The reply being that they were both within,

Mr Sparkler humbly offered his arm. Miss Fanny accepting it, was squired

up the great staircase by Mr Sparkler, who, if he still believed (which

there is not any reason to doubt) that she had no nonsense about her,

rather deceived himself.

Arrived in a mouldering reception-room, where the faded hangings, of a

sad sea-green, had worn and withered until they looked as if they

might have claimed kindred with the waifs of seaweed drifting under

the windows, or clinging to the walls and weeping for their imprisoned

relations, Miss Fanny despatched emissaries for her father and brother.

Pending whose appearance, she showed to great advantage on a sofa,

completing Mr Sparkler's conquest with some remarks upon Dante--known

to that gentleman as an eccentric man in the nature of an Old File,

who used to put leaves round his head, and sit upon a stool for some

unaccountable purpose, outside the cathedral at Florence.

Mr Dorrit welcomed the visitor with the highest urbanity, and most

courtly manners. He inquired particularly after Mrs Merdle. He inquired

particularly after Mr Merdle. Mr Sparkler said, or rather twitched out

of himself in small pieces by the shirt-collar, that Mrs Merdle having

completely used up her place in the country, and also her house at

Brighton, and being, of course, unable, don't you see, to remain in

London when there wasn't a soul there, and not feeling herself this year

quite up to visiting about at people's places, had resolved to have

a touch at Rome, where a woman like herself, with a proverbially fine

appearance, and with no nonsense about her, couldn't fail to be a great

acquisition. As to Mr Merdle, he was so much wanted by the men in the

City and the rest of those places, and was such a doosed extraordinary

phenomenon in Buying and Banking and that, that Mr Sparkler doubted if

the monetary system of the country would be able to spare him; though

that his work was occasionally one too many for him, and that he would

be all the better for a temporary shy at an entirely new scene and

climate, Mr Sparkler did not conceal. As to himself, Mr Sparkler

conveyed to the Dorrit family that he was going, on rather particular

business, wherever they were going.

This immense conversational achievement required time, but was effected.

Being effected, Mr Dorrit expressed his hope that Mr Sparkler would

shortly dine with them. Mr Sparkler received the idea so kindly that Mr

Dorrit asked what he was going to do that day, for instance? As he was

going to do nothing that day (his usual occupation, and one for which he

was particularly qualified), he was secured without postponement; being

further bound over to accompany the ladies to the Opera in the evening.

At dinner-time Mr Sparkler rose out of the sea, like Venus's son taking

after his mother, and made a splendid appearance ascending the great

staircase. If Fanny had been charming in the morning, she was now thrice

charming, very becomingly dressed in her most suitable colours, and with

an air of negligence upon her that doubled Mr Sparkler's fetters, and

riveted them.

'I hear you are acquainted, Mr Sparkler,' said his host at dinner,

'with--ha--Mr Gowan. Mr Henry Gowan?'

'Perfectly, sir,' returned Mr Sparkler. 'His mother and my mother are

cronies in fact.'

'If I had thought of it, Amy,' said Mr Dorrit, with a patronage as

magnificent as that of Lord Decimus himself, 'you should have despatched

a note to them, asking them to dine to-day. Some of our people could

have--ha--fetched them, and taken them home. We could have spared

a--hum--gondola for that purpose. I am sorry to have forgotten this.

Pray remind me of them to-morrow.'

Little Dorrit was not without doubts how Mr Henry Gowan might take their

patronage; but she promised not to fail in the reminder.

'Pray, does Mr Henry Gowan paint--ha--Portraits?' inquired Mr Dorrit.

Mr Sparkler opined that he painted anything, if he could get the job.

'He has no particular walk?' said Mr Dorrit.

Mr Sparkler, stimulated by Love to brilliancy, replied that for a

particular walk a man ought to have a particular pair of shoes; as, for

example, shooting, shooting-shoes; cricket, cricket-shoes. Whereas, he

believed that Henry Gowan had no particular pair of shoes.

'No speciality?' said Mr Dorrit.

This being a very long word for Mr Sparkler, and his mind being

exhausted by his late effort, he replied, 'No, thank you. I seldom take

it.'

'Well!' said Mr Dorrit. 'It would be very agreeable to me to present

a gentleman so connected, with some--ha--Testimonial of my desire to

further his interests, and develop the--hum--germs of his genius. I

think I must engage Mr Gowan to paint my picture. If the result should

be--ha--mutually satisfactory, I might afterwards engage him to try his

hand upon my family.'

The exquisitely bold and original thought presented itself to Mr

Sparkler, that there was an opening here for saying there were some of

the family (emphasising 'some' in a marked manner) to whom no painter

could render justice. But, for want of a form of words in which to

express the idea, it returned to the skies.

This was the more to be regretted as Miss Fanny greatly applauded the

notion of the portrait, and urged her papa to act upon it. She surmised,

she said, that Mr Gowan had lost better and higher opportunities by

marrying his pretty wife; and Love in a cottage, painting pictures for

dinner, was so delightfully interesting, that she begged her papa to

give him the commission whether he could paint a likeness or not: though

indeed both she and Amy knew he could, from having seen a speaking

likeness on his easel that day, and having had the opportunity of

comparing it with the original. These remarks made Mr Sparkler (as

perhaps they were intended to do) nearly distracted; for while on

the one hand they expressed Miss Fanny's susceptibility of the tender

passion, she herself showed such an innocent unconsciousness of his

admiration that his eyes goggled in his head with jealousy of an unknown

rival.

Descending into the sea again after dinner, and ascending out of it

at the Opera staircase, preceded by one of their gondoliers, like an

attendant Merman, with a great linen lantern, they entered their box,

and Mr Sparkler entered on an evening of agony. The theatre being

dark, and the box light, several visitors lounged in during the

representation; in whom Fanny was so interested, and in conversation

with whom she fell into such charming attitudes, as she had little

confidences with them, and little disputes concerning the identity of

people in distant boxes, that the wretched Sparkler hated all mankind.

But he had two consolations at the close of the performance. She gave

him her fan to hold while she adjusted her cloak, and it was his

blessed privilege to give her his arm down-stairs again. These crumbs of

encouragement, Mr Sparkler thought, would just keep him going; and it is

not impossible that Miss Dorrit thought so too.

The Merman with his light was ready at the box-door, and other Mermen

with other lights were ready at many of the doors. The Dorrit Merman

held his lantern low, to show the steps, and Mr Sparkler put on another

heavy set of fetters over his former set, as he watched her radiant

feet twinkling down the stairs beside him. Among the loiterers here, was

Blandois of Paris. He spoke, and moved forward beside Fanny.

Little Dorrit was in front with her brother and Mrs General (Mr Dorrit

had remained at home), but on the brink of the quay they all came

together. She started again to find Blandois close to her, handing Fanny

into the boat.

'Gowan has had a loss,' he said, 'since he was made happy to-day by a

visit from fair ladies.'

'A loss?' repeated Fanny, relinquished by the bereaved Sparkler, and

taking her seat.

'A loss,' said Blandois. 'His dog Lion.'

Little Dorrit's hand was in his, as he spoke.

'He is dead,' said Blandois.

'Dead?' echoed Little Dorrit. 'That noble dog?'

'Faith, dear ladies!' said Blandois, smiling and shrugging his

shoulders, 'somebody has poisoned that noble dog. He is as dead as the

Doges!'

CHAPTER 7. Mostly, Prunes and Prism

Mrs General, always on her coach-box keeping the proprieties well

together, took pains to form a surface on her very dear young friend,

and Mrs General's very dear young friend tried hard to receive it. Hard

as she had tried in her laborious life to attain many ends, she had

never tried harder than she did now, to be varnished by Mrs General. It

made her anxious and ill at ease to be operated upon by that smoothing

hand, it is true; but she submitted herself to the family want in

its greatness as she had submitted herself to the family want in its

littleness, and yielded to her own inclinations in this thing no more

than she had yielded to her hunger itself, in the days when she had

saved her dinner that her father might have his supper.

One comfort that she had under the Ordeal by General was more

sustaining to her, and made her more grateful than to a less devoted

and affectionate spirit, not habituated to her struggles and sacrifices,

might appear quite reasonable; and, indeed, it may often be observed in

life, that spirits like Little Dorrit do not appear to reason half

as carefully as the folks who get the better of them. The continued

kindness of her sister was this comfort to Little Dorrit. It was nothing

to her that the kindness took the form of tolerant patronage; she was

used to that. It was nothing to her that it kept her in a tributary

position, and showed her in attendance on the flaming car in which Miss

Fanny sat on an elevated seat, exacting homage; she sought no better

place. Always admiring Fanny's beauty, and grace, and readiness, and not

now asking herself how much of her disposition to be strongly attached

to Fanny was due to her own heart, and how much to Fanny's, she gave her

all the sisterly fondness her great heart contained.

The wholesale amount of Prunes and Prism which Mrs General infused into

the family life, combined with the perpetual plunges made by Fanny into

society, left but a very small residue of any natural deposit at the

bottom of the mixture. This rendered confidences with Fanny doubly

precious to Little Dorrit, and heightened the relief they afforded her.

'Amy,' said Fanny to her one night when they were alone, after a day so

tiring that Little Dorrit was quite worn out, though Fanny would have

taken another dip into society with the greatest pleasure in life, 'I

am going to put something into your little head. You won't guess what it

is, I suspect.'

'I don't think that's likely, dear,' said Little Dorrit.

'Come, I'll give you a clue, child,' said Fanny. 'Mrs General.'

Prunes and Prism, in a thousand combinations, having been wearily in the

ascendant all day--everything having been surface and varnish and show

without substance--Little Dorrit looked as if she had hoped that Mrs

General was safely tucked up in bed for some hours.

'Now, can you guess, Amy?' said Fanny.

'No, dear. Unless I have done anything,' said Little Dorrit, rather

alarmed, and meaning anything calculated to crack varnish and ruffle

surface.

Fanny was so very much amused by the misgiving, that she took up her

favourite fan (being then seated at her dressing-table with her armoury

of cruel instruments about her, most of them reeking from the heart

of Sparkler), and tapped her sister frequently on the nose with it,

laughing all the time.

'Oh, our Amy, our Amy!' said Fanny. 'What a timid little goose our Amy

is! But this is nothing to laugh at. On the contrary, I am very cross,

my dear.'

'As it is not with me, Fanny, I don't mind,' returned her sister,

smiling.

'Ah! But I do mind,' said Fanny, 'and so will you, Pet, when I enlighten

you. Amy, has it never struck you that somebody is monstrously polite to

Mrs General?'

'Everybody is polite to Mrs General,' said Little Dorrit. 'Because--'

'Because she freezes them into it?' interrupted Fanny. 'I don't mean

that; quite different from that. Come! Has it never struck you, Amy,

that Pa is monstrously polite to Mrs General.'

Amy, murmuring 'No,' looked quite confounded. 'No; I dare say not. But

he is,' said Fanny. 'He is, Amy. And remember my words. Mrs General has

designs on Pa!'

'Dear Fanny, do you think it possible that Mrs General has designs on

any one?'

'Do I think it possible?' retorted Fanny. 'My love, I know it. I tell

you she has designs on Pa. And more than that, I tell you Pa considers

her such a wonder, such a paragon of accomplishment, and such an

acquisition to our family, that he is ready to get himself into a state

of perfect infatuation with her at any moment. And that opens a pretty

picture of things, I hope? Think of me with Mrs General for a Mama!'

Little Dorrit did not reply, 'Think of me with Mrs General for a Mama;'

but she looked anxious, and seriously inquired what had led Fanny to

these conclusions.

'Lord, my darling,' said Fanny, tartly. 'You might as well ask me how

I know when a man is struck with myself! But, of course I do know. It

happens pretty often: but I always know it. I know this in much the same

way, I suppose. At all events, I know it.'

'You never heard Papa say anything?'

'Say anything?' repeated Fanny. 'My dearest, darling child, what

necessity has he had, yet awhile, to say anything?'

'And you have never heard Mrs General say anything?' 'My goodness me,

Amy,' returned Fanny, 'is she the sort of woman to say anything? Isn't

it perfectly plain and clear that she has nothing to do at present but

to hold herself upright, keep her aggravating gloves on, and go sweeping

about? Say anything! If she had the ace of trumps in her hand at whist,

she wouldn't say anything, child. It would come out when she played it.'

'At least, you may be mistaken, Fanny. Now, may you not?'

'O yes, I MAY be,' said Fanny, 'but I am not. However, I am glad you

can contemplate such an escape, my dear, and I am glad that you can take

this for the present with sufficient coolness to think of such a chance.

It makes me hope that you may be able to bear the connection. I should

not be able to bear it, and I should not try.

I'd marry young Sparkler first.'

'O, you would never marry him, Fanny, under any circumstances.'

'Upon my word, my dear,' rejoined that young lady with exceeding

indifference, 'I wouldn't positively answer even for that. There's

no knowing what might happen. Especially as I should have many

opportunities, afterwards, of treating that woman, his mother, in her

own style. Which I most decidedly should not be slow to avail myself of,

Amy.'

No more passed between the sisters then; but what had passed gave the

two subjects of Mrs General and Mr Sparkler great prominence in Little

Dorrit's mind, and thenceforth she thought very much of both.

Mrs General, having long ago formed her own surface to such perfection

that it hid whatever was below it (if anything), no observation was to

be made in that quarter. Mr Dorrit was undeniably very polite to her

and had a high opinion of her; but Fanny, impetuous at most times, might

easily be wrong for all that.

Whereas, the Sparkler question was on the different footing that any one

could see what was going on there, and Little Dorrit saw it and pondered

on it with many doubts and wonderings.

The devotion of Mr Sparkler was only to be equalled by the caprice

and cruelty of his enslaver. Sometimes she would prefer him to such

distinction of notice, that he would chuckle aloud with joy; next day,

or next hour, she would overlook him so completely, and drop him into

such an abyss of obscurity, that he would groan under a weak pretence of

coughing. The constancy of his attendance never touched Fanny: though he

was so inseparable from Edward, that, when that gentleman wished for

a change of society, he was under the irksome necessity of gliding out

like a conspirator in disguised boats and by secret doors and back ways;

though he was so solicitous to know how Mr Dorrit was, that he called

every other day to inquire, as if Mr Dorrit were the prey of an

intermittent fever; though he was so constantly being paddled up and

down before the principal windows, that he might have been supposed to

have made a wager for a large stake to be paddled a thousand miles in

a thousand hours; though whenever the gondola of his mistress left the

gate, the gondola of Mr Sparkler shot out from some watery ambush

and gave chase, as if she were a fair smuggler and he a custom-house

officer. It was probably owing to this fortification of the natural

strength of his constitution with so much exposure to the air, and the

salt sea, that Mr Sparkler did not pine outwardly; but, whatever the

cause, he was so far from having any prospect of moving his mistress by

a languishing state of health, that he grew bluffer every day, and that

peculiarity in his appearance of seeming rather a swelled boy than

a young man, became developed to an extraordinary degree of ruddy

puffiness.

Blandois calling to pay his respects, Mr Dorrit received him with

affability as the friend of Mr Gowan, and mentioned to him his idea of

commissioning Mr Gowan to transmit him to posterity. Blandois highly

extolling it, it occurred to Mr Dorrit that it might be agreeable to

Blandois to communicate to his friend the great opportunity reserved

for him. Blandois accepted the commission with his own free elegance of

manner, and swore he would discharge it before he was an hour older. On

his imparting the news to Gowan, that Master gave Mr Dorrit to the

Devil with great liberality some round dozen of times (for he resented

patronage almost as much as he resented the want of it), and was

inclined to quarrel with his friend for bringing him the message.

'It may be a defect in my mental vision, Blandois,' said he, 'but may I

die if I see what you have to do with this.'

'Death of my life,' replied Blandois, 'nor I neither, except that I

thought I was serving my friend.'

'By putting an upstart's hire in his pocket?' said Gowan, frowning.

'Do you mean that? Tell your other friend to get his head painted for

the sign of some public-house, and to get it done by a sign-painter. Who

am I, and who is he?'

'Professore,' returned the ambassador, 'and who is Blandois?'

Without appearing at all interested in the latter question, Gowan

angrily whistled Mr Dorrit away. But, next day, he resumed the subject

by saying in his off-hand manner and with a slighting laugh, 'Well,

Blandois, when shall we go to this Maecenas of yours?

We journeymen must take jobs when we can get them. When shall we go and

look after this job?' 'When you will,' said the injured Blandois, 'as

you please. What have I to do with it? What is it to me?'

'I can tell you what it is to me,' said Gowan. 'Bread and cheese. One

must eat! So come along, my Blandois.'

Mr Dorrit received them in the presence of his daughters and of Mr

Sparkler, who happened, by some surprising accident, to be calling

there. 'How are you, Sparkler?' said Gowan carelessly. 'When you have

to live by your mother wit, old boy, I hope you may get on better than I

do.'

Mr Dorrit then mentioned his proposal. 'Sir,' said Gowan, laughing,

after receiving it gracefully enough, 'I am new to the trade, and not

expert at its mysteries. I believe I ought to look at you in various

lights, tell you you are a capital subject, and consider when I shall be

sufficiently disengaged to devote myself with the necessary enthusiasm

to the fine picture I mean to make of you. I assure you,' and he laughed

again, 'I feel quite a traitor in the camp of those dear, gifted, good,

noble fellows, my brother artists, by not doing the hocus-pocus better.

But I have not been brought up to it, and it's too late to learn it.

Now, the fact is, I am a very bad painter, but not much worse than the

generality. If you are going to throw away a hundred guineas or so, I

am as poor as a poor relation of great people usually is, and I shall be

very much obliged to you, if you'll throw them away upon me. I'll do the

best I can for the money; and if the best should be bad, why even then,

you may probably have a bad picture with a small name to it, instead of

a bad picture with a large name to it.'

This tone, though not what he had expected, on the whole suited Mr

Dorrit remarkably well. It showed that the gentleman, highly connected,

and not a mere workman, would be under an obligation to him. He

expressed his satisfaction in placing himself in Mr Gowan's hands, and

trusted that he would have the pleasure, in their characters of private

gentlemen, of improving his acquaintance.

'You are very good,' said Gowan. 'I have not forsworn society since I

joined the brotherhood of the brush (the most delightful fellows on the

face of the earth), and am glad enough to smell the old fine gunpowder

now and then, though it did blow me into mid-air and my present calling.

You'll not think, Mr Dorrit,' and here he laughed again in the easiest

way, 'that I am lapsing into the freemasonry of the craft--for it's not

so; upon my life I can't help betraying it wherever I go, though, by

Jupiter, I love and honour the craft with all my might--if I propose a

stipulation as to time and place?'

Ha! Mr Dorrit could erect no--hum--suspicion of that kind on Mr Gowan's

frankness.

'Again you are very good,' said Gowan. 'Mr Dorrit, I hear you are going

to Rome. I am going to Rome, having friends there. Let me begin to do

you the injustice I have conspired to do you, there--not here. We shall

all be hurried during the rest of our stay here; and though there's not

a poorer man with whole elbows in Venice, than myself, I have not quite

got all the Amateur out of me yet--comprising the trade again, you

see!--and can't fall on to order, in a hurry, for the mere sake of the

sixpences.' These remarks were not less favourably received by Mr Dorrit

than their predecessors. They were the prelude to the first reception of

Mr and Mrs Gowan at dinner, and they skilfully placed Gowan on his usual

ground in the new family.

His wife, too, they placed on her usual ground. Miss Fanny understood,

with particular distinctness, that Mrs Gowan's good looks had cost her

husband very dear; that there had been a great disturbance about her

in the Barnacle family; and that the Dowager Mrs Gowan, nearly

heart-broken, had resolutely set her face against the marriage until

overpowered by her maternal feelings. Mrs General likewise clearly

understood that the attachment had occasioned much family grief and

dissension. Of honest Mr Meagles no mention was made; except that it

was natural enough that a person of that sort should wish to raise his

daughter out of his own obscurity, and that no one could blame him for

trying his best to do so.

Little Dorrit's interest in the fair subject of this easily accepted

belief was too earnest and watchful to fail in accurate observation. She

could see that it had its part in throwing upon Mrs Gowan the touch of a

shadow under which she lived, and she even had an instinctive knowledge

that there was not the least truth in it. But it had an influence in

placing obstacles in the way of her association with Mrs Gowan by making

the Prunes and Prism school excessively polite to her, but not very

intimate with her; and Little Dorrit, as an enforced sizar of that

college, was obliged to submit herself humbly to its ordinances.

Nevertheless, there was a sympathetic understanding already

established between the two, which would have carried them over

greater difficulties, and made a friendship out of a more restricted

intercourse. As though accidents were determined to be favourable to

it, they had a new assurance of congeniality in the aversion which each

perceived that the other felt towards Blandois of Paris; an aversion

amounting to the repugnance and horror of a natural antipathy towards an

odious creature of the reptile kind.

And there was a passive congeniality between them, besides this active

one. To both of them, Blandois behaved in exactly the same manner; and

to both of them his manner had uniformly something in it, which

they both knew to be different from his bearing towards others. The

difference was too minute in its expression to be perceived by others,

but they knew it to be there. A mere trick of his evil eyes, a mere turn

of his smooth white hand, a mere hair's-breadth of addition to the fall

of his nose and the rise of the moustache in the most frequent movement

of his face, conveyed to both of them, equally, a swagger personal to

themselves. It was as if he had said, 'I have a secret power in this

quarter. I know what I know.'

This had never been felt by them both in so great a degree, and never

by each so perfectly to the knowledge of the other, as on a day when he

came to Mr Dorrit's to take his leave before quitting Venice. Mrs

Gowan was herself there for the same purpose, and he came upon the

two together; the rest of the family being out. The two had not been

together five minutes, and the peculiar manner seemed to convey to them,

'You were going to talk about me. Ha! Behold me here to prevent it!'

'Gowan is coming here?' said Blandois, with a smile.

Mrs Gowan replied he was not coming.

'Not coming!' said Blandois. 'Permit your devoted servant, when you

leave here, to escort you home.'

'Thank you: I am not going home.'

'Not going home!' said Blandois. 'Then I am forlorn.'

That he might be; but he was not so forlorn as to roam away and leave

them together. He sat entertaining them with his finest compliments, and

his choicest conversation; but he conveyed to them, all the time, 'No,

no, no, dear ladies. Behold me here expressly to prevent it!'

He conveyed it to them with so much meaning, and he had such a

diabolical persistency in him, that at length, Mrs Gowan rose to depart.

On his offering his hand to Mrs Gowan to lead her down the staircase,

she retained Little Dorrit's hand in hers, with a cautious pressure, and

said, 'No, thank you. But, if you will please to see if my boatman is

there, I shall be obliged to you.'

It left him no choice but to go down before them. As he did so, hat in

hand, Mrs Gowan whispered:

'He killed the dog.'

'Does Mr Gowan know it?' Little Dorrit whispered.

'No one knows it. Don't look towards me; look towards him. He will turn

his face in a moment. No one knows it, but I am sure he did. You are?'

'I--I think so,' Little Dorrit answered.

'Henry likes him, and he will not think ill of him; he is so generous

and open himself. But you and I feel sure that we think of him as he

deserves. He argued with Henry that the dog had been already poisoned

when he changed so, and sprang at him. Henry believes it, but we do not.

I see he is listening, but can't hear.

Good-bye, my love! Good-bye!'

The last words were spoken aloud, as the vigilant Blandois stopped,

turned his head, and looked at them from the bottom of the staircase.

Assuredly he did look then, though he looked his politest, as if any

real philanthropist could have desired no better employment than to lash

a great stone to his neck, and drop him into the water flowing beyond

the dark arched gateway in which he stood. No such benefactor to mankind

being on the spot, he handed Mrs Gowan to her boat, and stood there

until it had shot out of the narrow view; when he handed himself into

his own boat and followed.

Little Dorrit had sometimes thought, and now thought again as she

retraced her steps up the staircase, that he had made his way too easily

into her father's house. But so many and such varieties of people did

the same, through Mr Dorrit's participation in his elder daughter's

society mania, that it was hardly an exceptional case. A perfect fury

for making acquaintances on whom to impress their riches and importance,

had seized the House of Dorrit.

It appeared on the whole, to Little Dorrit herself, that this same

society in which they lived, greatly resembled a superior sort of

Marshalsea. Numbers of people seemed to come abroad, pretty much

as people had come into the prison; through debt, through idleness,

relationship, curiosity, and general unfitness for getting on at home.

They were brought into these foreign towns in the custody of couriers

and local followers, just as the debtors had been brought into the

prison. They prowled about the churches and picture-galleries, much in

the old, dreary, prison-yard manner. They were usually going away again

to-morrow or next week, and rarely knew their own minds, and seldom did

what they said they would do, or went where they said they would go: in

all this again, very like the prison debtors. They paid high for poor

accommodation, and disparaged a place while they pretended to like it:

which was exactly the Marshalsea custom. They were envied when they went

away by people left behind, feigning not to want to go: and that again

was the Marshalsea habit invariably. A certain set of words and phrases,

as much belonging to tourists as the College and the Snuggery belonged

to the jail, was always in their mouths. They had precisely the same

incapacity for settling down to anything, as the prisoners used to have;

they rather deteriorated one another, as the prisoners used to do; and

they wore untidy dresses, and fell into a slouching way of life: still,

always like the people in the Marshalsea.

The period of the family's stay at Venice came, in its course, to an

end, and they moved, with their retinue, to Rome. Through a repetition

of the former Italian scenes, growing more dirty and more haggard as

they went on, and bringing them at length to where the very air was

diseased, they passed to their destination. A fine residence had been

taken for them on the Corso, and there they took up their abode, in a

city where everything seemed to be trying to stand still for ever on

the ruins of something else--except the water, which, following eternal

laws, tumbled and rolled from its glorious multitude of fountains.

Here it seemed to Little Dorrit that a change came over the Marshalsea

spirit of their society, and that Prunes and Prism got the upper hand.

Everybody was walking about St Peter's and the Vatican on somebody

else's cork legs, and straining every visible object through somebody

else's sieve. Nobody said what anything was, but everybody said what the

Mrs Generals, Mr Eustace, or somebody else said it was. The whole body

of travellers seemed to be a collection of voluntary human sacrifices,

bound hand and foot, and delivered over to Mr Eustace and his

attendants, to have the entrails of their intellects arranged according

to the taste of that sacred priesthood. Through the rugged remains

of temples and tombs and palaces and senate halls and theatres and

amphitheatres of ancient days, hosts of tongue-tied and blindfolded

moderns were carefully feeling their way, incessantly repeating Prunes

and Prism in the endeavour to set their lips according to the received

form. Mrs General was in her pure element. Nobody had an opinion. There

was a formation of surface going on around her on an amazing scale, and

it had not a flaw of courage or honest free speech in it.

Another modification of Prunes and Prism insinuated itself on Little

Dorrit's notice very shortly after their arrival. They received an early

visit from Mrs Merdle, who led that extensive department of life in the

Eternal City that winter; and the skilful manner in which she and Fanny

fenced with one another on the occasion, almost made her quiet sister

wink, like the glittering of small-swords.

'So delighted,' said Mrs Merdle, 'to resume an acquaintance so

inauspiciously begun at Martigny.'

'At Martigny, of course,' said Fanny. 'Charmed, I am sure!'

'I understand,' said Mrs Merdle, 'from my son Edmund Sparkler, that

he has already improved that chance occasion. He has returned quite

transported with Venice.'

'Indeed?' returned the careless Fanny. 'Was he there long?'

'I might refer that question to Mr Dorrit,' said Mrs Merdle, turning the

bosom towards that gentleman; 'Edmund having been so much indebted to

him for rendering his stay agreeable.'

'Oh, pray don't speak of it,' returned Fanny. 'I believe Papa had the

pleasure of inviting Mr Sparkler twice or thrice,--but it was nothing.

We had so many people about us, and kept such open house, that if he had

that pleasure, it was less than nothing.'

'Except, my dear,' said Mr Dorrit, 'except--ha--as it afforded me

unusual gratification to--hum--show by any means, however slight and

worthless, the--ha, hum--high estimation in which, in--ha--common with

the rest of the world, I hold so distinguished and princely a character

as Mr Merdle's.'

The bosom received this tribute in its most engaging manner. 'Mr

Merdle,' observed Fanny, as a means of dismissing Mr Sparkler into the

background, 'is quite a theme of Papa's, you must know, Mrs Merdle.'

'I have been--ha--disappointed, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, 'to understand

from Mr Sparkler that there is no great--hum--probability of Mr Merdle's

coming abroad.'

'Why, indeed,' said Mrs Merdle, 'he is so much engaged and in such

request, that I fear not. He has not been able to get abroad for years.

You, Miss Dorrit, I believe have been almost continually abroad for a

long time.'

'Oh dear yes,' drawled Fanny, with the greatest hardihood. 'An immense

number of years.'

'So I should have inferred,' said Mrs Merdle.

'Exactly,' said Fanny.

'I trust, however,' resumed Mr Dorrit, 'that if I have not

the--hum--great advantage of becoming known to Mr Merdle on this side

of the Alps or Mediterranean, I shall have that honour on returning to

England. It is an honour I particularly desire and shall particularly

esteem.' 'Mr Merdle,' said Mrs Merdle, who had been looking admiringly

at Fanny through her eye-glass, 'will esteem it, I am sure, no less.'

Little Dorrit, still habitually thoughtful and solitary though no longer

alone, at first supposed this to be mere Prunes and Prism. But as her

father when they had been to a brilliant reception at Mrs Merdle's,

harped at their own family breakfast-table on his wish to know Mr

Merdle, with the contingent view of benefiting by the advice of that

wonderful man in the disposal of his fortune, she began to think it had

a real meaning, and to entertain a curiosity on her own part to see the

shining light of the time.

CHAPTER 8. The Dowager Mrs Gowan is reminded that 'It Never Does'

While the waters of Venice and the ruins of Rome were sunning themselves

for the pleasure of the Dorrit family, and were daily being sketched

out of all earthly proportion, lineament, and likeness, by travelling

pencils innumerable, the firm of Doyce and Clennam hammered away in

Bleeding Heart Yard, and the vigorous clink of iron upon iron was heard

there through the working hours.

The younger partner had, by this time, brought the business into sound

trim; and the elder, left free to follow his own ingenious devices, had

done much to enhance the character of the factory. As an ingenious man,

he had necessarily to encounter every discouragement that the ruling

powers for a length of time had been able by any means to put in the way

of this class of culprits; but that was only reasonable self-defence in

the powers, since How to do it must obviously be regarded as the natural

and mortal enemy of How not to do it. In this was to be found the basis

of the wise system, by tooth and nail upheld by the Circumlocution

Office, of warning every ingenious British subject to be ingenious

at his peril: of harassing him, obstructing him, inviting robbers (by

making his remedy uncertain, and expensive) to plunder him, and at the

best of confiscating his property after a short term of enjoyment, as

though invention were on a par with felony. The system had uniformly

found great favour with the Barnacles, and that was only reasonable,

too; for one who worthily invents must be in earnest, and the Barnacles

abhorred and dreaded nothing half so much. That again was very

reasonable; since in a country suffering under the affliction of a great

amount of earnestness, there might, in an exceeding short space of time,

be not a single Barnacle left sticking to a post.

Daniel Doyce faced his condition with its pains and penalties attached

to it, and soberly worked on for the work's sake. Clennam cheering him

with a hearty co-operation, was a moral support to him, besides doing

good service in his business relation. The concern prospered, and the

partners were fast friends. But Daniel could not forget the old design

of so many years. It was not in reason to be expected that he should; if

he could have lightly forgotten it, he could never have conceived it,

or had the patience and perseverance to work it out. So Clennam thought,

when he sometimes observed him of an evening looking over the models and

drawings, and consoling himself by muttering with a sigh as he put them

away again, that the thing was as true as it ever was.

To show no sympathy with so much endeavour, and so much disappointment,

would have been to fail in what Clennam regarded as among the implied

obligations of his partnership. A revival of the passing interest in

the subject which had been by chance awakened at the door of the

Circumlocution Office, originated in this feeling. He asked his partner

to explain the invention to him; 'having a lenient consideration,' he

stipulated, 'for my being no workman, Doyce.'

'No workman?' said Doyce. 'You would have been a thorough workman if you

had given yourself to it. You have as good a head for understanding such

things as I have met with.'

'A totally uneducated one, I am sorry to add,' said Clennam.

'I don't know that,' returned Doyce, 'and I wouldn't have you say

that. No man of sense who has been generally improved, and has improved

himself, can be called quite uneducated as to anything. I don't

particularly favour mysteries. I would as soon, on a fair and clear

explanation, be judged by one class of man as another, provided he had

the qualification I have named.'

'At all events,' said Clennam--'this sounds as if we were exchanging

compliments, but we know we are not--I shall have the advantage of as

plain an explanation as can be given.'

'Well!' said Daniel, in his steady even way,'I'll try to make it so.'

He had the power, often to be found in union with such a character, of

explaining what he himself perceived, and meant, with the direct force

and distinctness with which it struck his own mind. His manner of

demonstration was so orderly and neat and simple, that it was not easy

to mistake him. There was something almost ludicrous in the complete

irreconcilability of a vague conventional notion that he must be a

visionary man, with the precise, sagacious travelling of his eye and

thumb over the plans, their patient stoppages at particular points,

their careful returns to other points whence little channels of

explanation had to be traced up, and his steady manner of making

everything good and everything sound at each important stage, before

taking his hearer on a line's-breadth further. His dismissal of himself

from his description, was hardly less remarkable. He never said, I

discovered this adaptation or invented that combination; but showed the

whole thing as if the Divine artificer had made it, and he had happened

to find it; so modest he was about it, such a pleasant touch of respect

was mingled with his quiet admiration of it, and so calmly convinced he

was that it was established on irrefragable laws.

Not only that evening, but for several succeeding evenings, Clennam was

quite charmed by this investigation. The more he pursued it, and the

oftener he glanced at the grey head bending over it, and the shrewd eye

kindling with pleasure in it and love of it--instrument for probing his

heart though it had been made for twelve long years--the less he could

reconcile it to his younger energy to let it go without one effort more.

At length he said:

'Doyce, it came to this at last--that the business was to be sunk with

Heaven knows how many more wrecks, or begun all over again?'

'Yes,' returned Doyce, 'that's what the noblemen and gentlemen made of

it after a dozen years.'

'And pretty fellows too!' said Clennam, bitterly.

'The usual thing!' observed Doyce. 'I must not make a martyr of myself,

when I am one of so large a company.'

'Relinquish it, or begin it all over again?' mused Clennam.

'That was exactly the long and the short of it,' said Doyce.

'Then, my friend,' cried Clennam, starting up and taking his

work-roughened hand, 'it shall be begun all over again!'

Doyce looked alarmed, and replied in a hurry--for him, 'No, no. Better

put it by. Far better put it by. It will be heard of, one day. I can

put it by. You forget, my good Clennam; I HAVE put it by. It's all at an

end.'

'Yes, Doyce,' returned Clennam, 'at an end as far as your efforts and

rebuffs are concerned, I admit, but not as far as mine are. I am younger

than you: I have only once set foot in that precious office, and I am

fresh game for them. Come! I'll try them. You shall do exactly as you

have been doing since we have been together. I will add (as I easily

can) to what I have been doing, the attempt to get public justice done

to you; and, unless I have some success to report, you shall hear no

more of it.'

Daniel Doyce was still reluctant to consent, and again and again urged

that they had better put it by. But it was natural that he should

gradually allow himself to be over-persuaded by Clennam, and should

yield. Yield he did. So Arthur resumed the long and hopeless labour of

striving to make way with the Circumlocution Office.

The waiting-rooms of that Department soon began to be familiar with his

presence, and he was generally ushered into them by its janitors much

as a pickpocket might be shown into a police-office; the principal

difference being that the object of the latter class of public business

is to keep the pickpocket, while the Circumlocution object was to

get rid of Clennam. However, he was resolved to stick to the Great

Department; and so the work of form-filling, corresponding, minuting,

memorandum-making, signing, counter-signing, counter-counter-signing,

referring backwards and forwards, and referring sideways, crosswise, and

zig-zag, recommenced.

Here arises a feature of the Circumlocution Office, not previously

mentioned in the present record. When that admirable Department got

into trouble, and was, by some infuriated members of Parliament whom

the smaller Barnacles almost suspected of labouring under diabolic

possession, attacked on the merits of no individual case, but as an

Institution wholly abominable and Bedlamite; then the noble or right

honourable Barnacle who represented it in the House, would smite that

member and cleave him asunder, with a statement of the quantity of

business (for the prevention of business) done by the Circumlocution

Office. Then would that noble or right honourable Barnacle hold in his

hand a paper containing a few figures, to which, with the permission

of the House, he would entreat its attention. Then would the inferior

Barnacles exclaim, obeying orders,'Hear, Hear, Hear!' and 'Read!' Then

would the noble or right honourable Barnacle perceive, sir, from this

little document, which he thought might carry conviction even to the

perversest mind (Derisive laughter and cheering from the Barnacle fry),

that within the short compass of the last financial half-year, this

much-maligned Department (Cheers) had written and received fifteen

thousand letters (Loud cheers), had written twenty-four thousand minutes

(Louder cheers), and thirty-two thousand five hundred and seventeen

memoranda (Vehement cheering). Nay, an ingenious gentleman connected

with the Department, and himself a valuable public servant, had done

him the favour to make a curious calculation of the amount of stationery

consumed in it during the same period. It formed a part of this same

short document; and he derived from it the remarkable fact that the

sheets of foolscap paper it had devoted to the public service would pave

the footways on both sides of Oxford Street from end to end, and leave

nearly a quarter of a mile to spare for the park (Immense cheering and

laughter); while of tape--red tape--it had used enough to stretch, in

graceful festoons, from Hyde Park Corner to the General Post Office.

Then, amidst a burst of official exultation, would the noble or right

honourable Barnacle sit down, leaving the mutilated fragments of the

Member on the field. No one, after that exemplary demolition of him,

would have the hardihood to hint that the more the Circumlocution Office

did, the less was done, and that the greatest blessing it could confer

on an unhappy public would be to do nothing.

With sufficient occupation on his hands, now that he had this additional

task--such a task had many and many a serviceable man died of before his

day--Arthur Clennam led a life of slight variety. Regular visits to his

mother's dull sick room, and visits scarcely less regular to Mr Meagles

at Twickenham, were its only changes during many months.

He sadly and sorely missed Little Dorrit. He had been prepared to miss

her very much, but not so much. He knew to the full extent only through

experience, what a large place in his life was left blank when her

familiar little figure went out of it. He felt, too, that he must

relinquish the hope of its return, understanding the family character

sufficiently well to be assured that he and she were divided by a broad

ground of separation. The old interest he had had in her, and her old

trusting reliance on him, were tinged with melancholy in his mind: so

soon had change stolen over them, and so soon had they glided into the

past with other secret tendernesses.

When he received her letter he was greatly moved, but did not the less

sensibly feel that she was far divided from him by more than distance.

It helped him to a clearer and keener perception of the place assigned

him by the family. He saw that he was cherished in her grateful

remembrance secretly, and that they resented him with the jail and the

rest of its belongings.

Through all these meditations which every day of his life crowded about

her, he thought of her otherwise in the old way. She was his innocent

friend, his delicate child, his dear Little Dorrit. This very change

of circumstances fitted curiously in with the habit, begun on the night

when the roses floated away, of considering himself as a much older man

than his years really made him. He regarded her from a point of view

which in its remoteness, tender as it was, he little thought would have

been unspeakable agony to her. He speculated about her future destiny,

and about the husband she might have, with an affection for her which

would have drained her heart of its dearest drop of hope, and broken it.

Everything about him tended to confirm him in the custom of looking on

himself as an elderly man, from whom such aspirations as he had combated

in the case of Minnie Gowan (though that was not so long ago either,

reckoning by months and seasons), were finally departed. His relations

with her father and mother were like those on which a widower son-in-law

might have stood. If the twin sister who was dead had lived to pass away

in the bloom of womanhood, and he had been her husband, the nature of

his intercourse with Mr and Mrs Meagles would probably have been just

what it was. This imperceptibly helped to render habitual the impression

within him, that he had done with, and dismissed that part of life.

He invariably heard of Minnie from them, as telling them in her letters

how happy she was, and how she loved her husband; but inseparable from

that subject, he invariably saw the old cloud on Mr Meagles's face. Mr

Meagles had never been quite so radiant since the marriage as before.

He had never quite recovered the separation from Pet. He was the same

good-humoured, open creature; but as if his face, from being much turned

towards the pictures of his two children which could show him only one

look, unconsciously adopted a characteristic from them, it always had

now, through all its changes of expression, a look of loss in it.

One wintry Saturday when Clennam was at the cottage, the Dowager Mrs

Gowan drove up, in the Hampton Court equipage which pretended to be the

exclusive equipage of so many individual proprietors. She descended, in

her shady ambuscade of green fan, to favour Mr and Mrs Meagles with a

call.

'And how do you both do, Papa and Mama Meagles?' said she, encouraging

her humble connections. 'And when did you last hear from or about my

poor fellow?'

My poor fellow was her son; and this mode of speaking of him politely

kept alive, without any offence in the world, the pretence that he had

fallen a victim to the Meagles' wiles.

'And the dear pretty one?' said Mrs Gowan. 'Have you later news of her

than I have?'

Which also delicately implied that her son had been captured by mere

beauty, and under its fascination had forgone all sorts of worldly

advantages.

'I am sure,' said Mrs Gowan, without straining her attention on the

answers she received, 'it's an unspeakable comfort to know they continue

happy. My poor fellow is of such a restless disposition, and has been

so used to roving about, and to being inconstant and popular among all

manner of people, that it's the greatest comfort in life. I suppose

they're as poor as mice, Papa Meagles?'

Mr Meagles, fidgety under the question, replied, 'I hope not, ma'am. I

hope they will manage their little income.'

'Oh! my dearest Meagles!' returned the lady, tapping him on the arm with

the green fan and then adroitly interposing it between a yawn and

the company, 'how can you, as a man of the world and one of the most

business-like of human beings--for you know you are business-like, and a

great deal too much for us who are not--'

(Which went to the former purpose, by making Mr Meagles out to be an

artful schemer.)

'--How can you talk about their managing their little means? My poor

dear fellow! The idea of his managing hundreds! And the sweet pretty

creature too. The notion of her managing! Papa Meagles! Don't!'

'Well, ma'am,' said Mr Meagles, gravely, 'I am sorry to admit, then,

that Henry certainly does anticipate his means.'

'My dear good man--I use no ceremony with you, because we are a kind of

relations;--positively, Mama Meagles,' exclaimed Mrs Gowan cheerfully,

as if the absurd coincidence then flashed upon her for the first time,

'a kind of relations! My dear good man, in this world none of us can

have everything our own way.'

This again went to the former point, and showed Mr Meagles with all good

breeding that, so far, he had been brilliantly successful in his deep

designs. Mrs Gowan thought the hit so good a one, that she dwelt upon

it; repeating 'Not everything. No, no; in this world we must not expect

everything, Papa Meagles.'

'And may I ask, ma'am,' retorted Mr Meagles, a little heightened in

colour, 'who does expect everything?'

'Oh, nobody, nobody!' said Mrs Gowan. 'I was going to say--but you put

me out. You interrupting Papa, what was I going to say?'

Drooping her large green fan, she looked musingly at Mr Meagles while

she thought about it; a performance not tending to the cooling of that

gentleman's rather heated spirits.

'Ah! Yes, to be sure!' said Mrs Gowan. 'You must remember that my poor

fellow has always been accustomed to expectations. They may have been

realised, or they may not have been realised--'

'Let us say, then, may not have been realised,' observed Mr Meagles.

The Dowager for a moment gave him an angry look; but tossed it off with

her head and her fan, and pursued the tenor of her way in her former

manner.

'It makes no difference. My poor fellow has been accustomed to that

sort of thing, and of course you knew it, and were prepared for the

consequences. I myself always clearly foresaw the consequences, and am

not surprised. And you must not be surprised.

In fact, can't be surprised. Must have been prepared for it.'

Mr Meagles looked at his wife and at Clennam; bit his lip; and coughed.

'And now here's my poor fellow,' Mrs Gowan pursued, 'receiving notice

that he is to hold himself in expectation of a baby, and all the

expenses attendant on such an addition to his family! Poor Henry! But

it can't be helped now; it's too late to help it now. Only don't talk of

anticipating means, Papa Meagles, as a discovery; because that would be

too much.'

'Too much, ma'am?' said Mr Meagles, as seeking an explanation.

'There, there!' said Mrs Gowan, putting him in his inferior place with

an expressive action of her hand. 'Too much for my poor fellow's

mother to bear at this time of day. They are fast married, and can't

be unmarried. There, there! I know that! You needn't tell me that, Papa

Meagles. I know it very well. What was it I said just now? That it was

a great comfort they continued happy. It is to be hoped they will still

continue happy. It is to be hoped Pretty One will do everything she

can to make my poor fellow happy, and keep him contented. Papa and Mama

Meagles, we had better say no more about it. We never did look at this

subject from the same side, and we never shall. There, there! Now I am

good.'

Truly, having by this time said everything she could say in maintenance

of her wonderfully mythical position, and in admonition to Mr Meagles

that he must not expect to bear his honours of alliance too cheaply, Mrs

Gowan was disposed to forgo the rest. If Mr Meagles had submitted to

a glance of entreaty from Mrs Meagles, and an expressive gesture from

Clennam, he would have left her in the undisturbed enjoyment of this

state of mind. But Pet was the darling and pride of his heart; and if he

could ever have championed her more devotedly, or loved her better, than

in the days when she was the sunlight of his house, it would have been

now, when, as its daily grace and delight, she was lost to it.

'Mrs Gowan, ma'am,' said Mr Meagles, 'I have been a plain man all my

life. If I was to try--no matter whether on myself, on somebody else,

or both--any genteel mystifications, I should probably not succeed in

them.'

'Papa Meagles,' returned the Dowager, with an affable smile, but with

the bloom on her cheeks standing out a little more vividly than usual as

the neighbouring surface became paler,'probably not.'

'Therefore, my good madam,' said Mr Meagles, at great pains to

restrain himself, 'I hope I may, without offence, ask to have no such

mystification played off upon me.' 'Mama Meagles,' observed Mrs Gowan,

'your good man is incomprehensible.'

Her turning to that worthy lady was an artifice to bring her into the

discussion, quarrel with her, and vanquish her. Mr Meagles interposed to

prevent that consummation.

'Mother,' said he, 'you are inexpert, my dear, and it is not a fair

match. Let me beg of you to remain quiet. Come, Mrs Gowan, come! Let

us try to be sensible; let us try to be good-natured; let us try to

be fair. Don't you pity Henry, and I won't pity Pet. And don't be

one-sided, my dear madam; it's not considerate, it's not kind. Don't

let us say that we hope Pet will make Henry happy, or even that we hope

Henry will make Pet happy,' (Mr Meagles himself did not look happy as he

spoke the words,) 'but let us hope they will make each other happy.'

'Yes, sure, and there leave it, father,' said Mrs Meagles the

kind-hearted and comfortable.

'Why, mother, no,' returned Mr Meagles, 'not exactly there. I can't

quite leave it there; I must say just half-a-dozen words more. Mrs

Gowan, I hope I am not over-sensitive. I believe I don't look it.'

'Indeed you do not,' said Mrs Gowan, shaking her head and the great

green fan together, for emphasis.

'Thank you, ma'am; that's well. Notwithstanding which, I feel a

little--I don't want to use a strong word--now shall I say hurt?'

asked Mr Meagles at once with frankness and moderation, and with a

conciliatory appeal in his tone.

'Say what you like,' answered Mrs Gowan. 'It is perfectly indifferent to

me.'

'No, no, don't say that,' urged Mr Meagles, 'because that's not

responding amiably. I feel a little hurt when I hear references made to

consequences having been foreseen, and to its being too late now, and so

forth.'

'Do you, Papa Meagles?' said Mrs Gowan. 'I am not surprised.'

'Well, ma'am,' reasoned Mr Meagles, 'I was in hopes you would have been

at least surprised, because to hurt me wilfully on so tender a subject

is surely not generous.' 'I am not responsible,' said Mrs Gowan, 'for

your conscience, you know.'

Poor Mr Meagles looked aghast with astonishment.

'If I am unluckily obliged to carry a cap about with me, which is yours

and fits you,' pursued Mrs Gowan, 'don't blame me for its pattern, Papa

Meagles, I beg!' 'Why, good Lord, ma'am!' Mr Meagles broke out, 'that's

as much as to state--'

'Now, Papa Meagles, Papa Meagles,' said Mrs Gowan, who became extremely

deliberate and prepossessing in manner whenever that gentleman became at

all warm, 'perhaps to prevent confusion, I had better speak for myself

than trouble your kindness to speak for me.

It's as much as to state, you begin. If you please, I will finish the

sentence. It is as much as to state--not that I wish to press it or even

recall it, for it is of no use now, and my only wish is to make the

best of existing circumstances--that from the first to the last I always

objected to this match of yours, and at a very late period yielded a

most unwilling consent to it.'

'Mother!' cried Mr Meagles. 'Do you hear this! Arthur! Do you hear

this!'

'The room being of a convenient size,' said Mrs Gowan, looking about

as she fanned herself, 'and quite charmingly adapted in all respects to

conversation, I should imagine I am audible in any part of it.'

Some moments passed in silence, before Mr Meagles could hold himself in

his chair with sufficient security to prevent his breaking out of it at

the next word he spoke. At last he said: 'Ma'am, I am very unwilling to

revive them, but I must remind you what my opinions and my course were,

all along, on that unfortunate subject.'

'O, my dear sir!' said Mrs Gowan, smiling and shaking her head with

accusatory intelligence, 'they were well understood by me, I assure

you.'

'I never, ma'am,' said Mr Meagles, 'knew unhappiness before that time,

I never knew anxiety before that time. It was a time of such distress to

me that--' That Mr Meagles could really say no more about it, in short,

but passed his handkerchief before his Face.

'I understood the whole affair,' said Mrs Gowan, composedly looking

over her fan. 'As you have appealed to Mr Clennam, I may appeal to Mr

Clennam, too. He knows whether I did or not.'

'I am very unwilling,' said Clennam, looked to by all parties, 'to take

any share in this discussion, more especially because I wish to preserve

the best understanding and the clearest relations with Mr Henry Gowan.

I have very strong reasons indeed, for entertaining that wish. Mrs Gowan

attributed certain views of furthering the marriage to my friend here,

in conversation with me before it took place; and I endeavoured to

undeceive her. I represented that I knew him (as I did and do) to be

strenuously opposed to it, both in opinion and action.'

'You see?' said Mrs Gowan, turning the palms of her hands towards Mr

Meagles, as if she were Justice herself, representing to him that he had

better confess, for he had not a leg to stand on. 'You see? Very good!

Now Papa and Mama Meagles both!' here she rose; 'allow me to take the

liberty of putting an end to this rather formidable controversy. I will

not say another word upon its merits. I will only say that it is an

additional proof of what one knows from all experience; that this kind

of thing never answers--as my poor fellow himself would say, that it

never pays--in one word, that it never does.'

Mr Meagles asked, What kind of thing?

'It is in vain,' said Mrs Gowan, 'for people to attempt to get on

together who have such extremely different antecedents; who are jumbled

against each other in this accidental, matrimonial sort of way; and who

cannot look at the untoward circumstance which has shaken them together

in the same light. It never does.'

Mr Meagles was beginning, 'Permit me to say, ma'am--'

'No, don't,' returned Mrs Gowan. 'Why should you! It is an ascertained

fact. It never does. I will therefore, if you please, go my way, leaving

you to yours. I shall at all times be happy to receive my poor fellow's

pretty wife, and I shall always make a point of being on the most

affectionate terms with her. But as to these terms, semi-family and

semi-stranger, semi-goring and semi-boring, they form a state of things

quite amusing in its impracticability. I assure you it never does.'

The Dowager here made a smiling obeisance, rather to the room than to

any one in it, and therewith took a final farewell of Papa and Mama

Meagles. Clennam stepped forward to hand her to the Pill-Box which was

at the service of all the Pills in Hampton Court Palace; and she got

into that vehicle with distinguished serenity, and was driven away.

Thenceforth the Dowager, with a light and careless humour, often

recounted to her particular acquaintance how, after a hard trial, she

had found it impossible to know those people who belonged to Henry's

wife, and who had made that desperate set to catch him. Whether she had

come to the conclusion beforehand, that to get rid of them would give

her favourite pretence a better air, might save her some occasional

inconvenience, and could risk no loss (the pretty creature being fast

married, and her father devoted to her), was best known to herself.

Though this history has its opinion on that point too, and decidedly in

the affirmative.

CHAPTER 9. Appearance and Disappearance

'Arthur, my dear boy,' said Mr Meagles, on the evening of the following

day, 'Mother and I have been talking this over, and we don't feel

comfortable in remaining as we are. That elegant connection of

ours--that dear lady who was here yesterday--'

'I understand,' said Arthur.

'Even that affable and condescending ornament of society,' pursued Mr

Meagles, 'may misrepresent us, we are afraid. We could bear a great

deal, Arthur, for her sake; but we think we would rather not bear that,

if it was all the same to her.'

'Good,' said Arthur. 'Go on.'

'You see,' proceeded Mr Meagles 'it might put us wrong with our

son-in-law, it might even put us wrong with our daughter, and it might

lead to a great deal of domestic trouble. You see, don't you?'

'Yes, indeed,' returned Arthur, 'there is much reason in what you say.'

He had glanced at Mrs Meagles, who was always on the good and sensible

side; and a petition had shone out of her honest face that he would

support Mr Meagles in his present inclinings.

'So we are very much disposed, are Mother and I,' said Mr Meagles, 'to

pack up bags and baggage and go among the Allongers and Marshongers once

more. I mean, we are very much disposed to be off, strike right through

France into Italy, and see our Pet.'

'And I don't think,' replied Arthur, touched by the motherly

anticipation in the bright face of Mrs Meagles (she must have been very

like her daughter, once), 'that you could do better. And if you ask me

for my advice, it is that you set off to-morrow.'

'Is it really, though?' said Mr Meagles. 'Mother, this is being backed

in an idea!'

Mother, with a look which thanked Clennam in a manner very agreeable to

him, answered that it was indeed.

'The fact is, besides, Arthur,' said Mr Meagles, the old cloud coming

over his face, 'that my son-in-law is already in debt again, and that I

suppose I must clear him again. It may be as well, even on this account,

that I should step over there, and look him up in a friendly way. Then

again, here's Mother foolishly anxious (and yet naturally too) about

Pet's state of health, and that she should not be left to feel lonesome

at the present time. It's undeniably a long way off, Arthur, and a

strange place for the poor love under all the circumstances. Let her be

as well cared for as any lady in that land, still it is a long way off.

just as Home is Home though it's never so Homely, why you see,' said Mr

Meagles, adding a new version to the proverb, 'Rome is Rome, though it's

never so Romely.'

'All perfectly true,' observed Arthur, 'and all sufficient reasons for

going.'

'I am glad you think so; it decides me. Mother, my dear, you may get

ready. We have lost our pleasant interpreter (she spoke three foreign

languages beautifully, Arthur; you have heard her many a time), and you

must pull me through it, Mother, as well as you can.

I require a deal of pulling through, Arthur,' said Mr Meagles, shaking

his head, 'a deal of pulling through. I stick at everything beyond a

noun-substantive--and I stick at him, if he's at all a tight one.'

'Now I think of it,' returned Clennam, 'there's Cavalletto. He shall

go with you, if you like. I could not afford to lose him, but you will

bring him safe back.'

'Well! I am much obliged to you, my boy,' said Mr Meagles, turning it

over, 'but I think not. No, I think I'll be pulled through by Mother.

Cavallooro (I stick at his very name to start with, and it sounds like

the chorus to a comic song) is so necessary to you, that I don't like

the thought of taking him away. More than that, there's no saying when

we may come home again; and it would never do to take him away for

an indefinite time. The cottage is not what it was. It only holds two

little people less than it ever did, Pet, and her poor unfortunate maid

Tattycoram; but it seems empty now. Once out of it, there's no knowing

when we may come back to it. No, Arthur, I'll be pulled through by

Mother.'

They would do best by themselves perhaps, after all, Clennam thought;

therefore did not press his proposal.

'If you would come down and stay here for a change, when it wouldn't

trouble you,' Mr Meagles resumed, 'I should be glad to think--and so

would Mother too, I know--that you were brightening up the old place

with a bit of life it was used to when it was full, and that the Babies

on the wall there had a kind eye upon them sometimes. You so belong to

the spot, and to them, Arthur, and we should every one of us have been

so happy if it had fallen out--but, let us see--how's the weather for

travelling now?' Mr Meagles broke off, cleared his throat, and got up to

look out of the window.

They agreed that the weather was of high promise; and Clennam kept the

talk in that safe direction until it had become easy again, when he

gently diverted it to Henry Gowan and his quick sense and agreeable

qualities when he was delicately dealt With; he likewise dwelt on the

indisputable affection he entertained for his wife. Clennam did not fail

of his effect upon good Mr Meagles, whom these commendations greatly

cheered; and who took Mother to witness that the single and cordial

desire of his heart in reference to their daughter's husband, was

harmoniously to exchange friendship for friendship, and confidence for

confidence. Within a few hours the cottage furniture began to be wrapped

up for preservation in the family absence--or, as Mr Meagles expressed

it, the house began to put its hair in papers--and within a few days

Father and Mother were gone, Mrs Tickit and Dr Buchan were posted, as of

yore, behind the parlour blind, and Arthur's solitary feet were rustling

among the dry fallen leaves in the garden walks.

As he had a liking for the spot, he seldom let a week pass without

paying a visit. Sometimes, he went down alone from Saturday to Monday;

sometimes his partner accompanied him; sometimes, he merely strolled for

an hour or two about the house and garden, saw that all was right, and

returned to London again. At all times, and under all circumstances, Mrs

Tickit, with her dark row of curls, and Dr Buchan, sat in the parlour

window, looking out for the family return.

On one of his visits Mrs Tickit received him with the words, 'I

have something to tell you, Mr Clennam, that will surprise you.' So

surprising was the something in question, that it actually brought Mrs

Tickit out of the parlour window and produced her in the garden walk,

when Clennam went in at the gate on its being opened for him.

'What is it, Mrs Tickit?' said he.

'Sir,' returned that faithful housekeeper, having taken him into the

parlour and closed the door; 'if ever I saw the led away and deluded

child in my life, I saw her identically in the dusk of yesterday

evening.'

'You don't mean Tatty--'

'Coram yes I do!' quoth Mrs Tickit, clearing the disclosure at a leap.

'Where?'

'Mr Clennam,' returned Mrs Tickit, 'I was a little heavy in my eyes,

being that I was waiting longer than customary for my cup of tea which

was then preparing by Mary Jane. I was not sleeping, nor what a person

would term correctly, dozing. I was more what a person would strictly

call watching with my eyes closed.'

Without entering upon an inquiry into this curious abnormal condition,

Clennam said, 'Exactly. Well?'

'Well, sir,' proceeded Mrs Tickit, 'I was thinking of one thing and

thinking of another, just as you yourself might. Just as anybody might.'

'Precisely so,' said Clennam. 'Well?'

'And when I do think of one thing and do think of another,' pursued

Mrs Tickit, 'I hardly need to tell you, Mr Clennam, that I think of the

family. Because, dear me! a person's thoughts,' Mrs Tickit said this

with an argumentative and philosophic air, 'however they may stray, will

go more or less on what is uppermost in their minds. They will do it,

sir, and a person can't prevent them.'

Arthur subscribed to this discovery with a nod.

'You find it so yourself, sir, I'll be bold to say,' said Mrs Tickit,

'and we all find it so. It an't our stations in life that changes us, Mr

Clennam; thoughts is free!--As I was saying, I was thinking of one thing

and thinking of another, and thinking very much of the family. Not of

the family in the present times only, but in the past times too. For

when a person does begin thinking of one thing and thinking of another

in that manner, as it's getting dark, what I say is, that all times

seem to be present, and a person must get out of that state and consider

before they can say which is which.'

He nodded again; afraid to utter a word, lest it should present any new

opening to Mrs Tickit's conversational powers.

'In consequence of which,' said Mrs Tickit, 'when I quivered my eyes and

saw her actual form and figure looking in at the gate, I let them close

again without so much as starting, for that actual form and figure came

so pat to the time when it belonged to the house as much as mine or your

own, that I never thought at the moment of its having gone away. But,

sir, when I quivered my eyes again, and saw that it wasn't there, then

it all flooded upon me with a fright, and I jumped up.'

'You ran out directly?' said Clennam.

'I ran out,' assented Mrs Tickit, 'as fast as ever my feet would carry

me; and if you'll credit it, Mr Clennam, there wasn't in the whole

shining Heavens, no not so much as a finger of that young woman.'

Passing over the absence from the firmament of this novel constellation,

Arthur inquired of Mrs Tickit if she herself went beyond the gate?

'Went to and fro, and high and low,' said Mrs Tickit, 'and saw no sign

of her!'

He then asked Mrs Tickit how long a space of time she supposed there

might have been between the two sets of ocular quiverings she had

experienced? Mrs Tickit, though minutely circumstantial in her reply,

had no settled opinion between five seconds and ten minutes.

She was so plainly at sea on this part of the case, and had so clearly

been startled out of slumber, that Clennam was much disposed to regard

the appearance as a dream. Without hurting Mrs Tickit's feelings with

that infidel solution of her mystery, he took it away from the cottage

with him; and probably would have retained it ever afterwards if a

circumstance had not soon happened to change his opinion. He was passing

at nightfall along the Strand, and the lamp-lighter was going on before

him, under whose hand the street-lamps, blurred by the foggy air, burst

out one after another, like so many blazing sunflowers coming into

full-blow all at once,--when a stoppage on the pavement, caused by a

train of coal-waggons toiling up from the wharves at the river-side,

brought him to a stand-still. He had been walking quickly, and going

with some current of thought, and the sudden check given to both

operations caused him to look freshly about him, as people under such

circumstances usually do.

Immediately, he saw in advance--a few people intervening, but still

so near to him that he could have touched them by stretching out

his arm--Tattycoram and a strange man of a remarkable appearance: a

swaggering man, with a high nose, and a black moustache as false in its

colour as his eyes were false in their expression, who wore his heavy

cloak with the air of a foreigner. His dress and general appearance were

those of a man on travel, and he seemed to have very recently joined

the girl. In bending down (being much taller than she was), listening

to whatever she said to him, he looked over his shoulder with the

suspicious glance of one who was not unused to be mistrustful that his

footsteps might be dogged. It was then that Clennam saw his face; as

his eyes lowered on the people behind him in the aggregate, without

particularly resting upon Clennam's face or any other.

He had scarcely turned his head about again, and it was still bent down,

listening to the girl, when the stoppage ceased, and the obstructed

stream of people flowed on. Still bending his head and listening to the

girl, he went on at her side, and Clennam followed them, resolved to

play this unexpected play out, and see where they went.

He had hardly made the determination (though he was not long about it),

when he was again as suddenly brought up as he had been by the stoppage.

They turned short into the Adelphi,--the girl evidently leading,--and

went straight on, as if they were going to the Terrace which overhangs

the river.

There is always, to this day, a sudden pause in that place to the roar

of the great thoroughfare. The many sounds become so deadened that the

change is like putting cotton in the ears, or having the head thickly

muffled. At that time the contrast was far greater; there being no small

steam-boats on the river, no landing places but slippery wooden stairs

and foot-causeways, no railroad on the opposite bank, no hanging bridge

or fish-market near at hand, no traffic on the nearest bridge of stone,

nothing moving on the stream but watermen's wherries and coal-lighters.

Long and broad black tiers of the latter, moored fast in the mud as if

they were never to move again, made the shore funereal and silent after

dark; and kept what little water-movement there was, far out towards

mid-stream. At any hour later than sunset, and not least at that hour

when most of the people who have anything to eat at home are going home

to eat it, and when most of those who have nothing have hardly yet slunk

out to beg or steal, it was a deserted place and looked on a deserted

scene.

Such was the hour when Clennam stopped at the corner, observing the girl

and the strange man as they went down the street. The man's footsteps

were so noisy on the echoing stones that he was unwilling to add the

sound of his own. But when they had passed the turning and were in the

darkness of the dark corner leading to the terrace, he made after them

with such indifferent appearance of being a casual passenger on his way,

as he could assume.

When he rounded the dark corner, they were walking along the terrace

towards a figure which was coming towards them. If he had seen it by

itself, under such conditions of gas-lamp, mist, and distance, he might

not have known it at first sight, but with the figure of the girl to

prompt him, he at once recognised Miss Wade.

He stopped at the corner, seeming to look back expectantly up the street

as if he had made an appointment with some one to meet him there; but he

kept a careful eye on the three. When they came together, the man took

off his hat, and made Miss Wade a bow. The girl appeared to say a few

words as though she presented him, or accounted for his being late, or

early, or what not; and then fell a pace or so behind, by herself. Miss

Wade and the man then began to walk up and down; the man having the

appearance of being extremely courteous and complimentary in manner;

Miss Wade having the appearance of being extremely haughty.

When they came down to the corner and turned, she was saying,

'If I pinch myself for it, sir, that is my business. Confine yourself to

yours, and ask me no question.'

'By Heaven, ma'am!' he replied, making her another bow. 'It was my

profound respect for the strength of your character, and my admiration

of your beauty.'

'I want neither the one nor the other from any one,' said she, 'and

certainly not from you of all creatures. Go on with your report.'

'Am I pardoned?' he asked, with an air of half abashed gallantry.

'You are paid,' she said, 'and that is all you want.'

Whether the girl hung behind because she was not to hear the business,

or as already knowing enough about it, Clennam could not determine. They

turned and she turned. She looked away at the river, as she walked

with her hands folded before her; and that was all he could make of

her without showing his face. There happened, by good fortune, to be a

lounger really waiting for some one; and he sometimes looked over the

railing at the water, and sometimes came to the dark corner and looked

up the street, rendering Arthur less conspicuous.

When Miss Wade and the man came back again, she was saying, 'You must

wait until to-morrow.'

'A thousand pardons?' he returned. 'My faith! Then it's not convenient

to-night?'

'No. I tell you I must get it before I can give it to you.'

She stopped in the roadway, as if to put an end to the conference. He of

course stopped too. And the girl stopped.

'It's a little inconvenient,' said the man. 'A little. But, Holy Blue!

that's nothing in such a service. I am without money to-night, by

chance. I have a good banker in this city, but I would not wish to draw

upon the house until the time when I shall draw for a round sum.'

'Harriet,' said Miss Wade, 'arrange with him--this gentleman here--for

sending him some money to-morrow.' She said it with a slur of the word

gentleman which was more contemptuous than any emphasis, and walked

slowly on. The man bent his head again, and the girl spoke to him as

they both followed her. Clennam ventured to look at the girl as they

Moved away. He could note that her rich black eyes were fastened upon

the man with a scrutinising expression, and that she kept at a little

distance from him, as they walked side by side to the further end of the

terrace.

A loud and altered clank upon the pavement warned him, before he could

discern what was passing there, that the man was coming back alone.

Clennam lounged into the road, towards the railing; and the man passed

at a quick swing, with the end of his cloak thrown over his shoulder,

singing a scrap of a French song.

The whole vista had no one in it now but himself. The lounger had

lounged out of view, and Miss Wade and Tattycoram were gone. More than

ever bent on seeing what became of them, and on having some information

to give his good friend, Mr Meagles, he went out at the further end of

the terrace, looking cautiously about him. He rightly judged that, at

first at all events, they would go in a contrary direction from their

late companion. He soon saw them in a neighbouring bye-street, which was

not a thoroughfare, evidently allowing time for the man to get well

out of their way. They walked leisurely arm-in-arm down one side of the

street, and returned on the opposite side. When they came back to the

street-corner, they changed their pace for the pace of people with an

object and a distance before them, and walked steadily away. Clennam, no

less steadily, kept them in sight.

They crossed the Strand, and passed through Covent Garden (under the

windows of his old lodging where dear Little Dorrit had come that

night), and slanted away north-east, until they passed the great

building whence Tattycoram derived her name, and turned into the Gray's

Inn Road. Clennam was quite at home here, in right of Flora, not to

mention the Patriarch and Pancks, and kept them in view with ease. He

was beginning to wonder where they might be going next, when that wonder

was lost in the greater wonder with which he saw them turn into the

Patriarchal street. That wonder was in its turn swallowed up on the

greater wonder with which he saw them stop at the Patriarchal door. A

low double knock at the bright brass knocker, a gleam of light into the

road from the opened door, a brief pause for inquiry and answer and the

door was shut, and they were housed.

After looking at the surrounding objects for assurance that he was

not in an odd dream, and after pacing a little while before the house,

Arthur knocked at the door. It was opened by the usual maid-servant,

and she showed him up at once, with her usual alacrity, to Flora's

sitting-room.

There was no one with Flora but Mr F.'s Aunt, which respectable

gentlewoman, basking in a balmy atmosphere of tea and toast, was

ensconced in an easy-chair by the fireside, with a little table at her

elbow, and a clean white handkerchief spread over her lap on which

two pieces of toast at that moment awaited consumption. Bending over

a steaming vessel of tea, and looking through the steam, and breathing

forth the steam, like a malignant Chinese enchantress engaged in the

performance of unholy rites, Mr F.'s Aunt put down her great teacup and

exclaimed, 'Drat him, if he an't come back again!'

It would seem from the foregoing exclamation that this uncompromising

relative of the lamented Mr F., measuring time by the acuteness of her

sensations and not by the clock, supposed Clennam to have lately gone

away; whereas at least a quarter of a year had elapsed since he had had

the temerity to present himself before her.

'My goodness Arthur!' cried Flora, rising to give him a cordial

reception, 'Doyce and Clennam what a start and a surprise for though not

far from the machinery and foundry business and surely might be taken

sometimes if at no other time about mid-day when a glass of sherry and a

humble sandwich of whatever cold meat in the larder might not come amiss

nor taste the worse for being friendly for you know you buy it somewhere

and wherever bought a profit must be made or they would never keep the

place it stands to reason without a motive still never seen and learnt

now not to be expected, for as Mr F. himself said if seeing is believing

not seeing is believing too and when you don't see you may fully believe

you're not remembered not that I expect you Arthur Doyce and Clennam to

remember me why should I for the days are gone but bring another teacup

here directly and tell her fresh toast and pray sit near the fire.'

Arthur was in the greatest anxiety to explain the object of his

visit; but was put off for the moment, in spite of himself, by what he

understood of the reproachful purport of these words, and by the genuine

pleasure she testified in seeing him. 'And now pray tell me something

all you know,' said Flora, drawing her chair near to his, 'about

the good dear quiet little thing and all the changes of her fortunes

carriage people now no doubt and horses without number most romantic, a

coat of arms of course and wild beasts on their hind legs showing it

as if it was a copy they had done with mouths from ear to ear good

gracious, and has she her health which is the first consideration after

all for what is wealth without it Mr F. himself so often saying when his

twinges came that sixpence a day and find yourself and no gout so much

preferable, not that he could have lived on anything like it being the

last man or that the previous little thing though far too familiar an

expression now had any tendency of that sort much too slight and small

but looked so fragile bless her?'

Mr F.'s Aunt, who had eaten a piece of toast down to the crust, here

solemnly handed the crust to Flora, who ate it for her as a matter of

business. Mr F.'s Aunt then moistened her ten fingers in slow succession

at her lips, and wiped them in exactly the same order on the white

handkerchief; then took the other piece of toast, and fell to work

upon it. While pursuing this routine, she looked at Clennam with an

expression of such intense severity that he felt obliged to look at her

in return, against his personal inclinations.

'She is in Italy, with all her family, Flora,' he said, when the dreaded

lady was occupied again.

'In Italy is she really?' said Flora, 'with the grapes growing

everywhere and lava necklaces and bracelets too that land of poetry with

burning mountains picturesque beyond belief though if the organ-boys

come away from the neighbourhood not to be scorched nobody can wonder

being so young and bringing their white mice with them most humane, and

is she really in that favoured land with nothing but blue about her and

dying gladiators and Belvederes though Mr F. himself did not believe

for his objection when in spirits was that the images could not be true

there being no medium between expensive quantities of linen badly got

up and all in creases and none whatever, which certainly does not seem

probable though perhaps in consequence of the extremes of rich and poor

which may account for it.'

Arthur tried to edge a word in, but Flora hurried on again.

'Venice Preserved too,' said she, 'I think you have been there is it

well or ill preserved for people differ so and Maccaroni if they really

eat it like the conjurors why not cut it shorter, you are acquainted

Arthur--dear Doyce and Clennam at least not dear and most assuredly

not Doyce for I have not the pleasure but pray excuse me--acquainted I

believe with Mantua what has it got to do with Mantua-making for I never

have been able to conceive?'

'I believe there is no connection, Flora, between the two,' Arthur was

beginning, when she caught him up again.

'Upon your word no isn't there I never did but that's like me I run away

with an idea and having none to spare I keep it, alas there was a time

dear Arthur that is to say decidedly not dear nor Arthur neither but you

understand me when one bright idea gilded the what's-his-name horizon of

et cetera but it is darkly clouded now and all is over.'

Arthur's increasing wish to speak of something very different was by

this time so plainly written on his face, that Flora stopped in a tender

look, and asked him what it was?

'I have the greatest desire, Flora, to speak to some one who is now in

this house--with Mr Casby no doubt. Some one whom I saw come in, and

who, in a misguided and deplorable way, has deserted the house of a

friend of mine.'

'Papa sees so many and such odd people,' said Flora, rising, 'that I

shouldn't venture to go down for any one but you Arthur but for you I

would willingly go down in a diving-bell much more a dining-room and

will come back directly if you'll mind and at the same time not mind Mr

F.'s Aunt while I'm gone.'

With those words and a parting glance, Flora bustled out, leaving

Clennam under dreadful apprehension of this terrible charge.

The first variation which manifested itself in Mr F.'s Aunt's demeanour

when she had finished her piece of toast, was a loud and prolonged

sniff. Finding it impossible to avoid construing this demonstration

into a defiance of himself, its gloomy significance being unmistakable,

Clennam looked plaintively at the excellent though prejudiced lady

from whom it emanated, in the hope that she might be disarmed by a meek

submission.

'None of your eyes at me,' said Mr F.'s Aunt, shivering with hostility.

'Take that.'

'That' was the crust of the piece of toast. Clennam accepted the boon

with a look of gratitude, and held it in his hand under the pressure

of a little embarrassment, which was not relieved when Mr F.'s Aunt,

elevating her voice into a cry of considerable power, exclaimed, 'He

has a proud stomach, this chap! He's too proud a chap to eat it!' and,

coming out of her chair, shook her venerable fist so very close to his

nose as to tickle the surface. But for the timely return of Flora, to

find him in this difficult situation, further consequences might

have ensued. Flora, without the least discomposure or surprise, but

congratulating the old lady in an approving manner on being 'very lively

to-night', handed her back to her chair.

'He has a proud stomach, this chap,' said Mr F.'s relation, on being

reseated. 'Give him a meal of chaff!'

'Oh! I don't think he would like that, aunt,' returned Flora.

'Give him a meal of chaff, I tell you,' said Mr F.'s Aunt, glaring round

Flora on her enemy. 'It's the only thing for a proud stomach. Let him

eat up every morsel. Drat him, give him a meal of chaff!'

Under a general pretence of helping him to this refreshment, Flora got

him out on the staircase; Mr F.'s Aunt even then constantly reiterating,

with inexpressible bitterness, that he was 'a chap,' and had a 'proud

stomach,' and over and over again insisting on that equine provision

being made for him which she had already so strongly prescribed.

'Such an inconvenient staircase and so many corner-stairs Arthur,'

whispered Flora, 'would you object to putting your arm round me under my

pelerine?'

With a sense of going down-stairs in a highly-ridiculous manner, Clennam

descended in the required attitude, and only released his fair burden at

the dining-room door; indeed, even there she was rather difficult to

be got rid of, remaining in his embrace to murmur, 'Arthur, for mercy's

sake, don't breathe it to papa!'

She accompanied Arthur into the room, where the Patriarch sat alone,

with his list shoes on the fender, twirling his thumbs as if he had

never left off. The youthful Patriarch, aged ten, looked out of his

picture-frame above him with no calmer air than he. Both smooth heads

were alike beaming, blundering, and bumpy.

'Mr Clennam, I am glad to see you. I hope you are well, sir, I hope you

are well. Please to sit down, please to sit down.'

'I had hoped, sir,' said Clennam, doing so, and looking round with a

face of blank disappointment, 'not to find you alone.'

'Ah, indeed?' said the Patriarch, sweetly. 'Ah, indeed?'

'I told you so you know papa,' cried Flora.

'Ah, to be sure!' returned the Patriarch. 'Yes, just so. Ah, to be

sure!'

'Pray, sir,'demanded Clennam, anxiously, 'is Miss Wade gone?'

'Miss--? Oh, you call her Wade,' returned Mr Casby. 'Highly proper.'

Arthur quickly returned, 'What do you call her?'

'Wade,' said Mr Casby. 'Oh, always Wade.'

After looking at the philanthropic visage and the long silky white hair

for a few seconds, during which Mr Casby twirled his thumbs, and smiled

at the fire as if he were benevolently wishing it to burn him that he

might forgive it, Arthur began:

'I beg your pardon, Mr Casby--'

'Not so, not so,' said the Patriarch, 'not so.'

'--But, Miss Wade had an attendant with her--a young woman brought up

by friends of mine, over whom her influence is not considered very

salutary, and to whom I should be glad to have the opportunity of giving

the assurance that she has not yet forfeited the interest of those

protectors.'

'Really, really?' returned the Patriarch.

'Will you therefore be so good as to give me the address of Miss Wade?'

'Dear, dear, dear!' said the Patriarch, 'how very unfortunate! If you

had only sent in to me when they were here! I observed the young woman,

Mr Clennam. A fine full-coloured young woman, Mr Clennam, with very dark

hair and very dark eyes. If I mistake not, if I mistake not?'

Arthur assented, and said once more with new expression, 'If you would

be so good as to give me the address.'

'Dear, dear, dear!' exclaimed the Patriarch in sweet regret. 'Tut, tut,

tut! what a pity, what a pity! I have no address, sir. Miss Wade mostly

lives abroad, Mr Clennam. She has done so for some years, and she is (if

I may say so of a fellow-creature and a lady) fitful and uncertain to a

fault, Mr Clennam. I may not see her again for a long, long time. I may

never see her again. What a pity, what a pity!'

Clennam saw now, that he had as much hope of getting assistance out of

the Portrait as out of the Patriarch; but he said nevertheless:

'Mr Casby, could you, for the satisfaction of the friends I have

mentioned, and under any obligation of secrecy that you may consider it

your duty to impose, give me any information at all touching Miss Wade?

I have seen her abroad, and I have seen her at home, but I know nothing

of her. Could you give me any account of her whatever?'

'None,' returned the Patriarch, shaking his big head with his utmost

benevolence. 'None at all. Dear, dear, dear! What a real pity that

she stayed so short a time, and you delayed! As confidential agency

business, agency business, I have occasionally paid this lady money; but

what satisfaction is it to you, sir, to know that?'

'Truly, none at all,' said Clennam.

'Truly,' assented the Patriarch, with a shining face as he

philanthropically smiled at the fire, 'none at all, sir. You hit the

wise answer, Mr Clennam. Truly, none at all, sir.' His turning of

his smooth thumbs over one another as he sat there, was so typical to

Clennam of the way in which he would make the subject revolve if it were

pursued, never showing any new part of it nor allowing it to make the

smallest advance, that it did much to help to convince him of his labour

having been in vain. He might have taken any time to think about it, for

Mr Casby, well accustomed to get on anywhere by leaving everything to

his bumps and his white hair, knew his strength to lie in silence. So

there Casby sat, twirling and twirling, and making his polished head and

forehead look largely benevolent in every knob.

With this spectacle before him, Arthur had risen to go, when from the

inner Dock where the good ship Pancks was hove down when out in no

cruising ground, the noise was heard of that steamer labouring towards

him. It struck Arthur that the noise began demonstratively far off, as

though Mr Pancks sought to impress on any one who might happen to think

about it, that he was working on from out of hearing. Mr Pancks and

he shook hands, and the former brought his employer a letter or two to

sign. Mr Pancks in shaking hands merely scratched his eyebrow with his

left forefinger and snorted once, but Clennam, who understood him better

now than of old, comprehended that he had almost done for the evening

and wished to say a word to him outside. Therefore, when he had taken

his leave of Mr Casby, and (which was a more difficult process) of

Flora, he sauntered in the neighbourhood on Mr Pancks's line of road.

He had waited but a short time when Mr Pancks appeared. Mr Pancks

shaking hands again with another expressive snort, and taking off his

hat to put his hair up, Arthur thought he received his cue to speak to

him as one who knew pretty well what had just now passed. Therefore he

said, without any preface:

'I suppose they were really gone, Pancks?'

'Yes,' replied Pancks. 'They were really gone.'

'Does he know where to find that lady?'

'Can't say. I should think so.'

Mr Pancks did not? No, Mr Pancks did not. Did Mr Pancks know anything

about her? 'I expect,' rejoined that worthy, 'I know as much about

her as she knows about herself. She is somebody's child--anybody's,

nobody's.

Put her in a room in London here with any six people old enough to be

her parents, and her parents may be there for anything she knows. They

may be in any house she sees, they may be in any churchyard she passes,

she may run against 'em in any street, she may make chance acquaintance

of 'em at any time; and never know it.

She knows nothing about 'em. She knows nothing about any relative

whatever. Never did. Never will.' 'Mr Casby could enlighten her,

perhaps?'

'May be,' said Pancks. 'I expect so, but don't know. He has long had

money (not overmuch as I make out) in trust to dole out to her when

she can't do without it. Sometimes she's proud and won't touch it for

a length of time; sometimes she's so poor that she must have it. She

writhes under her life. A woman more angry, passionate, reckless,

and revengeful never lived. She came for money to-night. Said she had

peculiar occasion for it.'

'I think,' observed Clennam musing, 'I by chance know what occasion--I

mean into whose pocket the money is to go.'

'Indeed?' said Pancks. 'If it's a compact, I recommend that party to be

exact in it. I wouldn't trust myself to that woman, young and handsome

as she is, if I had wronged her; no, not for twice my proprietor's

money! Unless,' Pancks added as a saving clause, 'I had a lingering

illness on me, and wanted to get it over.'

Arthur, hurriedly reviewing his own observation of her, found it to

tally pretty nearly with Mr Pancks's view.

'The wonder is to me,' pursued Pancks, 'that she has never done for my

proprietor, as the only person connected with her story she can lay

hold of. Mentioning that, I may tell you, between ourselves, that I am

sometimes tempted to do for him myself.'

Arthur started and said, 'Dear me, Pancks, don't say that!'

'Understand me,' said Pancks, extending five cropped coaly finger-nails

on Arthur's arm; 'I don't mean, cut his throat. But by all that's

precious, if he goes too far, I'll cut his hair!'

Having exhibited himself in the new light of enunciating this tremendous

threat, Mr Pancks, with a countenance of grave import, snorted several

times and steamed away.

CHAPTER 10. The Dreams of Mrs Flintwinch thicken

The shady waiting-rooms of the Circumlocution Office, where he passed a

good deal of time in company with various troublesome Convicts who were

under sentence to be broken alive on that wheel, had afforded Arthur

Clennam ample leisure, in three or four successive days, to exhaust the

subject of his late glimpse of Miss Wade and Tattycoram. He had been

able to make no more of it and no less of it, and in this unsatisfactory

condition he was fain to leave it.

During this space he had not been to his mother's dismal old house.

One of his customary evenings for repairing thither now coming round,

he left his dwelling and his partner at nearly nine o'clock, and slowly

walked in the direction of that grim home of his youth.

It always affected his imagination as wrathful, mysterious, and sad;

and his imagination was sufficiently impressible to see the whole

neighbourhood under some tinge of its dark shadow. As he went along,

upon a dreary night, the dim streets by which he went, seemed all

depositories of oppressive secrets. The deserted counting-houses, with

their secrets of books and papers locked up in chests and safes; the

banking-houses, with their secrets of strong rooms and wells, the

keys of which were in a very few secret pockets and a very few secret

breasts; the secrets of all the dispersed grinders in the vast mill,

among whom there were doubtless plunderers, forgers, and trust-betrayers

of many sorts, whom the light of any day that dawned might reveal; he

could have fancied that these things, in hiding, imparted a heaviness

to the air. The shadow thickening and thickening as he approached its

source, he thought of the secrets of the lonely church-vaults, where the

people who had hoarded and secreted in iron coffers were in their turn

similarly hoarded, not yet at rest from doing harm; and then of the

secrets of the river, as it rolled its turbid tide between two frowning

wildernesses of secrets, extending, thick and dense, for many miles, and

warding off the free air and the free country swept by winds and wings

of birds.

The shadow still darkening as he drew near the house, the melancholy

room which his father had once occupied, haunted by the appealing face

he had himself seen fade away with him when there was no other watcher

by the bed, arose before his mind. Its close air was secret. The gloom,

and must, and dust of the whole tenement, were secret. At the heart of

it his mother presided, inflexible of face, indomitable of will, firmly

holding all the secrets of her own and his father's life, and austerely

opposing herself, front to front, to the great final secret of all life.

He had turned into the narrow and steep street from which the court of

enclosure wherein the house stood opened, when another footstep turned

into it behind him, and so close upon his own that he was jostled to the

wall. As his mind was teeming with these thoughts, the encounter took

him altogether unprepared, so that the other passenger had had time to

say, boisterously, 'Pardon! Not my fault!' and to pass on before the

instant had elapsed which was requisite to his recovery of the realities

about him.

When that moment had flashed away, he saw that the man striding on

before him was the man who had been so much in his mind during the last

few days. It was no casual resemblance, helped out by the force of

the impression the man made upon him. It was the man; the man he had

followed in company with the girl, and whom he had overheard talking to

Miss Wade.

The street was a sharp descent and was crooked too, and the man (who

although not drunk had the air of being flushed with some strong drink)

went down it so fast that Clennam lost him as he looked at him. With

no defined intention of following him, but with an impulse to keep the

figure in view a little longer, Clennam quickened his pace to pass the

twist in the street which hid him from his sight. On turning it, he saw

the man no more.

Standing now, close to the gateway of his mother's house, he looked

down the street: but it was empty. There was no projecting shadow large

enough to obscure the man; there was no turning near that he could have

taken; nor had there been any audible sound of the opening and closing

of a door. Nevertheless, he concluded that the man must have had a key

in his hand, and must have opened one of the many house-doors and gone

in.

Ruminating on this strange chance and strange glimpse, he turned into

the court-yard. As he looked, by mere habit, towards the feebly lighted

windows of his mother's room, his eyes encountered the figure he had

just lost, standing against the iron railings of the little waste

enclosure looking up at those windows and laughing to himself. Some of

the many vagrant cats who were always prowling about there by night,

and who had taken fright at him, appeared to have stopped when he had

stopped, and were looking at him with eyes by no means unlike his own

from tops of walls and porches, and other safe points of pause. He had

only halted for a moment to entertain himself thus; he immediately went

forward, throwing the end of his cloak off his shoulder as he went,

ascended the unevenly sunken steps, and knocked a sounding knock at the

door.

Clennam's surprise was not so absorbing but that he took his resolution

without any incertitude. He went up to the door too, and ascended the

steps too. His friend looked at him with a braggart air, and sang to

himself.

'Who passes by this road so late?

Compagnon de la Majolaine;

Who passes by this road so late?

Always gay!'

After which he knocked again.

'You are impatient, sir,' said Arthur.

'I am, sir. Death of my life, sir,' returned the stranger, 'it's my

character to be impatient!' The sound of Mistress Affery cautiously

chaining the door before she opened it, caused them both to look that

way. Affery opened it a very little, with a flaring candle in her hands

and asked who was that, at that time of night, with that knock! 'Why,

Arthur!' she added with astonishment, seeing him first. 'Not you sure?

Ah, Lord save us! No,' she cried out, seeing the other. 'Him again!'

'It's true! Him again, dear Mrs Flintwinch,' cried the stranger. 'Open

the door, and let me take my dear friend Jeremiah to my arms! Open the

door, and let me hasten myself to embrace my Flintwinch!'

'He's not at home,' cried Affery.

'Fetch him!' cried the stranger. 'Fetch my Flintwinch! Tell him that it

is his old Blandois, who comes from arriving in England; tell him that

it is his little boy who is here, his cabbage, his well-beloved! Open

the door, beautiful Mrs Flintwinch, and in the meantime let me to pass

upstairs, to present my compliments--homage of Blandois--to my lady! My

lady lives always? It is well.

Open then!'

To Arthur's increased surprise, Mistress Affery, stretching her eyes

wide at himself, as if in warning that this was not a gentleman for

him to interfere with, drew back the chain, and opened the door. The

stranger, without ceremony, walked into the hall, leaving Arthur to

follow him.

'Despatch then! Achieve then! Bring my Flintwinch! Announce me to my

lady!' cried the stranger, clanking about the stone floor.

'Pray tell me, Affery,' said Arthur aloud and sternly, as he surveyed

him from head to foot with indignation; 'who is this gentleman?'

'Pray tell me, Affery,' the stranger repeated in his turn, 'who--ha, ha,

ha!--who is this gentleman?'

The voice of Mrs Clennam opportunely called from her chamber above,

'Affery, let them both come up. Arthur, come straight to me!'

'Arthur?' exclaimed Blandois, taking off his hat at arm's length,

and bringing his heels together from a great stride in making him a

flourishing bow. 'The son of my lady? I am the all-devoted of the son of

my lady!'

Arthur looked at him again in no more flattering manner than before,

and, turning on his heel without acknowledgment, went up-stairs. The

visitor followed him up-stairs. Mistress Affery took the key from behind

the door, and deftly slipped out to fetch her lord.

A bystander, informed of the previous appearance of Monsieur Blandois

in that room, would have observed a difference in Mrs Clennam's present

reception of him. Her face was not one to betray it; and her suppressed

manner, and her set voice, were equally under her control. It wholly

consisted in her never taking her eyes off his face from the moment of

his entrance, and in her twice or thrice, when he was becoming noisy,

swaying herself a very little forward in the chair in which she sat

upright, with her hands immovable upon its elbows; as if she gave him

the assurance that he should be presently heard at any length he would.

Arthur did not fail to observe this; though the difference between the

present occasion and the former was not within his power of observation.

'Madame,' said Blandois, 'do me the honour to present me to Monsieur,

your son. It appears to me, madame, that Monsieur, your son, is disposed

to complain of me. He is not polite.'

'Sir,' said Arthur, striking in expeditiously, 'whoever you are, and

however you come to be here, if I were the master of this house I would

lose no time in placing you on the outside of it.'

'But you are not,' said his mother, without looking at him.

'Unfortunately for the gratification of your unreasonable temper, you

are not the master, Arthur.'

'I make no claim to be, mother. If I object to this person's manner of

conducting himself here, and object to it so much, that if I had any

authority here I certainly would not suffer him to remain a minute, I

object on your account.'

'In the case of objection being necessary,' she returned, 'I could

object for myself. And of course I should.'

The subject of their dispute, who had seated himself, laughed aloud, and

rapped his legs with his hand.

'You have no right,' said Mrs Clennam, always intent on Blandois,

however directly she addressed her son, 'to speak to the prejudice of

any gentleman (least of all a gentleman from another country), because

he does not conform to your standard, or square his behaviour by your

rules. It is possible that the gentleman may, on similar grounds, object

to you.'

'I hope so,' returned Arthur.

'The gentleman,' pursued Mrs Clennam, 'on a former occasion brought

a letter of recommendation to us from highly esteemed and responsible

correspondents. I am perfectly unacquainted with the gentleman's object

in coming here at present. I am entirely ignorant of it, and cannot be

supposed likely to be able to form the remotest guess at its nature;'

her habitual frown became stronger, as she very slowly and weightily

emphasised those words; 'but, when the gentleman proceeds to explain

his object, as I shall beg him to have the goodness to do to myself and

Flintwinch, when Flintwinch returns, it will prove, no doubt, to be one

more or less in the usual way of our business, which it will be both our

business and our pleasure to advance. It can be nothing else.'

'We shall see, madame!' said the man of business.

'We shall see,' she assented. 'The gentleman is acquainted with

Flintwinch; and when the gentleman was in London last, I remember

to have heard that he and Flintwinch had some entertainment or

good-fellowship together. I am not in the way of knowing much that

passes outside this room, and the jingle of little worldly things beyond

it does not much interest me; but I remember to have heard that.'

'Right, madame. It is true.' He laughed again, and whistled the burden

of the tune he had sung at the door.

'Therefore, Arthur,' said his mother, 'the gentleman comes here as an

acquaintance, and no stranger; and it is much to be regretted that your

unreasonable temper should have found offence in him. I regret it. I say

so to the gentleman. You will not say so, I know; therefore I say it for

myself and Flintwinch, since with us two the gentleman's business lies.'

The key of the door below was now heard in the lock, and the door was

heard to open and close. In due sequence Mr Flintwinch appeared; on

whose entrance the visitor rose from his chair, laughing loud, and

folded him in a close embrace.

'How goes it, my cherished friend!' said he. 'How goes the world, my

Flintwinch? Rose-coloured? So much the better, so much the better! Ah,

but you look charming! Ah, but you look young and fresh as the flowers

of Spring! Ah, good little boy! Brave child, brave child!'

While heaping these compliments on Mr Flintwinch, he rolled him about

with a hand on each of his shoulders, until the staggerings of that

gentleman, who under the circumstances was dryer and more twisted than

ever, were like those of a teetotum nearly spent.

'I had a presentiment, last time, that we should be better and more

intimately acquainted. Is it coming on you, Flintwinch? Is it yet coming

on?'

'Why, no, sir,' retorted Mr Flintwinch. 'Not unusually. Hadn't you

better be seated? You have been calling for some more of that port, sir,

I guess?'

'Ah, Little joker! Little pig!' cried the visitor. 'Ha ha ha ha!' And

throwing Mr Flintwinch away, as a closing piece of raillery, he sat down

again.

The amazement, suspicion, resentment, and shame, with which Arthur

looked on at all this, struck him dumb. Mr Flintwinch, who had spun

backward some two or three yards under the impetus last given to him,

brought himself up with a face completely unchanged in its stolidity

except as it was affected by shortness of breath, and looked hard at

Arthur. Not a whit less reticent and wooden was Mr Flintwinch outwardly,

than in the usual course of things: the only perceptible difference in

him being that the knot of cravat which was generally under his ear,

had worked round to the back of his head: where it formed an ornamental

appendage not unlike a bagwig, and gave him something of a courtly

appearance. As Mrs Clennam never removed her eyes from Blandois (on whom

they had some effect, as a steady look has on a lower sort of dog), so

Jeremiah never removed his from Arthur. It was as if they had tacitly

agreed to take their different provinces. Thus, in the ensuing silence,

Jeremiah stood scraping his chin and looking at Arthur as though he were

trying to screw his thoughts out of him with an instrument.

After a little, the visitor, as if he felt the silence irksome, rose,

and impatiently put himself with his back to the sacred fire which had

burned through so many years. Thereupon Mrs Clennam said, moving one of

her hands for the first time, and moving it very slightly with an action

of dismissal:

'Please to leave us to our business, Arthur.' 'Mother, I do so with

reluctance.'

'Never mind with what,' she returned, 'or with what not. Please to leave

us. Come back at any other time when you may consider it a duty to bury

half an hour wearily here. Good night.'

She held up her muffled fingers that he might touch them with his,

according to their usual custom, and he stood over her wheeled chair to

touch her face with his lips. He thought, then, that her cheek was

more strained than usual, and that it was colder. As he followed the

direction of her eyes, in rising again, towards Mr Flintwinch's good

friend, Mr Blandois, Mr Blandois snapped his finger and thumb with one

loud contemptuous snap.

'I leave your--your business acquaintance in my mother's room, Mr

Flintwinch,' said Clennam, 'with a great deal of surprise and a great

deal of unwillingness.'

The person referred to snapped his finger and thumb again.

'Good night, mother.'

'Good night.'

'I had a friend once, my good comrade Flintwinch,' said Blandois,

standing astride before the fire, and so evidently saying it to arrest

Clennam's retreating steps, that he lingered near the door; 'I had a

friend once, who had heard so much of the dark side of this city and

its ways, that he wouldn't have confided himself alone by night with two

people who had an interest in getting him under the ground--my faith!

not even in a respectable house like this--unless he was bodily too

strong for them. Bah! What a poltroon, my Flintwinch! Eh?'

'A cur, sir.'

'Agreed! A cur. But he wouldn't have done it, my Flintwinch, unless he

had known them to have the will to silence him, without the power. He

wouldn't have drunk from a glass of water under such circumstances--not

even in a respectable house like this, my Flintwinch--unless he had seen

one of them drink first, and swallow too!'

Disdaining to speak, and indeed not very well able, for he was

half-choking, Clennam only glanced at the visitor as he passed out.

The visitor saluted him with another parting snap, and his nose came

down over his moustache and his moustache went up under his nose, in an

ominous and ugly smile.

'For Heaven's sake, Affery,' whispered Clennam, as she opened the door

for him in the dark hall, and he groped his way to the sight of the

night-sky, 'what is going on here?'

Her own appearance was sufficiently ghastly, standing in the dark

with her apron thrown over her head, and speaking behind it in a low,

deadened voice.

'Don't ask me anything, Arthur. I've been in a dream for ever so long.

Go away!'

He went out, and she shut the door upon him. He looked up at the windows

of his mother's room, and the dim light, deadened by the yellow blinds,

seemed to say a response after Affery, and to mutter, 'Don't ask me

anything. Go away!'

CHAPTER 11. A Letter from Little Dorrit

Dear Mr Clennam,

As I said in my last that it was best for nobody to write to me, and

as my sending you another little letter can therefore give you no other

trouble than the trouble of reading it (perhaps you may not find leisure

for even that, though I hope you will some day), I am now going to

devote an hour to writing to you again. This time, I write from Rome.

We left Venice before Mr and Mrs Gowan did, but they were not so long

upon the road as we were, and did not travel by the same way, and so

when we arrived we found them in a lodging here, in a place called the

Via Gregoriana. I dare say you know it.

Now I am going to tell you all I can about them, because I know that is

what you most want to hear. Theirs is not a very comfortable lodging,

but perhaps I thought it less so when I first saw it than you would have

done, because you have been in many different countries and have

seen many different customs. Of course it is a far, far better

place--millions of times--than any I have ever been used to until

lately; and I fancy I don't look at it with my own eyes, but with hers.

For it would be easy to see that she has always been brought up in a

tender and happy home, even if she had not told me so with great love

for it.

Well, it is a rather bare lodging up a rather dark common staircase, and

it is nearly all a large dull room, where Mr Gowan paints. The windows

are blocked up where any one could look out, and the walls have been

all drawn over with chalk and charcoal by others who have lived there

before--oh,--I should think, for years!

There is a curtain more dust-coloured than red, which divides it, and

the part behind the curtain makes the private sitting-room.

When I first saw her there she was alone, and her work had fallen out of

her hand, and she was looking up at the sky shining through the tops of

the windows. Pray do not be uneasy when I tell you, but it was not

quite so airy, nor so bright, nor so cheerful, nor so happy and youthful

altogether as I should have liked it to be.

On account of Mr Gowan's painting Papa's picture (which I am not quite

convinced I should have known from the likeness if I had not seen him

doing it), I have had more opportunities of being with her since then

than I might have had without this fortunate chance. She is very much

alone. Very much alone indeed.

Shall I tell you about the second time I saw her? I went one day, when

it happened that I could run round by myself, at four or five o'clock

in the afternoon. She was then dining alone, and her solitary dinner had

been brought in from somewhere, over a kind of brazier with a fire in

it, and she had no company or prospect of company, that I could see,

but the old man who had brought it. He was telling her a long story (of

robbers outside the walls being taken up by a stone statue of a Saint),

to entertain her--as he said to me when I came out, 'because he had a

daughter of his own, though she was not so pretty.'

I ought now to mention Mr Gowan, before I say what little more I have to

say about her. He must admire her beauty, and he must be proud of her,

for everybody praises it, and he must be fond of her, and I do not

doubt that he is--but in his way. You know his way, and if it appears

as careless and discontented in your eyes as it does in mine, I am not

wrong in thinking that it might be better suited to her. If it does not

seem so to you, I am quite sure I am wholly mistaken; for your unchanged

poor child confides in your knowledge and goodness more than she could

ever tell you if she was to try. But don't be frightened, I am not going

to try. Owing (as I think, if you think so too) to Mr Gowan's unsettled

and dissatisfied way, he applies himself to his profession very little.

He does nothing steadily or patiently; but equally takes things up and

throws them down, and does them, or leaves them undone, without caring

about them. When I have heard him talking to Papa during the sittings

for the picture, I have sat wondering whether it could be that he has no

belief in anybody else, because he has no belief in himself. Is it so?

I wonder what you will say when you come to this! I know how you will

look, and I can almost hear the voice in which you would tell me on the

Iron Bridge.

Mr Gowan goes out a good deal among what is considered the best company

here--though he does not look as if he enjoyed it or liked it when he is

with it--and she sometimes accompanies him, but lately she has gone out

very little. I think I have noticed that they have an inconsistent way

of speaking about her, as if she had made some great self-interested

success in marrying Mr Gowan, though, at the same time, the very same

people, would not have dreamed of taking him for themselves or their

daughters. Then he goes into the country besides, to think about making

sketches; and in all places where there are visitors, he has a large

acquaintance and is very well known. Besides all this, he has a friend

who is much in his society both at home and away from home, though he

treats this friend very coolly and is very uncertain in his behaviour

to him. I am quite sure (because she has told me so), that she does not

like this friend. He is so revolting to me, too, that his being away

from here, at present, is quite a relief to my mind. How much more to

hers!

But what I particularly want you to know, and why I have resolved

to tell you so much while I am afraid it may make you a little

uncomfortable without occasion, is this. She is so true and so devoted,

and knows so completely that all her love and duty are his for ever,

that you may be certain she will love him, admire him, praise him, and

conceal all his faults, until she dies. I believe she conceals them, and

always will conceal them, even from herself.

She has given him a heart that can never be taken back; and however much

he may try it, he will never wear out its affection. You know the truth

of this, as you know everything, far far better than I; but I cannot

help telling you what a nature she shows, and that you can never think

too well of her.

I have not yet called her by her name in this letter, but we are such

friends now that I do so when we are quietly together, and she speaks to

me by my name--I mean, not my Christian name, but the name you gave me.

When she began to call me Amy, I told her my short story, and that you

had always called me Little Dorrit. I told her that the name was much

dearer to me than any other, and so she calls me Little Dorrit too.

Perhaps you have not heard from her father or mother yet, and may not

know that she has a baby son. He was born only two days ago, and just a

week after they came. It has made them very happy. However, I must tell

you, as I am to tell you all, that I fancy they are under a constraint

with Mr Gowan, and that they feel as if his mocking way with them was

sometimes a slight given to their love for her. It was but yesterday,

when I was there, that I saw Mr Meagles change colour, and get up and

go out, as if he was afraid that he might say so, unless he prevented

himself by that means. Yet I am sure they are both so considerate,

good-humoured, and reasonable, that he might spare them. It is hard in

him not to think of them a little more.

I stopped at the last full stop to read all this over. It looked at

first as if I was taking on myself to understand and explain so much,

that I was half inclined not to send it. But when I thought it over a

little, I felt more hopeful for your knowing at once that I had only

been watchful for you, and had only noticed what I think I have noticed,

because I was quickened by your interest in it. Indeed, you may be sure

that is the truth.

And now I have done with the subject in the present letter, and have

little left to say.

We are all quite well, and Fanny improves every day. You can hardly

think how kind she is to me, and what pains she takes with me. She has

a lover, who has followed her, first all the way from Switzerland, and

then all the way from Venice, and who has just confided to me that he

means to follow her everywhere. I was much confused by his speaking to

me about it, but he would. I did not know what to say, but at last I

told him that I thought he had better not. For Fanny (but I did not tell

him this) is much too spirited and clever to suit him. Still, he said he

would, all the same. I have no lover, of course.

If you should ever get so far as this in this long letter, you will

perhaps say, Surely Little Dorrit will not leave off without telling me

something about her travels, and surely it is time she did. I think it

is indeed, but I don't know what to tell you. Since we left Venice we

have been in a great many wonderful places, Genoa and Florence among

them, and have seen so many wonderful sights, that I am almost giddy

when I think what a crowd they make.

But you can tell me so much more about them than I can tell you, that

why should I tire you with my accounts and descriptions?

Dear Mr Clennam, as I had the courage to tell you what the familiar

difficulties in my travelling mind were before, I will not be a coward

now. One of my frequent thoughts is this:--Old as these cities are,

their age itself is hardly so curious, to my reflections, as that they

should have been in their places all through those days when I did not

even know of the existence of more than two or three of them, and when

I scarcely knew of anything outside our old walls. There is something

melancholy in it, and I don't know why. When we went to see the famous

leaning tower at Pisa, it was a bright sunny day, and it and the

buildings near it looked so old, and the earth and the sky looked so

young, and its shadow on the ground was so soft and retired! I could not

at first think how beautiful it was, or how curious, but I thought, 'O

how many times when the shadow of the wall was falling on our room, and

when that weary tread of feet was going up and down the yard--O how many

times this place was just as quiet and lovely as it is to-day!' It quite

overpowered me. My heart was so full that tears burst out of my eyes,

though I did what I could to restrain them. And I have the same feeling

often--often.

Do you know that since the change in our fortunes, though I appear to

myself to have dreamed more than before, I have always dreamed of myself

as very young indeed! I am not very old, you may say. No, but that is

not what I mean. I have always dreamed of myself as a child learning

to do needlework. I have often dreamed of myself as back there, seeing

faces in the yard little known, and which I should have thought I had

quite forgotten; but, as often as not, I have been abroad here--in

Switzerland, or France, or Italy--somewhere where we have been--yet

always as that little child. I have dreamed of going down to Mrs

General, with the patches on my clothes in which I can first remember

myself. I have over and over again dreamed of taking my place at dinner

at Venice when we have had a large company, in the mourning for my poor

mother which I wore when I was eight years old, and wore long after it

was threadbare and would mend no more. It has been a great distress to

me to think how irreconcilable the company would consider it with my

father's wealth, and how I should displease and disgrace him and Fanny

and Edward by so plainly disclosing what they wished to keep secret. But

I have not grown out of the little child in thinking of it; and at the

self-same moment I have dreamed that I have sat with the heart-ache at

table, calculating the expenses of the dinner, and quite distracting

myself with thinking how they were ever to be made good. I have never

dreamed of the change in our fortunes itself; I have never dreamed of

your coming back with me that memorable morning to break it; I have

never even dreamed of you.

Dear Mr Clennam, it is possible that I have thought of you--and

others--so much by day, that I have no thoughts left to wander round

you by night. For I must now confess to you that I suffer from

home-sickness--that I long so ardently and earnestly for home, as

sometimes, when no one sees me, to pine for it. I cannot bear to turn my

face further away from it. My heart is a little lightened when we turn

towards it, even for a few miles, and with the knowledge that we are

soon to turn away again. So dearly do I love the scene of my poverty and

your kindness. O so dearly, O so dearly!

Heaven knows when your poor child will see England again. We are all

fond of the life here (except me), and there are no plans for our

return. My dear father talks of a visit to London late in this next

spring, on some affairs connected with the property, but I have no hope

that he will bring me with him.

I have tried to get on a little better under Mrs General's instruction,

and I hope I am not quite so dull as I used to be. I have begun to speak

and understand, almost easily, the hard languages I told you about. I

did not remember, at the moment when I wrote last, that you knew them

both; but I remembered it afterwards, and it helped me on. God bless

you, dear Mr Clennam. Do not forget your ever grateful and affectionate

LITTLE DORRIT.

P.S.--Particularly remember that Minnie Gowan deserves the best

remembrance in which you can hold her. You cannot think too generously

or too highly of her. I forgot Mr Pancks last time. Please, if you

should see him, give him your Little Dorrit's kind regard. He was very

good to Little D.

CHAPTER 12. In which a Great Patriotic Conference is holden

The famous name of Merdle became, every day, more famous in the land.

Nobody knew that the Merdle of such high renown had ever done any good

to any one, alive or dead, or to any earthly thing; nobody knew that he

had any capacity or utterance of any sort in him, which had ever thrown,

for any creature, the feeblest farthing-candle ray of light on any path

of duty or diversion, pain or pleasure, toil or rest, fact or fancy,

among the multiplicity of paths in the labyrinth trodden by the sons

of Adam; nobody had the smallest reason for supposing the clay of which

this object of worship was made, to be other than the commonest clay,

with as clogged a wick smouldering inside of it as ever kept an image of

humanity from tumbling to pieces. All people knew (or thought they knew)

that he had made himself immensely rich; and, for that reason alone,

prostrated themselves before him, more degradedly and less excusably

than the darkest savage creeps out of his hole in the ground to

propitiate, in some log or reptile, the Deity of his benighted soul.

Nay, the high priests of this worship had the man before them as

a protest against their meanness. The multitude worshipped on

trust--though always distinctly knowing why--but the officiators at the

altar had the man habitually in their view. They sat at his feasts, and

he sat at theirs. There was a spectre always attendant on him, saying to

these high priests, 'Are such the signs you trust, and love to honour;

this head, these eyes, this mode of speech, the tone and manner of this

man? You are the levers of the Circumlocution Office, and the rulers of

men. When half-a-dozen of you fall out by the ears, it seems that mother

earth can give birth to no other rulers. Does your qualification lie in

the superior knowledge of men which accepts, courts, and puffs this man?

Or, if you are competent to judge aright the signs I never fail to

show you when he appears among you, is your superior honesty your

qualification?' Two rather ugly questions these, always going about

town with Mr Merdle; and there was a tacit agreement that they must be

stifled. In Mrs Merdle's absence abroad, Mr Merdle still kept the great

house open for the passage through it of a stream Of visitors. A few of

these took affable possession of the establishment. Three or four ladies

of distinction and liveliness used to say to one another, 'Let us dine

at our dear Merdle's next Thursday. Whom shall we have?' Our dear Merdle

would then receive his instructions; and would sit heavily among

the company at table and wander lumpishly about his drawing-rooms

afterwards, only remarkable for appearing to have nothing to do with the

entertainment beyond being in its way.

The Chief Butler, the Avenging Spirit of this great man's life, relaxed

nothing of his severity. He looked on at these dinners when the bosom

was not there, as he looked on at other dinners when the bosom was

there; and his eye was a basilisk to Mr Merdle. He was a hard man, and

would never bate an ounce of plate or a bottle of wine. He would not

allow a dinner to be given, unless it was up to his mark. He set forth

the table for his own dignity. If the guests chose to partake of what

was served, he saw no objection; but it was served for the maintenance

of his rank. As he stood by the sideboard he seemed to announce, 'I have

accepted office to look at this which is now before me, and to look at

nothing less than this.' If he missed the presiding bosom, it was as a

part of his own state of which he was, from unavoidable circumstances,

temporarily deprived, just as he might have missed a centre-piece, or a

choice wine-cooler, which had been sent to the Banker's.

Mr Merdle issued invitations for a Barnacle dinner. Lord Decimus was to

be there, Mr Tite Barnacle was to be there, the pleasant young Barnacle

was to be there; and the Chorus of Parliamentary Barnacles who went

about the provinces when the House was up, warbling the praises of their

Chief, were to be represented there. It was understood to be a great

occasion. Mr Merdle was going to take up the Barnacles. Some delicate

little negotiations had occurred between him and the noble Decimus--the

young Barnacle of engaging manners acting as negotiator--and Mr Merdle

had decided to cast the weight of his great probity and great riches

into the Barnacle scale. Jobbery was suspected by the malicious; perhaps

because it was indisputable that if the adherence of the immortal Enemy

of Mankind could have been secured by a job, the Barnacles would have

jobbed him--for the good of the country, for the good of the country.

Mrs Merdle had written to this magnificent spouse of hers, whom it was

heresy to regard as anything less than all the British Merchants since

the days of Whittington rolled into one, and gilded three feet deep all

over--had written to this spouse of hers, several letters from Rome, in

quick succession, urging upon him with importunity that now or never was

the time to provide for Edmund Sparkler. Mrs Merdle had shown him that

the case of Edmund was urgent, and that infinite advantages might result

from his having some good thing directly. In the grammar of Mrs

Merdle's verbs on this momentous subject, there was only one mood, the

Imperative; and that Mood had only one Tense, the Present. Mrs Merdle's

verbs were so pressingly presented to Mr Merdle to conjugate, that his

sluggish blood and his long coat-cuffs became quite agitated.

In which state of agitation, Mr Merdle, evasively rolling his eyes

round the Chief Butler's shoes without raising them to the index of that

stupendous creature's thoughts, had signified to him his intention of

giving a special dinner: not a very large dinner, but a very special

dinner. The Chief Butler had signified, in return, that he had no

objection to look on at the most expensive thing in that way that could

be done; and the day of the dinner was now come.

Mr Merdle stood in one of his drawing-rooms, with his back to the fire,

waiting for the arrival of his important guests. He seldom or never took

the liberty of standing with his back to the fire unless he was quite

alone. In the presence of the Chief Butler, he could not have done such

a deed. He would have clasped himself by the wrists in that constabulary

manner of his, and have paced up and down the hearthrug, or gone

creeping about among the rich objects of furniture, if his oppressive

retainer had appeared in the room at that very moment. The sly shadows

which seemed to dart out of hiding when the fire rose, and to dart back

into it when the fire fell, were sufficient witnesses of his making

himself so easy.

They were even more than sufficient, if his uncomfortable glances at

them might be taken to mean anything.

Mr Merdle's right hand was filled with the evening paper, and the

evening paper was full of Mr Merdle. His wonderful enterprise, his

wonderful wealth, his wonderful Bank, were the fattening food of the

evening paper that night. The wonderful Bank, of which he was the chief

projector, establisher, and manager, was the latest of the many Merdle

wonders. So modest was Mr Merdle withal, in the midst of these splendid

achievements, that he looked far more like a man in possession of his

house under a distraint, than a commercial Colossus bestriding his own

hearthrug, while the little ships were sailing into dinner.

Behold the vessels coming into port! The engaging young Barnacle was the

first arrival; but Bar overtook him on the staircase. Bar, strengthened

as usual with his double eye-glass and his little jury droop, was

overjoyed to see the engaging young Barnacle; and opined that we were

going to sit in Banco, as we lawyers called it, to take a special

argument?

'Indeed,' said the sprightly young Barnacle, whose name was Ferdinand;

'how so?'

'Nay,' smiled Bar. 'If you don't know, how can I know? You are in the

innermost sanctuary of the temple; I am one of the admiring concourse on

the plain without.'

Bar could be light in hand, or heavy in hand, according to the customer

he had to deal with. With Ferdinand Barnacle he was gossamer. Bar was

likewise always modest and self-depreciatory--in his way. Bar was a man

of great variety; but one leading thread ran through the woof of all his

patterns. Every man with whom he had to do was in his eyes a jury-man;

and he must get that jury-man over, if he could.

'Our illustrious host and friend,' said Bar; 'our shining mercantile

star;--going into politics?'

'Going? He has been in Parliament some time, you know,' returned the

engaging young Barnacle.

'True,' said Bar, with his light-comedy laugh for special jury-men,

which was a very different thing from his low-comedy laugh for comic

tradesmen on common juries: 'he has been in Parliament for some time.

Yet hitherto our star has been a vacillating and wavering star? Humph?'

An average witness would have been seduced by the Humph? into an

affirmative answer, But Ferdinand Barnacle looked knowingly at Bar as he

strolled up-stairs, and gave him no answer at all.

'Just so, just so,' said Bar, nodding his head, for he was not to be put

off in that way, 'and therefore I spoke of our sitting in Banco to take

a special argument--meaning this to be a high and solemn occasion, when,

as Captain Macheath says, "the judges are met: a terrible show!" We

lawyers are sufficiently liberal, you see, to quote the Captain, though

the Captain is severe upon us. Nevertheless, I think I could put in

evidence an admission of the Captain's,' said Bar, with a little jocose

roll of his head; for, in his legal current of speech, he always assumed

the air of rallying himself with the best grace in the world; 'an

admission of the Captain's that Law, in the gross, is at least

intended to be impartial. For what says the Captain, if I quote

him correctly--and if not,' with a light-comedy touch of his double

eye-glass on his companion's shoulder, 'my learned friend will set me

right:

"Since laws were made for every degree,

To curb vice in others as well as in me,

I wonder we ha'n't better company

Upon Tyburn Tree!"'

These words brought them to the drawing-room, where Mr Merdle stood

before the fire. So immensely astounded was Mr Merdle by the entrance

of Bar with such a reference in his mouth, that Bar explained himself

to have been quoting Gay. 'Assuredly not one of our Westminster Hall

authorities,' said he, 'but still no despicable one to a man possessing

the largely-practical Mr Merdle's knowledge of the world.'

Mr Merdle looked as if he thought he would say something, but

subsequently looked as if he thought he wouldn't. The interval afforded

time for Bishop to be announced. Bishop came in with meekness, and yet

with a strong and rapid step as if he wanted to get his seven-league

dress-shoes on, and go round the world to see that everybody was in

a satisfactory state. Bishop had no idea that there was anything

significant in the occasion. That was the most remarkable trait in

his demeanour. He was crisp, fresh, cheerful, affable, bland; but so

surprisingly innocent.

Bar sidled up to prefer his politest inquiries in reference to the

health of Mrs Bishop. Mrs Bishop had been a little unfortunate in the

article of taking cold at a Confirmation, but otherwise was well. Young

Mr Bishop was also well. He was down, with his young wife and little

family, at his Cure of Souls. The representatives of the Barnacle Chorus

dropped in next, and Mr Merdle's physician dropped in next. Bar, who

had a bit of one eye and a bit of his double eye-glass for every one who

came in at the door, no matter with whom he was conversing or what he

was talking about, got among them all by some skilful means, without

being seen to get at them, and touched each individual gentleman of the

jury on his own individual favourite spot. With some of the Chorus,

he laughed about the sleepy member who had gone out into the lobby the

other night, and voted the wrong way: with others, he deplored that

innovating spirit in the time which could not even be prevented from

taking an unnatural interest in the public service and the public money:

with the physician he had a word to say about the general health; he had

also a little information to ask him for, concerning a professional man

of unquestioned erudition and polished manners--but those credentials

in their highest development he believed were the possession of other

professors of the healing art (jury droop)--whom he had happened to

have in the witness-box the day before yesterday, and from whom he had

elicited in cross-examination that he claimed to be one of the exponents

of this new mode of treatment which appeared to Bar to--eh?--well, Bar

thought so; Bar had thought, and hoped, Physician would tell him so.

Without presuming to decide where doctors disagreed, it did appear to

Bar, viewing it as a question of common sense and not of so-called legal

penetration, that this new system was--might be, in the presence of so

great an authority--say, Humbug? Ah! Fortified by such encouragement, he

could venture to say Humbug; and now Bar's mind was relieved.

Mr Tite Barnacle, who, like Dr johnson's celebrated acquaintance, had

only one idea in his head and that was a wrong one, had appeared by this

time. This eminent gentleman and Mr Merdle, seated diverse ways and with

ruminating aspects on a yellow ottoman in the light of the fire,

holding no verbal communication with each other, bore a strong general

resemblance to the two cows in the Cuyp picture over against them.

But now, Lord Decimus arrived. The Chief Butler, who up to this time

had limited himself to a branch of his usual function by looking at the

company as they entered (and that, with more of defiance than favour),

put himself so far out of his way as to come up-stairs with him and

announce him. Lord Decimus being an overpowering peer, a bashful young

member of the Lower House who was the last fish but one caught by the

Barnacles, and who had been invited on this occasion to commemorate his

capture, shut his eyes when his Lordship came in.

Lord Decimus, nevertheless, was glad to see the Member. He was also

glad to see Mr Merdle, glad to see Bishop, glad to see Bar, glad to see

Physician, glad to see Tite Barnacle, glad to see Chorus, glad to

see Ferdinand his private secretary. Lord Decimus, though one of the

greatest of the earth, was not remarkable for ingratiatory manners, and

Ferdinand had coached him up to the point of noticing all the fellows

he might find there, and saying he was glad to see them. When he had

achieved this rush of vivacity and condescension, his Lordship composed

himself into the picture after Cuyp, and made a third cow in the group.

Bar, who felt that he had got all the rest of the jury and must now lay

hold of the Foreman, soon came sidling up, double eye-glass in hand. Bar

tendered the weather, as a subject neatly aloof from official reserve,

for the Foreman's consideration. Bar said that he was told (as everybody

always is told, though who tells them, and why, will ever remain a

mystery), that there was to be no wall-fruit this year. Lord Decimus

had not heard anything amiss of his peaches, but rather believed, if his

people were correct, he was to have no apples. No apples? Bar was lost

in astonishment and concern. It would have been all one to him, in

reality, if there had not been a pippin on the surface of the earth, but

his show of interest in this apple question was positively painful.

Now, to what, Lord Decimus--for we troublesome lawyers loved to gather

information, and could never tell how useful it might prove to us--to

what, Lord Decimus, was this to be attributed? Lord Decimus could not

undertake to propound any theory about it. This might have stopped

another man; but Bar, sticking to him fresh as ever, said, 'As to pears,

now?'

Long after Bar got made Attorney-General, this was told of him as

a master-stroke. Lord Decimus had a reminiscence about a pear-tree

formerly growing in a garden near the back of his dame's house at Eton,

upon which pear-tree the only joke of his life perennially bloomed. It

was a joke of a compact and portable nature, turning on the difference

between Eton pears and Parliamentary pairs; but it was a joke, a refined

relish of which would seem to have appeared to Lord Decimus impossible

to be had without a thorough and intimate acquaintance with the tree.

Therefore, the story at first had no idea of such a tree, sir, then

gradually found it in winter, carried it through the changing season,

saw it bud, saw it blossom, saw it bear fruit, saw the fruit ripen; in

short, cultivated the tree in that diligent and minute manner before it

got out of the bed-room window to steal the fruit, that many thanks had

been offered up by belated listeners for the trees having been planted

and grafted prior to Lord Decimus's time. Bar's interest in apples was

so overtopped by the wrapt suspense in which he pursued the changes

of these pears, from the moment when Lord Decimus solemnly opened with

'Your mentioning pears recalls to my remembrance a pear-tree,' down to

the rich conclusion, 'And so we pass, through the various changes

of life, from Eton pears to Parliamentary pairs,' that he had to go

down-stairs with Lord Decimus, and even then to be seated next to him

at table in order that he might hear the anecdote out. By that time, Bar

felt that he had secured the Foreman, and might go to dinner with a good

appetite.

It was a dinner to provoke an appetite, though he had not had one. The

rarest dishes, sumptuously cooked and sumptuously served; the choicest

fruits; the most exquisite wines; marvels of workmanship in gold and

silver, china and glass; innumerable things delicious to the senses of

taste, smell, and sight, were insinuated into its composition. O, what

a wonderful man this Merdle, what a great man, what a master man, how

blessedly and enviably endowed--in one word, what a rich man!

He took his usual poor eighteenpennyworth of food in his usual

indigestive way, and had as little to say for himself as ever a

wonderful man had. Fortunately Lord Decimus was one of those sublimities

who have no occasion to be talked to, for they can be at any time

sufficiently occupied with the contemplation of their own greatness.

This enabled the bashful young Member to keep his eyes open long enough

at a time to see his dinner. But, whenever Lord Decimus spoke, he shut

them again.

The agreeable young Barnacle, and Bar, were the talkers of the party.

Bishop would have been exceedingly agreeable also, but that his

innocence stood in his way. He was so soon left behind. When there was

any little hint of anything being in the wind, he got lost directly.

Worldly affairs were too much for him; he couldn't make them out at all.

This was observable when Bar said, incidentally, that he was happy to

have heard that we were soon to have the advantage of enlisting on

the good side, the sound and plain sagacity--not demonstrative or

ostentatious, but thoroughly sound and practical--of our friend Mr

Sparkler.

Ferdinand Barnacle laughed, and said oh yes, he believed so. A vote was

a vote, and always acceptable.

Bar was sorry to miss our good friend Mr Sparkler to-day, Mr Merdle.

'He is away with Mrs Merdle,' returned that gentleman, slowly coming

out of a long abstraction, in the course of which he had been fitting a

tablespoon up his sleeve. 'It is not indispensable for him to be on the

spot.'

'The magic name of Merdle,' said Bar, with the jury droop, 'no doubt

will suffice for all.'

'Why--yes--I believe so,' assented Mr Merdle, putting the spoon aside,

and clumsily hiding each of his hands in the coat-cuff of the other

hand. 'I believe the people in my interest down there will not make any

difficulty.'

'Model people!' said Bar. 'I am glad you approve of them,' said Mr

Merdle.

'And the people of those other two places, now,' pursued Bar, with a

bright twinkle in his keen eye, as it slightly turned in the direction

of his magnificent neighbour; 'we lawyers are always curious, always

inquisitive, always picking up odds and ends for our patchwork minds,

since there is no knowing when and where they may fit into some

corner;--the people of those other two places now? Do they yield so

laudably to the vast and cumulative influence of such enterprise and

such renown; do those little rills become absorbed so quietly

and easily, and, as it were by the influence of natural laws, so

beautifully, in the swoop of the majestic stream as it flows upon its

wondrous way enriching the surrounding lands; that their course is

perfectly to be calculated, and distinctly to be predicated?'

Mr Merdle, a little troubled by Bar's eloquence, looked fitfully about

the nearest salt-cellar for some moments, and then said hesitating:

'They are perfectly aware, sir, of their duty to Society. They will

return anybody I send to them for that purpose.'

'Cheering to know,' said Bar. 'Cheering to know.'

The three places in question were three little rotten holes in this

Island, containing three little ignorant, drunken, guzzling, dirty,

out-of-the-way constituencies, that had reeled into Mr Merdle's pocket.

Ferdinand Barnacle laughed in his easy way, and airily said they were

a nice set of fellows. Bishop, mentally perambulating among paths of

peace, was altogether swallowed up in absence of mind.

'Pray,' asked Lord Decimus, casting his eyes around the table, 'what

is this story I have heard of a gentleman long confined in a debtors'

prison proving to be of a wealthy family, and having come into the

inheritance of a large sum of money? I have met with a variety of

allusions to it. Do you know anything of it, Ferdinand?'

'I only know this much,' said Ferdinand, 'that he has given the

Department with which I have the honour to be associated;' this

sparkling young Barnacle threw off the phrase sportively, as who should

say, We know all about these forms of speech, but we must keep it up,

we must keep the game alive; 'no end of trouble, and has put us into

innumerable fixes.'

'Fixes?' repeated Lord Decimus, with a majestic pausing and pondering

on the word that made the bashful Member shut his eyes quite tight.

'Fixes?'

'A very perplexing business indeed,' observed Mr Tite Barnacle, with an

air of grave resentment.

'What,' said Lord Decimus, 'was the character of his business; what was

the nature of these--a--Fixes, Ferdinand?'

'Oh, it's a good story, as a story,' returned that gentleman; 'as good

a thing of its kind as need be. This Mr Dorrit (his name is Dorrit) had

incurred a responsibility to us, ages before the fairy came out of

the Bank and gave him his fortune, under a bond he had signed for the

performance of a contract which was not at all performed. He was a

partner in a house in some large way--spirits, or buttons, or wine, or

blacking, or oatmeal, or woollen, or pork, or hooks and eyes, or iron,

or treacle, or shoes, or something or other that was wanted for troops,

or seamen, or somebody--and the house burst, and we being among

the creditors, detainees were lodged on the part of the Crown in a

scientific manner, and all the rest Of it. When the fairy had appeared

and he wanted to pay us off, Egad we had got into such an exemplary

state of checking and counter-checking, signing and counter-signing,

that it was six months before we knew how to take the money, or how to

give a receipt for it. It was a triumph of public business,' said this

handsome young Barnacle, laughing heartily, 'You never saw such a lot of

forms in your life. "Why," the attorney said to me one day, "if I wanted

this office to give me two or three thousand pounds instead of take it,

I couldn't have more trouble about it." "You are right, old fellow,"

I told him, "and in future you'll know that we have something to do

here."' The pleasant young Barnacle finished by once more laughing

heartily. He was a very easy, pleasant fellow indeed, and his manners

were exceedingly winning.

Mr Tite Barnacle's view of the business was of a less airy character. He

took it ill that Mr Dorrit had troubled the Department by wanting to

pay the money, and considered it a grossly informal thing to do after so

many years. But Mr Tite Barnacle was a buttoned-up man, and consequently

a weighty one. All buttoned-up men are weighty. All buttoned-up men are

believed in. Whether or no the reserved and never-exercised power of

unbuttoning, fascinates mankind; whether or no wisdom is supposed to

condense and augment when buttoned up, and to evaporate when unbuttoned;

it is certain that the man to whom importance is accorded is the

buttoned-up man. Mr Tite Barnacle never would have passed for half his

current value, unless his coat had been always buttoned-up to his white

cravat.

'May I ask,' said Lord Decimus, 'if Mr Darrit--or Dorrit--has any

family?'

Nobody else replying, the host said, 'He has two daughters, my lord.'

'Oh! you are acquainted with him?' asked Lord Decimus.

'Mrs Merdle is. Mr Sparkler is, too. In fact,' said Mr Merdle, 'I rather

believe that one of the young ladies has made an impression on Edmund

Sparkler. He is susceptible, and--I--think--the conquest--' Here Mr

Merdle stopped, and looked at the table-cloth, as he usually did when he

found himself observed or listened to.

Bar was uncommonly pleased to find that the Merdle family, and this

family, had already been brought into contact. He submitted, in a low

voice across the table to Bishop, that it was a kind of analogical

illustration of those physical laws, in virtue of which Like flies to

Like. He regarded this power of attraction in wealth to draw wealth

to it, as something remarkably interesting and curious--something

indefinably allied to the loadstone and gravitation. Bishop, who

had ambled back to earth again when the present theme was broached,

acquiesced. He said it was indeed highly important to Society that one

in the trying situation of unexpectedly finding himself invested with a

power for good or for evil in Society, should become, as it were, merged

in the superior power of a more legitimate and more gigantic growth, the

influence of which (as in the case of our friend at whose board we sat)

was habitually exercised in harmony with the best interests of Society.

Thus, instead of two rival and contending flames, a larger and a lesser,

each burning with a lurid and uncertain glare, we had a blended and a

softened light whose genial ray diffused an equable warmth throughout

the land. Bishop seemed to like his own way of putting the case very

much, and rather dwelt upon it; Bar, meanwhile (not to throw away a

jury-man), making a show of sitting at his feet and feeding on his

precepts.

The dinner and dessert being three hours long, the bashful Member cooled

in the shadow of Lord Decimus faster than he warmed with food and drink,

and had but a chilly time of it. Lord Decimus, like a tall tower in a

flat country, seemed to project himself across the table-cloth, hide the

light from the honourable Member, cool the honourable Member's marrow,

and give him a woeful idea of distance. When he asked this unfortunate

traveller to take wine, he encompassed his faltering steps with the

gloomiest of shades; and when he said, 'Your health sir!' all around him

was barrenness and desolation.

At length Lord Decimus, with a coffee-cup in his hand, began to hover

about among the pictures, and to cause an interesting speculation to

arise in all minds as to the probabilities of his ceasing to hover, and

enabling the smaller birds to flutter up-stairs; which could not be

done until he had urged his noble pinions in that direction. After some

delay, and several stretches of his wings which came to nothing, he

soared to the drawing-rooms.

And here a difficulty arose, which always does arise when two people

are specially brought together at a dinner to confer with one another.

Everybody (except Bishop, who had no suspicion of it) knew perfectly

well that this dinner had been eaten and drunk, specifically to the end

that Lord Decimus and Mr Merdle should have five minutes' conversation

together. The opportunity so elaborately prepared was now arrived, and

it seemed from that moment that no mere human ingenuity could so much as

get the two chieftains into the same room. Mr Merdle and his noble guest

persisted in prowling about at opposite ends of the perspective. It was

in vain for the engaging Ferdinand to bring Lord Decimus to look at the

bronze horses near Mr Merdle. Then Mr Merdle evaded, and wandered away.

It was in vain for him to bring Mr Merdle to Lord Decimus to tell him

the history of the unique Dresden vases. Then Lord Decimus evaded and

wandered away, while he was getting his man up to the mark.

'Did you ever see such a thing as this?' said Ferdinand to Bar when he

had been baffled twenty times.

'Often,' returned Bar.

'Unless I butt one of them into an appointed corner, and you butt the

other,' said Ferdinand,'it will not come off after all.'

'Very good,' said Bar. 'I'll butt Merdle, if you like; but not my lord.'

Ferdinand laughed, in the midst of his vexation. 'Confound them both!'

said he, looking at his watch. 'I want to get away. Why the deuce can't

they come together! They both know what they want and mean to do. Look

at them!'

They were still looming at opposite ends of the perspective, each with

an absurd pretence of not having the other on his mind, which could not

have been more transparently ridiculous though his real mind had been

chalked on his back. Bishop, who had just now made a third with Bar and

Ferdinand, but whose innocence had again cut him out of the subject and

washed him in sweet oil, was seen to approach Lord Decimus and glide

into conversation.

'I must get Merdle's doctor to catch and secure him, I suppose,' said

Ferdinand; 'and then I must lay hold of my illustrious kinsman, and

decoy him if I can--drag him if I can't--to the conference.'

'Since you do me the honour,' said Bar, with his slyest smile, to ask

for my poor aid, it shall be yours with the greatest pleasure. I don't

think this is to be done by one man. But if you will undertake to pen

my lord into that furthest drawing-room where he is now so profoundly

engaged, I will undertake to bring our dear Merdle into the presence,

without the possibility of getting away.'

'Done!' said Ferdinand.

'Done!' said Bar.

Bar was a sight wondrous to behold, and full of matter, when, jauntily

waving his double eye-glass by its ribbon, and jauntily drooping to an

Universe of jurymen, he, in the most accidental manner ever seen,

found himself at Mr Merdle's shoulder, and embraced that opportunity of

mentioning a little point to him, on which he particularly wished to

be guided by the light of his practical knowledge. (Here he took Mr

Merdle's arm and walked him gently away.) A banker, whom we would call

A. B., advanced a considerable sum of money, which we would call fifteen

thousand pounds, to a client or customer of his, whom he would call P.

q. (Here, as they were getting towards Lord Decimus, he held Mr Merdle

tight.) As a security for the repayment of this advance to P. Q. whom

we would call a widow lady, there were placed in A. B.'s hands the

title-deeds of a freehold estate, which we would call Blinkiter Doddles.

Now, the point was this. A limited right of felling and lopping in

the woods of Blinkiter Doddles, lay in the son of P. Q. then past his

majority, and whom we would call X. Y.--but really this was too bad! In

the presence of Lord Decimus, to detain the host with chopping our dry

chaff of law, was really too bad! Another time! Bar was truly repentant,

and would not say another syllable. Would Bishop favour him with

half-a-dozen words? (He had now set Mr Merdle down on a couch, side by

side with Lord Decimus, and to it they must go, now or never.)

And now the rest of the company, highly excited and interested, always

excepting Bishop, who had not the slightest idea that anything was going

on, formed in one group round the fire in the next drawing-room, and

pretended to be chatting easily on the infinite variety of small topics,

while everybody's thoughts and eyes were secretly straying towards the

secluded pair. The Chorus were excessively nervous, perhaps as labouring

under the dreadful apprehension that some good thing was going to

be diverted from them! Bishop alone talked steadily and evenly. He

conversed with the great Physician on that relaxation of the throat with

which young curates were too frequently afflicted, and on the means

of lessening the great prevalence of that disorder in the church.

Physician, as a general rule, was of opinion that the best way to avoid

it was to know how to read, before you made a profession of reading.

Bishop said dubiously, did he really think so? And Physician said,

decidedly, yes he did.

Ferdinand, meanwhile, was the only one of the party who skirmished on

the outside of the circle; he kept about mid-way between it and the

two, as if some sort of surgical operation were being performed by Lord

Decimus on Mr Merdle, or by Mr Merdle on Lord Decimus, and his services

might at any moment be required as Dresser. In fact, within a quarter

of an hour Lord Decimus called to him 'Ferdinand!' and he went, and

took his place in the conference for some five minutes more. Then a

half-suppressed gasp broke out among the Chorus; for Lord Decimus rose

to take his leave. Again coached up by Ferdinand to the point of making

himself popular, he shook hands in the most brilliant manner with the

whole company, and even said to Bar, 'I hope you were not bored by my

pears?' To which Bar retorted, 'Eton, my lord, or Parliamentary?' neatly

showing that he had mastered the joke, and delicately insinuating that

he could never forget it while his life remained.

All the grave importance that was buttoned up in Mr Tite Barnacle, took

itself away next; and Ferdinand took himself away next, to the opera.

Some of the rest lingered a little, marrying golden liqueur glasses to

Buhl tables with sticky rings; on the desperate chance of Mr Merdle's

saying something. But Merdle, as usual, oozed sluggishly and muddily

about his drawing-room, saying never a word.

In a day or two it was announced to all the town, that Edmund Sparkler,

Esquire, son-in-law of the eminent Mr Merdle of worldwide renown, was

made one of the Lords of the Circumlocution Office; and proclamation was

issued, to all true believers, that this admirable appointment was to

be hailed as a graceful and gracious mark of homage, rendered by the

graceful and gracious Decimus, to that commercial interest which must

ever in a great commercial country--and all the rest of it, with

blast of trumpet. So, bolstered by this mark of Government homage, the

wonderful Bank and all the other wonderful undertakings went on and went

up; and gapers came to Harley Street, Cavendish Square, only to look at

the house where the golden wonder lived.

And when they saw the Chief Butler looking out at the hall-door in

his moments of condescension, the gapers said how rich he looked, and

wondered how much money he had in the wonderful Bank. But, if they had

known that respectable Nemesis better, they would not have wondered

about it, and might have stated the amount with the utmost precision.

CHAPTER 13. The Progress of an Epidemic

That it is at least as difficult to stay a moral infection as a physical

one; that such a disease will spread with the malignity and rapidity of

the Plague; that the contagion, when it has once made head, will spare

no pursuit or condition, but will lay hold on people in the soundest

health, and become developed in the most unlikely constitutions: is

a fact as firmly established by experience as that we human creatures

breathe an atmosphere. A blessing beyond appreciation would be conferred

upon mankind, if the tainted, in whose weakness or wickedness these

virulent disorders are bred, could be instantly seized and placed in

close confinement (not to say summarily smothered) before the poison is

communicable.

As a vast fire will fill the air to a great distance with its roar, so

the sacred flame which the mighty Barnacles had fanned caused the air to

resound more and more with the name of Merdle. It was deposited on every

lip, and carried into every ear. There never was, there never had

been, there never again should be, such a man as Mr Merdle. Nobody,

as aforesaid, knew what he had done; but everybody knew him to be the

greatest that had appeared.

Down in Bleeding Heart Yard, where there was not one unappropriated

halfpenny, as lively an interest was taken in this paragon of men as on

the Stock Exchange. Mrs Plornish, now established in the small grocery

and general trade in a snug little shop at the crack end of the Yard,

at the top of the steps, with her little old father and Maggy acting

as assistants, habitually held forth about him over the counter in

conversation with her customers. Mr Plornish, who had a small share in a

small builder's business in the neighbourhood, said, trowel in hand, on

the tops of scaffolds and on the tiles of houses, that people did tell

him as Mr Merdle was the one, mind you, to put us all to rights in

respects of that which all on us looked to, and to bring us all safe

home as much as we needed, mind you, fur toe be brought. Mr Baptist,

sole lodger of Mr and Mrs Plornish was reputed in whispers to lay by

the savings which were the result of his simple and moderate life,

for investment in one of Mr Merdle's certain enterprises. The female

Bleeding Hearts, when they came for ounces of tea, and hundredweights of

talk, gave Mrs Plornish to understand, That how, ma'am, they had heard

from their cousin Mary Anne, which worked in the line, that his lady's

dresses would fill three waggons. That how she was as handsome a lady,

ma'am, as lived, no matter wheres, and a busk like marble itself. That

how, according to what they was told, ma'am, it was her son by a former

husband as was took into the Government; and a General he had been, and

armies he had marched again and victory crowned, if all you heard was to

be believed. That how it was reported that Mr Merdle's words had been,

that if they could have made it worth his while to take the whole

Government he would have took it without a profit, but that take it he

could not and stand a loss. That how it was not to be expected, ma'am,

that he should lose by it, his ways being, as you might say and utter

no falsehood, paved with gold; but that how it was much to be regretted

that something handsome hadn't been got up to make it worth his while;

for it was such and only such that knowed the heighth to which the bread

and butchers' meat had rose, and it was such and only such that both

could and would bring that heighth down.

So rife and potent was the fever in Bleeding Heart Yard, that Mr

Pancks's rent-days caused no interval in the patients. The disease took

the singular form, on those occasions, of causing the infected to find

an unfathomable excuse and consolation in allusions to the magic name.

'Now, then!' Mr Pancks would say, to a defaulting lodger. 'Pay up!

Come on!'

'I haven't got it, Mr Pancks,' Defaulter would reply. 'I tell you the

truth, sir, when I say I haven't got so much as a single sixpence of it

to bless myself with.'

'This won't do, you know,' Mr Pancks would retort. 'You don't expect it

will do; do you?' Defaulter would admit, with a low-spirited 'No, sir,'

having no such expectation.

'My proprietor isn't going to stand this, you know,' Mr Pancks would

proceed. 'He don't send me here for this. Pay up! Come!'

The Defaulter would make answer, 'Ah, Mr Pancks. If I was the rich

gentleman whose name is in everybody's mouth--if my name was Merdle,

sir--I'd soon pay up, and be glad to do it.'

Dialogues on the rent-question usually took place at the house-doors

or in the entries, and in the presence of several deeply interested

Bleeding Hearts. They always received a reference of this kind with a

low murmur of response, as if it were convincing; and the Defaulter,

however black and discomfited before, always cheered up a little in

making it.

'If I was Mr Merdle, sir, you wouldn't have cause to complain of me

then. No, believe me!' the Defaulter would proceed with a shake of the

head. 'I'd pay up so quick then, Mr Pancks, that you shouldn't have to

ask me.'

The response would be heard again here, implying that it was impossible

to say anything fairer, and that this was the next thing to paying the

money down.

Mr Pancks would be now reduced to saying as he booked the case, 'Well!

You'll have the broker in, and be turned out; that's what'll happen to

you. It's no use talking to me about Mr Merdle. You are not Mr Merdle,

any more than I am.'

'No, sir,' the Defaulter would reply. 'I only wish you were him, sir.'

The response would take this up quickly; replying with great feeling,

'Only wish you were him, sir.'

'You'd be easier with us if you were Mr Merdle, sir,' the Defaulter

would go on with rising spirits, 'and it would be better for all

parties. Better for our sakes, and better for yours, too. You wouldn't

have to worry no one, then, sir. You wouldn't have to worry us, and you

wouldn't have to worry yourself. You'd be easier in your own mind, sir,

and you'd leave others easier, too, you would, if you were Mr Merdle.'

Mr Pancks, in whom these impersonal compliments produced an irresistible

sheepishness, never rallied after such a charge. He could only bite

his nails and puff away to the next Defaulter. The responsive Bleeding

Hearts would then gather round the Defaulter whom he had just abandoned,

and the most extravagant rumours would circulate among them, to their

great comfort, touching the amount of Mr Merdle's ready money.

From one of the many such defeats of one of many rent-days, Mr Pancks,

having finished his day's collection, repaired with his note-book

under his arm to Mrs Plornish's corner. Mr Pancks's object was not

professional, but social. He had had a trying day, and wanted a little

brightening. By this time he was on friendly terms with the Plornish

family, having often looked in upon them at similar seasons, and borne

his part in recollections of Miss Dorrit.

Mrs Plornish's shop-parlour had been decorated under her own eye, and

presented, on the side towards the shop, a little fiction in which Mrs

Plornish unspeakably rejoiced. This poetical heightening of the parlour

consisted in the wall being painted to represent the exterior of a

thatched cottage; the artist having introduced (in as effective a manner

as he found compatible with their highly disproportionate dimensions)

the real door and window. The modest sunflower and hollyhock were

depicted as flourishing with great luxuriance on this rustic dwelling,

while a quantity of dense smoke issuing from the chimney indicated good

cheer within, and also, perhaps, that it had not been lately swept.

A faithful dog was represented as flying at the legs of the friendly

visitor, from the threshold; and a circular pigeon-house, enveloped in a

cloud of pigeons, arose from behind the garden-paling. On the door (when

it was shut), appeared the semblance of a brass-plate, presenting

the inscription, Happy Cottage, T. and M. Plornish; the partnership

expressing man and wife. No Poetry and no Art ever charmed the

imagination more than the union of the two in this counterfeit cottage

charmed Mrs Plornish. It was nothing to her that Plornish had a habit

of leaning against it as he smoked his pipe after work, when his

hat blotted out the pigeon-house and all the pigeons, when his back

swallowed up the dwelling, when his hands in his pockets uprooted the

blooming garden and laid waste the adjacent country. To Mrs Plornish, it

was still a most beautiful cottage, a most wonderful deception; and

it made no difference that Mr Plornish's eye was some inches above the

level of the gable bed-room in the thatch. To come out into the shop

after it was shut, and hear her father sing a song inside this cottage,

was a perfect Pastoral to Mrs Plornish, the Golden Age revived. And

truly if that famous period had been revived, or had ever been at all,

it may be doubted whether it would have produced many more heartily

admiring daughters than the poor woman.

Warned of a visitor by the tinkling bell at the shop-door, Mrs Plornish

came out of Happy Cottage to see who it might be. 'I guessed it was

you, Mr Pancks,' said she, 'for it's quite your regular night; ain't it?

Here's father, you see, come out to serve at the sound of the bell, like

a brisk young shopman. Ain't he looking well? Father's more pleased to

see you than if you was a customer, for he dearly loves a gossip; and

when it turns upon Miss Dorrit, he loves it all the more. You never

heard father in such voice as he is at present,' said Mrs Plornish, her

own voice quavering, she was so proud and pleased. 'He gave us Strephon

last night to that degree that Plornish gets up and makes him this

speech across the table. "John Edward Nandy," says Plornish to father,

"I never heard you come the warbles as I have heard you come the warbles

this night." An't it gratifying, Mr Pancks, though; really?'

Mr Pancks, who had snorted at the old man in his friendliest manner,

replied in the affirmative, and casually asked whether that lively Altro

chap had come in yet? Mrs Plornish answered no, not yet, though he had

gone to the West-End with some work, and had said he should be back

by tea-time. Mr Pancks was then hospitably pressed into Happy Cottage,

where he encountered the elder Master Plornish just come home from

school. Examining that young student, lightly, on the educational

proceedings of the day, he found that the more advanced pupils who

were in the large text and the letter M, had been set the copy 'Merdle,

Millions.'

'And how are you getting on, Mrs Plornish,' said Pancks, 'since we're

mentioning millions?'

'Very steady, indeed, sir,' returned Mrs Plornish. 'Father, dear, would

you go into the shop and tidy the window a little bit before tea, your

taste being so beautiful?'

John Edward Nandy trotted away, much gratified, to comply with his

daughter's request. Mrs Plornish, who was always in mortal terror

of mentioning pecuniary affairs before the old gentleman, lest any

disclosure she made might rouse his spirit and induce him to run away to

the workhouse, was thus left free to be confidential with Mr Pancks.

'It's quite true that the business is very steady indeed,' said Mrs

Plornish, lowering her voice; 'and has a excellent connection. The only

thing that stands in its way, sir, is the Credit.'

This drawback, rather severely felt by most people who engaged in

commercial transactions with the inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard,

was a large stumbling-block in Mrs Plornish's trade. When Mr Dorrit had

established her in the business, the Bleeding Hearts had shown an amount

of emotion and a determination to support her in it, that did honour to

human nature. Recognising her claim upon their generous feelings as one

who had long been a member of their community, they pledged themselves,

with great feeling, to deal with Mrs Plornish, come what would and

bestow their patronage on no other establishment. Influenced by these

noble sentiments, they had even gone out of their way to purchase little

luxuries in the grocery and butter line to which they were unaccustomed;

saying to one another, that if they did stretch a point, was it not for

a neighbour and a friend, and for whom ought a point to be stretched if

not for such? So stimulated, the business was extremely brisk, and the

articles in stock went off with the greatest celerity. In short, if the

Bleeding Hearts had but paid, the undertaking would have been a complete

success; whereas, by reason of their exclusively confining themselves to

owing, the profits actually realised had not yet begun to appear in the

books.

Mr Pancks was making a very porcupine of himself by sticking his hair

up in the contemplation of this state of accounts, when old Mr Nandy,

re-entering the cottage with an air of mystery, entreated them to come

and look at the strange behaviour of Mr Baptist, who seemed to have met

with something that had scared him. All three going into the shop, and

watching through the window, then saw Mr Baptist, pale and agitated, go

through the following extraordinary performances. First, he was observed

hiding at the top of the steps leading down into the Yard, and peeping

up and down the street with his head cautiously thrust out close to the

side of the shop-door. After very anxious scrutiny, he came out of

his retreat, and went briskly down the street as if he were going away

altogether; then, suddenly turned about, and went, at the same pace, and

with the same feint, up the street. He had gone no further up the street

than he had gone down, when he crossed the road and disappeared. The

object of this last manoeuvre was only apparent, when his entering the

shop with a sudden twist, from the steps again, explained that he

had made a wide and obscure circuit round to the other, or Doyce and

Clennam, end of the Yard, and had come through the Yard and bolted in.

He was out of breath by that time, as he might well be, and his heart

seemed to jerk faster than the little shop-bell, as it quivered and

jingled behind him with his hasty shutting of the door.

'Hallo, old chap!' said Mr Pancks. 'Altro, old boy! What's the matter?'

Mr Baptist, or Signor Cavalletto, understood English now almost as well

as Mr Pancks himself, and could speak it very well too. Nevertheless,

Mrs Plornish, with a pardonable vanity in that accomplishment of hers

which made her all but Italian, stepped in as interpreter.

'E ask know,' said Mrs Plornish, 'What go wrong?'

'Come into the happy little cottage, Padrona,' returned Mr Baptist,

imparting great stealthiness to his flurried back-handed shake of his

right forefinger. 'Come there!'

Mrs Plornish was proud of the title Padrona, which she regarded as

signifying: not so much Mistress of the house, as Mistress of the

Italian tongue. She immediately complied with Mr Baptist's request, and

they all went into the cottage.

'E ope you no fright,' said Mrs Plornish then, interpreting Mr Pancks

in a new way with her usual fertility of resource. 'What appen? Peaka

Padrona!'

'I have seen some one,' returned Baptist. 'I have rincontrato him.'

'Im? Oo him?' asked Mrs Plornish.

'A bad man. A baddest man. I have hoped that I should never see him

again.' 'Ow you know him bad?' asked Mrs Plornish.

'It does not matter, Padrona. I know it too well.'

''E see you?' asked Mrs Plornish.

'No. I hope not. I believe not.'

'He says,' Mrs Plornish then interpreted, addressing her father and

Pancks with mild condescension, 'that he has met a bad man, but he hopes

the bad man didn't see him--Why,' inquired Mrs Plornish, reverting to

the Italian language, 'why ope bad man no see?'

'Padrona, dearest,' returned the little foreigner whom she so

considerately protected, 'do not ask, I pray. Once again I say it

matters not. I have fear of this man. I do not wish to see him, I do not

wish to be known of him--never again! Enough, most beautiful. Leave it.'

The topic was so disagreeable to him, and so put his usual liveliness to

the rout, that Mrs Plornish forbore to press him further: the rather as

the tea had been drawing for some time on the hob. But she was not the

less surprised and curious for asking no more questions; neither was

Mr Pancks, whose expressive breathing had been labouring hard since the

entrance of the little man, like a locomotive engine with a great load

getting up a steep incline. Maggy, now better dressed than of yore,

though still faithful to the monstrous character of her cap, had been

in the background from the first with open mouth and eyes, which staring

and gaping features were not diminished in breadth by the untimely

suppression of the subject. However, no more was said about it, though

much appeared to be thought on all sides: by no means excepting the two

young Plornishes, who partook of the evening meal as if their eating

the bread and butter were rendered almost superfluous by the painful

probability of the worst of men shortly presenting himself for the

purpose of eating them. Mr Baptist, by degrees began to chirp a little;

but never stirred from the seat he had taken behind the door and close

to the window, though it was not his usual place. As often as the little

bell rang, he started and peeped out secretly, with the end of the

little curtain in his hand and the rest before his face; evidently not

at all satisfied but that the man he dreaded had tracked him through all

his doublings and turnings, with the certainty of a terrible bloodhound.

The entrance, at various times, of two or three customers and of Mr

Plornish, gave Mr Baptist just enough of this employment to keep the

attention of the company fixed upon him. Tea was over, and the children

were abed, and Mrs Plornish was feeling her way to the dutiful proposal

that her father should favour them with Chloe, when the bell rang again,

and Mr Clennam came in.

Clennam had been poring late over his books and letters; for the

waiting-rooms of the Circumlocution Office ravaged his time sorely.

Over and above that, he was depressed and made uneasy by the late

occurrence at his mother's. He looked worn and solitary. He felt so,

too; but, nevertheless, was returning home from his counting-house by

that end of the Yard to give them the intelligence that he had received

another letter from Miss Dorrit.

The news made a sensation in the cottage which drew off the general

attention from Mr Baptist. Maggy, who pushed her way into the foreground

immediately, would have seemed to draw in the tidings of her Little

Mother equally at her ears, nose, mouth, and eyes, but that the last

were obstructed by tears. She was particularly delighted when Clennam

assured her that there were hospitals, and very kindly conducted

hospitals, in Rome. Mr Pancks rose into new distinction in virtue of

being specially remembered in the letter. Everybody was pleased and

interested, and Clennam was well repaid for his trouble. 'But you are

tired, sir. Let me make you a cup of tea,' said Mrs Plornish, 'if you'd

condescend to take such a thing in the cottage; and many thanks to you,

too, I am sure, for bearing us in mind so kindly.'

Mr Plornish deeming it incumbent on him, as host, to add his personal

acknowledgments, tendered them in the form which always expressed his

highest ideal of a combination of ceremony with sincerity.

'John Edward Nandy,' said Mr Plornish, addressing the old gentleman.

'Sir. It's not too often that you see unpretending actions without a

spark of pride, and therefore when you see them give grateful honour

unto the same, being that if you don't, and live to want 'em, it follows

serve you right.'

To which Mr Nandy replied:

'I am heartily of your opinion, Thomas, and which your opinion is the

same as mine, and therefore no more words and not being backwards

with that opinion, which opinion giving it as yes, Thomas, yes, is the

opinion in which yourself and me must ever be unanimously jined by all,

and where there is not difference of opinion there can be none but one

opinion, which fully no, Thomas, Thomas, no!'

Arthur, with less formality, expressed himself gratified by their high

appreciation of so very slight an attention on his part; and explained

as to the tea that he had not yet dined, and was going straight home to

refresh after a long day's labour, or he would have readily accepted the

hospitable offer. As Mr Pancks was somewhat noisily getting his steam

up for departure, he concluded by asking that gentleman if he would walk

with him? Mr Pancks said he desired no better engagement, and the two

took leave of Happy Cottage.

'If you will come home with me, Pancks,' said Arthur, when they got into

the street, 'and will share what dinner or supper there is, it will

be next door to an act of charity; for I am weary and out of sorts

to-night.'

'Ask me to do a greater thing than that,' said Pancks, 'when you want it

done, and I'll do it.'

Between this eccentric personage and Clennam, a tacit understanding and

accord had been always improving since Mr Pancks flew over Mr Rugg's

back in the Marshalsea Yard. When the carriage drove away on the

memorable day of the family's departure, these two had looked after it

together, and had walked slowly away together. When the first letter

came from little Dorrit, nobody was more interested in hearing of

her than Mr Pancks. The second letter, at that moment in Clennam's

breast-pocket, particularly remembered him by name. Though he had never

before made any profession or protestation to Clennam, and though what

he had just said was little enough as to the words in which it was

expressed, Clennam had long had a growing belief that Mr Pancks, in

his own odd way, was becoming attached to him. All these strings

intertwining made Pancks a very cable of anchorage that night.

'I am quite alone,' Arthur explained as they walked on. 'My partner is

away, busily engaged at a distance on his branch of our business, and

you shall do just as you like.'

'Thank you. You didn't take particular notice of little Altro just now;

did you?' said Pancks.

'No. Why?'

'He's a bright fellow, and I like him,' said Pancks. 'Something has

gone amiss with him to-day. Have you any idea of any cause that can have

overset him?'

'You surprise me! None whatever.'

Mr Pancks gave his reasons for the inquiry. Arthur was quite unprepared

for them, and quite unable to suggest an explanation of them.

'Perhaps you'll ask him,' said Pancks, 'as he's a stranger?'

'Ask him what?' returned Clennam.

'What he has on his mind.'

'I ought first to see for myself that he has something on his mind, I

think,' said Clennam. 'I have found him in every way so diligent, so

grateful (for little enough), and so trustworthy, that it might look

like suspecting him. And that would be very unjust.'

'True,' said Pancks. 'But, I say! You oughtn't to be anybody's

proprietor, Mr Clennam. You're much too delicate.' 'For the matter of

that,' returned Clennam laughing, 'I have not a large proprietary share

in Cavalletto. His carving is his livelihood. He keeps the keys of

the Factory, watches it every alternate night, and acts as a sort of

housekeeper to it generally; but we have little work in the way of his

ingenuity, though we give him what we have. No! I am rather his adviser

than his proprietor. To call me his standing counsel and his banker

would be nearer the fact. Speaking of being his banker, is it not

curious, Pancks, that the ventures which run just now in so many

people's heads, should run even in little Cavalletto's?'

'Ventures?' retorted Pancks, with a snort. 'What ventures?'

'These Merdle enterprises.'

'Oh! Investments,' said Pancks. 'Ay, ay! I didn't know you were speaking

of investments.' His quick way of replying caused Clennam to look

at him, with a doubt whether he meant more than he said. As it was

accompanied, however, with a quickening of his pace and a corresponding

increase in the labouring of his machinery, Arthur did not pursue the

matter, and they soon arrived at his house.

A dinner of soup and a pigeon-pie, served on a little round table before

the fire, and flavoured with a bottle of good wine, oiled Mr Pancks's

works in a highly effective manner; so that when Clennam produced his

Eastern pipe, and handed Mr Pancks another Eastern pipe, the latter

gentleman was perfectly comfortable.

They puffed for a while in silence, Mr Pancks like a steam-vessel

with wind, tide, calm water, and all other sea-going conditions in her

favour. He was the first to speak, and he spoke thus:

'Yes. Investments is the word.'

Clennam, with his former look, said 'Ah!'

'I am going back to it, you see,' said Pancks.

'Yes. I see you are going back to it,' returned Clennam, wondering why.

'Wasn't it a curious thing that they should run in little Altro's head?

Eh?' said Pancks as he smoked. 'Wasn't that how you put it?'

'That was what I said.'

'Ay! But think of the whole Yard having got it. Think of their

all meeting me with it, on my collecting days, here and there and

everywhere. Whether they pay, or whether they don't pay. Merdle, Merdle,

Merdle. Always Merdle.'

'Very strange how these runs on an infatuation prevail,' said Arthur.

'An't it?' returned Pancks. After smoking for a minute or so, more drily

than comported with his recent oiling, he added: 'Because you see these

people don't understand the subject.'

'Not a bit,' assented Clennam.

'Not a bit,' cried Pancks. 'Know nothing of figures. Know nothing of

money questions. Never made a calculation. Never worked it, sir!'

'If they had--' Clennam was going on to say; when Mr Pancks, without

change of countenance, produced a sound so far surpassing all his usual

efforts, nasal or bronchial, that he stopped.

'If they had?' repeated Pancks in an inquiring tone.

'I thought you--spoke,' said Arthur, hesitating what name to give the

interruption.

'Not at all,' said Pancks. 'Not yet. I may in a minute. If they had?'

'If they had,' observed Clennam, who was a little at a loss how to take

his friend, 'why, I suppose they would have known better.'

'How so, Mr Clennam?' Pancks asked quickly, and with an odd effect of

having been from the commencement of the conversation loaded with the

heavy charge he now fired off. 'They're right, you know. They don't mean

to be, but they're right.'

'Right in sharing Cavalletto's inclination to speculate with Mr Merdle?'

'Per-fectly, sir,' said Pancks. 'I've gone into it. I've made the

calculations. I've worked it. They're safe and genuine.' Relieved by

having got to this, Mr Pancks took as long a pull as his lungs would

permit at his Eastern pipe, and looked sagaciously and steadily at

Clennam while inhaling and exhaling too.

In those moments, Mr Pancks began to give out the dangerous infection

with which he was laden. It is the manner of communicating these

diseases; it is the subtle way in which they go about.

'Do you mean, my good Pancks,' asked Clennam emphatically, 'that you

would put that thousand pounds of yours, let us say, for instance, out

at this kind of interest?'

'Certainly,' said Pancks. 'Already done it, sir.'

Mr Pancks took another long inhalation, another long exhalation, another

long sagacious look at Clennam.

'I tell you, Mr Clennam, I've gone into it,' said Pancks. 'He's a man of

immense resources--enormous capital--government influence. They're the

best schemes afloat. They're safe. They're certain.'

'Well!' returned Clennam, looking first at him gravely and then at the

fire gravely. 'You surprise me!'

'Bah!' Pancks retorted. 'Don't say that, sir. It's what you ought to do

yourself! Why don't you do as I do?'

Of whom Mr Pancks had taken the prevalent disease, he could no more have

told than if he had unconsciously taken a fever. Bred at first, as many

physical diseases are, in the wickedness of men, and then disseminated

in their ignorance, these epidemics, after a period, get communicated to

many sufferers who are neither ignorant nor wicked. Mr Pancks might, or

might not, have caught the illness himself from a subject of this class;

but in this category he appeared before Clennam, and the infection he

threw off was all the more virulent.

'And you have really invested,' Clennam had already passed to that word,

'your thousand pounds, Pancks?'

'To be sure, sir!' replied Pancks boldly, with a puff of smoke. 'And

only wish it ten!'

Now, Clennam had two subjects lying heavy on his lonely mind that night;

the one, his partner's long-deferred hope; the other, what he had seen

and heard at his mother's. In the relief of having this companion,

and of feeling that he could trust him, he passed on to both, and both

brought him round again, with an increase and acceleration of force, to

his point of departure.

It came about in the simplest manner. Quitting the investment subject,

after an interval of silent looking at the fire through the smoke of his

pipe, he told Pancks how and why he was occupied with the great National

Department. 'A hard case it has been, and a hard case it is on Doyce,'

he finished by saying, with all the honest feeling the topic roused in

him.

'Hard indeed,' Pancks acquiesced. 'But you manage for him, Mr Clennam?'

'How do you mean?'

'Manage the money part of the business?'

'Yes. As well as I can.'

'Manage it better, sir,' said Pancks. 'Recompense him for his toils and

disappointments. Give him the chances of the time. He'll never benefit

himself in that way, patient and preoccupied workman. He looks to you,

sir.'

'I do my best, Pancks,' returned Clennam, uneasily. 'As to duly weighing

and considering these new enterprises of which I have had no experience,

I doubt if I am fit for it, I am growing old.'

'Growing old?' cried Pancks. 'Ha, ha!'

There was something so indubitably genuine in the wonderful laugh, and

series of snorts and puffs, engendered in Mr Pancks's astonishment at,

and utter rejection of, the idea, that his being quite in earnest could

not be questioned.

'Growing old?' cried Pancks. 'Hear, hear, hear! Old? Hear him, hear

him!'

The positive refusal expressed in Mr Pancks's continued snorts, no less

than in these exclamations, to entertain the sentiment for a single

instant, drove Arthur away from it. Indeed, he was fearful of something

happening to Mr Pancks in the violent conflict that took place between

the breath he jerked out of himself and the smoke he jerked into

himself. This abandonment of the second topic threw him on the third.

'Young, old, or middle-aged, Pancks,' he said, when there was a

favourable pause, 'I am in a very anxious and uncertain state; a state

that even leads me to doubt whether anything now seeming to belong to

me, may be really mine. Shall I tell you how this is? Shall I put a

great trust in you?'

'You shall, sir,' said Pancks, 'if you believe me worthy of it.'

'I do.'

'You may!' Mr Pancks's short and sharp rejoinder, confirmed by the

sudden outstretching of his coaly hand, was most expressive and

convincing. Arthur shook the hand warmly.

He then, softening the nature of his old apprehensions as much as was

possible consistently with their being made intelligible and never

alluding to his mother by name, but speaking vaguely of a relation

of his, confided to Mr Pancks a broad outline of the misgivings he

entertained, and of the interview he had witnessed. Mr Pancks listened

with such interest that, regardless of the charms of the Eastern pipe,

he put it in the grate among the fire-irons, and occupied his hands

during the whole recital in so erecting the loops and hooks of hair

all over his head, that he looked, when it came to a conclusion, like a

journeyman Hamlet in conversation with his father's spirit.

'Brings me back, sir,' was his exclamation then, with a startling touch

on Clennam's knee, 'brings me back, sir, to the Investments! I don't

say anything of your making yourself poor to repair a wrong you never

committed. That's you. A man must be himself. But I say this,

fearing you may want money to save your own blood from exposure and

disgrace--make as much as you can!'

Arthur shook his head, but looked at him thoughtfully too.

'Be as rich as you can, sir,' Pancks adjured him with a powerful

concentration of all his energies on the advice. 'Be as rich as you

honestly can. It's your duty. Not for your sake, but for the sake of

others. Take time by the forelock. Poor Mr Doyce (who really is growing

old) depends upon you. Your relative depends upon you. You don't know

what depends upon you.'

'Well, well, well!' returned Arthur. 'Enough for to-night.'

'One word more, Mr Clennam,' retorted Pancks, 'and then enough for

to-night. Why should you leave all the gains to the gluttons, knaves,

and impostors? Why should you leave all the gains that are to be got to

my proprietor and the like of him? Yet you're always doing it. When I

say you, I mean such men as you. You know you are. Why, I see it

every day of my life. I see nothing else. It's my business to see it.

Therefore I say,' urged Pancks, 'Go in and win!'

'But what of Go in and lose?' said Arthur.

'Can't be done, sir,' returned Pancks. 'I have looked into it. Name up

everywhere--immense resources--enormous capital--great position--high

connection--government influence. Can't be done!'

Gradually, after this closing exposition, Mr Pancks subsided; allowed

his hair to droop as much as it ever would droop on the utmost

persuasion; reclaimed the pipe from the fire-irons, filled it anew, and

smoked it out. They said little more; but were company to one another in

silently pursuing the same subjects, and did not part until midnight.

On taking his leave, Mr Pancks, when he had shaken hands with Clennam,

worked completely round him before he steamed out at the door. This,

Arthur received as an assurance that he might implicitly rely on Pancks,

if he ever should come to need assistance; either in any of the matters

of which they had spoken that night, or any other subject that could in

any way affect himself.

At intervals all next day, and even while his attention was fixed on

other things, he thought of Mr Pancks's investment of his thousand

pounds, and of his having 'looked into it.' He thought of Mr Pancks's

being so sanguine in this matter, and of his not being usually of a

sanguine character. He thought of the great National Department, and of

the delight it would be to him to see Doyce better off. He thought

of the darkly threatening place that went by the name of Home in his

remembrance, and of the gathering shadows which made it yet more darkly

threatening than of old. He observed anew that wherever he went, he

saw, or heard, or touched, the celebrated name of Merdle; he found it

difficult even to remain at his desk a couple of hours, without having

it presented to one of his bodily senses through some agency or other.

He began to think it was curious too that it should be everywhere, and

that nobody but he should seem to have any mistrust of it. Though indeed

he began to remember, when he got to this, even he did not mistrust it;

he had only happened to keep aloof from it.

Such symptoms, when a disease of the kind is rife, are usually the signs

of sickening.

CHAPTER 14. Taking Advice

When it became known to the Britons on the shore of the yellow Tiber

that their intelligent compatriot, Mr Sparkler, was made one of the

Lords of their Circumlocution Office, they took it as a piece of news

with which they had no nearer concern than with any other piece of

news--any other Accident or Offence--in the English papers. Some

laughed; some said, by way of complete excuse, that the post was

virtually a sinecure, and any fool who could spell his name was good

enough for it; some, and these the more solemn political oracles,

said that Decimus did wisely to strengthen himself, and that the sole

constitutional purpose of all places within the gift of Decimus, was,

that Decimus should strengthen himself. A few bilious Britons there were

who would not subscribe to this article of faith; but their objection

was purely theoretical. In a practical point of view, they listlessly

abandoned the matter, as being the business of some other Britons

unknown, somewhere, or nowhere. In like manner, at home, great numbers

of Britons maintained, for as long as four-and-twenty consecutive hours,

that those invisible and anonymous Britons 'ought to take it up;' and

that if they quietly acquiesced in it, they deserved it. But of what

class the remiss Britons were composed, and where the unlucky creatures

hid themselves, and why they hid themselves, and how it constantly

happened that they neglected their interests, when so many other Britons

were quite at a loss to account for their not looking after those

interests, was not, either upon the shore of the yellow Tiber or the

shore of the black Thames, made apparent to men.

Mrs Merdle circulated the news, as she received congratulations on it,

with a careless grace that displayed it to advantage, as the setting

displays the jewel. Yes, she said, Edmund had taken the place. Mr Merdle

wished him to take it, and he had taken it. She hoped Edmund might like

it, but really she didn't know. It would keep him in town a good

deal, and he preferred the country. Still, it was not a disagreeable

position--and it was a position. There was no denying that the thing

was a compliment to Mr Merdle, and was not a bad thing for Edmund if he

liked it. It was just as well that he should have something to do, and

it was just as well that he should have something for doing it. Whether

it would be more agreeable to Edmund than the army, remained to be seen.

Thus the Bosom; accomplished in the art of seeming to make things of

small account, and really enhancing them in the process. While Henry

Gowan, whom Decimus had thrown away, went through the whole round of

his acquaintance between the Gate of the People and the town of Albano,

vowing, almost (but not quite) with tears in his eyes, that Sparkler was

the sweetest-tempered, simplest-hearted, altogether most lovable jackass

that ever grazed on the public common; and that only one circumstance

could have delighted him (Gowan) more, than his (the beloved jackass's)

getting this post, and that would have been his (Gowan's) getting it

himself. He said it was the very thing for Sparkler. There was nothing

to do, and he would do it charmingly; there was a handsome salary to

draw, and he would draw it charmingly; it was a delightful, appropriate,

capital appointment; and he almost forgave the donor his slight of

himself, in his joy that the dear donkey for whom he had so great an

affection was so admirably stabled. Nor did his benevolence stop here.

He took pains, on all social occasions, to draw Mr Sparkler out, and

make him conspicuous before the company; and, although the considerate

action always resulted in that young gentleman's making a dreary and

forlorn mental spectacle of himself, the friendly intention was not to

be doubted.

Unless, indeed, it chanced to be doubted by the object of Mr Sparkler's

affections. Miss Fanny was now in the difficult situation of being

universally known in that light, and of not having dismissed Mr

Sparkler, however capriciously she used him. Hence, she was sufficiently

identified with the gentleman to feel compromised by his being more than

usually ridiculous; and hence, being by no means deficient in quickness,

she sometimes came to his rescue against Gowan, and did him very good

service. But, while doing this, she was ashamed of him, undetermined

whether to get rid of him or more decidedly encourage him, distracted

with apprehensions that she was every day becoming more and more

immeshed in her uncertainties, and tortured by misgivings that Mrs

Merdle triumphed in her distress. With this tumult in her mind, it is no

subject for surprise that Miss Fanny came home one night in a state

of agitation from a concert and ball at Mrs Merdle's house, and on her

sister affectionately trying to soothe her, pushed that sister away from

the toilette-table at which she sat angrily trying to cry, and declared

with a heaving bosom that she detested everybody, and she wished she was

dead.

'Dear Fanny, what is the matter? Tell me.'

'Matter, you little Mole,' said Fanny. 'If you were not the blindest of

the blind, you would have no occasion to ask me. The idea of daring to

pretend to assert that you have eyes in your head, and yet ask me what's

the matter!'

'Is it Mr Sparkler, dear?' 'Mis-ter Spark-ler!' repeated Fanny, with

unbounded scorn, as if he were the last subject in the Solar system that

could possibly be near her mind. 'No, Miss Bat, it is not.'

Immediately afterwards, she became remorseful for having called her

sister names; declaring with sobs that she knew she made herself

hateful, but that everybody drove her to it.

'I don't think you are well to-night, dear Fanny.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' replied the young lady, turning angry again; 'I am

as well as you are. Perhaps I might say better, and yet make no boast of

it.'

Poor Little Dorrit, not seeing her way to the offering of any soothing

words that would escape repudiation, deemed it best to remain quiet. At

first, Fanny took this ill, too; protesting to her looking-glass, that

of all the trying sisters a girl could have, she did think the most

trying sister was a flat sister. That she knew she was at times a

wretched temper; that she knew she made herself hateful; that when she

made herself hateful, nothing would do her half the good as being told

so; but that, being afflicted with a flat sister, she never WAS told so,

and the consequence resulted that she was absolutely tempted and

goaded into making herself disagreeable. Besides (she angrily told

her looking-glass), she didn't want to be forgiven. It was not a right

example, that she should be constantly stooping to be forgiven by a

younger sister. And this was the Art of it--that she was always being

placed in the position of being forgiven, whether she liked it or not.

Finally she burst into violent weeping, and, when her sister came and

sat close at her side to comfort her, said, 'Amy, you're an Angel!'

'But, I tell you what, my Pet,' said Fanny, when her sister's gentleness

had calmed her, 'it now comes to this; that things cannot and shall not

go on as they are at present going on, and that there must be an end of

this, one way or another.'

As the announcement was vague, though very peremptory, Little Dorrit

returned, 'Let us talk about it.'

'Quite so, my dear,' assented Fanny, as she dried her eyes. 'Let us talk

about it. I am rational again now, and you shall advise me. Will you

advise me, my sweet child?'

Even Amy smiled at this notion, but she said, 'I will, Fanny, as well as

I can.'

'Thank you, dearest Amy,' returned Fanny, kissing her. 'You are my

anchor.'

Having embraced her Anchor with great affection, Fanny took a bottle of

sweet toilette water from the table, and called to her maid for a fine

handkerchief. She then dismissed that attendant for the night, and went

on to be advised; dabbing her eyes and forehead from time to time to

cool them.

'My love,' Fanny began, 'our characters and points of view are

sufficiently different (kiss me again, my darling), to make it very

probable that I shall surprise you by what I am going to say. What I am

going to say, my dear, is, that notwithstanding our property, we labour,

socially speaking, under disadvantages. You don't quite understand what

I mean, Amy?'

'I have no doubt I shall,' said Amy, mildly, 'after a few words more.'

'Well, my dear, what I mean is, that we are, after all, newcomers into

fashionable life.'

'I am sure, Fanny,' Little Dorrit interposed in her zealous admiration,

'no one need find that out in you.'

'Well, my dear child, perhaps not,' said Fanny, 'though it's most kind

and most affectionate in you, you precious girl, to say so.' Here she

dabbed her sister's forehead, and blew upon it a little. 'But you are,'

resumed Fanny, 'as is well known, the dearest little thing that ever

was! To resume, my child. Pa is extremely gentlemanly and extremely well

informed, but he is, in some trifling respects, a little different from

other gentlemen of his fortune: partly on account of what he has gone

through, poor dear: partly, I fancy, on account of its often running in

his mind that other people are thinking about that, while he is talking

to them. Uncle, my love, is altogether unpresentable. Though a dear

creature to whom I am tenderly attached, he is, socially speaking,

shocking. Edward is frightfully expensive and dissipated. I don't mean

that there is anything ungenteel in that itself--far from it--but I

do mean that he doesn't do it well, and that he doesn't, if I may

so express myself, get the money's-worth in the sort of dissipated

reputation that attaches to him.'

'Poor Edward!' sighed Little Dorrit, with the whole family history in

the sigh.

'Yes. And poor you and me, too,' returned Fanny, rather sharply.

'Very true! Then, my dear, we have no mother, and we have a Mrs General.

And I tell you again, darling, that Mrs General, if I may reverse a

common proverb and adapt it to her, is a cat in gloves who WILL

catch mice. That woman, I am quite sure and confident, will be our

mother-in-law.'

'I can hardly think, Fanny-' Fanny stopped her.

'Now, don't argue with me about it, Amy,' said she, 'because I know

better.' Feeling that she had been sharp again, she dabbed her sister's

forehead again, and blew upon it again. 'To resume once more, my dear.

It then becomes a question with me (I am proud and spirited, Amy, as you

very well know: too much so, I dare say) whether I shall make up my mind

to take it upon myself to carry the family through.' 'How?' asked her

sister, anxiously.

'I will not,' said Fanny, without answering the question, 'submit to

be mother-in-lawed by Mrs General; and I will not submit to be, in any

respect whatever, either patronised or tormented by Mrs Merdle.'

Little Dorrit laid her hand upon the hand that held the bottle of sweet

water, with a still more anxious look. Fanny, quite punishing her own

forehead with the vehement dabs she now began to give it, fitfully went

on.

'That he has somehow or other, and how is of no consequence, attained a

very good position, no one can deny. That it is a very good connection,

no one can deny. And as to the question of clever or not clever, I doubt

very much whether a clever husband would be suitable to me. I cannot

submit. I should not be able to defer to him enough.'

'O, my dear Fanny!' expostulated Little Dorrit, upon whom a kind of

terror had been stealing as she perceived what her sister meant. 'If you

loved any one, all this feeling would change. If you loved any one, you

would no more be yourself, but you would quite lose and forget yourself

in your devotion to him. If you loved him, Fanny--' Fanny had stopped

the dabbing hand, and was looking at her fixedly.

'O, indeed!' cried Fanny. 'Really? Bless me, how much some people know

of some subjects! They say every one has a subject, and I certainly

seem to have hit upon yours, Amy. There, you little thing, I was only in

fun,' dabbing her sister's forehead; 'but don't you be a silly puss,

and don't you think flightily and eloquently about degenerate

impossibilities. There! Now, I'll go back to myself.'

'Dear Fanny, let me say first, that I would far rather we worked for

a scanty living again than I would see you rich and married to Mr

Sparkler.'

'Let you say, my dear?' retorted Fanny. 'Why, of course, I will let you

say anything. There is no constraint upon you, I hope. We are together

to talk it over. And as to marrying Mr Sparkler, I have not the

slightest intention of doing so to-night, my dear, or to-morrow morning

either.'

'But at some time?'

'At no time, for anything I know at present,' answered Fanny, with

indifference. Then, suddenly changing her indifference into a burning

restlessness, she added, 'You talk about the clever men, you little

thing! It's all very fine and easy to talk about the clever men; but

where are they? I don't see them anywhere near me!'

'My dear Fanny, so short a time--'

'Short time or long time,' interrupted Fanny. 'I am impatient of our

situation. I don't like our situation, and very little would induce

me to change it. Other girls, differently reared and differently

circumstanced altogether, might wonder at what I say or may do. Let

them. They are driven by their lives and characters; I am driven by

mine.'

'Fanny, my dear Fanny, you know that you have qualities to make you the

wife of one very superior to Mr Sparkler.'

'Amy, my dear Amy,' retorted Fanny, parodying her words, 'I know that I

wish to have a more defined and distinct position, in which I can assert

myself with greater effect against that insolent woman.'

'Would you therefore--forgive my asking, Fanny--therefore marry her

son?'

'Why, perhaps,' said Fanny, with a triumphant smile. 'There may be many

less promising ways of arriving at an end than that, MY dear. That piece

of insolence may think, now, that it would be a great success to get her

son off upon me, and shelve me. But, perhaps, she little thinks how I

would retort upon her if I married her son.

I would oppose her in everything, and compete with her. I would make it

the business of my life.'

Fanny set down the bottle when she came to this, and walked about the

room; always stopping and standing still while she spoke.

'One thing I could certainly do, my child: I could make her older. And I

would!'

This was followed by another walk.

'I would talk of her as an old woman. I would pretend to know--if I

didn't, but I should from her son--all about her age. And she should

hear me say, Amy: affectionately, quite dutifully and affectionately:

how well she looked, considering her time of life. I could make her seem

older at once, by being myself so much younger. I may not be as handsome

as she is; I am not a fair judge of that question, I suppose; but I know

I am handsome enough to be a thorn in her side. And I would be!'

'My dear sister, would you condemn yourself to an unhappy life for

this?'

'It wouldn't be an unhappy life, Amy. It would be the life I am fitted

for. Whether by disposition, or whether by circumstances, is no matter;

I am better fitted for such a life than for almost any other.'

There was something of a desolate tone in those words; but, with a

short proud laugh she took another walk, and after passing a great

looking-glass came to another stop.

'Figure! Figure, Amy! Well. The woman has a good figure. I will give her

her due, and not deny it. But is it so far beyond all others that it is

altogether unapproachable? Upon my word, I am not so sure of it. Give

some much younger woman the latitude as to dress that she has, being

married; and we would see about that, my dear!'

Something in the thought that was agreeable and flattering, brought her

back to her seat in a gayer temper. She took her sister's hands in hers,

and clapped all four hands above her head as she looked in her sister's

face laughing:

'And the dancer, Amy, that she has quite forgotten--the dancer who bore

no sort of resemblance to me, and of whom I never remind her, oh dear

no!--should dance through her life, and dance in her way, to such a tune

as would disturb her insolent placidity a little. Just a little, my dear

Amy, just a little!'

Meeting an earnest and imploring look in Amy's face, she brought the

four hands down, and laid only one on Amy's lips.

'Now, don't argue with me, child,' she said in a sterner way, 'because

it is of no use. I understand these subjects much better than you do. I

have not nearly made up my mind, but it may be. Now we have talked this

over comfortably, and may go to bed. You best and dearest little mouse,

Good night!' With those words Fanny weighed her Anchor, and--having

taken so much advice--left off being advised for that occasion.

Thenceforward, Amy observed Mr Sparkler's treatment by his enslaver,

with new reasons for attaching importance to all that passed between

them. There were times when Fanny appeared quite unable to endure his

mental feebleness, and when she became so sharply impatient of it that

she would all but dismiss him for good. There were other times when she

got on much better with him; when he amused her, and when her sense of

superiority seemed to counterbalance that opposite side of the scale. If

Mr Sparkler had been other than the faithfullest and most submissive of

swains, he was sufficiently hard pressed to have fled from the scene of

his trials, and have set at least the whole distance from Rome to London

between himself and his enchantress. But he had no greater will of his

own than a boat has when it is towed by a steam-ship; and he followed

his cruel mistress through rough and smooth, on equally strong

compulsion.

Mrs Merdle, during these passages, said little to Fanny, but said

more about her. She was, as it were, forced to look at her through her

eye-glass, and in general conversation to allow commendations of her

beauty to be wrung from her by its irresistible demands. The defiant

character it assumed when Fanny heard these extollings (as it generally

happened that she did), was not expressive of concessions to the

impartial bosom; but the utmost revenge the bosom took was, to say

audibly, 'A spoilt beauty--but with that face and shape, who could

wonder?'

It might have been about a month or six weeks after the night of the

new advice, when Little Dorrit began to think she detected some new

understanding between Mr Sparkler and Fanny. Mr Sparkler, as if in

attendance to some compact, scarcely ever spoke without first looking

towards Fanny for leave. That young lady was too discreet ever to look

back again; but, if Mr Sparkler had permission to speak, she remained

silent; if he had not, she herself spoke. Moreover, it became plain

whenever Henry Gowan attempted to perform the friendly office of drawing

him out, that he was not to be drawn. And not only that, but Fanny would

presently, without any pointed application in the world, chance to say

something with such a sting in it that Gowan would draw back as if he

had put his hand into a bee-hive.

There was yet another circumstance which went a long way to confirm

Little Dorrit in her fears, though it was not a great circumstance

in itself. Mr Sparkler's demeanour towards herself changed. It became

fraternal. Sometimes, when she was in the outer circle of assemblies--at

their own residence, at Mrs Merdle's, or elsewhere--she would find

herself stealthily supported round the waist by Mr Sparkler's arm. Mr

Sparkler never offered the slightest explanation of this attention;

but merely smiled with an air of blundering, contented, good-natured

proprietorship, which, in so heavy a gentleman, was ominously

expressive.

Little Dorrit was at home one day, thinking about Fanny with a heavy

heart. They had a room at one end of their drawing-room suite, nearly

all irregular bay-window, projecting over the street, and commanding

all the picturesque life and variety of the Corso, both up and down. At

three or four o'clock in the afternoon, English time, the view from this

window was very bright and peculiar; and Little Dorrit used to sit

and muse here, much as she had been used to while away the time in her

balcony at Venice. Seated thus one day, she was softly touched on the

shoulder, and Fanny said, 'Well, Amy dear,' and took her seat at her

side. Their seat was a part of the window; when there was anything in

the way of a procession going on, they used to have bright draperies

hung out of the window, and used to kneel or sit on this seat, and look

out at it, leaning on the brilliant colour. But there was no procession

that day, and Little Dorrit was rather surprised by Fanny's being at

home at that hour, as she was generally out on horseback then.

'Well, Amy,' said Fanny, 'what are you thinking of, little one?' 'I was

thinking of you, Fanny.'

'No? What a coincidence! I declare here's some one else. You were not

thinking of this some one else too; were you, Amy?'

Amy HAD been thinking of this some one else too; for it was Mr Sparkler.

She did not say so, however, as she gave him her hand. Mr Sparkler

came and sat down on the other side of her, and she felt the fraternal

railing come behind her, and apparently stretch on to include Fanny.

'Well, my little sister,' said Fanny with a sigh, 'I suppose you know

what this means?'

'She's as beautiful as she's doated on,' stammered Mr Sparkler--'and

there's no nonsense about her--it's arranged--'

'You needn't explain, Edmund,' said Fanny.

'No, my love,' said Mr Sparkler.

'In short, pet,' proceeded Fanny, 'on the whole, we are engaged. We

must tell papa about it either to-night or to-morrow, according to the

opportunities. Then it's done, and very little more need be said.'

'My dear Fanny,' said Mr Sparkler, with deference, 'I should like to say

a word to Amy.'

'Well, well! Say it for goodness' sake,' returned the young lady.

'I am convinced, my dear Amy,' said Mr Sparkler, 'that if ever there

was a girl, next to your highly endowed and beautiful sister, who had no

nonsense about her--'

'We know all about that, Edmund,' interposed Miss Fanny. 'Never mind

that. Pray go on to something else besides our having no nonsense about

us.'

'Yes, my love,' said Mr Sparkler. 'And I assure you, Amy, that nothing

can be a greater happiness to myself, myself--next to the happiness of

being so highly honoured with the choice of a glorious girl who hasn't

an atom of--'

'Pray, Edmund, pray!' interrupted Fanny, with a slight pat of her pretty

foot upon the floor.

'My love, you're quite right,' said Mr Sparkler, 'and I know I have a

habit of it. What I wished to declare was, that nothing can be a greater

happiness to myself, myself-next to the happiness of being united to

pre-eminently the most glorious of girls--than to have the happiness

of cultivating the affectionate acquaintance of Amy. I may not myself,'

said Mr Sparkler manfully, 'be up to the mark on some other subjects

at a short notice, and I am aware that if you were to poll Society the

general opinion would be that I am not; but on the subject of Amy I am

up to the mark!'

Mr Sparkler kissed her, in witness thereof.

'A knife and fork and an apartment,' proceeded Mr Sparkler, growing, in

comparison with his oratorical antecedents, quite diffuse, 'will ever

be at Amy's disposal. My Governor, I am sure, will always be proud to

entertain one whom I so much esteem. And regarding my mother,' said Mr

Sparkler, 'who is a remarkably fine woman, with--'

'Edmund, Edmund!' cried Miss Fanny, as before.

'With submission, my soul,' pleaded Mr Sparkler. 'I know I have a habit

of it, and I thank you very much, my adorable girl, for taking the

trouble to correct it; but my mother is admitted on all sides to be a

remarkably fine woman, and she really hasn't any.'

'That may be, or may not be,' returned Fanny, 'but pray don't mention it

any more.'

'I will not, my love,' said Mr Sparkler.

'Then, in fact, you have nothing more to say, Edmund; have you?'

inquired Fanny.

'So far from it, my adorable girl,' answered Mr Sparkler, 'I apologise

for having said so much.'

Mr Sparkler perceived, by a kind of inspiration, that the question

implied had he not better go? He therefore withdrew the fraternal

railing, and neatly said that he thought he would, with submission, take

his leave. He did not go without being congratulated by Amy, as well

as she could discharge that office in the flutter and distress of her

spirits.

When he was gone, she said, 'O Fanny, Fanny!' and turned to her sister

in the bright window, and fell upon her bosom and cried there. Fanny

laughed at first; but soon laid her face against her sister's and cried

too--a little. It was the last time Fanny ever showed that there was any

hidden, suppressed, or conquered feeling in her on the matter. From that

hour the way she had chosen lay before her, and she trod it with her own

imperious self-willed step.

CHAPTER 15. No just Cause or Impediment why these Two Persons

should not be joined together

Mr Dorrit, on being informed by his elder daughter that she had accepted

matrimonial overtures from Mr Sparkler, to whom she had plighted her

troth, received the communication at once with great dignity and with a

large display of parental pride; his dignity dilating with the widened

prospect of advantageous ground from which to make acquaintances, and

his parental pride being developed by Miss Fanny's ready sympathy with

that great object of his existence. He gave her to understand that her

noble ambition found harmonious echoes in his heart; and bestowed

his blessing on her, as a child brimful of duty and good principle,

self-devoted to the aggrandisement of the family name.

To Mr Sparkler, when Miss Fanny permitted him to appear, Mr Dorrit said,

he would not disguise that the alliance Mr Sparkler did him the honour

to propose was highly congenial to his feelings; both as being in unison

with the spontaneous affections of his daughter Fanny, and as opening

a family connection of a gratifying nature with Mr Merdle, the

master spirit of the age. Mrs Merdle also, as a leading lady rich in

distinction, elegance, grace, and beauty, he mentioned in very laudatory

terms. He felt it his duty to remark (he was sure a gentleman of Mr

Sparkler's fine sense would interpret him with all delicacy), that he

could not consider this proposal definitely determined on, until he

should have had the privilege of holding some correspondence with Mr

Merdle; and of ascertaining it to be so far accordant with the views

of that eminent gentleman as that his (Mr Dorrit's) daughter would be

received on that footing which her station in life and her dowry and

expectations warranted him in requiring that she should maintain in

what he trusted he might be allowed, without the appearance of being

mercenary, to call the Eye of the Great World. While saying this, which

his character as a gentleman of some little station, and his character

as a father, equally demanded of him, he would not be so diplomatic

as to conceal that the proposal remained in hopeful abeyance and

under conditional acceptance, and that he thanked Mr Sparkler for the

compliment rendered to himself and to his family. He concluded with

some further and more general observations on the--ha--character of an

independent gentleman, and the--hum--character of a possibly too

partial and admiring parent. To sum the whole up shortly, he received

Mr Sparkler's offer very much as he would have received three or four

half-crowns from him in the days that were gone.

Mr Sparkler, finding himself stunned by the words thus heaped upon his

inoffensive head, made a brief though pertinent rejoinder; the same

being neither more nor less than that he had long perceived Miss Fanny

to have no nonsense about her, and that he had no doubt of its being all

right with his Governor. At that point the object of his affections shut

him up like a box with a spring lid, and sent him away.

Proceeding shortly afterwards to pay his respects to the Bosom, Mr

Dorrit was received by it with great consideration. Mrs Merdle had heard

of this affair from Edmund. She had been surprised at first, because she

had not thought Edmund a marrying man. Society had not thought Edmund

a marrying man. Still, of course she had seen, as a woman (we women

did instinctively see these things, Mr Dorrit!), that Edmund had been

immensely captivated by Miss Dorrit, and she had openly said that Mr

Dorrit had much to answer for in bringing so charming a girl abroad to

turn the heads of his countrymen.

'Have I the honour to conclude, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, 'that the

direction which Mr Sparkler's affections have taken, is--ha-approved of

by you?'

'I assure you, Mr Dorrit,' returned the lady, 'that, personally, I am

charmed.'

That was very gratifying to Mr Dorrit.

'Personally,' repeated Mrs Merdle, 'charmed.'

This casual repetition of the word 'personally,' moved Mr Dorrit to

express his hope that Mr Merdle's approval, too, would not be wanting?

'I cannot,' said Mrs Merdle, 'take upon myself to answer positively for

Mr Merdle; gentlemen, especially gentlemen who are what Society calls

capitalists, having their own ideas of these matters. But I should

think--merely giving an opinion, Mr Dorrit--I should think Mr Merdle

would be upon the whole,' here she held a review of herself before

adding at her leisure, 'quite charmed.'

At the mention of gentlemen whom Society called capitalists, Mr Dorrit

had coughed, as if some internal demur were breaking out of him. Mrs

Merdle had observed it, and went on to take up the cue.

'Though, indeed, Mr Dorrit, it is scarcely necessary for me to make that

remark, except in the mere openness of saying what is uppermost to one

whom I so highly regard, and with whom I hope I may have the pleasure

of being brought into still more agreeable relations. For one cannot

but see the great probability of your considering such things from Mr

Merdle's own point of view, except indeed that circumstances have made

it Mr Merdle's accidental fortune, or misfortune, to be engaged in

business transactions, and that they, however vast, may a little cramp

his horizons. I am a very child as to having any notion of business,'

said Mrs Merdle; 'but I am afraid, Mr Dorrit, it may have that

tendency.'

This skilful see-saw of Mr Dorrit and Mrs Merdle, so that each of them

sent the other up, and each of them sent the other down, and neither

had the advantage, acted as a sedative on Mr Dorrit's cough. He remarked

with his utmost politeness, that he must beg to protest against its

being supposed, even by Mrs Merdle, the accomplished and graceful

(to which compliment she bent herself), that such enterprises as Mr

Merdle's, apart as they were from the puny undertakings of the rest of

men, had any lower tendency than to enlarge and expand the genius in

which they were conceived. 'You are generosity itself,' said Mrs Merdle

in return, smiling her best smile; 'let us hope so. But I confess I am

almost superstitious in my ideas about business.'

Mr Dorrit threw in another compliment here, to the effect that business,

like the time which was precious in it, was made for slaves; and that it

was not for Mrs Merdle, who ruled all hearts at her supreme pleasure,

to have anything to do with it. Mrs Merdle laughed, and conveyed to

Mr Dorrit an idea that the Bosom flushed--which was one of her best

effects.

'I say so much,' she then explained, 'merely because Mr Merdle has

always taken the greatest interest in Edmund, and has always expressed

the strongest desire to advance his prospects. Edmund's public position,

I think you know. His private position rests solely with Mr Merdle. In

my foolish incapacity for business, I assure you I know no more.'

Mr Dorrit again expressed, in his own way, the sentiment that business

was below the ken of enslavers and enchantresses. He then mentioned his

intention, as a gentleman and a parent, of writing to Mr Merdle. Mrs

Merdle concurred with all her heart--or with all her art, which was

exactly the same thing--and herself despatched a preparatory letter by

the next post to the eighth wonder of the world.

In his epistolary communication, as in his dialogues and discourses on

the great question to which it related, Mr Dorrit surrounded the

subject with flourishes, as writing-masters embellish copy-books and

ciphering-books: where the titles of the elementary rules of

arithmetic diverge into swans, eagles, griffins, and other calligraphic

recreations, and where the capital letters go out of their minds and

bodies into ecstasies of pen and ink. Nevertheless, he did render the

purport of his letter sufficiently clear, to enable Mr Merdle to make a

decent pretence of having learnt it from that source. Mr Merdle replied

to it accordingly. Mr Dorrit replied to Mr Merdle; Mr Merdle replied to

Mr Dorrit; and it was soon announced that the corresponding powers had

come to a satisfactory understanding.

Now, and not before, Miss Fanny burst upon the scene, completely arrayed

for her new part. Now and not before, she wholly absorbed Mr Sparkler in

her light, and shone for both, and twenty more. No longer feeling that

want of a defined place and character which had caused her so much

trouble, this fair ship began to steer steadily on a shaped course, and

to swim with a weight and balance that developed her sailing qualities.

'The preliminaries being so satisfactorily arranged, I think I will now,

my dear,' said Mr Dorrit, 'announce--ha--formally, to Mrs General--'

'Papa,' returned Fanny, taking him up short upon that name, 'I don't see

what Mrs General has got to do with it.'

'My dear,' said Mr Dorrit, 'it will be an act of courtesy to--hum--a

lady, well bred and refined--'

'Oh! I am sick of Mrs General's good breeding and refinement, papa,'

said Fanny. 'I am tired of Mrs General.'

'Tired,' repeated Mr Dorrit in reproachful astonishment, 'of--ha--Mrs

General.'

'Quite disgusted with her, papa,' said Fanny. 'I really don't see what

she has to do with my marriage. Let her keep to her own matrimonial

projects--if she has any.'

'Fanny,' returned Mr Dorrit, with a grave and weighty slowness upon him,

contrasting strongly with his daughter's levity: 'I beg the favour of

your explaining--ha--what it is you mean.' 'I mean, papa,' said Fanny,

'that if Mrs General should happen to have any matrimonial projects of

her own, I dare say they are quite enough to occupy her spare time. And

that if she has not, so much the better; but still I don't wish to have

the honour of making announcements to her.'

'Permit me to ask you, Fanny,' said Mr Dorrit, 'why not?'

'Because she can find my engagement out for herself, papa,' retorted

Fanny. 'She is watchful enough, I dare say. I think I have seen her

so. Let her find it out for herself. If she should not find it out for

herself, she will know it when I am married. And I hope you will not

consider me wanting in affection for you, papa, if I say it strikes me

that will be quite enough for Mrs General.'

'Fanny,' returned Mr Dorrit, 'I am amazed, I am displeased by

this--hum--this capricious and unintelligible display of animosity

towards--ha--Mrs General.'

'Do not, if you please, papa,' urged Fanny, 'call it animosity, because

I assure you I do not consider Mrs General worth my animosity.'

At this, Mr Dorrit rose from his chair with a fixed look of severe

reproof, and remained standing in his dignity before his daughter. His

daughter, turning the bracelet on her arm, and now looking at him, and

now looking from him, said, 'Very well, papa. I am truly sorry if you

don't like it; but I can't help it. I am not a child, and I am not Amy,

and I must speak.'

'Fanny,' gasped Mr Dorrit, after a majestic silence, 'if I request

you to remain here, while I formally announce to Mrs General, as

an exemplary lady, who is--hum--a trusted member of this family,

the--ha--the change that is contemplated among us; if I--ha--not only

request it, but--hum--insist upon it--'

'Oh, papa,' Fanny broke in with pointed significance, 'if you make so

much of it as that, I have in duty nothing to do but comply. I hope I

may have my thoughts upon the subject, however, for I really cannot help

it under the circumstances.'So, Fanny sat down with a meekness which,

in the junction of extremes, became defiance; and her father, either not

deigning to answer, or not knowing what to answer, summoned Mr Tinkler

into his presence.

'Mrs General.'

Mr Tinkler, unused to receive such short orders in connection with the

fair varnisher, paused. Mr Dorrit, seeing the whole Marshalsea and all

its testimonials in the pause, instantly flew at him with, 'How dare

you, sir? What do you mean?'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' pleaded Mr Tinkler, 'I was wishful to know--'

'You wished to know nothing, sir,' cried Mr Dorrit, highly flushed.

'Don't tell me you did. Ha. You didn't. You are guilty of mockery, sir.'

'I assure you, sir--' Mr Tinkler began.

'Don't assure me!' said Mr Dorrit. 'I will not be assured by a

domestic. You are guilty of mockery. You shall leave me--hum--the whole

establishment shall leave me. What are you waiting for?'

'Only for my orders, sir.'

'It's false,' said Mr Dorrit, 'you have your orders. Ha--hum. MY

compliments to Mrs General, and I beg the favour of her coming to me, if

quite convenient, for a few minutes. Those are your orders.'

In his execution of this mission, Mr Tinkler perhaps expressed that Mr

Dorrit was in a raging fume. However that was, Mrs General's skirts were

very speedily heard outside, coming along--one might almost have said

bouncing along--with unusual expedition. Albeit, they settled down at

the door and swept into the room with their customary coolness.

'Mrs General,' said Mr Dorrit, 'take a chair.'

Mrs General, with a graceful curve of acknowledgment, descended into the

chair which Mr Dorrit offered.

'Madam,' pursued that gentleman, 'as you have had the kindness to

undertake the--hum--formation of my daughters, and as I am persuaded

that nothing nearly affecting them can--ha--be indifferent to you--'

'Wholly impossible,' said Mrs General in the calmest of ways.

'--I therefore wish to announce to you, madam, that my daughter now

present--'

Mrs General made a slight inclination of her head to Fanny, who made

a very low inclination of her head to Mrs General, and came loftily

upright again.

'--That my daughter Fanny is--ha--contracted to be married to Mr

Sparkler, with whom you are acquainted. Hence, madam, you will be

relieved of half your difficult charge--ha--difficult charge.' Mr

Dorrit repeated it with his angry eye on Fanny. 'But not, I hope, to

the--hum--diminution of any other portion, direct or indirect, of the

footing you have at present the kindness to occupy in my family.'

'Mr Dorrit,' returned Mrs General, with her gloved hands resting on

one another in exemplary repose, 'is ever considerate, and ever but too

appreciative of my friendly services.'

(Miss Fanny coughed, as much as to say, 'You are right.')

'Miss Dorrit has no doubt exercised the soundest discretion of which

the circumstances admitted, and I trust will allow me to offer her my

sincere congratulations. When free from the trammels of passion,' Mrs

General closed her eyes at the word, as if she could not utter it, and

see anybody; 'when occurring with the approbation of near relatives;

and when cementing the proud structure of a family edifice; these are

usually auspicious events.

I trust Miss Dorrit will allow me to offer her my best congratulations.'

Here Mrs General stopped, and added internally, for the setting of her

face, 'Papa, potatoes, poultry, Prunes, and prism.'

'Mr Dorrit,' she superadded aloud, 'is ever most obliging; and for

the attention, and I will add distinction, of having this confidence

imparted to me by himself and Miss Dorrit at this early time, I beg to

offer the tribute of my thanks. My thanks, and my congratulations, are

equally the meed of Mr Dorrit and of Miss Dorrit.'

'To me,' observed Miss Fanny, 'they are excessively

gratifying--inexpressibly so. The relief of finding that you have no

objection to make, Mrs General, quite takes a load off my mind, I am

sure. I hardly know what I should have done,' said Fanny, 'if you had

interposed any objection, Mrs General.'

Mrs General changed her gloves, as to the right glove being uppermost

and the left undermost, with a Prunes and Prism smile.

'To preserve your approbation, Mrs General,' said Fanny, returning the

smile with one in which there was no trace of those ingredients, 'will

of course be the highest object of my married life; to lose it, would of

course be perfect wretchedness. I am sure your great kindness will

not object, and I hope papa will not object, to my correcting a

small mistake you have made, however. The best of us are so liable to

mistakes, that even you, Mrs General, have fallen into a little error.

The attention and distinction you have so impressively mentioned, Mrs

General, as attaching to this confidence, are, I have no doubt, of the

most complimentary and gratifying description; but they don't at all

proceed from me. The merit of having consulted you on the subject would

have been so great in me, that I feel I must not lay claim to it when it

really is not mine. It is wholly papa's. I am deeply obliged to you for

your encouragement and patronage, but it was papa who asked for it.

I have to thank you, Mrs General, for relieving my breast of a great

weight by so handsomely giving your consent to my engagement, but you

have really nothing to thank me for. I hope you will always approve of

my proceedings after I have left home and that my sister also may long

remain the favoured object of your condescension, Mrs General.'

With this address, which was delivered in her politest manner, Fanny

left the room with an elegant and cheerful air--to tear up-stairs with

a flushed face as soon as she was out of hearing, pounce in upon her

sister, call her a little Dormouse, shake her for the better opening of

her eyes, tell her what had passed below, and ask her what she thought

of Pa now?

Towards Mrs Merdle, the young lady comported herself with great

independence and self-possession; but not as yet with any more decided

opening of hostilities. Occasionally they had a slight skirmish, as when

Fanny considered herself patted on the back by that lady, or as when Mrs

Merdle looked particularly young and well; but Mrs Merdle always soon

terminated those passages of arms by sinking among her cushions with the

gracefullest indifference, and finding her attention otherwise engaged.

Society (for that mysterious creature sat upon the Seven Hills too)

found Miss Fanny vastly improved by her engagement. She was much more

accessible, much more free and engaging, much less exacting; insomuch

that she now entertained a host of followers and admirers, to the bitter

indignation of ladies with daughters to marry, who were to be regarded

as Having revolted from Society on the Miss Dorrit grievance, and

erected a rebellious standard. Enjoying the flutter she caused. Miss

Dorrit not only haughtily moved through it in her own proper person, but

haughtily, even Ostentatiously, led Mr Sparkler through it too: seeming

to say to them all, 'If I think proper to march among you in triumphal

procession attended by this weak captive in bonds, rather than a

stronger one, that is my business. Enough that I choose to do it!' Mr

Sparkler for his part, questioned nothing; but went wherever he was

taken, did whatever he was told, felt that for his bride-elect to be

distinguished was for him to be distinguished on the easiest terms, and

was truly grateful for being so openly acknowledged.

The winter passing on towards the spring while this condition of affairs

prevailed, it became necessary for Mr Sparkler to repair to England, and

take his appointed part in the expression and direction of its genius,

learning, commerce, spirit, and sense. The land of Shakespeare, Milton,

Bacon, Newton, Watt, the land of a host of past and present abstract

philosophers, natural philosophers, and subduers of Nature and Art in

their myriad forms, called to Mr Sparkler to come and take care of it,

lest it should perish. Mr Sparkler, unable to resist the agonised cry

from the depths of his country's soul, declared that he must go.

It followed that the question was rendered pressing when, where, and

how Mr Sparkler should be married to the foremost girl in all this world

with no nonsense about her. Its solution, after some little mystery and

secrecy, Miss Fanny herself announced to her sister.

'Now, my child,' said she, seeking her out one day, 'I am going to tell

you something. It is only this moment broached; and naturally I hurry to

you the moment it IS broached.'

'Your marriage, Fanny?'

'My precious child,' said Fanny, 'don't anticipate me. Let me impart my

confidence to you, you flurried little thing, in my own way. As to your

guess, if I answered it literally, I should answer no. For really it is

not my marriage that is in question, half as much as it is Edmund's.'

Little Dorrit looked, and perhaps not altogether without cause, somewhat

at a loss to understand this fine distinction.

'I am in no difficulty,' exclaimed Fanny, 'and in no hurry. I am not

wanted at any public office, or to give any vote anywhere else.

But Edmund is. And Edmund is deeply dejected at the idea of going away

by himself, and, indeed, I don't like that he should be trusted by

himself. For, if it's possible--and it generally is--to do a foolish

thing, he is sure to do it.'

As she concluded this impartial summary of the reliance that might be

safely placed upon her future husband, she took off, with an air of

business, the bonnet she wore, and dangled it by its strings upon the

ground.

'It is far more Edmund's question, therefore, than mine. However, we

need say no more about that. That is self-evident on the face of it.

Well, my dearest Amy! The point arising, is he to go by himself, or is

he not to go by himself, this other point arises, are we to be married

here and shortly, or are we to be married at home months hence?'

'I see I am going to lose you, Fanny.'

'What a little thing you are,' cried Fanny, half tolerant and half

impatient, 'for anticipating one! Pray, my darling, hear me out. That

woman,' she spoke of Mrs Merdle, of course, 'remains here until after

Easter; so, in the case of my being married here and going to London

with Edmund, I should have the start of her. That is something. Further,

Amy. That woman being out of the way, I don't know that I greatly object

to Mr Merdle's proposal to Pa that Edmund and I should take up our abode

in that house--you know--where you once went with a dancer, my dear,

until our own house can be chosen and fitted up. Further still, Amy.

Papa having always intended to go to town himself, in the spring,--you

see, if Edmund and I were married here, we might go off to Florence,

where papa might join us, and we might all three travel home together.

Mr Merdle has entreated Pa to stay with him in that same mansion I have

mentioned, and I suppose he will. But he is master of his own actions;

and upon that point (which is not at all material) I can't speak

positively.' The difference between papa's being master of his own

actions and Mr Sparkler's being nothing of the sort, was forcibly

expressed by Fanny in her manner of stating the case. Not that her

sister noticed it; for she was divided between regret at the coming

separation, and a lingering wish that she had been included in the plans

for visiting England.

'And these are the arrangements, Fanny dear?'

'Arrangements!' repeated Fanny. 'Now, really, child, you are a little

trying. You know I particularly guarded myself against laying my words

open to any such construction. What I said was, that certain questions

present themselves; and these are the questions.'

Little Dorrit's thoughtful eyes met hers, tenderly and quietly.

'Now, my own sweet girl,' said Fanny, weighing her bonnet by the strings

with considerable impatience, 'it's no use staring. A little owl could

stare. I look to you for advice, Amy. What do you advise me to do?'

'Do you think,' asked Little Dorrit, persuasively, after a short

hesitation, 'do you think, Fanny, that if you were to put it off for a

few months, it might be, considering all things, best?'

'No, little Tortoise,' retorted Fanny, with exceeding sharpness. 'I

don't think anything of the kind.'

Here, she threw her bonnet from her altogether, and flounced into a

chair. But, becoming affectionate almost immediately, she flounced out

of it again, and kneeled down on the floor to take her sister, chair and

all, in her arms.

'Don't suppose I am hasty or unkind, darling, because I really am not.

But you are such a little oddity! You make one bite your head off,

when one wants to be soothing beyond everything. Didn't I tell you, you

dearest baby, that Edmund can't be trusted by himself? And don't you

know that he can't?'

'Yes, yes, Fanny. You said so, I know.'

'And you know it, I know,' retorted Fanny. 'Well, my precious child! If

he is not to be trusted by himself, it follows, I suppose, that I should

go with him?'

'It--seems so, love,' said Little Dorrit.

'Therefore, having heard the arrangements that are feasible to carry

out that object, am I to understand, dearest Amy, that on the whole you

advise me to make them?'

'It--seems so, love,' said Little Dorrit again.

'Very well,' cried Fanny with an air of resignation, 'then I suppose it

must be done! I came to you, my sweet, the moment I saw the doubt, and

the necessity of deciding. I have now decided. So let it be.'

After yielding herself up, in this pattern manner, to sisterly advice

and the force of circumstances, Fanny became quite benignant: as one

who had laid her own inclinations at the feet of her dearest friend, and

felt a glow of conscience in having made the sacrifice. 'After all, my

Amy,' she said to her sister, 'you are the best of small creatures, and

full of good sense; and I don't know what I shall ever do without you!'

With which words she folded her in a closer embrace, and a really fond

one.

'Not that I contemplate doing without You, Amy, by any means, for I hope

we shall ever be next to inseparable. And now, my pet, I am going

to give you a word of advice. When you are left alone here with Mrs

General--'

'I am to be left alone here with Mrs General?' said Little Dorrit,

quietly.

'Why, of course, my precious, till papa comes back! Unless you call

Edward company, which he certainly is not, even when he is here, and

still more certainly is not when he is away at Naples or in Sicily. I

was going to say--but you are such a beloved little Marplot for putting

one out--when you are left alone here with Mrs General, Amy, don't you

let her slide into any sort of artful understanding with you that she is

looking after Pa, or that Pa is looking after her. She will if she can.

I know her sly manner of feeling her way with those gloves of hers. But

don't you comprehend her on any account. And if Pa should tell you when

he comes back, that he has it in contemplation to make Mrs General your

mama (which is not the less likely because I am going away), my advice

to you is, that you say at once, "Papa, I beg to object most strongly.

Fanny cautioned me about this, and she objected, and I object." I don't

mean to say that any objection from you, Amy, is likely to be of the

smallest effect, or that I think you likely to make it with any degree

of firmness. But there is a principle involved--a filial principle--and

I implore you not to submit to be mother-in-lawed by Mrs General,

without asserting it in making every one about you as uncomfortable as

possible. I don't expect you to stand by it--indeed, I know you won't,

Pa being concerned--but I wish to rouse you to a sense of duty. As to

any help from me, or as to any opposition that I can offer to such a

match, you shall not be left in the lurch, my love. Whatever weight

I may derive from my position as a married girl not wholly devoid of

attractions--used, as that position always shall be, to oppose that

woman--I will bring to bear, you May depend upon it, on the head and

false hair (for I am confident it's not all real, ugly as it is and

unlikely as it appears that any One in their Senses would go to the

expense of buying it) of Mrs General!' Little Dorrit received this

counsel without venturing to oppose it but without giving Fanny any

reason to believe that she intended to act upon it. Having now, as

it were, formally wound up her single life and arranged her worldly

affairs, Fanny proceeded with characteristic ardour to prepare for the

serious change in her condition.

The preparation consisted in the despatch of her maid to Paris under the

protection of the Courier, for the purchase of that outfit for a bride

on which it would be extremely low, in the present narrative, to bestow

an English name, but to which (on a vulgar principle it observes

of adhering to the language in which it professes to be written) it

declines to give a French one. The rich and beautiful wardrobe purchased

by these agents, in the course of a few weeks made its way through the

intervening country, bristling with custom-houses, garrisoned by an

immense army of shabby mendicants in uniform who incessantly repeated

the Beggar's Petition over it, as if every individual warrior among them

were the ancient Belisarius: and of whom there were so many Legions,

that unless the Courier had expended just one bushel and a half of

silver money relieving their distresses, they would have worn the

wardrobe out before it got to Rome, by turning it over and over. Through

all such dangers, however, it was triumphantly brought, inch by inch,

and arrived at its journey's end in fine condition.

There it was exhibited to select companies of female viewers, in whose

gentle bosoms it awakened implacable feelings. Concurrently, active

preparations were made for the day on which some of its treasures were

to be publicly displayed. Cards of breakfast-invitation were sent out

to half the English in the city of Romulus; the other half made

arrangements to be under arms, as criticising volunteers, at various

outer points of the solemnity. The most high and illustrious English

Signor Edgardo Dorrit, came post through the deep mud and ruts (from

forming a surface under the improving Neapolitan nobility), to grace

the occasion. The best hotel and all its culinary myrmidons, were set to

work to prepare the feast. The drafts of Mr Dorrit almost constituted a

run on the Torlonia Bank. The British Consul hadn't had such a marriage

in the whole of his Consularity.

The day came, and the She-Wolf in the Capitol might have snarled with

envy to see how the Island Savages contrived these things now-a-days.

The murderous-headed statues of the wicked Emperors of the Soldiery,

whom sculptors had not been able to flatter out of their villainous

hideousness, might have come off their pedestals to run away with the

Bride. The choked old fountain, where erst the gladiators washed, might

have leaped into life again to honour the ceremony. The Temple of

Vesta might have sprung up anew from its ruins, expressly to lend its

countenance to the occasion. Might have done; but did not. Like sentient

things--even like the lords and ladies of creation sometimes--might

have done much, but did nothing. The celebration went off with admirable

pomp; monks in black robes, white robes, and russet robes stopped to

look after the carriages; wandering peasants in fleeces of sheep, begged

and piped under the house-windows; the English volunteers defiled; the

day wore on to the hour of vespers; the festival wore away; the thousand

churches rang their bells without any reference to it; and St Peter

denied that he had anything to do with it.

But by that time the Bride was near the end of the first day's journey

towards Florence. It was the peculiarity of the nuptials that they

were all Bride. Nobody noticed the Bridegroom. Nobody noticed the first

Bridesmaid. Few could have seen Little Dorrit (who held that post) for

the glare, even supposing many to have sought her. So, the Bride had

mounted into her handsome chariot, incidentally accompanied by the

Bridegroom; and after rolling for a few minutes smoothly over a fair

pavement, had begun to jolt through a Slough of Despond, and through a

long, long avenue of wrack and ruin. Other nuptial carriages are said to

have gone the same road, before and since.

If Little Dorrit found herself left a little lonely and a little low

that night, nothing would have done so much against her feeling of

depression as the being able to sit at work by her father, as in the old

time, and help him to his supper and his rest. But that was not to be

thought of now, when they sat in the state-equipage with Mrs General on

the coach-box. And as to supper! If Mr Dorrit had wanted supper, there

was an Italian cook and there was a Swiss confectioner, who must

have put on caps as high as the Pope's Mitre, and have performed the

mysteries of Alchemists in a copper-saucepaned laboratory below, before

he could have got it.

He was sententious and didactic that night. If he had been simply

loving, he would have done Little Dorrit more good; but she accepted him

as he was--when had she not accepted him as he was!--and made the most

and best of him. Mrs General at length retired. Her retirement for the

night was always her frostiest ceremony, as if she felt it necessary

that the human imagination should be chilled into stone to prevent

its following her. When she had gone through her rigid preliminaries,

amounting to a sort of genteel platoon-exercise, she withdrew. Little

Dorrit then put her arm round her father's neck, to bid him good night.

'Amy, my dear,' said Mr Dorrit, taking her by the hand, 'this is the

close of a day, that has--ha--greatly impressed and gratified me.' 'A

little tired you, dear, too?'

'No,' said Mr Dorrit, 'no: I am not sensible of fatigue when it arises

from an occasion so--hum--replete with gratification of the purest

kind.'

Little Dorrit was glad to find him in such heart, and smiled from her

own heart.

'My dear,' he continued, 'this is an occasion--ha--teeming with a good

example. With a good example, my favourite and attached child--hum--to

you.'

Little Dorrit, fluttered by his words, did not know what to say, though

he stopped as if he expected her to say something.

'Amy,' he resumed; 'your dear sister, our Fanny, has contracted

ha hum--a marriage, eminently calculated to extend the basis of

our--ha--connection, and to--hum--consolidate our social relations. My

love, I trust that the time is not far distant when some--ha--eligible

partner may be found for you.'

'Oh no! Let me stay with you. I beg and pray that I may stay with you! I

want nothing but to stay and take care of you!' She said it like one in

sudden alarm.

'Nay, Amy, Amy,' said Mr Dorrit. 'This is weak and foolish, weak

and foolish. You have a--ha--responsibility imposed upon you by your

position. It is to develop that position, and be--hum--worthy of that

position. As to taking care of me; I can--ha--take care of myself.

Or,' he added after a moment, 'if I should need to be taken care of,

I--hum--can, with the--ha--blessing of Providence, be taken care of,

I--ha hum--I cannot, my dear child, think of engrossing, and--ha--as it

were, sacrificing you.'

O what a time of day at which to begin that profession of self-denial;

at which to make it, with an air of taking credit for it; at which to

believe it, if such a thing could be!

'Don't speak, Amy. I positively say I cannot do it. I--ha--must not do

it. My--hum--conscience would not allow it. I therefore, my love, take

the opportunity afforded by this gratifying and impressive occasion

of--ha--solemnly remarking, that it is now a cherished wish and purpose

of mine to see you--ha--eligibly (I repeat eligibly) married.'

'Oh no, dear! Pray!'

'Amy,' said Mr Dorrit, 'I am well persuaded that if the topic were

referred to any person of superior social knowledge, of superior

delicacy and sense--let us say, for instance, to--ha--Mrs General--that

there would not be two opinions as to the--hum--affectionate character

and propriety of my sentiments. But, as I know your loving and dutiful

nature from--hum--from experience, I am quite satisfied that it is

necessary to say no more. I have--hum--no husband to propose at

present, my dear: I have not even one in view. I merely wish that we

should--ha--understand each other. Hum. Good night, my dear and sole

remaining daughter. Good night.

God bless you!'

If the thought ever entered Little Dorrit's head that night, that he

could give her up lightly now in his prosperity, and when he had it in

his mind to replace her with a second wife, she drove it away. Faithful

to him still, as in the worst times through which she had borne him

single-handed, she drove the thought away; and entertained no harder

reflection, in her tearful unrest, than that he now saw everything

through their wealth, and through the care he always had upon him that

they should continue rich, and grow richer.

They sat in their equipage of state, with Mrs General on the box, for

three weeks longer, and then he started for Florence to join Fanny.

Little Dorrit would have been glad to bear him company so far, only for

the sake of her own love, and then to have turned back alone, thinking

of dear England. But, though the Courier had gone on with the Bride, the

Valet was next in the line; and the succession would not have come to

her, as long as any one could be got for money.

Mrs General took life easily--as easily, that is, as she could

take anything--when the Roman establishment remained in their sole

occupation; and Little Dorrit would often ride out in a hired carriage

that was left them, and alight alone and wander among the ruins of old

Rome. The ruins of the vast old Amphitheatre, of the old Temples, of the

old commemorative Arches, of the old trodden highways, of the old

tombs, besides being what they were, to her were ruins of the old

Marshalsea--ruins of her own old life--ruins of the faces and forms

that of old peopled it--ruins of its loves, hopes, cares, and joys. Two

ruined spheres of action and suffering were before the solitary girl

often sitting on some broken fragment; and in the lonely places, under

the blue sky, she saw them both together.

Up, then, would come Mrs General; taking all the colour out of

everything, as Nature and Art had taken it out of herself; writing

Prunes and Prism, in Mr Eustace's text, wherever she could lay a hand;

looking everywhere for Mr Eustace and company, and seeing nothing else;

scratching up the driest little bones of antiquity, and bolting them

whole without any human visitings--like a Ghoule in gloves.

CHAPTER 16. Getting on

The newly married pair, on their arrival in Harley Street, Cavendish

Square, London, were received by the Chief Butler. That great man was

not interested in them, but on the whole endured them. People must

continue to be married and given in marriage, or Chief Butlers would not

be wanted. As nations are made to be taxed, so families are made to

be butlered. The Chief Butler, no doubt, reflected that the course of

nature required the wealthy population to be kept up, on his account.

He therefore condescended to look at the carriage from the Hall-door

without frowning at it, and said, in a very handsome way, to one of

his men, 'Thomas, help with the luggage.' He even escorted the Bride

up-stairs into Mr Merdle's presence; but this must be considered as an

act of homage to the sex (of which he was an admirer, being notoriously

captivated by the charms of a certain Duchess), and not as a committal

of himself with the family.

Mr Merdle was slinking about the hearthrug, waiting to welcome Mrs

Sparkler. His hand seemed to retreat up his sleeve as he advanced to

do so, and he gave her such a superfluity of coat-cuff that it was like

being received by the popular conception of Guy Fawkes. When he put his

lips to hers, besides, he took himself into custody by the wrists, and

backed himself among the ottomans and chairs and tables as if he were

his own Police officer, saying to himself, 'Now, none of that! Come!

I've got you, you know, and you go quietly along with me!'

Mrs Sparkler, installed in the rooms of state--the innermost sanctuary

of down, silk, chintz, and fine linen--felt that so far her triumph was

good, and her way made, step by step. On the day before her marriage,

she had bestowed on Mrs Merdle's maid with an air of gracious

indifference, in Mrs Merdle's presence, a trifling little keepsake

(bracelet, bonnet, and two dresses, all new) about four times as

valuable as the present formerly made by Mrs Merdle to her. She was now

established in Mrs Merdle's own rooms, to which some extra touches had

been given to render them more worthy of her occupation. In her mind's

eye, as she lounged there, surrounded by every luxurious accessory that

wealth could obtain or invention devise, she saw the fair bosom that

beat in unison with the exultation of her thoughts, competing with the

bosom that had been famous so long, outshining it, and deposing it.

Happy? Fanny must have been happy. No more wishing one's self dead now.

The Courier had not approved of Mr Dorrit's staying in the house of

a friend, and had preferred to take him to an hotel in Brook Street,

Grosvenor Square. Mr Merdle ordered his carriage to be ready early

in the morning that he might wait upon Mr Dorrit immediately after

breakfast. Bright the carriage looked, sleek the horses looked, gleaming

the harness looked, luscious and lasting the liveries looked. A rich,

responsible turn-out. An equipage for a Merdle. Early people looked

after it as it rattled along the streets, and said, with awe in their

breath, 'There he goes!'

There he went, until Brook Street stopped him. Then, forth from its

magnificent case came the jewel; not lustrous in itself, but quite the

contrary.

Commotion in the office of the hotel. Merdle! The landlord, though

a gentleman of a haughty spirit who had just driven a pair of

thorough-bred horses into town, turned out to show him up-stairs.

The clerks and servants cut him off by back-passages, and were found

accidentally hovering in doorways and angles, that they might look upon

him. Merdle! O ye sun, moon, and stars, the great man! The rich man, who

had in a manner revised the New Testament, and already entered into the

kingdom of Heaven. The man who could have any one he chose to dine with

him, and who had made the money!

As he went up the stairs, people were already posted on the lower

stairs, that his shadow might fall upon them when he came down. So were

the sick brought out and laid in the track of the Apostle--who had NOT

got into the good society, and had NOT made the money.

Mr Dorrit, dressing-gowned and newspapered, was at his breakfast. The

Courier, with agitation in his voice, announced 'Miss Mairdale!' Mr

Dorrit's overwrought heart bounded as he leaped up.

'Mr Merdle, this is--ha--indeed an honour. Permit me to express

the--hum--sense, the high sense, I entertain of this--ha hum--highly

gratifying act of attention. I am well aware, sir, of the many demands

upon your time, and its--ha--enormous value,' Mr Dorrit could not

say enormous roundly enough for his own satisfaction. 'That you

should--ha--at this early hour, bestow any of your priceless time upon

me, is--ha--a compliment that I acknowledge with the greatest esteem.'

Mr Dorrit positively trembled in addressing the great man.

Mr Merdle uttered, in his subdued, inward, hesitating voice, a few

sounds that were to no purpose whatever; and finally said, 'I am glad to

see you, sir.'

'You are very kind,' said Mr Dorrit. 'Truly kind.' By this time the

visitor was seated, and was passing his great hand over his exhausted

forehead. 'You are well, I hope, Mr Merdle?'

'I am as well as I--yes, I am as well as I usually am,' said Mr Merdle.

'Your occupations must be immense.'

'Tolerably so. But--Oh dear no, there's not much the matter with me,'

said Mr Merdle, looking round the room.

'A little dyspeptic?' Mr Dorrit hinted.

'Very likely. But I--Oh, I am well enough,' said Mr Merdle.

There were black traces on his lips where they met, as if a little train

of gunpowder had been fired there; and he looked like a man who, if his

natural temperament had been quicker, would have been very feverish that

morning. This, and his heavy way of passing his hand over his forehead,

had prompted Mr Dorrit's solicitous inquiries.

'Mrs Merdle,' Mr Dorrit insinuatingly pursued, 'I left, as you will be

prepared to hear, the--ha--observed of all observers, the--hum--admired

of all admirers, the leading fascination and charm of Society in Rome.

She was looking wonderfully well when I quitted it.'

'Mrs Merdle,' said Mr Merdle, 'is generally considered a very attractive

woman. And she is, no doubt. I am sensible of her being SO.'

'Who can be otherwise?' responded Mr Dorrit.

Mr Merdle turned his tongue in his closed mouth--it seemed rather a

stiff and unmanageable tongue--moistened his lips, passed his hand over

his forehead again, and looked all round the room again, principally

under the chairs.

'But,' he said, looking Mr Dorrit in the face for the first time, and

immediately afterwards dropping his eyes to the buttons of Mr Dorrit's

waistcoat; 'if we speak of attractions, your daughter ought to be the

subject of our conversation. She is extremely beautiful. Both in face

and figure, she is quite uncommon. When the young people arrived last

night, I was really surprised to see such charms.'

Mr Dorrit's gratification was such that he said--ha--he could not

refrain from telling Mr Merdle verbally, as he had already done by

letter, what honour and happiness he felt in this union of their

families. And he offered his hand. Mr Merdle looked at the hand for a

little while, took it on his for a moment as if his were a yellow salver

or fish-slice, and then returned it to Mr Dorrit.

'I thought I would drive round the first thing,' said Mr Merdle, 'to

offer my services, in case I can do anything for you; and to say that

I hope you will at least do me the honour of dining with me to-day, and

every day when you are not better engaged during your stay in town.'

Mr Dorrit was enraptured by these attentions.

'Do you stay long, sir?'

'I have not at present the intention,' said Mr Dorrit,

'of--ha--exceeding a fortnight.'

'That's a very short stay, after so long a journey,' returned Mr Merdle.

'Hum. Yes,' said Mr Dorrit. 'But the truth is--ha--my dear Mr Merdle,

that I find a foreign life so well suited to my health and taste, that

I--hum--have but two objects in my present visit to London. First,

the--ha--the distinguished happiness and--ha--privilege which I now

enjoy and appreciate; secondly, the arrangement--hum--the laying out,

that is to say, in the best way, of--ha, hum--my money.'

'Well, sir,' said Mr Merdle, after turning his tongue again, 'if I can

be of any use to you in that respect, you may command me.'

Mr Dorrit's speech had had more hesitation in it than usual, as he

approached the ticklish topic, for he was not perfectly clear how so

exalted a potentate might take it. He had doubts whether reference to

any individual capital, or fortune, might not seem a wretchedly retail

affair to so wholesale a dealer. Greatly relieved by Mr Merdle's

affable offer of assistance, he caught at it directly, and heaped

acknowledgments upon him.

'I scarcely--ha--dared,' said Mr Dorrit, 'I assure you, to hope for

so--hum--vast an advantage as your direct advice and assistance. Though

of course I should, under any circumstances, like the--ha, hum--rest of

the civilised world, have followed in Mr Merdle's train.'

'You know we may almost say we are related, sir,' said Mr Merdle,

curiously interested in the pattern of the carpet, 'and, therefore, you

may consider me at your service.'

'Ha. Very handsome, indeed!' cried Mr Dorrit. 'Ha. Most handsome!'

'It would not,' said Mr Merdle, 'be at the present moment easy for

what I may call a mere outsider to come into any of the good things--of

course I speak of my own good things--'

'Of course, of course!' cried Mr Dorrit, in a tone implying that there

were no other good things.

'--Unless at a high price. At what we are accustomed to term a very long

figure.'

Mr Dorrit laughed in the buoyancy of his spirit. Ha, ha, ha! Long

figure. Good. Ha. Very expressive to be sure!

'However,' said Mr Merdle, 'I do generally retain in my own hands the

power of exercising some preference--people in general would be pleased

to call it favour--as a sort of compliment for my care and trouble.'

'And public spirit and genius,' Mr Dorrit suggested.

Mr Merdle, with a dry, swallowing action, seemed to dispose of those

qualities like a bolus; then added, 'As a sort of return for it. I will

see, if you please, how I can exert this limited power (for people are

jealous, and it is limited), to your advantage.' 'You are very good,'

replied Mr Dorrit. 'You are very good.'

'Of course,' said Mr Merdle, 'there must be the strictest integrity

and uprightness in these transactions; there must be the purest faith

between man and man; there must be unimpeached and unimpeachable

confidence; or business could not be carried on.'

Mr Dorrit hailed these generous sentiments with fervour.

'Therefore,' said Mr Merdle, 'I can only give you a preference to a

certain extent.'

'I perceive. To a defined extent,' observed Mr Dorrit.

'Defined extent. And perfectly above-board. As to my advice, however,'

said Mr Merdle, 'that is another matter. That, such as it is--'

Oh! Such as it was! (Mr Dorrit could not bear the faintest appearance of

its being depreciated, even by Mr Merdle himself.)

'--That, there is nothing in the bonds of spotless honour between myself

and my fellow-man to prevent my parting with, if I choose. And that,'

said Mr Merdle, now deeply intent upon a dust-cart that was passing the

windows, 'shall be at your command whenever you think proper.'

New acknowledgments from Mr Dorrit. New passages of Mr Merdle's hand

over his forehead. Calm and silence. Contemplation of Mr Dorrit's

waistcoat buttons by Mr Merdle.

'My time being rather precious,' said Mr Merdle, suddenly getting up,

as if he had been waiting in the interval for his legs and they had just

come, 'I must be moving towards the City. Can I take you anywhere, sir?

I shall be happy to set you down, or send you on. My carriage is at your

disposal.'

Mr Dorrit bethought himself that he had business at his banker's. His

banker's was in the City. That was fortunate; Mr Merdle would take

him into the City. But, surely, he might not detain Mr Merdle while he

assumed his coat? Yes, he might and must; Mr Merdle insisted on it. So

Mr Dorrit, retiring into the next room, put himself under the hands of

his valet, and in five minutes came back glorious.

Then said Mr Merdle, 'Allow me, sir. Take my arm!' Then leaning on

Mr Merdle's arm, did Mr Dorrit descend the staircase, seeing the

worshippers on the steps, and feeling that the light of Mr Merdle shone

by reflection in himself. Then the carriage, and the ride into the

City; and the people who looked at them; and the hats that flew off grey

heads; and the general bowing and crouching before this wonderful mortal

the like of which prostration of spirit was not to be seen--no, by

high Heaven, no! It may be worth thinking of by Fawners of all

denominations--in Westminster Abbey and Saint Paul's Cathedral put

together, on any Sunday in the year. It was a rapturous dream to Mr

Dorrit to find himself set aloft in this public car of triumph, making a

magnificent progress to that befitting destination, the golden Street of

the Lombards.

There Mr Merdle insisted on alighting and going his way a-foot, and

leaving his poor equipage at Mr Dorrit's disposition. So the dream

increased in rapture when Mr Dorrit came out of the bank alone, and

people looked at him in default of Mr Merdle, and when, with the ears of

his mind, he heard the frequent exclamation as he rolled glibly along,

'A wonderful man to be Mr Merdle's friend!'

At dinner that day, although the occasion was not foreseen and provided

for, a brilliant company of such as are not made of the dust of the

earth, but of some superior article for the present unknown, shed

their lustrous benediction upon Mr Dorrit's daughter's marriage. And Mr

Dorrit's daughter that day began, in earnest, her competition with that

woman not present; and began it so well that Mr Dorrit could all but

have taken his affidavit, if required, that Mrs Sparkler had all her

life been lying at full length in the lap of luxury, and had never heard

of such a rough word in the English tongue as Marshalsea.

Next day, and the day after, and every day, all graced by more dinner

company, cards descended on Mr Dorrit like theatrical snow. As the

friend and relative by marriage of the illustrious Merdle, Bar, Bishop,

Treasury, Chorus, Everybody, wanted to make or improve Mr Dorrit's

acquaintance. In Mr Merdle's heap of offices in the City, when Mr Dorrit

appeared at any of them on his business taking him Eastward (which it

frequently did, for it throve amazingly), the name of Dorrit was always

a passport to the great presence of Merdle. So the dream increased in

rapture every hour, as Mr Dorrit felt increasingly sensible that this

connection had brought him forward indeed.

Only one thing sat otherwise than auriferously, and at the same time

lightly, on Mr Dorrit's mind. It was the Chief Butler. That stupendous

character looked at him, in the course of his official looking at the

dinners, in a manner that Mr Dorrit considered questionable. He looked

at him, as he passed through the hall and up the staircase, going to

dinner, with a glazed fixedness that Mr Dorrit did not like. Seated

at table in the act of drinking, Mr Dorrit still saw him through his

wine-glass, regarding him with a cold and ghostly eye. It misgave him

that the Chief Butler must have known a Collegian, and must have seen

him in the College--perhaps had been presented to him. He looked as

closely at the Chief Butler as such a man could be looked at, and yet

he did not recall that he had ever seen him elsewhere. Ultimately he was

inclined to think that there was no reverence in the man, no sentiment

in the great creature. But he was not relieved by that; for, let him

think what he would, the Chief Butler had him in his supercilious eye,

even when that eye was on the plate and other table-garniture; and he

never let him out of it. To hint to him that this confinement in his eye

was disagreeable, or to ask him what he meant, was an act too daring to

venture upon; his severity with his employers and their visitors being

terrific, and he never permitting himself to be approached with the

slightest liberty.

CHAPTER 17. Missing

The term of Mr Dorrit's visit was within two days of being out, and he

was about to dress for another inspection by the Chief Butler (whose

victims were always dressed expressly for him), when one of the servants

of the hotel presented himself bearing a card. Mr Dorrit, taking it,

read:

'Mrs Finching.'

The servant waited in speechless deference.

'Man, man,' said Mr Dorrit, turning upon him with grievous indignation,

'explain your motive in bringing me this ridiculous name. I am wholly

unacquainted with it. Finching, sir?' said Mr Dorrit, perhaps avenging

himself on the Chief Butler by Substitute.

'Ha! What do you mean by Finching?'

The man, man, seemed to mean Flinching as much as anything else, for

he backed away from Mr Dorrit's severe regard, as he replied, 'A lady,

sir.'

'I know no such lady, sir,' said Mr Dorrit. 'Take this card away. I know

no Finching of either sex.'

'Ask your pardon, sir. The lady said she was aware she might be unknown

by name. But she begged me to say, sir, that she had formerly the honour

of being acquainted with Miss Dorrit. The lady said, sir, the youngest

Miss Dorrit.'

Mr Dorrit knitted his brows and rejoined, after a moment or two, 'Inform

Mrs Finching, sir,' emphasising the name as if the innocent man were

solely responsible for it, 'that she can come up.'

He had reflected, in his momentary pause, that unless she were admitted

she might leave some message, or might say something below, having

a disgraceful reference to that former state of existence. Hence the

concession, and hence the appearance of Flora, piloted in by the man,

man.

'I have not the pleasure,' said Mr Dorrit, standing with the card in his

hand, and with an air which imported that it would scarcely have been a

first-class pleasure if he had had it, 'of knowing either this name, or

yourself, madam. Place a chair, sir.' The responsible man, with a start,

obeyed, and went out on tiptoe. Flora, putting aside her veil with a

bashful tremor upon her, proceeded to introduce herself. At the same

time a singular combination of perfumes was diffused through the room,

as if some brandy had been put by mistake in a lavender-water bottle, or

as if some lavender-water had been put by mistake in a brandy-bottle.

'I beg Mr Dorrit to offer a thousand apologies and indeed they would

be far too few for such an intrusion which I know must appear extremely

bold in a lady and alone too, but I thought it best upon the whole

however difficult and even apparently improper though Mr F.'s Aunt would

have willingly accompanied me and as a character of great force and

spirit would probably have struck one possessed of such a knowledge of

life as no doubt with so many changes must have been acquired, for Mr F.

himself said frequently that although well educated in the neighbourhood

of Blackheath at as high as eighty guineas which is a good deal for

parents and the plate kept back too on going away but that is more a

meanness than its value that he had learnt more in his first years as a

commercial traveller with a large commission on the sale of an article

that nobody would hear of much less buy which preceded the wine trade

a long time than in the whole six years in that academy conducted by a

college Bachelor, though why a Bachelor more clever than a married man I

do not see and never did but pray excuse me that is not the point.'

Mr Dorrit stood rooted to the carpet, a statue of mystification.

'I must openly admit that I have no pretensions,' said Flora, 'but

having known the dear little thing which under altered circumstances

appears a liberty but is not so intended and Goodness knows there was no

favour in half-a-crown a-day to such a needle as herself but quite the

other way and as to anything lowering in it far from it the labourer is

worthy of his hire and I am sure I only wish he got it oftener and more

animal food and less rheumatism in the back and legs poor soul.'

'Madam,' said Mr Dorrit, recovering his breath by a great effort, as the

relict of the late Mr Finching stopped to take hers; 'madam,' said Mr

Dorrit, very red in the face, 'if I understand you to refer to--ha--to

anything in the antecedents of--hum--a daughter of mine, involving--ha

hum--daily compensation, madam, I beg to observe that the--ha--fact,

assuming it--ha--to be fact, never was within my knowledge. Hum. I

should not have permitted it. Ha. Never! Never!'

'Unnecessary to pursue the subject,' returned Flora, 'and would not have

mentioned it on any account except as supposing it a favourable and only

letter of introduction but as to being fact no doubt whatever and you

may set your mind at rest for the very dress I have on now can prove it

and sweetly made though there is no denying that it would tell better on

a better figure for my own is much too fat though how to bring it down I

know not, pray excuse me I am roving off again.' Mr Dorrit backed to his

chair in a stony way, and seated himself, as Flora gave him a softening

look and played with her parasol.

'The dear little thing,' said Flora, 'having gone off perfectly limp

and white and cold in my own house or at least papa's for though not

a freehold still a long lease at a peppercorn on the morning when

Arthur--foolish habit of our youthful days and Mr Clennam far more

adapted to existing circumstances particularly addressing a stranger and

that stranger a gentleman in an elevated station--communicated the glad

tidings imparted by a person of name of Pancks emboldens me.'

At the mention of these two names, Mr Dorrit frowned, stared, frowned

again, hesitated with his fingers at his lips, as he had hesitated long

ago, and said, 'Do me the favour to--ha--state your pleasure, madam.'

'Mr Dorrit,' said Flora, 'you are very kind in giving me permission and

highly natural it seems to me that you should be kind for though more

stately I perceive a likeness filled out of course but a likeness still,

the object of my intruding is my own without the slightest consultation

with any human being and most decidedly not with Arthur--pray excuse me

Doyce and Clennam I don't know what I am saying Mr Clennam solus--for to

put that individual linked by a golden chain to a purple time when all

was ethereal out of any anxiety would be worth to me the ransom of a

monarch not that I have the least idea how much that would come to but

using it as the total of all I have in the world and more.'

Mr Dorrit, without greatly regarding the earnestness of these latter

words, repeated, 'State your pleasure, madam.'

'It's not likely I well know,' said Flora, 'but it's possible and being

possible when I had the gratification of reading in the papers that you

had arrived from Italy and were going back I made up my mind to try it

for you might come across him or hear something of him and if so what a

blessing and relief to all!'

'Allow me to ask, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, with his ideas in wild

confusion, 'to whom--ha--To whom,' he repeated it with a raised voice in

mere desperation, 'you at present allude?'

'To the foreigner from Italy who disappeared in the City as no doubt you

have read in the papers equally with myself,' said Flora, 'not referring

to private sources by the name of Pancks from which one gathers what

dreadfully ill-natured things some people are wicked enough to whisper

most likely judging others by themselves and what the uneasiness

and indignation of Arthur--quite unable to overcome it Doyce and

Clennam--cannot fail to be.'

It happened, fortunately for the elucidation of any intelligible result,

that Mr Dorrit had heard or read nothing about the matter. This

caused Mrs Finching, with many apologies for being in great practical

difficulties as to finding the way to her pocket among the stripes of

her dress at length to produce a police handbill, setting forth that

a foreign gentleman of the name of Blandois, last from Venice, had

unaccountably disappeared on such a night in such a part of the city of

London; that he was known to have entered such a house, at such an hour;

that he was stated by the inmates of that house to have left it, about

so many minutes before midnight; and that he had never been beheld

since. This, with exact particulars of time and locality, and with

a good detailed description of the foreign gentleman who had so

mysteriously vanished, Mr Dorrit read at large.

'Blandois!' said Mr Dorrit. 'Venice! And this description! I know this

gentleman. He has been in my house. He is intimately acquainted with a

gentleman of good family (but in indifferent circumstances), of whom I

am a--hum--patron.'

'Then my humble and pressing entreaty is the more,' said Flora, 'that

in travelling back you will have the kindness to look for this foreign

gentleman along all the roads and up and down all the turnings and to

make inquiries for him at all the hotels and orange-trees and vineyards

and volcanoes and places for he must be somewhere and why doesn't he

come forward and say he's there and clear all parties up?'

'Pray, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, referring to the handbill again, 'who is

Clennam and Co.? Ha. I see the name mentioned here, in connection with

the occupation of the house which Monsieur Blandois was seen to

enter: who is Clennam and Co.? Is it the individual of whom I had

formerly--hum--some--ha--slight transitory knowledge, and to whom I

believe you have referred? Is it--ha--that person?'

'It's a very different person indeed,' replied Flora, 'with no limbs and

wheels instead and the grimmest of women though his mother.'

'Clennam and Co. a--hum--a mother!' exclaimed Mr Dorrit.

'And an old man besides,' said Flora.

Mr Dorrit looked as if he must immediately be driven out of his mind

by this account. Neither was it rendered more favourable to sanity by

Flora's dashing into a rapid analysis of Mr Flintwinch's cravat, and

describing him, without the lightest boundary line of separation between

his identity and Mrs Clennam's, as a rusty screw in gaiters. Which

compound of man and woman, no limbs, wheels, rusty screw, grimness, and

gaiters, so completely stupefied Mr Dorrit, that he was a spectacle to

be pitied. 'But I would not detain you one moment longer,' said Flora,

upon whom his condition wrought its effect, though she was quite

unconscious of having produced it, 'if you would have the goodness to

give your promise as a gentleman that both in going back to Italy and

in Italy too you would look for this Mr Blandois high and low and if

you found or heard of him make him come forward for the clearing of

all parties.' By that time Mr Dorrit had so far recovered from his

bewilderment, as to be able to say, in a tolerably connected manner,

that he should consider that his duty. Flora was delighted with her

success, and rose to take her leave.

'With a million thanks,' said she, 'and my address upon my card in case

of anything to be communicated personally, I will not send my love to

the dear little thing for it might not be acceptable, and indeed there

is no dear little thing left in the transformation so why do it but

both myself and Mr F.'s Aunt ever wish her well and lay no claim to any

favour on our side you may be sure of that but quite the other way for

what she undertook to do she did and that is more than a great many of

us do, not to say anything of her doing it as Well as it could be

done and I myself am one of them for I have said ever since I began to

recover the blow of Mr F's death that I would learn the Organ of which

I am extremely fond but of which I am ashamed to say I do not yet know a

note, good evening!'

When Mr Dorrit, who attended her to the room-door, had had a little time

to collect his senses, he found that the interview had summoned back

discarded reminiscences which jarred with the Merdle dinner-table.

He wrote and sent off a brief note excusing himself for that day, and

ordered dinner presently in his own rooms at the hotel. He had another

reason for this. His time in London was very nearly out, and was

anticipated by engagements; his plans were made for returning; and he

thought it behoved his importance to pursue some direct inquiry into the

Blandois disappearance, and be in a condition to carry back to Mr

Henry Gowan the result of his own personal investigation. He therefore

resolved that he would take advantage of that evening's freedom to go

down to Clennam and Co.'s, easily to be found by the direction set forth

in the handbill; and see the place, and ask a question or two there

himself.

Having dined as plainly as the establishment and the Courier would let

him, and having taken a short sleep by the fire for his better recovery

from Mrs Finching, he set out in a hackney-cabriolet alone. The deep

bell of St Paul's was striking nine as he passed under the shadow of

Temple Bar, headless and forlorn in these degenerate days.

As he approached his destination through the by-streets and water-side

ways, that part of London seemed to him an uglier spot at such an hour

than he had ever supposed it to be. Many long years had passed since he

had seen it; he had never known much of it; and it wore a mysterious and

dismal aspect in his eyes. So powerfully was his imagination impressed

by it, that when his driver stopped, after having asked the way more

than once, and said to the best of his belief this was the gateway they

wanted, Mr Dorrit stood hesitating, with the coach-door in his hand,

half afraid of the dark look of the place.

Truly, it looked as gloomy that night as even it had ever looked. Two of

the handbills were posted on the entrance wall, one on either side, and

as the lamp flickered in the night air, shadows passed over them, not

unlike the shadows of fingers following the lines. A watch was evidently

kept upon the place. As Mr Dorrit paused, a man passed in from over the

way, and another man passed out from some dark corner within; and both

looked at him in passing, and both remained standing about.

As there was only one house in the enclosure, there was no room for

uncertainty, so he went up the steps of that house and knocked. There

was a dim light in two windows on the first-floor. The door gave back

a dreary, vacant sound, as though the house were empty; but it was not,

for a light was visible, and a step was audible, almost directly. They

both came to the door, and a chain grated, and a woman with her apron

thrown over her face and head stood in the aperture.

'Who is it?' said the woman.

Mr Dorrit, much amazed by this appearance, replied that he was from

Italy, and that he wished to ask a question relative to the missing

person, whom he knew.

'Hi!' cried the woman, raising a cracked voice. 'Jeremiah!'

Upon this, a dry old man appeared, whom Mr Dorrit thought he identified

by his gaiters, as the rusty screw. The woman was Under apprehensions

of the dry old man, for she whisked her apron away as he approached, and

disclosed a pale affrighted face. 'Open the door, you fool,' said the

old man; 'and let the gentleman in.'

Mr Dorrit, not without a glance over his shoulder towards his driver and

the cabriolet, walked into the dim hall. 'Now, sir,' said Mr Flintwinch,

'you can ask anything here you think proper; there are no secrets here,

sir.'

Before a reply could be made, a strong stern voice, though a woman's,

called from above, 'Who is it?'

'Who is it?' returned Jeremiah. 'More inquiries. A gentleman from

Italy.'

'Bring him up here!'

Mr Flintwinch muttered, as if he deemed that unnecessary; but, turning

to Mr Dorrit, said, 'Mrs Clennam. She will do as she likes. I'll show

you the way.' He then preceded Mr Dorrit up the blackened staircase;

that gentleman, not unnaturally looking behind him on the road, saw the

woman following, with her apron thrown over her head again in her former

ghastly manner.

Mrs Clennam had her books open on her little table. 'Oh!' said she

abruptly, as she eyed her visitor with a steady look. 'You are from

Italy, sir, are you. Well?' Mr Dorrit was at a loss for any more

distinct rejoinder at the moment than 'Ha--well?'

'Where is this missing man? Have you come to give us information where

he is? I hope you have?'

'So far from it, I--hum--have come to seek information.' 'Unfortunately

for us, there is none to be got here. Flintwinch, show the gentleman the

handbill. Give him several to take away. Hold the light for him to read

it.'

Mr Flintwinch did as he was directed, and Mr Dorrit read it through,

as if he had not previously seen it; glad enough of the opportunity of

collecting his presence of mind, which the air of the house and of the

people in it had a little disturbed. While his eyes were on the paper,

he felt that the eyes of Mr Flintwinch and of Mrs Clennam were on him.

He found, when he looked up, that this sensation was not a fanciful one.

'Now you know as much,' said Mrs Clennam, 'as we know, sir. Is Mr

Blandois a friend of yours?'

'No--a--hum--an acquaintance,' answered Mr Dorrit.

'You have no commission from him, perhaps?'

'I? Ha. Certainly not.'

The searching look turned gradually to the floor, after taking Mr

Flintwinch's face in its way. Mr Dorrit, discomfited by finding that

he was the questioned instead of the questioner, applied himself to the

reversal of that unexpected order of things.

'I am--ha--a gentleman of property, at present residing in Italy with my

family, my servants, and--hum--my rather large establishment. Being in

London for a short time on affairs connected with--ha--my estate,

and hearing of this strange disappearance, I wished to make myself

acquainted with the circumstances at first-hand, because there is--ha

hum--an English gentleman in Italy whom I shall no doubt see on my

return, who has been in habits of close and daily intimacy with Monsieur

Blandois. Mr Henry Gowan. You may know the name.'

'Never heard of it.' Mrs Clennam said it, and Mr Flintwinch echoed it.

'Wishing to--ha--make the narrative coherent and consecutive to him,'

said Mr Dorrit, 'may I ask--say, three questions?'

'Thirty, if you choose.'

'Have you known Monsieur Blandois long?'

'Not a twelvemonth. Mr Flintwinch here, will refer to the books and tell

you when, and by whom at Paris he was introduced to us. If that,'

Mrs Clennam added, 'should be any satisfaction to you. It is poor

satisfaction to us.'

'Have you seen him often?'

'No. Twice. Once before, and--' 'That once,' suggested Mr Flintwinch.

'And that once.'

'Pray, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, with a growing fancy upon him as he

recovered his importance, that he was in some superior way in the

Commission of the Peace; 'pray, madam, may I inquire, for the greater

satisfaction of the gentleman whom I have the honour to--ha--retain, or

protect or let me say to--hum--know--to know--Was Monsieur Blandois here

on business on the night indicated in this present sheet?'

'On what he called business,' returned Mrs Clennam.

'Is--ha--excuse me--is its nature to be communicated?'

'No.'

It was evidently impracticable to pass the barrier of that reply.

'The question has been asked before,' said Mrs Clennam, 'and the answer

has been, No. We don't choose to publish our transactions, however

unimportant, to all the town. We say, No.'

'I mean, he took away no money with him, for example,' said Mr Dorrit.

'He took away none of ours, sir, and got none here.'

'I suppose,' observed Mr Dorrit, glancing from Mrs Clennam to Mr

Flintwinch, and from Mr Flintwinch to Mrs Clennam, 'you have no way of

accounting to yourself for this mystery?'

'Why do you suppose so?' rejoined Mrs Clennam.

Disconcerted by the cold and hard inquiry, Mr Dorrit was unable to

assign any reason for his supposing so.

'I account for it, sir,' she pursued after an awkward silence on Mr

Dorrit's part, 'by having no doubt that he is travelling somewhere, or

hiding somewhere.'

'Do you know--ha--why he should hide anywhere?'

'No.'

It was exactly the same No as before, and put another barrier up. 'You

asked me if I accounted for the disappearance to myself,' Mrs Clennam

sternly reminded him, 'not if I accounted for it to you. I do not

pretend to account for it to you, sir. I understand it to be no more my

business to do that, than it is yours to require that.'

Mr Dorrit answered with an apologetic bend of his head. As he stepped

back, preparatory to saying he had no more to ask, he could not but

observe how gloomily and fixedly she sat with her eyes fastened on

the ground, and a certain air upon her of resolute waiting; also,

how exactly the self-same expression was reflected in Mr Flintwinch,

standing at a little distance from her chair, with his eyes also on the

ground, and his right hand softly rubbing his chin.

At that moment, Mistress Affery (of course, the woman with the apron)

dropped the candlestick she held, and cried out, 'There! O good Lord!

there it is again. Hark, Jeremiah! Now!'

If there were any sound at all, it was so slight that she must have

fallen into a confirmed habit of listening for sounds; but Mr Dorrit

believed he did hear a something, like the falling of dry leaves. The

woman's terror, for a very short space, seemed to touch the three; and

they all listened.

Mr Flintwinch was the first to stir. 'Affery, my woman,' said he,

sidling at her with his fists clenched, and his elbows quivering with

impatience to shake her, 'you are at your old tricks. You'll be walking

in your sleep next, my woman, and playing the whole round of your

distempered antics. You must have some physic. When I have shown this

gentleman out, I'll make you up such a comfortable dose, my woman; such

a comfortable dose!'

It did not appear altogether comfortable in expectation to Mistress

Affery; but Jeremiah, without further reference to his healing medicine,

took another candle from Mrs Clennam's table, and said, 'Now, sir; shall

I light you down?'

Mr Dorrit professed himself obliged, and went down. Mr Flintwinch shut

him out, and chained him out, without a moment's loss of time.

He was again passed by the two men, one going out and the other coming

in; got into the vehicle he had left waiting, and was driven away.

Before he had gone far, the driver stopped to let him know that he

had given his name, number, and address to the two men, on their joint

requisition; and also the address at which he had taken Mr Dorrit up,

the hour at which he had been called from his stand and the way by which

he had come. This did not make the night's adventure run any less hotly

in Mr Dorrit's mind, either when he sat down by his fire again, or

when he went to bed. All night he haunted the dismal house, saw the two

people resolutely waiting, heard the woman with her apron over her face

cry out about the noise, and found the body of the missing Blandois, now

buried in the cellar, and now bricked up in a wall.

CHAPTER 18. A Castle in the Air

Manifold are the cares of wealth and state. Mr Dorrit's satisfaction in

remembering that it had not been necessary for him to announce himself

to Clennam and Co., or to make an allusion to his having had any

knowledge of the intrusive person of that name, had been damped

over-night, while it was still fresh, by a debate that arose within him

whether or no he should take the Marshalsea in his way back, and look

at the old gate. He had decided not to do so; and had astonished the

coachman by being very fierce with him for proposing to go over London

Bridge and recross the river by Waterloo Bridge--a course which would

have taken him almost within sight of his old quarters. Still, for all

that, the question had raised a conflict in his breast; and, for some

odd reason or no reason, he was vaguely dissatisfied. Even at the Merdle

dinner-table next day, he was so out of sorts about it that he

continued at intervals to turn it over and over, in a manner frightfully

inconsistent with the good society surrounding him. It made him hot to

think what the Chief Butler's opinion of him would have been, if that

illustrious personage could have plumbed with that heavy eye of his the

stream of his meditations.

The farewell banquet was of a gorgeous nature, and wound up his visit

in a most brilliant manner. Fanny combined with the attractions of her

youth and beauty, a certain weight of self-sustainment as if she had

been married twenty years. He felt that he could leave her with a

quiet mind to tread the paths of distinction, and wished--but without

abatement of patronage, and without prejudice to the retiring virtues of

his favourite child--that he had such another daughter.

'My dear,' he told her at parting, 'our family looks to you

to--ha--assert its dignity and--hum--maintain its importance. I know you

will never disappoint it.'

'No, papa,' said Fanny, 'you may rely upon that, I think. My best love

to dearest Amy, and I will write to her very soon.'

'Shall I convey any message to--ha--anybody else?' asked Mr Dorrit, in

an insinuating manner.

'Papa,' said Fanny, before whom Mrs General instantly loomed, 'no, I

thank you. You are very kind, Pa, but I must beg to be excused. There

is no other message to send, I thank you, dear papa, that it would be at

all agreeable to you to take.'

They parted in an outer drawing-room, where only Mr Sparkler waited

on his lady, and dutifully bided his time for shaking hands. When Mr

Sparkler was admitted to this closing audience, Mr Merdle came creeping

in with not much more appearance of arms in his sleeves than if he

had been the twin brother of Miss Biffin, and insisted on escorting

Mr Dorrit down-stairs. All Mr Dorrit's protestations being in vain,

he enjoyed the honour of being accompanied to the hall-door by this

distinguished man, who (as Mr Dorrit told him in shaking hands on the

step) had really overwhelmed him with attentions and services during

this memorable visit. Thus they parted; Mr Dorrit entering his carriage

with a swelling breast, not at all sorry that his Courier, who had

come to take leave in the lower regions, should have an opportunity of

beholding the grandeur of his departure.

The aforesaid grandeur was yet full upon Mr Dorrit when he alighted at

his hotel. Helped out by the Courier and some half-dozen of the hotel

servants, he was passing through the hall with a serene magnificence,

when lo! a sight presented itself that struck him dumb and motionless.

John Chivery, in his best clothes, with his tall hat under his arm, his

ivory-handled cane genteelly embarrassing his deportment, and a bundle

of cigars in his hand!

'Now, young man,' said the porter. 'This is the gentleman. This young

man has persisted in waiting, sir, saying you would be glad to see him.'

Mr Dorrit glared on the young man, choked, and said, in the mildest of

tones, 'Ah! Young John! It is Young John, I think; is it not?'

'Yes, sir,' returned Young John.

'I--ha--thought it was Young john!' said Mr Dorrit. 'The young man may

come up,' turning to the attendants, as he passed on: 'oh yes, he may

come up. Let Young John follow. I will speak to him above.'

Young John followed, smiling and much gratified. Mr Dorrit's rooms were

reached. Candles were lighted. The attendants withdrew.

'Now, sir,' said Mr Dorrit, turning round upon him and seizing him by

the collar when they were safely alone. 'What do you mean by this?'

The amazement and horror depicted in the unfortunate john's face--for

he had rather expected to be embraced next--were of that powerfully

expressive nature that Mr Dorrit withdrew his hand and merely glared at

him.

'How dare you do this?' said Mr Dorrit. 'How do you presume to come

here? How dare you insult me?'

'I insult you, sir?' cried Young John. 'Oh!'

'Yes, sir,' returned Mr Dorrit. 'Insult me. Your coming here is an

affront, an impertinence, an audacity. You are not wanted here.

Who sent you here? What--ha--the Devil do you do here?'

'I thought, sir,' said Young John, with as pale and shocked a face as

ever had been turned to Mr Dorrit's in his life--even in his College

life: 'I thought, sir, you mightn't object to have the goodness to

accept a bundle--'

'Damn your bundle, sir!' cried Mr Dorrit, in irrepressible rage.

'I--hum--don't smoke.'

'I humbly beg your pardon, sir. You used to.'

'Tell me that again,' cried Mr Dorrit, quite beside himself, 'and I'll

take the poker to you!'

John Chivery backed to the door.

'Stop, sir!' cried Mr Dorrit. 'Stop! Sit down. Confound you sit down!'

John Chivery dropped into the chair nearest the door, and Mr Dorrit

walked up and down the room; rapidly at first; then, more slowly. Once,

he went to the window, and stood there with his forehead against the

glass. All of a sudden, he turned and said:

'What else did you come for, Sir?'

'Nothing else in the world, sir. Oh dear me! Only to say, Sir, that I

hoped you was well, and only to ask if Miss Amy was Well?'

'What's that to you, sir?' retorted Mr Dorrit.

'It's nothing to me, sir, by rights. I never thought of lessening the

distance betwixt us, I am sure. I know it's a liberty, sir, but I never

thought you'd have taken it ill. Upon my word and honour, sir,' said

Young John, with emotion, 'in my poor way, I am too proud to have come,

I assure you, if I had thought so.'

Mr Dorrit was ashamed. He went back to the window, and leaned his

forehead against the glass for some time. When he turned, he had his

handkerchief in his hand, and he had been wiping his eyes with it, and

he looked tired and ill.

'Young John, I am very sorry to have been hasty with you, but--ha--some

remembrances are not happy remembrances, and--hum--you shouldn't have

come.'

'I feel that now, sir,' returned John Chivery; 'but I didn't before, and

Heaven knows I meant no harm, sir.'

'No. No,' said Mr Dorrit. 'I am--hum--sure of that. Ha. Give me your

hand, Young John, give me your hand.'

Young John gave it; but Mr Dorrit had driven his heart out of it, and

nothing could change his face now, from its white, shocked look.

'There!' said Mr Dorrit, slowly shaking hands with him. 'Sit down again,

Young John.'

'Thank you, sir--but I'd rather stand.'

Mr Dorrit sat down instead. After painfully holding his head a little

while, he turned it to his visitor, and said, with an effort to be easy:

'And how is your father, Young John? How--ha--how are they all, Young

John?'

'Thank you, sir, They're all pretty well, sir. They're not any ways

complaining.'

'Hum. You are in your--ha--old business I see, John?' said Mr Dorrit,

with a glance at the offending bundle he had anathematised.

'Partly, sir. I am in my'--John hesitated a little--'father's business

likewise.'

'Oh indeed!' said Mr Dorrit. 'Do you--ha hum--go upon the ha--'

'Lock, sir? Yes, sir.'

'Much to do, John?'

'Yes, sir; we're pretty heavy at present. I don't know how it is, but we

generally ARE pretty heavy.'

'At this time of the year, Young John?'

'Mostly at all times of the year, sir. I don't know the time that makes

much difference to us. I wish you good night, sir.'

'Stay a moment, John--ha--stay a moment. Hum. Leave me the cigars, John,

I--ha--beg.'

'Certainly, sir.' John put them, with a trembling hand, on the table.

'Stay a moment, Young John; stay another moment. It would be a--ha--a

gratification to me to send a little--hum--Testimonial, by such a trusty

messenger, to be divided among--ha hum--them--them--according to their

wants. Would you object to take it, John?'

'Not in any ways, sir. There's many of them, I'm sure, that would be the

better for it.'

'Thank you, John. I--ha--I'll write it, John.'

His hand shook so that he was a long time writing it, and wrote it in

a tremulous scrawl at last. It was a cheque for one hundred pounds. He

folded it up, put it in Young john's hand, and pressed the hand in his.

'I hope you'll--ha--overlook--hum--what has passed, John.'

'Don't speak of it, sir, on any accounts. I don't in any ways bear

malice, I'm sure.'

But nothing while John was there could change John's face to its natural

colour and expression, or restore John's natural manner.

'And, John,' said Mr Dorrit, giving his hand a final pressure, and

releasing it, 'I hope we--ha--agree that we have spoken together

in confidence; and that you will abstain, in going out, from saying

anything to any one that might--hum--suggest that--ha--once I--'

'Oh! I assure you, sir,' returned John Chivery, 'in my poor humble way,

sir, I'm too proud and honourable to do it, sir.'

Mr Dorrit was not too proud and honourable to listen at the door that

he might ascertain for himself whether John really went straight out, or

lingered to have any talk with any one. There was no doubt that he went

direct out at the door, and away down the street with a quick step.

After remaining alone for an hour, Mr Dorrit rang for the Courier,

who found him with his chair on the hearth-rug, sitting with his back

towards him and his face to the fire. 'You can take that bundle of

cigars to smoke on the journey, if you like,' said Mr Dorrit, with

a careless wave of his hand. 'Ha--brought by--hum--little offering

from--ha--son of old tenant of mine.'

Next morning's sun saw Mr Dorrit's equipage upon the Dover road, where

every red-jacketed postilion was the sign of a cruel house, established

for the unmerciful plundering of travellers. The whole business of the

human race, between London and Dover, being spoliation, Mr Dorrit was

waylaid at Dartford, pillaged at Gravesend, rifled at Rochester, fleeced

at Sittingbourne, and sacked at Canterbury. However, it being the

Courier's business to get him out of the hands of the banditti, the

Courier brought him off at every stage; and so the red-jackets went

gleaming merrily along the spring landscape, rising and falling to

a regular measure, between Mr Dorrit in his snug corner and the next

chalky rise in the dusty highway.

Another day's sun saw him at Calais. And having now got the Channel

between himself and John Chivery, he began to feel safe, and to find

that the foreign air was lighter to breathe than the air of England.

On again by the heavy French roads for Paris. Having now quite recovered

his equanimity, Mr Dorrit, in his snug corner, fell to castle-building

as he rode along. It was evident that he had a very large castle in

hand. All day long he was running towers up, taking towers down, adding

a wing here, putting on a battlement there, looking to the walls,

strengthening the defences, giving ornamental touches to the interior,

making in all respects a superb castle of it. His preoccupied face so

clearly denoted the pursuit in which he was engaged, that every cripple

at the post-houses, not blind, who shoved his little battered tin-box in

at the carriage window for Charity in the name of Heaven, Charity in the

name of our Lady, Charity in the name of all the Saints, knew as well

what work he was at, as their countryman Le Brun could have known it

himself, though he had made that English traveller the subject of a

special physiognomical treatise.

Arrived at Paris, and resting there three days, Mr Dorrit strolled

much about the streets alone, looking in at the shop-windows, and

particularly the jewellers' windows. Ultimately, he went into the most

famous jeweller's, and said he wanted to buy a little gift for a lady.

It was a charming little woman to whom he said it--a sprightly little

woman, dressed in perfect taste, who came out of a green velvet bower

to attend upon him, from posting up some dainty little books of account

which one could hardly suppose to be ruled for the entry of any articles

more commercial than kisses, at a dainty little shining desk which

looked in itself like a sweetmeat.

For example, then, said the little woman, what species of gift did

Monsieur desire? A love-gift?

Mr Dorrit smiled, and said, Eh, well! Perhaps. What did he know? It was

always possible; the sex being so charming. Would she show him some?

Most willingly, said the little woman. Flattered and enchanted to show

him many. But pardon! To begin with, he would have the great goodness

to observe that there were love-gifts, and there were nuptial gifts.

For example, these ravishing ear-rings and this necklace so superb to

correspond, were what one called a love-gift. These brooches and these

rings, of a beauty so gracious and celestial, were what one called, with

the permission of Monsieur, nuptial gifts.

Perhaps it would be a good arrangement, Mr Dorrit hinted, smiling, to

purchase both, and to present the love-gift first, and to finish with

the nuptial offering?

Ah Heaven! said the little woman, laying the tips of the fingers of her

two little hands against each other, that would be generous indeed, that

would be a special gallantry! And without doubt the lady so crushed with

gifts would find them irresistible.

Mr Dorrit was not sure of that. But, for example, the sprightly little

woman was very sure of it, she said. So Mr Dorrit bought a gift of

each sort, and paid handsomely for it. As he strolled back to his hotel

afterwards, he carried his head high: having plainly got up his castle

now to a much loftier altitude than the two square towers of Notre Dame.

Building away with all his might, but reserving the plans of his castle

exclusively for his own eye, Mr Dorrit posted away for Marseilles.

Building on, building on, busily, busily, from morning to night. Falling

asleep, and leaving great blocks of building materials dangling in the

air; waking again, to resume work and get them into their places. What

time the Courier in the rumble, smoking Young john's best cigars, left

a little thread of thin light smoke behind--perhaps as he built a castle

or two with stray pieces of Mr Dorrit's money.

Not a fortified town that they passed in all their journey was as

strong, not a Cathedral summit was as high, as Mr Dorrit's castle.

Neither the Saone nor the Rhone sped with the swiftness of that peerless

building; nor was the Mediterranean deeper than its foundations; nor

were the distant landscapes on the Cornice road, nor the hills and bay

of Genoa the Superb, more beautiful. Mr Dorrit and his matchless castle

were disembarked among the dirty white houses and dirtier felons of

Civita Vecchia, and thence scrambled on to Rome as they could, through

the filth that festered on the way.

CHAPTER 19. The Storming of the Castle in the Air

The sun had gone down full four hours, and it was later than most

travellers would like it to be for finding themselves outside the walls

of Rome, when Mr Dorrit's carriage, still on its last wearisome

stage, rattled over the solitary Campagna. The savage herdsmen and

the fierce-looking peasants who had chequered the way while the light

lasted, had all gone down with the sun, and left the wilderness

blank. At some turns of the road, a pale flare on the horizon, like an

exhalation from the ruin-sown land, showed that the city was yet far

off; but this poor relief was rare and short-lived. The carriage dipped

down again into a hollow of the black dry sea, and for a long time there

was nothing visible save its petrified swell and the gloomy sky.

Mr Dorrit, though he had his castle-building to engage his mind, could

not be quite easy in that desolate place. He was far more curious, in

every swerve of the carriage, and every cry of the postilions, than he

had been since he quitted London. The valet on the box evidently quaked.

The Courier in the rumble was not altogether comfortable in his mind. As

often as Mr Dorrit let down the glass and looked back at him (which was

very often), he saw him smoking John Chivery out, it is true, but still

generally standing up the while and looking about him, like a man who

had his suspicions, and kept upon his guard. Then would Mr Dorrit,

pulling up the glass again, reflect that those postilions were

cut-throat looking fellows, and that he would have done better to have

slept at Civita Vecchia, and have started betimes in the morning. But,

for all this, he worked at his castle in the intervals.

And now, fragments of ruinous enclosure, yawning window-gap and crazy

wall, deserted houses, leaking wells, broken water-tanks, spectral

cypress-trees, patches of tangled vine, and the changing of the track to

a long, irregular, disordered lane where everything was crumbling away,

from the unsightly buildings to the jolting road--now, these objects

showed that they were nearing Rome. And now, a sudden twist and stoppage

of the carriage inspired Mr Dorrit with the mistrust that the brigand

moment was come for twisting him into a ditch and robbing him; until,

letting down the glass again and looking out, he perceived himself

assailed by nothing worse than a funeral procession, which came

mechanically chaunting by, with an indistinct show of dirty vestments,

lurid torches, swinging censers, and a great cross borne before a

priest. He was an ugly priest by torchlight; of a lowering aspect, with

an overhanging brow; and as his eyes met those of Mr Dorrit, looking

bareheaded out of the carriage, his lips, moving as they chaunted,

seemed to threaten that important traveller; likewise the action of

his hand, which was in fact his manner of returning the traveller's

salutation, seemed to come in aid of that menace. So thought Mr Dorrit,

made fanciful by the weariness of building and travelling, as the priest

drifted past him, and the procession straggled away, taking its dead

along with it. Upon their so-different way went Mr Dorrit's company too;

and soon, with their coach load of luxuries from the two great capitals

of Europe, they were (like the Goths reversed) beating at the gates of

Rome.

Mr Dorrit was not expected by his own people that night. He had been;

but they had given him up until to-morrow, not doubting that it was

later than he would care, in those parts, to be out. Thus, when his

equipage stopped at his own gate, no one but the porter appeared to

receive him. Was Miss Dorrit from home? he asked. No. She was within.

Good, said Mr Dorrit to the assembling servants; let them keep where

they were; let them help to unload the carriage; he would find Miss

Dorrit for himself. So he went up his grand staircase, slowly, and

tired, and looked into various chambers which were empty, until he saw a

light in a small ante-room. It was a curtained nook, like a tent,

within two other rooms; and it looked warm and bright in colour, as he

approached it through the dark avenue they made.

There was a draped doorway, but no door; and as he stopped here, looking

in unseen, he felt a pang. Surely not like jealousy? For why like

jealousy? There was only his daughter and his brother there: he, with

his chair drawn to the hearth, enjoying the warmth of the evening wood

fire; she seated at a little table, busied with some embroidery work.

Allowing for the great difference in the still-life of the picture, the

figures were much the same as of old; his brother being sufficiently

like himself to represent himself, for a moment, in the composition.

So had he sat many a night, over a coal fire far away; so had she sat,

devoted to him. Yet surely there was nothing to be jealous of in the old

miserable poverty. Whence, then, the pang in his heart?

'Do you know, uncle, I think you are growing young again?'

Her uncle shook his head and said, 'Since when, my dear; since when?'

'I think,' returned Little Dorrit, plying her needle, 'that you have

been growing younger for weeks past. So cheerful, uncle, and so ready,

and so interested.'

'My dear child--all you.'

'All me, uncle!'

'Yes, yes. You have done me a world of good. You have been so

considerate of me, and so tender with me, and so delicate in trying to

hide your attentions from me, that I--well, well, well! It's treasured

up, my darling, treasured up.'

'There is nothing in it but your own fresh fancy, uncle,' said Little

Dorrit, cheerfully.

'Well, well, well!' murmured the old man. 'Thank God!'

She paused for an instant in her work to look at him, and her look

revived that former pain in her father's breast; in his poor weak

breast, so full of contradictions, vacillations, inconsistencies, the

little peevish perplexities of this ignorant life, mists which the

morning without a night only can clear away.

'I have been freer with you, you see, my dove,' said the old man, 'since

we have been alone. I say, alone, for I don't count Mrs General; I

don't care for her; she has nothing to do with me. But I know Fanny was

impatient of me. And I don't wonder at it, or complain of it, for I am

sensible that I must be in the way, though I try to keep out of it as

well as I can. I know I am not fit company for our company. My brother

William,' said the old man admiringly, 'is fit company for monarchs;

but not so your uncle, my dear. Frederick Dorrit is no credit to William

Dorrit, and he knows it quite well. Ah! Why, here's your father, Amy!

My dear William, welcome back! My beloved brother, I am rejoiced to see

you!'

(Turning his head in speaking, he had caught sight of him as he stood in

the doorway.)

Little Dorrit with a cry of pleasure put her arms about her father's

neck, and kissed him again and again. Her father was a little impatient,

and a little querulous. 'I am glad to find you at last, Amy,' he said.

'Ha. Really I am glad to find--hum--any one to receive me at last.

I appear to have been--ha--so little expected, that upon my word

I began--ha hum--to think it might be right to offer an apology

for--ha--taking the liberty of coming back at all.'

'It was so late, my dear William,' said his brother, 'that we had given

you up for to-night.'

'I am stronger than you, dear Frederick,' returned his brother with an

elaboration of fraternity in which there was severity; 'and I hope I can

travel without detriment at--ha--any hour I choose.'

'Surely, surely,' returned the other, with a misgiving that he had given

offence. 'Surely, William.'

'Thank you, Amy,' pursued Mr Dorrit, as she helped him to put off his

wrappers. 'I can do it without assistance. I--ha--need not trouble you,

Amy. Could I have a morsel of bread and a glass of wine, or--hum--would

it cause too much inconvenience?'

'Dear father, you shall have supper in a very few minutes.'

'Thank you, my love,' said Mr Dorrit, with a reproachful frost upon him;

'I--ha--am afraid I am causing inconvenience. Hum. Mrs General pretty

well?'

'Mrs General complained of a headache, and of being fatigued; and so,

when we gave you up, she went to bed, dear.'

Perhaps Mr Dorrit thought that Mrs General had done well in being

overcome by the disappointment of his not arriving. At any rate, his

face relaxed, and he said with obvious satisfaction, 'Extremely sorry to

hear that Mrs General is not well.'

During this short dialogue, his daughter had been observant of him, with

something more than her usual interest. It would seem as though he had

a changed or worn appearance in her eyes, and he perceived and resented

it; for he said with renewed peevishness, when he had divested himself

of his travelling-cloak, and had come to the fire: 'Amy, what are you

looking at? What do you see in me that causes you to--ha--concentrate

your solicitude on me in that--hum--very particular manner?'

'I did not know it, father; I beg your pardon. It gladdens my eyes to

see you again; that's all.'

'Don't say that's all, because--ha--that's not all. You--hum--you

think,' said Mr Dorrit, with an accusatory emphasis, 'that I am not

looking well.' 'I thought you looked a little tired, love.'

'Then you are mistaken,' said Mr Dorrit. 'Ha, I am not tired. Ha, hum. I

am very much fresher than I was when I went away.'

He was so inclined to be angry that she said nothing more in her

justification, but remained quietly beside him embracing his arm. As

he stood thus, with his brother on the other side, he fell into a heavy

doze, of not a minute's duration, and awoke with a start.

'Frederick,' he said, turning to his brother: 'I recommend you to go to

bed immediately.'

'No, William. I'll wait and see you sup.'

'Frederick,' he retorted, 'I beg you to go to bed. I--ha--make it a

personal request that you go to bed. You ought to have been in bed long

ago. You are very feeble.'

'Hah!' said the old man, who had no wish but to please him. 'Well, well,

well! I dare say I am.'

'My dear Frederick,' returned Mr Dorrit, with an astonishing superiority

to his brother's failing powers, 'there can be no doubt of it. It is

painful to me to see you so weak. Ha. It distresses me. Hum. I don't

find you looking at all well. You are not fit for this sort of thing.

You should be more careful, you should be very careful.'

'Shall I go to bed?' asked Frederick.

'Dear Frederick,' said Mr Dorrit, 'do, I adjure you! Good night,

brother. I hope you will be stronger to-morrow. I am not at all pleased

with your looks. Good night, dear fellow.' After dismissing his brother

in this gracious way, he fell into a doze again before the old man was

well out of the room: and he would have stumbled forward upon the logs,

but for his daughter's restraining hold.

'Your uncle wanders very much, Amy,' he said, when he was thus roused.

'He is less--ha--coherent, and his conversation is more--hum--broken,

than I have--ha, hum--ever known. Has he had any illness since I have

been gone?' 'No, father.'

'You--ha--see a great change in him, Amy?'

'I have not observed it, dear.'

'Greatly broken,' said Mr Dorrit. 'Greatly broken. My poor,

affectionate, failing Frederick! Ha. Even taking into account what he

was before, he is--hum--sadly broken!'

His supper, which was brought to him there, and spread upon the little

table where he had seen her working, diverted his attention.

She sat at his side as in the days that were gone, for the first time

since those days ended. They were alone, and she helped him to his meat

and poured out his drink for him, as she had been used to do in the

prison. All this happened now, for the first time since their accession

to wealth. She was afraid to look at him much, after the offence he had

taken; but she noticed two occasions in the course of his meal, when

he all of a sudden looked at her, and looked about him, as if the

association were so strong that he needed assurance from his sense of

sight that they were not in the old prison-room. Both times, he put his

hand to his head as if he missed his old black cap--though it had been

ignominiously given away in the Marshalsea, and had never got free

to that hour, but still hovered about the yards on the head of his

successor.

He took very little supper, but was a long time over it, and often

reverted to his brother's declining state. Though he expressed the

greatest pity for him, he was almost bitter upon him. He said that poor

Frederick--ha hum--drivelled. There was no other word to express it;

drivelled. Poor fellow! It was melancholy to reflect what Amy must have

undergone from the excessive tediousness of his Society--wandering and

babbling on, poor dear estimable creature, wandering and babbling on--if

it had not been for the relief she had had in Mrs General.

Extremely sorry, he then repeated with his former satisfaction, that

that--ha--superior woman was poorly.

Little Dorrit, in her watchful love, would have remembered the lightest

thing he said or did that night, though she had had no subsequent reason

to recall that night. She always remembered that, when he looked about

him under the strong influence of the old association, he tried to

keep it out of her mind, and perhaps out of his own too, by immediately

expatiating on the great riches and great company that had encompassed

him in his absence, and on the lofty position he and his family had to

sustain. Nor did she fail to recall that there were two under-currents,

side by side, pervading all his discourse and all his manner; one

showing her how well he had got on without her, and how independent

he was of her; the other, in a fitful and unintelligible way almost

complaining of her, as if it had been possible that she had neglected

him while he was away.

His telling her of the glorious state that Mr Merdle kept, and of the

court that bowed before him, naturally brought him to Mrs Merdle. So

naturally indeed, that although there was an unusual want of sequence in

the greater part of his remarks, he passed to her at once, and asked how

she was.

'She is very well. She is going away next week.'

'Home?' asked Mr Dorrit.

'After a few weeks' stay upon the road.'

'She will be a vast loss here,' said Mr Dorrit. 'A vast--ha--acquisition

at home. To Fanny, and to--hum--the rest of the--ha--great world.'

Little Dorrit thought of the competition that was to be entered upon,

and assented very softly.

'Mrs Merdle is going to have a great farewell Assembly, dear, and a

dinner before it. She has been expressing her anxiety that you should

return in time. She has invited both you and me to her dinner.'

'She is--ha--very kind. When is the day?'

'The day after to-morrow.'

'Write round in the morning, and say that I have returned, and

shall--hum--be delighted.'

'May I walk with you up the stairs to your room, dear?'

'No!' he answered, looking angrily round; for he was moving away, as if

forgetful of leave-taking. 'You may not, Amy. I want no help. I am your

father, not your infirm uncle!' He checked himself, as abruptly as he

had broken into this reply, and said, 'You have not kissed me, Amy. Good

night, my dear! We must marry--ha--we must marry YOU, now.' With that

he went, more slowly and more tired, up the staircase to his rooms, and,

almost as soon as he got there, dismissed his valet. His next care was

to look about him for his Paris purchases, and, after opening their

cases and carefully surveying them, to put them away under lock and

key. After that, what with dozing and what with castle-building, he lost

himself for a long time, so that there was a touch of morning on the

eastward rim of the desolate Campagna when he crept to bed.

Mrs General sent up her compliments in good time next day, and hoped

he had rested well after this fatiguing journey. He sent down his

compliments, and begged to inform Mrs General that he had rested very

well indeed, and was in high condition. Nevertheless, he did not come

forth from his own rooms until late in the afternoon; and, although he

then caused himself to be magnificently arrayed for a drive with

Mrs General and his daughter, his appearance was scarcely up to his

description of himself. As the family had no visitors that day, its four

members dined alone together. He conducted Mrs General to the seat at

his right hand with immense ceremony; and Little Dorrit could not

but notice as she followed with her uncle, both that he was again

elaborately dressed, and that his manner towards Mrs General was very

particular. The perfect formation of that accomplished lady's surface

rendered it difficult to displace an atom of its genteel glaze, but

Little Dorrit thought she descried a slight thaw of triumph in a corner

of her frosty eye.

Notwithstanding what may be called in these pages the Pruney and

Prismatic nature of the family banquet, Mr Dorrit several times fell

asleep while it was in progress. His fits of dozing were as sudden as

they had been overnight, and were as short and profound. When the first

of these slumberings seized him, Mrs General looked almost amazed: but,

on each recurrence of the symptoms, she told her polite beads, Papa,

Potatoes, Poultry, Prunes, and Prism; and, by dint of going through that

infallible performance very slowly, appeared to finish her rosary at

about the same time as Mr Dorrit started from his sleep.

He was again painfully aware of a somnolent tendency in Frederick (which

had no existence out of his own imagination), and after dinner, when

Frederick had withdrawn, privately apologised to Mrs General for the

poor man. 'The most estimable and affectionate of brothers,' he said,

'but--ha, hum--broken up altogether. Unhappily, declining fast.'

'Mr Frederick, sir,' quoth Mrs General, 'is habitually absent and

drooping, but let us hope it is not so bad as that.'

Mr Dorrit, however, was determined not to let him off. 'Fast declining,

madam. A wreck. A ruin. Mouldering away before our eyes. Hum. Good

Frederick!'

'You left Mrs Sparkler quite well and happy, I trust?' said Mrs General,

after heaving a cool sigh for Frederick.

'Surrounded,' replied Mr Dorrit, 'by--ha--all that can charm the taste,

and--hum--elevate the mind. Happy, my dear madam, in a--hum--husband.'

Mrs General was a little fluttered; seeming delicately to put the word

away with her gloves, as if there were no knowing what it might lead to.

'Fanny,' Mr Dorrit continued. 'Fanny, Mrs General, has high

qualities. Ha. Ambition--hum--purpose, consciousness of--ha--position,

determination to support that position--ha, hum--grace, beauty, and

native nobility.'

'No doubt,' said Mrs General (with a little extra stiffness).

'Combined with these qualities, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, 'Fanny

has--ha--manifested one blemish which has made me--hum--made me uneasy,

and--ha--I must add, angry; but which I trust may now be considered

at an end, even as to herself, and which is undoubtedly at an end as

to--ha--others.'

'To what, Mr Dorrit,' returned Mrs General, with her gloves again

somewhat excited, 'can you allude? I am at a loss to--'

'Do not say that, my dear madam,' interrupted Mr Dorrit.

Mrs General's voice, as it died away, pronounced the words, 'at a loss

to imagine.'

After which Mr Dorrit was seized with a doze for about a minute, out of

which he sprang with spasmodic nimbleness.

'I refer, Mrs General, to that--ha--strong spirit of opposition,

or--hum--I might say--ha--jealousy in Fanny, which has occasionally

risen against the--ha--sense I entertain of--hum--the claims of--ha--the

lady with whom I have now the honour of communing.'

'Mr Dorrit,' returned Mrs General, 'is ever but too obliging, ever but

too appreciative. If there have been moments when I have imagined that

Miss Dorrit has indeed resented the favourable opinion Mr Dorrit has

formed of my services, I have found, in that only too high opinion, my

consolation and recompense.'

'Opinion of your services, madam?' said Mr Dorrit.

'Of,' Mrs General repeated, in an elegantly impressive manner, 'my

services.'

'Of your services alone, dear madam?' said Mr Dorrit.

'I presume,' retorted Mrs General, in her former impressive manner, 'of

my services alone. For, to what else,' said Mrs General, with a slightly

interrogative action of her gloves, 'could I impute--'

'To--ha--yourself, Mrs General. Ha, hum. To yourself and your merits,'

was Mr Dorrit's rejoinder.

'Mr Dorrit will pardon me,' said Mrs General, 'if I remark that this

is not a time or place for the pursuit of the present conversation.

Mr Dorrit will excuse me if I remind him that Miss Dorrit is in the

adjoining room, and is visible to myself while I utter her name. Mr

Dorrit will forgive me if I observe that I am agitated, and that I find

there are moments when weaknesses I supposed myself to have subdued,

return with redoubled power. Mr Dorrit will allow me to withdraw.'

'Hum. Perhaps we may resume this--ha--interesting conversation,' said

Mr Dorrit, 'at another time; unless it should be, what I hope it is

not--hum--in any way disagreeable to--ah--Mrs General.' 'Mr Dorrit,'

said Mrs General, casting down her eyes as she rose with a bend, 'must

ever claim my homage and obedience.'

Mrs General then took herself off in a stately way, and not with that

amount of trepidation upon her which might have been expected in a less

remarkable woman. Mr Dorrit, who had conducted his part of the dialogue

with a certain majestic and admiring condescension--much as some people

may be seen to conduct themselves in Church, and to perform their part

in the service--appeared, on the whole, very well satisfied with himself

and with Mrs General too. On the return of that lady to tea, she had

touched herself up with a little powder and pomatum, and was not without

moral enchantment likewise: the latter showing itself in much sweet

patronage of manner towards Miss Dorrit, and in an air of as tender

interest in Mr Dorrit as was consistent with rigid propriety. At the

close of the evening, when she rose to retire, Mr Dorrit took her by the

hand as if he were going to lead her out into the Piazza of the people

to walk a minuet by moonlight, and with great solemnity conducted her to

the room door, where he raised her knuckles to his lips. Having parted

from her with what may be conjectured to have been a rather bony kiss of

a cosmetic flavour, he gave his daughter his blessing, graciously. And

having thus hinted that there was something remarkable in the wind, he

again went to bed.

He remained in the seclusion of his own chamber next morning; but, early

in the afternoon, sent down his best compliments to Mrs General, by Mr

Tinkler, and begged she would accompany Miss Dorrit on an airing

without him. His daughter was dressed for Mrs Merdle's dinner before he

appeared. He then presented himself in a refulgent condition as to his

attire, but looking indefinably shrunken and old. However, as he was

plainly determined to be angry with her if she so much as asked him how

he was, she only ventured to kiss his cheek, before accompanying him to

Mrs Merdle's with an anxious heart.

The distance that they had to go was very short, but he was at his

building work again before the carriage had half traversed it. Mrs

Merdle received him with great distinction; the bosom was in admirable

preservation, and on the best terms with itself; the dinner was very

choice; and the company was very select.

It was principally English; saving that it comprised the usual French

Count and the usual Italian Marchese--decorative social milestones,

always to be found in certain places, and varying very little in

appearance. The table was long, and the dinner was long; and Little

Dorrit, overshadowed by a large pair of black whiskers and a large white

cravat, lost sight of her father altogether, until a servant put a scrap

of paper in her hand, with a whispered request from Mrs Merdle that she

would read it directly. Mrs Merdle had written on it in pencil, 'Pray

come and speak to Mr Dorrit, I doubt if he is well.'

She was hurrying to him, unobserved, when he got up out of his chair,

and leaning over the table called to her, supposing her to be still in

her place:

'Amy, Amy, my child!'

The action was so unusual, to say nothing of his strange eager

appearance and strange eager voice, that it instantaneously caused a

profound silence.

'Amy, my dear,' he repeated. 'Will you go and see if Bob is on the

lock?'

She was at his side, and touching him, but he still perversely supposed

her to be in her seat, and called out, still leaning over the table,

'Amy, Amy. I don't feel quite myself. Ha. I don't know what's the matter

with me. I particularly wish to see Bob. Ha. Of all the turnkeys, he's

as much my friend as yours. See if Bob is in the lodge, and beg him to

come to me.'

All the guests were now in consternation, and everybody rose.

'Dear father, I am not there; I am here, by you.'

'Oh! You are here, Amy! Good. Hum. Good. Ha. Call Bob. If he has been

relieved, and is not on the lock, tell Mrs Bangham to go and fetch him.'

She was gently trying to get him away; but he resisted, and would not

go.

'I tell you, child,' he said petulantly, 'I can't be got up the narrow

stairs without Bob. Ha. Send for Bob. Hum. Send for Bob--best of all the

turnkeys--send for Bob!'

He looked confusedly about him, and, becoming conscious of the number of

faces by which he was surrounded, addressed them:

'Ladies and gentlemen, the duty--ha--devolves upon me of--hum--welcoming

you to the Marshalsea! Welcome to the Marshalsea! The space

is--ha--limited--limited--the parade might be wider; but you will

find it apparently grow larger after a time--a time, ladies and

gentlemen--and the air is, all things considered, very good. It blows

over the--ha--Surrey hills. Blows over the Surrey hills. This is the

Snuggery. Hum. Supported by a small subscription of the--ha--Collegiate

body. In return for which--hot water--general kitchen--and little

domestic advantages. Those who are habituated to the--ha--Marshalsea,

are pleased to call me its father. I am accustomed to be complimented by

strangers as the--ha--Father of the Marshalsea. Certainly, if years of

residence may establish a claim to so--ha--honourable a title, I may

accept the--hum--conferred distinction. My child, ladies and gentlemen.

My daughter. Born here!'

She was not ashamed of it, or ashamed of him. She was pale and

frightened; but she had no other care than to soothe him and get him

away, for his own dear sake. She was between him and the wondering

faces, turned round upon his breast with her own face raised to his. He

held her clasped in his left arm, and between whiles her low voice was

heard tenderly imploring him to go away with her.

'Born here,' he repeated, shedding tears. 'Bred here. Ladies and

gentlemen, my daughter. Child of an unfortunate father, but--ha--always

a gentleman. Poor, no doubt, but--hum--proud. Always proud. It

has become a--hum--not infrequent custom for my--ha--personal

admirers--personal admirers solely--to be pleased to express

their desire to acknowledge my semi-official position here,

by offering--ha--little tributes, which usually take the form

of--ha--voluntary recognitions of my humble endeavours to--hum--to

uphold a Tone here--a Tone--I beg it to be understood that I do not

consider myself compromised. Ha. Not compromised. Ha. Not a beggar. No;

I repudiate the title! At the same time far be it from me to--hum--to

put upon the fine feelings by which my partial friends are actuated,

the slight of scrupling to admit that those offerings are--hum--highly

acceptable. On the contrary, they are most acceptable. In my child's

name, if not in my own, I make the admission in the fullest manner, at

the same time reserving--ha--shall I say my personal dignity? Ladies and

gentlemen, God bless you all!'

By this time, the exceeding mortification undergone by the Bosom had

occasioned the withdrawal of the greater part of the company into other

rooms. The few who had lingered thus long followed the rest, and Little

Dorrit and her father were left to the servants and themselves. Dearest

and most precious to her, he would come with her now, would he not? He

replied to her fervid entreaties, that he would never be able to get up

the narrow stairs without Bob; where was Bob, would nobody fetch Bob?

Under pretence of looking for Bob, she got him out against the stream of

gay company now pouring in for the evening assembly, and got him into a

coach that had just set down its load, and got him home.

The broad stairs of his Roman palace were contracted in his failing

sight to the narrow stairs of his London prison; and he would suffer no

one but her to touch him, his brother excepted. They got him up to his

room without help, and laid him down on his bed. And from that hour his

poor maimed spirit, only remembering the place where it had broken its

wings, cancelled the dream through which it had since groped, and knew

of nothing beyond the Marshalsea. When he heard footsteps in the street,

he took them for the old weary tread in the yards. When the hour came

for locking up, he supposed all strangers to be excluded for the night.

When the time for opening came again, he was so anxious to see Bob, that

they were fain to patch up a narrative how that Bob--many a year dead

then, gentle turnkey--had taken cold, but hoped to be out to-morrow, or

the next day, or the next at furthest.

He fell away into a weakness so extreme that he could not raise his

hand. But he still protected his brother according to his long usage;

and would say with some complacency, fifty times a day, when he saw him

standing by his bed, 'My good Frederick, sit down. You are very feeble

indeed.'

They tried him with Mrs General, but he had not the faintest knowledge

of her. Some injurious suspicion lodged itself in his brain, that she

wanted to supplant Mrs Bangham, and that she was given to drinking. He

charged her with it in no measured terms; and was so urgent with his

daughter to go round to the Marshal and entreat him to turn her out,

that she was never reproduced after the first failure. Saving that

he once asked 'if Tip had gone outside?' the remembrance of his two

children not present seemed to have departed from him. But the child who

had done so much for him and had been so poorly repaid, was never out of

his mind. Not that he spared her, or was fearful of her being spent by

watching and fatigue; he was not more troubled on that score than he

had usually been. No; he loved her in his old way. They were in the jail

again, and she tended him, and he had constant need of her, and could

not turn without her; and he even told her, sometimes, that he was

content to have undergone a great deal for her sake. As to her, she bent

over his bed with her quiet face against his, and would have laid down

her own life to restore him.

When he had been sinking in this painless way for two or three days, she

observed him to be troubled by the ticking of his watch--a pompous gold

watch that made as great a to-do about its going as if nothing else

went but itself and Time. She suffered it to run down; but he was still

uneasy, and showed that was not what he wanted. At length he roused

himself to explain that he wanted money to be raised on this watch. He

was quite pleased when she pretended to take it away for the purpose,

and afterwards had a relish for his little tastes of wine and jelly,

that he had not had before.

He soon made it plain that this was so; for, in another day or two

he sent off his sleeve-buttons and finger-rings. He had an amazing

satisfaction in entrusting her with these errands, and appeared to

consider it equivalent to making the most methodical and provident

arrangements. After his trinkets, or such of them as he had been able to

see about him, were gone, his clothes engaged his attention; and it

is as likely as not that he was kept alive for some days by the

satisfaction of sending them, piece by piece, to an imaginary

pawnbroker's.

Thus for ten days Little Dorrit bent over his pillow, laying her cheek

against his. Sometimes she was so worn out that for a few minutes

they would slumber together. Then she would awake; to recollect with

fast-flowing silent tears what it was that touched her face, and to see,

stealing over the cherished face upon the pillow, a deeper shadow than

the shadow of the Marshalsea Wall.

Quietly, quietly, all the lines of the plan of the great Castle

melted one after another. Quietly, quietly, the ruled and cross-ruled

countenance on which they were traced, became fair and blank.

Quietly, quietly, the reflected marks of the prison bars and of the

zig-zag iron on the wall-top, faded away. Quietly, quietly, the face

subsided into a far younger likeness of her own than she had ever seen

under the grey hair, and sank to rest.

At first her uncle was stark distracted. 'O my brother! O William,

William! You to go before me; you to go alone; you to go, and I to

remain! You, so far superior, so distinguished, so noble; I, a poor

useless creature fit for nothing, and whom no one would have missed!'

It did her, for the time, the good of having him to think of and to

succour.

'Uncle, dear uncle, spare yourself, spare me!'

The old man was not deaf to the last words. When he did begin to

restrain himself, it was that he might spare her. He had no care for

himself; but, with all the remaining power of the honest heart, stunned

so long and now awaking to be broken, he honoured and blessed her.

'O God,' he cried, before they left the room, with his wrinkled hands

clasped over her. 'Thou seest this daughter of my dear dead brother! All

that I have looked upon, with my half-blind and sinful eyes, Thou hast

discerned clearly, brightly. Not a hair of her head shall be harmed

before Thee. Thou wilt uphold her here to her last hour. And I know Thou

wilt reward her hereafter!'

They remained in a dim room near, until it was almost midnight, quiet

and sad together. At times his grief would seek relief in a burst like

that in which it had found its earliest expression; but, besides that

his little strength would soon have been unequal to such strains, he

never failed to recall her words, and to reproach himself and calm

himself. The only utterance with which he indulged his sorrow, was the

frequent exclamation that his brother was gone, alone; that they had

been together in the outset of their lives, that they had fallen into

misfortune together, that they had kept together through their many

years of poverty, that they had remained together to that day; and that

his brother was gone alone, alone!

They parted, heavy and sorrowful. She would not consent to leave him

anywhere but in his own room, and she saw him lie down in his clothes

upon his bed, and covered him with her own hands. Then she sank upon her

own bed, and fell into a deep sleep: the sleep of exhaustion and

rest, though not of complete release from a pervading consciousness of

affliction. Sleep, good Little Dorrit. Sleep through the night!

It was a moonlight night; but the moon rose late, being long past the

full. When it was high in the peaceful firmament, it shone through

half-closed lattice blinds into the solemn room where the stumblings and

wanderings of a life had so lately ended. Two quiet figures were within

the room; two figures, equally still and impassive, equally removed

by an untraversable distance from the teeming earth and all that it

contains, though soon to lie in it.

One figure reposed upon the bed. The other, kneeling on the floor,

drooped over it; the arms easily and peacefully resting on the coverlet;

the face bowed down, so that the lips touched the hand over which with

its last breath it had bent. The two brothers were before their Father;

far beyond the twilight judgment of this world; high above its mists and

obscurities.

CHAPTER 20. Introduces the next

The passengers were landing from the packet on the pier at Calais.

A low-lying place and a low-spirited place Calais was, with the tide

ebbing out towards low water-mark. There had been no more water on the

bar than had sufficed to float the packet in; and now the bar itself,

with a shallow break of sea over it, looked like a lazy marine monster

just risen to the surface, whose form was indistinctly shown as it lay

asleep. The meagre lighthouse all in white, haunting the seaboard as if

it were the ghost of an edifice that had once had colour and rotundity,

dropped melancholy tears after its late buffeting by the waves. The long

rows of gaunt black piles, slimy and wet and weather-worn, with funeral

garlands of seaweed twisted about them by the late tide, might

have represented an unsightly marine cemetery. Every wave-dashed,

storm-beaten object, was so low and so little, under the broad grey sky,

in the noise of the wind and sea, and before the curling lines of surf,

making at it ferociously, that the wonder was there was any Calais left,

and that its low gates and low wall and low roofs and low ditches and

low sand-hills and low ramparts and flat streets, had not yielded

long ago to the undermining and besieging sea, like the fortifications

children make on the sea-shore.

After slipping among oozy piles and planks, stumbling up wet steps and

encountering many salt difficulties, the passengers entered on their

comfortless peregrination along the pier; where all the French vagabonds

and English outlaws in the town (half the population) attended to

prevent their recovery from bewilderment. After being minutely inspected

by all the English, and claimed and reclaimed and counter-claimed as

prizes by all the French in a hand-to-hand scuffle three quarters of a

mile long, they were at last free to enter the streets, and to make off

in their various directions, hotly pursued.

Clennam, harassed by more anxieties than one, was among this devoted

band. Having rescued the most defenceless of his compatriots from

situations of great extremity, he now went his way alone, or as nearly

alone as he could be, with a native gentleman in a suit of grease and

a cap of the same material, giving chase at a distance of some fifty

yards, and continually calling after him, 'Hi! Ice-say! You! Seer!

Ice-say! Nice Oatel!'

Even this hospitable person, however, was left behind at last, and

Clennam pursued his way, unmolested. There was a tranquil air in the

town after the turbulence of the Channel and the beach, and its dulness

in that comparison was agreeable. He met new groups of his countrymen,

who had all a straggling air of having at one time overblown themselves,

like certain uncomfortable kinds of flowers, and of being now mere

weeds. They had all an air, too, of lounging out a limited round, day

after day, which strongly reminded him of the Marshalsea. But, taking

no further note of them than was sufficient to give birth to the

reflection, he sought out a certain street and number which he kept in

his mind.

'So Pancks said,' he murmured to himself, as he stopped before a dull

house answering to the address. 'I suppose his information to be correct

and his discovery, among Mr Casby's loose papers, indisputable; but,

without it, I should hardly have supposed this to be a likely place.'

A dead sort of house, with a dead wall over the way and a dead gateway

at the side, where a pendant bell-handle produced two dead tinkles, and

a knocker produced a dead, flat, surface-tapping, that seemed not to

have depth enough in it to penetrate even the cracked door. However, the

door jarred open on a dead sort of spring; and he closed it behind him

as he entered a dull yard, soon brought to a close by another dead wall,

where an attempt had been made to train some creeping shrubs, which were

dead; and to make a little fountain in a grotto, which was dry; and to

decorate that with a little statue, which was gone.

The entry to the house was on the left, and it was garnished as the

outer gateway was, with two printed bills in French and English,

announcing Furnished Apartments to let, with immediate possession. A

strong cheerful peasant woman, all stocking, petticoat, white cap, and

ear-ring, stood here in a dark doorway, and said with a pleasant show of

teeth, 'Ice-say! Seer! Who?'

Clennam, replying in French, said the English lady; he wished to see

the English lady. 'Enter then and ascend, if you please,' returned the

peasant woman, in French likewise. He did both, and followed her up a

dark bare staircase to a back room on the first-floor. Hence, there was

a gloomy view of the yard that was dull, and of the shrubs that were

dead, and of the fountain that was dry, and of the pedestal of the

statue that was gone.

'Monsieur Blandois,' said Clennam.

'With pleasure, Monsieur.'

Thereupon the woman withdrew and left him to look at the room. It was

the pattern of room always to be found in such a house. Cool, dull, and

dark. Waxed floor very slippery. A room not large enough to skate in;

nor adapted to the easy pursuit of any other occupation. Red and

white curtained windows, little straw mat, little round table with a

tumultuous assemblage of legs underneath, clumsy rush-bottomed chairs,

two great red velvet arm-chairs affording plenty of space to be

uncomfortable in, bureau, chimney-glass in several pieces pretending to

be in one piece, pair of gaudy vases of very artificial flowers; between

them a Greek warrior with his helmet off, sacrificing a clock to the

Genius of France.

After some pause, a door of communication with another room was opened,

and a lady entered. She manifested great surprise on seeing Clennam, and

her glance went round the room in search of some one else.

'Pardon me, Miss Wade. I am alone.'

'It was not your name that was brought to me.'

'No; I know that. Excuse me. I have already had experience that my name

does not predispose you to an interview; and I ventured to mention the

name of one I am in search of.'

'Pray,' she returned, motioning him to a chair so coldly that he

remained standing, 'what name was it that you gave?'

'I mentioned the name of Blandois.'

'Blandois?'

'A name you are acquainted with.'

'It is strange,' she said, frowning, 'that you should still press an

undesired interest in me and my acquaintances, in me and my affairs, Mr

Clennam. I don't know what you mean.'

'Pardon me. You know the name?'

'What can you have to do with the name? What can I have to do with the

name? What can you have to do with my knowing or not knowing any name?

I know many names and I have forgotten many more. This may be in the

one class, or it may be in the other, or I may never have heard it. I am

acquainted with no reason for examining myself, or for being examined,

about it.'

'If you will allow me,' said Clennam, 'I will tell you my reason for

pressing the subject. I admit that I do press it, and I must beg you to

forgive me if I do so, very earnestly. The reason is all mine, I do not

insinuate that it is in any way yours.'

'Well, sir,' she returned, repeating a little less haughtily than before

her former invitation to him to be seated: to which he now deferred, as

she seated herself. 'I am at least glad to know that this is not another

bondswoman of some friend of yours, who is bereft of free choice, and

whom I have spirited away. I will hear your reason, if you please.'

'First, to identify the person of whom we speak,' said Clennam, 'let me

observe that it is the person you met in London some time back. You will

remember meeting him near the river--in the Adelphi!'

'You mix yourself most unaccountably with my business,' she replied,

looking full at him with stern displeasure. 'How do you know that?'

'I entreat you not to take it ill. By mere accident.' 'What accident?'

'Solely the accident of coming upon you in the street and seeing the

meeting.'

'Do you speak of yourself, or of some one else?'

'Of myself. I saw it.'

'To be sure it was in the open street,' she observed, after a few

moments of less and less angry reflection. 'Fifty people might have seen

it. It would have signified nothing if they had.'

'Nor do I make my having seen it of any moment, nor (otherwise than as

an explanation of my coming here) do I connect my visit with it or the

favour that I have to ask.'

'Oh! You have to ask a favour! It occurred to me,' and the handsome face

looked bitterly at him, 'that your manner was softened, Mr Clennam.'

He was content to protest against this by a slight action without

contesting it in words. He then referred to Blandois' disappearance, of

which it was probable she had heard? However probable it was to him, she

had heard of no such thing. Let him look round him (she said) and judge

for himself what general intelligence was likely to reach the ears of

a woman who had been shut up there while it was rife, devouring her own

heart. When she had uttered this denial, which he believed to be true,

she asked him what he meant by disappearance? That led to his narrating

the circumstances in detail, and expressing something of his anxiety

to discover what had really become of the man, and to repel the dark

suspicions that clouded about his mother's house. She heard him with

evident surprise, and with more marks of suppressed interest than he

had seen in her; still they did not overcome her distant, proud, and

self-secluded manner. When he had finished, she said nothing but these

words:

'You have not yet told me, sir, what I have to do with it, or what the

favour is? Will you be so good as come to that?'

'I assume,' said Arthur, persevering, in his endeavour to soften

her scornful demeanour, 'that being in communication--may I say,

confidential communication?--with this person--'

'You may say, of course, whatever you like,' she remarked; 'but I do not

subscribe to your assumptions, Mr Clennam, or to any one's.'

'--that being, at least in personal communication with him,' said

Clennam, changing the form of his position in the hope of making

it unobjectionable, 'you can tell me something of his antecedents,

pursuits, habits, usual place of residence. Can give me some little clue

by which to seek him out in the likeliest manner, and either produce

him, or establish what has become of him. This is the favour I ask,

and I ask it in a distress of mind for which I hope you will feel some

consideration. If you should have any reason for imposing conditions

upon me, I will respect it without asking what it is.'

'You chanced to see me in the street with the man,' she observed,

after being, to his mortification, evidently more occupied with her own

reflections on the matter than with his appeal. 'Then you knew the man

before?'

'Not before; afterwards. I never saw him before, but I saw him again on

this very night of his disappearance. In my mother's room, in fact. I

left him there. You will read in this paper all that is known of him.'

He handed her one of the printed bills, which she read with a steady and

attentive face.

'This is more than I knew of him,' she said, giving it back.

Clennam's looks expressed his heavy disappointment, perhaps his

incredulity; for she added in the same unsympathetic tone: 'You don't

believe it. Still, it is so. As to personal communication: it seems that

there was personal communication between him and your mother. And yet

you say you believe her declaration that she knows no more of him!'

A sufficiently expressive hint of suspicion was conveyed in these words,

and in the smile by which they were accompanied, to bring the blood into

Clennam's cheeks.

'Come, sir,' she said, with a cruel pleasure in repeating the stab, 'I

will be as open with you as you can desire. I will confess that if I

cared for my credit (which I do not), or had a good name to preserve

(which I have not, for I am utterly indifferent to its being considered

good or bad), I should regard myself as heavily compromised by having

had anything to do with this fellow. Yet he never passed in at MY

door--never sat in colloquy with ME until midnight.'

She took her revenge for her old grudge in thus turning his subject

against him. Hers was not the nature to spare him, and she had no

compunction.

'That he is a low, mercenary wretch; that I first saw him prowling about

Italy (where I was, not long ago), and that I hired him there, as the

suitable instrument of a purpose I happened to have; I have no objection

to tell you. In short, it was worth my while, for my own pleasure--the

gratification of a strong feeling--to pay a spy who would fetch and

carry for money. I paid this creature. And I dare say that if I had

wanted to make such a bargain, and if I could have paid him enough, and

if he could have done it in the dark, free from all risk, he would have

taken any life with as little scruple as he took my money. That, at

least, is my opinion of him; and I see it is not very far removed from

yours. Your mother's opinion of him, I am to assume (following your

example of assuming this and that), was vastly different.'

'My mother, let me remind you,' said Clennam, 'was first brought into

communication with him in the unlucky course of business.'

'It appears to have been an unlucky course of business that last brought

her into communication with him,' returned Miss Wade; 'and business

hours on that occasion were late.'

'You imply,' said Arthur, smarting under these cool-handed thrusts, of

which he had deeply felt the force already, 'that there was something--'

'Mr Clennam,' she composedly interrupted, 'recollect that I do not speak

by implication about the man. He is, I say again without disguise, a low

mercenary wretch. I suppose such a creature goes where there is occasion

for him. If I had not had occasion for him, you would not have seen him

and me together.'

Wrung by her persistence in keeping that dark side of the case before

him, of which there was a half-hidden shadow in his own breast, Clennam

was silent.

'I have spoken of him as still living,' she added, 'but he may have been

put out of the way for anything I know. For anything I care, also. I

have no further occasion for him.'

With a heavy sigh and a despondent air, Arthur Clennam slowly rose.

She did not rise also, but said, having looked at him in the meanwhile

with a fixed look of suspicion, and lips angrily compressed:

'He was the chosen associate of your dear friend, Mr Gowan, was he not?

Why don't you ask your dear friend to help you?'

The denial that he was a dear friend rose to Arthur's lips; but he

repressed it, remembering his old struggles and resolutions, and said:

'Further than that he has never seen Blandois since Blandois set out for

England, Mr Gowan knows nothing additional about him. He was a chance

acquaintance, made abroad.'

'A chance acquaintance made abroad!' she repeated. 'Yes. Your dear

friend has need to divert himself with all the acquaintances he can

make, seeing what a wife he has. I hate his wife, sir.'

The anger with which she said it, the more remarkable for being so much

under her restraint, fixed Clennam's attention, and kept him on the

spot. It flashed out of her dark eyes as they regarded him, quivered in

her nostrils, and fired the very breath she exhaled; but her face was

otherwise composed into a disdainful serenity; and her attitude was as

calmly and haughtily graceful as if she had been in a mood of complete

indifference.

'All I will say is, Miss Wade,' he remarked, 'that you can have received

no provocation to a feeling in which I believe you have no sharer.'

'You may ask your dear friend, if you choose,' she returned, 'for his

opinion upon that subject.'

'I am scarcely on those intimate terms with my dear friend,' said

Arthur, in spite of his resolutions, 'that would render my approaching

the subject very probable, Miss Wade.'

'I hate him,' she returned. 'Worse than his wife, because I was once

dupe enough, and false enough to myself, almost to love him. You have

seen me, sir, only on common-place occasions, when I dare say you have

thought me a common-place woman, a little more self-willed than the

generality. You don't know what I mean by hating, if you know me no

better than that; you can't know, without knowing with what care I have

studied myself and people about me. For this reason I have for some

time inclined to tell you what my life has been--not to propitiate your

opinion, for I set no value on it; but that you may comprehend, when

you think of your dear friend and his dear wife, what I mean by hating.

Shall I give you something I have written and put by for your perusal,

or shall I hold my hand?'

Arthur begged her to give it to him. She went to the bureau, unlocked

it, and took from an inner drawer a few folded sheets of paper. Without

any conciliation of him, scarcely addressing him, rather speaking as if

she were speaking to her own looking-glass for the justification of her

own stubbornness, she said, as she gave them to him:

'Now you may know what I mean by hating! No more of that. Sir, whether

you find me temporarily and cheaply lodging in an empty London house, or

in a Calais apartment, you find Harriet with me. You may like to see

her before you leave. Harriet, come in!' She called Harriet again. The

second call produced Harriet, once Tattycoram.

'Here is Mr Clennam,' said Miss Wade; 'not come for you; he has given

you up,--I suppose you have, by this time?'

'Having no authority, or influence--yes,' assented Clennam.

'Not come in search of you, you see; but still seeking some one. He

wants that Blandois man.'

'With whom I saw you in the Strand in London,' hinted Arthur. 'If you

know anything of him, Harriet, except that he came from Venice--which

we all know--tell it to Mr Clennam freely.' 'I know nothing more about

him,' said the girl.

'Are you satisfied?' Miss Wade inquired of Arthur.

He had no reason to disbelieve them; the girl's manner being so natural

as to be almost convincing, if he had had any previous doubts. He

replied, 'I must seek for intelligence elsewhere.'

He was not going in the same breath; but he had risen before the girl

entered, and she evidently thought he was. She looked quickly at him,

and said:

'Are they well, sir?'

'Who?'

She stopped herself in saying what would have been 'all of them;'

glanced at Miss Wade; and said 'Mr and Mrs Meagles.'

'They were, when I last heard of them. They are not at home. By the way,

let me ask you. Is it true that you were seen there?'

'Where? Where does any one say I was seen?' returned the girl, sullenly

casting down her eyes.

'Looking in at the garden gate of the cottage.'

'No,' said Miss Wade. 'She has never been near it.'

'You are wrong, then,' said the girl. 'I went down there the last time

we were in London. I went one afternoon when you left me alone. And I

did look in.'

'You poor-spirited girl,' returned Miss Wade with infinite contempt;

'does all our companionship, do all our conversations, do all your old

complainings, tell for so little as that?'

'There was no harm in looking in at the gate for an instant,' said the

girl. 'I saw by the windows that the family were not there.'

'Why should you go near the place?'

'Because I wanted to see it. Because I felt that I should like to look

at it again.'

As each of the two handsome faces looked at the other, Clennam felt how

each of the two natures must be constantly tearing the other to pieces.

'Oh!' said Miss Wade, coldly subduing and removing her glance; 'if you

had any desire to see the place where you led the life from which I

rescued you because you had found out what it was, that is another

thing. But is that your truth to me? Is that your fidelity to me? Is

that the common cause I make with you? You are not worth the confidence

I have placed in you. You are not worth the favour I have shown you. You

are no higher than a spaniel, and had better go back to the people who

did worse than whip you.'

'If you speak so of them with any one else by to hear, you'll provoke me

to take their part,' said the girl.

'Go back to them,' Miss Wade retorted. 'Go back to them.'

'You know very well,' retorted Harriet in her turn, 'that I won't go

back to them. You know very well that I have thrown them off, and never

can, never shall, never will, go back to them. Let them alone, then,

Miss Wade.'

'You prefer their plenty to your less fat living here,' she rejoined.

'You exalt them, and slight me. What else should I have expected? I

ought to have known it.'

'It's not so,' said the girl, flushing high, 'and you don't say what you

mean. I know what you mean. You are reproaching me, underhanded, with

having nobody but you to look to. And because I have nobody but you

to look to, you think you are to make me do, or not do, everything you

please, and are to put any affront upon me. You are as bad as they were,

every bit. But I will not be quite tamed, and made submissive. I will

say again that I went to look at the house, because I had often thought

that I should like to see it once more. I will ask again how they are,

because I once liked them and at times thought they were kind to me.'

Hereupon Clennam said that he was sure they would still receive her

kindly, if she should ever desire to return.

'Never!' said the girl passionately. 'I shall never do that. Nobody

knows that better than Miss Wade, though she taunts me because she has

made me her dependent. And I know I am so; and I know she is overjoyed

when she can bring it to my mind.'

'A good pretence!' said Miss Wade, with no less anger, haughtiness, and

bitterness; 'but too threadbare to cover what I plainly see in this. My

poverty will not bear competition with their money. Better go back at

once, better go back at once, and have done with it!'

Arthur Clennam looked at them, standing a little distance asunder in the

dull confined room, each proudly cherishing her own anger; each, with

a fixed determination, torturing her own breast, and torturing the

other's. He said a word or two of leave-taking; but Miss Wade barely

inclined her head, and Harriet, with the assumed humiliation of an

abject dependent and serf (but not without defiance for all that), made

as if she were too low to notice or to be noticed.

He came down the dark winding stairs into the yard with an increased

sense upon him of the gloom of the wall that was dead, and of the shrubs

that were dead, and of the fountain that was dry, and of the statue that

was gone. Pondering much on what he had seen and heard in that house,

as well as on the failure of all his efforts to trace the suspicious

character who was lost, he returned to London and to England by the

packet that had taken him over. On the way he unfolded the sheets of

paper, and read in them what is reproduced in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 21. The History of a Self-Tormentor

I have the misfortune of not being a fool. From a very early age I have

detected what those about me thought they hid from me. If I could have

been habitually imposed upon, instead of habitually discerning the

truth, I might have lived as smoothly as most fools do.

My childhood was passed with a grandmother; that is to say, with a lady

who represented that relative to me, and who took that title on herself.

She had no claim to it, but I--being to that extent a little fool--had

no suspicion of her. She had some children of her own family in her

house, and some children of other people. All girls; ten in number,

including me. We all lived together and were educated together.

I must have been about twelve years old when I began to see how

determinedly those girls patronised me. I was told I was an orphan.

There was no other orphan among us; and I perceived (here was the

first disadvantage of not being a fool) that they conciliated me in an

insolent pity, and in a sense of superiority. I did not set this down

as a discovery, rashly. I tried them often. I could hardly make them

quarrel with me. When I succeeded with any of them, they were sure to

come after an hour or two, and begin a reconciliation. I tried them over

and over again, and I never knew them wait for me to begin. They were

always forgiving me, in their vanity and condescension. Little images of

grown people!

One of them was my chosen friend. I loved that stupid mite in a

passionate way that she could no more deserve than I can remember

without feeling ashamed of, though I was but a child. She had what they

called an amiable temper, an affectionate temper. She could distribute,

and did distribute pretty looks and smiles to every one among them. I

believe there was not a soul in the place, except myself, who knew that

she did it purposely to wound and gall me!

Nevertheless, I so loved that unworthy girl that my life was made stormy

by my fondness for her. I was constantly lectured and disgraced for what

was called 'trying her;' in other words charging her with her little

perfidy and throwing her into tears by showing her that I read her

heart. However, I loved her faithfully; and one time I went home with

her for the holidays.

She was worse at home than she had been at school. She had a crowd of

cousins and acquaintances, and we had dances at her house, and went out

to dances at other houses, and, both at home and out, she tormented my

love beyond endurance. Her plan was, to make them all fond of her--and

so drive me wild with jealousy. To be familiar and endearing with them

all--and so make me mad with envying them. When we were left alone in

our bedroom at night, I would reproach her with my perfect knowledge of

her baseness; and then she would cry and cry and say I was cruel, and

then I would hold her in my arms till morning: loving her as much as

ever, and often feeling as if, rather than suffer so, I could so hold

her in my arms and plunge to the bottom of a river--where I would still

hold her after we were both dead.

It came to an end, and I was relieved. In the family there was an aunt

who was not fond of me. I doubt if any of the family liked me much; but

I never wanted them to like me, being altogether bound up in the one

girl. The aunt was a young woman, and she had a serious way with her

eyes of watching me. She was an audacious woman, and openly looked

compassionately at me. After one of the nights that I have spoken of, I

came down into a greenhouse before breakfast. Charlotte (the name of

my false young friend) had gone down before me, and I heard this aunt

speaking to her about me as I entered. I stopped where I was, among the

leaves, and listened.

The aunt said, 'Charlotte, Miss Wade is wearing you to death, and this

must not continue.' I repeat the very words I heard.

Now, what did she answer? Did she say, 'It is I who am wearing her to

death, I who am keeping her on a rack and am the executioner, yet she

tells me every night that she loves me devotedly, though she knows what

I make her undergo?' No; my first memorable experience was true to

what I knew her to be, and to all my experience. She began sobbing and

weeping (to secure the aunt's sympathy to herself), and said, 'Dear

aunt, she has an unhappy temper; other girls at school, besides I, try

hard to make it better; we all try hard.'

Upon that the aunt fondled her, as if she had said something noble

instead of despicable and false, and kept up the infamous pretence by

replying, 'But there are reasonable limits, my dear love, to everything,

and I see that this poor miserable girl causes you more constant and

useless distress than even so good an effort justifies.'

The poor miserable girl came out of her concealment, as you may be

prepared to hear, and said, 'Send me home.' I never said another word

to either of them, or to any of them, but 'Send me home, or I will

walk home alone, night and day!' When I got home, I told my supposed

grandmother that, unless I was sent away to finish my education

somewhere else before that girl came back, or before any one of them

came back, I would burn my sight away by throwing myself into the fire,

rather than I would endure to look at their plotting faces.

I went among young women next, and I found them no better. Fair

words and fair pretences; but I penetrated below those assertions of

themselves and depreciations of me, and they were no better. Before

I left them, I learned that I had no grandmother and no recognised

relation. I carried the light of that information both into my past

and into my future. It showed me many new occasions on which people

triumphed over me, when they made a pretence of treating me with

consideration, or doing me a service.

A man of business had a small property in trust for me. I was to be

a governess; I became a governess; and went into the family of a poor

nobleman, where there were two daughters--little children, but the

parents wished them to grow up, if possible, under one instructress. The

mother was young and pretty. From the first, she made a show of behaving

to me with great delicacy. I kept my resentment to myself; but I knew

very well that it was her way of petting the knowledge that she was my

Mistress, and might have behaved differently to her servant if it had

been her fancy.

I say I did not resent it, nor did I; but I showed her, by not

gratifying her, that I understood her. When she pressed me to take wine,

I took water. If there happened to be anything choice at table, she

always sent it to me: but I always declined it, and ate of the rejected

dishes. These disappointments of her patronage were a sharp retort, and

made me feel independent.

I liked the children. They were timid, but on the whole disposed to

attach themselves to me. There was a nurse, however, in the house, a

rosy-faced woman always making an obtrusive pretence of being gay and

good-humoured, who had nursed them both, and who had secured their

affections before I saw them. I could almost have settled down to my

fate but for this woman. Her artful devices for keeping herself before

the children in constant competition with me, might have blinded many

in my place; but I saw through them from the first. On the pretext of

arranging my rooms and waiting on me and taking care of my wardrobe (all

of which she did busily), she was never absent. The most crafty of her

many subtleties was her feint of seeking to make the children fonder of

me. She would lead them to me and coax them to me. 'Come to good Miss

Wade, come to dear Miss Wade, come to pretty Miss Wade. She loves you

very much. Miss Wade is a clever lady, who has read heaps of books, and

can tell you far better and more interesting stories than I know. Come

and hear Miss Wade!' How could I engage their attentions, when my heart

was burning against these ignorant designs? How could I wonder, when I

saw their innocent faces shrinking away, and their arms twining round

her neck, instead of mine? Then she would look up at me, shaking their

curls from her face, and say, 'They'll come round soon, Miss Wade;

they're very simple and loving, ma'am; don't be at all cast down about

it, ma'am'--exulting over me!

There was another thing the woman did. At times, when she saw that she

had safely plunged me into a black despondent brooding by these means,

she would call the attention of the children to it, and would show them

the difference between herself and me. 'Hush! Poor Miss Wade is not

well. Don't make a noise, my dears, her head aches. Come and comfort

her. Come and ask her if she is better; come and ask her to lie down. I

hope you have nothing on your mind, ma'am. Don't take on, ma'am, and be

sorry!'

It became intolerable. Her ladyship, my Mistress, coming in one day when

I was alone, and at the height of feeling that I could support it no

longer, I told her I must go. I could not bear the presence of that

woman Dawes.

'Miss Wade! Poor Dawes is devoted to you; would do anything for you!'

I knew beforehand she would say so; I was quite prepared for it; I only

answered, it was not for me to contradict my Mistress; I must go.

'I hope, Miss Wade,' she returned, instantly assuming the tone of

superiority she had always so thinly concealed, 'that nothing I have

ever said or done since we have been together, has justified your use of

that disagreeable word, "Mistress." It must have been wholly inadvertent

on my part. Pray tell me what it is.'

I replied that I had no complaint to make, either of my Mistress or to

my Mistress; but I must go.

She hesitated a moment, and then sat down beside me, and laid her hand

on mine. As if that honour would obliterate any remembrance!

'Miss Wade, I fear you are unhappy, through causes over which I have no

influence.'

I smiled, thinking of the experience the word awakened, and said, 'I

have an unhappy temper, I suppose.' 'I did not say that.'

'It is an easy way of accounting for anything,' said I.

'It may be; but I did not say so. What I wish to approach is something

very different. My husband and I have exchanged some remarks upon the

subject, when we have observed with pain that you have not been easy

with us.'

'Easy? Oh! You are such great people, my lady,' said I.

'I am unfortunate in using a word which may convey a meaning--and

evidently does--quite opposite to my intention.' (She had not expected

my reply, and it shamed her.) 'I only mean, not happy with us. It is

a difficult topic to enter on; but, from one young woman to another,

perhaps--in short, we have been apprehensive that you may allow some

family circumstances of which no one can be more innocent than yourself,

to prey upon your spirits. If so, let us entreat you not to make them

a cause of grief. My husband himself, as is well known, formerly had a

very dear sister who was not in law his sister, but who was universally

beloved and respected.

I saw directly that they had taken me in for the sake of the dead woman,

whoever she was, and to have that boast of me and advantage of me; I

saw, in the nurse's knowledge of it, an encouragement to goad me as

she had done; and I saw, in the children's shrinking away, a vague

impression, that I was not like other people. I left that house that

night.

After one or two short and very similar experiences, which are not to

the present purpose, I entered another family where I had but one pupil:

a girl of fifteen, who was the only daughter. The parents here were

elderly people: people of station, and rich. A nephew whom they had

brought up was a frequent visitor at the house, among many other

visitors; and he began to pay me attention.

I was resolute in repulsing him; for I had determined when I went

there, that no one should pity me or condescend to me. But he wrote me a

letter. It led to our being engaged to be married.

He was a year younger than I, and young-looking even when that allowance

was made. He was on absence from India, where he had a post that was

soon to grow into a very good one. In six months we were to be married,

and were to go to India. I was to stay in the house, and was to be

married from the house. Nobody objected to any part of the plan.

I cannot avoid saying he admired me; but, if I could, I would. Vanity

has nothing to do with the declaration, for his admiration worried me.

He took no pains to hide it; and caused me to feel among the rich people

as if he had bought me for my looks, and made a show of his purchase to

justify himself. They appraised me in their own minds, I saw, and were

curious to ascertain what my full value was. I resolved that they

should not know. I was immovable and silent before them; and would have

suffered any one of them to kill me sooner than I would have laid myself

out to bespeak their approval.

He told me I did not do myself justice. I told him I did, and it was

because I did and meant to do so to the last, that I would not stoop to

propitiate any of them. He was concerned and even shocked, when I added

that I wished he would not parade his attachment before them; but he

said he would sacrifice even the honest impulses of his affection to my

peace.

Under that pretence he began to retort upon me. By the hour together, he

would keep at a distance from me, talking to any one rather than to me.

I have sat alone and unnoticed, half an evening, while he conversed with

his young cousin, my pupil. I have seen all the while, in people's eyes,

that they thought the two looked nearer on an equality than he and I.

I have sat, divining their thoughts, until I have felt that his young

appearance made me ridiculous, and have raged against myself for ever

loving him.

For I did love him once. Undeserving as he was, and little as he thought

of all these agonies that it cost me--agonies which should have made him

wholly and gratefully mine to his life's end--I loved him. I bore with

his cousin's praising him to my face, and with her pretending to think

that it pleased me, but full well knowing that it rankled in my breast;

for his sake. While I have sat in his presence recalling all my slights

and wrongs, and deliberating whether I should not fly from the house at

once and never see him again--I have loved him.

His aunt (my Mistress you will please to remember) deliberately,

wilfully, added to my trials and vexations. It was her delight to

expatiate on the style in which we were to live in India, and on the

establishment we should keep, and the company we should entertain when

he got his advancement. My pride rose against this barefaced way of

pointing out the contrast my married life was to present to my then

dependent and inferior position. I suppressed my indignation; but I

showed her that her intention was not lost upon me, and I repaid her

annoyance by affecting humility. What she described would surely be

a great deal too much honour for me, I would tell her. I was afraid

I might not be able to support so great a change. Think of a mere

governess, her daughter's governess, coming to that high distinction! It

made her uneasy, and made them all uneasy, when I answered in this way.

They knew that I fully understood her.

It was at the time when my troubles were at their highest, and when

I was most incensed against my lover for his ingratitude in caring as

little as he did for the innumerable distresses and mortifications I

underwent on his account, that your dear friend, Mr Gowan, appeared

at the house. He had been intimate there for a long time, but had been

abroad. He understood the state of things at a glance, and he understood

me.

He was the first person I had ever seen in my life who had understood

me. He was not in the house three times before I knew that he

accompanied every movement of my mind. In his coldly easy way with all

of them, and with me, and with the whole subject, I saw it clearly.

In his light protestations of admiration of my future husband, in his

enthusiasm regarding our engagement and our prospects, in his hopeful

congratulations on our future wealth and his despondent references to

his own poverty--all equally hollow, and jesting, and full of mockery--I

saw it clearly. He made me feel more and more resentful, and more and

more contemptible, by always presenting to me everything that surrounded

me with some new hateful light upon it, while he pretended to exhibit

it in its best aspect for my admiration and his own. He was like the

dressed-up Death in the Dutch series; whatever figure he took upon his

arm, whether it was youth or age, beauty or ugliness, whether he danced

with it, sang with it, played with it, or prayed with it, he made it

ghastly.

You will understand, then, that when your dear friend complimented me,

he really condoled with me; that when he soothed me under my vexations,

he laid bare every smarting wound I had; that when he declared my

'faithful swain' to be 'the most loving young fellow in the world, with

the tenderest heart that ever beat,' he touched my old misgiving that

I was made ridiculous. These were not great services, you may say. They

were acceptable to me, because they echoed my own mind, and confirmed

my own knowledge. I soon began to like the society of your dear friend

better than any other.

When I perceived (which I did, almost as soon) that jealousy was growing

out of this, I liked this society still better. Had I not been subject

to jealousy, and were the endurances to be all mine? No. Let him know

what it was! I was delighted that he should know it; I was delighted

that he should feel keenly, and I hoped he did.

More than that. He was tame in comparison with Mr Gowan, who knew how

to address me on equal terms, and how to anatomise the wretched people

around us.

This went on, until the aunt, my Mistress, took it upon herself to speak

to me. It was scarcely worth alluding to; she knew I meant nothing; but

she suggested from herself, knowing it was only necessary to suggest,

that it might be better if I were a little less companionable with Mr

Gowan.

I asked her how she could answer for what I meant? She could always

answer, she replied, for my meaning nothing wrong. I thanked her,

but said I would prefer to answer for myself and to myself. Her other

servants would probably be grateful for good characters, but I wanted

none.

Other conversation followed, and induced me to ask her how she knew that

it was only necessary for her to make a suggestion to me, to have it

obeyed? Did she presume on my birth, or on my hire? I was not bought,

body and soul. She seemed to think that her distinguished nephew had

gone into a slave-market and purchased a wife.

It would probably have come, sooner or later, to the end to which it did

come, but she brought it to its issue at once. She told me, with assumed

commiseration, that I had an unhappy temper. On this repetition of the

old wicked injury, I withheld no longer, but exposed to her all I had

known of her and seen in her, and all I had undergone within myself

since I had occupied the despicable position of being engaged to her

nephew. I told her that Mr Gowan was the only relief I had had in my

degradation; that I had borne it too long, and that I shook it off too

late; but that I would see none of them more. And I never did. Your dear

friend followed me to my retreat, and was very droll on the severance of

the connection; though he was sorry, too, for the excellent people

(in their way the best he had ever met), and deplored the necessity of

breaking mere house-flies on the wheel. He protested before long, and

far more truly than I then supposed, that he was not worth acceptance

by a woman of such endowments, and such power of character; but--well,

well--!

Your dear friend amused me and amused himself as long as it suited

his inclinations; and then reminded me that we were both people of the

world, that we both understood mankind, that we both knew there was no

such thing as romance, that we were both prepared for going different

ways to seek our fortunes like people of sense, and that we both foresaw

that whenever we encountered one another again we should meet as the

best friends on earth. So he said, and I did not contradict him.

It was not very long before I found that he was courting his present

wife, and that she had been taken away to be out of his reach. I hated

her then, quite as much as I hate her now; and naturally, therefore,

could desire nothing better than that she should marry him. But I was

restlessly curious to look at her--so curious that I felt it to be one

of the few sources of entertainment left to me. I travelled a little:

travelled until I found myself in her society, and in yours. Your dear

friend, I think, was not known to you then, and had not given you any of

those signal marks of his friendship which he has bestowed upon you.

In that company I found a girl, in various circumstances of whose

position there was a singular likeness to my own, and in whose character

I was interested and pleased to see much of the rising against swollen

patronage and selfishness, calling themselves kindness, protection,

benevolence, and other fine names, which I have described as inherent in

my nature. I often heard it said, too, that she had 'an unhappy temper.'

Well understanding what was meant by the convenient phrase, and wanting

a companion with a knowledge of what I knew, I thought I would try to

release the girl from her bondage and sense of injustice. I have no

occasion to relate that I succeeded.

We have been together ever since, sharing my small means.

CHAPTER 22. Who passes by this Road so late?

Arthur Clennam had made his unavailing expedition to Calais in the midst

of a great pressure of business. A certain barbaric Power with valuable

possessions on the map of the world, had occasion for the services of

one or two engineers, quick in invention and determined in execution:

practical men, who could make the men and means their ingenuity

perceived to be wanted out of the best materials they could find

at hand; and who were as bold and fertile in the adaptation of such

materials to their purpose, as in the conception of their purpose

itself. This Power, being a barbaric one, had no idea of stowing away

a great national object in a Circumlocution Office, as strong wine is

hidden from the light in a cellar until its fire and youth are gone,

and the labourers who worked in the vineyard and pressed the grapes are

dust. With characteristic ignorance, it acted on the most decided and

energetic notions of How to do it; and never showed the least respect

for, or gave any quarter to, the great political science, How not to do

it. Indeed it had a barbarous way of striking the latter art and mystery

dead, in the person of any enlightened subject who practised it.

Accordingly, the men who were wanted were sought out and found; which

was in itself a most uncivilised and irregular way of proceeding. Being

found, they were treated with great confidence and honour (which again

showed dense political ignorance), and were invited to come at once and

do what they had to do. In short, they were regarded as men who meant to

do it, engaging with other men who meant it to be done.

Daniel Doyce was one of the chosen. There was no foreseeing at that time

whether he would be absent months or years. The preparations for his

departure, and the conscientious arrangement for him of all the details

and results of their joint business, had necessitated labour within a

short compass of time, which had occupied Clennam day and night. He

had slipped across the water in his first leisure, and had slipped as

quickly back again for his farewell interview with Doyce.

Him Arthur now showed, with pains and care, the state of their gains and

losses, responsibilities and prospects. Daniel went through it all

in his patient manner, and admired it all exceedingly. He audited the

accounts, as if they were a far more ingenious piece of mechanism than

he had ever constructed, and afterwards stood looking at them, weighing

his hat over his head by the brims, as if he were absorbed in the

contemplation of some wonderful engine.

'It's all beautiful, Clennam, in its regularity and order. Nothing can

be plainer. Nothing can be better.'

'I am glad you approve, Doyce. Now, as to the management of your capital

while you are away, and as to the conversion of so much of it as the

business may need from time to time--' His partner stopped him.

'As to that, and as to everything else of that kind, all rests with you.

You will continue in all such matters to act for both of us, as you

have done hitherto, and to lighten my mind of a load it is much relieved

from.'

'Though, as I often tell you,' returned Clennam, 'you unreasonably

depreciate your business qualities.'

'Perhaps so,' said Doyce, smiling. 'And perhaps not. Anyhow, I have a

calling that I have studied more than such matters, and that I am better

fitted for. I have perfect confidence in my partner, and I am satisfied

that he will do what is best. If I have a prejudice connected with money

and money figures,' continued Doyce, laying that plastic workman's thumb

of his on the lapel of his partner's coat, 'it is against speculating.

I don't think I have any other. I dare say I entertain that prejudice,

only because I have never given my mind fully to the subject.'

'But you shouldn't call it a prejudice,' said Clennam. 'My dear Doyce,

it is the soundest sense.'

'I am glad you think so,' returned Doyce, with his grey eye looking kind

and bright.

'It so happens,' said Clennam, 'that just now, not half an hour before

you came down, I was saying the same thing to Pancks, who looked in

here. We both agreed that to travel out of safe investments is one of

the most dangerous, as it is one of the most common, of those follies

which often deserve the name of vices.'

'Pancks?' said Doyce, tilting up his hat at the back, and nodding with

an air of confidence. 'Aye, aye, aye! That's a cautious fellow.'

'He is a very cautious fellow indeed,' returned Arthur. 'Quite a

specimen of caution.'

They both appeared to derive a larger amount of satisfaction from the

cautious character of Mr Pancks, than was quite intelligible, judged by

the surface of their conversation.

'And now,' said Daniel, looking at his watch, 'as time and tide wait

for no man, my trusty partner, and as I am ready for starting, bag and

baggage, at the gate below, let me say a last word. I want you to grant

a request of mine.'

'Any request you can make--Except,' Clennam was quick with his

exception, for his partner's face was quick in suggesting it, 'except

that I will abandon your invention.'

'That's the request, and you know it is,' said Doyce.

'I say, No, then. I say positively, No. Now that I have begun, I will

have some definite reason, some responsible statement, something in the

nature of a real answer, from those people.'

'You will not,' returned Doyce, shaking his head. 'Take my word for it,

you never will.'

'At least, I'll try,' said Clennam. 'It will do me no harm to try.'

'I am not certain of that,' rejoined Doyce, laying his hand persuasively

on his shoulder. 'It has done me harm, my friend. It has aged me, tired

me, vexed me, disappointed me. It does no man any good to have his

patience worn out, and to think himself ill-used. I fancy, even already,

that unavailing attendance on delays and evasions has made you something

less elastic than you used to be.'

'Private anxieties may have done that for the moment,' said Clennam,

'but not official harrying. Not yet. I am not hurt yet.'

'Then you won't grant my request?'

'Decidedly, No,' said Clennam. 'I should be ashamed if I submitted to

be so soon driven out of the field, where a much older and a much more

sensitively interested man contended with fortitude so long.'

As there was no moving him, Daniel Doyce returned the grasp of his hand,

and, casting a farewell look round the counting-house, went down-stairs

with him. Doyce was to go to Southampton to join the small staff of

his fellow-travellers; and a coach was at the gate, well furnished and

packed, and ready to take him there. The workmen were at the gate to see

him off, and were mightily proud of him. 'Good luck to you, Mr Doyce!'

said one of the number. 'Wherever you go, they'll find as they've got a

man among 'em, a man as knows his tools and as his tools knows, a man

as is willing and a man as is able, and if that's not a man, where is

a man!' This oration from a gruff volunteer in the back-ground, not

previously suspected of any powers in that way, was received with three

loud cheers; and the speaker became a distinguished character for ever

afterwards. In the midst of the three loud cheers, Daniel gave them all

a hearty 'Good Bye, Men!' and the coach disappeared from sight, as if

the concussion of the air had blown it out of Bleeding Heart Yard.

Mr Baptist, as a grateful little fellow in a position of trust, was

among the workmen, and had done as much towards the cheering as a mere

foreigner could. In truth, no men on earth can cheer like Englishmen,

who do so rally one another's blood and spirit when they cheer in

earnest, that the stir is like the rush of their whole history, with all

its standards waving at once, from Saxon Alfred's downwards. Mr Baptist

had been in a manner whirled away before the onset, and was taking his

breath in quite a scared condition when Clennam beckoned him to follow

up-stairs, and return the books and papers to their places.

In the lull consequent on the departure--in that first vacuity which

ensues on every separation, foreshadowing the great separation that

is always overhanging all mankind--Arthur stood at his desk, looking

dreamily out at a gleam of sun. But his liberated attention soon

reverted to the theme that was foremost in his thoughts, and began, for

the hundredth time, to dwell upon every circumstance that had impressed

itself upon his mind on the mysterious night when he had seen the man at

his mother's. Again the man jostled him in the crooked street, again

he followed the man and lost him, again he came upon the man in the

court-yard looking at the house, again he followed the man and stood

beside him on the door-steps.

'Who passes by this road so late?

Compagnon de la Majolaine;

Who passes by this road so late?

Always gay!'

It was not the first time, by many, that he had recalled the song of the

child's game, of which the fellow had hummed @ verse while they stood

side by side; but he was so unconscious of having repeated it audibly,

that he started to hear the next verse.

'Of all the king's knights 'tis the flower,

Compagnon de la Majolaine;

Of all the king's knights 'tis the flower,

Always gay!'

Cavalletto had deferentially suggested the words and tune, supposing him

to have stopped short for want of more.

'Ah! You know the song, Cavalletto?'

'By Bacchus, yes, sir! They all know it in France. I have heard it many

times, sung by the little children. The last time when it I have heard,'

said Mr Baptist, formerly Cavalletto, who usually went back to his

native construction of sentences when his memory went near home, 'is

from a sweet little voice. A little voice, very pretty, very innocent.

Altro!'

'The last time I heard it,' returned Arthur, 'was in a voice quite the

reverse of pretty, and quite the reverse of innocent.' He said it more

to himself than to his companion, and added to himself, repeating

the man's next words. 'Death of my life, sir, it's my character to be

impatient!'

'EH!' cried Cavalletto, astounded, and with all his colour gone in a

moment.

'What is the matter?'

'Sir! You know where I have heard that song the last time?'

With his rapid native action, his hands made the outline of a high hook

nose, pushed his eyes near together, dishevelled his hair, puffed out

his upper lip to represent a thick moustache, and threw the heavy end

of an ideal cloak over his shoulder. While doing this, with a swiftness

incredible to one who has not watched an Italian peasant, he indicated a

very remarkable and sinister smile.

The whole change passed over him like a flash of light, and he stood in

the same instant, pale and astonished, before his patron.

'In the name of Fate and wonder,' said Clennam, 'what do you mean? Do

you know a man of the name of Blandois?'

'No!' said Mr Baptist, shaking his head.

'You have just now described a man who was by when you heard that song;

have you not?'

'Yes!' said Mr Baptist, nodding fifty times.

'And was he not called Blandois?'

'No!' said Mr Baptist. 'Altro, Altro, Altro, Altro!' He could not reject

the name sufficiently, with his head and his right forefinger going at

once.

'Stay!' cried Clennam, spreading out the handbill on his desk. 'Was this

the man? You can understand what I read aloud?'

'Altogether. Perfectly.'

'But look at it, too. Come here and look over me, while I read.'

Mr Baptist approached, followed every word with his quick eyes, saw

and heard it all out with the greatest impatience, then clapped his

two hands flat upon the bill as if he had fiercely caught some noxious

creature, and cried, looking eagerly at Clennam, 'It is the man! Behold

him!'

'This is of far greater moment to me' said Clennam, in great agitation,

'than you can imagine. Tell me where you knew the man.'

Mr Baptist, releasing the paper very slowly and with much discomfiture,

and drawing himself back two or three paces, and making as though he

dusted his hands, returned, very much against his will:

'At Marsiglia--Marseilles.'

'What was he?'

'A prisoner, and--Altro! I believe yes!--an,' Mr Baptist crept closer

again to whisper it, 'Assassin!'

Clennam fell back as if the word had struck him a blow: so terrible

did it make his mother's communication with the man appear.

Cavalletto dropped on one knee, and implored him, with a redundancy of

gesticulation, to hear what had brought himself into such foul company.

He told with perfect truth how it had come of a little contraband

trading, and how he had in time been released from prison, and how he

had gone away from those antecedents. How, at the house of entertainment

called the Break of Day at Chalons on the Saone, he had been awakened

in his bed at night by the same assassin, then assuming the name of

Lagnier, though his name had formerly been Rigaud; how the assassin had

proposed that they should join their fortunes together; how he held

the assassin in such dread and aversion that he had fled from him at

daylight, and how he had ever since been haunted by the fear of seeing

the assassin again and being claimed by him as an acquaintance. When he

had related this, with an emphasis and poise on the word, 'assassin,'

peculiarly belonging to his own language, and which did not serve to

render it less terrible to Clennam, he suddenly sprang to his feet,

pounced upon the bill again, and with a vehemence that would have been

absolute madness in any man of Northern origin, cried 'Behold the same

assassin! Here he is!'

In his passionate raptures, he at first forgot the fact that he had

lately seen the assassin in London. On his remembering it, it suggested

hope to Clennam that the recognition might be of later date than the

night of the visit at his mother's; but Cavalletto was too exact and

clear about time and place, to leave any opening for doubt that it had

preceded that occasion.

'Listen,' said Arthur, very seriously. 'This man, as we have read here,

has wholly disappeared.'

'Of it I am well content!' said Cavalletto, raising his eyes piously. 'A

thousand thanks to Heaven! Accursed assassin!'

'Not so,' returned Clennam; 'for until something more is heard of him, I

can never know an hour's peace.'

'Enough, Benefactor; that is quite another thing. A million of excuses!'

'Now, Cavalletto,' said Clennam, gently turning him by the arm, so that

they looked into each other's eyes. 'I am certain that for the little

I have been able to do for you, you are the most sincerely grateful of

men.'

'I swear it!' cried the other.

'I know it. If you could find this man, or discover what has become of

him, or gain any later intelligence whatever of him, you would render

me a service above any other service I could receive in the world, and

would make me (with far greater reason) as grateful to you as you are to

me.' 'I know not where to look,' cried the little man, kissing Arthur's

hand in a transport. 'I know not where to begin. I know not where to go.

But, courage! Enough! It matters not! I go, in this instant of time!'

'Not a word to any one but me, Cavalletto.'

'Al-tro!' cried Cavalletto. And was gone with great speed.

CHAPTER 23. Mistress Affery makes a Conditional Promise,

respecting her Dreams

Left alone, with the expressive looks and gestures of Mr Baptist,

otherwise Giovanni Baptista Cavalletto, vividly before him, Clennam

entered on a weary day. It was in vain that he tried to control his

attention by directing it to any business occupation or train of

thought; it rode at anchor by the haunting topic, and would hold to no

other idea. As though a criminal should be chained in a stationary boat

on a deep clear river, condemned, whatever countless leagues of water

flowed past him, always to see the body of the fellow-creature he had

drowned lying at the bottom, immovable, and unchangeable, except as

the eddies made it broad or long, now expanding, now contracting

its terrible lineaments; so Arthur, below the shifting current of

transparent thoughts and fancies which were gone and succeeded by others

as soon as come, saw, steady and dark, and not to be stirred from its

place, the one subject that he endeavoured with all his might to rid

himself of, and that he could not fly from. The assurance he now

had, that Blandois, whatever his right name, was one of the worst of

characters, greatly augmented the burden of his anxieties. Though the

disappearance should be accounted for to-morrow, the fact that

his mother had been in communication with such a man, would remain

unalterable. That the communication had been of a secret kind, and that

she had been submissive to him and afraid of him, he hoped might be

known to no one beyond himself; yet, knowing it, how could he separate

it from his old vague fears, and how believe that there was nothing evil

in such relations? Her resolution not to enter on the question with him,

and his knowledge of her indomitable character, enhanced his sense of

helplessness. It was like the oppression of a dream to believe that

shame and exposure were impending over her and his father's memory, and

to be shut out, as by a brazen wall, from the possibility of coming to

their aid. The purpose he had brought home to his native country, and

had ever since kept in view, was, with her greatest determination,

defeated by his mother herself, at the time of all others when he feared

that it pressed most. His advice, energy, activity, money, credit,

all his resources whatsoever, were all made useless. If she had been

possessed of the old fabled influence, and had turned those who looked

upon her into stone, she could not have rendered him more completely

powerless (so it seemed to him in his distress of mind) than she did,

when she turned her unyielding face to his in her gloomy room.

But the light of that day's discovery, shining on these considerations,

roused him to take a more decided course of action.

Confident in the rectitude of his purpose, and impelled by a sense of

overhanging danger closing in around, he resolved, if his mother would

still admit of no approach, to make a desperate appeal to Affery. If she

could be brought to become communicative, and to do what lay in her to

break the spell of secrecy that enshrouded the house, he might shake

off the paralysis of which every hour that passed over his head made

him more acutely sensible. This was the result of his day's anxiety, and

this was the decision he put in practice when the day closed in.

His first disappointment, on arriving at the house, was to find the door

open, and Mr Flintwinch smoking a pipe on the steps. If circumstances

had been commonly favourable, Mistress Affery would have opened the

door to his knock. Circumstances being uncommonly unfavourable, the door

stood open, and Mr Flintwinch was smoking his pipe on the steps.

'Good evening,' said Arthur.

'Good evening,' said Mr Flintwinch.

The smoke came crookedly out of Mr Flintwinch's mouth, as if it

circulated through the whole of his wry figure and came back by his wry

throat, before coming forth to mingle with the smoke from the crooked

chimneys and the mists from the crooked river.

'Have you any news?' said Arthur.

'We have no news,' said Jeremiah.

'I mean of the foreign man,' Arthur explained.

\_'I\_ mean of the foreign man,' said Jeremiah.

He looked so grim, as he stood askew, with the knot of his cravat under

his ear, that the thought passed into Clennam's mind, and not for the

first time by many, could Flintwinch for a purpose of his own have got

rid of Blandois? Could it have been his secret, and his safety, that

were at issue? He was small and bent, and perhaps not actively strong;

yet he was as tough as an old yew-tree, and as crusty as an old jackdaw.

Such a man, coming behind a much younger and more vigorous man, and

having the will to put an end to him and no relenting, might do it

pretty surely in that solitary place at a late hour.

While, in the morbid condition of his thoughts, these thoughts drifted

over the main one that was always in Clennam's mind, Mr Flintwinch,

regarding the opposite house over the gateway with his neck twisted and

one eye shut up, stood smoking with a vicious expression upon him; more

as if he were trying to bite off the stem of his pipe, than as if he

were enjoying it. Yet he was enjoying it in his own way.

'You'll be able to take my likeness, the next time you call, Arthur,

I should think,' said Mr Flintwinch, drily, as he stooped to knock the

ashes out.

Rather conscious and confused, Arthur asked his pardon, if he had stared

at him unpolitely. 'But my mind runs so much upon this matter,' he said,

'that I lose myself.'

'Hah! Yet I don't see,' returned Mr Flintwinch, quite at his leisure,

'why it should trouble YOU, Arthur.'

'No?'

'No,' said Mr Flintwinch, very shortly and decidedly: much as if he were

of the canine race, and snapped at Arthur's hand.

'Is it nothing to see those placards about? Is it nothing to me to

see my mother's name and residence hawked up and down in such an

association?'

'I don't see,' returned Mr Flintwinch, scraping his horny cheek, 'that

it need signify much to you. But I'll tell you what I do see, Arthur,'

glancing up at the windows; 'I see the light of fire and candle in your

mother's room!'

'And what has that to do with it?'

'Why, sir, I read by it,' said Mr Flintwinch, screwing himself at him,

'that if it's advisable (as the proverb says it is) to let sleeping dogs

lie, it's just as advisable, perhaps, to let missing dogs lie. Let 'em

be. They generally turn up soon enough.'

Mr Flintwinch turned short round when he had made this remark, and went

into the dark hall. Clennam stood there, following him with his eyes,

as he dipped for a light in the phosphorus-box in the little room at the

side, got one after three or four dips, and lighted the dim lamp against

the wall. All the while, Clennam was pursuing the probabilities--rather

as if they were being shown to him by an invisible hand than as if he

himself were conjuring them up--of Mr Flintwinch's ways and means of

doing that darker deed, and removing its traces by any of the black

avenues of shadow that lay around them.

'Now, sir,' said the testy Jeremiah; 'will it be agreeable to walk

up-stairs?'

'My mother is alone, I suppose?'

'Not alone,' said Mr Flintwinch. 'Mr Casby and his daughter are with

her. They came in while I was smoking, and I stayed behind to have my

smoke out.'

This was the second disappointment. Arthur made no remark upon it, and

repaired to his mother's room, where Mr Casby and Flora had been

taking tea, anchovy paste, and hot buttered toast. The relics of those

delicacies were not yet removed, either from the table or from the

scorched countenance of Affery, who, with the kitchen toasting-fork

still in her hand, looked like a sort of allegorical personage; except

that she had a considerable advantage over the general run of such

personages in point of significant emblematical purpose.

Flora had spread her bonnet and shawl upon the bed, with a care

indicative of an intention to stay some time. Mr Casby, too, was beaming

near the hob, with his benevolent knobs shining as if the warm butter of

the toast were exuding through the patriarchal skull, and with his face

as ruddy as if the colouring matter of the anchovy paste were mantling

in the patriarchal visage. Seeing this, as he exchanged the

usual salutations, Clennam decided to speak to his mother without

postponement.

It had long been customary, as she never changed her room, for those who

had anything to say to her apart, to wheel her to her desk; where she

sat, usually with the back of her chair turned towards the rest of the

room, and the person who talked with her seated in a corner, on a stool

which was always set in that place for that purpose. Except that it

was long since the mother and son had spoken together without the

intervention of a third person, it was an ordinary matter of course

within the experience of visitors for Mrs Clennam to be asked, with a

word of apology for the interruption, if she could be spoken with on

a matter of business, and, on her replying in the affirmative, to be

wheeled into the position described.

Therefore, when Arthur now made such an apology, and such a request,

and moved her to her desk and seated himself on the stool, Mrs Finching

merely began to talk louder and faster, as a delicate hint that she

could overhear nothing, and Mr Casby stroked his long white locks with

sleepy calmness.

'Mother, I have heard something to-day which I feel persuaded you don't

know, and which I think you should know, of the antecedents of that man

I saw here.'

'I know nothing of the antecedents of the man you saw here, Arthur.'

She spoke aloud. He had lowered his own voice; but she rejected that

advance towards confidence as she rejected every other, and spoke in her

usual key and in her usual stern voice.

'I have received it on no circuitous information; it has come to me

direct.' She asked him, exactly as before, if he were there to tell her

what it was?

'I thought it right that you should know it.'

'And what is it?'

'He has been a prisoner in a French gaol.'

She answered with composure, 'I should think that very likely.'

'But in a gaol for criminals, mother. On an accusation of murder.'

She started at the word, and her looks expressed her natural horror. Yet

she still spoke aloud, when she demanded:--

'Who told you so?'

'A man who was his fellow-prisoner.'

'That man's antecedents, I suppose, were not known to you, before he

told you?'

'No.'

'Though the man himself was?'

'Yes.'

'My case and Flintwinch's, in respect of this other man! I dare say the

resemblance is not so exact, though, as that your informant became known

to you through a letter from a correspondent with whom he had deposited

money? How does that part of the parallel stand?'

Arthur had no choice but to say that his informant had not become known

to him through the agency of any such credentials, or indeed of any

credentials at all. Mrs Clennam's attentive frown expanded by degrees

into a severe look of triumph, and she retorted with emphasis, 'Take

care how you judge others, then. I say to you, Arthur, for your good,

take care how you judge!' Her emphasis had been derived from her eyes

quite as much as from the stress she laid upon her words. She continued

to look at him; and if, when he entered the house, he had had any latent

hope of prevailing in the least with her, she now looked it out of his

heart.

'Mother, shall I do nothing to assist you?'

'Nothing.'

'Will you entrust me with no confidence, no charge, no explanation?

Will you take no counsel with me? Will you not let me come near you?'

'How can you ask me? You separated yourself from my affairs. It was not

my act; it was yours. How can you consistently ask me such a question?

You know that you left me to Flintwinch, and that he occupies your

place.'

Glancing at Jeremiah, Clennam saw in his very gaiters that his attention

was closely directed to them, though he stood leaning against the wall

scraping his jaw, and pretended to listen to Flora as she held forth in

a most distracting manner on a chaos of subjects, in which mackerel, and

Mr F.'s Aunt in a swing, had become entangled with cockchafers and the

wine trade.

'A prisoner, in a French gaol, on an accusation of murder,' repeated

Mrs Clennam, steadily going over what her son had said. 'That is all you

know of him from the fellow-prisoner?'

'In substance, all.'

'And was the fellow-prisoner his accomplice and a murderer, too? But, of

course, he gives a better account of himself than of his friend; it is

needless to ask. This will supply the rest of them here with something

new to talk about. Casby, Arthur tells me--'

'Stay, mother! Stay, stay!' He interrupted her hastily, for it had not

entered his imagination that she would openly proclaim what he had told

her.

'What now?' she said with displeasure. 'What more?'

'I beg you to excuse me, Mr Casby--and you, too, Mrs Finching--for one

other moment with my mother--'

He had laid his hand upon her chair, or she would otherwise have wheeled

it round with the touch of her foot upon the ground. They were still

face to face. She looked at him, as he ran over the possibilities of

some result he had not intended, and could not foresee, being influenced

by Cavalletto's disclosure becoming a matter of notoriety, and hurriedly

arrived at the conclusion that it had best not be talked about; though

perhaps he was guided by no more distinct reason than that he had taken

it for granted that his mother would reserve it to herself and her

partner.

'What now?' she said again, impatiently. 'What is it?'

'I did not mean, mother, that you should repeat what I have

communicated. I think you had better not repeat it.'

'Do you make that a condition with me?'

'Well! Yes.'

'Observe, then! It is you who make this a secret,' said she, holding

up her hand, 'and not I. It is you, Arthur, who bring here doubts and

suspicions and entreaties for explanations, and it is you, Arthur, who

bring secrets here. What is it to me, do you think, where the man has

been, or what he has been? What can it be to me? The whole world may

know it, if they care to know it; it is nothing to me. Now, let me go.'

He yielded to her imperious but elated look, and turned her chair back

to the place from which he had wheeled it. In doing so he saw elation

in the face of Mr Flintwinch, which most assuredly was not inspired by

Flora. This turning of his intelligence and of his whole attempt and

design against himself, did even more than his mother's fixedness and

firmness to convince him that his efforts with her were idle. Nothing

remained but the appeal to his old friend Affery.

But even to get the very doubtful and preliminary stage of making the

appeal, seemed one of the least promising of human undertakings. She

was so completely under the thrall of the two clever ones, was so

systematically kept in sight by one or other of them, and was so afraid

to go about the house besides, that every opportunity of speaking to her

alone appeared to be forestalled. Over and above that, Mistress Affery,

by some means (it was not very difficult to guess, through the sharp

arguments of her liege lord), had acquired such a lively conviction

of the hazard of saying anything under any circumstances, that she had

remained all this time in a corner guarding herself from approach with

that symbolical instrument of hers; so that, when a word or two had

been addressed to her by Flora, or even by the bottle-green patriarch

himself, she had warded off conversation with the toasting-fork like a

dumb woman.

After several abortive attempts to get Affery to look at him while

she cleared the table and washed the tea-service, Arthur thought of an

expedient which Flora might originate. To whom he therefore whispered,

'Could you say you would like to go through the house?'

Now, poor Flora, being always in fluctuating expectation of the time

when Clennam would renew his boyhood and be madly in love with her

again, received the whisper with the utmost delight; not only as

rendered precious by its mysterious character, but as preparing the

way for a tender interview in which he would declare the state of his

affections. She immediately began to work out the hint.

'Ah dear me the poor old room,' said Flora, glancing round, 'looks just

as ever Mrs Clennam I am touched to see except for being smokier which

was to be expected with time and which we must all expect and reconcile

ourselves to being whether we like it or not as I am sure I have had to

do myself if not exactly smokier dreadfully stouter which is the same or

worse, to think of the days when papa used to bring me here the least of

girls a perfect mass of chilblains to be stuck upon a chair with my feet

on the rails and stare at Arthur--pray excuse me--Mr Clennam--the

least of boys in the frightfullest of frills and jackets ere yet Mr

F. appeared a misty shadow on the horizon paying attentions like the

well-known spectre of some place in Germany beginning with a B is a

moral lesson inculcating that all the paths in life are similar to the

paths down in the North of England where they get the coals and make the

iron and things gravelled with ashes!'

Having paid the tribute of a sigh to the instability of human existence,

Flora hurried on with her purpose.

'Not that at any time,' she proceeded, 'its worst enemy could have said

it was a cheerful house for that it was never made to be but always

highly impressive, fond memory recalls an occasion in youth ere yet the

judgment was mature when Arthur--confirmed habit--Mr Clennam--took

me down into an unused kitchen eminent for mouldiness and proposed to

secrete me there for life and feed me on what he could hide from his

meals when he was not at home for the holidays and on dry bread in

disgrace which at that halcyon period too frequently occurred, would

it be inconvenient or asking too much to beg to be permitted to revive

those scenes and walk through the house?'

Mrs Clennam, who responded with a constrained grace to Mrs Finching's

good nature in being there at all, though her visit (before Arthur's

unexpected arrival) was undoubtedly an act of pure good nature and no

self-gratification, intimated that all the house was open to her. Flora

rose and looked to Arthur for his escort. 'Certainly,' said he, aloud;

'and Affery will light us, I dare say.'

Affery was excusing herself with 'Don't ask nothing of me, Arthur!' when

Mr Flintwinch stopped her with 'Why not? Affery, what's the matter with

you, woman? Why not, jade!' Thus expostulated with, she came unwillingly

out of her corner, resigned the toasting-fork into one of her husband's

hands, and took the candlestick he offered from the other.

'Go before, you fool!' said Jeremiah. 'Are you going up, or down, Mrs

Finching?'

Flora answered, 'Down.'

'Then go before, and down, you Affery,' said Jeremiah. 'And do it

properly, or I'll come rolling down the banisters, and tumbling over

you!'

Affery headed the exploring party; Jeremiah closed it. He had no

intention of leaving them. Clennam looking back, and seeing him

following three stairs behind, in the coolest and most methodical

manner exclaimed in a low voice, 'Is there no getting rid of him!' Flora

reassured his mind by replying promptly, 'Why though not exactly

proper Arthur and a thing I couldn't think of before a younger man or

a stranger still I don't mind him if you so particularly wish it and

provided you'll have the goodness not to take me too tight.'

Wanting the heart to explain that this was not at all what he meant,

Arthur extended his supporting arm round Flora's figure. 'Oh my goodness

me,' said she. 'You are very obedient indeed really and it's extremely

honourable and gentlemanly in you I am sure but still at the same time

if you would like to be a little tighter than that I shouldn't consider

it intruding.'

In this preposterous attitude, unspeakably at variance with his anxious

mind, Clennam descended to the basement of the house; finding that

wherever it became darker than elsewhere, Flora became heavier, and

that when the house was lightest she was too. Returning from the dismal

kitchen regions, which were as dreary as they could be, Mistress Affery

passed with the light into his father's old room, and then into the old

dining-room; always passing on before like a phantom that was not to be

overtaken, and neither turning nor answering when he whispered, 'Affery!

I want to speak to you!'

In the dining-room, a sentimental desire came over Flora to look into

the dragon closet which had so often swallowed Arthur in the days of his

boyhood--not improbably because, as a very dark closet, it was a likely

place to be heavy in. Arthur, fast subsiding into despair, had opened

it, when a knock was heard at the outer door.

Mistress Affery, with a suppressed cry, threw her apron over her head.

'What? You want another dose!' said Mr Flintwinch. 'You shall have it,

my woman, you shall have a good one! Oh! You shall have a sneezer, you

shall have a teaser!'

'In the meantime is anybody going to the door?' said Arthur.

'In the meantime, I am going to the door, sir,' returned the old man so

savagely, as to render it clear that in a choice of difficulties he felt

he must go, though he would have preferred not to go. 'Stay here the

while, all! Affery, my woman, move an inch, or speak a word in your

foolishness, and I'll treble your dose!'

The moment he was gone, Arthur released Mrs Finching: with some

difficulty, by reason of that lady misunderstanding his intentions, and

making arrangements with a view to tightening instead of slackening.

'Affery, speak to me now!'

'Don't touch me, Arthur!' she cried, shrinking from him. 'Don't come

near me. He'll see you. Jeremiah will. Don't.'

'He can't see me,' returned Arthur, suiting the action to the word, 'if

I blow the candle out.'

'He'll hear you,' cried Affery.

'He can't hear me,' returned Arthur, suiting the action to the words

again, 'if I draw you into this black closet, and speak here.

Why do you hide your face?'

'Because I am afraid of seeing something.'

'You can't be afraid of seeing anything in this darkness, Affery.'

'Yes I am. Much more than if it was light.'

'Why are you afraid?'

'Because the house is full of mysteries and secrets; because it's full

of whisperings and counsellings; because it's full of noises. There

never was such a house for noises. I shall die of 'em, if Jeremiah don't

strangle me first. As I expect he will.'

'I have never heard any noises here, worth speaking of.'

'Ah! But you would, though, if you lived in the house, and was obliged

to go about it as I am,' said Affery; 'and you'd feel that they was so

well worth speaking of, that you'd feel you was nigh bursting through

not being allowed to speak of 'em. Here's Jeremiah! You'll get me

killed.'

'My good Affery, I solemnly declare to you that I can see the light of

the open door on the pavement of the hall, and so could you if you would

uncover your face and look.'

'I durstn't do it,' said Affery, 'I durstn't never, Arthur. I'm always

blind-folded when Jeremiah an't a looking, and sometimes even when he

is.'

'He cannot shut the door without my seeing him,' said Arthur. 'You are

as safe with me as if he was fifty miles away.'

('I wish he was!' cried Affery.)

'Affery, I want to know what is amiss here; I want some light thrown

on the secrets of this house.' 'I tell you, Arthur,' she interrupted,

'noises is the secrets, rustlings and stealings about, tremblings,

treads overhead and treads underneath.'

'But those are not all the secrets.'

'I don't know,' said Affery. 'Don't ask me no more. Your old sweetheart

an't far off, and she's a blabber.'

His old sweetheart, being in fact so near at hand that she was then

reclining against him in a flutter, a very substantial angle of

forty-five degrees, here interposed to assure Mistress Affery with

greater earnestness than directness of asseveration, that what she heard

should go no further, but should be kept inviolate, 'if on no other

account on Arthur's--sensible of intruding in being too familiar Doyce

and Clennam's.'

'I make an imploring appeal to you, Affery, to you, one of the few

agreeable early remembrances I have, for my mother's sake, for your

husband's sake, for my own, for all our sakes. I am sure you can tell me

something connected with the coming here of this man, if you will.'

'Why, then I'll tell you, Arthur,' returned Affery--'Jeremiah's coming!'

'No, indeed he is not. The door is open, and he is standing outside,

talking.'

'I'll tell you then,' said Affery, after listening, 'that the first time

he ever come he heard the noises his own self. "What's that?" he said to

me. "I don't know what it is," I says to him, catching hold of him,

"but I have heard it over and over again." While I says it, he stands a

looking at me, all of a shake, he do.'

'Has he been here often?'

'Only that night, and the last night.'

'What did you see of him on the last night, after I was gone?'

'Them two clever ones had him all alone to themselves. Jeremiah come

a dancing at me sideways, after I had let you out (he always comes a

dancing at me sideways when he's going to hurt me), and he said to me,

"Now, Affery," he said, "I am a coming behind you, my woman, and a going

to run you up." So he took and squeezed the back of my neck in his hand,

till it made me open MY mouth, and then he pushed me before him to bed,

squeezing all the way. That's what he calls running me up, he do. Oh,

he's a wicked one!'

'And did you hear or see no more, Affery?'

'Don't I tell you I was sent to bed, Arthur! Here he is!'

'I assure you he is still at the door. Those whisperings and

counsellings, Affery, that you have spoken of. What are they?'

'How should I know? Don't ask me nothing about 'em, Arthur. Get away!'

'But my dear Affery; unless I can gain some insight into these hidden

things, in spite of your husband and in spite of my mother, ruin will

come of it.'

'Don't ask me nothing,' repeated Affery. 'I have been in a dream for

ever so long. Go away, go away!'

'You said that before,' returned Arthur. 'You used the same expression

that night, at the door, when I asked you what was going on here. What

do you mean by being in a dream?'

'I an't a going to tell you. Get away! I shouldn't tell you, if you was

by yourself; much less with your old sweetheart here.'

It was equally vain for Arthur to entreat, and for Flora to protest.

Affery, who had been trembling and struggling the whole time, turned a

deaf ear to all adjuration, and was bent on forcing herself out of the

closet.

'I'd sooner scream to Jeremiah than say another word! I'll call out to

him, Arthur, if you don't give over speaking to me. Now here's the very

last word I'll say afore I call to him--If ever you begin to get the

better of them two clever ones your own self (you ought to it, as I told

you when you first come home, for you haven't been a living here long

years, to be made afeared of your life as I have), then do you get the

better of 'em afore my face; and then do you say to me, Affery tell your

dreams! Maybe, then I'll tell 'em!'

The shutting of the door stopped Arthur from replying. They glided into

the places where Jeremiah had left them; and Clennam, stepping forward

as that old gentleman returned, informed him that he had accidentally

extinguished the candle. Mr Flintwinch looked on as he re-lighted it at

the lamp in the hall, and preserved a profound taciturnity respecting

the person who had been holding him in conversation. Perhaps his

irascibility demanded compensation for some tediousness that the visitor

had expended on him; however that was, he took such umbrage at seeing

his wife with her apron over her head, that he charged at her, and

taking her veiled nose between his thumb and finger, appeared to throw

the whole screw-power of his person into the wring he gave it.

Flora, now permanently heavy, did not release Arthur from the survey of

the house, until it had extended even to his old garret bedchamber. His

thoughts were otherwise occupied than with the tour of inspection; yet

he took particular notice at the time, as he afterwards had occasion to

remember, of the airlessness and closeness of the house; that they left

the track of their footsteps in the dust on the upper floors; and that

there was a resistance to the opening of one room door, which occasioned

Affery to cry out that somebody was hiding inside, and to continue to

believe so, though somebody was sought and not discovered. When they at

last returned to his mother's room, they found her shading her face

with her muffled hand, and talking in a low voice to the Patriarch as he

stood before the fire, whose blue eyes, polished head, and silken locks,

turning towards them as they came in, imparted an inestimable value and

inexhaustible love of his species to his remark:

'So you have been seeing the premises, seeing the

premises--premises--seeing the premises!'

it was not in itself a jewel of benevolence or wisdom, yet he made it an

exemplar of both that one would have liked to have a copy of.

CHAPTER 24. The Evening of a Long Day

That illustrious man and great national ornament, Mr Merdle, continued

his shining course. It began to be widely understood that one who had

done society the admirable service of making so much money out of it,

could not be suffered to remain a commoner. A baronetcy was spoken of

with confidence; a peerage was frequently mentioned. Rumour had it

that Mr Merdle had set his golden face against a baronetcy; that he had

plainly intimated to Lord Decimus that a baronetcy was not enough

for him; that he had said, 'No--a Peerage, or plain Merdle.' This was

reported to have plunged Lord Decimus as nigh to his noble chin in a

slough of doubts as so lofty a person could be sunk. For the Barnacles,

as a group of themselves in creation, had an idea that such distinctions

belonged to them; and that when a soldier, sailor, or lawyer became

ennobled, they let him in, as it were, by an act of condescension, at

the family door, and immediately shut it again. Not only (said Rumour)

had the troubled Decimus his own hereditary part in this impression, but

he also knew of several Barnacle claims already on the file, which came

into collision with that of the master spirit.

Right or wrong, Rumour was very busy; and Lord Decimus, while he was, or

was supposed to be, in stately excogitation of the difficulty, lent her

some countenance by taking, on several public occasions, one of those

elephantine trots of his through a jungle of overgrown sentences, waving

Mr Merdle about on his trunk as Gigantic Enterprise, The Wealth of

England, Elasticity, Credit, Capital, Prosperity, and all manner of

blessings.

So quietly did the mowing of the old scythe go on, that fully three

months had passed unnoticed since the two English brothers had been laid

in one tomb in the strangers' cemetery at Rome. Mr and Mrs Sparkler were

established in their own house: a little mansion, rather of the Tite

Barnacle class, quite a triumph of inconvenience, with a perpetual smell

in it of the day before yesterday's soup and coach-horses, but extremely

dear, as being exactly in the centre of the habitable globe. In this

enviable abode (and envied it really was by many people), Mrs Sparkler

had intended to proceed at once to the demolition of the Bosom, when

active hostilities had been suspended by the arrival of the Courier with

his tidings of death. Mrs Sparkler, who was not unfeeling, had received

them with a violent burst of grief, which had lasted twelve hours;

after which, she had arisen to see about her mourning, and to take every

precaution that could ensure its being as becoming as Mrs Merdle's. A

gloom was then cast over more than one distinguished family (according

to the politest sources of intelligence), and the Courier went back

again.

Mr and Mrs Sparkler had been dining alone, with their gloom cast over

them, and Mrs Sparkler reclined on a drawing-room sofa. It was a hot

summer Sunday evening. The residence in the centre of the habitable

globe, at all times stuffed and close as if it had an incurable cold in

its head, was that evening particularly stifling.

The bells of the churches had done their worst in the way of clanging

among the unmelodious echoes of the streets, and the lighted windows of

the churches had ceased to be yellow in the grey dusk, and had died out

opaque black. Mrs Sparkler, lying on her sofa, looking through an open

window at the opposite side of a narrow street over boxes of mignonette

and flowers, was tired of the view. Mrs Sparkler, looking at another

window where her husband stood in the balcony, was tired of that view.

Mrs Sparkler, looking at herself in her mourning, was even tired of that

view: though, naturally, not so tired of that as of the other two.

'It's like lying in a well,' said Mrs Sparkler, changing her position

fretfully. 'Dear me, Edmund, if you have anything to say, why don't you

say it?'

Mr Sparkler might have replied with ingenuousness, 'My life, I have

nothing to say.' But, as the repartee did not occur to him, he contented

himself with coming in from the balcony and standing at the side of his

wife's couch.

'Good gracious, Edmund!' said Mrs Sparkler more fretfully still, you are

absolutely putting mignonette up your nose! Pray don't!'

Mr Sparkler, in absence of mind--perhaps in a more literal absence of

mind than is usually understood by the phrase--had smelt so hard at a

sprig in his hand as to be on the verge of the offence in question. He

smiled, said, 'I ask your pardon, my dear,' and threw it out of window.

'You make my head ache by remaining in that position, Edmund,' said Mrs

Sparkler, raising her eyes to him after another minute; 'you look so

aggravatingly large by this light. Do sit down.'

'Certainly, my dear,' said Mr Sparkler, and took a chair on the same

spot.

'If I didn't know that the longest day was past,' said Fanny, yawning in

a dreary manner, 'I should have felt certain this was the longest day. I

never did experience such a day.'

'Is that your fan, my love?' asked Mr Sparkler, picking up one and

presenting it.

'Edmund,' returned his wife, more wearily yet, 'don't ask weak

questions, I entreat you not. Whose can it be but mine?'

'Yes, I thought it was yours,' said Mr Sparkler.

'Then you shouldn't ask,' retorted Fanny. After a little while she

turned on her sofa and exclaimed, 'Dear me, dear me, there never was

such a long day as this!' After another little while, she got up slowly,

walked about, and came back again.

'My dear,' said Mr Sparkler, flashing with an original conception, 'I

think you must have got the fidgets.'

'Oh, Fidgets!' repeated Mrs Sparkler. 'Don't.'

'My adorable girl,' urged Mr Sparkler, 'try your aromatic vinegar. I

have often seen my mother try it, and it seemingly refreshed her.

And she is, as I believe you are aware, a remarkably fine woman, with no

non--'

'Good Gracious!' exclaimed Fanny, starting up again. 'It's beyond all

patience! This is the most wearisome day that ever did dawn upon the

world, I am certain.'

Mr Sparkler looked meekly after her as she lounged about the room, and

he appeared to be a little frightened. When she had tossed a few trifles

about, and had looked down into the darkening street out of all the

three windows, she returned to her sofa, and threw herself among its

pillows.

'Now Edmund, come here! Come a little nearer, because I want to be able

to touch you with my fan, that I may impress you very much with what I

am going to say. That will do. Quite close enough. Oh, you do look so

big!'

Mr Sparkler apologised for the circumstance, pleaded that he couldn't

help it, and said that 'our fellows,' without more particularly

indicating whose fellows, used to call him by the name of Quinbus

Flestrin, Junior, or the Young Man Mountain.

'You ought to have told me so before,' Fanny complained.

'My dear,' returned Mr Sparkler, rather gratified, 'I didn't know

It would interest you, or I would have made a point of telling you.'

'There! For goodness sake, don't talk,' said Fanny; 'I want to talk,

myself. Edmund, we must not be alone any more. I must take such

precautions as will prevent my being ever again reduced to the state of

dreadful depression in which I am this evening.'

'My dear,' answered Mr Sparkler; 'being as you are well known to be, a

remarkably fine woman with no--'

'Oh, good GRACIOUS!' cried Fanny.

Mr Sparkler was so discomposed by the energy of this exclamation,

accompanied with a flouncing up from the sofa and a flouncing down

again, that a minute or two elapsed before he felt himself equal to

saying in explanation:

'I mean, my dear, that everybody knows you are calculated to shine in

society.'

'Calculated to shine in society,' retorted Fanny with great

irritability; 'yes, indeed! And then what happens? I no sooner recover,

in a visiting point of view, the shock of poor dear papa's death, and my

poor uncle's--though I do not disguise from myself that the last was

a happy release, for, if you are not presentable you had much better

die--'

'You are not referring to me, my love, I hope?' Mr Sparkler humbly

interrupted.

'Edmund, Edmund, you would wear out a Saint. Am I not expressly speaking

of my poor uncle?'

'You looked with so much expression at myself, my dear girl,' said Mr

Sparkler, 'that I felt a little uncomfortable. Thank you, my love.'

'Now you have put me out,' observed Fanny with a resigned toss of her

fan, 'and I had better go to bed.'

'Don't do that, my love,' urged Mr Sparkler. 'Take time.'

Fanny took a good deal of time: lying back with her eyes shut, and her

eyebrows raised with a hopeless expression as if she had utterly given

up all terrestrial affairs. At length, without the slightest notice, she

opened her eyes again, and recommenced in a short, sharp manner:

'What happens then, I ask! What happens? Why, I find myself at the very

period when I might shine most in society, and should most like for

very momentous reasons to shine in society--I find myself in a situation

which to a certain extent disqualifies me for going into society. It's

too bad, really!'

'My dear,' said Mr Sparkler. 'I don't think it need keep you at

home.' 'Edmund, you ridiculous creature,' returned Fanny, with great

indignation; 'do you suppose that a woman in the bloom of youth and not

wholly devoid of personal attractions, can put herself, at such a

time, in competition as to figure with a woman in every other way her

inferior? If you do suppose such a thing, your folly is boundless.'

Mr Sparkler submitted that he had thought 'it might be got over.' 'Got

over!' repeated Fanny, with immeasurable scorn.

'For a time,' Mr Sparkler submitted.

Honouring the last feeble suggestion with no notice, Mrs Sparkler

declared with bitterness that it really was too bad, and that positively

it was enough to make one wish one was dead!

'However,' she said, when she had in some measure recovered from her

sense of personal ill-usage; 'provoking as it is, and cruel as it seems,

I suppose it must be submitted to.'

'Especially as it was to be expected,' said Mr Sparkler.

'Edmund,' returned his wife, 'if you have nothing more becoming to do

than to attempt to insult the woman who has honoured you with her hand,

when she finds herself in adversity, I think YOU had better go to bed!'

Mr Sparkler was much afflicted by the charge, and offered a most

tender and earnest apology. His apology was accepted; but Mrs Sparkler

requested him to go round to the other side of the sofa and sit in the

window-curtain, to tone himself down.

'Now, Edmund,' she said, stretching out her fan, and touching him with

it at arm's length, 'what I was going to say to you when you began as

usual to prose and worry, is, that I shall guard against our being alone

any more, and that when circumstances prevent my going out to my own

satisfaction, I must arrange to have some people or other always here;

for I really cannot, and will not, have another such day as this has

been.'

Mr Sparkler's sentiments as to the plan were, in brief, that it had no

nonsense about it. He added, 'And besides, you know it's likely that

you'll soon have your sister--'

'Dearest Amy, yes!' cried Mrs Sparkler with a sigh of affection.

'Darling little thing! Not, however, that Amy would do here alone.'

Mr Sparkler was going to say 'No?' interrogatively, but he saw his

danger and said it assentingly, 'No, Oh dear no; she wouldn't do here

alone.'

'No, Edmund. For not only are the virtues of the precious child of that

still character that they require a contrast--require life and movement

around them to bring them out in their right colours and make one love

them of all things; but she will require to be roused, on more accounts

than one.'

'That's it,' said Mr Sparkler. 'Roused.'

'Pray don't, Edmund! Your habit of interrupting without having the least

thing in the world to say, distracts one. You must be broken of it.

Speaking of Amy;--my poor little pet was devotedly attached to poor

papa, and no doubt will have lamented his loss exceedingly, and grieved

very much. I have done so myself. I have felt it dreadfully. But Amy

will no doubt have felt it even more, from having been on the spot the

whole time, and having been with poor dear papa at the last; which I

unhappily was not.'

Here Fanny stopped to weep, and to say, 'Dear, dear, beloved papa! How

truly gentlemanly he was! What a contrast to poor uncle!'

'From the effects of that trying time,' she pursued, 'my good little

Mouse will have to be roused. Also, from the effects of this long

attendance upon Edward in his illness; an attendance which is not

yet over, which may even go on for some time longer, and which in the

meanwhile unsettles us all by keeping poor dear papa's affairs from

being wound up. Fortunately, however, the papers with his agents

here being all sealed up and locked up, as he left them when he

providentially came to England, the affairs are in that state of order

that they can wait until my brother Edward recovers his health in

Sicily, sufficiently to come over, and administer, or execute, or

whatever it may be that will have to be done.'

'He couldn't have a better nurse to bring him round,' Mr Sparkler made

bold to opine.

'For a wonder, I can agree with you,' returned his wife, languidly

turning her eyelids a little in his direction (she held forth, in

general, as if to the drawing-room furniture), 'and can adopt your

words. He couldn't have a better nurse to bring him round. There are

times when my dear child is a little wearing to an active mind; but, as

a nurse, she is Perfection. Best of Amys!'

Mr Sparkler, growing rash on his late success, observed that Edward had

had, biggodd, a long bout of it, my dear girl.

'If Bout, Edmund,' returned Mrs Sparkler, 'is the slang term for

indisposition, he has. If it is not, I am unable to give an opinion

on the barbarous language you address to Edward's sister. That he

contracted Malaria Fever somewhere, either by travelling day and night

to Rome, where, after all, he arrived too late to see poor dear papa

before his death--or under some other unwholesome circumstances--is

indubitable, if that is what you mean. Likewise that his extremely

careless life has made him a very bad subject for it indeed.'

Mr Sparkler considered it a parallel case to that of some of our fellows

in the West Indies with Yellow Jack. Mrs Sparkler closed her eyes again,

and refused to have any consciousness of our fellows of the West Indies,

or of Yellow Jack.

'So, Amy,' she pursued, when she reopened her eyelids, 'will require

to be roused from the effects of many tedious and anxious weeks. And

lastly, she will require to be roused from a low tendency which I know

very well to be at the bottom of her heart. Don't ask me what it is,

Edmund, because I must decline to tell you.'

'I am not going to, my dear,' said Mr Sparkler.

'I shall thus have much improvement to effect in my sweet child,' Mrs

Sparkler continued, 'and cannot have her near me too soon. Amiable and

dear little Twoshoes! As to the settlement of poor papa's affairs, my

interest in that is not very selfish. Papa behaved very generously to me

when I was married, and I have little or nothing to expect. Provided

he had made no will that can come into force, leaving a legacy to Mrs

General, I am contented. Dear papa, dear papa.'

She wept again, but Mrs General was the best of restoratives. The name

soon stimulated her to dry her eyes and say:

'It is a highly encouraging circumstance in Edward's illness, I am

thankful to think, and gives one the greatest confidence in his sense

not being impaired, or his proper spirit weakened--down to the time

of poor dear papa's death at all events--that he paid off Mrs General

instantly, and sent her out of the house. I applaud him for it. I could

forgive him a great deal for doing, with such promptitude, so exactly

what I would have done myself!'

Mrs Sparkler was in the full glow of her gratification, when a double

knock was heard at the door. A very odd knock. Low, as if to avoid

making a noise and attracting attention. Long, as if the person knocking

were preoccupied in mind, and forgot to leave off.

'Halloa!' said Mr Sparkler. 'Who's this?'

'Not Amy and Edward without notice and without a carriage!' said Mrs

Sparkler. 'Look out.'

The room was dark, but the street was lighter, because of its lamps. Mr

Sparkler's head peeping over the balcony looked so very bulky and heavy

that it seemed on the point of overbalancing him and flattening the

unknown below.

'It's one fellow,' said Mr Sparkler. 'I can't see who--stop though!' On

this second thought he went out into the balcony again and had another

look. He came back as the door was opened, and announced that he

believed he had identified 'his governor's tile.' He was not mistaken,

for his governor, with his tile in his hand, was introduced immediately

afterwards.

'Candles!' said Mrs Sparkler, with a word of excuse for the darkness.

'It's light enough for me,' said Mr Merdle.

When the candles were brought in, Mr Merdle was discovered standing

behind the door, picking his lips. 'I thought I'd give you a call,' he

said. 'I am rather particularly occupied just now; and, as I happened to

be out for a stroll, I thought I'd give you a call.'

As he was in dinner dress, Fanny asked him where he had been dining?

'Well,' said Mr Merdle, 'I haven't been dining anywhere, particularly.'

'Of course you have dined?' said Fanny.

'Why--no, I haven't exactly dined,' said Mr Merdle.

He had passed his hand over his yellow forehead and considered, as if he

were not sure about it. Something to eat was proposed. 'No, thank you,'

said Mr Merdle, 'I don't feel inclined for it. I was to have dined out

along with Mrs Merdle. But as I didn't feel inclined for dinner, I let

Mrs Merdle go by herself just as we were getting into the carriage, and

thought I'd take a stroll instead.'

Would he have tea or coffee? 'No, thank you,' said Mr Merdle. 'I looked

in at the Club, and got a bottle of wine.'

At this period of his visit, Mr Merdle took the chair which Edmund

Sparkler had offered him, and which he had hitherto been pushing slowly

about before him, like a dull man with a pair of skates on for the first

time, who could not make up his mind to start. He now put his hat upon

another chair beside him, and, looking down into it as if it were some

twenty feet deep, said again: 'You see I thought I'd give you a call.'

'Flattering to us,' said Fanny, 'for you are not a calling man.'

'No--no,' returned Mr Merdle, who was by this time taking himself into

custody under both coat-sleeves. 'No, I am not a calling man.'

'You have too much to do for that,' said Fanny. 'Having so much to do,

Mr Merdle, loss of appetite is a serious thing with you, and you must

have it seen to. You must not be ill.' 'Oh! I am very well,' replied Mr

Merdle, after deliberating about it. 'I am as well as I usually am. I am

well enough. I am as well as I want to be.'

The master-mind of the age, true to its characteristic of being at all

times a mind that had as little as possible to say for itself and great

difficulty in saying it, became mute again. Mrs Sparkler began to wonder

how long the master-mind meant to stay.

'I was speaking of poor papa when you came in, sir.'

'Aye! Quite a coincidence,' said Mr Merdle.

Fanny did not see that; but felt it incumbent on her to continue

talking. 'I was saying,' she pursued, 'that my brother's illness has

occasioned a delay in examining and arranging papa's property.'

'Yes,' said Mr Merdle; 'yes. There has been a delay.'

'Not that it is of consequence,' said Fanny.

'Not,' assented Mr Merdle, after having examined the cornice of all

that part of the room which was within his range: 'not that it is of any

consequence.'

'My only anxiety is,' said Fanny, 'that Mrs General should not get

anything.'

'She won't get anything,' said Mr Merdle.

Fanny was delighted to hear him express the opinion. Mr Merdle, after

taking another gaze into the depths of his hat as if he thought he saw

something at the bottom, rubbed his hair and slowly appended to his last

remark the confirmatory words, 'Oh dear no. No. Not she. Not likely.'

As the topic seemed exhausted, and Mr Merdle too, Fanny inquired if he

were going to take up Mrs Merdle and the carriage in his way home?

'No,' he answered; 'I shall go by the shortest way, and leave Mrs Merdle

to--' here he looked all over the palms of both his hands as if he were

telling his own fortune--'to take care of herself. I dare say she'll

manage to do it.'

'Probably,' said Fanny.

There was then a long silence; during which, Mrs Sparkler, lying back

on her sofa again, shut her eyes and raised her eyebrows in her former

retirement from mundane affairs.

'But, however,' said Mr Merdle, 'I am equally detaining you and myself.

I thought I'd give you a call, you know.'

'Charmed, I am sure,' said Fanny.

'So I am off,' added Mr Merdle, getting up. 'Could you lend me a

penknife?'

It was an odd thing, Fanny smilingly observed, for her who could seldom

prevail upon herself even to write a letter, to lend to a man of such

vast business as Mr Merdle. 'Isn't it?' Mr Merdle acquiesced; 'but

I want one; and I know you have got several little wedding keepsakes

about, with scissors and tweezers and such things in them. You shall

have it back to-morrow.'

'Edmund,' said Mrs Sparkler, 'open (now, very carefully, I beg and

beseech, for you are so very awkward) the mother of pearl box on my

little table there, and give Mr Merdle the mother of pearl penknife.'

'Thank you,' said Mr Merdle; 'but if you have got one with a darker

handle, I think I should prefer one with a darker handle.'

'Tortoise-shell?'

'Thank you,' said Mr Merdle; 'yes. I think I should prefer

tortoise-shell.'

Edmund accordingly received instructions to open the tortoise-shell box,

and give Mr Merdle the tortoise-shell knife. On his doing so, his wife

said to the master-spirit graciously:

'I will forgive you, if you ink it.'

'I'll undertake not to ink it,' said Mr Merdle.

The illustrious visitor then put out his coat-cuff, and for a moment

entombed Mrs Sparkler's hand: wrist, bracelet, and all. Where his own

hand had shrunk to, was not made manifest, but it was as remote from Mrs

Sparkler's sense of touch as if he had been a highly meritorious Chelsea

Veteran or Greenwich Pensioner.

Thoroughly convinced, as he went out of the room, that it was the

longest day that ever did come to an end at last, and that there never

was a woman, not wholly devoid of personal attractions, so worn out by

idiotic and lumpish people, Fanny passed into the balcony for a breath

of air. Waters of vexation filled her eyes; and they had the effect of

making the famous Mr Merdle, in going down the street, appear to leap,

and waltz, and gyrate, as if he were possessed of several Devils.

CHAPTER 25. The Chief Butler Resigns the Seals of Office

The dinner-party was at the great Physician's. Bar was there, and in

full force. Ferdinand Barnacle was there, and in his most engaging

state. Few ways of life were hidden from Physician, and he was oftener

in its darkest places than even Bishop. There were brilliant ladies

about London who perfectly doted on him, my dear, as the most charming

creature and the most delightful person, who would have been shocked to

find themselves so close to him if they could have known on what sights

those thoughtful eyes of his had rested within an hour or two, and near

to whose beds, and under what roofs, his composed figure had stood. But

Physician was a composed man, who performed neither on his own trumpet,

nor on the trumpets of other people. Many wonderful things did he see

and hear, and much irreconcilable moral contradiction did he pass his

life among; yet his equality of compassion was no more disturbed than

the Divine Master's of all healing was. He went, like the rain,

among the just and unjust, doing all the good he could, and neither

proclaiming it in the synagogues nor at the corner of streets.

As no man of large experience of humanity, however quietly carried

it may be, can fail to be invested with an interest peculiar to the

possession of such knowledge, Physician was an attractive man. Even the

daintier gentlemen and ladies who had no idea of his secret, and

who would have been startled out of more wits than they had, by the

monstrous impropriety of his proposing to them 'Come and see what I

see!' confessed his attraction. Where he was, something real was. And

half a grain of reality, like the smallest portion of some other scarce

natural productions, will flavour an enormous quantity of diluent.

It came to pass, therefore, that Physician's little dinners always

presented people in their least conventional lights. The guests said to

themselves, whether they were conscious of it or no, 'Here is a man who

really has an acquaintance with us as we are, who is admitted to some

of us every day with our wigs and paint off, who hears the wanderings of

our minds, and sees the undisguised expression of our faces, when both

are past our control; we may as well make an approach to reality with

him, for the man has got the better of us and is too strong for us.'

Therefore, Physician's guests came out so surprisingly at his round

table that they were almost natural.

Bar's knowledge of that agglomeration of jurymen which is called

humanity was as sharp as a razor; yet a razor is not a generally

convenient instrument, and Physician's plain bright scalpel, though far

less keen, was adaptable to far wider purposes. Bar knew all about the

gullibility and knavery of people; but Physician could have given him

a better insight into their tendernesses and affections, in one week of

his rounds, than Westminster Hall and all the circuits put together,

in threescore years and ten. Bar always had a suspicion of this, and

perhaps was glad to encourage it (for, if the world were really a great

Law Court, one would think that the last day of Term could not too soon

arrive); and so he liked and respected Physician quite as much as any

other kind of man did.

Mr Merdle's default left a Banquo's chair at the table; but, if he had

been there, he would have merely made the difference of Banquo in it,

and consequently he was no loss. Bar, who picked up all sorts of odds

and ends about Westminster Hall, much as a raven would have done if he

had passed as much of his time there, had been picking up a great many

straws lately and tossing them about, to try which way the Merdle wind

blew. He now had a little talk on the subject with Mrs Merdle herself;

sidling up to that lady, of course, with his double eye-glass and his

jury droop.

'A certain bird,' said Bar; and he looked as if it could have been no

other bird than a magpie; 'has been whispering among us lawyers lately,

that there is to be an addition to the titled personages of this realm.'

'Really?' said Mrs Merdle.

'Yes,' said Bar. 'Has not the bird been whispering in very different

ears from ours--in lovely ears?' He looked expressively at Mrs Merdle's

nearest ear-ring.

'Do you mean mine?' asked Mrs Merdle.

'When I say lovely,' said Bar, 'I always mean you.'

'You never mean anything, I think,' returned Mrs Merdle (not

displeased).

'Oh, cruelly unjust!' said Bar. 'But, the bird.'

'I am the last person in the world to hear news,' observed Mrs Merdle,

carelessly arranging her stronghold. 'Who is it?'

'What an admirable witness you would make!' said Bar. 'No jury (unless

we could empanel one of blind men) could resist you, if you were ever so

bad a one; but you would be such a good one!'

'Why, you ridiculous man?' asked Mrs Merdle, laughing.

Bar waved his double eye-glass three or four times between himself and

the Bosom, as a rallying answer, and inquired in his most insinuating

accents:

'What am I to call the most elegant, accomplished and charming of women,

a few weeks, or it may be a few days, hence?'

'Didn't your bird tell you what to call her?' answered Mrs Merdle. 'Do

ask it to-morrow, and tell me the next time you see me what it says.'

This led to further passages of similar pleasantry between the two; but

Bar, with all his sharpness, got nothing out of them. Physician, on the

other hand, taking Mrs Merdle down to her carriage and attending on her

as she put on her cloak, inquired into the symptoms with his usual calm

directness.

'May I ask,' he said, 'is this true about Merdle?'

'My dear doctor,' she returned, 'you ask me the very question that I was

half disposed to ask you.' 'To ask me! Why me?'

'Upon my honour, I think Mr Merdle reposes greater confidence in you

than in any one.'

'On the contrary, he tells me absolutely nothing, even professionally.

You have heard the talk, of course?'

'Of course I have. But you know what Mr Merdle is; you know how

taciturn and reserved he is. I assure you I have no idea what foundation

for it there may be. I should like it to be true; why should I deny that

to you? You would know better, if I did!'

'Just so,' said Physician.

'But whether it is all true, or partly true, or entirely false, I am

wholly unable to say. It is a most provoking situation, a most absurd

situation; but you know Mr Merdle, and are not surprised.'

Physician was not surprised, handed her into her carriage, and bade her

Good Night. He stood for a moment at his own hall door, looking sedately

at the elegant equipage as it rattled away. On his return up-stairs, the

rest of the guests soon dispersed, and he was left alone. Being a great

reader of all kinds of literature (and never at all apologetic for that

weakness), he sat down comfortably to read.

The clock upon his study table pointed to a few minutes short of twelve,

when his attention was called to it by a ringing at the door bell. A man

of plain habits, he had sent his servants to bed and must needs go down

to open the door. He went down, and there found a man without hat or

coat, whose shirt sleeves were rolled up tight to his shoulders. For a

moment, he thought the man had been fighting: the rather, as he was much

agitated and out of breath. A second look, however, showed him that

the man was particularly clean, and not otherwise discomposed as to his

dress than as it answered this description.

'I come from the warm-baths, sir, round in the neighbouring street.'

'And what is the matter at the warm-baths?'

'Would you please to come directly, sir. We found that, lying on the

table.'

He put into the physician's hand a scrap of paper. Physician looked at

it, and read his own name and address written in pencil; nothing more.

He looked closer at the writing, looked at the man, took his hat from

its peg, put the key of his door in his pocket, and they hurried away

together.

When they came to the warm-baths, all the other people belonging to that

establishment were looking out for them at the door, and running up and

down the passages. 'Request everybody else to keep back, if you please,'

said the physician aloud to the master; 'and do you take me straight to

the place, my friend,' to the messenger.

The messenger hurried before him, along a grove of little rooms,

and turning into one at the end of the grove, looked round the door.

Physician was close upon him, and looked round the door too.

There was a bath in that corner, from which the water had been hastily

drained off. Lying in it, as in a grave or sarcophagus, with a hurried

drapery of sheet and blanket thrown across it, was the body of a

heavily-made man, with an obtuse head, and coarse, mean, common

features. A sky-light had been opened to release the steam with which

the room had been filled; but it hung, condensed into water-drops,

heavily upon the walls, and heavily upon the face and figure in the

bath. The room was still hot, and the marble of the bath still warm; but

the face and figure were clammy to the touch. The white marble at the

bottom of the bath was veined with a dreadful red. On the ledge at

the side, were an empty laudanum-bottle and a tortoise-shell handled

penknife--soiled, but not with ink.

'Separation of jugular vein--death rapid--been dead at least half an

hour.' This echo of the physician's words ran through the passages

and little rooms, and through the house while he was yet straightening

himself from having bent down to reach to the bottom of the bath, and

while he was yet dabbling his hands in water; redly veining it as the

marble was veined, before it mingled into one tint.

He turned his eyes to the dress upon the sofa, and to the watch, money,

and pocket-book on the table. A folded note half buckled up in the

pocket-book, and half protruding from it, caught his observant glance.

He looked at it, touched it, pulled it a little further out from among

the leaves, said quietly, 'This is addressed to me,' and opened and read

it.

There were no directions for him to give. The people of the house knew

what to do; the proper authorities were soon brought; and they took an

equable business-like possession of the deceased, and of what had been

his property, with no greater disturbance of manner or countenance than

usually attends the winding-up of a clock. Physician was glad to walk

out into the night air--was even glad, in spite of his great experience,

to sit down upon a door-step for a little while: feeling sick and faint.

Bar was a near neighbour of his, and, when he came to the house, he saw

a light in the room where he knew his friend often sat late getting up

his work. As the light was never there when Bar was not, it gave him

assurance that Bar was not yet in bed. In fact, this busy bee had

a verdict to get to-morrow, against evidence, and was improving the

shining hours in setting snares for the gentlemen of the jury.

Physician's knock astonished Bar; but, as he immediately suspected that

somebody had come to tell him that somebody else was robbing him, or

otherwise trying to get the better of him, he came down promptly and

softly. He had been clearing his head with a lotion of cold water, as a

good preparative to providing hot water for the heads of the jury, and

had been reading with the neck of his shirt thrown wide open that he

might the more freely choke the opposite witnesses. In consequence, he

came down, looking rather wild. Seeing Physician, the least expected of

men, he looked wilder and said, 'What's the matter?'

'You asked me once what Merdle's complaint was.'

'Extraordinary answer! I know I did.'

'I told you I had not found out.'

'Yes. I know you did.'

'I have found it out.'

'My God!' said Bar, starting back, and clapping his hand upon the

other's breast. 'And so have I! I see it in your face.'

They went into the nearest room, where Physician gave him the letter to

read. He read it through half-a-dozen times. There was not much in it

as to quantity; but it made a great demand on his close and continuous

attention. He could not sufficiently give utterance to his regret that

he had not himself found a clue to this. The smallest clue, he said,

would have made him master of the case, and what a case it would have

been to have got to the bottom of!

Physician had engaged to break the intelligence in Harley Street. Bar

could not at once return to his inveiglements of the most enlightened

and remarkable jury he had ever seen in that box, with whom, he could

tell his learned friend, no shallow sophistry would go down, and no

unhappily abused professional tact and skill prevail (this was the way

he meant to begin with them); so he said he would go too, and would

loiter to and fro near the house while his friend was inside. They

walked there, the better to recover self-possession in the air; and the

wings of day were fluttering the night when Physician knocked at the

door.

A footman of rainbow hues, in the public eye, was sitting up for his

master--that is to say, was fast asleep in the kitchen over a couple

of candles and a newspaper, demonstrating the great accumulation of

mathematical odds against the probabilities of a house being set on fire

by accident When this serving man was roused, Physician had still to

await the rousing of the Chief Butler. At last that noble creature came

into the dining-room in a flannel gown and list shoes; but with his

cravat on, and a Chief Butler all over. It was morning now. Physician

had opened the shutters of one window while waiting, that he might see

the light. 'Mrs Merdle's maid must be called, and told to get Mrs Merdle

up, and prepare her as gently as she can to see me. I have dreadful news

to break to her.'

Thus Physician to the Chief Butler. The latter, who had a candle in his

hand, called his man to take it away. Then he approached the window with

dignity; looking on at Physician's news exactly as he had looked on at

the dinners in that very room.

'Mr Merdle is dead.'

'I should wish,' said the Chief Butler, 'to give a month's notice.'

'Mr Merdle has destroyed himself.'

'Sir,' said the Chief Butler, 'that is very unpleasant to the feelings

of one in my position, as calculated to awaken prejudice; and I should

wish to leave immediately.'

'If you are not shocked, are you not surprised, man?' demanded the

Physician, warmly.

The Chief Butler, erect and calm, replied in these memorable words.

'Sir, Mr Merdle never was the gentleman, and no ungentlemanly act on

Mr Merdle's part would surprise me. Is there anybody else I can send to

you, or any other directions I can give before I leave, respecting what

you would wish to be done?'

When Physician, after discharging himself of his trust up-stairs,

rejoined Bar in the street, he said no more of his interview with Mrs

Merdle than that he had not yet told her all, but that what he had told

her she had borne pretty well. Bar had devoted his leisure in the street

to the construction of a most ingenious man-trap for catching the whole

of his jury at a blow; having got that matter settled in his mind,

it was lucid on the late catastrophe, and they walked home slowly,

discussing it in every bearing. Before parting at the Physician's door,

they both looked up at the sunny morning sky, into which the smoke of a

few early fires and the breath and voices of a few early stirrers were

peacefully rising, and then looked round upon the immense city, and

said, if all those hundreds and thousands of beggared people who were

yet asleep could only know, as they two spoke, the ruin that impended

over them, what a fearful cry against one miserable soul would go up to

Heaven!

The report that the great man was dead, got about with astonishing

rapidity. At first, he was dead of all the diseases that ever were

known, and of several bran-new maladies invented with the speed of

Light to meet the demand of the occasion. He had concealed a dropsy from

infancy, he had inherited a large estate of water on the chest from his

grandfather, he had had an operation performed upon him every morning

of his life for eighteen years, he had been subject to the explosion of

important veins in his body after the manner of fireworks, he had had

something the matter with his lungs, he had had something the matter

with his heart, he had had something the matter with his brain. Five

hundred people who sat down to breakfast entirely uninformed on the

whole subject, believed before they had done breakfast, that they

privately and personally knew Physician to have said to Mr Merdle, 'You

must expect to go out, some day, like the snuff of a candle;' and that

they knew Mr Merdle to have said to Physician, 'A man can die but once.'

By about eleven o'clock in the forenoon, something the matter with the

brain, became the favourite theory against the field; and by twelve the

something had been distinctly ascertained to be 'Pressure.'

Pressure was so entirely satisfactory to the public mind, and seemed to

make everybody so comfortable, that it might have lasted all day but for

Bar's having taken the real state of the case into Court at half-past

nine. This led to its beginning to be currently whispered all over

London by about one, that Mr Merdle had killed himself. Pressure,

however, so far from being overthrown by the discovery, became a greater

favourite than ever. There was a general moralising upon Pressure, in

every street. All the people who had tried to make money and had not

been able to do it, said, There you were! You no sooner began to devote

yourself to the pursuit of wealth than you got Pressure. The idle people

improved the occasion in a similar manner. See, said they, what you

brought yourself to by work, work, work! You persisted in working, you

overdid it. Pressure came on, and you were done for! This consideration

was very potent in many quarters, but nowhere more so than among the

young clerks and partners who had never been in the slightest danger

of overdoing it. These, one and all, declared, quite piously, that they

hoped they would never forget the warning as long as they lived, and

that their conduct might be so regulated as to keep off Pressure, and

preserve them, a comfort to their friends, for many years.

But, at about the time of High 'Change, Pressure began to wane, and

appalling whispers to circulate, east, west, north, and south. At first

they were faint, and went no further than a doubt whether Mr Merdle's

wealth would be found to be as vast as had been supposed; whether there

might not be a temporary difficulty in 'realising' it; whether there

might not even be a temporary suspension (say a month or so), on the

part of the wonderful Bank. As the whispers became louder, which they

did from that time every minute, they became more threatening. He had

sprung from nothing, by no natural growth or process that any one could

account for; he had been, after all, a low, ignorant fellow; he had been

a down-looking man, and no one had ever been able to catch his eye;

he had been taken up by all sorts of people in quite an unaccountable

manner; he had never had any money of his own, his ventures had been

utterly reckless, and his expenditure had been most enormous. In steady

progression, as the day declined, the talk rose in sound and purpose.

He had left a letter at the Baths addressed to his physician, and his

physician had got the letter, and the letter would be produced at the

Inquest on the morrow, and it would fall like a thunderbolt upon the

multitude he had deluded. Numbers of men in every profession and trade

would be blighted by his insolvency; old people who had been in easy

circumstances all their lives would have no place of repentance for

their trust in him but the workhouse; legions of women and children

would have their whole future desolated by the hand of this mighty

scoundrel. Every partaker of his magnificent feasts would be seen to

have been a sharer in the plunder of innumerable homes; every servile

worshipper of riches who had helped to set him on his pedestal, would

have done better to worship the Devil point-blank. So, the talk, lashed

louder and higher by confirmation on confirmation, and by edition after

edition of the evening papers, swelled into such a roar when night came,

as might have brought one to believe that a solitary watcher on the

gallery above the Dome of St Paul's would have perceived the night air

to be laden with a heavy muttering of the name of Merdle, coupled with

every form of execration.

For by that time it was known that the late Mr Merdle's complaint

had been simply Forgery and Robbery. He, the uncouth object of such

wide-spread adulation, the sitter at great men's feasts, the roc's egg

of great ladies' assemblies, the subduer of exclusiveness, the leveller

of pride, the patron of patrons, the bargain-driver with a Minister

for Lordships of the Circumlocution Office, the recipient of more

acknowledgment within some ten or fifteen years, at most, than had been

bestowed in England upon all peaceful public benefactors, and upon

all the leaders of all the Arts and Sciences, with all their works to

testify for them, during two centuries at least--he, the shining wonder,

the new constellation to be followed by the wise men bringing gifts,

until it stopped over a certain carrion at the bottom of a bath and

disappeared--was simply the greatest Forger and the greatest Thief that

ever cheated the gallows.

CHAPTER 26. Reaping the Whirlwind

With a precursory sound of hurried breath and hurried feet, Mr Pancks

rushed into Arthur Clennam's Counting-house. The Inquest was over, the

letter was public, the Bank was broken, the other model structures of

straw had taken fire and were turned to smoke. The admired piratical

ship had blown up, in the midst of a vast fleet of ships of all rates,

and boats of all sizes; and on the deep was nothing but ruin; nothing

but burning hulls, bursting magazines, great guns self-exploded tearing

friends and neighbours to pieces, drowning men clinging to unseaworthy

spars and going down every minute, spent swimmers floating dead, and

sharks.

The usual diligence and order of the Counting-house at the Works were

overthrown. Unopened letters and unsorted papers lay strewn about the

desk. In the midst of these tokens of prostrated energy and dismissed

hope, the master of the Counting-house stood idle in his usual place,

with his arms crossed on the desk, and his head bowed down upon them.

Mr Pancks rushed in and saw him, and stood still. In another minute, Mr

Pancks's arms were on the desk, and Mr Pancks's head was bowed down

upon them; and for some time they remained in these attitudes, idle and

silent, with the width of the little room between them. Mr Pancks was

the first to lift up his head and speak.

'I persuaded you to it, Mr Clennam. I know it. Say what you will.

You can't say more to me than I say to myself. You can't say more than I

deserve.'

'O, Pancks, Pancks!' returned Clennam, 'don't speak of deserving. What

do I myself deserve!'

'Better luck,' said Pancks.

'I,' pursued Clennam, without attending to him, 'who have ruined my

partner! Pancks, Pancks, I have ruined Doyce! The honest, self-helpful,

indefatigable old man who has worked his way all through his life;

the man who has contended against so much disappointment, and who has

brought out of it such a good and hopeful nature; the man I have felt

so much for, and meant to be so true and useful to; I have ruined

him--brought him to shame and disgrace--ruined him, ruined him!'

The agony into which the reflection wrought his mind was so distressing

to see, that Mr Pancks took hold of himself by the hair of his head, and

tore it in desperation at the spectacle.

'Reproach me!' cried Pancks. 'Reproach me, sir, or I'll do myself an

injury. Say,--You fool, you villain. Say,--Ass, how could you do it;

Beast, what did you mean by it! Catch hold of me somewhere.

Say something abusive to me!' All the time, Mr Pancks was tearing at his

tough hair in a most pitiless and cruel manner.

'If you had never yielded to this fatal mania, Pancks,' said Clennam,

more in commiseration than retaliation, 'it would have been how much

better for you, and how much better for me!'

'At me again, sir!' cried Pancks, grinding his teeth in remorse. 'At

me again!' 'If you had never gone into those accursed calculations,

and brought out your results with such abominable clearness,' groaned

Clennam, 'it would have been how much better for you, Pancks, and how

much better for me!'

'At me again, sir!' exclaimed Pancks, loosening his hold of his hair;

'at me again, and again!'

Clennam, however, finding him already beginning to be pacified, had said

all he wanted to say, and more. He wrung his hand, only adding, 'Blind

leaders of the blind, Pancks! Blind leaders of the blind! But Doyce,

Doyce, Doyce; my injured partner!' That brought his head down on the

desk once more.

Their former attitudes and their former silence were once more first

encroached upon by Pancks.

'Not been to bed, sir, since it began to get about. Been high and low,

on the chance of finding some hope of saving any cinders from the fire.

All in vain. All gone. All vanished.'

'I know it,' returned Clennam, 'too well.'

Mr Pancks filled up a pause with a groan that came out of the very

depths of his soul.

'Only yesterday, Pancks,' said Arthur; 'only yesterday, Monday, I had

the fixed intention of selling, realising, and making an end of it.'

'I can't say as much for myself, sir,' returned Pancks. 'Though it's

wonderful how many people I've heard of, who were going to realise

yesterday, of all days in the three hundred and sixty-five, if it hadn't

been too late!'

His steam-like breathings, usually droll in their effect, were more

tragic than so many groans: while from head to foot, he was in that

begrimed, besmeared, neglected state, that he might have been an

authentic portrait of Misfortune which could scarcely be discerned

through its want of cleaning.

'Mr Clennam, had you laid out--everything?' He got over the break before

the last word, and also brought out the last word itself with great

difficulty.

'Everything.'

Mr Pancks took hold of his tough hair again, and gave it such a wrench

that he pulled out several prongs of it. After looking at these with an

eye of wild hatred, he put them in his pocket.

'My course,' said Clennam, brushing away some tears that had been

silently dropping down his face, 'must be taken at once. What wretched

amends I can make must be made. I must clear my unfortunate partner's

reputation. I must retain nothing for myself. I must resign to our

creditors the power of management I have so much abused, and I must work

out as much of my fault--or crime--as is susceptible of being worked out

in the rest of my days.'

'Is it impossible, sir, to tide over the present?'

'Out of the question. Nothing can be tided over now, Pancks. The sooner

the business can pass out of my hands, the better for it. There are

engagements to be met, this week, which would bring the catastrophe

before many days were over, even if I would postpone it for a single day

by going on for that space, secretly knowing what I know. All last night

I thought of what I would do; what remains is to do it.'

'Not entirely of yourself?' said Pancks, whose face was as damp as if

his steam were turning into water as fast as he dismally blew it off.

'Have some legal help.'

'Perhaps I had better.'

'Have Rugg.'

'There is not much to do. He will do it as well as another.'

'Shall I fetch Rugg, Mr Clennam?'

'If you could spare the time, I should be much obliged to you.'

Mr Pancks put on his hat that moment, and steamed away to Pentonville.

While he was gone Arthur never raised his head from the desk, but

remained in that one position.

Mr Pancks brought his friend and professional adviser, Mr Rugg, back

with him. Mr Rugg had had such ample experience, on the road, of Mr

Pancks's being at that present in an irrational state of mind, that he

opened his professional mediation by requesting that gentleman to take

himself out of the way. Mr Pancks, crushed and submissive, obeyed.

'He is not unlike what my daughter was, sir, when we began the Breach of

Promise action of Rugg and Bawkins, in which she was Plaintiff,' said

Mr Rugg. 'He takes too strong and direct an interest in the case. His

feelings are worked upon. There is no getting on, in our profession,

with feelings worked upon, sir.'

As he pulled off his gloves and put them in his hat, he saw, in a side

glance or two, that a great change had come over his client.

'I am sorry to perceive, sir,' said Mr Rugg, 'that you have been

allowing your own feelings to be worked upon. Now, pray don't, pray

don't. These losses are much to be deplored, sir, but we must look 'em

in the face.' 'If the money I have sacrificed had been all my own, Mr

Rugg,' sighed Mr Clennam, 'I should have cared far less.'

'Indeed, sir?' said Mr Rugg, rubbing his hands with a cheerful air.

'You surprise me. That's singular, sir. I have generally found, in my

experience, that it's their own money people are most particular about.

I have seen people get rid of a good deal of other people's money, and

bear it very well: very well indeed.'

With these comforting remarks, Mr Rugg seated himself on an office-stool

at the desk and proceeded to business.

'Now, Mr Clennam, by your leave, let us go into the matter. Let us see

the state of the case. The question is simple. The question is the

usual plain, straightforward, common-sense question. What can we do for

ourself? What can we do for ourself?'

'This is not the question with me, Mr Rugg,' said Arthur. 'You mistake

it in the beginning. It is, what can I do for my partner, how can I best

make reparation to him?'

'I am afraid, sir, do you know,' argued Mr Rugg persuasively, 'that you

are still allowing your feeling to be worked upon. I don't like the term

"reparation," sir, except as a lever in the hands of counsel. Will you

excuse my saying that I feel it my duty to offer you the caution, that

you really must not allow your feelings to be worked upon?'

'Mr Rugg,' said Clennam, nerving himself to go through with what he

had resolved upon, and surprising that gentleman by appearing, in his

despondency, to have a settled determination of purpose; 'you give me

the impression that you will not be much disposed to adopt the course

I have made up my mind to take. If your disapproval of it should render

you unwilling to discharge such business as it necessitates, I am sorry

for it, and must seek other aid. But I will represent to you at once,

that to argue against it with me is useless.'

'Good, sir,' answered Mr Rugg, shrugging his shoulders.'Good, sir. Since

the business is to be done by some hands, let it be done by mine. Such

was my principle in the case of Rugg and Bawkins. Such is my principle

in most cases.'

Clennam then proceeded to state to Mr Rugg his fixed resolution. He told

Mr Rugg that his partner was a man of great simplicity and integrity,

and that in all he meant to do, he was guided above all things by a

knowledge of his partner's character, and a respect for his feelings.

He explained that his partner was then absent on an enterprise of

importance, and that it particularly behoved himself publicly to accept

the blame of what he had rashly done, and publicly to exonerate his

partner from all participation in the responsibility of it, lest the

successful conduct of that enterprise should be endangered by the

slightest suspicion wrongly attaching to his partner's honour and credit

in another country. He told Mr Rugg that to clear his partner morally,

to the fullest extent, and publicly and unreservedly to declare that

he, Arthur Clennam, of that Firm, had of his own sole act, and even

expressly against his partner's caution, embarked its resources in the

swindles that had lately perished, was the only real atonement within

his power; was a better atonement to the particular man than it would be

to many men; and was therefore the atonement he had first to make. With

this view, his intention was to print a declaration to the foregoing

effect, which he had already drawn up; and, besides circulating it

among all who had dealings with the House, to advertise it in the public

papers. Concurrently with this measure (the description of which cost Mr

Rugg innumerable wry faces and great uneasiness in his limbs), he would

address a letter to all the creditors, exonerating his partner in a

solemn manner, informing them of the stoppage of the House until their

pleasure could be known and his partner communicated with, and humbly

submitting himself to their direction. If, through their consideration

for his partner's innocence, the affairs could ever be got into such

train as that the business could be profitably resumed, and its present

downfall overcome, then his own share in it should revert to his

partner, as the only reparation he could make to him in money value for

the distress and loss he had unhappily brought upon him, and he himself,

at as mall a salary as he could live upon, would ask to be allowed to

serve the business as a faithful clerk.

Though Mr Rugg saw plainly there was no preventing this from being done,

still the wryness of his face and the uneasiness of his limbs so sorely

required the propitiation of a Protest, that he made one.

'I offer no objection, sir,' said he, 'I argue no point with you. I will

carry out your views, sir; but, under protest.' Mr Rugg then stated,

not without prolixity, the heads of his protest. These were, in effect,

because the whole town, or he might say the whole country, was in the

first madness of the late discovery, and the resentment against the

victims would be very strong: those who had not been deluded being

certain to wax exceedingly wroth with them for not having been as wise

as they were: and those who had been deluded being certain to find

excuses and reasons for themselves, of which they were equally certain

to see that other sufferers were wholly devoid: not to mention the great

probability of every individual sufferer persuading himself, to his

violent indignation, that but for the example of all the other sufferers

he never would have put himself in the way of suffering. Because such a

declaration as Clennam's, made at such a time, would certainly draw down

upon him a storm of animosity, rendering it impossible to calculate on

forbearance in the creditors, or on unanimity among them; and exposing

him a solitary target to a straggling cross-fire, which might bring him

down from half-a-dozen quarters at once.

To all this Clennam merely replied that, granting the whole protest,

nothing in it lessened the force, or could lessen the force, of the

voluntary and public exoneration of his partner. He therefore, once

and for all, requested Mr Rugg's immediate aid in getting the business

despatched. Upon that, Mr Rugg fell to work; and Arthur, retaining no

property to himself but his clothes and books, and a little loose

money, placed his small private banker's-account with the papers of the

business.

The disclosure was made, and the storm raged fearfully. Thousands of

people were wildly staring about for somebody alive to heap reproaches

on; and this notable case, courting publicity, set the living somebody

so much wanted, on a scaffold. When people who had nothing to do with

the case were so sensible of its flagrancy, people who lost money by it

could scarcely be expected to deal mildly with it. Letters of reproach

and invective showered in from the creditors; and Mr Rugg, who sat upon

the high stool every day and read them all, informed his client within a

week that he feared there were writs out.

'I must take the consequences of what I have done,' said Clennam. 'The

writs will find me here.'

On the very next morning, as he was turning in Bleeding Heart Yard by

Mrs Plornish's corner, Mrs Plornish stood at the door waiting for him,

and mysteriously besought him to step into Happy Cottage. There he found

Mr Rugg.

'I thought I'd wait for you here. I wouldn't go on to the Counting-house

this morning if I was you, sir.'

'Why not, Mr Rugg?'

'There are as many as five out, to my knowledge.'

'It cannot be too soon over,' said Clennam. 'Let them take me at once.'

'Yes, but,' said Mr Rugg, getting between him and the door, 'hear

reason, hear reason. They'll take you soon enough, Mr Clennam, I don't

doubt; but, hear reason. It almost always happens, in these cases,

that some insignificant matter pushes itself in front and makes much

of itself. Now, I find there's a little one out--a mere Palace Court

jurisdiction--and I have reason to believe that a caption may be made

upon that. I wouldn't be taken upon that.'

'Why not?' asked Clennam.

'I'd be taken on a full-grown one, sir,' said Mr Rugg. 'It's as well to

keep up appearances. As your professional adviser, I should prefer your

being taken on a writ from one of the Superior Courts, if you have no

objection to do me that favour. It looks better.'

'Mr Rugg,' said Arthur, in his dejection, 'my only wish is, that it

should be over. I will go on, and take my chance.'

'Another word of reason, sir!' cried Mr Rugg. 'Now, this is reason.

The other may be taste; but this is reason. If you should be taken on a

little one, sir, you would go to the Marshalsea. Now, you know what the

Marshalsea is. Very close. Excessively confined. Whereas in the King's

Bench--' Mr Rugg waved his right hand freely, as expressing abundance of

space. 'I would rather,' said Clennam, 'be taken to the Marshalsea than

to any other prison.'

'Do you say so indeed, sir?' returned Mr Rugg. 'Then this is taste, too,

and we may be walking.'

He was a little offended at first, but he soon overlooked it. They

walked through the Yard to the other end. The Bleeding Hearts were more

interested in Arthur since his reverses than formerly; now regarding him

as one who was true to the place and had taken up his freedom. Many of

them came out to look after him, and to observe to one another, with

great unctuousness, that he was 'pulled down by it.' Mrs Plornish

and her father stood at the top of the steps at their own end, much

depressed and shaking their heads.

There was nobody visibly in waiting when Arthur and Mr Rugg arrived

at the Counting-house. But an elderly member of the Jewish persuasion,

preserved in rum, followed them close, and looked in at the glass before

Mr Rugg had opened one of the day's letters.

'Oh!' said Mr Rugg, looking up. 'How do you do? Step in--Mr Clennam, I

think this is the gentleman I was mentioning.'

This gentleman explained the object of his visit to be 'a tyfling madder

ob bithznithz,' and executed his legal function.

'Shall I accompany you, Mr Clennam?' asked Mr Rugg politely, rubbing his

hands.

'I would rather go alone, thank you. Be so good as send me my clothes.'

Mr Rugg in a light airy way replied in the affirmative, and shook hands

with him. He and his attendant then went down-stairs, got into the first

conveyance they found, and drove to the old gates.

'Where I little thought, Heaven forgive me,' said Clennam to himself,

'that I should ever enter thus!'

Mr Chivery was on the Lock, and Young John was in the Lodge: either

newly released from it, or waiting to take his own spell of duty. Both

were more astonished on seeing who the prisoner was, than one might have

thought turnkeys would have been. The elder Mr Chivery shook hands with

him in a shame-faced kind of way, and said, 'I don't call to mind,

sir, as I was ever less glad to see you.' The younger Mr Chivery, more

distant, did not shake hands with him at all; he stood looking at him

in a state of indecision so observable that it even came within the

observation of Clennam with his heavy eyes and heavy heart. Presently

afterwards, Young John disappeared into the jail.

As Clennam knew enough of the place to know that he was required to

remain in the Lodge a certain time, he took a seat in a corner, and

feigned to be occupied with the perusal of letters from his pocket.

They did not so engross his attention, but that he saw, with gratitude,

how the elder Mr Chivery kept the Lodge clear of prisoners; how he

signed to some, with his keys, not to come in, how he nudged others with

his elbows to go out, and how he made his misery as easy to him as he

could.

Arthur was sitting with his eyes fixed on the floor, recalling the past,

brooding over the present, and not attending to either, when he felt

himself touched upon the shoulder. It was by Young John; and he said,

'You can come now.'

He got up and followed Young John. When they had gone a step or two

within the inner iron-gate, Young John turned and said to him:

'You want a room. I have got you one.'

'I thank you heartily.'

Young John turned again, and took him in at the old doorway, up the old

staircase, into the old room. Arthur stretched out his hand. Young John

looked at it, looked at him--sternly--swelled, choked, and said:

'I don't know as I can. No, I find I can't. But I thought you'd like the

room, and here it is for you.'

Surprise at this inconsistent behaviour yielded when he was gone (he

went away directly) to the feelings which the empty room awakened in

Clennam's wounded breast, and to the crowding associations with the

one good and gentle creature who had sanctified it. Her absence in his

altered fortunes made it, and him in it, so very desolate and so much in

need of such a face of love and truth, that he turned against the

wall to weep, sobbing out, as his heart relieved itself, 'O my Little

Dorrit!'

CHAPTER 27. The Pupil of the Marshalsea

The day was sunny, and the Marshalsea, with the hot noon striking

upon it, was unwontedly quiet. Arthur Clennam dropped into a solitary

arm-chair, itself as faded as any debtor in the jail, and yielded

himself to his thoughts.

In the unnatural peace of having gone through the dreaded arrest, and

got there,--the first change of feeling which the prison most commonly

induced, and from which dangerous resting-place so many men had slipped

down to the depths of degradation and disgrace by so many ways,--he

could think of some passages in his life, almost as if he were removed

from them into another state of existence. Taking into account where he

was, the interest that had first brought him there when he had been free

to keep away, and the gentle presence that was equally inseparable from

the walls and bars about him and from the impalpable remembrances of his

later life which no walls or bars could imprison, it was not remarkable

that everything his memory turned upon should bring him round again to

Little Dorrit. Yet it was remarkable to him; not because of the fact

itself, but because of the reminder it brought with it, how much the

dear little creature had influenced his better resolutions.

None of us clearly know to whom or to what we are indebted in this wise,

until some marked stop in the whirling wheel of life brings the right

perception with it. It comes with sickness, it comes with sorrow, it

comes with the loss of the dearly loved, it is one of the most frequent

uses of adversity. It came to Clennam in his adversity, strongly and

tenderly. 'When I first gathered myself together,' he thought, 'and

set something like purpose before my jaded eyes, whom had I before me,

toiling on, for a good object's sake, without encouragement, without

notice, against ignoble obstacles that would have turned an army of

received heroes and heroines? One weak girl! When I tried to conquer

my misplaced love, and to be generous to the man who was more fortunate

than I, though he should never know it or repay me with a gracious word,

in whom had I watched patience, self-denial, self-subdual, charitable

construction, the noblest generosity of the affections? In the same poor

girl! If I, a man, with a man's advantages and means and energies, had

slighted the whisper in my heart, that if my father had erred, it was my

first duty to conceal the fault and to repair it, what youthful figure

with tender feet going almost bare on the damp ground, with spare hands

ever working, with its slight shape but half protected from the

sharp weather, would have stood before me to put me to shame? Little

Dorrit's.' So always as he sat alone in the faded chair, thinking.

Always, Little Dorrit. Until it seemed to him as if he met the reward of

having wandered away from her, and suffered anything to pass between him

and his remembrance of her virtues.

His door was opened, and the head of the elder Chivery was put in a very

little way, without being turned towards him.

'I am off the Lock, Mr Clennam, and going out. Can I do anything for

you?'

'Many thanks. Nothing.'

'You'll excuse me opening the door,' said Mr Chivery; 'but I couldn't

make you hear.'

'Did you knock?' 'Half-a-dozen times.'

Rousing himself, Clennam observed that the prison had awakened from its

noontide doze, that the inmates were loitering about the shady yard, and

that it was late in the afternoon. He had been thinking for hours. 'Your

things is come,' said Mr Chivery, 'and my son is going to carry 'em

up. I should have sent 'em up but for his wishing to carry 'em himself.

Indeed he would have 'em himself, and so I couldn't send 'em up. Mr

Clennam, could I say a word to you?'

'Pray come in,' said Arthur; for Mr Chivery's head was still put in at

the door a very little way, and Mr Chivery had but one ear upon him,

instead of both eyes. This was native delicacy in Mr Chivery--true

politeness; though his exterior had very much of a turnkey about it, and

not the least of a gentleman.

'Thank you, sir,' said Mr Chivery, without advancing; 'it's no odds me

coming in. Mr Clennam, don't you take no notice of my son (if you'll

be so good) in case you find him cut up anyways difficult. My son has a

'art, and my son's 'art is in the right place. Me and his mother knows

where to find it, and we find it sitiwated correct.'

With this mysterious speech, Mr Chivery took his ear away and shut the

door. He might have been gone ten minutes, when his son succeeded him.

'Here's your portmanteau,' he said to Arthur, putting it carefully down.

'It's very kind of you. I am ashamed that you should have the trouble.'

He was gone before it came to that; but soon returned, saying exactly as

before, 'Here's your black box:' which he also put down with care.

'I am very sensible of this attention. I hope we may shake hands now, Mr

John.'

Young John, however, drew back, turning his right wrist in a socket made

of his left thumb and middle-finger and said as he had said at first,

'I don't know as I can. No; I find I can't!' He then stood regarding the

prisoner sternly, though with a swelling humour in his eyes that looked

like pity.

'Why are you angry with me,' said Clennam, 'and yet so ready to do me

these kind services? There must be some mistake between us. If I have

done anything to occasion it I am sorry.'

'No mistake, sir,' returned John, turning the wrist backwards and

forwards in the socket, for which it was rather tight. 'No mistake, sir,

in the feelings with which my eyes behold you at the present moment! If

I was at all fairly equal to your weight, Mr Clennam--which I am not;

and if you weren't under a cloud--which you are; and if it wasn't

against all rules of the Marshalsea--which it is; those feelings are

such, that they would stimulate me, more to having it out with you in

a Round on the present spot than to anything else I could name.' Arthur

looked at him for a moment in some wonder, and some little anger. 'Well,

well!' he said. 'A mistake, a mistake!' Turning away, he sat down with a

heavy sigh in the faded chair again.

Young John followed him with his eyes, and, after a short pause, cried

out, 'I beg your pardon!'

'Freely granted,' said Clennam, waving his hand without raising his

sunken head. 'Say no more. I am not worth it.'

'This furniture, sir,' said Young John in a voice of mild and soft

explanation, 'belongs to me. I am in the habit of letting it out to

parties without furniture, that have the room. It an't much, but it's at

your service. Free, I mean. I could not think of letting you have it on

any other terms. You're welcome to it for nothing.'

Arthur raised his head again to thank him, and to say he could

not accept the favour. John was still turning his wrist, and still

contending with himself in his former divided manner.

'What is the matter between us?' said Arthur.

'I decline to name it, sir,' returned Young John, suddenly turning loud

and sharp. 'Nothing's the matter.'

Arthur looked at him again, in vain, for an explanation of his

behaviour. After a while, Arthur turned away his head again. Young John

said, presently afterwards, with the utmost mildness:

'The little round table, sir, that's nigh your elbow, was--you know

whose--I needn't mention him--he died a great gentleman. I bought it of

an individual that he gave it to, and that lived here after him. But the

individual wasn't any ways equal to him. Most individuals would find it

hard to come up to his level.'

Arthur drew the little table nearer, rested his arm upon it, and kept it

there.

'Perhaps you may not be aware, sir,' said Young John, 'that I intruded

upon him when he was over here in London. On the whole he was of opinion

that it WAS an intrusion, though he was so good as to ask me to sit

down and to inquire after father and all other old friends. Leastways

humblest acquaintances. He looked, to me, a good deal changed, and I

said so when I came back. I asked him if Miss Amy was well--'

'And she was?'

'I should have thought you would have known without putting the question

to such as me,' returned Young John, after appearing to take a large

invisible pill. 'Since you do put me the question, I am sorry I can't

answer it. But the truth is, he looked upon the inquiry as a liberty,

and said, "What was that to me?" It was then I became quite aware I was

intruding: of which I had been fearful before. However, he spoke very

handsome afterwards; very handsome.'

They were both silent for several minutes: except that Young John

remarked, at about the middle of the pause, 'He both spoke and acted

very handsome.'

It was again Young John who broke the silence by inquiring:

'If it's not a liberty, how long may it be your intentions, sir, to go

without eating and drinking?'

'I have not felt the want of anything yet,' returned Clennam. 'I have no

appetite just now.'

'The more reason why you should take some support, sir,' urged Young

John. 'If you find yourself going on sitting here for hours and hours

partaking of no refreshment because you have no appetite, why then you

should and must partake of refreshment without an appetite. I'm going to

have tea in my own apartment. If it's not a liberty, please to come and

take a cup. Or I can bring a tray here in two minutes.'

Feeling that Young John would impose that trouble on himself if he

refused, and also feeling anxious to show that he bore in mind both

the elder Mr Chivery's entreaty, and the younger Mr Chivery's apology,

Arthur rose and expressed his willingness to take a cup of tea in Mr

john's apartment. Young John locked his door for him as they went out,

slided the key into his pocket with great dexterity, and led the way to

his own residence.

It was at the top of the house nearest to the gateway. It was the room

to which Clennam had hurried on the day when the enriched family had

left the prison for ever, and where he had lifted her insensible from

the floor. He foresaw where they were going as soon as their feet

touched the staircase. The room was so far changed that it was papered

now, and had been repainted, and was far more comfortably furnished; but

he could recall it just as he had seen it in that single glance, when he

raised her from the ground and carried her down to the carriage.

Young John looked hard at him, biting his fingers.

'I see you recollect the room, Mr Clennam?' 'I recollect it well, Heaven

bless her!'

Oblivious of the tea, Young John continued to bite his fingers and to

look at his visitor, as long as his visitor continued to glance about

the room. Finally, he made a start at the teapot, gustily rattled a

quantity of tea into it from a canister, and set off for the common

kitchen to fill it with hot water.

The room was so eloquent to Clennam in the changed circumstances of his

return to the miserable Marshalsea; it spoke to him so mournfully of

her, and of his loss of her; that it would have gone hard with him to

resist it, even though he had not been alone. Alone, he did not try.

He had his hand on the insensible wall as tenderly as if it had been

herself that he touched, and pronounced her name in a low voice. He

stood at the window, looking over the prison-parapet with its grim

spiked border, and breathed a benediction through the summer haze

towards the distant land where she was rich and prosperous.

Young John was some time absent, and, when he came back, showed that he

had been outside by bringing with him fresh butter in a cabbage leaf,

some thin slices of boiled ham in another cabbage leaf, and a little

basket of water-cresses and salad herbs. When these were arranged upon

the table to his satisfaction, they sat down to tea.

Clennam tried to do honour to the meal, but unavailingly. The ham

sickened him, the bread seemed to turn to sand in his mouth. He could

force nothing upon himself but a cup of tea.

'Try a little something green,' said Young John, handing him the basket.

He took a sprig or so of water-cress, and tried again; but the bread

turned to a heavier sand than before, and the ham (though it was good

enough of itself) seemed to blow a faint simoom of ham through the whole

Marshalsea.

'Try a little more something green, sir,' said Young John; and again

handed the basket.

It was so like handing green meat into the cage of a dull imprisoned

bird, and John had so evidently brought the little basket as a handful

of fresh relief from the stale hot paving-stones and bricks of the jail,

that Clennam said, with a smile, 'It was very kind of you to think of

putting this between the wires; but I cannot even get this down to-day.'

As if the difficulty were contagious, Young John soon pushed away his

own plate, and fell to folding the cabbage-leaf that had contained the

ham. When he had folded it into a number of layers, one over another,

so that it was small in the palm of his hand, he began to flatten it

between both his hands, and to eye Clennam attentively. 'I wonder,' he

at length said, compressing his green packet with some force, 'that if

it's not worth your while to take care of yourself for your own sake,

it's not worth doing for some one else's.'

'Truly,' returned Arthur, with a sigh and a smile, 'I don't know for

whose.'

'Mr Clennam,' said John, warmly, 'I am surprised that a gentleman who

is capable of the straightforwardness that you are capable of, should be

capable of the mean action of making me such an answer. Mr Clennam, I am

surprised that a gentleman who is capable of having a heart of his own,

should be capable of the heartlessness of treating mine in that way. I

am astonished at it, sir. Really and truly I am astonished!'

Having got upon his feet to emphasise his concluding words, Young John

sat down again, and fell to rolling his green packet on his right leg;

never taking his eyes off Clennam, but surveying him with a fixed look

of indignant reproach.

'I had got over it, sir,' said John. 'I had conquered it, knowing that

it must be conquered, and had come to the resolution to think no more

about it. I shouldn't have given my mind to it again, I hope, if to this

prison you had not been brought, and in an hour unfortunate for me,

this day!' (In his agitation Young John adopted his mother's powerful

construction of sentences.) 'When you first came upon me, sir, in the

Lodge, this day, more as if a Upas tree had been made a capture of than

a private defendant, such mingled streams of feelings broke loose again

within me, that everything was for the first few minutes swept away

before them, and I was going round and round in a vortex. I got out of

it. I struggled, and got out of it. If it was the last word I had to

speak, against that vortex with my utmost powers I strove, and out of it

I came. I argued that if I had been rude, apologies was due, and those

apologies without a question of demeaning, I did make. And now, when

I've been so wishful to show that one thought is next to being a holy

one with me and goes before all others--now, after all, you dodge me

when I ever so gently hint at it, and throw me back upon myself. For, do

not, sir,' said Young John, 'do not be so base as to deny that dodge you

do, and thrown me back upon myself you have!'

All amazement, Arthur gazed at him like one lost, only saying, 'What is

it? What do you mean, John?' But, John, being in that state of mind in

which nothing would seem to be more impossible to a certain class of

people than the giving of an answer, went ahead blindly.

'I hadn't,' John declared, 'no, I hadn't, and I never had the

audaciousness to think, I am sure, that all was anything but lost. I

hadn't, no, why should I say I hadn't if I ever had, any hope that it

was possible to be so blest, not after the words that passed, not even

if barriers insurmountable had not been raised! But is that a reason why

I am to have no memory, why I am to have no thoughts, why I am to have

no sacred spots, nor anything?'

'What can you mean?' cried Arthur.

'It's all very well to trample on it, sir,' John went on, scouring a

very prairie of wild words, 'if a person can make up his mind to be

guilty of the action. It's all very well to trample on it, but it's

there. It may be that it couldn't be trampled upon if it wasn't there.

But that doesn't make it gentlemanly, that doesn't make it honourable,

that doesn't justify throwing a person back upon himself after he has

struggled and strived out of himself like a butterfly. The world may

sneer at a turnkey, but he's a man--when he isn't a woman, which among

female criminals he's expected to be.'

Ridiculous as the incoherence of his talk was, there was yet a

truthfulness in Young john's simple, sentimental character, and a sense

of being wounded in some very tender respect, expressed in his burning

face and in the agitation of his voice and manner, which Arthur must

have been cruel to disregard. He turned his thoughts back to the

starting-point of this unknown injury; and in the meantime Young John,

having rolled his green packet pretty round, cut it carefully into three

pieces, and laid it on a plate as if it were some particular delicacy.

'It seems to me just possible,' said Arthur, when he had retraced the

conversation to the water-cresses and back again, 'that you have made

some reference to Miss Dorrit.'

'It is just possible, sir,' returned John Chivery.

'I don't understand it. I hope I may not be so unlucky as to make you

think I mean to offend you again, for I never have meant to offend you

yet, when I say I don't understand it.'

'Sir,' said Young John, 'will you have the perfidy to deny that you know

and long have known that I felt towards Miss Dorrit, call it not the

presumption of love, but adoration and sacrifice?'

'Indeed, John, I will not have any perfidy if I know it; why you should

suspect me of it I am at a loss to think. Did you ever hear from Mrs

Chivery, your mother, that I went to see her once?'

'No, sir,' returned John, shortly. 'Never heard of such a thing.'

'But I did. Can you imagine why?'

'No, sir,' returned John, shortly. 'I can't imagine why.'

'I will tell you. I was solicitous to promote Miss Dorrit's happiness;

and if I could have supposed that Miss Dorrit returned your affection--'

Poor John Chivery turned crimson to the tips of his ears. 'Miss Dorrit

never did, sir. I wish to be honourable and true, so far as in my humble

way I can, and I would scorn to pretend for a moment that she ever did,

or that she ever led me to believe she did; no, nor even that it was

ever to be expected in any cool reason that she would or could. She was

far above me in all respects at all times. As likewise,' added John,

'similarly was her gen-teel family.' His chivalrous feeling towards all

that belonged to her made him so very respectable, in spite of his

small stature and his rather weak legs, and his very weak hair, and

his poetical temperament, that a Goliath might have sat in his place

demanding less consideration at Arthur's hands.

'You speak, john,' he said, with cordial admiration, 'like a Man.'

'Well, sir,' returned John, brushing his hand across his eyes, 'then I

wish you'd do the same.'

He was quick with this unexpected retort, and it again made Arthur

regard him with a wondering expression of face.

'Leastways,' said John, stretching his hand across the tea-tray, 'if too

strong a remark, withdrawn! But, why not, why not? When I say to you,

Mr Clennam, take care of yourself for some one else's sake, why not be

open, though a turnkey? Why did I get you the room which I knew you'd

like best? Why did I carry up your things?

Not that I found 'em heavy; I don't mention 'em on that accounts; far

from it. Why have I cultivated you in the manner I have done since the

morning? On the ground of your own merits? No. They're very great, I've

no doubt at all; but not on the ground of them. Another's merits have

had their weight, and have had far more weight with Me. Then why not

speak free?'

'Unaffectedly, John,' said Clennam, 'you are so good a fellow and I have

so true a respect for your character, that if I have appeared to be less

sensible than I really am of the fact that the kind services you have

rendered me to-day are attributable to my having been trusted by

Miss Dorrit as her friend--I confess it to be a fault, and I ask your

forgiveness.'

'Oh! why not,' John repeated with returning scorn, 'why not speak free!'

'I declare to you,' returned Arthur, 'that I do not understand you.

Look at me. Consider the trouble I have been in. Is it likely that I

would wilfully add to my other self-reproaches, that of being ungrateful

or treacherous to you. I do not understand you.'

John's incredulous face slowly softened into a face of doubt. He rose,

backed into the garret-window of the room, beckoned Arthur to come

there, and stood looking at him thoughtfully. 'Mr Clennam, do you mean

to say that you don't know?'

'What, John?'

'Lord,' said Young John, appealing with a gasp to the spikes on the

wall. 'He says, What!'

Clennam looked at the spikes, and looked at John; and looked at the

spikes, and looked at John.

'He says What! And what is more,' exclaimed Young John, surveying him in

a doleful maze, 'he appears to mean it! Do you see this window, sir?'

'Of course I see this window.'

'See this room?'

'Why, of course I see this room.'

'That wall opposite, and that yard down below? They have all been

witnesses of it, from day to day, from night to night, from week to

week, from month to month. For how often have I seen Miss Dorrit here

when she has not seen me!'

'Witnesses of what?' said Clennam.

'Of Miss Dorrit's love.'

'For whom?'

'You,' said John. And touched him with the back of his hand upon the

breast, and backed to his chair, and sat down on it with a pale face,

holding the arms, and shaking his head at him.

If he had dealt Clennam a heavy blow, instead of laying that light touch

upon him, its effect could not have been to shake him more. He stood

amazed; his eyes looking at John; his lips parted, and seeming now and

then to form the word 'Me!' without uttering it; his hands dropped at

his sides; his whole appearance that of a man who has been awakened from

sleep, and stupefied by intelligence beyond his full comprehension.

'Me!' he at length said aloud.

'Ah!' groaned Young John. 'You!'

He did what he could to muster a smile, and returned, 'Your fancy. You

are completely mistaken.'

'I mistaken, sir!' said Young John. '\_I\_ completely mistaken on that

subject! No, Mr Clennam, don't tell me so. On any other, if you like,

for I don't set up to be a penetrating character, and am well aware of

my own deficiencies. But, \_I\_ mistaken on a point that has caused me

more smart in my breast than a flight of savages' arrows could have

done! \_I\_ mistaken on a point that almost sent me into my grave, as

I sometimes wished it would, if the grave could only have been made

compatible with the tobacco-business and father and mother's feelings! I

mistaken on a point that, even at the present moment, makes me take out

my pocket-handkercher like a great girl, as people say: though I am sure

I don't know why a great girl should be a term of reproach, for every

rightly constituted male mind loves 'em great and small. Don't tell me

so, don't tell me so!'

Still highly respectable at bottom, though absurd enough upon the

surface, Young John took out his pocket-handkerchief with a genuine

absence both of display and concealment, which is only to be seen in

a man with a great deal of good in him, when he takes out his

pocket-handkerchief for the purpose of wiping his eyes. Having dried

them, and indulged in the harmless luxury of a sob and a sniff, he put

it up again.

The touch was still in its influence so like a blow that Arthur could

not get many words together to close the subject with. He assured John

Chivery when he had returned his handkerchief to his pocket, that he

did all honour to his disinterestedness and to the fidelity of his

remembrance of Miss Dorrit. As to the impression on his mind, of which

he had just relieved it--here John interposed, and said, 'No impression!

Certainty!'--as to that, they might perhaps speak of it at another time,

but would say no more now. Feeling low-spirited and weary, he would go

back to his room, with john's leave, and come out no more that night.

John assented, and he crept back in the shadow of the wall to his own

lodging.

The feeling of the blow was still so strong upon him that, when the

dirty old woman was gone whom he found sitting on the stairs outside

his door, waiting to make his bed, and who gave him to understand while

doing it, that she had received her instructions from Mr Chivery, 'not

the old 'un but the young 'un,' he sat down in the faded arm-chair,

pressing his head between his hands, as if he had been stunned. Little

Dorrit love him! More bewildering to him than his misery, far.

Consider the improbability. He had been accustomed to call her his

child, and his dear child, and to invite her confidence by dwelling upon

the difference in their respective ages, and to speak of himself as one

who was turning old. Yet she might not have thought him old. Something

reminded him that he had not thought himself so, until the roses had

floated away upon the river.

He had her two letters among other papers in his box, and he took them

out and read them. There seemed to be a sound in them like the sound

of her sweet voice. It fell upon his ear with many tones of tenderness,

that were not insusceptible of the new meaning. Now it was that the

quiet desolation of her answer,'No, No, No,' made to him that night

in that very room--that night when he had been shown the dawn of her

altered fortune, and when other words had passed between them which he

had been destined to remember in humiliation and a prisoner, rushed into

his mind.

Consider the improbability.

But it had a preponderating tendency, when considered, to become

fainter. There was another and a curious inquiry of his own heart's that

concurrently became stronger. In the reluctance he had felt to believe

that she loved any one; in his desire to set that question at rest; in

a half-formed consciousness he had had that there would be a kind of

nobleness in his helping her love for any one, was there no suppressed

something on his own side that he had hushed as it arose? Had he ever

whispered to himself that he must not think of such a thing as her

loving him, that he must not take advantage of her gratitude, that he

must keep his experience in remembrance as a warning and reproof;

that he must regard such youthful hopes as having passed away, as his

friend's dead daughter had passed away; that he must be steady in saying

to himself that the time had gone by him, and he was too saddened and

old?

He had kissed her when he raised her from the ground on the day when she

had been so consistently and expressively forgotten. Quite as he might

have kissed her, if she had been conscious? No difference?

The darkness found him occupied with these thoughts. The darkness also

found Mr and Mrs Plornish knocking at his door. They brought with them a

basket, filled with choice selections from that stock in trade which met

with such a quick sale and produced such a slow return. Mrs Plornish was

affected to tears. Mr Plornish amiably growled, in his philosophical but

not lucid manner, that there was ups you see, and there was downs. It

was in vain to ask why ups, why downs; there they was, you know. He had

heerd it given for a truth that accordin' as the world went round, which

round it did rewolve undoubted, even the best of gentlemen must take his

turn of standing with his ed upside down and all his air a flying

the wrong way into what you might call Space. Wery well then. What

Mr Plornish said was, wery well then. That gentleman's ed would come

up-ards when his turn come, that gentleman's air would be a pleasure to

look upon being all smooth again, and wery well then!

It has been already stated that Mrs Plornish, not being philosophical,

wept. It further happened that Mrs Plornish, not being philosophical,

was intelligible. It may have arisen out of her softened state of mind,

out of her sex's wit, out of a woman's quick association of ideas,

or out of a woman's no association of ideas, but it further happened

somehow that Mrs Plornish's intelligibility displayed itself upon the

very subject of Arthur's meditations.

'The way father has been talking about you, Mr Clennam,' said Mrs

Plornish, 'you hardly would believe. It's made him quite poorly. As

to his voice, this misfortune has took it away. You know what a sweet

singer father is; but he couldn't get a note out for the children at

tea, if you'll credit what I tell you.'

While speaking, Mrs Plornish shook her head, and wiped her eyes, and

looked retrospectively about the room.

'As to Mr Baptist,' pursued Mrs Plornish, 'whatever he'll do when he

comes to know of it, I can't conceive nor yet imagine. He'd have been

here before now, you may be sure, but that he's away on confidential

business of your own. The persevering manner in which he follows up that

business, and gives himself no rest from it--it really do,' said

Mrs Plornish, winding up in the Italian manner, 'as I say to him,

Mooshattonisha padrona.'

Though not conceited, Mrs Plornish felt that she had turned this Tuscan

sentence with peculiar elegance. Mr Plornish could not conceal his

exultation in her accomplishments as a linguist.

'But what I say is, Mr Clennam,' the good woman went on, 'there's always

something to be thankful for, as I am sure you will yourself admit.

Speaking in this room, it's not hard to think what the present something

is. It's a thing to be thankful for, indeed, that Miss Dorrit is not

here to know it.'

Arthur thought she looked at him with particular expression.

'It's a thing,' reiterated Mrs Plornish, 'to be thankful for, indeed,

that Miss Dorrit is far away. It's to be hoped she is not likely to hear

of it. If she had been here to see it, sir, it's not to be doubted

that the sight of you,' Mrs Plornish repeated those words--'not to be

doubted, that the sight of you--in misfortune and trouble, would have

been almost too much for her affectionate heart. There's nothing I can

think of, that would have touched Miss Dorrit so bad as that.'

Of a certainty Mrs Plornish did look at him now, with a sort of

quivering defiance in her friendly emotion.

'Yes!' said she. 'And it shows what notice father takes, though at his

time of life, that he says to me this afternoon, which Happy Cottage

knows I neither make it up nor any ways enlarge, "Mary, it's much to

be rejoiced in that Miss Dorrit is not on the spot to behold it." Those

were father's words. Father's own words was, "Much to be rejoiced in,

Mary, that Miss Dorrit is not on the spot to behold it." I says to

father then, I says to him, "Father, you are right!" That,' Mrs Plornish

concluded, with the air of a very precise legal witness, 'is what passed

betwixt father and me. And I tell you nothing but what did pass betwixt

me and father.'

Mr Plornish, as being of a more laconic temperament, embraced this

opportunity of interposing with the suggestion that she should now leave

Mr Clennam to himself. 'For, you see,' said Mr Plornish, gravely, 'I

know what it is, old gal;' repeating that valuable remark several times,

as if it appeared to him to include some great moral secret. Finally,

the worthy couple went away arm in arm.

Little Dorrit, Little Dorrit. Again, for hours. Always Little Dorrit!

Happily, if it ever had been so, it was over, and better over. Granted

that she had loved him, and he had known it and had suffered himself

to love her, what a road to have led her away upon--the road that would

have brought her back to this miserable place! He ought to be much

comforted by the reflection that she was quit of it forever; that she

was, or would soon be, married (vague rumours of her father's projects

in that direction had reached Bleeding Heart Yard, with the news of her

sister's marriage); and that the Marshalsea gate had shut for ever on

all those perplexed possibilities of a time that was gone.

Dear Little Dorrit.

Looking back upon his own poor story, she was its vanishing-point. Every

thing in its perspective led to her innocent figure. He had travelled

thousands of miles towards it; previous unquiet hopes and doubts had

worked themselves out before it; it was the centre of the interest

of his life; it was the termination of everything that was good and

pleasant in it; beyond, there was nothing but mere waste and darkened

sky.

As ill at ease as on the first night of his lying down to sleep within

those dreary walls, he wore the night out with such thoughts. What time

Young John lay wrapt in peaceful slumber, after composing and arranging

the following monumental inscription on his pillow--

STRANGER!

RESPECT THE TOMB OF

JOHN CHIVERY, JUNIOR,

WHO DIED AT AN ADVANCED AGE

NOT NECESSARY TO MENTION.

HE ENCOUNTERED HIS RIVAL IN A DISTRESSED STATE,

AND FELT INCLINED

TO HAVE A ROUND WITH HIM;

BUT, FOR THE SAKE OF THE LOVED ONE, CONQUERED THOSE FEELINGS

OF BITTERNESS, AND BECAME

MAGNANIMOUS.

CHAPTER 28. An Appearance in the Marshalsea

The opinion of the community outside the prison gates bore hard on

Clennam as time went on, and he made no friends among the community

within. Too depressed to associate with the herd in the yard, who got

together to forget their cares; too retiring and too unhappy to join in

the poor socialities of the tavern; he kept his own room, and was held

in distrust. Some said he was proud; some objected that he was

sullen and reserved; some were contemptuous of him, for that he was a

poor-spirited dog who pined under his debts. The whole population were

shy of him on these various counts of indictment, but especially the

last, which involved a species of domestic treason; and he soon became

so confirmed in his seclusion, that his only time for walking up and

down was when the evening Club were assembled at their songs and toasts

and sentiments, and when the yard was nearly left to the women and

children.

Imprisonment began to tell upon him. He knew that he idled and moped.

After what he had known of the influences of imprisonment within the

four small walls of the very room he occupied, this consciousness made

him afraid of himself. Shrinking from the observation of other men, and

shrinking from his own, he began to change very sensibly. Anybody might

see that the shadow of the wall was dark upon him.

One day when he might have been some ten or twelve weeks in jail, and

when he had been trying to read and had not been able to release even

the imaginary people of the book from the Marshalsea, a footstep stopped

at his door, and a hand tapped at it. He arose and opened it, and an

agreeable voice accosted him with 'How do you do, Mr Clennam? I hope I

am not unwelcome in calling to see you.'

It was the sprightly young Barnacle, Ferdinand. He looked very

good-natured and prepossessing, though overpoweringly gay and free, in

contrast with the squalid prison.

'You are surprised to see me, Mr Clennam,' he said, taking the seat

which Clennam offered him.

'I must confess to being much surprised.'

'Not disagreeably, I hope?'

'By no means.'

'Thank you. Frankly,' said the engaging young Barnacle, 'I have been

excessively sorry to hear that you were under the necessity of a

temporary retirement here, and I hope (of course as between two private

gentlemen) that our place has had nothing to do with it?'

'Your office?'

'Our Circumlocution place.'

'I cannot charge any part of my reverses upon that remarkable

establishment.'

Upon my life,' said the vivacious young Barnacle, 'I am heartily glad to

know it. It is quite a relief to me to hear you say it. I should have

so exceedingly regretted our place having had anything to do with your

difficulties.'

Clennam again assured him that he absolved it of the responsibility.

'That's right,' said Ferdinand. 'I am very happy to hear it. I was

rather afraid in my own mind that we might have helped to floor you,

because there is no doubt that it is our misfortune to do that kind

of thing now and then. We don't want to do it; but if men will be

gravelled, why--we can't help it.'

'Without giving an unqualified assent to what you say,' returned Arthur,

gloomily, 'I am much obliged to you for your interest in me.'

'No, but really! Our place is,' said the easy young Barnacle, 'the most

inoffensive place possible. You'll say we are a humbug. I won't say

we are not; but all that sort of thing is intended to be, and must be.

Don't you see?'

'I do not,' said Clennam.

'You don't regard it from the right point of view. It is the point of

view that is the essential thing. Regard our place from the point of

view that we only ask you to leave us alone, and we are as capital a

Department as you'll find anywhere.'

'Is your place there to be left alone?' asked Clennam.

'You exactly hit it,' returned Ferdinand. 'It is there with the express

intention that everything shall be left alone. That is what it means.

That is what it's for. No doubt there's a certain form to be kept up

that it's for something else, but it's only a form. Why, good Heaven,

we are nothing but forms! Think what a lot of our forms you have gone

through. And you have never got any nearer to an end?'

'Never,' said Clennam.

'Look at it from the right point of view, and there you have

us--official and effectual. It's like a limited game of cricket. A field

of outsiders are always going in to bowl at the Public Service, and we

block the balls.'

Clennam asked what became of the bowlers? The airy young Barnacle

replied that they grew tired, got dead beat, got lamed, got their backs

broken, died off, gave it up, went in for other games.

'And this occasions me to congratulate myself again,' he pursued,

'on the circumstance that our place has had nothing to do with your

temporary retirement. It very easily might have had a hand in it;

because it is undeniable that we are sometimes a most unlucky place, in

our effects upon people who will not leave us alone. Mr Clennam, I am

quite unreserved with you. As between yourself and myself, I know I may

be. I was so, when I first saw you making the mistake of not leaving us

alone; because I perceived that you were inexperienced and sanguine, and

had--I hope you'll not object to my saying--some simplicity.'

'Not at all.'

'Some simplicity. Therefore I felt what a pity it was, and I went out

of my way to hint to you (which really was not official, but I never am

official when I can help it) something to the effect that if I were you,

I wouldn't bother myself. However, you did bother yourself, and you have

since bothered yourself. Now, don't do it any more.'

'I am not likely to have the opportunity,' said Clennam.

'Oh yes, you are! You'll leave here. Everybody leaves here. There are no

ends of ways of leaving here. Now, don't come back to us. That entreaty

is the second object of my call. Pray, don't come back to us. Upon my

honour,' said Ferdinand in a very friendly and confiding way, 'I shall

be greatly vexed if you don't take warning by the past and keep away

from us.'

'And the invention?' said Clennam.

'My good fellow,' returned Ferdinand, 'if you'll excuse the freedom of

that form of address, nobody wants to know of the invention, and nobody

cares twopence-halfpenny about it.'

'Nobody in the Office, that is to say?'

'Nor out of it. Everybody is ready to dislike and ridicule any

invention. You have no idea how many people want to be left alone.

You have no idea how the Genius of the country (overlook the

Parliamentary nature of the phrase, and don't be bored by it) tends

to being left alone. Believe me, Mr Clennam,' said the sprightly young

Barnacle in his pleasantest manner, 'our place is not a wicked Giant to

be charged at full tilt; but only a windmill showing you, as it grinds

immense quantities of chaff, which way the country wind blows.'

'If I could believe that,' said Clennam, 'it would be a dismal prospect

for all of us.'

'Oh! Don't say so!' returned Ferdinand. 'It's all right. We must have

humbug, we all like humbug, we couldn't get on without humbug.

A little humbug, and a groove, and everything goes on admirably, if you

leave it alone.'

With this hopeful confession of his faith as the head of the rising

Barnacles who were born of woman, to be followed under a variety of

watchwords which they utterly repudiated and disbelieved, Ferdinand

rose. Nothing could be more agreeable than his frank and courteous

bearing, or adapted with a more gentlemanly instinct to the

circumstances of his visit.

'Is it fair to ask,' he said, as Clennam gave him his hand with a real

feeling of thankfulness for his candour and good-humour, 'whether it

is true that our late lamented Merdle is the cause of this passing

inconvenience?'

'I am one of the many he has ruined. Yes.'

'He must have been an exceedingly clever fellow,' said Ferdinand

Barnacle.

Arthur, not being in the mood to extol the memory of the deceased, was

silent.

'A consummate rascal, of course,' said Ferdinand, 'but remarkably

clever! One cannot help admiring the fellow. Must have been such a

master of humbug. Knew people so well--got over them so completely--did

so much with them!' In his easy way, he was really moved to genuine

admiration.

'I hope,' said Arthur, 'that he and his dupes may be a warning to people

not to have so much done with them again.'

'My dear Mr Clennam,' returned Ferdinand, laughing, 'have you really

such a verdant hope? The next man who has as large a capacity and as

genuine a taste for swindling, will succeed as well. Pardon me, but

I think you really have no idea how the human bees will swarm to the

beating of any old tin kettle; in that fact lies the complete manual of

governing them. When they can be got to believe that the kettle is made

of the precious metals, in that fact lies the whole power of men like

our late lamented. No doubt there are here and there,' said Ferdinand

politely, 'exceptional cases, where people have been taken in for what

appeared to them to be much better reasons; and I need not go far to

find such a case; but they don't invalidate the rule. Good day! I hope

that when I have the pleasure of seeing you, next, this passing cloud

will have given place to sunshine. Don't come a step beyond the door. I

know the way out perfectly. Good day!'

With those words, the best and brightest of the Barnacles went

down-stairs, hummed his way through the Lodge, mounted his horse in the

front court-yard, and rode off to keep an appointment with his noble

kinsman, who wanted a little coaching before he could triumphantly

answer certain infidel Snobs who were going to question the Nobs about

their statesmanship.

He must have passed Mr Rugg on his way out, for, a minute or two

afterwards, that ruddy-headed gentleman shone in at the door, like an

elderly Phoebus.

'How do you do to-day, sir?' said Mr Rugg. 'Is there any little thing I

can do for you to-day, sir?'

'No, I thank you.'

Mr Rugg's enjoyment of embarrassed affairs was like a housekeeper's

enjoyment in pickling and preserving, or a washerwoman's enjoyment of a

heavy wash, or a dustman's enjoyment of an overflowing dust-bin, or any

other professional enjoyment of a mess in the way of business.

'I still look round, from time to time, sir,' said Mr Rugg, cheerfully,

'to see whether any lingering Detainers are accumulating at the gate.

They have fallen in pretty thick, sir; as thick as we could have

expected.'

He remarked upon the circumstance as if it were matter of

congratulation: rubbing his hands briskly, and rolling his head a

little.

'As thick,' repeated Mr Rugg, 'as we could reasonably have expected.

Quite a shower-bath of 'em. I don't often intrude upon you now, when I

look round, because I know you are not inclined for company, and that if

you wished to see me, you would leave word in the Lodge. But I am here

pretty well every day, sir. Would this be an unseasonable time, sir,'

asked Mr Rugg, coaxingly, 'for me to offer an observation?'

'As seasonable a time as any other.'

'Hum! Public opinion, sir,' said Mr Rugg, 'has been busy with you.'

'I don't doubt it.'

'Might it not be advisable, sir,' said Mr Rugg, more coaxingly yet, 'now

to make, at last and after all, a trifling concession to public opinion?

We all do it in one way or another. The fact is, we must do it.'

'I cannot set myself right with it, Mr Rugg, and have no business to

expect that I ever shall.'

'Don't say that, sir, don't say that. The cost of being moved to the

Bench is almost insignificant, and if the general feeling is strong that

you ought to be there, why--really--'

'I thought you had settled, Mr Rugg,' said Arthur, 'that my

determination to remain here was a matter of taste.'

'Well, sir, well! But is it good taste, is it good taste? That's the

Question.' Mr Rugg was so soothingly persuasive as to be quite pathetic.

'I was almost going to say, is it good feeling? This is an extensive

affair of yours; and your remaining here where a man can come for a

pound or two, is remarked upon as not in keeping. It is not in keeping.

I can't tell you, sir, in how many quarters I heard it mentioned. I

heard comments made upon it last night in a Parlour frequented by what

I should call, if I did not look in there now and then myself, the best

legal company--I heard, there, comments on it that I was sorry to hear.

They hurt me on your account. Again, only this morning at breakfast. My

daughter (but a woman, you'll say: yet still with a feeling for these

things, and even with some little personal experience, as the plaintiff

in Rugg and Bawkins) was expressing her great surprise; her great

surprise.

Now under these circumstances, and considering that none of us can quite

set ourselves above public opinion, wouldn't a trifling concession to

that opinion be--Come, sir,' said Rugg, 'I will put it on the lowest

ground of argument, and say, amiable?'

Arthur's thoughts had once more wandered away to Little Dorrit, and the

question remained unanswered.

'As to myself, sir,' said Mr Rugg, hoping that his eloquence had reduced

him to a state of indecision, 'it is a principle of mine not to consider

myself when a client's inclinations are in the scale. But, knowing your

considerate character and general wish to oblige, I will repeat that I

should prefer your being in the Bench.

Your case has made a noise; it is a creditable case to be professionally

concerned in; I should feel on a better standing with my connection, if

you went to the Bench. Don't let that influence you, sir. I merely state

the fact.'

So errant had the prisoner's attention already grown in solitude and

dejection, and so accustomed had it become to commune with only one

silent figure within the ever-frowning walls, that Clennam had to shake

off a kind of stupor before he could look at Mr Rugg, recall the thread

of his talk, and hurriedly say, 'I am unchanged, and unchangeable, in my

decision. Pray, let it be; let it be!' Mr Rugg, without concealing that

he was nettled and mortified, replied:

'Oh! Beyond a doubt, sir. I have travelled out of the record, sir, I am

aware, in putting the point to you. But really, when I herd it remarked

in several companies, and in very good company, that however worthy of a

foreigner, it is not worthy of the spirit of an Englishman to remain in

the Marshalsea when the glorious liberties of his island home admit

of his removal to the Bench, I thought I would depart from the narrow

professional line marked out to me, and mention it. Personally,' said Mr

Rugg, 'I have no opinion on the topic.'

'That's well,' returned Arthur.

'Oh! None at all, sir!' said Mr Rugg. 'If I had, I should have been

unwilling, some minutes ago, to see a client of mine visited in this

place by a gentleman of a high family riding a saddle-horse. But it was

not my business. If I had, I might have wished to be now empowered to

mention to another gentleman, a gentleman of military exterior at

present waiting in the Lodge, that my client had never intended to

remain here, and was on the eve of removal to a superior abode. But my

course as a professional machine is clear; I have nothing to do with it.

Is it your good pleasure to see the gentleman, sir?'

'Who is waiting to see me, did you say?'

'I did take that unprofessional liberty, sir. Hearing that I was your

professional adviser, he declined to interpose before my very limited

function was performed. Happily,' said Mr Rugg, with sarcasm, 'I did not

so far travel out of the record as to ask the gentleman for his name.'

'I suppose I have no resource but to see him,' sighed Clennam, wearily.

'Then it IS your good pleasure, sir?' retorted Rugg. 'Am I honoured by

your instructions to mention as much to the gentleman, as I pass out? I

am? Thank you, sir. I take my leave.' His leave he took accordingly, in

dudgeon.

The gentleman of military exterior had so imperfectly awakened Clennam's

curiosity, in the existing state of his mind, that a half-forgetfulness

of such a visitor's having been referred to, was already creeping over

it as a part of the sombre veil which almost always dimmed it now, when

a heavy footstep on the stairs aroused him. It appeared to ascend them,

not very promptly or spontaneously, yet with a display of stride and

clatter meant to be insulting. As it paused for a moment on the

landing outside his door, he could not recall his association with the

peculiarity of its sound, though he thought he had one. Only a moment

was given him for consideration. His door was immediately swung open

by a thump, and in the doorway stood the missing Blandois, the cause of

many anxieties.

'Salve, fellow jail-bird!' said he. 'You want me, it seems. Here I am!'

Before Arthur could speak to him in his indignant wonder, Cavalletto

followed him into the room. Mr Pancks followed Cavalletto. Neither of

the two had been there since its present occupant had had possession of

it. Mr Pancks, breathing hard, sidled near the window, put his hat on

the ground, stirred his hair up with both hands, and folded his arms,

like a man who had come to a pause in a hard day's work. Mr Baptist,

never taking his eyes from his dreaded chum of old, softly sat down on

the floor with his back against the door and one of his ankles in

each hand: resuming the attitude (except that it was now expressive of

unwinking watchfulness) in which he had sat before the same man in the

deeper shade of another prison, one hot morning at Marseilles. 'I have

it on the witnessing of these two madmen,' said Monsieur Blandois,

otherwise Lagnier, otherwise Rigaud, 'that you want me, brother-bird.

Here I am!' Glancing round contemptuously at the bedstead, which was

turned up by day, he leaned his back against it as a resting-place,

without removing his hat from his head, and stood defiantly lounging

with his hands in his pockets.

'You villain of ill-omen!' said Arthur. 'You have purposely cast a

dreadful suspicion upon my mother's house. Why have you done it?

What prompted you to the devilish invention?'

Monsieur Rigaud, after frowning at him for a moment, laughed. 'Hear this

noble gentleman! Listen, all the world, to this creature of Virtue! But

take care, take care. It is possible, my friend, that your ardour is a

little compromising. Holy Blue! It is possible.'

'Signore!' interposed Cavalletto, also addressing Arthur: 'for to

commence, hear me! I received your instructions to find him, Rigaud; is

it not?'

'It is the truth.'

'I go, consequentementally,'--it would have given Mrs Plornish great

concern if she could have been persuaded that his occasional lengthening

of an adverb in this way, was the chief fault of his English,--'first

among my countrymen. I ask them what news in Londra, of foreigners

arrived. Then I go among the French. Then I go among the Germans. They

all tell me. The great part of us know well the other, and they all tell

me. But!--no person can tell me nothing of him, Rigaud. Fifteen times,'

said Cavalletto, thrice throwing out his left hand with all its fingers

spread, and doing it so rapidly that the sense of sight could hardly

follow the action, 'I ask of him in every place where go the foreigners;

and fifteen times,' repeating the same swift performance, 'they know

nothing. But!--' At this significant Italian rest on the word 'But,' his

backhanded shake of his right forefinger came into play; a very little,

and very cautiously.

'But!--After a long time when I have not been able to find that he

is here in Londra, some one tells me of a soldier with white

hair--hey?--not hair like this that he carries--white--who lives retired

secrettementally, in a certain place. But!--' with another rest upon

the word, 'who sometimes in the after-dinner, walks, and smokes. It is

necessary, as they say in Italy (and as they know, poor people), to

have patience. I have patience. I ask where is this certain place. One.

believes it is here, one believes it is there. Eh well! It is not here,

it is not there. I wait patientissamentally. At last I find it. Then I

watch; then I hide, until he walks and smokes. He is a soldier with grey

hair--But!--' a very decided rest indeed, and a very vigorous play from

side to side of the back-handed forefinger--'he is also this man that

you see.'

It was noticeable, that, in his old habit of submission to one who had

been at the trouble of asserting superiority over him, he even then

bestowed upon Rigaud a confused bend of his head, after thus pointing

him out.

'Eh well, Signore!' he cried in conclusion, addressing Arthur again. 'I

waited for a good opportunity. I writed some words to Signor Panco,' an

air of novelty came over Mr Pancks with this designation, 'to come and

help. I showed him, Rigaud, at his window, to Signor Panco, who was

often the spy in the day. I slept at night near the door of the house.

At last we entered, only this to-day, and now you see him! As he would

not come up in presence of the illustrious Advocate,' such was Mr

Baptist's honourable mention of Mr Rugg, 'we waited down below there,

together, and Signor Panco guarded the street.'

At the close of this recital, Arthur turned his eyes upon the impudent

and wicked face. As it met his, the nose came down over the moustache

and the moustache went up under the nose. When nose and moustache had

settled into their places again, Monsieur Rigaud loudly snapped his

fingers half-a-dozen times; bending forward to jerk the snaps at Arthur,

as if they were palpable missiles which he jerked into his face.

'Now, Philosopher!' said Rigaud.'What do you want with me?'

'I want to know,' returned Arthur, without disguising his abhorrence,

'how you dare direct a suspicion of murder against my mother's house?'

'Dare!' cried Rigaud. 'Ho, ho! Hear him! Dare? Is it dare? By Heaven, my

small boy, but you are a little imprudent!'

'I want that suspicion to be cleared away,' said Arthur. 'You shall

be taken there, and be publicly seen. I want to know, moreover,

what business you had there when I had a burning desire to fling you

down-stairs. Don't frown at me, man! I have seen enough of you to know

that you are a bully and coward. I need no revival of my spirits from

the effects of this wretched place to tell you so plain a fact, and one

that you know so well.'

White to the lips, Rigaud stroked his moustache, muttering, 'By Heaven,

my small boy, but you are a little compromising of my lady, your

respectable mother'--and seemed for a minute undecided how to act.

His indecision was soon gone. He sat himself down with a threatening

swagger, and said:

'Give me a bottle of wine. You can buy wine here. Send one of your

madmen to get me a bottle of wine. I won't talk to you without wine.

Come! Yes or no?'

'Fetch him what he wants, Cavalletto,' said Arthur, scornfully,

producing the money.

'Contraband beast,' added Rigaud, 'bring Port wine! I'll drink nothing

but Porto-Porto.'

The contraband beast, however, assuring all present, with his

significant finger, that he peremptorily declined to leave his post at

the door, Signor Panco offered his services. He soon returned with the

bottle of wine: which, according to the custom of the place, originating

in a scarcity of corkscrews among the Collegians (in common with a

scarcity of much else), was already opened for use.

'Madman! A large glass,' said Rigaud.

Signor Panco put a tumbler before him; not without a visible conflict of

feeling on the question of throwing it at his head.

'Haha!' boasted Rigaud. 'Once a gentleman, and always a gentleman.

A gentleman from the beginning, and a gentleman to the end. What

the Devil! A gentleman must be waited on, I hope? It's a part of my

character to be waited on!'

He half filled the tumbler as he said it, and drank off the contents

when he had done saying it.

'Hah!' smacking his lips. 'Not a very old prisoner that! I judge by your

looks, brave sir, that imprisonment will subdue your blood much sooner

than it softens this hot wine. You are mellowing--losing body and colour

already. I salute you!'

He tossed off another half glass: holding it up both before and

afterwards, so as to display his small, white hand.

'To business,' he then continued. 'To conversation. You have shown

yourself more free of speech than body, sir.'

'I have used the freedom of telling you what you know yourself to be.

You know yourself, as we all know you, to be far worse than that.'

'Add, always a gentleman, and it's no matter. Except in that regard, we

are all alike. For example: you couldn't for your life be a gentleman;

I couldn't for my life be otherwise. How great the difference! Let us go

on. Words, sir, never influence the course of the cards, or the course

of the dice. Do you know that? You do? I also play a game, and words are

without power over it.'

Now that he was confronted with Cavalletto, and knew that his story was

known--whatever thin disguise he had worn, he dropped; and faced it out,

with a bare face, as the infamous wretch he was.

'No, my son,' he resumed, with a snap of his fingers. 'I play my game

to the end in spite of words; and Death of my Body and Death of my Soul!

I'll win it. You want to know why I played this little trick that

you have interrupted? Know then that I had, and that I have--do you

understand me? have--a commodity to sell to my lady your respectable

mother. I described my precious commodity, and fixed my price. Touching

the bargain, your admirable mother was a little too calm, too stolid,

too immovable and statue-like. In fine, your admirable mother vexed me.

To make variety in my position, and to amuse myself--what! a gentleman

must be amused at somebody's expense!--I conceived the happy idea of

disappearing. An idea, see you, that your characteristic mother and my

Flintwinch would have been well enough pleased to execute. Ah! Bah,

bah, bah, don't look as from high to low at me! I repeat it. Well enough

pleased, excessively enchanted, and with all their hearts ravished. How

strongly will you have it?'

He threw out the lees of his glass on the ground, so that they nearly

spattered Cavalletto. This seemed to draw his attention to him anew. He

set down his glass and said:

'I'll not fill it. What! I am born to be served. Come then, you

Cavalletto, and fill!'

The little man looked at Clennam, whose eyes were occupied with Rigaud,

and, seeing no prohibition, got up from the ground, and poured out

from the bottle into the glass. The blending, as he did so, of his old

submission with a sense of something humorous; the striving of that

with a certain smouldering ferocity, which might have flashed fire in

an instant (as the born gentleman seemed to think, for he had a wary

eye upon him); and the easy yielding of all to a good-natured, careless,

predominant propensity to sit down on the ground again: formed a very

remarkable combination of character.

'This happy idea, brave sir,' Rigaud resumed after drinking, 'was a

happy idea for several reasons. It amused me, it worried your dear

mama and my Flintwinch, it caused you agonies (my terms for a lesson

in politeness towards a gentleman), and it suggested to all the amiable

persons interested that your entirely devoted is a man to fear. By

Heaven, he is a man to fear! Beyond this; it might have restored her wit

to my lady your mother--might, under the pressing little suspicion your

wisdom has recognised, have persuaded her at last to announce, covertly,

in the journals, that the difficulties of a certain contract would be

removed by the appearance of a certain important party to it. Perhaps

yes, perhaps no. But that, you have interrupted. Now, what is it you

say? What is it you want?'

Never had Clennam felt more acutely that he was a prisoner in bonds,

than when he saw this man before him, and could not accompany him to his

mother's house. All the undiscernible difficulties and dangers he had

ever feared were closing in, when he could not stir hand or foot.

'Perhaps, my friend, philosopher, man of virtue, Imbecile, what you

will; perhaps,' said Rigaud, pausing in his drink to look out of his

glass with his horrible smile, 'you would have done better to leave me

alone?'

'No! At least,' said Clennam, 'you are known to be alive and unharmed.

At least you cannot escape from these two witnesses; and they can

produce you before any public authorities, or before hundreds of

people!'

'But will not produce me before one,' said Rigaud, snapping his

fingers again with an air of triumphant menace. 'To the Devil with your

witnesses! To the Devil with your produced! To the Devil with yourself!

What! Do I know what I know, for that? Have I my commodity on sale, for

that? Bah, poor debtor! You have interrupted my little project. Let it

pass. How then? What remains? To you, nothing; to me, all. Produce

me! Is that what you want? I will produce myself, only too quickly.

Contrabandist!

Give me pen, ink, and paper.'

Cavalletto got up again as before, and laid them before him in his

former manner. Rigaud, after some villainous thinking and smiling,

wrote, and read aloud, as follows:

'To MRS CLENNAM.

'Wait answer.

'Prison of the Marshalsea. 'At the apartment of your son.

'Dear Madam,--I am in despair to be informed to-day by our prisoner here

(who has had the goodness to employ spies to seek me, living for politic

reasons in retirement), that you have had fears for my safety.

'Reassure yourself, dear madam. I am well, I am strong and constant.

'With the greatest impatience I should fly to your house, but that I

foresee it to be possible, under the circumstances, that you will not

yet have quite definitively arranged the little proposition I have had

the honour to submit to you. I name one week from this day, for a last

final visit on my part; when you will unconditionally accept it or

reject it, with its train of consequences.

'I suppress my ardour to embrace you and achieve this interesting

business, in order that you may have leisure to adjust its details to

our perfect mutual satisfaction.

'In the meanwhile, it is not too much to propose (our prisoner having

deranged my housekeeping), that my expenses of lodging and nourishment

at an hotel shall be paid by you. 'Receive, dear madam, the assurance of

my highest and most distinguished consideration,

'RIGAUD BLANDOIS.

'A thousand friendships to that dear Flintwinch.

'I kiss the hands of Madame F.'

When he had finished this epistle, Rigaud folded it and tossed it with

a flourish at Clennam's feet. 'Hola you! Apropos of producing, let

somebody produce that at its address, and produce the answer here.'

'Cavalletto,' said Arthur. 'Will you take this fellow's letter?'

But, Cavalletto's significant finger again expressing that his post was

at the door to keep watch over Rigaud, now he had found him with so much

trouble, and that the duty of his post was to sit on the floor backed up

by the door, looking at Rigaud and holding his own ankles,--Signor Panco

once more volunteered. His services being accepted, Cavalletto suffered

the door to open barely wide enough to admit of his squeezing himself

out, and immediately shut it on him.

'Touch me with a finger, touch me with an epithet, question my

superiority as I sit here drinking my wine at my pleasure,' said Rigaud,

'and I follow the letter and cancel my week's grace. You wanted me? You

have got me! How do you like me?'

'You know,' returned Clennam, with a bitter sense of his helplessness,

'that when I sought you, I was not a prisoner.'

'To the Devil with you and your prison,' retorted Rigaud, leisurely,

as he took from his pocket a case containing the materials for making

cigarettes, and employed his facile hands in folding a few for present

use; 'I care for neither of you. Contrabandist! A light.'

Again Cavalletto got up, and gave him what he wanted. There had been

something dreadful in the noiseless skill of his cold, white hands, with

the fingers lithely twisting about and twining one over another like

serpents. Clennam could not prevent himself from shuddering inwardly, as

if he had been looking on at a nest of those creatures.

'Hola, Pig!' cried Rigaud, with a noisy stimulating cry, as if

Cavalletto were an Italian horse or mule. 'What! The infernal old jail

was a respectable one to this. There was dignity in the bars and stones

of that place. It was a prison for men. But this? Bah! A hospital for

imbeciles!'

He smoked his cigarette out, with his ugly smile so fixed upon his face

that he looked as though he were smoking with his drooping beak of a

nose, rather than with his mouth; like a fancy in a weird picture. When

he had lighted a second cigarette at the still burning end of the first,

he said to Clennam:

'One must pass the time in the madman's absence. One must talk. One

can't drink strong wine all day long, or I would have another bottle.

She's handsome, sir. Though not exactly to my taste, still, by

the Thunder and the Lightning! handsome. I felicitate you on your

admiration.'

'I neither know nor ask,' said Clennam, 'of whom you speak.'

'Della bella Gowana, sir, as they say in Italy. Of the Gowan, the fair

Gowan.'

'Of whose husband you were the--follower, I think?'

'Sir? Follower? You are insolent. The friend.'

'Do you sell all your friends?'

Rigaud took his cigarette from his mouth, and eyed him with a momentary

revelation of surprise. But he put it between his lips again, as he

answered with coolness:

'I sell anything that commands a price. How do your lawyers live, your

politicians, your intriguers, your men of the Exchange? How do you live?

How do you come here? Have you sold no friend? Lady of mine! I rather

think, yes!'

Clennam turned away from him towards the window, and sat looking out at

the wall.

'Effectively, sir,' said Rigaud, 'Society sells itself and sells me: and

I sell Society. I perceive you have acquaintance with another lady. Also

handsome. A strong spirit. Let us see. How do they call her? Wade.'

He received no answer, but could easily discern that he had hit the

mark.

'Yes,' he went on, 'that handsome lady and strong spirit addresses me in

the street, and I am not insensible. I respond. That handsome lady and

strong spirit does me the favour to remark, in full confidence, "I have

my curiosity, and I have my chagrins. You are not more than ordinarily

honourable, perhaps?" I announce myself, "Madame, a gentleman from

the birth, and a gentleman to the death; but NOT more than ordinarily

honourable. I despise such a weak fantasy." Thereupon she is pleased to

compliment. "The difference between you and the rest is," she answers,

"that you say so." For she knows Society. I accept her congratulations

with gallantry and politeness. Politeness and little gallantries are

inseparable from my character. She then makes a proposition, which is,

in effect, that she has seen us much together; that it appears to her

that I am for the passing time the cat of the house, the friend of

the family; that her curiosity and her chagrins awaken the fancy to be

acquainted with their movements, to know the manner of their life, how

the fair Gowana is beloved, how the fair Gowana is cherished, and so

on. She is not rich, but offers such and such little recompenses for the

little cares and derangements of such services; and I graciously--to do

everything graciously is a part of my character--consent to accept them.

O yes! So goes the world. It is the mode.'

Though Clennam's back was turned while he spoke, and thenceforth to the

end of the interview, he kept those glittering eyes of his that were too

near together, upon him, and evidently saw in the very carriage of the

head, as he passed with his braggart recklessness from clause to clause

of what he said, that he was saying nothing which Clennam did not

already know.

'Whoof! The fair Gowana!' he said, lighting a third cigarette with a

sound as if his lightest breath could blow her away. 'Charming, but

imprudent! For it was not well of the fair Gowana to make mysteries of

letters from old lovers, in her bedchamber on the mountain, that her

husband might not see them. No, no. That was not well. Whoof! The Gowana

was mistaken there.'

'I earnestly hope,' cried Arthur aloud, 'that Pancks may not be long

gone, for this man's presence pollutes the room.'

'Ah! But he'll flourish here, and everywhere,' said Rigaud, with an

exulting look and snap of his fingers. 'He always has; he always will!'

Stretching his body out on the only three chairs in the room besides

that on which Clennam sat, he sang, smiting himself on the breast as the

gallant personage of the song.

'Who passes by this road so late?

Compagnon de la Majolaine!

Who passes by this road so late?

Always gay!

'Sing the Refrain, pig! You could sing it once, in another jail. Sing

it! Or, by every Saint who was stoned to death, I'll be affronted and

compromising; and then some people who are not dead yet, had better have

been stoned along with them!'

'Of all the king's knights 'tis the flower,

Compagnon de la Majolaine!

Of all the king's knights 'tis the flower,

Always gay!'

Partly in his old habit of submission, partly because his not doing it

might injure his benefactor, and partly because he would as soon do

it as anything else, Cavalletto took up the Refrain this time. Rigaud

laughed, and fell to smoking with his eyes shut.

Possibly another quarter of an hour elapsed before Mr Pancks's step was

heard upon the stairs, but the interval seemed to Clennam insupportably

long. His step was attended by another step; and when Cavalletto opened

the door, he admitted Mr Pancks and Mr Flintwinch. The latter was no

sooner visible, than Rigaud rushed at him and embraced him boisterously.

'How do you find yourself, sir?' said Mr Flintwinch, as soon as he could

disengage himself, which he struggled to do with very little ceremony.

'Thank you, no; I don't want any more.' This was in reference to another

menace of attention from his recovered friend.

'Well, Arthur. You remember what I said to you about sleeping dogs and

missing ones. It's come true, you see.'

He was as imperturbable as ever, to all appearance, and nodded his head

in a moralising way as he looked round the room.

'And this is the Marshalsea prison for debt!' said Mr Flintwinch. 'Hah!

you have brought your pigs to a very indifferent market, Arthur.'

If Arthur had patience, Rigaud had not. He took his little Flintwinch,

with fierce playfulness, by the two lapels of his coat, and cried:

'To the Devil with the Market, to the Devil with the Pigs, and to the

Devil with the Pig-Driver! Now! Give me the answer to my letter.'

'If you can make it convenient to let go a moment, sir,' returned Mr

Flintwinch, 'I'll first hand Mr Arthur a little note that I have for

him.'

He did so. It was in his mother's maimed writing, on a slip of paper,

and contained only these words:

'I hope it is enough that you have ruined yourself. Rest contented

without more ruin. Jeremiah Flintwinch is my messenger and

representative. Your affectionate M. C.'

Clennam read this twice, in silence, and then tore it to pieces. Rigaud

in the meanwhile stepped into a chair, and sat himself on the back with

his feet upon the seat.

'Now, Beau Flintwinch,' he said, when he had closely watched the note to

its destruction, 'the answer to my letter?'

'Mrs Clennam did not write, Mr Blandois, her hands being cramped,

and she thinking it as well to send it verbally by me.' Mr Flintwinch

screwed this out of himself, unwillingly and rustily. 'She sends

her compliments, and says she doesn't on the whole wish to term

you unreasonable, and that she agrees. But without prejudicing the

appointment that stands for this day week.'

Monsieur Rigaud, after indulging in a fit of laughter, descended from

his throne, saying, 'Good! I go to seek an hotel!' But, there his eyes

encountered Cavalletto, who was still at his post.

'Come, Pig,' he added, 'I have had you for a follower against my will;

now, I'll have you against yours. I tell you, my little reptiles, I

am born to be served. I demand the service of this contrabandist as my

domestic until this day week.'

In answer to Cavalletto's look of inquiry, Clennam made him a sign

to go; but he added aloud, 'unless you are afraid of him.' Cavalletto

replied with a very emphatic finger-negative.'No, master, I am not

afraid of him, when I no more keep it secrettementally that he was once

my comrade.' Rigaud took no notice of either remark until he had lighted

his last cigarette and was quite ready for walking.

'Afraid of him,' he said then, looking round upon them all. 'Whoof! My

children, my babies, my little dolls, you are all afraid of him. You

give him his bottle of wine here; you give him meat, drink, and lodging

there; you dare not touch him with a finger or an epithet. No. It is his

character to triumph! Whoof!

'Of all the king's knights he's the flower, And he's always gay!'

With this adaptation of the Refrain to himself, he stalked out of the

room closely followed by Cavalletto, whom perhaps he had pressed into

his service because he tolerably well knew it would not be easy to get

rid of him. Mr Flintwinch, after scraping his chin, and looking about

with caustic disparagement of the Pig-Market, nodded to Arthur, and

followed. Mr Pancks, still penitent and depressed, followed too; after

receiving with great attention a secret word or two of instructions from

Arthur, and whispering back that he would see this affair out, and stand

by it to the end.

The prisoner, with the feeling that he was more despised, more scorned

and repudiated, more helpless, altogether more miserable and fallen than

before, was left alone again.

CHAPTER 29. A Plea in the Marshalsea

Haggard anxiety and remorse are bad companions to be barred up with.

Brooding all day, and resting very little indeed at night, t will not

arm a man against misery. Next morning, Clennam felt that his health was

sinking, as his spirits had already sunk and that the weight under which

he bent was bearing him down.

Night after night he had risen from his bed of wretchedness at twelve or

one o'clock, and had sat at his window watching the sickly lamps in the

yard, and looking upward for the first wan trace of day, hours before it

was possible that the sky could show it to him. Now when the night came,

he could not even persuade himself to undress.

For a burning restlessness set in, an agonised impatience of the prison,

and a conviction that he was going to break his heart and die there,

which caused him indescribable suffering. His dread and hatred of the

place became so intense that he felt it a labour to draw his breath in

it. The sensation of being stifled sometimes so overpowered him, that

he would stand at the window holding his throat and gasping. At the

same time a longing for other air, and a yearning to be beyond the blind

blank wall, made him feel as if he must go mad with the ardour of the

desire.

Many other prisoners had had experience of this condition before him,

and its violence and continuity had worn themselves out in their cases,

as they did in his. Two nights and a day exhausted it. It came back by

fits, but those grew fainter and returned at lengthening intervals. A

desolate calm succeeded; and the middle of the week found him settled

down in the despondency of low, slow fever.

With Cavalletto and Pancks away, he had no visitors to fear but Mr and

Mrs Plornish. His anxiety, in reference to that worthy pair, was that

they should not come near him; for, in the morbid state of his nerves,

he sought to be left alone, and spared the being seen so subdued and

weak. He wrote a note to Mrs Plornish representing himself as occupied

with his affairs, and bound by the necessity of devoting himself to

them, to remain for a time even without the pleasant interruption of

a sight of her kind face. As to Young John, who looked in daily at a

certain hour, when the turnkeys were relieved, to ask if he could do

anything for him; he always made a pretence of being engaged in writing,

and to answer cheerfully in the negative. The subject of their only

long conversation had never been revived between them. Through all these

changes of unhappiness, however, it had never lost its hold on Clennam's

mind.

The sixth day of the appointed week was a moist, hot, misty day. It

seemed as though the prison's poverty, and shabbiness, and dirt, were

growing in the sultry atmosphere. With an aching head and a weary heart,

Clennam had watched the miserable night out, listening to the fall of

rain on the yard pavement, thinking of its softer fall upon the country

earth. A blurred circle of yellow haze had risen up in the sky in lieu

of sun, and he had watched the patch it put upon his wall, like a bit of

the prison's raggedness. He had heard the gates open; and the badly shod

feet that waited outside shuffle in; and the sweeping, and pumping,

and moving about, begin, which commenced the prison morning. So ill and

faint that he was obliged to rest many times in the process of getting

himself washed, he had at length crept to his chair by the open window.

In it he sat dozing, while the old woman who arranged his room went

through her morning's work.

Light of head with want of sleep and want of food (his appetite, and

even his sense of taste, having forsaken him), he had been two or three

times conscious, in the night, of going astray. He had heard fragments

of tunes and songs in the warm wind, which he knew had no existence.

Now that he began to doze in exhaustion, he heard them again; and voices

seemed to address him, and he answered, and started.

Dozing and dreaming, without the power of reckoning time, so that

a minute might have been an hour and an hour a minute, some abiding

impression of a garden stole over him--a garden of flowers, with a

damp warm wind gently stirring their scents. It required such a painful

effort to lift his head for the purpose of inquiring into this, or

inquiring into anything, that the impression appeared to have become

quite an old and importunate one when he looked round. Beside the

tea-cup on his table he saw, then, a blooming nosegay: a wonderful

handful of the choicest and most lovely flowers.

Nothing had ever appeared so beautiful in his sight. He took them up and

inhaled their fragrance, and he lifted them to his hot head, and he put

them down and opened his parched hands to them, as cold hands are opened

to receive the cheering of a fire. It was not until he had delighted in

them for some time, that he wondered who had sent them; and opened his

door to ask the woman who must have put them there, how they had come

into her hands. But she was gone, and seemed to have been long gone; for

the tea she had left for him on the table was cold. He tried to drink

some, but could not bear the odour of it: so he crept back to his chair

by the open window, and put the flowers on the little round table of

old.

When the first faintness consequent on having moved about had left him,

he subsided into his former state. One of the night-tunes was playing

in the wind, when the door of his room seemed to open to a light touch,

and, after a moment's pause, a quiet figure seemed to stand there, with

a black mantle on it. It seemed to draw the mantle off and drop it on

the ground, and then it seemed to be his Little Dorrit in her old, worn

dress. It seemed to tremble, and to clasp its hands, and to smile, and

to burst into tears.

He roused himself, and cried out. And then he saw, in the loving,

pitying, sorrowing, dear face, as in a mirror, how changed he was; and

she came towards him; and with her hands laid on his breast to keep him

in his chair, and with her knees upon the floor at his feet, and with

her lips raised up to kiss him, and with her tears dropping on him as

the rain from Heaven had dropped upon the flowers, Little Dorrit, a

living presence, called him by his name.

'O, my best friend! Dear Mr Clennam, don't let me see you weep! Unless

you weep with pleasure to see me. I hope you do. Your own poor child

come back!' So faithful, tender, and unspoiled by Fortune. In the sound

of her voice, in the light of her eyes, in the touch of her hands, so

Angelically comforting and true!

As he embraced her, she said to him, 'They never told me you were ill,'

and drawing an arm softly round his neck, laid his head upon her bosom,

put a hand upon his head, and resting her cheek upon that hand, nursed

him as lovingly, and GOD knows as innocently, as she had nursed her

father in that room when she had been but a baby, needing all the care

from others that she took of them.

When he could speak, he said, 'Is it possible that you have come to me?

And in this dress?'

'I hoped you would like me better in this dress than any other. I have

always kept it by me, to remind me: though I wanted no reminding. I am

not alone, you see. I have brought an old friend with me.'

Looking round, he saw Maggy in her big cap which had been long

abandoned, with a basket on her arm as in the bygone days, chuckling

rapturously.

'It was only yesterday evening that I came to London with my brother.

I sent round to Mrs Plornish almost as soon as we arrived, that I might

hear of you and let you know I had come. Then I heard that you were

here. Did you happen to think of me in the night? I almost believe you

must have thought of me a little. I thought of you so anxiously, and it

appeared so long to morning.'

'I have thought of you--' he hesitated what to call her. She perceived

it in an instant.

'You have not spoken to me by my right name yet. You know what my right

name always is with you.'

'I have thought of you, Little Dorrit, every day, every hour, every

minute, since I have been here.'

'Have you? Have you?'

He saw the bright delight of her face, and the flush that kindled in

it, with a feeling of shame. He, a broken, bankrupt, sick, dishonoured

prisoner.

'I was here before the gates were opened, but I was afraid to come

straight to you. I should have done you more harm than good, at first;

for the prison was so familiar and yet so strange, and it brought back

so many remembrances of my poor father, and of you too, that at first

it overpowered me. But we went to Mr Chivery before we came to the gate,

and he brought us in, and got john's room for us--my poor old room, you

know--and we waited there a little. I brought the flowers to the door,

but you didn't hear me.' She looked something more womanly than when

she had gone away, and the ripening touch of the Italian sun was visible

upon her face. But, otherwise, she was quite unchanged. The same deep,

timid earnestness that he had always seen in her, and never without

emotion, he saw still. If it had a new meaning that smote him to the

heart, the change was in his perception, not in her.

She took off her old bonnet, hung it in the old place, and noiselessly

began, with Maggy's help, to make his room as fresh and neat as it could

be made, and to sprinkle it with a pleasant-smelling water. When that

was done, the basket, which was filled with grapes and other fruit,

was unpacked, and all its contents were quietly put away. When that was

done, a moment's whisper despatched Maggy to despatch somebody else to

fill the basket again; which soon came back replenished with new

stores, from which a present provision of cooling drink and jelly, and

a prospective supply of roast chicken and wine and water, were the first

extracts. These various arrangements completed, she took out her old

needle-case to make him a curtain for his window; and thus, with a quiet

reigning in the room, that seemed to diffuse itself through the else

noisy prison, he found himself composed in his chair, with Little Dorrit

working at his side.

To see the modest head again bent down over its task, and the nimble

fingers busy at their old work--though she was not so absorbed in it,

but that her compassionate eyes were often raised to his face, and, when

they drooped again had tears in them--to be so consoled and comforted,

and to believe that all the devotion of this great nature was turned to

him in his adversity to pour out its inexhaustible wealth of goodness

upon him, did not steady Clennam's trembling voice or hand, or

strengthen him in his weakness. Yet it inspired him with an inward

fortitude, that rose with his love. And how dearly he loved her now,

what words can tell!

As they sat side by side in the shadow of the wall, the shadow fell like

light upon him. She would not let him speak much, and he lay back in

his chair, looking at her. Now and again she would rise and give him

the glass that he might drink, or would smooth the resting-place of his

head; then she would gently resume her seat by him, and bend over her

work again.

The shadow moved with the sun, but she never moved from his side, except

to wait upon him. The sun went down and she was still there. She had

done her work now, and her hand, faltering on the arm of his chair since

its last tending of him, was hesitating there yet. He laid his hand upon

it, and it clasped him with a trembling supplication.

'Dear Mr Clennam, I must say something to you before I go. I have put it

off from hour to hour, but I must say it.'

'I too, dear Little Dorrit. I have put off what I must say.' She

nervously moved her hand towards his lips as if to stop him; then it

dropped, trembling, into its former place.

'I am not going abroad again. My brother is, but I am not. He was always

attached to me, and he is so grateful to me now--so much too grateful,

for it is only because I happened to be with him in his illness--that

he says I shall be free to stay where I like best, and to do what I like

best. He only wishes me to be happy, he says.'

There was one bright star shining in the sky. She looked up at it While

she spoke, as if it were the fervent purpose of her own heart shining

above her.

'You will understand, I dare say, without my telling you, that my

brother has come home to find my dear father's will, and to take

possession of his property. He says, if there is a will, he is sure I

shall be left rich; and if there is none, that he will make me so.'

He would have spoken; but she put up her trembling hand again, and he

stopped.

'I have no use for money, I have no wish for it. It would be of no value

at all to me but for your sake. I could not be rich, and you here. I

must always be much worse than poor, with you distressed. Will you let

me lend you all I have? Will you let me give it you? Will you let me

show you that I have never forgotten, that I never can forget, your

protection of me when this was my home? Dear Mr Clennam, make me of all

the world the happiest, by saying Yes. Make me as happy as I can be in

leaving you here, by saying nothing to-night, and letting me go

away with the hope that you will think of it kindly; and that for my

sake--not for yours, for mine, for nobody's but mine!--you will give me

the greatest joy I can experience on earth, the joy of knowing that I

have been serviceable to you, and that I have paid some little of the

great debt of my affection and gratitude. I can't say what I wish to

say. I can't visit you here where I have lived so long, I can't think of

you here where I have seen so much, and be as calm and comforting as I

ought. My tears will make their way. I cannot keep them back. But

pray, pray, pray, do not turn from your Little Dorrit, now, in your

affliction! Pray, pray, pray, I beg you and implore you with all my

grieving heart, my friend--my dear!--take all I have, and make it a

Blessing to me!'

The star had shone on her face until now, when her face sank upon his

hand and her own.

It had grown darker when he raised her in his encircling arm, and softly

answered her.

'No, darling Little Dorrit. No, my child. I must not hear of such a

sacrifice. Liberty and hope would be so dear, bought at such a price,

that I could never support their weight, never bear the reproach of

possessing them. But with what ardent thankfulness and love I say this,

I may call Heaven to witness!'

'And yet you will not let me be faithful to you in your affliction?'

'Say, dearest Little Dorrit, and yet I will try to be faithful to you.

If, in the bygone days when this was your home and when this was your

dress, I had understood myself (I speak only of myself) better, and

had read the secrets of my own breast more distinctly; if, through my

reserve and self-mistrust, I had discerned a light that I see brightly

now when it has passed far away, and my weak footsteps can never

overtake it; if I had then known, and told you that I loved and honoured

you, not as the poor child I used to call you, but as a woman whose

true hand would raise me high above myself and make me a far happier and

better man; if I had so used the opportunity there is no recalling--as

I wish I had, O I wish I had!--and if something had kept us apart then,

when I was moderately thriving, and when you were poor; I might have met

your noble offer of your fortune, dearest girl, with other words than

these, and still have blushed to touch it. But, as it is, I must never

touch it, never!'

She besought him, more pathetically and earnestly, with her little

supplicatory hand, than she could have done in any words.

'I am disgraced enough, my Little Dorrit. I must not descend so low as

that, and carry you--so dear, so generous, so good--down with me. GOD

bless you, GOD reward you! It is past.' He took her in his arms, as if

she had been his daughter.

'Always so much older, so much rougher, and so much less worthy, even

what I was must be dismissed by both of us, and you must see me only as

I am. I put this parting kiss upon your cheek, my child--who might have

been more near to me, who never could have been more dear--a ruined man

far removed from you, for ever separated from you, whose course is

run while yours is but beginning. I have not the courage to ask to be

forgotten by you in my humiliation; but I ask to be remembered only as I

am.'

The bell began to ring, warning visitors to depart. He took her mantle

from the wall, and tenderly wrapped it round her.

'One other word, my Little Dorrit. A hard one to me, but it is a

necessary one. The time when you and this prison had anything in common

has long gone by. Do you understand?'

'O! you will never say to me,' she cried, weeping bitterly, and holding

up her clasped hands in entreaty, 'that I am not to come back any more!

You will surely not desert me so!'

'I would say it, if I could; but I have not the courage quite to shut

out this dear face, and abandon all hope of its return. But do not come

soon, do not come often! This is now a tainted place, and I well know

the taint of it clings to me. You belong to much brighter and better

scenes. You are not to look back here, my Little Dorrit; you are to look

away to very different and much happier paths. Again, GOD bless you in

them! GOD reward you!'

Maggy, who had fallen into very low spirits, here cried, 'Oh get him

into a hospital; do get him into a hospital, Mother! He'll never look

like hisself again, if he an't got into a hospital. And then the little

woman as was always a spinning at her wheel, she can go to the cupboard

with the Princess, and say, what do you keep the Chicking there for? and

then they can take it out and give it to him, and then all be happy!'

The interruption was seasonable, for the bell had nearly rung itself

out. Again tenderly wrapping her mantle about her, and taking her on his

arm (though, but for her visit, he was almost too weak to walk), Arthur

led Little Dorrit down-stairs. She was the last visitor to pass out at

the Lodge, and the gate jarred heavily and hopelessly upon her.

With the funeral clang that it sounded into Arthur's heart, his sense of

weakness returned. It was a toilsome journey up-stairs to his room, and

he re-entered its dark solitary precincts in unutterable misery.

When it was almost midnight, and the prison had long been quiet, a

cautious creak came up the stairs, and a cautious tap of a key was given

at his door. It was Young John. He glided in, in his stockings, and held

the door closed, while he spoke in a whisper.

'It's against all rules, but I don't mind. I was determined to come

through, and come to you.'

'What is the matter?'

'Nothing's the matter, sir. I was waiting in the court-yard for Miss

Dorrit when she came out. I thought you'd like some one to see that she

was safe.'

'Thank you, thank you! You took her home, John?'

'I saw her to her hotel. The same that Mr Dorrit was at. Miss Dorrit

walked all the way, and talked to me so kind, it quite knocked me over.

Why do you think she walked instead of riding?'

'I don't know, John.'

'To talk about you. She said to me, "John, you was always honourable,

and if you'll promise me that you will take care of him, and never let

him want for help and comfort when I am not there, my mind will be at

rest so far." I promised her. And I'll stand by you,' said John Chivery,

'for ever!'

Clennam, much affected, stretched out his hand to this honest spirit.

'Before I take it,' said John, looking at it, without coming from the

door, 'guess what message Miss Dorrit gave me.'

Clennam shook his head.

'"Tell him,"' repeated John, in a distinct, though quavering voice,

'"that his Little Dorrit sent him her undying love." Now it's delivered.

Have I been honourable, sir?'

'Very, very!'

'Will you tell Miss Dorrit I've been honourable, sir?'

'I will indeed.'

'There's my hand, sir,' said john, 'and I'll stand by you forever!'

After a hearty squeeze, he disappeared with the same cautious creak upon

the stair, crept shoeless over the pavement of the yard, and, locking

the gates behind him, passed out into the front where he had left his

shoes. If the same way had been paved with burning ploughshares, it is

not at all improbable that John would have traversed it with the same

devotion, for the same purpose.

CHAPTER 30. Closing in

The last day of the appointed week touched the bars of the Marshalsea

gate. Black, all night, since the gate had clashed upon Little Dorrit,

its iron stripes were turned by the early-glowing sun into stripes of

gold. Far aslant across the city, over its jumbled roofs, and through

the open tracery of its church towers, struck the long bright rays, bars

of the prison of this lower world.

Throughout the day the old house within the gateway remained untroubled

by any visitors. But, when the sun was low, three men turned in at the

gateway and made for the dilapidated house.

Rigaud was the first, and walked by himself smoking. Mr Baptist was

the second, and jogged close after him, looking at no other object.

Mr Pancks was the third, and carried his hat under his arm for the

liberation of his restive hair; the weather being extremely hot. They

all came together at the door-steps.

'You pair of madmen!' said Rigaud, facing about. 'Don't go yet!'

'We don't mean to,' said Mr Pancks. Giving him a dark glance in

acknowledgment of his answer, Rigaud knocked loudly. He had charged

himself with drink, for the playing out of his game, and was impatient

to begin. He had hardly finished one long resounding knock, when he

turned to the knocker again and began another. That was not yet finished

when Jeremiah Flintwinch opened the door, and they all clanked into the

stone hall. Rigaud, thrusting Mr Flintwinch aside, proceeded straight

up-stairs. His two attendants followed him, Mr Flintwinch followed them,

and they all came trooping into Mrs Clennam's quiet room. It was in its

usual state; except that one of the windows was wide open, and Affery

sat on its old-fashioned window-seat, mending a stocking. The usual

articles were on the little table; the usual deadened fire was in the

grate; the bed had its usual pall upon it; and the mistress of all sat

on her black bier-like sofa, propped up by her black angular bolster

that was like the headsman's block.

Yet there was a nameless air of preparation in the room, as if it were

strung up for an occasion. From what the room derived it--every one of

its small variety of objects being in the fixed spot it had occupied

for years--no one could have said without looking attentively at its

mistress, and that, too, with a previous knowledge of her face. Although

her unchanging black dress was in every plait precisely as of old, and

her unchanging attitude was rigidly preserved, a very slight additional

setting of her features and contraction of her gloomy forehead was so

powerfully marked, that it marked everything about her.

'Who are these?' she said, wonderingly, as the two attendants entered.

'What do these people want here?'

'Who are these, dear madame, is it?' returned Rigaud. 'Faith, they are

friends of your son the prisoner. And what do they want here, is it?

Death, madame, I don't know. You will do well to ask them.'

'You know you told us at the door, not to go yet,' said Pancks.

'And you know you told me at the door, you didn't mean to go,' retorted

Rigaud. 'In a word, madame, permit me to present two spies of the

prisoner's--madmen, but spies. If you wish them to remain here during

our little conversation, say the word. It is nothing to me.'

'Why should I wish them to remain here?' said Mrs Clennam. 'What have I

to do with them?'

'Then, dearest madame,' said Rigaud, throwing himself into an arm-chair

so heavily that the old room trembled, 'you will do well to dismiss

them. It is your affair. They are not my spies, not my rascals.'

'Hark! You Pancks,' said Mrs Clennam, bending her brows upon him

angrily, 'you Casby's clerk! Attend to your employer's business and your

own. Go. And take that other man with you.' 'Thank you, ma'am,' returned

Mr Pancks, 'I am glad to say I see no objection to our both retiring.

We have done all we undertook to do for Mr Clennam. His constant anxiety

has been (and it grew worse upon him when he became a prisoner), that

this agreeable gentleman should be brought back here to the place from

which he slipped away. Here he is--brought back. And I will say,' added

Mr Pancks, 'to his ill-looking face, that in my opinion the world would

be no worse for his slipping out of it altogether.'

'Your opinion is not asked,' answered Mrs Clennam. 'Go.'

'I am sorry not to leave you in better company, ma'am,' said Pancks;

'and sorry, too, that Mr Clennam can't be present. It's my fault, that

is.'

'You mean his own,' she returned.

'No, I mean mine, ma'am,' said Pancks,'for it was my misfortune to lead

him into a ruinous investment.' (Mr Pancks still clung to that word,

and never said speculation.) 'Though I can prove by figures,' added Mr

Pancks, with an anxious countenance, 'that it ought to have been a good

investment. I have gone over it since it failed, every day of my life,

and it comes out--regarded as a question of figures--triumphant. The

present is not a time or place,' Mr Pancks pursued, with a longing

glance into his hat, where he kept his calculations, 'for entering upon

the figures; but the figures are not to be disputed. Mr Clennam ought to

have been at this moment in his carriage and pair, and I ought to have

been worth from three to five thousand pound.'

Mr Pancks put his hair erect with a general aspect of confidence that

could hardly have been surpassed, if he had had the amount in his

pocket. These incontrovertible figures had been the occupation of every

moment of his leisure since he had lost his money, and were destined to

afford him consolation to the end of his days.

'However,' said Mr Pancks, 'enough of that. Altro, old boy, you have

seen the figures, and you know how they come out.' Mr Baptist, who had

not the slightest arithmetical power of compensating himself in this

way, nodded, with a fine display of bright teeth.

At whom Mr Flintwinch had been looking, and to whom he then said:

'Oh! it's you, is it? I thought I remembered your face, but I wasn't

certain till I saw your teeth. Ah! yes, to be sure. It was this

officious refugee,' said Jeremiah to Mrs Clennam, 'who came knocking

at the door on the night when Arthur and Chatterbox were here, and who

asked me a whole Catechism of questions about Mr Blandois.'

'It is true,' Mr Baptist cheerfully admitted. 'And behold him, padrone!

I have found him consequentementally.'

'I shouldn't have objected,' returned Mr Flintwinch, 'to your having

broken your neck consequentementally.'

'And now,' said Mr Pancks, whose eye had often stealthily wandered to

the window-seat and the stocking that was being mended there, 'I've

only one other word to say before I go. If Mr Clennam was here--but

unfortunately, though he has so far got the better of this fine

gentleman as to return him to this place against his will, he is ill

and in prison--ill and in prison, poor fellow--if he was here,' said Mr

Pancks, taking one step aside towards the window-seat, and laying

his right hand upon the stocking; 'he would say, "Affery, tell your

dreams!"'

Mr Pancks held up his right forefinger between his nose and the stocking

with a ghostly air of warning, turned, steamed out and towed Mr Baptist

after him. The house-door was heard to close upon them, their steps

were heard passing over the dull pavement of the echoing court-yard, and

still nobody had added a word. Mrs Clennam and Jeremiah had exchanged a

look; and had then looked, and looked still, at Affery, who sat mending

the stocking with great assiduity.

'Come!' said Mr Flintwinch at length, screwing himself a curve or two in

the direction of the window-seat, and rubbing the palms of his hands on

his coat-tail as if he were preparing them to do something: 'Whatever

has to be said among us had better be begun to be said without more loss

of time.--So, Affery, my woman, take yourself away!'

In a moment Affery had thrown the stocking down, started up, caught

hold of the windowsill with her right hand, lodged herself upon the

window-seat with her right knee, and was flourishing her left hand,

beating expected assailants off.

'No, I won't, Jeremiah--no, I won't--no, I won't! I won't go! I'll stay

here. I'll hear all I don't know, and say all I know. I will, at last,

if I die for it. I will, I will, I will, I will!'

Mr Flintwinch, stiffening with indignation and amazement, moistened the

fingers of one hand at his lips, softly described a circle with them in

the palm of the other hand, and continued with a menacing grin to

screw himself in the direction of his wife; gasping some remark as he

advanced, of which, in his choking anger, only the words, 'Such a dose!'

were audible.

'Not a bit nearer, Jeremiah!' cried Affery, never ceasing to beat the

air. 'Don't come a bit nearer to me, or I'll rouse the neighbourhood!

I'll throw myself out of window. I'll scream Fire and Murder! I'll wake

the dead! Stop where you are, or I'll make shrieks enough to wake the

dead!'

The determined voice of Mrs Clennam echoed 'Stop!' Jeremiah had stopped

already. 'It is closing in, Flintwinch. Let her alone. Affery, do you

turn against me after these many years?'

'I do, if it's turning against you to hear what I don't know, and say

what I know. I have broke out now, and I can't go back. I am determined

to do it. I will do it, I will, I will, I will! If that's turning

against you, yes, I turn against both of you two clever ones. I told

Arthur when he first come home to stand up against you. I told him it

was no reason, because I was afeard of my life of you, that he should

be. All manner of things have been a-going on since then, and I won't

be run up by Jeremiah, nor yet I won't be dazed and scared, nor made a

party to I don't know what, no more. I won't, I won't, I won't! I'll

up for Arthur when he has nothing left, and is ill, and in prison, and

can't up for himself. I will, I will, I will, I will!'

'How do you know, you heap of confusion,' asked Mrs Clennam sternly,

'that in doing what you are doing now, you are even serving Arthur?'

'I don't know nothing rightly about anything,' said Affery; 'and if

ever you said a true word in your life, it's when you call me a heap of

confusion, for you two clever ones have done your most to make me such.

You married me whether I liked it or not, and you've led me, pretty well

ever since, such a life of dreaming and frightening as never was known,

and what do you expect me to be but a heap of confusion? You wanted to

make me such, and I am such; but I won't submit no longer; no, I won't,

I won't, I won't, I won't!' She was still beating the air against all

comers.

After gazing at her in silence, Mrs Clennam turned to Rigaud. 'You

see and hear this foolish creature. Do you object to such a piece of

distraction remaining where she is?'

'I, madame,' he replied, 'do I? That's a question for you.'

'I do not,' she said, gloomily. 'There is little left to choose now.

Flintwinch, it is closing in.'

Mr Flintwinch replied by directing a look of red vengeance at his wife,

and then, as if to pinion himself from falling upon her, screwed his

crossed arms into the breast of his waistcoat, and with his chin very

near one of his elbows stood in a corner, watching Rigaud in the oddest

attitude. Rigaud, for his part, arose from his chair, and seated himself

on the table with his legs dangling. In this easy attitude, he met Mrs

Clennam's set face, with his moustache going up and his nose coming

down.

'Madame, I am a gentleman--'

'Of whom,' she interrupted in her steady tones, 'I have heard

disparagement, in connection with a French jail and an accusation of

murder.'

He kissed his hand to her with his exaggerated gallantry.

'Perfectly. Exactly. Of a lady too! What absurdity! How incredible! I

had the honour of making a great success then; I hope to have the

honour of making a great success now. I kiss your hands. Madame, I am a

gentleman (I was going to observe), who when he says, "I will definitely

finish this or that affair at the present sitting," does definitely

finish it. I announce to you that we are arrived at our last sitting on

our little business. You do me the favour to follow, and to comprehend?'

She kept her eyes fixed upon him with a frown. 'Yes.'

'Further, I am a gentleman to whom mere mercenary trade-bargains are

unknown, but to whom money is always acceptable as the means of pursuing

his pleasures. You do me the favour to follow, and to comprehend?'

'Scarcely necessary to ask, one would say. Yes.'

'Further, I am a gentleman of the softest and sweetest disposition,

but who, if trifled with, becomes enraged. Noble natures under such

circumstances become enraged. I possess a noble nature. When the lion

is awakened--that is to say, when I enrage--the satisfaction of my

animosity is as acceptable to me as money. You always do me the favour

to follow, and to comprehend?'

'Yes,' she answered, somewhat louder than before.

'Do not let me derange you; pray be tranquil. I have said we are now

arrived at our last sitting. Allow me to recall the two sittings we have

held.'

'It is not necessary.'

'Death, madame,' he burst out, 'it's my fancy! Besides, it clears the

way. The first sitting was limited. I had the honour of making your

acquaintance--of presenting my letter; I am a Knight of Industry, at

your service, madame, but my polished manners had won me so much of

success, as a master of languages, among your compatriots who are as

stiff as their own starch is to one another, but are ready to relax to

a foreign gentleman of polished manners--and of observing one or two

little things,' he glanced around the room and smiled, 'about this

honourable house, to know which was necessary to assure me, and

to convince me that I had the distinguished pleasure of making the

acquaintance of the lady I sought. I achieved this. I gave my word

of honour to our dear Flintwinch that I would return. I gracefully

departed.'

Her face neither acquiesced nor demurred. The same when he paused, and

when he spoke, it as yet showed him always the one attentive frown,

and the dark revelation before mentioned of her being nerved for the

occasion.

'I say, gracefully departed, because it was graceful to retire without

alarming a lady. To be morally graceful, not less than physically, is

a part of the character of Rigaud Blandois. It was also politic, as

leaving you with something overhanging you, to expect me again with a

little anxiety on a day not named. But your slave is politic. By Heaven,

madame, politic! Let us return. On the day not named, I have again the

honour to render myself at your house. I intimate that I have something

to sell, which, if not bought, will compromise madame whom I highly

esteem. I explain myself generally. I demand--I think it was a thousand

pounds. Will you correct me?'

Thus forced to speak, she replied with constraint, 'You demanded as much

as a thousand pounds.'

'I demand at present, Two. Such are the evils of delay. But to return

once more. We are not accordant; we differ on that occasion. I am

playful; playfulness is a part of my amiable character. Playfully, I

become as one slain and hidden. For, it may alone be worth half the sum

to madame, to be freed from the suspicions that my droll idea awakens.

Accident and spies intermix themselves against my playfulness, and spoil

the fruit, perhaps--who knows? only you and Flintwinch--when it is just

ripe. Thus, madame, I am here for the last time. Listen! Definitely the

last.'

As he struck his straggling boot-heels against the flap of the table,

meeting her frown with an insolent gaze, he began to change his tone for

a fierce one.

'Bah! Stop an instant! Let us advance by steps. Here is my Hotel-note to

be paid, according to contract. Five minutes hence we may be at daggers'

points. I'll not leave it till then, or you'll cheat me. Pay it! Count

me the money!'

'Take it from his hand and pay it, Flintwinch,' said Mrs Clennam.

He spirted it into Mr Flintwinch's face when the old man advanced to

take it, and held forth his hand, repeating noisily, 'Pay it! Count it

out! Good money!' Jeremiah picked the bill up, looked at the total with

a bloodshot eye, took a small canvas bag from his pocket, and told the

amount into his hand.

Rigaud chinked the money, weighed it in his hand, threw it up a little

way and caught it, chinked it again.

'The sound of it, to the bold Rigaud Blandois, is like the taste of

fresh meat to the tiger. Say, then, madame. How much?'

He turned upon her suddenly with a menacing gesture of the weighted hand

that clenched the money, as if he were going to strike her with it.

'I tell you again, as I told you before, that we are not rich here, as

you suppose us to be, and that your demand is excessive. I have not the

present means of complying with such a demand, if I had ever so great an

inclination.'

'If!' cried Rigaud. 'Hear this lady with her If! Will you say that you

have not the inclination?'

'I will say what presents itself to me, and not what presents itself to

you.'

'Say it then. As to the inclination. Quick! Come to the inclination, and

I know what to do.'

She was no quicker, and no slower, in her reply. 'It would seem that

you have obtained possession of a paper--or of papers--which I assuredly

have the inclination to recover.'

Rigaud, with a loud laugh, drummed his heels against the table, and

chinked his money. 'I think so! I believe you there!'

'The paper might be worth, to me, a sum of money. I cannot say how much,

or how little.'

'What the Devil!' he asked savagely.'Not after a week's grace to

consider?'

'No! I will not out of my scanty means--for I tell you again, we are

poor here, and not rich--I will not offer any price for a power that I

do not know the worst and the fullest extent of. This is the third time

of your hinting and threatening. You must speak explicitly, or you may

go where you will, and do what you will. It is better to be torn to

pieces at a spring, than to be a mouse at the caprice of such a cat.'

He looked at her so hard with those eyes too near together that the

sinister sight of each, crossing that of the other, seemed to make the

bridge of his hooked nose crooked. After a long survey, he said, with

the further setting off of his internal smile:

'You are a bold woman!'

'I am a resolved woman.'

'You always were. What? She always was; is it not so, my little

Flintwinch?'

'Flintwinch, say nothing to him. It is for him to say, here and now,

all he can; or to go hence, and do all he can. You know this to be our

determination. Leave him to his action on it.'

She did not shrink under his evil leer, or avoid it. He turned it upon

her again, but she remained steady at the point to which she had fixed

herself. He got off the table, placed a chair near the sofa, sat down in

it, and leaned an arm upon the sofa close to her own, which he touched

with his hand. Her face was ever frowning, attentive, and settled.

'It is your pleasure then, madame, that I shall relate a morsel of

family history in this little family society,' said Rigaud, with a

warning play of his lithe fingers on her arm. 'I am something of a

doctor. Let me touch your pulse.'

She suffered him to take her wrist in his hand. Holding it, he proceeded

to say:

'A history of a strange marriage, and a strange mother, and a revenge,

and a suppression.--Aye, aye, aye? this pulse is beating curiously!

It appears to me that it doubles while I touch it. Are these the usual

changes of your malady, madame?'

There was a struggle in her maimed arm as she twisted it away, but there

was none in her face. On his face there was his own smile.

'I have lived an adventurous life. I am an adventurous character. I have

known many adventurers; interesting spirits--amiable society! To one

of them I owe my knowledge and my proofs--I repeat it, estimable

lady--proofs--of the ravishing little family history I go to commence.

You will be charmed with it. But, bah! I forget. One should name a

history. Shall I name it the history of a house? But, bah, again. There

are so many houses. Shall I name it the history of this house?'

Leaning over the sofa, poised on two legs of his chair and his left

elbow; that hand often tapping her arm to beat his words home; his

legs crossed; his right hand sometimes arranging his hair, sometimes

smoothing his moustache, sometimes striking his nose, always threatening

her whatever it did; coarse, insolent, rapacious, cruel, and powerful,

he pursued his narrative at his ease.

'In fine, then, I name it the history of this house. I commence it.

There live here, let us suppose, an uncle and nephew. The uncle, a

rigid old gentleman of strong force of character; the nephew, habitually

timid, repressed, and under constraint.'

Mistress Affery, fixedly attentive in the window-seat, biting the

rolled up end of her apron, and trembling from head to foot, here cried

out,'Jeremiah, keep off from me! I've heerd, in my dreams, of Arthur's

father and his uncle. He's a talking of them. It was before my time

here; but I've heerd in my dreams that Arthur's father was a poor,

irresolute, frightened chap, who had had everything but his orphan life

scared out of him when he was young, and that he had no voice in the

choice of his wife even, but his uncle chose her. There she sits! I

heerd it in my dreams, and you said it to her own self.'

As Mr Flintwinch shook his fist at her, and as Mrs Clennam gazed upon

her, Rigaud kissed his hand to her. 'Perfectly right, dear Madame

Flintwinch. You have a genius for dreaming.'

'I don't want none of your praises,' returned Affery. 'I don't want to

have nothing at all to say to you. But Jeremiah said they was dreams,

and I'll tell 'em as such!' Here she put her apron in her mouth again,

as if she were stopping somebody else's mouth--perhaps jeremiah's, which

was chattering with threats as if he were grimly cold.

'Our beloved Madame Flintwinch,' said Rigaud, 'developing all of a

sudden a fine susceptibility and spirituality, is right to a marvel.

Yes. So runs the history. Monsieur, the uncle, commands the nephew to

marry. Monsieur says to him in effect, "My nephew, I introduce to you a

lady of strong force of character, like myself--a resolved lady, a stern

lady, a lady who has a will that can break the weak to powder: a lady

without pity, without love, implacable, revengeful, cold as the stone,

but raging as the fire."

Ah! what fortitude! Ah, what superiority of intellectual strength!

Truly, a proud and noble character that I describe in the supposed words

of Monsieur, the uncle. Ha, ha, ha! Death of my soul, I love the sweet

lady!'

Mrs Clennam's face had changed. There was a remarkable darkness of

colour on it, and the brow was more contracted. 'Madame, madame,' said

Rigaud, tapping her on the arm, as if his cruel hand were sounding a

musical instrument, 'I perceive I interest you. I perceive I awaken your

sympathy. Let us go on.'

The drooping nose and the ascending moustache had, however, to be hidden

for a moment with the white hand, before he could go on; he enjoyed the

effect he made so much.

'The nephew, being, as the lucid Madame Flintwinch has remarked, a poor

devil who has had everything but his orphan life frightened and famished

out of him--the nephew abases his head, and makes response: "My uncle,

it is to you to command. Do as you will!" Monsieur, the uncle, does as

he will. It is what he always does. The auspicious nuptials take place;

the newly married come home to this charming mansion; the lady is

received, let us suppose, by Flintwinch. Hey, old intriguer?'

Jeremiah, with his eyes upon his mistress, made no reply. Rigaud looked

from one to the other, struck his ugly nose, and made a clucking with

his tongue.

'Soon the lady makes a singular and exciting discovery. Thereupon,

full of anger, full of jealousy, full of vengeance, she forms--see you,

madame!--a scheme of retribution, the weight of which she ingeniously

forces her crushed husband to bear himself, as well as execute upon her

enemy. What superior intelligence!'

'Keep off, Jeremiah!' cried the palpitating Affery, taking her apron

from her mouth again. 'But it was one of my dreams, that you told her,

when you quarrelled with her one winter evening at dusk--there she sits

and you looking at her--that she oughtn't to have let Arthur when he

come home, suspect his father only; that she had always had the strength

and the power; and that she ought to have stood up more to Arthur, for

his father. It was in the same dream where you said to her that she was

not--not something, but I don't know what, for she burst out tremendous

and stopped you. You know the dream as well as I do. When you come

down-stairs into the kitchen with the candle in your hand, and hitched

my apron off my head. When you told me I had been dreaming. When you

wouldn't believe the noises.' After this explosion Affery put her apron

into her mouth again; always keeping her hand on the window-sill and her

knee on the window-seat, ready to cry out or jump out if her lord and

master approached.

Rigaud had not lost a word of this.

'Haha!' he cried, lifting his eyebrows, folding his arms, and leaning

back in his chair. 'Assuredly, Madame Flintwinch is an oracle! How shall

we interpret the oracle, you and I and the old intriguer? He said that

you were not--? And you burst out and stopped him! What was it you were

not? What is it you are not? Say then, madame!'

Under this ferocious banter, she sat breathing harder, and her mouth was

disturbed. Her lips quivered and opened, in spite of her utmost efforts

to keep them still.

'Come then, madame! Speak, then! Our old intriguer said that you were

not--and you stopped him. He was going to say that you were not--what?

I know already, but I want a little confidence from you. How, then? You

are not what?'

She tried again to repress herself, but broke out vehemently, 'Not

Arthur's mother!'

'Good,' said Rigaud. 'You are amenable.'

With the set expression of her face all torn away by the explosion

of her passion, and with a bursting, from every rent feature, of the

smouldering fire so long pent up, she cried out: 'I will tell it myself!

I will not hear it from your lips, and with the taint of your wickedness

upon it. Since it must be seen, I will have it seen by the light I stood

in. Not another word. Hear me!'

'Unless you are a more obstinate and more persisting woman than even

I know you to be,' Mr Flintwinch interposed, 'you had better leave Mr

Rigaud, Mr Blandois, Mr Beelzebub, to tell it in his own way. What does

it signify when he knows all about it?'

'He does not know all about it.'

'He knows all he cares about it,' Mr Flintwinch testily urged. 'He does

not know me.'

'What do you suppose he cares for you, you conceited woman?' said Mr

Flintwinch.

'I tell you, Flintwinch, I will speak. I tell you when it has come

to this, I will tell it with my own lips, and will express myself

throughout it. What! Have I suffered nothing in this room, no

deprivation, no imprisonment, that I should condescend at last to

contemplate myself in such a glass as that. Can you see him? Can you

hear him? If your wife were a hundred times the ingrate that she is, and

if I were a thousand times more hopeless than I am of inducing her to be

silent if this man is silenced, I would tell it myself, before I would

bear the torment of the hearing it from him.'

Rigaud pushed his chair a little back; pushed his legs out straight

before him; and sat with his arms folded over against her.

'You do not know what it is,' she went on addressing him, 'to be brought

up strictly and straitly. I was so brought up. Mine was no light youth

of sinful gaiety and pleasure. Mine were days of wholesome repression,

punishment, and fear. The corruption of our hearts, the evil of our

ways, the curse that is upon us, the terrors that surround us--these

were the themes of my childhood. They formed my character, and filled me

with an abhorrence of evil-doers. When old Mr Gilbert Clennam proposed

his orphan nephew to my father for my husband, my father impressed upon

me that his bringing-up had been, like mine, one of severe restraint.

He told me, that besides the discipline his spirit had undergone, he

had lived in a starved house, where rioting and gaiety were unknown, and

where every day was a day of toil and trial like the last. He told me

that he had been a man in years long before his uncle had acknowledged

him as one; and that from his school-days to that hour, his uncle's roof

has been a sanctuary to him from the contagion of the irreligious

and dissolute. When, within a twelvemonth of our marriage, I found

my husband, at that time when my father spoke of him, to have sinned

against the Lord and outraged me by holding a guilty creature in my

place, was I to doubt that it had been appointed to me to make the

discovery, and that it was appointed to me to lay the hand of punishment

upon that creature of perdition? Was I to dismiss in a moment--not my

own wrongs--what was I! but all the rejection of sin, and all the war

against it, in which I had been bred?' She laid her wrathful hand upon

the watch on the table.

'No! "Do not forget." The initials of those words are within here now,

and were within here then. I was appointed to find the old letter that

referred to them, and that told me what they meant, and whose work they

were, and why they were worked, lying with this watch in his secret

drawer. But for that appointment there would have been no discovery.

"Do not forget." It spoke to me like a voice from an angry cloud. Do

not forget the deadly sin, do not forget the appointed discovery, do not

forget the appointed suffering. I did not forget. Was it my own wrong I

remembered? Mine! I was but a servant and a minister. What power could I

have over them, but that they were bound in the bonds of their sin, and

delivered to me!'

More than forty years had passed over the grey head of this determined

woman, since the time she recalled. More than forty years of strife

and struggle with the whisper that, by whatever name she called her

vindictive pride and rage, nothing through all eternity could change

their nature. Yet, gone those more than forty years, and come this

Nemesis now looking her in the face, she still abided by her old

impiety--still reversed the order of Creation, and breathed her own

breath into a clay image of her Creator. Verily, verily, travellers have

seen many monstrous idols in many countries; but no human eyes have ever

seen more daring, gross, and shocking images of the Divine nature than

we creatures of the dust make in our own likenesses, of our own bad

passions.

'When I forced him to give her up to me, by her name and place of

abode,' she went on in her torrent of indignation and defence; 'when I

accused her, and she fell hiding her face at my feet, was it my injury

that I asserted, were they my reproaches that I poured upon her? Those

who were appointed of old to go to wicked kings and accuse them--were

they not ministers and servants? And had not I, unworthy and far-removed

from them, sin to denounce? When she pleaded to me her youth, and his

wretched and hard life (that was her phrase for the virtuous training he

had belied), and the desecrated ceremony of marriage there had

secretly been between them, and the terrors of want and shame that had

overwhelmed them both when I was first appointed to be the instrument of

their punishment, and the love (for she said the word to me, down at my

feet) in which she had abandoned him and left him to me, was it my enemy

that became my footstool, were they the words of my wrath that made her

shrink and quiver! Not unto me the strength be ascribed; not unto me the

wringing of the expiation!'

Many years had come and gone since she had had the free use even of

her fingers; but it was noticeable that she had already more than once

struck her clenched hand vigorously upon the table, and that when she

said these words she raised her whole arm in the air, as though it had

been a common action with her.

'And what was the repentance that was extorted from the hardness of her

heart and the blackness of her depravity? I, vindictive and implacable?

It may be so, to such as you who know no righteousness, and no

appointment except Satan's. Laugh; but I will be known as I know

myself, and as Flintwinch knows me, though it is only to you and this

half-witted woman.'

'Add, to yourself, madame,' said Rigaud. 'I have my little suspicions

that madame is rather solicitous to be justified to herself.'

'It is false. It is not so. I have no need to be,' she said, with great

energy and anger.

'Truly?' retorted Rigaud. 'Hah!'

'I ask, what was the penitence, in works, that was demanded of her?

"You have a child; I have none. You love that child. Give him to me. He

shall believe himself to be my son, and he shall be believed by every

one to be my son. To save you from exposure, his father shall swear

never to see or communicate with you more; equally to save him from

being stripped by his uncle, and to save your child from being a beggar,

you shall swear never to see or communicate with either of them more.

That done, and your present means, derived from my husband, renounced,

I charge myself with your support. You may, with your place of retreat

unknown, then leave, if you please, uncontradicted by me, the lie that

when you passed out of all knowledge but mine, you merited a good name."

That was all. She had to sacrifice her sinful and shameful affections;

no more. She was then free to bear her load of guilt in secret, and to

break her heart in secret; and through such present misery (light enough

for her, I think!) to purchase her redemption from endless misery, if

she could. If, in this, I punished her here, did I not open to her a way

hereafter? If she knew herself to be surrounded by insatiable vengeance

and unquenchable fires, were they mine? If I threatened her, then and

afterwards, with the terrors that encompassed her, did I hold them in my

right hand?'

She turned the watch upon the table, and opened it, and, with an

unsoftening face, looked at the worked letters within.

'They did not forget. It is appointed against such offences that the

offenders shall not be able to forget. If the presence of Arthur was a

daily reproach to his father, and if the absence of Arthur was a daily

agony to his mother, that was the just dispensation of Jehovah. As well

might it be charged upon me, that the stings of an awakened conscience

drove her mad, and that it was the will of the Disposer of all things

that she should live so, many years. I devoted myself to reclaim the

otherwise predestined and lost boy; to give him the reputation of an

honest origin; to bring him up in fear and trembling, and in a life of

practical contrition for the sins that were heavy on his head before his

entrance into this condemned world. Was that a cruelty? Was I, too,

not visited with consequences of the original offence in which I had no

complicity? Arthur's father and I lived no further apart, with half the

globe between us, than when we were together in this house. He died,

and sent this watch back to me, with its Do not forget. I do NOT forget,

though I do not read it as he did. I read in it, that I was appointed

to do these things. I have so read these three letters since I have

had them lying on this table, and I did so read them, with equal

distinctness, when they were thousands of miles away.'

As she took the watch-case in her hand, with that new freedom in the use

of her hand of which she showed no consciousness whatever, bending her

eyes upon it as if she were defying it to move her, Rigaud cried with a

loud and contemptuous snapping of his fingers. 'Come, madame! Time runs

out. Come, lady of piety, it must be! You can tell nothing I don't know.

Come to the money stolen, or I will! Death of my soul, I have had enough

of your other jargon. Come straight to the stolen money!'

'Wretch that you are,' she answered, and now her hands clasped her head:

'through what fatal error of Flintwinch's, through what incompleteness

on his part, who was the only other person helping in these things and

trusted with them, through whose and what bringing together of the ashes

of a burnt paper, you have become possessed of that codicil, I know no

more than how you acquired the rest of your power here--'

'And yet,' interrupted Rigaud, 'it is my odd fortune to have by me, in a

convenient place that I know of, that same short little addition to the

will of Monsieur Gilbert Clennam, written by a lady and witnessed by the

same lady and our old intriguer! Ah, bah, old intriguer, crooked little

puppet! Madame, let us go on. Time presses. You or I to finish?'

'I!' she answered, with increased determination, if it were possible.

'I, because I will not endure to be shown myself, and have myself

shown to any one, with your horrible distortion upon me. You, with your

practices of infamous foreign prisons and galleys would make it the

money that impelled me. It was not the money.'

'Bah, bah, bah! I repudiate, for the moment, my politeness, and say,

Lies, lies, lies. You know you suppressed the deed and kept the money.'

'Not for the money's sake, wretch!' She made a struggle as if she were

starting up; even as if, in her vehemence, she had almost risen on her

disabled feet. 'If Gilbert Clennam, reduced to imbecility, at the point

of death, and labouring under the delusion of some imaginary relenting

towards a girl of whom he had heard that his nephew had once had a fancy

for her which he had crushed out of him, and that she afterwards drooped

away into melancholy and withdrawal from all who knew her--if, in that

state of weakness, he dictated to me, whose life she had darkened with

her sin, and who had been appointed to know her wickedness from her

own hand and her own lips, a bequest meant as a recompense to her

for supposed unmerited suffering; was there no difference between my

spurning that injustice, and coveting mere money--a thing which you, and

your comrades in the prisons, may steal from anyone?'

'Time presses, madame. Take care!'

'If this house was blazing from the roof to the ground,' she returned,

'I would stay in it to justify myself against my righteous motives being

classed with those of stabbers and thieves.'

Rigaud snapped his fingers tauntingly in her face. 'One thousand guineas

to the little beauty you slowly hunted to death. One thousand guineas

to the youngest daughter her patron might have at fifty, or (if he

had none) brother's youngest daughter, on her coming of age, "as the

remembrance his disinterestedness may like best, of his protection of

a friendless young orphan girl." Two thousand guineas. What! You will

never come to the money?'

'That patron,' she was vehemently proceeding, when he checked her.

'Names! Call him Mr Frederick Dorrit. No more evasions.'

'That Frederick Dorrit was the beginning of it all. If he had not been

a player of music, and had not kept, in those days of his youth and

prosperity, an idle house where singers, and players, and such-like

children of Evil turned their backs on the Light and their faces to the

Darkness, she might have remained in her lowly station, and might not

have been raised out of it to be cast down. But, no. Satan entered into

that Frederick Dorrit, and counselled him that he was a man of innocent

and laudable tastes who did kind actions, and that here was a poor girl

with a voice for singing music with. Then he is to have her taught. Then

Arthur's father, who has all along been secretly pining in the ways of

virtuous ruggedness for those accursed snares which are called the Arts,

becomes acquainted with her. And so, a graceless orphan, training to be

a singing girl, carries it, by that Frederick Dorrit's agency, against

me, and I am humbled and deceived!--Not I, that is to say,' she added

quickly, as colour flushed into her face; 'a greater than I. What am I?'

Jeremiah Flintwinch, who had been gradually screwing himself towards

her, and who was now very near her elbow without her knowing it, made a

specially wry face of objection when she said these words, and moreover

twitched his gaiters, as if such pretensions were equivalent to little

barbs in his legs.

'Lastly,' she continued, 'for I am at the end of these things, and I

will say no more of them, and you shall say no more of them, and all

that remains will be to determine whether the knowledge of them can

be kept among us who are here present; lastly, when I suppressed that

paper, with the knowledge of Arthur's father--'

'But not with his consent, you know,' said Mr Flintwinch.

'Who said with his consent?' She started to find Jeremiah so near her,

and drew back her head, looking at him with some rising distrust. 'You

were often enough between us when he would have had me produce it and

I would not, to have contradicted me if I had said, with his consent. I

say, when I suppressed that paper, I made no effort to destroy it, but

kept it by me, here in this house, many years. The rest of the Gilbert

property being left to Arthur's father, I could at any time, without

unsettling more than the two sums, have made a pretence of finding

it. But, besides that I must have supported such pretence by a direct

falsehood (a great responsibility), I have seen no new reason, in

all the time I have been tried here, to bring it to light. It was a

rewarding of sin; the wrong result of a delusion. I did what I was

appointed to do, and I have undergone, within these four walls, what

I was appointed to undergo. When the paper was at last destroyed--as

I thought--in my presence, she had long been dead, and her patron,

Frederick Dorrit, had long been deservedly ruined and imbecile. He had

no daughter. I had found the niece before then; and what I did for her,

was better for her far than the money of which she would have had no

good.' She added, after a moment, as though she addressed the watch:

'She herself was innocent, and I might not have forgotten to relinquish

it to her at my death:' and sat looking at it.

'Shall I recall something to you, worthy madame?' said Rigaud. 'The

little paper was in this house on the night when our friend the

prisoner--jail-comrade of my soul--came home from foreign countries.

Shall I recall yet something more to you? The little singing-bird

that never was fledged, was long kept in a cage by a guardian of your

appointing, well enough known to our old intriguer here. Shall we coax

our old intriguer to tell us when he saw him last?'

'I'll tell you!' cried Affery, unstopping her mouth. 'I dreamed it,

first of all my dreams. Jeremiah, if you come a-nigh me now, I'll scream

to be heard at St Paul's! The person as this man has spoken of, was

jeremiah's own twin brother; and he was here in the dead of the night,

on the night when Arthur come home, and Jeremiah with his own hands give

him this paper, along with I don't know what more, and he took it away

in an iron box--Help! Murder! Save me from Jere-mi-ah!'

Mr Flintwinch had made a run at her, but Rigaud had caught him in his

arms midway. After a moment's wrestle with him, Flintwinch gave up, and

put his hands in his pockets.

'What!' cried Rigaud, rallying him as he poked and jerked him back with

his elbows, 'assault a lady with such a genius for dreaming! Ha, ha, ha!

Why, she'll be a fortune to you as an exhibition. All that she dreams

comes true. Ha, ha, ha! You're so like him, Little Flintwinch. So like

him, as I knew him (when I first spoke English for him to the host) in

the Cabaret of the Three Billiard Tables, in the little street of the

high roofs, by the wharf at Antwerp! Ah, but he was a brave boy to

drink. Ah, but he was a brave boy to smoke! Ah, but he lived in a sweet

bachelor-apartment--furnished, on the fifth floor, above the wood and

charcoal merchant's, and the dress-maker's, and the chair-maker's, and

the maker of tubs--where I knew him too, and wherewith his cognac and

tobacco, he had twelve sleeps a day and one fit, until he had a fit too

much, and ascended to the skies. Ha, ha, ha! What does it matter how I

took possession of the papers in his iron box? Perhaps he confided it

to my hands for you, perhaps it was locked and my curiosity was piqued,

perhaps I suppressed it. Ha, ha, ha! What does it matter, so that I

have it safe? We are not particular here; hey, Flintwinch? We are not

particular here; is it not so, madame?'

Retiring before him with vicious counter-jerks of his own elbows, Mr

Flintwinch had got back into his corner, where he now stood with his

hands in his pockets, taking breath, and returning Mrs Clennam's stare.

'Ha, ha, ha! But what's this?' cried Rigaud. 'It appears as if you

don't know, one the other. Permit me, Madame Clennam who suppresses, to

present Monsieur Flintwinch who intrigues.'

Mr Flintwinch, unpocketing one of his hands to scrape his jaw, advanced

a step or so in that attitude, still returning Mrs Clennam's look, and

thus addressed her:

'Now, I know what you mean by opening your eyes so wide at me, but you

needn't take the trouble, because I don't care for it. I've been telling

you for how many years that you're one of the most opinionated and

obstinate of women. That's what YOU are. You call yourself humble and

sinful, but you are the most Bumptious of your sex. That's what YOU are.

I have told you, over and over again when we have had a tiff, that you

wanted to make everything go down before you, but I wouldn't go down

before you--that you wanted to swallow up everybody alive, but I

wouldn't be swallowed up alive. Why didn't you destroy the paper when

you first laid hands upon it?

I advised you to; but no, it's not your way to take advice. You must

keep it forsooth. Perhaps you may carry it out at some other time,

forsooth. As if I didn't know better than that! I think I see your pride

carrying it out, with a chance of being suspected of having kept it by

you. But that's the way you cheat yourself. Just as you cheat yourself

into making out that you didn't do all this business because you were a

rigorous woman, all slight, and spite, and power, and unforgiveness, but

because you were a servant and a minister, and were appointed to do it.

Who are you, that you should be appointed to do it? That may be your

religion, but it's my gammon. And to tell you all the truth while I

am about it,' said Mr Flintwinch, crossing his arms, and becoming the

express image of irascible doggedness, 'I have been rasped--rasped these

forty years--by your taking such high ground even with me, who knows

better; the effect of it being coolly to put me on low ground. I admire

you very much; you are a woman of strong head and great talent; but

the strongest head, and the greatest talent, can't rasp a man for forty

years without making him sore. So I don't care for your present eyes.

Now, I am coming to the paper, and mark what I say. You put it away

somewhere, and you kept your own counsel where. You're an active woman

at that time, and if you want to get that paper, you can get it. But,

mark. There comes a time when you are struck into what you are now, and

then if you want to get that paper, you can't get it. So it lies, long

years, in its hiding-place. At last, when we are expecting Arthur home

every day, and when any day may bring him home, and it's impossible to

say what rummaging he may make about the house, I recommend you five

thousand times, if you can't get at it, to let me get at it, that it may

be put in the fire. But no--no one but you knows where it is, and that's

power; and, call yourself whatever humble names you will, I call you a

female Lucifer in appetite for power! On a Sunday night, Arthur comes

home. He has not been in this room ten minutes, when he speaks of his

father's watch. You know very well that the Do Not Forget, at the time

when his father sent that watch to you, could only mean, the rest of the

story being then all dead and over, Do Not Forget the suppression. Make

restitution! Arthur's ways have frightened you a bit, and the paper

shall be burnt after all. So, before that jumping jade and Jezebel,' Mr

Flintwinch grinned at his wife, 'has got you into bed, you at last tell

me where you have put the paper, among the old ledgers in the cellars,

where Arthur himself went prowling the very next morning. But it's not

to be burnt on a Sunday night. No; you are strict, you are; we must wait

over twelve o'clock, and get into Monday. Now, all this is a swallowing

of me up alive that rasps me; so, feeling a little out of temper, and

not being as strict as yourself, I take a look at the document before

twelve o'clock to refresh my memory as to its appearance--fold up one of

the many yellow old papers in the cellars like it--and afterwards, when

we have got into Monday morning, and I have, by the light of your

lamp, to walk from you, lying on that bed, to this grate, make a little

exchange like the conjuror, and burn accordingly. My brother

Ephraim, the lunatic-keeper (I wish he had had himself to keep in a

strait-waistcoat), had had many jobs since the close of the long job he

got from you, but had not done well. His wife died (not that that

was much; mine might have died instead, and welcome), he speculated

unsuccessfully in lunatics, he got into difficulty about over-roasting

a patient to bring him to reason, and he got into debt. He was going out

of the way, on what he had been able to scrape up, and a trifle from me.

He was here that early Monday morning, waiting for the tide; in short,

he was going to Antwerp, where (I am afraid you'll be shocked at

my saying, And be damned to him!) he made the acquaintance of this

gentleman. He had come a long way, and, I thought then, was only sleepy;

but, I suppose now, was drunk. When Arthur's mother had been under

the care of him and his wife, she had been always writing, incessantly

writing,--mostly letters of confession to you, and Prayers for

forgiveness. My brother had handed, from time to time, lots of these

sheets to me. I thought I might as well keep them to myself as have them

swallowed up alive too; so I kept them in a box, looking over them when

I felt in the humour. Convinced that it was advisable to get the paper

out of the place, with Arthur coming about it, I put it into this same

box, and I locked the whole up with two locks, and I trusted it to my

brother to take away and keep, till I should write about it. I did write

about it, and never got an answer. I didn't know what to make of it,

till this gentleman favoured us with his first visit. Of course, I began

to suspect how it was, then; and I don't want his word for it now to

understand how he gets his knowledge from my papers, and your paper, and

my brother's cognac and tobacco talk (I wish he'd had to gag himself).

Now, I have only one thing more to say, you hammer-headed woman, and

that is, that I haven't altogether made up my mind whether I might, or

might not, have ever given you any trouble about the codicil. I think

not; and that I should have been quite satisfied with knowing I had got

the better of you, and that I held the power over you. In the present

state of circumstances, I have no more explanation to give you till

this time to-morrow night. So you may as well,' said Mr Flintwinch,

terminating his oration with a screw, 'keep your eyes open at somebody

else, for it's no use keeping 'em open at me.'

She slowly withdrew them when he had ceased, and dropped her forehead

on her hand. Her other hand pressed hard upon the table, and again the

curious stir was observable in her, as if she were going to rise.

'This box can never bring, elsewhere, the price it will bring here.

This knowledge can never be of the same profit to you, sold to any other

person, as sold to me. But I have not the present means of raising the

sum you have demanded. I have not prospered. What will you take now, and

what at another time, and how am I to be assured of your silence?'

'My angel,' said Rigaud, 'I have said what I will take, and time

presses. Before coming here, I placed copies of the most important of

these papers in another hand. Put off the time till the Marshalsea

gate shall be shut for the night, and it will be too late to treat. The

prisoner will have read them.'

She put her two hands to her head again, uttered a loud exclamation, and

started to her feet. She staggered for a moment, as if she would have

fallen; then stood firm.

'Say what you mean. Say what you mean, man!'

Before her ghostly figure, so long unused to its erect attitude, and so

stiffened in it, Rigaud fell back and dropped his voice. It was, to all

the three, almost as if a dead woman had risen.

'Miss Dorrit,' answered Rigaud, 'the little niece of Monsieur Frederick,

whom I have known across the water, is attached to the prisoner. Miss

Dorrit, little niece of Monsieur Frederick, watches at this moment over

the prisoner, who is ill. For her I with my own hands left a packet

at the prison, on my way here, with a letter of instructions, "FOR HIS

SAKE"--she will do anything for his sake--to keep it without breaking

the seal, in case of its being reclaimed before the hour of shutting up

to-night--if it should not be reclaimed before the ringing of the prison

bell, to give it to him; and it encloses a second copy for herself,

which he must give to her. What! I don't trust myself among you, now we

have got so far, without giving my secret a second life. And as to its

not bringing me, elsewhere, the price it will bring here, say then,

madame, have you limited and settled the price the little niece will

give--for his sake--to hush it up? Once more I say, time presses. The

packet not reclaimed before the ringing of the bell to-night, you cannot

buy. I sell, then, to the little girl!'

Once more the stir and struggle in her, and she ran to a closet, tore

the door open, took down a hood or shawl, and wrapped it over her head.

Affery, who had watched her in terror, darted to her in the middle of

the room, caught hold of her dress, and went on her knees to her.

'Don't, don't, don't! What are you doing? Where are you going? You're a

fearful woman, but I don't bear you no ill-will. I can do poor Arthur

no good now, that I see; and you needn't be afraid of me. I'll keep your

secret. Don't go out, you'll fall dead in the street. Only promise me,

that, if it's the poor thing that's kept here secretly, you'll let me

take charge of her and be her nurse. Only promise me that, and never be

afraid of me.'

Mrs Clennam stood still for an instant, at the height of her rapid

haste, saying in stern amazement:

'Kept here? She has been dead a score of years or more. Ask

Flintwinch--ask HIM. They can both tell you that she died when Arthur

went abroad.'

'So much the worse,' said Affery, with a shiver, 'for she haunts the

house, then. Who else rustles about it, making signals by dropping

dust so softly? Who else comes and goes, and marks the walls with

long crooked touches when we are all a-bed? Who else holds the door

sometimes? But don't go out--don't go out! Mistress, you'll die in the

street!'

Her mistress only disengaged her dress from the beseeching hands, said

to Rigaud, 'Wait here till I come back!' and ran out of the room. They

saw her, from the window, run wildly through the court-yard and out at

the gateway.

For a few moments they stood motionless. Affery was the first to move,

and she, wringing her hands, pursued her mistress. Next, Jeremiah

Flintwinch, slowly backing to the door, with one hand in a pocket, and

the other rubbing his chin, twisted himself out in his reticent way,

speechlessly. Rigaud, left alone, composed himself upon the window-seat

of the open window, in the old Marseilles-jail attitude. He laid his

cigarettes and fire-box ready to his hand, and fell to smoking.

'Whoof! Almost as dull as the infernal old jail. Warmer, but almost as

dismal. Wait till she comes back? Yes, certainly; but where is she gone,

and how long will she be gone? No matter! Rigaud Lagnier Blandois, my

amiable subject, you will get your money. You will enrich yourself. You

have lived a gentleman; you will die a gentleman. You triumph, my little

boy; but it is your character to triumph. Whoof!' In the hour of his

triumph, his moustache went up and his nose came down, as he ogled a

great beam over his head with particular satisfaction.

CHAPTER 31. Closed

The sun had set, and the streets were dim in the dusty twilight, when

the figure so long unused to them hurried on its way. In the immediate

neighbourhood of the old house it attracted little attention, for there

were only a few straggling people to notice it; but, ascending from the

river by the crooked ways that led to London Bridge, and passing into

the great main road, it became surrounded by astonishment.

Resolute and wild of look, rapid of foot and yet weak and uncertain,

conspicuously dressed in its black garments and with its hurried

head-covering, gaunt and of an unearthly paleness, it pressed forward,

taking no more heed of the throng than a sleep-walker. More remarkable

by being so removed from the crowd it was among than if it had been

lifted on a pedestal to be seen, the figure attracted all eyes.

Saunterers pricked up their attention to observe it; busy people,

crossing it, slackened their pace and turned their heads; companions

pausing and standing aside, whispered one another to look at this

spectral woman who was coming by; and the sweep of the figure as it

passed seemed to create a vortex, drawing the most idle and most curious

after it.

Made giddy by the turbulent irruption of this multitude of staring faces

into her cell of years, by the confusing sensation of being in the air,

and the yet more confusing sensation of being afoot, by the unexpected

changes in half-remembered objects, and the want of likeness between the

controllable pictures her imagination had often drawn of the life from

which she was secluded and the overwhelming rush of the reality, she

held her way as if she were environed by distracting thoughts, rather

than by external humanity and observation. But, having crossed the

bridge and gone some distance straight onward, she remembered that she

must ask for a direction; and it was only then, when she stopped and

turned to look about her for a promising place of inquiry, that she

found herself surrounded by an eager glare of faces.

'Why are you encircling me?' she asked, trembling.

None of those who were nearest answered; but from the outer ring there

arose a shrill cry of ''Cause you're mad!'

'I am sure as sane as any one here. I want to find the Marshalsea

prison.'

The shrill outer circle again retorted, 'Then that 'ud show you was mad

if nothing else did, 'cause it's right opposite!'

A short, mild, quiet-looking young man made his way through to her, as

a whooping ensued on this reply, and said: 'Was it the Marshalsea you

wanted? I'm going on duty there. Come across with me.'

She laid her hand upon his arm, and he took her over the way; the crowd,

rather injured by the near prospect of losing her, pressing before and

behind and on either side, and recommending an adjournment to Bedlam.

After a momentary whirl in the outer court-yard, the prison-door opened,

and shut upon them. In the Lodge, which seemed by contrast with the

outer noise a place of refuge and peace, a yellow lamp was already

striving with the prison shadows.

'Why, John!' said the turnkey who admitted them. 'What is it?'

'Nothing, father; only this lady not knowing her way, and being badgered

by the boys. Who did you want, ma'am?'

'Miss Dorrit. Is she here?'

The young man became more interested. 'Yes, she is here. What might your

name be?'

'Mrs Clennam.'

'Mr Clennam's mother?' asked the young man.

She pressed her lips together, and hesitated. 'Yes. She had better be

told it is his mother.'

'You see,' said the young man,'the Marshal's family living in the

country at present, the Marshal has given Miss Dorrit one of the rooms

in his house to use when she likes. Don't you think you had better come

up there, and let me bring Miss Dorrit?'

She signified her assent, and he unlocked a door and conducted her up

a side staircase into a dwelling-house above. He showed her into a

darkening room, and left her. The room looked down into the darkening

prison-yard, with its inmates strolling here and there, leaning out

of windows communing as much apart as they could with friends who were

going away, and generally wearing out their imprisonment as they best

might that summer evening. The air was heavy and hot; the closeness

of the place, oppressive; and from without there arose a rush of

free sounds, like the jarring memory of such things in a headache and

heartache. She stood at the window, bewildered, looking down into this

prison as it were out of her own different prison, when a soft word or

two of surprise made her start, and Little Dorrit stood before her.

'Is it possible, Mrs Clennam, that you are so happily recovered as--'

Little Dorrit stopped, for there was neither happiness nor health in the

face that turned to her. 'This is not recovery; it is not strength; I

don't know what it is.' With an agitated wave of her hand, she put all

that aside. 'You have a packet left with you which you were to give to

Arthur, if it was not reclaimed before this place closed to-night.'

'Yes.'

'I reclaim it.'

Little Dorrit took it from her bosom, and gave it into her hand, which

remained stretched out after receiving it.

'Have you any idea of its contents?'

Frightened by her being there with that new power Of Movement in her,

which, as she said herself, was not strength, and which was unreal

to look upon, as though a picture or statue had been animated, Little

Dorrit answered 'No.'

'Read them.'

Little Dorrit took the packet from the still outstretched hand, and

broke the seal. Mrs Clennam then gave her the inner packet that was

addressed to herself, and held the other. The shadow of the wall and of

the prison buildings, which made the room sombre at noon, made it too

dark to read there, with the dusk deepening apace, save in the window.

In the window, where a little of the bright summer evening sky

could shine upon her, Little Dorrit stood, and read. After a broken

exclamation or so of wonder and of terror, she read in silence. When

she had finished, she looked round, and her old mistress bowed herself

before her.

'You know, now, what I have done.'

'I think so. I am afraid so; though my mind is so hurried, and so sorry,

and has so much to pity that it has not been able to follow all I have

read,' said Little Dorrit tremulously.

'I will restore to you what I have withheld from you. Forgive me. Can

you forgive me?'

'I can, and Heaven knows I do! Do not kiss my dress and kneel to me; you

are too old to kneel to me; I forgive you freely without that.'

'I have more yet to ask.'

'Not in that posture,' said Little Dorrit. 'It is unnatural to see your

grey hair lower than mine. Pray rise; let me help you.' With that she

raised her up, and stood rather shrinking from her, but looking at her

earnestly.

'The great petition that I make to you (there is another which grows

out of it), the great supplication that I address to your merciful and

gentle heart, is, that you will not disclose this to Arthur until I am

dead. If you think, when you have had time for consideration, that it

can do him any good to know it while I am yet alive, then tell him. But

you will not think that; and in such case, will you promise me to spare

me until I am dead?'

'I am so sorry, and what I have read has so confused my thoughts,'

returned Little Dorrit, 'that I can scarcely give you a steady answer.

If I should be quite sure that to be acquainted with it will do Mr

Clennam no good--'

'I know you are attached to him, and will make him the first

consideration. It is right that he should be the first consideration. I

ask that. But, having regarded him, and still finding that you may spare

me for the little time I shall remain on earth, will you do it?'

'I will.'

'GOD bless you!'

She stood in the shadow so that she was only a veiled form to Little

Dorrit in the light; but the sound of her voice, in saying those three

grateful words, was at once fervent and broken--broken by emotion as

unfamiliar to her frozen eyes as action to her frozen limbs.

'You will wonder, perhaps,' she said in a stronger tone, 'that I can

better bear to be known to you whom I have wronged, than to the son

of my enemy who wronged me.--For she did wrong me! She not only sinned

grievously against the Lord, but she wronged me. What Arthur's father

was to me, she made him. From our marriage day I was his dread, and that

she made me. I was the scourge of both, and that is referable to her.

You love Arthur (I can see the blush upon your face; may it be the dawn

of happier days to both of you!), and you will have thought already that

he is as merciful and kind as you, and why do I not trust myself to him

as soon as to you. Have you not thought so?'

'No thought,' said Little Dorrit, 'can be quite a stranger to my heart,

that springs out of the knowledge that Mr Clennam is always to be relied

upon for being kind and generous and good.'

'I do not doubt it. Yet Arthur is, of the whole world, the one person

from whom I would conceal this, while I am in it. I kept over him as

a child, in the days of his first remembrance, my restraining and

correcting hand. I was stern with him, knowing that the transgressions

of the parents are visited on their offspring, and that there was an

angry mark upon him at his birth. I have sat with him and his father,

seeing the weakness of his father yearning to unbend to him; and forcing

it back, that the child might work out his release in bondage and

hardship. I have seen him, with his mother's face, looking up at me in

awe from his little books, and trying to soften me with his mother's

ways that hardened me.'

The shrinking of her auditress stopped her for a moment in her flow of

words, delivered in a retrospective gloomy voice.

'For his good. Not for the satisfaction of my injury. What was I, and

what was the worth of that, before the curse of Heaven! I have seen that

child grow up; not to be pious in a chosen way (his mother's influence

lay too heavy on him for that), but still to be just and upright, and

to be submissive to me. He never loved me, as I once half-hoped he

might--so frail we are, and so do the corrupt affections of the flesh

war with our trusts and tasks; but he always respected me and ordered

himself dutifully to me. He does to this hour. With an empty place in

his heart that he has never known the meaning of, he has turned

away from me and gone his separate road; but even that he has done

considerately and with deference. These have been his relations towards

me. Yours have been of a much slighter kind, spread over a much shorter

time. When you have sat at your needle in my room, you have been in fear

of me, but you have supposed me to have been doing you a kindness; you

are better informed now, and know me to have done you an injury. Your

misconstruction and misunderstanding of the cause in which, and the

motives with which, I have worked out this work, is lighter to endure

than his would be. I would not, for any worldly recompense I can

imagine, have him in a moment, however blindly, throw me down from the

station I have held before him all his life, and change me altogether

into something he would cast out of his respect, and think detected and

exposed. Let him do it, if it must be done, when I am not here to see

it. Let me never feel, while I am still alive, that I die before his

face, and utterly perish away from him, like one consumed by lightning

and swallowed by an earthquake.'

Her pride was very strong in her, the pain of it and of her old passions

was very sharp with her, when she thus expressed herself. Not less so,

when she added:

'Even now, I see YOU shrink from me, as if I had been cruel.'

Little Dorrit could not gainsay it. She tried not to show it, but she

recoiled with dread from the state of mind that had burnt so fiercely

and lasted so long. It presented itself to her, with no sophistry upon

it, in its own plain nature.

'I have done,' said Mrs Clennam,'what it was given to me to do. I have

set myself against evil; not against good. I have been an instrument

of severity against sin. Have not mere sinners like myself been

commissioned to lay it low in all time?'

'In all time?' repeated Little Dorrit.

'Even if my own wrong had prevailed with me, and my own vengeance had

moved me, could I have found no justification? None in the old days

when the innocent perished with the guilty 2 a thousand to one? When the

wrath of the hater of the unrighteous was not slaked even in blood, and

yet found favour?'

'O, Mrs Clennam, Mrs Clennam,' said Little Dorrit, 'angry feelings and

unforgiving deeds are no comfort and no guide to you and me. My life

has been passed in this poor prison, and my teaching has been very

defective; but let me implore you to remember later and better days.

Be guided only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the

friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who

shed tears of compassion for our infirmities. We cannot but be right if

we put all the rest away, and do everything in remembrance of Him. There

is no vengeance and no infliction of suffering in His life, I am sure.

There can be no confusion in following Him, and seeking for no other

footsteps, I am certain.'

In the softened light of the window, looking from the scene of her early

trials to the shining sky, she was not in stronger opposition to the

black figure in the shade than the life and doctrine on which she rested

were to that figure's history. It bent its head low again, and said not

a word. It remained thus, until the first warning bell began to ring.

'Hark!' cried Mrs Clennam starting, 'I said I had another petition.

It is one that does not admit of delay. The man who brought you this

packet and possesses these proofs, is now waiting at my house to be

bought off. I can keep this from Arthur, only by buying him off. He

asks a large sum; more than I can get together to pay him without having

time. He refuses to make any abatement, because his threat is, that if

he fails with me, he will come to you. Will you return with me and show

him that you already know it? Will you return with me and try to prevail

with him? Will you come and help me with him? Do not refuse what I ask

in Arthur's name, though I dare not ask it for Arthur's sake!'

Little Dorrit yielded willingly. She glided away into the prison for a

few moments, returned, and said she was ready to go. They went out

by another staircase, avoiding the lodge; and coming into the front

court-yard, now all quiet and deserted, gained the street.

It was one of those summer evenings when there is no greater darkness

than a long twilight. The vista of street and bridge was plain to see,

and the sky was serene and beautiful. People stood and sat at their

doors, playing with children and enjoying the evening; numbers were

walking for air; the worry of the day had almost worried itself out, and

few but themselves were hurried. As they crossed the bridge, the clear

steeples of the many churches looked as if they had advanced out of the

murk that usually enshrouded them, and come much nearer. The smoke that

rose into the sky had lost its dingy hue and taken a brightness upon it.

The beauties of the sunset had not faded from the long light films of

cloud that lay at peace in the horizon. From a radiant centre, over

the whole length and breadth of the tranquil firmament, great shoots of

light streamed among the early stars, like signs of the blessed later

covenant of peace and hope that changed the crown of thorns into a

glory.

Less remarkable, now that she was not alone and it was darker, Mrs

Clennam hurried on at Little Dorrit's side, unmolested. They left the

great thoroughfare at the turning by which she had entered it, and wound

their way down among the silent, empty, cross-streets. Their feet were

at the gateway, when there was a sudden noise like thunder.

'What was that! Let us make haste in,' cried Mrs Clennam.

They were in the gateway. Little Dorrit, with a piercing cry, held her

back.

In one swift instant the old house was before them, with the man lying

smoking in the window; another thundering sound, and it heaved, surged

outward, opened asunder in fifty places, collapsed, and fell. Deafened

by the noise, stifled, choked, and blinded by the dust, they hid their

faces and stood rooted to the spot. The dust storm, driving between them

and the placid sky, parted for a moment and showed them the stars. As

they looked up, wildly crying for help, the great pile of chimneys,

which was then alone left standing like a tower in a whirlwind, rocked,

broke, and hailed itself down upon the heap of ruin, as if every

tumbling fragment were intent on burying the crushed wretch deeper.

So blackened by the flying particles of rubbish as to be unrecognisable,

they ran back from the gateway into the street, crying and shrieking.

There, Mrs Clennam dropped upon the stones; and she never from that hour

moved so much as a finger again, or had the power to speak one word.

For upwards of three years she reclined in a wheeled chair, looking

attentively at those about her and appearing to understand what they

said; but the rigid silence she had so long held was evermore enforced

upon her, and except that she could move her eyes and faintly express a

negative and affirmative with her head, she lived and died a statue.

Affery had been looking for them at the prison, and had caught sight

of them at a distance on the bridge. She came up to receive her old

mistress in her arms, to help to carry her into a neighbouring house,

and to be faithful to her. The mystery of the noises was out now;

Affery, like greater people, had always been right in her facts, and

always wrong in the theories she deduced from them.

When the storm of dust had cleared away and the summer night was calm

again, numbers of people choked up every avenue of access, and parties

of diggers were formed to relieve one another in digging among the

ruins. There had been a hundred people in the house at the time of its

fall, there had been fifty, there had been fifteen, there had been

two. Rumour finally settled the number at two; the foreigner and Mr

Flintwinch. The diggers dug all through the short night by flaring pipes

of gas, and on a level with the early sun, and deeper and deeper below

it as it rose into its zenith, and aslant of it as it declined, and on a

level with it again as it departed. Sturdy digging, and shovelling,

and carrying away, in carts, barrows, and baskets, went on without

intermission, by night and by day; but it was night for the second time

when they found the dirty heap of rubbish that had been the foreigner

before his head had been shivered to atoms, like so much glass, by the

great beam that lay upon him, crushing him.

Still, they had not come upon Flintwinch yet; so the sturdy digging and

shovelling and carrying away went on without intermission by night and

by day. It got about that the old house had had famous cellarage (which

indeed was true), and that Flintwinch had been in a cellar at the

moment, or had had time to escape into one, and that he was safe under

its strong arch, and even that he had been heard to cry, in hollow,

subterranean, suffocated notes, 'Here I am!' At the opposite extremity

of the town it was even known that the excavators had been able to open

a communication with him through a pipe, and that he had received both

soup and brandy by that channel, and that he had said with admirable

fortitude that he was All right, my lads, with the exception of his

collar-bone. But the digging and shovelling and carrying away went on

without intermission, until the ruins were all dug out, and the cellars

opened to the light; and still no Flintwinch, living or dead, all right

or all wrong, had been turned up by pick or spade.

It began then to be perceived that Flintwinch had not been there at the

time of the fall; and it began then to be perceived that he had been

rather busy elsewhere, converting securities into as much money as could

be got for them on the shortest notice, and turning to his own exclusive

account his authority to act for the Firm. Affery, remembering that the

clever one had said he would explain himself further in four-and-twenty

hours' time, determined for her part that his taking himself off within

that period with all he could get, was the final satisfactory sum and

substance of his promised explanation; but she held her peace, devoutly

thankful to be quit of him. As it seemed reasonable to conclude that a

man who had never been buried could not be unburied, the diggers gave

him up when their task was done, and did not dig down for him into the

depths of the earth.

This was taken in ill part by a great many people, who persisted

in believing that Flintwinch was lying somewhere among the London

geological formation. Nor was their belief much shaken by repeated

intelligence which came over in course of time, that an old man who wore

the tie of his neckcloth under one ear, and who was very well known to

be an Englishman, consorted with the Dutchmen on the quaint banks of the

canals of the Hague and in the drinking-shops of Amsterdam, under the

style and designation of Mynheer von Flyntevynge.

CHAPTER 32. Going

Arthur continuing to lie very ill in the Marshalsea, and Mr Rugg

descrying no break in the legal sky affording a hope of his enlargement,

Mr Pancks suffered desperately from self-reproaches. If it had not been

for those infallible figures which proved that Arthur, instead of pining

in imprisonment, ought to be promenading in a carriage and pair, and

that Mr Pancks, instead of being restricted to his clerkly wages, ought

to have from three to five thousand pounds of his own at his immediate

disposal, that unhappy arithmetician would probably have taken to his

bed, and there have made one of the many obscure persons who turned

their faces to the wall and died, as a last sacrifice to the late Mr

Merdle's greatness. Solely supported by his unimpugnable calculations,

Mr Pancks led an unhappy and restless life; constantly carrying his

figures about with him in his hat, and not only going over them himself

on every possible occasion, but entreating every human being he could

lay hold of to go over them with him, and observe what a clear case it

was. Down in Bleeding Heart Yard there was scarcely an inhabitant of

note to whom Mr Pancks had not imparted his demonstration, and, as

figures are catching, a kind of cyphering measles broke out in that

locality, under the influence of which the whole Yard was light-headed.

The more restless Mr Pancks grew in his mind, the more impatient he

became of the Patriarch. In their later conferences his snorting assumed

an irritable sound which boded the Patriarch no good; likewise, Mr

Pancks had on several occasions looked harder at the Patriarchal bumps

than was quite reconcilable with the fact of his not being a painter, or

a peruke-maker in search of the living model.

However, he steamed in and out of his little back Dock according as he

was wanted or not wanted in the Patriarchal presence, and business had

gone on in its customary course. Bleeding Heart Yard had been harrowed

by Mr Pancks, and cropped by Mr Casby, at the regular seasons; Mr Pancks

had taken all the drudgery and all the dirt of the business as his

share; Mr Casby had taken all the profits, all the ethereal vapour, and

all the moonshine, as his share; and, in the form of words which that

benevolent beamer generally employed on Saturday evenings, when he

twirled his fat thumbs after striking the week's balance, 'everything

had been satisfactory to all parties--all parties--satisfactory, sir, to

all parties.'

The Dock of the Steam-Tug, Pancks, had a leaden roof, which, frying in

the very hot sunshine, may have heated the vessel. Be that as it

may, one glowing Saturday evening, on being hailed by the lumbering

bottle-green ship, the Tug instantly came working out of the Dock in a

highly heated condition. 'Mr Pancks,' was the Patriarchal remark, 'you

have been remiss, you have been remiss, sir.'

'What do you mean by that?' was the short rejoinder.

The Patriarchal state, always a state of calmness and composure, was

so particularly serene that evening as to be provoking. Everybody else

within the bills of mortality was hot; but the Patriarch was perfectly

cool. Everybody was thirsty, and the Patriarch was drinking. There was

a fragrance of limes or lemons about him; and he made a drink of golden

sherry, which shone in a large tumbler as if he were drinking the

evening sunshine. This was bad, but not the worst. The worst was, that

with his big blue eyes, and his polished head, and his long white hair,

and his bottle-green legs stretched out before him, terminating in his

easy shoes easily crossed at the instep, he had a radiant appearance

of having in his extensive benevolence made the drink for the human

species, while he himself wanted nothing but his own milk of human

kindness.

Wherefore, Mr Pancks said, 'What do you mean by that?' and put his hair

up with both hands, in a highly portentous manner.

'I mean, Mr Pancks, that you must be sharper with the people, sharper

with the people, much sharper with the people, sir. You don't squeeze

them. You don't squeeze them. Your receipts are not up to the mark. You

must squeeze them, sir, or our connection will not continue to be as

satisfactory as I could wish it to be to all parties. All parties.'

'Don't I squeeze 'em?' retorted Mr Pancks. 'What else am I made for?'

'You are made for nothing else, Mr Pancks. You are made to do your

duty, but you don't do your duty. You are paid to squeeze, and you

must squeeze to pay.' The Patriarch so much surprised himself by this

brilliant turn, after Dr Johnson, which he had not in the least

expected or intended, that he laughed aloud; and repeated with great

satisfaction, as he twirled his thumbs and nodded at his youthful

portrait, 'Paid to squeeze, sir, and must squeeze to pay.'

'Oh,' said Pancks. 'Anything more?'

'Yes, sir, yes, sir. Something more. You will please, Mr Pancks, to

squeeze the Yard again, the first thing on Monday morning.'

'Oh!' said Pancks. 'Ain't that too soon? I squeezed it dry to-day.'

'Nonsense, sir. Not near the mark, not near the mark.'

'Oh!' said Pancks, watching him as he benevolently gulped down a good

draught of his mixture. 'Anything more?'

'Yes, sir, yes, sir, something more. I am not at all pleased, Mr Pancks,

with my daughter; not at all pleased. Besides calling much too often

to inquire for Mrs Clennam, Mrs Clennam, who is not just now in

circumstances that are by any means calculated to--to be satisfactory to

all parties, she goes, Mr Pancks, unless I am much deceived, to inquire

for Mr Clennam in jail. In jail.'

'He's laid up, you know,' said Pancks. 'Perhaps it's kind.'

'Pooh, pooh, Mr Pancks. She has nothing to do with that, nothing to do

with that. I can't allow it. Let him pay his debts and come out, come

out; pay his debts, and come out.'

Although Mr Pancks's hair was standing up like strong wire, he gave it

another double-handed impulse in the perpendicular direction, and smiled

at his proprietor in a most hideous manner.

'You will please to mention to my daughter, Mr Pancks, that I can't

allow it, can't allow it,' said the Patriarch blandly.

'Oh!' said Pancks. 'You couldn't mention it yourself?'

'No, sir, no; you are paid to mention it,' the blundering old booby

could not resist the temptation of trying it again, 'and you must

mention it to pay, mention it to pay.'

'Oh!' said Pancks. 'Anything more?'

'Yes, sir. It appears to me, Mr Pancks, that you yourself are too often

and too much in that direction, that direction. I recommend you, Mr

Pancks, to dismiss from your attention both your own losses and other

people's losses, and to mind your business, mind your business.'

Mr Pancks acknowledged this recommendation with such an extraordinarily

abrupt, short, and loud utterance of the monosyllable 'Oh!' that even

the unwieldy Patriarch moved his blue eyes in something of a hurry, to

look at him. Mr Pancks, with a sniff of corresponding intensity, then

added, 'Anything more?'

'Not at present, sir, not at present. I am going,' said the Patriarch,

finishing his mixture, and rising with an amiable air, 'to take a little

stroll, a little stroll. Perhaps I shall find you here when I come back.

If not, sir, duty, duty; squeeze, squeeze, squeeze, on Monday; squeeze

on Monday!'

Mr Pancks, after another stiffening of his hair, looked on at the

Patriarchal assumption of the broad-brimmed hat, with a momentary

appearance of indecision contending with a sense of injury. He was also

hotter than at first, and breathed harder. But he suffered Mr Casby to

go out, without offering any further remark, and then took a peep at

him over the little green window-blinds. 'I thought so,' he observed. 'I

knew where you were bound to. Good!' He then steamed back to his Dock,

put it carefully in order, took down his hat, looked round the Dock,

said 'Good-bye!' and puffed away on his own account. He steered straight

for Mrs Plornish's end of Bleeding Heart Yard, and arrived there, at the

top of the steps, hotter than ever.

At the top of the steps, resisting Mrs Plornish's invitations to come

and sit along with father in Happy Cottage--which to his relief were not

so numerous as they would have been on any other night than Saturday,

when the connection who so gallantly supported the business with

everything but money gave their orders freely--at the top of the steps

Mr Pancks remained until he beheld the Patriarch, who always entered

the Yard at the other end, slowly advancing, beaming, and surrounded

by suitors. Then Mr Pancks descended and bore down upon him, with his

utmost pressure of steam on.

The Patriarch, approaching with his usual benignity, was surprised to

see Mr Pancks, but supposed him to have been stimulated to an immediate

squeeze instead of postponing that operation until Monday. The

population of the Yard were astonished at the meeting, for the two

powers had never been seen there together, within the memory of the

oldest Bleeding Heart. But they were overcome by unutterable amazement

when Mr Pancks, going close up to the most venerable of men and halting

in front of the bottle-green waistcoat, made a trigger of his right

thumb and forefinger, applied the same to the brim of the broad-brimmed

hat, and, with singular smartness and precision, shot it off the

polished head as if it had been a large marble.

Having taken this little liberty with the Patriarchal person, Mr Pancks

further astounded and attracted the Bleeding Hearts by saying in an

audible voice, 'Now, you sugary swindler, I mean to have it out with

you!'

Mr Pancks and the Patriarch were instantly the centre of a press, all

eyes and ears; windows were thrown open, and door-steps were thronged.

'What do you pretend to be?' said Mr Pancks. 'What's your moral game?

What do you go in for? Benevolence, an't it? You benevolent!' Here Mr

Pancks, apparently without the intention of hitting him, but merely to

relieve his mind and expend his superfluous power in wholesome exercise,

aimed a blow at the bumpy head, which the bumpy head ducked to

avoid. This singular performance was repeated, to the ever-increasing

admiration of the spectators, at the end of every succeeding article of

Mr Pancks's oration.

'I have discharged myself from your service,' said Pancks, 'that I may

tell you what you are. You're one of a lot of impostors that are the

worst lot of all the lots to be met with. Speaking as a sufferer by

both, I don't know that I wouldn't as soon have the Merdle lot as your

lot. You're a driver in disguise, a screwer by deputy, a wringer, and

squeezer, and shaver by substitute. You're a philanthropic sneak. You're

a shabby deceiver!' (The repetition of the performance at this point was

received with a burst of laughter.)

'Ask these good people who's the hard man here. They'll tell you Pancks,

I believe.'

This was confirmed with cries of 'Certainly,' and 'Hear!'

'But I tell you, good people--Casby! This mound of meekness, this lump

of love, this bottle-green smiler, this is your driver!' said Pancks.

'If you want to see the man who would flay you alive--here he is! Don't

look for him in me, at thirty shillings a week, but look for him in

Casby, at I don't know how much a year!'

'Good!' cried several voices. 'Hear Mr Pancks!'

'Hear Mr Pancks?' cried that gentleman (after repeating the popular

performance). 'Yes, I should think so! It's almost time to hear Mr

Pancks. Mr Pancks has come down into the Yard to-night on purpose that

you should hear him. Pancks is only the Works; but here's the Winder!'

The audience would have gone over to Mr Pancks, as one man, woman, and

child, but for the long, grey, silken locks, and the broad-brimmed hat.

'Here's the Stop,' said Pancks, 'that sets the tune to be ground. And

there is but one tune, and its name is Grind, Grind, Grind! Here's the

Proprietor, and here's his Grubber. Why, good people, when he comes

smoothly spinning through the Yard to-night, like a slow-going

benevolent Humming-Top, and when you come about him with your complaints

of the Grubber, you don't know what a cheat the Proprietor is! What do

you think of his showing himself to-night, that I may have all the blame

on Monday? What do you think of his having had me over the coals this

very evening, because I don't squeeze you enough? What do you think of

my being, at the present moment, under special orders to squeeze you dry

on Monday?'

The reply was given in a murmur of 'Shame!' and 'Shabby!'

'Shabby?' snorted Pancks. 'Yes, I should think so! The lot that your

Casby belongs to, is the shabbiest of all the lots. Setting their

Grubbers on, at a wretched pittance, to do what they're ashamed and

afraid to do and pretend not to do, but what they will have done, or

give a man no rest! Imposing on you to give their Grubbers nothing but

blame, and to give them nothing but credit! Why, the worst-looking

cheat in all this town who gets the value of eighteenpence under false

pretences, an't half such a cheat as this sign-post of The Casby's Head

here!'

Cries of 'That's true!' and 'No more he an't!'

'And see what you get of these fellows, besides,' said Pancks' 'See what

more you get of these precious Humming-Tops, revolving among you with

such smoothness that you've no idea of the pattern painted on 'em, or

the little window in 'em. I wish to call your attention to myself for a

moment. I an't an agreeable style of chap, I know that very well.'

The auditory were divided on this point; its more uncompromising members

crying, 'No, you are not,' and its politer materials, 'Yes, you are.'

'I am, in general,' said Mr Pancks, 'a dry, uncomfortable, dreary

Plodder and Grubber. That's your humble servant. There's his full-length

portrait, painted by himself and presented to you, warranted a likeness!

But what's a man to be, with such a man as this for his Proprietor?

What can be expected of him? Did anybody ever find boiled mutton and

caper-sauce growing in a cocoa-nut?'

None of the Bleeding Hearts ever had, it was clear from the alacrity of

their response.

'Well,' said Mr Pancks, 'and neither will you find in Grubbers like

myself, under Proprietors like this, pleasant qualities. I've been a

Grubber from a boy. What has my life been? Fag and grind, fag and grind,

turn the wheel, turn the wheel! I haven't been agreeable to myself,

and I haven't been likely to be agreeable to anybody else. If I was a

shilling a week less useful in ten years' time, this impostor would give

me a shilling a week less; if as useful a man could be got at sixpence

cheaper, he would be taken in my place at sixpence cheaper. Bargain and

sale, bless you! Fixed principles! It's a mighty fine sign-post, is The

Casby's Head,' said Mr Pancks, surveying it with anything rather than

admiration; 'but the real name of the House is the Sham's Arms. Its

motto is, Keep the Grubber always at it. Is any gentleman present,' said

Mr Pancks, breaking off and looking round, 'acquainted with the English

Grammar?'

Bleeding Heart Yard was shy of claiming that acquaintance.

'It's no matter,' said Mr Pancks, 'I merely wish to remark that the task

this Proprietor has set me, has been never to leave off conjugating the

Imperative Mood Present Tense of the verb To keep always at it. Keep

thou always at it. Let him keep always at it. Keep we or do we keep

always at it. Keep ye or do ye or you keep always at it. Let them keep

always at it. Here is your benevolent Patriarch of a Casby, and there is

his golden rule. He is uncommonly improving to look at, and I am not

at all so. He is as sweet as honey, and I am as dull as ditch-water. He

provides the pitch, and I handle it, and it sticks to me. Now,' said

Mr Pancks, closing upon his late Proprietor again, from whom he had

withdrawn a little for the better display of him to the Yard; 'as I am

not accustomed to speak in public, and as I have made a rather lengthy

speech, all circumstances considered, I shall bring my observations to a

close by requesting you to get out of this.'

The Last of the Patriarchs had been so seized by assault, and required

so much room to catch an idea in, an so much more room to turn it in,

that he had not a word to offer in reply. He appeared to be meditating

some Patriarchal way out of his delicate position, when Mr Pancks, once

more suddenly applying the trigger to his hat, shot it off again with

his former dexterity. On the preceding occasion, one or two of the

Bleeding Heart Yarders had obsequiously picked it up and handed it to

its owner; but Mr Pancks had now so far impressed his audience, that the

Patriarch had to turn and stoop for it himself.

Quick as lightning, Mr Pancks, who, for some moments, had had his right

hand in his coat pocket, whipped out a pair of shears, swooped upon the

Patriarch behind, and snipped off short the sacred locks that flowed

upon his shoulders. In a paroxysm of animosity and rapidity, Mr Pancks

then caught the broad-brimmed hat out of the astounded Patriarch's hand,

cut it down into a mere stewpan, and fixed it on the Patriarch's head.

Before the frightful results of this desperate action, Mr Pancks himself

recoiled in consternation. A bare-polled, goggle-eyed, big-headed

lumbering personage stood staring at him, not in the least impressive,

not in the least venerable, who seemed to have started out of the

earth to ask what was become of Casby. After staring at this phantom in

return, in silent awe, Mr Pancks threw down his shears, and fled for a

place of hiding, where he might lie sheltered from the consequences of

his crime. Mr Pancks deemed it prudent to use all possible despatch in

making off, though he was pursued by nothing but the sound of laughter

in Bleeding Heart Yard, rippling through the air and making it ring

again.

CHAPTER 33. Going!

The changes of a fevered room are slow and fluctuating; but the changes

of the fevered world are rapid and irrevocable.

It was Little Dorrit's lot to wait upon both kinds of change. The

Marshalsea walls, during a portion of every day, again embraced her in

their shadows as their child, while she thought for Clennam, worked for

him, watched him, and only left him, still to devote her utmost love and

care to him. Her part in the life outside the gate urged its pressing

claims upon her too, and her patience untiringly responded to them.

Here was Fanny, proud, fitful, whimsical, further advanced in that

disqualified state for going into society which had so much fretted

her on the evening of the tortoise-shell knife, resolved always to want

comfort, resolved not to be comforted, resolved to be deeply wronged,

and resolved that nobody should have the audacity to think her so. Here

was her brother, a weak, proud, tipsy, young old man, shaking from

head to foot, talking as indistinctly as if some of the money he plumed

himself upon had got into his mouth and couldn't be got out, unable to

walk alone in any act of his life, and patronising the sister whom he

selfishly loved (he always had that negative merit, ill-starred and

ill-launched Tip!) because he suffered her to lead him. Here was Mrs

Merdle in gauzy mourning--the original cap whereof had possibly been

rent to pieces in a fit of grief, but had certainly yielded to a highly

becoming article from the Parisian market--warring with Fanny foot to

foot, and breasting her with her desolate bosom every hour in the day.

Here was poor Mr Sparkler, not knowing how to keep the peace between

them, but humbly inclining to the opinion that they could do no better

than agree that they were both remarkably fine women, and that there was

no nonsense about either of them--for which gentle recommendation they

united in falling upon him frightfully. Then, too, here was Mrs General,

got home from foreign parts, sending a Prune and a Prism by post every

other day, demanding a new Testimonial by way of recommendation to some

vacant appointment or other. Of which remarkable gentlewoman it may be

finally observed, that there surely never was a gentlewoman of whose

transcendent fitness for any vacant appointment on the face of this

earth, so many people were (as the warmth of her Testimonials evinced)

so perfectly satisfied--or who was so very unfortunate in having a

large circle of ardent and distinguished admirers, who never themselves

happened to want her in any capacity.

On the first crash of the eminent Mr Merdle's decease, many important

persons had been unable to determine whether they should cut Mrs Merdle,

or comfort her. As it seemed, however, essential to the strength of

their own case that they should admit her to have been cruelly deceived,

they graciously made the admission, and continued to know her. It

followed that Mrs Merdle, as a woman of fashion and good breeding who

had been sacrificed to the wiles of a vulgar barbarian (for Mr Merdle

was found out from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, the

moment he was found out in his pocket), must be actively championed by

her order for her order's sake. She returned this fealty by causing it

to be understood that she was even more incensed against the felonious

shade of the deceased than anybody else was; thus, on the whole, she

came out of her furnace like a wise woman, and did exceedingly well.

Mr Sparkler's lordship was fortunately one of those shelves on which a

gentleman is considered to be put away for life, unless there should be

reasons for hoisting him up with the Barnacle crane to a more lucrative

height. That patriotic servant accordingly stuck to his colours (the

Standard of four Quarterings), and was a perfect Nelson in respect

of nailing them to the mast. On the profits of his intrepidity, Mrs

Sparkler and Mrs Merdle, inhabiting different floors of the genteel

little temple of inconvenience to which the smell of the day before

yesterday's soup and coach-horses was as constant as Death to man,

arrayed themselves to fight it out in the lists of Society, sworn

rivals. And Little Dorrit, seeing all these things as they developed

themselves, could not but wonder, anxiously, into what back corner of

the genteel establishment Fanny's children would be poked by-and-by, and

who would take care of those unborn little victims.

Arthur being far too ill to be spoken with on subjects of emotion or

anxiety, and his recovery greatly depending on the repose into which

his weakness could be hushed, Little Dorrit's sole reliance during this

heavy period was on Mr Meagles. He was still abroad; but she had written

to him through his daughter, immediately after first seeing Arthur in

the Marshalsea and since, confiding her uneasiness to him on the points

on which she was most anxious, but especially on one. To that one,

the continued absence of Mr Meagles abroad, instead of his comforting

presence in the Marshalsea, was referable.

Without disclosing the precise nature of the documents that had fallen

into Rigaud's hands, Little Dorrit had confided the general outline of

that story to Mr Meagles, to whom she had also recounted his fate. The

old cautious habits of the scales and scoop at once showed Mr Meagles

the importance of recovering the original papers; wherefore he wrote

back to Little Dorrit, strongly confirming her in the solicitude she

expressed on that head, and adding that he would not come over to

England 'without making some attempt to trace them out.'

By this time Mr Henry Gowan had made up his mind that it would be

agreeable to him not to know the Meagleses. He was so considerate as to

lay no injunctions on his wife in that particular; but he mentioned

to Mr Meagles that personally they did not appear to him to get on

together, and that he thought it would be a good thing if--politely, and

without any scene, or anything of that sort--they agreed that they were

the best fellows in the world, but were best apart. Poor Mr Meagles, who

was already sensible that he did not advance his daughter's happiness by

being constantly slighted in her presence, said 'Good, Henry! You are

my Pet's husband; you have displaced me, in the course of nature; if

you wish it, good!' This arrangement involved the contingent advantage,

which perhaps Henry Gowan had not foreseen, that both Mr and Mrs

Meagles were more liberal than before to their daughter, when their

communication was only with her and her young child: and that his high

spirit found itself better provided with money, without being under the

degrading necessity of knowing whence it came.

Mr Meagles, at such a period, naturally seized an occupation with great

ardour. He knew from his daughter the various towns which Rigaud had

been haunting, and the various hotels at which he had been living for

some time back. The occupation he set himself was to visit these with

all discretion and speed, and, in the event of finding anywhere that he

had left a bill unpaid, and a box or parcel behind, to pay such bill,

and bring away such box or parcel.

With no other attendant than Mother, Mr Meagles went upon his

pilgrimage, and encountered a number of adventures. Not the least of his

difficulties was, that he never knew what was said to him, and that he

pursued his inquiries among people who never knew what he said to them.

Still, with an unshaken confidence that the English tongue was somehow

the mother tongue of the whole world, only the people were too stupid

to know it, Mr Meagles harangued innkeepers in the most voluble manner,

entered into loud explanations of the most complicated sort, and utterly

renounced replies in the native language of the respondents, on the

ground that they were 'all bosh.' Sometimes interpreters were called

in; whom Mr Meagles addressed in such idiomatic terms of speech, as

instantly to extinguish and shut up--which made the matter worse. On a

balance of the account, however, it may be doubted whether he lost much;

for, although he found no property, he found so many debts and various

associations of discredit with the proper name, which was the only word

he made intelligible, that he was almost everywhere overwhelmed with

injurious accusations. On no fewer than four occasions the police

were called in to receive denunciations of Mr Meagles as a Knight of

Industry, a good-for-nothing, and a thief, all of which opprobrious

language he bore with the best temper (having no idea what it meant),

and was in the most ignominious manner escorted to steam-boats and

public carriages, to be got rid of, talking all the while, like a

cheerful and fluent Briton as he was, with Mother under his arm.

But, in his own tongue, and in his own head, Mr Meagles was a clear,

shrewd, persevering man. When he had 'worked round,' as he called it, to

Paris in his pilgrimage, and had wholly failed in it so far, he was not

disheartened. 'The nearer to England I follow him, you see, Mother,'

argued Mr Meagles, 'the nearer I am likely to come to the papers,

whether they turn up or no. Because it is only reasonable to conclude

that he would deposit them somewhere where they would be safe from

people over in England, and where they would yet be accessible to

himself, don't you see?'

At Paris Mr Meagles found a letter from Little Dorrit, lying waiting for

him; in which she mentioned that she had been able to talk for a minute

or two with Mr Clennam about this man who was no more; and that when she

told Mr Clennam that his friend Mr Meagles, who was on his way to see

him, had an interest in ascertaining something about the man if he

could, he had asked her to tell Mr Meagles that he had been known

to Miss Wade, then living in such a street at Calais. 'Oho!' said Mr

Meagles.

As soon afterwards as might be in those Diligence days, Mr Meagles

rang the cracked bell at the cracked gate, and it jarred open, and the

peasant-woman stood in the dark doorway, saying, 'Ice-say! Seer! Who?'

In acknowledgment of whose address, Mr Meagles murmured to himself that

there was some sense about these Calais people, who really did know

something of what you and themselves were up to; and returned, 'Miss

Wade, my dear.' He was then shown into the presence of Miss Wade.

'It's some time since we met,' said Mr Meagles, clearing his throat; 'I

hope you have been pretty well, Miss Wade?'

Without hoping that he or anybody else had been pretty well, Miss Wade

asked him to what she was indebted for the honour of seeing him again?

Mr Meagles, in the meanwhile, glanced all round the room without

observing anything in the shape of a box.

'Why, the truth is, Miss Wade,' said Mr Meagles, in a comfortable,

managing, not to say coaxing voice, 'it is possible that you may be able

to throw a light upon a little something that is at present dark. Any

unpleasant bygones between us are bygones, I hope. Can't be helped now.

You recollect my daughter? Time changes so! A mother!'

In his innocence, Mr Meagles could not have struck a worse key-note. He

paused for any expression of interest, but paused in vain.

'That is not the subject you wished to enter on?' she said, after a cold

silence.

'No, no,' returned Mr Meagles. 'No. I thought your good nature might--'

'I thought you knew,' she interrupted, with a smile, 'that my good

nature is not to be calculated upon?'

'Don't say so,' said Mr Meagles; 'you do yourself an injustice. However,

to come to the point.' For he was sensible of having gained nothing

by approaching it in a roundabout way. 'I have heard from my friend

Clennam, who, you will be sorry to hear, has been and still is very

ill--'

He paused again, and again she was silent.

'--that you had some knowledge of one Blandois, lately killed in London

by a violent accident. Now, don't mistake me! I know it was a slight

knowledge,' said Mr Meagles, dexterously forestalling an angry

interruption which he saw about to break. 'I am fully aware of that. It

was a slight knowledge, I know. But the question is,' Mr Meagles's voice

here became comfortable again, 'did he, on his way to England last time,

leave a box of papers, or a bundle of papers, or some papers or other in

some receptacle or other--any papers--with you: begging you to allow him

to leave them here for a short time, until he wanted them?'

'The question is?' she repeated. 'Whose question is?'

'Mine,' said Mr Meagles. 'And not only mine but Clennam's question, and

other people's question. Now, I am sure,' continued Mr Meagles, whose

heart was overflowing with Pet, 'that you can't have any unkind feeling

towards my daughter; it's impossible. Well! It's her question, too;

being one in which a particular friend of hers is nearly interested.

So here I am, frankly to say that is the question, and to ask, Now, did

he?'

'Upon my word,' she returned, 'I seem to be a mark for everybody who

knew anything of a man I once in my life hired, and paid, and dismissed,

to aim their questions at!'

'Now, don't,' remonstrated Mr Meagles, 'don't! Don't take offence,

because it's the plainest question in the world, and might be asked

of any one. The documents I refer to were not his own, were wrongfully

obtained, might at some time or other be troublesome to an innocent

person to have in keeping, and are sought by the people to whom they

really belong. He passed through Calais going to London, and there were

reasons why he should not take them with him then, why he should wish

to be able to put his hand upon them readily, and why he should distrust

leaving them with people of his own sort. Did he leave them here? I

declare if I knew how to avoid giving you offence, I would take any

pains to do it. I put the question personally, but there's nothing

personal in it. I might put it to any one; I have put it already to many

people. Did he leave them here? Did he leave anything here?'

'No.'

'Then unfortunately, Miss Wade, you know nothing about them?'

'I know nothing about them. I have now answered your unaccountable

question. He did not leave them here, and I know nothing about them.'

'There!' said Mr Meagles rising. 'I am sorry for it; that's over; and I

hope there is not much harm done.--Tattycoram well, Miss Wade?'

'Harriet well? O yes!'

'I have put my foot in it again,' said Mr Meagles, thus corrected. 'I

can't keep my foot out of it here, it seems. Perhaps, if I had thought

twice about it, I might never have given her the jingling name. But,

when one means to be good-natured and sportive with young people, one

doesn't think twice. Her old friend leaves a kind word for her, Miss

Wade, if you should think proper to deliver it.'

She said nothing as to that; and Mr Meagles, taking his honest face out

of the dull room, where it shone like a sun, took it to the Hotel where

he had left Mrs Meagles, and where he made the Report: 'Beaten, Mother;

no effects!' He took it next to the London Steam Packet, which sailed in

the night; and next to the Marshalsea.

The faithful John was on duty when Father and Mother Meagles presented

themselves at the wicket towards nightfall. Miss Dorrit was not there

then, he said; but she had been there in the morning, and invariably

came in the evening. Mr Clennam was slowly mending; and Maggy and Mrs

Plornish and Mr Baptist took care of him by turns. Miss Dorrit was sure

to come back that evening before the bell rang. There was the room the

Marshal had lent her, up-stairs, in which they could wait for her, if

they pleased. Mistrustful that it might be hazardous to Arthur to see

him without preparation, Mr Meagles accepted the offer; and they were

left shut up in the room, looking down through its barred window into

the jail.

The cramped area of the prison had such an effect on Mrs Meagles that

she began to weep, and such an effect on Mr Meagles that he began to

gasp for air. He was walking up and down the room, panting, and making

himself worse by laboriously fanning himself with her handkerchief, when

he turned towards the opening door.

'Eh? Good gracious!' said Mr Meagles, 'this is not Miss Dorrit! Why,

Mother, look! Tattycoram!'

No other. And in Tattycoram's arms was an iron box some two feet square.

Such a box had Affery Flintwinch seen, in the first of her dreams, going

out of the old house in the dead of the night under Double's arm. This,

Tattycoram put on the ground at her old master's feet: this, Tattycoram

fell on her knees by, and beat her hands upon, crying half in exultation

and half in despair, half in laughter and half in tears, 'Pardon, dear

Master; take me back, dear Mistress; here it is!'

'Tatty!' exclaimed Mr Meagles.

'What you wanted!' said Tattycoram. 'Here it is! I was put in the next

room not to see you. I heard you ask her about it, I heard her say she

hadn't got it, I was there when he left it, and I took it at bedtime and

brought it away. Here it is!'

'Why, my girl,' cried Mr Meagles, more breathless than before, 'how did

you come over?'

'I came in the boat with you. I was sitting wrapped up at the other end.

When you took a coach at the wharf, I took another coach and followed

you here. She never would have given it up after what you had said to

her about its being wanted; she would sooner have sunk it in the sea, or

burnt it. But, here it is!'

The glow and rapture that the girl was in, with her 'Here it is!'

'She never wanted it to be left, I must say that for her; but he left

it, and I knew well that after what you said, and after her denying

it, she never would have given it up. But here it is! Dear Master, dear

Mistress, take me back again, and give me back the dear old name! Let

this intercede for me. Here it is!'

Father and Mother Meagles never deserved their names better than when

they took the headstrong foundling-girl into their protection again.

'Oh! I have been so wretched,' cried Tattycoram, weeping much more,

'always so unhappy, and so repentant! I was afraid of her from the first

time I saw her. I knew she had got a power over me through understanding

what was bad in me so well. It was a madness in me, and she could raise

it whenever she liked. I used to think, when I got into that state, that

people were all against me because of my first beginning; and the kinder

they were to me, the worse fault I found in them. I made it out that

they triumphed above me, and that they wanted to make me envy them, when

I know--when I even knew then--that they never thought of such a thing.

And my beautiful young mistress not so happy as she ought to have been,

and I gone away from her! Such a brute and a wretch as she must think

me! But you'll say a word to her for me, and ask her to be as forgiving

as you two are? For I am not so bad as I was,' pleaded Tattycoram; 'I am

bad enough, but not so bad as I was, indeed. I have had Miss Wade

before me all this time, as if it was my own self grown ripe--turning

everything the wrong way, and twisting all good into evil. I have had

her before me all this time, finding no pleasure in anything but keeping

me as miserable, suspicious, and tormenting as herself. Not that she had

much to do, to do that,' cried Tattycoram, in a closing great burst of

distress, 'for I was as bad as bad could be. I only mean to say, that,

after what I have gone through, I hope I shall never be quite so bad

again, and that I shall get better by very slow degrees. I'll try very

hard. I won't stop at five-and-twenty, sir, I'll count five-and-twenty

hundred, five-and-twenty thousand!'

Another opening of the door, and Tattycoram subsided, and Little Dorrit

came in, and Mr Meagles with pride and joy produced the box, and her

gentle face was lighted up with grateful happiness and joy.

The secret was safe now! She could keep her own part of it from him; he

should never know of her loss; in time to come he should know all that

was of import to himself; but he should never know what concerned her

only. That was all passed, all forgiven, all forgotten.

'Now, my dear Miss Dorrit,' said Mr Meagles; 'I am a man of business--or

at least was--and I am going to take my measures promptly, in that

character. Had I better see Arthur to-night?'

'I think not to-night. I will go to his room and ascertain how he is.

But I think it will be better not to see him to-night.'

'I am much of your opinion, my dear,' said Mr Meagles, 'and therefore

I have not been any nearer to him than this dismal room. Then I shall

probably not see him for some little time to come. But I'll explain what

I mean when you come back.'

She left the room. Mr Meagles, looking through the bars of the window,

saw her pass out of the Lodge below him into the prison-yard. He said

gently, 'Tattycoram, come to me a moment, my good girl.'

She went up to the window.

'You see that young lady who was here just now--that little, quiet,

fragile figure passing along there, Tatty? Look. The people stand out

of the way to let her go by. The men--see the poor, shabby fellows--pull

off their hats to her quite politely, and now she glides in at that

doorway. See her, Tattycoram?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I have heard tell, Tatty, that she was once regularly called the child

of this place. She was born here, and lived here many years.

I can't breathe here. A doleful place to be born and bred in,

Tattycoram?'

'Yes indeed, sir!'

'If she had constantly thought of herself, and settled with herself that

everybody visited this place upon her, turned it against her, and cast

it at her, she would have led an irritable and probably an useless

existence. Yet I have heard tell, Tattycoram, that her young life has

been one of active resignation, goodness, and noble service. Shall I

tell you what I consider those eyes of hers, that were here just now, to

have always looked at, to get that expression?'

'Yes, if you please, sir.'

'Duty, Tattycoram. Begin it early, and do it well; and there is no

antecedent to it, in any origin or station, that will tell against us

with the Almighty, or with ourselves.'

They remained at the window, Mother joining them and pitying the

prisoners, until she was seen coming back. She was soon in the room, and

recommended that Arthur, whom she had left calm and composed, should not

be visited that night.

'Good!' said Mr Meagles, cheerily. 'I have not a doubt that's best. I

shall trust my remembrances then, my sweet nurse, in your hands, and I

well know they couldn't be in better. I am off again to-morrow morning.'

Little Dorrit, surprised, asked him where?

'My dear,' said Mr Meagles, 'I can't live without breathing. This place

has taken my breath away, and I shall never get it back again until

Arthur is out of this place.'

'How is that a reason for going off again to-morrow morning?'

'You shall understand,' said Mr Meagles. 'To-night we three will put up

at a City Hotel. To-morrow morning, Mother and Tattycoram will go down

to Twickenham, where Mrs Tickit, sitting attended by Dr Buchan in the

parlour-window, will think them a couple of ghosts; and I shall go

abroad again for Doyce. We must have Dan here. Now, I tell you, my love,

it's of no use writing and planning and conditionally speculating upon

this and that and the other, at uncertain intervals and distances; we

must have Doyce here. I devote myself at daybreak to-morrow morning, to

bringing Doyce here. It's nothing to me to go and find him. I'm an old

traveller, and all foreign languages and customs are alike to me--I

never understand anything about any of 'em. Therefore I can't be put

to any inconvenience. Go at once I must, it stands to reason; because

I can't live without breathing freely; and I can't breathe freely until

Arthur is out of this Marshalsea. I am stifled at the present moment,

and have scarcely breath enough to say this much, and to carry this

precious box down-stairs for you.'

They got into the street as the bell began to ring, Mr Meagles carrying

the box. Little Dorrit had no conveyance there: which rather surprised

him. He called a coach for her and she got into it, and he placed the

box beside her when she was seated. In her joy and gratitude she kissed

his hand.

'I don't like that, my dear,' said Mr Meagles. 'It goes against my

feeling of what's right, that YOU should do homage to ME--at the

Marshalsea Gate.'

She bent forward, and kissed his cheek.

'You remind me of the days,' said Mr Meagles, suddenly drooping--'but

she's very fond of him, and hides his faults, and thinks that no

one sees them--and he certainly is well connected and of a very good

family!'

It was the only comfort he had in the loss of his daughter, and if he

made the most of it, who could blame him?

CHAPTER 34. Gone

On a healthy autumn day, the Marshalsea prisoner, weak but otherwise

restored, sat listening to a voice that read to him. On a healthy autumn

day; when the golden fields had been reaped and ploughed again, when the

summer fruits had ripened and waned, when the green perspectives of hops

had been laid low by the busy pickers, when the apples clustering in the

orchards were russet, and the berries of the mountain ash were crimson

among the yellowing foliage. Already in the woods, glimpses of the hardy

winter that was coming were to be caught through unaccustomed openings

among the boughs where the prospect shone defined and clear, free from

the bloom of the drowsy summer weather, which had rested on it as the

bloom lies on the plum. So, from the seashore the ocean was no longer to

be seen lying asleep in the heat, but its thousand sparkling eyes were

open, and its whole breadth was in joyful animation, from the cool sand

on the beach to the little sails on the horizon, drifting away like

autumn-tinted leaves that had drifted from the trees. Changeless and

barren, looking ignorantly at all the seasons with its fixed, pinched

face of poverty and care, the prison had not a touch of any of these

beauties on it. Blossom what would, its bricks and bars bore uniformly

the same dead crop. Yet Clennam, listening to the voice as it read to

him, heard in it all that great Nature was doing, heard in it all the

soothing songs she sings to man. At no Mother's knee but hers had he

ever dwelt in his youth on hopeful promises, on playful fancies, on

the harvests of tenderness and humility that lie hidden in the

early-fostered seeds of the imagination; on the oaks of retreat from

blighting winds, that have the germs of their strong roots in nursery

acorns.

But, in the tones of the voice that read to him, there were memories of

an old feeling of such things, and echoes of every merciful and loving

whisper that had ever stolen to him in his life.

When the voice stopped, he put his hand over his eyes, murmuring that

the light was strong upon them.

Little Dorrit put the book by, and presently arose quietly to shade

the window. Maggy sat at her needlework in her old place. The light

softened, Little Dorrit brought her chair closer to his side.

'This will soon be over now, dear Mr Clennam. Not only are Mr Doyce's

letters to you so full of friendship and encouragement, but Mr Rugg says

his letters to him are so full of help, and that everybody (now a little

anger is past) is so considerate, and speaks so well of you, that it

will soon be over now.'

'Dear girl. Dear heart. Good angel!'

'You praise me far too much. And yet it is such an exquisite pleasure

to me to hear you speak so feelingly, and to--and to see,' said Little

Dorrit, raising her eyes to his, 'how deeply you mean it, that I cannot

say Don't.'

He lifted her hand to his lips.

'You have been here many, many times, when I have not seen you, Little

Dorrit?'

'Yes, I have been here sometimes when I have not come into the room.'

'Very often?'

'Rather often,' said Little Dorrit, timidly.

'Every day?'

'I think,' said Little Dorrit, after hesitating, 'that I have been here

at least twice every day.' He might have released the little light hand

after fervently kissing it again; but that, with a very gentle lingering

where it was, it seemed to court being retained. He took it in both of

his, and it lay softly on his breast.

'Dear Little Dorrit, it is not my imprisonment only that will soon be

over. This sacrifice of you must be ended. We must learn to part again,

and to take our different ways so wide asunder. You have not forgotten

what we said together, when you came back?'

'O no, I have not forgotten it. But something has been--You feel quite

strong to-day, don't you?'

'Quite strong.'

The hand he held crept up a little nearer his face.

'Do you feel quite strong enough to know what a great fortune I have

got?'

'I shall be very glad to be told. No fortune can be too great or good

for Little Dorrit.'

'I have been anxiously waiting to tell you. I have been longing and

longing to tell you. You are sure you will not take it?'

'Never!'

'You are quite sure you will not take half of it?'

'Never, dear Little Dorrit!'

As she looked at him silently, there was something in her affectionate

face that he did not quite comprehend: something that could have broken

into tears in a moment, and yet that was happy and proud.

'You will be sorry to hear what I have to tell you about Fanny. Poor

Fanny has lost everything. She has nothing left but her husband's

income. All that papa gave her when she married was lost as your money

was lost. It was in the same hands, and it is all gone.'

Arthur was more shocked than surprised to hear it. 'I had hoped it might

not be so bad,' he said: 'but I had feared a heavy loss there, knowing

the connection between her husband and the defaulter.'

'Yes. It is all gone. I am very sorry for Fanny; very, very, very sorry

for poor Fanny. My poor brother too!' 'Had he property in the same

hands?'

'Yes! And it's all gone.--How much do you think my own great fortune

is?'

As Arthur looked at her inquiringly, with a new apprehension on him,

she withdrew her hand, and laid her face down on the spot where it had

rested.

'I have nothing in the world. I am as poor as when I lived here. When

papa came over to England, he confided everything he had to the same

hands, and it is all swept away. O my dearest and best, are you quite

sure you will not share my fortune with me now?'

Locked in his arms, held to his heart, with his manly tears upon her own

cheek, she drew the slight hand round his neck, and clasped it in its

fellow-hand.

'Never to part, my dearest Arthur; never any more, until the last!

I never was rich before, I never was proud before, I never was happy

before, I am rich in being taken by you, I am proud in having been

resigned by you, I am happy in being with you in this prison, as I

should be happy in coming back to it with you, if it should be the will

of GOD, and comforting and serving you with all my love and truth. I am

yours anywhere, everywhere! I love you dearly! I would rather pass my

life here with you, and go out daily, working for our bread, than I

would have the greatest fortune that ever was told, and be the greatest

lady that ever was honoured. O, if poor papa may only know how blest at

last my heart is, in this room where he suffered for so many years!'

Maggy had of course been staring from the first, and had of course been

crying her eyes out long before this. Maggy was now so overjoyed that,

after hugging her little mother with all her might, she went down-stairs

like a clog-hornpipe to find somebody or other to whom to impart her

gladness. Whom should Maggy meet but Flora and Mr F.'s Aunt opportunely

coming in? And whom else, as a consequence of that meeting, should

Little Dorrit find waiting for herself, when, a good two or three hours

afterwards, she went out?

Flora's eyes were a little red, and she seemed rather out of spirits.

Mr F.'s Aunt was so stiffened that she had the appearance of being past

bending by any means short of powerful mechanical pressure. Her bonnet

was cocked up behind in a terrific manner; and her stony reticule was as

rigid as if it had been petrified by the Gorgon's head, and had got it

at that moment inside. With these imposing attributes, Mr F.'s Aunt,

publicly seated on the steps of the Marshal's official residence, had

been for the two or three hours in question a great boon to the younger

inhabitants of the Borough, whose sallies of humour she had considerably

flushed herself by resenting at the point of her umbrella, from time to

time.

'Painfully aware, Miss Dorrit, I am sure,' said Flora, 'that to propose

an adjournment to any place to one so far removed by fortune and so

courted and caressed by the best society must ever appear intruding

even if not a pie-shop far below your present sphere and a back-parlour

though a civil man but if for the sake of Arthur--cannot overcome it

more improper now than ever late Doyce and Clennam--one last remark I

might wish to make one last explanation I might wish to offer perhaps

your good nature might excuse under pretence of three kidney ones the

humble place of conversation.'

Rightly interpreting this rather obscure speech, Little Dorrit returned

that she was quite at Flora's disposition. Flora accordingly led the

way across the road to the pie-shop in question: Mr F.'s Aunt stalking

across in the rear, and putting herself in the way of being run over,

with a perseverance worthy of a better cause.

When the 'three kidney ones,' which were to be a blind to the

conversation, were set before them on three little tin platters, each

kidney one ornamented with a hole at the top, into which the civil man

poured hot gravy out of a spouted can as if he were feeding three lamps,

Flora took out her pocket-handkerchief.

'If Fancy's fair dreams,' she began, 'have ever pictured that when

Arthur--cannot overcome it pray excuse me--was restored to freedom even

a pie as far from flaky as the present and so deficient in kidney as to

be in that respect like a minced nutmeg might not prove unacceptable if

offered by the hand of true regard such visions have for ever fled

and all is cancelled but being aware that tender relations are in

contemplation beg to state that I heartily wish well to both and find

no fault with either not the least, it may be withering to know that ere

the hand of Time had made me much less slim than formerly and dreadfully

red on the slightest exertion particularly after eating I well know when

it takes the form of a rash, it might have been and was not through the

interruption of parents and mental torpor succeeded until the mysterious

clue was held by Mr F. still I would not be ungenerous to either and I

heartily wish well to both.'

Little Dorrit took her hand, and thanked her for all her old kindness.

'Call it not kindness,' returned Flora, giving her an honest kiss, 'for

you always were the best and dearest little thing that ever was if I

may take the liberty and even in a money point of view a saving being

Conscience itself though I must add much more agreeable than mine ever

was to me for though not I hope more burdened than other people's yet

I have always found it far readier to make one uncomfortable than

comfortable and evidently taking a greater pleasure in doing it but I am

wandering, one hope I wish to express ere yet the closing scene draws

in and it is that I do trust for the sake of old times and old sincerity

that Arthur will know that I didn't desert him in his misfortunes but

that I came backwards and forwards constantly to ask if I could do

anything for him and that I sat in the pie-shop where they very civilly

fetched something warm in a tumbler from the hotel and really very nice

hours after hours to keep him company over the way without his knowing

it.'

Flora really had tears in her eyes now, and they showed her to great

advantage.

'Over and above which,' said Flora, 'I earnestly beg you as the dearest

thing that ever was if you'll still excuse the familiarity from one who

moves in very different circles to let Arthur understand that I don't

know after all whether it wasn't all nonsense between us though pleasant

at the time and trying too and certainly Mr F. did work a change and

the spell being broken nothing could be expected to take place without

weaving it afresh which various circumstances have combined to prevent

of which perhaps not the least powerful was that it was not to be, I

am not prepared to say that if it had been agreeable to Arthur and had

brought itself about naturally in the first instance I should not have

been very glad being of a lively disposition and moped at home where

papa undoubtedly is the most aggravating of his sex and not improved

since having been cut down by the hand of the Incendiary into something

of which I never saw the counterpart in all my life but jealousy is not

my character nor ill-will though many faults.'

Without having been able closely to follow Mrs Finching through this

labyrinth, Little Dorrit understood its purpose, and cordially accepted

the trust.

'The withered chaplet my dear,' said Flora, with great enjoyment, 'is

then perished the column is crumbled and the pyramid is standing upside

down upon its what's-his-name call it not giddiness call it not weakness

call it not folly I must now retire into privacy and look upon the ashes

of departed joys no more but taking a further liberty of paying for the

pastry which has formed the humble pretext of our interview will for

ever say Adieu!'

Mr F.'s Aunt, who had eaten her pie with great solemnity, and who had

been elaborating some grievous scheme of injury in her mind since her

first assumption of that public position on the Marshal's steps, took

the present opportunity of addressing the following Sibyllic apostrophe

to the relict of her late nephew.

'Bring him for'ard, and I'll chuck him out o' winder!'

Flora tried in vain to soothe the excellent woman by explaining that

they were going home to dinner. Mr F.'s Aunt persisted in replying,

'Bring him for'ard and I'll chuck him out o' winder!' Having reiterated

this demand an immense number of times, with a sustained glare of

defiance at Little Dorrit, Mr F.'s Aunt folded her arms, and sat down in

the corner of the pie-shop parlour; steadfastly refusing to budge until

such time as 'he' should have been 'brought for'ard,' and the chucking

portion of his destiny accomplished.

In this condition of things, Flora confided to Little Dorrit that she

had not seen Mr F.'s Aunt so full of life and character for weeks; that

she would find it necessary to remain there 'hours perhaps,' until the

inexorable old lady could be softened; and that she could manage her

best alone. They parted, therefore, in the friendliest manner, and with

the kindest feeling on both sides.

Mr F.'s Aunt holding out like a grim fortress, and Flora becoming in

need of refreshment, a messenger was despatched to the hotel for the

tumbler already glanced at, which was afterwards replenished. With the

aid of its content, a newspaper, and some skimming of the cream of the

pie-stock, Flora got through the remainder of the day in perfect good

humour; though occasionally embarrassed by the consequences of an

idle rumour which circulated among the credulous infants of the

neighbourhood, to the effect that an old lady had sold herself to the

pie-shop to be made up, and was then sitting in the pie-shop parlour,

declining to complete her contract. This attracted so many young persons

of both sexes, and, when the shades of evening began to fall, occasioned

so much interruption to the business, that the merchant became very

pressing in his proposals that Mr F.'s Aunt should be removed. A

conveyance was accordingly brought to the door, which, by the joint

efforts of the merchant and Flora, this remarkable woman was at last

induced to enter; though not without even then putting her head out of

the window, and demanding to have him 'brought for'ard' for the purpose

originally mentioned. As she was observed at this time to direct baleful

glances towards the Marshalsea, it has been supposed that this admirably

consistent female intended by 'him,' Arthur Clennam.

This, however, is mere speculation; who the person was, who, for the

satisfaction of Mr F.'s Aunt's mind, ought to have been brought forward

and never was brought forward, will never be positively known.

The autumn days went on, and Little Dorrit never came to the Marshalsea

now and went away without seeing him. No, no, no.

One morning, as Arthur listened for the light feet that every morning

ascended winged to his heart, bringing the heavenly brightness of a new

love into the room where the old love had wrought so hard and been so

true; one morning, as he listened, he heard her coming, not alone.

'Dear Arthur,' said her delighted voice outside the door, 'I have some

one here. May I bring some one in?'

He had thought from the tread there were two with her. He answered

'Yes,' and she came in with Mr Meagles. Sun-browned and jolly Mr

Meagles looked, and he opened his arms and folded Arthur in them, like a

sun-browned and jolly father.

'Now I am all right,' said Mr Meagles, after a minute or so. 'Now it's

over. Arthur, my dear fellow, confess at once that you expected me

before.' 'I did,' said Arthur; 'but Amy told me--' 'Little Dorrit. Never

any other name.' (It was she who whispered it.)

'--But my Little Dorrit told me that, without asking for any further

explanation, I was not to expect you until I saw you.'

'And now you see me, my boy,' said Mr Meagles, shaking him by the hand

stoutly; 'and now you shall have any explanation and every explanation.

The fact is, I was here--came straight to you from the Allongers

and Marshongers, or I should be ashamed to look you in the face this

day,--but you were not in company trim at the moment, and I had to start

off again to catch Doyce.'

'Poor Doyce!' sighed Arthur.

'Don't call him names that he don't deserve,' said Mr Meagles.

'He's not poor; he's doing well enough. Doyce is a wonderful fellow over

there. I assure you he is making out his case like a house a-fire. He

has fallen on his legs, has Dan. Where they don't want things done and

find a man to do 'em, that man's off his legs; but where they do want

things done and find a man to do 'em, that man's on his legs. You won't

have occasion to trouble the Circumlocution Office any more. Let me tell

you, Dan has done without 'em!'

'What a load you take from my mind!' cried Arthur. 'What happiness you

give me!'

'Happiness?' retorted Mr Meagles. 'Don't talk about happiness till you

see Dan. I assure you Dan is directing works and executing labours over

yonder, that it would make your hair stand on end to look at. He's no

public offender, bless you, now! He's medalled and ribboned, and starred

and crossed, and I don't-know-what all'd, like a born nobleman. But we

mustn't talk about that over here.'

'Why not?'

'Oh, egad!' said Mr Meagles, shaking his head very seriously, 'he must

hide all those things under lock and key when he comes over here. They

won't do over here. In that particular, Britannia is a Britannia in the

Manger--won't give her children such distinctions herself, and won't

allow them to be seen when they are given by other countries. No, no,

Dan!' said Mr Meagles, shaking his head again. 'That won't do here!'

'If you had brought me (except for Doyce's sake) twice what I have

lost,' cried Arthur, 'you would not have given me the pleasure that you

give me in this news.' 'Why, of course, of course,' assented Mr Meagles.

'Of course I know that, my good fellow, and therefore I come out with

it in the first burst. Now, to go back, about catching Doyce. I caught

Doyce. Ran against him among a lot of those dirty brown dogs in women's

nightcaps a great deal too big for 'em, calling themselves Arabs and all

sorts of incoherent races. YOU know 'em! Well! He was coming straight to

me, and I was going to him, and so we came back together.'

'Doyce in England!' exclaimed Arthur.

'There!' said Mr Meagles, throwing open his arms. 'I am the worst man

in the world to manage a thing of this sort. I don't know what I should

have done if I had been in the diplomatic line--right, perhaps! The long

and short of it is, Arthur, we have both been in England this fortnight.

And if you go on to ask where Doyce is at the present moment, why, my

plain answer is--here he is! And now I can breathe again at last!'

Doyce darted in from behind the door, caught Arthur by both hands, and

said the rest for himself.

'There are only three branches of my subject, my dear Clennam,' said

Doyce, proceeding to mould them severally, with his plastic thumb, on

the palm of his hand, 'and they're soon disposed of. First, not a word

more from you about the past. There was an error in your calculations.

I know what that is. It affects the whole machine, and failure is the

consequence. You will profit by the failure, and will avoid it another

time. I have done a similar thing myself, in construction, often. Every

failure teaches a man something, if he will learn; and you are too

sensible a man not to learn from this failure. So much for firstly.

Secondly. I was sorry you should have taken it so heavily to heart, and

reproached yourself so severely; I was travelling home night and day

to put matters right, with the assistance of our friend, when I fell in

with our friend as he has informed you. Thirdly. We two agreed, that,

after what you had undergone, after your distress of mind, and after

your illness, it would be a pleasant surprise if we could so far keep

quiet as to get things perfectly arranged without your knowledge, and

then come and say that all the affairs were smooth, that everything was

right, that the business stood in greater want of you than ever it did,

and that a new and prosperous career was opened before you and me as

partners. That's thirdly. But you know we always make an allowance for

friction, and so I have reserved space to close in. My dear Clennam,

I thoroughly confide in you; you have it in your power to be quite as

useful to me as I have, or have had, it in my power to be useful to you;

your old place awaits you, and wants you very much; there is nothing to

detain you here one half-hour longer.'

There was silence, which was not broken until Arthur had stood for some

time at the window with his back towards them, and until his little wife

that was to be had gone to him and stayed by him.

'I made a remark a little while ago,' said Daniel Doyce then, 'which I

am inclined to think was an incorrect one. I said there was nothing

to detain you here, Clennam, half an hour longer. Am I mistaken in

supposing that you would rather not leave here till to-morrow morning?

Do I know, without being very wise, where you would like to go, direct

from these walls and from this room?'

'You do,' returned Arthur. 'It has been our cherished purpose.'

'Very well!' said Doyce. 'Then, if this young lady will do me the honour

of regarding me for four-and-twenty hours in the light of a father, and

will take a ride with me now towards Saint Paul's Churchyard, I dare say

I know what we want to get there.'

Little Dorrit and he went out together soon afterwards, and Mr Meagles

lingered behind to say a word to his friend.

'I think, Arthur, you will not want Mother and me in the morning and

we will keep away. It might set Mother thinking about Pet; she's a

soft-hearted woman. She's best at the Cottage, and I'll stay there and

keep her company.'

With that they parted for the time. And the day ended, and the night

ended, and the morning came, and Little Dorrit, simply dressed as usual

and having no one with her but Maggy, came into the prison with the

sunshine. The poor room was a happy room that morning. Where in the

world was there a room so full of quiet joy!

'My dear love,' said Arthur. 'Why does Maggy light the fire? We shall be

gone directly.'

'I asked her to do it. I have taken such an odd fancy. I want you to

burn something for me.'

'What?'

'Only this folded paper. If you will put it in the fire with your own

hand, just as it is, my fancy will be gratified.'

'Superstitious, darling Little Dorrit? Is it a charm?'

'It is anything you like best, my own,' she answered, laughing with

glistening eyes and standing on tiptoe to kiss him, 'if you will only

humour me when the fire burns up.'

So they stood before the fire, waiting: Clennam with his arm about her

waist, and the fire shining, as fire in that same place had often shone,

in Little Dorrit's eyes. 'Is it bright enough now?' said Arthur. 'Quite

bright enough now,' said Little Dorrit. 'Does the charm want any words

to be said?' asked Arthur, as he held the paper over the flame. 'You can

say (if you don't mind) "I love you!"' answered Little Dorrit. So he said

it, and the paper burned away.

They passed very quietly along the yard; for no one was there, though

many heads were stealthily peeping from the windows.

Only one face, familiar of old, was in the Lodge. When they had both

accosted it, and spoken many kind words, Little Dorrit turned back one

last time with her hand stretched out, saying, 'Good-bye, good John! I

hope you will live very happy, dear!'

Then they went up the steps of the neighbouring Saint George's Church,

and went up to the altar, where Daniel Doyce was waiting in his paternal

character. And there was Little Dorrit's old friend who had given her

the Burial Register for a pillow; full of admiration that she should

come back to them to be married, after all.

And they were married with the sun shining on them through the painted

figure of Our Saviour on the window. And they went into the very room

where Little Dorrit had slumbered after her party, to sign the Marriage

Register. And there, Mr Pancks, (destined to be chief clerk to Doyce and

Clennam, and afterwards partner in the house), sinking the Incendiary

in the peaceful friend, looked in at the door to see it done, with Flora

gallantly supported on one arm and Maggy on the other, and a back-ground

of John Chivery and father and other turnkeys who had run round for the

moment, deserting the parent Marshalsea for its happy child. Nor had

Flora the least signs of seclusion upon her, notwithstanding her recent

declaration; but, on the contrary, was wonderfully smart, and enjoyed

the ceremonies mightily, though in a fluttered way.

Little Dorrit's old friend held the inkstand as she signed her name, and

the clerk paused in taking off the good clergyman's surplice, and all

the witnesses looked on with special interest. 'For, you see,' said

Little Dorrit's old friend, 'this young lady is one of our curiosities,

and has come now to the third volume of our Registers. Her birth is in

what I call the first volume; she lay asleep, on this very floor,

with her pretty head on what I call the second volume; and she's now

a-writing her little name as a bride in what I call the third volume.'

They all gave place when the signing was done, and Little Dorrit and her

husband walked out of the church alone. They paused for a moment on the

steps of the portico, looking at the fresh perspective of the street in

the autumn morning sun's bright rays, and then went down.

Went down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness. Went down

to give a mother's care, in the fulness of time, to Fanny's neglected

children no less than to their own, and to leave that lady going into

Society for ever and a day. Went down to give a tender nurse and friend

to Tip for some few years, who was never vexed by the great exactions he

made of her in return for the riches he might have given her if he had

ever had them, and who lovingly closed his eyes upon the Marshalsea

and all its blighted fruits. They went quietly down into the roaring

streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine

and shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and

the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar.