Chapter X - The Law-Writer

On the eastern borders of Chancery Lane, that is to say, more particularly in Cook's Court, Cursitor Street, Mr Snagsby, law-stationer, pursues his lawful calling. In the shade of Cook's Court, at most times a shady place, Mr Snagsby has dealt in all sorts of blank forms of legal process; in skins and rolls of parchment; in paper--foolscap, brief, draft, brown, white, whitey- brown, and blotting; in stamps; in office-quills, pens, ink, India- rubber, pounce, pins, pencils, sealing-wax, and wafers; in red tape and green ferret; in pocket-books, almanacs, diaries, and law lists; in string boxes, rulers, inkstands--glass and leaden--pen-knives, scissors, bodkins, and other small office-cutlery; in short, in articles too numerous to mention, ever since he was out of his time and went into partnership with Peffer. On that occasion, Cook's Court was in a manner revolutionized by the new inscription in fresh paint, PEFFER AND SNAGSBY, displacing the time-honoured and not easily to be deciphered legend PEFFER only. For smoke, which is the London ivy, had so wreathed itself round Peffer's name and clung to his dwelling-place that the affectionate parasite quite overpowered the parent tree.

Peffer is never seen in Cook's Court now. He is not expected there, for he has been recumbent this quarter of a century in the churchyard of St. Andrews, Holborn, with the waggons and hackney- coaches roaring past him all the day and half the night like one great dragon. If he ever steal forth when the dragon is at rest to air himself again in Cook's Court until admonished to return by the crowing of the sanguine cock in the cellar at the little dairy in Cursitor Street, whose ideas of daylight it would be curious to ascertain, since he knows from his personal observation next to nothing about it--if Peffer ever do revisit the pale glimpses of Cook's Court, which no law-stationer in the trade can positively deny, he comes invisibly, and no one is the worse or wiser.

In his lifetime, and likewise in the period of Snagsby's ‘time’ of seven long years, there dwelt with Peffer in the same law- stationering premises a niece--a short, shrewd niece, something too violently compressed about the waist, and with a sharp nose like a sharp autumn evening, inclining to be frosty towards the end. The Cook's Courtiers had a rumour flying among them that the mother of this niece did, in her daughter's childhood, moved by too jealous a solicitude that her figure should approach perfection, lace her up every morning with her maternal foot against the bed-post for a stronger hold and purchase; and further, that she exhibited internally pints of vinegar and lemon-juice, which acids, they held, had mounted to the nose and temper of the patient. With whichsoever of the many tongues of Rumour this frothy report originated, it either never reached or never influenced the ears of young Snagsby, who, having

wooed and won its fair subject on his arrival at man's estate, entered into two partnerships at once. So now, in Cook's Court, Cursitor Street, Mr Snagsby and the niece are one; and the niece still cherishes her figure, which, however tastes may differ, is unquestionably so far precious that there is mighty little of it.

Mr and Mrs Snagsby are not only one bone and one flesh, but, to the neighbours' thinking, one voice too. That voice, appearing to proceed from Mrs Snagsby alone, is heard in Cook's Court very often. Mr Snagsby, otherwise than as he finds expression through these dulcet tones, is rarely heard. He is a mild, bald, timid man with a shining head and a scrubby clump of black hair sticking out at the back. He tends to meekness and obesity. As he stands at his door in Cook's Court in his grey shop-coat and black calico sleeves, looking up at the clouds, or stands behind a desk in his dark shop with a heavy flat ruler, snipping and slicing at sheepskin in company with his two 'prentices, he is emphatically a retiring and unassuming man. From beneath his feet, at such times, as from a shrill ghost unquiet in its grave, there frequently arise complainings and lamentations in the voice already mentioned; and haply, on some occasions when these reach a sharper pitch than usual, Mr Snagsby mentions to the 'prentices, 'I think my little woman is a-giving it to Guster!'

This proper name, so used by Mr Snagsby, has before now sharpened the wit of the Cook's Courtiers to remark that it ought to be the name of Mrs Snagsby, seeing that she might with great force and expression be termed a Guster, in compliment to her stormy character. It is, however, the possession, and the only possession except fifty shillings per annum and a very small box indifferently filled with clothing, of a lean young woman from a workhouse (by some supposed to have been christened Augusta) who, although she was farmed or contracted for during her growing time by an amiable benefactor of his species resident at Tooting, and cannot fail to have been developed under the most favourable circumstances, 'has fits,' which the parish can't account for.

Guster, really aged three or four and twenty, but looking a round ten years older, goes cheap with this unaccountable drawback of fits, and is so apprehensive of being returned on the hands of her patron saint that except when she is found with her head in the pail, or the sink, or the copper, or the dinner, or anything else that happens to be near her at the time of her seizure, she is always at work. She is a satisfaction to the parents and guardians of the 'prentices, who feel that there is little danger of her inspiring tender emotions in the breast of youth; she is a satisfaction to Mrs Snagsby, who can always find fault with her; she is a satisfaction to Mr Snagsby, who thinks it a charity to keep her. The law-stationer's establishment is, in Guster's eyes, a temple of plenty and splendour. She believes the little drawing-

room upstairs, always kept, as one may say, with its hair in papers and its pinafore on, to be the most elegant apartment in Christendom. The view it commands of Cook's Court at one end (not to mention a squint into Cursitor Street) and of Coavinses' the sheriff's officer's backyard at the other she regards as a prospect of unequalled beauty. The portraits it displays in oil--and plenty of it too--of Mr Snagsby looking at Mrs Snagsby and of Mrs Snagsby looking at Mr Snagsby are in her eyes as achievements of Raphael or Titian. Guster has some recompenses for her many privations.

Mr Snagsby refers everything not in the practical mysteries of the business to Mrs Snagsby. She manages the money, reproaches the tax-gatherers, appoints the times and places of devotion on Sundays, licenses Mr Snagsby's entertainments, and acknowledges no responsibility as to what she thinks fit to provide for dinner, insomuch that she is the high standard of comparison among the neighbouring wives a long way down Chancery Lane on both sides, and even out in Holborn, who in any domestic passages of arms habitually call upon their husbands to look at the difference between their (the wives') position and Mrs Snagsby's, and their (the husbands') behaviour and Mr Snagsby's. Rumour, always flying bat-like about Cook's Court and skimming in and out at everybody's windows, does say that Mrs Snagsby is jealous and inquisitive and that Mr Snagsby is sometimes worried out of house and home, and that if he had the spirit of a mouse he wouldn't stand it. It is even observed that the wives who quote him to their self-willed husbands as a shining example in reality look down upon him and that nobody does so with greater superciliousness than one particular lady whose lord is more than suspected of laying his umbrella on her as an instrument of correction. But these vague whisperings may arise from Mr Snagsby's being in his way rather a meditative and poetical man, loving to walk in Staple Inn in the summer-time and to observe how countrified the sparrows and the leaves are, also to lounge about the Rolls Yard of a Sunday afternoon and to remark (if in good spirits) that there were old times once and that you'd find a stone coffin or two now under that chapel, he'll be bound, if you was to dig for it. He solaces his imagination, too, by thinking of the many Chancellors and Vices, and Masters of the Rolls who are deceased; and he gets such a flavour of the country out of telling the two 'prentices how he HAS heard say that a brook ‘as clear as crystial’ once ran right down the middle of Holborn, when Turnstile really was a turnstile, leading slap away into the meadows--gets such a flavour of the country out of this that he never wants to go there.

The day is closing in and the gas is lighted, but is not yet fully effective, for it is not quite dark. Mr Snagsby standing at his shop-door looking up at the clouds sees a crow who is out late skim westward over the slice of sky belonging to Cook's Court. The crow

flies straight across Chancery Lane and Lincoln's Inn Garden into Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Here, in a large house, formerly a house of state, lives Mr Tulkinghorn. It is let off in sets of chambers now, and in those shrunken fragments of its greatness, lawyers lie like maggots in nuts. But its roomy staircases, passages, and antechambers still remain; and even its painted ceilings, where Allegory, in Roman helmet and celestial linen, sprawls among balustrades and pillars, flowers, clouds, and big-legged boys, and makes the head ache--as would seem to be Allegory's object always, more or less. Here, among his many boxes labelled with transcendent names, lives Mr Tulkinghorn, when not speechlessly at home in country-houses where the great ones of the earth are bored to death. Here he is to-day, quiet at his table. An oyster of the old school whom nobody can open.

Like as he is to look at, so is his apartment in the dusk of the present afternoon. Rusty, out of date, withdrawing from attention, able to afford it. Heavy, broad-backed, old-fashioned, mahogany- and-horsehair chairs, not easily lifted; obsolete tables with spindle-legs and dusty baize covers; presentation prints of the holders of great titles in the last generation or the last but one, environ him. A thick and dingy Turkey-carpet muffles the floor where he sits, attended by two candles in old-fashioned silver candlesticks that give a very insufficient light to his large room. The titles on the backs of his books have retired into the binding; everything that can have a lock has got one; no key is visible. Very few loose papers are about. He has some manuscript near him, but is not referring to it. With the round top of an inkstand and two broken bits of sealing-wax he is silently and slowly working out whatever train of indecision is in his mind. Now the inkstand top is in the middle, now the red bit of sealing-wax, now the black bit. That's not it. Mr Tulkinghorn must gather them all up and begin again.

Here, beneath the painted ceiling, with foreshortened Allegory staring down at his intrusion as if it meant to swoop upon him, and he cutting it dead, Mr Tulkinghorn has at once his house and office. He keeps no staff, only one middle-aged man, usually a little out at elbows, who sits in a high pew in the hall and is rarely overburdened with business. Mr Tulkinghorn is not in a common way. He wants no clerks. He is a great reservoir of confidences, not to be so tapped. His clients want HIM; he is all in all. Drafts that he requires to be drawn are drawn by special- pleaders in the temple on mysterious instructions; fair copies that he requires to be made are made at the stationers', expense being no consideration. The middle-aged man in the pew knows scarcely more of the affairs of the peerage than any crossing-sweeper in Holborn.

The red bit, the black bit, the inkstand top, the other inkstand top, the little sand-box. So! You to the middle, you to the right, you to the left. This train of indecision must surely be worked out now or never. Now! Mr Tulkinghorn gets up, adjusts his spectacles, puts on his hat, puts the manuscript in his pocket, goes out, tells the middle-aged man out at elbows, 'I shall be back presently.' Very rarely tells him anything more explicit.

Mr Tulkinghorn goes, as the crow came--not quite so straight, but nearly--to Cook's Court, Cursitor Street. To Snagsby's, Law-Stationer's, Deeds engrossed and copied, Law-Writing executed in all its branches, &c., &c., &c.

It is somewhere about five or six o'clock in the afternoon, and a balmy fragrance of warm tea hovers in Cook's Court. It hovers about Snagsby's door. The hours are early there: dinner at half-past one and supper at half-past nine. Mr Snagsby was about to descend into the subterranean regions to take tea when he looked out of his door just now and saw the crow who was out late.

'Master at home?' Guster is minding the shop, for the 'prentices take tea in the kitchen with Mr and Mrs Snagsby; consequently, the robe-maker's two daughters, combing their curls at the two glasses in the two second-floor windows of the opposite house, are not driving the two 'prentices to distraction as they fondly suppose, but are merely awakening the unprofitable admiration of Guster, whose hair won't grow, and never would, and it is confidently thought, never will.

'Master at home?' says Mr Tulkinghorn.

Master is at home, and Guster will fetch him. Guster disappears, glad to get out of the shop, which she regards with mingled dread and veneration as a storehouse of awful implements of the great torture of the law--a place not to be entered after the gas is turned off.

Mr Snagsby appears, greasy, warm, herbaceous, and chewing. Bolts a bit of bread and butter. Says, 'Bless my soul, sir! Mr Tulkinghorn!'

'I want half a word with you, Snagsby.'

'Certainly, sir! Dear me, sir, why didn't you send your young man round for me? Pray walk into the back shop, sir.' Snagsby has brightened in a moment.

The confined room, strong of parchment-grease, is warehouse, counting-house, and copying-office. Mr Tulkinghorn sits, facing round, on a stool at the desk.

‘Jarndyce and Jarndyce, Snagsby.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Mr Snagsby turns up the gas and coughs behind his hand, modestly anticipating profit. Mr Snagsby, as a timid man, is accustomed to cough with a variety of expressions, and so to save words.

‘You copied some affidavits in that cause for me lately.’

‘Yes, sir, we did.’

‘There was one of them,’ says Mr Tulkinghorn, carelessly feeling--tight, unopenable oyster of the old school!--in the wrong coat- pocket, ‘the handwriting of which is peculiar, and I rather like. As I happened to be passing, and thought I had it about me, I looked in to ask you--but I haven't got it. No matter, any other time will do. Ah! here it is! I looked in to ask you who copied this.’

‘Who copied this, sir?’ says Mr Snagsby, taking it, laying it flat on the desk, and separating all the sheets at once with a twirl and a twist of the left hand peculiar to lawstationers. ‘We gave this out, sir. We were giving out rather a large quantity of work just at that time. I can tell you in a moment who copied it, sir, by referring to my book.’

Mr Snagsby takes his book down from the safe, makes another bolt of the bit of bread and butter which seemed to have stopped short, eyes the affidavit aside, and brings his right forefinger travelling down a page of the book, ‘Jewby--Packer--Jarndyce.’

‘Jarndyce! Here we are, sir,’ says Mr Snagsby. ‘To be sure! I might have remembered it. This was given out, sir, to a writer who lodges just over on the opposite side of the lane.’

Mr Tulkinghorn has seen the entry, found it before the law- stationer, read it while the forefinger was coming down the hill.

‘WHAT do you call him? Nemo?’ says Mr Tulkinghorn. ‘Nemo, sir. Here it is. Forty-two folio. Given out on the Wednesday night at eight o'clock, brought in on the Thursday morning at half after nine.’

‘Nemo!’ repeats Mr Tulkinghorn. ‘Nemo is Latin for no one.’

‘It must be English for some one, sir, I think,’ Mr Snagsby submits with his deferential cough. ‘It is a person's name. Here it is, you see, sir! Forty-two folio. Given out Wednesday night, eight o'clock; brought in Thursday morning, half after nine.’

The tail of Mr Snagsby's eye becomes conscious of the head of Mrs Snagsby looking in at the shop-door to know what he means by deserting his tea. Mr Snagsby addresses an explanatory cough to Mrs Snagsby, as who should say, 'My dear, a customer!'

'Half after nine, sir,' repeats Mr Snagsby. 'Our law-writers, who live by job-work, are a queer lot; and this may not be his name, but it's the name he goes by. I remember now, sir, that he gives it in a written advertisement he sticks up down at the Rule Office, and the King's Bench Office, and the Judges' Chambers, and so forth. You know the kind of document, sir--wanting employ?'

Mr Tulkinghorn glances through the little window at the back of Coavinses', the sheriff's officer's, where lights shine in Coavinses' windows. Coavinses' coffee-room is at the back, and the shadows of several gentlemen under a cloud loom cloudily upon the blinds. Mr Snagsby takes the opportunity of slightly turning his head to glance over his shoulder at his little woman and to make apologetic motions with his mouth to this effect: 'Tul-king-horn-- rich--in-flu-en-tial!'

'Have you given this man work before?' asks Mr Tulkinghorn.

'Oh, dear, yes, sir! Work of yours.'

'Thinking of more important matters, I forget where you said he lived?'

'Across the lane, sir. In fact, he lodges at a--' Mr Snagsby makes another bolt, as if the bit of bread and buffer were insurmountable '--at a rag and bottle shop.'

'Can you show me the place as I go back?'

'With the greatest pleasure, sir!'

Mr Snagsby pulls off his sleeves and his grey coat, pulls on his black coat, takes his hat from its peg. 'Oh! Here is my little woman!' he says aloud. 'My dear, will you be so kind as to tell one of the lads to look after the shop while I step across the lane with Mr Tulkinghorn? Mrs Snagsby, sir--I shan't be two minutes, my love!'

Mrs Snagsby bends to the lawyer, retires behind the counter, peeps at them through the window-blind, goes softly into the back office, refers to the entries in the book still lying open. Is evidently curious.

'You will find that the place is rough, sir,' says Mr Snagsby, walking deferentially in the road and leaving the narrow pavement to the lawyer; 'and the party is very rough. But they're a wild lot in general,

sir. The advantage of this particular man is that he never wants sleep. He'll go at it right on end if you want him to, as long as ever you like.'

It is quite dark now, and the gas-lamps have acquired their full effect. Jostling against clerks going to post the day's letters, and against counsel and attorneys going home to dinner, and against plaintiffs and defendants and suitors of all sorts, and against the general crowd, in whose way the forensic wisdom of ages has interposed a million of obstacles to the transaction of the commonest business of life; diving through law and equity, and through that kindred mystery, the street mud, which is made of nobody knows what and collects about us nobody knows whence or how-- we only knowing in general that when there is too much of it we find it necessary to shovel it away--the lawyer and the law-stationer come to a rag and bottle shop and general emporium of much disregarded merchandise, lying and being in the shadow of the wall of Lincoln's Inn, and kept, as is announced in paint, to all whom it may concern, by one Krook.

'This is where he lives, sir,' says the law-stationer.

'This is where he lives, is it?' says the lawyer unconcernedly. 'Thank you.'

'Are you not going in, sir?'

'No, thank you, no; I am going on to the Fields at present. Good evening. Thank you!' Mr Snagsby lifts his hat and returns to his little woman and his tea.

But Mr Tulkinghorn does not go on to the Fields at present. He goes a short way, turns back, comes again to the shop of Mr Krook, and enters it straight. It is dim enough, with a blot-headed candle or so in the windows, and an old man and a cat sitting in the back part by a fire. The old man rises and comes forward, with another blot-headed candle in his hand.

'Pray is your lodger within?'

'Male or female, sir?' says Mr Krook.

'Male. The person who does copying.'

Mr Krook has eyed his man narrowly. Knows him by sight. Has an indistinct impression of his aristocratic repute.

'Did you wish to see him, sir?'

'Yes.'

‘It's what I seldom do myself,’ says Mr Krook with a grin. ‘Shall I call him down? But it's a weak chance if he'd come, sir!’

‘I'll go up to him, then,’ says Mr Tulkinghorn.

‘Second floor, sir. Take the candle. Up there!’ Mr Krook, with his cat beside him, stands at the bottom of the staircase, looking after Mr Tulkinghorn. ‘Hi-hi!’ he says when Mr Tulkinghorn has nearly disappeared. The lawyer looks down over the hand-rail. The cat expands her wicked mouth and snarls at him.

‘Order, Lady Jane! Behave yourself to visitors, my lady! You know what they say of my lodger?’ whispers Krook, going up a step or two.

‘What do they say of him?’

‘They say he has sold himself to the enemy, but you and I know better--he don't buy. I'll tell you what, though; my lodger is so black-humoured and gloomy that I believe he'd as soon make that bargain as any other. Don't put him out, sir. That's my advice!’

Mr Tulkinghorn with a nod goes on his way. He comes to the dark door on the second floor. He knocks, receives no answer, opens it, and accidentally extinguishes his candle in doing so.

The air of the room is almost bad enough to have extinguished it if he had not. It is a small room, nearly black with soot, and grease, and dirt. In the rusty skeleton of a grate, pinched at the middle as if poverty had gripped it, a red coke fire burns low. In the corner by the chimney stand a deal table and a broken desk, a wilderness marked with a rain of ink. In another corner a ragged old portmanteau on one of the two chairs serves for cabinet or wardrobe; no larger one is needed, for it collapses like the cheeks of a starved man. The floor is bare, except that one old mat, trodden to shreds of rope-yarn, lies perishing upon the hearth. No curtain veils the darkness of the night, but the discoloured shutters are drawn together, and through the two gaunt holes pierced in them, famine might be staring in--the banshee of the man upon the bed.

For, on a low bed opposite the fire, a confusion of dirty patchwork, lean-ribbed ticking, and coarse sacking, the lawyer, hesitating just within the doorway, sees a man. He lies there, dressed in shirt and trousers, with bare feet. He has a yellow look in the spectral darkness of a candle that has guttered down until the whole length of its wick (still burning) has doubled over and left a tower of winding-sheet above it. His hair is ragged, mingling with his whiskers and his beard--the latter, ragged too, and grown, like the scum and mist around him, in neglect. Foul and filthy as the room is, foul and filthy as the

air is, it is not easy to perceive what fumes those are which most oppress the senses in it; but through the general sickliness and faintness, and the odour of stale tobacco, there comes into the lawyer's mouth the bitter, vapid taste of opium.

'Hallo, my friend!' he cries, and strikes his iron candlestick against the door.

He thinks he has awakened his friend. He lies a little turned away, but his eyes are surely open.

'Hallo, my friend!' he cries again. 'Hallo! Hallo!'

As he rattles on the door, the candle which has drooped so long goes out and leaves him in the dark, with the gaunt eyes in the shutters staring down upon the bed.