

CHAPTER LI - Enlightened

When Mr Woodcourt arrived in London, he went, that very same day, to Mr Vholes's in Symond's Inn. For he never once, from the moment when I entreated him to be a friend to Richard, neglected or forgot his promise. He had told me that he accepted the charge as a sacred trust, and he was ever true to it in that spirit.

He found Mr Vholes in his office and informed Mr Vholes of his agreement with Richard that he should call there to learn his address.

'Just so, sir,' said Mr Vholes. 'Mr C.'s address is not a hundred miles from here, sir, Mr C.'s address is not a hundred miles from here. Would you take a seat, sir?'

Mr Woodcourt thanked Mr Vholes, but he had no business with him beyond what he had mentioned.

'Just so, sir. I believe, sir,' said Mr Vholes, still quietly insisting on the seat by not giving the address, 'that you have influence with Mr C. Indeed I am aware that you have.'

'I was not aware of it myself,' returned Mr Woodcourt; 'but I suppose you know best.'

'Sir,' rejoined Mr Vholes, self-contained as usual, voice and all, 'it is a part of my professional duty to know best. It is a part of my professional duty to study and to understand a gentleman who confides his interests to me. In my professional duty I shall not be wanting, sir, if I know it. I may, with the best intentions, be wanting in it without knowing it; but not if I know it, sir.'

Mr Woodcourt again mentioned the address.

'Give me leave, sir,' said Mr Vholes. 'Bear with me for a moment. Sir, Mr C. is playing for a considerable stake, and cannot play without--need I say what?'

'Money, I presume?'

'Sir,' said Mr Vholes, 'to be honest with you (honesty being my golden rule, whether I gain by it or lose, and I find that I generally lose), money is the word. Now, sir, upon the chances of Mr C.'s game I express to you no opinion, NO opinion. It might be highly impolitic in Mr C., after playing so long and so high, to leave off; it might be the reverse; I say nothing. No, sir,' said Mr Vholes, bringing his hand flat down upon his desk in a positive manner, 'nothing.'

'You seem to forget,' returned Mr Woodcourt, 'that I ask you to say nothing and have no interest in anything you say.'

'Pardon me, sir!' retorted Mr Vholes. 'You do yourself an injustice. No, sir! Pardon me! You shall not--shall not in my office, if I know it--do yourself an injustice. You are interested in anything, and in everything, that relates to your friend. I know human nature much better, sir, than to admit for an instant that a gentleman of your appearance is not interested in whatever concerns his friend.'

'Well,' replied Mr Woodcourt, 'that may be. I am particularly interested in his address.'

'The number, sir,' said Mr Vholes parenthetically, 'I believe I have already mentioned. If Mr C. is to continue to play for this considerable stake, sir, he must have funds. Understand me! There are funds in hand at present. I ask for nothing; there are funds in hand. But for the onward play, more funds must be provided, unless Mr C. is to throw away what he has already ventured, which is wholly and solely a point for his consideration. This, sir, I take the opportunity of stating openly to you as the friend of Mr C. Without funds I shall always be happy to appear and act for Mr C. to the extent of all such costs as are safe to be allowed out of the estate, not beyond that. I could not go beyond that, sir, without wronging some one. I must either wrong my three dear girls or my venerable father, who is entirely dependent on me, in the Vale of Taunton; or some one. Whereas, sir, my resolution is (call it weakness or folly if you please) to wrong no one.'

Mr Woodcourt rather sternly rejoined that he was glad to hear it.

'I wish, sir,' said Mr Vholes, 'to leave a good name behind me. Therefore I take every opportunity of openly stating to a friend of Mr C. how Mr C. is situated. As to myself, sir, the labourer is worthy of his hire. If I undertake to put my shoulder to the wheel, I do it, and I earn what I get. I am here for that purpose. My name is painted on the door outside, with that object.'

'And Mr Carstone's address, Mr Vholes?'

'Sir,' returned Mr Vholes, 'as I believe I have already mentioned, it is next door. On the second story you will find Mr C.'s apartments. Mr C. desires to be near his professional adviser, and I am far from objecting, for I court inquiry.'

Upon this Mr Woodcourt wished Mr Vholes good day and went in search of Richard, the change in whose appearance he began to understand now but too well.

He found him in a dull room, fadedly furnished, much as I had found him in his barrack-room but a little while before, except that he was not writing but was sitting with a book before him, from which his eyes and thoughts were far astray. As the door chanced to be standing open, Mr Woodcourt was in his presence for some moments without being perceived, and he told me that he never could forget the haggardness of his face and the dejection of his manner before he was aroused from his dream.

‘Woodcourt, my dear fellow,’ cried Richard, starting up with extended hands, ‘you come upon my vision like a ghost.’

‘A friendly one,’ he replied, ‘and only waiting, as they say ghosts do, to be addressed. How does the mortal world go?’ They were seated now, near together.

‘Badly enough, and slowly enough,’ said Richard, ‘speaking at least for my part of it.’

‘What part is that?’

‘The Chancery part.’

‘I never heard,’ returned Mr Woodcourt, shaking his head, ‘of its going well yet.’

‘Nor I,’ said Richard moodily. ‘Who ever did?’ He brightened again in a moment and said with his natural openness, ‘Woodcourt, I should be sorry to be misunderstood by you, even if I gained by it in your estimation. You must know that I have done no good this long time. I have not intended to do much harm, but I seem to have been capable of nothing else. It may be that I should have done better by keeping out of the net into which my destiny has worked me, but I think not, though I dare say you will soon hear, if you have not already heard, a very different opinion. To make short of a long story, I am afraid I have wanted an object; but I have an object now--or it has me--and it is too late to discuss it. Take me as I am, and make the best of me.’

‘A bargain,’ said Mr Woodcourt. ‘Do as much by me in return.’

‘Oh! You,’ returned Richard, ‘you can pursue your art for its own sake, and can put your hand upon the plough and never turn, and can strike a purpose out of anything. You and I are very different creatures.’

He spoke regretfully and lapsed for a moment into his weary condition.

'Well, well!' he cried, shaking it off. 'Everything has an end. We shall see! So you will take me as I am, and make the best of me?'

'Aye! Indeed I will.' They shook hands upon it laughingly, but in deep earnestness. I can answer for one of them with my heart of hearts.

'You come as a godsend,' said Richard, 'for I have seen nobody here yet but Vholes. Woodcourt, there is one subject I should like to mention, for once and for all, in the beginning of our treaty. You can hardly make the best of me if I don't. You know, I dare say, that I have an attachment to my cousin Ada?'

Mr Woodcourt replied that I had hinted as much to him. 'Now pray,' returned Richard, 'don't think me a heap of selfishness. Don't suppose that I am splitting my head and half breaking my heart over this miserable Chancery suit for my own rights and interests alone. Ada's are bound up with mine; they can't be separated; Vholes works for both of us. Do think of that!'

He was so very solicitous on this head that Mr Woodcourt gave him the strongest assurances that he did him no injustice.

'You see,' said Richard, with something pathetic in his manner of lingering on the point, though it was off-hand and unstudied, 'to an upright fellow like you, bringing a friendly face like yours here, I cannot bear the thought of appearing selfish and mean. I want to see Ada righted, Woodcourt, as well as myself; I want to do my utmost to right her, as well as myself; I venture what I can scrape together to extricate her, as well as myself. Do, I beseech you, think of that!'

Afterwards, when Mr Woodcourt came to reflect on what had passed, he was so very much impressed by the strength of Richard's anxiety on this point that in telling me generally of his first visit to Symond's Inn he particularly dwelt upon it. It revived a fear I had had before that my dear girl's little property would be absorbed by Mr Vholes and that Richard's justification to himself would be sincerely this. It was just as I began to take care of Caddy that the interview took place, and I now return to the time when Caddy had recovered and the shade was still between me and my darling.

I proposed to Ada that morning that we should go and see Richard. It a little surprised me to find that she hesitated and was not so radiantly willing as I had expected.

'My dear,' said I, 'you have not had any difference with Richard since I have been so much away?'

'No, Esther.'

'Not heard of him, perhaps?' said I.

'Yes, I have heard of him,' said Ada.

Such tears in her eyes, and such love in her face. I could not make my darling out. Should I go to Richard's by myself? I said. No, Ada thought I had better not go by myself. Would she go with me? Yes, Ada thought she had better go with me. Should we go now? Yes, let us go now. Well, I could not understand my darling, with the tears in her eyes and the love in her face!

We were soon equipped and went out. It was a sombre day, and drops of chill rain fell at intervals. It was one of those colourless days when everything looks heavy and harsh. The houses frowned at us, the dust rose at us, the smoke swooped at us, nothing made any compromise about itself or wore a softened aspect. I fancied my beautiful girl quite out of place in the rugged streets, and I thought there were more funerals passing along the dismal pavements than I had ever seen before.

We had first to find out Symond's Inn. We were going to inquire in a shop when Ada said she thought it was near Chancery Lane. 'We are not likely to be far out, my love, if we go in that direction,' said I. So to Chancery Lane we went, and there, sure enough, we saw it written up. Symond's Inn.

We had next to find out the number. 'Or Mr Vholes's office will do,' I recollected, 'for Mr Vholes's office is next door.' Upon which Ada said, perhaps that was Mr Vholes's office in the corner there. And it really was.

Then came the question, which of the two next doors? I was going for the one, and my darling was going for the other; and my darling was right again. So up we went to the second story, when we came to Richard's name in great white letters on a hearse-like panel.

I should have knocked, but Ada said perhaps we had better turn the handle and go in. Thus we came to Richard, poring over a table covered with dusty bundles of papers which seemed to me like dusty mirrors reflecting his own mind. Wherever I looked I saw the ominous words that ran in it repeated. Jarndyce and Jarndyce.

He received us very affectionately, and we sat down. 'If you had come a little earlier,' he said, 'you would have found Woodcourt here. There never was such a good fellow as Woodcourt is. He finds time to look in between-whiles, when anybody else with half his work to do would be thinking about not being able to come. And he is so cheery, so fresh,

so sensible, so earnest, so--everything that I am not, that the place brightens whenever he comes, and darkens whenever he goes again.'

'God bless him,' I thought, 'for his truth to me!'

'He is not so sanguine, Ada,' continued Richard, casting his dejected look over the bundles of papers, 'as Vholes and I are usually, but he is only an outsider and is not in the mysteries. We have gone into them, and he has not. He can't be expected to know much of such a labyrinth.'

As his look wandered over the papers again and he passed his two hands over his head, I noticed how sunken and how large his eyes appeared, how dry his lips were, and how his finger-nails were all bitten away.

'Is this a healthy place to live in, Richard, do you think?' said I.

'Why, my dear Minerva,' answered Richard with his old gay laugh, 'it is neither a rural nor a cheerful place; and when the sun shines here, you may lay a pretty heavy wager that it is shining brightly in an open spot. But it's well enough for the time. It's near the offices and near Vholes.'

'Perhaps,' I hinted, 'a change from both--'

'Might do me good?' said Richard, forcing a laugh as he finished the sentence. 'I shouldn't wonder! But it can only come in one way now--in one of two ways, I should rather say. Either the suit must be ended, Esther, or the suitor. But it shall be the suit, my dear girl, the suit, my dear girl!'

These latter words were addressed to Ada, who was sitting nearest to him. Her face being turned away from me and towards him, I could not see it.

'We are doing very well,' pursued Richard. 'Vholes will tell you so. We are really spinning along. Ask Vholes. We are giving them no rest. Vholes knows all their windings and turnings, and we are upon them everywhere. We have astonished them already. We shall rouse up that nest of sleepers, mark my words!'

His hopefulness had long been more painful to me than his despondency; it was so unlike hopefulness, had something so fierce in its determination to be it, was so hungry and eager, and yet so conscious of being forced and unsustainable that it had long touched me to the heart. But the commentary upon it now indelibly written in his handsome face made it far more distressing than it used to be. I

say indelibly, for I felt persuaded that if the fatal cause could have been for ever terminated, according to his brightest visions, in that same hour, the traces of the premature anxiety, self-reproach, and disappointment it had occasioned him would have remained upon his features to the hour of his death.

‘The sight of our dear little woman,’ said Richard, Ada still remaining silent and quiet, ‘is so natural to me, and her compassionate face is so like the face of old days--’

Ah! No, no. I smiled and shook my head.

‘--So exactly like the face of old days,’ said Richard in his cordial voice, and taking my hand with the brotherly regard which nothing ever changed, ‘that I can't make pretences with her. I fluctuate a little; that's the truth. Sometimes I hope, my dear, and sometimes I--don't quite despair, but nearly. I get,’ said Richard, relinquishing my hand gently and walking across the room, ‘so tired!’

He took a few turns up and down and sunk upon the sofa. ‘I get,’ he repeated gloomily, ‘so tired. It is such weary, weary work!’

He was leaning on his arm saying these words in a meditative voice and looking at the ground when my darling rose, put off her bonnet, kneeled down beside him with her golden hair falling like sunlight on his head, clasped her two arms round his neck, and turned her face to me. Oh, what a loving and devoted face I saw!

‘Esther, dear,’ she said very quietly, ‘I am not going home again.’

A light shone in upon me all at once.

‘Never any more. I am going to stay with my dear husband. We have been married above two months. Go home without me, my own Esther; I shall never go home any more!’ With those words my darling drew his head down on her breast and held it there. And if ever in my life I saw a love that nothing but death could change, I saw it then before me.

‘Speak to Esther, my dearest,’ said Richard, breaking the silence presently. ‘Tell her how it was.’

I met her before she could come to me and folded her in my arms. We neither of us spoke, but with her cheek against my own I wanted to hear nothing. ‘My pet,’ said I. ‘My love. My poor, poor girl!’ I pitied her so much. I was very fond of Richard, but the impulse that I had upon me was to pity her so much.

'Esther, will you forgive me? Will my cousin John forgive me?'

'My dear,' said I, 'to doubt it for a moment is to do him a great wrong. And as to me!' Why, as to me, what had I to forgive!

I dried my sobbing darling's eyes and sat beside her on the sofa, and Richard sat on my other side; and while I was reminded of that so different night when they had first taken me into their confidence and had gone on in their own wild happy way, they told me between them how it was.

'All I had was Richard's,' Ada said; 'and Richard would not take it, Esther, and what could I do but be his wife when I loved him dearly!'

'And you were so fully and so kindly occupied, excellent Dame Durden,' said Richard, 'that how could we speak to you at such a time! And besides, it was not a long-considered step. We went out one morning and were married.'

'And when it was done, Esther,' said my darling, 'I was always thinking how to tell you and what to do for the best. And sometimes I thought you ought to know it directly, and sometimes I thought you ought not to know it and keep it from my cousin John; and I could not tell what to do, and I fretted very much.'

How selfish I must have been not to have thought of this before! I don't know what I said now. I was so sorry, and yet I was so fond of them and so glad that they were fond of me; I pitied them so much, and yet I felt a kind of pride in their loving one another. I never had experienced such painful and pleasurable emotion at one time, and in my own heart I did not know which predominated. But I was not there to darken their way; I did not do that.

When I was less foolish and more composed, my darling took her wedding-ring from her bosom, and kissed it, and put it on. Then I remembered last night and told Richard that ever since her marriage she had worn it at night when there was no one to see. Then Ada blushing asked me how did I know that, my dear. Then I told Ada how I had seen her hand concealed under her pillow and had little thought why, my dear. Then they began telling me how it was all over again, and I began to be sorry and glad again, and foolish again, and to hide my plain old face as much as I could lest I should put them out of heart.

Thus the time went on until it became necessary for me to think of returning. When that time arrived it was the worst of all, for then my darling completely broke down. She clung round my neck, calling me by every dear name she could think of and saying what should she do

without me! Nor was Richard much better; and as for me, I should have been the worst of the three if I had not severely said to myself, 'Now Esther, if you do, I'll never speak to you again!'

'Why, I declare,' said I, 'I never saw such a wife. I don't think she loves her husband at all. Here, Richard, take my child, for goodness' sake.' But I held her tight all the while, and could have wept over her I don't know how long.

'I give this dear young couple notice,' said I, 'that I am only going away to come back to-morrow and that I shall be always coming backwards and forwards until Symond's Inn is tired of the sight of me. So I shall not say good-bye, Richard. For what would be the use of that, you know, when I am coming back so soon!'

I had given my darling to him now, and I meant to go; but I lingered for one more look of the precious face which it seemed to rive my heart to turn from.

So I said (in a merry, bustling manner) that unless they gave me some encouragement to come back, I was not sure that I could take that liberty, upon which my dear girl looked up, faintly smiling through her tears, and I folded her lovely face between my hands, and gave it one last kiss, and laughed, and ran away.

And when I got downstairs, oh, how I cried! It almost seemed to me that I had lost my Ada for ever. I was so lonely and so blank without her, and it was so desolate to be going home with no hope of seeing her there, that I could get no comfort for a little while as I walked up and down in a dim corner sobbing and crying.

I came to myself by and by, after a little scolding, and took a coach home. The poor boy whom I had found at St. Albans had reappeared a short time before and was lying at the point of death; indeed, was then dead, though I did not know it. My guardian had gone out to inquire about him and did not return to dinner. Being quite alone, I cried a little again, though on the whole I don't think I behaved so very, very ill.

It was only natural that I should not be quite accustomed to the loss of my darling yet. Three or four hours were not a long time after years. But my mind dwelt so much upon the uncongenial scene in which I had left her, and I pictured it as such an overshadowed stony-hearted one, and I so longed to be near her and taking some sort of care of her, that I determined to go back in the evening only to look up at her windows.

It was foolish, I dare say, but it did not then seem at all so to me, and it does not seem quite so even now. I took Charley into my confidence, and we went out at dusk. It was dark when we came to the new strange home of my dear girl, and there was a light behind the yellow blinds. We walked past cautiously three or four times, looking up, and narrowly missed encountering Mr Vholes, who came out of his office while we were there and turned his head to look up too before going home. The sight of his lank black figure and the lonesome air of that nook in the dark were favourable to the state of my mind. I thought of the youth and love and beauty of my dear girl, shut up in such an ill-assorted refuge, almost as if it were a cruel place.

It was very solitary and very dull, and I did not doubt that I might safely steal upstairs. I left Charley below and went up with a light foot, not distressed by any glare from the feeble oil lanterns on the way. I listened for a few moments, and in the musty rotting silence of the house believed that I could hear the murmur of their young voices. I put my lips to the hearse-like panel of the door as a kiss for my dear and came quietly down again, thinking that one of these days I would confess to the visit.

And it really did me good, for though nobody but Charley and I knew anything about it, I somehow felt as if it had diminished the separation between Ada and me and had brought us together again for those moments. I went back, not quite accustomed yet to the change, but all the better for that hovering about my darling.

My guardian had come home and was standing thoughtfully by the dark window. When I went in, his face cleared and he came to his seat, but he caught the light upon my face as I took mine.

'Little woman,' said he, 'You have been crying.'

'Why, yes, guardian,' said I, 'I am afraid I have been, a little. Ada has been in such distress, and is so very sorry, guardian.'

I put my arm on the back of his chair, and I saw in his glance that my words and my look at her empty place had prepared him.

'Is she married, my dear?'

I told him all about it and how her first entreaties had referred to his forgiveness.

'She has no need of it,' said he. 'Heaven bless her and her husband!' But just as my first impulse had been to pity her, so was his. 'Poor girl, poor girl! Poor Rick! Poor Ada!'

Neither of us spoke after that, until he said with a sigh, 'Well, well, my dear! Bleak House is thinning fast.'

'But its mistress remains, guardian.' Though I was timid about saying it, I ventured because of the sorrowful tone in which he had spoken. 'She will do all she can to make it happy,' said I.

'She will succeed, my love!'

The letter had made no difference between us except that the seat by his side had come to be mine; it made none now. He turned his old bright fatherly look upon me, laid his hand on my hand in his old way, and said again, 'She will succeed, my dear. Nevertheless, Bleak House is thinning fast, O little woman!'

I was sorry presently that this was all we said about that. I was rather disappointed. I feared I might not quite have been all I had meant to be since the letter and the answer.