CHAPTER LX - Perspective

I proceed to other passages of my narrative. From the goodness of all about me I derived such consolation as I can never think of unmoved. I have already said so much of myself, and so much still remains, that I will not dwell upon my sorrow. I had an illness, but it was not a long one; and I would avoid even this mention of it if I could quite keep down the recollection of their sympathy.

I proceed to other passages of my narrative.

During the time of my illness, we were still in London, where Mrs Woodcourt had come, on my guardian's invitation, to stay with us. When my guardian thought me well and cheerful enough to talk with him in our old way--though I could have done that sooner if he would have believed me--I resumed my work and my chair beside his. He had appointed the time himself, and we were alone.

'Dame Trot,' said he, receiving me with a kiss, 'welcome to the growlery again, my dear. I have a scheme to develop, little woman. I propose to remain here, perhaps for six months, perhaps for a longer time--as it may be. Quite to settle here for a while, in short.'

'And in the meanwhile leave Bleak House?' said I.

'Aye, my dear? Bleak House,' he returned, 'must learn to take care of itself.'

I thought his tone sounded sorrowful, but looking at him, I saw his kind face lighted up by its pleasantest smile.

'Bleak House,' he repeated--and his tone did NOT sound sorrowful, I found--'must learn to take care of itself. It is a long way from Ada, my dear, and Ada stands much in need of you.'

'It's like you, guardian,' said I, 'to have been taking that into consideration for a happy surprise to both of us.'

'Not so disinterested either, my dear, if you mean to extol me for that virtue, since if you were generally on the road, you could be seldom with me. And besides, I wish to hear as much and as often of Ada as I can in this condition of estrangement from poor Rick. Not of her alone, but of him too, poor fellow.'

'Have you seen Mr Woodcourt, this morning, guardian?'

'I see Mr Woodcourt every morning, Dame Durden.'

'Does he still say the same of Richard?'

'Just the same. He knows of no direct bodily illness that he has; on the contrary, he believes that he has none. Yet he is not easy about him; who CAN be?'

My dear girl had been to see us lately every day, some times twice in a day. But we had foreseen, all along, that this would only last until I was quite myself. We knew full well that her fervent heart was as full of affection and gratitude towards her cousin John as it had ever been, and we acquitted Richard of laying any injunctions upon her to stay away; but we knew on the other hand that she felt it a part of her duty to him to be sparing of her visits at our house. My guardian's delicacy had soon perceived this and had tried to convey to her that he thought she was right.

'Dear, unfortunate, mistaken Richard,' said I. 'When will he awake from his delusion!'

'He is not in the way to do so now, my dear,' replied my guardian. 'The more he suffers, the more averse he will be to me, having made me the principal representative of the great occasion of his suffering.'

I could not help adding, 'So unreasonably!'

'Ah, Dame Trot, Dame Trot,' returned my guardian, 'what shall we find reasonable in Jarndyce and Jarndyce! Unreason and injustice at the top, unreason and injustice at the heart and at the bottom, unreason and injustice from beginning to end--if it ever has an end--how should poor Rick, always hovering near it, pluck reason out of it? He no more gathers grapes from thorns or figs from thistles than older men did in old times.'

His gentleness and consideration for Richard whenever we spoke of him touched me so that I was always silent on this subject very soon.

'I suppose the Lord Chancellor, and the Vice Chancellors, and the whole Chancery battery of great guns would be infinitely astonished by such unreason and injustice in one of their suitors,' pursued my guardian. 'When those learned gentlemen begin to raise moss-roses from the powder they sow in their wigs, I shall begin to be astonished too!'

He checked himself in glancing towards the window to look where the wind was and leaned on the back of my chair instead.

'Well, well, little woman! To go on, my dear. This rock we must leave to time, chance, and hopeful circumstance. We must not shipwreck Ada

upon it. She cannot afford, and he cannot afford, the remotest chance of another separation from a friend. Therefore I have particularly begged of Woodcourt, and I now particularly beg of you, my dear, not to move this subject with Rick. Let it rest. Next week, next month, next year, sooner or later, he will see me with clearer eyes. I can wait.'

But I had already discussed it with him, I confessed; and so, I thought, had Mr Woodcourt.

'So he tells me,' returned my guardian. 'Very good. He has made his protest, and Dame Durden has made hers, and there is nothing more to be said about it. Now I come to Mrs Woodcourt. How do you like her, my dear?'

In answer to this question, which was oddly abrupt, I said I liked her very much and thought she was more agreeable than she used to be.

'I think so too,' said my guardian. 'Less pedigree? Not so much of Morgan ap--what's his name?'

That was what I meant, I acknowledged, though he was a very harmless person, even when we had had more of him.

'Still, upon the whole, he is as well in his native mountains,' said my guardian. 'I agree with you. Then, little woman, can I do better for a time than retain Mrs Woodcourt here?'

No. And yet--

My guardian looked at me, waiting for what I had to say.

I had nothing to say. At least I had nothing in my mind that I could say. I had an undefined impression that it might have been better if we had had some other inmate, but I could hardly have explained why even to myself. Or, if to myself, certainly not to anybody else.

'You see,' said my guardian, 'our neighbourhood is in Woodcourt's way, and he can come here to see her as often as he likes, which is agreeable to them both; and she is familiar to us and fond of you.'

Yes. That was undeniable. I had nothing to say against it. I could not have suggested a better arrangement, but I was not quite easy in my mind. Esther, Esther, why not? Esther, think!

'It is a very good plan indeed, dear guardian, and we could not do better.'

'Sure, little woman?'

Quite sure. I had had a moment's time to think, since I had urged that duty on myself, and I was quite sure.

'Good,' said my guardian. 'It shall be done. Carried unanimously.'

'Carried unanimously,' I repeated, going on with my work.

It was a cover for his book-table that I happened to be ornamenting. It had been laid by on the night preceding my sad journey and never resumed. I showed it to him now, and he admired it highly. After I had explained the pattern to him and all the great effects that were to come out by and by, I thought I would go back to our last theme.

'You said, dear guardian, when we spoke of Mr Woodcourt before Ada left us, that you thought he would give a long trial to another country. Have you been advising him since?'

'Yes, little woman, pretty often.'

'Has he decided to do so?'

'I rather think not.'

'Some other prospect has opened to him, perhaps?' said I.

'Why--yes--perhaps,' returned my guardian, beginning his answer in a very deliberate manner. 'About half a year hence or so, there is a medical attendant for the poor to be appointed at a certain place in Yorkshire. It is a thriving place, pleasantly situated--streams and streets, town and country, mill and moor--and seems to present an opening for such a man. I mean a man whose hopes and aims may sometimes lie (as most men's sometimes do, I dare say) above the ordinary level, but to whom the ordinary level will be high enough after all if it should prove to be a way of usefulness and good service leading to no other. All generous spirits are ambitious, I suppose, but the ambition that calmly trusts itself to such a road, instead of spasmodically trying to fly over it, is of the kind I care for. It is Woodcourt's kind.'

'And will he get this appointment?' I asked.

'Why, little woman,' returned my guardian, smiling, 'not being an oracle, I cannot confidently say, but I think so. His reputation stands very high; there were people from that part of the country in the shipwreck; and strange to say, I believe the best man has the best chance. You must not suppose it to be a fine endowment. It is a very, very commonplace affair, my dear, an appointment to a great amount

of work and a small amount of pay; but better things will gather about it, it may be fairly hoped.'

'The poor of that place will have reason to bless the choice if it falls on Mr Woodcourt, guardian.'

'You are right, little woman; that I am sure they will.'

We said no more about it, nor did he say a word about the future of Bleak House. But it was the first time I had taken my seat at his side in my mourning dress, and that accounted for it, I considered.

I now began to visit my dear girl every day in the dull dark corner where she lived. The morning was my usual time, but whenever I found I had an hour or so to spare, I put on my bonnet and bustled off to Chancery Lane. They were both so glad to see me at all hours, and used to brighten up so when they heard me opening the door and coming in (being quite at home, I never knocked), that I had no fear of becoming troublesome just yet.

On these occasions I frequently found Richard absent. At other times he would be writing or reading papers in the cause at that table of his, so covered with papers, which was never disturbed. Sometimes I would come upon him lingering at the door of Mr Vholes's office. Sometimes I would meet him in the neighbourhood lounging about and biting his nails. I often met him wandering in Lincoln's Inn, near the place where I had first seen him, oh how different, how different!

That the money Ada brought him was melting away with the candles I used to see burning after dark in Mr Vholes's office I knew very well. It was not a large amount in the beginning, he had married in debt, and I could not fail to understand, by this time, what was meant by Mr Vholes's shoulder being at the wheel--as I still heard it was. My dear made the best of housekeepers and tried hard to save, but I knew that they were getting poorer and poorer every day.

She shone in the miserable corner like a beautiful star. She adorned and graced it so that it became another place. Paler than she had been at home, and a little quieter than I had thought natural when she was yet so cheerful and hopeful, her face was so unshadowed that I half believed she was blinded by her love for Richard to his ruinous career.

I went one day to dine with them while I was under this impression. As I turned into Symond's Inn, I met little Miss Flite coming out. She had been to make a stately call upon the wards in Jarndyce, as she still called them, and had derived the highest gratification from that ceremony. Ada had already told me that she called every Monday at

five o'clock, with one little extra white bow in her bonnet, which never appeared there at any other time, and with her largest reticule of documents on her arm.

'My dear!' she began. 'So delighted! How do you do! So glad to see you. And you are going to visit our interesting Jarndyce wards? TO be sure! Our beauty is at home, my dear, and will be charmed to see you.'

'Then Richard is not come in yet?' said I. 'I am glad of that, for I was afraid of being a little late.'

'No, he is not come in,' returned Miss Flite. 'He has had a long day in court. I left him there with Vholes. You don't like Vholes, I hope? DON'T like Vholes. Dan-gerous man!'

'I am afraid you see Richard oftener than ever now,' said I.

'My dearest,' returned Miss Flite, 'daily and hourly. You know what I told you of the attraction on the Chancellor's table? My dear, next to myself he is the most constant suitor in court. He begins quite to amuse our little party. Ve-ry friendly little party, are we not?'

It was miserable to hear this from her poor mad lips, though it was no surprise.

'In short, my valued friend,' pursued Miss Flite, advancing her lips to my ear with an air of equal patronage and mystery, 'I must tell you a secret. I have made him my executor. Nominated, constituted, and appointed him. In my will. Ye-es.'

'Indeed?' said I.

'Ye-es,' repeated Miss Flite in her most genteel accents, 'my executor, administrator, and assign. (Our Chancery phrases, my love.) I have reflected that if I should wear out, he will be able to watch that judgment. Being so very regular in his attendance.'

It made me sigh to think of him.

'I did at one time mean,' said Miss Flite, echoing the sigh, 'to nominate, constitute, and appoint poor Gridley. Also very regular, my charming girl. I assure you, most exemplary! But he wore out, poor man, so I have appointed his successor. Don't mention it. This is in confidence.'

She carefully opened her reticule a little way and showed me a folded piece of paper inside as the appointment of which she spoke.

‘Another secret, my dear. I have added to my collection of birds.’

‘Really, Miss Flite?’ said I, knowing how it pleased her to have her confidence received with an appearance of interest.

She nodded several times, and her face became overcast and gloomy. ‘Two more. I call them the Wards in Jarndyce. They are caged up with all the others. With Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Death, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon, and Spinach!’

The poor soul kissed me with the most troubled look I had ever seen in her and went her way. Her manner of running over the names of her birds, as if she were afraid of hearing them even from her own lips, quite chilled me.

This was not a cheering preparation for my visit, and I could have dispensed with the company of Mr Vholes, when Richard (who arrived within a minute or two after me) brought him to share our dinner. Although it was a very plain one, Ada and Richard were for some minutes both out of the room together helping to get ready what we were to eat and drink. Mr Vholes took that opportunity of holding a little conversation in a low voice with me. He came to the window where I was sitting and began upon Symond's Inn.

‘A dull place, Miss Summerson, for a life that is not an official one,’ said Mr Vholes, smearing the glass with his black glove to make it clearer for me.

‘There is not much to see here,’ said I.

‘Nor to hear, miss,’ returned Mr Vholes. ‘A little music does occasionally stray in, but we are not musical in the law and soon eject it. I hope Mr Jarndyce is as well as his friends could wish him?’

I thanked Mr Vholes and said he was quite well.

‘I have not the pleasure to be admitted among the number of his friends myself,’ said Mr Vholes, ‘and I am aware that the gentlemen of our profession are sometimes regarded in such quarters with an unfavourable eye. Our plain course, however, under good report and evil report, and all kinds of prejudice (we are the victims of prejudice), is to have everything openly carried on. How do you find Mr C. looking, Miss Summerson?’

‘He looks very ill. Dreadfully anxious.’

‘Just so,’ said Mr Vholes.

He stood behind me with his long black figure reaching nearly to the ceiling of those low rooms, feeling the pimples on his face as if they were ornaments and speaking inwardly and evenly as though there were not a human passion or emotion in his nature.

‘Mr Woodcourt is in attendance upon Mr C., I believe?’ he resumed.

‘Mr Woodcourt is his disinterested friend,’ I answered.

‘But I mean in professional attendance, medical attendance.’

‘That can do little for an unhappy mind,’ said I.

‘Just so,’ said Mr Vholes.

So slow, so eager, so bloodless and gaunt, I felt as if Richard were wasting away beneath the eyes of this adviser and there were something of the vampire in him.

‘Miss Summerson,’ said Mr Vholes, very slowly rubbing his gloved hands, as if, to his cold sense of touch, they were much the same in black kid or out of it, ‘this was an ill-advised marriage of Mr C.'s.’

I begged he would excuse me from discussing it. They had been engaged when they were both very young, I told him (a little indignantly) and when the prospect before them was much fairer and brighter. When Richard had not yielded himself to the unhappy influence which now darkened his life.

‘Just so,’ assented Mr Vholes again. ‘Still, with a view to everything being openly carried on, I will, with your permission, Miss Summerson, observe to you that I consider this a very ill- advised marriage indeed. I owe the opinion not only to Mr C.'s connexions, against whom I should naturally wish to protect myself, but also to my own reputation--dear to myself as a professional man aiming to keep respectable; dear to my three girls at home, for whom I am striving to realize some little independence; dear, I will even say, to my aged father, whom it is my privilege to support.’

‘It would become a very different marriage, a much happier and better marriage, another marriage altogether, Mr Vholes,’ said I, ‘if Richard were persuaded to turn his back on the fatal pursuit in which you are engaged with him.’

Mr Vholes, with a noiseless cough--or rather gasp--into one of his black gloves, inclined his head as if he did not wholly dispute even that.

'Miss Summerson,' he said, 'it may be so; and I freely admit that the young lady who has taken Mr C.'s name upon herself in so ill- advised a manner--you will I am sure not quarrel with me for throwing out that remark again, as a duty I owe to Mr C.'s connexions--is a highly genteel young lady. Business has prevented me from mixing much with general society in any but a professional character; still I trust I am competent to perceive that she is a highly genteel young lady. As to beauty, I am not a judge of that myself, and I never did give much attention to it from a boy, but I dare say the young lady is equally eligible in that point of view. She is considered so (I have heard) among the clerks in the Inn, and it is a point more in their way than in mine. In reference to Mr C.'s pursuit of his interests--'

'Oh! His interests, Mr Vholes!'

'Pardon me,' returned Mr Vholes, going on in exactly the same inward and dispassionate manner. 'Mr C. takes certain interests under certain wills disputed in the suit. It is a term we use. In reference to Mr C,'s pursuit of his interests, I mentioned to you, Miss Summerson, the first time I had the pleasure of seeing you, in my desire that everything should be openly carried on--I used those words, for I happened afterwards to note them in my diary, which is producible at any time--I mentioned to you that Mr C. had laid down the principle of watching his own interests, and that when a client of mine laid down a principle which was not of an immoral (that is to say, unlawful) nature, it devolved upon me to carry it out. I HAVE carried it out; I do carry it out. But I will not smooth things over to any connexion of Mr C.'s on any account. As open as I was to Mr Jarndyce, I am to you. I regard it in the light of a professional duty to be so, though it can be charged to no one. I openly say, unpalatable as it may be, that I consider Mr C.'s affairs in a very bad way, that I consider Mr C. himself in a very bad way, and that I regard this as an exceedingly ill-advised marriage. Am I here, sir? Yes, I thank you; I am here, Mr C., and enjoying the pleasure of some agreeable conversation with Miss Summerson, for which I have to thank you very much, sir!'

He broke off thus in answer to Richard, who addressed him as he came into the room. By this time I too well understood Mr Vholes's scrupulous way of saving himself and his respectability not to feel that our worst fears did but keep pace with his client's progress.

We sat down to dinner, and I had an opportunity of observing Richard, anxiously. I was not disturbed by Mr Vholes (who took off his gloves to dine), though he sat opposite to me at the small table, for I

doubt if, looking up at all, he once removed his eyes from his host's face. I found Richard thin and languid, slovenly in his dress, abstracted in his manner, forcing his spirits now and then, and at other intervals relapsing into a dull thoughtfulness. About his large bright eyes that used to be so merry there was a wanness and a restlessness that changed them altogether. I cannot use the expression that he looked old. There is a ruin of youth which is not like age, and into such a ruin Richard's youth and youthful beauty had all fallen away.

He ate little and seemed indifferent what it was, showed himself to be much more impatient than he used to be, and was quick even with Ada. I thought at first that his old light-hearted manner was all gone, but it shone out of him sometimes as I had occasionally known little momentary glimpses of my own old face to look out upon me from the glass. His laugh had not quite left him either, but it was like the echo of a joyful sound, and that is always sorrowful.

Yet he was as glad as ever, in his old affectionate way, to have me there, and we talked of the old times pleasantly. These did not appear to be interesting to Mr Vholes, though he occasionally made a gasp which I believe was his smile. He rose shortly after dinner and said that with the permission of the ladies he would retire to his office.

'Always devoted to business, Vholes!' cried Richard.

'Yes, Mr C.,' he returned, 'the interests of clients are never to be neglected, sir. They are paramount in the thoughts of a professional man like myself, who wishes to preserve a good name among his fellow-practitioners and society at large. My denying myself the pleasure of the present agreeable conversation may not be wholly irrespective of your own interests, Mr C.'

Richard expressed himself quite sure of that and lighted Mr Vholes out. On his return he told us, more than once, that Vholes was a good fellow, a safe fellow, a man who did what he pretended to do, a very good fellow indeed! He was so defiant about it that it struck me he had begun to doubt Mr Vholes.

Then he threw himself on the sofa, tired out; and Ada and I put things to rights, for they had no other servant than the woman who attended to the chambers. My dear girl had a cottage piano there and quietly sat down to sing some of Richard's favourites, the lamp being first removed into the next room, as he complained of its hurting his eyes.

I sat between them, at my dear girl's side, and felt very melancholy listening to her sweet voice. I think Richard did too; I think he darkened the room for that reason. She had been singing some time,

rising between whiles to bend over him and speak to him, when Mr Woodcourt came in. Then he sat down by Richard and half playfully, half earnestly, quite naturally and easily, found out how he felt and where he had been all day. Presently he proposed to accompany him in a short walk on one of the bridges, as it was a moonlight airy night; and Richard readily consenting, they went out together.

They left my dear girl still sitting at the piano and me still sitting beside her. When they were gone out, I drew my arm round her waist. She put her left hand in mine (I was sitting on that side), but kept her right upon the keys, going over and over them without striking any note.

'Esther, my dearest,' she said, breaking silence, 'Richard is never so well and I am never so easy about him as when he is with Allan Woodcourt. We have to thank you for that.'

I pointed out to my darling how this could scarcely be, because Mr Woodcourt had come to her cousin John's house and had known us all there, and because he had always liked Richard, and Richard had always liked him, and--and so forth.

'All true,' said Ada, 'but that he is such a devoted friend to us we owe to you.'

I thought it best to let my dear girl have her way and to say no more about it. So I said as much. I said it lightly, because I felt her trembling.

'Esther, my dearest, I want to be a good wife, a very, very good wife indeed. You shall teach me.'

I teach! I said no more, for I noticed the hand that was fluttering over the keys, and I knew that it was not I who ought to speak, that it was she who had something to say to me.

'When I married Richard I was not insensible to what was before him. I had been perfectly happy for a long time with you, and I had never known any trouble or anxiety, so loved and cared for, but I understood the danger he was in, dear Esther.'

'I know, I know, my darling.'

'When we were married I had some little hope that I might be able to convince him of his mistake, that he might come to regard it in a new way as my husband and not pursue it all the more desperately for my sake--as he does. But if I had not had that hope, I would have married him just the same, Esther. Just the same!'

In the momentary firmness of the hand that was never still--a firmness inspired by the utterance of these last words, and dying away with them--I saw the confirmation of her earnest tones.

'You are not to think, my dearest Esther, that I fail to see what you see and fear what you fear. No one can understand him better than I do. The greatest wisdom that ever lived in the world could scarcely know Richard better than my love does.'

She spoke so modestly and softly and her trembling hand expressed such agitation as it moved to and fro upon the silent notes! My dear, dear girl!

'I see him at his worst every day. I watch him in his sleep. I know every change of his face. But when I married Richard I was quite determined, Esther, if heaven would help me, never to show him that I grieved for what he did and so to make him more unhappy. I want him, when he comes home, to find no trouble in my face. I want him, when he looks at me, to see what he loved in me. I married him to do this, and this supports me.'

I felt her trembling more. I waited for what was yet to come, and I now thought I began to know what it was.

'And something else supports me, Esther.'

She stopped a minute. Stopped speaking only; her hand was still in motion.

'I look forward a little while, and I don't know what great aid may come to me. When Richard turns his eyes upon me then, there may be something lying on my breast more eloquent than I have been, with greater power than mine to show him his true course and win him back.'

Her hand stopped now. She clasped me in her arms, and I clasped her in mine.

'If that little creature should fail too, Esther, I still look forward. I look forward a long while, through years and years, and think that then, when I am growing old, or when I am dead perhaps, a beautiful woman, his daughter, happily married, may be proud of him and a blessing to him. Or that a generous brave man, as handsome as he used to be, as hopeful, and far more happy, may walk in the sunshine with him, honouring his grey head and saying to himself, 'I thank God this is my father! Ruined by a fatal inheritance, and restored through me!''

Oh, my sweet girl, what a heart was that which beat so fast against me!

'These hopes uphold me, my dear Esther, and I know they will. Though sometimes even they depart from me before a dread that arises when I look at Richard.'

I tried to cheer my darling, and asked her what it was. Sobbing and weeping, she replied, 'That he may not live to see his child.'