

Chapter XLIX - I Am Involved In Mystery

I received one morning by the post, the following letter, dated Canterbury, and addressed to me at Doctor's Commons; which I read with some surprise:

'MY DEAR SIR,

'Circumstances beyond my individual control have, for a considerable lapse of time, effected a severance of that intimacy which, in the limited opportunities conceded to me in the midst of my professional duties, of contemplating the scenes and events of the past, tinged by the prismatic hues of memory, has ever afforded me, as it ever must continue to afford, gratifying emotions of no common description. This fact, my dear sir, combined with the distinguished elevation to which your talents have raised you, deters me from presuming to aspire to the liberty of addressing the companion of my youth, by the familiar appellation of Copperfield! It is sufficient to know that the name to which I do myself the honour to refer, will ever be treasured among the muniments of our house (I allude to the archives connected with our former lodgers, preserved by Mrs Micawber), with sentiments of personal esteem amounting to affection.

'It is not for one, situated, through his original errors and a fortuitous combination of unpropitious events, as is the foundered Bark (if he may be allowed to assume so maritime a denomination), who now takes up the pen to address you - it is not, I repeat, for one so circumstanced, to adopt the language of compliment, or of congratulation. That he leaves to abler and to purer hands.

'If your more important avocations should admit of your ever tracing these imperfect characters thus far - which may be, or may not be, as circumstances arise - you will naturally inquire by what object am I influenced, then, in inditing the present missive? Allow me to say that I fully defer to the reasonable character of that inquiry, and proceed to develop it; premising that it is not an object of a pecuniary nature.

'Without more directly referring to any latent ability that may possibly exist on my part, of wielding the thunderbolt, or directing the devouring and avenging flame in any quarter, I may be permitted to observe, in passing, that my brightest visions are for ever dispelled - that my peace is shattered and my power of enjoyment destroyed - that my heart is no longer in the right place - and that I no more walk erect before my fellow man. The canker is in the flower. The cup is bitter to the brim. The worm is at his work, and will soon dispose of his victim. The sooner the better. But I will not digress. 'Placed in a mental position of peculiar painfulness, beyond the assuaging reach even of Mrs Micawber's influence, though exercised in the tripartite

character of woman, wife, and mother, it is my intention to fly from myself for a short period, and devote a respite of eight-and-forty hours to revisiting some metropolitan scenes of past enjoyment. Among other havens of domestic tranquillity and peace of mind, my feet will naturally tend towards the King's Bench Prison. In stating that I shall be (D. V.) on the outside of the south wall of that place of incarceration on civil process, the day after tomorrow, at seven in the evening, precisely, my object in this epistolary communication is accomplished.

'I do not feel warranted in soliciting my former friend Mr Copperfield, or my former friend Mr Thomas Traddles of the Inner Temple, if that gentleman is still existent and forthcoming, to condescend to meet me, and renew (so far as may be) our past relations of the olden time. I confine myself to throwing out the observation, that, at the hour and place I have indicated, may be found such ruined vestiges as yet 'Remain, 'Of 'A 'Fallen Tower, 'WILKINS MICAWBER.

'P.S. It may be advisable to superadd to the above, the statement that Mrs Micawber is not in confidential possession of my intentions.'

I read the letter over several times. Making due allowance for Mr Micawber's lofty style of composition, and for the extraordinary relish with which he sat down and wrote long letters on all possible and impossible occasions, I still believed that something important lay hidden at the bottom of this roundabout communication. I put it down, to think about it; and took it up again, to read it once more; and was still pursuing it, when Traddles found me in the height of my perplexity.

'My dear fellow,' said I, 'I never was better pleased to see you. You come to give me the benefit of your sober judgement at a most opportune time. I have received a very singular letter, Traddles, from Mr Micawber.'

'No?' cried Traddles. 'You don't say so? And I have received one from Mrs Micawber!'

With that, Traddles, who was flushed with walking, and whose hair, under the combined effects of exercise and excitement, stood on end as if he saw a cheerful ghost, produced his letter and made an exchange with me. I watched him into the heart of Mr Micawber's letter, and returned the elevation of eyebrows with which he said "Wielding the thunderbolt, or directing the devouring and avenging flame!" Bless me, Copperfield!- and then entered on the perusal of Mrs Micawber's epistle.

It ran thus:

'My best regards to Mr Thomas Traddles, and if he should still remember one who formerly had the happiness of being well acquainted with him, may I beg a few moments of his leisure time? I assure Mr T. T. that I would not intrude upon his kindness, were I in any other position than on the confines of distraction.

'Though harrowing to myself to mention, the alienation of Mr Micawber (formerly so domesticated) from his wife and family, is the cause of my addressing my unhappy appeal to Mr Traddles, and soliciting his best indulgence. Mr T. can form no adequate idea of the change in Mr Micawber's conduct, of his wildness, of his violence. It has gradually augmented, until it assumes the appearance of aberration of intellect. Scarcely a day passes, I assure Mr Traddles, on which some paroxysm does not take place. Mr T. will not require me to depict my feelings, when I inform him that I have become accustomed to hear Mr Micawber assert that he has sold himself to the D. Mystery and secrecy have long been his principal characteristic, have long replaced unlimited confidence. The slightest provocation, even being asked if there is anything he would prefer for dinner, causes him to express a wish for a separation. Last night, on being childishly solicited for twopence, to buy 'lemon-stunners' - a local sweetmeat - he presented an oyster-knife at the twins!

'I entreat Mr Traddles to bear with me in entering into these details. Without them, Mr T. would indeed find it difficult to form the faintest conception of my heart-rending situation.

'May I now venture to confide to Mr T. the purport of my letter? Will he now allow me to throw myself on his friendly consideration? Oh yes, for I know his heart!

'The quick eye of affection is not easily blinded, when of the female sex. Mr Micawber is going to London. Though he studiously concealed his hand, this morning before breakfast, in writing the direction-card which he attached to the little brown valise of happier days, the eagleglance of matrimonial anxiety detected, d, o, n, distinctly traced. The West-End destination of the coach, is the Golden Cross. Dare I fervently implore Mr T. to see my misguided husband, and to reason with him? Dare I ask Mr T. to endeavour to step in between Mr Micawber and his agonized family? Oh no, for that would be too much!

'If Mr Copperfield should yet remember one unknown to fame, will Mr T. take charge of my unalterable regards and similar entreaties? In any case, he will have the benevolence to consider this communication strictly private, and on no account whatever to be alluded to, however distantly, in the presence of Mr Micawber. If Mr T. should ever reply to it (which I cannot but feel to be most improbable), a letter addressed

to M. E., Post Office, Canterbury, will be fraught with less painful consequences than any addressed immediately to one, who subscribes herself, in extreme distress,

'Mr Thomas Traddles's respectful friend and suppliant,

'EMMA MICAWBER.'

'What do you think of that letter?' said Traddles, casting his eyes upon me, when I had read it twice.

'What do you think of the other?' said I. For he was still reading it with knitted brows.

'I think that the two together, Copperfield,' replied Traddles, 'mean more than Mr and Mrs Micawber usually mean in their correspondence - but I don't know what. They are both written in good faith, I have no doubt, and without any collusion. Poor thing!' he was now alluding to Mrs Micawber's letter, and we were standing side by side comparing the two; 'it will be a charity to write to her, at all events, and tell her that we will not fail to see Mr Micawber.'

I acceded to this the more readily, because I now reproached myself with having treated her former letter rather lightly. It had set me thinking a good deal at the time, as I have mentioned in its place; but my absorption in my own affairs, my experience of the family, and my hearing nothing more, had gradually ended in my dismissing the subject. I had often thought of the Micawbers, but chiefly to wonder what 'pecuniary liabilities' they were establishing in Canterbury, and to recall how shy Mr Micawber was of me when he became clerk to Uriah Heep.

However, I now wrote a comforting letter to Mrs Micawber, in our joint names, and we both signed it. As we walked into town to post it, Traddles and I held a long conference, and launched into a number of speculations, which I need not repeat. We took my aunt into our counsels in the afternoon; but our only decided conclusion was, that we would be very punctual in keeping Mr Micawber's appointment.

Although we appeared at the stipulated place a quarter of an hour before the time, we found Mr Micawber already there. He was standing with his arms folded, over against the wall, looking at the spikes on the top, with a sentimental expression, as if they were the interlacing boughs of trees that had shaded him in his youth.

When we accosted him, his manner was something more confused, and something less genteel, than of yore. He had relinquished his legal suit of black for the purposes of this excursion, and wore the old

surtout and tights, but not quite with the old air. He gradually picked up more and more of it as we conversed with him; but, his very eye-glass seemed to hang less easily, and his shirt-collar, though still of the old formidable dimensions, rather drooped.

'Gentlemen!' said Mr Micawber, after the first salutations, 'you are friends in need, and friends indeed. Allow me to offer my inquiries with reference to the physical welfare of Mrs Copperfield in esse, and Mrs Traddles in posse, - presuming, that is to say, that my friend Mr Traddles is not yet united to the object of his affections, for weal and for woe.'

We acknowledged his politeness, and made suitable replies. He then directed our attention to the wall, and was beginning, 'I assure you, gentlemen,' when I ventured to object to that ceremonious form of address, and to beg that he would speak to us in the old way.

'My dear Copperfield,' he returned, pressing my hand, 'your cordiality overpowers me. This reception of a shattered fragment of the Temple once called Man - if I may be permitted so to express myself - bespeaks a heart that is an honour to our common nature. I was about to observe that I again behold the serene spot where some of the happiest hours of my existence fled by.'

'Made so, I am sure, by Mrs Micawber,' said I. 'I hope she is well?'

'Thank you,' returned Mr Micawber, whose face clouded at this reference, 'she is but so-so. And this,' said Mr Micawber, nodding his head sorrowfully, 'is the Bench! Where, for the first time in many revolving years, the overwhelming pressure of pecuniary liabilities was not proclaimed, from day to day, by importune voices declining to vacate the passage; where there was no knocker on the door for any creditor to appeal to; where personal service of process was not required, and detainees were merely lodged at the gate! Gentlemen,' said Mr Micawber, 'when the shadow of that iron-work on the summit of the brick structure has been reflected on the gravel of the Parade, I have seen my children thread the mazes of the intricate pattern, avoiding the dark marks. I have been familiar with every stone in the place. If I betray weakness, you will know how to excuse me.'

'We have all got on in life since then, Mr Micawber,' said I.

'Mr Copperfield,' returned Mr Micawber, bitterly, 'when I was an inmate of that retreat I could look my fellow-man in the face, and punch his head if he offended me. My fellow-man and myself are no longer on those glorious terms!'

Turning from the building in a downcast manner, Mr Micawber accepted my proffered arm on one side, and the proffered arm of Traddles on the other, and walked away between us.

'There are some landmarks,' observed Mr Micawber, looking fondly back over his shoulder, 'on the road to the tomb, which, but for the impiety of the aspiration, a man would wish never to have passed. Such is the Bench in my chequered career.'

'Oh, you are in low spirits, Mr Micawber,' said Traddles.

'I am, sir,' interposed Mr Micawber.

'I hope,' said Traddles, 'it is not because you have conceived a dislike to the law - for I am a lawyer myself, you know.'

Mr Micawber answered not a word.

'How is our friend Heep, Mr Micawber?' said I, after a silence.

'My dear Copperfield,' returned Mr Micawber, bursting into a state of much excitement, and turning pale, 'if you ask after my employer as your friend, I am sorry for it; if you ask after him as MY friend, I sardonically smile at it. In whatever capacity you ask after my employer, I beg, without offence to you, to limit my reply to this - that whatever his state of health may be, his appearance is foxy: not to say diabolical. You will allow me, as a private individual, to decline pursuing a subject which has lashed me to the utmost verge of desperation in my professional capacity.'

I expressed my regret for having innocently touched upon a theme that roused him so much. 'May I ask,' said I, 'without any hazard of repeating the mistake, how my old friends Mr and Miss Wickfield are?'

'Miss Wickfield,' said Mr Micawber, now turning red, 'is, as she always is, a pattern, and a bright example. My dear Copperfield, she is the only starry spot in a miserable existence. My respect for that young lady, my admiration of her character, my devotion to her for her love and truth, and goodness! - Take me,' said Mr Micawber, 'down a turning, for, upon my soul, in my present state of mind I am not equal to this!'

We wheeled him off into a narrow street, where he took out his pocket-handkerchief, and stood with his back to a wall. If I looked as gravely at him as Traddles did, he must have found our company by no means inspiring.

'It is my fate,' said Mr Micawber, unfeignedly sobbing, but doing even that, with a shadow of the old expression of doing something genteel; 'it is my fate, gentlemen, that the finer feelings of our nature have become reproaches to me. My homage to Miss Wickfield, is a flight of arrows in my bosom. You had better leave me, if you please, to walk the earth as a vagabond. The worm will settle my business in double-quick time.'

Without attending to this invocation, we stood by, until he put up his pocket-handkerchief, pulled up his shirt-collar, and, to delude any person in the neighbourhood who might have been observing him, hummed a tune with his hat very much on one side. I then mentioned - not knowing what might be lost if we lost sight of him yet - that it would give me great pleasure to introduce him to my aunt, if he would ride out to Highgate, where a bed was at his service.

'You shall make us a glass of your own punch, Mr Micawber,' said I, 'and forget whatever you have on your mind, in pleasanter reminiscences.'

'Or, if confiding anything to friends will be more likely to relieve you, you shall impart it to us, Mr Micawber,' said Traddles, prudently.

'Gentlemen,' returned Mr Micawber, 'do with me as you will! I am a straw upon the surface of the deep, and am tossed in all directions by the elephants - I beg your pardon; I should have said the elements.'

We walked on, arm-in-arm, again; found the coach in the act of starting; and arrived at Highgate without encountering any difficulties by the way. I was very uneasy and very uncertain in my mind what to say or do for the best - so was Traddles, evidently. Mr Micawber was for the most part plunged into deep gloom. He occasionally made an attempt to smarten himself, and hum the fag-end of a tune; but his relapses into profound melancholy were only made the more impressive by the mockery of a hat exceedingly on one side, and a shirt-collar pulled up to his eyes.

We went to my aunt's house rather than to mine, because of Dora's not being well. My aunt presented herself on being sent for, and welcomed Mr Micawber with gracious cordiality. Mr Micawber kissed her hand, retired to the window, and pulling out his pocket-handkerchief, had a mental wrestle with himself.

Mr Dick was at home. He was by nature so exceedingly compassionate of anyone who seemed to be ill at ease, and was so quick to find any such person out, that he shook hands with Mr Micawber, at least half-a-dozen times in five minutes. To Mr Micawber, in his trouble, this warmth, on the part of a stranger, was so extremely touching,

that he could only say, on the occasion of each successive shake, 'My dear sir, you overpower me!' Which gratified Mr Dick so much, that he went at it again with greater vigour than before.

'The friendliness of this gentleman,' said Mr Micawber to my aunt, 'if you will allow me, ma'am, to cull a figure of speech from the vocabulary of our coarser national sports - floors me. To a man who is struggling with a complicated burden of perplexity and disquiet, such a reception is trying, I assure you.'

'My friend Mr Dick,' replied my aunt proudly, 'is not a common man.'

'That I am convinced of,' said Mr Micawber. 'My dear sir!' for Mr Dick was shaking hands with him again; 'I am deeply sensible of your cordiality!'

'How do you find yourself?' said Mr Dick, with an anxious look.

'Indifferent, my dear sir,' returned Mr Micawber, sighing.

'You must keep up your spirits,' said Mr Dick, 'and make yourself as comfortable as possible.'

Mr Micawber was quite overcome by these friendly words, and by finding Mr Dick's hand again within his own. 'It has been my lot,' he observed, 'to meet, in the diversified panorama of human existence, with an occasional oasis, but never with one so green, so gushing, as the present!'

At another time I should have been amused by this; but I felt that we were all constrained and uneasy, and I watched Mr Micawber so anxiously, in his vacillations between an evident disposition to reveal something, and a counter-disposition to reveal nothing, that I was in a perfect fever. Traddles, sitting on the edge of his chair, with his eyes wide open, and his hair more emphatically erect than ever, stared by turns at the ground and at Mr Micawber, without so much as attempting to put in a word. My aunt, though I saw that her shrewdest observation was concentrated on her new guest, had more useful possession of her wits than either of us; for she held him in conversation, and made it necessary for him to talk, whether he liked it or not.

'You are a very old friend of my nephew's, Mr Micawber,' said my aunt. 'I wish I had had the pleasure of seeing you before.'

'Madam,' returned Mr Micawber, 'I wish I had had the honour of knowing you at an earlier period. I was not always the wreck you at present behold.'

'I hope Mrs Micawber and your family are well, sir,' said my aunt.

Mr Micawber inclined his head. 'They are as well, ma'am,' he desperately observed after a pause, 'as Aliens and Outcasts can ever hope to be.'

'Lord bless you, sir!' exclaimed my aunt, in her abrupt way. 'What are you talking about?'

'The subsistence of my family, ma'am,' returned Mr Micawber, 'trembles in the balance. My employer -'

Here Mr Micawber provokingly left off; and began to peel the lemons that had been under my directions set before him, together with all the other appliances he used in making punch.

'Your employer, you know,' said Mr Dick, jogging his arm as a gentle reminder.

'My good sir,' returned Mr Micawber, 'you recall me, I am obliged to you.' They shook hands again. 'My employer, ma'am - Mr Heep - once did me the favour to observe to me, that if I were not in the receipt of the stipendiary emoluments appertaining to my engagement with him, I should probably be a mountebank about the country, swallowing a sword-blade, and eating the devouring element. For anything that I can perceive to the contrary, it is still probable that my children may be reduced to seek a livelihood by personal contortion, while Mrs Micawber abets their unnatural feats by playing the barrel-organ.'

Mr Micawber, with a random but expressive flourish of his knife, signified that these performances might be expected to take place after he was no more; then resumed his peeling with a desperate air.

My aunt leaned her elbow on the little round table that she usually kept beside her, and eyed him attentively. Notwithstanding the aversion with which I regarded the idea of entrapping him into any disclosure he was not prepared to make voluntarily, I should have taken him up at this point, but for the strange proceedings in which I saw him engaged; whereof his putting the lemon-peel into the kettle, the sugar into the snuffer-tray, the spirit into the empty jug, and confidently attempting to pour boiling water out of a candlestick, were among the most remarkable. I saw that a crisis was at hand, and it came. He clattered all his means and implements together, rose from his chair, pulled out his pocket-handkerchief, and burst into tears.

'My dear Copperfield,' said Mr Micawber, behind his handkerchief, 'this is an occupation, of all others, requiring an untroubled mind, and self-respect. I cannot perform it. It is out of the question.'

'Mr Micawber,' said I, 'what is the matter? Pray speak out. You are among friends.'

'Among friends, sir!' repeated Mr Micawber; and all he had reserved came breaking out of him. 'Good heavens, it is principally because I AM among friends that my state of mind is what it is. What is the matter, gentlemen? What is NOT the matter? Villainy is the matter; baseness is the matter; deception, fraud, conspiracy, are the matter; and the name of the whole atrocious mass is - HEEP!'

MY aunt clapped her hands, and we all started up as if we were possessed.

'The struggle is over!' said Mr Micawber violently gesticulating with his pocket-handkerchief, and fairly striking out from time to time with both arms, as if he were swimming under superhuman difficulties. 'I will lead this life no longer. I am a wretched being, cut off from everything that makes life tolerable. I have been under a Taboo in that infernal scoundrel's service. Give me back my wife, give me back my family, substitute Micawber for the petty wretch who walks about in the boots at present on my feet, and call upon me to swallow a sword tomorrow, and I'll do it. With an appetite!'

I never saw a man so hot in my life. I tried to calm him, that we might come to something rational; but he got hotter and hotter, and wouldn't hear a word.

'I'll put my hand in no man's hand,' said Mr Micawber, gasping, puffing, and sobbing, to that degree that he was like a man fighting with cold water, 'until I have - blown to fragments - the - a - detestable - serpent - HEEP! I'll partake of no one's hospitality, until I have - a - moved Mount Vesuvius - to eruption - on - a - the abandoned rascal - HEEP! Refreshment - a - underneath this roof - particularly punch - would - a - choke me - unless - I had - previously - choked the eyes - out of the head - a - of - interminable cheat, and liar - HEEP! I - a - I'll know nobody - and - a - say nothing - and - a - live nowhere - until I have crushed - to - a - undiscoverable atoms - the - transcendent and immortal hypocrite and perjurer - HEEP!'

I really had some fear of Mr Micawber's dying on the spot. The manner in which he struggled through these inarticulate sentences, and, whenever he found himself getting near the name of Heep, fought his way on to it, dashed at it in a fainting state, and brought it out with a vehemence little less than marvellous, was frightful; but now, when he sank into a chair, steaming, and looked at us, with every possible colour in his face that had no business there, and an endless procession of lumps following one another in hot haste up his throat, whence they seemed to shoot into his forehead, he had the

appearance of being in the last extremity. I would have gone to his assistance, but he waved me off, and wouldn't hear a word.

'No, Copperfield! - No communication - a - until - Miss Wickfield - a - redress from wrongs inflicted by consummate scoundrel - HEEP!' (I am quite convinced he could not have uttered three words, but for the amazing energy with which this word inspired him when he felt it coming.) 'Inviolable secret - a - from the whole world - a - no exceptions - this day week - a - at breakfast-time - a - everybody present - including aunt - a - and extremely friendly gentleman - to be at the hotel at Canterbury - a - where - Mrs Micawber and myself - Auld Lang Syne in chorus - and - a - will expose intolerable ruffian - HEEP! No more to say - a - or listen to persuasion - go immediately - not capable - a - bear society - upon the track of devoted and doomed traitor - HEEP!'

With this last repetition of the magic word that had kept him going at all, and in which he surpassed all his previous efforts, Mr Micawber rushed out of the house; leaving us in a state of excitement, hope, and wonder, that reduced us to a condition little better than his own. But even then his passion for writing letters was too strong to be resisted; for while we were yet in the height of our excitement, hope, and wonder, the following pastoral note was brought to me from a neighbouring tavern, at which he had called to write it: -

'Most secret and confidential. 'MY DEAR SIR,

'I beg to be allowed to convey, through you, my apologies to your excellent aunt for my late excitement. An explosion of a smouldering volcano long suppressed, was the result of an internal contest more easily conceived than described.

'I trust I rendered tolerably intelligible my appointment for the morning of this day week, at the house of public entertainment at Canterbury, where Mrs Micawber and myself had once the honour of uniting our voices to yours, in the well-known strain of the Immortal exciseman nurtured beyond the Tweed.

'The duty done, and act of reparation performed, which can alone enable me to contemplate my fellow mortal, I shall be known no more. I shall simply require to be deposited in that place of universal resort, where

Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep,

'- With the plain Inscription,

'WILKINS MICAWBER.'