Chapter III - Home

It was a Sunday evening in London, gloomy, close, and stale. Maddening church bells of all degrees of dissonance, sharp and flat, cracked and clear, fast and slow, made the brick-and-mortar echoes hideous. Melancholy streets, in a penitential garb of soot, steeped the souls of the people who were condemned to look at them out of windows, in dire despondency. In every thoroughfare, up almost every alley, and down almost every turning, some doleful bell was throbbing, jerking, tolling, as if the Plague were in the city and the dead-carts were going round. Everything was bolted and barred that could by possibility furnish relief to an overworked people. No pictures, no unfamiliar animals, no rare plants or flowers, no natural or artificial wonders of the ancient world - all TABOO with that enlightened strictness, that the ugly South Sea gods in the British Museum might have supposed themselves at home again. Nothing to see but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to breathe but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to change the brooding mind, or raise it up. Nothing for the spent toiler to do, but to compare the monotony of his seventh day with the monotony of his six days, think what a weary life he led, and make the best of it - or the worst, according to the probabilities.

At such a happy time, so propitious to the interests of religion and morality, Mr Arthur Clennam, newly arrived from Marseilles by way of Dover, and by Dover coach the Blue-eyed Maid, sat in the window of a coffee-house on Ludgate Hill. Ten thousand responsible houses surrounded him, frowning as heavily on the streets they composed, as if they were every one inhabited by the ten young men of the Calender's story, who blackened their faces and bemoaned their miseries every night. Fifty thousand lairs surrounded him where people lived so unwholesomely that fair water put into their crowded rooms on Saturday night, would be corrupt on Sunday morning; albeit my lord, their county member, was amazed that they failed to sleep in company with their butcher's meat. Miles of close wells and pits of houses, where the inhabitants gasped for air, stretched far away towards every point of the compass. Through the heart of the town a deadly sewer ebbed and flowed, in the place of a fine fresh river. What secular want could the million or so of human beings whose daily labour, six days in the week, lay among these Arcadian objects, from the sweet sameness of which they had no escape between the cradle and the grave - what secular want could they possibly have upon their seventh day? Clearly they could want nothing but a stringent policeman.

Mr Arthur Clennam sat in the window of the coffee-house on Ludgate Hill, counting one of the neighbouring bells, making sentences and burdens of songs out of it in spite of himself, and wondering how many sick people it might be the death of in the course of the year. As

the hour approached, its changes of measure made it more and more exasperating. At the quarter, it went off into a condition of deadly-lively importunity, urging the populace in a voluble manner to Come to church, Come to church, Come to church! At the ten minutes, it became aware that the congregation would be scanty, and slowly hammered out in low spirits, They WON'T come, they WON'T come, they WON'T come! At the five minutes, it abandoned hope, and shook every house in the neighbourhood for three hundred seconds, with one dismal swing per second, as a groan of despair.

'Thank Heaven!' said Clennam, when the hour struck, and the bell stopped.

But its sound had revived a long train of miserable Sundays, and the procession would not stop with the bell, but continued to march on. 'Heaven forgive me,' said he, 'and those who trained me. How I have hated this day!'

There was the dreary Sunday of his childhood, when he sat with his hands before him, scared out of his senses by a horrible tract which commenced business with the poor child by asking him in its title, why he was going to Perdition? - a piece of curiosity that he really, in a frock and drawers, was not in a condition to satisfy - and which, for the further attraction of his infant mind, had a parenthesis in every other line with some such hiccupping reference as 2 Ep. Thess. c. iii, v. 6 & 7. There was the sleepy Sunday of his boyhood, when, like a military deserter, he was marched to chapel by a picquet of teachers three times a day, morally handcuffed to another boy; and when he would willingly have bartered two meals of indigestible sermon for another ounce or two of inferior mutton at his scanty dinner in the flesh. There was the interminable Sunday of his nonage; when his mother, stern of face and unrelenting of heart, would sit all day behind a Bible - bound, like her own construction of it, in the hardest, barest, and straitest boards, with one dinted ornament on the cover like the drag of a chain, and a wrathful sprinkling of red upon the edges of the leaves - as if it, of all books! were a fortification against sweetness of temper, natural affection, and gentle intercourse. There was the resentful Sunday of a little later, when he sat down glowering and glooming through the tardy length of the day, with a sullen sense of injury in his heart, and no more real knowledge of the beneficent history of the New Testament than if he had been bred among idolaters. There was a legion of Sundays, all days of unserviceable bitterness and mortification, slowly passing before him. 'Beg pardon, sir,' said a brisk waiter, rubbing the table. 'Wish see bed-room?'

'Yes. I have just made up my mind to do it.'

'Chaymaid!' cried the waiter. 'Gelen box num seven wish see room!'

'Stay!' said Clennam, rousing himself. 'I was not thinking of what I said; I answered mechanically. I am not going to sleep here. I am going home.'

'Deed, sir? Chaymaid! Gelen box num seven, not go sleep here, gome.'

He sat in the same place as the day died, looking at the dull houses opposite, and thinking, if the disembodied spirits of former inhabitants were ever conscious of them, how they must pity themselves for their old places of imprisonment. Sometimes a face would appear behind the dingy glass of a window, and would fade away into the gloom as if it had seen enough of life and had vanished out of it. Presently the rain began to fall in slanting lines between him and those houses, and people began to collect under cover of the public passage opposite, and to look out hopelessly at the sky as the rain dropped thicker and faster. Then wet umbrellas began to appear, draggled skirts, and mud. What the mud had been doing with itself, or where it came from, who could say? But it seemed to collect in a moment, as a crowd will, and in five minutes to have splashed all the sons and daughters of Adam. The lamplighter was going his rounds now; and as the fiery jets sprang up under his touch, one might have fancied them astonished at being suffered to introduce any show of brightness into such a dismal scene.

Mr Arthur Clennam took up his hat and buttoned his coat, and walked out. In the country, the rain would have developed a thousand fresh scents, and every drop would have had its bright association with some beautiful form of growth or life. In the city, it developed only foul stale smells, and was a sickly, lukewarm, dirt- stained, wretched addition to the gutters.

He crossed by St Paul's and went down, at a long angle, almost to the water's edge, through some of the crooked and descending streets which lie (and lay more crookedly and closely then) between the river and Cheapside. Passing, now the mouldy hall of some obsolete Worshipful Company, now the illuminated windows of a Congregationless Church that seemed to be waiting for some adventurous Belzoni to dig it out and discover its history; passing silent warehouses and wharves, and here and there a narrow alley leading to the river, where a wretched little bill, FOUND DROWNED, was weeping on the wet wall; he came at last to the house he sought. An old brick house, so dingy as to be all but black, standing by itself within a gateway. Before it, a square court-yard where a shrub or two and a patch of grass were as rank (which is saying much) as the iron railings enclosing them were rusty; behind it, a jumble of roots. It was a double house, with long, narrow, heavily-framed windows. Many

years ago, it had had it in its mind to slide down sideways; it had been propped up, however, and was leaning on some half-dozen gigantic crutches: which gymnasium for the neighbouring cats, weather-stained, smoke- blackened, and overgrown with weeds, appeared in these latter days to be no very sure reliance.

'Nothing changed,' said the traveller, stopping to look round. 'Dark and miserable as ever. A light in my mother's window, which seems never to have been extinguished since I came home twice a year from school, and dragged my box over this pavement. Well, well, well!'

He went up to the door, which had a projecting canopy in carved work of festooned jack-towels and children's heads with water on the brain, designed after a once-popular monumental pattern, and knocked. A shuffling step was soon heard on the stone floor of the hall, and the door was opened by an old man, bent and dried, but with keen eyes.

He had a candle in his hand, and he held it up for a moment to assist his keen eyes. 'Ah, Mr Arthur?' he said, without any emotion, 'you are come at last? Step in.'

Mr Arthur stepped in and shut the door.

'Your figure is filled out, and set,' said the old man, turning to look at him with the light raised again, and shaking his head; 'but you don't come up to your father in my opinion. Nor yet your mother.'

'How is my mother?'

'She is as she always is now. Keeps her room when not actually bedridden, and hasn't been out of it fifteen times in as many years, Arthur.' They had walked into a spare, meagre dining-room. The old man had put the candlestick upon the table, and, supporting his right elbow with his left hand, was smoothing his leathern jaws while he looked at the visitor. The visitor offered his hand. The old man took it coldly enough, and seemed to prefer his jaws, to which he returned as soon as he could.

'I doubt if your mother will approve of your coming home on the Sabbath, Arthur,' he said, shaking his head warily.

'You wouldn't have me go away again?'

'Oh! I? I? I am not the master. It's not what *I* would have. I have stood between your father and mother for a number of years. I don't pretend to stand between your mother and you.'

'Will you tell her that I have come home?'

'Yes, Arthur, yes. Oh, to be sure! I'll tell her that you have come home. Please to wait here. You won't find the room changed.'

He took another candle from a cupboard, lighted it, left the first on the table, and went upon his errand. He was a short, bald old man, in a high-shouldered black coat and waistcoat, drab breeches, and long drab gaiters. He might, from his dress, have been either clerk or servant, and in fact had long been both. There was nothing about him in the way of decoration but a watch, which was lowered into the depths of its proper pocket by an old black ribbon, and had a tarnished copper key moored above it, to show where it was sunk. His head was awry, and he had a one-sided, crab-like way with him, as if his foundations had yielded at about the same time as those of the house, and he ought to have been propped up in a similar manner.

'How weak am I,' said Arthur Clennam, when he was gone, 'that I could shed tears at this reception! I, who have never experienced anything else; who have never expected anything else.' He not only could, but did. It was the momentary yielding of a nature that had been disappointed from the dawn of its perceptions, but had not quite given up all its hopeful yearnings yet. He subdued it, took up the candle, and examined the room. The old articles of furniture were in their old places; the Plagues of Egypt, much the dimmer for the fly and smoke plagues of London, were framed and glazed upon the walls. There was the old cellaret with nothing in it, lined with lead, like a sort of coffin in compartments; there was the old dark closet, also with nothing in it, of which he had been many a time the sole contents, in days of punishment, when he had regarded it as the veritable entrance to that bourne to which the tract had found him galloping. There was the large, hard- featured clock on the sideboard, which he used to see bending its figured brows upon him with a savage joy when he was behind-hand with his lessons, and which, when it was wound up once a week with an iron handle, used to sound as if it were growling in ferocious anticipation of the miseries into which it would bring him. But here was the old man come back, saying, 'Arthur, I'll go before and light you.'

Arthur followed him up the staircase, which was panelled off into spaces like so many mourning tablets, into a dim bed-chamber, the floor of which had gradually so sunk and settled, that the fire- place was in a dell. On a black bier-like sofa in this hollow, propped up behind with one great angular black bolster like the block at a state execution in the good old times, sat his mother in a widow's dress.

She and his father had been at variance from his earliest remembrance. To sit speechless himself in the midst of rigid silence, glancing in dread from the one averted face to the other, had been the peacefullest occupation of his childhood. She gave him one glassy

kiss, and four stiff fingers muffled in worsted. This embrace concluded, he sat down on the opposite side of her little table. There was a fire in the grate, as there had been night and day for fifteen years. There was a kettle on the hob, as there had been night and day for fifteen years. There was a little mound of damped ashes on the top of the fire, and another little mound swept together under the grate, as there had been night and day for fifteen years. There was a smell of black dye in the airless room, which the fire had been drawing out of the crape and stuff of the widow's dress for fifteen months, and out of the bier- like sofa for fifteen years.

'Mother, this is a change from your old active habits.'

'The world has narrowed to these dimensions, Arthur,' she rep lied, glancing round the room. 'It is well for me that I never set my heart upon its hollow vanities.'

The old influence of her presence and her stern strong voice, so gathered about her son, that he felt conscious of a renewal of the timid chill and reserve of his childhood.

'Do you never leave your room, mother?'

'What with my rheumatic affection, and what with its attendant debility or nervous weakness - names are of no matter now - I have lost the use of my limbs. I never leave my room. I have not been outside this door for - tell him for how long,' she said, speaking over her shoulder.

'A dozen year next Christmas,' returned a cracked voice out of the dimness behind.

'Is that Affery?' said Arthur, looking towards it.

The cracked voice replied that it was Affery: and an old woman came forward into what doubtful light there was, and kissed her hand once; then subsided again into the dimness.

'I am able,' said Mrs Clennam, with a slight motion of her worsted-muffled right hand toward a chair on wheels, standing before a tall writing cabinet close shut up, 'I am able to attend to my business duties, and I am thankful for the privilege. It is a great privilege. But no more of business on this day. It is a bad night, is it not?'

'Yes, mother.'

'Does it snow?'

'Snow, mother? And we only yet in September?'

'All seasons are alike to me,' she returned, with a grim kind of luxuriousness. 'I know nothing of summer and winter, shut up here.

The Lord has been pleased to put me beyond all that.' With her cold grey eyes and her cold grey hair, and her immovable face, as stiff as the folds of her stony head-dress, - her being beyond the reach of the seasons seemed but a fit sequence to her being beyond the reach of all changing emotions.

On her little table lay two or three books, her handkerchief, a pair of steel spectacles newly taken off, and an old-fashioned gold watch in a heavy double case. Upon this last object her son's eyes and her own now rested together.

'I see that you received the packet I sent you on my father's death, safely, mother.'

'You see.'

'I never knew my father to show so much anxiety on any subject, as that his watch should be sent straight to you.'

'I keep it here as a remembrance of your father.'

'It was not until the last, that he expressed the wish; when he could only put his hand upon it, and very indistinctly say to me 'your mother.' A moment before, I thought him wandering in his mind, as he had been for many hours - I think he had no consciousness of pain in his short illness - when I saw him turn himself in his bed and try to open it.'

'Was your father, then, not wandering in his mind when he tried to open it?'

'No. He was quite sensible at that time.'

Mrs Clennam shook her head; whether in dismissal of the deceased or opposing herself to her son's opinion, was not clearly expressed.

'After my father's death I opened it myself, thinking there might be, for anything I knew, some memorandum there. However, as I need not tell you, mother, there was nothing but the old silk watch- paper worked in beads, which you found (no doubt) in its place between the cases, where I found and left it.'

Mrs Clennam signified assent; then added, 'No more of business on this day,' and then added, 'Affery, it is nine o'clock.'

Upon this, the old woman cleared the little table, went out of the room, and quickly returned with a tray on which was a dish of little rusks and a small precise pat of butter, cool, symmetrical, white, and plump. The old man who had been standing by the door in one attitude during the whole interview, looking at the mother up- stairs as he had looked at the son down-stairs, went out at the same time, and, after a longer absence, returned with another tray on which was the greater part of a bottle of port wine (which, to judge by his panting, he had brought from the cellar), a lemon, a sugar-basin, and a spice box. With these materials and the aid of the kettle, he filled a tumbler with a hot and odorous mixture, measured out and compounded with as much nicety as a physician's prescription. Into this mixture Mrs Clennam dipped certain of the rusks, and ate them; while the old woman buttered certain other of the rusks, which were to be eaten alone. When the invalid had eaten all the rusks and drunk all the mixture, the two trays were removed; and the books and the candle, watch, handkerchief, and spectacles were replaced upon the table. She then put on the spectacles and read certain passages aloud from a book - sternly, fiercely, wrathfully - praying that her enemies (she made them by her tone and manner expressly hers) might be put to the edge of the sword, consumed by fire, smitten by plagues and leprosy, that their bones might be ground to dust, and that they might be utterly exterminated. As she read on, years seemed to fall away from her son like the imaginings of a dream, and all the old dark horrors of his usual preparation for the sleep of an innocent child to overshadow him.

She shut the book and remained for a little time with her face shaded by her hand. So did the old man, otherwise still unchanged

in attitude; so, probably, did the old woman in her dimmer part of the room. Then the sick woman was ready for bed.

'Good night, Arthur. Affery will see to your accommodation. Only touch me, for my hand is tender.' He touched the worsted muffling of her hand - that was nothing; if his mother had been sheathed in brass there would have been no new barrier between them - and followed the old man and woman down-stairs.

The latter asked him, when they were alone together among the heavy shadows of the dining-room, would he have some supper?

'No, Affery, no supper.'

'You shall if you like,' said Affery. 'There's her tomorrow's partridge in the larder - her first this year; say the word and I'll cook it.'

No, he had not long dined, and could eat nothing.

'Have something to drink, then,' said Affery; 'you shall have some of her bottle of port, if you like. I'll tell Jeremiah that you ordered me to bring it you.'

No; nor would he have that, either.

'It's no reason, Arthur,' said the old woman, bending over him to whisper, 'that because I am afeared of my life of 'em, you should be. You've got half the property, haven't you?'

'Yes, yes.'

'Well then, don't you be cowed. You're clever, Arthur, an't you? ' He nodded, as she seemed to expect an answer in the affirmative. 'Then stand up against them! She's awful clever, and none but a clever one durst say a word to her. HE'S a clever one - oh, he's a clever one! - and he gives it her when he has a mind to't, he does!'

'Your husband does?'

'Does? It makes me shake from head to foot, to hear him give it her. My husband, Jeremiah Flintwinch, can conquer even your mother. What can he be but a clever one to do that!'

His shuffling footstep coming towards them caused her to retreat to the other end of the room. Though a tall, hard-favoured, sinewy old woman, who in her youth might have enlisted in the Foot Guards without much fear of discovery, she collapsed before the little keen-eyed crab-like old man.

'Now, Affery,' said he, 'now, woman, what are you doing? Can't you find Master Arthur something or another to pick at?'

Master Arthur repeated his recent refusal to pick at anything.

'Very well, then,' said the old man; 'make his bed. Stir yourself.' His neck was so twisted that the knotted ends of his white cravat usually dangled under one ear; his natural acerbity and energy, always contending with a second nature of habitual repression, gave his features a swollen and suffused look; and altogether, he had a weird appearance of having hanged himself at one time or other, and of having gone about ever since, halter and all, exactly as some timely hand had cut him down.

'You'll have bitter words together to-morrow, Arthur; you and your mother,' said Jeremiah. 'Your having given up the business on your father's death - which she suspects, though we have left it to you to tell her - won't go off smoothly.'

'I have given up everything in life for the business, and the time came for me to give up that.'

'Good!' cried Jeremiah, evidently meaning Bad. 'Very good! only don't expect me to stand between your mother and you, Arthur. I stood between your mother and your father, fending off this, and fending off that, and getting crushed and pounded betwixt em; and I've done with such work.'

'You will never be asked to begin it again for me, Jeremiah.'

' Good. I'm glad to hear it; because I should have had to decline it, if I had been. That's enough - as your mother says - and more than enough of such matters on a Sabbath night. Affery, woman, have you found what you want yet?'

She had been collecting sheets and blankets from a press, and hastened to gather them up, and to reply, 'Yes, Jeremiah.' Arthur Clennam helped her by carrying the load himself, wished the old man good night, and went up-stairs with her to the top of the house.

They mounted up and up, through the musty smell of an old close house, little used, to a large garret bed-room. Meagre and spare, like all the other rooms, it was even uglier and grimmer than the rest, by being the place of banishment for the worn-out furniture. Its movables were ugly old chairs with worn-out seats, and ugly old chairs without any seats; a threadbare patternless carpet, a maimed table, a crippled wardrobe, a lean set of fire-irons like the skeleton of a set deceased, a washing-stand that looked as if it had stood for ages in a hail of dirty soapsuds, and a bedstead with four bare atomies of posts, each terminating in a spike, as if for the dismal accommodation of lodgers who might prefer to impale themselves. Arthur opened the long low window, and looked out upon the old blasted and blackened forest of chimneys, and the old red glare in the sky, which had seemed to him once upon a time but a nightly reflection of the fiery environment that was presented to his childish fancy in all directions, let it look where it would.

He drew in his head again, sat down at the bedside, and looked on at Affery Flintwinch making the bed.

'Affery, you were not married when I went away.'

She screwed her mouth into the form of saying 'No,' shook her head, and proceeded to get a pillow into its case.

'How did it happen?'

'Why, Jeremiah, o' course,' said Affery, with an end of the pillow- case between her teeth.

'Of course he proposed it, but how did it all come about? I should have thought that neither of you would have married; least of all should I have thought of your marrying each other.'

'No more should I,' said Mrs Flintwinch, tying the pillow tightly in its case.

'That's what I mean. When did you begin to think otherwise?'

'Never begun to think otherwise at all,' said Mrs Flintwinch.

Seeing, as she patted the pillow into its place on the bolster, that he was still looking at her as if waiting for the rest of her reply, she gave it a great poke in the middle, and asked, 'How could I help myself?'

'How could you help yourself from being married!'

'O' course,' said Mrs Flintwinch. 'It was no doing o' mine. I'D never thought of it. I'd got something to do, without thinking, indeed! She kept me to it (as well as he) when she could go about, and she could go about then.' 'Well?'

'Well?' echoed Mrs Flintwinch. 'That's what I said myself. Well! What's the use of considering? If them two clever ones have made up their minds to it, what's left for me to do? Nothing.'

'Was it my mother's project, then?'

'The Lord bless you, Arthur, and forgive me the wish!' cried Affery, speaking always in a low tone. 'If they hadn't been both of a mind in it, how could it ever have been? Jeremiah never courted me; t'ant likely that he would, after living in the house with me and ordering me about for as many years as he'd done. He said to me one day, he said, 'Affery,' he said, 'now I am going to tell you something. What do you think of the name of Flintwinch?' 'What do I think of it?' I says. 'Yes,' he said, 'because you're going to take it,' he said. 'Take it?' I says. 'Jere-MI-ah?' Oh! he's a clever one!'

Mrs Flintwinch went on to spread the upper sheet over the bed, and the blanket over that, and the counterpane over that, as if she had quite concluded her story. 'Well?' said Arthur again.

'Well?' echoed Mrs Flintwinch again. 'How could I help myself? He said to me, 'Affery, you and me must be married, and I'll tell you why. She's failing in health, and she'll want pretty constant attendance up in her room, and we shall have to be much with her, and there'll be nobody about now but ourselves when we're away from her, and altogether it will be more convenient. She's of my opinion,' he said, 'so if you'll put your bonnet on next Monday morning at eight, we'll get it over." Mrs Flintwinch tucked up the bed.

'Well?'

'Well?' repeated Mrs Flintwinch, 'I think so! I sits me down and says it. Well! - Jeremiah then says to me, 'As to banns, next Sunday being the third time of asking (for I've put 'em up a fortnight), is my reason for naming Monday. She'll speak to you about it herself, and now she'll find you prepared, Affery.' That same day she spoke to me, and she said, 'So, Affery, I understand that you and Jeremiah are going to be married. I am glad of it, and so are you, with reason. It is a very good thing for you, and very welcome under the circumstances to me. He is a sensible man, and a trustworthy man, and a persevering man, and a pious man.' What could I say when it had come to that? Why, if it had been - a smothering instead of a wedding,' Mrs Flintwinch cast about in her mind with great pains for this form of expression, 'I couldn't have said a word upon it, against them two clever ones.'

'In good faith, I believe so.' 'And so you may, Arthur.'

'Affery, what girl was that in my mother's room just now?'

'Girl?' said Mrs Flintwinch in a rather sharp key.

'It was a girl, surely, whom I saw near you - almost hidden in the dark corner?'

'Oh! She? Little Dorrit? She's nothing; she's a whim of - hers.' It was a peculiarity of Affery Flintwinch that she never spoke of Mrs Clennam by name. 'But there's another sort of girls than that about. Have you forgot your old sweetheart? Long and long ago, I'll be bound.'

'I suffered enough from my mother's separating us, to remember her.

I recollect her very well.'

'Have you got another?'

'No.'

'Here's news for you, then. She's well to do now, and a widow. And if you like to have her, why you can.'

'And how do you know that, Affery?'

'Them two clever ones have been speaking about it. - There's Jeremiah on the stairs!' She was gone in a moment. Mrs Flintwinch had introduced into the web that his mind was busily weaving, in that old workshop where the loom of his youth had stood, the last thread wanting to the pattern. The airy folly of a boy's love had found its way even into that house, and he had been as wretched under its hopelessness as if the house had been a castle of romance. Little more than a week ago at Marseilles, the face of the pretty girl from whom he had parted with regret, had had an unusual interest for him, and a tender hold upon him, because of some resemblance, real or imagined, to this first face that had soared out of his gloomy life into the bright glories of fancy. He leaned upon the sill of the long low window, and looking out upon the blackened forest of chimneys again, began to dream; for it had been the uniform tendency of this man's life - so much was wanting in it to think about, so much that might have been better directed and happier to speculate upon - to make him a dreamer, after all.