

Chapter VI - The Father Of The Marshalsea

Thirty years ago there stood, a few doors short of the church of Saint George, in the borough of Southwark, on the left-hand side of the way going southward, the Marshalsea Prison. It had stood there many years before, and it remained there some years afterwards; but it is gone now, and the world is none the worse without it.

It was an oblong pile of barrack building, partitioned into squalid houses standing back to back, so that there were no back rooms; environed by a narrow paved yard, hemmed in by high walls duly spiked at top. Itself a close and confined prison for debtors, it contained within it a much closer and more confined jail for smugglers. Offenders against the revenue laws, and defaulters to excise or customs who had incurred fines which they were unable to pay, were supposed to be incarcerated behind an iron-plated door closing up a second prison, consisting of a strong cell or two, and a blind alley some yard and a half wide, which formed the mysterious termination of the very limited skittle-ground in which the Marshalsea debtors bowled down their troubles.

Supposed to be incarcerated there, because the time had rather outgrown the strong cells and the blind alley. In practice they had come to be considered a little too bad, though in theory they were quite as good as ever; which may be observed to be the case at the present day with other cells that are not at all strong, and with other blind alleys that are stone-blind. Hence the smugglers habitually consorted with the debtors (who received them with open arms), except at certain constitutional moments when somebody came from some Office, to go through some form of overlooking something which neither he nor anybody else knew anything about. On these truly British occasions, the smugglers, if any, made a feint of walking into the strong cells and the blind alley, while this somebody pretended to do his something: and made a reality of walking out again as soon as he hadn't done it - neatly epitomising the administration of most of the public affairs in our right little, tight little, island.

There had been taken to the Marshalsea Prison, long before the day when the sun shone on Marseilles and on the opening of this narrative, a debtor with whom this narrative has some concern.

He was, at that time, a very amiable and very helpless middle-aged gentleman, who was going out again directly. Necessarily, he was going out again directly, because the Marshalsea lock never turned upon a debtor who was not. He brought in a portmanteau with him, which he doubted its being worth while to unpack; he was so perfectly clear - like all the rest of them, the turnkey on the lock said - that he was going out again directly.

He was a shy, retiring man; well-looking, though in an effeminate style; with a mild voice, curling hair, and irresolute hands - rings upon the fingers in those days - which nervously wandered to his trembling lip a hundred times in the first half-hour of his acquaintance with the jail. His principal anxiety was about his wife.

'Do you think, sir,' he asked the turnkey, 'that she will be very much shocked, if she should come to the gate to-morrow morning?'

The turnkey gave it as the result of his experience that some of 'em was and some of 'em wasn't. In general, more no than yes. 'What like is she, you see?' he philosophically asked: 'that's what it hinges on.'

'She is very delicate and inexperienced indeed.'

'That,' said the turnkey, 'is agen her.'

'She is so little used to go out alone,' said the debtor, 'that I am at a loss to think how she will ever make her way here, if she walks.'

'P'raps,' quoth the turnkey, 'she'll take a ackney coach.'

'Perhaps.' The irresolute fingers went to the trembling lip. 'I hope she will. She may not think of it.'

'Or p'raps,' said the turnkey, offering his suggestions from the the top of his well-worn wooden stool, as he might have offered them to a child for whose weakness he felt a compassion, 'p'raps she'll get her brother, or her sister, to come along with her.'

'She has no brother or sister.'

'Niece, nevy, cousin, serwant, young 'ooman, greengrocer. - Dash it!

One or another on 'em,' said the turnkey, repudiating beforehand the refusal of all his suggestions.

'I fear - I hope it is not against the rules - that she will bring the children.'

'The children?' said the turnkey. 'And the rules? Why, lord set you up like a corner pin, we've a reg'lar playground o' children here. Children! Why we swarm with 'em. How many a you got?'

'Two,' said the debtor, lifting his irresolute hand to his lip again, and turning into the prison.

The turnkey followed him with his eyes. 'And you another,' he observed to himself, 'which makes three on you. And your wife another, I'll lay a crown. Which makes four on you. And another coming, I'll lay half-a-crown. Which'll make five on you. And I'll go another seven and sixpence to name which is the helplessesest, the unborn baby or you!'

He was right in all his particulars. She came next day with a little boy of three years old, and a little girl of two, and he stood entirely corroborated.

'Got a room now; haven't you?' the turnkey asked the debtor after a week or two.

'Yes, I have got a very good room.'

'Any little sticks a coming to furnish it?' said the turnkey.

'I expect a few necessary articles of furniture to be delivered by the carrier, this afternoon.'

'Missis and little 'uns a coming to keep you company?' asked the turnkey.

'Why, yes, we think it better that we should not be scattered, even for a few weeks.'

'Even for a few weeks, OF course,' replied the turnkey. And he followed him again with his eyes, and nodded his head seven times when he was gone.

The affairs of this debtor were perplexed by a partnership, of which he knew no more than that he had invested money in it; by legal matters of assignment and settlement, conveyance here and conveyance there, suspicion of unlawful preference of creditors in this direction, and of mysterious spiriting away of property in that; and as nobody on the face of the earth could be more incapable of explaining any single item in the heap of confusion than the debtor himself, nothing comprehensible could be made of his case. To question him in detail, and endeavour to reconcile his answers; to closet him with accountants and sharp practitioners, learned in the wiles of insolvency and bankruptcy; was only to put the case out at compound interest and incomprehensibility. The irresolute fingers fluttered more and more ineffectually about the trembling lip on every such occasion, and the sharpest practitioners gave him up as a hopeless job.

'Out?' said the turnkey, 'he'll never get out, unless his creditors take him by the shoulders and shove him out.'

He had been there five or six months, when he came running to this turnkey one forenoon to tell him, breathless and pale, that his wife was ill.

'As anybody might a known she would be,' said the turnkey.

'We intended,' he returned, 'that she should go to a country lodging only to-morrow. What am I to do! Oh, good heaven, what am I to do!'

'Don't waste your time in clasping your hands and biting your fingers,' responded the practical turnkey, taking him by the elbow, 'but come along with me.'

The turnkey conducted him - trembling from head to foot, and constantly crying under his breath, What was he to do! while his irresolute fingers bedabbled the tears upon his face - up one of the common staircases in the prison to a door on the garret story. Upon which door the turnkey knocked with the handle of his key.

'Come in!' cried a voice inside.

The turnkey, opening the door, disclosed in a wretched, ill-smelling little room, two hoarse, puffy, red-faced personages seated at a rickety table, playing at all-fours, smoking pipes, and drinking brandy. 'Doctor,' said the turnkey, 'here's a gentleman's wife in want of you without a minute's loss of time!'

The doctor's friend was in the positive degree of hoarseness, puffiness, red-facedness, all-fours, tobacco, dirt, and brandy; the doctor in the comparative - hoarser, puffier, more red-faced, more all-fourey, tobaccoer, dirtier, and brandier. The doctor was amazingly shabby, in a torn and darned rough-weather sea-jacket, out at elbows and eminently short of buttons (he had been in his time the experienced surgeon carried by a passenger ship), the dirtiest white trousers conceivable by mortal man, carpet slippers, and no visible linen. 'Childbed?' said the doctor. 'I'm the boy!' With that the doctor took a comb from the chimney-piece and stuck his hair upright - which appeared to be his way of washing himself - produced a professional chest or case, of most abject appearance, from the cupboard where his cup and saucer and coals were, settled his chin in the frowsy wrapper round his neck, and became a ghastly medical scarecrow.

The doctor and the debtor ran down-stairs, leaving the turnkey to return to the lock, and made for the debtor's room. All the ladies in the prison had got hold of the news, and were in the yard. Some of them had already taken possession of the two children, and were hospitably carrying them off; others were offering loans of little comforts from their own scanty store; others were sympathising with

the greatest volubility. The gentlemen prisoners, feeling themselves at a disadvantage, had for the most part retired, not to say sneaked, to their rooms; from the open windows of which some of them now complimented the doctor with whistles as he passed below, while others, with several stories between them, interchanged sarcastic references to the prevalent excitement.

It was a hot summer day, and the prison rooms were baking between the high walls. In the debtor's confined chamber, Mrs Bangham, charwoman and messenger, who was not a prisoner (though she had been once), but was the popular medium of communication with the outer world, had volunteered her services as fly-catcher and general attendant. The walls and ceiling were blackened with flies. Mrs Bangham, expert in sudden device, with one hand fanned the patient with a cabbage leaf, and with the other set traps of vinegar and sugar in gallipots; at the same time enunciating sentiments of an encouraging and congratulatory nature, adapted to the occasion.

'The flies trouble you, don't they, my dear?' said Mrs Bangham. 'But p'raps they'll take your mind off of it, and do you good. What between the buryin ground, the grocer's, the waggon-stables, and the paunch trade, the Marshalsea flies gets very large. P'raps they're sent as a consolation, if we only know'd it. How are you now, my dear? No better? No, my dear, it ain't to be expected; you'll be worse before you're better, and you know it, don't you? Yes. That's right! And to think of a sweet little cherub being born inside the lock! Now ain't it pretty, ain't THAT something to carry you through it pleasant? Why, we ain't had such a thing happen here, my dear, not for I couldn't name the time when. And you a crying too?' said Mrs Bangham, to rally the patient more and more. 'You! Making yourself so famous! With the flies a falling into the gallipots by fifties! And everything a going on so well! And here if there ain't,' said Mrs Bangham as the door opened, 'if there ain't your dear gentleman along with Dr Haggage! And now indeed we ARE complete, I THINK!'

The doctor was scarcely the kind of apparition to inspire a patient with a sense of absolute completeness, but as he presently delivered the opinion, 'We are as right as we can be, Mrs Bangham, and we shall come out of this like a house afire;' and as he and Mrs Bangham took possession of the poor helpless pair, as everybody else and anybody else had always done, the means at hand were as good on the whole as better would have been. The special feature in Dr Haggage's treatment of the case, was his determination to keep Mrs Bangham up to the mark. As thus:

'Mrs Bangham,' said the doctor, before he had been there twenty minutes, 'go outside and fetch a little brandy, or we shall have you giving in.'

'Thank you, sir. But none on my accounts,' said Mrs Bangham.

'Mrs Bangham,' returned the doctor, 'I am in professional attendance on this lady, and don't choose to allow any discussion on your part. Go outside and fetch a little brandy, or I foresee that you'll break down.'

'You're to be obeyed, sir,' said Mrs Bangham, rising. 'If you was to put your own lips to it, I think you wouldn't be the worse, for you look but poorly, sir.'

'Mrs Bangham,' returned the doctor, 'I am not your business, thank you, but you are mine. Never you mind ME, if you please. What you have got to do, is, to do as you are told, and to go and get what I bid you.'

Mrs Bangham submitted; and the doctor, having administered her potion, took his own. He repeated the treatment every hour, being very determined with Mrs Bangham. Three or four hours passed; the flies fell into the traps by hundreds; and at length one little life, hardly stronger than theirs, appeared among the multitude of lesser deaths.

'A very nice little girl indeed,' said the doctor; 'little, but well-formed. Halloa, Mrs Bangham! You're looking queer! You be off, ma'am, this minute, and fetch a little more brandy, or we shall have you in hysterics.'

By this time, the rings had begun to fall from the debtor's irresolute hands, like leaves from a wintry tree. Not one was left upon them that night, when he put something that chinked into the doctor's greasy palm. In the meantime Mrs Bangham had been out on an errand to a neighbouring establishment decorated with three golden balls, where she was very well known.

'Thank you,' said the doctor, 'thank you. Your good lady is quite composed. Doing charmingly.'

'I am very happy and very thankful to know it,' said the debtor, 'though I little thought once, that - '

'That a child would be born to you in a place like this?' said the doctor. 'Bah, bah, sir, what does it signify? A little more elbow-room is all we want here. We are quiet here; we don't get badgered here; there's no knocker here, sir, to be hammered at by creditors and bring a man's heart into his mouth. Nobody comes here to ask if a man's at home, and to say he'll stand on the door mat till he is. Nobody writes threatening letters about money to this place. It's freedom, sir, it's freedom! I have had to-day's practice at home and abroad, on a

march, and aboard ship, and I'll tell you this: I don't know that I have ever pursued it under such quiet circumstances as here this day. Elsewhere, people are restless, worried, hurried about, anxious respecting one thing, anxious respecting another. Nothing of the kind here, sir. We have done all that - we know the worst of it; we have got to the bottom, we can't fall, and what have we found? Peace. That's the word for it. Peace.' With this profession of faith, the doctor, who was an old jail-bird, and was more sodden than usual, and had the additional and unusual stimulus of money in his pocket, returned to his associate and chum in hoarseness, puffiness, red-facedness, all-fours, tobacco, dirt, and brandy.

Now, the debtor was a very different man from the doctor, but he had already begun to travel, by his opposite segment of the circle, to the same point. Crushed at first by his imprisonment, he had soon found a dull relief in it. He was under lock and key; but the lock and key that kept him in, kept numbers of his troubles out. If he had been a man with strength of purpose to face those troubles and fight them, he might have broken the net that held him, or broken his heart; but being what he was, he languidly slipped into this smooth descent, and never more took one step upward.

When he was relieved of the perplexed affairs that nothing would make plain, through having them returned upon his hands by a dozen agents in succession who could make neither beginning, middle, nor end of them or him, he found his miserable place of refuge a quieter refuge than it had been before. He had unpacked the portmanteau long ago; and his elder children now played regularly about the yard, and everybody knew the baby, and claimed a kind of proprietorship in her.

'Why, I'm getting proud of you,' said his friend the turnkey, one day. 'You'll be the oldest inhabitant soon. The Marshalsea wouldn't be like the Marshalsea now, without you and your family.'

The turnkey really was proud of him. He would mention him in laudatory terms to new-comers, when his back was turned. 'You took notice of him,' he would say, 'that went out of the lodge just now?'

New-comer would probably answer Yes.

'Brought up as a gentleman, he was, if ever a man was. Ed'cated at no end of expense. Went into the Marshal's house once to try a new piano for him. Played it, I understand, like one o'clock - beautiful! As to languages - speaks anything. We've had a Frenchman here in his time, and it's my opinion he knowed more French than the Frenchman did. We've had an Italian here in his time, and he shut him up in about half a minute. You'll find some characters behind

other locks, I don't say you won't; but if you want the top sawyer in such respects as I've mentioned, you must come to the Marshalsea.'

When his youngest child was eight years old, his wife, who had long been languishing away - of her own inherent weakness, not that she retained any greater sensitiveness as to her place of abode than he did - went upon a visit to a poor friend and old nurse in the country, and died there. He remained shut up in his room for a fortnight afterwards; and an attorney's clerk, who was going through the Insolvent Court, engrossed an address of condolence to him, which looked like a Lease, and which all the prisoners signed.

When he appeared again he was greyer (he had soon begun to turn grey); and the turnkey noticed that his hands went often to his trembling lips again, as they had used to do when he first came in.

But he got pretty well over it in a month or two; and in the meantime the children played about the yard as regularly as ever, but in black.

Then Mrs Bangham, long popular medium of communication with the outer world, began to be infirm, and to be found oftener than usual comatose on pavements, with her basket of purchases spilt, and the change of her clients ninepence short. His son began to supersede Mrs Bangham, and to execute commissions in a knowing manner, and to be of the prison prisonous, of the streets streeety.

Time went on, and the turnkey began to fail. His chest swelled, and his legs got weak, and he was short of breath. The well-worn wooden stool was 'beyond him,' he complained. He sat in an arm- chair with a cushion, and sometimes wheezed so, for minutes together, that he couldn't turn the key. When he was overpowered by these fits, the debtor often turned it for him. 'You and me,' said the turnkey, one snowy winter's night when the lodge, with a bright fire in it, was pretty full of company, 'is the oldest inhabitants. I wasn't here myself above seven year before you. I shan't last long. When I'm off the lock for good and all, you'll be the Father of the Marshalsea.' The turnkey went off the lock of this world next day. His words were remembered and repeated; and tradition afterwards handed down from generation to generation - a Marshalsea generation might be calculated as about three months - that the shabby old debtor with the soft manner and the white hair, was the Father of the Marshalsea.

And he grew to be proud of the title. If any impostor had arisen to claim it, he would have shed tears in resentment of the attempt to deprive him of his rights. A disposition began to be perceived in him to exaggerate the number of years he had been there; it was generally understood that you must deduct a few from his account; he was vain, the fleeting generations of debtors said.

All new-comers were presented to him. He was punctilious in the exaction of this ceremony. The wits would perform the office of introduction with overcharged pomp and politeness, but they could not easily overstep his sense of its gravity. He received them in his poor room (he disliked an introduction in the mere yard, as informal - a thing that might happen to anybody), with a kind of bowed-down beneficence. They were welcome to the Marshalsea, he would tell them. Yes, he was the Father of the place. So the world was kind enough to call him; and so he was, if more than twenty years of residence gave him a claim to the title. It looked small at first, but there was very good company there - among a mixture - necessarily a mixture - and very good air.

It became a not unusual circumstance for letters to be put under his door at night, enclosing half-a-crown, two half-crowns, now and then at long intervals even half-a-sovereign, for the Father of the Marshalsea. 'With the compliments of a collegian taking leave.' He received the gifts as tributes, from admirers, to a public character. Sometimes these correspondents assumed facetious names, as the Brick, Bellows, Old Gooseberry, Wideawake, Snooks, Mops, Cutaway, the Dogs-meat Man; but he considered this in bad taste, and was always a little hurt by it.

In the fulness of time, this correspondence showing signs of wearing out, and seeming to require an effort on the part of the correspondents to which in the hurried circumstances of departure many of them might not be equal, he established the custom of attending collegians of a certain standing, to the gate, and taking leave of them there. The collegian under treatment, after shaking hands, would occasionally stop to wrap up something in a bit of paper, and would come back again calling 'Hi!'

He would look round surprised. 'Me?' he would say, with a smile. By this time the collegian would be up with him, and he would paternally add, 'What have you forgotten? What can I do for you?'

'I forgot to leave this,' the collegian would usually return, 'for the Father of the Marshalsea.'

'My good sir,' he would rejoin, 'he is infinitely obliged to you.' But, to the last, the irresolute hand of old would remain in the pocket into which he had slipped the money during two or three turns about the yard, lest the transaction should be too conspicuous to the general body of collegians.

One afternoon he had been doing the honours of the place to a rather large party of collegians, who happened to be going out, when, as he was coming back, he encountered one from the poor side who had

been taken in execution for a small sum a week before, had 'settled' in the course of that afternoon, and was going out too. The man was a mere Plasterer in his working dress; had his wife with him, and a bundle; and was in high spirits.

'God bless you, sir,' he said in passing.

'And you,' benignantly returned the Father of the Marshalsea.

They were pretty far divided, going their several ways, when the Plasterer called out, 'I say! - sir!' and came back to him.

'It ain't much,' said the Plasterer, putting a little pile of halfpence in his hand, 'but it's well meant.'

The Father of the Marshalsea had never been offered tribute in copper yet. His children often had, and with his perfect acquiescence it had gone into the common purse to buy meat that he had eaten, and drink that he had drunk; but fustian splashed with white lime, bestowing halfpence on him, front to front, was new.

'How dare you!' he said to the man, and feebly burst into tears.

The Plasterer turned him towards the wall, that his face might not be seen; and the action was so delicate, and the man was so penetrated with repentance, and asked pardon so honestly, that he could make him no less acknowledgment than, 'I know you meant it kindly. Say no more.'

'Bless your soul, sir,' urged the Plasterer, 'I did indeed. I'd do more by you than the rest of 'em do, I fancy.'

'What would you do?' he asked.

'I'd come back to see you, after I was let out.'

'Give me the money again,' said the other, eagerly, 'and I'll keep it, and never spend it. Thank you for it, thank you! I shall see you again?' 'If I live a week you shall.'

They shook hands and parted. The collegians, assembled in Symposium in the Snuggery that night, marvelled what had happened to their Father; he walked so late in the shadows of the yard, and seemed so downcast.