Chapter VII - The Child Of The Marshalsea

The baby whose first draught of air had been tinctured with Doctor Haggage's brandy, was handed down among the generations of collegians, like the tradition of their common parent. In the earlier stages of her existence, she was handed down in a literal and prosaic sense; it being almost a part of the entrance footing of every new collegian to nurse the child who had been born in the college.

'By rights,' remarked the turnkey when she was first shown to him, 'I ought to be her godfather.'

The debtor irresolutely thought of it for a minute, and said, 'Perhaps you wouldn't object to really being her godfather?'

'Oh! *I* don't object,' replied the turnkey, 'if you don't.'

Thus it came to pass that she was christened one Sunday afternoon, when the turnkey, being relieved, was off the lock; and that the turnkey went up to the font of Saint George's Church, and promised and vowed and renounced on her behalf, as he himself related when he came back, 'like a good 'un.'

This invested the turnkey with a new proprietary share in the child, over and above his former official one. When she began to walk and talk, he became fond of her; bought a little arm-chair and stood it by the high fender of the lodge fire-place; liked to have her company when he was on the lock; and used to bribe her with cheap toys to come and talk to him. The child, for her part, soon grew so fond of the turnkey that she would come climbing up the lodge-steps of her own accord at all hours of the day. When she fell asleep in the little armchair by the high fender, the turnkey would cover her with his pocket-handkerchief; and when she sat in it dressing and undressing a doll which soon came to be unlike dolls on the other side of the lock, and to bear a horrible family resemblance to Mrs Bangham - he would contemplate her from the top of his stool with exceeding gentleness. Witnessing these things, the collegians would express an opinion that the turnkey, who was a bachelor, had been cut out by nature for a family man. But the turnkey thanked them, and said, 'No, on the whole it was enough to see other people's children there.' At what period of her early life the little creature began to perceive that it was not the habit of all the world to live locked up in narrow yards surrounded by high walls with spikes at the top, would be a difficult question to settle. But she was a very, very little creature indeed, when she had somehow gained the knowledge that her clasp of her father's hand was to be always loosened at the door which the great key opened; and that while her own light steps were free to pass beyond it, his feet must never cross that line. A pitiful and plaintive

look, with which she had begun to regard him when she was still extremely young, was perhaps a part of this discovery.

With a pitiful and plaintive look for everything, indeed, but with something in it for only him that was like protection, this Child of the Marshalsea and the child of the Father of the Marshalsea, sat by her friend the turnkey in the lodge, kept the family room, or wandered about the prison-yard, for the first eight years of her life. With a pitiful and plaintive look for her wayward sister; for her idle brother; for the high blank walls; for the faded crowd they shut in; for the games of the prison children as they whooped and ran, and played at hide-and-seek, and made the iron bars of the inner gateway 'Home.'

Wistful and wondering, she would sit in summer weather by the high fender in the lodge, looking up at the sky through the barred window, until, when she turned her eyes away, bars of light would arise between her and her friend, and she would see him through a grating, too. 'Thinking of the fields,' the turnkey said once, after watching her, 'ain't you?'

'Where are they?' she inquired.

'Why, they're - over there, my dear,' said the turnkey, with a vague flourish of his key. 'Just about there.'

'Does anybody open them, and shut them? Are they locked?'

The turnkey was discomfited. 'Well,' he said. 'Not in general.'

'Are they very pretty, Bob?' She called him Bob, by his own particular request and instruction.

'Lovely. Full of flowers. There's buttercups, and there's daisies, and there's' - the turnkey hesitated, being short of floral nomenclature - 'there's dandelions, and all manner of games.'

'Is it very pleasant to be there, Bob?'

'Prime,' said the turnkey.

'Was father ever there?'

'Hem!' coughed the turnkey. 'O yes, he was there, sometimes.'

'Is he sorry not to be there now?'

'N-not particular,' said the turnkey.

'Nor any of the people?' she asked, glancing at the listless crowd within. 'O are you quite sure and certain, Bob?'

At this difficult point of the conversation Bob gave in, and changed the subject to hard-bake: always his last resource when he found his little friend getting him into a political, social, or theological corner. But this was the origin of a series of Sunday excursions that these two curious companions made together. They used to issue from the lodge on alternate Sunday afternoons with great gravity, bound for some meadows or green lanes that had been elaborately appointed by the turnkey in the course of the week; and there she picked grass and flowers to bring home, while he smoked his pipe. Afterwards, there were tea-gardens, shrimps, ale, and other delicacies; and then they would come back hand in hand, unless she was more than usually tired, and had fallen asleep on his shoulder.

In those early days, the turnkey first began profoundly to consider a question which cost him so much mental labour, that it remained undetermined on the day of his death. He decided to will and bequeath his little property of savings to his godchild, and the point arose how could it be so 'tied up' as that only she should have the benefit of it? His experience on the lock gave him such an acute perception of the enormous difficulty of 'tying up' money with any approach to tightness, and contrariwise of the remarkable ease with which it got loose, that through a series of years he regularly propounded this knotty point to every new insolvent agent and other professional gentleman who passed in and out.

'Supposing,' he would say, stating the case with his key on the professional gentleman's waistcoat; 'supposing a man wanted to leave his property to a young female, and wanted to tie it up so that nobody else should ever be able to make a grab at it; how would you tie up that property?'

'Settle it strictly on herself,' the professional gentleman would complacently answer.

'But look here,' quoth the turnkey. 'Supposing she had, say a brother, say a father, say a husband, who would be likely to make a grab at that property when she came into it - how about that?'

'It would be settled on herself, and they would have no more legal claim on it than you,' would be the professional answer.

'Stop a bit,' said the turnkey. 'Supposing she was tender-hearted, and they came over her. Where's your law for tying it up then?'

The deepest character whom the turnkey sounded, was unable to produce his law for tying such a knot as that. So, the turnkey thought about it all his life, and died intestate after all.

But that was long afterwards, when his god-daughter was past sixteen. The first half of that space of her life was only just accomplished, when her pitiful and plaintive look saw her father a widower. From that time the protection that her wondering eyes had expressed towards him, became embodied in action, and the Child of the Marshalsea took upon herself a new relation towards the Father.

At first, such a baby could do little more than sit with him, deserting her livelier place by the high fender, and quietly watching him. But this made her so far necessary to him that he became accustomed to her, and began to be sensible of missing her when she was not there. Through this little gate, she passed out of childhood into the care-laden world.

What her pitiful look saw, at that early time, in her father, in her sister, in her brother, in the jail; how much, or how little of the wretched truth it pleased God to make visible to her; lies hidden with many mysteries. It is enough that she was inspired to be something which was not what the rest were, and to be that something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest. Inspired? Yes. Shall we speak of the inspiration of a poet or a priest, and not of the heart impelled by love and self-devotion to the lowliest work in the lowliest way of life!

With no earthly friend to help her, or so much as to see her, but the one so strangely assorted; with no knowledge even of the common daily tone and habits of the common members of the free community who are not shut up in prisons; born and bred in a social condition, false even with a reference to the falsest condition outside the walls; drinking from infancy of a well whose waters had their own peculiar stain, their own unwholesome and unnatural taste; the Child of the Marshalsea began her womanly life.

No matter through what mistakes and discouragements, what ridicule (not unkindly meant, but deeply felt) of her youth and little figure, what humble consciousness of her own babyhood and want of strength, even in the matter of lifting and carrying; through how much weariness and hopelessness, and how many secret tears; she drudged on, until recognised as useful, even indispensable. That time came. She took the place of eldest of the three, in all things but precedence; was the head of the fallen family; and bore, in her own heart, its anxieties and shames.

At thirteen, she could read and keep accounts, that is, could put down in words and figures how much the bare necessaries that they

wanted would cost, and how much less they had to buy them with. She had been, by snatches of a few weeks at a time, to an evening school outside, and got her sister and brother sent to day-schools by desultory starts, during three or four years. There was no instruction for any of them at home; but she knew well - no one better - that a man so broken as to be the Father of the Marshalsea, could be no father to his own children.

To these scanty means of improvement, she added another of her own contriving. Once, among the heterogeneous crowd of inmates there appeared a dancing-master. Her sister had a great desire to learn the dancing-master's art, and seemed to have a taste that way. At thirteen years old, the Child of the Marshalsea presented herself to the dancing-master, with a little bag in her hand, and preferred her humble petition.

'If you please, I was born here, sir.'

'Oh! You are the young lady, are you?' said the dancing-master, surveying the small figure and uplifted face.

'Yes, sir.'

'And what can I do for you?' said the dancing-master.

'Nothing for me, sir, thank you,' anxiously undrawing the strings of the little bag; 'but if, while you stay here, you could be so kind as to teach my sister cheap - '

'My child, I'll teach her for nothing,' said the dancing-master, shutting up the bag. He was as good-natured a dancing-master as ever danced to the Insolvent Court, and he kept his word. The sister was so apt a pupil, and the dancing-master had such abundant leisure to bestow upon her (for it took him a matter of ten weeks to set to his creditors, lead off, turn the Commissioners, and right and left back to his professional pursuits), that wonderful progress was made. Indeed the dancing-master was so proud of it, and so wishful to display it before he left to a few select friends among the collegians, that at six o'clock on a certain fine morning, a minuet de la cour came off in the yard - the college- rooms being of too confined proportions for the purpose - in which so much ground was covered, and the steps were so conscientiously executed, that the dancing-master, having to play the kit besides, was thoroughly blown.

The success of this beginning, which led to the dancing-master's continuing his instruction after his release, emboldened the poor child to try again. She watched and waited months for a seamstress. In the

fulness of time a milliner came in, and to her she repaired on her own behalf.

'I beg your pardon, ma'am,' she said, looking timidly round the door of the milliner, whom she found in tears and in bed: 'but I was born here.'

Everybody seemed to hear of her as soon as they arrived; for the milliner sat up in bed, drying her eyes, and said, just as the dancing-master had said:

'Oh! You are the child, are you?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'I am sorry I haven't got anything for you,' said the milliner, shaking her head.

'It's not that, ma'am. If you please I want to learn needle-work.'

'Why should you do that,' returned the milliner, 'with me before you? It has not done me much good.'

'Nothing - whatever it is - seems to have done anybody much good who comes here,' she returned in all simplicity; 'but I want to learn just the same.'

'I am afraid you are so weak, you see,' the milliner objected.

'I don't think I am weak, ma'am.'

'And you are so very, very little, you see,' the milliner objected.

'Yes, I am afraid I am very little indeed,' returned the Child of the Marshalsea; and so began to sob over that unfortunate defect of hers, which came so often in her way. The milliner - who was not morose or hard-hearted, only newly insolvent - was touched, took her in hand with goodwill, found her the most patient and earnest of pupils, and made her a cunning work-woman in course of time.

In course of time, and in the very self-same course of time, the Father of the Marshalsea gradually developed a new flower of character. The more Fatherly he grew as to the Marshalsea, and the more dependent he became on the contributions of his changing family, the greater stand he made by his forlorn gentility. With the same hand that he pocketed a collegian's half-crown half an hour ago, he would wipe away the tears that streamed over his cheeks if any reference were made to his daughters' earning their bread. So, over and above other

daily cares, the Child of the Marshalsea had always upon her the care of preserving the genteel fiction that they were all idle beggars together.

The sister became a dancer. There was a ruined uncle in the family group - ruined by his brother, the Father of the Marshalsea, and knowing no more how than his ruiner did, but accepting the fact as an inevitable certainty - on whom her protection devolved. Naturally a retired and simple man, he had shown no particular sense of being ruined at the time when that calamity fell upon him, further than that he left off washing himself when the shock was announced, and never took to that luxury any more. He had been a very indifferent musical amateur in his better days; and when he fell with his brother, resorted for support to playing a clarionet as dirty as himself in a small Theatre Orchestra. It was the theatre in which his niece became a dancer; he had been a fixture there a long time when she took her poor station in it; and he accepted the task of serving as her escort and guardian, just as he would have accepted an illness, a legacy, a feast, starvation - anything but soap.

To enable this girl to earn her few weekly shillings, it was necessary for the Child of the Marshalsea to go through an elaborate form with the Father.

'Fanny is not going to live with us just now, father. She will be here a good deal in the day, but she is going to live outside with uncle.'

'You surprise me. Why?'

'I think uncle wants a companion, father. He should be attended to, and looked after.'

'A companion? He passes much of his time here. And you attend to him and look after him, Amy, a great deal more than ever your sister will. You all go out so much; you all go out so much.'

This was to keep up the ceremony and pretence of his having no idea that Amy herself went out by the day to work.

'But we are always glad to come home, father; now, are we not? And as to Fanny, perhaps besides keeping uncle company and taking care of him, it may be as well for her not quite to live here, always. She was not born here as I was, you know, father.'

'Well, Amy, well. I don't quite follow you, but it's natural I suppose that Fanny should prefer to be outside, and even that you often should, too. So, you and Fanny and your uncle, my dear, shall have your own way. Good, good. I'll not meddle; don't mind me.'

To get her brother out of the prison; out of the succession to Mrs Bangham in executing commissions, and out of the slang interchange with very doubtful companions consequent upon both; was her hardest task. At eighteen he would have dragged on from hand to mouth, from hour to hour, from penny to penny, until eighty. Nobody got into the prison from whom he derived anything useful or good, and she could find no patron for him but her old friend and godfather.

'Dear Bob,' said she, 'what is to become of poor Tip?' His name was Edward, and Ted had been transformed into Tip, within the walls.

The turnkey had strong private opinions as to what would become of poor Tip, and had even gone so far with the view of averting their fulfilment, as to sound Tip in reference to the expediency of running away and going to serve his country. But Tip had thanked him, and said he didn't seem to care for his country.

'Well, my dear,' said the turnkey, 'something ought to be done with him. Suppose I try and get him into the law?'

'That would be so good of you, Bob!'

The turnkey had now two points to put to the professional gentlemen as they passed in and out. He put this second one so perseveringly that a stool and twelve shillings a week were at last found for Tip in the office of an attorney in a great National Palladium called the Palace Court; at that time one of a considerable list of everlasting bulwarks to the dignity and safety of Albion, whose places know them no more.

Tip languished in Clifford's Inns for six months, and at the expiration of that term sauntered back one evening with his hands in his pockets, and incidentally observed to his sister that he was not going back again.

'Not going back again?' said the poor little anxious Child of the Marshalsea, always calculating and planning for Tip, in the front rank of her charges.

'I am so tired of it,' said Tip, 'that I have cut it.'

Tip tired of everything. With intervals of Marshalsea lounging, and Mrs Bangham succession, his small second mother, aided by her trusty friend, got him into a warehouse, into a market garden, into the hop trade, into the law again, into an auctioneers, into a brewery, into a stockbroker's, into the law again, into a coach office, into a waggon office, into the law again, into a general dealer's, into a distillery, into the law again, into a wool house, into a dry goods house, into the

Billingsgate trade, into the foreign fruit trade, and into the docks. But whatever Tip went into, he came out of tired, announcing that he had cut it. Wherever he went, this foredoomed Tip appeared to take the prison walls with him, and to set them up in such trade or calling; and to prowl about within their narrow limits in the old slip-shod, purposeless, down-at-heel way; until the real immovable Marshalsea walls asserted their fascination over him, and brought him back.

Nevertheless, the brave little creature did so fix her heart on her brother's rescue, that while he was ringing out these doleful changes, she pinched and scraped enough together to ship him for Canada. When he was tired of nothing to do, and disposed in its turn to cut even that, he graciously consented to go to Canada. And there was grief in her bosom over parting with him, and joy in the hope of his being put in a straight course at last.

'God bless you, dear Tip. Don't be too proud to come and see us, when you have made your fortune.'

'All right!' said Tip, and went.

But not all the way to Canada; in fact, not further than Liverpool.

After making the voyage to that port from London, he found himself so strongly impelled to cut the vessel, that he resolved to walk back again. Carrying out which intention, he presented himself before her at the expiration of a month, in rags, without shoes, and much more tired than ever. At length, after another interval of successorship to Mrs Bangham, he found a pursuit for himself, and announced it.

'Amy, I have got a situation.'

'Have you really and truly, Tip?'

'All right. I shall do now. You needn't look anxious about me any more, old girl.'

'What is it, Tip?'

'Why, you know Slingo by sight?'

'Not the man they call the dealer?'

'That's the chap. He'll be out on Monday, and he's going to give me a berth.'

'What is he a dealer in, Tip?'

'Horses. All right! I shall do now, Amy.'

She lost sight of him for months afterwards, and only heard from him once. A whisper passed among the elder collegians that he had been seen at a mock auction in Moorfields, pretending to buy plated articles for massive silver, and paying for them with the greatest liberality in bank notes; but it never reached her ears. One evening she was alone at work - standing up at the window, to save the twilight lingering above the wall - when he opened the door and walked in.

She kissed and welcomed him; but was afraid to ask him any questions. He saw how anxious and timid she was, and appeared sorry.

'I am afraid, Amy, you'll be vexed this time. Upon my life I am!'

'I am very sorry to hear you say so, Tip. Have you come back?'

'Why - yes.'

'Not expecting this time that what you had found would answer very well, I am less surprised and sorry than I might have been, Tip.'

'Ah! But that's not the worst of it.'

'Not the worst of it?'

'Don't look so startled. No, Amy, not the worst of it. I have come back, you see; but - DON'T look so startled - I have come back in what I may call a new way. I am off the volunteer list altogether. I am in now, as one of the regulars.'

'Oh! Don't say you are a prisoner, Tip! Don't, don't!'

'Well, I don't want to say it,' he returned in a reluctant tone; 'but if you can't understand me without my saying it, what am I to do? I am in for forty pound odd.'

For the first time in all those years, she sunk under her cares. She cried, with her clasped hands lifted above her head, that it would kill their father if he ever knew it; and fell down at Tip's graceless feet.

It was easier for Tip to bring her to her senses than for her to bring him to understand that the Father of the Marshalsea would be beside himself if he knew the truth. The thing was incomprehensible to Tip, and altogether a fanciful notion. He yielded to it in that light only, when he submitted to her entreaties, backed by those of his uncle and sister. There was no want of precedent for his return; it was

accounted for to the father in the usual way; and the collegians, with a better comprehension of the pious fraud than Tip, supported it loyally.

This was the life, and this the history, of the child of the Marshalsea at twenty-two. With a still surviving attachment to the one miserable yard and block of houses as her birthplace and home, she passed to and fro in it shrinkingly now, with a womanly consciousness that she was pointed out to every one. Since she had begun to work beyond the walls, she had found it necessary to conceal where she lived, and to come and go as secretly as she could, between the free city and the iron gates, outside of which she had never slept in her life. Her original timidity had grown with this concealment, and her light step and her little figure shunned the thronged streets while they passed along them.

Worldly wise in hard and poor necessities, she was innocent in all things else. Innocent, in the mist through which she saw her father, and the prison, and the turbid living river that flowed through it and flowed on.

This was the life, and this the history, of Little Dorrit; now going home upon a dull September evening, observed at a distance by Arthur Clennam. This was the life, and this the history, of Little Dorrit; turning at the end of London Bridge, recrossing it, going back again, passing on to Saint George's Church, turning back suddenly once more, and flitting in at the open outer gate and little court-yard of the Marshalsea.