

Chapter VIII - The Lock

Arthur Clennam stood in the street, waiting to ask some passer-by what place that was. He suffered a few people to pass him in whose face there was no encouragement to make the inquiry, and still stood pausing in the street, when an old man came up and turned into the courtyard.

He stooped a good deal, and plodded along in a slow pre-occupied manner, which made the bustling London thoroughfares no very safe resort for him. He was dirtily and meanly dressed, in a threadbare coat, once blue, reaching to his ankles and buttoned to his chin, where it vanished in the pale ghost of a velvet collar. A piece of red cloth with which that phantom had been stiffened in its lifetime was now laid bare, and poked itself up, at the back of the old man's neck, into a confusion of grey hair and rusty stock and buckle which altogether nearly poked his hat off. A greasy hat it was, and a napless; impending over his eyes, cracked and crumpled at the brim, and with a wisp of pocket-handkerchief dangling out below it. His trousers were so long and loose, and his shoes so clumsy and large, that he shuffled like an elephant; though how much of this was gait, and how much trailing cloth and leather, no one could have told. Under one arm he carried a limp and worn-out case, containing some wind instrument; in the same hand he had a pennyworth of snuff in a little packet of whitey-brown paper, from which he slowly comforted his poor blue old nose with a lengthened-out pinch, as Arthur Clennam looked at him. To this old man crossing the court-yard, he preferred his inquiry, touching him on the shoulder. The old man stopped and looked round, with the expression in his weak grey eyes of one whose thoughts had been far off, and who was a little dull of hearing also.

'Pray, sir,' said Arthur, repeating his question, 'what is this place?'

'Ay! This place?' returned the old man, staying his pinch of snuff on its road, and pointing at the place without looking at it. 'This is the Marshalsea, sir.'

'The debtors' prison?'

'Sir,' said the old man, with the air of deeming it not quite necessary to insist upon that designation, 'the debtors' prison.'

He turned himself about, and went on.

'I beg your pardon,' said Arthur, stopping him once more, 'but will you allow me to ask you another question? Can any one go in here?'

'Any one can go IN,' replied the old man; plainly adding by the significance of his emphasis, 'but it is not every one who can go out.'

'Pardon me once more. Are you familiar with the place?'

'Sir,' returned the old man, squeezing his little packet of snuff in his hand, and turning upon his interrogator as if such questions hurt him. 'I am.'

'I beg you to excuse me. I am not impertinently curious, but have a good object. Do you know the name of Dorrit here?'

'My name, sir,' replied the old man most unexpectedly, 'is Dorrit.'

Arthur pulled off his hat to him. 'Grant me the favour of half-a- dozen words. I was wholly unprepared for your announcement, and hope that assurance is my sufficient apology for having taken the liberty of addressing you. I have recently come home to England after a long absence. I have seen at my mother's - Mrs Clennam in the city - a young woman working at her needle, whom I have only heard addressed or spoken of as Little Dorrit. I have felt sincerely interested in her, and have had a great desire to know something more about her. I saw her, not a minute before you came up, pass in at that door.'

The old man looked at him attentively. 'Are you a sailor, sir?' he asked. He seemed a little disappointed by the shake of the head that replied to him. 'Not a sailor? I judged from your sunburnt face that you might be. Are you in earnest, sir?'

'I do assure you that I am, and do entreat you to believe that I am, in plain earnest.'

'I know very little of the world, sir,' returned the other, who had a weak and quavering voice. 'I am merely passing on, like the shadow over the sun-dial. It would be worth no man's while to mislead me; it would really be too easy - too poor a success, to yield any satisfaction. The young woman whom you saw go in here is my brother's child. My brother is William Dorrit; I am Frederick. You say you have seen her at your mother's (I know your mother befriends her), you have felt an interest in her, and you wish to know what she does here. Come and see.'

He went on again, and Arthur accompanied him.

'My brother,' said the old man, pausing on the step and slowly facing round again, 'has been here many years; and much that happens even among ourselves, out of doors, is kept from him for reasons that I needn't enter upon now. Be so good as to say nothing of my niece's

working at her needle. Be so good as to say nothing that goes beyond what is said among us. If you keep within our bounds, you cannot well be wrong. Now! Come and see.'

Arthur followed him down a narrow entry, at the end of which a key was turned, and a strong door was opened from within. It admitted them into a lodge or lobby, across which they passed, and so through another door and a grating into the prison. The old man always plodding on before, turned round, in his slow, stiff, stooping manner, when they came to the turnkey on duty, as if to present his companion. The turnkey nodded; and the companion passed in without being asked whom he wanted.

The night was dark; and the prison lamps in the yard, and the candles in the prison windows faintly shining behind many sorts of wry old curtain and blind, had not the air of making it lighter. A few people loitered about, but the greater part of the population was within doors. The old man, taking the right-hand side of the yard, turned in at the third or fourth doorway, and began to ascend the stairs. 'They are rather dark, sir, but you will not find anything in the way.'

He paused for a moment before opening a door on the second story. He had no sooner turned the handle than the visitor saw Little Dorrit, and saw the reason of her setting so much store by dining alone.

She had brought the meat home that she should have eaten herself, and was already warming it on a gridiron over the fire for her father, clad in an old grey gown and a black cap, awaiting his supper at the table. A clean cloth was spread before him, with knife, fork, and spoon, salt-cellar, pepper-box, glass, and pewter ale-pot. Such zests as his particular little phial of cayenne pepper and his pennyworth of pickles in a saucer, were not wanting.

She started, coloured deeply, and turned white. The visitor, more with his eyes than by the slight impulsive motion of his hand, entreated her to be reassured and to trust him.

'I found this gentleman,' said the uncle - 'Mr Clennam, William, son of Amy's friend - at the outer gate, wishful, as he was going by, of paying his respects, but hesitating whether to come in or not. This is my brother William, sir.' 'I hope,' said Arthur, very doubtful what to say, 'that my respect for your daughter may explain and justify my desire to be presented to you, sir.'

'Mr Clennam,' returned the other, rising, taking his cap off in the flat of his hand, and so holding it, ready to put on again, 'you do me honour. You are welcome, sir;' with a low bow. 'Frederick, a chair. Pray sit down, Mr Clennam.'

He put his black cap on again as he had taken it off, and resumed his own seat. There was a wonderful air of benignity and patronage in his manner. These were the ceremonies with which he received the collegians.

'You are welcome to the Marshalsea, sir. I have welcomed many gentlemen to these walls. Perhaps you are aware - my daughter Amy may have mentioned that I am the Father of this place.'

'I - so I have understood,' said Arthur, dashing at the assertion.

'You know, I dare say, that my daughter Amy was born here. A good girl, sir, a dear girl, and long a comfort and support to me. Amy, my dear, put this dish on; Mr Clennam will excuse the primitive customs to which we are reduced here. Is it a compliment to ask you if you would do me the honour, sir, to - '

'Thank you,' returned Arthur. 'Not a morsel.'

He felt himself quite lost in wonder at the manner of the man, and that the probability of his daughter's having had a reserve as to her family history, should be so far out of his mind.

She filled his glass, put all the little matters on the table ready to his hand, and then sat beside him while he ate his supper. Evidently in observance of their nightly custom, she put some bread before herself, and touched his glass with her lips; but Arthur saw she was troubled and took nothing. Her look at her father, half admiring him and proud of him, half ashamed for him, all devoted and loving, went to his inmost heart.

The Father of the Marshalsea condescended towards his brother as an amiable, well-meaning man; a private character, who had not arrived at distinction. 'Frederick,' said he, 'you and Fanny sup at your lodgings to-night, I know. What have you done with Fanny, Frederick?' 'She is walking with Tip.'

'Tip - as you may know - is my son, Mr Clennam. He has been a little wild, and difficult to settle, but his introduction to the world was rather' - he shrugged his shoulders with a faint sigh, and looked round the room - 'a little adverse. Your first visit here, sir?'

'my first.'

'You could hardly have been here since your boyhood without my knowledge. It very seldom happens that anybody - of any pretensions - any pretensions - comes here without being presented to me.'

'As many as forty or fifty in a day have been introduced to my brother,' said Frederick, faintly lighting up with a ray of pride.

'Yes!' the Father of the Marshalsea assented. 'We have even exceeded that number. On a fine Sunday in term time, it is quite a Levee - quite a Levee. Amy, my dear, I have been trying half the day to remember the name of the gentleman from Camberwell who was introduced to me last Christmas week by that agreeable coal-merchant who was remanded for six months.'

'I don't remember his name, father.'

'Frederick, do you remember his name?' Frederick doubted if he had ever heard it. No one could doubt that Frederick was the last person upon earth to put such a question to, with any hope of information.

'I mean,' said his brother, 'the gentleman who did that handsome action with so much delicacy. Ha! Tush! The name has quite escaped me. Mr Clennam, as I have happened to mention handsome and delicate action, you may like, perhaps, to know what it was.'

'Very much,' said Arthur, withdrawing his eyes from the delicate head beginning to droop and the pale face with a new solicitude stealing over it.

'It is so generous, and shows so much fine feeling, that it is almost a duty to mention it. I said at the time that I always would mention it on every suitable occasion, without regard to personal sensitiveness. A - well - a - it's of no use to disguise the fact - you must know, Mr Clennam, that it does sometimes occur that people who come here desire to offer some little - Testimonial - to the Father of the place.'

To see her hand upon his arm in mute entreaty half-repressed, and her timid little shrinking figure turning away, was to see a sad, sad sight.

'Sometimes,' he went on in a low, soft voice, agitated, and clearing his throat every now and then; 'sometimes - hem - it takes one shape and sometimes another; but it is generally - ha - Money. And it is, I cannot but confess it, it is too often - hem - acceptable. This gentleman that I refer to, was presented to me, Mr Clennam, in a manner highly gratifying to my feelings, and conversed not only with great politeness, but with great - ahem - information.' All this time, though he had finished his supper, he was nervously going about his plate with his knife and fork, as if some of it were still before him. 'It appeared from his conversation that he had a garden, though he was delicate of mentioning it at first, as gardens are - hem - are not accessible to me. But it came out, through my admiring a very fine cluster of geranium

- beautiful cluster of geranium to be sure - which he had brought from his conservatory. On my taking notice of its rich colour, he showed me a piece of paper round it, on which was written, 'For the Father of the Marshalsea,' and presented it to me. But this was - hem - not all. He made a particular request, on taking leave, that I would remove the paper in half an hour. I - ha - I did so; and I found that it contained - ahem - two guineas. I assure you, Mr Clennam, I have received - hem - Testimonials in many ways, and of many degrees of value, and they have always been - ha - unfortunately acceptable; but I never was more pleased than with this - ahem - this particular Testimonial.' Arthur was in the act of saying the little he could say on such a theme, when a bell began to ring, and footsteps approached the door. A pretty girl of a far better figure and much more developed than Little Dorrit, though looking much younger in the face when the two were observed together, stopped in the doorway on seeing a stranger; and a young man who was with her, stopped too.

'Mr Clennam, Fanny. My eldest daughter and my son, Mr Clennam. The bell is a signal for visitors to retire, and so they have come to say good night; but there is plenty of time, plenty of time. Girls, Mr Clennam will excuse any household business you may have together. He knows, I dare say, that I have but one room here.'

'I only want my clean dress from Amy, father,' said the second girl.

'And I my clothes,' said Tip.

Amy opened a drawer in an old piece of furniture that was a chest of drawers above and a bedstead below, and produced two little bundles, which she handed to her brother and sister. 'Mended and made up?' Clennam heard the sister ask in a whisper. To which Amy answered 'Yes.' He had risen now, and took the opportunity of glancing round the room. The bare walls had been coloured green, evidently by an unskilled hand, and were poorly decorated with a few prints. The window was curtained, and the floor carpeted; and there were shelves and pegs, and other such conveniences, that had accumulated in the course of years. It was a close, confined room, poorly furnished; and the chimney smoked to boot, or the tin screen at the top of the fireplace was superfluous; but constant pains and care had made it neat, and even, after its kind, comfortable. All the while the bell was ringing, and the uncle was anxious to go. 'Come, Fanny, come, Fanny,' he said, with his ragged clarionet case under his arm; 'the lock, child, the lock!'

Fanny bade her father good night, and whisked off airily. Tip had already clattered down-stairs. 'Now, Mr Clennam,' said the uncle, looking back as he shuffled out after them, 'the lock, sir, the lock.'

Mr Clennam had two things to do before he followed; one, to offer his testimonial to the Father of the Marshalsea, without giving pain to his child; the other to say something to that child, though it were but a word, in explanation of his having come there.

'Allow me,' said the Father, 'to see you down-stairs.'

She had slipped out after the rest, and they were alone. 'Not on any account,' said the visitor, hurriedly. 'Pray allow me to - ' chink, chink, chink.

'Mr Clennam,' said the Father, 'I am deeply, deeply - ' But his visitor had shut up his hand to stop the clinking, and had gone down-stairs with great speed.

He saw no Little Dorrit on his way down, or in the yard. The last two or three stragglers were hurrying to the lodge, and he was following, when he caught sight of her in the doorway of the first house from the entrance. He turned back hastily.

'Pray forgive me,' he said, 'for speaking to you here; pray forgive me for coming here at all! I followed you to-night. I did so, that I might endeavour to render you and your family some service. You know the terms on which I and my mother are, and may not be surprised that I have preserved our distant relations at her house, lest I should unintentionally make her jealous, or resentful, or do you any injury in her estimation. What I have seen here, in this short time, has greatly increased my heartfelt wish to be a friend to you. It would recompense me for much disappointment if I could hope to gain your confidence.'

She was scared at first, but seemed to take courage while he spoke to her.

'You are very good, sir. You speak very earnestly to me. But I - but I wish you had not watched me.'

He understood the emotion with which she said it, to arise in her father's behalf; and he respected it, and was silent.

'Mrs Clennam has been of great service to me; I don't know what we should have done without the employment she has given me; I am afraid it may not be a good return to become secret with her; I can say no more to-night, sir. I am sure you mean to be kind to us. Thank you, thank you.' 'Let me ask you one question before I leave. Have you known my mother long?'

'I think two years, sir, - The bell has stopped.'

'How did you know her first? Did she send here for you?'

'No. She does not even know that I live here. We have a friend, father and I - a poor labouring man, but the best of friends - and I wrote out that I wished to do needlework, and gave his address. And he got what I wrote out displayed at a few places where it cost nothing, and Mrs Clennam found me that way, and sent for me. The gate will be locked, sir!'

She was so tremulous and agitated, and he was so moved by compassion for her, and by deep interest in her story as it dawned upon him, that he could scarcely tear himself away. But the stoppage of the bell, and the quiet in the prison, were a warning to depart; and with a few hurried words of kindness he left her gliding back to her father.

But he remained too late. The inner gate was locked, and the lodge closed. After a little fruitless knocking with his hand, he was standing there with the disagreeable conviction upon him that he had got to get through the night, when a voice accosted him from behind.

'Caught, eh?' said the voice. 'You won't go home till morning. Oh! It's you, is it, Mr Clennam?'

The voice was Tip's; and they stood looking at one another in the prison-yard, as it began to rain.

'You've done it,' observed Tip; 'you must be sharper than that next time.'

'But you are locked in too,' said Arthur.

'I believe I am!' said Tip, sarcastically. 'About! But not in your way. I belong to the shop, only my sister has a theory that our governor must never know it. I don't see why, myself.'

'Can I get any shelter?' asked Arthur. 'What had I better do?'

'We had better get hold of Amy first of all,' said Tip, referring any difficulty to her as a matter of course.

'I would rather walk about all night - it's not much to do - than give that trouble.'

'You needn't do that, if you don't mind paying for a bed. If you don't mind paying, they'll make you up one on the Snuggery table, under the circumstances. If you'll come along, I'll introduce you there.'

As they passed down the yard, Arthur looked up at the window of the room he had lately left, where the light was still burning. 'Yes, sir,' said Tip, following his glance. 'That's the governor's. She'll sit with him for another hour reading yesterday's paper to him, or something of that sort; and then she'll come out like a little ghost, and vanish away without a sound.'

'I don't understand you.'

'The governor sleeps up in the room, and she has a lodging at the turnkey's. First house there,' said Tip, pointing out the doorway into which she had retired. 'First house, sky parlour. She pays twice as much for it as she would for one twice as good outside. But she stands by the governor, poor dear girl, day and night.'

This brought them to the tavern-establishment at the upper end of the prison, where the collegians had just vacated their social evening club. The apartment on the ground-floor in which it was held, was the Snuggery in question; the presidential tribune of the chairman, the pewter-pots, glasses, pipes, tobacco-ashes, and general flavour of members, were still as that convivial institution had left them on its adjournment. The Snuggery had two of the qualities popularly held to be essential to grog for ladies, in respect that it was hot and strong; but in the third point of analogy, requiring plenty of it, the Snuggery was defective; being but a cooped-up apartment.

The unaccustomed visitor from outside, naturally assumed everybody here to be prisoners - landlord, waiter, barmaid, potboy, and all. Whether they were or not, did not appear; but they all had a weedy look. The keeper of a chandler's shop in a front parlour, who took in gentlemen boarders, lent his assistance in making the bed. He had been a tailor in his time, and had kept a phaeton, he said. He boasted that he stood up litigiously for the interests of the college; and he had undefined and undefinable ideas that the marshal intercepted a 'Fund,' which ought to come to the collegians. He liked to believe this, and always impressed the shadowy grievance on new-comers and strangers; though he could not, for his life, have explained what Fund he meant, or how the notion had got rooted in his soul. He had fully convinced himself, notwithstanding, that his own proper share of the Fund was three and ninepence a week; and that in this amount he, as an individual collegian, was swindled by the marshal, regularly every Monday. Apparently, he helped to make the bed, that he might not lose an opportunity of stating this case; after which unloading of his mind, and after announcing (as it seemed he always did, without anything coming of it) that he was going to write a letter to the papers and show the marshal up, he fell into miscellaneous conversation with the rest. It was evident from the general tone of the whole party, that they had come to regard insolvency as the normal state of mankind,

and the payment of debts as a disease that occasionally broke out. In this strange scene, and with these strange spectres flitting about him, Arthur Clennam looked on at the preparations as if they were part of a dream. Pending which, the long-initiated Tip, with an awful enjoyment of the Snuggery's resources, pointed out the common kitchen fire maintained by subscription of collegians, the boiler for hot water supported in like manner, and other premises generally tending to the deduction that the way to be healthy, wealthy, and wise, was to come to the Marshalsea.

The two tables put together in a corner, were, at length, converted into a very fair bed; and the stranger was left to the Windsor chairs, the presidential tribune, the beery atmosphere, sawdust, pipe-lights, spittoons and repose. But the last item was long, long, long, in linking itself to the rest. The novelty of the place, the coming upon it without preparation, the sense of being locked up, the remembrance of that room up-stairs, of the two brothers, and above all of the retiring childish form, and the face in which he now saw years of insufficient food, if not of want, kept him waking and unhappy.

Speculations, too, bearing the strangest relations towards the prison, but always concerning the prison, ran like nightmares through his mind while he lay awake. Whether coffins were kept ready for people who might die there, where they were kept, how they were kept, where people who died in the prison were buried, how they were taken out, what forms were observed, whether an implacable creditor could arrest the dead? As to escaping, what chances there were of escape? Whether a prisoner could scale the walls with a cord and grapple, how he would descend upon the other side? whether he could alight on a housetop, steal down a staircase, let himself out at a door, and get lost in the crowd? As to Fire in the prison, if one were to break out while he lay there?

And these involuntary starts of fancy were, after all, but the setting of a picture in which three people kept before him. His father, with the steadfast look with which he had died, prophetically darkened forth in the portrait; his mother, with her arm up, warding off his suspicion; Little Dorrit, with her hand on the degraded arm, and her drooping head turned away.

What if his mother had an old reason she well knew for softening to this poor girl! What if the prisoner now sleeping quietly - Heaven grant it! - by the light of the great Day of judgment should trace back his fall to her. What if any act of hers and of his father's, should have even remotely brought the grey heads of those two brothers so low!

A swift thought shot into his mind. In that long imprisonment here, and in her own long confinement to her room, did his mother find a

balance to be struck? 'I admit that I was accessory to that man's captivity. I have suffered for it in kind. He has decayed in his prison: I in mine. I have paid the penalty.'

When all the other thoughts had faded out, this one held possession of him. When he fell asleep, she came before him in her wheeled chair, warding him off with this justification. When he awoke, and sprang up causelessly frightened, the words were in his ears, as if her voice had slowly spoken them at his pillow, to break his rest: 'He withers away in his prison; I wither away in mine; inexorable justice is done; what do I owe on this score!'