

## Chapter XIV - Little Dorrit's Party

Arthur Clennam rose hastily, and saw her standing at the door. This history must sometimes see with Little Dorrit's eyes, and shall begin that course by seeing him.

Little Dorrit looked into a dim room, which seemed a spacious one to her, and grandly furnished. Courtly ideas of Covent Garden, as a place with famous coffee-houses, where gentlemen wearing gold-laced coats and swords had quarrelled and fought duels; costly ideas of Covent Garden, as a place where there were flowers in winter at guineas a-piece, pine-apples at guineas a pound, and peas at guineas a pint; picturesque ideas of Covent Garden, as a place where there was a mighty theatre, showing wonderful and beautiful sights to richly-dressed ladies and gentlemen, and which was for ever far beyond the reach of poor Fanny or poor uncle; desolate ideas of Covent Garden, as having all those arches in it, where the miserable children in rags among whom she had just now passed, like young rats, slunk and hid, fed on offal, huddled together for warmth, and were hunted about (look to the rats young and old, all ye Barnacles, for before God they are eating away our foundations, and will bring the roofs on our heads!); teeming ideas of Covent Garden, as a place of past and present mystery, romance, abundance, want, beauty, ugliness, fair country gardens, and foul street gutters; all confused together, - made the room dimmer than it was in Little Dorrit's eyes, as they timidly saw it from the door.

At first in the chair before the gone-out fire, and then turned round wondering to see her, was the gentleman whom she sought. The brown, grave gentleman, who smiled so pleasantly, who was so frank and considerate in his manner, and yet in whose earnestness there was something that reminded her of his mother, with the great difference that she was earnest in asperity and he in gentleness. Now he regarded her with that attentive and inquiring look before which Little Dorrit's eyes had always fallen, and before which they fell still.

'My poor child! Here at midnight?'

'I said Little Dorrit, sir, on purpose to prepare you. I knew you must be very much surprised.'

'Are you alone?'

'No sir, I have got Maggy with me.' Considering her entrance sufficiently prepared for by this mention of her name, Maggy appeared from the landing outside, on the broad grin. She instantly suppressed that manifestation, however, and became fixedly solemn.

'And I have no fire,' said Clennam. 'And you are - ' He was going to say so lightly clad, but stopped himself in what would have been a reference to her poverty, saying instead, 'And it is so cold.'

Putting the chair from which he had risen nearer to the grate, he made her sit down in it; and hurriedly bringing wood and coal, heaped them together and got a blaze.

'Your foot is like marble, my child;' he had happened to touch it, while stooping on one knee at his work of kindling the fire; 'put it nearer the warmth.' Little Dorrit thanked him hastily. It was quite warm, it was very warm! It smote upon his heart to feel that she hid her thin, worn shoe.

Little Dorrit was not ashamed of her poor shoes. He knew her story, and it was not that. Little Dorrit had a misgiving that he might blame her father, if he saw them; that he might think, 'why did he dine to-day, and leave this little creature to the mercy of the cold stones!' She had no belief that it would have been a just reflection; she simply knew, by experience, that such delusions did sometimes present themselves to people. It was a part of her father's misfortunes that they did.

'Before I say anything else,' Little Dorrit began, sitting before the pale fire, and raising her eyes again to the face which in its harmonious look of interest, and pity, and protection, she felt to be a mystery far above her in degree, and almost removed beyond her guessing at; 'may I tell you something, sir?'

'Yes, my child.' A slight shade of distress fell upon her, at his so often calling her a child. She was surprised that he should see it, or think of such a slight thing; but he said directly: 'I wanted a tender word, and could think of no other. As you just now gave yourself the name they give you at my mother's, and as that is the name by which I always think of you, let me call you Little Dorrit.'

'Thank you, sir, I should like it better than any name.'

'Little Dorrit.'

'Little mother,' Maggy (who had been falling asleep) put in, as a correction.

'It's all the same, Maggy,' returned Little Dorrit, 'all the same.'

'Is it all the same, mother?'

'Just the same.'

Maggy laughed, and immediately snored. In Little Dorrit's eyes and ears, the uncouth figure and the uncouth sound were as pleasant as could be. There was a glow of pride in her big child, overspreading her face, when it again met the eyes of the grave brown gentleman. She wondered what he was thinking of, as he looked at Maggy and her. She thought what a good father he would be. How, with some such look, he would counsel and cherish his daughter.

'What I was going to tell you, sir,' said Little Dorrit, 'is, that MY brother is at large.'

Arthur was rejoiced to hear it, and hoped he would do well.

'And what I was going to tell you, sir,' said Little Dorrit, trembling in all her little figure and in her voice, 'is, that I am not to know whose generosity released him - am never to ask, and am never to be told, and am never to thank that gentleman with all MY grateful heart!'

He would probably need no thanks, Clennam said. Very likely he would be thankful himself (and with reason), that he had had the means and chance of doing a little service to her, who well deserved a great one.

'And what I was going to say, sir, is,' said Little Dorrit, trembling more and more, 'that if I knew him, and I might, I would tell him that he can never, never know how I feel his goodness, and how my good father would feel it. And what I was going to say, sir, is, that if I knew him, and I might - but I don't know him and I must not - I know that! - I would tell him that I shall never any more lie down to sleep without having prayed to Heaven to bless him and reward him. And if I knew him, and I might, I would go down on my knees to him, and take his hand and kiss it and ask him not to draw it away, but to leave it - O to leave it for a moment - and let my thankful tears fall on it; for I have no other thanks to give him!'

Little Dorrit had put his hand to her lips, and would have kneeled to him, but he gently prevented her, and replaced her in her chair.

Her eyes, and the tones of her voice, had thanked him far better than she thought. He was not able to say, quite as composedly as usual, 'There, Little Dorrit, there, there, there! We will suppose that you did know this person, and that you might do all this, and that it was all done. And now tell me, Who am quite another person - who am nothing more than the friend who begged you to trust him - why you are out at midnight, and what it is that brings you so far through the streets at this late hour, my slight, delicate,' child was on his lips again, 'Little Dorrit!'

'Maggy and I have been to-night,' she answered, subduing herself with the quiet effort that had long been natural to her, 'to the theatre where my sister is engaged.'

'And oh ain't it a Ev'nly place,' suddenly interrupted Maggy, who seemed to have the power of going to sleep and waking up whenever she chose. 'Almost as good as a hospital. Only there ain't no Chicking in it.'

Here she shook herself, and fell asleep again.

'We went there,' said Little Dorrit, glancing at her charge, 'because I like sometimes to know, of my own knowledge, that my sister is doing well; and like to see her there, with my own eyes, when neither she nor Uncle is aware. It is very seldom indeed that I can do that, because when I am not out at work, I am with my father, and even when I am out at work, I hurry home to him. But I pretend to-night that I am at a party.'

As she made the confession, timidly hesitating, she raised her eyes to the face, and read its expression so plainly that she answered it. 'Oh no, certainly! I never was at a party in my life.' She paused a little under his attentive look, and then said, 'I hope there is no harm in it. I could never have been of any use, if I had not pretended a little.'

She feared that he was blaming her in his mind for so devising to contrive for them, think for them, and watch over them, without their knowledge or gratitude; perhaps even with their reproaches for supposed neglect. But what was really in his mind, was the weak figure with its strong purpose, the thin worn shoes, the insufficient dress, and the pretence of recreation and enjoyment. He asked where the suppositious party was? At a place where she worked, answered Little Dorrit, blushing. She had said very little about it; only a few words to make her father easy. Her father did not believe it to be a grand party - indeed he might suppose that. And she glanced for an instant at the shawl she wore.

'It is the first night,' said Little Dorrit, 'that I have ever been away from home. And London looks so large, so barren, and so wild.' In Little Dorrit's eyes, its vastness under the black sky was awful; a tremor passed over her as she said the words.

'But this is not,' she added, with the quiet effort again, 'what I have come to trouble you with, sir. My sister's having found a friend, a lady she has told me of and made me rather anxious about, was the first cause of my coming away from home. And being away, and coming (on purpose) round by where you lived and seeing a light in the window - '

Not for the first time. No, not for the first time. In Little Dorrit's eyes, the outside of that window had been a distant star on other nights than this. She had toiled out of her way, tired and troubled, to look up at it, and wonder about the grave, brown gentleman from so far off, who had spoken to her as a friend and protector.

'There were three things,' said Little Dorrit, 'that I thought I would like to say, if you were alone and I might come up-stairs. First, what I have tried to say, but never can - never shall - '

'Hush, hush! That is done with, and disposed of. Let us pass to the second,' said Clennam, smiling her agitation away, making the blaze shine upon her, and putting wine and cake and fruit towards her on the table.

'I think,' said Little Dorrit - 'this is the second thing, sir - I think Mrs Clennam must have found out my secret, and must know where I come from and where I go to. Where I live, I mean.'

'Indeed!' returned Clennam quickly. He asked her, after short consideration, why she supposed so.

'I think,' replied Little Dorrit, 'that Mr Flintwinch must have watched me.'

And why, Clennam asked, as he turned his eyes upon the fire, bent his brows, and considered again; why did she suppose that?

'I have met him twice. Both times near home. Both times at night, when I was going back. Both times I thought (though that may easily be my mistake), that he hardly looked as if he had met me by accident.' 'Did he say anything?'

'No; he only nodded and put his head on one side.'

'The devil take his head!' mused Clennam, still looking at the fire; 'it's always on one side.' He roused himself to persuade her to put some wine to her lips, and to touch something to eat - it was very difficult, she was so timid and shy - and then said, musing again: 'Is my mother at all changed to you?'

'Oh, not at all. She is just the same. I wondered whether I had better tell her my history. I wondered whether I might - I mean, whether you would like me to tell her. I wondered,' said Little Dorrit, looking at him in a suppliant way, and gradually withdrawing her eyes as he looked at her, 'whether you would advise me what I ought to do.'

'Little Dorrit,' said Clennam; and the phrase had already begun, between these two, to stand for a hundred gentle phrases, according to the varying tone and connection in which it was used; 'do nothing. I will have some talk with my old friend, Mrs Affery. Do nothing, Little Dorrit - except refresh yourself with such means as there are here. I entreat you to do that.'

'Thank you, I am not hungry. Nor,' said Little Dorrit, as he softly put her glass towards her, 'nor thirsty. - I think Maggy might like something, perhaps.'

'We will make her find pockets presently for all there is here,' said Clennam: 'but before we awake her, there was a third thing to say.'

'Yes. You will not be offended, sir?'

'I promise that, unreservedly.'

'It will sound strange. I hardly know how to say it. Don't think it unreasonable or ungrateful in me,' said Little Dorrit, with returning and increasing agitation.

'No, no, no. I am sure it will be natural and right. I am not afraid that I shall put a wrong construction on it, whatever it is.'

'Thank you. You are coming back to see my father again?'

'Yes.'

'You have been so good and thoughtful as to write him a note, saying that you are coming to-morrow?'

'Oh, that was nothing! Yes.'

'Can you guess,' said Little Dorrit, folding her small hands tight in one another, and looking at him with all the earnestness of her soul looking steadily out of her eyes, 'what I am going to ask you not to do?'

'I think I can. But I may be wrong.' 'No, you are not wrong,' said Little Dorrit, shaking her head. 'If we should want it so very, very badly that we cannot do without it, let me ask you for it.'

'I Will, - I Will.'

'Don't encourage him to ask. Don't understand him if he does ask. Don't give it to him. Save him and spare him that, and you will be able to think better of him!'

Clennam said - not very plainly, seeing those tears glistening in her anxious eyes - that her wish should be sacred with him.

'You don't know what he is,' she said; 'you don't know what he really is. How can you, seeing him there all at once, dear love, and not gradually, as I have done! You have been so good to us, so delicately and truly good, that I want him to be better in your eyes than in anybody's. And I cannot bear to think,' cried Little Dorrit, covering her tears with her hands, 'I cannot bear to think that you of all the world should see him in his only moments of degradation.'

'Pray,' said Clennam, 'do not be so distressed. Pray, pray, Little Dorrit! This is quite understood now.'

'Thank you, sir. Thank you! I have tried very much to keep myself from saying this; I have thought about it, days and nights; but when I knew for certain you were coming again, I made up my mind to speak to you. Not because I am ashamed of him,' she dried her tears quickly, 'but because I know him better than any one does, and love him, and am proud of him.'

Relieved of this weight, Little Dorrit was nervously anxious to be gone. Maggy being broad awake, and in the act of distantly gloating over the fruit and cakes with chuckles of anticipation, Clennam made the best diversion in his power by pouring her out a glass of wine, which she drank in a series of loud smacks; putting her hand upon her windpipe after every one, and saying, breathless, with her eyes in a prominent state, 'Oh, ain't it d'licious! Ain't it hospitably!' When she had finished the wine and these encomiums, he charged her to load her basket (she was never without her basket) with every eatable thing upon the table, and to take especial care to leave no scrap behind. Maggy's pleasure in doing this and her little mother's pleasure in seeing Maggy pleased, was as good a turn as circumstances could have given to the late conversation.

'But the gates will have been locked long ago,' said Clennam, suddenly remembering it. 'Where are you going?'

'I am going to Maggy's lodging,' answered Little Dorrit. 'I shall be quite safe, quite well taken care of.'

'I must accompany you there,' said Clennam, 'I cannot let you go alone.'

'Yes, pray leave us to go there by ourselves. Pray do!' begged Little Dorrit.

She was so earnest in the petition, that Clennam felt a delicacy in obtruding himself upon her: the rather, because he could well understand that Maggy's lodging was of the obscurest sort. 'Come, Maggy,' said Little Dorrit cheerily, 'we shall do very well; we know the way by this time, Maggy?'

'Yes, yes, little mother; we know the way,' chuckled Maggy. And away they went. Little Dorrit turned at the door to say, 'God bless you!' She said it very softly, but perhaps she may have been as audible above - who knows! - as a whole cathedral choir.

Arthur Clennam suffered them to pass the corner of the street before he followed at a distance; not with any idea of encroaching a second time on Little Dorrit's privacy, but to satisfy his mind by seeing her secure in the neighbourhood to which she was accustomed. So diminutive she looked, so fragile and defenceless against the bleak damp weather, flitting along in the shuffling shadow of her charge, that he felt, in his compassion, and in his habit of considering her a child apart from the rest of the rough world, as if he would have been glad to take her up in his arms and carry her to her journey's end.

In course of time she came into the leading thoroughfare where the Marshalsea was, and then he saw them slacken their pace, and soon turn down a by-street. He stopped, felt that he had no right to go further, and slowly left them. He had no suspicion that they ran any risk of being houseless until morning; had no idea of the truth until long, long afterwards.

But, said Little Dorrit, when they stopped at a poor dwelling all in darkness, and heard no sound on listening at the door, 'Now, this is a good lodging for you, Maggy, and we must not give offence. Consequently, we will only knock twice, and not very loud; and if we cannot wake them so, we must walk about till day.'

Once, Little Dorrit knocked with a careful hand, and listened. Twice, Little Dorrit knocked with a careful hand, and listened. All was close and still. 'Maggy, we must do the best we can, my dear. We must be patient, and wait for day.'

It was a chill dark night, with a damp wind blowing, when they came out into the leading street again, and heard the clocks strike half-past one. 'In only five hours and a half,' said Little Dorrit, 'we shall be able to go home.' To speak of home, and to go and look at it, it being so near, was a natural sequence. They went to the closed gate, and peeped through into the court-yard. 'I hope he is sound asleep,' said Little Dorrit, kissing one of the bars, 'and does not miss me.'



The gate was so familiar, and so like a companion, that they put down Maggy's basket in a corner to serve for a seat, and keeping close together, rested there for some time. While the street was empty and silent, Little Dorrit was not afraid; but when she heard a footstep at a distance, or saw a moving shadow among the street lamps, she was startled, and whispered, 'Maggy, I see some one. Come away!' Maggy would then wake up more or less fretfully, and they would wander about a little, and come back again.

As long as eating was a novelty and an amusement, Maggy kept up pretty well. But that period going by, she became querulous about the cold, and shivered and whimpered. 'It will soon be over, dear,' said Little Dorrit patiently. 'Oh it's all very fine for you, little mother,' returned Maggy, 'but I'm a poor thing, only ten years old.' At last, in the dead of the night, when the street was very still indeed, Little Dorrit laid the heavy head upon her bosom, and soothed her to sleep. And thus she sat at the gate, as it were alone; looking up at the stars, and seeing the clouds pass over them in their wild flight - which was the dance at Little Dorrit's party.

'If it really was a party!' she thought once, as she sat there. 'If it was light and warm and beautiful, and it was our house, and my poor dear was its master, and had never been inside these walls.

And if Mr Clennam was one of our visitors, and we were dancing to delightful music, and were all as gay and light-hearted as ever we could be! I wonder - ' Such a vista of wonder opened out before her, that she sat looking up at the stars, quite lost, until Maggy was querulous again, and wanted to get up and walk.

Three o'clock, and half-past three, and they had passed over London Bridge. They had heard the rush of the tide against obstacles; and looked down, awed, through the dark vapour on the river; had seen little spots of lighted water where the bridge lamps were reflected, shining like demon eyes, with a terrible fascination in them for guilt and misery. They had shrunk past homeless people, lying coiled up in nooks. They had run from drunkards. They had started from slinking men, whistling and signing to one another at bye corners, or running away at full speed. Though everywhere the leader and the guide, Little Dorrit, happy for once in her youthful appearance, feigned to cling to and rely upon Maggy. And more than once some voice, from among a knot of brawling or prowling figures in their path, had called out to the rest to 'let the woman and the child go by!'

So, the woman and the child had gone by, and gone on, and five had sounded from the steeples. They were walking slowly towards the east, already looking for the first pale streak of day, when a woman came after them.

'What are you doing with the child?' she said to Maggy.

She was young - far too young to be there, Heaven knows! - and neither ugly nor wicked-looking. She spoke coarsely, but with no naturally coarse voice; there was even something musical in its sound. 'What are you doing with yourself?' retorted Maggy, for want of a better answer.

'Can't you see, without my telling you?'

'I don't know as I can,' said Maggy.

'Killing myself! Now I have answered you, answer me. What are you doing with the child?'

The supposed child kept her head drooped down, and kept her form close at Maggy's side.

'Poor thing!' said the woman. 'Have you no feeling, that you keep her out in the cruel streets at such a time as this? Have you no eyes, that you don't see how delicate and slender she is? Have you no sense (you don't look as if you had much) that you don't take more pity on this cold and trembling little hand?'

She had stepped across to that side, and held the hand between her own two, chafing it. 'Kiss a poor lost creature, dear,' she said, bending her face, 'and tell me where's she taking you.'

Little Dorrit turned towards her.

'Why, my God!' she said, recoiling, 'you're a woman!'

'Don't mind that!' said Little Dorrit, clasping one of her hands that had suddenly released hers. 'I am not afraid of you.'

'Then you had better be,' she answered. 'Have you no mother?'

'No.'

'No father?'

'Yes, a very dear one.'

'Go home to him, and be afraid of me. Let me go. Good night!'

'I must thank you first; let me speak to you as if I really were a child.'

'You can't do it,' said the woman. 'You are kind and innocent; but you can't look at me out of a child's eyes. I never should have touched you, but I thought that you were a child.' And with a strange, wild cry, she went away.

No day yet in the sky, but there was day in the resounding stones of the streets; in the waggons, carts, and coaches; in the workers going to various occupations; in the opening of early shops; in the traffic at markets; in the stir of the riverside. There was coming day in the flaring lights, with a feebler colour in them than they would have had at another time; coming day in the increased sharpness of the air, and the ghastly dying of the night.

They went back again to the gate, intending to wait there now until it should be opened; but the air was so raw and cold that Little Dorrit, leading Maggy about in her sleep, kept in motion. Going round by the Church, she saw lights there, and the door open; and went up the steps and looked in.

'Who's that?' cried a stout old man, who was putting on a nightcap as if he were going to bed in a vault.

'It's no one particular, sir,' said Little Dorrit.

'Stop!' cried the man. 'Let's have a look at you!'

This caused her to turn back again in the act of going out, and to present herself and her charge before him.

'I thought so!' said he. 'I know YOU.'

'We have often seen each other,' said Little Dorrit, recognising the sexton, or the beadle, or the verger, or whatever he was, 'when I have been at church here.'

'More than that, we've got your birth in our Register, you know; you're one of our curiosities.'

'Indeed!' said Little Dorrit.

'To be sure. As the child of the - by-the-bye, how did you get out so early?'

'We were shut out last night, and are waiting to get in.'

'You don't mean it? And there's another hour good yet! Come into the vestry. You'll find a fire in the vestry, on account of the painters. I'm waiting for the painters, or I shouldn't be here, you may depend upon

it. One of our curiosities mustn't be cold when we have it in our power to warm her up comfortable. Come along.'

He was a very good old fellow, in his familiar way; and having stirred the vestry fire, he looked round the shelves of registers for a particular volume. 'Here you are, you see,' he said, taking it down and turning the leaves. 'Here you'll find yourself, as large as life. Amy, daughter of William and Fanny Dorrit. Born, Marshalsea Prison, Parish of St George. And we tell people that you have lived there, without so much as a day's or a night's absence, ever since. Is it true?'

'Quite true, till last night.' 'Lord!' But his surveying her with an admiring gaze suggested something else to him, to wit: 'I am sorry to see, though, that you are faint and tired. Stay a bit. I'll get some cushions out of the church, and you and your friend shall lie down before the fire.'

Don't be afraid of not going in to join your father when the gate opens. I'll call you.'

He soon brought in the cushions, and strewed them on the ground.

'There you are, you see. Again as large as life. Oh, never mind thanking. I've daughters of my own. And though they weren't born in the Marshalsea Prison, they might have been, if I had been, in my ways of carrying on, of your father's breed. Stop a bit. I must put something under the cushion for your head. Here's a burial volume. just the thing! We have got Mrs Bangham in this book. But what makes these books interesting to most people is - not who's in 'em, but who isn't - who's coming, you know, and when. That's the interesting question.'

Commendingly looking back at the pillow he had improvised, he left them to their hour's repose. Maggy was snoring already, and Little Dorrit was soon fast asleep with her head resting on that sealed book of Fate, untroubled by its mysterious blank leaves.

This was Little Dorrit's party. The shame, desertion, wretchedness, and exposure of the great capital; the wet, the cold, the slow hours, and the swift clouds of the dismal night. This was the party from which Little Dorrit went home, jaded, in the first grey mist of a rainy morning.