

Chapter XV - Mrs Flintwinch Has Another Dream

The debilitated old house in the city, wrapped in its mantle of soot, and leaning heavily on the crutches that had partaken of its decay and worn out with it, never knew a healthy or a cheerful interval, let what would betide. If the sun ever touched it, it was but with a ray, and that was gone in half an hour; if the moonlight ever fell upon it, it was only to put a few patches on its doleful cloak, and make it look more wretched. The stars, to be sure, coldly watched it when the nights and the smoke were clear enough; and all bad weather stood by it with a rare fidelity. You should alike find rain, hail, frost, and thaw lingering in that dismal enclosure when they had vanished from other places; and as to snow, you should see it there for weeks, long after it had changed from yellow to black, slowly weeping away its grimy life. The place had no other adherents. As to street noises, the rumbling of wheels in the lane merely rushed in at the gateway in going past, and rushed out again: making the listening Mistress Affery feel as if she were deaf, and recovered the sense of hearing by instantaneous flashes. So with whistling, singing, talking, laughing, and all pleasant human sounds. They leaped the gap in a moment, and went upon their way. The varying light of fire and candle in Mrs Clennam's room made the greatest change that ever broke the dead monotony of the spot. In her two long narrow windows, the fire shone sullenly all day, and sullenly all night. On rare occasions it flashed up passionately, as she did; but for the most part it was suppressed, like her, and preyed upon itself evenly and slowly. During many hours of the short winter days, however, when it was dusk there early in the afternoon, changing distortions of herself in her wheeled chair, of Mr Flintwinch with his wry neck, of Mistress Affery coming and going, would be thrown upon the house wall that was over the gateway, and would hover there like shadows from a great magic lantern. As the room-ridden invalid settled for the night, these would gradually disappear: Mistress Affery's magnified shadow always flitting about, last, until it finally glided away into the air, as though she were off upon a witch excursion. Then the solitary light would burn unchangingly, until it burned pale before the dawn, and at last died under the breath of Mrs Affery, as her shadow descended on it from the witch-region of sleep.

Strange, if the little sick-room fire were in effect a beacon fire, summoning some one, and that the most unlikely some one in the world, to the spot that MUST be come to. Strange, if the little sick-room light were in effect a watch-light, burning in that place every night until an appointed event should be watched out! Which of the vast multitude of travellers, under the sun and the stars, climbing the dusty hills and toiling along the weary plains, journeying by land and journeying by sea, coming and going so strangely, to meet and to act and react on one another; which of the host may, with no suspicion of the journey's end, be travelling surely hither?

Time shall show us. The post of honour and the post of shame, the general's station and the drummer's, a peer's statue in Westminster Abbey and a seaman's hammock in the bosom of the deep, the mitre and the workhouse, the woolsack and the gallows, the throne and the guillotine - the travellers to all are on the great high road, but it has wonderful divergencies, and only Time shall show us whither each traveller is bound.

On a wintry afternoon at twilight, Mrs Flintwinch, having been heavy all day, dreamed this dream:

She thought she was in the kitchen getting the kettle ready for tea, and was warming herself with her feet upon the fender and the skirt of her gown tucked up, before the collapsed fire in the middle of the grate, bordered on either hand by a deep cold black ravine. She thought that as she sat thus, musing upon the question whether life was not for some people a rather dull invention, she was frightened by a sudden noise behind her. She thought that she had been similarly frightened once last week, and that the noise was of a mysterious kind - a sound of rustling and of three or four quick beats like a rapid step; while a shock or tremble was communicated to her heart, as if the step had shaken the floor, or even as if she had been touched by some awful hand. She thought that this revived within her certain old fears of hers that the house was haunted; and that she flew up the kitchen stairs without knowing how she got up, to be nearer company.

Mistress Affery thought that on reaching the hall, she saw the door of her liege lord's office standing open, and the room empty. That she went to the ripped-up window in the little room by the street door to connect her palpitating heart, through the glass, with living things beyond and outside the haunted house. That she then saw, on the wall over the gateway, the shadows of the two clever ones in conversation above. That she then went upstairs with her shoes in her hand, partly to be near the clever ones as a match for most ghosts, and partly to hear what they were talking about.

'None of your nonsense with me,' said Mr Flintwinch. 'I won't take it from you.'

Mrs Flintwinch dreamed that she stood behind the door, which was just ajar, and most distinctly heard her husband say these bold words.

'Flintwinch,' returned Mrs Clennam, in her usual strong low voice, 'there is a demon of anger in you. Guard against it.'

'I don't care whether there's one or a dozen,' said Mr Flintwinch, forcibly suggesting in his tone that the higher number was nearer the

mark. 'If there was fifty, they should all say, None of your nonsense with me, I won't take it from you - I'd make 'em say it, whether they liked it or not.'

'What have I done, you wrathful man?' her strong voice asked.

'Done?' said Mr Flintwinch. 'Dropped down upon me.'

'If you mean, remonstrated with you - '

'Don't put words into my mouth that I don't mean,' said Jeremiah, sticking to his figurative expression with tenacious and impenetrable obstinacy: 'I mean dropped down upon me.'

'I remonstrated with you,' she began again, 'because - '

'I won't have it!' cried Jeremiah. 'You dropped down upon me.'

'I dropped down upon you, then, you ill-conditioned man,' (Jeremiah chuckled at having forced her to adopt his phrase,) 'for having been needlessly significant to Arthur that morning. I have a right to complain of it as almost a breach of confidence. You did not mean it - '

'I won't have it!' interposed the contradictory Jeremiah, flinging back the concession. 'I did mean it.'

'I suppose I must leave you to speak in soliloquy if you choose,' she replied, after a pause that seemed an angry one. 'It is useless my addressing myself to a rash and headstrong old man who has a set purpose not to hear me.'

'Now, I won't take that from you either,' said Jeremiah. 'I have no such purpose. I have told you I did mean it. Do you wish to know why I meant it, you rash and headstrong old woman?'

'After all, you only restore me my own words,' she said, struggling with her indignation. 'Yes.'

'This is why, then. Because you hadn't cleared his father to him, and you ought to have done it. Because, before you went into any tantrum about yourself, who are - '

'Hold there, Flintwinch!' she cried out in a changed voice: 'you may go a word too far.'

The old man seemed to think so. There was another pause, and he had altered his position in the room, when he spoke again more mildly:

'I was going to tell you why it was. Because, before you took your own part, I thought you ought to have taken the part of Arthur's father. Arthur's father! I had no particular love for Arthur's father. I served Arthur's father's uncle, in this house, when Arthur's father was not much above me - was poorer as far as his pocket went - and when his uncle might as soon have left me his heir as have left him. He starved in the parlour, and I starved in the kitchen; that was the principal difference in our positions; there was not much more than a flight of breakneck stairs between us. I never took to him in those times; I don't know that I ever took to him greatly at any time. He was an undecided, irresolute chap, who had everything but his orphan life scared out of him when he was young. And when he brought you home here, the wife his uncle had named for him, I didn't need to look at you twice (you were a good-looking woman at that time) to know who'd be master. You have stood of your own strength ever since. Stand of your own strength now. Don't lean against the dead.'

'I do not - as you call it - lean against the dead.'

'But you had a mind to do it, if I had submitted,' growled Jeremiah, 'and that's why you drop down upon me. You can't forget that I didn't submit. I suppose you are astonished that I should consider it worth my while to have justice done to Arthur's father?'

Hey? It doesn't matter whether you answer or not, because I know you are, and you know you are. Come, then, I'll tell you how it is. I may be a bit of an oddity in point of temper, but this is my temper - I can't let anybody have entirely their own way. You are a determined woman, and a clever woman; and when you see your purpose before you, nothing will turn you from it. Who knows that better than I do?'

'Nothing will turn me from it, Flintwinch, when I have justified it to myself. Add that.'

'Justified it to yourself? I said you were the most determined woman on the face of the earth (or I meant to say so), and if you are determined to justify any object you entertain, of course you'll do it.'

'Man! I justify myself by the authority of these Books,' she cried, with stern emphasis, and appearing from the sound that followed to strike the dead-weight of her arm upon the table.

'Never mind that,' returned Jeremiah calmly, 'we won't enter into that question at present. However that may be, you carry out your purposes, and you make everything go down before them. Now, I won't go down before them. I have been faithful to you, and useful to you, and I am attached to you. But I can't consent, and I won't consent, and I never did consent, and I never will consent to be lost in you.'

Swallow up everybody else, and welcome. The peculiarity of my temper is, ma'am, that I won't be swallowed up alive.'

Perhaps this had Originally been the mainspring of the understanding between them. Descrying thus much of force of character in Mr Flintwinch, perhaps Mrs Clennam had deemed alliance with him worth her while.

'Enough and more than enough of the subject,' said she gloomily.

'Unless you drop down upon me again,' returned the persistent Flintwinch, 'and then you must expect to hear of it again.'

Mistress Affery dreamed that the figure of her lord here began walking up and down the room, as if to cool his spleen, and that she ran away; but that, as he did not issue forth when she had stood listening and trembling in the shadowy hall a little time, she crept up-stairs again, impelled as before by ghosts and curiosity, and once more cowered outside the door.

'Please to light the candle, Flintwinch,' Mrs Clennam was saying, apparently wishing to draw him back into their usual tone. 'It is nearly time for tea. Little Dorrit is coming, and will find me in the dark.'

Mr Flintwinch lighted the candle briskly, and said as he put it down upon the table:

'What are you going to do with Little Dorrit? Is she to come to work here for ever? To come to tea here for ever? To come backwards and forwards here, in the same way, for ever?' 'How can you talk about 'for ever' to a maimed creature like me? Are we not all cut down like the grass of the field, and was not I shorn by the scythe many years ago: since when I have been lying here, waiting to be gathered into the barn?'

'Ay, ay! But since you have been lying here - not near dead - nothing like it - numbers of children and young people, blooming women, strong men, and what not, have been cut down and carried; and still here are you, you see, not much changed after all. Your time and mine may be a long one yet. When I say for ever, I mean (though I am not poetical) through all our time.' Mr Flintwinch gave this explanation with great calmness, and calmly waited for an answer.

'So long as Little Dorrit is quiet and industrious, and stands in need of the slight help I can give her, and deserves it; so long, I suppose, unless she withdraws of her own act, she will continue to come here, I being spared.'

'Nothing more than that?' said Flintwinch, stroking his mouth and chin.

'What should there be more than that! What could there be more than that!' she ejaculated in her sternly wondering way.

Mrs Flintwinch dreamed, that, for the space of a minute or two, they remained looking at each other with the candle between them, and that she somehow derived an impression that they looked at each other fixedly.

'Do you happen to know, Mrs Clennam,' Affery's liege lord then demanded in a much lower voice, and with an amount of expression that seemed quite out of proportion to the simple purpose of his words, 'where she lives?'

'No.'

'Would you - now, would you like to know?' said Jeremiah with a pounce as if he had sprung upon her.

'If I cared to know, I should know already. Could I not have asked her any day?'

'Then you don't care to know?'

'I do not.'

Mr Flintwinch, having expelled a long significant breath said, with his former emphasis, 'For I have accidentally - mind! - found out.' 'Wherever she lives,' said Mrs Clennam, speaking in one unmodulated hard voice, and separating her words as distinctly as if she were reading them off from separate bits of metal that she took up one by one, 'she has made a secret of it, and she shall always keep her secret from me.'

'After all, perhaps you would rather not have known the fact, any how?' said Jeremiah; and he said it with a twist, as if his words had come out of him in his own wry shape.

'Flintwinch,' said his mistress and partner, flashing into a sudden energy that made Affery start, 'why do you goad me? Look round this room. If it is any compensation for my long confinement within these narrow limits - not that I complain of being afflicted; you know I never complain of that - if it is any compensation to me for long confinement to this room, that while I am shut up from all pleasant change I am also shut up from the knowledge of some things that I may prefer to avoid knowing, why should you, of all men, grudge me that belief?'

'I don't grudge it to you,' returned Jeremiah.

'Then say no more. Say no more. Let Little Dorrit keep her secret from me, and do you keep it from me also. Let her come and go, unobserved and unquestioned. Let me suffer, and let me have what alleviation belongs to my condition. Is it so much, that you torment me like an evil spirit?'

'I asked you a question. That's all.'

'I have answered it. So, say no more. Say no more.' Here the sound of the wheeled chair was heard upon the floor, and Affery's bell rang with a hasty jerk.

More afraid of her husband at the moment than of the mysterious sound in the kitchen, Affery crept away as lightly and as quickly as she could, descended the kitchen stairs almost as rapidly as she had ascended them, resumed her seat before the fire, tucked up her skirt again, and finally threw her apron over her head. Then the bell rang once more, and then once more, and then kept on ringing; in despite of which importunate summons, Affery still sat behind her apron, recovering her breath.

At last Mr Flintwinch came shuffling down the staircase into the hall, muttering and calling 'Affery woman!' all the way. Affery still remaining behind her apron, he came stumbling down the kitchen stairs, candle in hand, sidled up to her, twitched her apron off, and roused her.

'Oh Jeremiah!' cried Affery, waking. 'What a start you gave me!'

'What have you been doing, woman?' inquired Jeremiah. 'You've been rung for fifty times.'

'Oh Jeremiah,' said Mistress Affery, 'I have been a-dreaming!'

Reminded of her former achievement in that way, Mr Flintwinch held the candle to her head, as if he had some idea of lighting her up for the illumination of the kitchen.

'Don't you know it's her tea-time?' he demanded with a vicious grin, and giving one of the legs of Mistress Affery's chair a kick.

'Jeremiah? Tea-time? I don't know what's come to me. But I got such a dreadful turn, Jeremiah, before I went - off a-dreaming, that I think it must be that.'

'Yoogh! Sleepy-Head!' said Mr Flintwinch, 'what are you talking about?'

'Such a strange noise, Jeremiah, and such a curious movement. In the kitchen here - just here.'

Jeremiah held up his light and looked at the blackened ceiling, held down his light and looked at the damp stone floor, turned round with his light and looked about at the spotted and blotched walls.

'Rats, cats, water, drains,' said Jeremiah.

Mistress Affery negatived each with a shake of her head. 'No, Jeremiah; I have felt it before. I have felt it up-stairs, and once on the staircase as I was going from her room to ours in the night - a rustle and a sort of trembling touch behind me.'

'Affery, my woman,' said Mr Flintwinch grimly, after advancing his nose to that lady's lips as a test for the detection of spirituous liquors, 'if you don't get tea pretty quick, old woman, you'll become sensible of a rustle and a touch that'll send you flying to the other end of the kitchen.'

This prediction stimulated Mrs Flintwinch to bestir herself, and to hasten up-stairs to Mrs Clennam's chamber. But, for all that, she now began to entertain a settled conviction that there was something wrong in the gloomy house. Henceforth, she was never at peace in it after daylight departed; and never went up or down stairs in the dark without having her apron over her head, lest she should see something.

What with these ghostly apprehensions and her singular dreams, Mrs Flintwinch fell that evening into a haunted state of mind, from which it may be long before this present narrative descries any trace of her recovery. In the vagueness and indistinctness of all her new experiences and perceptions, as everything about her was mysterious to herself she began to be mysterious to others: and became as difficult to be made out to anybody's satisfaction as she found the house and everything in it difficult to make out to her own.

She had not yet finished preparing Mrs Clennam's tea, when the soft knock came to the door which always announced Little Dorrit. Mistress Affery looked on at Little Dorrit taking off her homely bonnet in the hall, and at Mr Flintwinch scraping his jaws and contemplating her in silence, as expecting some wonderful consequence to ensue which would frighten her out of her five wits or blow them all three to pieces.

After tea there came another knock at the door, announcing Arthur. Mistress Affery went down to let him in, and he said on entering, 'Affery, I am glad it's you. I want to ask you a question.' Affery immediately replied, 'For goodness sake don't ask me nothing, Arthur! I am frightened out of one half of my life, and dreamed out of the other. Don't ask me nothing! I don't know which is which, or what is what!' - and immediately started away from him, and came near him no more.

Mistress Affery having no taste for reading, and no sufficient light for needlework in the subdued room, supposing her to have the inclination, now sat every night in the dimness from which she had momentarily emerged on the evening of Arthur Clennam's return, occupied with crowds of wild speculations and suspicions respecting her mistress and her husband and the noises in the house. When the ferocious devotional exercises were engaged in, these speculations would distract Mistress Affery's eyes towards the door, as if she expected some dark form to appear at those propitious moments, and make the party one too many.

Otherwise, Affery never said or did anything to attract the attention of the two clever ones towards her in any marked degree, except on certain occasions, generally at about the quiet hour towards bed-time, when she would suddenly dart out of her dim corner, and whisper with a face of terror to Mr Flintwinch, reading the paper near Mrs Clennam's little table: 'There, jeremiah! Now! What's that noise?'

Then the noise, if there were any, would have ceased, and Mr Flintwinch would snarl, turning upon her as if she had cut him down that moment against his will, 'Affery, old woman, you shall have a dose, old woman, such a dose! You have been dreaming again!'