

Chapter XVII - Nobody's Rival

Before breakfast in the morning, Arthur walked out to look about him. As the morning was fine and he had an hour on his hands, he crossed the river by the ferry, and strolled along a footpath through some meadows. When he came back to the towing-path, he found the ferry-boat on the opposite side, and a gentleman hailing it and waiting to be taken over.

This gentleman looked barely thirty. He was well dressed, of a sprightly and gay appearance, a well-knit figure, and a rich dark complexion. As Arthur came over the stile and down to the water's edge, the loungee glanced at him for a moment, and then resumed his occupation of idly tossing stones into the water with his foot. There was something in his way of spurning them out of their places with his heel, and getting them into the required position, that Clennam thought had an air of cruelty in it. Most of us have more or less frequently derived a similar impression from a man's manner of doing some very little thing: plucking a flower, clearing away an obstacle, or even destroying an insentient object.

The gentleman's thoughts were preoccupied, as his face showed, and he took no notice of a fine Newfoundland dog, who watched him attentively, and watched every stone too, in its turn, eager to spring into the river on receiving his master's sign. The ferry-boat came over, however, without his receiving any sign, and when it grounded his master took him by the collar and walked him into it.

'Not this morning,' he said to the dog. 'You won't do for ladies' company, dripping wet. Lie down.'

Clennam followed the man and the dog into the boat, and took his seat. The dog did as he was ordered. The man remained standing, with his hands in his pockets, and towered between Clennam and the prospect. Man and dog both jumped lightly out as soon as they touched the other side, and went away. Clennam was glad to be rid of them.

The church clock struck the breakfast hour as he walked up the little lane by which the garden-gate was approached. The moment he pulled the bell a deep loud barking assailed him from within the wall.

'I heard no dog last night,' thought Clennam. The gate was opened by one of the rosy maids, and on the lawn were the Newfoundland dog and the man.

'Miss Minnie is not down yet, gentlemen,' said the blushing portress, as they all came together in the garden. Then she said to the master of the dog, 'Mr Clennam, sir,' and tripped away.

'Odd enough, Mr Clennam, that we should have met just now,' said the man. Upon which the dog became mute. 'Allow me to introduce myself - Henry Gowan. A pretty place this, and looks wonderfully well this morning!'

The manner was easy, and the voice agreeable; but still Clennam thought, that if he had not made that decided resolution to avoid falling in love with Pet, he would have taken a dislike to this Henry Gowan.

'It's new to you, I believe?' said this Gowan, when Arthur had extolled the place. 'Quite new. I made acquaintance with it only yesterday afternoon.'

'Ah! Of course this is not its best aspect. It used to look charming in the spring, before they went away last time. I should like you to have seen it then.'

But for that resolution so often recalled, Clennam might have wished him in the crater of Mount Etna, in return for this civility.

'I have had the pleasure of seeing it under many circumstances during the last three years, and it's - a Paradise.'

It was (at least it might have been, always excepting for that wise resolution) like his dexterous impudence to call it a Paradise. He only called it a Paradise because he first saw her coming, and so made her out within her hearing to be an angel, Confusion to him! And ah! how beaming she looked, and how glad! How she caressed the dog, and how the dog knew her! How expressive that heightened colour in her face, that fluttered manner, her downcast eyes, her irresolute happiness! When had Clennam seen her look like this? Not that there was any reason why he might, could, would, or should have ever seen her look like this, or that he had ever hoped for himself to see her look like this; but still - when had he ever known her do it!

He stood at a little distance from them. This Gowan when he had talked about a Paradise, had gone up to her and taken her hand. The dog had put his great paws on her arm and laid his head against her dear bosom. She had laughed and welcomed them, and made far too much of the dog, far, far, too much - that is to say, supposing there had been any third person looking on who loved her.

She disengaged herself now, and came to Clennam, and put her hand in his and wished him good morning, and gracefully made as if she would take his arm and be escorted into the house. To this Gowan had no objection. No, he knew he was too safe.

There was a passing cloud on Mr Meagles's good-humoured face when they all three (four, counting the dog, and he was the most objectionable but one of the party) came in to breakfast. Neither it, nor the touch of uneasiness on Mrs Meagles as she directed her eyes towards it, was unobserved by Clennam.

'Well, Gowan,' said Mr Meagles, even suppressing a sigh; 'how goes the world with you this morning?'

'Much as usual, sir. Lion and I being determined not to waste anything of our weekly visit, turned out early, and came over from Kingston, my present headquarters, where I am making a sketch or two.' Then he told how he had met Mr Clennam at the ferry, and they had come over together.

'Mrs Gowan is well, Henry?' said Mrs Meagles. (Clennam became attentive.)

'My mother is quite well, thank you.' (Clennam became inattentive.) 'I have taken the liberty of making an addition to your family dinner-party to-day, which I hope will not be inconvenient to you or to Mr Meagles. I couldn't very well get out of it,' he explained, turning to the latter. 'The young fellow wrote to propose himself to me; and as he is well connected, I thought you would not object to my transferring him here.' 'Who is the young fellow?' asked Mr Meagles with peculiar complacency.

'He is one of the Barnacles. Tite Barnacle's son, Clarence Barnacle, who is in his father's Department. I can at least guarantee that the river shall not suffer from his visit. He won't set it on fire.'

'Aye, aye?' said Meagles. 'A Barnacle is he? We know something of that family, eh, Dan? By George, they are at the top of the tree, though! Let me see. What relation will this young fellow be to Lord Decimus now? His Lordship married, in seventeen ninety-seven, Lady Jemima Bilberry, who was the second daughter by the third marriage - no! There I am wrong! That was Lady Seraphina - Lady Jemima was the first daughter by the second marriage of the fifteenth Earl of Stiltstalking with the Honourable Clementina Toozellem. Very well. Now this young fellow's father married a Stiltstalking and his father married his cousin who was a Barnacle.'

The father of that father who married a Barnacle, married a Joddleby.
- I am getting a little too far back, Gowan; I want to make out what relation this young fellow is to Lord Decimus.'

'That's easily stated. His father is nephew to Lord Decimus.'

'Nephew - to - Lord - Decimus,' Mr Meagles luxuriously repeated with his eyes shut, that he might have nothing to distract him from the full flavour of the genealogical tree. 'By George, you are right, Gowan. So he is.'

'Consequently, Lord Decimus is his great uncle.'

'But stop a bit!' said Mr Meagles, opening his eyes with a fresh discovery. 'Then on the mother's side, Lady Stiltstalking is his great aunt.'

'Of course she is.'

'Aye, aye, aye?' said Mr Meagles with much interest. 'Indeed, indeed? We shall be glad to see him. We'll entertain him as well as we can, in our humble way; and we shall not starve him, I hope, at all events.'

In the beginning of this dialogue, Clennam had expected some great harmless outburst from Mr Meagles, like that which had made him burst out of the Circumlocution Office, holding Doyce by the collar. But his good friend had a weakness which none of us need go into the next street to find, and which no amount of Circumlocution experience could long subdue in him. Clennam looked at Doyce; but Doyce knew all about it beforehand, and looked at his plate, and made no sign, and said no word.

'I am much obliged to you,' said Gowan, to conclude the subject. 'Clarence is a great ass, but he is one of the dearest and best fellows that ever lived!'

It appeared, before the breakfast was over, that everybody whom this Gowan knew was either more or less of an ass, or more or less of a knave; but was, notwithstanding, the most lovable, the most engaging, the simplest, truest, kindest, dearest, best fellow that ever lived. The process by which this unvarying result was attained, whatever the premises, might have been stated by Mr Henry Gowan thus: 'I claim to be always book-keeping, with a peculiar nicety, in every man's case, and posting up a careful little account of Good and Evil with him. I do this so conscientiously, that I am happy to tell you I find the most worthless of men to be the dearest old fellow too: and am in a condition to make the gratifying report, that there is much less difference than you are inclined to suppose between an honest man

and a scoundrel.' The effect of this cheering discovery happened to be, that while he seemed to be scrupulously finding good in most men, he did in reality lower it where it was, and set it up where it was not; but that was its only disagreeable or dangerous feature.

It scarcely seemed, however, to afford Mr Meagles as much satisfaction as the Barnacle genealogy had done. The cloud that Clennam had never seen upon his face before that morning, frequently overcast it again; and there was the same shadow of uneasy observation of him on the comely face of his wife. More than once or twice when Pet caressed the dog, it appeared to Clennam that her father was unhappy in seeing her do it; and, in one particular instance when Gowan stood on the other side of the dog, and bent his head at the same time, Arthur fancied that he saw tears rise to Mr Meagles's eyes as he hurried out of the room. It was either the fact too, or he fancied further, that Pet herself was not insensible to these little incidents; that she tried, with a more delicate affection than usual, to express to her good father how much she loved him; that it was on this account that she fell behind the rest, both as they went to church and as they returned from it, and took his arm. He could not have sworn but that as he walked alone in the garden afterwards, he had an instantaneous glimpse of her in her father's room, clinging to both her parents with the greatest tenderness, and weeping on her father's shoulder.

The latter part of the day turning out wet, they were fain to keep the house, look over Mr Meagles's collection, and beguile the time with conversation. This Gowan had plenty to say for himself, and said it in an off-hand and amusing manner. He appeared to be an artist by profession, and to have been at Rome some time; yet he had a slight, careless, amateur way with him - a perceptible limp, both in his devotion to art and his attainments - which Clennam could scarcely understand.

He applied to Daniel Doyce for help, as they stood together, looking out of window.

'You know Mr Gowan?' he said in a low voice.

'I have seen him here. Comes here every Sunday when they are at home.'

'An artist, I infer from what he says?'

'A sort of a one,' said Daniel Doyce, in a surly tone.

'What sort of a one?' asked Clennam, with a smile.

'Why, he has sauntered into the Arts at a leisurely Pall-Mall pace,' said Doyce, 'and I doubt if they care to be taken quite so coolly.'

Pursuing his inquiries, Clennam found that the Gowan family were a very distant ramification of the Barnacles; and that the paternal Gowan, originally attached to a legation abroad, had been pensioned off as a Commissioner of nothing particular somewhere or other, and had died at his post with his drawn salary in his hand, nobly defending it to the last extremity. In consideration of this eminent public service, the Barnacle then in power had recommended the Crown to bestow a pension of two or three hundred a-year on his widow; to which the next Barnacle in power had added certain shady and sedate apartments in the Palaces at Hampton Court, where the old lady still lived, deploring the degeneracy of the times in company with several other old ladies of both sexes. Her son, Mr Henry Gowan, inheriting from his father, the Commissioner, that very questionable help in life, a very small independence, had been difficult to settle; the rather, as public appointments chanced to be scarce, and his genius, during his earlier manhood, was of that exclusively agricultural character which applies itself to the cultivation of wild oats. At last he had declared that he would become a Painter; partly because he had always had an idle knack that way, and partly to grieve the souls of the Barnacles-in-chief who had not provided for him. So it had come to pass successively, first, that several distinguished ladies had been frightfully shocked; then, that portfolios of his performances had been handed about o' nights, and declared with ecstasy to be perfect Claudes, perfect Cuyps, perfect phaenomena; then, that Lord Decimus had bought his picture, and had asked the President and Council to dinner at a blow, and had said, with his own magnificent gravity, 'Do you know, there appears to me to be really immense merit in that work?' and, in short, that people of condition had absolutely taken pains to bring him into fashion. But, somehow, it had all failed. The prejudiced public had stood out against it obstinately. They had determined not to admire Lord Decimus's picture. They had determined to believe that in every service, except their own, a man must qualify himself, by striving early and late, and by working heart and soul, might and main. So now Mr Gowan, like that worn-out old coffin which never was Mahomet's nor anybody else's, hung midway between two points: jaundiced and jealous as to the one he had left: jaundiced and jealous as to the other that he couldn't reach.

Such was the substance of Clennam's discoveries concerning him, made that rainy Sunday afternoon and afterwards.

About an hour or so after dinner time, Young Barnacle appeared, attended by his eye-glass; in honour of whose family connections, Mr Meagles had cashiered the pretty parlour-maids for the day, and had placed on duty in their stead two dingy men. Young Barnacle was in

the last degree amazed and disconcerted at sight of Arthur, and had murmured involuntarily, 'Look here! upon my soul, you know!' before his presence of mind returned.

Even then, he was obliged to embrace the earliest opportunity of taking his friend into a window, and saying, in a nasal way that was a part of his general debility:

'I want to speak to you, Gowan. I say. Look here. Who is that fellow?'

'A friend of our host's. None of mine.'

'He's a most ferocious Radical, you know,' said Young Barnacle.

'Is he? How do you know?'

'Ecod, sir, he was Pitching into our people the other day in the most tremendous manner. Went up to our place and Pitched into my father to that extent that it was necessary to order him out. Came back to our Department, and Pitched into me. Look here. You never saw such a fellow.'

'What did he want?'

'Ecod, sir,' returned Young Barnacle, 'he said he wanted to know, you know! Pervaded our Department - without an appointment - and said he wanted to know!'

The stare of indignant wonder with which Young Barnacle accompanied this disclosure, would have strained his eyes injuriously but for the opportune relief of dinner. Mr Meagles (who had been extremely solicitous to know how his uncle and aunt were) begged him to conduct Mrs Meagles to the dining-room. And when he sat on Mrs Meagles's right hand, Mr Meagles looked as gratified as if his whole family were there.

All the natural charm of the previous day was gone. The eaters of the dinner, like the dinner itself, were lukewarm, insipid, overdone - and all owing to this poor little dull Young Barnacle. Conversationless at any time, he was now the victim of a weakness special to the occasion, and solely referable to Clennam. He was under a pressing and continual necessity of looking at that gentleman, which occasioned his eye-glass to get into his soup, into his wine-glass, into Mrs Meagles's plate, to hang down his back like a bell-rope, and be several times disgracefully restored to his bosom by one of the dingy men. Weakened in mind by his frequent losses of this instrument, and its determination not to stick in his eye, and more and more enfeebled in intellect every time he looked at the mysterious Clennam, he applied

spoons to his eyes, forks, and other foreign matters connected with the furniture of the dinner-table. His discovery of these mistakes greatly increased his difficulties, but never released him from the necessity of looking at Clennam. And whenever Clennam spoke, this ill-starred young man was clearly seized with a dread that he was coming, by some artful device, round to that point of wanting to know, you know.

It may be questioned, therefore, whether any one but Mr Meagles had much enjoyment of the time. Mr Meagles, however, thoroughly enjoyed Young Barnacle. As a mere flask of the golden water in the tale became a full fountain when it was poured out, so Mr Meagles seemed to feel that this small spice of Barnacle imparted to his table the flavour of the whole family-tree. In its presence, his frank, fine, genuine qualities paled; he was not so easy, he was not so natural, he was striving after something that did not belong to him, he was not himself. What a strange peculiarity on the part of Mr Meagles, and where should we find another such case!

At last the wet Sunday wore itself out in a wet night; and Young Barnacle went home in a cab, feebly smoking; and the objectionable Gowan went away on foot, accompanied by the objectionable dog. Pet had taken the most amiable pains all day to be friendly with Clennam, but Clennam had been a little reserved since breakfast - that is to say, would have been, if he had loved her.

When he had gone to his own room, and had again thrown himself into the chair by the fire, Mr Doyce knocked at the door, candle in hand, to ask him how and at what hour he proposed returning on the morrow? After settling this question, he said a word to Mr Doyce about this Gowan - who would have run in his head a good deal, if he had been his rival.

'Those are not good prospects for a painter,' said Clennam.

'No,' returned Doyce.

Mr Doyce stood, chamber-candlestick in hand, the other hand in his pocket, looking hard at the flame of his candle, with a certain quiet perception in his face that they were going to say something more. 'I thought our good friend a little changed, and out of spirits, after he came this morning?' said Clennam.

'Yes,' returned Doyce.

'But not his daughter?' said Clennam.

'No,' said Doyce.

There was a pause on both sides. Mr Doyce, still looking at the flame of his candle, slowly resumed:

'The truth is, he has twice taken his daughter abroad in the hope of separating her from Mr Gowan. He rather thinks she is disposed to like him, and he has painful doubts (I quite agree with him, as I dare say you do) of the hopefulness of such a marriage.'

'There - ' Clennam choked, and coughed, and stopped.

'Yes, you have taken cold,' said Daniel Doyce. But without looking at him.

'There is an engagement between them, of course?' said Clennam airily.

'No. As I am told, certainly not. It has been solicited on the gentleman's part, but none has been made. Since their recent return, our friend has yielded to a weekly visit, but that is the utmost. Minnie would not deceive her father and mother. You have travelled with them, and I believe you know what a bond there is among them, extending even beyond this present life. All that there is between Miss Minnie and Mr Gowan, I have no doubt we see.'

'Ah! We see enough!' cried Arthur.

Mr Doyce wished him Good Night in the tone of a man who had heard a mournful, not to say despairing, exclamation, and who sought to infuse some encouragement and hope into the mind of the person by whom it had been uttered. Such tone was probably a part of his oddity, as one of a crotchety band; for how could he have heard anything of that kind, without Clennam's hearing it too?

The rain fell heavily on the roof, and pattered on the ground, and dripped among the evergreens and the leafless branches of the trees. The rain fell heavily, drearily. It was a night of tears.

If Clennam had not decided against falling in love with Pet; if he had had the weakness to do it; if he had, little by little, persuaded himself to set all the earnestness of his nature, all the might of his hope, and all the wealth of his matured character, on that cast; if he had done this and found that all was lost; he would have been, that night, unutterably miserable. As it was - As it was, the rain fell heavily, drearily.