Chapter XVIII - Little Dorrit's Lover

Little Dorrit had not attained her twenty-second birthday without finding a lover. Even in the shallow Marshalsea, the ever young Archer shot off a few featherless arrows now and then from a mouldy bow, and winged a Collegian or two.

Little Dorrit's lover, however, was not a Collegian. He was the sentimental son of a turnkey. His father hoped, in the fulness of time, to leave him the inheritance of an unstained key; and had from his early youth familiarised him with the duties of his office, and with an ambition to retain the prison-lock in the family. While the succession was yet in abeyance, he assisted his mother in the conduct of a snug tobacco business round the corner of Horsemonger Lane (his father being a non-resident turnkey), which could usually command a neat connection within the College walls.

Years agone, when the object of his affections was wont to sit in her little arm-chair by the high Lodge-fender, Young John (family name, Chivery), a year older than herself, had eyed her with admiring wonder. When he had played with her in the yard, his favourite game had been to counterfeit locking her up in corners, and to counterfeit letting her out for real kisses. When he grew tall enough to peep through the keyhole of the great lock of the main door, he had divers times set down his father's dinner, or supper, to get on as it might on the outer side thereof, while he stood taking cold in one eye by dint of peeping at her through that airy perspective.

If Young John had ever slackened in his truth in the less penetrable days of his boyhood, when youth is prone to wear its boots unlaced and is happily unconscious of digestive organs, he had soon strung it up again and screwed it tight. At nineteen, his hand had inscribed in chalk on that part of the wall which fronted her lodgings, on the occasion of her birthday, 'Welcome sweet nursling of the Fairies!' At twenty-three, the same hand falteringly presented cigars on Sundays to the Father of the Marshalsea, and Father of the queen of his soul.

Young John was small of stature, with rather weak legs and very weak light hair. One of his eyes (perhaps the eye that used to peep through the keyhole) was also weak, and looked larger than the other, as if it couldn't collect itself. Young John was gentle likewise. But he was great of soul. Poetical, expansive, faithful.

Though too humble before the ruler of his heart to be sanguine, Young John had considered the object of his attachment in all its lights and shades. Following it out to blissful results, he had descried, without self-commendation, a fitness in it. Say things prospered, and they were united. She, the child of the Marshalsea; he, the lock-keeper.

There was a fitness in that. Say he became a resident turnkey. She would officially succeed to the chamber she had rented so long. There was a beautiful propriety in that. It looked over the wall, if you stood on tip-toe; and, with a trellis-work of scarlet beans and a canary or so, would become a very Arbour. There was a charming idea in that. Then, being all in all to one another, there was even an appropriate grace in the lock. With the world shut out (except that part of it which would be shut in); with its troubles and disturbances only known to them by hearsay, as they would be described by the pilgrims tarrying with them on their way to the Insolvent Shrine; with the Arbour above, and the Lodge below; they would glide down the stream of time, in pastoral domestic happiness. Young John drew tears from his eyes by finishing the picture with a tombstone in the adjoining churchyard, close against the prison wall, bearing the following touching inscription: 'Sacred to the Memory Of JOHN CHIVERY, Sixty years Turnkey, and fifty years Head Turnkey, Of the neighbouring Marshalsea, Who departed this life, universally respected, on the thirty-first of December, One thousand eight hundred and eighty- six, Aged eighty-three years. Also of his truly beloved and truly loving wife, AMY, whose maiden name was DORRIT, Who survived his loss not quite forty-eight hours, And who breathed her last in the Marshalsea aforesaid. There she was born, There she lived, There she died.'

The Chivery parents were not ignorant of their son's attachment - indeed it had, on some exceptional occasions, thrown him into a state of mind that had impelled him to conduct himself with irascibility towards the customers, and damage the business - but they, in their turns, had worked it out to desirable conclusions. Mrs Chivery, a prudent woman, had desired her husband to take notice that their john's prospects of the Lock would certainly be strengthened by an alliance with Miss Dorrit, who had herself a kind of claim upon the College and was much respected there. Mrs Chivery had desired her husband to take notice that if, on the one hand, their John had means and a post of trust, on the other hand, Miss Dorrit had family; and that her (Mrs Chivery's) sentiment was, that two halves made a whole. Mrs Chivery, speaking as a mother and not as a diplomatist, had then, from a different point of view, desired her husband to recollect that their John had never been strong, and that his love had fretted and worrited him enough as it was, without his being driven to do himself a mischief, as nobody couldn't say he wouldn't be if he was crossed. These arguments had so powerfully influenced the mind of Mr Chivery, who was a man of few words, that he had on sundry Sunday mornings, given his boy what he termed 'a lucky touch,' signifying that he considered such commendation of him to Good Fortune, preparatory to his that day declaring his passion and becoming triumphant. But Young John had never taken courage to make the declaration; and it was principally on these occasions that he had returned excited to the tobacco shop, and flown at the

customers. In this affair, as in every other, Little Dorrit herself was the last person considered. Her brother and sister were aware of it, and attained a sort of station by making a peg of it on which to air the miserably ragged old fiction of the family gentility. Her sister asserted the family gentility by flouting the poor swain as he loitered about the prison for glimpses of his dear. Tip asserted the family gentility, and his own, by coming out in the character of the aristocratic brother, and loftily swaggering in the little skittle ground respecting seizures by the scruff of the neck, which there were looming probabilities of some gentleman unknown executing on some little puppy not mentioned. These were not the only members of the Dorrit family who turned it to account.

No, no. The Father of the Marshalsea was supposed to know nothing about the matter, of course: his poor dignity could not see so low.

But he took the cigars, on Sundays, and was glad to get them; and sometimes even condescended to walk up and down the yard with the donor (who was proud and hopeful then), and benignantly to smoke one in his society. With no less readiness and condescension did he receive attentions from Chivery Senior, who always relinquished his arm-chair and newspaper to him, when he came into the Lodge during one of his spells of duty; and who had even mentioned to him, that, if he would like at any time after dusk quietly to step out into the fore-court and take a look at the street, there was not much to prevent him. If he did not avail himself of this latter civility, it was only because he had lost the relish for it; inasmuch as he took everything else he could get, and would say at times, 'Extremely civil person, Chivery; very attentive man and very respectful. Young Chivery, too; really almost with a delicate perception of one's position here. A very well conducted family indeed, the Chiveries. Their behaviour gratifies me.'

The devoted Young John all this time regarded the family with reverence. He never dreamed of disputing their pretensions, but did homage to the miserable Mumbo jumbo they paraded. As to resenting any affront from her brother, he would have felt, even if he had not naturally been of a most pacific disposition, that to wag his tongue or lift his hand against that sacred gentleman would be an unhallowed act. He was sorry that his noble mind should take offence; still, he felt the fact to be not incompatible with its nobility, and sought to propitiate and conciliate that gallant soul. Her father, a gentleman in misfortune - a gentleman of a fine spirit and courtly manners, who always bore with him - he deeply honoured. Her sister he considered somewhat vain and proud, but a young lady of infinite accomplishments, who could not forget the past. It was an instinctive testimony to Little Dorrit's worth and difference from all the rest, that

the poor young fellow honoured and loved her for being simply what she was.

The tobacco business round the corner of Horsemonger Lane was carried out in a rural establishment one story high, which had the benefit of the air from the yards of Horsemonger Lane jail, and the advantage of a retired walk under the wall of that pleasant establishment. The business was of too modest a character to support a life-size Highlander, but it maintained a little one on a bracket on the door-post, who looked like a fallen Cherub that had found it necessary to take to a kilt. From the portal thus decorated, one Sunday after an early dinner of baked viands, Young John issued forth on his usual Sunday errand; not empty-handed, but with his offering of cigars. He was neatly attired in a plum-coloured coat, with as large a collar of black velvet as his figure could carry; a silken waistcoat, bedecked with golden sprigs; a chaste neckerchief much in vogue at that day, representing a preserve of lilac pheasants on a buff ground; pantaloons so highly decorated with side-stripes that each leg was a three-stringed lute; and a hat of state very high and hard. When the prudent Mrs Chivery perceived that in addition to these adornments her John carried a pair of white kid gloves, and a cane like a little finger-post, surmounted by an ivory hand marshalling him the way that he should go; and when she saw him, in this heavy marching order, turn the corner to the right; she remarked to Mr Chivery, who was at home at the time, that she thought she knew which way the wind blew.

The Collegians were entertaining a considerable number of visitors that Sunday afternoon, and their Father kept his room for the purpose of receiving presentations. After making the tour of the yard, Little Dorrit's lover with a hurried heart went up-stairs, and knocked with his knuckles at the Father's door.

'Come in, come in!' said a gracious voice. The Father's voice, her father's, the Marshalsea's father's. He was seated in his black velvet cap, with his newspaper, three-and-sixpence accidentally left on the table, and two chairs arranged. Everything prepared for holding his Court.

'Ah, Young John! How do you do, how do you do!'

'Pretty well, I thank you, sir. I hope you are the same.'

'Yes, John Chivery; yes. Nothing to complain of.'

'I have taken the liberty, sir, of - '

'Eh?' The Father of the Marshalsea always lifted up his eyebrows at this point, and became amiably distraught and smilingly absent in mind.

' - A few cigars, sir.'

'Oh!' (For the moment, excessively surprised.) 'Thank you, Young John, thank you. But really, I am afraid I am too - No? Well then, I will say no more about it. Put them on the mantelshelf, if you please, Young John. And sit down, sit down. You are not a stranger, John.'

'Thank you, sir, I am sure - Miss;' here Young John turned the great hat round and round upon his left-hand, like a slowly twirling mouse-cage; 'Miss Amy quite well, sir?' 'Yes, John, yes; very well. She is out.' 'Indeed, sir?'

'Yes, John. Miss Amy is gone for an airing. My young people all go out a good deal. But at their time of life, it's natural, John.'

'Very much so, I am sure, sir.'

'An airing. An airing. Yes.' He was blandly tapping his fingers on the table, and casting his eyes up at the window. 'Amy has gone for an airing on the Iron Bridge. She has become quite partial to the Iron Bridge of late, and seems to like to walk there better than anywhere.' He returned to conversation. 'Your father is not on duty at present, I think, John?'

'No, sir, he comes on later in the afternoon.' Another twirl of the great hat, and then Young John said, rising, 'I am afraid I must wish you good day, sir.'

'So soon? Good day, Young John. Nay, nay,' with the utmost condescension, 'never mind your glove, John. Shake hands with it on. You are no stranger here, you know.'

Highly gratified by the kindness of his reception, Young John descended the staircase. On his way down he met some Collegians bringing up visitors to be presented, and at that moment Mr Dorrit happened to call over the banisters with particular distinctness, 'Much obliged to you for your little testimonial, John!'

Little Dorrit's lover very soon laid down his penny on the tollplate of the Iron Bridge, and came upon it looking about him for the well-known and well-beloved figure. At first he feared she was not there; but as he walked on towards the Middlesex side, he saw her standing still, looking at the water. She was absorbed in thought, and he wondered what she might be thinking about. There were the piles of

city roofs and chimneys, more free from smoke than on week-days; and there were the distant masts and steeples. Perhaps she was thinking about them.

Little Dorrit mused so long, and was so entirely preoccupied, that although her lover stood quiet for what he thought was a long time, and twice or thrice retired and came back again to the former spot, still she did not move. So, in the end, he made up his mind to go on, and seem to come upon her casually in passing, and speak to her. The place was quiet, and now or never was the time to speak to her.

He walked on, and she did not appear to hear his steps until he was close upon her. When he said 'Miss Dorrit!' she started and fell back from him, with an expression in her face of fright and something like dislike that caused him unutterable dismay. She had often avoided him before - always, indeed, for a long, long while. She had turned away and glided off so often when she had seen him coming toward her, that the unfortunate Young John could not think it accidental. But he had hoped that it might be shyness, her retiring character, her foreknowledge of the state of his heart, anything short of aversion. Now, that momentary look had said, 'You, of all people! I would rather have seen any one on earth than you!'

It was but a momentary look, inasmuch as she checked it, and said in her soft little voice, 'Oh, Mr John! Is it you?' But she felt what it had been, as he felt what it had been; and they stood looking at one another equally confused.

'Miss Amy, I am afraid I disturbed you by speaking to you.'

'Yes, rather. I - I came here to be alone, and I thought I was.'

'Miss Amy, I took the liberty of walking this way, because Mr Dorrit chanced to mention, when I called upon him just now, that you - '

She caused him more dismay than before by suddenly murmuring, 'O father, father!' in a heartrending tone, and turning her face away.

'Miss Amy, I hope I don't give you any uneasiness by naming Mr Dorrit. I assure you I found him very well and in the best of Spirits, and he showed me even more than his usual kindness; being so very kind as to say that I was not a stranger there, and in all ways gratifying me very much.'

To the inexpressible consternation of her lover, Little Dorrit, with her hands to her averted face, and rocking herself where she stood as if she were in pain, murmured, 'O father, how can you! O dear, dear father, how can you, can you, do it!'

The poor fellow stood gazing at her, overflowing with sympathy, but not knowing what to make of this, until, having taken out her handkerchief and put it to her still averted face, she hurried away. At first he remained stock still; then hurried after her.

'Miss Amy, pray! Will you have the goodness to stop a moment? Miss Amy, if it comes to that, let ME go. I shall go out of my senses, if I have to think that I have driven you away like this.'

His trembling voice and unfeigned earnestness brought Little Dorrit to a stop. 'Oh, I don't know what to do,' she cried, 'I don't know what to do!'

To Young John, who had never seen her bereft of her quiet self-command, who had seen her from her infancy ever so reliable and self-suppressed, there was a shock in her distress, and in having to associate himself with it as its cause, that shook him from his great hat to the pavement. He felt it necessary to explain himself. He might be misunderstood - supposed to mean something, or to have done something, that had never entered into his imagination. He begged her to hear him explain himself, as the greatest favour she could show him.

'Miss Amy, I know very well that your family is far above mine. It were vain to conceal it. There never was a Chivery a gentleman that ever I heard of, and I will not commit the meanness of making a false representation on a subject so momentous. Miss Amy, I know very well that your high-souled brother, and likewise your spirited sister, spurn me from a height. What I have to do is to respect them, to wish to be admitted to their friendship, to look up at the eminence on which they are placed from my lowlier station - for, whether viewed as tobacco or viewed as the lock, I well know it is lowly - and ever wish them well and happy.'

There really was a genuineness in the poor fellow, and a contrast between the hardness of his hat and the softness of his heart (albeit, perhaps, of his head, too), that was moving. Little Dorrit entreated him to disparage neither himself nor his station, and, above all things, to divest himself of any idea that she supposed hers to be superior. This gave him a little comfort.

'Miss Amy,' he then stammered, 'I have had for a long time - ages they seem to me - Revolving ages - a heart-cherished wish to say something to you. May I say it?'

Little Dorrit involuntarily started from his side again, with the faintest shadow of her former look; conquering that, she went on at great speed half across the Bridge without replying!

'May I - Miss Amy, I but ask the question humbly - may I say it? I have been so unlucky already in giving you pain without having any such intentions, before the holy Heavens! that there is no fear of my saying it unless I have your leave. I can be miserable alone, I can be cut up by myself, why should I also make miserable and cut up one that I would fling myself off that parapet to give half a moment's joy to! Not that that's much to do, for I'd do it for twopence.'

The mournfulness of his spirits, and the gorgeousness of his appearance, might have made him ridiculous, but that his delicacy made him respectable. Little Dorrit learnt from it what to do.

'If you please, John Chivery,' she returned, trembling, but in a quiet way, 'since you are so considerate as to ask me whether you shall say any more - if you please, no.'

'Never, Miss Amy?'

'No, if you please. Never.'

'O Lord!' gasped Young John.

'But perhaps you will let me, instead, say something to you. I want to say it earnestly, and with as plain a meaning as it is possible to express. When you think of us, John - I mean my brother, and sister, and me - don't think of us as being any different from the rest; for, whatever we once were (which I hardly know) we ceased to be long ago, and never can be any more. It will be much better for you, and much better for others, if you will do that instead of what you are doing now.'

Young John dolefully protested that he would try to bear it in mind, and would be heartily glad to do anything she wished.

'As to me,' said Little Dorrit, 'think as little of me as you can; the less, the better. When you think of me at all, John, let it only be as the child you have seen grow up in the prison with one set of duties always occupying her; as a weak, retired, contented, unprotected girl. I particularly want you to remember, that when I come outside the gate, I am unprotected and solitary.'

He would try to do anything she wished. But why did Miss Amy so much want him to remember that?

'Because,' returned Little Dorrit, 'I know I can then quite trust you not to forget to-day, and not to say any more to me. You are so generous that I know I can trust to you for that; and I do and I always will. I am going to show you, at once, that I fully trust you. I like this place

where we are speaking better than any place I know;' her slight colour had faded, but her lover thought he saw it coming back just then; 'and I may be often here. I know it is only necessary for me to tell you so, to be quite sure that you will never come here again in search of me. And I am - quite sure!'

She might rely upon it, said Young John. He was a miserable wretch, but her word was more than a law for him.

'And good-bye, John,' said Little Dorrit. 'And I hope you will have a good wife one day, and be a happy man. I am sure you will deserve to be happy, and you will be, John.'

As she held out her hand to him with these words, the heart that was under the waistcoat of sprigs - mere slop-work, if the truth must be known - swelled to the size of the heart of a gentleman; and the poor common little fellow, having no room to hold it, burst into tears.

'Oh, don't cry,' said Little Dorrit piteously. 'Don't, don't! Good-bye, John. God bless you!'

'Good-bye, Miss Amy. Good-bye!'

And so he left her: first observing that she sat down on the corner of a seat, and not only rested her little hand upon the rough wall, but laid her face against it too, as if her head were heavy, and her mind were sad. It was an affecting illustration of the fallacy of human projects, to behold her lover, with the great hat pulled over his eyes, the velvet collar turned up as if it rained, the plum-coloured coat buttoned to conceal the silken waistcoat of golden sprigs, and the little direction-post pointing inexorably home, creeping along by the worst back-streets, and composing, as he went, the following new inscription for a tombstone in St George's Churchyard:

'Here lie the mortal remains Of JOHN CHIVERY, Never anything worth mentioning, Who died about the end of the year one thousand eight hundred and twenty-six, Of a broken heart, Requesting with his last breath that the word AMY might be inscribed over his ashes, which was accordingly directed to be done, By his afflicted Parents.'