Chapter XIX - The Father Of The Marshalsea In Two Or Three Relations

The brothers William and Frederick Dorrit, walking up and down the College-yard - of course on the aristocratic or Pump side, for the Father made it a point of his state to be chary of going among his children on the Poor side, except on Sunday mornings, Christmas Days, and other occasions of ceremony, in the observance whereof he was very punctual, and at which times he laid his hand upon the heads of their infants, and blessed those young insolvents with a benignity that was highly edifying - the brothers, walking up and down the College-yard together, were a memorable sight. Frederick the free, was so humbled, bowed, withered, and faded; William the bond, was so courtly, condescending, and benevolently conscious of a position; that in this regard only, if in no other, the brothers were a spectacle to wonder at.

They walked up and down the yard on the evening of Little Dorrit's Sunday interview with her lover on the Iron Bridge. The cares of state were over for that day, the Drawing Room had been well attended, several new presentations had taken place, the three-and- sixpence accidentally left on the table had accidentally increased to twelve shillings, and the Father of the Marshalsea refreshed himself with a whiff of cigar. As he walked up and down, affably accommodating his step to the shuffle of his brother, not proud in his superiority, but considerate of that poor creature, bearing with him, and breathing toleration of his infirmities in every little puff of smoke that issued from his lips and aspired to get over the spiked wall, he was a sight to wonder at.

His brother Frederick of the dim eye, palsied hand, bent form, and groping mind, submissively shuffled at his side, accepting his patronage as he accepted every incident of the labyrinthian world in which he had got lost. He held the usual screwed bit of whitey- brown paper in his hand, from which he ever and again unscrewed a spare pinch of snuff. That falteringly taken, he would glance at his brother not unadmiringly, put his hands behind him, and shuffle on so at his side until he took another pinch, or stood still to look about him - perchance suddenly missing his clarionet. The College visitors were melting away as the shades of night drew on, but the yard was still pretty full, the Collegians being mostly out, seeing their friends to the Lodge. As the brothers paced the yard, William the bond looked about him to receive salutes, returned them by graciously lifting off his hat, and, with an engaging air, prevented Frederick the free from running against the company, or being jostled against the wall. The Collegians as a body were not easily impressible, but even they, according to their various ways of wondering, appeared to find in the two brothers a sight to wonder at.

'You are a little low this evening, Frederick,' said the Father of the Marshalsea. 'Anything the matter?'

'The matter?' He stared for a moment, and then dropped his head and eyes again. 'No, William, no. Nothing is the matter.'

'If you could be persuaded to smarten yourself up a little, Frederick - '

'Aye, aye!' said the old man hurriedly. 'But I can't be. I can't be. Don't talk so. That's all over.'

The Father of the Marshalsea glanced at a passing Collegian with whom he was on friendly terms, as who should say, 'An enfeebled old man, this; but he is my brother, sir, my brother, and the voice of Nature is potent!' and steered his brother clear of the handle of the pump by the threadbare sleeve. Nothing would have been wanting to the perfection of his character as a fraternal guide, philosopher and friend, if he had only steered his brother clear of ruin, instead of bringing it upon him.

'I think, William,' said the object of his affectionate consideration, 'that I am tired, and will go home to bed.'

'My dear Frederick,' returned the other, 'don't let me detain you; don't sacrifice your inclination to me.'

'Late hours, and a heated atmosphere, and years, I suppose,' said Frederick, 'weaken me.'

'My dear Frederick,' returned the Father of the Marshalsea, 'do you think you are sufficiently careful of yourself? Do you think your habits are as precise and methodical as - shall I say as mine are? Not to revert again to that little eccentricity which I mentioned just now, I doubt if you take air and exercise enough, Frederick. Here is the parade, always at your service. Why not use it more regularly than you do?'

'Hah!' sighed the other. 'Yes, yes, yes, yes.'

'But it is of no use saying yes, yes, my dear Frederick,' the Father of the Marshalsea in his mild wisdom persisted, 'unless you act on that assent. Consider my case, Frederick. I am a kind of example. Necessity and time have taught me what to do. At certain stated hours of the day, you will find me on the parade, in my room, in the Lodge, reading the paper, receiving company, eating and drinking. I have impressed upon Amy during many years, that I must have my meals (for instance) punctually. Amy has grown up in a sense of the

importance of these arrangements, and you know what a good girl she is.'

The brother only sighed again, as he plodded dreamily along, 'Hah! Yes, yes, yes, yes.'

'My dear fellow,' said the Father of the Marshalsea, laying his hand upon his shoulder, and mildly rallying him - mildly, because of his weakness, poor dear soul; 'you said that before, and it does not express much, Frederick, even if it means much. I wish I could rouse you, my good Frederick; you want to be roused.'

'Yes, William, yes. No doubt,' returned the other, lifting his dim eyes to his face. 'But I am not like you.'

The Father of the Marshalsea said, with a shrug of modest self-depreciation, 'Oh! You might be like me, my dear Frederick; you might be, if you chose!' and forbore, in the magnanimity of his strength, to press his fallen brother further.

There was a great deal of leave-taking going on in corners, as was usual on Sunday nights; and here and there in the dark, some poor woman, wife or mother, was weeping with a new Collegian. The time had been when the Father himself had wept, in the shades of that yard, as his own poor wife had wept. But it was many years ago; and now he was like a passenger aboard ship in a long voyage, who has recovered from sea-sickness, and is impatient of that weakness in the fresher passengers taken aboard at the last port. He was inclined to remonstrate, and to express his opinion that people who couldn't get on without crying, had no business there. In manner, if not in words, he always testified his displeasure at these interruptions of the general harmony; and it was so well understood, that delinquents usually withdrew if they were aware of him.

On this Sunday evening, he accompanied his brother to the gate with an air of endurance and clemency; being in a bland temper and graciously disposed to overlook the tears. In the flaring gaslight of the Lodge, several Collegians were basking; some taking leave of visitors, and some who had no visitors, watching the frequent turning of the key, and conversing with one another and with Mr Chivery. The paternal entrance made a sensation of course; and Mr Chivery, touching his hat (in a short manner though) with his key, hoped he found himself tolerable.

'Thank you, Chivery, quite well. And you?'

Mr Chivery said in a low growl, 'Oh! he was all right.' Which was his general way of acknowledging inquiries after his health when a little sullen.

'I had a visit from Young John to-day, Chivery. And very smart he looked, I assure you.'

So Mr Chivery had heard. Mr Chivery must confess, however, that his wish was that the boy didn't lay out so much money upon it. For what did it bring him in? It only brought him in wexation. And he could get that anywhere for nothing.

'How vexation, Chivery?' asked the benignant father.

'No odds,' returned Mr Chivery. 'Never mind. Mr Frederick going out?'

'Yes, Chivery, my brother is going home to bed. He is tired, and not quite well. Take care, Frederick, take care. Good night, my dear Frederick!'

Shaking hands with his brother, and touching his greasy hat to the company in the Lodge, Frederick slowly shuffled out of the door which Mr Chivery unlocked for him. The Father of the Marshalsea showed the amiable solicitude of a superior being that he should come to no harm.

'Be so kind as to keep the door open a moment, Chivery, that I may see him go along the passage and down the steps. Take care, Frederick! (He is very infirm.) Mind the steps! (He is so very absent.) Be careful how you cross, Frederick. (I really don't like the notion of his going wandering at large, he is so extremely liable to be run over.)'

With these words, and with a face expressive of many uneasy doubts and much anxious guardianship, he turned his regards upon the assembled company in the Lodge: so plainly indicating that his brother was to be pitied for not being under lock and key, that an opinion to that effect went round among the Collegians assembled.

But he did not receive it with unqualified assent; on the contrary, he said, No, gentlemen, no; let them not misunderstand him. His brother Frederick was much broken, no doubt, and it might be more comfortable to himself (the Father of the Marshalsea) to know that he was safe within the walls. Still, it must be remembered that to support an existence there during many years, required a certain combination of qualities - he did not say high qualities, but qualities - moral qualities. Now, had his brother Frederick that peculiar union of qualities? Gentlemen, he was a most excellent man, a most gentle, tender, and estimable man, with the simplicity of a child; but would

he, though unsuited for most other places, do for that place? No; he said confidently, no! And, he said, Heaven forbid that Frederick should be there in any other character than in his present voluntary character! Gentlemen, whoever came to that College, to remain there a length of time, must have strength of character to go through a good deal and to come out of a good deal. Was his beloved brother Frederick that man? No. They saw him, even as it was, crushed. Misfortune crushed him. He had not power of recoil enough, not elasticity enough, to be a long time in such a place, and yet preserve his self-respect and feel conscious that he was a gentleman. Frederick had not (if he might use the expression) Power enough to see in any delicate little attentions and - and - Testimonials that he might under such circumstances receive, the goodness of human nature, the fine spirit animating the Collegians as a community, and at the same time no degradation to himself, and no depreciation of his claims as a gentleman. Gentlemen, God bless you!

Such was the homily with which he improved and pointed the occasion to the company in the Lodge before turning into the sallow yard again, and going with his own poor shabby dignity past the Collegian in the dressing-gown who had no coat, and past the Collegian in the sea-side slippers who had no shoes, and past the stout greengrocer Collegian in the corduroy knee-breeches who had no cares, and past the lean clerk Collegian in buttonless black who had no hopes, up his own poor shabby staircase to his own poor shabby room.

There, the table was laid for his supper, and his old grey gown was ready for him on his chair-back at the fire. His daughter put her little prayer-book in her pocket - had she been praying for pity on all prisoners and captives! - and rose to welcome him.

Uncle had gone home, then? she asked @ as she changed his coat and gave him his black velvet cap. Yes, uncle had gone home. Had her father enjoyed his walk? Why, not much, Amy; not much. No! Did he not feel quite well?

As she stood behind him, leaning over his chair so lovingly, he looked with downcast eyes at the fire. An uneasiness stole over him that was like a touch of shame; and when he spoke, as he presently did, it was in an unconnected and embarrassed manner.

'Something, I - hem! - I don't know what, has gone wrong with Chivery. He is not - ha! - not nearly so obliging and attentive as usual to-night. It - hem! - it's a little thing, but it puts me out, my love. It's impossible to forget,' turning his hands over and over and looking closely at them, 'that - hem! - that in such a life as mine, I am

unfortunately dependent on these men for something every hour in the day.'

Her arm was on his shoulder, but she did not look in his face while he spoke. Bending her head she looked another way.

'I - hem! - I can't think, Amy, what has given Chivery offence. He is generally so - so very attentive and respectful. And to-night he was quite - quite short with me. Other people there too! Why, good Heaven! if I was to lose the support and recognition of Chivery and his brother officers, I might starve to death here.' While he spoke, he was opening and shutting his hands like valves; so conscious all the time of that touch of shame, that he shrunk before his own knowledge of his meaning.

'I - ha! - I can't think what it's owing to. I am sure I cannot imagine what the cause of it is. There was a certain Jackson here once, a turnkey of the name of Jackson (I don't think you can remember him, my dear, you were very young), and - hem! - and he had a - brother, and this - young brother paid his addresses to - at least, did not go so far as to pay his addresses to - but admired - respectfully admired - the - not daughter, the sister - of one of us; a rather distinguished Collegian; I may say, very much so. His name was Captain Martin; and he consulted me on the question whether It was necessary that his daughter - sister - should hazard offending the turnkey brother by being too - ha! - too plain with the other brother. Captain Martin was a gentleman and a man of honour, and I put it to him first to give me his - his own opinion. Captain Martin (highly respected in the army) then unhesitatingly said that it appeared to him that his - hem! - sister was not called upon to understand the young man too distinctly, and that she might lead him on - I am doubtful whether ‘lead him on’ was Captain Martin's exact expression: indeed I think he said tolerate him - on her father's - I should say, brother's - account. I hardly know how I have strayed into this story. I suppose it has been through being unable to account for Chivery; but as to the connection between the two, I don't see - '

His voice died away, as if she could not bear the pain of hearing him, and her hand had gradually crept to his lips. For a little while there was a dead silence and stillness; and he remained shrunk in his chair, and she remained with her arm round his neck and her head bowed down upon his shoulder.

His supper was cooking in a saucepan on the fire, and, when she moved, it was to make it ready for him on the table. He took his usual seat, she took hers, and he began his meal. They did not, as yet, look at one another. By little and little he began; laying down his knife and fork with a noise, taking things up sharply, biting at his bread as if he

were offended with it, and in other similar ways showing that he was out of sorts. At length he pushed his plate from him, and spoke aloud; with the strangest inconsistency.

'What does it matter whether I eat or starve? What does it matter whether such a blighted life as mine comes to an end, now, next week, or next year? What am I worth to anyone? A poor prisoner, fed on alms and broken victuals; a squalid, disgraced wretch!'

'Father, father!' As he rose she went on her knees to him, and held up her hands to him.

'Amy,' he went on in a suppressed voice, trembling violently, and looking at her as wildly as if he had gone mad. 'I tell you, if you could see me as your mother saw me, you wouldn't believe it to be the creature you have only looked at through the bars of this cage. I was young, I was accomplished, I was good-looking, I was independent - by God I was, child! - and people sought me out, and envied me. Envied me!'

'Dear father!' She tried to take down the shaking arm that he flourished in the air, but he resisted, and put her hand away.

'If I had but a picture of myself in those days, though it was ever so ill done, you would be proud of it, you would be proud of it. But I have no such thing. Now, let me be a warning! Let no man,' he cried, looking haggardly about, 'fail to preserve at least that little of the times of his prosperity and respect. Let his children have that clue to what he was. Unless my face, when I am dead, subsides into the long departed look - they say such things happen, I don't know - my children will have never seen me.'

'Father, father!'

'O despise me, despise me! Look away from me, don't listen to me, stop me, blush for me, cry for me - even you, Amy! Do it, do it! I do it to myself! I am hardened now, I have sunk too low to care long even for that.'

'Dear father, loved father, darling of my heart!' She was clinging to him with her arms, and she got him to drop into his chair again, and caught at the raised arm, and tried to put it round her neck.

'Let it lie there, father. Look at me, father, kiss me, father! Only think of me, father, for one little moment!'

Still he went on in the same wild way, though it was gradually breaking down into a miserable whining.

'And yet I have some respect here. I have made some stand against it. I am not quite trodden down. Go out and ask who is the chief person in the place. They'll tell you it's your father. Go out and ask who is never trifled with, and who is always treated with some delicacy. They'll say, your father. Go out and ask what funeral here (it must be here, I know it can be nowhere else) will make more talk, and perhaps more grief, than any that has ever gone out at the gate. They'll say your father's. Well then. Amy! Amy! Is your father so universally despised? Is there nothing to redeem him? Will you have nothing to remember him by but his ruin and decay? Will you be able to have no affection for him when he is gone, poor castaway, gone?'

He burst into tears of maudlin pity for himself, and at length suffering her to embrace him and take charge of him, let his grey head rest against her cheek, and bewailed his wretchedness. Presently he changed the subject of his lamentations, and clasping his hands about her as she embraced him, cried, O Amy, his motherless, forlorn child! O the days that he had seen her careful and laborious for him! Then he reverted to himself, and weakly told her how much better she would have loved him if she had known him in his vanished character, and how he would have married her to a gentleman who should have been proud of her as his daughter, and how (at which he cried again) she should first have ridden at his fatherly side on her own horse, and how the crowd (by which he meant in effect the people who had given him the twelve shillings he then had in his pocket) should have trudged the dusty roads respectfully.

Thus, now boasting, now despairing, in either fit a captive with the jail-rot upon him, and the impurity of his prison worn into the grain of his soul, he revealed his degenerate state to his affectionate child. No one else ever beheld him in the details of his humiliation. Little recked the Collegians who were laughing in their rooms over his late address in the Lodge, what a serious picture they had in their obscure gallery of the Marshalsea that Sunday night.

There was a classical daughter once - perhaps - who ministered to her father in his prison as her mother had ministered to her. Little Dorrit, though of the unheroic modern stock and mere English, did much more, in comforting her father's wasted heart upon her innocent breast, and turning to it a fountain of love and fidelity that never ran dry or waned through all his years of famine.

She soothed him; asked him for his forgiveness if she had been, or seemed to have been, undutiful; told him, Heaven knows truly, that she could not honour him more if he were the favourite of Fortune and the whole world acknowledged him. When his tears were dried, and he sobbed in his weakness no longer, and was free from that touch of shame, and had recovered his usual bearing, she prepared the

remains of his supper afresh, and, sitting by his side, rejoiced to see him eat and drink. For now he sat in his black velvet cap and old grey gown, magnanimous again; and would have comported himself towards any Collegian who might have looked in to ask his advice, like a great moral Lord Chesterfield, or Master of the ethical ceremonies of the Marshalsea.

To keep his attention engaged, she talked with him about his wardrobe; when he was pleased to say, that Yes, indeed, those shirts she proposed would be exceedingly acceptable, for those he had were worn out, and, being ready-made, had never fitted him. Being conversational, and in a reasonable flow of spirits, he then invited her attention to his coat as it hung behind the door: remarking that the Father of the place would set an indifferent example to his children, already disposed to be slovenly, if he went among them out at elbows. He was jocular, too, as to the heeling of his shoes; but became grave on the subject of his cravat, and promised her that, when she could afford it, she should buy him a new one.

While he smoked out his cigar in peace, she made his bed, and put the small room in order for his repose. Being weary then, owing to the advanced hour and his emotions, he came out of his chair to bless her and wish her Good night. All this time he had never once thought of HER dress, her shoes, her need of anything. No other person upon earth, save herself, could have been so unmindful of her wants.

He kissed her many times with 'Bless you, my love. Good night, MY dear!'

But her gentle breast had been so deeply wounded by what she had seen of him that she was unwilling to leave him alone, lest he should lament and despair again. 'Father, dear, I am not tired; let me come back presently, when you are in bed, and sit by you.'

He asked her, with an air of protection, if she felt solitary?

'Yes, father.'

'Then come back by all means, my love.'

'I shall be very quiet, father.'

'Don't think of me, my dear,' he said, giving her his kind permission fully. 'Come back by all means.'

He seemed to be dozing when she returned, and she put the low fire together very softly lest she should awake him. But he overheard her, and called out who was that?

'Only Amy, father.'

'Amy, my child, come here. I want to say a word to you.' He raised himself a little in his low bed, as she kneeled beside it to bring her face near him; and put his hand between hers. O! Both the private father and the Father of the Marshalsea were strong within him then.

'My love, you have had a life of hardship here. No companions, no recreations, many cares I am afraid?'

'Don't think of that, dear. I never do.'

'You know my position, Amy. I have not been able to do much for you; but all I have been able to do, I have done.'

'Yes, my dear father,' she rejoined, kissing him. 'I know, I know.'

'I am in the twenty-third year of my life here,' he said, with a catch in his breath that was not so much a sob as an irrepressible sound of self-approval, the momentary outburst of a noble consciousness. 'It is all I could do for my children - I have done it. Amy, my love, you are by far the best loved of the three; I have had you principally in my mind - whatever I have done for your sake, my dear child, I have done freely and without murmuring.'

Only the wisdom that holds the clue to all hearts and all mysteries, can surely know to what extent a man, especially a man brought down as this man had been, can impose upon himself. Enough, for the present place, that he lay down with wet eyelashes, serene, in a manner majestic, after bestowing his life of degradation as a sort of portion on the devoted child upon whom its miseries had fallen so heavily, and whose love alone had saved him to be even what he was.

That child had no doubts, asked herself no question, for she was but too content to see him with a lustre round his head. Poor dear, good dear, truest, kindest, dearest, were the only words she had for him, as she hushed him to rest.

She never left him all that night. As if she had done him a wrong which her tenderness could hardly repair, she sat by him in his sleep, at times softly kissing him with suspended breath, and calling him in a whisper by some endearing name. At times she stood aside so as not to intercept the low fire-light, and, watching him when it fell upon his sleeping face, wondered did he look now at all as he had looked when he was prosperous and happy; as he had so touched her by imagining that he might look once more in that awful time. At the thought of that time, she kneeled beside his bed again, and prayed, 'O spare his

life! O save him to me! O look down upon my dear, long-suffering, unfortunate, much- changed, dear dear father!'

Not until the morning came to protect him and encourage him, did she give him a last kiss and leave the small room. When she had stolen down-stairs, and along the empty yard, and had crept up to her own high garret, the smokeless housetops and the distant country hills were discernible over the wall in the clear morning. As she gently opened the window, and looked eastward down the prison yard, the spikes upon the wall were tipped with red, then made a sullen purple pattern on the sun as it came flaming up into the heavens. The spikes had never looked so sharp and cruel, nor the bars so heavy, nor the prison space so gloomy and contracted. She thought of the sunrise on rolling rivers, of the sunrise on wide seas, of the sunrise on rich landscapes, of the sunrise on great forests where the birds were waking and the trees were rustling; and she looked down into the living grave on which the sun had risen, with her father in it three-and-twenty years, and said, in a burst of sorrow and compassion, 'No, no, I have never seen him in my life!'