Chapter XXII - A Puzzle

Mr Clennam did not increase in favour with the Father of the Marshalsea in the ratio of his increasing visits. His obtuseness on the great Testimonial question was not calculated to awaken admiration in the paternal breast, but had rather a tendency to give offence in that sensitive quarter, and to be regarded as a positive shortcoming in point of gentlemanly feeling. An impression of disappointment, occasioned by the discovery that Mr Clennam scarcely possessed that delicacy for which, in the confidence of his nature, he had been inclined to give him credit, began to darken the fatherly mind in connection with that gentleman. The father went so far as to say, in his private family circle, that he feared Mr Clennam was not a man of high instincts. He was happy, he observed, in his public capacity as leader and representative of the College, to receive Mr Clennam when he called to pay his respects; but he didn't find that he got on with him personally. There appeared to be something (he didn't know what it was) wanting in him. Howbeit, the father did not fail in any outward show of politeness, but, on the contrary, honoured him with much attention; perhaps cherishing the hope that, although not a man of a sufficiently brilliant and spontaneous turn of mind to repeat his former testimonial unsolicited, it might still be within the compass of his nature to bear the part of a responsive gentleman, in any correspondence that way tending.

In the threefold capacity, of the gentleman from outside who had been accidentally locked in on the night of his first appearance, of the gentleman from outside who had inquired into the affairs of the Father of the Marshalsea with the stupendous idea of getting him out, and of the gentleman from outside who took an interest in the child of the Marshalsea, Clennam soon became a visitor of mark.

He was not surprised by the attentions he received from Mr Chivery when that officer was on the lock, for he made little distinction between Mr Chivery's politeness and that of the other turnkeys. It was on one particular afternoon that Mr Chivery surprised him all at once, and stood forth from his companions in bold relief.

Mr Chivery, by some artful exercise of his power of clearing the Lodge, had contrived to rid it of all sauntering Collegians; so that Clennam, coming out of the prison, should find him on duty alone.

'(Private) I ask your pardon, sir,' said Mr Chivery in a secret manner; 'but which way might you be going?'

'I am going over the Bridge.' He saw in Mr Chivery, with some astonishment, quite an Allegory of Silence, as he stood with his key on his lips.

'(Private) I ask your pardon again,' said Mr Chivery, 'but could you go round by Horsemonger Lane? Could you by any means find time to look in at that address?' handing him a little card, printed for circulation among the connection of Chivery and Co., Tobacconists, Importers of pure Havannah Cigars, Bengal Cheroots, and fine-flavoured Cubas, Dealers in Fancy Snuffs, &C. &C.

'(Private) It an't tobacco business,' said Mr Chivery. 'The truth is, it's my wife. She's wishful to say a word to you, sir, upon a point respecting - yes,' said Mr Chivery, answering Clennam's look of apprehension with a nod, 'respecting her.'

'I will make a point of seeing your wife directly.'

'Thank you, sir. Much obliged. It an't above ten minutes out of your way. Please to ask for Mrs Chivery!' These instructions, Mr Chivery, who had already let him out, cautiously called through a little slide in the outer door, which he could draw back from within for the inspection of visitors when it pleased him.

Arthur Clennam, with the card in his hand, betook himself to the address set forth upon it, and speedily arrived there. It was a very small establishment, wherein a decent woman sat behind the counter working at her needle. Little jars of tobacco, little boxes of cigars, a little assortment of pipes, a little jar or two of snuff, and a little instrument like a shoeing horn for serving it out, composed the retail stock in trade.

Arthur mentioned his name, and his having promised to call, on the solicitation of Mr Chivery. About something relating to Miss Dorrit, he believed. Mrs Chivery at once laid aside her work, rose up from her seat behind the counter, and deploringly shook her head.

'You may see him now,' said she, 'if you'll condescend to take a peep.'

With these mysterious words, she preceded the visitor into a little parlour behind the shop, with a little window in it commanding a very little dull back-yard. In this yard a wash of sheets and table-cloths tried (in vain, for want of air) to get itself dried on a line or two; and among those flapping articles was sitting in a chair, like the last mariner left alive on the deck of a damp ship without the power of furling the sails, a little woe-begone young man.

'Our John,' said Mrs Chivery.

Not to be deficient in interest, Clennam asked what he might be doing there?

'It's the only change he takes,' said Mrs Chivery, shaking her head afresh. 'He won't go out, even in the back-yard, when there's no linen; but when there's linen to keep the neighbours' eyes off, he'll sit there, hours. Hours he will. Says he feels as if it was groves!' Mrs Chivery shook her head again, put her apron in a motherly way to her eyes, and reconducted her visitor into the regions of the business.

'Please to take a seat, sir,' said Mrs Chivery. 'Miss Dorrit is the matter with Our John, sir; he's a breaking his heart for her, and I would wish to take the liberty to ask how it's to be made good to his parents when bust?'

Mrs Chivery, who was a comfortable-looking woman much respected about Horsemonger Lane for her feelings and her conversation, uttered this speech with fell composure, and immediately afterwards began again to shake her head and dry her eyes.

'Sir,' said she in continuation, 'you are acquainted with the family, and have interested yourself with the family, and are influential with the family. If you can promote views calculated to make two young people happy, let me, for Our john's sake, and for both their sakes, implore you so to do!'

'I have been so habituated,' returned Arthur, at a loss, 'during the short time I have known her, to consider Little - I have been so habituated to consider Miss Dorrit in a light altogether removed from that in which you present her to me, that you quite take me by surprise. Does she know your son?'

'Brought up together, sir,' said Mrs Chivery. 'Played together.'

'Does she know your son as her admirer?'

'Oh! bless you, sir,' said Mrs Chivery, with a sort of triumphant shiver, 'she never could have seen him on a Sunday without knowing he was that. His cane alone would have told it long ago, if nothing else had. Young men like John don't take to ivory hands a pinting, for nothing. How did I first know it myself? Similarly.'

'Perhaps Miss Dorrit may not be so ready as you, you see.'

'Then she knows it, sir,' said Mrs Chivery, 'by word of mouth.'

'Are you sure?'

'Sir,' said Mrs Chivery, 'sure and certain as in this house I am. I see my son go out with my own eyes when in this house I was, and I see my son come in with my own eyes when in this house I was, and I

know he done it!' Mrs Chivery derived a surprising force of emphasis from the foregoing circumstantiality and repetition.

'May I ask you how he came to fall into the desponding state which causes you so much uneasiness?'

'That,' said Mrs Chivery, 'took place on that same day when to this house I see that John with these eyes return. Never been himself in this house since. Never was like what he has been since, not from the hour when to this house seven year ago me and his father, as tenants by the quarter, came!' An effect in the nature of an affidavit was gained from this speech by Mrs Chivery's peculiar power of construction. 'May I venture to inquire what is your version of the matter?'

'You may,' said Mrs Chivery, 'and I will give it to you in honour and in word as true as in this shop I stand. Our John has every one's good word and every one's good wish. He played with her as a child when in that yard a child she played. He has known her ever since. He went out upon the Sunday afternoon when in this very parlour he had dined, and met her, with appointment or without appointment; which, I do not pretend to say. He made his offer to her. Her brother and sister is high in their views, and against Our John. Her father is all for himself in his views and against sharing her with any one. Under which circumstances she has answered Our John, 'No, John, I cannot have you, I cannot have any husband, it is not my intentions ever to become a wife, it is my intentions to be always a sacrifice, farewell, find another worthy of you, and forget me!' This is the way in which she is doomed to be a constant slave to them that are not worthy that a constant slave she unto them should be. This is the way in which Our John has come to find no pleasure but in taking cold among the linen, and in showing in that yard, as in that yard I have myself shown you, a broken-down ruin that goes home to his mother's heart!' Here the good woman pointed to the little window, whence her son might be seen sitting disconsolate in the tuneless groves; and again shook her head and wiped her eyes, and besought him, for the united sakes of both the young people, to exercise his influence towards the bright reversal of these dismal events.

She was so confident in her exposition of the case, and it was so undeniably founded on correct premises in so far as the relative positions of Little Dorrit and her family were concerned, that Clennam could not feel positive on the other side. He had come to attach to Little Dorrit an interest so peculiar - an interest that removed her from, while it grew out of, the common and coarse things surrounding her - that he found it disappointing, disagreeable, almost painful, to suppose her in love with young Mr Chivery in the back-yard, or any such person. On the other hand, he reasoned with himself that she

was just as good and just as true in love with him, as not in love with him; and that to make a kind of domesticated fairy of her, on the penalty of isolation at heart from the only people she knew, would be but a weakness of his own fancy, and not a kind one. Still, her youthful and ethereal appearance, her timid manner, the charm of her sensitive voice and eyes, the very many respects in which she had interested him out of her own individuality, and the strong difference between herself and those about her, were not in unison, and were determined not to be in unison, with this newly presented idea.

He told the worthy Mrs Chivery, after turning these things over in his mind - he did that, indeed, while she was yet speaking - that he might be relied upon to do his utmost at all times to promote the happiness of Miss Dorrit, and to further the wishes of her heart if it were in his power to do so, and if he could discover what they were. At the same time he cautioned her against assumptions and appearances; enjoined strict silence and secrecy, lest Miss Dorrit should be made unhappy; and particularly advised her to endeavour to win her son's confidence and so to make quite sure of the state of the case. Mrs Chivery considered the latter precaution superfluous, but said she would try. She shook her head as if she had not derived all the comfort she had fondly expected from this interview, but thanked him nevertheless for the trouble he had kindly taken. They then parted good friends, and Arthur walked away.

The crowd in the street jostling the crowd in his mind, and the two crowds making a confusion, he avoided London Bridge, and turned off in the quieter direction of the Iron Bridge. He had scarcely set foot upon it, when he saw Little Dorrit walking on before him. It was a pleasant day, with a light breeze blowing, and she seemed to have that minute come there for air. He had left her in her father's room within an hour.

It was a timely chance, favourable to his wish of observing her face and manner when no one else was by. He quickened his pace; but before he reached her, she turned her head.

'Have I startled you?' he asked.

'I thought I knew the step,' she answered, hesitating.

'And did you know it, Little Dorrit? You could hardly have expected mine.'

'I did not expect any. But when I heard a step, I thought it - sounded like yours.'

'Are you going further?'

'No, sir, I am only walking her for a little change.'

They walked together, and she recovered her confiding manner with him, and looked up in his face as she said, after glancing around:

'It is so strange. Perhaps you can hardly understand it. I sometimes have a sensation as if it was almost unfeeling to walk here.'

'Unfeeling?'

'To see the river, and so much sky, and so many objects, and such change and motion. Then to go back, you know, and find him in the same cramped place.'

'Ah yes! But going back, you must remember that you take with you the spirit and influence of such things to cheer him.'

'Do I? I hope I may! I am afraid you fancy too much, sir, and make me out too powerful. If you were in prison, could I bring such comfort to you?' 'Yes, Little Dorrit, I am sure of it.'

He gathered from a tremor on her lip, and a passing shadow of great agitation on her face, that her mind was with her father. He remained silent for a few moments, that she might regain her composure. The Little Dorrit, trembling on his arm, was less in unison than ever with Mrs Chivery's theory, and yet was not irreconcilable with a new fancy which sprung up within him, that there might be some one else in the hopeless - newer fancy still - in the hopeless unattainable distance.

They turned, and Clennam said, Here was Maggy coming! Little Dorrit looked up, surprised, and they confronted Maggy, who brought herself at sight of them to a dead stop. She had been trotting along, so preoccupied and busy that she had not recognised them until they turned upon her. She was now in a moment so conscience- stricken that her very basket partook of the change.

'Maggy, you promised me to stop near father.'

'So I would, Little Mother, only he wouldn't let me. If he takes and sends me out I must go. If he takes and says, 'Maggy, you hurry away and back with that letter, and you shall have a sixpence if the answer's a good 'un,' I must take it. Lor, Little Mother, what's a poor thing of ten year old to do? And if Mr Tip - if he happens to be a coming in as I come out, and if he says 'Where are you going, Maggy?' and if I says, 'I'm a going So and So,' and if he says, 'I'll have a Try too,' and if he goes into the George and writes a letter and if he gives it me and says, 'Take that one to the same place, and if the answer's a good 'un I'll give you a shilling,' it ain't my fault, mother!'

Arthur read, in Little Dorrit's downcast eyes, to whom she foresaw that the letters were addressed.

'I'm a going So and So. There! That's where I am a going to,' said Maggy. 'I'm a going So and So. It ain't you, Little Mother, that's got anything to do with it - it's you, you know,' said Maggy, addressing Arthur. 'You'd better come, So and So, and let me take and give 'em to you.'

'We will not be so particular as that, Maggy. Give them me here,' said Clennam in a low voice.

'Well, then, come across the road,' answered Maggy in a very loud whisper. 'Little Mother wasn't to know nothing of it, and she would never have known nothing of it if you had only gone So and So, instead of bothering and loitering about. It ain't my fault. I must do what I am told. They ought to be ashamed of themselves for telling me.'

Clennam crossed to the other side, and hurriedly opened the letters. That from the father mentioned that most unexpectedly finding himself in the novel position of having been disappointed of a remittance from the City on which he had confidently counted, he took up his pen, being restrained by the unhappy circumstance of his incarceration during three-and-twenty years (doubly underlined), from coming himself, as he would otherwise certainly have done - took up his pen to entreat Mr Clennam to advance him the sum of Three Pounds Ten Shillings upon his I.O.U., which he begged to enclose. That from the son set forth that Mr Clennam would, he knew, be gratified to hear that he had at length obtained permanent employment of a highly satisfactory nature, accompanied with every prospect of complete success in life; but that the temporary inability of his employer to pay him his arrears of salary to that date (in which condition said employer had appealed to that generous forbearance in which he trusted he should never be wanting towards a fellow-creature), combined with the fraudulent conduct of a false friend and the present high price of provisions, had reduced him to the verge of ruin, unless he could by a quarter before six that evening raise the sum of eight pounds. This sum, Mr Clennam would be happy to learn, he had, through the promptitude of several friends who had a lively confidence in his probity, already raised, with the exception of a trifling balance of one pound seventeen and fourpence; the loan of which balance, for the period of one month, would be fraught with the usual beneficent consequences.

These letters Clennam answered with the aid of his pencil and pocket-book, on the spot; sending the father what he asked for, and excusing himself from compliance with the demand of the son. He then

commissioned Maggy to return with his replies, and gave her the shilling of which the failure of her supplemental enterprise would have disappointed her otherwise.

When he rejoined Little Dorrit, and they had begun walking as before, she said all at once:

'I think I had better go. I had better go home.'

'Don't be distressed,' said Clennam, 'I have answered the letters. They were nothing. You know what they were. They were nothing.'

'But I am afraid,' she returned, 'to leave him, I am afraid to leave any of them. When I am gone, they pervert - but they don't mean it - even Maggy.'

'It was a very innocent commission that she undertook, poor thing. And in keeping it secret from you, she supposed, no doubt, that she was only saving you uneasiness.'

'Yes, I hope so, I hope so. But I had better go home! It was but the other day that my sister told me I had become so used to the prison that I had its tone and character. It must be so. I am sure it must be when I see these things. My place is there. I am better there. it is unfeeling in me to be here, when I can do the least thing there. Good-bye. I had far better stay at home!'

The agonised way in which she poured this out, as if it burst of itself from her suppressed heart, made it difficult for Clennam to keep the tears from his eyes as he saw and heard her.

'Don't call it home, my child!' he entreated. 'It is always painful to me to hear you call it home.'

'But it is home! What else can I call home? Why should I ever forget it for a single moment?'

'You never do, dear Little Dorrit, in any good and true service.'

'I hope not, O I hope not! But it is better for me to stay there; much better, much more dutiful, much happier. Please don't go with me, let me go by myself. Good-bye, God bless you. Thank you, thank you.'

He felt that it was better to respect her entreaty, and did not move while her slight form went quickly away from him. When it had fluttered out of sight, he turned his face towards the water and stood thinking.

She would have been distressed at any time by this discovery of the letters; but so much so, and in that unrestrainable way?

No.

When she had seen her father begging with his threadbare disguise on, when she had entreated him not to give her father money, she had been distressed, but not like this. Something had made her keenly and additionally sensitive just now. Now, was there some one in the hopeless unattainable distance? Or had the suspicion been brought into his mind, by his own associations of the troubled river running beneath the bridge with the same river higher up, its changeless tune upon the prow of the ferry-boat, so many miles an hour the peaceful flowing of the stream, here the rushes, there the lilies, nothing uncertain or unquiet?

He thought of his poor child, Little Dorrit, for a long time there; he thought of her going home; he thought of her in the night; he thought of her when the day came round again. And the poor child Little Dorrit thought of him - too faithfully, ah, too faithfully! - in the shadow of the Marshalsea wall.