

Chapter XXIV - Fortune-Telling

Little Dorrit received a call that same evening from Mr Plornish, who, having intimated that he wished to speak to her privately, in a series of coughs so very noticeable as to favour the idea that her father, as regarded her seamstress occupation, was an illustration of the axiom that there are no such stone-blind men as those who will not see, obtained an audience with her on the common staircase outside the door.

'There's been a lady at our place to-day, Miss Dorrit,' Plornish growled, 'and another one along with her as is a old wixen if ever I met with such. The way she snapped a person's head off, dear me!'

The mild Plornish was at first quite unable to get his mind away from Mr F.'s Aunt. 'For,' said he, to excuse himself, 'she is, I do assure you, the winegariest party.'

At length, by a great effort, he detached himself from the subject sufficiently to observe:

'But she's neither here nor there just at present. The other lady, she's Mr Casby's daughter; and if Mr Casby an't well off, none better, it an't through any fault of Pancks. For, as to Pancks, he does, he really does, he does indeed!'

Mr Plornish, after his usual manner, was a little obscure, but conscientiously emphatic.

'And what she come to our place for,' he pursued, 'was to leave word that if Miss Dorrit would step up to that card - which it's Mr Casby's house that is, and Pancks he has a office at the back, where he really does, beyond belief - she would be glad for to engage her. She was a old and a dear friend, she said particular, of Mr Clennam, and hoped for to prove herself a useful friend to his friend. Them was her words. Wishing to know whether Miss Dorrit could come to-morrow morning, I said I would see you, Miss, and inquire, and look round there to-night, to say yes, or, if you was engaged to-morrow, when.'

'I can go to-morrow, thank you,' said Little Dorrit. 'This is very kind of you, but you are always kind.'

Mr Plornish, with a modest disavowal of his merits, opened the room door for her readmission, and followed her in with such an exceedingly bald pretence of not having been out at all, that her father might have observed it without being very suspicious. In his affable unconsciousness, however, he took no heed. Plornish, after a little conversation, in which he blended his former duty as a Collegian with

his present privilege as a humble outside friend, qualified again by his low estate as a plasterer, took his leave; making the tour of the prison before he left, and looking on at a game of skittles with the mixed feelings of an old inhabitant who had his private reasons for believing that it might be his destiny to come back again.

Early in the morning, Little Dorrit, leaving Maggy in high domestic trust, set off for the Patriarchal tent. She went by the Iron Bridge, though it cost her a penny, and walked more slowly in that part of her journey than in any other. At five minutes before eight her hand was on the Patriarchal knocker, which was quite as high as she could reach.

She gave Mrs Finching's card to the young woman who opened the door, and the young woman told her that 'Miss Flora' - Flora having, on her return to the parental roof, reinvested herself with the title under which she had lived there - was not yet out of her bedroom, but she was to please to walk up into Miss Flora's sitting-room. She walked up into Miss Flora's sitting-room, as in duty bound, and there found a breakfast-table comfortably laid for two, with a supplementary tray upon it laid for one. The young woman, disappearing for a few moments, returned to say that she was to please to take a chair by the fire, and to take off her bonnet and make herself at home. But Little Dorrit, being bashful, and not used to make herself at home on such occasions, felt at a loss how to do it; so she was still sitting near the door with her bonnet on, when Flora came in in a hurry half an hour afterwards.

Flora was so sorry to have kept her waiting, and good gracious why did she sit out there in the cold when she had expected to find her by the fire reading the paper, and hadn't that heedless girl given her the message then, and had she really been in her bonnet all this time, and pray for goodness sake let Flora take it off! Flora taking it off in the best-natured manner in the world, was so struck with the face disclosed, that she said, 'Why, what a good little thing you are, my dear!' and pressed her face between her hands like the gentlest of women.

It was the word and the action of a moment. Little Dorrit had hardly time to think how kind it was, when Flora dashed at the breakfast-table full of business, and plunged over head and ears into loquacity.

'Really so sorry that I should happen to be late on this morning of all mornings because my intention and my wish was to be ready to meet you when you came in and to say that any one that interested Arthur Clennam half so much must interest me and that I gave you the heartiest welcome and was so glad, instead of which they never called me and there I still am snoring I dare say if the truth was known and

if you don't like either cold fowl or hot boiled ham which many people don't I dare say besides Jews and theirs are scruples of conscience which we must all respect though I must say I wish they had them equally strong when they sell us false articles for real that certainly ain't worth the money I shall be quite vexed,' said Flora.

Little Dorrit thanked her, and said, shyly, bread-and-butter and tea was all she usually -

'Oh nonsense my dear child I can never hear of that,' said Flora, turning on the urn in the most reckless manner, and making herself wink by splashing hot water into her eyes as she bent down to look into the teapot. 'You are coming here on the footing of a friend and companion you know if you will let me take that liberty and I should be ashamed of myself indeed if you could come here upon any other, besides which Arthur Clennam spoke in such terms - you are tired my dear.'

'No, ma'am.'

'You turn so pale you have walked too far before breakfast and I dare say live a great way off and ought to have had a ride,' said Flora, 'dear dear is there anything that would do you good?'

'Indeed I am quite well, ma'am. I thank you again and again, but I am quite well.'

'Then take your tea at once I beg,' said Flora, 'and this wing of fowl and bit of ham, don't mind me or wait for me, because I always carry in this tray myself to Mr F.'s Aunt who breakfasts in bed and a charming old lady too and very clever, Portrait of Mr F. behind the door and very like though too much forehead and as to a pillar with a marble pavement and balustrades and a mountain, I never saw him near it nor not likely in the wine trade, excellent man but not at all in that way.'

Little Dorrit glanced at the portrait, very imperfectly following the references to that work of art.

'Mr F. was so devoted to me that he never could bear me out of his sight,' said Flora, 'though of course I am unable to say how long that might have lasted if he hadn't been cut short while I was a new broom, worthy man but not poetical manly prose but not romance.'

Little Dorrit glanced at the portrait again. The artist had given it a head that would have been, in an intellectual point of view, top-heavy for Shakespeare. 'Romance, however,' Flora went on, busily arranging Mr F.'s Aunt's toast, 'as I openly said to Mr F. when he proposed to me

and you will be surprised to hear that he proposed seven times once in a hackney-coach once in a boat once in a pew once on a donkey at Tunbridge Wells and the rest on his knees, Romance was fled with the early days of Arthur Clennam, our parents tore us asunder we became marble and stern reality usurped the throne, Mr F. said very much to his credit that he was perfectly aware of it and even preferred that state of things accordingly the word was spoken the fiat went forth and such is life you see my dear and yet we do not break but bend, pray make a good breakfast while I go in with the tray.'

She disappeared, leaving Little Dorrit to ponder over the meaning of her scattered words. She soon came back again; and at last began to take her own breakfast, talking all the while.

'You see, my dear,' said Flora, measuring out a spoonful or two of some brown liquid that smelt like brandy, and putting it into her tea, 'I am obliged to be careful to follow the directions of my medical man though the flavour is anything but agreeable being a poor creature and it may be have never recovered the shock received in youth from too much giving way to crying in the next room when separated from Arthur, have you known him long?'

As soon as Little Dorrit comprehended that she had been asked this question - for which time was necessary, the galloping pace of her new patroness having left her far behind - she answered that she had known Mr Clennam ever since his return.

'To be sure you couldn't have known him before unless you had been in China or had corresponded neither of which is likely,' returned Flora, 'for travelling-people usually get more or less mahogany and you are not at all so and as to corresponding what about? that's very true unless tea, so it was at his mother's was it really that you knew him first, highly sensible and firm but dreadfully severe - ought to be the mother of the man in the iron mask.'

'Mrs Clennam has been kind to me,' said Little Dorrit.

'Really? I am sure I am glad to hear it because as Arthur's mother it's naturally pleasant to my feelings to have a better opinion of her than I had before, though what she thinks of me when I run on as I am certain to do and she sits glowering at me like Fate in a go-cart - shocking comparison really - invalid and not her fault - I never know or can imagine.'

'Shall I find my work anywhere, ma'am?' asked Little Dorrit, looking timidly about; 'can I get it?'

'You industrious little fairy,' returned Flora, taking, in another cup of tea, another of the doses prescribed by her medical man, 'there's not the slightest hurry and it's better that we should begin by being confidential about our mutual friend - too cold a word for me at least I don't mean that, very proper expression mutual friend - than become through mere formalities not you but me like the Spartan boy with the fox biting him, which I hope you'll excuse my bringing up for of all the tiresome boys that will go tumbling into every sort of company that boy's the tiresomest.'

Little Dorrit, her face very pale, sat down again to listen. 'Hadn't I better work the while?' she asked. 'I can work and attend too. I would rather, if I may.'

Her earnestness was so expressive of her being uneasy without her work, that Flora answered, 'Well my dear whatever you like best,' and produced a basket of white handkerchiefs. Little Dorrit gladly put it by her side, took out her little pocket-housewife, threaded the needle, and began to hem.

'What nimble fingers you have,' said Flora, 'but are you sure you are well?'

'Oh yes, indeed!'

Flora put her feet upon the fender, and settled herself for a thorough good romantic disclosure. She started off at score, tossing her head, sighing in the most demonstrative manner, making a great deal of use of her eyebrows, and occasionally, but not often, glancing at the quiet face that bent over the work.

'You must know my dear,' said Flora, 'but that I have no doubt you know already not only because I have already thrown it out in a general way but because I feel I carry it stamped in burning what's his names upon my brow that before I was introduced to the late Mr F. I had been engaged to Arthur Clennam - Mr Clennam in public where reserve is necessary Arthur here - we were all in all to one another it was the morning of life it was bliss it was frenzy it was everything else of that sort in the highest degree, when rent asunder we turned to stone in which capacity Arthur went to China and I became the statue bride of the late Mr F.'

Flora, uttering these words in a deep voice, enjoyed herself immensely.

'To paint,' said she, 'the emotions of that morning when all was marble within and Mr F.'s Aunt followed in a glass-coach which it stands to reason must have been in shameful repair or it never could have broken down two streets from the house and Mr F.'s Aunt

brought home like the fifth of November in a rush-bottomed chair I will not attempt, suffice it to say that the hollow form of breakfast took place in the dining-room downstairs that papa partaking too freely of pickled salmon was ill for weeks and that Mr F. and myself went upon a continental tour to Calais where the people fought for us on the pier until they separated us though not for ever that was not yet to be.'

The statue bride, hardly pausing for breath, went on, with the greatest complacency, in a rambling manner sometimes incidental to flesh and blood.

'I will draw a veil over that dreamy life, Mr F. was in good spirits his appetite was good he liked the cookery he considered the wine weak but palatable and all was well, we returned to the immediate neighbourhood of Number Thirty Little Gosling Street London Docks and settled down, ere we had yet fully detected the housemaid in selling the feathers out of the spare bed Gout flying upwards soared with Mr F. to another sphere.'

His relict, with a glance at his portrait, shook her head and wiped her eyes.

'I revere the memory of Mr F. as an estimable man and most indulgent husband, only necessary to mention Asparagus and it appeared or to hint at any little delicate thing to drink and it came like magic in a pint bottle it was not ecstasy but it was comfort, I returned to papa's roof and lived secluded if not happy during some years until one day papa came smoothly blundering in and said that Arthur Clennam awaited me below, I went below and found him ask me not what I found him except that he was still unmarried still unchanged!'

The dark mystery with which Flora now enshrouded herself might have stopped other fingers than the nimble fingers that worked near her.

They worked on without pause, and the busy head bent over them watching the stitches.

'Ask me not,' said Flora, 'if I love him still or if he still loves me or what the end is to be or when, we are surrounded by watchful eyes and it may be that we are destined to pine asunder it may be never more to be reunited not a word not a breath not a look to betray us all must be secret as the tomb wonder not therefore that even if I should seem comparatively cold to Arthur or Arthur should seem comparatively cold to me we have fatal reasons it is enough if we understand them hush!'

All of which Flora said with so much headlong vehemence as if she really believed it. There is not much doubt that when she worked herself into full mermaid condition, she did actually believe whatever she said in it.

'Hush!' repeated Flora, 'I have now told you all, confidence is established between us hush, for Arthur's sake I will always be a friend to you my dear girl and in Arthur's name you may always rely upon me.'

The nimble fingers laid aside the work, and the little figure rose and kissed her hand. 'You are very cold,' said Flora, changing to her own natural kind-hearted manner, and gaining greatly by the change. 'Don't work to-day. I am sure you are not well I am sure you are not strong.'

'It is only that I feel a little overcome by your kindness, and by Mr Clennam's kindness in confiding me to one he has known and loved so long.'

'Well really my dear,' said Flora, who had a decided tendency to be always honest when she gave herself time to think about it, 'it's as well to leave that alone now, for I couldn't undertake to say after all, but it doesn't signify lie down a little!'

'I have always been strong enough to do what I want to do, and I shall be quite well directly,' returned Little Dorrit, with a faint smile. 'You have overpowered me with gratitude, that's all. If I keep near the window for a moment I shall be quite myself.'

Flora opened a window, sat her in a chair by it, and considerately retired to her former place. It was a windy day, and the air stirring on Little Dorrit's face soon brightened it. In a very few minutes she returned to her basket of work, and her nimble fingers were as nimble as ever.

Quietly pursuing her task, she asked Flora if Mr Clennam had told her where she lived? When Flora replied in the negative, Little Dorrit said that she understood why he had been so delicate, but that she felt sure he would approve of her confiding her secret to Flora, and that she would therefore do so now with Flora's permission. Receiving an encouraging answer, she condensed the narrative of her life into a few scanty words about herself and a glowing eulogy upon her father; and Flora took it all in with a natural tenderness that quite understood it, and in which there was no incoherence.

When dinner-time came, Flora drew the arm of her new charge through hers, and led her down-stairs, and presented her to the

Patriarch and Mr Pancks, who were already in the dining-room waiting to begin. (Mr F.'s Aunt was, for the time, laid up in ordinary in her chamber.) By those gentlemen she was received according to their characters; the Patriarch appearing to do her some inestimable service in saying that he was glad to see her, glad to see her; and Mr Pancks blowing off his favourite sound as a salute.

In that new presence she would have been bashful enough under any circumstances, and particularly under Flora's insisting on her drinking a glass of wine and eating of the best that was there; but her constraint was greatly increased by Mr Pancks. The demeanour of that gentleman at first suggested to her mind that he might be a taker of likenesses, so intently did he look at her, and so frequently did he glance at the little note-book by his side. Observing that he made no sketch, however, and that he talked about business only, she began to have suspicions that he represented some creditor of her father's, the balance due to whom was noted in that pocket volume. Regarded from this point of view Mr Pancks's puffings expressed injury and impatience, and each of his louder snorts became a demand for payment.

But here again she was undeceived by anomalous and incongruous conduct on the part of Mr Pancks himself. She had left the table half an hour, and was at work alone. Flora had 'gone to lie down' in the next room, concurrently with which retirement a smell of something to drink had broken out in the house. The Patriarch was fast asleep, with his philanthropic mouth open under a yellow pocket-handkerchief in the dining-room. At this quiet time, Mr Pancks softly appeared before her, urbanely nodding.

'Find it a little dull, Miss Dorrit?' inquired Pancks in a low voice.

'No, thank you, sir,' said Little Dorrit.

'Busy, I see,' observed Mr Pancks, stealing into the room by inches. 'What are those now, Miss Dorrit?'

'Handkerchiefs.'

'Are they, though!' said Pancks. 'I shouldn't have thought it.' Not in the least looking at them, but looking at Little Dorrit. 'Perhaps you wonder who I am. Shall I tell you? I am a fortune-teller.'

Little Dorrit now began to think he was mad.

'I belong body and soul to my proprietor,' said Pancks; 'you saw my proprietor having his dinner below. But I do a little in the other way, sometimes; privately, very privately, Miss Dorrit.'

Little Dorrit looked at him doubtfully, and not without alarm.

'I wish you'd show me the palm of your hand,' said Pancks. 'I should like to have a look at it. Don't let me be troublesome.' He was so far troublesome that he was not at all wanted there, but she laid her work in her lap for a moment, and held out her left hand with her thimble on it.

'Years of toil, eh?' said Pancks, softly, touching it with his blunt forefinger. 'But what else are we made for? Nothing. Hallo!' looking into the lines. 'What's this with bars? It's a College! And what's this with a grey gown and a black velvet cap? it's a father! And what's this with a clarionet? It's an uncle! And what's this in dancing-shoes? It's a sister! And what's this straggling about in an idle sort of a way? It's a brother! And what's this thinking for 'em all? Why, this is you, Miss Dorrit!' Her eyes met his as she looked up wonderingly into his face, and she thought that although his were sharp eyes, he was a brighter and gentler-looking man than she had supposed at dinner. His eyes were on her hand again directly, and her opportunity of confirming or correcting the impression was gone.

'Now, the deuce is in it,' muttered Pancks, tracing out a line in her hand with his clumsy finger, 'if this isn't me in the corner here! What do I want here? What's behind me?'

He carried his finger slowly down to the wrist, and round the wrist, and affected to look at the back of the hand for what was behind him.

'Is it any harm?' asked Little Dorrit, smiling.

'Deuce a bit!' said Pancks. 'What do you think it's worth?'

'I ought to ask you that. I am not the fortune-teller.'

'True,' said Pancks. 'What's it worth? You shall live to see, Miss Dorrit.'

Releasing the hand by slow degrees, he drew all his fingers through his prongs of hair, so that they stood up in their most portentous manner; and repeated slowly, 'Remember what I say, Miss Dorrit. You shall live to see.'

She could not help showing that she was much surprised, if it were only by his knowing so much about her.

'Ah! That's it!' said Pancks, pointing at her. 'Miss Dorrit, not that, ever!'

More surprised than before, and a little more frightened, she looked to him for an explanation of his last words.

'Not that,' said Pancks, making, with great seriousness, an imitation of a surprised look and manner that appeared to be unintentionally grotesque. 'Don't do that. Never on seeing me, no matter when, no matter where. I am nobody. Don't take on to mind me. Don't mention me. Take no notice. Will you agree, Miss Dorrit?'

'I hardly know what to say,' returned Little Dorrit, quite astounded. 'Why?'

'Because I am a fortune-teller. Pancks the gipsy. I haven't told you so much of your fortune yet, Miss Dorrit, as to tell you what's behind me on that little hand. I have told you you shall live to see. Is it agreed, Miss Dorrit?'

'Agreed that I - am - to - '

'To take no notice of me away from here, unless I take on first. Not to mind me when I come and go. It's very easy. I am no loss, I am not handsome, I am not good company, I am only my proprietors grubber. You need do no more than think, 'Ah! Pancks the gipsy at his fortune-telling - he'll tell the rest of my fortune one day - I shall live to know it.' Is it agreed, Miss Dorrit?'

'Ye-es,' faltered Little Dorrit, whom he greatly confused, 'I suppose so, while you do no harm.'

'Good!' Mr Pancks glanced at the wall of the adjoining room, and stooped forward. 'Honest creature, woman of capital points, but heedless and a loose talker, Miss Dorrit.' With that he rubbed his hands as if the interview had been very satisfactory to him, panted away to the door, and urbanely nodded himself out again.

If Little Dorrit were beyond measure perplexed by this curious conduct on the part of her new acquaintance, and by finding herself involved in this singular treaty, her perplexity was not diminished by ensuing circumstances. Besides that Mr Pancks took every opportunity afforded him in Mr Casby's house of significantly glancing at her and snorting at her - which was not much, after what he had done already - he began to pervade her daily life. She saw him in the street, constantly. When she went to Mr Casby's, he was always there. When she went to Mrs Clennam's, he came there on any pretence, as if to keep her in his sight. A week had not gone by, when she found him to her astonishment in the Lodge one night, conversing with the turnkey on duty, and to all appearance one of his familiar companions. Her next surprise was to find him equally at his ease

within the prison; to hear of his presenting himself among the visitors at her father's Sunday levee; to see him arm in arm with a Collegiate friend about the yard; to learn, from Fame, that he had greatly distinguished himself one evening at the social club that held its meetings in the Snuggery, by addressing a speech to the members of the institution, singing a song, and treating the company to five gallons of ale - report madly added a bushel of shrimps. The effect on Mr Plornish of such of these phenomena as he became an eye-witness of in his faithful visits, made an impression on Little Dorrit only second to that produced by the phenomena themselves. They seemed to gag and bind him. He could only stare, and sometimes weakly mutter that it wouldn't be believed down Bleeding Heart Yard that this was Pancks; but he never said a word more, or made a sign more, even to Little Dorrit.

Mr Pancks crowned his mysteries by making himself acquainted with Tip in some unknown manner, and taking a Sunday saunter into the College on that gentleman's arm. Throughout he never took any notice of Little Dorrit, save once or twice when he happened to come close to her and there was no one very near; on which occasions, he said in passing, with a friendly look and a puff of encouragement, 'Pancks the gipsy - fortune-telling.'

Little Dorrit worked and strove as usual, wondering at all this, but keeping her wonder, as she had from her earliest years kept many heavier loads, in her own breast. A change had stolen, and was stealing yet, over the patient heart. Every day found her something more retiring than the day before. To pass in and out of the prison unnoticed, and elsewhere to be overlooked and forgotten, were, for herself, her chief desires.

To her own room too, strangely assorted room for her delicate youth and character, she was glad to retreat as often as she could without desertion of any duty. There were afternoon times when she was unemployed, when visitors dropped in to play a hand at cards with her father, when she could be spared and was better away. Then she would flit along the yard, climb the scores of stairs that led to her room, and take her seat at the window. Many combinations did those spikes upon the wall assume, many light shapes did the strong iron weave itself into, many golden touches fell upon the rust, while Little Dorrit sat there musing. New zig-zags sprung into the cruel pattern sometimes, when she saw it through a burst of tears; but beautified or hardened still, always over it and under it and through it, she was fain to look in her solitude, seeing everything with that ineffaceable brand. A garret, and a Marshalsea garret without compromise, was Little Dorrit's room. Beautifully kept, it was ugly in itself, and had little but cleanliness and air to set it off; for what embellishment she had ever been able to buy, had gone to her father's room. Howbeit, for this poor

place she showed an increasing love; and to sit in it alone became her favourite rest.

Insomuch, that on a certain afternoon during the Pancks mysteries, when she was seated at her window, and heard Maggy's well-known step coming up the stairs, she was very much disturbed by the apprehension of being summoned away. As Maggy's step came higher up and nearer, she trembled and faltered; and it was as much as she could do to speak, when Maggy at length appeared.

'Please, Little Mother,' said Maggy, panting for breath, 'you must come down and see him. He's here.'

'Who, Maggy?'

'Who, o' course Mr Clennam. He's in your father's room, and he says to me, Maggy, will you be so kind and go and say it's only me.'

'I am not very well, Maggy. I had better not go. I am going to lie down. See! I lie down now, to ease my head. Say, with my grateful regard, that you left me so, or I would have come.'

'Well, it an't very polite though, Little Mother,' said the staring Maggy, 'to turn your face away, neither!'

Maggy was very susceptible to personal slights, and very ingenious in inventing them. 'Putting both your hands afore your face too!' she went on. 'If you can't bear the looks of a poor thing, it would be better to tell her so at once, and not go and shut her out like that, hurting her feelings and breaking her heart at ten year old, poor thing!'

'It's to ease my head, Maggy.'

'Well, and if you cry to ease your head, Little Mother, let me cry too. Don't go and have all the crying to yourself,' expostulated Maggy, 'that an't not being greedy.' And immediately began to blubber.

It was with some difficulty that she could be induced to go back with the excuse; but the promise of being told a story - of old her great delight - on condition that she concentrated her faculties upon the errand and left her little mistress to herself for an hour longer, combined with a misgiving on Maggy's part that she had left her good temper at the bottom of the staircase, prevailed. So away she went, muttering her message all the way to keep it in her mind, and, at the appointed time, came back.

'He was very sorry, I can tell you,' she announced, 'and wanted to send a doctor. And he's coming again to-morrow he is and I don't

think he'll have a good sleep to-night along o' hearing about your head, Little Mother. Oh my! Ain't you been a-crying!

'I think I have, a little, Maggy.'

'A little! Oh!'

'But it's all over now - all over for good, Maggy. And my head is much better and cooler, and I am quite comfortable. I am very glad I did not go down.'

Her great staring child tenderly embraced her; and having smoothed her hair, and bathed her forehead and eyes with cold water (offices in which her awkward hands became skilful), hugged her again, exulted in her brighter looks, and stationed her in her chair by the window. Over against this chair, Maggy, with apoplectic exertions that were not at all required, dragged the box which was her seat on story-telling occasions, sat down upon it, hugged her own knees, and said, with a voracious appetite for stories, and with widely-opened eyes:

'Now, Little Mother, let's have a good 'un!'

'What shall it be about, Maggy?'

'Oh, let's have a princess,' said Maggy, 'and let her be a reg'lar one. Beyond all belief, you know!'

Little Dorrit considered for a moment; and with a rather sad smile upon her face, which was flushed by the sunset, began:

'Maggy, there was once upon a time a fine King, and he had everything he could wish for, and a great deal more. He had gold and silver, diamonds and rubies, riches of every kind. He had palaces, and he had - '

'Hospitals,' interposed Maggy, still nursing her knees. 'Let him have hospitals, because they're so comfortable. Hospitals with lots of Chicking.'

'Yes, he had plenty of them, and he had plenty of everything.'

'Plenty of baked potatoes, for instance?' said Maggy.

'Plenty of everything.'

'Lor!' chuckled Maggy, giving her knees a hug. 'Wasn't it prime!'

'This King had a daughter, who was the wisest and most beautiful Princess that ever was seen. When she was a child she understood all her lessons before her masters taught them to her; and when she was grown up, she was the wonder of the world. Now, near the Palace where this Princess lived, there was a cottage in which there was a poor little tiny woman, who lived all alone by herself.'

'An old woman,' said Maggy, with an unctuous smack of her lips.

'No, not an old woman. Quite a young one.'

'I wonder she warn't afraid,' said Maggy. 'Go on, please.'

'The Princess passed the cottage nearly every day, and whenever she went by in her beautiful carriage, she saw the poor tiny woman spinning at her wheel, and she looked at the tiny woman, and the tiny woman looked at her. So, one day she stopped the coachman a little way from the cottage, and got out and walked on and peeped in at the door, and there, as usual, was the tiny woman spinning at her wheel, and she looked at the Princess, and the Princess looked at her.'

'Like trying to stare one another out,' said Maggy. 'Please go on, Little Mother.'

'The Princess was such a wonderful Princess that she had the power of knowing secrets, and she said to the tiny woman, Why do you keep it there? This showed her directly that the Princess knew why she lived all alone by herself spinning at her wheel, and she kneeled down at the Princess's feet, and asked her never to betray her. So the Princess said, I never will betray you. Let me see it. So the tiny woman closed the shutter of the cottage window and fastened the door, and trembling from head to foot for fear that any one should suspect her, opened a very secret place and showed the Princess a shadow.'

'Lor!' said Maggy. 'It was the shadow of Some one who had gone by long before: of Some one who had gone on far away quite out of reach, never, never to come back. It was bright to look at; and when the tiny woman showed it to the Princess, she was proud of it with all her heart, as a great, great treasure. When the Princess had considered it a little while, she said to the tiny woman, And you keep watch over this every day? And she cast down her eyes, and whispered, Yes. Then the Princess said, Remind me why. To which the other replied, that no one so good and kind had ever passed that way, and that was why in the beginning. She said, too, that nobody missed it, that nobody was the worse for it, that Some one had gone on, to those who were expecting him - '

'Some one was a man then?' interposed Maggy.

Little Dorrit timidly said Yes, she believed so; and resumed:

' - Had gone on to those who were expecting him, and that this remembrance was stolen or kept back from nobody. The Princess made answer, Ah! But when the cottager died it would be discovered there. The tiny woman told her No; when that time came, it would sink quietly into her own grave, and would never be found.'

'Well, to be sure!' said Maggy. 'Go on, please.'

'The Princess was very much astonished to hear this, as you may suppose, Maggy.' ('And well she might be,' said Maggy.)

'So she resolved to watch the tiny woman, and see what came of it. Every day she drove in her beautiful carriage by the cottage-door, and there she saw the tiny woman always alone by herself spinning at her wheel, and she looked at the tiny woman, and the tiny woman looked at her. At last one day the wheel was still, and the tiny woman was not to be seen. When the Princess made inquiries why the wheel had stopped, and where the tiny woman was, she was informed that the wheel had stopped because there was nobody to turn it, the tiny woman being dead.'

('They ought to have took her to the Hospital,' said Maggy, and then she'd have got over it.)

'The Princess, after crying a very little for the loss of the tiny woman, dried her eyes and got out of her carriage at the place where she had stopped it before, and went to the cottage and peeped in at the door. There was nobody to look at her now, and nobody for her to look at, so she went in at once to search for the treasured shadow. But there was no sign of it to be found anywhere; and then she knew that the tiny woman had told her the truth, and that it would never give anybody any trouble, and that it had sunk quietly into her own grave, and that she and it were at rest together.

'That's all, Maggy.'

The sunset flush was so bright on Little Dorrit's face when she came thus to the end of her story, that she interposed her hand to shade it.

'Had she got to be old?' Maggy asked.

'The tiny woman?' 'Ah!'

'I don't know,' said Little Dorrit. 'But it would have been just the same if she had been ever so old.'

'Would it rally!' said Maggy. 'Well, I suppose it would though.' And sat staring and ruminating.

She sat so long with her eyes wide open, that at length Little Dorrit, to entice her from her box, rose and looked out of window. As she glanced down into the yard, she saw Pancks come in and leer up with the corner of his eye as he went by.

'Who's he, Little Mother?' said Maggy. She had joined her at the window and was leaning on her shoulder. 'I see him come in and out often.'

'I have heard him called a fortune-teller,' said Little Dorrit. 'But I doubt if he could tell many people even their past or present fortunes.'

'Couldn't have told the Princess hers?' said Maggy.

Little Dorrit, looking musingly down into the dark valley of the prison, shook her head.

'Nor the tiny woman hers?' said Maggy.

'No,' said Little Dorrit, with the sunset very bright upon her. 'But let us come away from the window.'