Chapter XXV - Conspirators And Others

The private residence of Mr Pancks was in Pentonville, where he lodged on the second-floor of a professional gentleman in an extremely small way, who had an inner-door within the street door, poised on a spring and starting open with a click like a trap; and who wrote up in the fan-light, RUGG, GENERAL AGENT, ACCOUNTANT, DEBTS RECOVERED.

This scroll, majestic in its severe simplicity, illuminated a little slip of front garden abutting on the thirsty high-road, where a few of the dustiest of leaves hung their dismal heads and led a life of choking. A professor of writing occupied the first- floor, and enlivened the garden railings with glass-cases containing choice examples of what his pupils had been before six lessons and while the whole of his young family shook the table, and what they had become after six lessons when the young family was under restraint. The tenancy of Mr Pancks was limited to one airy bedroom; he covenanting and agreeing with Mr Rugg his landlord, that in consideration of a certain scale of payments accurately defined, and on certain verbal notice duly given, he should be at liberty to elect to share the Sunday breakfast, dinner, tea, or supper, or each or any or all of those repasts or meals of Mr and Miss Rugg (his daughter) in the back-parlour.

Miss Rugg was a lady of a little property which she had acquired, together with much distinction in the neighbourhood, by having her heart severely lacerated and her feelings mangled by a middle-aged baker resident in the vicinity, against whom she had, by the agency of Mr Rugg, found it necessary to proceed at law to recover damages for a breach of promise of marriage. The baker having been, by the counsel for Miss Rugg, witheringly denounced on that occasion up to the full amount of twenty guineas, at the rate of about eighteen- pence an epithet, and having been cast in corresponding damages, still suffered occasional persecution from the youth of Pentonville. But Miss Rugg, environed by the majesty of the law, and having her damages invested in the public securities, was regarded with consideration.

In the society of Mr Rugg, who had a round white visage, as if all his blushes had been drawn out of him long ago, and who had a ragged yellow head like a worn-out hearth broom; and in the society of Miss Rugg, who had little nankeen spots, like shirt buttons, all over her face, and whose own yellow tresses were rather scrubby than luxuriant; Mr Pancks had usually dined on Sundays for some few years, and had twice a week, or so, enjoyed an evening collation of bread, Dutch cheese, and porter. Mr Pancks was one of the very few marriageable men for whom Miss Rugg had no terrors, the argument with which he reassured himself being twofold; that is to say, firstly,

'that it wouldn't do twice,' and secondly, 'that he wasn't worth it.' Fortified within this double armour, Mr Pancks snorted at Miss Rugg on easy terms.

Up to this time, Mr Pancks had transacted little or no business at his quarters in Pentonville, except in the sleeping line; but now that he had become a fortune-teller, he was often closeted after midnight with Mr Rugg in his little front-parlour office, and even after those untimely hours, burnt tallow in his bed-room. Though his duties as his proprietor's grubber were in no wise lessened; and though that service bore no greater resemblance to a bed of roses than was to be discovered in its many thorns; some new branch of industry made a constant demand upon him. When he cast off the Patriarch at night, it was only to take an anonymous craft in tow, and labour away afresh in other waters.

The advance from a personal acquaintance with the elder Mr Chivery to an introduction to his amiable wife and disconsolate son, may have been easy; but easy or not, Mr Pancks soon made it. He nestled in the bosom of the tobacco business within a week or two after his first appearance in the College, and particularly addressed himself to the cultivation of a good understanding with Young John. In this endeavour he so prospered as to lure that pining shepherd forth from the groves, and tempt him to undertake mysterious missions; on which he began to disappear at uncertain intervals for as long a space as two or three days together. The prudent Mrs Chivery, who wondered greatly at this change, would have protested against it as detrimental to the Highland typification on the doorpost but for two forcible reasons; one, that her John was roused to take strong interest in the business which these starts were supposed to advance - and this she held to be good for his drooping spirits; the other, that Mr Pancks confidentially agreed to pay her, for the occupation of her son's time, at the handsome rate of seven and sixpence per day. The proposal originated with himself, and was couched in the pithy terms, 'If your John is weak enough, ma'am, not to take it, that is no reason why you should be, don't you see? So, quite between ourselves, ma'am, business being business, here it is!'

What Mr Chivery thought of these things, or how much or how little he knew about them, was never gathered from himself. It has been already remarked that he was a man of few words; and it may be here observed that he had imbibed a professional habit of locking everything up. He locked himself up as carefully as he locked up the Marshalsea debtors. Even his custom of bolting his meals may have been a part of an uniform whole; but there is no question, that, as to all other purposes, he kept his mouth as he kept the Marshalsea door. He never opened it without occasion. When it was necessary to let

anything out, he opened it a little way, held it open just as long as sufficed for the purpose, and locked it again.

Even as he would be sparing of his trouble at the Marshalsea door, and would keep a visitor who wanted to go out, waiting for a few moments if he saw another visitor coming down the yard, so that one turn of the key should suffice for both, similarly he would often reserve a remark if he perceived another on its way to his lips, and would deliver himself of the two together. As to any key to his inner knowledge being to be found in his face, the Marshalsea key was as legible as an index to the individual characters and histories upon which it was turned.

That Mr Pancks should be moved to invite any one to dinner at Pentonville, was an unprecedented fact in his calendar. But he invited Young John to dinner, and even brought him within range of the dangerous (because expensive) fascinations of Miss Rugg. The banquet was appointed for a Sunday, and Miss Rugg with her own hands stuffed a leg of mutton with oysters on the occasion, and sent it to the baker's - not THE baker's but an opposition establishment. Provision of oranges, apples, and nuts was also made. And rum was brought home by Mr Pancks on Saturday night, to gladden the visitor's heart. The store of creature comforts was not the chief part of the visitor's reception. Its special feature was a foregone family confidence and sympathy. When Young John appeared at half-past one without the ivory hand and waistcoat of golden sprigs, the sun shorn of his beams by disastrous clouds, Mr Pancks presented him to the yellow-haired Ruggs as the young man he had so often mentioned who loved Miss Dorrit. 'I am glad,' said Mr Rugg, challenging him specially in that character, 'to have the distinguished gratification of making your acquaintance, sir. Your feelings do you honour. You are young; may you never outlive your feelings! If I was to outlive my own feelings, sir,' said Mr Rugg, who was a man of many words, and was considered to possess a remarkably good address; 'if I was to outlive my own feelings, I'd leave fifty pound in my will to the man who would put me out of existence.'

Miss Rugg heaved a sigh.

'My daughter, sir,' said Mr Rugg. 'Anastatia, you are no stranger to the state of this young man's affections. My daughter has had her trials, sir' - Mr Rugg might have used the word more pointedly in the singular number - 'and she can feel for you.'

Young John, almost overwhelmed by the touching nature of this greeting, professed himself to that effect.

'What I envy you, sir, is,' said Mr Rugg, 'allow me to take your hat - we are rather short of pegs - I'll put it in the corner, nobody will tread on it there - What I envy you, sir, is the luxury of your own feelings. I belong to a profession in which that luxury is sometimes denied us.'

Young John replied, with acknowledgments, that he only hoped he did what was right, and what showed how entirely he was devoted to Miss Dorrit. He wished to be unselfish; and he hoped he was. He wished to do anything as laid in his power to serve Miss Dorrit, altogether putting himself out of sight; and he hoped he did. It was but little that he could do, but he hoped he did it.

'Sir,' said Mr Rugg, taking him by the hand, 'you are a young man that it does one good to come across. You are a young man that I should like to put in the witness-box, to humanise the minds of the legal profession. I hope you have brought your appetite with you, and intend to play a good knife and fork?'

'Thank you, sir,' returned Young John, 'I don't eat much at present.'

Mr Rugg drew him a little apart. 'My daughter's case, sir,' said he, 'at the time when, in vindication of her outraged feelings and her sex, she became the plaintiff in Rugg and Bawkins. I suppose I could have put it in evidence, Mr Chivery, if I had thought it worth my while, that the amount of solid sustenance my daughter consumed at that period did not exceed ten ounces per week.' 'I think I go a little beyond that, sir,' returned the other, hesitating, as if he confessed it with some shame.

'But in your case there's no fiend in human form,' said Mr Rugg, with argumentative smile and action of hand. 'Observe, Mr Chivery!

No fiend in human form!' 'No, sir, certainly,' Young John added with simplicity, 'I should be very sorry if there was.'

'The sentiment,' said Mr Rugg, 'is what I should have expected from your known principles. It would affect my daughter greatly, sir, if she heard it. As I perceive the mutton, I am glad she didn't hear it. Mr Pancks, on this occasion, pray face me. My dear, face Mr Chivery. For what we are going to receive, may we (and Miss Dorrit) be truly thankful!'

But for a grave waggishness in Mr Rugg's manner of delivering this introduction to the feast, it might have appeared that Miss Dorrit was expected to be one of the company. Pancks recognised the sally in his usual way, and took in his provender in his usual way. Miss Rugg, perhaps making up some of her arrears, likewise took very kindly to the mutton, and it rapidly diminished to the bone. A bread-and-butter

pudding entirely disappeared, and a considerable amount of cheese and radishes vanished by the same means. Then came the dessert.

Then also, and before the broaching of the rum and water, came Mr Pancks's note-book. The ensuing business proceedings were brief but curious, and rather in the nature of a conspiracy. Mr Pancks looked over his note-book, which was now getting full, studiously; and picked out little extracts, which he wrote on separate slips of paper on the table; Mr Rugg, in the meanwhile, looking at him with close attention, and Young John losing his uncollected eye in mists of meditation. When Mr Pancks, who supported the character of chief conspirator, had completed his extracts, he looked them over, corrected them, put up his note-book, and held them like a hand at cards.

'Now, there's a churchyard in Bedfordshire,' said Pancks. 'Who takes it?'

'I'll take it, sir,' returned Mr Rugg, 'if no one bids.'

Mr Pancks dealt him his card, and looked at his hand again.

'Now, there's an Enquiry in York,' said Pancks. 'Who takes it?'

'I'm not good for York,' said Mr Rugg.

'Then perhaps,' pursued Pancks, 'you'll be so obliging, John Chivery?' Young John assenting, Pancks dealt him his card, and consulted his hand again.

'There's a Church in London; I may as well take that. And a Family Bible; I may as well take that, too. That's two to me. Two to me,' repeated Pancks, breathing hard over his cards. 'Here's a Clerk at Durham for you, John, and an old seafaring gentleman at Dunstable for you, Mr Rugg. Two to me, was it? Yes, two to me. Here's a Stone; three to me. And a Still-born Baby; four to me. And all, for the present, told.' When he had thus disposed of his cards, all being done very quietly and in a suppressed tone, Mr Pancks puffed his way into his own breast-pocket and tugged out a canvas bag; from which, with a sparing hand, he told forth money for travelling expenses in two little portions. 'Cash goes out fast,' he said anxiously, as he pushed a portion to each of his male companions, 'very fast.'

'I can only assure you, Mr Pancks,' said Young John, 'that I deeply regret my circumstances being such that I can't afford to pay my own charges, or that it's not advisable to allow me the time necessary for my doing the distances on foot; because nothing would give me greater satisfaction than to walk myself off my legs without fee or reward.'

This young man's disinterestedness appeared so very ludicrous in the eyes of Miss Rugg, that she was obliged to effect a precipitate retirement from the company, and to sit upon the stairs until she had had her laugh out. Meanwhile Mr Pancks, looking, not without some pity, at Young John, slowly and thoughtfully twisted up his canvas bag as if he were wringing its neck. The lady, returning as he restored it to his pocket, mixed rum and water for the party, not forgetting her fair self, and handed to every one his glass. When all were supplied, Mr Rugg rose, and silently holding out his glass at arm's length above the centre of the table, by that gesture invited the other three to add theirs, and to unite in a general conspiratorial clink. The ceremony was effective up to a certain point, and would have been wholly so throughout, if Miss Rugg, as she raised her glass to her lips in completion of it, had not happened to look at Young John; when she was again so overcome by the contemptible comicality of his disinterestedness as to splutter some ambrosial drops of rum and water around, and withdraw in confusion.

Such was the dinner without precedent, given by Pancks at Pentonville; and such was the busy and strange life Pancks led. The only waking moments at which he appeared to relax from his cares, and to recreate himself by going anywhere or saying anything without a pervading object, were when he showed a dawning interest in the lame foreigner with the stick, down Bleeding Heart Yard.

The foreigner, by name John Baptist Cavalletto - they called him Mr Baptist in the Yard - was such a chirping, easy, hopeful little fellow, that his attraction for Pancks was probably in the force of contrast. Solitary, weak, and scantily acquainted with the most necessary words of the only language in which he could communicate with the people about him, he went with the stream of his fortunes, in a brisk way that was new in those parts. With little to eat, and less to drink, and nothing to wear but what he wore upon him, or had brought tied up in one of the smallest bundles that ever were seen, he put as bright a face upon it as if he were in the most flourishing circumstances when he first hobbled up and down the Yard, humbly propitiating the general good-will with his white teeth.

It was uphill work for a foreigner, lame or sound, to make his way with the Bleeding Hearts. In the first place, they were vaguely persuaded that every foreigner had a knife about him; in the second, they held it to be a sound constitutional national axiom that he ought to go home to his own country. They never thought of inquiring how many of their own countrymen would be returned upon their hands from divers parts of the world, if the principle were generally recognised; they considered it particularly and peculiarly British. In the third place, they had a notion that it was a sort of Divine visitation upon a foreigner that he was not an Englishman, and that all kinds of

calamities happened to his country because it did things that England did not, and did not do things that England did. In this belief, to be sure, they had long been carefully trained by the Barnacles and Stiltstalkings, who were always proclaiming to them, officially, that no country which failed to submit itself to those two large families could possibly hope to be under the protection of Providence; and who, when they believed it, disparaged them in private as the most prejudiced people under the sun.

This, therefore, might be called a political position of the Bleeding Hearts; but they entertained other objections to having foreigners in the Yard. They believed that foreigners were always badly off; and though they were as ill off themselves as they could desire to be, that did not diminish the force of the objection. They believed that foreigners were dragooned and bayoneted; and though they certainly got their own skulls promptly fractured if they showed any ill-humour, still it was with a blunt instrument, and that didn't count. They believed that foreigners were always immoral; and though they had an occasional assize at home, and now and then a divorce case or so, that had nothing to do with it. They believed that foreigners had no independent spirit, as never being escorted to the poll in droves by Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle, with colours flying and the tune of Rule Britannia playing. Not to be tedious, they had many other beliefs of a similar kind.

Against these obstacles, the lame foreigner with the stick had to make head as well as he could; not absolutely single-handed, because Mr Arthur Clennam had recommended him to the Plornishes (he lived at the top of the same house), but still at heavy odds. However, the Bleeding Hearts were kind hearts; and when they saw the little fellow cheerily limping about with a good-humoured face, doing no harm, drawing no knives, committing no outrageous immoralities, living chiefly on farinaceous and milk diet, and playing with Mrs Plornish's children of an evening, they began to think that although he could never hope to be an Englishman, still it would be hard to visit that affliction on his head. They began to accommodate themselves to his level, calling him 'Mr Baptist,' but treating him like a baby, and laughing immoderately at his lively gestures and his childish English - more, because he didn't mind it, and laughed too. They spoke to him in very loud voices as if he were stone deaf. They constructed sentences, by way of teaching him the language in its purity, such as were addressed by the savages to Captain Cook, or by Friday to Robinson Crusoe. Mrs Plornish was particularly ingenious in this art; and attained so much celebrity for saying 'Me ope you leg well soon,' that it was considered in the Yard but a very short remove indeed from speaking Italian. Even Mrs Plornish herself began to think that she had a natural call towards that language. As he became more popular, household objects were brought into requisition for his

instruction in a copious vocabulary; and whenever he appeared in the Yard ladies would fly out at their doors crying 'Mr Baptist - tea-pot!' 'Mr Baptist - dust-pan!' 'Mr Baptist - flour-dredger!' 'Mr Baptist - coffee-biggin!' At the same time exhibiting those articles, and penetrating him with a sense of the appalling difficulties of the Anglo-Saxon tongue.

It was in this stage of his progress, and in about the third week of his occupation, that Mr Pancks's fancy became attracted by the little man. Mounting to his attic, attended by Mrs Plornish as interpreter, he found Mr Baptist with no furniture but his bed on the ground, a table, and a chair, carving with the aid of a few simple tools, in the blithest way possible.

'Now, old chap,' said Mr Pancks, 'pay up!'

He had his money ready, folded in a scrap of paper, and laughingly handed it in; then with a free action, threw out as many fingers of his right hand as there were shillings, and made a cut crosswise in the air for an odd sixpence.

'Oh!' said Mr Pancks, watching him, wonderingly. 'That's it, is it? You're a quick customer. It's all right. I didn't expect to receive it, though.'

Mrs Plornish here interposed with great condescension, and explained to Mr Baptist. 'E please. E glad get money.'

The little man smiled and nodded. His bright face seemed uncommonly attractive to Mr Pancks. 'How's he getting on in his limb?' he asked Mrs Plornish.

'Oh, he's a deal better, sir,' said Mrs Plornish. 'We expect next week he'll be able to leave off his stick entirely.' (The opportunity being too favourable to be lost, Mrs Plornish displayed her great accomplishment by explaining with pardonable pride to Mr Baptist, 'E ope you leg well soon.')

'He's a merry fellow, too,' said Mr Pancks, admiring him as if he were a mechanical toy. 'How does he live?'

'Why, sir,' rejoined Mrs Plornish, 'he turns out to have quite a power of carving them flowers that you see him at now.' (Mr Baptist, watching their faces as they spoke, held up his work. Mrs Plornish interpreted in her Italian manner, on behalf of Mr Pancks, 'E please. Double good!')

'Can he live by that?' asked Mr Pancks. 'He can live on very little, sir, and it is expected as he will be able, in time, to make a very good living. Mr Clennam got it him to do, and gives him odd jobs besides in at the Works next door - makes 'em for him, in short, when he knows he wants 'em.'

'And what does he do with himself, now, when he ain't hard at it?' said Mr Pancks.

'Why, not much as yet, sir, on accounts I suppose of not being able to walk much; but he goes about the Yard, and he chats without particular understanding or being understood, and he plays with the children, and he sits in the sun - he'll sit down anywhere, as if it was an arm-chair - and he'll sing, and he'll laugh!'

'Laugh!' echoed Mr Pancks. 'He looks to me as if every tooth in his head was always laughing.'

'But whenever he gets to the top of the steps at t'other end of the Yard,' said Mrs Plornish, 'he'll peep out in the curiousest way! So that some of us thinks he's peeping out towards where his own country is, and some of us thinks he's looking for somebody he don't want to see, and some of us don't know what to think.'

Mr Baptist seemed to have a general understanding of what she said; or perhaps his quickness caught and applied her slight action of peeping. In any case he closed his eyes and tossed his head with the air of a man who had sufficient reasons for what he did, and said in his own tongue, it didn't matter. Altro!

'What's Altro?' said Pancks.

'Hem! It's a sort of a general kind of expression, sir,' said Mrs Plornish.

'Is it?' said Pancks. 'Why, then Altro to you, old chap. Good afternoon. Altro!'

Mr Baptist in his vivacious way repeating the word several times, Mr Pancks in his duller way gave it him back once. From that time it became a frequent custom with Pancks the gipsy, as he went home jaded at night, to pass round by Bleeding Heart Yard, go quietly up the stairs, look in at Mr Baptist's door, and, finding him in his room, to say, 'Hallo, old chap! Altro!' To which Mr Baptist would reply with innumerable bright nods and smiles, 'Altro, signore, altro, altro, altro!' After this highly condensed conversation, Mr Pancks would go his way with an appearance of being lightened and refreshed.