

Chapter XXVIII - Nobody's Disappearance

Not resting satisfied with the endeavours he had made to recover his lost charge, Mr Meagles addressed a letter of remonstrance, breathing nothing but goodwill, not only to her, but to Miss Wade too. No answer coming to these epistles, or to another written to the stubborn girl by the hand of her late young mistress, which might have melted her if anything could (all three letters were returned weeks afterwards as having been refused at the house- door), he deputed Mrs Meagles to make the experiment of a personal interview. That worthy lady being unable to obtain one, and being steadfastly denied admission, Mr Meagles besought Arthur to essay once more what he could do. All that came of his compliance was, his discovery that the empty house was left in charge of the old woman, that Miss Wade was gone, that the waifs and strays of furniture were gone, and that the old woman would accept any number of half-crowns and thank the donor kindly, but had no information whatever to exchange for those coins, beyond constantly offering for perusal a memorandum relative to fixtures, which the house- agent's young man had left in the hall.

Unwilling, even under this discomfiture, to resign the ingrate and leave her hopeless, in case of her better dispositions obtaining the mastery over the darker side of her character, Mr Meagles, for six successive days, published a discreetly covert advertisement in the morning papers, to the effect that if a certain young person who had lately left home without reflection, would at any time apply to his address at Twickenham, everything would be as it had been before, and no reproaches need be apprehended. The unexpected consequences of this notification suggested to the dismayed Mr Meagles for the first time that some hundreds of young persons must be leaving their homes without reflection every day; for shoals of wrong young people came down to Twickenham, who, not finding themselves received with enthusiasm, generally demanded compensation by way of damages, in addition to coach-hire there and back. Nor were these the only uninvited clients whom the advertisement produced. The swarm of begging-letter writers, who would seem to be always watching eagerly for any hook, however small, to hang a letter upon, wrote to say that having seen the advertisement, they were induced to apply with confidence for various sums, ranging from ten shillings to fifty pounds: not because they knew anything about the young person, but because they felt that to part with those donations would greatly relieve the advertiser's mind. Several projectors, likewise, availed themselves of the same opportunity to correspond with Mr Meagles; as, for example, to apprise him that their attention having been called to the advertisement by a friend, they begged to state that if they should ever hear anything of the young person, they would not fail to make it known to him immediately, and that in the meantime if he would

oblige them with the funds necessary for bringing to perfection a certain entirely novel description of Pump, the happiest results would ensue to mankind.

Mr Meagles and his family, under these combined discouragements, had begun reluctantly to give up Tattycoram as irrecoverable, when the new and active firm of Doyce and Clennam, in their private capacities, went down on a Saturday to stay at the cottage until Monday. The senior partner took the coach, and the junior partner took his walking-stick.

A tranquil summer sunset shone upon him as he approached the end of his walk, and passed through the meadows by the river side. He had that sense of peace, and of being lightened of a weight of care, which country quiet awakens in the breasts of dwellers in towns. Everything within his view was lovely and placid. The rich foliage of the trees, the luxuriant grass diversified with wild flowers, the little green islands in the river, the beds of rushes, the water-lilies floating on the surface of the stream, the distant voices in boats borne musically towards him on the ripple of the water and the evening air, were all expressive of rest. In the occasional leap of a fish, or dip of an oar, or twittering of a bird not yet at roost, or distant barking of a dog, or lowing of a cow - in all such sounds, there was the prevailing breath of rest, which seemed to encompass him in every scent that sweetened the fragrant air. The long lines of red and gold in the sky, and the glorious track of the descending sun, were all divinely calm. Upon the purple tree-tops far away, and on the green height near at hand up which the shades were slowly creeping, there was an equal hush. Between the real landscape and its shadow in the water, there was no division; both were so untroubled and clear, and, while so fraught with solemn mystery of life and death, so hopefully reassuring to the gazer's soothed heart, because so tenderly and mercifully beautiful.

Clennam had stopped, not for the first time by many times, to look about him and suffer what he saw to sink into his soul, as the shadows, looked at, seemed to sink deeper and deeper into the water. He was slowly resuming his way, when he saw a figure in the path before him which he had, perhaps, already associated with the evening and its impressions.

Minnie was there, alone. She had some roses in her hand, and seemed to have stood still on seeing him, waiting for him. Her face was towards him, and she appeared to have been coming from the opposite direction. There was a flutter in her manner, which Clennam had never seen in it before; and as he came near her, it entered his mind all at once that she was there of a set purpose to speak to him.

She gave him her hand, and said, 'You wonder to see me here by myself? But the evening is so lovely, I have strolled further than I meant at first. I thought it likely I might meet you, and that made me more confident. You always come this way, do you not?'

As Clennam said that it was his favourite way, he felt her hand falter on his arm, and saw the roses shake.

'Will you let me give you one, Mr Clennam? I gathered them as I came out of the garden. Indeed, I almost gathered them for you, thinking it so likely I might meet you. Mr Doyce arrived more than an hour ago, and told us you were walking down.'

His own hand shook, as he accepted a rose or two from hers and thanked her. They were now by an avenue of trees. Whether they turned into it on his movement or on hers matters little. He never knew how that was.

'It is very grave here,' said Clennam, 'but very pleasant at this hour. Passing along this deep shade, and out at that arch of light at the other end, we come upon the ferry and the cottage by the best approach, I think.' In her simple garden-hat and her light summer dress, with her rich brown hair naturally clustering about her, and her wonderful eyes raised to his for a moment with a look in which regard for him and trustfulness in him were strikingly blended with a kind of timid sorrow for him, she was so beautiful that it was well for his peace - or ill for his peace, he did not quite know which - that he had made that vigorous resolution he had so often thought about.

She broke a momentary silence by inquiring if he knew that papa had been thinking of another tour abroad? He said he had heard it mentioned. She broke another momentary silence by adding, with some hesitation, that papa had abandoned the idea.

At this, he thought directly, 'they are to be married.'

'Mr Clennam,' she said, hesitating more timidly yet, and speaking so low that he bent his head to hear her. 'I should very much like to give you my confidence, if you would not mind having the goodness to receive it. I should have very much liked to have given it to you long ago, because - I felt that you were becoming so much our friend.'

'How can I be otherwise than proud of it at any time! Pray give it to me. Pray trust me.'

'I could never have been afraid of trusting you,' she returned, raising her eyes frankly to his face. 'I think I would have done so some time ago, if I had known how. But I scarcely know how, even now.'

'Mr Gowan,' said Arthur Clennam, 'has reason to be very happy. God bless his wife and him!'

She wept, as she tried to thank him. He reassured her, took her hand as it lay with the trembling roses in it on his arm, took the remaining roses from it, and put it to his lips. At that time, it seemed to him, he first finally resigned the dying hope that had flickered in nobody's heart so much to its pain and trouble; and from that time he became in his own eyes, as to any similar hope or prospect, a very much older man who had done with that part of life.

He put the roses in his breast and they walked on for a little while, slowly and silently, under the umbrageous trees. Then he asked her, in a voice of cheerful kindness, was there anything else that she would say to him as her friend and her father's friend, many years older than herself; was there any trust she would repose in him, any service she would ask of him, any little aid to her happiness that she could give him the lasting gratification of believing it was in his power to render?

She was going to answer, when she was so touched by some little hidden sorrow or sympathy - what could it have been? - that she said, bursting into tears again: 'O Mr Clennam! Good, generous, Mr Clennam, pray tell me you do not blame me.'

'I blame you?' said Clennam. 'My dearest girl! I blame you? No!'

After clasping both her hands upon his arm, and looking confidentially up into his face, with some hurried words to the effect that she thanked him from her heart (as she did, if it be the source of earnestness), she gradually composed herself, with now and then a word of encouragement from him, as they walked on slowly and almost silently under the darkening trees.

'And, now, Minnie Gowan,' at length said Clennam, smiling; 'will you ask me nothing?'

'Oh! I have very much to ask of you.'

'That's well! I hope so; I am not disappointed.'

'You know how I am loved at home, and how I love home. You can hardly think it perhaps, dear Mr Clennam,' she spoke with great agitation, 'seeing me going from it of my own free will and choice, but I do so dearly love it!'

'I am sure of that,' said Clennam. 'Can you suppose I doubt it?'

'No, no. But it is strange, even to me, that loving it so much and being so much beloved in it, I can bear to cast it away. It seems so neglectful of it, so unthankful.'

'My dear girl,' said Clennam, 'it is in the natural progress and change of time. All homes are left so.'

'Yes, I know; but all homes are not left with such a blank in them as there will be in mine when I am gone. Not that there is any scarcity of far better and more endearing and more accomplished girls than I am; not that I am much, but that they have made so much of me!'

Pet's affectionate heart was overcharged, and she sobbed while she pictured what would happen.

'I know what a change papa will feel at first, and I know that at first I cannot be to him anything like what I have been these many years. And it is then, Mr Clennam, then more than at any time, that I beg and entreat you to remember him, and sometimes to keep him company when you can spare a little while; and to tell him that you know I was fonder of him when I left him, than I ever was in all my life. For there is nobody - he told me so himself when he talked to me this very day - there is nobody he likes so well as you, or trusts so much.'

A clue to what had passed between the father and daughter dropped like a heavy stone into the well of Clennam's heart, and swelled the water to his eyes. He said, cheerily, but not quite so cheerily as he tried to say, that it should be done - that he gave her his faithful promise.

'If I do not speak of mama,' said Pet, more moved by, and more pretty in, her innocent grief, than Clennam could trust himself even to consider - for which reason he counted the trees between them and the fading light as they slowly diminished in number - 'it is because mama will understand me better in this action, and will feel my loss in a different way, and will look forward in a different manner. But you know what a dear, devoted mother she is, and you will remember her too; will you not?'

Let Minnie trust him, Clennam said, let Minnie trust him to do all she wished.

'And, dear Mr Clennam,' said Minnie, 'because papa and one whom I need not name, do not fully appreciate and understand one another yet, as they will by-and-by; and because it will be the duty, and the pride, and pleasure of my new life, to draw them to a better knowledge of one another, and to be a happiness to one another, and to be proud

of one another, and to love one another, both loving me so dearly; oh, as you are a kind, true man! when I am first separated from home (I am going a long distance away), try to reconcile papa to him a little more, and use your great influence to keep him before papa's mind free from prejudice and in his real form. Will you do this for me, as you are a noble-hearted friend?'

Poor Pet! Self-deceived, mistaken child! When were such changes ever made in men's natural relations to one another: when was such reconciliation of ingrained differences ever effected! It has been tried many times by other daughters, Minnie; it has never succeeded; nothing has ever come of it but failure.

So Clennam thought. So he did not say; it was too late. He bound himself to do all she asked, and she knew full well that he would do it.

They were now at the last tree in the avenue. She stopped, and withdrew her arm. Speaking to him with her eyes lifted up to his, and with the hand that had lately rested on his sleeve trembling by touching one of the roses in his breast as an additional appeal to him, she said:

'Dear Mr Clennam, in my happiness - for I am happy, though you have seen me crying - I cannot bear to leave any cloud between us. If you have anything to forgive me (not anything that I have wilfully done, but any trouble I may have caused you without meaning it, or having it in my power to help it), forgive me to-night out of your noble heart!'

He stooped to meet the guileless face that met his without shrinking. He kissed it, and answered, Heaven knew that he had nothing to forgive. As he stooped to meet the innocent face once again, she whispered, 'Good-bye!' and he repeated it. It was taking leave of all his old hopes - all nobody's old restless doubts. They came out of the avenue next moment, arm-in-arm as they had entered it: and the trees seemed to close up behind them in the darkness, like their own perspective of the past.

The voices of Mr and Mrs Meagles and Doyce were audible directly, speaking near the garden gate. Hearing Pet's name among them, Clennam called out, 'She is here, with me.' There was some little wondering and laughing until they came up; but as soon as they had all come together, it ceased, and Pet glided away.

Mr Meagles, Doyce, and Clennam, without speaking, walked up and down on the brink of the river, in the light of the rising moon, for a few minutes; and then Doyce lingered behind, and went into the house. Mr Meagles and Clennam walked up and down together for a few

minutes more without speaking, until at length the former broke silence.

'Arthur,' said he, using that familiar address for the first time in their communication, 'do you remember my telling you, as we walked up and down one hot morning, looking over the harbour at Marseilles, that Pet's baby sister who was dead seemed to Mother and me to have grown as she had grown, and changed as she had changed?'

'Very well.'

'You remember my saying that our thoughts had never been able to separate those twin sisters, and that, in our fancy, whatever Pet was, the other was?'

'Yes, very well.'

'Arthur,' said Mr Meagles, much subdued, 'I carry that fancy further to-night. I feel to-night, my dear fellow, as if you had loved my dead child very tenderly, and had lost her when she was like what Pet is now.'

'Thank you!' murmured Clennam, 'thank you!' And pressed his hand.

'Will you come in?' said Mr Meagles, presently.

'In a little while.'

Mr Meagles fell away, and he was left alone. When he had walked on the river's brink in the peaceful moonlight for some half an hour, he put his hand in his breast and tenderly took out the handful of roses. Perhaps he put them to his heart, perhaps he put them to his lips, but certainly he bent down on the shore and gently launched them on the flowing river. Pale and unreal in the moonlight, the river floated them away. The lights were bright within doors when he entered, and the faces on which they shone, his own face not excepted, were soon quietly cheerful. They talked of many subjects (his partner never had had such a ready store to draw upon for the beguiling of the time), and so to bed, and to sleep. While the flowers, pale and unreal in the moonlight, floated away upon the river; and thus do greater things that once were in our breasts, and near our hearts, flow from us to the eternal seas.