Chapter XXXV - What Was Behind Mr Pancks On Little Dorrit's Hand

It was at this time that Mr Pancks, in discharge of his compact with Clennam, revealed to him the whole of his gipsy story, and told him Little Dorrit's fortune. Her father was heir-at-law to a great estate that had long lain unknown of, unclaimed, and accumulating. His right was now clear, nothing interposed in his way, the Marshalsea gates stood open, the Marshalsea walls were down, a few flourishes of his pen, and he was extremely rich.

In his tracking out of the claim to its complete establishment, Mr Pancks had shown a sagacity that nothing could baffle, and a patience and secrecy that nothing could tire. 'I little thought, sir,' said Pancks, when you and I crossed Smithfield that night, and I told you what sort of a Collector I was, that this would come of it. I little thought, sir, when I told you you were not of the Clennams of Cornwall, that I was ever going to tell you who were of the Dorrits of Dorsetshire.' He then went on to detail. How, having that name recorded in his note-book, he was first attracted by the name alone. How, having often found two exactly similar names, even belonging to the same place, to involve no traceable consanguinity, near or distant, he did not at first give much heed to this, except in the way of speculation as to what a surprising change would be made in the condition of a little seamstress, if she could be shown to have any interest in so large a property. How he rather supposed himself to have pursued the idea into its next degree, because there was something uncommon in the quiet little seamstress, which pleased him and provoked his curiosity.

How he had felt his way inch by inch, and 'Moled it out, sir' (that was Mr Pancks's expression), grain by grain. How, in the beginning of the labour described by this new verb, and to render which the more expressive Mr Pancks shut his eyes in pronouncing it and shook his hair over them, he had alternated from sudden lights and hopes to sudden darkness and no hopes, and back again, and back again. How he had made acquaintances in the Prison, expressly that he might come and go there as all other comers and goers did; and how his first ray of light was unconsciously given him by Mr Dorrit himself and by his son; to both of whom he easily became known; with both of whom he talked much, casually ('but always Moleing you'll observe,' said Mr Pancks): and from whom he derived, without being at all suspected, two or three little points of family history which, as he began to hold clues of his own, suggested others. How it had at length become plain to Mr Pancks that he had made a real discovery of the heir-at-law to a great fortune, and that his discovery had but to be ripened to legal fulness and perfection. How he had, thereupon, sworn his landlord, Mr Rugg, to secrecy in a solemn manner, and taken him into Moleing partnership.

How they had employed John Chivery as their sole clerk and agent, seeing to whom he was devoted. And how, until the present hour, when authorities mighty in the Bank and learned in the law declared their successful labours ended, they had confided in no other human being.

'So if the whole thing had broken down, sir,' concluded Pancks, 'at the very last, say the day before the other day when I showed you our papers in the Prison yard, or say that very day, nobody but ourselves would have been cruelly disappointed, or a penny the worse.'

Clennam, who had been almost incessantly shaking hands with him throughout the narrative, was reminded by this to say, in an amazement which even the preparation he had had for the main disclosure smoothed down, 'My dear Mr Pancks, this must have cost you a great sum of money.'

'Pretty well, sir,' said the triumphant Pancks. 'No trifle, though we did it as cheap as it could be done. And the outlay was a difficulty, let me tell you.'

'A difficulty!' repeated Clennam. 'But the difficulties you have so wonderfully conquered in the whole business!' shaking his hand again.

'I'll tell you how I did it,' said the delighted Pancks, putting his hair into a condition as elevated as himself. 'First, I spent all I had of my own. That wasn't much.'

'I am sorry for it,' said Clennam: 'not that it matters now, though. Then, what did you do?'

'Then,' answered Pancks, 'I borrowed a sum of my proprietor.'

'Of Mr Casby?' said Clennam. 'He's a fine old fellow.'

'Noble old boy; an't he?' said Mr Pancks, entering on a series of the dryest snorts. 'Generous old buck. Confiding old boy. Philanthropic old buck. Benevolent old boy! Twenty per cent. I engaged to pay him, sir. But we never do business for less at our shop.'

Arthur felt an awkward consciousness of having, in his exultant condition, been a little premature.

'I said to that boiling-over old Christian,' Mr Pancks pursued, appearing greatly to relish this descriptive epithet, 'that I had got a little project on hand; a hopeful one; I told him a hopeful one; which wanted a certain small capital. I proposed to him to lend me the

money on my note. Which he did, at twenty; sticking the twenty on in a business-like way, and putting it into the note, to look like a part of the principal. If I had broken down after that, I should have been his grubber for the next seven years at half wages and double grind. But he's a perfect Patriarch; and it would do a man good to serve him on such terms - on any terms.'

Arthur for his life could not have said with confidence whether Pancks really thought so or not.

'When that was gone, sir,' resumed Pancks, 'and it did go, though I dribbled it out like so much blood, I had taken Mr Rugg into the secret. I proposed to borrow of Mr Rugg (or of Miss Rugg; it's the same thing; she made a little money by a speculation in the Common Pleas once). He lent it at ten, and thought that pretty high. But Mr Rugg's a red-haired man, sir, and gets his hair cut. And as to the crown of his hat, it's high. And as to the brim of his hat, it's narrow. And there's no more benevolence bubbling out of him, than out of a ninepin.'

'Your own recompense for all this, Mr Pancks,' said Clennam, 'ought to be a large one.'

'I don't mistrust getting it, sir,' said Pancks. 'I have made no bargain. I owed you one on that score; now I have paid it. Money out of pocket made good, time fairly allowed for, and Mr Rugg's bill settled, a thousand pounds would be a fortune to me. That matter I place in your hands. I authorize you now to break all this to the family in any way you think best. Miss Amy Dorrit will be with Mrs Finching this morning. The sooner done the better. Can't be done too soon.'

This conversation took place in Clennam's bed-room, while he was yet in bed. For Mr Pancks had knocked up the house and made his way in, very early in the morning; and, without once sitting down or standing still, had delivered himself of the whole of his details (illustrated with a variety of documents) at the bedside. He now said he would 'go and look up Mr Rugg', from whom his excited state of mind appeared to require another back; and bundling up his papers, and exchanging one more hearty shake of the hand with Clennam, he went at full speed down-stairs, and steamed off.

Clennam, of course, resolved to go direct to Mr Casby's. He dressed and got out so quickly that he found himself at the corner of the patriarchal street nearly an hour before her time; but he was not sorry to have the opportunity of calming himself with a leisurely walk.

When he returned to the street, and had knocked at the bright brass knocker, he was informed that she had come, and was shown upstairs to Flora's breakfast-room. Little Dorrit was not there herself, but Flora was, and testified the greatest amazement at seeing him.

'Good gracious, Arthur - Doyce and Clennam!' cried that lady, 'who would have ever thought of seeing such a sight as this and pray excuse a wrapper for upon my word I really never and a faded check too which is worse but our little friend is making me a, not that I need mind mentioning it to you for you must know that there are such things a skirt, and having arranged that a trying on should take place after breakfast is the reason though I wish not so badly starched.'

'I ought to make an apology,' said Arthur, 'for so early and abrupt a visit; but you will excuse it when I tell you the cause.'

'In times for ever fled Arthur,' returned Mrs Finching, 'pray excuse me Doyce and Clennam infinitely more correct and though unquestionably distant still 'tis distance lends enchantment to the view, at least I don't mean that and if I did I suppose it would depend considerably on the nature of the view, but I'm running on again and you put it all out of my head.'

She glanced at him tenderly, and resumed:

'In times for ever fled I was going to say it would have sounded strange indeed for Arthur Clennam - Doyce and Clennam naturally quite different - to make apologies for coming here at any time, but that is past and what is past can never be recalled except in his own case as poor Mr F. said when he was in spirits Cucumber and therefore never ate it.'

She was making the tea when Arthur came in, and now hastily finished that operation.

'Papa,' she said, all mystery and whisper, as she shut down the teapot lid, 'is sitting prosingly breaking his new laid egg in the back parlour over the City article exactly like the Woodpecker Tapping and need never know that you are here, and our little friend you are well aware may be fully trusted when she comes down from cutting out on the large table overhead.'

Arthur then told her, in the fewest words, that it was their little friend he came to see; and what he had to announce to their little friend. At which astounding intelligence, Flora clasped her hands, fell into a tremble, and shed tears of sympathy and pleasure, like the goodnatured creature she really was.

'For goodness sake let me get out of the way first,' said Flora, putting her hands to her ears and moving towards the door, 'or I know I shall go off dead and screaming and make everybody worse, and the dear little thing only this morning looking so nice and neat and good and yet so poor and now a fortune is she really and deserves it too! and might I mention it to Mr F.'s Aunt Arthur not Doyce and Clennam for this once or if objectionable not on any account.'

Arthur nodded his free permission, since Flora shut out all verbal communication. Flora nodded in return to thank him, and hurried out of the room.

Little Dorrit's step was already on the stairs, and in another moment she was at the door. Do what he could to compose his face, he could not convey so much of an ordinary expression into it, but that the moment she saw it she dropped her work, and cried, 'Mr Clennam! What's the matter?'

' Nothing, nothing. That is, no misfortune has happened. I have come to tell you something, but it is a piece of great good- fortune.' 'Goodfortune?'

'Wonderful fortune!'

They stood in a window, and her eyes, full of light, were fixed upon his face. He put an arm about her, seeing her likely to sink down. She put a hand upon that arm, partly to rest upon it, and partly so to preserve their relative positions as that her intent look at him should be shaken by no change of attitude in either of them. Her lips seemed to repeat 'Wonderful fortune?' He repeated it again, aloud.

'Dear Little Dorrit! Your father.'

The ice of the pale face broke at the word, and little lights and shoots of expression passed all over it. They were all expressions of pain. Her breath was faint and hurried. Her heart beat fast. He would have clasped the little figure closer, but he saw that the eyes appealed to him not to be moved.

Your father can be free within this week. He does not know it; we must go to him from here, to tell him of it. Your father will be free within a few days. Your father will be free within a few hours. Remember we must go to him from here, to tell him of it!'

That brought her back. Her eyes were closing, but they opened again.

'This is not all the good-fortune. This is not all the wonderful good-fortune, my dear Little Dorrit. Shall I tell you more?'

Her lips shaped 'Yes.'

Your father will be no beggar when he is free. He will want for nothing. Shall I tell you more? Remember! He knows nothing of it; we must go to him, from here, to tell him of it!'

She seemed to entreat him for a little time. He held her in his arm, and, after a pause, bent down his ear to listen.

'Did you ask me to go on?'

'Yes.'

'He will be a rich man. He is a rich man. A great sum of money is waiting to be paid over to him as his inheritance; you are all henceforth very wealthy. Bravest and best of children, I thank Heaven that you are rewarded!'

As he kissed her, she turned her head towards his shoulder, and raised her arm towards his neck; cried out 'Father! Father! Father!' and swooned away.

Upon which Flora returned to take care of her, and hovered about her on a sofa, intermingling kind offices and incoherent scraps of conversation in a manner so confounding, that whether she pressed the Marshalsea to take a spoonful of unclaimed dividends, for it would do her good; or whether she congratulated Little Dorrit's father on coming into possession of a hundred thousand smelling- bottles; or whether she explained that she put seventy-five thousand drops of spirits of lavender on fifty thousand pounds of lump sugar, and that she entreated Little Dorrit to take that gentle restorative; or whether she bathed the foreheads of Doyce and Clennam in vinegar, and gave the late Mr F. more air; no one with any sense of responsibility could have undertaken to decide. A tributary stream of confusion, moreover, poured in from an adjoining bedroom, where Mr F.'s Aunt appeared, from the sound of her voice, to be in a horizontal posture, awaiting her breakfast; and from which bower that inexorable lady snapped off short taunts, whenever she could get a hearing, as, 'Don't believe it's his doing!' and 'He needn't take no credit to himself for it!' and 'It'll be long enough, I expect, afore he'll give up any of his own money!' all designed to disparage Clennam's share in the discovery, and to relieve those inveterate feelings with which Mr F.'s Aunt regarded him.

But Little Dorrit's solicitude to get to her father, and to carry the joyful tidings to him, and not to leave him in his jail a moment with this happiness in store for him and still unknown to him, did more for her speedy restoration than all the skill and attention on earth could have done. 'Come with me to my dear father. Pray come and tell my dear father!' were the first words she said. Her father, her father. She spoke of nothing but him, thought of nothing but him. Kneeling down and

pouring out her thankfulness with uplifted hands, her thanks were for her father.

Flora's tenderness was quite overcome by this, and she launched out among the cups and saucers into a wonderful flow of tears and speech.

'I declare,' she sobbed, 'I never was so cut up since your mama and my papa not Doyce and Clennam for this once but give the precious little thing a cup of tea and make her put it to her lips at least pray Arthur do, not even Mr F.'s last illness for that was of another kind and gout is not a child's affection though very painful for all parties and Mr F. a martyr with his leg upon a rest and the wine trade in itself inflammatory for they will do it more or less among themselves and who can wonder, it seems like a dream I am sure to think of nothing at all this morning and now Mines of money is it really, but you must know my darling love because you never will be strong enough to tell him all about it upon teaspoons, mightn't it be even best to try the directions of my own medical man for though the flavour is anything but agreeable still I force myself to do it as a prescription and find the benefit, you'd rather not why no my dear I'd rather not but still I do it as a duty, everybody will congratulate you some in earnest and some not and many will congratulate you with all their hearts but none more so I do assure you from the bottom of my own I do myself though sensible of blundering and being stupid, and will be judged by Arthur not Doyce and Clennam for this once so good-bye darling and God bless you and may you be very happy and excuse the liberty, vowing that the dress shall never be finished by anybody else but shall be laid by for a keepsake just as it is and called Little Dorrit though why that strangest of denominations at any time I never did myself and now I never shall!'

Thus Flora, in taking leave of her favourite. Little Dorrit thanked her, and embraced her, over and over again; and finally came out of the house with Clennam, and took coach for the Marshalsea.

It was a strangely unreal ride through the old squalid streets, with a sensation of being raised out of them into an airy world of wealth and grandeur. When Arthur told her that she would soon ride in her own carriage through very different scenes, when all the familiar experiences would have vanished away, she looked frightened. But when he substituted her father for herself, and told her how he would ride in his carriage, and how great and grand he would be, her tears of joy and innocent pride fell fast. Seeing that the happiness her mind could realise was all shining upon him, Arthur kept that single figure before her; and so they rode brightly through the poor streets in the prison neighbourhood to carry him the great news.

When Mr Chivery, who was on duty, admitted them into the Lodge, he saw something in their faces which filled him with astonishment. He stood looking after them, when they hurried into the prison, as though he perceived that they had come back accompanied by a ghost apiece. Two or three Collegians whom they passed, looked after them too, and presently joining Mr Chivery, formed a little group on the Lodge steps, in the midst of which there spontaneously originated a whisper that the Father was going to get his discharge. Within a few minutes, it was heard in the remotest room in the College.

Little Dorrit opened the door from without, and they both entered. He was sitting in his old grey gown and his old black cap, in the sunlight by the window, reading his newspaper. His glasses were in his hand, and he had just looked round; surprised at first, no doubt, by her step upon the stairs, not expecting her until night; surprised again, by seeing Arthur Clennam in her company. As they came in, the same unwonted look in both of them which had already caught attention in the yard below, struck him. He did not rise or speak, but laid down his glasses and his newspaper on the table beside him, and looked at them with his mouth a little open and his lips trembling. When Arthur put out his hand, he touched it, but not with his usual state; and then he turned to his daughter, who had sat down close beside him with her hands upon his shoulder, and looked attentively in her face.

'Father! I have been made so happy this morning!'

'You have been made so happy, my dear?'

'By Mr Clennam, father. He brought me such joyful and wonderful intelligence about you! If he had not with his great kindness and gentleness, prepared me for it, father - prepared me for it, father - I think I could not have borne it.'

Her agitation was exceedingly great, and the tears rolled down her face. He put his hand suddenly to his heart, and looked at Clennam.

'Compose yourself, sir,' said Clennam, 'and take a little time to think. To think of the brightest and most fortunate accidents of life. We have all heard of great surprises of joy. They are not at an end, sir. They are rare, but not at an end.'

'Mr Clennam? Not at an end? Not at an end for - ' He touched himself upon the breast, instead of saying 'me.'

'No,' returned Clennam.

'What surprise,' he asked, keeping his left hand over his heart, and there stopping in his speech, while with his right hand he put his glasses exactly level on the table: 'what such surprise can be in store for me?'

'Let me answer with another question. Tell me, Mr Dorrit, what surprise would be the most unlooked for and the most acceptable to you. Do not be afraid to imagine it, or to say what it would be.'

He looked steadfastly at Clennam, and, so looking at him, seemed to change into a very old haggard man. The sun was bright upon the wall beyond the window, and on the spikes at top. He slowly stretched out the hand that had been upon his heart, and pointed at the wall.

'It is down,' said Clennam. 'Gone!'

He remained in the same attitude, looking steadfastly at him.

'And in its place,' said Clennam, slowly and distinctly, 'are the means to possess and enjoy the utmost that they have so long shut out. Mr Dorrit, there is not the smallest doubt that within a few days you will be free, and highly prosperous. I congratulate you with all my soul on this change of fortune, and on the happy future into which you are soon to carry the treasure you have been blest with here - the best of all the riches you can have elsewhere - the treasure at your side.'

With those words, he pressed his hand and released it; and his daughter, laying her face against his, encircled him in the hour of his prosperity with her arms, as she had in the long years of his adversity encircled him with her love and toil and truth; and poured out her full heart in gratitude, hope, joy, blissful ecstasy, and all for him.

'I shall see him as I never saw him yet. I shall see my dear love, with the dark cloud cleared away. I shall see him, as my poor mother saw him long ago. O my dear, my dear! O father, father! O thank God, thank God!'

He yielded himself to her kisses and caresses, but did not return them, except that he put an arm about her. Neither did he say one word. His steadfast look was now divided between her and Clennam, and he began to shake as if he were very cold. Explaining to Little Dorrit that he would run to the coffee-house for a bottle of wine, Arthur fetched it with all the haste he could use. While it was being brought from the cellar to the bar, a number of excited people asked him what had happened; when he hurriedly informed them that Mr Dorrit had succeeded to a fortune.

On coming back with the wine in his hand, he found that she had placed her father in his easy chair, and had loosened his shirt and neckcloth. They filled a tumbler with wine, and held it to his lips.

When he had swallowed a little, he took the glass himself and emptied it. Soon after that, he leaned back in his chair and cried, with his handkerchief before his face.

After this had lasted a while Clennam thought it a good season for diverting his attention from the main surprise, by relating its details. Slowly, therefore, and in a quiet tone of voice, he explained them as best he could, and enlarged on the nature of Pancks's service.

'He shall be - ha - he shall be handsomely recompensed, sir,' said the Father, starting up and moving hurriedly about the room. 'Assure yourself, Mr Clennam, that everybody concerned shall be - ha - shall be nobly rewarded. No one, my dear sir, shall say that he has an unsatisfied claim against me. I shall repay the - hum - the advances I have had from you, sir, with peculiar pleasure. I beg to be informed at your earliest convenience, what advances you have made my son.'

He had no purpose in going about the room, but he was not still a moment.

'Everybody,' he said, 'shall be remembered. I will not go away from here in anybody's debt. All the people who have been - ha - well behaved towards myself and my family, shall be rewarded. Chivery shall be rewarded. Young John shall be rewarded. I particularly wish, and intend, to act munificently, Mr Clennam.'

'Will you allow me,' said Arthur, laying his purse on the table, 'to supply any present contingencies, Mr Dorrit? I thought it best to bring a sum of money for the purpose.'

'Thank you, sir, thank you. I accept with readiness, at the present moment, what I could not an hour ago have conscientiously taken. I am obliged to you for the temporary accommodation. Exceedingly temporary, but well timed - well timed.' His hand had closed upon the money, and he carried it about with him. 'Be so kind, sir, as to add the amount to those former advances to which I have already referred; being careful, if you please, not to omit advances made to my son. A mere verbal statement of the gross amount is all I shall - ha - all I shall require.'

His eye fell upon his daughter at this point, and he stopped for a moment to kiss her, and to pat her head.

'It will be necessary to find a milliner, my love, and to make a speedy and complete change in your very plain dress. Something must be done with Maggy too, who at present is - ha - barely respectable, barely respectable. And your sister, Amy, and your brother. And my brother, your uncle - poor soul, I trust this will rouse him -

messengers must be despatched to fetch them. They must be informed of this. We must break it to them cautiously, but they must be informed directly. We owe it as a duty to them and to ourselves, from this moment, not to let them - hum - not to let them do anything.'

This was the first intimation he had ever given, that he was privy to the fact that they did something for a livelihood.

He was still jogging about the room, with the purse clutched in his hand, when a great cheering arose in the yard. 'The news has spread already,' said Clennam, looking down from the window. 'Will you show yourself to them, Mr Dorrit? They are very earnest, and they evidently wish it.'

'I - hum - ha - I confess I could have desired, Amy my dear,' he said, jogging about in a more feverish flutter than before, 'to have made some change in my dress first, and to have bought a - hum - a watch and chain. But if it must be done as it is, it - ha - it must be done. Fasten the collar of my shirt, my dear. Mr Clennam, would you oblige me - hum - with a blue neckcloth you will find in that drawer at your elbow. Button my coat across at the chest, my love. It looks - ha - it looks broader, buttoned.'

With his trembling hand he pushed his grey hair up, and then, taking Clennam and his daughter for supporters, appeared at the window leaning on an arm of each. The Collegians cheered him very heartily, and he kissed his hand to them with great urbanity and protection. When he withdrew into the room again, he said 'Poor creatures!' in a tone of much pity for their miserable condition.

Little Dorrit was deeply anxious that he should lie down to compose himself. On Arthur's speaking to her of his going to inform Pancks that he might now appear as soon as he would, and pursue the joyful business to its close, she entreated him in a whisper to stay with her until her father should be quite calm and at rest. He needed no second entreaty; and she prepared her father's bed, and begged him to lie down. For another half-hour or more he would be persuaded to do nothing but go about the room, discussing with himself the probabilities for and against the Marshal's allowing the whole of the prisoners to go to the windows of the official residence which commanded the street, to see himself and family depart for ever in a carriage - which, he said, he thought would be a Sight for them. But gradually he began to droop and tire, and at last stretched himself upon the bed.

She took her faithful place beside him, fanning him and cooling his forehead; and he seemed to be falling asleep (always with the money in his hand), when he unexpectedly sat up and said:

'Mr Clennam, I beg your pardon. Am I to understand, my dear sir, that I could - ha - could pass through the Lodge at this moment, and - hum - take a walk?'

'I think not, Mr Dorrit,' was the unwilling reply. 'There are certain forms to be completed; and although your detention here is now in itself a form, I fear it is one that for a little longer has to be observed too.'

At this he shed tears again.

'It is but a few hours, sir,' Clennam cheerfully urged upon him.

'A few hours, sir,' he returned in a sudden passion. 'You talk very easily of hours, sir! How long do you suppose, sir, that an hour is to a man who is choking for want of air?'

It was his last demonstration for that time; as, after shedding some more tears and querulously complaining that he couldn't breathe, he slowly fell into a slumber. Clennam had abundant occupation for his thoughts, as he sat in the quiet room watching the father on his bed, and the daughter fanning his face. Little Dorrit had been thinking too. After softly putting his grey hair aside, and touching his forehead with her lips, she looked towards Arthur, who came nearer to her, and pursued in a low whisper the subject of her thoughts.

'Mr Clennam, will he pay all his debts before he leaves here?'

'No doubt. All.'

'All the debts for which he had been imprisoned here, all my life and longer?'

'No doubt.'

There was something of uncertainty and remonstrance in her look; something that was not all satisfaction. He wondered to detect it, and said:

'You are glad that he should do so?'

'Are you?' asked Little Dorrit, wistfully.

'Am I? Most heartily glad!'

'Then I know I ought to be.'

'And are you not?'

'It seems to me hard,' said Little Dorrit, 'that he should have lost so many years and suffered so much, and at last pay all the debts as well. It seems to me hard that he should pay in life and money both.'

'My dear child - ' Clennam was beginning.

'Yes, I know I am wrong,' she pleaded timidly, 'don't think any worse of me; it has grown up with me here.'

The prison, which could spoil so many things, had tainted Little Dorrit's mind no more than this. Engendered as the confusion was, in compassion for the poor prisoner, her father, it was the first speck Clennam had ever seen, it was the last speck Clennam ever saw, of the prison atmosphere upon her.

He thought this, and forebore to say another word. With the thought, her purity and goodness came before him in their brightest light. The little spot made them the more beautiful.

Worn out with her own emotions, and yielding to the silence of the room, her hand slowly slackened and failed in its fanning movement, and her head dropped down on the pillow at her father's side. Clennam rose softly, opened and closed the door without a sound, and passed from the prison, carrying the quiet with him into the turbulent streets.