

Chapter XLIII - Mostly, Prunes And Prism

Mrs General, always on her coach-box keeping the proprieties well together, took pains to form a surface on her very dear young friend, and Mrs General's very dear young friend tried hard to receive it. Hard as she had tried in her laborious life to attain many ends, she had never tried harder than she did now, to be varnished by Mrs General. It made her anxious and ill at ease to be operated upon by that smoothing hand, it is true; but she submitted herself to the family want in its greatness as she had submitted herself to the family want in its littleness, and yielded to her own inclinations in this thing no more than she had yielded to her hunger itself, in the days when she had saved her dinner that her father might have his supper.

One comfort that she had under the Ordeal by General was more sustaining to her, and made her more grateful than to a less devoted and affectionate spirit, not habituated to her struggles and sacrifices, might appear quite reasonable; and, indeed, it may often be observed in life, that spirits like Little Dorrit do not appear to reason half as carefully as the folks who get the better of them. The continued kindness of her sister was this comfort to Little Dorrit. It was nothing to her that the kindness took the form of tolerant patronage; she was used to that. It was nothing to her that it kept her in a tributary position, and showed her in attendance on the flaming car in which Miss Fanny sat on an elevated seat, exacting homage; she sought no better place. Always admiring Fanny's beauty, and grace, and readiness, and not now asking herself how much of her disposition to be strongly attached to Fanny was due to her own heart, and how much to Fanny's, she gave her all the sisterly fondness her great heart contained.

The wholesale amount of Prunes and Prism which Mrs General infused into the family life, combined with the perpetual plunges made by Fanny into society, left but a very small residue of any natural deposit at the bottom of the mixture. This rendered confidences with Fanny doubly precious to Little Dorrit, and heightened the relief they afforded her.

'Amy,' said Fanny to her one night when they were alone, after a day so tiring that Little Dorrit was quite worn out, though Fanny would have taken another dip into society with the greatest pleasure in life, 'I am going to put something into your little head. You won't guess what it is, I suspect.'

'I don't think that's likely, dear,' said Little Dorrit.

'Come, I'll give you a clue, child,' said Fanny. 'Mrs General.'

Prunes and Prism, in a thousand combinations, having been wearily in the ascendant all day - everything having been surface and varnish and show without substance - Little Dorrit looked as if she had hoped that Mrs General was safely tucked up in bed for some hours.

'Now, can you guess, Amy?' said Fanny.

'No, dear. Unless I have done anything,' said Little Dorrit, rather alarmed, and meaning anything calculated to crack varnish and ruffle surface.

Fanny was so very much amused by the misgiving, that she took up her favourite fan (being then seated at her dressing-table with her armoury of cruel instruments about her, most of them reeking from the heart of Sparkler), and tapped her sister frequently on the nose with it, laughing all the time.

'Oh, our Amy, our Amy!' said Fanny. 'What a timid little goose our Amy is! But this is nothing to laugh at. On the contrary, I am very cross, my dear.'

'As it is not with me, Fanny, I don't mind,' returned her sister, smiling.

'Ah! But I do mind,' said Fanny, 'and so will you, Pet, when I enlighten you. Amy, has it never struck you that somebody is monstrously polite to Mrs General?'

'Everybody is polite to Mrs General,' said Little Dorrit. 'Because - '

'Because she freezes them into it?' interrupted Fanny. 'I don't mean that; quite different from that. Come! Has it never struck you, Amy, that Pa is monstrously polite to Mrs General.'

Amy, murmuring 'No,' looked quite confounded. 'No; I dare say not. But he is,' said Fanny. 'He is, Amy. And remember my words. Mrs General has designs on Pa!'

'Dear Fanny, do you think it possible that Mrs General has designs on any one?'

'Do I think it possible?' retorted Fanny. 'My love, I know it. I tell you she has designs on Pa. And more than that, I tell you Pa considers her such a wonder, such a paragon of accomplishment, and such an acquisition to our family, that he is ready to get himself into a state of perfect infatuation with her at any moment. And that opens a pretty picture of things, I hope? Think of me with Mrs General for a Mama!'

Little Dorrit did not reply, 'Think of me with Mrs General for a Mama;' but she looked anxious, and seriously inquired what had led Fanny to these conclusions.

'Lord, my darling,' said Fanny, tartly. 'You might as well ask me how I know when a man is struck with myself! But, of course I do know. It happens pretty often: but I always know it. I know this in much the same way, I suppose. At all events, I know it.'

'You never heard Papa say anything?'

'Say anything?' repeated Fanny. 'My dearest, darling child, what necessity has he had, yet awhile, to say anything?'

'And you have never heard Mrs General say anything?' 'My goodness me, Amy,' returned Fanny, 'is she the sort of woman to say anything? Isn't it perfectly plain and clear that she has nothing to do at present but to hold herself upright, keep her aggravating gloves on, and go sweeping about? Say anything! If she had the ace of trumps in her hand at whist, she wouldn't say anything, child. It would come out when she played it.'

'At least, you may be mistaken, Fanny. Now, may you not?'

'O yes, I MAY be,' said Fanny, 'but I am not. However, I am glad you can contemplate such an escape, my dear, and I am glad that you can take this for the present with sufficient coolness to think of such a chance. It makes me hope that you may be able to bear the connection. I should not be able to bear it, and I should not try.'

'I'd marry young Sparkler first.'

'O, you would never marry him, Fanny, under any circumstances.'

'Upon my word, my dear,' rejoined that young lady with exceeding indifference, 'I wouldn't positively answer even for that. There's no knowing what might happen. Especially as I should have many opportunities, afterwards, of treating that woman, his mother, in her own style. Which I most decidedly should not be slow to avail myself of, Amy.'

No more passed between the sisters then; but what had passed gave the two subjects of Mrs General and Mr Sparkler great prominence in Little Dorrit's mind, and thenceforth she thought very much of both.

Mrs General, having long ago formed her own surface to such perfection that it hid whatever was below it (if anything), no observation was to be made in that quarter. Mr Dorrit was undeniably

very polite to her and had a high opinion of her; but Fanny, impetuous at most times, might easily be wrong for all that.

Whereas, the Sparkler question was on the different footing that any one could see what was going on there, and Little Dorrit saw it and pondered on it with many doubts and wonderings.

The devotion of Mr Sparkler was only to be equalled by the caprice and cruelty of his enslaver. Sometimes she would prefer him to such distinction of notice, that he would chuckle aloud with joy; next day, or next hour, she would overlook him so completely, and drop him into such an abyss of obscurity, that he would groan under a weak pretence of coughing. The constancy of his attendance never touched Fanny: though he was so inseparable from Edward, that, when that gentleman wished for a change of society, he was under the irksome necessity of gliding out like a conspirator in disguised boats and by secret doors and back ways; though he was so solicitous to know how Mr Dorrit was, that he called every other day to inquire, as if Mr Dorrit were the prey of an intermittent fever; though he was so constantly being paddled up and down before the principal windows, that he might have been supposed to have made a wager for a large stake to be paddled a thousand miles in a thousand hours; though whenever the gondola of his mistress left the gate, the gondola of Mr Sparkler shot out from some watery ambush and gave chase, as if she were a fair smuggler and he a custom-house officer. It was probably owing to this fortification of the natural strength of his constitution with so much exposure to the air, and the salt sea, that Mr Sparkler did not pine outwardly; but, whatever the cause, he was so far from having any prospect of moving his mistress by a languishing state of health, that he grew bluffer every day, and that peculiarity in his appearance of seeming rather a swelled boy than a young man, became developed to an extraordinary degree of ruddy puffiness.

Blandois calling to pay his respects, Mr Dorrit received him with affability as the friend of Mr Gowan, and mentioned to him his idea of commissioning Mr Gowan to transmit him to posterity. Blandois highly extolling it, it occurred to Mr Dorrit that it might be agreeable to Blandois to communicate to his friend the great opportunity reserved for him. Blandois accepted the commission with his own free elegance of manner, and swore he would discharge it before he was an hour older. On his imparting the news to Gowan, that Master gave Mr Dorrit to the Devil with great liberality some round dozen of times (for he resented patronage almost as much as he resented the want of it), and was inclined to quarrel with his friend for bringing him the message.

'It may be a defect in my mental vision, Blandois,' said he, 'but may I die if I see what you have to do with this.'

'Death of my life,' replied Blandois, 'nor I neither, except that I thought I was serving my friend.'

'By putting an upstart's hire in his pocket?' said Gowan, frowning.

'Do you mean that? Tell your other friend to get his head painted for the sign of some public-house, and to get it done by a sign-painter. Who am I, and who is he?'

'Professore,' returned the ambassador, 'and who is Blandois?'

Without appearing at all interested in the latter question, Gowan angrily whistled Mr Dorrit away. But, next day, he resumed the subject by saying in his off-hand manner and with a slighting laugh, 'Well, Blandois, when shall we go to this Maecenas of yours?'

'We journeymen must take jobs when we can get them. When shall we go and look after this job?' 'When you will,' said the injured Blandois, 'as you please. What have I to do with it? What is it to me?'

'I can tell you what it is to me,' said Gowan. 'Bread and cheese. One must eat! So come along, my Blandois.'

Mr Dorrit received them in the presence of his daughters and of Mr Sparkler, who happened, by some surprising accident, to be calling there. 'How are you, Sparkler?' said Gowan carelessly. 'When you have to live by your mother wit, old boy, I hope you may get on better than I do.'

Mr Dorrit then mentioned his proposal. 'Sir,' said Gowan, laughing, after receiving it gracefully enough, 'I am new to the trade, and not expert at its mysteries. I believe I ought to look at you in various lights, tell you you are a capital subject, and consider when I shall be sufficiently disengaged to devote myself with the necessary enthusiasm to the fine picture I mean to make of you. I assure you,' and he laughed again, 'I feel quite a traitor in the camp of those dear, gifted, good, noble fellows, my brother artists, by not doing the hocus-pocus better. But I have not been brought up to it, and it's too late to learn it. Now, the fact is, I am a very bad painter, but not much worse than the generality. If you are going to throw away a hundred guineas or so, I am as poor as a poor relation of great people usually is, and I shall be very much obliged to you, if you'll throw them away upon me. I'll do the best I can for the money; and if the best should be bad, why even then, you may probably have a bad picture with a small name to it, instead of a bad picture with a large name to it.'

This tone, though not what he had expected, on the whole suited Mr Dorrit remarkably well. It showed that the gentleman, highly

connected, and not a mere workman, would be under an obligation to him. He expressed his satisfaction in placing himself in Mr Gowan's hands, and trusted that he would have the pleasure, in their characters of private gentlemen, of improving his acquaintance.

'You are very good,' said Gowan. 'I have not forsworn society since I joined the brotherhood of the brush (the most delightful fellows on the face of the earth), and am glad enough to smell the old fine gunpowder now and then, though it did blow me into mid-air and my present calling. You'll not think, Mr Dorrit,' and here he laughed again in the easiest way, 'that I am lapsing into the freemasonry of the craft - for it's not so; upon my life I can't help betraying it wherever I go, though, by Jupiter, I love and honour the craft with all my might - if I propose a stipulation as to time and place?'

Ha! Mr Dorrit could erect no - hum - suspicion of that kind on Mr Gowan's frankness.

'Again you are very good,' said Gowan. 'Mr Dorrit, I hear you are going to Rome. I am going to Rome, having friends there. Let me begin to do you the injustice I have conspired to do you, there - not here. We shall all be hurried during the rest of our stay here; and though there's not a poorer man with whole elbows in Venice, than myself, I have not quite got all the Amateur out of me yet - comprising the trade again, you see! - and can't fall on to order, in a hurry, for the mere sake of the sixpences.' These remarks were not less favourably received by Mr Dorrit than their predecessors. They were the prelude to the first reception of Mr and Mrs Gowan at dinner, and they skilfully placed Gowan on his usual ground in the new family.

His wife, too, they placed on her usual ground. Miss Fanny understood, with particular distinctness, that Mrs Gowan's good looks had cost her husband very dear; that there had been a great disturbance about her in the Barnacle family; and that the Dowager Mrs Gowan, nearly heart-broken, had resolutely set her face against the marriage until overpowered by her maternal feelings. Mrs General likewise clearly understood that the attachment had occasioned much family grief and dissension. Of honest Mr Meagles no mention was made; except that it was natural enough that a person of that sort should wish to raise his daughter out of his own obscurity, and that no one could blame him for trying his best to do so.

Little Dorrit's interest in the fair subject of this easily accepted belief was too earnest and watchful to fail in accurate observation. She could see that it had its part in throwing upon Mrs Gowan the touch of a shadow under which she lived, and she even had an instinctive knowledge that there was not the least truth in it. But it had an influence in placing obstacles in the way of her association with Mrs

Gowan by making the Prunes and Prism school excessively polite to her, but not very intimate with her; and Little Dorrit, as an enforced sizar of that college, was obliged to submit herself humbly to its ordinances.

Nevertheless, there was a sympathetic understanding already established between the two, which would have carried them over greater difficulties, and made a friendship out of a more restricted intercourse. As though accidents were determined to be favourable to it, they had a new assurance of congeniality in the aversion which each perceived that the other felt towards Blandois of Paris; an aversion amounting to the repugnance and horror of a natural antipathy towards an odious creature of the reptile kind.

And there was a passive congeniality between them, besides this active one. To both of them, Blandois behaved in exactly the same manner; and to both of them his manner had uniformly something in it, which they both knew to be different from his bearing towards others. The difference was too minute in its expression to be perceived by others, but they knew it to be there. A mere trick of his evil eyes, a mere turn of his smooth white hand, a mere hair's-breadth of addition to the fall of his nose and the rise of the moustache in the most frequent movement of his face, conveyed to both of them, equally, a swagger personal to themselves. It was as if he had said, 'I have a secret power in this quarter. I know what I know.'

This had never been felt by them both in so great a degree, and never by each so perfectly to the knowledge of the other, as on a day when he came to Mr Dorrit's to take his leave before quitting Venice. Mrs Gowan was herself there for the same purpose, and he came upon the two together; the rest of the family being out. The two had not been together five minutes, and the peculiar manner seemed to convey to them, 'You were going to talk about me. Ha! Behold me here to prevent it!'

'Gowan is coming here?' said Blandois, with a smile.

Mrs Gowan replied he was not coming.

'Not coming!' said Blandois. 'Permit your devoted servant, when you leave here, to escort you home.'

'Thank you: I am not going home.'

'Not going home!' said Blandois. 'Then I am forlorn.'

That he might be; but he was not so forlorn as to roam away and leave them together. He sat entertaining them with his finest compliments,

and his choicest conversation; but he conveyed to them, all the time, 'No, no, no, dear ladies. Behold me here expressly to prevent it!'

He conveyed it to them with so much meaning, and he had such a diabolical persistency in him, that at length, Mrs Gowan rose to depart. On his offering his hand to Mrs Gowan to lead her down the staircase, she retained Little Dorrit's hand in hers, with a cautious pressure, and said, 'No, thank you. But, if you will please to see if my boatman is there, I shall be obliged to you.'

It left him no choice but to go down before them. As he did so, hat in hand, Mrs Gowan whispered:

'He killed the dog.'

'Does Mr Gowan know it?' Little Dorrit whispered.

'No one knows it. Don't look towards me; look towards him. He will turn his face in a moment. No one knows it, but I am sure he did. You are?'

'I - I think so,' Little Dorrit answered.

'Henry likes him, and he will not think ill of him; he is so generous and open himself. But you and I feel sure that we think of him as he deserves. He argued with Henry that the dog had been already poisoned when he changed so, and sprang at him. Henry believes it, but we do not. I see he is listening, but can't hear.'

Good-bye, my love! Good-bye!

The last words were spoken aloud, as the vigilant Blandois stopped, turned his head, and looked at them from the bottom of the staircase. Assuredly he did look then, though he looked his politest, as if any real philanthropist could have desired no better employment than to lash a great stone to his neck, and drop him into the water flowing beyond the dark arched gateway in which he stood. No such benefactor to mankind being on the spot, he handed Mrs Gowan to her boat, and stood there until it had shot out of the narrow view; when he handed himself into his own boat and followed.

Little Dorrit had sometimes thought, and now thought again as she retraced her steps up the staircase, that he had made his way too easily into her father's house. But so many and such varieties of people did the same, through Mr Dorrit's participation in his elder daughter's society mania, that it was hardly an exceptional case. A perfect fury for making acquaintances on whom to impress their riches and importance, had seized the House of Dorrit.

It appeared on the whole, to Little Dorrit herself, that this same society in which they lived, greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea. Numbers of people seemed to come abroad, pretty much as people had come into the prison; through debt, through idleness, relationship, curiosity, and general unfitness for getting on at home. They were brought into these foreign towns in the custody of couriers and local followers, just as the debtors had been brought into the prison. They prowled about the churches and picture-galleries, much in the old, dreary, prison-yard manner. They were usually going away again to-morrow or next week, and rarely knew their own minds, and seldom did what they said they would do, or went where they said they would go: in all this again, very like the prison debtors. They paid high for poor accommodation, and disparaged a place while they pretended to like it: which was exactly the Marshalsea custom. They were envied when they went away by people left behind, feigning not to want to go: and that again was the Marshalsea habit invariably. A certain set of words and phrases, as much belonging to tourists as the College and the Snuggery belonged to the jail, was always in their mouths. They had precisely the same incapacity for settling down to anything, as the prisoners used to have; they rather deteriorated one another, as the prisoners used to do; and they wore untidy dresses, and fell into a slouching way of life: still, always like the people in the Marshalsea.

The period of the family's stay at Venice came, in its course, to an end, and they moved, with their retinue, to Rome. Through a repetition of the former Italian scenes, growing more dirty and more haggard as they went on, and bringing them at length to where the very air was diseased, they passed to their destination. A fine residence had been taken for them on the Corso, and there they took up their abode, in a city where everything seemed to be trying to stand still for ever on the ruins of something else - except the water, which, following eternal laws, tumbled and rolled from its glorious multitude of fountains.

Here it seemed to Little Dorrit that a change came over the Marshalsea spirit of their society, and that Prunes and Prism got the upper hand. Everybody was walking about St Peter's and the Vatican on somebody else's cork legs, and straining every visible object through somebody else's sieve. Nobody said what anything was, but everybody said what the Mrs Generals, Mr Eustace, or somebody else said it was. The whole body of travellers seemed to be a collection of voluntary human sacrifices, bound hand and foot, and delivered over to Mr Eustace and his attendants, to have the entrails of their intellects arranged according to the taste of that sacred priesthood. Through the rugged remains of temples and tombs and palaces and senate halls and theatres and amphitheatres of ancient days, hosts of tongue-tied and blindfolded moderns were carefully feeling their way, incessantly repeating Prunes and Prism in the endeavour to set their

lips according to the received form. Mrs General was in her pure element. Nobody had an opinion. There was a formation of surface going on around her on an amazing scale, and it had not a flaw of courage or honest free speech in it.

Another modification of Prunes and Prism insinuated itself on Little Dorrit's notice very shortly after their arrival. They received an early visit from Mrs Merdle, who led that extensive department of life in the Eternal City that winter; and the skilful manner in which she and Fanny fenced with one another on the occasion, almost made her quiet sister wink, like the glittering of small-swords.

'So delighted,' said Mrs Merdle, 'to resume an acquaintance so inauspiciously begun at Martigny.'

'At Martigny, of course,' said Fanny. 'Charmed, I am sure!'

'I understand,' said Mrs Merdle, 'from my son Edmund Sparkler, that he has already improved that chance occasion. He has returned quite transported with Venice.'

'Indeed?' returned the careless Fanny. 'Was he there long?'

'I might refer that question to Mr Dorrit,' said Mrs Merdle, turning the bosom towards that gentleman; 'Edmund having been so much indebted to him for rendering his stay agreeable.'

'Oh, pray don't speak of it,' returned Fanny. 'I believe Papa had the pleasure of inviting Mr Sparkler twice or thrice, - but it was nothing. We had so many people about us, and kept such open house, that if he had that pleasure, it was less than nothing.'

'Except, my dear,' said Mr Dorrit, 'except - ha - as it afforded me unusual gratification to - hum - show by any means, however slight and worthless, the - ha, hum - high estimation in which, in - ha - common with the rest of the world, I hold so distinguished and princely a character as Mr Merdle's.'

The bosom received this tribute in its most engaging manner. 'Mr Merdle,' observed Fanny, as a means of dismissing Mr Sparkler into the background, 'is quite a theme of Papa's, you must know, Mrs Merdle.'

'I have been - ha - disappointed, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, 'to understand from Mr Sparkler that there is no great - hum - probability of Mr Merdle's coming abroad.'

'Why, indeed,' said Mrs Merdle, 'he is so much engaged and in such request, that I fear not. He has not been able to get abroad for years. You, Miss Dorrit, I believe have been almost continually abroad for a long time.'

'Oh dear yes,' drawled Fanny, with the greatest hardihood. 'An immense number of years.'

'So I should have inferred,' said Mrs Merdle.

'Exactly,' said Fanny.

'I trust, however,' resumed Mr Dorrit, 'that if I have not the - hum - great advantage of becoming known to Mr Merdle on this side of the Alps or Mediterranean, I shall have that honour on returning to England. It is an honour I particularly desire and shall particularly esteem.' 'Mr Merdle,' said Mrs Merdle, who had been looking admiringly at Fanny through her eye-glass, 'will esteem it, I am sure, no less.'

Little Dorrit, still habitually thoughtful and solitary though no longer alone, at first supposed this to be mere Prunes and Prism. But as her father when they had been to a brilliant reception at Mrs Merdle's, harped at their own family breakfast-table on his wish to know Mr Merdle, with the contingent view of benefiting by the advice of that wonderful man in the disposal of his fortune, she began to think it had a real meaning, and to entertain a curiosity on her own part to see the shining light of the time.