Chapter XLIV - The Dowager Mrs Gowan Is Reminded That 'It Never Does'

While the waters of Venice and the ruins of Rome were sunning themselves for the pleasure of the Dorrit family, and were daily being sketched out of all earthly proportion, lineament, and likeness, by travelling pencils innumerable, the firm of Doyce and Clennam hammered away in Bleeding Heart Yard, and the vigorous clink of iron upon iron was heard there through the working hours.

The younger partner had, by this time, brought the business into sound trim; and the elder, left free to follow his own ingenious devices, had done much to enhance the character of the factory. As an ingenious man, he had necessarily to encounter every discouragement that the ruling powers for a length of time had been able by any means to put in the way of this class of culprits; but that was only reasonable self-defence in the powers, since How to do it must obviously be regarded as the natural and mortal enemy of How not to do it. In this was to be found the basis of the wise system, by tooth and nail upheld by the Circumlocution Office, of warning every ingenious British subject to be ingenious at his peril: of harassing him, obstructing him, inviting robbers (by making his remedy uncertain, and expensive) to plunder him, and at the best of confiscating his property after a short term of enjoyment, as though invention were on a par with felony. The system had uniformly found great favour with the Barnacles, and that was only reasonable, too; for one who worthily invents must be in earnest, and the Barnacles abhorred and dreaded nothing half so much. That again was very reasonable; since in a country suffering under the affliction of a great amount of earnestness, there might, in an exceeding short space of time, be not a single Barnacle left sticking to a post.

Daniel Doyce faced his condition with its pains and penalties attached to it, and soberly worked on for the work's sake. Clennam cheering him with a hearty co-operation, was a moral support to him, besides doing good service in his business relation. The concern prospered, and the partners were fast friends. But Daniel could not forget the old design of so many years. It was not in reason to be expected that he should; if he could have lightly forgotten it, he could never have conceived it, or had the patience and perseverance to work it out. So Clennam thought, when he sometimes observed him of an evening looking over the models and drawings, and consoling himself by muttering with a sigh as he put them away again, that the thing was as true as it ever was.

To show no sympathy with so much endeavour, and so much disappointment, would have been to fail in what Clennam regarded as among the implied obligations of his partnership. A revival of the

passing interest in the subject which had been by chance awakened at the door of the Circumlocution Office, originated in this feeling. He asked his partner to explain the invention to him; 'having a lenient consideration,' he stipulated, 'for my being no workman, Doyce.'

'No workman?' said Doyce. 'You would have been a thorough workman if you had given yourself to it. You have as good a head for understanding such things as I have met with.'

'A totally uneducated one, I am sorry to add,' said Clennam.

'I don't know that,' returned Doyce, 'and I wouldn't have you say that. No man of sense who has been generally improved, and has improved himself, can be called quite uneducated as to anything. I don't particularly favour mysteries. I would as soon, on a fair and clear explanation, be judged by one class of man as another, provided he had the qualification I have named.'

'At all events,' said Clennam - 'this sounds as if we were exchanging compliments, but we know we are not - I shall have the advantage of as plain an explanation as can be given.'

'Well!' said Daniel, in his steady even way,'I'll try to make it so.'

He had the power, often to be found in union with such a character, of explaining what he himself perceived, and meant, with the direct force and distinctness with which it struck his own mind. His manner of demonstration was so orderly and neat and simple, that it was not easy to mistake him. There was something almost ludicrous in the complete irreconcilability of a vague conventional notion that he must be a visionary man, with the precise, sagacious travelling of his eye and thumb over the plans, their patient stoppages at particular points, their careful returns to other points whence little channels of explanation had to be traced up, and his steady manner of making everything good and everything sound at each important stage, before taking his hearer on a line's-breadth further. His dismissal of himself from his description, was hardly less remarkable. He never said, I discovered this adaptation or invented that combination; but showed the whole thing as if the Divine artificer had made it, and he had happened to find it; so modest he was about it, such a pleasant touch of respect was mingled with his quiet admiration of it, and so calmly convinced he was that it was established on irrefragable laws.

Not only that evening, but for several succeeding evenings, Clennam was quite charmed by this investigation. The more he pursued it, and the oftener he glanced at the grey head bending over it, and the shrewd eye kindling with pleasure in it and love of it - instrument for probing his heart though it had been made for twelve long years - the

less he could reconcile it to his younger energy to let it go without one effort more. At length he said:

'Doyce, it came to this at last - that the business was to be sunk with Heaven knows how many more wrecks, or begun all over again?'

'Yes,' returned Doyce, 'that's what the noblemen and gentlemen made of it after a dozen years.'

'And pretty fellows too!' said Clennam, bitterly.

'The usual thing!' observed Doyce. 'I must not make a martyr of myself, when I am one of so large a company.'

'Relinquish it, or begin it all over again?' mused Clennam.

'That was exactly the long and the short of it,' said Doyce.

'Then, my friend,' cried Clennam, starting up and taking his work-roughened hand, 'it shall be begun all over again!'

Doyce looked alarmed, and replied in a hurry - for him, 'No, no. Better put it by. Far better put it by. It will be heard of, one day. I can put it by. You forget, my good Clennam; I HAVE put it by. It's all at an end.'

'Yes, Doyce,' returned Clennam, 'at an end as far as your efforts and rebuffs are concerned, I admit, but not as far as mine are. I am younger than you: I have only once set foot in that precious office, and I am fresh game for them. Come! I'll try them. You shall do exactly as you have been doing since we have been together. I will add (as I easily can) to what I have been doing, the attempt to get public justice done to you; and, unless I have some success to report, you shall hear no more of it.'

Daniel Doyce was still reluctant to consent, and again and again urged that they had better put it by. But it was natural that he should gradually allow himself to be over-persuaded by Clennam, and should yield. Yield he did. So Arthur resumed the long and hopeless labour of striving to make way with the Circumlocution Office.

The waiting-rooms of that Department soon began to be familiar with his presence, and he was generally ushered into them by its janitors much as a pickpocket might be shown into a police-office; the principal difference being that the object of the latter class of public business is to keep the pickpocket, while the Circumlocution object was to get rid of Clennam. However, he was resolved to stick to the Great Department; and so the work of form- filling, corresponding, minuting, memorandum-making, signing, counter-signing, counter-

counter-signing, referring backwards and forwards, and referring sideways, crosswise, and zig-zag, recommenced.

Here arises a feature of the Circumlocution Office, not previously mentioned in the present record. When that admirable Department got into trouble, and was, by some infuriated members of Parliament whom the smaller Barnacles almost suspected of labouring under diabolic possession, attacked on the merits of no individual case, but as an Institution wholly abominable and Bedlamite; then the noble or right honourable Barnacle who represented it in the House, would smite that member and cleave him asunder, with a statement of the quantity of business (for the prevention of business) done by the Circumlocution Office. Then would that noble or right honourable Barnacle hold in his hand a paper containing a few figures, to which, with the permission of the House, he would entreat its attention. Then would the inferior Barnacles exclaim, obeying orders,'Hear, Hear, Hear!' and 'Read!' Then would the noble or right honourable Barnacle perceive, sir, from this little document, which he thought might carry conviction even to the perversest mind (Derisive laughter and cheering from the Barnacle fry), that within the short compass of the last financial half- year, this much-maligned Department (Cheers) had written and received fifteen thousand letters (Loud cheers), had written twenty-four thousand minutes (Louder cheers), and thirty-two thousand five hundred and seventeen memoranda (Vehement cheering). Nay, an ingenious gentleman connected with the Department, and himself a valuable public servant, had done him the favour to make a curious calculation of the amount of stationery consumed in it during the same period. It formed a part of this same short document; and he derived from it the remarkable fact that the sheets of foolscap paper it had devoted to the public service would pave the footways on both sides of Oxford Street from end to end, and leave nearly a quarter of a mile to spare for the park (Immense cheering and laughter); while of tape - red tape - it had used enough to stretch, in graceful festoons, from Hyde Park Corner to the General Post Office. Then, amidst a burst of official exultation, would the noble or right honourable Barnacle sit down, leaving the mutilated fragments of the Member on the field. No one, after that exemplary demolition of him, would have the hardihood to hint that the more the Circumlocution Office did, the less was done, and that the greatest blessing it could confer on an unhappy public would be to do nothing.

With sufficient occupation on his hands, now that he had this additional task - such a task had many and many a serviceable man died of before his day - Arthur Clennam led a life of slight variety. Regular visits to his mother's dull sick room, and visits scarcely less regular to Mr Meagles at Twickenham, were its only changes during many months.

He sadly and sorely missed Little Dorrit. He had been prepared to miss her very much, but not so much. He knew to the full extent only through experience, what a large place in his life was left blank when her familiar little figure went out of it. He felt, too, that he must relinquish the hope of its return, understanding the family character sufficiently well to be assured that he and she were divided by a broad ground of separation. The old interest he had had in her, and her old trusting reliance on him, were tinged with melancholy in his mind: so soon had change stolen over them, and so soon had they glided into the past with other secret tendernesses.

When he received her letter he was greatly moved, but did not the less sensibly feel that she was far divided from him by more than distance. It helped him to a clearer and keener perception of the place assigned him by the family. He saw that he was cherished in her grateful remembrance secretly, and that they resented him with the jail and the rest of its belongings.

Through all these meditations which every day of his life crowded about her, he thought of her otherwise in the old way. She was his innocent friend, his delicate child, his dear Little Dorrit. This very change of circumstances fitted curiously in with the habit, begun on the night when the roses floated away, of considering himself as a much older man than his years really made him. He regarded her from a point of view which in its remoteness, tender as it was, he little thought would have been unspeakable agony to her. He speculated about her future destiny, and about the husband she might have, with an affection for her which would have drained her heart of its dearest drop of hope, and broken it.

Everything about him tended to confirm him in the custom of looking on himself as an elderly man, from whom such aspirations as he had combated in the case of Minnie Gowan (though that was not so long ago either, reckoning by months and seasons), were finally departed. His relations with her father and mother were like those on which a widower son-in-law might have stood. If the twin sister who was dead had lived to pass away in the bloom of womanhood, and he had been her husband, the nature of his intercourse with Mr and Mrs Meagles would probably have been just what it was. This imperceptibly helped to render habitual the impression within him, that he had done with, and dismissed that part of life.

He invariably heard of Minnie from them, as telling them in her letters how happy she was, and how she loved her husband; but inseparable from that subject, he invariably saw the old cloud on Mr Meagles's face. Mr Meagles had never been quite so radiant since the marriage as before. He had never quite recovered the separation from Pet. He was the same good-humoured, open creature; but as if his face, from

being much turned towards the pictures of his two children which could show him only one look, unconsciously adopted a characteristic from them, it always had now, through all its changes of expression, a look of loss in it.

One wintry Saturday when Clennam was at the cottage, the Dowager Mrs Gowan drove up, in the Hampton Court equipage which pretended to be the exclusive equipage of so many individual proprietors. She descended, in her shady ambuscade of green fan, to favour Mr and Mrs Meagles with a call.

'And how do you both do, Papa and Mama Meagles?' said she, encouraging her humble connections. 'And when did you last hear from or about my poor fellow?'

My poor fellow was her son; and this mode of speaking of him politely kept alive, without any offence in the world, the pretence that he had fallen a victim to the Meagles' wiles.

'And the dear pretty one?' said Mrs Gowan. 'Have you later news of her than I have?'

Which also delicately implied that her son had been captured by mere beauty, and under its fascination had forgone all sorts of worldly advantages.

' I am sure,' said Mrs Gowan, without straining her attention on the answers she received, 'it's an unspeakable comfort to know they continue happy. My poor fellow is of such a restless disposition, and has been so used to roving about, and to being inconstant and popular among all manner of people, that it's the greatest comfort in life. I suppose they're as poor as mice, Papa Meagles?'

Mr Meagles, fidgety under the question, replied, 'I hope not, ma'am. I hope they will manage their little income.'

'Oh! my dearest Meagles!' returned the lady, tapping him on the arm with the green fan and then adroitly interposing it between a yawn and the company, 'how can you, as a man of the world and one of the most business-like of human beings - for you know you are business-like, and a great deal too much for us who are not - '

(Which went to the former purpose, by making Mr Meagles out to be an artful schemer.)

' - How can you talk about their managing their little means? My poor dear fellow! The idea of his managing hundreds! And the sweet pretty creature too. The notion of her managing! Papa Meagles! Don't!'

'Well, ma'am,' said Mr Meagles, gravely, 'I am sorry to admit, then, that Henry certainly does anticipate his means.'

'My dear good man - I use no ceremony with you, because we are a kind of relations; - positively, Mama Meagles,' exclaimed Mrs Gowan cheerfully, as if the absurd coincidence then flashed upon her for the first time, 'a kind of relations! My dear good man, in this world none of us can have everything our own way.'

This again went to the former point, and showed Mr Meagles with all good breeding that, so far, he had been brilliantly successful in his deep designs. Mrs Gowan thought the hit so good a one, that she dwelt upon it; repeating 'Not everything. No, no; in this world we must not expect everything, Papa Meagles.'

'And may I ask, ma'am,' retorted Mr Meagles, a little heightened in colour, 'who does expect everything?'

'Oh, nobody, nobody!' said Mrs Gowan. 'I was going to say - but you put me out. You interrupting Papa, what was I going to say?'

Drooping her large green fan, she looked musingly at Mr Meagles while she thought about it; a performance not tending to the cooling of that gentleman's rather heated spirits.

'Ah! Yes, to be sure!' said Mrs Gowan. 'You must remember that my poor fellow has always been accustomed to expectations. They may have been realised, or they may not have been realised - '

'Let us say, then, may not have been realised,' observed Mr Meagles.

The Dowager for a moment gave him an angry look; but tossed it off with her head and her fan, and pursued the tenor of her way in her former manner.

'It makes no difference. My poor fellow has been accustomed to that sort of thing, and of course you knew it, and were prepared for the consequences. I myself always clearly foresaw the consequences, and am not surprised. And you must not be surprised.

In fact, can't be surprised. Must have been prepared for it.'

Mr Meagles looked at his wife and at Clennam; bit his lip; and coughed.

'And now here's my poor fellow,' Mrs Gowan pursued, 'receiving notice that he is to hold himself in expectation of a baby, and all the expenses attendant on such an addition to his family! Poor Henry! But

it can't be helped now; it's too late to help it now. Only don't talk of anticipating means, Papa Meagles, as a discovery; because that would be too much.'

'Too much, ma'am?' said Mr Meagles, as seeking an explanation.

'There, there!' said Mrs Gowan, putting him in his inferior place with an expressive action of her hand. 'Too much for my poor fellow's mother to bear at this time of day. They are fast married, and can't be unmarried. There, there! I know that! You needn't tell me that, Papa Meagles. I know it very well. What was it I said just now? That it was a great comfort they continued happy. It is to be hoped they will still continue happy. It is to be hoped Pretty One will do everything she can to make my poor fellow happy, and keep him contented. Papa and Mama Meagles, we had better say no more about it. We never did look at this subject from the same side, and we never shall. There, there! Now I am good.'

Truly, having by this time said everything she could say in maintenance of her wonderfully mythical position, and in admonition to Mr Meagles that he must not expect to bear his honours of alliance too cheaply, Mrs Gowan was disposed to forgo the rest. If Mr Meagles had submitted to a glance of entreaty from Mrs Meagles, and an expressive gesture from Clennam, he would have left her in the undisturbed enjoyment of this state of mind. But Pet was the darling and pride of his heart; and if he could ever have championed her more devotedly, or loved her better, than in the days when she was the sunlight of his house, it would have been now, when, as its daily grace and delight, she was lost to it.

'Mrs Gowan, ma'am,' said Mr Meagles, 'I have been a plain man all my life. If I was to try - no matter whether on myself, on somebody else, or both - any genteel mystifications, I should probably not succeed in them.'

'Papa Meagles,' returned the Dowager, with an affable smile, but with the bloom on her cheeks standing out a little more vividly than usual as the neighbouring surface became paler,'probably not.'

'Therefore, my good madam,' said Mr Meagles, at great pains to restrain himself, 'I hope I may, without offence, ask to have no such mystification played off upon me.' 'Mama Meagles,' observed Mrs Gowan, 'your good man is incomprehensible.'

Her turning to that worthy lady was an artifice to bring her into the discussion, quarrel with her, and vanquish her. Mr Meagles interposed to prevent that consummation.

'Mother,' said he, 'you are inexpert, my dear, and it is not a fair match. Let me beg of you to remain quiet. Come, Mrs Gowan, come! Let us try to be sensible; let us try to be good-natured; let us try to be fair. Don't you pity Henry, and I won't pity Pet. And don't be one-sided, my dear madam; it's not considerate, it's not kind. Don't let us say that we hope Pet will make Henry happy, or even that we hope Henry will make Pet happy,' (Mr Meagles himself did not look happy as he spoke the words,) 'but let us hope they will make each other happy.'

'Yes, sure, and there leave it, father,' said Mrs Meagles the kind-hearted and comfortable.

'Why, mother, no,' returned Mr Meagles, 'not exactly there. I can't quite leave it there; I must say just half-a-dozen words more. Mrs Gowan, I hope I am not over-sensitive. I believe I don't look it.'

'Indeed you do not,' said Mrs Gowan, shaking her head and the great green fan together, for emphasis.

'Thank you, ma'am; that's well. Notwithstanding which, I feel a little - I don't want to use a strong word - now shall I say hurt?' asked Mr Meagles at once with frankness and moderation, and with a conciliatory appeal in his tone.

'Say what you like,' answered Mrs Gowan. 'It is perfectly indifferent to me.'

'No, no, don't say that,' urged Mr Meagles, 'because that's not responding amiably. I feel a little hurt when I hear references made to consequences having been foreseen, and to its being too late now, and so forth.'

'Do you, Papa Meagles?' said Mrs Gowan. 'I am not surprised.'

'Well, ma'am,' reasoned Mr Meagles, 'I was in hopes you would have been at least surprised, because to hurt me wilfully on so tender a subject is surely not generous.' 'I am not responsible,' said Mrs Gowan, 'for your conscience, you know.'

Poor Mr Meagles looked aghast with astonishment.

'If I am unluckily obliged to carry a cap about with me, which is yours and fits you,' pursued Mrs Gowan, 'don't blame me for its pattern, Papa Meagles, I beg!' 'Why, good Lord, ma'am!' Mr Meagles broke out, 'that's as much as to state - '

'Now, Papa Meagles, Papa Meagles,' said Mrs Gowan, who became extremely deliberate and prepossessing in manner whenever that gentleman became at all warm, 'perhaps to prevent confusion, I had better speak for myself than trouble your kindness to speak for me.

It's as much as to state, you begin. If you please, I will finish the sentence. It is as much as to state - not that I wish to press it or even recall it, for it is of no use now, and my only wish is to make the best of existing circumstances - that from the first to the last I always objected to this match of yours, and at a very late period yielded a most unwilling consent to it.'

'Mother!' cried Mr Meagles. 'Do you hear this! Arthur! Do you hear this!'

'The room being of a convenient size,' said Mrs Gowan, looking about as she fanned herself, 'and quite charmingly adapted in all respects to conversation, I should imagine I am audible in any part of it.'

Some moments passed in silence, before Mr Meagles could hold himself in his chair with sufficient security to prevent his breaking out of it at the next word he spoke. At last he said: 'Ma'am, I am very unwilling to revive them, but I must remind you what my opinions and my course were, all along, on that unfortunate subject.'

'O, my dear sir!' said Mrs Gowan, smiling and shaking her head with accusatory intelligence, 'they were well understood by me, I assure you.'

'I never, ma'am,' said Mr Meagles, 'knew unhappiness before that time, I never knew anxiety before that time. It was a time of such distress to me that - ' That Mr Meagles could really say no more about it, in short, but passed his handkerchief before his Face.

'I understood the whole affair,' said Mrs Gowan, composedly looking over her fan. 'As you have appealed to Mr Clennam, I may appeal to Mr Clennam, too. He knows whether I did or not.'

'I am very unwilling,' said Clennam, looked to by all parties, 'to take any share in this discussion, more especially because I wish to preserve the best understanding and the clearest relations with Mr Henry Gowan. I have very strong reasons indeed, for entertaining that wish. Mrs Gowan attributed certain views of furthering the marriage to my friend here, in conversation with me before it took place; and I endeavoured to undeceive her. I represented that I knew him (as I did and do) to be strenuously opposed to it, both in opinion and action.'

'You see?' said Mrs Gowan, turning the palms of her hands towards Mr Meagles, as if she were Justice herself, representing to him that he had better confess, for he had not a leg to stand on. 'You see? Very good! Now Papa and Mama Meagles both!' here she rose; 'allow me to take the liberty of putting an end to this rather formidable controversy. I will not say another word upon its merits. I will only say that it is an additional proof of what one knows from all experience; that this kind of thing never answers - as my poor fellow himself would say, that it never pays - in one word, that it never does.'

Mr Meagles asked, What kind of thing?

'It is in vain,' said Mrs Gowan, 'for people to attempt to get on together who have such extremely different antecedents; who are jumbled against each other in this accidental, matrimonial sort of way; and who cannot look at the untoward circumstance which has shaken them together in the same light. It never does.'

Mr Meagles was beginning, 'Permit me to say, ma'am - '

'No, don't,' returned Mrs Gowan. 'Why should you! It is an ascertained fact. It never does. I will therefore, if you please, go my way, leaving you to yours. I shall at all times be happy to receive my poor fellow's pretty wife, and I shall always make a point of being on the most affectionate terms with her. But as to these terms, semi-family and semi-stranger, semi-goring and semi- boring, they form a state of things quite amusing in its impracticability. I assure you it never does.'

The Dowager here made a smiling obeisance, rather to the room than to any one in it, and therewith took a final farewell of Papa and Mama Meagles. Clennam stepped forward to hand her to the Pill-Box which was at the service of all the Pills in Hampton Court Palace; and she got into that vehicle with distinguished serenity, and was driven away.

Thenceforth the Dowager, with a light and careless humour, often recounted to her particular acquaintance how, after a hard trial, she had found it impossible to know those people who belonged to Henry's wife, and who had made that desperate set to catch him. Whether she had come to the conclusion beforehand, that to get rid of them would give her favourite pretence a better air, might save her some occasional inconvenience, and could risk no loss (the pretty creature being fast married, and her father devoted to her), was best known to herself. Though this history has its opinion on that point too, and decidedly in the affirmative.