

Chapter XLVI - The Dreams Of Mrs Flintwinch Thicken

The shady waiting-rooms of the Circumlocution Office, where he passed a good deal of time in company with various troublesome Convicts who were under sentence to be broken alive on that wheel, had afforded Arthur Clennam ample leisure, in three or four successive days, to exhaust the subject of his late glimpse of Miss Wade and Tattycoram. He had been able to make no more of it and no less of it, and in this unsatisfactory condition he was fain to leave it.

During this space he had not been to his mother's dismal old house.

One of his customary evenings for repairing thither now coming round, he left his dwelling and his partner at nearly nine o'clock, and slowly walked in the direction of that grim home of his youth.

It always affected his imagination as wrathful, mysterious, and sad; and his imagination was sufficiently impressible to see the whole neighbourhood under some tinge of its dark shadow. As he went along, upon a dreary night, the dim streets by which he went, seemed all depositories of oppressive secrets. The deserted counting-houses, with their secrets of books and papers locked up in chests and safes; the banking-houses, with their secrets of strong rooms and wells, the keys of which were in a very few secret pockets and a very few secret breasts; the secrets of all the dispersed grinders in the vast mill, among whom there were doubtless plunderers, forgers, and trust-betrayers of many sorts, whom the light of any day that dawned might reveal; he could have fancied that these things, in hiding, imparted a heaviness to the air. The shadow thickening and thickening as he approached its source, he thought of the secrets of the lonely church-vaults, where the people who had hoarded and secreted in iron coffers were in their turn similarly hoarded, not yet at rest from doing harm; and then of the secrets of the river, as it rolled its turbid tide between two frowning wildernesses of secrets, extending, thick and dense, for many miles, and warding off the free air and the free country swept by winds and wings of birds.

The shadow still darkening as he drew near the house, the melancholy room which his father had once occupied, haunted by the appealing face he had himself seen fade away with him when there was no other watcher by the bed, arose before his mind. Its close air was secret. The gloom, and must, and dust of the whole tenement, were secret. At the heart of it his mother presided, inflexible of face, indomitable of will, firmly holding all the secrets of her own and his father's life, and austere opposing herself, front to front, to the great final secret of all life.

He had turned into the narrow and steep street from which the court of enclosure wherein the house stood opened, when another footstep turned into it behind him, and so close upon his own that he was jostled to the wall. As his mind was teeming with these thoughts, the encounter took him altogether unprepared, so that the other passenger had had time to say, boisterously, 'Pardon! Not my fault!' and to pass on before the instant had elapsed which was requisite to his recovery of the realities about him.

When that moment had flashed away, he saw that the man striding on before him was the man who had been so much in his mind during the last few days. It was no casual resemblance, helped out by the force of the impression the man made upon him. It was the man; the man he had followed in company with the girl, and whom he had overheard talking to Miss Wade.

The street was a sharp descent and was crooked too, and the man (who although not drunk had the air of being flushed with some strong drink) went down it so fast that Clennam lost him as he looked at him. With no defined intention of following him, but with an impulse to keep the figure in view a little longer, Clennam quickened his pace to pass the twist in the street which hid him from his sight. On turning it, he saw the man no more.

Standing now, close to the gateway of his mother's house, he looked down the street: but it was empty. There was no projecting shadow large enough to obscure the man; there was no turning near that he could have taken; nor had there been any audible sound of the opening and closing of a door. Nevertheless, he concluded that the man must have had a key in his hand, and must have opened one of the many house-doors and gone in.

Ruminating on this strange chance and strange glimpse, he turned into the court-yard. As he looked, by mere habit, towards the feebly lighted windows of his mother's room, his eyes encountered the figure he had just lost, standing against the iron railings of the little waste enclosure looking up at those windows and laughing to himself. Some of the many vagrant cats who were always prowling about there by night, and who had taken fright at him, appeared to have stopped when he had stopped, and were looking at him with eyes by no means unlike his own from tops of walls and porches, and other safe points of pause. He had only halted for a moment to entertain himself thus; he immediately went forward, throwing the end of his cloak off his shoulder as he went, ascended the unevenly sunken steps, and knocked a sounding knock at the door.

Clennam's surprise was not so absorbing but that he took his resolution without any incertitude. He went up to the door too, and

ascended the steps too. His friend looked at him with a braggart air, and sang to himself.

'Who passes by this road so late? Compagnon de la Majolaine; Who passes by this road so late? Always gay!'

After which he knocked again.

'You are impatient, sir,' said Arthur.

'I am, sir. Death of my life, sir,' returned the stranger, 'it's my character to be impatient!' The sound of Mistress Affery cautiously chaining the door before she opened it, caused them both to look that way. Affery opened it a very little, with a flaring candle in her hands and asked who was that, at that time of night, with that knock! 'Why, Arthur!' she added with astonishment, seeing him first. 'Not you sure? Ah, Lord save us! No,' she cried out, seeing the other. 'Him again!'

'It's true! Him again, dear Mrs Flintwinch,' cried the stranger. 'Open the door, and let me take my dear friend Jeremiah to my arms! Open the door, and let me hasten myself to embrace my Flintwinch!'

'He's not at home,' cried Affery.

'Fetch him!' cried the stranger. 'Fetch my Flintwinch! Tell him that it is his old Blandois, who comes from arriving in England; tell him that it is his little boy who is here, his cabbage, his well-beloved! Open the door, beautiful Mrs Flintwinch, and in the meantime let me to pass upstairs, to present my compliments - homage of Blandois - to my lady! My lady lives always? It is well.

Open then!'

To Arthur's increased surprise, Mistress Affery, stretching her eyes wide at himself, as if in warning that this was not a gentleman for him to interfere with, drew back the chain, and opened the door. The stranger, without ceremony, walked into the hall, leaving Arthur to follow him.

'Despatch then! Achieve then! Bring my Flintwinch! Announce me to my lady!' cried the stranger, clanking about the stone floor.

'Pray tell me, Affery,' said Arthur aloud and sternly, as he surveyed him from head to foot with indignation; 'who is this gentleman?'

'Pray tell me, Affery,' the stranger repeated in his turn, 'who - ha, ha, ha! - who is this gentleman?'

The voice of Mrs Clennam opportunely called from her chamber above, 'Affery, let them both come up. Arthur, come straight to me!'

'Arthur?' exclaimed Blandois, taking off his hat at arm's length, and bringing his heels together from a great stride in making him a flourishing bow. 'The son of my lady? I am the all-devoted of the son of my lady!'

Arthur looked at him again in no more flattering manner than before, and, turning on his heel without acknowledgment, went up- stairs. The visitor followed him up-stairs. Mistress Affery took the key from behind the door, and deftly slipped out to fetch her lord.

A bystander, informed of the previous appearance of Monsieur Blandois in that room, would have observed a difference in Mrs Clennam's present reception of him. Her face was not one to betray it; and her suppressed manner, and her set voice, were equally under her control. It wholly consisted in her never taking her eyes off his face from the moment of his entrance, and in her twice or thrice, when he was becoming noisy, swaying herself a very little forward in the chair in which she sat upright, with her hands immovable upon its elbows; as if she gave him the assurance that he should be presently heard at any length he would. Arthur did not fail to observe this; though the difference between the present occasion and the former was not within his power of observation.

'Madame,' said Blandois, 'do me the honour to present me to Monsieur, your son. It appears to me, madame, that Monsieur, your son, is disposed to complain of me. He is not polite.'

'Sir,' said Arthur, striking in expeditiously, 'whoever you are, and however you come to be here, if I were the master of this house I would lose no time in placing you on the outside of it.'

'But you are not,' said his mother, without looking at him. 'Unfortunately for the gratification of your unreasonable temper, you are not the master, Arthur.'

'I make no claim to be, mother. If I object to this person's manner of conducting himself here, and object to it so much, that if I had any authority here I certainly would not suffer him to remain a minute, I object on your account.'

'In the case of objection being necessary,' she returned, 'I could object for myself. And of course I should.'

The subject of their dispute, who had seated himself, laughed aloud, and rapped his legs with his hand.

'You have no right,' said Mrs Clennam, always intent on Blandois, however directly she addressed her son, 'to speak to the prejudice of any gentleman (least of all a gentleman from another country), because he does not conform to your standard, or square his behaviour by your rules. It is possible that the gentleman may, on similar grounds, object to you.'

'I hope so,' returned Arthur.

'The gentleman,' pursued Mrs Clennam, 'on a former occasion brought a letter of recommendation to us from highly esteemed and responsible correspondents. I am perfectly unacquainted with the gentleman's object in coming here at present. I am entirely ignorant of it, and cannot be supposed likely to be able to form the remotest guess at its nature;' her habitual frown became stronger, as she very slowly and weightily emphasised those words; 'but, when the gentleman proceeds to explain his object, as I shall beg him to have the goodness to do to myself and Flintwinch, when Flintwinch returns, it will prove, no doubt, to be one more or less in the usual way of our business, which it will be both our business and our pleasure to advance. It can be nothing else.'

'We shall see, madame!' said the man of business.

'We shall see,' she assented. 'The gentleman is acquainted with Flintwinch; and when the gentleman was in London last, I remember to have heard that he and Flintwinch had some entertainment or good-fellowship together. I am not in the way of knowing much that passes outside this room, and the jingle of little worldly things beyond it does not much interest me; but I remember to have heard that.'

'Right, madame. It is true.' He laughed again, and whistled the burden of the tune he had sung at the door.

'Therefore, Arthur,' said his mother, 'the gentleman comes here as an acquaintance, and no stranger; and it is much to be regretted that your unreasonable temper should have found offence in him. I regret it. I say so to the gentleman. You will not say so, I know; therefore I say it for myself and Flintwinch, since with us two the gentleman's business lies.'

The key of the door below was now heard in the lock, and the door was heard to open and close. In due sequence Mr Flintwinch appeared; on whose entrance the visitor rose from his chair, laughing loud, and folded him in a close embrace.

'How goes it, my cherished friend!' said he. 'How goes the world, my Flintwinch? Rose-coloured? So much the better, so much the better!

Ah, but you look charming! Ah, but you look young and fresh as the flowers of Spring! Ah, good little boy! Brave child, brave child!

While heaping these compliments on Mr Flintwinch, he rolled him about with a hand on each of his shoulders, until the staggerings of that gentleman, who under the circumstances was dryer and more twisted than ever, were like those of a teetotum nearly spent.

'I had a presentiment, last time, that we should be better and more intimately acquainted. Is it coming on you, Flintwinch? Is it yet coming on?'

'Why, no, sir,' retorted Mr Flintwinch. 'Not unusually. Hadn't you better be seated? You have been calling for some more of that port, sir, I guess?'

'Ah, Little joker! Little pig!' cried the visitor. 'Ha ha ha ha!' And throwing Mr Flintwinch away, as a closing piece of raillery, he sat down again.

The amazement, suspicion, resentment, and shame, with which Arthur looked on at all this, struck him dumb. Mr Flintwinch, who had spun backward some two or three yards under the impetus last given to him, brought himself up with a face completely unchanged in its stolidity except as it was affected by shortness of breath, and looked hard at Arthur. Not a whit less reticent and wooden was Mr Flintwinch outwardly, than in the usual course of things: the only perceptible difference in him being that the knot of cravat which was generally under his ear, had worked round to the back of his head: where it formed an ornamental appendage not unlike a bagwig, and gave him something of a courtly appearance. As Mrs Clennam never removed her eyes from Blandois (on whom they had some effect, as a steady look has on a lower sort of dog), so Jeremiah never removed his from Arthur. It was as if they had tacitly agreed to take their different provinces. Thus, in the ensuing silence, Jeremiah stood scraping his chin and looking at Arthur as though he were trying to screw his thoughts out of him with an instrument.

After a little, the visitor, as if he felt the silence irksome, rose, and impatiently put himself with his back to the sacred fire which had burned through so many years. Thereupon Mrs Clennam said, moving one of her hands for the first time, and moving it very slightly with an action of dismissal:

'Please to leave us to our business, Arthur.' 'Mother, I do so with reluctance.'

'Never mind with what,' she returned, 'or with what not. Please to leave us. Come back at any other time when you may consider it a duty to bury half an hour wearily here. Good night.'

She held up her muffled fingers that he might touch them with his, according to their usual custom, and he stood over her wheeled chair to touch her face with his lips. He thought, then, that her cheek was more strained than usual, and that it was colder. As he followed the direction of her eyes, in rising again, towards Mr Flintwinch's good friend, Mr Blandois, Mr Blandois snapped his finger and thumb with one loud contemptuous snap.

'I leave your - your business acquaintance in my mother's room, Mr Flintwinch,' said Clennam, 'with a great deal of surprise and a great deal of unwillingness.'

The person referred to snapped his finger and thumb again.

'Good night, mother.'

'Good night.'

'I had a friend once, my good comrade Flintwinch,' said Blandois, standing astride before the fire, and so evidently saying it to arrest Clennam's retreating steps, that he lingered near the door; 'I had a friend once, who had heard so much of the dark side of this city and its ways, that he wouldn't have confided himself alone by night with two people who had an interest in getting him under the ground - my faith! not even in a respectable house like this - unless he was bodily too strong for them. Bah! What a poltroon, my Flintwinch! Eh?'

'A cur, sir.'

'Agreed! A cur. But he wouldn't have done it, my Flintwinch, unless he had known them to have the will to silence him, without the power. He wouldn't have drunk from a glass of water under such circumstances - not even in a respectable house like this, my Flintwinch - unless he had seen one of them drink first, and swallow too!'

Disdaining to speak, and indeed not very well able, for he was half-choking, Clennam only glanced at the visitor as he passed out.

The visitor saluted him with another parting snap, and his nose came down over his moustache and his moustache went up under his nose, in an ominous and ugly smile.

'For Heaven's sake, Affery,' whispered Clennam, as she opened the door for him in the dark hall, and he groped his way to the sight of the night-sky, 'what is going on here?'

Her own appearance was sufficiently ghastly, standing in the dark with her apron thrown over her head, and speaking behind it in a low, deadened voice.

'Don't ask me anything, Arthur. I've been in a dream for ever so long. Go away!'

He went out, and she shut the door upon him. He looked up at the windows of his mother's room, and the dim light, deadened by the yellow blinds, seemed to say a response after Affery, and to mutter, 'Don't ask me anything. Go away!'