

## Chapter LIII - Missing

The term of Mr Dorrit's visit was within two days of being out, and he was about to dress for another inspection by the Chief Butler (whose victims were always dressed expressly for him), when one of the servants of the hotel presented himself bearing a card. Mr Dorrit, taking it, read:

'Mrs Finching.'

The servant waited in speechless deference.

'Man, man,' said Mr Dorrit, turning upon him with grievous indignation, 'explain your motive in bringing me this ridiculous name. I am wholly unacquainted with it. Finching, sir?' said Mr Dorrit, perhaps avenging himself on the Chief Butler by Substitute.

'ha! What do you mean by Finching?'

The man, man, seemed to mean Flinching as much as anything else, for he backed away from Mr Dorrit's severe regard, as he replied, 'A lady, sir.'

'I know no such lady, sir,' said Mr Dorrit. 'Take this card away. I know no Finching of either sex.'

'Ask your pardon, sir. The lady said she was aware she might be unknown by name. But she begged me to say, sir, that she had formerly the honour of being acquainted with Miss Dorrit. The lady said, sir, the youngest Miss Dorrit.'

Mr Dorrit knitted his brows and rejoined, after a moment or two, 'Inform Mrs Finching, sir,' emphasising the name as if the innocent man were solely responsible for it, 'that she can come up.'

He had reflected, in his momentary pause, that unless she were admitted she might leave some message, or might say something below, having a disgraceful reference to that former state of existence. Hence the concession, and hence the appearance of Flora, piloted in by the man, man.

'I have not the pleasure,' said Mr Dorrit, standing with the card in his hand, and with an air which imported that it would scarcely have been a first-class pleasure if he had had it, 'of knowing either this name, or yourself, madam. Place a chair, sir.' The responsible man, with a start, obeyed, and went out on tiptoe. Flora, putting aside her veil with a bashful tremor upon her, proceeded to introduce herself. At the same time a singular combination of perfumes was diffused

through the room, as if some brandy had been put by mistake in a lavender-water bottle, or as if some lavender-water had been put by mistake in a brandy-bottle.

'I beg Mr Dorrit to offer a thousand apologies and indeed they would be far too few for such an intrusion which I know must appear extremely bold in a lady and alone too, but I thought it best upon the whole however difficult and even apparently improper though Mr F.'s Aunt would have willingly accompanied me and as a character of great force and spirit would probably have struck one possessed of such a knowledge of life as no doubt with so many changes must have been acquired, for Mr F. himself said frequently that although well educated in the neighbourhood of Blackheath at as high as eighty guineas which is a good deal for parents and the plate kept back too on going away but that is more a meanness than its value that he had learnt more in his first years as a commercial traveller with a large commission on the sale of an article that nobody would hear of much less buy which preceded the wine trade a long time than in the whole six years in that academy conducted by a college Bachelor, though why a Bachelor more clever than a married man I do not see and never did but pray excuse me that is not the point.'

Mr Dorrit stood rooted to the carpet, a statue of mystification.

'I must openly admit that I have no pretensions,' said Flora, 'but having known the dear little thing which under altered circumstances appears a liberty but is not so intended and Goodness knows there was no favour in half-a-crown a-day to such a needle as herself but quite the other way and as to anything lowering in it far from it the labourer is worthy of his hire and I am sure I only wish he got it oftener and more animal food and less rheumatism in the back and legs poor soul.'

'Madam,' said Mr Dorrit, recovering his breath by a great effort, as the relict of the late Mr Finching stopped to take hers; 'madam,' said Mr Dorrit, very red in the face, 'if I understand you to refer to - ha - to anything in the antecedents of - hum - a daughter of mine, involving - ha hum - daily compensation, madam, I beg to observe that the - ha - fact, assuming it - ha - to be fact, never was within my knowledge. Hum. I should not have permitted it. Ha. Never! Never!'

'Unnecessary to pursue the subject,' returned Flora, 'and would not have mentioned it on any account except as supposing it a favourable and only letter of introduction but as to being fact no doubt whatever and you may set your mind at rest for the very dress I have on now can prove it and sweetly made though there is no denying that it would tell better on a better figure for my own is much too fat though how to bring it down I know not, pray excuse me I am roving off

again.' Mr Dorrit backed to his chair in a stony way, and seated himself, as Flora gave him a softening look and played with her parasol.

'The dear little thing,' said Flora, 'having gone off perfectly limp and white and cold in my own house or at least papa's for though not a freehold still a long lease at a peppercorn on the morning when Arthur - foolish habit of our youthful days and Mr Clennam far more adapted to existing circumstances particularly addressing a stranger and that stranger a gentleman in an elevated station - communicated the glad tidings imparted by a person of name of Pancks emboldens me.'

At the mention of these two names, Mr Dorrit frowned, stared, frowned again, hesitated with his fingers at his lips, as he had hesitated long ago, and said, 'Do me the favour to - ha - state your pleasure, madam.'

'Mr Dorrit,' said Flora, 'you are very kind in giving me permission and highly natural it seems to me that you should be kind for though more stately I perceive a likeness filled out of course but a likeness still, the object of my intruding is my own without the slightest consultation with any human being and most decidedly not with Arthur - pray excuse me Doyce and Clennam I don't know what I am saying Mr Clennam solus - for to put that individual linked by a golden chain to a purple time when all was ethereal out of any anxiety would be worth to me the ransom of a monarch not that I have the least idea how much that would come to but using it as the total of all I have in the world and more.'

Mr Dorrit, without greatly regarding the earnestness of these latter words, repeated, 'State your pleasure, madam.'

'It's not likely I well know,' said Flora, 'but it's possible and being possible when I had the gratification of reading in the papers that you had arrived from Italy and were going back I made up my mind to try it for you might come across him or hear something of him and if so what a blessing and relief to all!'

'Allow me to ask, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, with his ideas in wild confusion, 'to whom - ha - To whom,' he repeated it with a raised voice in mere desperation, 'you at present allude?'

'To the foreigner from Italy who disappeared in the City as no doubt you have read in the papers equally with myself,' said Flora, 'not referring to private sources by the name of Pancks from which one gathers what dreadfully ill-natured things some people are wicked enough to whisper most likely judging others by themselves and what

the uneasiness and indignation of Arthur - quite unable to overcome it  
Doyle and Clennam - cannot fail to be.'

It happened, fortunately for the elucidation of any intelligible result, that Mr Dorrit had heard or read nothing about the matter. This caused Mrs Finching, with many apologies for being in great practical difficulties as to finding the way to her pocket among the stripes of her dress at length to produce a police handbill, setting forth that a foreign gentleman of the name of Blandois, last from Venice, had unaccountably disappeared on such a night in such a part of the city of London; that he was known to have entered such a house, at such an hour; that he was stated by the inmates of that house to have left it, about so many minutes before midnight; and that he had never been beheld since. This, with exact particulars of time and locality, and with a good detailed description of the foreign gentleman who had so mysteriously vanished, Mr Dorrit read at large.

'Blandois!' said Mr Dorrit. 'Venice! And this description! I know this gentleman. He has been in my house. He is intimately acquainted with a gentleman of good family (but in indifferent circumstances), of whom I am a - hum - patron.'

'Then my humble and pressing entreaty is the more,' said Flora, 'that in travelling back you will have the kindness to look for this foreign gentleman along all the roads and up and down all the turnings and to make inquiries for him at all the hotels and orange-trees and vineyards and volcanoes and places for he must be somewhere and why doesn't he come forward and say he's there and clear all parties up?'

'Pray, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, referring to the handbill again, 'who is Clennam and Co.? Ha. I see the name mentioned here, in connection with the occupation of the house which Monsieur Blandois was seen to enter: who is Clennam and Co.? Is it the individual of whom I had formerly - hum - some - ha - slight transitory knowledge, and to whom I believe you have referred? Is it - ha - that person?'

'It's a very different person indeed,' replied Flora, 'with no limbs and wheels instead and the grimmest of women though his mother.'

'Clennam and Co. a - hum - a mother!' exclaimed Mr Dorrit.

'And an old man besides,' said Flora.

Mr Dorrit looked as if he must immediately be driven out of his mind by this account. Neither was it rendered more favourable to sanity by Flora's dashing into a rapid analysis of Mr Flintwinch's cravat, and describing him, without the lightest boundary line of separation

between his identity and Mrs Clennam's, as a rusty screw in gaiters. Which compound of man and woman, no limbs, wheels, rusty screw, grimness, and gaiters, so completely stupefied Mr Dorrit, that he was a spectacle to be pitied. 'But I would not detain you one moment longer,' said Flora, upon whom his condition wrought its effect, though she was quite unconscious of having produced it, 'if you would have the goodness to give your promise as a gentleman that both in going back to Italy and in Italy too you would look for this Mr Blandois high and low and if you found or heard of him make him come forward for the clearing of all parties.' By that time Mr Dorrit had so far recovered from his bewilderment, as to be able to say, in a tolerably connected manner, that he should consider that his duty. Flora was delighted with her success, and rose to take her leave.

'With a million thanks,' said she, 'and my address upon my card in case of anything to be communicated personally, I will not send my love to the dear little thing for it might not be acceptable, and indeed there is no dear little thing left in the transformation so why do it but both myself and Mr F.'s Aunt ever wish her well and lay no claim to any favour on our side you may be sure of that but quite the other way for what she undertook to do she did and that is more than a great many of us do, not to say anything of her doing it as well as it could be done and I myself am one of them for I have said ever since I began to recover the blow of Mr F.'s death that I would learn the Organ of which I am extremely fond but of which I am ashamed to say I do not yet know a note, good evening!'

When Mr Dorrit, who attended her to the room-door, had had a little time to collect his senses, he found that the interview had summoned back discarded reminiscences which jarred with the Merdle dinner-table. He wrote and sent off a brief note excusing himself for that day, and ordered dinner presently in his own rooms at the hotel. He had another reason for this. His time in London was very nearly out, and was anticipated by engagements; his plans were made for returning; and he thought it behoved his importance to pursue some direct inquiry into the Blandois disappearance, and be in a condition to carry back to Mr Henry Gowan the result of his own personal investigation. He therefore resolved that he would take advantage of that evening's freedom to go down to Clennam and Co.'s, easily to be found by the direction set forth in the handbill; and see the place, and ask a question or two there himself.

Having dined as plainly as the establishment and the Courier would let him, and having taken a short sleep by the fire for his better recovery from Mrs Finching, he set out in a hackney-cabriolet alone. The deep bell of St Paul's was striking nine as he passed under the shadow of Temple Bar, headless and forlorn in these degenerate days.

As he approached his destination through the by-streets and water-side ways, that part of London seemed to him an uglier spot at such an hour than he had ever supposed it to be. Many long years had passed since he had seen it; he had never known much of it; and it wore a mysterious and dismal aspect in his eyes. So powerfully was his imagination impressed by it, that when his driver stopped, after having asked the way more than once, and said to the best of his belief this was the gateway they wanted, Mr Dorrit stood hesitating, with the coach-door in his hand, half afraid of the dark look of the place.

Truly, it looked as gloomy that night as even it had ever looked. Two of the handbills were posted on the entrance wall, one on either side, and as the lamp flickered in the night air, shadows passed over them, not unlike the shadows of fingers following the lines. A watch was evidently kept upon the place. As Mr Dorrit paused, a man passed in from over the way, and another man passed out from some dark corner within; and both looked at him in passing, and both remained standing about.

As there was only one house in the enclosure, there was no room for uncertainty, so he went up the steps of that house and knocked. There was a dim light in two windows on the first-floor. The door gave back a dreary, vacant sound, as though the house were empty; but it was not, for a light was visible, and a step was audible, almost directly. They both came to the door, and a chain grated, and a woman with her apron thrown over her face and head stood in the aperture.

'Who is it?' said the woman.

Mr Dorrit, much amazed by this appearance, replied that he was from Italy, and that he wished to ask a question relative to the missing person, whom he knew.

'Hi!' cried the woman, raising a cracked voice. 'Jeremiah!'

Upon this, a dry old man appeared, whom Mr Dorrit thought he identified by his gaiters, as the rusty screw. The woman was under apprehensions of the dry old man, for she whisked her apron away as he approached, and disclosed a pale affrighted face. 'Open the door, you fool,' said the old man; 'and let the gentleman in.'

Mr Dorrit, not without a glance over his shoulder towards his driver and the cabriolet, walked into the dim hall. 'Now, sir,' said Mr Flintwinch, 'you can ask anything here you think proper; there are no secrets here, sir.'

Before a reply could be made, a strong stern voice, though a woman's, called from above, 'Who is it?'

'Who is it?' returned Jeremiah. 'More inquiries. A gentleman from Italy.'

'Bring him up here!'

Mr Flintwinch muttered, as if he deemed that unnecessary; but, turning to Mr Dorrit, said, 'Mrs Clennam. She will do as she likes. I'll show you the way.' He then preceded Mr Dorrit up the blackened staircase; that gentleman, not unnaturally looking behind him on the road, saw the woman following, with her apron thrown over her head again in her former ghastly manner.

Mrs Clennam had her books open on her little table. 'Oh!' said she abruptly, as she eyed her visitor with a steady look. 'You are from Italy, sir, are you. Well?' Mr Dorrit was at a loss for any more distinct rejoinder at the moment than 'Ha - well?'

'Where is this missing man? Have you come to give us information where he is? I hope you have?'

'So far from it, I - hum - have come to seek information.' 'Unfortunately for us, there is none to be got here. Flintwinch, show the gentleman the handbill. Give him several to take away. Hold the light for him to read it.'

Mr Flintwinch did as he was directed, and Mr Dorrit read it through, as if he had not previously seen it; glad enough of the opportunity of collecting his presence of mind, which the air of the house and of the people in it had a little disturbed. While his eyes were on the paper, he felt that the eyes of Mr Flintwinch and of Mrs Clennam were on him. He found, when he looked up, that this sensation was not a fanciful one.

'Now you know as much,' said Mrs Clennam, 'as we know, sir. Is Mr Blandois a friend of yours?'

'No - a - hum - an acquaintance,' answered Mr Dorrit.

'You have no commission from him, perhaps?'

'I? Ha. Certainly not.'

The searching look turned gradually to the floor, after taking Mr Flintwinch's face in its way. Mr Dorrit, discomfited by finding that he

was the questioned instead of the questioner, applied himself to the reversal of that unexpected order of things.

'I am - ha - a gentleman of property, at present residing in Italy with my family, my servants, and - hum - my rather large establishment. Being in London for a short time on affairs connected with - ha - my estate, and hearing of this strange disappearance, I wished to make myself acquainted with the circumstances at first-hand, because there is - ha hum - an English gentleman in Italy whom I shall no doubt see on my return, who has been in habits of close and daily intimacy with Monsieur Blandois. Mr Henry Gowan. You may know the name.'

'Never heard of it.' Mrs Clennam said it, and Mr Flintwinch echoed it.

'Wishing to - ha - make the narrative coherent and consecutive to him,' said Mr Dorrit, 'may I ask - say, three questions?'

'Thirty, if you choose.'

'Have you known Monsieur Blandois long?'

'Not a twelvemonth. Mr Flintwinch here, will refer to the books and tell you when, and by whom at Paris he was introduced to us. If that,' Mrs Clennam added, 'should be any satisfaction to you. It is poor satisfaction to us.'

'Have you seen him often?'

'No. Twice. Once before, and - ' 'That once,' suggested Mr Flintwinch.

'And that once.'

'Pray, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, with a growing fancy upon him as he recovered his importance, that he was in some superior way in the Commission of the Peace; 'pray, madam, may I inquire, for the greater satisfaction of the gentleman whom I have the honour to - ha - retain, or protect or let me say to - hum - know - to know - Was Monsieur Blandois here on business on the night indicated in this present sheet?'

'On what he called business,' returned Mrs Clennam.

'Is - ha - excuse me - is its nature to be communicated?'

'No.'

It was evidently impracticable to pass the barrier of that reply.



'The question has been asked before,' said Mrs Clennam, 'and the answer has been, No. We don't choose to publish our transactions, however unimportant, to all the town. We say, No.'

'I mean, he took away no money with him, for example,' said Mr Dorrit.

'He took away none of ours, sir, and got none here.'

'I suppose,' observed Mr Dorrit, glancing from Mrs Clennam to Mr Flintwinch, and from Mr Flintwinch to Mrs Clennam, 'you have no way of accounting to yourself for this mystery?'

'Why do you suppose so?' rejoined Mrs Clennam.

Disconcerted by the cold and hard inquiry, Mr Dorrit was unable to assign any reason for his supposing so. 'I account for it, sir,' she pursued after an awkward silence on Mr Dorrit's part, 'by having no doubt that he is travelling somewhere, or hiding somewhere.'

'Do you know - ha - why he should hide anywhere?'

'No.'

It was exactly the same No as before, and put another barrier up. 'You asked me if I accounted for the disappearance to myself,' Mrs Clennam sternly reminded him, 'not if I accounted for it to you. I do not pretend to account for it to you, sir. I understand it to be no more my business to do that, than it is yours to require that.'

Mr Dorrit answered with an apologetic bend of his head. As he stepped back, preparatory to saying he had no more to ask, he could not but observe how gloomily and fixedly she sat with her eyes fastened on the ground, and a certain air upon her of resolute waiting; also, how exactly the self-same expression was reflected in Mr Flintwinch, standing at a little distance from her chair, with his eyes also on the ground, and his right hand softly rubbing his chin.

At that moment, Mistress Affery (of course, the woman with the apron) dropped the candlestick she held, and cried out, 'There! O good Lord! there it is again. Hark, Jeremiah! Now!'

If there were any sound at all, it was so slight that she must have fallen into a confirmed habit of listening for sounds; but Mr Dorrit believed he did hear a something, like the falling of dry leaves. The woman's terror, for a very short space, seemed to touch the three; and they all listened.

Mr Flintwinch was the first to stir. 'Affery, my woman,' said he, sidling at her with his fists clenched, and his elbows quivering with impatience to shake her, 'you are at your old tricks. You'll be walking in your sleep next, my woman, and playing the whole round of your distempered antics. You must have some physic. When I have shown this gentleman out, I'll make you up such a comfortable dose, my woman; such a comfortable dose!'

It did not appear altogether comfortable in expectation to Mistress Affery; but Jeremiah, without further reference to his healing medicine, took another candle from Mrs Clennam's table, and said, 'Now, sir; shall I light you down?'

Mr Dorrit professed himself obliged, and went down. Mr Flintwinch shut him out, and chained him out, without a moment's loss of time.

He was again passed by the two men, one going out and the other coming in; got into the vehicle he had left waiting, and was driven away.

Before he had gone far, the driver stopped to let him know that he had given his name, number, and address to the two men, on their joint requisition; and also the address at which he had taken Mr Dorrit up, the hour at which he had been called from his stand and the way by which he had come. This did not make the night's adventure run any less hotly in Mr Dorrit's mind, either when he sat down by his fire again, or when he went to bed. All night he haunted the dismal house, saw the two people resolutely waiting, heard the woman with her apron over her face cry out about the noise, and found the body of the missing Blandois, now buried in the cellar, and now bricked up in a wall.