Chapter LIV - A Castle In The Air

Manifold are the cares of wealth and state. Mr Dorrit's satisfaction in remembering that it had not been necessary for him to announce himself to Clennam and Co., or to make an allusion to his having had any knowledge of the intrusive person of that name, had been damped over-night, while it was still fresh, by a debate that arose within him whether or no he should take the Marshalsea in his way back, and look at the old gate. He had decided not to do so; and had astonished the coachman by being very fierce with him for proposing to go over London Bridge and recross the river by Waterloo Bridge - a course which would have taken him almost within sight of his old quarters. Still, for all that, the question had raised a conflict in his breast; and, for some odd reason or no reason, he was vaguely dissatisfied. Even at the Merdle dinner- table next day, he was so out of sorts about it that he continued at intervals to turn it over and over, in a manner frightfully inconsistent with the good society surrounding him. It made him hot to think what the Chief Butler's opinion of him would have been, if that illustrious personage could have plumbed with that heavy eye of his the stream of his meditations.

The farewell banquet was of a gorgeous nature, and wound up his visit in a most brilliant manner. Fanny combined with the attractions of her youth and beauty, a certain weight of self- sustainment as if she had been married twenty years. He felt that he could leave her with a quiet mind to tread the paths of distinction, and wished - but without abatement of patronage, and without prejudice to the retiring virtues of his favourite child - that he had such another daughter.

'My dear,' he told her at parting, 'our family looks to you to - ha - assert its dignity and - hum - maintain its importance. I know you will never disappoint it.'

'No, papa,' said Fanny, 'you may rely upon that, I think. My best love to dearest Amy, and I will write to her very soon.'

'Shall I convey any message to - ha - anybody else?' asked Mr Dorrit, in an insinuating manner.

'Papa,' said Fanny, before whom Mrs General instantly loomed, 'no, I thank you. You are very kind, Pa, but I must beg to be excused. There is no other message to send, I thank you, dear papa, that it would be at all agreeable to you to take.'

They parted in an outer drawing-room, where only Mr Sparkler waited on his lady, and dutifully bided his time for shaking hands. When Mr Sparkler was admitted to this closing audience, Mr Merdle came creeping in with not much more appearance of arms in his sleeves

than if he had been the twin brother of Miss Biffin, and insisted on escorting Mr Dorrit down-stairs. All Mr Dorrit's protestations being in vain, he enjoyed the honour of being accompanied to the hall-door by this distinguished man, who (as Mr Dorrit told him in shaking hands on the step) had really overwhelmed him with attentions and services during this memorable visit. Thus they parted; Mr Dorrit entering his carriage with a swelling breast, not at all sorry that his Courier, who had come to take leave in the lower regions, should have an opportunity of beholding the grandeur of his departure.

The aforesaid grandeur was yet full upon Mr Dorrit when he alighted at his hotel. Helped out by the Courier and some half-dozen of the hotel servants, he was passing through the hall with a serene magnificence, when lo! a sight presented itself that struck him dumb and motionless. John Chivery, in his best clothes, with his tall hat under his arm, his ivory-handled cane genteelly embarrassing his deportment, and a bundle of cigars in his hand!

'Now, young man,' said the porter. 'This is the gentleman. This young man has persisted in waiting, sir, saying you would be glad to see him.'

Mr Dorrit glared on the young man, choked, and said, in the mildest of tones, 'Ah! Young John! It is Young John, I think; is it not?'

'Yes, sir,' returned Young John.

'I - ha - thought it was Young john!' said Mr Dorrit. 'The young man may come up,' turning to the attendants, as he passed on: 'oh yes, he may come up. Let Young John follow. I will speak to him above.'

Young John followed, smiling and much gratified. Mr Dorrit's rooms were reached. Candles were lighted. The attendants withdrew.

'Now, sir,' said Mr Dorrit, turning round upon him and seizing him by the collar when they were safely alone. 'What do you mean by this?'

The amazement and horror depicted in the unfortunate john's face - for he had rather expected to be embraced next - were of that powerfully expressive nature that Mr Dorrit withdrew his hand and merely glared at him.

'How dare you do this?' said Mr Dorrit. 'How do you presume to come here? How dare you insult me?'

'I insult you, sir?' cried Young John. 'Oh!'

'Yes, sir,' returned Mr Dorrit. 'Insult me. Your coming here is an affront, an impertinence, an audacity. You are not wanted here.

Who sent you here? What - ha - the Devil do you do here?'

'I thought, sir,' said Young John, with as pale and shocked a face as ever had been turned to Mr Dorrit's in his life - even in his College life: 'I thought, sir, you mightn't object to have the goodness to accept a bundle - '

'Damn your bundle, sir!' cried Mr Dorrit, in irrepressible rage. 'I - hum - don't smoke.'

'I humbly beg your pardon, sir. You used to.'

'Tell me that again,' cried Mr Dorrit, quite beside himself, 'and I'll take the poker to you!'

John Chivery backed to the door.

'Stop, sir!' cried Mr Dorrit. 'Stop! Sit down. Confound you,

sit down!'

John Chivery dropped into the chair nearest the door, and Mr Dorrit walked up and down the room; rapidly at first; then, more slowly. Once, he went to the window, and stood there with his forehead against the glass. All of a sudden, he turned and said:

'What else did you come for, Sir?'

'Nothing else in the world, sir. Oh dear me! Only to say, Sir, that I hoped you was well, and only to ask if Miss Amy was Well?'

'What's that to you, sir?' retorted Mr Dorrit.

'It's nothing to me, sir, by rights. I never thought of lessening the distance betwixt us, I am sure. I know it's a liberty, sir, but I never thought you'd have taken it ill. Upon my word and honour, sir,' said Young John, with emotion, 'in my poor way, I am too proud to have come, I assure you, if I had thought so.'

Mr Dorrit was ashamed. He went back to the window, and leaned his forehead against the glass for some time. When he turned, he had his handkerchief in his hand, and he had been wiping his eyes with it, and he looked tired and ill.

'Young John, I am very sorry to have been hasty with you, but - ha - some remembrances are not happy remembrances, and - hum - you shouldn't have come.'

'I feel that now, sir,' returned John Chivery; 'but I didn't before, and Heaven knows I meant no harm, sir.'

'No. No,' said Mr Dorrit. 'I am - hum - sure of that. Ha. Give me your hand, Young John, give me your hand.'

Young John gave it; but Mr Dorrit had driven his heart out of it, and nothing could change his face now, from its white, shocked look.

'There!' said Mr Dorrit, slowly shaking hands with him. 'Sit down again, Young John.'

'Thank you, sir - but I'd rather stand.'

Mr Dorrit sat down instead. After painfully holding his head a little while, he turned it to his visitor, and said, with an effort to be easy:

'And how is your father, Young John? How - ha - how are they all, Young John?'

'Thank you, sir, They're all pretty well, sir. They're not any ways complaining.'

'Hum. You are in your - ha - old business I see, John?' said Mr Dorrit, with a glance at the offending bundle he had anathematised.

'Partly, sir. I am in my' - John hesitated a little - 'father's business likewise.'

'Oh indeed!' said Mr Dorrit. 'Do you - ha hum - go upon the ha - '

'Lock, sir? Yes, sir.'

'Much to do, John?'

'Yes, sir; we're pretty heavy at present. I don't know how it is, but we generally ARE pretty heavy.'

'At this time of the year, Young John?'

'Mostly at all times of the year, sir. I don't know the time that makes much difference to us. I wish you good night, sir.'

'Stay a moment, John - ha - stay a moment. Hum. Leave me the cigars, John, I - ha - beg.'

'Certainly, sir.' John put them, with a trembling hand, on the table.

'Stay a moment, Young John; stay another moment. It would be a - ha - a gratification to me to send a little - hum - Testimonial, by such a trusty messenger, to be divided among - ha hum - them - them - according to their wants. Would you object to take

it, John?'

'Not in any ways, sir. There's many of them, I'm sure, that would be the better for it.'

'Thank you, John. I - ha - I'll write it, John.'

His hand shook so that he was a long time writing it, and wrote it in a tremulous scrawl at last. It was a cheque for one hundred pounds. He folded it up, put it in Young john's hand, and pressed the hand in his.

'I hope you'll - ha - overlook - hum - what has passed, John.'

'Don't speak of it, sir, on any accounts. I don't in any ways bear malice, I'm sure.'

But nothing while John was there could change John's face to its natural colour and expression, or restore John's natural manner.

'And, John,' said Mr Dorrit, giving his hand a final pressure, and releasing it, 'I hope we - ha - agree that we have spoken together in confidence; and that you will abstain, in going out, from saying anything to any one that might - hum - suggest that - ha - once I - '

'Oh! I assure you, sir,' returned John Chivery, 'in my poor humble way, sir, I'm too proud and honourable to do it, sir.'

Mr Dorrit was not too proud and honourable to listen at the door that he might ascertain for himself whether John really went straight out, or lingered to have any talk with any one. There was no doubt that he went direct out at the door, and away down the street with a quick step. After remaining alone for an hour, Mr Dorrit rang for the Courier, who found him with his chair on the hearth-rug, sitting with his back towards him and his face to the fire. 'You can take that bundle of cigars to smoke on the journey, if you like,' said Mr Dorrit, with a careless wave of his hand. 'Ha - brought by - hum - little offering from - ha - son of old tenant of mine.'

Next morning's sun saw Mr Dorrit's equipage upon the Dover road, where every red-jacketed postilion was the sign of a cruel house, established for the unmerciful plundering of travellers. The whole business of the human race, between London and Dover, being spoliation, Mr Dorrit was waylaid at Dartford, pillaged at Gravesend, rifled at Rochester, fleeced at Sittingbourne, and sacked at Canterbury. However, it being the Courier's business to get him out of the hands of the banditti, the Courier brought him off at every stage; and so the red-jackets went gleaming merrily along the spring landscape, rising and falling to a regular measure, between Mr Dorrit in his snug corner and the next chalky rise in the dusty highway.

Another day's sun saw him at Calais. And having now got the Channel between himself and John Chivery, he began to feel safe, and to find that the foreign air was lighter to breathe than the air of England.

On again by the heavy French roads for Paris. Having now quite recovered his equanimity, Mr Dorrit, in his snug corner, fell to castle-building as he rode along. It was evident that he had a very large castle in hand. All day long he was running towers up, taking towers down, adding a wing here, putting on a battlement there, looking to the walls, strengthening the defences, giving ornamental touches to the interior, making in all respects a superb castle of it. His preoccupied face so clearly denoted the pursuit in which he was engaged, that every cripple at the post-houses, not blind, who shoved his little battered tin-box in at the carriage window for Charity in the name of Heaven, Charity in the name of our Lady, Charity in the name of all the Saints, knew as well what work he was at, as their countryman Le Brun could have known it himself, though he had made that English traveller the subject of a special physiognomical treatise.

Arrived at Paris, and resting there three days, Mr Dorrit strolled much about the streets alone, looking in at the shop-windows, and particularly the jewellers' windows. Ultimately, he went into the most famous jeweller's, and said he wanted to buy a little gift for a lady.

It was a charming little woman to whom he said it - a sprightly little woman, dressed in perfect taste, who came out of a green velvet bower to attend upon him, from posting up some dainty little books of account which one could hardly suppose to be ruled for the entry of any articles more commercial than kisses, at a dainty little shining desk which looked in itself like a sweetmeat.

For example, then, said the little woman, what species of gift did Monsieur desire? A love-gift?

Mr Dorrit smiled, and said, Eh, well! Perhaps. What did he know? It was always possible; the sex being so charming. Would she show him some?

Most willingly, said the little woman. Flattered and enchanted to show him many. But pardon! To begin with, he would have the great goodness to observe that there were love-gifts, and there were nuptial gifts. For example, these ravishing ear-rings and this necklace so superb to correspond, were what one called a love- gift. These brooches and these rings, of a beauty so gracious and celestial, were what one called, with the permission of Monsieur, nuptial gifts.

Perhaps it would be a good arrangement, Mr Dorrit hinted, smiling, to purchase both, and to present the love-gift first, and to finish with the nuptial offering?

Ah Heaven! said the little woman, laying the tips of the fingers of her two little hands against each other, that would be generous indeed, that would be a special gallantry! And without doubt the lady so crushed with gifts would find them irresistible.

Mr Dorrit was not sure of that. But, for example, the sprightly little woman was very sure of it, she said. So Mr Dorrit bought a gift of each sort, and paid handsomely for it. As he strolled back to his hotel afterwards, he carried his head high: having plainly got up his castle now to a much loftier altitude than the two square towers of Notre Dame.

Building away with all his might, but reserving the plans of his castle exclusively for his own eye, Mr Dorrit posted away for Marseilles. Building on, building on, busily, busily, from morning to night. Falling asleep, and leaving great blocks of building materials dangling in the air; waking again, to resume work and get them into their places. What time the Courier in the rumble, smoking Young john's best cigars, left a little thread of thin light smoke behind - perhaps as he built a castle or two with stray pieces of Mr Dorrit's money.

Not a fortified town that they passed in all their journey was as strong, not a Cathedral summit was as high, as Mr Dorrit's castle. Neither the Saone nor the Rhone sped with the swiftness of that peerless building; nor was the Mediterranean deeper than its foundations; nor were the distant landscapes on the Cornice road, nor the hills and bay of Genoa the Superb, more beautiful. Mr Dorrit and his matchless castle were disembarked among the dirty white houses and dirtier felons of Civita Vecchia, and thence scrambled on to Rome as they could, through the filth that festered on the way.