Chapter LVI - Introduces The Next

The passengers were landing from the packet on the pier at Calais. A low-lying place and a low-spirited place Calais was, with the tide ebbing out towards low water-mark. There had been no more water on the bar than had sufficed to float the packet in; and now the bar itself, with a shallow break of sea over it, looked like a lazy marine monster just risen to the surface, whose form was indistinctly shown as it lay asleep. The meagre lighthouse all in white, haunting the seaboard as if it were the ghost of an edifice that had once had colour and rotundity, dropped melancholy tears after its late buffeting by the waves. The long rows of gaunt black piles, slimy and wet and weather-worn, with funeral garlands of seaweed twisted about them by the late tide, might have represented an unsightly marine cemetery. Every wave-dashed, storm-beaten object, was so low and so little, under the broad grey sky, in the noise of the wind and sea, and before the curling lines of surf, making at it ferociously, that the wonder was there was any Calais left, and that its low gates and low wall and low roofs and low ditches and low sand-hills and low ramparts and flat streets, had not yielded long ago to the undermining and besieging sea, like the fortifications children make on the sea-shore.

After slipping among oozy piles and planks, stumbling up wet steps and encountering many salt difficulties, the passengers entered on their comfortless peregrination along the pier; where all the French vagabonds and English outlaws in the town (half the population) attended to prevent their recovery from bewilderment. After being minutely inspected by all the English, and claimed and reclaimed and counter-claimed as prizes by all the French in a hand-to-hand scuffle three quarters of a mile long, they were at last free to enter the streets, and to make off in their various directions, hotly pursued.

Clennam, harassed by more anxieties than one, was among this devoted band. Having rescued the most defenceless of his compatriots from situations of great extremity, he now went his way alone, or as nearly alone as he could be, with a native gentleman in a suit of grease and a cap of the same material, giving chase at a distance of some fifty yards, and continually calling after him, 'Hi! Ice-say! You! Seer! Ice-say! Nice Oatel!'

Even this hospitable person, however, was left behind at last, and Clennam pursued his way, unmolested. There was a tranquil air in the town after the turbulence of the Channel and the beach, and its dulness in that comparison was agreeable. He met new groups of his countrymen, who had all a straggling air of having at one time overblown themselves, like certain uncomfortable kinds of flowers, and of being now mere weeds. They had all an air, too, of lounging out a limited round, day after day, which strongly reminded him of the

Marshalsea. But, taking no further note of them than was sufficient to give birth to the reflection, he sought out a certain street and number which he kept in his mind.

'So Pancks said,' he murmured to himself, as he stopped before a dull house answering to the address. 'I suppose his information to be correct and his discovery, among Mr Casby's loose papers, indisputable; but, without it, I should hardly have supposed this to be a likely place.'

A dead sort of house, with a dead wall over the way and a dead gateway at the side, where a pendant bell-handle produced two dead tinkles, and a knocker produced a dead, flat, surface-tapping, that seemed not to have depth enough in it to penetrate even the cracked door. However, the door jarred open on a dead sort of spring; and he closed it behind him as he entered a dull yard, soon brought to a close by another dead wall, where an attempt had been made to train some creeping shrubs, which were dead; and to make a little fountain in a grotto, which was dry; and to decorate that with a little statue, which was gone.

The entry to the house was on the left, and it was garnished as the outer gateway was, with two printed bills in French and English, announcing Furnished Apartments to let, with immediate possession. A strong cheerful peasant woman, all stocking, petticoat, white cap, and ear-ring, stood here in a dark doorway, and said with a pleasant show of teeth, 'Ice-say! Seer! Who?'

Clennam, replying in French, said the English lady; he wished to see the English lady. 'Enter then and ascend, if you please,' returned the peasant woman, in French likewise. He did both, and followed her up a dark bare staircase to a back room on the first- floor. Hence, there was a gloomy view of the yard that was dull, and of the shrubs that were dead, and of the fountain that was dry, and of the pedestal of the statue that was gone.

'Monsieur Blandois,' said Clennam.

'With pleasure, Monsieur.'

Thereupon the woman withdrew and left him to look at the room. It was the pattern of room always to be found in such a house. Cool, dull, and dark. Waxed floor very slippery. A room not large enough to skate in; nor adapted to the easy pursuit of any other occupation. Red and white curtained windows, little straw mat, little round table with a tumultuous assemblage of legs underneath, clumsy rush-bottomed chairs, two great red velvet arm-chairs affording plenty of space to be uncomfortable in, bureau, chimney- glass in several pieces pretending

to be in one piece, pair of gaudy vases of very artificial flowers; between them a Greek warrior with his helmet off, sacrificing a clock to the Genius of France.

After some pause, a door of communication with another room was opened, and a lady entered. She manifested great surprise on seeing Clennam, and her glance went round the room in search of some one else.

'Pardon me, Miss Wade. I am alone.'

'It was not your name that was brought to me.'

'No; I know that. Excuse me. I have already had experience that my name does not predispose you to an interview; and I ventured to mention the name of one I am in search of.'

'Pray,' she returned, motioning him to a chair so coldly that he remained standing, 'what name was it that you gave?'

'I mentioned the name of Blandois.'

'Blandois?'

'A name you are acquainted with.'

'It is strange,' she said, frowning, 'that you should still press an undesired interest in me and my acquaintances, in me and my affairs, Mr Clennam. I don't know what you mean.'

'Pardon me. You know the name?'

'What can you have to do with the name? What can I have to do with the name? What can you have to do with my knowing or not knowing any name? I know many names and I have forgotten many more. This may be in the one class, or it may be in the other, or I may never have heard it. I am acquainted with no reason for examining myself, or for being examined, about it.'

'If you will allow me,' said Clennam, 'I will tell you my reason for pressing the subject. I admit that I do press it, and I must beg you to forgive me if I do so, very earnestly. The reason is all mine, I do not insinuate that it is in any way yours.'

'Well, sir,' she returned, repeating a little less haughtily than before her former invitation to him to be seated: to which he now deferred, as she seated herself. 'I am at least glad to know that this is not another

bondswoman of some friend of yours, who is bereft of free choice, and whom I have spirited away. I will hear your reason, if you please.'

'First, to identify the person of whom we speak,' said Clennam, 'let me observe that it is the person you met in London some time back. You will remember meeting him near the river - in the Adelphi!'

'You mix yourself most unaccountably with my business,' she replied, looking full at him with stern displeasure. 'How do you know that?'

'I entreat you not to take it ill. By mere accident.' 'What accident?'

'Solely the accident of coming upon you in the street and seeing the meeting.'

'Do you speak of yourself, or of some one else?'

'Of myself. I saw it.'

'To be sure it was in the open street,' she observed, after a few moments of less and less angry reflection. 'Fifty people might have seen it. It would have signified nothing if they had.'

'Nor do I make my having seen it of any moment, nor (otherwise than as an explanation of my coming here) do I connect my visit with it or the favour that I have to ask.'

'Oh! You have to ask a favour! It occurred to me,' and the handsome face looked bitterly at him, 'that your manner was softened, Mr Clennam.'

He was content to protest against this by a slight action without contesting it in words. He then referred to Blandois' disappearance, of which it was probable she had heard? However probable it was to him, she had heard of no such thing. Let him look round him (she said) and judge for himself what general intelligence was likely to reach the ears of a woman who had been shut up there while it was rife, devouring her own heart. When she had uttered this denial, which he believed to be true, she asked him what he meant by disappearance? That led to his narrating the circumstances in detail, and expressing something of his anxiety to discover what had really become of the man, and to repel the dark suspicions that clouded about his mother's house. She heard him with evident surprise, and with more marks of suppressed interest than he had seen in her; still they did not overcome her distant, proud, and self-secluded manner. When he had finished, she said nothing but these words:

'You have not yet told me, sir, what I have to do with it, or what the favour is? Will you be so good as come to that?'

'I assume,' said Arthur, persevering, in his endeavour to soften her scornful demeanour, 'that being in communication - may I say, confidential communication? - with this person - '

'You may say, of course, whatever you like,' she remarked; 'but I do not subscribe to your assumptions, Mr Clennam, or to any one's.'

' - that being, at least in personal communication with him,' said Clennam, changing the form of his position in the hope of making it unobjectionable, 'you can tell me something of his antecedents, pursuits, habits, usual place of residence. Can give me some little clue by which to seek him out in the likeliest manner, and either produce him, or establish what has become of him. This is the favour I ask, and I ask it in a distress of mind for which I hope you will feel some consideration. If you should have any reason for imposing conditions upon me, I will respect it without asking what it is.'

'You chanced to see me in the street with the man,' she observed, after being, to his mortification, evidently more occupied with her own reflections on the matter than with his appeal. 'Then you knew the man before?'

'Not before; afterwards. I never saw him before, but I saw him again on this very night of his disappearance. In my mother's room, in fact. I left him there. You will read in this paper all that is known of him.'

He handed her one of the printed bills, which she read with a steady and attentive face.

'This is more than I knew of him,' she said, giving it back.

Clennam's looks expressed his heavy disappointment, perhaps his incredulity; for she added in the same unsympathetic tone: 'You don't believe it. Still, it is so. As to personal communication: it seems that there was personal communication between him and your mother. And yet you say you believe her declaration that she knows no more of him!'

A sufficiently expressive hint of suspicion was conveyed in these words, and in the smile by which they were accompanied, to bring the blood into Clennam's cheeks.

'Come, sir,' she said, with a cruel pleasure in repeating the stab, 'I will be as open with you as you can desire. I will confess that if I cared for my credit (which I do not), or had a good name to preserve (which I

have not, for I am utterly indifferent to its being considered good or bad), I should regard myself as heavily compromised by having had anything to do with this fellow. Yet he never passed in at MY door - never sat in colloquy with ME until midnight.'

She took her revenge for her old grudge in thus turning his subject against him. Hers was not the nature to spare him, and she had no compunction.

'That he is a low, mercenary wretch; that I first saw him prowling about Italy (where I was, not long ago), and that I hired him there, as the suitable instrument of a purpose I happened to have; I have no objection to tell you. In short, it was worth my while, for my own pleasure - the gratification of a strong feeling - to pay a spy who would fetch and carry for money. I paid this creature. And I dare say that if I had wanted to make such a bargain, and if I could have paid him enough, and if he could have done it in the dark, free from all risk, he would have taken any life with as little scruple as he took my money. That, at least, is my opinion of him; and I see it is not very far removed from yours. Your mother's opinion of him, I am to assume (following your example of assuming this and that), was vastly different.'

'My mother, let me remind you,' said Clennam, 'was first brought into communication with him in the unlucky course of business.'

'It appears to have been an unlucky course of business that last brought her into communication with him,' returned Miss Wade; 'and business hours on that occasion were late.'

'You imply,' said Arthur, smarting under these cool-handed thrusts, of which he had deeply felt the force already, 'that there was something - '

'Mr Clennam,' she composedly interrupted, 'recollect that I do not speak by implication about the man. He is, I say again without disguise, a low mercenary wretch. I suppose such a creature goes where there is occasion for him. If I had not had occasion for him, you would not have seen him and me together.'

Wrung by her persistence in keeping that dark side of the case before him, of which there was a half-hidden shadow in his own breast, Clennam was silent.

'I have spoken of him as still living,' she added, 'but he may have been put out of the way for anything I know. For anything I care, also. I have no further occasion for him.'

With a heavy sigh and a despondent air, Arthur Clennam slowly rose.

She did not rise also, but said, having looked at him in the meanwhile with a fixed look of suspicion, and lips angrily compressed:

'He was the chosen associate of your dear friend, Mr Gowan, was he not? Why don't you ask your dear friend to help you?'

The denial that he was a dear friend rose to Arthur's lips; but he repressed it, remembering his old struggles and resolutions, and said:

'Further than that he has never seen Blandois since Blandois set out for England, Mr Gowan knows nothing additional about him. He was a chance acquaintance, made abroad.'

'A chance acquaintance made abroad!' she repeated. 'Yes. Your dear friend has need to divert himself with all the acquaintances he can make, seeing what a wife he has. I hate his wife, sir.'

The anger with which she said it, the more remarkable for being so much under her restraint, fixed Clennam's attention, and kept him on the spot. It flashed out of her dark eyes as they regarded him, quivered in her nostrils, and fired the very breath she exhaled; but her face was otherwise composed into a disdainful serenity; and her attitude was as calmly and haughtily graceful as if she had been in a mood of complete indifference.

'All I will say is, Miss Wade,' he remarked, 'that you can have received no provocation to a feeling in which I believe you have no sharer.'

'You may ask your dear friend, if you choose,' she returned, 'for his opinion upon that subject.'

'I am scarcely on those intimate terms with my dear friend,' said Arthur, in spite of his resolutions, 'that would render my approaching the subject very probable, Miss Wade.'

'I hate him,' she returned. 'Worse than his wife, because I was once dupe enough, and false enough to myself, almost to love him. You have seen me, sir, only on common-place occasions, when I dare say you have thought me a common-place woman, a little more self- willed than the generality. You don't know what I mean by hating, if you know me no better than that; you can't know, without knowing with what care I have studied myself and people about me. For this reason I have for some time inclined to tell you what my life has been - not to propitiate your opinion, for I set no value on it; but that you may comprehend, when you think of your dear friend and his dear wife,

what I mean by hating. Shall I give you something I have written and put by for your perusal, or shall I hold my hand?'

Arthur begged her to give it to him. She went to the bureau, unlocked it, and took from an inner drawer a few folded sheets of paper. Without any conciliation of him, scarcely addressing him, rather speaking as if she were speaking to her own looking-glass for the justification of her own stubbornness, she said, as she gave them to him:

'Now you may know what I mean by hating! No more of that. Sir, whether you find me temporarily and cheaply lodging in an empty London house, or in a Calais apartment, you find Harriet with me. You may like to see her before you leave. Harriet, come in!' She called Harriet again. The second call produced Harriet, once Tattycoram.

'Here is Mr Clennam,' said Miss Wade; 'not come for you; he has given you up, - I suppose you have, by this time?'

'Having no authority, or influence - yes,' assented Clennam.

'Not come in search of you, you see; but still seeking some one. He wants that Blandois man.'

'With whom I saw you in the Strand in London,' hinted Arthur. 'If you know anything of him, Harriet, except that he came from Venice - which we all know - tell it to Mr Clennam freely.' 'I know nothing more about him,' said the girl.

'Are you satisfied?' Miss Wade inquired of Arthur.

He had no reason to disbelieve them; the girl's manner being so natural as to be almost convincing, if he had had any previous doubts. He replied, 'I must seek for intelligence elsewhere.'

He was not going in the same breath; but he had risen before the girl entered, and she evidently thought he was. She looked quickly at him, and said:

'Are they well, sir?'

'Who?'

She stopped herself in saying what would have been 'all of them;' glanced at Miss Wade; and said 'Mr and Mrs Meagles.'

'They were, when I last heard of them. They are not at home. By the way, let me ask you. Is it true that you were seen there?'

'Where? Where does any one say I was seen?' returned the girl, sullenly casting down her eyes.

'Looking in at the garden gate of the cottage.'

'No,' said Miss Wade. 'She has never been near it.'

'You are wrong, then,' said the girl. 'I went down there the last time we were in London. I went one afternoon when you left me alone. And I did look in.'

'You poor-spirited girl,' returned Miss Wade with infinite contempt; 'does all our companionship, do all our conversations, do all your old complainings, tell for so little as that?'

'There was no harm in looking in at the gate for an instant,' said the girl. 'I saw by the windows that the family were not there.'

'Why should you go near the place?'

'Because I wanted to see it. Because I felt that I should like to look at it again.'

As each of the two handsome faces looked at the other, Clennam felt how each of the two natures must be constantly tearing the other to pieces.

'Oh!' said Miss Wade, coldly subduing and removing her glance; 'if you had any desire to see the place where you led the life from which I rescued you because you had found out what it was, that is another thing. But is that your truth to me? Is that your fidelity to me? Is that the common cause I make with you? You are not worth the confidence I have placed in you. You are not worth the favour I have shown you. You are no higher than a spaniel, and had better go back to the people who did worse than whip you.'

'If you speak so of them with any one else by to hear, you'll provoke me to take their part,' said the girl.

'Go back to them,' Miss Wade retorted. 'Go back to them.'

'You know very well,' retorted Harriet in her turn, 'that I won't go back to them. You know very well that I have thrown them off, and never can, never shall, never will, go back to them. Let them alone, then, Miss Wade.'

'You prefer their plenty to your less fat living here,' she rejoined. 'You exalt them, and slight me. What else should I have expected? I ought to have known it.'

'It's not so,' said the girl, flushing high, 'and you don't say what you mean. I know what you mean. You are reproaching me, underhanded, with having nobody but you to look to. And because I have nobody but you to look to, you think you are to make me do, or not do, everything you please, and are to put any affront upon me. You are as bad as they were, every bit. But I will not be quite tamed, and made submissive. I will say again that I went to look at the house, because I had often thought that I should like to see it once more. I will ask again how they are, because I once liked them and at times thought they were kind to me.'

Hereupon Clennam said that he was sure they would still receive her kindly, if she should ever desire to return.

'Never!' said the girl passionately. 'I shall never do that. Nobody knows that better than Miss Wade, though she taunts me because she has made me her dependent. And I know I am so; and I know she is overjoyed when she can bring it to my mind.'

'A good pretence!' said Miss Wade, with no less anger, haughtiness, and bitterness; 'but too threadbare to cover what I plainly see in this. My poverty will not bear competition with their money. Better go back at once, better go back at once, and have done with it!'

Arthur Clennam looked at them, standing a little distance asunder in the dull confined room, each proudly cherishing her own anger; each, with a fixed determination, torturing her own breast, and torturing the other's. He said a word or two of leave-taking; but Miss Wade barely inclined her head, and Harriet, with the assumed humiliation of an abject dependent and serf (but not without defiance for all that), made as if she were too low to notice or to be noticed.

He came down the dark winding stairs into the yard with an increased sense upon him of the gloom of the wall that was dead, and of the shrubs that were dead, and of the fountain that was dry, and of the statue that was gone. Pondering much on what he had seen and heard in that house, as well as on the failure of all his efforts to trace the suspicious character who was lost, he returned to London and to England by the packet that had taken him over. On the way he unfolded the sheets of paper, and read in them what is reproduced in the next chapter.