

Chapter LIX - Mistress Affery Makes A Conditional Promise, Respecting Her Dreams

Left alone, with the expressive looks and gestures of Mr Baptist, otherwise Giovanni Battista Cavalletto, vividly before him, Clennam entered on a weary day. It was in vain that he tried to control his attention by directing it to any business occupation or train of thought; it rode at anchor by the haunting topic, and would hold to no other idea. As though a criminal should be chained in a stationary boat on a deep clear river, condemned, whatever countless leagues of water flowed past him, always to see the body of the fellow-creature he had drowned lying at the bottom, immovable, and unchangeable, except as the eddies made it broad or long, now expanding, now contracting its terrible lineaments; so Arthur, below the shifting current of transparent thoughts and fancies which were gone and succeeded by others as soon as come, saw, steady and dark, and not to be stirred from its place, the one subject that he endeavoured with all his might to rid himself of, and that he could not fly from. The assurance he now had, that Blandois, whatever his right name, was one of the worst of characters, greatly augmented the burden of his anxieties. Though the disappearance should be accounted for tomorrow, the fact that his mother had been in communication with such a man, would remain unalterable. That the communication had been of a secret kind, and that she had been submissive to him and afraid of him, he hoped might be known to no one beyond himself; yet, knowing it, how could he separate it from his old vague fears, and how believe that there was nothing evil in such relations? Her resolution not to enter on the question with him, and his knowledge of her indomitable character, enhanced his sense of helplessness. It was like the oppression of a dream to believe that shame and exposure were impending over her and his father's memory, and to be shut out, as by a brazen wall, from the possibility of coming to their aid. The purpose he had brought home to his native country, and had ever since kept in view, was, with her greatest determination, defeated by his mother herself, at the time of all others when he feared that it pressed most. His advice, energy, activity, money, credit, all his resources whatsoever, were all made useless. If she had been possessed of the old fabled influence, and had turned those who looked upon her into stone, she could not have rendered him more completely powerless (so it seemed to him in his distress of mind) than she did, when she turned her unyielding face to his in her gloomy room.

But the light of that day's discovery, shining on these considerations, roused him to take a more decided course of action.

Confident in the rectitude of his purpose, and impelled by a sense of overhanging danger closing in around, he resolved, if his mother would still admit of no approach, to make a desperate appeal to Affery.

If she could be brought to become communicative, and to do what lay in her to break the spell of secrecy that enshrouded the house, he might shake off the paralysis of which every hour that passed over his head made him more acutely sensible. This was the result of his day's anxiety, and this was the decision he put in practice when the day closed in.

His first disappointment, on arriving at the house, was to find the door open, and Mr Flintwinch smoking a pipe on the steps. If circumstances had been commonly favourable, Mistress Affery would have opened the door to his knock. Circumstances being uncommonly unfavourable, the door stood open, and Mr Flintwinch was smoking his pipe on the steps.

'Good evening,' said Arthur.

'Good evening,' said Mr Flintwinch.

The smoke came crookedly out of Mr Flintwinch's mouth, as if it circulated through the whole of his wry figure and came back by his wry throat, before coming forth to mingle with the smoke from the crooked chimneys and the mists from the crooked river.

'Have you any news?' said Arthur.

'We have no news,' said Jeremiah.

'I mean of the foreign man,' Arthur explained.

'I mean of the foreign man,' said Jeremiah.

He looked so grim, as he stood askew, with the knot of his cravat under his ear, that the thought passed into Clennam's mind, and not for the first time by many, could Flintwinch for a purpose of his own have got rid of Blandois? Could it have been his secret, and his safety, that were at issue? He was small and bent, and perhaps not actively strong; yet he was as tough as an old yew-tree, and as crusty as an old jackdaw. Such a man, coming behind a much younger and more vigorous man, and having the will to put an end to him and no relenting, might do it pretty surely in that solitary place at a late hour.

While, in the morbid condition of his thoughts, these thoughts drifted over the main one that was always in Clennam's mind, Mr Flintwinch, regarding the opposite house over the gateway with his neck twisted and one eye shut up, stood smoking with a vicious expression upon him; more as if he were trying to bite off the stem of his pipe, than as if he were enjoying it. Yet he was enjoying it in his own way.

'You'll be able to take my likeness, the next time you call, Arthur, I should think,' said Mr Flintwinch, drily, as he stooped to knock the ashes out.

Rather conscious and confused, Arthur asked his pardon, if he had stared at him unpolitely. 'But my mind runs so much upon this matter,' he said, 'that I lose myself.'

'Hah! Yet I don't see,' returned Mr Flintwinch, quite at his leisure, 'why it should trouble YOU, Arthur.'

'No?'

'No,' said Mr Flintwinch, very shortly and decidedly: much as if he were of the canine race, and snapped at Arthur's hand.

'Is it nothing to see those placards about? Is it nothing to me to see my mother's name and residence hawked up and down in such an association?'

'I don't see,' returned Mr Flintwinch, scraping his horny cheek, 'that it need signify much to you. But I'll tell you what I do see, Arthur,' glancing up at the windows; 'I see the light of fire and candle in your mother's room!'

'And what has that to do with it?'

'Why, sir, I read by it,' said Mr Flintwinch, screwing himself at him, 'that if it's advisable (as the proverb says it is) to let sleeping dogs lie, it's just as advisable, perhaps, to let missing dogs lie. Let 'em be. They generally turn up soon enough.'

Mr Flintwinch turned short round when he had made this remark, and went into the dark hall. Clennam stood there, following him with his eyes, as he dipped for a light in the phosphorus-box in the little room at the side, got one after three or four dips, and lighted the dim lamp against the wall. All the while, Clennam was pursuing the probabilities - rather as if they were being shown to him by an invisible hand than as if he himself were conjuring them up - of Mr Flintwinch's ways and means of doing that darker deed, and removing its traces by any of the black avenues of shadow that lay around them.

'Now, sir,' said the testy Jeremiah; 'will it be agreeable to walk up-stairs?'

'My mother is alone, I suppose?'

'Not alone,' said Mr Flintwinch. 'Mr Casby and his daughter are with her. They came in while I was smoking, and I stayed behind to have my smoke out.'

This was the second disappointment. Arthur made no remark upon it, and repaired to his mother's room, where Mr Casby and Flora had been taking tea, anchovy paste, and hot buttered toast. The relics of those delicacies were not yet removed, either from the table or from the scorched countenance of Affery, who, with the kitchen toasting-fork still in her hand, looked like a sort of allegorical personage; except that she had a considerable advantage over the general run of such personages in point of significant emblematical purpose.

Flora had spread her bonnet and shawl upon the bed, with a care indicative of an intention to stay some time. Mr Casby, too, was beaming near the hob, with his benevolent knobs shining as if the warm butter of the toast were exuding through the patriarchal skull, and with his face as ruddy as if the colouring matter of the anchovy paste were mantling in the patriarchal visage. Seeing this, as he exchanged the usual salutations, Clennam decided to speak to his mother without postponement.

It had long been customary, as she never changed her room, for those who had anything to say to her apart, to wheel her to her desk; where she sat, usually with the back of her chair turned towards the rest of the room, and the person who talked with her seated in a corner, on a stool which was always set in that place for that purpose. Except that it was long since the mother and son had spoken together without the intervention of a third person, it was an ordinary matter of course within the experience of visitors for Mrs Clennam to be asked, with a word of apology for the interruption, if she could be spoken with on a matter of business, and, on her replying in the affirmative, to be wheeled into the position described.

Therefore, when Arthur now made such an apology, and such a request, and moved her to her desk and seated himself on the stool, Mrs Finching merely began to talk louder and faster, as a delicate hint that she could overhear nothing, and Mr Casby stroked his long white locks with sleepy calmness.

'Mother, I have heard something to-day which I feel persuaded you don't know, and which I think you should know, of the antecedents of that man I saw here.'

'I know nothing of the antecedents of the man you saw here, Arthur.'

She spoke aloud. He had lowered his own voice; but she rejected that advance towards confidence as she rejected every other, and spoke in her usual key and in her usual stern voice.

'I have received it on no circuitous information; it has come to me direct.' She asked him, exactly as before, if he were there to tell her what it was?

'I thought it right that you should know it.'

'And what is it?'

'He has been a prisoner in a French gaol.'

She answered with composure, 'I should think that very likely.'

'But in a gaol for criminals, mother. On an accusation of murder.'

She started at the word, and her looks expressed her natural horror. Yet she still spoke aloud, when she demanded: -

'Who told you so?'

'A man who was his fellow-prisoner.'

'That man's antecedents, I suppose, were not known to you, before he told you?'

'No.'

'Though the man himself was?'

'Yes.'

'My case and Flintwinch's, in respect of this other man! I dare say the resemblance is not so exact, though, as that your informant became known to you through a letter from a correspondent with whom he had deposited money? How does that part of the parallel stand?'

Arthur had no choice but to say that his informant had not become known to him through the agency of any such credentials, or indeed of any credentials at all. Mrs Clennam's attentive frown expanded by degrees into a severe look of triumph, and she retorted with emphasis, 'Take care how you judge others, then. I say to you, Arthur, for your good, take care how you judge!' Her emphasis had been derived from her eyes quite as much as from the stress she laid upon her words. She continued to look at him; and if, when he entered the house, he

had had any latent hope of prevailing in the least with her, she now looked it out of his heart.

'Mother, shall I do nothing to assist you?'

'Nothing.'

'Will you entrust me with no confidence, no charge, no explanation?'

'Will you take no counsel with me? Will you not let me come near you?'

'How can you ask me? You separated yourself from my affairs. It was not my act; it was yours. How can you consistently ask me such a question? You know that you left me to Flintwinch, and that he occupies your place.'

Glancing at Jeremiah, Clennam saw in his very gaiters that his attention was closely directed to them, though he stood leaning against the wall scraping his jaw, and pretended to listen to Flora as she held forth in a most distracting manner on a chaos of subjects, in which mackerel, and Mr F.'s Aunt in a swing, had become entangled with cockchafers and the wine trade.

'A prisoner, in a French gaol, on an accusation of murder,' repeated Mrs Clennam, steadily going over what her son had said. 'That is all you know of him from the fellow-prisoner?'

'In substance, all.'

'And was the fellow-prisoner his accomplice and a murderer, too? But, of course, he gives a better account of himself than of his friend; it is needless to ask. This will supply the rest of them here with something new to talk about. Casby, Arthur tells me - '

'Stay, mother! Stay, stay!' He interrupted her hastily, for it had not entered his imagination that she would openly proclaim what he had told her.

'What now?' she said with displeasure. 'What more?'

'I beg you to excuse me, Mr Casby - and you, too, Mrs Finching - for one other moment with my mother - '

He had laid his hand upon her chair, or she would otherwise have wheeled it round with the touch of her foot upon the ground. They were still face to face. She looked at him, as he ran over the possibilities of some result he had not intended, and could not foresee, being influenced by Cavalletto's disclosure becoming a matter

of notoriety, and hurriedly arrived at the conclusion that it had best not be talked about; though perhaps he was guided by no more distinct reason than that he had taken it for granted that his mother would reserve it to herself and her partner.

'What now?' she said again, impatiently. 'What is it?'

'I did not mean, mother, that you should repeat what I have communicated. I think you had better not repeat it.'

'Do you make that a condition with me?'

'Well! Yes.'

'Observe, then! It is you who make this a secret,' said she, holding up her hand, 'and not I. It is you, Arthur, who bring here doubts and suspicions and entreaties for explanations, and it is you, Arthur, who bring secrets here. What is it to me, do you think, where the man has been, or what he has been? What can it be to me? The whole world may know it, if they care to know it; it is nothing to me. Now, let me go.'

He yielded to her imperious but elated look, and turned her chair back to the place from which he had wheeled it. In doing so he saw elation in the face of Mr Flintwinch, which most assuredly was not inspired by Flora. This turning of his intelligence and of his whole attempt and design against himself, did even more than his mother's fixedness and firmness to convince him that his efforts with her were idle. Nothing remained but the appeal to his old friend Affery.

But even to get the very doubtful and preliminary stage of making the appeal, seemed one of the least promising of human undertakings. She was so completely under the thrall of the two clever ones, was so systematically kept in sight by one or other of them, and was so afraid to go about the house besides, that every opportunity of speaking to her alone appeared to be forestalled. Over and above that, Mistress Affery, by some means (it was not very difficult to guess, through the sharp arguments of her liege lord), had acquired such a lively conviction of the hazard of saying anything under any circumstances, that she had remained all this time in a corner guarding herself from approach with that symbolical instrument of hers; so that, when a word or two had been addressed to her by Flora, or even by the bottle-green patriarch himself, she had warded off conversation with the toasting-fork like a dumb woman.

After several abortive attempts to get Affery to look at him while she cleared the table and washed the tea-service, Arthur thought of an

expedient which Flora might originate. To whom he therefore whispered, 'Could you say you would like to go through the house?'

Now, poor Flora, being always in fluctuating expectation of the time when Clennam would renew his boyhood and be madly in love with her again, received the whisper with the utmost delight; not only as rendered precious by its mysterious character, but as preparing the way for a tender interview in which he would declare the state of his affections. She immediately began to work out the hint.

'Ah dear me the poor old room,' said Flora, glancing round, 'looks just as ever Mrs Clennam I am touched to see except for being smokier which was to be expected with time and which we must all expect and reconcile ourselves to being whether we like it or not as I am sure I have had to do myself if not exactly smokier dreadfully stouter which is the same or worse, to think of the days when papa used to bring me here the least of girls a perfect mass of chilblains to be stuck upon a chair with my feet on the rails and stare at Arthur - pray excuse me - Mr Clennam - the least of boys in the frightfullest of frills and jackets ere yet Mr F. appeared a misty shadow on the horizon paying attentions like the well-known spectre of some place in Germany beginning with a B is a moral lesson inculcating that all the paths in life are similar to the paths down in the North of England where they get the coals and make the iron and things gravelled with ashes!'

Having paid the tribute of a sigh to the instability of human existence, Flora hurried on with her purpose.

'Not that at any time,' she proceeded, 'its worst enemy could have said it was a cheerful house for that it was never made to be but always highly impressive, fond memory recalls an occasion in youth ere yet the judgment was mature when Arthur - confirmed habit - Mr Clennam - took me down into an unused kitchen eminent for mouldiness and proposed to secrete me there for life and feed me on what he could hide from his meals when he was not at home for the holidays and on dry bread in disgrace which at that halcyon period too frequently occurred, would it be inconvenient or asking too much to beg to be permitted to revive those scenes and walk through the house?'

Mrs Clennam, who responded with a constrained grace to Mrs Finching's good nature in being there at all, though her visit (before Arthur's unexpected arrival) was undoubtedly an act of pure good nature and no self-gratification, intimated that all the house was open to her. Flora rose and looked to Arthur for his escort. 'Certainly,' said he, aloud; 'and Affery will light us, I dare say.'

Affery was excusing herself with 'Don't ask nothing of me, Arthur!' when Mr Flintwinch stopped her with 'Why not? Affery, what's the matter with you, woman? Why not, jade!' Thus expostulated with, she came unwillingly out of her corner, resigned the toasting-fork into one of her husband's hands, and took the candlestick he offered from the other.

'Go before, you fool!' said Jeremiah. 'Are you going up, or down, Mrs Finching?'

Flora answered, 'Down.'

'Then go before, and down, you Affery,' said Jeremiah. 'And do it properly, or I'll come rolling down the banisters, and tumbling over you!'

Affery headed the exploring party; Jeremiah closed it. He had no intention of leaving them. Clennam looking back, and seeing him following three stairs behind, in the coolest and most methodical manner exclaimed in a low voice, 'Is there no getting rid of him!' Flora reassured his mind by replying promptly, 'Why though not exactly proper Arthur and a thing I couldn't think of before a younger man or a stranger still I don't mind him if you so particularly wish it and provided you'll have the goodness not to take me too tight.'

Wanting the heart to explain that this was not at all what he meant, Arthur extended his supporting arm round Flora's figure. 'Oh my goodness me,' said she. 'You are very obedient indeed really and it's extremely honourable and gentlemanly in you I am sure but still at the same time if you would like to be a little tighter than that I shouldn't consider it intruding.'

In this preposterous attitude, unspeakably at variance with his anxious mind, Clennam descended to the basement of the house; finding that wherever it became darker than elsewhere, Flora became heavier, and that when the house was lightest she was too. Returning from the dismal kitchen regions, which were as dreary as they could be, Mistress Affery passed with the light into his father's old room, and then into the old dining-room; always passing on before like a phantom that was not to be overtaken, and neither turning nor answering when he whispered, 'Affery! I want to speak to you!'

In the dining-room, a sentimental desire came over Flora to look into the dragon closet which had so often swallowed Arthur in the days of his boyhood - not improbably because, as a very dark closet, it was a likely place to be heavy in. Arthur, fast subsiding into despair, had opened it, when a knock was heard at the outer door.

Mistress Affery, with a suppressed cry, threw her apron over her head.

'What? You want another dose!' said Mr Flintwinch. 'You shall have it, my woman, you shall have a good one! Oh! You shall have a sneezer, you shall have a teaser!'

'In the meantime is anybody going to the door?' said Arthur.

'In the meantime, I am going to the door, sir,' returned the old man so savagely, as to render it clear that in a choice of difficulties he felt he must go, though he would have preferred not to go. 'Stay here the while, all! Affery, my woman, move an inch, or speak a word in your foolishness, and I'll treble your dose!'

The moment he was gone, Arthur released Mrs Finching: with some difficulty, by reason of that lady misunderstanding his intentions, and making arrangements with a view to tightening instead of slackening.

'Affery, speak to me now!'

'Don't touch me, Arthur!' she cried, shrinking from him. 'Don't come near me. He'll see you. Jeremiah will. Don't.'

'He can't see me,' returned Arthur, suiting the action to the word, 'if I blow the candle out.'

'He'll hear you,' cried Affery.

'He can't hear me,' returned Arthur, suiting the action to the words again, 'if I draw you into this black closet, and speak here.'

'Why do you hide your face?'

'Because I am afraid of seeing something.'

'You can't be afraid of seeing anything in this darkness, Affery.'

'Yes I am. Much more than if it was light.'

'Why are you afraid?'

'Because the house is full of mysteries and secrets; because it's full of whisperings and counsellings; because it's full of noises. There never was such a house for noises. I shall die of 'em, if Jeremiah don't strangle me first. As I expect he will.'

'I have never heard any noises here, worth speaking of.'

'Ah! But you would, though, if you lived in the house, and was obliged to go about it as I am,' said Affery; 'and you'd feel that they was so well worth speaking of, that you'd feel you was nigh bursting through not being allowed to speak of 'em. Here's Jeremiah! You'll get me killed.'

'My good Affery, I solemnly declare to you that I can see the light of the open door on the pavement of the hall, and so could you if you would uncover your face and look.'

'I durstn't do it,' said Affery, 'I durstn't never, Arthur. I'm always blindfolded when Jeremiah an't a looking, and sometimes even when he is.'

'He cannot shut the door without my seeing him,' said Arthur. 'You are as safe with me as if he was fifty miles away.'

('I wish he was!' cried Affery.)

'Affery, I want to know what is amiss here; I want some light thrown on the secrets of this house.' 'I tell you, Arthur,' she interrupted, 'noises is the secrets, rustlings and stealings about, tremblings, treads overhead and treads underneath.'

'But those are not all the secrets.'

'I don't know,' said Affery. 'Don't ask me no more. Your old sweetheart an't far off, and she's a blabber.'

His old sweetheart, being in fact so near at hand that she was then reclining against him in a flutter, a very substantial angle of forty-five degrees, here interposed to assure Mistress Affery with greater earnestness than directness of asseveration, that what she heard should go no further, but should be kept inviolate, 'if on no other account on Arthur's - sensible of intruding in being too familiar Doyce and Clennam's.'

'I make an imploring appeal to you, Affery, to you, one of the few agreeable early remembrances I have, for my mother's sake, for your husband's sake, for my own, for all our sakes. I am sure you can tell me something connected with the coming here of this man, if you will.'

'Why, then I'll tell you, Arthur,' returned Affery - 'Jeremiah's coming!'

'No, indeed he is not. The door is open, and he is standing outside, talking.'

'I'll tell you then,' said Affery, after listening, 'that the first time he ever come he heard the noises his own self. 'What's that?' he said to me. 'I

don't know what it is,' I says to him, catching hold of him, 'but I have heard it over and over again.' While I says it, he stands a looking at me, all of a shake, he do.'

'Has he been here often?'

'Only that night, and the last night.'

'What did you see of him on the last night, after I was gone?'

'Them two clever ones had him all alone to themselves. Jeremiah come a dancing at me sideways, after I had let you out (he always comes a dancing at me sideways when he's going to hurt me), and he said to me, 'Now, Affery,' he said, 'I am a coming behind you, my woman, and a going to run you up.' So he took and squeezed the back of my neck in his hand, till it made me open MY mouth, and then he pushed me before him to bed, squeezing all the way. That's what he calls running me up, he do. Oh, he's a wicked one!'

'And did you hear or see no more, Affery?'

'Don't I tell you I was sent to bed, Arthur! Here he is!'

'I assure you he is still at the door. Those whisperings and counsellings, Affery, that you have spoken of. What are they?'

'How should I know? Don't ask me nothing about 'em, Arthur. Get away!'

'But my dear Affery; unless I can gain some insight into these hidden things, in spite of your husband and in spite of my mother, ruin will come of it.'

'Don't ask me nothing,' repeated Affery. 'I have been in a dream for ever so long. Go away, go away!'

'You said that before,' returned Arthur. 'You used the same expression that night, at the door, when I asked you what was going on here. What do you mean by being in a dream?'

'I an't a going to tell you. Get away! I shouldn't tell you, if you was by yourself; much less with your old sweetheart here.'

It was equally vain for Arthur to entreat, and for Flora to protest. Affery, who had been trembling and struggling the whole time, turned a deaf ear to all adjuration, and was bent on forcing herself out of the closet.

'I'd sooner scream to Jeremiah than say another word! I'll call out to him, Arthur, if you don't give over speaking to me. Now here's the very last word I'll say afore I call to him - If ever you begin to get the better of them two clever ones your own self (you ought to it, as I told you when you first come home, for you haven't been a living here long years, to be made afeared of your life as I have), then do you get the better of 'em afore my face; and then do you say to me, Affery tell your dreams! Maybe, then I'll tell 'em!'

The shutting of the door stopped Arthur from replying. They glided into the places where Jeremiah had left them; and Clennam, stepping forward as that old gentleman returned, informed him that he had accidentally extinguished the candle. Mr Flintwinch looked on as he re-lighted it at the lamp in the hall, and preserved a profound taciturnity respecting the person who had been holding him in conversation. Perhaps his irascibility demanded compensation for some tediousness that the visitor had expended on him; however that was, he took such umbrage at seeing his wife with her apron over her head, that he charged at her, and taking her veiled nose between his thumb and finger, appeared to throw the whole screw- power of his person into the wring he gave it.

Flora, now permanently heavy, did not release Arthur from the survey of the house, until it had extended even to his old garret bedchamber. His thoughts were otherwise occupied than with the tour of inspection; yet he took particular notice at the time, as he afterwards had occasion to remember, of the airlessness and closeness of the house; that they left the track of their footsteps in the dust on the upper floors; and that there was a resistance to the opening of one room door, which occasioned Affery to cry out that somebody was hiding inside, and to continue to believe so, though somebody was sought and not discovered. When they at last returned to his mother's room, they found her shading her face with her muffled hand, and talking in a low voice to the Patriarch as he stood before the fire, whose blue eyes, polished head, and silken locks, turning towards them as they came in, imparted an inestimable value and inexhaustible love of his species to his remark:

'So you have been seeing the premises, seeing the premises - premises - seeing the premises!'

it was not in itself a jewel of benevolence or wisdom, yet he made it an exemplar of both that one would have liked to have a copy of.