

Chapter LXV - A Plea In The Marshalsea

Haggard anxiety and remorse are bad companions to be barred up with. Brooding all day, and resting very little indeed at night, will not arm a man against misery. Next morning, Clennam felt that his health was sinking, as his spirits had already sunk and that the weight under which he bent was bearing him down.

Night after night he had risen from his bed of wretchedness at twelve or one o'clock, and had sat at his window watching the sickly lamps in the yard, and looking upward for the first wan trace of day, hours before it was possible that the sky could show it to him. Now when the night came, he could not even persuade himself to undress.

For a burning restlessness set in, an agonised impatience of the prison, and a conviction that he was going to break his heart and die there, which caused him indescribable suffering. His dread and hatred of the place became so intense that he felt it a labour to draw his breath in it. The sensation of being stifled sometimes so overpowered him, that he would stand at the window holding his throat and gasping. At the same time a longing for other air, and a yearning to be beyond the blind blank wall, made him feel as if he must go mad with the ardour of the desire.

Many other prisoners had had experience of this condition before him, and its violence and continuity had worn themselves out in their cases, as they did in his. Two nights and a day exhausted it. It came back by fits, but those grew fainter and returned at lengthening intervals. A desolate calm succeeded; and the middle of the week found him settled down in the despondency of low, slow fever.

With Cavalletto and Pancks away, he had no visitors to fear but Mr and Mrs Plornish. His anxiety, in reference to that worthy pair, was that they should not come near him; for, in the morbid state of his nerves, he sought to be left alone, and spared the being seen so subdued and weak. He wrote a note to Mrs Plornish representing himself as occupied with his affairs, and bound by the necessity of devoting himself to them, to remain for a time even without the pleasant interruption of a sight of her kind face. As to Young John, who looked in daily at a certain hour, when the turnkeys were relieved, to ask if he could do anything for him; he always made a pretence of being engaged in writing, and to answer cheerfully in the negative. The subject of their only long conversation had never been revived between them. Through all these changes of unhappiness, however, it had never lost its hold on Clennam's mind.

The sixth day of the appointed week was a moist, hot, misty day. It seemed as though the prison's poverty, and shabbiness, and dirt, were

growing in the sultry atmosphere. With an aching head and a weary heart, Clennam had watched the miserable night out, listening to the fall of rain on the yard pavement, thinking of its softer fall upon the country earth. A blurred circle of yellow haze had risen up in the sky in lieu of sun, and he had watched the patch it put upon his wall, like a bit of the prison's raggedness. He had heard the gates open; and the badly shod feet that waited outside shuffle in; and the sweeping, and pumping, and moving about, begin, which commenced the prison morning. So ill and faint that he was obliged to rest many times in the process of getting himself washed, he had at length crept to his chair by the open window. In it he sat dozing, while the old woman who arranged his room went through her morning's work.

Light of head with want of sleep and want of food (his appetite, and even his sense of taste, having forsaken him), he had been two or three times conscious, in the night, of going astray. He had heard fragments of tunes and songs in the warm wind, which he knew had no existence. Now that he began to doze in exhaustion, he heard them again; and voices seemed to address him, and he answered, and started.

Dozing and dreaming, without the power of reckoning time, so that a minute might have been an hour and an hour a minute, some abiding impression of a garden stole over him - a garden of flowers, with a damp warm wind gently stirring their scents. It required such a painful effort to lift his head for the purpose of inquiring into this, or inquiring into anything, that the impression appeared to have become quite an old and importunate one when he looked round. Beside the tea-cup on his table he saw, then, a blooming nosegay: a wonderful handful of the choicest and most lovely flowers.

Nothing had ever appeared so beautiful in his sight. He took them up and inhaled their fragrance, and he lifted them to his hot head, and he put them down and opened his parched hands to them, as cold hands are opened to receive the cheering of a fire. It was not until he had delighted in them for some time, that he wondered who had sent them; and opened his door to ask the woman who must have put them there, how they had come into her hands. But she was gone, and seemed to have been long gone; for the tea she had left for him on the table was cold. He tried to drink some, but could not bear the odour of it: so he crept back to his chair by the open window, and put the flowers on the little round table of old.

When the first faintness consequent on having moved about had left him, he subsided into his former state. One of the night-tunes was playing in the wind, when the door of his room seemed to open to a light touch, and, after a moment's pause, a quiet figure seemed to stand there, with a black mantle on it. It seemed to draw the mantle

off and drop it on the ground, and then it seemed to be his Little Dorrit in her old, worn dress. It seemed to tremble, and to clasp its hands, and to smile, and to burst into tears.

He roused himself, and cried out. And then he saw, in the loving, pitying, sorrowing, dear face, as in a mirror, how changed he was; and she came towards him; and with her hands laid on his breast to keep him in his chair, and with her knees upon the floor at his feet, and with her lips raised up to kiss him, and with her tears dropping on him as the rain from Heaven had dropped upon the flowers, Little Dorrit, a living presence, called him by his name.

'O, my best friend! Dear Mr Clennam, don't let me see you weep! Unless you weep with pleasure to see me. I hope you do. Your own poor child come back!' So faithful, tender, and unspoiled by Fortune. In the sound of her voice, in the light of her eyes, in the touch of her hands, so Angelically comforting and true!

As he embraced her, she said to him, 'They never told me you were ill,' and drawing an arm softly round his neck, laid his head upon her bosom, put a hand upon his head, and resting her cheek upon that hand, nursed him as lovingly, and GOD knows as innocently, as she had nursed her father in that room when she had been but a baby, needing all the care from others that she took of them.

When he could speak, he said, 'Is it possible that you have come to me? And in this dress?'

'I hoped you would like me better in this dress than any other. I have always kept it by me, to remind me: though I wanted no reminding. I am not alone, you see. I have brought an old friend with me.'

Looking round, he saw Maggy in her big cap which had been long abandoned, with a basket on her arm as in the bygone days, chuckling rapturously.

'It was only yesterday evening that I came to London with my brother. I sent round to Mrs Plornish almost as soon as we arrived, that I might hear of you and let you know I had come. Then I heard that you were here. Did you happen to think of me in the night? I almost believe you must have thought of me a little. I thought of you so anxiously, and it appeared so long to morning.'

'I have thought of you - ' he hesitated what to call her. She perceived it in an instant.

'You have not spoken to me by my right name yet. You know what my right name always is with you.'

'I have thought of you, Little Dorrit, every day, every hour, every minute, since I have been here.'

'Have you? Have you?'

He saw the bright delight of her face, and the flush that kindled in it, with a feeling of shame. He, a broken, bankrupt, sick, dishonoured prisoner.

'I was here before the gates were opened, but I was afraid to come straight to you. I should have done you more harm than good, at first; for the prison was so familiar and yet so strange, and it brought back so many remembrances of my poor father, and of you too, that at first it overpowered me. But we went to Mr Chivery before we came to the gate, and he brought us in, and got John's room for us - my poor old room, you know - and we waited there a little. I brought the flowers to the door, but you didn't hear me.' She looked something more womanly than when she had gone away, and the ripening touch of the Italian sun was visible upon her face. But, otherwise, she was quite unchanged. The same deep, timid earnestness that he had always seen in her, and never without emotion, he saw still. If it had a new meaning that smote him to the heart, the change was in his perception, not in her.

She took off her old bonnet, hung it in the old place, and noiselessly began, with Maggy's help, to make his room as fresh and neat as it could be made, and to sprinkle it with a pleasant-smelling water. When that was done, the basket, which was filled with grapes and other fruit, was unpacked, and all its contents were quietly put away. When that was done, a moment's whisper despatched Maggy to despatch somebody else to fill the basket again; which soon came back replenished with new stores, from which a present provision of cooling drink and jelly, and a prospective supply of roast chicken and wine and water, were the first extracts. These various arrangements completed, she took out her old needle-case to make him a curtain for his window; and thus, with a quiet reigning in the room, that seemed to diffuse itself through the else noisy prison, he found himself composed in his chair, with Little Dorrit working at his side.

To see the modest head again bent down over its task, and the nimble fingers busy at their old work - though she was not so absorbed in it, but that her compassionate eyes were often raised to his face, and, when they drooped again had tears in them - to be so consoled and comforted, and to believe that all the devotion of this great nature was turned to him in his adversity to pour out its inexhaustible wealth of goodness upon him, did not steady Clennam's trembling voice or hand, or strengthen him in his weakness. Yet it inspired him with an

inward fortitude, that rose with his love. And how dearly he loved her now, what words can tell!

As they sat side by side in the shadow of the wall, the shadow fell like light upon him. She would not let him speak much, and he lay back in his chair, looking at her. Now and again she would rise and give him the glass that he might drink, or would smooth the resting-place of his head; then she would gently resume her seat by him, and bend over her work again.

The shadow moved with the sun, but she never moved from his side, except to wait upon him. The sun went down and she was still there. She had done her work now, and her hand, faltering on the arm of his chair since its last tending of him, was hesitating there yet. He laid his hand upon it, and it clasped him with a trembling supplication.

'Dear Mr Clennam, I must say something to you before I go. I have put it off from hour to hour, but I must say it.'

'I too, dear Little Dorrit. I have put off what I must say.' She nervously moved her hand towards his lips as if to stop him; then it dropped, trembling, into its former place.

'I am not going abroad again. My brother is, but I am not. He was always attached to me, and he is so grateful to me now - so much too grateful, for it is only because I happened to be with him in his illness - that he says I shall be free to stay where I like best, and to do what I like best. He only wishes me to be happy, he says.'

There was one bright star shining in the sky. She looked up at it while she spoke, as if it were the fervent purpose of her own heart shining above her.

'You will understand, I dare say, without my telling you, that my brother has come home to find my dear father's will, and to take possession of his property. He says, if there is a will, he is sure I shall be left rich; and if there is none, that he will make me so.'

He would have spoken; but she put up her trembling hand again, and he stopped.

'I have no use for money, I have no wish for it. It would be of no value at all to me but for your sake. I could not be rich, and you here. I must always be much worse than poor, with you distressed. Will you let me lend you all I have? Will you let me give it you? Will you let me show you that I have never forgotten, that I never can forget, your protection of me when this was my home? Dear Mr Clennam, make me of all the world the happiest, by saying Yes. Make me as happy as

I can be in leaving you here, by saying nothing to-night, and letting me go away with the hope that you will think of it kindly; and that for my sake - not for yours, for mine, for nobody's but mine! - you will give me the greatest joy I can experience on earth, the joy of knowing that I have been serviceable to you, and that I have paid some little of the great debt of my affection and gratitude. I can't say what I wish to say. I can't visit you here where I have lived so long, I can't think of you here where I have seen so much, and be as calm and comforting as I ought. My tears will make their way. I cannot keep them back. But pray, pray, pray, do not turn from your Little Dorrit, now, in your affliction! Pray, pray, pray, I beg you and implore you with all my grieving heart, my friend - my dear! - take all I have, and make it a Blessing to me!

The star had shone on her face until now, when her face sank upon his hand and her own.

It had grown darker when he raised her in his encircling arm, and softly answered her.

'No, darling Little Dorrit. No, my child. I must not hear of such a sacrifice. Liberty and hope would be so dear, bought at such a price, that I could never support their weight, never bear the reproach of possessing them. But with what ardent thankfulness and love I say this, I may call Heaven to witness!'

'And yet you will not let me be faithful to you in your affliction?'

'Say, dearest Little Dorrit, and yet I will try to be faithful to you. If, in the bygone days when this was your home and when this was your dress, I had understood myself (I speak only of myself) better, and had read the secrets of my own breast more distinctly; if, through my reserve and self-mistrust, I had discerned a light that I see brightly now when it has passed far away, and my weak footsteps can never overtake it; if I had then known, and told you that I loved and honoured you, not as the poor child I used to call you, but as a woman whose true hand would raise me high above myself and make me a far happier and better man; if I had so used the opportunity there is no recalling - as I wish I had, O I wish I had! - and if something had kept us apart then, when I was moderately thriving, and when you were poor; I might have met your noble offer of your fortune, dearest girl, with other words than these, and still have blushed to touch it. But, as it is, I must never touch it, never!'

She besought him, more pathetically and earnestly, with her little supplicatory hand, than she could have done in any words.

'I am disgraced enough, my Little Dorrit. I must not descend so low as that, and carry you - so dear, so generous, so good - down with me. GOD bless you, GOD reward you! It is past.' He took her in his arms, as if she had been his daughter.

'Always so much older, so much rougher, and so much less worthy, even what I was must be dismissed by both of us, and you must see me only as I am. I put this parting kiss upon your cheek, my child - who might have been more near to me, who never could have been more dear - a ruined man far removed from you, for ever separated from you, whose course is run while yours is but beginning. I have not the courage to ask to be forgotten by you in my humiliation; but I ask to be remembered only as I am.'

The bell began to ring, warning visitors to depart. He took her mantle from the wall, and tenderly wrapped it round her.

'One other word, my Little Dorrit. A hard one to me, but it is a necessary one. The time when you and this prison had anything in common has long gone by. Do you understand?'

'O! you will never say to me,' she cried, weeping bitterly, and holding up her clasped hands in entreaty, 'that I am not to come back any more! You will surely not desert me so!'

'I would say it, if I could; but I have not the courage quite to shut out this dear face, and abandon all hope of its return. But do not come soon, do not come often! This is now a tainted place, and I well know the taint of it clings to me. You belong to much brighter and better scenes. You are not to look back here, my Little Dorrit; you are to look away to very different and much happier paths. Again, GOD bless you in them! GOD reward you!'

Maggy, who had fallen into very low spirits, here cried, 'Oh get him into a hospital; do get him into a hospital, Mother! He'll never look like hisself again, if he an't got into a hospital. And then the little woman as was always a spinning at her wheel, she can go to the cupboard with the Princess, and say, what do you keep the Chicking there for? and then they can take it out and give it to him, and then all be happy!'

The interruption was seasonable, for the bell had nearly rung itself out. Again tenderly wrapping her mantle about her, and taking her on his arm (though, but for her visit, he was almost too weak to walk), Arthur led Little Dorrit down-stairs. She was the last visitor to pass out at the Lodge, and the gate jarred heavily and hopelessly upon her.

With the funeral clang that it sounded into Arthur's heart, his sense of weakness returned. It was a toilsome journey up-stairs to his room, and he re-entered its dark solitary precincts in unutterable misery.

When it was almost midnight, and the prison had long been quiet, a cautious creak came up the stairs, and a cautious tap of a key was given at his door. It was Young John. He glided in, in his stockings, and held the door closed, while he spoke in a whisper.

'It's against all rules, but I don't mind. I was determined to come through, and come to you.'

'What is the matter?'

'Nothing's the matter, sir. I was waiting in the court-yard for Miss Dorrit when she came out. I thought you'd like some one to see that she was safe.'

'Thank you, thank you! You took her home, John?'

'I saw her to her hotel. The same that Mr Dorrit was at. Miss Dorrit walked all the way, and talked to me so kind, it quite knocked me over. Why do you think she walked instead of riding?'

'I don't know, John.'

'To talk about you. She said to me, 'John, you was always honourable, and if you'll promise me that you will take care of him, and never let him want for help and comfort when I am not there, my mind will be at rest so far.' I promised her. And I'll stand by you,' said John Chivery, 'for ever!'

Clennam, much affected, stretched out his hand to this honest spirit.

'Before I take it,' said John, looking at it, without coming from the door, 'guess what message Miss Dorrit gave me.'

Clennam shook his head.

'Tell him,' repeated John, in a distinct, though quavering voice, 'that his Little Dorrit sent him her undying love.' Now it's delivered. Have I been honourable, sir?'

'Very, very!'

'Will you tell Miss Dorrit I've been honourable, sir?'

'I will indeed.'

'There's my hand, sir,' said John, 'and I'll stand by you forever!'

After a hearty squeeze, he disappeared with the same cautious creak upon the stair, crept shoeless over the pavement of the yard, and, locking the gates behind him, passed out into the front where he had left his shoes. If the same way had been paved with burning ploughshares, it is not at all improbable that John would have traversed it with the same devotion, for the same purpose.