

Chapter LXVI - Closing In

The last day of the appointed week touched the bars of the Marshalsea gate. Black, all night, since the gate had clashed upon Little Dorrit, its iron stripes were turned by the early-glowing sun into stripes of gold. Far aslant across the city, over its jumbled roofs, and through the open tracery of its church towers, struck the long bright rays, bars of the prison of this lower world.

Throughout the day the old house within the gateway remained untroubled by any visitors. But, when the sun was low, three men turned in at the gateway and made for the dilapidated house.

Rigaud was the first, and walked by himself smoking. Mr Baptist was the second, and jogged close after him, looking at no other object. Mr Pancks was the third, and carried his hat under his arm for the liberation of his restive hair; the weather being extremely hot. They all came together at the door-steps.

'You pair of madmen!' said Rigaud, facing about. 'Don't go yet!'

'We don't mean to,' said Mr Pancks. Giving him a dark glance in acknowledgment of his answer, Rigaud knocked loudly. He had charged himself with drink, for the playing out of his game, and was impatient to begin. He had hardly finished one long resounding knock, when he turned to the knocker again and began another. That was not yet finished when Jeremiah Flintwinch opened the door, and they all clanked into the stone hall. Rigaud, thrusting Mr Flintwinch aside, proceeded straight up-stairs. His two attendants followed him, Mr Flintwinch followed them, and they all came trooping into Mrs Clennam's quiet room. It was in its usual state; except that one of the windows was wide open, and Affery sat on its old-fashioned window-seat, mending a stocking. The usual articles were on the little table; the usual deadened fire was in the grate; the bed had its usual pall upon it; and the mistress of all sat on her black bier-like sofa, propped up by her black angular bolster that was like the headsman's block.

Yet there was a nameless air of preparation in the room, as if it were strung up for an occasion. From what the room derived it - every one of its small variety of objects being in the fixed spot it had occupied for years - no one could have said without looking attentively at its mistress, and that, too, with a previous knowledge of her face. Although her unchanging black dress was in every plait precisely as of old, and her unchanging attitude was rigidly preserved, a very slight additional setting of her features and contraction of her gloomy forehead was so powerfully marked, that it marked everything about her.

'Who are these?' she said, wonderingly, as the two attendants entered. 'What do these people want here?'

'Who are these, dear madame, is it?' returned Rigaud. 'Faith, they are friends of your son the prisoner. And what do they want here, is it? Death, madame, I don't know. You will do well to ask them.'

'You know you told us at the door, not to go yet,' said Pancks.

'And you know you told me at the door, you didn't mean to go,' retorted Rigaud. 'In a word, madame, permit me to present two spies of the prisoner's - madmen, but spies. If you wish them to remain here during our little conversation, say the word. It is nothing to me.'

'Why should I wish them to remain here?' said Mrs Clennam. 'What have I to do with them?'

'Then, dearest madame,' said Rigaud, throwing himself into an arm-chair so heavily that the old room trembled, 'you will do well to dismiss them. It is your affair. They are not my spies, not my rascals.'

'Hark! You Pancks,' said Mrs Clennam, bending her brows upon him angrily, 'you Casby's clerk! Attend to your employer's business and your own. Go. And take that other man with you.' 'Thank you, ma'am,' returned Mr Pancks, 'I am glad to say I see no objection to our both retiring. We have done all we undertook to do for Mr Clennam. His constant anxiety has been (and it grew worse upon him when he became a prisoner), that this agreeable gentleman should be brought back here to the place from which he slipped away. Here he is - brought back. And I will say,' added Mr Pancks, 'to his ill-looking face, that in my opinion the world would be no worse for his slipping out of it altogether.'

'Your opinion is not asked,' answered Mrs Clennam. 'Go.'

'I am sorry not to leave you in better company, ma'am,' said Pancks; 'and sorry, too, that Mr Clennam can't be present. It's my fault, that is.'

'You mean his own,' she returned.

'No, I mean mine, ma'am,' said Pancks, 'for it was my misfortune to lead him into a ruinous investment.' (Mr Pancks still clung to that word, and never said speculation.) 'Though I can prove by figures,' added Mr Pancks, with an anxious countenance, 'that it ought to have been a good investment. I have gone over it since it failed, every day of my life, and it comes out - regarded as a question of figures - triumphant. The present is not a time or place,' Mr Pancks pursued,

with a longing glance into his hat, where he kept his calculations, 'for entering upon the figures; but the figures are not to be disputed. Mr Clennam ought to have been at this moment in his carriage and pair, and I ought to have been worth from three to five thousand pound.'

Mr Pancks put his hair erect with a general aspect of confidence that could hardly have been surpassed, if he had had the amount in his pocket. These incontrovertible figures had been the occupation of every moment of his leisure since he had lost his money, and were destined to afford him consolation to the end of his days.

'However,' said Mr Pancks, 'enough of that. Altro, old boy, you have seen the figures, and you know how they come out.' Mr Baptist, who had not the slightest arithmetical power of compensating himself in this way, nodded, with a fine display of bright teeth.

At whom Mr Flintwinch had been looking, and to whom he then said:

'Oh! it's you, is it? I thought I remembered your face, but I wasn't certain till I saw your teeth. Ah! yes, to be sure. It was this officious refugee,' said Jeremiah to Mrs Clennam, 'who came knocking at the door on the night when Arthur and Chatterbox were here, and who asked me a whole Catechism of questions about Mr Blandois.'

'It is true,' Mr Baptist cheerfully admitted. 'And behold him, padrone! I have found him consequentementally.'

'I shouldn't have objected,' returned Mr Flintwinch, 'to your having broken your neck consequentementally.'

'And now,' said Mr Pancks, whose eye had often stealthily wandered to the window-seat and the stocking that was being mended there, 'I've only one other word to say before I go. If Mr Clennam was here - but unfortunately, though he has so far got the better of this fine gentleman as to return him to this place against his will, he is ill and in prison - ill and in prison, poor fellow - if he was here,' said Mr Pancks, taking one step aside towards the window-seat, and laying his right hand upon the stocking; 'he would say, 'Affery, tell your dreams!''

Mr Pancks held up his right forefinger between his nose and the stocking with a ghostly air of warning, turned, steamed out and towed Mr Baptist after him. The house-door was heard to close upon them, their steps were heard passing over the dull pavement of the echoing court-yard, and still nobody had added a word. Mrs Clennam and Jeremiah had exchanged a look; and had then looked, and looked still, at Affery, who sat mending the stocking with great assiduity.

'Come!' said Mr Flintwinch at length, screwing himself a curve or two in the direction of the window-seat, and rubbing the palms of his hands on his coat-tail as if he were preparing them to do something: 'Whatever has to be said among us had better be begun to be said without more loss of time. - So, Affery, my woman, take yourself away!'

In a moment Affery had thrown the stocking down, started up, caught hold of the windowsill with her right hand, lodged herself upon the window-seat with her right knee, and was flourishing her left hand, beating expected assailants off.

'No, I won't, Jeremiah - no, I won't - no, I won't! I won't go! I'll stay here. I'll hear all I don't know, and say all I know. I will, at last, if I die for it. I will, I will, I will, I will!'

Mr Flintwinch, stiffening with indignation and amazement, moistened the fingers of one hand at his lips, softly described a circle with them in the palm of the other hand, and continued with a menacing grin to screw himself in the direction of his wife; gasping some remark as he advanced, of which, in his choking anger, only the words, 'Such a dose!' were audible.

'Not a bit nearer, Jeremiah!' cried Affery, never ceasing to beat the air. 'Don't come a bit nearer to me, or I'll rouse the neighbourhood! I'll throw myself out of window. I'll scream Fire and Murder! I'll wake the dead! Stop where you are, or I'll make shrieks enough to wake the dead!'

The determined voice of Mrs Clennam echoed 'Stop!' Jeremiah had stopped already. 'It is closing in, Flintwinch. Let her alone. Affery, do you turn against me after these many years?'

'I do, if it's turning against you to hear what I don't know, and say what I know. I have broke out now, and I can't go back. I am determined to do it. I will do it, I will, I will, I will! If that's turning against you, yes, I turn against both of you two clever ones. I told Arthur when he first come home to stand up against you. I told him it was no reason, because I was afeard of my life of you, that he should be. All manner of things have been a-going on since then, and I won't be run up by Jeremiah, nor yet I won't be dazed and scared, nor made a party to I don't know what, no more. I won't, I won't, I won't! I'll up for Arthur when he has nothing left, and is ill, and in prison, and can't up for himself. I will, I will, I will, I will!'

'How do you know, you heap of confusion,' asked Mrs Clennam sternly, 'that in doing what you are doing now, you are even serving Arthur?'

'I don't know nothing rightly about anything,' said Affery; 'and if ever you said a true word in your life, it's when you call me a heap of confusion, for you two clever ones have done your most to make me such. You married me whether I liked it or not, and you've led me, pretty well ever since, such a life of dreaming and frightening as never was known, and what do you expect me to be but a heap of confusion? You wanted to make me such, and I am such; but I won't submit no longer; no, I won't, I won't, I won't, I won't!' She was still beating the air against all comers.

After gazing at her in silence, Mrs Clennam turned to Rigaud. 'You see and hear this foolish creature. Do you object to such a piece of distraction remaining where she is?'

'I, madame,' he replied, 'do I? That's a question for you.'

'I do not,' she said, gloomily. 'There is little left to choose now. Flintwinch, it is closing in.'

Mr Flintwinch replied by directing a look of red vengeance at his wife, and then, as if to pinion himself from falling upon her, screwed his crossed arms into the breast of his waistcoat, and with his chin very near one of his elbows stood in a corner, watching Rigaud in the oddest attitude. Rigaud, for his part, arose from his chair, and seated himself on the table with his legs dangling. In this easy attitude, he met Mrs Clennam's set face, with his moustache going up and his nose coming down.

'Madame, I am a gentleman - '

'Of whom,' she interrupted in her steady tones, 'I have heard disparagement, in connection with a French jail and an accusation of murder.'

He kissed his hand to her with his exaggerated gallantry.

'Perfectly. Exactly. Of a lady too! What absurdity! How incredible! I had the honour of making a great success then; I hope to have the honour of making a great success now. I kiss your hands. Madame, I am a gentleman (I was going to observe), who when he says, 'I will definitely finish this or that affair at the present sitting,' does definitely finish it. I announce to you that we are arrived at our last sitting on our little business. You do me the favour to follow, and to comprehend?'

She kept her eyes fixed upon him with a frown. 'Yes.'

'Further, I am a gentleman to whom mere mercenary trade-bargains are unknown, but to whom money is always acceptable as the means of pursuing his pleasures. You do me the favour to follow, and to comprehend?'

'Scarcely necessary to ask, one would say. Yes.'

'Further, I am a gentleman of the softest and sweetest disposition, but who, if trifled with, becomes enraged. Noble natures under such circumstances become enraged. I possess a noble nature. When the lion is awakened - that is to say, when I enrage - the satisfaction of my animosity is as acceptable to me as money. You always do me the favour to follow, and to comprehend?'

'Yes,' she answered, somewhat louder than before.

'Do not let me derange you; pray be tranquil. I have said we are now arrived at our last sitting. Allow me to recall the two sittings we have held.'

'It is not necessary.'

'Death, madame,' he burst out, 'it's my fancy! Besides, it clears the way. The first sitting was limited. I had the honour of making your acquaintance - of presenting my letter; I am a Knight of Industry, at your service, madame, but my polished manners had won me so much of success, as a master of languages, among your compatriots who are as stiff as their own starch is to one another, but are ready to relax to a foreign gentleman of polished manners - and of observing one or two little things,' he glanced around the room and smiled, 'about this honourable house, to know which was necessary to assure me, and to convince me that I had the distinguished pleasure of making the acquaintance of the lady I sought. I achieved this. I gave my word of honour to our dear Flintwinch that I would return. I gracefully departed.'

Her face neither acquiesced nor demurred. The same when he paused, and when he spoke, it as yet showed him always the one attentive frown, and the dark revelation before mentioned of her being nerved for the occasion.

'I say, gracefully departed, because it was graceful to retire without alarming a lady. To be morally graceful, not less than physically, is a part of the character of Rigaud Blandois. It was also politic, as leaving you with something overhanging you, to expect me again with a little anxiety on a day not named. But your slave is politic. By Heaven, madame, politic! Let us return. On the day not named, I have again the honour to render myself at your house. I intimate that I have

something to sell, which, if not bought, will compromise madame whom I highly esteem. I explain myself generally. I demand - I think it was a thousand pounds. Will you correct me?'

Thus forced to speak, she replied with constraint, 'You demanded as much as a thousand pounds.'

'I demand at present, Two. Such are the evils of delay. But to return once more. We are not accordant; we differ on that occasion. I am playful; playfulness is a part of my amiable character. Playfully, I become as one slain and hidden. For, it may alone be worth half the sum to madame, to be freed from the suspicions that my droll idea awakens. Accident and spies intermix themselves against my playfulness, and spoil the fruit, perhaps - who knows? only you and Flintwinch - when it is just ripe. Thus, madame, I am here for the last time. Listen! Definitely the last.'

As he struck his straggling boot-heels against the flap of the table, meeting her frown with an insolent gaze, he began to change his tone for a fierce one.

'Bah! Stop an instant! Let us advance by steps. Here is my Hotel-note to be paid, according to contract. Five minutes hence we may be at daggers' points. I'll not leave it till then, or you'll cheat me. Pay it! Count me the money!'

'Take it from his hand and pay it, Flintwinch,' said Mrs Clennam.

He spirted it into Mr Flintwinch's face when the old man advanced to take it, and held forth his hand, repeating noisily, 'Pay it! Count it out! Good money!' Jeremiah picked the bill up, looked at the total with a bloodshot eye, took a small canvas bag from his pocket, and told the amount into his hand.

Rigaud chinked the money, weighed it in his hand, threw it up a little way and caught it, chinked it again.

'The sound of it, to the bold Rigaud Blandois, is like the taste of fresh meat to the tiger. Say, then, madame. How much?'

He turned upon her suddenly with a menacing gesture of the weighted hand that clenched the money, as if he were going to strike her with it.

'I tell you again, as I told you before, that we are not rich here, as you suppose us to be, and that your demand is excessive. I have not the present means of complying with such a demand, if I had ever so great an inclination.'

'If!' cried Rigaud. 'Hear this lady with her If! Will you say that you have not the inclination?'

'I will say what presents itself to me, and not what presents itself to you.'

'Say it then. As to the inclination. Quick! Come to the inclination, and I know what to do.'

She was no quicker, and no slower, in her reply. 'It would seem that you have obtained possession of a paper - or of papers - which I assuredly have the inclination to recover.'

Rigaud, with a loud laugh, drummed his heels against the table, and chinked his money. 'I think so! I believe you there!'

'The paper might be worth, to me, a sum of money. I cannot say how much, or how little.'

'What the Devil!' he asked savagely. 'Not after a week's grace to consider?'

'No! I will not out of my scanty means - for I tell you again, we are poor here, and not rich - I will not offer any price for a power that I do not know the worst and the fullest extent of. This is the third time of your hinting and threatening. You must speak explicitly, or you may go where you will, and do what you will. It is better to be torn to pieces at a spring, than to be a mouse at the caprice of such a cat.'

He looked at her so hard with those eyes too near together that the sinister sight of each, crossing that of the other, seemed to make the bridge of his hooked nose crooked. After a long survey, he said, with the further setting off of his internal smile:

'You are a bold woman!'

'I am a resolved woman.'

'You always were. What? She always was; is it not so, my little Flintwinch?'

'Flintwinch, say nothing to him. It is for him to say, here and now, all he can; or to go hence, and do all he can. You know this to be our determination. Leave him to his action on it.'

She did not shrink under his evil leer, or avoid it. He turned it upon her again, but she remained steady at the point to which she had fixed herself. He got off the table, placed a chair near the sofa, sat

down in it, and leaned an arm upon the sofa close to her own, which he touched with his hand. Her face was ever frowning, attentive, and settled.

'It is your pleasure then, madame, that I shall relate a morsel of family history in this little family society,' said Rigaud, with a warning play of his lithe fingers on her arm. 'I am something of a doctor. Let me touch your pulse.'

She suffered him to take her wrist in his hand. Holding it, he proceeded to say:

'A history of a strange marriage, and a strange mother, and a revenge, and a suppression. - Aye, aye, aye? this pulse is beating curiously! It appears to me that it doubles while I touch it. Are these the usual changes of your malady, madame?'

There was a struggle in her maimed arm as she twisted it away, but there was none in her face. On his face there was his own smile.

'I have lived an adventurous life. I am an adventurous character. I have known many adventurers; interesting spirits - amiable society! To one of them I owe my knowledge and my proofs - I repeat it, estimable lady - proofs - of the ravishing little family history I go to commence. You will be charmed with it. But, bah! I forget. One should name a history. Shall I name it the history of a house? But, bah, again. There are so many houses. Shall I name it the history of this house?'

Leaning over the sofa, poised on two legs of his chair and his left elbow; that hand often tapping her arm to beat his words home; his legs crossed; his right hand sometimes arranging his hair, sometimes smoothing his moustache, sometimes striking his nose, always threatening her whatever it did; coarse, insolent, rapacious, cruel, and powerful, he pursued his narrative at his ease.

'In fine, then, I name it the history of this house. I commence it. There live here, let us suppose, an uncle and nephew. The uncle, a rigid old gentleman of strong force of character; the nephew, habitually timid, repressed, and under constraint.'

Mistress Affery, fixedly attentive in the window-seat, biting the rolled up end of her apron, and trembling from head to foot, here cried out, 'Jeremiah, keep off from me! I've heerd, in my dreams, of Arthur's father and his uncle. He's a talking of them. It was before my time here; but I've heerd in my dreams that Arthur's father was a poor, irresolute, frightened chap, who had had everything but his orphan life scared out of him when he was young, and that he had no voice in

the choice of his wife even, but his uncle chose her. There she sits! I heard it in my dreams, and you said it to her own self.'

As Mr Flintwinch shook his fist at her, and as Mrs Clennam gazed upon her, Rigaud kissed his hand to her. 'Perfectly right, dear Madame Flintwinch. You have a genius for dreaming.'

'I don't want none of your praises,' returned Affery. 'I don't want to have nothing at all to say to you. But Jeremiah said they was dreams, and I'll tell 'em as such!' Here she put her apron in her mouth again, as if she were stopping somebody else's mouth - perhaps Jeremiah's, which was chattering with threats as if he were grimly cold.

'Our beloved Madame Flintwinch,' said Rigaud, 'developing all of a sudden a fine susceptibility and spirituality, is right to a marvel. Yes. So runs the history. Monsieur, the uncle, commands the nephew to marry. Monsieur says to him in effect, 'My nephew, I introduce to you a lady of strong force of character, like myself - a resolved lady, a stern lady, a lady who has a will that can break the weak to powder: a lady without pity, without love, implacable, revengeful, cold as the stone, but raging as the fire.'

Ah! what fortitude! Ah, what superiority of intellectual strength! Truly, a proud and noble character that I describe in the supposed words of Monsieur, the uncle. Ha, ha, ha! Death of my soul, I love the sweet lady!

Mrs Clennam's face had changed. There was a remarkable darkness of colour on it, and the brow was more contracted. 'Madame, madame,' said Rigaud, tapping her on the arm, as if his cruel hand were sounding a musical instrument, 'I perceive I interest you. I perceive I awaken your sympathy. Let us go on.'

The drooping nose and the ascending moustache had, however, to be hidden for a moment with the white hand, before he could go on; he enjoyed the effect he made so much.

'The nephew, being, as the lucid Madame Flintwinch has remarked, a poor devil who has had everything but his orphan life frightened and famished out of him - the nephew abases his head, and makes response: 'My uncle, it is to you to command. Do as you will!' Monsieur, the uncle, does as he will. It is what he always does. The auspicious nuptials take place; the newly married come home to this charming mansion; the lady is received, let us suppose, by Flintwinch. Hey, old intriguer?'

Jeremiah, with his eyes upon his mistress, made no reply. Rigaud looked from one to the other, struck his ugly nose, and made a clucking with his tongue.

'Soon the lady makes a singular and exciting discovery. Thereupon, full of anger, full of jealousy, full of vengeance, she forms - see you, madame! - a scheme of retribution, the weight of which she ingeniously forces her crushed husband to bear himself, as well as execute upon her enemy. What superior intelligence!'

'Keep off, Jeremiah!' cried the palpitating Affery, taking her apron from her mouth again. 'But it was one of my dreams, that you told her, when you quarrelled with her one winter evening at dusk - there she sits and you looking at her - that she oughtn't to have let Arthur when he come home, suspect his father only; that she had always had the strength and the power; and that she ought to have stood up more to Arthur, for his father. It was in the same dream where you said to her that she was not - not something, but I don't know what, for she burst out tremendous and stopped you. You know the dream as well as I do. When you come down-stairs into the kitchen with the candle in your hand, and hitched my apron off my head. When you told me I had been dreaming. When you wouldn't believe the noises.' After this explosion Affery put her apron into her mouth again; always keeping her hand on the window-sill and her knee on the window-seat, ready to cry out or jump out if her lord and master approached.

Rigaud had not lost a word of this.

'Haha!' he cried, lifting his eyebrows, folding his arms, and leaning back in his chair. 'Assuredly, Madame Flintwinch is an oracle! How shall we interpret the oracle, you and I and the old intriguer? He said that you were not - ? And you burst out and stopped him! What was it you were not? What is it you are not? Say then, madame!'

Under this ferocious banter, she sat breathing harder, and her mouth was disturbed. Her lips quivered and opened, in spite of her utmost efforts to keep them still.

'Come then, madame! Speak, then! Our old intriguer said that you were not - and you stopped him. He was going to say that you were not - what? I know already, but I want a little confidence from you. How, then? You are not what?'

She tried again to repress herself, but broke out vehemently, 'Not Arthur's mother!'

'Good,' said Rigaud. 'You are amenable.'

With the set expression of her face all torn away by the explosion of her passion, and with a bursting, from every rent feature, of the smouldering fire so long pent up, she cried out: 'I will tell it myself! I will not hear it from your lips, and with the taint of your wickedness upon it. Since it must be seen, I will have it seen by the light I stood in. Not another word. Hear me!'

'Unless you are a more obstinate and more persisting woman than even I know you to be,' Mr Flintwinch interposed, 'you had better leave Mr Rigaud, Mr Blandois, Mr Beelzebub, to tell it in his own way. What does it signify when he knows all about it?'

'He does not know all about it.'

'He knows all he cares about it,' Mr Flintwinch testily urged. 'He does not know me.'

'What do you suppose he cares for you, you conceited woman?' said Mr Flintwinch.

'I tell you, Flintwinch, I will speak. I tell you when it has come to this, I will tell it with my own lips, and will express myself throughout it. What! Have I suffered nothing in this room, no deprivation, no imprisonment, that I should condescend at last to contemplate myself in such a glass as that. Can you see him? Can you hear him? If your wife were a hundred times the ingrate that she is, and if I were a thousand times more hopeless than I am of inducing her to be silent if this man is silenced, I would tell it myself, before I would bear the torment of the hearing it from him.'

Rigaud pushed his chair a little back; pushed his legs out straight before him; and sat with his arms folded over against her.

'You do not know what it is,' she went on addressing him, 'to be brought up strictly and straitly. I was so brought up. Mine was no light youth of sinful gaiety and pleasure. Mine were days of wholesome repression, punishment, and fear. The corruption of our hearts, the evil of our ways, the curse that is upon us, the terrors that surround us - these were the themes of my childhood. They formed my character, and filled me with an abhorrence of evil-doers. When old Mr Gilbert Clennam proposed his orphan nephew to my father for my husband, my father impressed upon me that his bringing-up had been, like mine, one of severe restraint. He told me, that besides the discipline his spirit had undergone, he had lived in a starved house, where rioting and gaiety were unknown, and where every day was a day of toil and trial like the last. He told me that he had been a man in years long before his uncle had acknowledged him as one; and that from his school-days to that hour, his uncle's roof has been a

sanctuary to him from the contagion of the irreligious and dissolute. When, within a twelvemonth of our marriage, I found my husband, at that time when my father spoke of him, to have sinned against the Lord and outraged me by holding a guilty creature in my place, was I to doubt that it had been appointed to me to make the discovery, and that it was appointed to me to lay the hand of punishment upon that creature of perdition? Was I to dismiss in a moment - not my own wrongs - what was I! but all the rejection of sin, and all the war against it, in which I had been bred?' She laid her wrathful hand upon the watch on the table.

'No! 'Do not forget.' The initials of those words are within here now, and were within here then. I was appointed to find the old letter that referred to them, and that told me what they meant, and whose work they were, and why they were worked, lying with this watch in his secret drawer. But for that appointment there would have been no discovery. 'Do not forget.' It spoke to me like a voice from an angry cloud. Do not forget the deadly sin, do not forget the appointed discovery, do not forget the appointed suffering. I did not forget. Was it my own wrong I remembered? Mine! I was but a servant and a minister. What power could I have over them, but that they were bound in the bonds of their sin, and delivered to me!'

More than forty years had passed over the grey head of this determined woman, since the time she recalled. More than forty years of strife and struggle with the whisper that, by whatever name she called her vindictive pride and rage, nothing through all eternity could change their nature. Yet, gone those more than forty years, and come this Nemesis now looking her in the face, she still abided by her old impiety - still reversed the order of Creation, and breathed her own breath into a clay image of her Creator. Verily, verily, travellers have seen many monstrous idols in many countries; but no human eyes have ever seen more daring, gross, and shocking images of the Divine nature than we creatures of the dust make in our own likenesses, of our own bad passions.

'When I forced him to give her up to me, by her name and place of abode,' she went on in her torrent of indignation and defence; 'when I accused her, and she fell hiding her face at my feet, was it my injury that I asserted, were they my reproaches that I poured upon her? Those who were appointed of old to go to wicked kings and accuse them - were they not ministers and servants? And had not I, unworthy and far-removed from them, sin to denounce? When she pleaded to me her youth, and his wretched and hard life (that was her phrase for the virtuous training he had belied), and the desecrated ceremony of marriage there had secretly been between them, and the terrors of want and shame that had overwhelmed them both when I was first appointed to be the instrument of their punishment, and the love (for

she said the word to me, down at my feet) in which she had abandoned him and left him to me, was it my enemy that became my footstool, were they the words of my wrath that made her shrink and quiver! Not unto me the strength be ascribed; not unto me the wringing of the expiation!

Many years had come and gone since she had had the free use even of her fingers; but it was noticeable that she had already more than once struck her clenched hand vigorously upon the table, and that when she said these words she raised her whole arm in the air, as though it had been a common action with her.

'And what was the repentance that was extorted from the hardness of her heart and the blackness of her depravity? I, vindictive and implacable? It may be so, to such as you who know no righteousness, and no appointment except Satan's. Laugh; but I will be known as I know myself, and as Flintwinch knows me, though it is only to you and this half-witted woman.'

'Add, to yourself, madame,' said Rigaud. 'I have my little suspicions that madame is rather solicitous to be justified to herself.'

'It is false. It is not so. I have no need to be,' she said, with great energy and anger.

'Truly?' retorted Rigaud. 'Hah!'

'I ask, what was the penitence, in works, that was demanded of her?'

'You have a child; I have none. You love that child. Give him to me. He shall believe himself to be my son, and he shall be believed by every one to be my son. To save you from exposure, his father shall swear never to see or communicate with you more; equally to save him from being stripped by his uncle, and to save your child from being a beggar, you shall swear never to see or communicate with either of them more. That done, and your present means, derived from my husband, renounced, I charge myself with your support. You may, with your place of retreat unknown, then leave, if you please, uncontradicted by me, the lie that when you passed out of all knowledge but mine, you merited a good name.' That was all. She had to sacrifice her sinful and shameful affections; no more. She was then free to bear her load of guilt in secret, and to break her heart in secret; and through such present misery (light enough for her, I think!) to purchase her redemption from endless misery, if she could. If, in this, I punished her here, did I not open to her a way hereafter? If she knew herself to be surrounded by insatiable vengeance and unquenchable fires, were they mine? If I threatened her, then and afterwards, with the terrors that encompassed her, did I hold them in my right hand?'

She turned the watch upon the table, and opened it, and, with an unsoftening face, looked at the worked letters within.

'They did not forget. It is appointed against such offences that the offenders shall not be able to forget. If the presence of Arthur was a daily reproach to his father, and if the absence of Arthur was a daily agony to his mother, that was the just dispensation of Jehovah. As well might it be charged upon me, that the stings of an awakened conscience drove her mad, and that it was the will of the Disposer of all things that she should live so, many years. I devoted myself to reclaim the otherwise predestined and lost boy; to give him the reputation of an honest origin; to bring him up in fear and trembling, and in a life of practical contrition for the sins that were heavy on his head before his entrance into this condemned world. Was that a cruelty? Was I, too, not visited with consequences of the original offence in which I had no complicity? Arthur's father and I lived no further apart, with half the globe between us, than when we were together in this house. He died, and sent this watch back to me, with its Do not forget. I do NOT forget, though I do not read it as he did. I read in it, that I was appointed to do these things. I have so read these three letters since I have had them lying on this table, and I did so read them, with equal distinctness, when they were thousands of miles away.'

As she took the watch-case in her hand, with that new freedom in the use of her hand of which she showed no consciousness whatever, bending her eyes upon it as if she were defying it to move her, Rigaud cried with a loud and contemptuous snapping of his fingers. 'Come, madame! Time runs out. Come, lady of piety, it must be! You can tell nothing I don't know. Come to the money stolen, or I will! Death of my soul, I have had enough of your other jargon. Come straight to the stolen money!'

'Wretch that you are,' she answered, and now her hands clasped her head: 'through what fatal error of Flintwinch's, through what incompleteness on his part, who was the only other person helping in these things and trusted with them, through whose and what bringing together of the ashes of a burnt paper, you have become possessed of that codicil, I know no more than how you acquired the rest of your power here - '

'And yet,' interrupted Rigaud, 'it is my odd fortune to have by me, in a convenient place that I know of, that same short little addition to the will of Monsieur Gilbert Clennam, written by a lady and witnessed by the same lady and our old intriguer! Ah, bah, old intriguer, crooked little puppet! Madame, let us go on. Time presses. You or I to finish?'

'I!' she answered, with increased determination, if it were possible. 'I, because I will not endure to be shown myself, and have myself shown to any one, with your horrible distortion upon me. You, with your practices of infamous foreign prisons and galleys would make it the money that impelled me. It was not the money.'

'Bah, bah, bah! I repudiate, for the moment, my politeness, and say, Lies, lies, lies. You know you suppressed the deed and kept the money.'

'Not for the money's sake, wretch!' She made a struggle as if she were starting up; even as if, in her vehemence, she had almost risen on her disabled feet. 'If Gilbert Clennam, reduced to imbecility, at the point of death, and labouring under the delusion of some imaginary relenting towards a girl of whom he had heard that his nephew had once had a fancy for her which he had crushed out of him, and that she afterwards drooped away into melancholy and withdrawal from all who knew her - if, in that state of weakness, he dictated to me, whose life she had darkened with her sin, and who had been appointed to know her wickedness from her own hand and her own lips, a bequest meant as a recompense to her for supposed unmerited suffering; was there no difference between my spurning that injustice, and coveting mere money - a thing which you, and your comrades in the prisons, may steal from anyone?'

'Time presses, madame. Take care!'

'If this house was blazing from the roof to the ground,' she returned, 'I would stay in it to justify myself against my righteous motives being classed with those of stabbers and thieves.'

Rigaud snapped his fingers tauntingly in her face. 'One thousand guineas to the little beauty you slowly hunted to death. One thousand guineas to the youngest daughter her patron might have at fifty, or (if he had none) brother's youngest daughter, on her coming of age, 'as the remembrance his disinterestedness may like best, of his protection of a friendless young orphan girl.' Two thousand guineas. What! You will never come to the money?'

'That patron,' she was vehemently proceeding, when he checked her.

'Names! Call him Mr Frederick Dorrit. No more evasions.'

'That Frederick Dorrit was the beginning of it all. If he had not been a player of music, and had not kept, in those days of his youth and prosperity, an idle house where singers, and players, and such-like children of Evil turned their backs on the Light and their faces to the Darkness, she might have remained in her lowly station, and might

not have been raised out of it to be cast down. But, no. Satan entered into that Frederick Dorrit, and counselled him that he was a man of innocent and laudable tastes who did kind actions, and that here was a poor girl with a voice for singing music with. Then he is to have her taught. Then Arthur's father, who has all along been secretly pining in the ways of virtuous ruggedness for those accursed snares which are called the Arts, becomes acquainted with her. And so, a graceless orphan, training to be a singing girl, carries it, by that Frederick Dorrit's agency, against me, and I am humbled and deceived! - Not I, that is to say,' she added quickly, as colour flushed into her face; 'a greater than I. What am I?'

Jeremiah Flintwinch, who had been gradually screwing himself towards her, and who was now very near her elbow without her knowing it, made a specially wry face of objection when she said these words, and moreover twitched his gaiters, as if such pretensions were equivalent to little barbs in his legs.

'Lastly,' she continued, 'for I am at the end of these things, and I will say no more of them, and you shall say no more of them, and all that remains will be to determine whether the knowledge of them can be kept among us who are here present; lastly, when I suppressed that paper, with the knowledge of Arthur's father - '

'But not with his consent, you know,' said Mr Flintwinch.

'Who said with his consent?' She started to find Jeremiah so near her, and drew back her head, looking at him with some rising distrust. 'You were often enough between us when he would have had me produce it and I would not, to have contradicted me if I had said, with his consent. I say, when I suppressed that paper, I made no effort to destroy it, but kept it by me, here in this house, many years. The rest of the Gilbert property being left to Arthur's father, I could at any time, without unsettling more than the two sums, have made a pretence of finding it. But, besides that I must have supported such pretence by a direct falsehood (a great responsibility), I have seen no new reason, in all the time I have been tried here, to bring it to light. It was a rewarding of sin; the wrong result of a delusion. I did what I was appointed to do, and I have undergone, within these four walls, what I was appointed to undergo. When the paper was at last destroyed - as I thought - in my presence, she had long been dead, and her patron, Frederick Dorrit, had long been deservedly ruined and imbecile. He had no daughter. I had found the niece before then; and what I did for her, was better for her far than the money of which she would have had no good.' She added, after a moment, as though she addressed the watch: 'She herself was innocent, and I might not have forgotten to relinquish it to her at my death:' and sat looking at it.

'Shall I recall something to you, worthy madame?' said Rigaud. 'The little paper was in this house on the night when our friend the prisoner - jail-comrade of my soul - came home from foreign countries. Shall I recall yet something more to you? The little singing-bird that never was fledged, was long kept in a cage by a guardian of your appointing, well enough known to our old intriguer here. Shall we coax our old intriguer to tell us when he saw him last?'

'I'll tell you!' cried Affery, unstopping her mouth. 'I dreamed it, first of all my dreams. Jeremiah, if you come a-nigh me now, I'll scream to be heard at St Paul's! The person as this man has spoken of, was Jeremiah's own twin brother; and he was here in the dead of the night, on the night when Arthur come home, and Jeremiah with his own hands give him this paper, along with I don't know what more, and he took it away in an iron box - Help! Murder! Save me from Jere-mi-ah!'

Mr Flintwinch had made a run at her, but Rigaud had caught him in his arms midway. After a moment's wrestle with him, Flintwinch gave up, and put his hands in his pockets.

'What!' cried Rigaud, rallying him as he poked and jerked him back with his elbows, 'assault a lady with such a genius for dreaming! Ha, ha, ha! Why, she'll be a fortune to you as an exhibition. All that she dreams comes true. Ha, ha, ha! You're so like him, Little Flintwinch. So like him, as I knew him (when I first spoke English for him to the host) in the Cabaret of the Three Billiard Tables, in the little street of the high roofs, by the wharf at Antwerp! Ah, but he was a brave boy to drink. Ah, but he was a brave boy to smoke! Ah, but he lived in a sweet bachelor- apartment - furnished, on the fifth floor, above the wood and charcoal merchant's, and the dress-maker's, and the chair-maker's, and the maker of tubs - where I knew him too, and wherewith his cognac and tobacco, he had twelve sleeps a day and one fit, until he had a fit too much, and ascended to the skies. Ha, ha, ha! What does it matter how I took possession of the papers in his iron box? Perhaps he confided it to my hands for you, perhaps it was locked and my curiosity was piqued, perhaps I suppressed it. Ha, ha, ha! What does it matter, so that I have it safe? We are not particular here; hey, Flintwinch? We are not particular here; is it not so, madame?'

Retiring before him with vicious counter-jerks of his own elbows, Mr Flintwinch had got back into his corner, where he now stood with his hands in his pockets, taking breath, and returning Mrs Clennam's stare. 'Ha, ha, ha! But what's this?' cried Rigaud. 'It appears as if you don't know, one the other. Permit me, Madame Clennam who suppresses, to present Monsieur Flintwinch who intrigues.'

Mr Flintwinch, unpocketing one of his hands to scrape his jaw, advanced a step or so in that attitude, still returning Mrs Clennam's look, and thus addressed her:

'Now, I know what you mean by opening your eyes so wide at me, but you needn't take the trouble, because I don't care for it. I've been telling you for how many years that you're one of the most opinionated and obstinate of women. That's what YOU are. You call yourself humble and sinful, but you are the most Bumptious of your sex. That's what YOU are. I have told you, over and over again when we have had a tiff, that you wanted to make everything go down before you, but I wouldn't go down before you - that you wanted to swallow up everybody alive, but I wouldn't be swallowed up alive. Why didn't you destroy the paper when you first laid hands upon it?

I advised you to; but no, it's not your way to take advice. You must keep it forsooth. Perhaps you may carry it out at some other time, forsooth. As if I didn't know better than that! I think I see your pride carrying it out, with a chance of being suspected of having kept it by you. But that's the way you cheat yourself. just as you cheat yourself into making out that you didn't do all this business because you were a rigorous woman, all slight, and spite, and power, and unforgiveness, but because you were a servant and a minister, and were appointed to do it. Who are you, that you should be appointed to do it? That may be your religion, but it's my gammon. And to tell you all the truth while I am about it,' said Mr Flintwinch, crossing his arms, and becoming the express image of irascible doggedness, 'I have been rasped - rasped these forty years - by your taking such high ground even with me, who knows better; the effect of it being coolly to put me on low ground. I admire you very much; you are a woman of strong head and great talent; but the strongest head, and the greatest talent, can't rasp a man for forty years without making him sore. So I don't care for your present eyes. Now, I am coming to the paper, and mark what I say. You put it away somewhere, and you kept your own counsel where. You're an active woman at that time, and if you want to get that paper, you can get it. But, mark. There comes a time when you are struck into what you are now, and then if you want to get that paper, you can't get it. So it lies, long years, in its hiding-place. At last, when we are expecting Arthur home every day, and when any day may bring him home, and it's impossible to say what rummaging he may make about the house, I recommend you five thousand times, if you can't get at it, to let me get at it, that it may be put in the fire. But no - no one but you knows where it is, and that's power; and, call yourself whatever humble names you will, I call you a female Lucifer in appetite for power! On a Sunday night, Arthur comes home. He has not been in this room ten minutes, when he speaks of his father's watch. You know very well that the Do Not Forget, at the time when his father sent that watch to you, could only mean, the rest of the

story being then all dead and over, Do Not Forget the suppression. Make restitution! Arthur's ways have frightened you a bit, and the paper shall be burnt after all. So, before that jumping jade and Jezebel,' Mr Flintwinch grinned at his wife, 'has got you into bed, you at last tell me where you have put the paper, among the old ledgers in the cellars, where Arthur himself went prowling the very next morning. But it's not to be burnt on a Sunday night. No; you are strict, you are; we must wait over twelve o'clock, and get into Monday. Now, all this is a swallowing of me up alive that rasps me; so, feeling a little out of temper, and not being as strict as yourself, I take a look at the document before twelve o'clock to refresh my memory as to its appearance - fold up one of the many yellow old papers in the cellars like it - and afterwards, when we have got into Monday morning, and I have, by the light of your lamp, to walk from you, lying on that bed, to this grate, make a little exchange like the conjuror, and burn accordingly. My brother Ephraim, the lunatic-keeper (I wish he had had himself to keep in a strait-waistcoat), had had many jobs since the close of the long job he got from you, but had not done well. His wife died (not that that was much; mine might have died instead, and welcome), he speculated unsuccessfully in lunatics, he got into difficulty about over-roasting a patient to bring him to reason, and he got into debt. He was going out of the way, on what he had been able to scrape up, and a trifle from me. He was here that early Monday morning, waiting for the tide; in short, he was going to Antwerp, where (I am afraid you'll be shocked at my saying, And be damned to him!) he made the acquaintance of this gentleman. He had come a long way, and, I thought then, was only sleepy; but, I suppose now, was drunk. When Arthur's mother had been under the care of him and his wife, she had been always writing, incessantly writing, - mostly letters of confession to you, and Prayers for forgiveness. My brother had handed, from time to time, lots of these sheets to me. I thought I might as well keep them to myself as have them swallowed up alive too; so I kept them in a box, looking over them when I felt in the humour. Convinced that it was advisable to get the paper out of the place, with Arthur coming about it, I put it into this same box, and I locked the whole up with two locks, and I trusted it to my brother to take away and keep, till I should write about it. I did write about it, and never got an answer. I didn't know what to make of it, till this gentleman favoured us with his first visit. Of course, I began to suspect how it was, then; and I don't want his word for it now to understand how he gets his knowledge from my papers, and your paper, and my brother's cognac and tobacco talk (I wish he'd had to gag himself). Now, I have only one thing more to say, you hammer-headed woman, and that is, that I haven't altogether made up my mind whether I might, or might not, have ever given you any trouble about the codicil. I think not; and that I should have been quite satisfied with knowing I had got the better of you, and that I held the power over you. In the present state of circumstances, I have no more

explanation to give you till this time to-morrow night. So you may as well,' said Mr Flintwinch, terminating his oration with a screw, 'keep your eyes open at somebody else, for it's no use keeping 'em open at me.'

She slowly withdrew them when he had ceased, and dropped her forehead on her hand. Her other hand pressed hard upon the table, and again the curious stir was observable in her, as if she were going to rise.

'This box can never bring, elsewhere, the price it will bring here.

This knowledge can never be of the same profit to you, sold to any other person, as sold to me. But I have not the present means of raising the sum you have demanded. I have not prospered. What will you take now, and what at another time, and how am I to be assured of your silence?'

'My angel,' said Rigaud, 'I have said what I will take, and time presses. Before coming here, I placed copies of the most important of these papers in another hand. Put off the time till the Marshalsea gate shall be shut for the night, and it will be too late to treat. The prisoner will have read them.'

She put her two hands to her head again, uttered a loud exclamation, and started to her feet. She staggered for a moment, as if she would have fallen; then stood firm.

'Say what you mean. Say what you mean, man!'

Before her ghostly figure, so long unused to its erect attitude, and so stiffened in it, Rigaud fell back and dropped his voice. It was, to all the three, almost as if a dead woman had risen.

'Miss Dorrit,' answered Rigaud, 'the little niece of Monsieur Frederick, whom I have known across the water, is attached to the prisoner. Miss Dorrit, little niece of Monsieur Frederick, watches at this moment over the prisoner, who is ill. For her I with my own hands left a packet at the prison, on my way here, with a letter of instructions, 'FOR HIS SAKE' - she will do anything for his sake - to keep it without breaking the seal, in case of its being reclaimed before the hour of shutting up to-night - if it should not be reclaimed before the ringing of the prison bell, to give it to him; and it encloses a second copy for herself, which he must give to her. What! I don't trust myself among you, now we have got so far, without giving my secret a second life. And as to its not bringing me, elsewhere, the price it will bring here, say then, madame, have you limited and settled the price the little niece will give - for his sake - to hush it up? Once more I say, time presses. The

packet not reclaimed before the ringing of the bell to-night, you cannot buy. I sell, then, to the little girl!

Once more the stir and struggle in her, and she ran to a closet, tore the door open, took down a hood or shawl, and wrapped it over her head. Affery, who had watched her in terror, darted to her in the middle of the room, caught hold of her dress, and went on her knees to her.

'Don't, don't, don't! What are you doing? Where are you going? You're a fearful woman, but I don't bear you no ill-will. I can do poor Arthur no good now, that I see; and you needn't be afraid of me. I'll keep your secret. Don't go out, you'll fall dead in the street. Only promise me, that, if it's the poor thing that's kept here secretly, you'll let me take charge of her and be her nurse. Only promise me that, and never be afraid of me.'

Mrs Clennam stood still for an instant, at the height of her rapid haste, saying in stern amazement:

'Kept here? She has been dead a score of years or more. Ask Flintwinch - ask HIM. They can both tell you that she died when Arthur went abroad.'

'So much the worse,' said Affery, with a shiver, 'for she haunts the house, then. Who else rustles about it, making signals by dropping dust so softly? Who else comes and goes, and marks the walls with long crooked touches when we are all a-bed? Who else holds the door sometimes? But don't go out - don't go out! Mistress, you'll die in the street!'

Her mistress only disengaged her dress from the beseeching hands, said to Rigaud, 'Wait here till I come back!' and ran out of the room. They saw her, from the window, run wildly through the court-yard and out at the gateway.

For a few moments they stood motionless. Affery was the first to move, and she, wringing her hands, pursued her mistress. Next, Jeremiah Flintwinch, slowly backing to the door, with one hand in a pocket, and the other rubbing his chin, twisted himself out in his reticent way, speechlessly. Rigaud, left alone, composed himself upon the window-seat of the open window, in the old Marseilles-jail attitude. He laid his cigarettes and fire-box ready to his hand, and fell to smoking.

'Whoof! Almost as dull as the infernal old jail. Warmer, but almost as dismal. Wait till she comes back? Yes, certainly; but where is she gone, and how long will she be gone? No matter! Rigaud Lagnier Blandois, my amiable subject, you will get your money. You will

enrich yourself. You have lived a gentleman; you will die a gentleman. You triumph, my little boy; but it is your character to triumph. Whoof!' In the hour of his triumph, his moustache went up and his nose came down, as he ogled a great beam over his head with particular satisfaction.