## Chapter LXVII - Closed

The sun had set, and the streets were dim in the dusty twilight, when the figure so long unused to them hurried on its way. In the immediate neighbourhood of the old house it attracted little attention, for there were only a few straggling people to notice it; but, ascending from the river by the crooked ways that led to London Bridge, and passing into the great main road, it became surrounded by astonishment.

Resolute and wild of look, rapid of foot and yet weak and uncertain, conspicuously dressed in its black garments and with its hurried head-covering, gaunt and of an unearthly paleness, it pressed forward, taking no more heed of the throng than a sleep- walker. More remarkable by being so removed from the crowd it was among than if it had been lifted on a pedestal to be seen, the figure attracted all eyes. Saunterers pricked up their attention to observe it; busy people, crossing it, slackened their pace and turned their heads; companions pausing and standing aside, whispered one another to look at this spectral woman who was coming by; and the sweep of the figure as it passed seemed to create a vortex, drawing the most idle and most curious after it.

Made giddy by the turbulent irruption of this multitude of staring faces into her cell of years, by the confusing sensation of being in the air, and the yet more confusing sensation of being afoot, by the unexpected changes in half-remembered objects, and the want of likeness between the controllable pictures her imagination had often drawn of the life from which she was secluded and the overwhelming rush of the reality, she held her way as if she were environed by distracting thoughts, rather than by external humanity and observation. But, having crossed the bridge and gone some distance straight onward, she remembered that she must ask for a direction; and it was only then, when she stopped and turned to look about her for a promising place of inquiry, that she found herself surrounded by an eager glare of faces.

'Why are you encircling me?' she asked, trembling.

None of those who were nearest answered; but from the outer ring there arose a shrill cry of ''Cause you're mad!'

'I am sure as sane as any one here. I want to find the Marshalsea prison.'

The shrill outer circle again retorted, 'Then that 'ud show you was mad if nothing else did, 'cause it's right opposite!'

A short, mild, quiet-looking young man made his way through to her, as a whooping ensued on this reply, and said: 'Was it the Marshalsea you wanted? I'm going on duty there. Come across with me.'

She laid her hand upon his arm, and he took her over the way; the crowd, rather injured by the near prospect of losing her, pressing before and behind and on either side, and recommending an adjournment to Bedlam. After a momentary whirl in the outer court-yard, the prison-door opened, and shut upon them. In the Lodge, which seemed by contrast with the outer noise a place of refuge and peace, a yellow lamp was already striving with the prison shadows.

'Why, John!' said the turnkey who admitted them. 'What is it?'

'Nothing, father; only this lady not knowing her way, and being badgered by the boys. Who did you want, ma'am?'

'Miss Dorrit. Is she here?'

The young man became more interested. 'Yes, she is here. What might your name be?'

'Mrs Clennam.'

'Mr Clennam's mother?' asked the young man.

She pressed her lips together, and hesitated. 'Yes. She had better be told it is his mother.'

'You see,' said the young man,'the Marshal's family living in the country at present, the Marshal has given Miss Dorrit one of the rooms in his house to use when she likes. Don't you think you had better come up there, and let me bring Miss Dorrit?'

She signified her assent, and he unlocked a door and conducted her up a side staircase into a dwelling-house above. He showed her into a darkening room, and left her. The room looked down into the darkening prison-yard, with its inmates strolling here and there, leaning out of windows communing as much apart as they could with friends who were going away, and generally wearing out their imprisonment as they best might that summer evening. The air was heavy and hot; the closeness of the place, oppressive; and from without there arose a rush of free sounds, like the jarring memory of such things in a headache and heartache. She stood at the window, bewildered, looking down into this prison as it were out of her own different prison, when a soft word or two of surprise made her start, and Little Dorrit stood before her.

'Is it possible, Mrs Clennam, that you are so happily recovered as - '

Little Dorrit stopped, for there was neither happiness nor health in the face that turned to her. 'This is not recovery; it is not strength; I don't know what it is.' With an agitated wave of her hand, she put all that aside. 'You have a packet left with you which you were to give to Arthur, if it was not reclaimed before this place closed to-night.'

'Yes.'

'I reclaim it.'

Little Dorrit took it from her bosom, and gave it into her hand, which remained stretched out after receiving it.

'Have you any idea of its contents?'

Frightened by her being there with that new power Of Movement in her, which, as she said herself, was not strength, and which was unreal to look upon, as though a picture or statue had been animated, Little Dorrit answered 'No.'

'Read them.'

Little Dorrit took the packet from the still outstretched hand, and broke the seal. Mrs Clennam then gave her the inner packet that was addressed to herself, and held the other. The shadow of the wall and of the prison buildings, which made the room sombre at noon, made it too dark to read there, with the dusk deepening apace, save in the window. In the window, where a little of the bright summer evening sky could shine upon her, Little Dorrit stood, and read. After a broken exclamation or so of wonder and of terror, she read in silence. When she had finished, she looked round, and her old mistress bowed herself before her.

'You know, now, what I have done.'

'I think so. I am afraid so; though my mind is so hurried, and so sorry, and has so much to pity that it has not been able to follow all I have read,' said Little Dorrit tremulously.

'I will restore to you what I have withheld from you. Forgive me. Can you forgive me?'

'I can, and Heaven knows I do! Do not kiss my dress and kneel to me; you are too old to kneel to me; I forgive you freely without that.'

'I have more yet to ask.'

'Not in that posture,' said Little Dorrit. 'It is unnatural to see your grey hair lower than mine. Pray rise; let me help you.' With that she raised her up, and stood rather shrinking from her, but looking at her earnestly.

'The great petition that I make to you (there is another which grows out of it), the great supplication that I address to your merciful and gentle heart, is, that you will not disclose this to Arthur until I am dead. If you think, when you have had time for consideration, that it can do him any good to know it while I am yet alive, then tell him. But you will not think that; and in such case, will you promise me to spare me until I am dead?'

'I am so sorry, and what I have read has so confused my thoughts,' returned Little Dorrit, 'that I can scarcely give you a steady answer. If I should be quite sure that to be acquainted with it will do Mr Clennam no good - '

'I know you are attached to him, and will make him the first consideration. It is right that he should be the first consideration. I ask that. But, having regarded him, and still finding that you may spare me for the little time I shall remain on earth, will you do it?'

'I will.'

'GOD bless you!'

She stood in the shadow so that she was only a veiled form to Little Dorrit in the light; but the sound of her voice, in saying those three grateful words, was at once fervent and broken - broken by emotion as unfamiliar to her frozen eyes as action to her frozen limbs.

'You will wonder, perhaps,' she said in a stronger tone, 'that I can better bear to be known to you whom I have wronged, than to the son of my enemy who wronged me. - For she did wrong me! She not only sinned grievously against the Lord, but she wronged me. What Arthur's father was to me, she made him. From our marriage day I was his dread, and that she made me. I was the scourge of both, and that is referable to her. You love Arthur (I can see the blush upon your face; may it be the dawn of happier days to both of you!), and you will have thought already that he is as merciful and kind as you, and why do I not trust myself to him as soon as to you. Have you not thought so?'

'No thought,' said Little Dorrit, 'can be quite a stranger to my heart, that springs out of the knowledge that Mr Clennam is always to be relied upon for being kind and generous and good.'

'I do not doubt it. Yet Arthur is, of the whole world, the one person from whom I would conceal this, while I am in it. I kept over him as a child, in the days of his first remembrance, my restraining and correcting hand. I was stern with him, knowing that the transgressions of the parents are visited on their offspring, and that there was an angry mark upon him at his birth. I have sat with him and his father, seeing the weakness of his father yearning to unbend to him; and forcing it back, that the child might work out his release in bondage and hardship. I have seen him, with his mother's face, looking up at me in awe from his little books, and trying to soften me with his mother's ways that hardened me.'

The shrinking of her auditress stopped her for a moment in her flow of words, delivered in a retrospective gloomy voice.

'For his good. Not for the satisfaction of my injury. What was I, and what was the worth of that, before the curse of Heaven! I have seen that child grow up; not to be pious in a chosen way (his mother's influence lay too heavy on him for that), but still to be just and upright, and to be submissive to me. He never loved me, as I once half-hoped he might - so frail we are, and so do the corrupt affections of the flesh war with our trusts and tasks; but he always respected me and ordered himself dutifully to me. He does to this hour. With an empty place in his heart that he has never known the meaning of, he has turned away from me and gone his separate road; but even that he has done considerately and with deference. These have been his relations towards me. Yours have been of a much slighter kind, spread over a much shorter time. When you have sat at your needle in my room, you have been in fear of me, but you have supposed me to have been doing you a kindness; you are better informed now, and know me to have done you an injury. Your misconstruction and misunderstanding of the cause in which, and the motives with which, I have worked out this work, is lighter to endure than his would be. I would not, for any worldly recompense I can imagine, have him in a moment, however blindly, throw me down from the station I have held before him all his life, and change me altogether into something he would cast out of his respect, and think detected and exposed. Let him do it, if it must be done, when I am not here to see it. Let me never feel, while I am still alive, that I die before his face, and utterly perish away from him, like one consumed by lightning and swallowed by an earthquake.'

Her pride was very strong in her, the pain of it and of her old passions was very sharp with her, when she thus expressed herself. Not less so, when she added:

'Even now, I see YOU shrink from me, as if I had been cruel.'

Little Dorrit could not gainsay it. She tried not to show it, but she recoiled with dread from the state of mind that had burnt so fiercely and lasted so long. It presented itself to her, with no sophistry upon it, in its own plain nature.

'I have done,' said Mrs Clennam,'what it was given to me to do. I have set myself against evil; not against good. I have been an instrument of severity against sin. Have not mere sinners like myself been commissioned to lay it low in all time?'

'In all time?' repeated Little Dorrit.

'Even if my own wrong had prevailed with me, and my own vengeance had moved me, could I have found no justification? None in the old days when the innocent perished with the guilty 2 a thousand to one? When the wrath of the hater of the unrighteous was not slaked even in blood, and yet found favour?'

'O, Mrs Clennam, Mrs Clennam,' said Little Dorrit, 'angry feelings and unforgiving deeds are no comfort and no guide to you and me. My life has been passed in this poor prison, and my teaching has been very defective; but let me implore you to remember later and better days. Be guided only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities. We cannot but be right if we put all the rest away, and do everything in remembrance of Him. There is no vengeance and no infliction of suffering in His life, I am sure. There can be no confusion in following Him, and seeking for no other footsteps, I am certain.'

In the softened light of the window, looking from the scene of her early trials to the shining sky, she was not in stronger opposition to the black figure in the shade than the life and doctrine on which she rested were to that figure's history. It bent its head low again, and said not a word. It remained thus, until the first warning bell began to ring.

'Hark!' cried Mrs Clennam starting, 'I said I had another petition.

It is one that does not admit of delay. The man who brought you this packet and possesses these proofs, is now waiting at my house to be bought off. I can keep this from Arthur, only by buying him off. He asks a large sum; more than I can get together to pay him without having time. He refuses to make any abatement, because his threat is, that if he fails with me, he will come to you. Will you return with me and show him that you already know it? Will you return with me and try to prevail with him? Will you come and help me with him? Do not refuse what I ask in Arthur's name, though I dare not ask it for Arthur's sake!'

Little Dorrit yielded willingly. She glided away into the prison for a few moments, returned, and said she was ready to go. They went out by another staircase, avoiding the lodge; and coming into the front court-yard, now all quiet and deserted, gained the street.

It was one of those summer evenings when there is no greater darkness than a long twilight. The vista of street and bridge was plain to see, and the sky was serene and beautiful. People stood and sat at their doors, playing with children and enjoying the evening; numbers were walking for air; the worry of the day had almost worried itself out, and few but themselves were hurried. As they crossed the bridge, the clear steeples of the many churches looked as if they had advanced out of the murk that usually enshrouded them, and come much nearer. The smoke that rose into the sky had lost its dingy hue and taken a brightness upon it. The beauties of the sunset had not faded from the long light films of cloud that lay at peace in the horizon. From a radiant centre, over the whole length and breadth of the tranquil firmament, great shoots of light streamed among the early stars, like signs of the blessed later covenant of peace and hope that changed the crown of thorns into a glory.

Less remarkable, now that she was not alone and it was darker, Mrs Clennam hurried on at Little Dorrit's side, unmolested. They left the great thoroughfare at the turning by which she had entered it, and wound their way down among the silent, empty, cross-streets. Their feet were at the gateway, when there was a sudden noise like thunder.

'What was that! Let us make haste in,' cried Mrs Clennam.

They were in the gateway. Little Dorrit, with a piercing cry, held her back.

In one swift instant the old house was before them, with the man lying smoking in the window; another thundering sound, and it heaved, surged outward, opened asunder in fifty places, collapsed, and fell. Deafened by the noise, stifled, choked, and blinded by the dust, they hid their faces and stood rooted to the spot. The dust storm, driving between them and the placid sky, parted for a moment and showed them the stars. As they looked up, wildly crying for help, the great pile of chimneys, which was then alone left standing like a tower in a whirlwind, rocked, broke, and hailed itself down upon the heap of ruin, as if every tumbling fragment were intent on burying the crushed wretch deeper.

So blackened by the flying particles of rubbish as to be unrecognisable, they ran back from the gateway into the street, crying and shrieking. There, Mrs Clennam dropped upon the stones; and she never from that hour moved so much as a finger again, or had the

power to speak one word. For upwards of three years she reclined in a wheeled chair, looking attentively at those about her and appearing to understand what they said; but the rigid silence she had so long held was evermore enforced upon her, and except that she could move her eyes and faintly express a negative and affirmative with her head, she lived and died a statue.

Affery had been looking for them at the prison, and had caught sight of them at a distance on the bridge. She came up to receive her old mistress in her arms, to help to carry her into a neighbouring house, and to be faithful to her. The mystery of the noises was out now; Affery, like greater people, had always been right in her facts, and always wrong in the theories she deduced from them.

When the storm of dust had cleared away and the summer night was calm again, numbers of people choked up every avenue of access, and parties of diggers were formed to relieve one another in digging among the ruins. There had been a hundred people in the house at the time of its fall, there had been fifty, there had been fifteen, there had been two. Rumour finally settled the number at two; the foreigner and Mr Flintwinch. The diggers dug all through the short night by flaring pipes of gas, and on a level with the early sun, and deeper and deeper below it as it rose into its zenith, and aslant of it as it declined, and on a level with it again as it departed. Sturdy digging, and shovelling, and carrying away, in carts, barrows, and baskets, went on without intermission, by night and by day; but it was night for the second time when they found the dirty heap of rubbish that had been the foreigner before his head had been shivered to atoms, like so much glass, by the great beam that lay upon him, crushing him.

Still, they had not come upon Flintwinch yet; so the sturdy digging and shovelling and carrying away went on without intermission by night and by day. It got about that the old house had had famous cellarage (which indeed was true), and that Flintwinch had been in a cellar at the moment, or had had time to escape into one, and that he was safe under its strong arch, and even that he had been heard to cry, in hollow, subterranean, suffocated notes, 'Here I am!' At the opposite extremity of the town it was even known that the excavators had been able to open a communication with him through a pipe, and that he had received both soup and brandy by that channel, and that he had said with admirable fortitude that he was All right, my lads, with the exception of his collar-bone. But the digging and shovelling and carrying away went on without intermission, until the ruins were all dug out, and the cellars opened to the light; and still no Flintwinch, living or dead, all right or all wrong, had been turned up by pick or spade.

It began then to be perceived that Flintwinch had not been there at the time of the fall; and it began then to be perceived that he had been rather busy elsewhere, converting securities into as much money as could be got for them on the shortest notice, and turning to his own exclusive account his authority to act for the Firm. Affery, remembering that the clever one had said he would explain himself further in four-and-twenty hours' time, determined for her part that his taking himself off within that period with all he could get, was the final satisfactory sum and substance of his promised explanation; but she held her peace, devoutly thankful to be quit of him. As it seemed reasonable to conclude that a man who had never been buried could not be unburied, the diggers gave him up when their task was done, and did not dig down for him into the depths of the earth.

This was taken in ill part by a great many people, who persisted in believing that Flintwinch was lying somewhere among the London geological formation. Nor was their belief much shaken by repeated intelligence which came over in course of time, that an old man who wore the tie of his neckcloth under one ear, and who was very well known to be an Englishman, consorted with the Dutchmen on the quaint banks of the canals of the Hague and in the drinking-shops of Amsterdam, under the style and designation of Mynheer von Flyntevynge.