Chapter LXX - Gone

On a healthy autumn day, the Marshalsea prisoner, weak but otherwise restored, sat listening to a voice that read to him. On a healthy autumn day; when the golden fields had been reaped and ploughed again, when the summer fruits had ripened and waned, when the green perspectives of hops had been laid low by the busy pickers, when the apples clustering in the orchards were russet, and the berries of the mountain ash were crimson among the yellowing foliage. Already in the woods, glimpses of the hardy winter that was coming were to be caught through unaccustomed openings among the boughs where the prospect shone defined and clear, free from the bloom of the drowsy summer weather, which had rested on it as the bloom lies on the plum. So, from the seashore the ocean was no longer to be seen lying asleep in the heat, but its thousand sparkling eyes were open, and its whole breadth was in joyful animation, from the cool sand on the beach to the little sails on the horizon, drifting away like autumn-tinted leaves that had drifted from the trees. Changeless and barren, looking ignorantly at all the seasons with its fixed, pinched face of poverty and care, the prison had not a touch of any of these beauties on it. Blossom what would, its bricks and bars bore uniformly the same dead crop. Yet Clennam, listening to the voice as it read to him, heard in it all that great Nature was doing, heard in it all the soothing songs she sings to man. At no Mother's knee but hers had he ever dwelt in his youth on hopeful promises, on playful fancies, on the harvests of tenderness and humility that lie hidden in the early-fostered seeds of the imagination; on the oaks of retreat from blighting winds, that have the germs of their strong roots in nursery acorns.

But, in the tones of the voice that read to him, there were memories of an old feeling of such things, and echoes of every merciful and loving whisper that had ever stolen to him in his life.

When the voice stopped, he put his hand over his eyes, murmuring that the light was strong upon them.

Little Dorrit put the book by, and presently arose quietly to shade the window. Maggy sat at her needlework in her old place. The light softened, Little Dorrit brought her chair closer to his side.

'This will soon be over now, dear Mr Clennam. Not only are Mr Doyce's letters to you so full of friendship and encouragement, but Mr Rugg says his letters to him are so full of help, and that everybody (now a little anger is past) is so considerate, and speaks so well of you, that it will soon be over now.'

'Dear girl. Dear heart. Good angel!'

'You praise me far too much. And yet it is such an exquisite pleasure to me to hear you speak so feelingly, and to - and to see,' said Little Dorrit, raising her eyes to his, 'how deeply you mean it, that I cannot say Don't.'

He lifted her hand to his lips.

'You have been here many, many times, when I have not seen you, Little Dorrit?'

'Yes, I have been here sometimes when I have not come into the room.'

'Very often?'

'Rather often,' said Little Dorrit, timidly.

'Every day?'

'I think,' said Little Dorrit, after hesitating, 'that I have been here at least twice every day.' He might have released the little light hand after fervently kissing it again; but that, with a very gentle lingering where it was, it seemed to court being retained. He took it in both of his, and it lay softly on his breast.

'Dear Little Dorrit, it is not my imprisonment only that will soon be over. This sacrifice of you must be ended. We must learn to part again, and to take our different ways so wide asunder. You have not forgotten what we said together, when you came back?'

'O no, I have not forgotten it. But something has been - You feel quite strong to-day, don't you?'

'Quite strong.'

The hand he held crept up a little nearer his face.

'Do you feel quite strong enough to know what a great fortune I have got?'

'I shall be very glad to be told. No fortune can be too great or good for Little Dorrit.'

'I have been anxiously waiting to tell you. I have been longing and longing to tell you. You are sure you will not take it?'

'Never!'

'You are quite sure you will not take half of it?'

'Never, dear Little Dorrit!'

As she looked at him silently, there was something in her affectionate face that he did not quite comprehend: something that could have broken into tears in a moment, and yet that was happy and proud.

'You will be sorry to hear what I have to tell you about Fanny. Poor Fanny has lost everything. She has nothing left but her husband's income. All that papa gave her when she married was lost as your money was lost. It was in the same hands, and it is all gone.'

Arthur was more shocked than surprised to hear it. 'I had hoped it might not be so bad,' he said: 'but I had feared a heavy loss there, knowing the connection between her husband and the defaulter.'

'Yes. It is all gone. I am very sorry for Fanny; very, very, very sorry for poor Fanny. My poor brother too!' 'Had he property in the same hands?'

'Yes! And it's all gone. - How much do you think my own great fortune is?'

As Arthur looked at her inquiringly, with a new apprehension on him, she withdrew her hand, and laid her face down on the spot where it had rested.

'I have nothing in the world. I am as poor as when I lived here. When papa came over to England, he confided everything he had to the same hands, and it is all swept away. O my dearest and best, are you quite sure you will not share my fortune with me now?'

Locked in his arms, held to his heart, with his manly tears upon her own cheek, she drew the slight hand round his neck, and clasped it in its fellow-hand.

' Never to part, my dearest Arthur; never any more, until the last!

I never was rich before, I never was proud before, I never was happy before, I am rich in being taken by you, I am proud in having been resigned by you, I am happy in being with you in this prison, as I should be happy in coming back to it with you, if it should be the will of GOD, and comforting and serving you with all my love and truth. I am yours anywhere, everywhere! I love you dearly! I would rather pass my life here with you, and go out daily, working for our bread, than I would have the greatest fortune that ever was told, and be the greatest lady that ever was honoured. O, if poor papa may only know how blest at last my heart is, in this room where he suffered for so many years!'

Maggy had of course been staring from the first, and had of course been crying her eyes out long before this. Maggy was now so overjoyed that, after hugging her little mother with all her might, she went down-stairs like a clog-hornpipe to find somebody or other to whom to impart her gladness. Whom should Maggy meet but Flora and Mr F.'s Aunt opportunely coming in? And whom else, as a consequence of that meeting, should Little Dorrit find waiting for herself, when, a good two or three hours afterwards, she went out?

Flora's eyes were a little red, and she seemed rather out of spirits. Mr F.'s Aunt was so stiffened that she had the appearance of being past bending by any means short of powerful mechanical pressure. Her bonnet was cocked up behind in a terrific manner; and her stony reticule was as rigid as if it had been petrified by the Gorgon's head, and had got it at that moment inside. With these imposing attributes, Mr F.'s Aunt, publicly seated on the steps of the Marshal's official residence, had been for the two or three hours in question a great boon to the younger inhabitants of the Borough, whose sallies of humour she had considerably flushed herself by resenting at the point of her umbrella, from time to time.

'Painfully aware, Miss Dorrit, I am sure,' said Flora, 'that to propose an adjournment to any place to one so far removed by fortune and so courted and caressed by the best society must ever appear intruding even if not a pie-shop far below your present sphere and a back-parlour though a civil man but if for the sake of Arthur - cannot overcome it more improper now than ever late Doyce and Clennam - one last remark I might wish to make one last explanation I might wish to offer perhaps your good nature might excuse under pretence of three kidney ones the humble place of conversation.'

Rightly interpreting this rather obscure speech, Little Dorrit returned that she was quite at Flora's disposition. Flora accordingly led the way across the road to the pie-shop in question: Mr F.'s Aunt stalking across in the rear, and putting herself in the way of being run over, with a perseverance worthy of a better cause.

When the 'three kidney ones,' which were to be a blind to the conversation, were set before them on three little tin platters, each kidney one ornamented with a hole at the top, into which the civil man poured hot gravy out of a spouted can as if he were feeding three lamps, Flora took out her pocket-handkerchief.

'If Fancy's fair dreams,' she began, 'have ever pictured that when Arthur - cannot overcome it pray excuse me - was restored to freedom even a pie as far from flaky as the present and so deficient in kidney as to be in that respect like a minced nutmeg might not prove unacceptable if offered by the hand of true regard such visions have

for ever fled and all is cancelled but being aware that tender relations are in contemplation beg to state that I heartily wish well to both and find no fault with either not the least, it may be withering to know that ere the hand of Time had made me much less slim than formerly and dreadfully red on the slightest exertion particularly after eating I well know when it takes the form of a rash, it might have been and was not through the interruption of parents and mental torpor succeeded until the mysterious clue was held by Mr F. still I would not be ungenerous to either and I heartily wish well to both.'

Little Dorrit took her hand, and thanked her for all her old kindness.

'Call it not kindness,' returned Flora, giving her an honest kiss, 'for you always were the best and dearest little thing that ever was if I may take the liberty and even in a money point of view a saving being Conscience itself though I must add much more agreeable than mine ever was to me for though not I hope more burdened than other people's yet I have always found it far readier to make one uncomfortable than comfortable and evidently taking a greater pleasure in doing it but I am wandering, one hope I wish to express ere yet the closing scene draws in and it is that I do trust for the sake of old times and old sincerity that Arthur will know that I didn't desert him in his misfortunes but that I came backwards and forwards constantly to ask if I could do anything for him and that I sat in the pie-shop where they very civilly fetched something warm in a tumbler from the hotel and really very nice hours after hours to keep him company over the way without his knowing it.'

Flora really had tears in her eyes now, and they showed her to great advantage.

'Over and above which,' said Flora, 'I earnestly beg you as the dearest thing that ever was if you'll still excuse the familiarity from one who moves in very different circles to let Arthur understand that I don't know after all whether it wasn't all nonsense between us though pleasant at the time and trying too and certainly Mr F. did work a change and the spell being broken nothing could be expected to take place without weaving it afresh which various circumstances have combined to prevent of which perhaps not the least powerful was that it was not to be, I am not prepared to say that if it had been agreeable to Arthur and had brought itself about naturally in the first instance I should not have been very glad being of a lively disposition and moped at home where papa undoubtedly is the most aggravating of his sex and not improved since having been cut down by the hand of the Incendiary into something of which I never saw the counterpart in all my life but jealousy is not my character nor ill-will though many faults.'

Without having been able closely to follow Mrs Finching through this labyrinth, Little Dorrit understood its purpose, and cordially accepted the trust.

'The withered chaplet my dear,' said Flora, with great enjoyment, 'is then perished the column is crumbled and the pyramid is standing upside down upon its what's-his-name call it not giddiness call it not weakness call it not folly I must now retire into privacy and look upon the ashes of departed joys no more but taking a further liberty of paying for the pastry which has formed the humble pretext of our interview will for ever say Adieu!'

Mr F.'s Aunt, who had eaten her pie with great solemnity, and who had been elaborating some grievous scheme of injury in her mind since her first assumption of that public position on the Marshal's steps, took the present opportunity of addressing the following Sibyllic apostrophe to the relict of her late nephew.

'Bring him for'ard, and I'll chuck him out o' winder!'

Flora tried in vain to soothe the excellent woman by explaining that they were going home to dinner. Mr F.'s Aunt persisted in replying, 'Bring him for'ard and I'll chuck him out o' winder!' Having reiterated this demand an immense number of times, with a sustained glare of defiance at Little Dorrit, Mr F.'s Aunt folded her arms, and sat down in the corner of the pie-shop parlour; steadfastly refusing to budge until such time as 'he' should have been 'brought for'ard,' and the chucking portion of his destiny accomplished.

In this condition of things, Flora confided to Little Dorrit that she had not seen Mr F.'s Aunt so full of life and character for weeks; that she would find it necessary to remain there 'hours perhaps,' until the inexorable old lady could be softened; and that she could manage her best alone. They parted, therefore, in the friendliest manner, and with the kindest feeling on both sides.

Mr F.'s Aunt holding out like a grim fortress, and Flora becoming in need of refreshment, a messenger was despatched to the hotel for the tumbler already glanced at, which was afterwards replenished. With the aid of its content, a newspaper, and some skimming of the cream of the pie-stock, Flora got through the remainder of the day in perfect good humour; though occasionally embarrassed by the consequences of an idle rumour which circulated among the credulous infants of the neighbourhood, to the effect that an old lady had sold herself to the pie-shop to be made up, and was then sitting in the pie-shop parlour, declining to complete her contract. This attracted so many young persons of both sexes, and, when the shades of evening began to fall, occasioned so much interruption to the business, that the merchant

became very pressing in his proposals that Mr F.'s Aunt should be removed. A conveyance was accordingly brought to the door, which, by the joint efforts of the merchant and Flora, this remarkable woman was at last induced to enter; though not without even then putting her head out of the window, and demanding to have him 'brought for'ard' for the purpose originally mentioned. As she was observed at this time to direct baleful glances towards the Marshalsea, it has been supposed that this admirably consistent female intended by 'him,' Arthur Clennam.

This, however, is mere speculation; who the person was, who, for the satisfaction of Mr F.'s Aunt's mind, ought to have been brought forward and never was brought forward, will never be positively known.

The autumn days went on, and Little Dorrit never came to the Marshalsea now and went away without seeing him. No, no, no.

One morning, as Arthur listened for the light feet that every morning ascended winged to his heart, bringing the heavenly brightness of a new love into the room where the old love had wrought so hard and been so true; one morning, as he listened, he heard her coming, not alone.

'Dear Arthur,' said her delighted voice outside the door, 'I have some one here. May I bring some one in?'

He had thought from the tread there were two with her. He answered 'Yes,' and she came in with Mr Meagles. Sun-browned and jolly Mr Meagles looked, and he opened his arms and folded Arthur in them, like a sun-browned and jolly father.

'Now I am all right,' said Mr Meagles, after a minute or so. 'Now it's over. Arthur, my dear fellow, confess at once that you expected me before.' 'I did,' said Arthur; 'but Amy told me - ' 'Little Dorrit. Never any other name.' (It was she who whispered it.)

' - But my Little Dorrit told me that, without asking for any further explanation, I was not to expect you until I saw you.'

'And now you see me, my boy,' said Mr Meagles, shaking him by the hand stoutly; 'and now you shall have any explanation and every explanation. The fact is, I was here - came straight to you from the Allongers and Marshongers, or I should be ashamed to look you in the face this day, - but you were not in company trim at the moment, and I had to start off again to catch Doyce.'

'Poor Doyce!' sighed Arthur.

'Don't call him names that he don't deserve,' said Mr Meagles.

'He's not poor; he's doing well enough. Doyce is a wonderful fellow over there. I assure you he is making out his case like a house a-fire. He has fallen on his legs, has Dan. Where they don't want things done and find a man to do 'em, that man's off his legs; but where they do want things done and find a man to do 'em, that man's on his legs. You won't have occasion to trouble the Circumlocution Office any more. Let me tell you, Dan has done without 'em!'

'What a load you take from my mind!' cried Arthur. 'What happiness you give me!'

'Happiness?' retorted Mr Meagles. 'Don't talk about happiness till you see Dan. I assure you Dan is directing works and executing labours over yonder, that it would make your hair stand on end to look at. He's no public offender, bless you, now! He's medalled and ribboned, and starred and crossed, and I don't-know-what all'd, like a born nobleman. But we mustn't talk about that over here.'

'Why not?'

'Oh, egad!' said Mr Meagles, shaking his head very seriously, 'he must hide all those things under lock and key when he comes over here. They won't do over here. In that particular, Britannia is a Britannia in the Manger - won't give her children such distinctions herself, and won't allow them to be seen when they are given by other countries. No, no, Dan!' said Mr Meagles, shaking his head again. 'That won't do here!'

'If you had brought me (except for Doyce's sake) twice what I have lost,' cried Arthur, 'you would not have given me the pleasure that you give me in this news.' 'Why, of course, of course,' assented Mr Meagles. 'Of course I know that, my good fellow, and therefore I come out with it in the first burst. Now, to go back, about catching Doyce. I caught Doyce. Ran against him among a lot of those dirty brown dogs in women's nightcaps a great deal too big for 'em, calling themselves Arabs and all sorts of incoherent races. YOU know 'em! Well! He was coming straight to me, and I was going to him, and so we came back together.'

'Doyce in England!' exclaimed Arthur.

'There!' said Mr Meagles, throwing open his arms. 'I am the worst man in the world to manage a thing of this sort. I don't know what I should have done if I had been in the diplomatic line - right, perhaps! The long and short of it is, Arthur, we have both been in England this fortnight. And if you go on to ask where Doyce is at the present

moment, why, my plain answer is - here he is! And now I can breathe again at last!'

Doyce darted in from behind the door, caught Arthur by both hands, and said the rest for himself.

'There are only three branches of my subject, my dear Clennam,' said Doyce, proceeding to mould them severally, with his plastic thumb, on the palm of his hand, 'and they're soon disposed of. First, not a word more from you about the past. There was an error in your calculations. I know what that is. It affects the whole machine, and failure is the consequence. You will profit by the failure, and will avoid it another time. I have done a similar thing myself, in construction, often. Every failure teaches a man something, if he will learn; and you are too sensible a man not to learn from this failure. So much for firstly. Secondly. I was sorry you should have taken it so heavily to heart, and reproached yourself so severely; I was travelling home night and day to put matters right, with the assistance of our friend, when I fell in with our friend as he has informed you. Thirdly. We two agreed, that, after what you had undergone, after your distress of mind, and after your illness, it would be a pleasant surprise if we could so far keep quiet as to get things perfectly arranged without your knowledge, and then come and say that all the affairs were smooth, that everything was right, that the business stood in greater want of you than ever it did, and that a new and prosperous career was opened before you and me as partners. That's thirdly. But you know we always make an allowance for friction, and so I have reserved space to close in. My dear Clennam, I thoroughly confide in you; you have it in your power to be quite as useful to me as I have, or have had, it in my power to be useful to you; your old place awaits you, and wants you very much; there is nothing to detain you here one half-hour longer.'

There was silence, which was not broken until Arthur had stood for some time at the window with his back towards them, and until his little wife that was to be had gone to him and stayed by him.

'I made a remark a little while ago,' said Daniel Doyce then, 'which I am inclined to think was an incorrect one. I said there was nothing to detain you here, Clennam, half an hour longer. Am I mistaken in supposing that you would rather not leave here till to-morrow morning? Do I know, without being very wise, where you would like to go, direct from these walls and from this room?'

'You do,' returned Arthur. 'It has been our cherished purpose.'

'Very well!' said Doyce. 'Then, if this young lady will do me the honour of regarding me for four-and-twenty hours in the light of a father, and

will take a ride with me now towards Saint Paul's Churchyard, I dare say I know what we want to get there.'

Little Dorrit and he went out together soon afterwards, and Mr Meagles lingered behind to say a word to his friend.

'I think, Arthur, you will not want Mother and me in the morning and we will keep away. It might set Mother thinking about Pet; she's a soft-hearted woman. She's best at the Cottage, and I'll stay there and keep her company.'

With that they parted for the time. And the day ended, and the night ended, and the morning came, and Little Dorrit, simply dressed as usual and having no one with her but Maggy, came into the prison with the sunshine. The poor room was a happy room that morning. Where in the world was there a room so full of quiet joy!

'My dear love,' said Arthur. 'Why does Maggy light the fire? We shall be gone directly.'

'I asked her to do it. I have taken such an odd fancy. I want you to burn something for me.'

'What?'

'Only this folded paper. If you will put it in the fire with your own hand, just as it is, my fancy will be gratified.'

'Superstitious, darling Little Dorrit? Is it a charm?'

'It is anything you like best, my own,' she answered, laughing with glistening eyes and standing on tiptoe to kiss him, 'if you will only humour me when the fire burns up.'

So they stood before the fire, waiting: Clennam with his arm about her waist, and the fire shining, as fire in that same place had often shone, in Little Dorrit's eyes. 'Is it bright enough now?' said Arthur. 'Quite bright enough now,' said Little Dorrit. 'Does the charm want any words to be said?' asked Arthur, as he held the paper over the flame. 'You can say (if you don't mind) 'I love you!' answered Little Dorrit. So he said it, and the paper burned away.

They passed very quietly along the yard; for no one was there, though many heads were stealthily peeping from the windows.

Only one face, familiar of old, was in the Lodge. When they had both accosted it, and spoken many kind words, Little Dorrit turned back

one last time with her hand stretched out, saying, 'Good-bye, good John! I hope you will live very happy, dear!'

Then they went up the steps of the neighbouring Saint George's Church, and went up to the altar, where Daniel Doyce was waiting in his paternal character. And there was Little Dorrit's old friend who had given her the Burial Register for a pillow; full of admiration that she should come back to them to be married, after all.

And they were married with the sun shining on them through the painted figure of Our Saviour on the window. And they went into the very room where Little Dorrit had slumbered after her party, to sign the Marriage Register. And there, Mr Pancks, (destined to be chief clerk to Doyce and Clennam, and afterwards partner in the house), sinking the Incendiary in the peaceful friend, looked in at the door to see it done, with Flora gallantly supported on one arm and Maggy on the other, and a back-ground of John Chivery and father and other turnkeys who had run round for the moment, deserting the parent Marshalsea for its happy child. Nor had Flora the least signs of seclusion upon her, notwithstanding her recent declaration; but, on the contrary, was wonderfully smart, and enjoyed the ceremonies mightily, though in a fluttered way.

Little Dorrit's old friend held the inkstand as she signed her name, and the clerk paused in taking off the good clergyman's surplice, and all the witnesses looked on with special interest. 'For, you see,' said Little Dorrit's old friend, 'this young lady is one of our curiosities, and has come now to the third volume of our Registers. Her birth is in what I call the first volume; she lay asleep, on this very floor, with her pretty head on what I call the second volume; and she's now a-writing her little name as a bride in what I call the third volume.'

They all gave place when the signing was done, and Little Dorrit and her husband walked out of the church alone. They paused for a moment on the steps of the portico, looking at the fresh perspective of the street in the autumn morning sun's bright rays, and then went down.

Went down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness. Went down to give a mother's care, in the fulness of time, to Fanny's neglected children no less than to their own, and to leave that lady going into Society for ever and a day. Went down to give a tender nurse and friend to Tip for some few years, who was never vexed by the great exactions he made of her in return for the riches he might have given her if he had ever had them, and who lovingly closed his eyes upon the Marshalsea and all its blighted fruits. They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and

the froward and the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar.

The End.