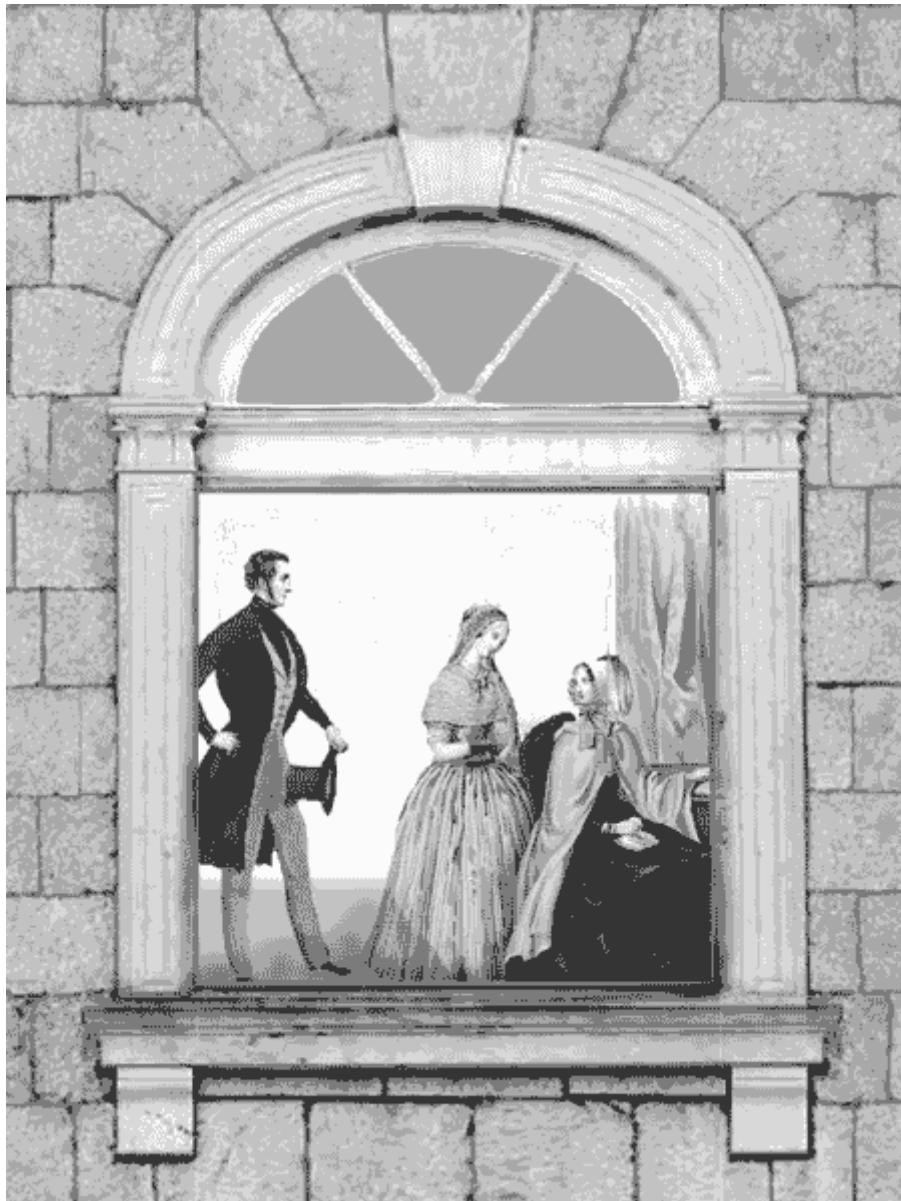


Charles Dickens's Bleak House

Abridged



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Emma Laybourn (Editor)

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Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Preface](#)

[Chapter 1 In Chancery](#)

[Chapter 2 In Fashion](#)

[Chapter 3 A Progress](#)

[Chapter 4 Telescopic Philanthropy](#)

[Chapter 5 A Morning Adventure](#)

[Chapter 6 Quite at Home](#)

[Chapter 7 The Ghost's Walk](#)

[Chapter 8 Covering a Multitude of Sins](#)

[Chapter 9 Signs and Tokens](#)

[Chapter 10 The Law-Writer](#)

[Chapter 11 Our Dear Brother](#)

[Chapter 12 On the Watch](#)

[Chapter 13 Esther's Narrative](#)

[Chapter 14 Deportment](#)

[Chapter 15 Bell Yard](#)

[Chapter 16 Tom-all-Alone's](#)

[Chapter 17 Esther's Narrative](#)

[Chapter 18 Lady Dedlock](#)

[Chapter 19 Moving On](#)

[Chapter 20 A New Lodger](#)

[Chapter 21 The Smallweed Family](#)

[Chapter 22 Mr. Bucket](#)

[Chapter 23 Esther's Narrative](#)

[Chapter 24 An Appeal Case](#)

[Chapter 25 Mrs. Snagsby Sees It All](#)

[Chapter 26 Sharpshooters](#)

[Chapter 27 More Old Soldiers Than One](#)

[Chapter 28 The Ironmaster](#)

[Chapter 29 The Young Man](#)

[Chapter 30 Esther's Narrative](#)

[Chapter 31 Nurse and Patient](#)

[Chapter 32 The Appointed Time](#)

[Chapter 33 Interlopers](#)

[Chapter 34 A Turn of the Screw](#)

[Chapter 35 Esther's Narrative](#)

[Chapter 36 Chesney Wold](#)

[Chapter 37 Jarndyce and Jarndyce](#)

[Chapter 38 A Struggle](#)

[Chapter 39 Attorney and Client](#)

[Chapter 40 National and Domestic](#)

[Chapter 41 In Mr. Tulkinghorn's Room](#)

[Chapter 42 In Mr. Tulkinghorn's Chambers](#)

[Chapter 43 Esther's Narrative](#)

[Chapter 44 The Letter and the Answer](#)
[Chapter 45 In Trust](#)
[Chapter 46 Stop Him!](#)
[Chapter 47 Jo's Will](#)
[Chapter 48 Closing In](#)
[Chapter 49 Dutiful Friendship](#)
[Chapter 50 Esther's Narrative](#)
[Chapter 51 Enlightened](#)
[Chapter 52 Obstinacy](#)
[Chapter 53 The Track](#)
[Chapter 54 Springing a Mine](#)
[Chapter 55 Flight](#)
[Chapter 56 Pursuit](#)
[Chapter 57 Esther's Narrative](#)
[Chapter 58 A Wintry Day and Night](#)
[Chapter 59 Esther's Narrative](#)
[Chapter 60 Perspective](#)
[Chapter 61 A Discovery](#)
[Chapter 62 Another Discovery](#)
[Chapter 63 Steel and Iron](#)
[Chapter 64 Esther's Narrative](#)
[Chapter 65 Beginning the World](#)
[Chapter 66 Down in Lincolnshire](#)
[Chapter 67 The Close of Esther's Narrative](#)
[Notes on some aspects of *Bleak House*](#)
[Other books in this series](#)

To return to the contents page at any time, use the ↑ arrow at the beginning of each chapter.

Introduction

Charles Dickens was born in 1812 in Portsmouth on the south coast of England. The son of a navy clerk, he had a happy childhood until the age of twelve, when his father was imprisoned for debt and he was forced to go to work in a shoe-blackening factory. As a young man, he learnt shorthand and began reporting parliamentary debates, before progressing to writing humorous sketches. These proved popular with readers, and were developed into his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, which was serialized in 20 monthly parts from 1836.

Thus began a long career during which Dickens wrote fifteen novels and numerous shorter works. Most of his books, like many novels of the day, were serialized. Dickens started his own magazines, notably *Household Words*, in which to publish his stories as well as those of authors such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Wilkie Collins.

Hugely successful in his career, Dickens was less so in his private life. As a husband and father he could be self-centred and demanding, and when he was in his forties his marriage to Catherine Hogarth foundered on the rocks of his obsession with the teenage actress Nelly Ternan. He remained highly popular with the public, however, and toured Britain and America to give readings from his novels. He may have exhausted himself doing so, for he died unexpectedly in 1870.

All of Dickens's novels are inventive, imaginative and full of drama and incident. *Bleak House*, acclaimed as one of his greatest works, contains the interlinked stories of aristocrats and some of the poorest of the poor. It has mysteries and conspiracies aplenty, a singularly touching deathbed scene and a horrific death by spontaneous combustion; and, in *Inspector Bucket*, one of the earliest and most memorable detectives in British fiction.

Like many of Dickens's books, *Bleak House* could be seen as a coming-of-age novel, but with a heroine instead of a hero. Books such as *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* depict the journeys of innocent young men through the difficulties of life amidst a host of sharply delineated characters – some would say caricatures, for Dickens loved the theatre and his minor characters were often theatrically vivid but two-dimensional. The scarcity of rounded and nuanced characters was perhaps Dickens's weakest point as an author. He has been particularly criticised for his portrayal of women; his heroines tended to be idealised, innocent and saccharine.

Esther Summerson, the heroine of *Bleak House*, follows this model, and yet thanks to her role as protagonist, and the first-person narrative used in her parts of the story, she comes alive as the author's other heroines (including

Ada Clare in the same book) do not. Esther is idealised, certainly, especially in her modest humility; but she is also perceptive, honest and decisive. Dickens gave her a measure of insight and some of his own opinions as well as a layer of sentiment (some of which has been removed in this version). The result is an unusually self-deprecating but otherwise realistic human being.

Esther knows nothing about her parents; yet *Bleak House* is a work in which parenthood and responsibility figure largely. There are scathing portraits of negligent, irresponsible or self-absorbed parents – Mrs. Jellyby, Harold Skimpole and Mr. Turveydrop – and it is made clear that effectiveness as a parent is strongly linked to usefulness in the greater world.

An example of good parenting is to be found in the Bagnets, with their combination of affection, care, and martial neatness and order. And, like the other ‘good’ characters in the novel, they assume responsibilities for those outside their family circle. John Jarndyce, though childless, takes on a parental role to his wards. Thanks to him, the Bleak House of the title is by no means the bleakest house in the book. Esther in her turn adopts a gentle, sensible, motherly manner to all those younger than herself, and becomes the heart of Bleak House.

Throughout the book, two parents predominate. One is Esther’s mysterious mother, whose secret identity is the agency which sets the plot running. The other is not a person, but the national institution which acts as guardian to the Wards in Jarndyce – the labyrinthine, self-interested, cannibalistic Court of Chancery; arguably the most monstrous parent of them all.

PREFACE

By Charles Dickens

Everything set forth in these pages concerning the Court of Chancery is substantially true. At the present moment (August, 1853) there is a lawsuit before the court which began twenty years ago, in which costs have been incurred to the amount of seventy thousand pounds, and which is a *friendly suit*. There is another well-known suit in Chancery which was commenced over fifty years ago and in which more than a hundred and forty thousand pounds has been swallowed up in costs. If I wanted other authorities for Jarndyce and Jarndyce, I could rain them on these pages.

There is one other point on which I offer a word of remark. The possibility of spontaneous human combustion has been denied; but I do not wilfully mislead my readers and before I wrote that description I took pains to investigate the subject. There are about thirty cases on record, of which the most famous, that of the Countess Cornelia de Baudi Cesenate, was investigated and described by Giuseppe Bianchini in 1731.

Chapter 1

In Chancery

London, and implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets as if the waters had only just retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be extraordinary to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses splashed to their very blinkers. Pedestrians, jostling each other in a general infection of ill temper, and slipping and sliding at street-corners.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog creeping round collier-brigs; fog hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the barges. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners; fog in the bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little apprentice boy on deck. People on bridges peeping into a sky of fog below them, as if they were up in a balloon and hanging in the misty clouds.

Gas-light looming through the fog in various places in the streets. Most of the shops lit up two hours early – as the gas seems to know, for it has a haggard and unwilling look.

The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest near that leaden-roofed old obstruction, Temple Bar. And close to Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, for the groping and floundering condition of this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners.

Here sits the Lord High Chancellor with a foggy glory round his head, softly fenced in with crimson cloth and curtains, addressed by a large lawyer with great whiskers. Some twenty members of the High Court of Chancery bar are here, engaged in one of the ten thousand stages of an endless cause, tripping one another up on slippery precedents, groping knee-deep in technicalities, and putting on serious faces, as actors might. On such an afternoon the various solicitors in the cause are ranged in a line, with bills, cross-bills, answers, rejoinders, affidavits, issues, reports, mountains of costly nonsense piled before them. Well may the court be dim; well may the fog hang heavy in it; well may the stained-glass windows lose their colour and admit no daylight; well may the public, who peep in through the door, be deterred from entrance!

This is the Court of Chancery, which has its blighted lands in every shire, which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse and its dead in every churchyard, which so exhausts finances, patience, courage, hope, so overthrows the brain and breaks the heart, that there is not an honourable lawyer who would not give the warning, “Endure any wrong rather than come here!”

Who else are in the Lord Chancellor’s court this murky afternoon? There is the registrar below the judge, in wig and gown; and there are two or three juniors. They are all yawning, for no crumb of amusement ever falls from Jarndyce and Jarndyce (the cause in hand), which was squeezed dry years upon years ago. The short-hand writers and court reporters invariably leave when Jarndyce and Jarndyce comes on. Their places are empty.

Standing on a seat at the side of the hall is a little mad old woman with a squeezed bonnet and a bag of documents who is always in court, and always expecting some incomprehensible judgment to be given in her favour. Some say she really is a party to a suit, but no one knows for certain because no one cares.

A sallow prisoner has come up, in custody, for the half-dozen time, in confusion about accounts of which it is not pretended that he had ever any knowledge. Another ruined suitor, who periodically appears from Shropshire and tries vainly to address the Chancellor at the close of the day’s business, plants himself in a good place and keeps an eye on the judge, ready to call out “My Lord!” in a voice of sonorous complaint on the instant of his rising.

Jarndyce and Jarndyce drones on. This scarecrow of a lawsuit has, in course of time, become so complicated that no man alive knows what it means. No two Chancery lawyers can talk about it for five minutes without coming to a total disagreement. Innumerable children have been born into the cause; innumerable old people have died out of it. Scores of persons have deliriously found themselves made parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce without knowing how or why; whole families have inherited legendary hatreds with the suit. Chancellors have come and gone; there are not three Jarndyces left upon the earth since old Tom Jarndyce in despair blew his brains out at a coffee-house in Chancery Lane; but Jarndyce and Jarndyce still drags its dreary length before the court, forever hopeless.

Jarndyce and Jarndyce has become a joke. That is the only good that has ever come of it. Every master in Chancery has made a reference to it after dinner. Articled clerks have practised their legal wit upon it. The last Lord Chancellor said that getting through Jarndyce and Jarndyce was as likely as the sky raining potatoes – a pleasantry that particularly tickled the juniors in court.

How many people Jarndyce and Jarndyce has stretched forth its unwholesome hand to spoil and corrupt would be a very wide question. From the master down to the copying-clerk, no man has been improved by it. It brings trickery, evasion, procrastination, botheration, and false pretences of all sorts. Even those on the outermost circle of such evil have been tempted

into letting bad things take their own bad course, and a loose belief that if the world goes wrong it was in some off-hand manner never meant to go right.

Thus, in the midst of the mud and at the heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

“Mr. Tangle,” says the Lord High Chancellor.

“Mlud,” says Mr. Tangle. Mr. Tangle knows more of Jarndyce and Jarndyce than anybody. He is famous for it – supposed never to have read anything else since he left school.

“Have you nearly concluded your argument?”

“Mlud, no – variety of points – feel it my duty tsubmit – ludship.”

“Several members of the bar are still to be heard, I believe?” says the Chancellor with a slight smile.

Eighteen of Mr. Tangle’s learned friends bob up like eighteen hammers in a pianoforte, and make eighteen bows.

“We will proceed with the hearing on Wednesday fortnight,” says the Chancellor. For the question at issue is only a question of costs, a mere bud on the forest tree of the lawsuit, and really will come to a settlement one of these days.

The Chancellor rises; the bar rises; the man from Shropshire cries, “My lord!” The junior lawyers frown at him indignantly.

“In reference,” proceeds the Chancellor, still on Jarndyce and Jarndyce, “to the young girl–”

“Begludship’s pardon – boy,” says Mr. Tangle.

“In reference,” proceeds the Chancellor with extra distinctness, “to the young girl and boy, the two young people” – Mr. Tangle crushed – “whom I told to come today and who are now in my private room, I will see them and consider making the order for their residing with their uncle.”

Mr. Tangle on his legs again. “Begludship’s pardon – dead.”

“With their” – Chancellor looking through his eye-glass at his papers – “grandfather.”

“Begludship’s pardon – victim of rash action – brains.”

Suddenly a very little lawyer with a terrific bass voice arises in the fog, and says, “I appear for him. He is a distant cousin.”

The very little counsel drops back into the fog. Everybody looks for him. Nobody can see him.

“I will speak with both the young people,” says the Chancellor, “on the subject of their residing with their cousin. I will mention the matter tomorrow morning when I take my seat.”

The man from Shropshire ventures another “My lord!” but the Chancellor has vanished. Everybody else quickly vanishes too. The little mad old woman marches off with her documents; the empty court is locked up. If all the injustice it has committed and all the misery it has caused could only be locked up with it, and the whole burnt away in a great funeral pyre – why, so much the better it would be!

Chapter 2

In Fashion

We need but a glimpse of the fashionable world on this miry afternoon. It is not unlike the Court of Chancery: both are things of precedent and usage.

It is not a large world. There are many good and true people in it; it has its place. But it is a world wrapped up in too much jeweller's cotton, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them. It is a deadened world, and sometimes unhealthy for want of air.

My Lady Dedlock has returned to her house in town for a few days before departing for Paris, where she intends to stay some weeks. My Lady Dedlock has been down at what she calls her "place" in Lincolnshire.

There are floods in Lincolnshire. An arch of the bridge in the park has been sapped away. The low-lying ground has become a stagnant river with melancholy trees for islands and a surface punctured all over, all day long, with falling rain. The deer leave quagmires where they pass.

The view from my Lady Dedlock's windows is lead-coloured. The vases on the stone terrace catch the rain all day; and the heavy drops fall upon the broad flag-stoned pavement, known as the Ghost's Walk. On Sundays the little church in the park is mouldy; there is a general smell as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves. My Lady Dedlock (who is childless), looking out in the early twilight from a game-keeper's lodge, and seeing a child running out into the rain to meet the wrapped-up figure of a man coming through the gate, has been put quite out of temper. My Lady Dedlock says she has been "bored to death."

Therefore my Lady Dedlock has come away from the place in Lincolnshire and has left it to the rain. The pictures of Dedlocks past and gone have seemed to vanish into the dark walls as the housekeeper has passed along the old rooms shutting up the shutters. And when they will next come forth again, the fashionable world cannot yet say.

Sir Leicester Dedlock is only a baronet, but his family is as old as the hills, and infinitely more respectable. He has the opinion that the world might get on without hills but would be finished without Dedlocks. He is a gentleman of strict conscience, disdainful of meanness: an honourable, obstinate, truthful, high-spirited, intensely prejudiced, perfectly unreasonable man.

Sir Leicester is twenty years older than my Lady. He is nearly seventy. He has gout now and then and walks a little stiffly. He is ceremonious, stately, most polite to my Lady, and holds her personal attractions in the highest esteem. His gallantry to my Lady, which has never changed since he courted her, is the one little touch of romantic fancy in him.

Indeed, he married her for love. It is said that she had no family; however, Sir Leicester had so much family that perhaps he could dispense

with any more. But she had beauty, pride, ambition, insolent resolve, and sense. Wealth and position, added to these, soon floated her upward, and for years now my Lady Dedlock has been at the top of the fashionable tree.

An exhausted composure, an even-tempered fatigue are the trophies of her victory. She is perfectly well-bred. She has beauty still: a fine face, with a classical demeanour; her figure is elegant, well-dressed and well-groomed.

My Lady Dedlock has come up from her place in Lincolnshire to pass a few days at her house in town before departing to Paris for some weeks, after which her movements are uncertain. And at her house in town, upon this murky afternoon, arrives an old-fashioned old gentleman, solicitor of the High Court of Chancery, who is legal adviser of the Dedlocks. Across the hall, and up the stairs, and through the rooms, which are very brilliant in the season and very dismal out of it – fairy-land to visit, but a desert to live in – the old gentleman is conducted into my Lady’s presence.

The old gentleman is rusty to look at, but is reputed to be very rich. He is surrounded by a mysterious halo of family confidences; there are many noble secrets shut up in the breast of Mr. Tulkinghorn. He is of what is called the old school – a phrase generally meaning anybody that seems never to have been young – and wears knee-breeches tied with ribbons, and black stockings. He never talks unless professionally consulted. He is found sometimes, silent but quite at home, at dinner-tables in great country houses, where everybody knows him and stops to say “How do you do, Mr. Tulkinghorn?” He receives these salutations with gravity and buries them along with the rest of his knowledge.

Sir Leicester Dedlock is with my Lady and is happy to see Mr. Tulkinghorn. He likes Mr. Tulkinghorn’s air, and his clothes, which are eminently respectable and retainer-like, as if he were the butler of the legal cellar of the Dedlocks.

Has Mr. Tulkinghorn any idea of this himself? It may be so, or it may not; but there is one remarkable thing about Lady Dedlock and indeed her whole class. She supposes herself to be an inscrutable Being, quite out of the reach of ordinary mortals. Yet every dim little star revolving about her, from her maid to the manager of the Italian Opera, knows her weaknesses, prejudices, and follies as well as her dressmaker knows her physical measurements. There are deferential people in a dozen callings who can tell you how to manage Lady Dedlock as if she were a baby, who do nothing but nurse her all their lives, who, pretending to follow with profound subservience, lead her and her whole troop after them. Therefore, while Mr. Tulkinghorn may not know what is passing in the Dedlock mind at present, it is very possible that he may.

“My Lady’s cause has been again before the Chancellor, has it, Mr. Tulkinghorn?” says Sir Leicester.

“Yes. It has been on again today,” Mr. Tulkinghorn replies, bowing to my Lady, who is on a sofa near the fire, shading her face.

“It would be useless to ask,” says my Lady with the dreariness of Lincolnshire still upon her, “whether anything has been done.”

“Nothing that *you* would call anything has been done today,” replies Mr. Tulkinghorn.

“Nor ever will be,” says my Lady.

Sir Leicester has no objection to an interminable Chancery suit. It is a slow, expensive, British kind of thing. To be sure, he has not a vital interest in the suit in question; Lady Dedlock’s part in it was the only property she brought him on marriage. But he regards the Court of Chancery, even if it should involve some trifling delay and confusion, as a wise and good institution, about which he should not complain.

“As a few fresh affidavits have been put upon the file,” says Mr. Tulkinghorn, “and as you are going to Paris, I have brought them in my pocket.”

He takes out his papers, puts on his spectacles, and begins to read.

““In Chancery. Between John Jarndyce—”“

My Lady interrupts, requesting him to miss as many of the formal horrors as he can.

Mr. Tulkinghorn begins again. My Lady sees the papers on the table – looks at them nearer – and asks impulsively, “Who copied that?”

Mr. Tulkinghorn stops short, surprised.

“Is it what you people call law-hand?” she asks, looking full at him.

“Not quite. Why do you ask?”

“Anything to vary this detestable monotony. Oh, go on, do!”

Mr. Tulkinghorn reads again. The heat is greater; my Lady screens her face. Sir Leicester dozes, starts up suddenly, and cries, “Eh? What do you say?”

“I say I am afraid,” says Mr. Tulkinghorn, who had risen hastily, “that Lady Dedlock is ill.”

“Faint,” my Lady murmurs with white lips, “only that; but it is like the faintness of death. Don’t speak to me. Ring, and take me to my room!”

Mr. Tulkinghorn retires into another chamber; bells ring, feet shuffle and patter, silence ensues. Mr. Tulkinghorn is summoned to return.

“Better now,” says Sir Leicester, motioning the lawyer to sit down. “I have been quite alarmed. I never knew my Lady swoon before. But the weather is extremely trying, and she really has been bored to death down at our place in Lincolnshire.”

Chapter 3

A Progress

I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever. I always knew that. I remember, when I was a very little girl, I used to say to my doll when we were alone together, “Now, Dolly, I am not clever, and you must be patient with me, like a dear!” And she used to sit propped up in a great arm-chair, staring at me – or, rather, at nothing – while I busily stitched away and told her every one of my secrets.

My dear old doll! I was such a shy little thing that I seldom dared to open my lips, and never dared to open my heart, to anybody else. It almost makes me cry to think what a relief it used to be when I came home from school, to run upstairs to my room and say, “Oh, dear faithful Dolly, I knew you would be expecting me!” and then to sit down and tell her all I had noticed since we parted. I had always rather a silent way of noticing what passed before me and thinking I should like to understand it better. I have not a quick understanding. When I love a person very tenderly, it seems to brighten. But even that may be my vanity.

I was brought up, from my earliest remembrance, by my godmother. At least, I only knew her as such. She was a good, good woman! She went to church three times every Sunday, and to morning prayers on Wednesdays and Fridays, and never missed. She was handsome; and if she had ever smiled, would have been (I used to think) like an angel – but she never smiled. She was always grave and strict. She was so very good herself, I thought, that the badness of other people made her frown all her life.

I felt so different from her, so poor, so trifling, and so far off that I could never even love her as I wished. It made me very sorry to consider how good she was and how unworthy of her I was, and I used ardently to hope that I might have a better heart; and I talked it over often with the dear old doll, but I never loved my godmother as I ought to have loved her if I had been a better girl.

This made me, I dare say, more timid and retiring than I naturally was. But something happened when I was still quite small that helped it very much.

I had never heard my mama spoken of. I had never been shown my mama’s grave, nor told where it was. Yet I had never been taught to pray for any relation but my godmother. I had more than once approached this subject of my thoughts with Mrs. Rachael, our only servant, who took my light away when I was in bed (another very good woman), and she had only said, “Esther, good night!” and gone away.

Although there were seven girls at the neighbouring school where I was a pupil, and although they called me little Esther Summerson, there seemed to be some other separation between us besides their being older and far more clever than I was. One of them did invite me home to a little party, to my

great joy. But my godmother wrote a stiff letter declining, and I never went. I never went out at all.

It was my birthday. There were rejoicings at home on other birthdays, I knew – there were none on mine. My birthday was the most melancholy day at home in the whole year.

Dinner was over, and my godmother and I were sitting at the table before the fire. The clock ticked; not another sound was heard in the house. I happened to look timidly up from my stitching, across the table at my godmother, and I saw her looking gloomily at me as if to say, “It would have been far better that you had no birthday, that you had never been born!”

I broke out crying and said, “Oh, dear godmother, pray do tell me, did Mama die on my birthday?”

“No,” she returned. “Ask me no more, child!”

“Oh, do pray tell me something of her, dear godmother, please! What did I do to her? How did I lose her? Why am I so different from other children, and why is it my fault, dear godmother? No, no, don’t go away. Oh, speak to me!”

I caught hold of her dress and was kneeling, while she said, “Let me go!” But now she stood still.

Her darkened face stopped me. I put up my trembling hand to clasp hers, but withdrew it as she looked at me, and laid it on my fluttering heart.

She said slowly in a cold, low voice, “Your mother is your disgrace, and you were hers. The time will come when you will understand this better and will feel it too. I have forgiven her” – but her face did not relent – “the wrong she did to me, and I say no more of it, though it was greater than anyone will ever know but I. For yourself, unfortunate girl, orphaned and degraded, pray that the sins of others be not visited upon your head. Forget your mother. Now, go!”

As I was about to depart, she added this: “Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it. You are different from other children, Esther. You are set apart.”

I went up to my room, and crept to bed, laid my doll’s cheek against mine, and cried myself to sleep. Imperfect as my understanding was, I knew that I had brought no joy at any time to anybody’s heart and that I was to no one upon earth what Dolly was to me.

Dear, dear, to think how often I repeated to the doll the story of my birthday and confided to her that I would try to repair the fault I had been born with (of which I felt guilty and yet innocent) and would strive to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted and to do some good to some one, and win some love to myself if I could. I hope it is not self-indulgent to shed these tears as I think of it. I am very thankful, I am very cheerful, but I cannot quite help their coming to my eyes.

There! I have wiped them away and can go on again properly.

I felt the distance between my godmother and myself so much more after the birthday that I found her even more difficult to approach; and I felt

the same way towards my school companions, and towards Mrs. Rachael, who was a widow. I was very quiet, and tried to be very diligent.

One sunny afternoon when I had come home from school and was gliding upstairs to my room as usual, my godmother looked out of the parlour-door and called me back. I found a stranger sitting with her: a portly, important-looking gentleman, dressed all in black.

My godmother said in her stern way, "This is Esther, sir."

The gentleman put on his glasses to look at me and said, "Come here, my dear!" He shook hands and asked me to take off my bonnet. "Ah!" he said; "Yes!" And he gave my godmother a nod.

My godmother said, "You may go upstairs, Esther!" And I curtsied and left him.

It must have been two years afterwards, and I was almost fourteen, when one dreadful night my godmother and I sat at the fireside. I had come down at nine o'clock as I always did to read the Bible to her, and was reading aloud from St. John how our Saviour stooped down, writing with his finger in the dust, when they brought the sinful woman to him.

"So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her!"

I was stopped by my godmother's rising, putting her hand to her head, and crying out in an awful voice from quite another part of the book,

"Watch ye, therefore, lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch!"

Then she fell down on the floor. I had no need to cry out; her voice had sounded through the house.

She was laid upon her bed. For more than a week she lay there, with her handsome resolute frown carved upon her face. Many and many a time, with my head upon the pillow next to her, I kissed her, thanked her, prayed for her, asked her for her blessing and forgiveness, entreated her to give me the least sign that she knew or heard me. No, no, no. Her face was immovable. To the very last her frown remained unsoftened.

On the day after my poor good godmother was buried, the gentleman in black reappeared. I was sent for by Mrs. Rachael, and found him in the same place, as if he had never gone away.

"My name is Kenge," he said; "you may remember it, my child; Kenge and Carboy, Lincoln's Inn."

I replied that I remembered to have seen him once before.

"Pray be seated. Don't distress yourself. Mrs. Rachael, I needn't inform you that the late Miss Barbary's means die with her and that this young lady, now her aunt is dead—"

"My aunt, sir!"

"It is really of no use carrying on a deception when no object is to be gained by it," said Mr. Kenge smoothly, "Aunt in fact, though not in law. Don't distress yourself! Don't tremble! Mrs. Rachael, our young friend has no doubt heard of – the – Jarndyce and Jarndyce."

"Never," said Mrs. Rachael.

“Not of Jarndyce and Jarndyce?” said Mr. Kenge, looking over his glasses at me. “Not of one of the greatest Chancery suits, in which every form of procedure is represented over and over again? It is a cause that could not exist outside of this free and great country. I should say that the total costs in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, Mrs. Rachael, amount at present to sixty or seventy thousand pounds! And she really never heard of the cause!” said Mr. Kenge. “Surprising!”

“Miss Barbary, sir,” returned Mrs. Rachael, “wished Esther only to know what would be useful to her.”

“Well!” said Mr. Kenge. “Very proper. Now to the point,” addressing me. “Miss Barbary being deceased and it naturally not being to be expected that Mrs. Rachael—”

“Oh, dear no!” said Mrs. Rachael quickly.

“—that Mrs. Rachael should charge herself with your maintenance (I beg you won’t distress yourself), you are in a position to receive the renewal of an offer which I was instructed to make to Miss Barbary two years ago and which, though rejected then, is now renewed. Now, I represent a highly humane, but at the same time singular man.”

Mr. Kenge, leaning back in his chair, appeared to enjoy the sound of his own voice. I couldn’t wonder at that, for it was mellow and full, and he listened to himself with obvious satisfaction. I was very much impressed by him.

“Mr. Jarndyce,” he pursued, “being aware of the desolate position of our young friend, offers to place her at a first-rate establishment where her education shall be completed, where her comfort shall be secured, and where she shall be qualified to do her duty in that station of life unto which Providence has called her.”

My heart was filled so full that I was not able to speak.

“Mr. Jarndyce,” he went on, “makes no condition beyond asking that our young friend will not remove herself from the establishment in question without his knowledge and agreement. That she will faithfully apply herself to acquiring those accomplishments upon which she will be ultimately dependent. That she will tread in the paths of virtue and honour, and so forth. Now, what does our young friend say?”

What I said, I need not repeat. What I felt, I could never relate.

This interview took place at Windsor, where I had passed my whole life. A week later I left it, inside the stagecoach, for Reading.

Mrs. Rachael was too good to feel any emotion at parting, but I was not so good, and wept bitterly. I thought that I ought to have made myself enough of a favourite with her to make her sorry. When she gave me one cold parting kiss upon my forehead, I felt so miserable and self-reproachful that I clung to her and told her it was my fault, I knew, that she could say good-bye so easily.

“No, Esther!” she returned. “It is your misfortune!”

The coach was at the gate; and thus I left her, with a sorrowful heart. She went in before my boxes were lifted to the coach-roof. As long as I could

see the house, I looked back at it from the window through my tears. My godmother had left Mrs. Rachael all the little property she possessed; and there was to be a sale. A day or two before, I had wrapped the dear old doll in her own shawl and quietly laid her – I am half ashamed to tell it – in the garden-earth under the tree outside my old window. I had no companion left but my bird, and him I carried with me in his cage.

When the house was out of sight, I sat, with my bird-cage at my feet, looking out of the window, watching the frosty trees, and the fields all smooth and white with last night's snow, and the sun, so red but yielding so little heat. There was a gentleman in the coach who sat on the opposite seat and looked very large in a quantity of wrappings, but he gazed out of the other window and took no notice of me.

I thought of my dead godmother, of the night when I read to her, of her frowning so sternly in her bed, of the strange place I was going to, of the people I should find there, and what they would be like, when a voice gave me a terrible start.

It said, "What the de-vil are you crying for?"

I was so frightened that I could only answer in a whisper, "Me, sir?" For of course it was the gentleman in the quantity of wrappings.

"Yes, you," he said, turning round.

"I didn't know I was crying, sir," I faltered.

"But you are!" said the gentleman. "Look here!" He came across to me, brushed one of his large furry cuffs across my eyes (but without hurting me), and showed me that it was wet.

"There!" he said. "what are you crying for? Don't you want to go there?"

"Where, sir?"

"Why, wherever you are going," said the gentleman.

"I am very glad to go there, sir," I answered.

"Well, then! Look glad!" said the gentleman.

I thought he was very strange. He was wrapped up to the chin, and his face was almost hidden in a fur cap; but I was not afraid of him. So I told him that I thought I must have been crying because of my godmother's death and because of Mrs. Rachael's not being sorry to part with me.

"Confound Mrs. Rachael!" said the gentleman. "Let her fly away in a high wind on a broomstick!"

I began to be really afraid of him now and looked at him with the greatest astonishment. But I thought that he had pleasant eyes, although he kept on muttering to himself in an angry manner.

After a little while he opened his outer wrapper, and put his arm down into a deep pocket in the side.

"Now, look here!" he said. "In this paper is a piece of the best plum-cake with sugar an inch thick. And here's a little pie made in France from the livers of fat geese. Now let's see you eat 'em."

"Thank you, sir," I replied; "but I hope you won't be offended – they are too rich for me."

“Floored again!” said the gentleman, which I didn’t at all understand, and threw them both out of the window.

He did not speak to me any more until he got out of the coach near Reading, when he advised me to be a good girl and to be studious, and shook hands with me. I must say I was relieved. We left him at a milestone. I often walked past it afterwards, and thought of him, half expecting to meet him. But I never did; and as time went on, he passed out of my mind.

When the coach stopped, a very neat lady looked up at the window and said, “Miss Donny.”

“No, ma’am, Esther Summerson.”

“That is quite right,” said the lady. “Miss Donny.”

I now understood that she was Miss Donny, and apologised, and at her request pointed out my boxes. They were put on a very small green carriage; and then Miss Donny, her maid, and I got inside and were driven away.

“Everything is ready for you, Esther,” said Miss Donny, “in exact accordance with the wishes of your guardian, Mr. Jarndyce.”

“Of – who did you say, ma’am?”

“Of your guardian, Mr. Jarndyce.”

I was bewildered. “Do you know my – guardian, Mr. Jarndyce, ma’am?” I asked after a good deal of hesitation.

“Not personally, Esther,” said Miss Donny; “merely through his solicitors, Kenge and Carboy of London. A very superior gentleman, Mr. Kenge!”

I felt this to be true, but was confused. Our speedy arrival at our destination increased my confusion, and I never shall forget the unreal air of everything at Greenleaf (Miss Donny’s house) that afternoon.

But I soon became used to it. Before long, I seemed to have been there a great while and almost to have dreamed my old life at my godmother’s. Nothing could be more precise, exact, and orderly than Greenleaf.

We were twelve boarders, and there were two Miss Donnys, twins. It was understood that I would have to become a governess by and by, and I was not only instructed in everything that was taught, but was very soon helping to instruct others. Although I was treated in every other respect like the rest of the school, this single difference was made in my case. As I began to know more, I taught more, and had plenty to do, which I was very fond of doing because it made the dear girls fond of me.

At last, whenever a new pupil came who was a little downcast and unhappy, she was so sure – indeed I don’t know why – to make a friend of me that all new-comers were confided to my care. They said I was so gentle, but I am sure *they* were! I often thought of the resolution I had made on my birthday to try to be industrious, contented, and to do some good and win some love if I could; and indeed, I felt almost ashamed to have done so little and to have won so much.

I passed at Greenleaf six happy, quiet years. I never saw in any face there, thank heaven, on my birthday, that it would have been better if I had

never been born. Instead I was given so many affectionate tokens that my room was beautiful with them.

In those six years I had never been away except on visits at holiday time in the neighbourhood. After the first six months or so I had asked Miss Donny's advice about writing to Mr. Kenge, and with her approval I had written saying that I was happy and grateful. I had received a formal answer: "We note the contents thereof, which shall be duly communicated to our client."

After that I sometimes heard Miss Donny and her sister mention how regularly my accounts were paid, and about twice a year I wrote a similar letter, and received exactly the same answer in the same round handwriting.

It seems so curious to me to be obliged to write all this about myself! As if this narrative were the story of *my* life! But I will soon fall into the background now.

Six quiet years I had passed at Greenleaf, when, one November morning, I received this letter.

Old Square, Lincoln's Inn

Madam,

Our clt Mr. Jarndyce being abt to rece into his house, under an Order of the Ct of Chy, a Ward of the Ct for whom he wishes to secure an elgble compn, directs us to inform you that he will be glad of your serces in the afsd capacity.

We have arrngd for your being forded, carriage free, pr eight o'clock coach from Reading, on Monday morning next, to White Horse Cellar, Piccadilly, London, where one of our clks will be in waiting to convey you to our offe as above.

We are, Madam, Your obedt Servts,
Kenge and Carboy

Oh, never shall I forget the emotion this letter caused in the house! It was so tender in them to care so much for me, it was so gracious in God to have made my orphan way so smooth and easy, that I could hardly bear it. The pleasure and the pain of it, and pride and joy and humble regret were so blended that my heart seemed almost breaking while it was full of rapture.

The letter gave me only five days' notice of my removal. When at last the morning came and they took me through all the rooms to see them for the last time, and when some cried, "Esther, dear, say good-bye to me here, where you first spoke so kindly to me!" and when they all surrounded me and clung to me weeping, and when I tried to tell them how good they had all been to me, and how I blessed and thanked them every one – what a heart I had!

And when the two Miss Donnys grieved as much as any, and when the maids said, "Bless you, miss, wherever you go!" and when the ugly lame old gardener, who I thought had hardly noticed me in all those years, came panting after the coach to give me a little nosegay of geraniums and told me I

had been the light of his eyes – what a heart I had then! Could I help it if I was quite bowed down in the coach by myself and said “Oh, I am so thankful, I am so thankful!” many times over!

But of course I soon considered that I must not take tears where I was going, after all that had been done for me. I made myself sob less by saying to myself, “Esther, now, this will not do!” I cheered myself up pretty well at last, though I am afraid I was longer about it than I ought to have been; and then it was time to watch for London.

When we began to jolt upon a stone pavement, and when every other conveyance seemed to be running into us, and we seemed to be running into every other conveyance, I began to believe that we were approaching the end of our journey. Very soon afterwards we stopped.

An ink-stained young gentleman addressed me from the pavement and said, “I am from Kenge and Carboy’s, miss, of Lincoln’s Inn.”

He was very obliging, and as he handed me into a carriage with my boxes, I asked him whether there was a great fire anywhere? For the streets were so full of dense brown smoke that scarcely anything was to be seen.

“Oh, dear no, miss,” he said. “This is a London particular.”

I had never heard of such a thing.

“A fog, miss,” said the young gentleman.

“Oh, indeed!” said I.

We drove slowly through the dirtiest, darkest, busiest streets that ever were seen (I thought), until we passed into sudden quietude under an old gateway and drove on through a silent square to a steep, broad flight of stairs in a corner, and an entrance like an entrance to a church. And there really was a churchyard outside under some cloisters, for I saw the gravestones from the staircase window.

This was Kenge and Carboy’s. The young gentleman showed me into Mr. Kenge’s room – there was no one in it – and politely put an arm-chair for me by the fire. He then called my attention to a little looking-glass hanging by the chimney-piece.

“In case you should wish to look at yourself, miss, after the journey, as you’re going before the Chancellor. Not that it’s needed, I am sure,” said he civilly.

“Going before the Chancellor?” I said, startled.

“Only a matter of form, miss,” returned the young gentleman. “Mr. Kenge is in court. He left his compliments, and would you partake of some refreshment” – there were biscuits and a decanter of wine on a small table – “and look over the newspaper,” which the young gentleman gave me. Then he left.

Everything was so strange that I read the newspaper without knowing what the words meant. I put the paper down, took a peep at my bonnet in the glass to see if it was neat, and looked at the room, with its shabby, dusty tables, and piles of writings, and a bookcase full of the most inexpressive-looking books. Then I went on, thinking, thinking; and the fire went on, burning, burning, for two hours.

At last Mr. Kenge came. He was not altered, but he was surprised to see how altered I was and appeared quite pleased.

“As you are going to be the companion of the young lady who is now in the Chancellor’s private room, Miss Summerson,” he said, “we thought you should attend also. You will not be discomposed by the Lord Chancellor, I dare say?”

“No, sir,” I said, “I don’t think I shall.”

So Mr. Kenge gave me his arm and we went round the corner, under a colonnade, and into a comfortable room where a young lady and a young gentleman were standing near a great, loud-roaring fire, and leaning on the fire-screen, talking.

They both looked up when I came in. The young lady was such a beautiful girl! With such rich golden hair, such soft blue eyes, and such a bright, innocent, trusting face!

“Miss Ada,” said Mr. Kenge, “this is Miss Summerson.”

She came to meet me with a smile of welcome, and impulsively kissed me. She had such a natural, winning manner that in a few minutes we were sitting in the window-seat, talking together as free and happy as could be.

What a load off my mind! It was so delightful to know that she could confide in me and like me! It was so good of her, and so encouraging to me!

The young gentleman was her distant cousin, she told me, and his name was Richard Carstone. He was a handsome youth with an ingenuous face and a most engaging laugh; and after she called him over, he stood by us, talking gaily, like a light-hearted boy. He was only nineteen, but that was nearly two years older than she was. They were both orphans, and curiously, had never met before that day. Our all three coming together for the first time in such an unusual place was a thing to talk about, and we talked about it – in low voices, because a gentleman in a wig frequently came in and out. He told Mr. Kenge that the Chancellor would be up in five minutes; and presently we heard a bustle, and Mr. Kenge said that the Court had risen and his lordship was in the next room.

So we all went into the next room, Mr. Kenge first, with my darling – it is so natural to me now that I can’t help writing it; and there, plainly dressed in black and sitting in an arm-chair, was his lordship, whose robe, trimmed with beautiful gold lace, was thrown upon another chair. He gave us a searching look as we entered, but his manner was both courtly and kind.

“Miss Ada Clare?” said the Lord Chancellor.

Mr. Kenge presented her, and his lordship begged her to sit down. I could see he was interested by her; it touched me that the home of such a beautiful young creature should be represented by that dry, official place. Even the Lord High Chancellor appeared a poor substitute for the love and pride of parents.

“The Jarndyce in question,” said the Lord Chancellor, turning over some papers, “is Jarndyce of Bleak House.”

“Jarndyce of Bleak House, my lord,” said Mr. Kenge.

“A dreary name,” said the Lord Chancellor.

“But not a dreary place at present, my lord,” said Mr. Kenge.

“And Bleak House,” said his lordship, “is in—”

“Hertfordshire, my lord.”

“Mr. Jarndyce of Bleak House is not married?” said his lordship.

“He is not, my lord,” said Mr. Kenge.

A pause.

“Young Mr. Richard Carstone is present?” said the Lord Chancellor, glancing towards him. Richard bowed and stepped forward.

“Hum!” said the Lord Chancellor, turning over more leaves.

“Mr. Jarndyce of Bleak House, my lord,” Mr. Kenge observed in a low voice, “if I may remind your lordship, provides a suitable companion for Miss Ada Clare. This is the young lady. Miss Summerson.”

His lordship gave me an indulgent look and acknowledged my curtsy graciously.

“Miss Summerson is not related to any party in the cause, I think?”

“No, my lord.” Mr. Kenge leant over and whispered. His lordship, with his eyes upon his papers, listened, nodded, and did not look towards me again until we were going away.

His lordship spoke a little to my pet (it is so natural to call her that that I can't help it), asking her whether she thought she would be happy under the roof of Mr. Jarndyce of Bleak House, and why she thought so? Presently he rose courteously, and then he spoke for a minute or two with Richard Carstone, with more ease and less ceremony, as if he knew how to go straight to the candour of a boy.

“Very well!” said his lordship. “I shall make the order. Mr. Jarndyce of Bleak House has chosen, so far as I may judge,” and he looked at me, “a very good companion for the young lady, and the arrangement seems the best which the circumstances admit.”

He dismissed us pleasantly, and we all went out. Mr. Kenge left us outside in the fog for a moment while he went back in to ask a question.

“Well!” said Richard Carstone. “That's over! And where do we go next, Miss Summerson?”

“Don't you know?” I said.

“Not in the least.”

“And don't *you* know, my love?” I asked Ada.

“No!” said she. “Don't you?”

“Not at all!” said I.

We looked at one another, laughing, when a curious little old woman in a squeezed bonnet and carrying a handbag came curtsying and smiling up to us.

“Oh!” said she. “The wards in Jarndyce! Ve-ry happy, I am sure, to meet you! It is a good omen for youth, and hope, and beauty when they find themselves here, and don't know what's to come of it.”

“Mad!” whispered Richard, not thinking she could hear him.

“Right! Mad, young gentleman,” she returned. “I was a ward myself. I was not mad at that time,” curtsying low and smiling between every sentence.

“I had youth and hope, and I believe, beauty. It matters very little now. Neither of the three saved me. I have the honour to attend court regularly. With my documents. I expect a judgment. Shortly. On the Day of Judgment. I have discovered that the sixth seal mentioned in the Revelations is the Great Seal.”

As Ada was a little frightened, I said, to humour the poor old lady, that we were much obliged to her.

“Ye-es!” she said. “I imagine so. And here is Kenge. How does your honourable worship do?”

“Quite well, quite well! Now don’t be troublesome, that’s a good soul!” said Mr. Kenge, leading the way back.

“By no means,” said the poor old lady, keeping up with us. “I shall confer estates on both. I expect a judgment. Shortly. On the Day of Judgment. This is a good omen for you. Accept my blessing!”

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs; and when we looked back she was still there, saying with a curtsy and a smile, “Youth. And hope. And beauty. And Chancery. Ha! Pray accept my blessing!”

Chapter 4

Telescopic Philanthropy

We were to pass the night, Mr. Kenge told us back in his room, at Mrs. Jellyby's. Then he turned to me and said he assumed I knew who Mrs. Jellyby was.

"I don't, sir," I returned.

"Indeed! Mrs. Jellyby," said Mr. Kenge, "is a lady of remarkable strength of character who devotes herself entirely to the public. She is at present devoted to the subject of Africa. Mr. Jarndyce, who is desirous to aid any good work, has, I believe, a very high opinion of Mrs. Jellyby."

"And Mr. Jellyby, sir?" suggested Richard.

"Ah! Mr. Jellyby," said Mr. Kenge, "is – a – is the husband of Mrs. Jellyby. I never had the pleasure of seeing Mr. Jellyby. He may be a very superior man, but he is, so to speak, merged in the more shining qualities of his wife." Mr. Kenge told us that as the road to Bleak House would have been very long and dark on such an evening, Mr. Jarndyce had proposed this arrangement. A carriage would be at Mrs. Jellyby's to convey us out of town early the next morning.

He then rang a little bell, and the inky young gentleman came in. Addressing him by the name of Guppy, Mr. Kenge inquired whether the baggage had been sent round. Mr. Guppy said yes, and a coach was waiting for us.

"Then it only remains," said Mr. Kenge, shaking hands with us, "for me to express my satisfaction in the arrangement this day concluded and my hope that it will lead to the happiness of all concerned! Guppy, see the party safely there."

"Where *is* 'there,' Mr. Guppy?" said Richard as we went downstairs.

"No distance," said Mr. Guppy; "only round the corner. We'll be there in four minutes' time. This is a London particular *now*, ain't it, miss?" He seemed quite delighted with it on my account.

"The fog is very dense indeed!" said I.

"Not that it affects you, though, I'm sure," said Mr. Guppy. "It seems to do you good, miss, judging from your appearance."

I knew he meant well in paying me this compliment, so I laughed at myself for blushing when I had got into the coach and he had got up on to the box; and we all three laughed and chatted about our inexperience and the strangeness of London, until we turned up at our destination – a narrow street of high houses like an oblong tank to hold the fog. There was a confused little crowd of people, principally children, gathered about the house where we stopped, which had a tarnished brass plate on the door inscribed JELLYBY.

"One of the young Jellybys has been and got his head through the railings!" said Mr. Guppy.

“Oh, poor child,” said I; “let me out, if you please!”

“Pray be careful, miss. The young Jellybys are always up to something,” said Mr. Guppy.

I made my way to the poor child, who was one of the dirtiest little unfortunates I ever saw, and found him very frightened and crying loudly, fixed by the neck between two iron railings, while a milkman and a beadle were trying to drag him back by the legs. I mentioned that it might be best to push him forward; and by this means he was happily extricated, and then began to beat Mr. Guppy with a hoop-stick in quite a frantic manner.

Nobody had appeared from the house except a person in clogs, who had been poking at the child with a broom. This person now appeared in the passage without the clogs, and going upstairs before Ada and me, announced us as, “Them two young ladies, Missis Jellyby!” We passed several more children on the way up, whom it was difficult to avoid treading on in the dark; and as we came into Mrs. Jellyby’s presence, one of the poor little things fell downstairs with a great noise.

Mrs. Jellyby, whose face reflected none of our uneasiness at hearing the dear child’s head bump down every stair, received us with perfect equanimity. She was a pretty, plump woman of from forty to fifty, with handsome eyes, though they had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off.

“I am very glad,” said Mrs. Jellyby, “to have the pleasure of receiving you. I have a great respect for Mr. Jarndyce.”

We thanked her and sat down on a limp sofa. Mrs. Jellyby had been too much occupied with her African duties to brush her hair; and when she turned, we could not help noticing that her dress didn’t meet up at the back, but was railed across with a lattice-work of corset-lace.

The room, which was strewn with papers and nearly filled by a great writing-table, was, I must say, not only very untidy but very dirty. A jaded and unhealthy-looking girl sat at the writing-table, biting her pen and staring at us. Nobody ever was in such a state of ink. And from her tumbled hair to her pretty feet, which were disfigured with frayed and broken slippers, she really seemed to have no article of dress that was in its proper condition.

“You find me, my dears,” said Mrs. Jellyby, “as usual, very busy; the African project at present employs my whole time. It involves me in correspondence with public bodies and private individuals all over the country. I am happy to say it is advancing. We hope by this time next year to have two hundred families cultivating coffee and educating the natives of Borriboola-Gha, on the left bank of the Niger.”

I said it must be very gratifying.

“It is gratifying,” said Mrs. Jellyby. “It involves the devotion of all my energies. Do you know, Miss Summerson, I almost wonder that *you* never turned your thoughts to Africa.”

This was so unexpected that I was at a loss. I hinted that the climate—

“The finest climate in the world!” said Mrs. Jellyby. “If you would like to look over some remarks on the subject, while I finish a letter I am now dictating to my eldest daughter, who is my scribe—”

The girl at the table stopped biting her pen and gave a nod, half bashful and half sulky.

“—I shall then have finished for the present,” proceeded Mrs. Jellyby with a smile, “though my work is never done. Where are you, Caddy?”

“ ‘Presents her compliments to Mr. Swallow, and begs—’ ” said Caddy.

“ ‘And begs,’ ” said Mrs. Jellyby, “ ‘to inform him, in reference to his letter of inquiry on the African project—’ No, Peepy!”

Peepy was the unfortunate child who had fallen downstairs, and who now came in, with a strip of plaster on his forehead, to exhibit his wounded knees. Mrs. Jellyby merely said serenely, “Go along, you naughty Peepy!” and proceeded with her dictation.

I ventured to pick up poor Peepy, who looked very much astonished, but soon fell fast asleep in my arms, sobbing at longer and longer intervals, until he was quiet. I was so occupied with Peepy that I lost the letter in detail, though I had a general impression of the momentous importance of Africa, and the utter insignificance of all other places and things.

“Six o’clock!” said Mrs. Jellyby. “And our dinner-hour is five! Caddy, show Miss Clare and Miss Summerson their rooms. You will excuse me, I know, being so busy. Oh, that bad child! Pray put him down, Miss Summerson!”

I begged permission to retain him, and carried him upstairs and laid him on my bed. Ada and I had two upper rooms with a connecting door between. They were excessively bare and disorderly, and the curtain to my window was fastened up with a fork.

“You would like some hot water, wouldn’t you?” said Miss Jellyby, looking round for a jug, but in vain.

“If it is not being troublesome,” said we.

“Oh, it’s not the trouble,” returned Miss Jellyby; “the question is, if there *is* any.”

The evening was so very cold and the rooms had such a marshy smell that I must confess it was a little miserable, and Ada was half crying. We soon laughed, however, and were busily unpacking when Miss Jellyby came back to say that she was sorry there was no hot water, but they couldn’t find the kettle, and the boiler was out of order.

We begged her not to mention it. But all the little children had come up to the landing to look at Peepy lying on my bed. It was impossible to shut the door of either room, for my door had no knob; and though the handle of Ada’s went round and round, it had no effect whatever on the door. Therefore I proposed to the children that they should come in and be very good, and I would tell them the story of Little Red Riding Hood while I dressed for dinner; which they did, and were as quiet as mice.

When we went downstairs we found a young woman with a swelled face bound up in a flannel bandage blowing the fire of the drawing-room and choking dreadfully. It smoked so much that we all sat coughing and crying with the windows open for half an hour, while Mrs. Jellyby directed letters about Africa. Richard quietly told us that he had washed his hands in a pie-

dish and that they had found the kettle on his dressing-table, and made me and Ada laugh in the most ridiculous manner.

Soon after seven o'clock we went down to dinner, stepping carefully on the torn stair-carpets. We had a fine cod-fish, a piece of roast beef, a dish of cutlets, and a pudding; an excellent dinner, if it had had any cooking to speak of, but it was almost raw. The young woman with the flannel bandage dropped everything on the table. The person in clogs, who I suppose to have been the cook, frequently came and skirmished with her at the door, and there appeared to be ill will between them.

All through dinner – which was long, because of such accidents as the potatoes being mislaid and the handle of the corkscrew coming off – Mrs. Jellyby stayed serene. She told us a great deal that was interesting about Borriboola-Gha and the natives, and received so many letters that Richard, who sat by her, saw four envelopes in the gravy at once. Some of the letters were proceedings of ladies' committees, which she read to us; others were applications from people excited about the cultivation of coffee; others required answers, which she sent her eldest daughter from the table three or four times to write.

I was curious to know who a mild bald gentleman in spectacles was, who dropped into a vacant chair after the fish was taken away, never speaking a word. It was not until we left the table and he remained alone with Richard that the possibility of his being Mr. Jellyby entered my head. But he *was* Mr. Jellyby; and a loquacious young man called Mr. Quale, with large shining knobs on his forehead and his hair all brushed back, came in, and told Ada he was a philanthropist.

This young man, besides having a great deal to say about Africa, delighted in drawing Mrs. Jellyby out by saying, "I believe now, Mrs. Jellyby, you have received as many as two hundred letters about Africa in a single day, have you not?" or, "Mrs. Jellyby, you once mentioned that you had sent off five thousand circulars at one time?" During the whole evening, Mr. Jellyby sat in a corner with his head against the wall as if he were in low spirits.

Mrs. Jellyby, sitting in a nest of waste paper, drank coffee and dictated to her eldest daughter. She also held a discussion with Mr. Quale, about – if I understood it – the brotherhood of humanity, and expressed some beautiful sentiments. I was not a very attentive listener, however, for Peepy and the other children came flocking about Ada and me to ask for another story; so we sat down and told them in whispers "Puss in Boots" until Mrs. Jellyby, accidentally remembering them, sent them to bed. As Peepy cried for me to take him to bed, I carried him upstairs, where the young woman with the flannel bandage charged into the midst of the little family like a dragon and overturned them into cribs.

After that I tidied our room and coaxed our very cross fire into burning. On my return downstairs, I felt that Mrs. Jellyby looked down upon me rather for being so frivolous.

It was nearly midnight before we could go to bed, and even then we left Mrs. Jellyby among her papers drinking coffee and Miss Jellyby biting her pen.

“What a strange house!” said Ada when we got upstairs. “How curious of my cousin Jarndyce to send us here!”

“My love,” said I, “it quite confuses me. I can’t understand it at all. It must be very good of Mrs. Jellyby to take such pains about the natives – and yet – Peepy and the housekeeping!”

Ada laughed and put her arm around me, and told me I was a quiet, dear, good creature.

“You are so thoughtful, Esther,” she said, “and yet so cheerful! And you do so much! You would make a home out of even this house.”

My simple darling! It was because of the goodness of her own heart that she praised me so.

“May I ask you a question?” said I when we were sitting before the fire. “Your cousin, Mr. Jarndyce. I owe so much to him. Would you mind describing him?”

Shaking her golden hair, Ada turned her eyes upon me with such laughing wonder that I was full of wonder too, partly at her beauty, partly at her surprise.

“Esther!” she cried. “I never saw him!”

Well, to be sure!

No, she had never seen him. Young as she was when her mama died, she remembered how the tears would come into her mother’s eyes when she spoke of his noble generosity. Her cousin Jarndyce had written to her a few months ago – “a plain, honest letter,” Ada said – proposing the arrangement we were now to enter on and telling her that “in time it might heal some of the wounds made by the miserable Chancery suit.” She had replied, gratefully accepting his proposal.

Richard had received a similar letter. He *had* seen Mr. Jarndyce once, five years ago, at Winchester school, and had told Ada that he was “a bluff, rosy fellow.” This was the best description Ada could give me.

It set me thinking; when Ada was asleep, I remained before the fire, wondering about Bleak House. My thoughts were recalled by a tap at the door.

I opened it softly and found Miss Jellyby shivering there with a broken candle in a broken candlestick.

“Good night!” she said very sulkily.

“Good night!” said I.

“May I come in?” she asked unexpectedly.

“Certainly,” said I. “Don’t wake Miss Clare.”

She would not sit down, but stood by the fire rubbing at the ink stains on her face, and looking very gloomy.

“I wish Africa was dead!” she said suddenly. “I do! I hate it and detest it. It’s a beast!”

I told her she was tired, and I was sorry. I put my hand upon her forehead, and said it was hot now but would be cool tomorrow. She stood pouting and frowning, but then turned softly towards the bed where Ada lay.

“She is very pretty!” she said with the same knitted brow. “An orphan. Ain’t she?”

“Yes.”

“But knows a quantity, I suppose? Can dance, and play music, and sing? She can talk French, I suppose, and do geography, and globes, and needlework, and everything?”

“No doubt,” said I.

“I can’t,” she returned. “I can’t do anything hardly, except write. I’m always writing for Ma. I wonder you two were not ashamed of yourselves to come in and see me able to do nothing else. It was like your ill nature. Yet you think yourselves very fine, I dare say!”

I could see that the poor girl was near crying, and I looked at her as mildly as I could.

“It’s disgraceful,” she said. “You know it is. The whole house is disgraceful. The children are disgraceful. I’m disgraceful. Pa’s miserable, and no wonder! Priscilla drinks – she’s always drinking. Shame on you if you say you didn’t smell her today. It was as bad as a public-house at dinner; you know it was!”

“My dear, I don’t know it,” said I.

“You do,” she said shortly. “You do!”

“Oh, my dear!” said I. “Let me speak—”

“I don’t want to hear you.”

“I think you do,” said I. “I did not know what you tell me because the servant did not come near me at dinner; but I don’t doubt you, and I am sorry to hear it.”

She was still standing by the bed, and now stooped down (with the same discontented face) and kissed Ada. Then she stood by the side of my chair. Her bosom was heaving in a distressful manner that I greatly pitied, but I thought it better not to speak.

“I wish I was dead!” she broke out. “I wish we were all dead. It would be a great deal better for us.”

In a moment, she knelt on the ground at my side, hid her face in my dress, passionately begged my pardon, and wept. I comforted her and would have raised her, but she cried no, no; she wanted to stay there!

“You used to teach girls,” she said, “I wish you could have taught me! I am so very miserable, and I like you so much!”

I could not persuade her to do anything but move onto a ragged stool, still holding my dress. Gradually the poor tired girl fell asleep, and then I contrived to raise her head so that it should rest on my lap, and to cover us both with shawls. The fire went out, and all night long she slumbered thus before the ashy grate. At first I was painfully awake; but at length, my thoughts became indistinct and mingled. I began to lose the identity of the

sleeper resting on me. Now it was Ada, now it was the little mad woman, now some one in authority at Bleak House. Lastly, it was no one, and I was no one.

The day was feebly struggling with the fog when I opened my eyes to see a dirty-faced little spectre fixed upon me. Peepy had scaled his crib, and crept down in his bed-gown and cap, his teeth chattering with the cold.

Chapter 5

A Morning Adventure

Although the morning was raw, and although the fog still seemed heavy beyond the dirt-encrusted windows, I was curious enough about London to agree when Miss Jellyby proposed that we should go out for a walk.

“Ma won’t be down for ever so long,” she said, “and then breakfast won’t be ready for an hour afterwards, they dawdle so. Pa gets what he can and goes to the office. He never has what you would call a regular breakfast.”

Ada said she would go out too. I suggested to Peepy that he should let me wash him and afterwards lay him down on my bed again. To this he submitted, looking astonished and miserable at the washing, certainly, but making no complaint, and going snugly to sleep as soon as it was over.

Ada and I found Miss Jellyby trying to warm herself at the fire in the writing-room, where everything was just as we had left it last night. Crumbs, dust, and waste-paper were all over the house. Some pewter pots and a milk-can hung on the area railings; the door stood open; and we met the cook round the corner coming out of a public-house, wiping her mouth.

But before we met the cook, we met Richard, who was agreeably surprised to see us and said he would gladly share our walk. So he took care of Ada, and Miss Jellyby and I went first. Miss Jellyby had relapsed into her sulky manner.

“Where would you wish to go?” she asked.

“Anywhere, my dear,” I replied.

“Anywhere’s nowhere,” said Miss Jellyby, stopping.

“Let us go somewhere at any rate,” said I.

She then walked on very fast.

“I don’t care!” she said. “If he was to come to our house with his great, shining, lumpy forehead night after night till he was as old as Methuselah, I wouldn’t have anything to say to him. Such asses as he and Ma make of themselves!”

“My dear!” I remonstrated. “Your duty as a child—”

“Oh! Don’t talk of that, Miss Summerson; where’s Ma’s duty as a parent? All made over to the public and Africa, I suppose! You are shocked, I dare say! Very well, so am I; we are both shocked, and there’s an end of it!”

She walked on faster yet.

“But for all that, he may come, and come, and come, and I won’t have anything to say to him. I can’t bear him. I hate the stuff he and Ma talk. It’s all such nonsense!”

I understood her to refer to Mr. Quale, the young gentleman who had appeared after dinner yesterday. Richard and Ada came up, laughing and asking us if we meant to run a race. Thus interrupted, Miss Jellyby became silent and walked moodily at my side while I admired the streets and the

people going to and fro, the number of vehicles passing, the sweeping out of shops, and the extraordinary creatures in rags secretly groping among the swept-out rubbish.

“So, cousin,” said the cheerful voice of Richard behind me, “we are never to get out of Chancery! We have come to it by another way, and – by the Great Seal, here’s the old lady again!”

Truly, there she was, curtsying and smiling, and saying, “The wards in Jarndyce! Ve-ry happy, I am sure!”

“You are out early, ma’am,” said I.

“Yes! I usually walk here early. Before the court sits. I collect my thoughts here for the business of the day,” said the old lady mincingly. “The business of the day requires a great deal of thought.”

“Who’s this, Miss Summerson?” whispered Miss Jellyby.

The little old lady heard, and answered for herself.

“A suitor, my child. At your service. I have the honour to attend court regularly. With my documents. Have I the pleasure of addressing another of the youthful parties in Jarndyce?” said the old lady, with her head on one side.

Richard good-naturedly explained that Miss Jellyby was not connected with the suit.

“Ha!” said the old lady. “She does not expect a judgment? She will still grow old. But not so old. Oh, dear, no! This is the garden of Lincoln’s Inn. I call it my garden. It is quite a bower in the summer-time. Where the birds sing. I pass the greater part of the long vacation here. You find the long vacation exceedingly long, don’t you?”

We said yes, as she seemed to expect it.

“When the leaves are falling from the trees,” said the old lady, “the vacation is fulfilled and the sixth seal, mentioned in the Revelations, again prevails. Pray come and see my lodging. It will be a good omen for me. Youth, and hope, and beauty very seldom visit.”

She had taken my hand, and was leading me and Miss Jellyby away. I did not know how to excuse myself and looked to Richard for aid. As he was half amused and half curious, he and Ada followed us.

The old lady lived close by, in a narrow back street.

“This is my lodging. Pray walk up!”

She had stopped at a shop over which was written KROOK, RAG AND BOTTLE WAREHOUSE. Also, in long thin letters, KROOK, DEALER IN MARINE STORES. In one part of the window was the inscription BONES BOUGHT. In another, KITCHEN-STUFF BOUGHT. In another, OLD IRON BOUGHT. In another, WASTE-PAPER BOUGHT. In another, LADIES’ AND GENTLEMEN’S WARDROBES BOUGHT. Everything seemed to be bought and nothing to be sold there.

In all parts of the window were quantities of dirty bottles – medicine bottles, ginger-beer and soda-water bottles, pickle bottles, wine bottles, and a great many ink bottles. The shop had the air of being a disowned relation of the law. There was a little tottering bench of shabby old volumes outside the door, labelled “Law Books, 9d.” Some of the inscriptions were written in law-

hand, like the letters I had received from Kenge and Carboy's office. One notice in the same writing announced that a respectable man aged forty-five wanted copying jobs, to execute with neatness and dispatch: Address to Nemo, care of Mr. Krook, within.

A little way inside the shop-door lay heaps of old cracked parchment scrolls, dog-eared law-papers and a litter of rags. One had only to fancy, as Richard whispered to Ada, that yonder bones in a corner, piled together and picked very clean, were the bones of clients, to make the picture complete.

We could only see all this by a lantern carried by an old man in the shop, in spectacles and a hairy cap. He was short, cadaverous, and withered, with his head sunk sideways between his shoulders and the breath issuing in visible smoke from his mouth as if he were on fire within. His puckered throat and chin were so frosted with white hairs that he looked like some old root in a fall of snow.

"Hi, hi!" said the old man, coming to the door. "Have you anything to sell?"

We naturally drew back and glanced at the old lady, who had been trying to open the house-door with a key. She became so pressingly earnest in her entreaties that we would walk up and see her apartment, that I saw nothing for it but to comply. I suppose we were all curious; at any rate, when the old man said, "Aye, aye! Please her! It won't take a minute!" we all went in, stimulated by Richard's laughing encouragement and relying on his protection.

"My landlord, Krook," said the little old lady. "He is called among the neighbours the Lord Chancellor. His shop is called the Court of Chancery. He is a very eccentric person. Oh, very odd!"

She shook her head and tapped her forehead with her finger. "For he is a little – you know – *M!*" The old man overheard, and laughed.

"It's true enough," he said, going before us with the lantern, "that they call me the Lord Chancellor and call my shop Chancery. And why do you think that is?"

"I don't know, I am sure!" said Richard carelessly.

"You see," said the old man, stopping and turning round, "they – Hi! Here's lovely hair! I have got three sacks of ladies' hair below, but none so beautiful as this!"

"That'll do, my good friend!" said Richard, strongly disapproving of his having drawn one of Ada's tresses through his yellow hand. The old man darted him a sudden startling look.

But Ada, blushing, interposed and laughingly said she could only feel proud of such admiration. Mr. Krook shrunk into his former self as suddenly as he had leaped out of it.

"You see, I have so many things here," he resumed, "that the neighbours have given me and my place a christening. I have a liking for rust and cobwebs. And all's fish that comes to my net. I can't abear to part with anything I once lay hold of, or to have any sweeping or cleaning. That's how I've got the name of Chancery. I don't mind. I go to see my noble and learned

brother pretty well every day, when he sits in the Inn. He don't notice me, but I notice him. Hi, Lady Jane!"

A large grey cat leaped from a shelf on to his shoulder and startled us all.

"Hi! Show 'em how you scratch, my lady!" said her master.

The cat leaped down and ripped at a bundle of rags with her tigerish claws.

"She'd do as much for anyone I was to set her on," said the old man. He had by this time led us across the shop, and now opened a door at the back. The little old lady graciously observed,

"That will do, Krook. You mean well, but are tiresome. My young friends are pressed for time. They are the wards in Jarndyce."

"Jarndyce!" said the old man with a start.

"Jarndyce and Jarndyce. The great suit, Krook," returned his lodger.

"Hi!" exclaimed the old man in a tone of thoughtful amazement. "Think of it!"

He looked so curiously at us that Richard said, "Why, you appear to trouble yourself a good deal about the causes set before your learned brother, the other Chancellor!"

"Yes," said the old man abstractedly. "Sure! *Your* name now will be—"

"Richard Carstone."

"Carstone," he repeated. "Yes. There was the name of Barbary, and the name of Clare, and the name of Dedlock, too, I think."

"He knows as much of the cause as the real Chancellor!" said Richard, quite astonished.

"Aye!" said the old man. "Yes! Tom Jarndyce was often in here. He got into a habit of strolling about when the cause was on, talking to the shopkeepers and telling 'em to keep out of Chancery, whatever they did. 'For,' says he, 'it's being roasted at a slow fire; it's being stung to death by single bees; it's being drowned by drops; it's going mad by grains.' He was as near making away with himself as could be."

We listened with horror.

"He come in at the door," said the old man, "on the day he did it – the whole neighbourhood had said for months that he would do it, sooner or later – he come in that day, and sat himself on a bench there, and asked me (I was a mortal sight younger then) to fetch him a pint of wine. 'For,' says he, 'Krook, I am much depressed; my cause is on again.' I persuaded him to go to the tavern across the way; and I followed and looked in at the window, and saw him, comfortable in the arm-chair by the fire, and company with him. I hadn't hardly got back here when I heard a shot go echoing. I ran out – neighbours ran out – twenty of us cried at once, 'Tom Jarndyce!'"

The old man stopped, looked hard at us, and blew the lantern out.

"We were right. Hi! To be sure, how the neighbourhood poured into court that afternoon while the cause was on! How my noble and learned brother, and all the rest of 'em, muddled away as usual and tried to look as if they'd heard nothing, or had nothing at all to do with it!"

Ada's colour had entirely left her, and Richard was scarcely less pale. I could not wonder. To my surprise, the old lady seemed unaffected and led the way upstairs again, informing us that her landlord was "a little M, you know!"

She lived at the top of the house, in a large room, from which she had a glimpse of Lincoln's Inn Hall. Her room was clean, but very, very bare. There were no coals nor ashes in the grate, and no articles of clothing anywhere, nor any kind of food. Upon a shelf were a plate or two, a cup or two, but all dry and empty. I thought, as I looked round, than I understood her pinched appearance better than before.

"Extremely honoured, I am sure," said our poor hostess, "by this visit from the wards in Jarndyce. And very much indebted for the omen. I have lived here many years. I pass my days in court, my evenings and my nights here. I find the nights long, for I sleep little and think much. That is, of course, unavoidable, being in Chancery. I am sorry I cannot offer chocolate. I expect a judgment shortly and shall then place my establishment on a superior footing. At present, I don't mind confessing to the wards in Jarndyce (in strict confidence) that I sometimes find it difficult to keep up a genteel appearance. I have felt the cold here. It matters very little."

She partly drew aside the curtain of the low garret window and called our attention to a number of bird-cages hanging there, containing at least twenty larks, linnets, and goldfinches.

"I began to keep the little creatures," she said, "with the intention of restoring them to liberty. When my judgment should be given. Yes! They die in prison, though. Their lives are so short in comparison with Chancery proceedings that, one by one, the whole collection has died over and over again. Very mortifying, is it not?"

She did not seem to expect a reply, but rambled on:

"Indeed, I doubt sometimes, I do assure you, whether I may not one day be found lying stark and senseless here, as I have found so many birds!"

Ada looked at Richard, who softly laid some money on the chimney-piece, unobserved.

"I can't allow the birds to sing much," said the little old lady, "for they confuse my mind. And my mind needs to be so very clear in court, you know! Another time, I'll tell you their names. On a day of such good omen, they shall sing as much as they like. In honour of youth, hope, and beauty," with a smile and curtsy. "There! We'll let in the light."

The birds began to stir and chirp.

"I cannot admit the air freely," said the little old lady, "because the cat you saw downstairs, called Lady Jane, is greedy for their lives. She crouches on the parapet outside for hours and hours. She is jealous of their regaining their liberty. In consequence of the judgment that will be shortly given. She is sly and full of malice."

Some neighbouring bells reminded the poor soul that it was half-past nine. She hurriedly took up her little bag of documents, and asked if we were also going into court. On our answering no, she opened the door to attend us downstairs.

“With such an omen, it is even more necessary than usual that I should be there before the Chancellor comes in,” said she, “for he might mention my case the first thing. I have a feeling that he will.”

She stopped on the second floor and silently pointed at a dark door.

“The only other lodger,” she whispered in explanation, “a law-writer. The children in the lanes here say he has sold himself to the devil. Hush!” She went before us down the stairs on tiptoe.

Passing through the shop on our way out, we found the old man storing a quantity of packets of waste-paper in a kind of well in the floor. He had a piece of chalk, with which, as he put each package down, he made a crooked mark on the wall.

The others had all gone past, when he touched me on the arm to stop me, and chalked the letter J upon the wall, in a very curious manner, shaping it backward.

“Can you read it?” he asked me with a keen glance.

“Surely,” said I. “It’s J.”

With another glance at me, and a glance at the door, he rubbed it out and wrote an “a” in its place, and said, “What’s that?”

I told him. He rubbed that out and wrote the letter “r,” and asked the same question. He went on this way until he had formed the word *Jarndyce*, without once leaving two letters on the wall together.

“What does that spell?” he asked me.

When I told him, he laughed. In the same odd way, he then produced singly, and rubbed out, the letters forming the words *Bleak House*. These, in some astonishment, I also read; and he laughed again.

“Hi!” said he. “I can copy from memory, you see, miss, though I can neither read nor write.”

He looked so disagreeable that I was quite relieved by Richard’s appearing at the door and saying, “Miss Summerson, I hope you are not bargaining for the sale of your hair. Don’t be tempted. Three sacks are quite enough for Mr. Krook!”

Wishing Mr. Krook good morning, I joined my friends outside, where we parted with the little old lady. Before we left, we looked back and saw Mr. Krook standing at his shop-door, in his spectacles, looking after us, with his cat upon his shoulder.

“Quite an adventure!” said Richard with a sigh. “Ah, cousin, it’s a weary word, this Chancery!”

“It is to me, and has been ever since I can remember,” returned Ada. “I am grieved that I and my relations should be enemies – as I suppose we are – and that we should all be ruining one another without knowing how or why. It seems very strange that an honest judge has not been able to find out what the right thing is.”

“Ah, cousin!” said Richard. “Strange, indeed! All this wasteful, wanton chess-playing is very strange. To see that composed court yesterday and to think of the wretchedness of the pieces on the board gave me the headache and the heartache both together. But at all events, Ada – I may call you Ada?”

“Of course you may, cousin Richard.”

“At all events, Chancery will work none of its bad influences on *us*. We have been brought together, thanks to our good kinsman, and it can't divide us now!”

“Never, I hope, cousin Richard!” said Ada gently.

Miss Jellyby gave me a very significant look. I smiled in return, and we made our way back.

Half an hour after our arrival, Mrs. Jellyby appeared; and the various things necessary for breakfast straggled one by one into the dining-room. Mrs. Jellyby did not seem to have changed her dress. She was greatly occupied during breakfast, for the morning's post brought a heavy correspondence about Borrioboola-Gha. The children tumbled about; and Peepy was lost for an hour and a half, and brought home from Newgate market by a policeman. The equable manner in which Mrs. Jellyby sustained both his absence and his restoration surprised us all.

She was by that time dictating to Caddy, and Caddy was fast relapsing into the inky condition in which we had found her. At one o'clock an open carriage arrived for us. Mrs. Jellyby charged us with many remembrances to her good friend Mr. Jarndyce; Caddy left her desk to see us depart, kissed me, and stood sobbing on the steps. Peepy, I am happy to say, was asleep and spared the pain of separation (I feared that he had gone to Newgate market in search of me); and all the other children got up behind the barouche and fell off. We saw them, with great concern, scattered over the ground as we rolled away.

Chapter 6

Quite at Home

The day brightened as we went our way through the sunshine and the fresh air, wondering at the extent of the streets, the traffic, and the crowds of people. By and by we left the city to proceed through suburbs which, of themselves, would have made a pretty large town in my eyes; and at last we got onto a real country road again, with windmills, milestones, farmers' waggons, scents of old hay, and horse troughs: trees, fields, and hedge-rows. It was delightful to see the green landscape; and when a waggon with a train of beautiful horses, furnished with red trappings and clear-sounding bells, came by us, I believe we could all three have sung to its music.

"The road has been reminding me of my namesake Dick Whittington," said Richard, "and that waggon is the finishing touch. Halloo! What's the matter?"

We had stopped, and the waggon had stopped too. The horses came to a stand, with a little shower of bell-ringing.

"The waggoner is coming back after us. Good day, friend!" said Richard. "Why, here's an extraordinary thing! He has got your name, Ada, in his hat!"

He had all our names in his hat. Tucked within the band were three small notes – one addressed to each of us. These the waggoner delivered; and on Richard's asking from whom they came, he briefly answered, "Master, sir, if you please." Putting on his hat again, he cracked his whip, and went melodiously away.

"Is that Mr. Jarndyce's waggon?" Richard asked our post-boy.

"Yes, sir," he replied.

We opened the notes. Each contained these words in a solid, plain hand.

"I look forward, my dear, to our meeting easily and without constraint on either side. I therefore have to propose that we meet as old friends and take the past for granted. It will be a relief to me, and possibly to you. And so my love to you.

"John Jarndyce."

I had not considered how I could thank my benefactor, my gratitude lying too deep in my heart for that; but I now began to wonder how I could meet him without thanking him, and felt it would be very difficult indeed.

The notes revived in Richard and Ada a general impression that their cousin Jarndyce could never bear thanks for any kindness he performed, and that sooner than receive any he would even run away. Ada dimly remembered to have heard her mother tell, when she was a little child, that he had once done her an act of uncommon generosity and that on her going to his house to

thank him, he saw her approaching through a window, and immediately escaped by the back gate, and was not heard of for three months. We wondered much about Mr. Jarndyce, and what the house would be like, and when we should get there.

The roads were very heavy for the horses, so we alighted and walked up all the hills. At Barnet there were other horses waiting for us, but as they had only just been fed, we had to wait for them too. These delays meant that the long night had closed in before we came to St. Albans, near to which Bleak House was.

By that time we were anxious and nervous. Ada and I trembled from head to foot. We both stood up in the carriage (Richard holding Ada lest she should be jolted down) and gazed round upon the open country and the starlit night for our destination. There was a light sparkling on the top of a hill before us, and the driver pointed to it, crying, "That's Bleak House!"

He put his horses into a canter; presently we turned into an avenue of trees and drove up towards the light. It was in a window of what seemed to be an old-fashioned house with three peaks in the roof and a circular sweep leading to the porch.

A bell was rung as we drew up. Amidst the sound of its deep voice in the still air, and the distant barking of some dogs, and a gush of light from the opened door, we alighted.

"Ada, my love, Esther, my dear, you are welcome. I rejoice to see you! Rick, if I had a hand to spare at present, I would give it you!"

The gentleman who said these words in a clear, bright, hospitable voice had one of his arms round Ada's waist and the other round mine, and kissed us both in a fatherly way. He bore us across the hall into a little room aglow with a blazing fire. Here he kissed us again, and made us sit down side by side on a sofa near the hearth. I felt that if we had been at all demonstrative, he would have run away in a moment.

"Now, Rick!" said he. "I am heartily glad to see you. You are at home. Warm yourself!"

Richard shook him by both hands, saying (with an earnestness that rather alarmed me, I was so afraid of Mr. Jarndyce's suddenly disappearing), "You are very kind, sir! We are very much obliged to you!"

"How did you like the ride, my dear?" said Mr. Jarndyce to Ada.

While Ada was replying, I glanced with interest at his face. It was a handsome, lively, quick face, full of change and motion; and his hair was a silvered iron-grey. I took him to be nearer sixty than fifty, but he was upright, hearty, and robust. When he first spoke to us his voice had connected itself with a memory that I could not define; but now, all at once, I recalled the gentleman in the stagecoach six years ago on the memorable day of my journey to Reading. I was certain it was he.

He caught my glance, and appearing to read my thoughts, gave such a look at the door that I thought we had lost him. However, I am happy to say he remained where he was, and asked me what I thought of Mrs. Jellyby.

"She exerts herself very much for Africa, sir," I said.

“Nobly!” returned Mr. Jarndyce. “But you think something else, I see.”

“We rather thought,” said I, glancing at Richard and Ada, “that perhaps she was a little unmindful of her home.”

“Floored!” cried Mr. Jarndyce. I was rather alarmed. “Well! I want to know your real thoughts, my dear. I may have sent you there on purpose.”

“We thought that, perhaps,” said I, hesitating, “it is right to begin with the obligations of home, sir; and that, perhaps, if those are neglected, no other duties can be substituted for them.”

“The little Jellybys,” said Richard, coming to my relief, “are really in a devil of a state, sir.”

“She means well,” said Mr. Jarndyce hastily. “The wind’s in the east.”

“It was in the north, sir, as we came down,” observed Richard.

“My dear Rick,” said Mr. Jarndyce, poking the fire, “it’s either in the east or going to be. I am always conscious of an uncomfortable feeling when the wind is blowing in the east.”

“Rheumatism, sir?” said Richard.

“I dare say it is, Rick. And so the little Jell – oh, Lord, yes, it’s easterly!” said Mr. Jarndyce.

He took two or three undecided turns up and down, holding the poker in one hand and rubbing his hair with the other, with a good-natured vexation at once both whimsical and lovable. He gave an arm to Ada and an arm to me, and bidding Richard bring a candle, was leading the way out when he suddenly turned us all back again.

“Those little Jellybys. Couldn’t you – now, if it had rained sugar-plums, or raspberry tarts, or anything of that sort!” said Mr. Jarndyce.

“Oh, cousin—” Ada hastily began.

“Good, my pretty pet. I like cousin. Cousin John, perhaps, is better.”

“Then, cousin John—” Ada laughingly began again.

“Ha, ha! Very good indeed!” said Mr. Jarndyce. “Yes, my dear?”

“It did better than that. It rained Esther.”

“Aye?” said Mr. Jarndyce. “What did Esther do?”

“Why, cousin John,” said Ada – though I wanted her to be quiet – “Esther was their friend at once. Esther nursed them, coaxed them to sleep, washed and dressed them, told them stories, kept them quiet, bought them keepsakes” – My dear girl! I had only gone out with Peepy after he was found and given him a little, tiny horse! – “and, cousin John, she softened poor Caroline, the eldest one, so much and was so thoughtful and amiable! No, I won’t be contradicted, Esther dear! You know it’s true!”

The warm-hearted darling leaned over and kissed me, and then boldly said, “At all events, cousin John, I will thank you for the companion you have given me.” I felt as if she challenged him to run away. But he didn’t.

“Where did you say the wind was, Rick?” asked Mr. Jarndyce.

“In the north, sir.”

“You are right. There’s no east in it. A mistake of mine. Come, girls, come and see your home!”

It was one of those delightfully irregular houses where you go up and down steps out of one room into another, and keep finding unexpected rooms, and little halls and passages, and still older cottage-rooms with lattice windows and green growth pressing through them.

Mine, which we entered first, was of this kind, with an up-and-down roof full of corners, and a chimney paved all around with pure white tiles, in each of which a bright miniature of the fire was blazing. From this room, you went down two steps into a charming little sitting-room looking down upon a flower-garden. Out of this you went up three steps into Ada's bedroom, which had a fine broad window commanding a beautiful view, and an enormous window-seat. Out of this room you passed into a little gallery, and by a winding staircase down into the hall.

But if instead of going out at Ada's door you came back into my room, and went out at the door by which you had entered it, and turned up a few crooked steps, you lost yourself in passages with mangles in them, and three-cornered tables, and a Hindu chair. From these you came to Richard's room, which was part library, part sitting-room, part comfortable bedroom. Out of that you went down a passage, to the plain room where Mr. Jarndyce slept with his window open, his bedstead standing alone in the middle of the floor. Out of that you came into another passage, where there were back-stairs and where you could hear the horses being rubbed down outside the stable. Or you might, if you came out at another door (every room had at least two doors), go straight down to the hall again through a low archway, wondering how you got back there or had ever got out of it.

The furniture, like the house, was old-fashioned and pleasantly irregular. Ada's bedroom was all flowers – in chintz and paper, velvet, needlework, and brocade. Our sitting-room had framed upon the walls numbers of surprising and surprised birds; a real trout in a case; the death of Captain Cook; and the process of preparing tea in China, as depicted by Chinese artists. In my room there were oval engravings of the months – ladies haymaking in large hats tied under the chin, for June; noblemen pointing with cocked-hats to village steeples, for October. I also had four angels, of Queen Anne's reign, taking a complacent gentleman to heaven, in festoons, with some difficulty; and a composition in needlework representing fruit, a kettle, and an alphabet.

Everything was in a state of perfect neatness, with the whitest linen, and lavender sweetening every drawer. Such, with its light, and warmth, and comfort; with the face of its generous master, and a faint wind blowing outside, were our first impressions of Bleak House.

"I am glad you like it," said Mr. Jarndyce when he had brought us round again to Ada's sitting-room. "It is a comfortable little place, I hope, and will be more so with such bright young looks in it. You have half an hour before dinner. There's no one else here but the finest creature upon earth – a child."

"More children, Esther!" said Ada.

"I don't mean literally a child," added Mr. Jarndyce; "not a child in years. He is as old as I am – but in simplicity, and enthusiasm, and a fine guileless inaptitude for all worldly affairs, he is a perfect child."

We felt that he must be very interesting.

“He is a musical man, an amateur, but might have been a professional. He is an artist too; a man of attainments. He has been unfortunate; but he don’t care – he’s a child!”

“Has he children of his own, sir?” inquired Richard.

“Yes, Rick! Half-a-dozen. But he has never looked after them. How could he? He wanted somebody to look after *him!*” said Mr. Jarndyce.

“And have the children looked after themselves at all, sir?” inquired Richard.

“Why,” said Mr. Jarndyce, his face suddenly falling. “Harold Skimpole’s children have tumbled up somehow or other. The wind’s getting round again, I am afraid! But come along!”

Our luggage having arrived, I was dressed in a few minutes and was putting my things away when a maid brought a basket into my room with two bunches of keys in it, all labelled.

“For you, miss, if you please,” said she.

“For me?”

“The housekeeping keys, miss. I was told to bring them as soon as you was alone, miss. The large bunch is the housekeeping, and the little bunch is the cellars, miss. Any time you was pleased to appoint tomorrow morning, I was to show you the cupboards and things they belong to.”

I said I would be ready at half-past six, and after she was gone, stood looking at the basket, quite lost in the magnitude of my trust. Ada found me thus, and showed a delightful confidence in me when I told her about the keys. I knew, to be sure, that it was only the dear girl’s kindness, but I liked to be so encouraged.

When we went downstairs, we were presented to Mr. Skimpole, who was standing before the fire. He was a little bright creature with a rather large head, but a delicate face and a sweet voice, and there was a perfect charm in him. He spoke with such a captivating gaiety that it was fascinating to hear him talk. Being more slender than Mr. Jarndyce and less grey, he looked younger. Indeed, he had more the appearance of a damaged young man rather than a well-preserved elderly one. There was an easy negligence in his manner and his dress which made me think of a romantic youth. It was not at all like the manner of a man who had experienced life’s usual cares.

I gathered from the conversation that Mr. Skimpole had been educated for the medical profession and had once been doctor in the household of a German prince. He told us, however, that as he had always been a mere child in point of weights and measures and had never known anything about them, he had never been able to prescribe accurately. And he told us, with great humour, that when he was wanted to tend the prince, he was generally found lying on his bed, reading the newspapers or sketching, and couldn’t come. When the prince objected to this, the post ended, and Mr. Skimpole having (as he added with delightful gaiety) “nothing to live upon but love, fell in love, and married, and surrounded himself with rosy cheeks.”

His good friend Jarndyce and some other friends helped him to several openings in life, but to no purpose, for he must confess that he had no idea of time, and no idea of money. In consequence of which he never kept an appointment, could never do any business, and never knew the value of anything! So here he was! He was very fond of reading the papers, and sketching with a pencil, very fond of nature and of art. All he asked of society was to let him live. *That* wasn't much. His wants were few. Give him the papers, conversation, music, mutton, coffee, landscape, fruit in the season, a few sheets of Bristol-board, and a little wine, and he asked no more.

All this he told us, with the utmost brilliancy, enjoyment, and candour – speaking of himself as if Skimpole were a third person, who had his singularities but had his claims too, which must not be slighted. He was quite enchanting, although I was confused by not exactly understanding why he was free of the duties of life. That he *was* free of them, I did not doubt; he was so very clear about it himself.

“I covet nothing,” said Mr. Skimpole in the same light way. “Possession is nothing to me. Here is my friend Jarndyce’s excellent house. I can sketch it; I can set it to music. When I am here, I have sufficient possession of it and have neither trouble, cost, nor responsibility. My steward’s name, in short, is Jarndyce, and he can’t cheat me. We have been mentioning Mrs. Jellyby. There is a woman of strong will and immense power of business detail! I do not regret that I have not those qualities; I can admire her without envy. I can dream of her objectives. I can lie down on the grass – in fine weather – and float along an African river, embracing all the natives I meet. I don’t know that it’s of any use, but it’s all I can do, and I do it thoroughly. Then, for heaven’s sake, let Harold Skimpole live and admire the human family, like good souls, and allow him to ride his rocking-horse!”

It was plain enough that Mr. Jarndyce had not neglected this advice.

“It’s only you, the generous creatures, whom I envy,” said Mr. Skimpole. “I envy you your power of doing what you do. I don’t feel any vulgar gratitude to you. I almost feel as if *you* ought to be grateful to *me* for giving you the opportunity of enjoying the luxury of generosity. I know you like it. For anything I can tell, I may have come into the world expressly for the purpose of increasing your happiness by helping me. Why should I regret my incapacity for worldly affairs when it leads to such pleasant consequences?”

Of all his playful speeches none seemed to be more agreeable to Mr. Jarndyce than this; Mr. Jarndyce being probably the most grateful of mankind for the smallest reasons, yet desiring to escape the gratitude of others.

We were all enchanted. Richard especially was pleased to be so freely confided in by such an attractive man. The more we listened, the more gaily Mr. Skimpole talked. And what with his fine hilarious manner and his engaging candour and his genial way of lightly tossing his own weaknesses about, the effect was absolutely dazzling.

He was so full of feeling too and had such a delicate sentiment for what was beautiful or tender that he could have won a heart by that alone. In the

evening, when I was preparing to make tea and Ada was touching the piano in the adjoining room and softly humming a tune to her cousin Richard, he came and sat down near me and so spoke of Ada that I almost loved him.

“She is like the morning,” he said. “With that golden hair, those blue eyes, and that fresh bloom on her cheek, she is like the summer morning. We will not call such a lovely young creature an orphan. She is the child of the universe.”

Mr. Jarndyce, I found, was standing near us, smiling.

“The universe,” he observed, “makes rather an indifferent parent, I am afraid.”

“Well!” cried Mr. Skimpole. “I know nothing of the world, so you shall have your way. But if I had mine, there should be no brambles of sordid realities in such a path as that. It should be strewn with roses; it should live in perpetual summer. Age or change should never wither it. The base word money should never be breathed near it!”

Mr. Jarndyce patted him on the head with a smile, as if he had been really a child, and glanced at the young cousins. His look was thoughtful, but had a benign expression which I often saw again, and which has long been engraven on my heart. Ada sat at the piano; Richard stood beside her. Upon the wall, their shadows blended together, shifting with the firelight. Ada touched the notes so softly and sang so low that the sighing wind was as audible as the music. The mystery of the future seemed expressed in the whole picture.

Mr. Jarndyce’s glance then rested for a moment on me. I felt as if in that moment he confided to me his hope that Ada and Richard might one day enter on a dearer relationship.

Mr. Skimpole could play the piano and the cello, and he was a composer – had composed half an opera once, but got tired of it – and played with taste. After tea we had quite a little concert, in which Richard – who was enthralled by Ada’s singing – and Mr. Jarndyce and I were the audience. After a little while first Mr. Skimpole and then Richard disappeared, and while I was wondering how he could stay away so long, the maid looked in at the door, saying, “If you please, miss, could you spare a minute?”

When I was shut out with her in the hall, she said, holding up her hands, “Please, miss, Mr. Carstone says would you come upstairs to Mr. Skimpole’s room. He has been took, miss!”

“Took?” said I.

“Took, miss. Sudden,” said the maid.

I was worried that he might be dangerously ill, but of course I collected myself as I followed her quickly upstairs, considering the best remedies if it should prove to be a fit. She threw open a door and I went into a chamber, where, to my surprise, instead of finding Mr. Skimpole stretched upon the bed, he was standing before the fire smiling at Richard, while Richard, embarrassed, looked at a person on the sofa, in a white great-coat, wiping his head with a pocket-handkerchief.

“Miss Summerson,” said Richard hurriedly, “I am glad you are come. You will be able to advise us. Our friend Mr. Skimpole – don’t be alarmed! – is arrested for debt.”

“And really, my dear Miss Summerson,” said Mr. Skimpole with his agreeable candour, “I never was in a situation in which your excellent sense and quiet usefulness were more needed.”

The person on the sofa gave such a very loud snort that he startled me.

“Are you arrested for much, sir?” I inquired of Mr. Skimpole.

“My dear Miss Summerson,” said he, shaking his head pleasantly, “I don’t know. Some pounds, odd shillings, and halfpence, I think, were mentioned.”

“It’s twenty-four pound, sixteen, and sevenpence ha’penny,” observed the stranger. “That’s wot it is.”

“And is that a small sum?” said Mr. Skimpole.

The strange man made another snort.

“Mr. Skimpole,” said Richard to me, “is reluctant to apply to my cousin Jarndyce because he has lately—”

“Oh, yes!” said Mr. Skimpole, smiling. “Though I forgot how much it was. Jarndyce would readily do it again, but I would rather develop generosity in a new soil and in a new form of flower.”

“What do you think will be best, Miss Summerson?” said Richard.

I inquired what would happen if the money were not produced.

“Jail,” said the strange man. “Or Coavinses.”

“May I ask, sir, what is—”

“Coavinses?” said the strange man. “A ’ouse. I’m Mr. Coavins’s bailiff.”

Richard and I looked at one another again. It was a most singular thing that the arrest was our embarrassment and not Mr. Skimpole’s. He observed us with a genial interest. He had entirely washed his hands of the difficulty, and it had become ours.

“I thought,” he suggested good-naturedly, “that being parties in a Chancery suit concerning (as people say) a large amount of property, Mr. Richard or his beautiful cousin, or both, could sign something, or make over something, or give some sort of undertaking?”

“Not a bit on it,” said the strange man gruffly.

“Keep your temper, my good fellow!” Mr. Skimpole gently reasoned with him. “Now, my dear Miss Summerson, and my dear Mr. Richard, here you see me utterly incapable of helping myself, and entirely in your hands! I only ask to be free – like the butterflies!”

“My dear Miss Summerson,” said Richard in a whisper, “I have ten pounds that I received from Mr. Kenge.”

I possessed fifteen pounds and some odd shillings, which I had saved from my allowance during several years. I had always tried to keep some money so that in case of some accident I might not be quite penniless. I told Richard of my little store and asked him delicately to inform Mr. Skimpole,

while I should be gone to fetch it, that we would have the pleasure of paying his debt.

When I came back, Mr. Skimpole kissed my hand and seemed quite touched. Not on his own account, but as if the contemplation of our happiness alone affected him. I counted out the money to the stranger in the white coat (whom Mr. Skimpole now jocularly called Coavinses). He put the money in his pocket and shortly said, "Well, I'll wish you a good evening, miss."

"My friend Coavinses," said Mr. Skimpole, "Did you know this morning that you were coming out on this errand?"

"Know'd it yes'day aft'noon," said Coavinses.

"It didn't make you at all uneasy?"

"Not a bit," said Coavinses. "I know'd if you was missed today, you wouldn't be missed tomorrow."

"But when you came down here," proceeded Mr. Skimpole, "it was a fine day. The sun was shining, the birds were singing. Didn't you think, 'Harold Skimpole loves to see the sun shine, loves to hear the birds, those choristers in Nature's great cathedral. And I am about to deprive Harold Skimpole of his share in such possessions!' You thought nothing to that effect?"

"I – certainly – did – not," said Coavinses doggedly.

"Very odd, you men of business!" said Mr. Skimpole thoughtfully.

"Thank you, my friend. Good night."

I returned downstairs and found Ada sitting by the fireside talking to her cousin John. Mr. Skimpole presently appeared, and Richard shortly after. That evening I took my first lesson in backgammon from Mr. Jarndyce, who was very fond of the game. But I thought, occasionally, when Mr. Skimpole played some fragments of his own compositions or when he kept up an effortless flow of conversation, that Richard and I seemed to retain the transferred impression of having been arrested and that it was very curious altogether.

It was late before we separated, for when Ada was going to bed at eleven, Mr. Skimpole went to the piano and rattled hilariously that the best of all ways to lengthen our days was to steal a few hours from night, my dear! It was past twelve before he took his candle and his radiant face out of the room. Ada and Richard were lingering for a few moments by the fire, when Mr. Jarndyce, who had been out of the room, returned.

"Oh, dear me, what's this, what's this they tell me?" he said, walking about with his good-humoured vexation. "Rick, my boy, Esther, my dear, what have you been doing? How much was it? The wind's round again. I feel it all over me!"

We neither of us quite knew what to answer.

"Come, Rick, come! I must settle this before I sleep. How much are you out of pocket? Why did you? How could you? Oh, Lord, yes, it's due east – must be!"

"Really, sir," said Richard, "Mr. Skimpole relied upon us—"

“Lord bless you, my dear boy! He relies upon everybody!” said Mr. Jarndyce. “He’ll be in the same scrape again next week. He’s always in the same scrape. I believe he was born in a scrape.”

Richard laughed but added, “Still, sir, I don’t want to break his confidence, and I hope you will consider before you press me any more.”

“Well!” cried Mr. Jarndyce. “I won’t press you, Rick; you may be right. But really – to get hold of you and Esther – and to squeeze you like a couple of tender young oranges! It’ll blow a gale tonight!” He was now alternately putting his hands into his pockets and taking them out again and rubbing them all over his head.

“Mr. Skimpole being quite a child, sir,” said I, “and so different from other people—”

“You are right!” said Mr. Jarndyce, brightening. “He is a child – an absolute child. Isn’t he?”

He was indeed, we said.

“When you come to think of it, it’s the height of childishness to regard him as a man. You can’t make *him* responsible. The idea of Harold Skimpole with designs or plans, or knowledge of consequences! Ha, ha, ha!”

It was delicious to see the clouds about his bright face clearing. I knew that his goodness was tortured by condemning or mistrusting anyone; and I saw the tears in Ada’s eyes, and felt them in my own.

“Why, the whole business shows the child from beginning to end. Nobody but a child would have thought of *your* having the money!” said Mr. Jarndyce with his whole face in a glow. “However, I must have a promise that nothing of this sort shall ever be done any more. No advances! Not even sixpences.”

We all promised faithfully, Richard giving me a merry glance and touching his pocket as if to remind me that there was no danger of *our* transgressing.

“As to Skimpole,” said Mr. Jarndyce, “he is in a child’s sleep by this time, I suppose; it’s time I went to bed too. Good night, my dears. God bless you! Oh, and I find it was a false alarm about the wind. It’s in the south!” He went away singing to himself.

Ada and I agreed, as we talked together for a little while upstairs, that this caprice about the wind was a fiction to account for any disappointment he could not conceal. We thought this very characteristic of his eccentric gentleness.

Indeed, so much affection for him had been added in this one evening to my gratitude that I hoped I already began to understand him. Once I was alone, my thoughts were busy not just with him, but with Ada and Richard and with the confidence I had seemed to receive about them. Then my fancy wandered back to my godmother’s house, raising shadowy speculations as to what Mr. Jarndyce knew of my earliest history. In the past I had pondered the possibility of his being my father, though that idle dream was quite gone now.

That past was all gone now. It was not for me to muse over by-gones, but to act with a cheerful spirit and a grateful heart.

So I said to myself, “Esther, Esther! Duty, my dear!” and gave my basket of housekeeping keys such a shake that, like little bells, they rang me hopefully to bed.

Chapter 7

The Ghost's Walk

While Esther sleeps, it is still wet weather down at the place in Lincolnshire. The rain is ever falling – drip, drip, drip – by day and night upon the broad stone-flagged terrace-pavement, the Ghost's Walk. The weather is so very bad there that no-one can imagine its ever being fine again. Sir Leicester is not here, but is in Paris with my Lady; and solitude, with dusky wings, sits brooding upon Chesney Wold.

The horses in the long stables may contemplate fine weather on occasions. The old roan, turning his large eye to the window near his hay-rack, may remember the fresh leaves of other times. The mastiff, dozing in his kennel in the court-yard, may think of the hot sunshine and may recall the house full of company, the coach-houses full of vehicles, the stables full of horses. The turkey in the poultry-yard may recall that summer morning when he got into the lane amongst the barley. But there is not much fancy otherwise stirring at Chesney Wold.

It has rained so hard that Mrs. Rouncewell, the old housekeeper at Chesney Wold, has several times taken off her spectacles and cleaned them to make certain that the drops were not upon the glasses. She is a fine old lady, handsome, stately, wonderfully neat and upright. Weather affects Mrs. Rouncewell little. She sits in her room on the ground floor, and the whole house reposes on her mind. She can open it on occasion and be busy and fluttered, but it is shut up now in a majestic sleep.

Mrs. Rouncewell has been here fifty years. Her progress in the family began in the time of the last Sir Leicester, starting as a maid in the still-room.

The present Sir Leicester Dedlock is an excellent master. He supposes all his servants to be utterly bereft of individual characters or opinions. If he were to make a discovery to the contrary, he would be simply stunned. But he has a great liking for Mrs. Rouncewell; he says she is a most respectable woman. He always shakes hands with her when he comes down to Chesney Wold and when he goes away; and if he were very ill, he would say, "send Mrs. Rouncewell here!" feeling his dignity safer with her than with anybody else.

Mrs. Rouncewell has known trouble. Her husband died many years ago: she has two sons, of whom the younger ran wild, and went for a soldier, and never came back. Even to this hour, Mrs. Rouncewell's calm hands lose their composure when she speaks of him, trembling as she says what a fine lad, what a gay, good-humoured, clever lad he was! Her second son would have been made steward at Chesney Wold in due season, but he took, when he was a schoolboy, to constructing steam-engines out of saucepans; a propensity which gave Mrs. Rouncewell great uneasiness. When he built a model of a power-loom, she mentioned it, with many tears, to the baronet.

“Mrs. Rouncewell,” said Sir Leicester, “You had better get him into some Works. The iron country farther north is, I suppose, the right direction for a boy with these tendencies.” So farther north he went, grew up, established himself, and married: and Mrs. Rouncewell’s grandson, who is out of his apprenticeship, and home from a journey in far countries, stands leaning against the chimney-piece this very day in Mrs. Rouncewell’s room at Chesney Wold.

“Again, I am glad to see you, Watt!” says Mrs. Rouncewell. “You are a fine young fellow. You are like your poor uncle George. Ah!” Her hands tremble, as usual, on this reference.

“They say I am like my father, grandmother.”

“Like him, also, my dear.” Mrs. Rouncewell folds her hands again. “He is well and happy?”

“Thriving, grandmother, in every way.”

“I am thankful! So he has sent you into foreign countries and the like? Well, he knows best. There may be a world beyond Chesney Wold that I don’t understand.”

“Grandmother,” says the young man, changing the subject, “what a very pretty girl that was I found with you just now. You called her Rosa?”

“Yes, child. She is daughter of a widow in the village. Maids are hard to teach, but she’s an apt scholar and will do well. She shows visitors around very prettily. She lives with me here.”

“I hope I have not driven her away?”

“She supposes we have family affairs to speak about, I dare say. She is very modest – a fine quality in a young woman. And scarcer than it formerly was!” Then Mrs. Rouncewell listens. “Wheels!” says she. “What wheels on such a day as this, for gracious sake?”

There is a tap at the door. A dark, shy, village beauty comes in – so fresh in her delicate bloom that the drops of rain on her hair look like the dew upon a flower.

“What company is this, Rosa?” says Mrs. Rouncewell.

“It’s two young men in a gig, ma’am, who want to see the house. I told them it was the wrong day and the wrong hour, but the young man who was driving begged me to bring this card to you.”

“Read it, my dear Watt,” says the housekeeper.

Rosa is so shy as she gives it to him that they drop it between them and almost knock their foreheads together as they pick it up.

“Mr. Guppy,” the card says.

“Guppy!” repeats Mrs. Rouncewell. “I never heard of him!”

“If you please, he told me that!” says Rosa. “But he said that he and the other young gentleman came from London only last night by the mail-coach, on business at the magistrates’ meeting, and that as their business was soon over, and they had heard a great deal about Chesney Wold, they had come through the wet to see it. They are lawyers. He says he is not in Mr. Tulkinghorn’s office, but he knows Mr. Tulkinghorn.”

Now, Mr. Tulkinghorn is, in a manner, part of the place, and besides, is supposed to have made Mrs. Rouncewell's will. The old lady relaxes, and consents to the visitors' admission. The grandson, being smitten by a sudden wish to see the house himself, proposes to join the party. The grandmother, pleased, accompanies him – though he is exceedingly unwilling to trouble her.

“Much obliged to you, ma'am!” says Mr. Guppy, removing his wet coat in the hall. “Us London lawyers don't often get out, and when we do, we like to make the most of it, you know.”

The old housekeeper, with gracious severity, waves her hand towards the great staircase. Mr. Guppy and his friend follow Rosa; Mrs. Rouncewell and her grandson follow them.

As is usually the case with people who go over houses, Mr. Guppy and his friend straggle about in the wrong places, don't care for the right things, yawn when more rooms are opened, and are clearly tired out. In each chamber that they enter, Mrs. Rouncewell, as upright as the house itself, sits in a window-seat and listens with stately approval to Rosa's exposition. Her grandson is so attentive that Rosa is shyer than ever – and prettier. Thus they pass from room to room, viewing the pictured Dedlocks. It appears to Mr. Guppy and his friend that there is no end to these Dedlocks.

Even the long drawing-room of Chesney Wold cannot revive Mr. Guppy's spirits. He droops on the threshold. But a portrait over the chimney-piece acts upon him like a charm. He stares at it with uncommon interest; he seems to be fixed and fascinated by it.

“Dear me!” says he. “Who's that?”

“That is the portrait of the present Lady Dedlock,” says Rosa. “It is considered a perfect likeness, and the best work of the artist.”

“I can't ever have seen her,” says Mr. Guppy, in a kind of dismay. “Yet I know her! Has the picture been reproduced, miss?”

“No. Sir Leicester has always refused permission for it to be engraved.”

“Well!” says Mr. Guppy in a low voice. “Very curious. I know that picture! So that's Lady Dedlock, is it! Dashed if I don't think I must have had a dream of that picture, you know!”

He remains so absorbed by the portrait that he stands immovable before it, and then comes out of the room dazed, walking around the succeeding rooms with a confused stare, as if he were looking for Lady Dedlock again.

He sees her elegant rooms, which are the last shown, and he looks out of the windows onto the terrace.

Rosa says, “The terrace below is much admired. It is called, from an old story in the family, the Ghost's Walk.”

“What's the story, miss?” asks Mr. Guppy.

“Pray tell us the story,” says Watt.

“I don't know it, sir.” Rosa is shyer than ever.

“It is almost forgotten,” says the housekeeper, advancing. “It has never been more than a family anecdote.”

“You’ll excuse my asking if it has anything to do with a picture, ma’am,” observes Mr. Guppy, “because the more I think of that picture the better I know it, without knowing how!”

The story has nothing to do with a picture. Mr. Guppy retires with his friend, and presently is heard to drive away.

It is now dusk. Mrs. Rouncewell tells her two young hearers how the terrace came to have that ghostly name.

She seats herself in a large chair by the fast-darkening window and says:

“In the days of King Charles the First, Sir Morbury Dedlock was the owner of Chesney Wold. Sir Morbury was, of course, on the side of the King. But it is said that his Lady favoured the bad cause, and that she gave the King’s enemies information. When any of his Majesty’s supporters met here, it is said that my Lady was always nearer to the door of their council-room than they supposed. Do you hear a sound like a footstep passing along the terrace, Watt?”

Rosa draws nearer to the housekeeper.

“I hear the rain-drip on the stones,” replies the young man, “and I hear a curious echo which is very like a halting step.”

The housekeeper gravely nods and continues: “Partly on account of this division between them, Sir Morbury and his Lady led a troubled life. She was a lady of a haughty temper. They were not well suited to each other, and they had no children to moderate between them. After her favourite brother was killed in the civil wars by Sir Morbury’s kinsman, her feeling was so violent that she hated the Dedlocks. When the Dedlocks were about to ride out from Chesney Wold in the king’s cause, she is supposed to have crept down to the stables and lamed their horses at dead of night; and the story is that once, at such an hour, her husband saw her gliding down the stairs and followed her into the stall where his own favourite horse stood. There he seized her by the wrist, and in a struggle or a fall, she was lamed and from that hour began to pine away.”

The housekeeper has dropped her voice to a whisper.

“She had been a lady of a handsome figure. She never complained of the change, or of being in pain, but day by day she tried to walk upon the terrace, and went up and down with greater difficulty every day. At last, one afternoon her husband (to whom she had never spoken since that night), standing at the window, saw her drop upon the pavement. He hastened down to raise her, but she repulsed him, and looking at him coldly, said, ‘I will die here where I have walked. And I will walk here, though I am in my grave. I will walk here until the pride of this house is humbled. And when calamity or disgrace is coming to it, let the Dedlocks listen for my step!’”

Watt looks at Rosa. Rosa looks down upon the ground, half frightened and half shy.

“There and then she died. And from those days,” says Mrs. Rouncewell, “the name has come down – the Ghost’s Walk. If the tread is an echo, it is an echo that is only heard after dark, and is often unheard for a long while

together. But it comes back from time to time; and so sure as there is sickness or death in the family, it will be heard then.”

“And disgrace, grandmother—” says Watt.

“Disgrace never comes to Chesney Wold. Whatever the sound is, it is a worrying sound,” says Mrs. Rouncewell, getting up from her chair; “and you cannot shut it out. Watt, there is a tall French clock behind you that has a loud beat and can play music. Set it a-going.”

Watt sets it a-going – music and all.

“Now, come here,” says the housekeeper. “I am not sure that it is dark enough yet, but listen! Can you hear the sound upon the terrace, through the music?”

“I certainly can!”

“So my Lady Dedlock says.”

Chapter 8

Covering a Multitude of Sins

When I dressed before daylight, it was interesting to peep out of the window at the indistinctness of night, and watch the day come. The prospect gradually revealed the scene over which the wind had wandered in the dark, like my memory over my life. The dark places in my room all melted away, and the day shone bright upon a cheerful landscape, in which the old Abbey Church, with its massive, rugged tower, threw a soft train of shadow on the view. But so from rough outsides, serene and gentle influences often come.

Every part of the house was in such order, and everyone was so attentive to me, that I had no trouble with my two bunches of keys; though what with trying to remember the contents of each store-room drawer and cupboard, and making notes about jams, pickles, and china, and a great many other things; and what with being generally a methodical, old-maidish sort of foolish little person, I was so busy that I could not believe it when breakfast-time came. Away I ran, and made tea; and then, as nobody was down yet, I thought I would take a peep at the garden.

I found it quite a delightful place – in front, the pretty avenue and drive by which we had approached (and where our wheels had cut up the gravel so terribly that I asked the gardener to roll it); at the back, the flower-garden, with my darling Ada at her window, smiling out at me. Beyond the flower-garden was a kitchen-garden, and then a paddock, and a snug little rick-yard, and a dear little farm-yard. As for the house itself, with its gables, its various-shaped windows, its trellis-work for roses and honey-suckle, and its homely, welcoming look – it was, as Ada said when she came out to meet me with Mr. Jarndyce, worthy of her cousin John; a bold thing to say, though he only pinched her cheek for it.

Mr. Skimpole was as agreeable at breakfast as he had been overnight. There was honey on the table, and it led him into a discourse about bees. He had no objection to honey, he said, but he didn't see why the busy bee should be proposed as a model to him; he supposed the bee liked to make honey, or it wouldn't do it. He thought the drone to have a pleasanter philosophy, always supposing the drone to be willing to be on good terms with the bee, which was so conceited about its honey!

He pursued this fancy lightly and made us all merry. I left them listening to him and withdrew to attend to my new duties. I was passing through the passages with my basket of keys on my arm, when Mr. Jarndyce called me into a small room next to his bedroom, which I found to be in part a little library of books and papers and in part a little museum of his shoes and hat-boxes.

“Sit down, my dear,” said Mr. Jarndyce. “This, you must know, is the growlery. When I am out of humour, I come and growl here.”

“You must be here very seldom, sir,” said I.

“Oh, you don’t know me!” he returned. “When I am deceived or disappointed in – the wind, and it’s easterly, I take refuge here. The growlery is the best-used room in the house. My dear, how you are trembling!”

I could not help it; being alone with him, and meeting his kind eyes, and feeling so happy and so honoured, and my heart so full – I kissed his hand. I don’t think I spoke. He was disconcerted and walked to the window; I almost believed with an intention of jumping out, until he turned and I was reassured by seeing in his eyes what he had gone there to hide. He gently patted me on the head.

“There! There!” he said. “That’s over. Don’t be foolish.”

“It shall not happen again, sir,” I returned, “but at first it is difficult—”

“Nonsense!” he said. “It’s easy, easy. Why not? I hear of a good little orphan girl without a protector, and I take it into my head to be that protector. She grows up, and justifies my good opinion, and I remain her guardian and her friend. What is there in all this? So, so! Now, we have cleared off old scores.”

I said to myself, “Esther, my dear, this really is not what I expected of you!” And I folded my hands upon my basket and recovered myself. Mr. Jarndyce, expressing his approval in his face, began to talk to me as confidentially as if I had been in the habit of conversing with him every morning.

“Of course, Esther,” he said, “you don’t understand this Chancery business?”

I shook my head.

“I don’t know who does,” he returned. “The lawyers have twisted it into such a state of bedevilment that the original merits of the case have long disappeared from the face of the earth. It’s about a will and the trusts under a will – or it was once. It’s about nothing but costs now. We are always appearing, and filing, and cross-filing, and arguing, and sealing, and referring, and revolving about the Lord Chancellor, and waltzing ourselves off to dusty death, about costs. All the rest, by some extraordinary means, has melted away.”

“But it was about a will, sir?” said I.

“Why, yes, it was about a will when it was about anything,” he returned. “A certain Jarndyce, in an evil hour, made a great fortune, and made a great will. In arguing how the trusts under that will are to be administered, the fortune left by the will is squandered away, and the will itself is made a dead letter. All through the deplorable cause, everybody must have copies, over and over again, of everything that has accumulated about it. Cartloads of papers must go up and down through such an infernal country-dance of costs and fees and nonsense and corruption as was never dreamed of. Equity sends questions to law, law sends questions back to equity; and thus, through years and years, everything is constantly beginning over and over again, and nothing ever ends. And we can’t get out of the suit, for we must take part in it,

whether we like it or not. But it won't do to think of it! When my great uncle, poor Tom Jarndyce, began to think of it, it was the beginning of the end!"

"The Mr. Jarndyce, sir, whose story I have heard?"

He nodded gravely. "I was his heir, and this was his house, Esther. When I came here, it was bleak indeed. He had left the signs of his misery upon it."

"How changed it must be now!" I said.

"He gave it its name and lived here shut up, day and night poring over the wicked heaps of papers in the suit and hoping against hope to disentangle it. In the meantime, the place became dilapidated, the wind whistled through the cracked walls, and the rain fell through the broken roof. When I brought his remains home here, the brains seemed to me to have been blown out of the house too, it was so shattered and ruined."

He walked a little to and fro after saying this, and then looked at me, and brightened, and came and sat down again with his hands in his pockets.

"I told you this was the growlery, my dear. Where was I?"

I reminded him, at the change he had made in Bleak House.

"Bleak House; true. There is, in that city of London there, some property of ours which is much what Bleak House was then; I say property of ours, meaning of the law-suit's. It is a street of blind houses, with their eyes stoned out, without a pane of glass, with the bare blank shutters tumbling from their hinges, the iron rails peeling away in flakes of rust, the chimneys sinking in, the very foundations decaying. Although Bleak House was not in Chancery, that street it, and is stamped with the same seal. These are the Great Seal's impressions, my dear, all over England!"

"How changed this house is!" I said again.

"Why, so it is," he answered much more cheerfully; "and you are wise to keep me to the bright side of the picture." (The idea of me being wise!)

"These are things I never think about, except in the growlery here. If you consider it right to mention them to Rick and Ada, you can. I leave it to your discretion, Esther."

"I hope, sir—" said I.

"I think you had better call me guardian, my dear."

I felt that I was choking again. But I gave the housekeeping keys a small shake as a reminder to myself, and looked at him quietly.

"I hope, guardian," said I, "that you may not trust too much to my discretion. I am afraid it will be a disappointment to you to know that I am not clever; but it is the truth."

He did not seem at all disappointed; quite the contrary. He told me, with a smile, that he knew me very well and that I was clever enough for him.

"I hope I may turn out so," said I, "but I am much afraid of it, guardian."

"You are clever enough," he said playfully, "to be the good little old woman of the nursery rhyme:

"Little old woman, and whither so high?

"To sweep the cobwebs out of the sky."

“You will sweep them so neatly, Esther, that one of these days we shall have to abandon the growlery and nail up the door.”

This was the beginning of my being called Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs. Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden, and so many names of that sort that my own name soon became quite lost among them.

“However,” said Mr. Jarndyce, “to return to our gossip. Here’s Rick, a fine young fellow full of promise. What’s to be done with him?”

Oh, my goodness, the idea of asking my advice on such a point!

“He must have a profession,” said Mr. Jarndyce, stretching out his legs; “he must make some choice for himself. There will be more wigglomeration about it, I suppose, but it must be done.”

“More what, guardian?” said I.

“More wigglomeration,” said he. “It’s the only name I know for the thing. He is a ward in Chancery, my dear. Kenge and Carboy will have something to say about it; counsel will have something to say about it; the Chancellor will have something to say about it; the whole thing will be vastly ceremonious, wordy, unsatisfactory, and expensive, and I call it wigglomeration.”

He began to rub his head. But his face recovered its benign expression as he looked at me; and he put his hands in his pockets again.

“Perhaps it would be best, first of all,” said I, “to ask Mr. Richard what he would like to do.”

“Exactly so,” he returned. “Talk it over, with your tact and in your quiet way, with him and Ada. We are sure to come at the heart of the matter by your means, little woman.”

I really was frightened at the thought of the importance I was attaining and the number of things that were being confided to me. But of course I said that I would do my best, though I feared that he thought me much wiser than I was. At which he laughed the pleasantest laugh I ever heard.

“Come!” he said, rising and pushing back his chair. “I think we may have done with the growlery for one day! Esther, my dear, do you wish to ask me anything?”

He looked so attentively at me that I felt sure I understood him.

“About myself, sir?” said I.

“Yes.”

“Guardian,” said I, venturing to put my hand in his, “nothing! I am sure that if there were anything I ought to know, you would tell it to me. I have nothing to ask you.”

He drew my hand through his arm and we went away to look for Ada. From that hour I felt quite easy with him, quite content to know no more, quite happy.

We lived, at first, rather a busy life at Bleak House, for we had to become acquainted with many people who knew Mr. Jarndyce. It seemed to Ada and me that everybody knew him who wanted to do anything with anybody else’s money. It amazed us when we began to sort his letters to find

how the great object of the lives of nearly all his correspondents appeared to be to form themselves into committees for getting in money.

The ladies threw themselves into committees in the most impassioned manner and collected subscriptions with a vehemence quite extraordinary. They wanted clothes, they wanted coals, they wanted soup, they wanted flannel, they wanted whatever Mr. Jarndyce had – or had not. They were going to raise new buildings, or pay off debts on old buildings; they were going to give a testimonial to Mrs. Jellyby, they were going to have their secretary's portrait painted and presented to his mother-in-law; they were going to get up everything from a marble monument to a silver tea-pot. They took a multitude of titles. They were the Women of England, the Daughters of Britain, the Sisters of all the virtues separately. They appeared to be always canvassing and electing, polling people by tens of thousands. It made our heads ache to think what feverish lives they must lead.

Among the ladies who were most distinguished for this rapacious benevolence (if I may use the expression) was a Mrs. Pardiggle, who seemed to be almost as powerful a correspondent as Mrs. Jellyby herself. We observed that the wind always changed when Mrs. Pardiggle became the subject of conversation. Mr. Jarndyce remarked that there were two classes of charitable people; one, the people who did a little and made a great deal of noise; the other, the people who did a great deal and made no noise at all. We were therefore curious to see Mrs. Pardiggle, suspecting her to be a type of the former class, and were glad when she called one day with her five young sons.

She was a formidable lady with spectacles, a prominent nose, and a loud voice, who knocked down little chairs with her skirts. As only Ada and I were at home, we received her timidly.

"These, young ladies," said Mrs. Pardiggle, "are my five boys. You may have seen their names in a printed subscription list sent to our esteemed friend Mr. Jarndyce. Egbert, my eldest (twelve), is the boy who sent his pocket-money, to the amount of five shillings and threepence, to the Tockahoopo Indians. Oswald, my second (ten and a half), contributed two and nine-pence to the Great National Smithers Testimonial. Francis, my third (nine), one and sixpence halfpenny; Felix, my fourth (seven), eightpence to the Superannuated Widows; Alfred, my youngest (five), has voluntarily enrolled himself in the Infant Bonds of Joy, and is pledged never to use tobacco in any form."

We had never seen such dissatisfied children. It was not merely that they were wizened and shrivelled – though they were certainly that – but they looked absolutely ferocious with discontent. At the mention of the Tockahoopo Indians, Egbert gave me a savage frown. The face of each child, as the amount of his contribution was mentioned, darkened.

"You have been visiting, I understand," said Mrs. Pardiggle, "at Mrs. Jellyby's?"

We said yes, we had passed one night there.

“Mrs. Jellyby,” pursued the lady, in the same loud, hard tone, “is a benefactor to society. My boys have contributed to the African project – Egbert, one and six, being the entire allowance of nine weeks; Oswald, one and a penny halfpenny; the rest, according to their little means. Nevertheless, I do not go with Mrs. Jellyby in all things. I do not go with her in her treatment of her young family. Her young family are excluded from participation in the objects to which she is devoted. This is not my course with *my* young family. I take them everywhere.”

At this the eldest child let out a sharp yell, which he turned into a yawn.

“They attend matins with me at half-past six o’clock in the morning all the year round,” said Mrs. Pardiggle, “and they are with me during the revolving duties of the day. I am a School lady, a Visiting lady, and a Distributing lady; I am on the local Linen Box Committee and many general committees; and my canvassing is very extensive. But they are my companions everywhere; and so they acquire a knowledge of the poor, and of charitable business. My young family are not frivolous; they have attended as many public meetings and lectures as most adults. Alfred (five), who, as I mentioned, has joined the Infant Bonds of Joy, heard a speech of two hours from the chairman that evening.”

Alfred glowered at us as if he would never forgive the injury of that night.

“You know Mr. Gusher?” said our visitor.

We were obliged to say that we did not.

“The loss is yours, I assure you,” said Mrs. Pardiggle. “He is a very fervid, impassioned speaker – full of fire! He would improve almost any occasion you could mention for hours and hours! By this time, young ladies, you have found me out, I dare say?”

Ada looked at me in dismay; while I think I must have blushed in my confusion.

“Well! I freely admit it, I am a woman of business,” announced Mrs. Pardiggle. “I love hard work; I enjoy hard work. The excitement does me good. I don’t know what fatigue is.”

We murmured that it was very astonishing and gratifying, or something to that effect.

“I do not understand what it is to be tired; you cannot tire me if you try!” said Mrs. Pardiggle. “The exertion that I go through sometimes astonishes myself. I have seen my young family, and Mr. Pardiggle, quite worn out with witnessing it, when I may truly say I have been as fresh as a lark!”

I observed that the eldest boy doubled his right fist and delivered a secret blow into the crown of his cap, which was under his left arm.

“If I find a person unwilling to hear what I have to say, I tell them directly, ‘I am incapable of fatigue, my good friend, I am never tired, and I mean to go on until I have done.’ It answers admirably! Miss Summerson, I hope I shall have your assistance in my visiting rounds immediately.”

At first I tried to excuse myself on the ground of having occupations which I must not neglect. But as this was ineffectual, I then said that I was not

sure of my qualifications for such work – that I had much to learn, myself, before I could teach others. For these reasons I thought it best to be as useful as I could, and to do what kind services I could for those immediately about me, and to try to let that circle of duty gradually and naturally expand itself. All this I said with anything but confidence.

“You are wrong, Miss Summerson,” said Mrs. Pardiggle, “but perhaps you are not equal to hard work, and that makes a vast difference. If you would like to see how I go through my work, I am now about to visit a brickmaker in the neighbourhood (a very bad character) and shall be glad to take you with me. Miss Clare also.”

Ada and I exchanged looks, and as we were going out in any case, accepted the offer. Mrs. Pardiggle took possession of Ada, and I followed with her family.

I am very fond of being confided in by children, but on this occasion it gave me great uneasiness. As soon as we were out of doors, Egbert demanded a shilling of me on the ground that his pocket-money was “boned” from him. On my pointing out the great impropriety of the word, he pinched me and said, “*You* wouldn’t like it! Why does she pretend to give me money, and take it away again? Why do you call it my allowance, and never let me spend it?”

These exasperating questions so inflamed his mind and the minds of Oswald and Francis that they all pinched me in a dreadfully expert way, and Felix stamped upon my toes. Little Alfred, who had pledged to abstain from cakes as well as tobacco, so swelled with grief and rage when we passed a pastry-cook’s shop that he terrified me by becoming purple.

I was glad when we came to the brickmaker’s house, though it was one of a cluster of wretched hovels in a brick-field, with pigsties close by and miserable little gardens growing nothing but stagnant pools. At the doors and windows some men and women lounged, and took little notice of us except to laugh to one another or to say something as we passed, about gentlefolks minding their own business.

Mrs. Pardiggle, leading the way with a great show of determination and talking loudly about the untidy habits of the people (though I doubted if the best of us could have been tidy in such a place), led us into a cottage. We nearly filled the damp ground-floor room. Besides ourselves, there were a woman with a black eye, nursing a poor little gasping baby; a man, all stained with clay and mud and looking very dissipated, lying at full length on the ground, smoking a pipe; a powerful young man fastening a collar on a dog; and a bold girl doing some washing in very dirty water. They all looked up as we came in, and the woman turned her face towards the fire as if to hide her bruised eye; nobody gave us any welcome.

“Well, my friends,” said Mrs. Pardiggle, but her voice had not a friendly sound, I thought. “How do you do, all of you? I am here again. I told you, you couldn’t tire me, you know.”

“There an’t any more on you to come in, is there?” growled the man on the floor.

The young man and the girl both laughed.

“You can’t tire me, good people,” said Mrs. Pardiggle. “I enjoy hard work, and the harder you make mine, the better I like it.”

“Then make it easy for her!” growled the man upon the floor. “I wants it done, and over. I wants a end of these liberties took with my place. Now you’re a-going to pry and question. Well! I’ll save you the trouble. Is my daughter a-washin? Yes, she is. Look at the water. Smell it! That’s wot we drinks. How do you like it, and what do you think of gin instead! An’t my place dirty? Yes, it is dirty – and we’ve had five dirty and onwholesome children, as is all dead, and so much the better for them, and for us besides. Have I read the little book wot you left? No, I an’t. There an’t nobody here as knows how to read it; and anyway it’s a book fit for a babby. How have I been conducting of myself? Why, I’ve been drunk for three days; and I’d a been drunk four if I’d a had the money. Don’t I never mean for to go to church? No, I don’t, and I shouldn’t be expected there, if I did. And how did my wife get that black eye? Why, I give it her!”

He had pulled his pipe out of his mouth to say all this, and he now turned over and smoked again. Mrs. Pardiggle pulled out a good book as if it were a constable’s staff and she were an inexorable policeman carrying them all off to the station.

Ada and I were very uncomfortable. We both felt intrusive and out of place, and we both thought that Mrs. Pardiggle would have got on much better if she had not had such a mechanical way of taking possession of people. The children sulked and stared; while the family took no notice of us whatever. We both felt painfully aware that between us and these people there was an iron barrier which could not be removed by our new friend. How it could be removed, we did not know, but we knew that. Even what Mrs. Pardiggle read seemed ill-chosen for such listeners, and we were relieved when she stopped.

The man on the floor said morosely, “Well! You’ve done, have you?”

“For today, I have, my friend. But I am never fatigued. I shall come to you again,” returned Mrs. Pardiggle.

“So long as you goes now,” said he, folding his arms and shutting his eyes with an oath, “you may do wot you like!”

Mrs. Pardiggle rose, and expressing her hope that the brickmaker and his house would be improved when she saw them next, she proceeded to another cottage. She supposed that we were following her, but instead, as soon as the space was clear, we approached the woman sitting by the fire to ask if the baby were ill.

She only looked at it as it lay on her lap. Ada, whose gentle heart was moved by its appearance, bent down to touch its little face.

As she did so, I saw what happened and drew her back. The child died.

“Oh, Esther!” cried Ada, sinking on her knees beside it. “Oh, Esther, my love, the little thing! I am so sorry for it. I am so sorry for the mother. I never saw a sight so pitiful as this before! Oh, baby, baby!”

Such compassion, such gentleness, as that with which she bent down weeping and put her hand upon the mother’s might have softened any

mother's heart. The woman gazed at her in astonishment and then burst into tears.

Presently I took the light burden from her lap, did what I could to make the baby's rest prettier and gentler, laid it on a shelf, and covered it with my own handkerchief. We tried to comfort the mother, and we whispered to her what Our Saviour said of children. She answered nothing, but sat weeping.

When I turned, I found that the young man had taken out the dog and was standing at the door looking in upon us with dry eyes, but quiet. The girl was quiet too and sat in a corner looking on the ground. The man had risen. He still smoked his pipe with an air of defiance, but he was silent.

An ugly woman, very poorly clothed, hurried in while I was glancing at them, and coming straight up to the mother, said, "Jenny! Jenny!" The mother rose and fell upon the woman's neck.

She also bore bruises on her face and arms. She had no kind of grace about her but the grace of sympathy. Her only words were "Jenny! Jenny!" All the rest was in the tone in which she said them.

I thought it very touching to see these two women, coarse and shabby and beaten, so united; to see what they could be to one another; to see how they felt for one another amidst the hard trials of their lives. I think the best side of such people is almost hidden from us.

We felt it better to withdraw and leave them. We stole out quietly. The man made way for us; he seemed to want to hide that he did this, but we perceived that he did, and thanked him. He made no answer.

Ada was full of grief all the way home. There, Richard was so distressed to see her in tears that we arranged to return at night with some little comforts and repeat our visit at the brick-maker's house. We said as little as we could to Mr. Jarndyce, but the wind changed directly.

Richard accompanied us at night to the scene. On our way there, we had to pass a noisy drinking-house, where a number of men were flocking about the door. Among them, and prominent in some dispute, was the father of the little child. The sister was standing laughing and talking with some other young women at the corner of the row of cottages, but she seemed ashamed and turned away as we went by.

We left Richard within sight of the brickmaker's dwelling and proceeded by ourselves. At the door, we found the woman who had brought consolation standing there looking anxiously out.

"It's you, young ladies, is it?" she said in a whisper. "I'm a-watching for my master. My heart's in my mouth. If he was to catch me away from home, he'd pretty near murder me."

"Do you mean your husband?" said I.

"Yes, miss, my master. Jenny's asleep, quite worn out. She's scarcely had the child off her lap, poor thing, these seven days and nights, except when I've been able to take it for a minute or two."

She went softly in and put what we had brought near the miserable bed on which the mother slept. No effort had been made to clean the room; but the small waxen form had been washed, and neatly dressed in some fragments of

white linen; and on my handkerchief, which still covered the poor baby, a little bunch of sweet herbs had been laid.

“May heaven reward you!” we said to her. “You are a good woman.”

“Me, young ladies?” she returned with surprise. “Hush! Jenny, Jenny!”

The mother had moaned in her sleep. The sound of the familiar voice seemed to calm her, and she was quiet once more.

How little I thought, when I raised my handkerchief to look upon the tiny sleeper – how little I thought in whose unquiet bosom that handkerchief would come to lie, after covering the motionless and peaceful breast!

The woman replaced it with a compassionate hand; we left her at the door, by turns looking and listening in terror for her husband, and saying in her soothing manner, “Jenny, Jenny!”

Chapter 9

Signs and Tokens

I don't know how it is I seem to be always writing about myself. I mean all the time to write about other people, and when I find myself coming into the story again, I am really vexed; but it is of no use. I hope anyone who may read this will understand that it is because I have really something to do with the story and can't be kept out.

My darling Ada and I read together, and worked, and practised so busily that the winter days flew by like bright-winged birds. In some afternoons, and always in the evenings, Richard gave us his company. Although he was a restless creature, he was very fond of our society.

He was very, very fond of Ada. I had better say it at once. I had never seen any young people falling in love before, but I found them out quite soon. I could not say so, of course, or show that I knew anything about it. On the contrary, I used to seem so unconscious of it that sometimes I wondered whether I was growing deceitful.

I was as quiet as a mouse, and they were as quiet as mice too, so far as any words were concerned, but as they took more and more to one another, they relied more and more upon me, with an innocent charm.

"Our dear little old woman is such a capital old woman," Richard would say, coming up to meet me in the garden early, with his pleasant laugh and perhaps the least tinge of a blush, "that I can't get on without her. Before I begin grinding away at my books, it does me so much good to come and have a steady walk with our comfortable friend!"

"You know, Dame Durden, dear," Ada would say at night, with her head upon my shoulder, "I don't want to talk. Only to sit a little while thinking, with your dear face for company, and to hear the wind and remember the poor sailors at sea—"

Ah! Perhaps Richard was going to be a sailor. We had talked it over often now, for he had had a boyhood leaning toward the sea. Mr. Jarndyce had written to a relation of the family, a great Sir Leicester Dedlock, for his interest in Richard's favour; and Sir Leicester had replied graciously that he would be happy to advance the prospects of the young gentleman if it should ever prove to be within his power, which was not at all probable, and that my Lady sent her compliments to her young relation and trusted that he would do his duty in any honourable profession to which he might devote himself.

"So it's pretty clear," said Richard to me, "that I shall have to work my own way. Never mind! Plenty of people have had to do that before now!"

With a buoyancy and hopefulness and a gaiety that hardly ever flagged, Richard had a carelessness in his character that quite perplexed me, principally because he mistook it, in a very odd way, for prudence. It entered

into his calculations about money in a singular manner which I can best explain by reverting to our loan to Mr. Skimpole.

Mr. Jarndyce had learnt the amount, either from Mr. Skimpole himself or from Coavinses, and had given me the money. Once I handed Richard his ten pounds, he used it to justify any number of thoughtless expenses.

“My prudent Mother Hubbard, why not?” he said to me when he wanted to give five pounds to the brickmaker. “I made ten pounds out of Coavinses’ business.”

“How was that?” said I.

“Why, I got rid of ten pounds which I was quite content to get rid of and never expected to see any more. Then I came into possession of ten pounds—”

“The same ten pounds.”

“That has nothing to do with it!” returned Richard. “I have got ten pounds more than I expected to have, and so I can afford to spend it without being particular.”

In the same way, when he was persuaded not to sacrifice those five pounds, by being convinced that it would do no good, he carried that sum to his credit and drew upon it.

“Let me see!” he would say. “I saved five pounds out of the brickmaker’s affair, so if I go to London and back in a post-chaise for four pounds, I shall have saved one!”

I believe Richard’s was as frank and generous a nature as can be. He was ardent and brave, and, for all his wild restlessness, was so gentle that I knew him like a brother in a few weeks. With Ada’s influence, he became a winning companion, always ready to be interested and happy and light-hearted. I am sure that I, walking and talking with them, and noticing from day to day how they were falling deeper and deeper in love, and saying nothing, and each shyly thinking that this love was perhaps not yet suspected even by the other – I am sure that I was scarcely less enchanted than they were with the pretty dream.

We were going on in this way, when one morning at breakfast Mr. Jarndyce received a letter. Reading it with evident pleasure, he announced that Boythorn was coming on a visit that day. Now who was Boythorn, we wondered?

“I went to school with this fellow, Lawrence Boythorn,” said Mr. Jarndyce, “five and forty years ago. He was then the most impetuous boy in the world, and the loudest and heartiest, and he is now the most impetuous and loudest and heartiest of men. He is a tremendous fellow.”

“In stature, sir?” asked Richard.

“Pretty well, Rick,” said Mr. Jarndyce; “being ten years older than I and a couple of inches taller – and his lungs! Talking, laughing, or snoring, they make the beams of the house shake.”

As Mr. Jarndyce talked, we observed the favourable omen that there was not the least sign of any change in the wind.

“But it’s the warm heart of the man, the passion of the man, that I speak of,” he pursued. “He is always in extremes. In his condemnation he is all

ferocity, so that you might suppose him to be an ogre. There! I'll tell you no more beforehand. You must not be surprised to see him take me under his protection, for he has never forgotten that at school our friendship began in his knocking two of my head tyrant's teeth out."

I took care that the preparations were made for Mr. Boythorn's reception, and we looked forward to his arrival with curiosity. The afternoon wore away, however, and he did not appear. The dinner-hour arrived, and still he did not appear. The dinner was put back an hour, and we were sitting round the fire when the hall-door suddenly burst open and the hall resounded with these words, uttered with the greatest vehemence:

"We have been misdirected, Jarndyce, by a ruffian, who told us to turn right instead of left. He is the most intolerable scoundrel on the face of the earth. I would have had the fellow shot!"

"Did he do it on purpose?" Mr. Jarndyce inquired.

"I have not the slightest doubt that the scoundrel has spent his whole life in misdirecting travellers!" returned the other. "I thought him the worst-looking dog I had ever beheld when he was telling me to take the turning to the right. And yet I didn't knock his brains out!"

"Teeth, you mean?" said Mr. Jarndyce.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Mr. Lawrence Boythorn, making the whole house vibrate. "What, you have not forgotten it yet! And that was another great vagabond! If I were to meet that cowardly scoundrel tomorrow, I would fell him like a rotten tree!"

"I have no doubt of it," said Mr. Jarndyce.

Talking thus, they went upstairs, and presently we heard him in his bedroom thundering "Ha, ha, ha!" in a most contagious way.

There was a sterling quality in this laugh, and in his vigorous, healthy voice, and in the very fury of his superlatives, which seemed to go off like blank cannons and hurt nothing. When Mr. Jarndyce presented him, we saw not only a very handsome old gentleman – upright and stalwart, with a massive grey head – but such a true gentleman in his manner, so chivalrously polite, with such a sweet smile, that I could not help looking at him with pleasure as he sat at dinner, giving out that tremendous "Ha, ha, ha!"

"You have brought your bird with you, I suppose?" said Mr. Jarndyce.

"By heaven, he is the most astonishing bird in Europe!" replied the other. "I wouldn't take ten thousand guineas for that bird. He is a phenomenon. And his father before him was one of the most astonishing birds that ever lived!"

The subject of this speech was a very little canary, who was so tame that he was brought down by Mr. Boythorn's man, on his forefinger, and after taking a gentle flight round the room, alighted on his master's head. To hear Mr. Boythorn expressing the sternest sentiments, with this fragile mite of a creature quietly perched on his forehead, was to have a good illustration of his character, I thought.

"By my soul, Jarndyce," he said, gently holding up a bit of bread for the canary, "if I were in your place I would seize every master in Chancery by the

throat and shake him until his money rolled out of his pockets. I would have a settlement, by fair means or by foul. If you would allow me, I would do it for you with the greatest satisfaction!”

“I thank you, Lawrence, but I hardly think that would advance the suit,” returned Mr. Jarndyce, laughing.

“There never was such an infernal cauldron as that Chancery!” said Mr. Boythorn. “Nothing but a bomb would reform it!”

It was impossible not to laugh at his energetic gravity. When we laughed, he did too, and again the whole country seemed to echo to his “Ha, ha, ha!” It did not disturb the bird, who hopped about the table turning its bright sudden eye on its master.

“But how do you and your neighbour get on about the disputed right of way?” said Mr. Jarndyce. “You are not free from the toils of the law yourself!”

“The fellow has brought actions against me for trespass, and I have brought actions against him for trespass,” returned Mr. Boythorn. “By heaven, he is the proudest fellow breathing, He should be called Sir Lucifer, not Sir Leicester.”

“Complimentary to our distant relation!” said my guardian laughingly to Ada and Richard.

“I would beg your pardons,” said our visitor to them, “if I were not reassured by seeing in your smiles that you keep your distant relation at a comfortable distance. By my soul,” suddenly firing another volley, “that fellow is the most stiff-necked, arrogant, imbecile, pig-headed numskull ever born! The fellow, or his agent, or somebody, writes to me ‘Sir Leicester Dedlock calls attention to the fact that the green pathway by the old parsonage, now the property of Mr. Lawrence Boythorn, is Sir Leicester’s right of way, being in fact a portion of the park of Chesney Wold, and that Sir Leicester finds it convenient to close up the same.’ I write to the fellow that I would like to see him try. The fellow sends a villain with one eye to construct a gateway. I chop it down and burn it. He sends his servants over the fence. I catch them in humane man traps and spray them with a fire hose. He brings actions for trespass; I bring actions for trespass. He brings actions for assault and battery; I defend them and continue to assault and batter. Ha, ha, ha!”

To hear him say all this, one might have thought him the angriest of mankind. To see him at the very same time softly smoothing his bird’s feathers, one might have thought him the gentlest.

“No, no,” he said, “no closing up of my paths by any Dedlock! Though I willingly confess,” here he softened, “that Lady Dedlock is the most accomplished lady in the world. But I am not the man to be walked over by any Sir Lucifer. Ha, ha, ha! But speaking of this trespass, is there nothing for me from your men Kenge and Carboy?”

“I think not, Esther?” said Mr. Jarndyce.

“Nothing, guardian.”

“Much obliged!” said Mr. Boythorn. “I inquired because I thought some letters might have been sent down here. I dare say they will report progress tomorrow morning.”

During that pleasant evening I saw him contemplate Richard and Ada with interest and satisfaction. I asked my guardian as we sat at the backgammon board whether Mr. Boythorn had ever been married.

“No,” said he.

“But he meant to be!” said I.

“How did you find out that?” he returned with a smile.

“Why, guardian,” I explained, reddening a little, “there is something so tender in his manner, and he is so very courtly and gentle to us.”

“You are right, little woman,” he answered. “He was all but married once, long ago.”

“Did the lady die?”

“No – but she died to him. That time has had its influence on all his later life. He has never been what he might have been,” said Mr. Jarndyce, “and now you see him in his age with no one near him but his servant and his little bird. It’s your throw, my dear!”

I felt, from my guardian’s manner, that I could not pursue the subject without changing the wind, and asked no more questions. But I thought a little while about this old love story in the night; and I tried to do that very difficult thing, imagine old people young again. I fell asleep before I had succeeded, and dreamed of the days when I lived in my godmother’s house. I do not know whether it is at all remarkable that I almost always dreamed of that period of my life.

With the morning there came a letter from Messrs. Kenge and Carboy to Mr. Boythorn informing him that one of their clerks would call upon him at noon. As it was the day of the week on which I paid the bills, and added up my house-keeping books, I remained at home while Mr. Jarndyce, Ada, and Richard went out. Mr. Boythorn was to wait for the clerk and then would go and meet them.

Well! I was full of business, adding up columns and filing receipts, when Mr. Guppy was announced and shown in. I scarcely knew him again, he was so uncommonly smart. He had an entirely new suit of glossy clothes on, a shining hat, a large hot-house flower in his button-hole, and a thick gold ring on his little finger. He looked at me with an attention that quite confused me when I begged him to take a seat; and as he sat there crossing and uncrossing his legs, I found him looking at me in the same scrutinizing and curious way.

When the servant invited him to go upstairs to Mr. Boythorn’s room, I mentioned that he would find lunch prepared when he came down. He said with some embarrassment, “Shall I have the honour of finding you here, miss?” I replied yes; and he went out with a bow and another look.

I thought him only awkward and shy, and I fancied that the best thing I could do would be to wait until he had everything he wanted and then to leave him to himself.

The lunch was soon brought, but it remained for some time on the table. The interview with Mr. Boythorn was a long and stormy one, for although his room was at some distance I heard his loud voice rising every now and then like a high wind.

At last Mr. Guppy came back, looking something the worse for the conference. "My eye, miss," he said in a low voice, "he's a Tartar!"

"Pray take some refreshment, sir," said I.

Mr. Guppy sat down at the table and began nervously sharpening the carving-knife, still looking at me in the same unusual manner.

"What will you take yourself, miss? You'll take a morsel of something?"

"No, thank you," said I. "I have only waited to see that you have everything you want. Is there anything I can order for you?"

"No, I am much obliged to you, miss, I'm sure. I've everything that I can require to make me comfortable – at least – not comfortable – I'm never that." He drank off two glasses of wine, one after another. I thought I had better go.

"I beg your pardon, miss!" said Mr. Guppy, rising. "But would you allow me the favour of a minute's private conversation?"

Not knowing what to say, I sat down again.

"What follows is without prejudice, miss?" said Mr. Guppy anxiously.

"I don't understand what you mean," said I, wondering.

"It's one of our law terms, miss. You won't make any use of it to my detriment at Kenge and Carboy's or elsewhere. If our conversation shouldn't lead to anything, I am not to be prejudiced in my situation. In short, it's in total confidence."

"I am at a loss, sir," said I, "to imagine what you can have to say in total confidence to me; but I should be very sorry to do you any injury."

"Thank you, miss." Mr. Guppy wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. "If you would excuse my taking another glass of wine, miss, I think it might assist me."

He did so. I took the opportunity of moving well behind the table.

"To proceed," said Mr. Guppy. "My present salary, Miss Summerson, is two pound a week. When I first had the happiness of looking upon you, it was one fifteen, but a rise of five has since taken place, and a further rise of five is guaranteed at the end of a term not exceeding twelve months from the present. My mother has a little property, which takes the form of a small life annuity, and is eminently calculated for a mother-in-law. She is all for peace, and her disposition easy. She has her failings – as who has not? – but I never knew her do it when company was present, at which time you may freely trust her with wines, spirits, or malt liquors. My own abode is lodgings at Penton Place. It is lowly, but airy. Miss Summerson! In the mildest language, I adore you. Would you be so kind as to allow me to file a declaration – to make an offer!"

Mr. Guppy went down on his knees.

I was not much frightened. I said, "Get up from that ridiculous position immediately, sir, or you will oblige me to ring the bell!"

“Hear me out, miss!” said Mr. Guppy, clasping his hands.

“I cannot consent to hear another word, sir,” I returned, “unless you get up from the carpet directly and sit down at the table.”

He looked piteously, but slowly rose and did so.

“I beg you to conclude,” said I; “since you have asked me to hear you out.”

“I will, miss,” said Mr. Guppy. “As I love and honour, so likewise I obey. Would that I could make thee the subject of that vow before the shrine!”

“That is quite impossible,” said I, “and entirely out of the question.”

“I am aware,” said Mr. Guppy, leaning forward over the tray intently, “that in a worldly point of view, my offer is a poor one. But, Miss Summerson! Angel! No, don’t ring – I have been brought up in a sharp school. I have ferreted out evidence, got up cases, and seen lots of life. Blest with your hand, I might find means of advancing your interests! What might I not get to know concerning you? I know nothing now, certainly; but what if I had your confidence, and you set me on?”

I told him that he would now understand that I requested him, if he pleased, to go away immediately.

“Cruel miss,” said Mr. Guppy, “hear but another word! I think you must have seen that I was struck with those charms on that first day I saw you. Thy image has ever since been fixed in my breast. I have walked up and down of an evening opposite Jellyby’s house only to look upon the bricks that once contained thee. This meeting today, quite unnecessary as far as its pretended object went, was planned by me alone for thee alone.”

“I should be pained, Mr. Guppy,” said I, rising and putting my hand upon the bell-rope, “to slight any honest feeling, however disagreeably expressed. If you have really meant to give me a proof of your good opinion, though ill-timed and misplaced, I feel that I ought to thank you. I hope that you will now go away as if you had never been so exceedingly foolish and attend to Messrs. Kenge and Carboy’s business.”

“Half a minute, miss!” cried Mr. Guppy. “This has been without prejudice?”

“I will never mention it,” said I, “unless you should give me future occasion to do so.”

“A quarter of a minute, miss! In case you should think better at any time of anything I have said, Mr. William Guppy, eighty-seven, Penton Place, or if removed, or dead (of blighted hopes or anything of that sort), care of Mrs. Guppy, three hundred and two, Old Street Road, will be sufficient.”

I rang the bell, the servant came, and Mr. Guppy, with a dejected bow, departed.

I sat there for another hour, getting through plenty of business. Then I arranged my desk, and put everything away, and was so composed and cheerful that I thought I had quite dismissed this unexpected incident. But, when I went upstairs to my own room, I surprised myself by beginning to laugh about it and then surprised myself still more by beginning to cry. In

short, I was in a flutter for a little while and felt as if an old chord had been more coarsely touched than it ever had been since the days of the dear old doll, long buried in the garden.

Chapter 10

The Law-Writer

On the eastern borders of Chancery Lane, in Cook's Court, Mr. Snagsby, law-stationer, pursues his lawful calling. In the shade of Cook's Court, at most times a shady place, Mr. Snagsby has dealt in all sorts of blank legal forms; in rolls of parchment; in paper; in stamps; in quills, pens, ink, India-rubber, pencils, sealing-wax, and wafers; in pocket-books, almanacs, and diaries; in ink-stands, scissors, and other small office-cutlery; in short, in articles too numerous to mention, ever since he went into partnership with Peffer. The inscription in Cook's Court used to read PEFFER AND SNAGSBY, but Peffer has been lying for a quarter of a century in the churchyard.

In his lifetime, there dwelt with Peffer a niece – a short, shrewd niece, with a sharp nose. The Cook's Courtiers had a rumour that this niece had been dosed with pints of vinegar, which had mounted to her temper. However, this rumour never reached the ears of young Snagsby, who wooed and won her, and so entered into two partnerships at once.

Mr. and Mrs. Snagsby are not only one flesh, but, to the neighbours' thinking, one voice too. That voice, through Mrs. Snagsby, is heard in Cook's Court very often. Mr. Snagsby is rarely heard. He is a mild, bald, timid man with a shining head. He tends to meekness and obesity. As he stands behind a desk in his dark shop, snipping parchment with his two apprentices, he is an unassuming man. At such times, as from a shrill ghost unquiet in its grave, there frequently arise complainings in the voice already mentioned; and Mr. Snagsby says, "I think my little woman is a-giving it to Guster!"

Guster is the name of a lean young woman from a workhouse (supposed to have been christened Augusta), who "has fits". Guster, aged three or four and twenty, but looking ten years older, is cheap because of this drawback of fits, and is so apprehensive of being returned to the workhouse that she is always at work. The law-stationer's establishment is, in her eyes, a temple of plenty and splendour. She believes the little drawing-room to be the most elegant apartment in Christendom, and its view of Cook's Court and Coavinses' the sheriff's officer's backyard to be a prospect of unequalled beauty.

Mr. Snagsby refers everything apart from stationery to Mrs. Snagsby. She manages the money, reproaches the tax-gatherers, licenses Mr. Snagsby's entertainments, and orders what she likes for dinner. Rumour, always flying bat-like about Cook's Court and skimming in and out at everybody's windows, does say that Mrs. Snagsby is jealous and inquisitive and that if Mr. Snagsby had the spirit of a mouse he wouldn't stand it. But these vague whisperings may arise from Mr. Snagsby's being rather a meditative and poetical man.

The day is closing in now and the gas is lit. Mr. Snagsby, standing at his shop-door, sees a crow skim westward over the slice of sky belonging to Cook's Court, and straight across Chancery Lane into Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Here, in a large house, lives Mr. Tulkinghorn. It is let off in sets of chambers now, and in those shrunken fragments of its greatness, lawyers lie like maggots in nuts. But its roomy staircases, passages, and antechambers remain; and even its painted ceilings, where Allegory, in Roman helmet and celestial linen, sprawls among pillars, flowers, and clouds. Here lives Mr. Tulkinghorn, when not speechless in country-houses. Here he is today, quiet at his table; an oyster of the old school whom nobody can open.

His apartment is rusty and out of date. Heavy, old-fashioned, mahogany-and-horsehair chairs; obsolete tables with spindle-legs and dusty baize covers. Two candles that give a very insufficient light to his large room. The titles on the backs of his books have retired into the binding; everything that can have a lock has got one. Very few loose papers are about. He has some manuscript near him, but is not reading. He is fiddling with some sealing-wax, and thinking.

Here, beneath the painted ceiling, with Allegory staring down at him, Mr. Tulkinghorn has at once his house and office. He keeps no staff, only one middle-aged man, who sits in a high pew in the hall and is rarely overburdened with business. Mr. Tulkinghorn needs no clerks. He is a great reservoir of confidences; his clients want *him*; he is all in all. Any copies that he requires are made at the stationers'.

Now Mr. Tulkinghorn gets up, puts on his hat, puts the manuscript in his pocket, and goes out, telling the middle-aged man, "I shall be back presently." He goes, as the crow came, to Cook's Court: to Snagsby's, Law-Stationer's.

It is five or six o'clock in the afternoon, and a balmy fragrance of warm tea hovers in Cook's Court. Mr. Snagsby has descended into the subterranean regions to take tea.

"Master at home?"

Guster is minding the shop. Master is at home, and Guster will fetch him. She disappears, glad to get out of the shop, which she regards with mingled dread and veneration.

Mr. Snagsby appears, greasy, warm, and chewing. He bolts a bit of bread and butter, and says, "Bless my soul, sir! Mr. Tulkinghorn!"

"I want half a word with you, Snagsby."

"Certainly, sir! Pray walk into the back shop."

The confined room is warehouse, counting-house, and copying-office. Mr. Tulkinghorn sits on a stool at the desk.

"Jarndyce and Jarndyce, Snagsby."

"Yes, sir." Mr. Snagsby turns up the gas and coughs, modestly anticipating profit. Mr. Snagsby, as a timid man, is accustomed to cough with a variety of expressions, so as to save words.

"You copied some affidavits in that cause for me lately."

"Yes, sir, we did."

“There was one of them,” says Mr. Tulkinghorn, carelessly feeling in the wrong coat-pocket, “the handwriting of which is peculiar, and which I rather like. As I happened to be passing, I looked in to ask you who copied this.”

“Who copied this, sir?” says Mr. Snagsby, laying it flat on the desk. “We gave this out, sir. We were giving out rather a large quantity of work just at that time. I can tell you in a moment who copied it, sir, by referring to my book.”

Mr. Snagsby takes his book down from the safe, and brings his right forefinger down a page.

“Here we are, sir,” he says. “To be sure! This was given out, sir, to a writer who lodges just across the lane.”

Mr. Tulkinghorn has seen the entry and read it while the forefinger was still coming down the page.

“*What* do you call him? Nemo?” says Mr. Tulkinghorn.

“Nemo, sir. Given out on the Wednesday night at eight o’clock, brought in on the Thursday morning at half after nine.”

“Nemo!” repeats Mr. Tulkinghorn. “Nemo is Latin for no one.”

“It must be English for some one, sir, I think,” Mr. Snagsby submits with his deferential cough. “Here it is, you see, sir!”

Mr. Snagsby becomes conscious of the head of Mrs. Snagsby looking in at the shop-door to know what he means by deserting his tea. Mr. Snagsby addresses an explanatory cough to her.

“Our law-writers, who live by job-work, are a queer lot, sir; and this may not be his name, but it’s the name he goes by. He has an advertisement stuck up at the Rule Office, and the Judges’ Chambers, and so forth. You know the kind of document, sir – wanting employ?”

Mr. Tulkinghorn glances through the little window at Coavinses’, the sheriff’s officer’s, where lights shine in the windows. Coavinses’ coffee-room is at the back, and the shadows of several gentlemen loom cloudily upon the blinds.

“Have you given this man work before?” asks Mr. Tulkinghorn.

“Oh, dear, yes, sir!”

“I forget where you said he lived?”

“Across the lane, sir. He lodges at a rag and bottle shop.”

“Can you show me the place as I go back?”

“With the greatest pleasure, sir!”

Mr. Snagsby pulls on his black coat, and takes his hat from its peg. “Oh! Here is my little woman!” he says. “My dear, will you be so kind as to tell one of the lads to look after the shop while I step across the lane with Mr. Tulkinghorn?”

Mrs. Snagsby retires behind the counter, peeps at them through the window-blind, goes softly into the back office, and looks at the entries in the book still lying open.

“You will find that the place is rough, sir,” says Mr. Snagsby. “But they’re a wild lot in general, sir. The advantage of this particular man is that he never wants sleep. He’ll work as long as ever you like.”

It is quite dark now. Jostling against clerks going to post the day's letters, and against counsel and attorneys going home to dinner, and against plaintiffs and defendants and suitors of all sorts, the lawyer and the law-stationer come to a rag and bottle shop in the shadow of the wall of Lincoln's Inn, kept by one Krook.

"This is where he lives, sir," says the law-stationer.

"Thank you. Good evening!"

Mr. Snagsby lifts his hat and returns to his little woman and his tea.

Mr. Tulkinghorn enters the shop. It is dim enough, with a candle in the window, and an old man and a cat sitting in the back by a fire. The old man rises and comes forward, with another candle in his hand.

"Pray is your lodger within? The person who does copying?"

Mr. Krook has eyed his man narrowly. Knows him by sight. Has an impression of his aristocratic repute.

"Did you wish to see him, sir?"

"Yes."

"Shall I call him down? But it's a weak chance he'd come, sir!" says Mr. Krook with a grin.

"I'll go up to him, then," says Mr. Tulkinghorn.

"Second floor, sir. Take the candle." Mr. Krook, with his cat beside him, stands at the bottom of the staircase. The cat snarls at Mr. Tulkinghorn.

"Order, Lady Jane! Behave yourself to visitors, my lady! You know what they say of my lodger?" whispers Krook.

"What do they say of him?"

"They say he has sold himself to the devil, but you and I know better. I'll tell you what, though; my lodger is so black-humoured and gloomy that I believe he'd as soon make that bargain as any other. Don't put him out, sir. That's my advice!"

Mr. Tulkinghorn with a nod goes on his way. He comes to the dark door on the second floor. He knocks, receives no answer; opens it.

It is a small room, nearly black with soot and dirt. In the rusty grate, a red fire burns low. In the corner by the chimney stand an old table and a broken desk, marked with a rain of ink. In another corner a ragged old portmanteau serves for a wardrobe, collapsing like the cheeks of a starved man. The floor is bare, except that one old mat, trodden to shreds, lies perishing upon the hearth. No curtain veils the darkness of the night, but the discoloured shutters are drawn together, and through the two gaunt holes pierced in them, famine might be staring in – the banshee of the man upon the bed.

For, on a low bed opposite the fire, a confusion of dirty patchwork and coarse sacking, the lawyer sees a man. He lies there, dressed in shirt and trousers, with bare feet. He has a yellow look in the spectral darkness of a drooping, dying candle. His hair is ragged and neglected, as is his beard. Foul and filthy as the room is, foul and filthy as the air is, it is not easy to perceive what fumes those are which most oppress the senses in it; but through the

general sickliness and odour of stale tobacco, there comes into the lawyer's mouth the bitter, vapid taste of opium.

“Hallo, my friend!” he cries.

The man lies a little turned away, but his eyes are surely open.

“Hallo, my friend!” cries Tulkinghorn again. “Hallo! Hallo!”

And the drooping candle goes out and leaves him in the dark, with the gaunt eyes in the shutters staring down upon the bed.

Chapter 11

Our Dear Brother

A touch on the lawyer's wrinkled hand as he stands in the dark room, irresolute, makes him start and say, "What's that?"

"It's me," returns the old man of the house. "Can't you wake him?"

"No."

"What have you done with your candle?"

"It's gone out."

Krook takes it, goes to the fire, stoops over the red embers, and tries to get a light, in vain. Muttering that he will go downstairs and bring a lighted candle from the shop, the old man departs. Mr. Tulkinghorn, for some reason, does not await his return in the room, but on the stairs outside.

The welcome light soon shines upon the wall, as Krook comes slowly up with his green-eyed cat following at his heels.

"Does the man generally sleep like this?" inquires the lawyer in a low voice.

"Hi! I don't know," says Krook, shaking his head. "I know next to nothing of his habits except that he keeps himself very close."

They go in together with the light. The great eyes in the shutters seem to close. Not so the eyes upon the bed.

"God save us!" exclaims Mr. Tulkinghorn. "He is dead!"

They look at one another for a moment.

"Send for a doctor! Call for Miss Flite up the stairs, sir. Here's poison by the bed!" says Krook.

Mr. Tulkinghorn hurries to the landing and calls, "Miss Flite! Make haste, here, whoever you are!" While he is calling, Krook steals across to the old portmanteau and back again.

"Run, Flite, run! The nearest doctor! Run!" So Mr. Krook addresses the crazy little woman who is his female lodger, who vanishes in a breath, and soon returns accompanied by a testy medical man with a broad Scotch accent.

"Ey! Bless the hearts o' ye," says the medical man, after a moment's examination. "He's just as dead as Phairy!"

Mr. Tulkinghorn asks how long he has been dead.

"It's probable about three hours, sir."

"About that time, I should say," observes a dark young man on the other side of the bed.

"Air you in the maydickle prayfession yourself, sir?" inquires the first.

The dark young man says yes.

"Then I'll just tak' my depairture," replies the other; and he leaves.

The dark young surgeon carefully examines the law-writer, who has now indeed become No one.

“I knew this person by sight very well,” says he. “He has purchased opium from me for the last year and a half. Was anybody present related to him?” glancing round upon the three bystanders.

“I was his landlord,” grimly answers Krook. “He told me once I was the nearest relation he had.”

“He has died,” says the surgeon, “of an over-dose of opium, there is no doubt. There is enough here,” taking an old tea-pot from Mr. Krook, “to kill a dozen people.”

“Do you think he did it on purpose?” asks Krook.

“I can’t say. I should think it unlikely, as he has been in the habit of taking so much. But nobody can tell. He was very poor, I suppose?”

“I suppose he was,” says Krook. “But he never told me.”

“Did he owe you any rent?”

“Six weeks.”

“He will never pay it!” says the young man. “He is indeed as dead as Pharaoh; and I should think it a happy release. Yet he must have been a good figure when a youth, and I dare say, good-looking.” He says this not unfeelingly. “I recollect once thinking there was something in his manner that denoted a fall in life. Was that so?”

Krook replies, “I only know that he was my lodger for a year and a half and lived – or didn’t live – by law-writing, I know no more of him.”

During this dialogue Mr. Tulkinghorn has stood aloof by the old portmanteau, with his hands behind him, apparently unmoved. His imperturbable face has been as inexpressive as his rusty clothes. He now addresses the young surgeon in his professional way.

“I looked in here,” he observes, “just before you, with the intention of giving this deceased man some employment at his trade of copying. I had heard of him from my stationer – Snagsby of Cook’s Court. Since no one here knows anything about him, it might be as well to send for Snagsby. Ah!” to the little crazy woman, who has often seen him in court. “Suppose you go for him!”

While she is gone, the surgeon covers the body with the patchwork counterpane. Mr. Krook and he exchange a word or two. Mr. Tulkinghorn says nothing, but stands near the old portmanteau.

Mr. Snagsby arrives hastily. “Dear me, dear me,” he says; “and it has come to this! Bless my soul!”

“Can you give us any information about this unfortunate creature?” inquires Mr. Tulkinghorn. “He owed rent, it seems. And he must be buried, you know.”

“Well, sir,” says Mr. Snagsby, coughing apologetically, “I really don’t know what advice I could offer, except sending for the beadle.”

“I don’t speak of advice,” returns Mr. Tulkinghorn. “I am asking for some clue to his connexions, or to where he came from.”

“I assure you, sir,” says Mr. Snagsby, “that I don’t know. About a year and a half ago he came into our place one morning, and finding my little woman in our shop, produced a specimen of his handwriting and told her that

he was in want of copying work to do and was, not to put too fine a point upon it, hard up! My little woman is not in general partial to strangers. But she was rather took by something about this person; and she accepted of the specimen. He gradually fell into job-work at our place; and that is the most I know of him except that he was a quick hand, and would work through the night."

"Hadn't you better see," says Mr. Tulkinghorn to Krook, "whether he had any papers that may enlighten you? There will be an inquest, and you will be asked the question. You can read?"

"No, I can't," returns the old man with a sudden grin.

"Snagsby," says Mr. Tulkinghorn, "look over the room for him. He will get into some difficulty otherwise. I'll wait if you make haste, and then I can testify on his behalf, if it should ever be necessary, that all was fair and right. If you will hold the candle for Mr. Snagsby, my friend, he'll soon see whether there is anything to help you."

"Here's an old portmanteau, sir," says Snagsby.

Ah, to be sure, so there is! Mr. Tulkinghorn does not appear to have seen it before, though he is standing so close to it.

The law-stationer conducts the search. The surgeon leans against the corner of the chimney-piece; Miss Flite peeps and trembles just within the door.

There are some worthless articles of clothing in the old portmanteau; a bundle of pawnbrokers' duplicates, a crumpled paper, smelling of opium, a few dirty scraps of newspapers, all referring to coroners' inquests; there is nothing else. They search the drawer of the ink-splashed table. There is not a morsel of any writing. The young surgeon examines the law-writer's clothes; a knife and some odd halfpence are all he finds. Mr. Snagsby's suggestion is the practical suggestion after all, and the beadle must be called in.

So the little crazy lodger goes for the beadle, and the rest come out of the room, driving the cat before them.

"Good night!" says Mr. Tulkinghorn, and goes home to Allegory and meditation.

By this time the news has got into the court. Groups of its inhabitants assemble to discuss it, and several boys are pushed forward to Mr. Krook's window to see what they can. A policeman stands like a tower at the door, only condescending to see the boys occasionally; but whenever he does see them, they quail and fall back. People talk across the court out of windows, and scouts come hurrying in from Chancery Lane to know what's the matter. In the midst of this sensation, the beadle arrives and goes in.

By and by the beadle comes out. He is understood to want witnesses for the inquest tomorrow who can tell the coroner anything whatever about the deceased. Is immediately referred to innumerable people who can tell nothing whatever. The beadle goes into various shops and parlours, examining the inhabitants, always shutting the door first, and exasperating the public, who lose interest. So the excitement dies off for the time; and the unmoved policeman pursues his lounging way with a heavy tread.

Under cover of the night, the feeble-minded beadle comes flitting about Chancery Lane with his summonses, in which every juror's name is wrongly spelt. And all that night the coffin stands ready by the old portmanteau; and the lonely figure on the bed, whose path in life has lain through five and forty years, lies there with no track behind him.

Next day the court is all alive. The coroner is to sit in the first-floor room at the Sol's Arms, which does brisk business all the morning. A pieman has established himself for the occasion at the corner of the court; and the beadle, hovering at the door, accepts a glass of ale.

At the appointed hour arrives the coroner, for whom the jurymen are waiting. He is conducted by the beadle and the landlord to the Harmonic Meeting Room, where he puts his hat on the piano and takes a chair at the head of a long table formed of several short tables put together and ornamented with glutinous rings made by pots and glasses. As many of the jury as can crowd together at the table sit there.

"Well, gentlemen—" the coroner begins.

"Silence there, will you!" says the beadle.

"Well, gentlemen," resumes the coroner. "You are to inquire into the death of a certain man. Evidence will be given as to the circumstances attending that death, and you will give your verdict according to the evidence. The first thing to be done is to view the body."

"Make way there!" cries the beadle.

So they go out in a loose procession, like a straggling funeral, and make their inspection in Mr. Krook's back second floor, from which a few of the jurymen retire pale and precipitately.

When the jurymen return, Mr. Tulkinghorn is seated near the coroner. The inquiry proceeds. The jury learn how the subject of their inquiry died, and learn no more about him.

"This eminent solicitor, gentlemen," says the coroner, "was accidentally present when the death was discovered, but he could only repeat the evidence you have already heard. Does anybody here know anything more?"

Mrs. Piper is pushed forward, and sworn in.

"Now, Mrs. Piper, what have you got to say about this?"

Why, Mrs. Piper has a good deal to say, chiefly without punctuation, but not much to tell. Mrs. Piper lives in the court and it has long been well known among the neighbours as the plaintive – so Mrs. Piper insists on calling the deceased – was reported to have sold himself. She see the plaintive often and considered as his air was feariocious and not to be allowed to go about some children being timid. Has seen the plaintive wexed and worried by the children. Has seen him hurry away as if not partial to children and never see him speak to neither child nor grown person at any time excepting the boy that sweeps the crossing down the lane over the way round the corner which if he was here would tell you that he has been seen a-speaking to him frequent.

Says the coroner, go and fetch that boy. While waiting, he converses with Mr. Tulkinghorn.

Oh! Here's the boy, gentlemen!

Here he is, very muddy, very hoarse, very ragged. He must be put through a few preliminary paces.

Name, Jo. Nothing else that he knows on. Don't know that everybody has two names. Don't know that Jo is short for a longer name. Thinks it long enough for *him*. Spell it? No, he can't spell it. No father, no mother, no friends. Never been to school. Knows a broom's a broom, and knows it's wicked to tell a lie. Don't recollect who told him about the broom or about the lie, but knows both. Can't exactly say what'll be done to him arter he's dead if he tells a lie to the gentlemen here, but believes it'll be something wery bad to punish him, so he'll tell the truth.

"This won't do, gentlemen!" says the coroner with a melancholy shake of the head. "You have heard the boy. 'Can't exactly say' won't do, you know. It's terrible depravity. We can't take his evidence."

Boy put aside. Is there any other witness? No other witness.

Very well, gentlemen! Here's a man unknown, proved to have been in the habit of taking opium in large quantities for a year and a half, found dead of too much opium. If you think you have any evidence that he committed suicide, you will come to that conclusion. If you think it is a case of accidental death, you will find a verdict accordingly.

Verdict accordingly. Accidental death. No doubt. Gentlemen, you are discharged. Good afternoon.

While the coroner buttons his great-coat, he and Mr. Tulkinghorn speak privately to the rejected witness, Jo, in a corner.

That graceless creature only knows that the dead man was sometimes hooted and pursued about the streets. That one cold winter night when he, the boy, was shivering in a doorway, the man turned to look at him, and came back, and having questioned him and found that he had not a friend in the world, said, "Neither have I. Not one!" and gave him the price of a supper and a night's lodging. That the man had often spoken to him since and asked him whether he slept sound at night, and how he bore cold and hunger, and whether he ever wished to die, and similar strange questions. That when the man had no money, he would say in passing, "I am as poor as you today, Jo," but that when he had any, he had always been glad to give him some.

"He was wery good to me," says the boy, wiping his eyes with his wretched sleeve. "He wos wery good to me, he wos!"

As he shuffles downstairs, Mr. Snagsby, lying in wait for him, puts a half-crown in his hand. "If you ever see me coming past your crossing with my little woman – I mean a lady—" says Mr. Snagsby with his finger on his nose, "don't allude to it!"

For some time the jurymen hang about the Sol's Arms in a cloud of pipe-smoke. Then, gradually, the Sol's Arms melts into the shadowy night.

Then there is rest around the lonely figure, now laid in its last earthly habitation; and it is watched by the gaunt eyes in the shutters through the quiet hours of night.

In the morning the body is taken to a hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene. With houses looking on, on every side, save where a reeking

little tunnel of a court gives access to the iron gate – here they lower our dear brother down a foot or two, here sow him in corruption.

Come night, come darkness, for you cannot come too soon or stay too long by such a place as this! Come, straggling lights into the windows of the ugly houses!

With the night comes a slouching figure through the tunnel-court to the outside of the iron gate. It holds the gate with its hands and looks in between the bars for a little while.

It then, with an old broom it carries, softly sweeps the step and makes the archway clean. It looks in again, and so departs.

Jo, is it thou? Well, well! Though a rejected witness, who “can’t exactly say” what will be done to him in greater hands than men’s, thou art not quite in outer darkness. There is something like a distant ray of light in thy muttered reason: “He was verry good to me, he wos!”

Chapter 12

On the Watch

It has left off raining down in Lincolnshire at last, and Sir Leicester and my Lady are coming home from Paris to Chesney Wold. There, according to the fashionable world, they will be entertaining a brilliant and distinguished circle of the elite.

The broken arch of the bridge in the park is mended; and the water, again spanned gracefully, makes a fine view from the house. The clear, cold sunshine glances into the brittle woods and approvingly beholds the sharp wind scattering the leaves and drying the moss. It glides over the park, chasing the shadows of the clouds. It looks in at the windows and touches the ancestral portraits with patches of brightness. Across the picture of my Lady, over the great chimney-piece, it throws a broad bend-sinister of light.

Through the same cold sunshine and the same sharp wind, my Lady and Sir Leicester start for home. With much jingling and whip-cracking, their carriage rattles out of the yard of the hotel and canters out of Paris.

To tell the truth, they cannot go away too fast, for even here my Lady Dedlock has been bored to death. Concert, assembly, opera, theatre, drive, nothing is new to my Lady under the worn-out heavens. Only last Sunday, when poor families were playing with children among the clipped trees and the statues in the Palace Garden; or walking in the Elysian Fields, or through the gloomy Cathedral – only last Sunday, my Lady, in the desolation of Boredom and the clutch of Giant Despair, almost hated her own maid for being in spirits.

She cannot, therefore, go too fast from Paris. Weariness of soul lies everywhere, but the imperfect remedy is always to fly from the last place where it has been felt. Fling Paris back into the distance, then!

Sir Leicester is generally complacent, and rarely bored. When he has nothing else to do, he can always contemplate his own greatness. It is a considerable advantage to a man to have so inexhaustible a subject. After reading his letters, he leans back in his corner of the carriage and reviews his importance to society.

“You have an unusual amount of correspondence this morning?” says my Lady.

“Nothing in it, though.”

“I saw one of Mr. Tulkinghorn’s long effusions, I think?”

“You see everything,” says Sir Leicester with admiration.

“Ha!” sighs my Lady. “He is the most tiresome of men!”

“He sends,” says Sir Leicester, unfolding the letter, “a message to you. Our stopping to change horses drove it out of my memory. He says—” Sir Leicester adjusts his eye-glass – “he says ‘In the matter of the right of way—’ I beg your pardon, that’s not the place. Here it is! He says, ‘I beg my

respectful compliments to my Lady. Will you do me the favour to mention that I have something to tell her on her return in reference to the person who copied the affidavit in the Chancery suit, which so powerfully stimulated her curiosity. I have seen him.”

My Lady looks out of her window. “I should like to walk a little,” she says.

“Walk?” repeats Sir Leicester in surprise.

“I should like to walk a little,” says my Lady distinctly. “Please stop the carriage.”

The carriage is stopped, and the door is opened. My Lady alights and walks away so quickly that Sir Leicester is left behind. A minute or two elapses before he catches up with her. She smiles, looks very handsome, takes his arm, lounges with him for a quarter of a mile, is very much bored, and resumes her seat in the carriage.

The rattle and clatter of travel continue for three days. Their courtly politeness to each other at the hotels where they stay is the theme of general admiration. Though my Lord is a little aged for my Lady, says Madame, the hostess of the Golden Ape, one can see at a glance that they love each other. One observes my Lord help my Lady from the carriage. One observes my Lady graciously incline her head to him. It is ravishing!

The sea has no appreciation of great men, but knocks them about like small fry. It is always hard upon Sir Leicester; nevertheless, his dignity gets over it, and he goes on with my Lady to Chesney Wold.

Through the cold sunlight and the sharp wind, as the day declines and the Ghost’s Walk resigns itself to coming night, they drive into the park. The rooks, swinging in their lofty houses in the elm-tree avenue, seem to break out into violent debate above them. The carriage rolls on to the house, where fires gleam warmly through some of the windows, though not many as yet. But the brilliant and distinguished circle will soon change that.

Mrs. Rouncewell is waiting and receives Sir Leicester’s handshake with a deep curtsy.

“How do you do, Mrs. Rouncewell? I am glad to see you.”

“I hope I have the honour of welcoming you in good health, Sir Leicester?”

“In excellent health, Mrs. Rouncewell.”

“My Lady is looking charmingly well,” says Mrs. Rouncewell with another curtsy.

My Lady signifies briefly that she is as wearily well as she can hope to be.

But Rosa is behind the housekeeper; and my Lady asks, “Who is that girl?”

“A young scholar of mine, my Lady. Rosa.”

“Come here, Rosa!” Lady Dedlock beckons her, with even an appearance of interest. “Why, do you know how pretty you are, child?” she says, touching her shoulder.

Rosa, very much abashed, says, “No, if you please, my Lady!” and glances up, and glances down, and doesn’t know where to look, but looks all the prettier.

“How old are you?”

“Nineteen, my Lady.”

“Nineteen,” repeats my Lady thoughtfully. “Take care they don’t spoil you by flattery.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

My Lady taps her cheek with delicate gloved fingers and goes on to the staircase.

That evening, in the housekeeper’s room, Rosa can do nothing but murmur Lady Dedlock’s praises. She is so affable, so graceful, so beautiful, so elegant; has such a sweet voice and such a thrilling touch that Rosa can feel it yet! Mrs. Rouncewell confirms all this with some pride, being unsure only about the Lady’s affability. If my Lady were not quite so cold and distant, Mrs. Rouncewell thinks she would be more affable.

“’Tis almost a pity,” Mrs. Rouncewell adds, “that my Lady has no family. If she had had a daughter to interest her, I think she would have had the only kind of excellence she lacks.”

“Might not that have made her still more proud, grandmother?” says Watt, who has come to visit again, he is such a good grandson. “She is proud, is she not?”

“If she is, she has reason to be. The Dedlock family have always reason to be.”

“I suppose, grandmother,” says Watt, “that even with the family and their guests here, there is no objection to my prolonging my stay at the Dedlock Arms for a day or two?”

“Surely, none in the world, child.”

“I am glad of that,” says Watt, “because I long to extend my knowledge of this beautiful neighbourhood.”

He happens to glance at Rosa, who looks down and is very shy indeed. But according to the old superstition, it should be Rosa’s ears that burn, and not her fresh bright cheeks; for my Lady’s maid is holding forth about her at this moment with great energy.

My Lady’s maid is a Frenchwoman of thirty-two, a large-eyed woman who would be handsome but for a certain feline mouth and general uncomfortable tightness of face. She has a watchful way of looking out of the corners of her eyes which could be pleasantly dispensed with, especially when she is in an ill humour and near knives. With her tasteful dress and little adornments, she seems like a very neat she-wolf imperfectly tamed. She has good English, and no lack of words to shower upon Rosa for having attracted my Lady’s attention. She pours them out with grim ridicule at dinner.

Ha, ha, ha! She, Hortense, has been in my Lady’s service since five years and always kept at the distance, and this doll, this puppet, caressed by my Lady on the moment of her arriving at the house! Oh, how droll!

In short, Mademoiselle Hortense can't forget it; but for days afterwards, shows her silent enjoyment of the joke by her tightness of face and thin compressed lips. Her sideways look is frequently reflected in my Lady's mirrors when my Lady is not there.

All the mirrors in the house are brought into action now. They reflect handsome faces, simpering faces, youthful faces, faces of seventy that will not submit to be old; all the faces that have come to pass a January week or two at Chesney Wold. The place in Lincolnshire is all alive. By day guns and voices are heard ringing in the woods, horsemen and carriages enliven the park roads, servants fill the village and the Dedlock Arms. On Sunday the chill little church is almost warmed by so much gallant company.

The brilliant and distinguished circle includes within it much education, sense, courage, honour, beauty, and virtue. Yet there is something a little wrong about it. What can it be?

Dandyism? There is no King George the Fourth now to set the dandy fashion; no exquisites swooning in opera boxes or beaux whom it takes four men to shake into his buckskins. But some ladies and gentlemen in the distinguished circle have set up a dandyism – in religion, for instance. In want of an emotion, they have agreed upon a little dandy talk about the vulgar lacking faith in things, and would make the vulgar very picturesque and faithful by putting back the hands of time and cancelling a few hundred years of history.

There are also ladies and gentlemen of another fashion, who have agreed to put a smooth glaze on the world and to keep down all its realities. For whom everything must be languid and pretty. Who are not to be disturbed by ideas. For whom even the fine arts must array themselves in the patterns of the past and be particularly careful not to be in earnest.

Then there is my Lord Boodle, of considerable reputation with his political party, who tells Sir Leicester Dedlock, after dinner, that a debate is not what it used to be; the House is not what it used to be; even a Cabinet is not what it formerly was; and the country is shipwrecked, gone to pieces!

Across the table, the Right Honourable William Buffy, M.P., contends that the shipwreck of the country is due entirely to the wrong people being in charge. It is perfectly clear to the brilliant and distinguished circle that Boodle and his retinue, and Buffy and his retinue, are the great actors for whom the stage is reserved. A People there are, no doubt – who are to be occasionally addressed, and relied upon for shouts and choruses; but Boodle and Buffy, and their followers and families, are the chief actors, managers, and leaders, and no others can appear upon the scene for ever and ever.

Chesney Wold is so full that only one room is empty. It is a turret chamber, plainly but comfortably furnished, with an old-fashioned business air. It is Mr. Tulkinghorn's room, and is never bestowed on anybody else, for he may come at any time. He is not come yet.

Every day before dinner, my Lady looks for him in the dusk of the library, but he is not there. Every day at dinner, my Lady glances down the table for the vacant place that would be set for him if he had just arrived, but

there is no vacant place. Every night my Lady casually asks her maid, "Is Mr. Tulkinghorn come?"

Every night the answer is, "No, my Lady, not yet."

One night, while having her hair undressed, my Lady loses herself in deep thought after this reply, until she sees her own brooding face in the glass, and Hortense curiously observing her.

"Be so good as to attend to your business," says my Lady.

At length, one afternoon a little before sunset, when the bright groups of figures which have for the last hour or two enlivened the Ghost's Walk are all dispersed and only Sir Leicester and my Lady remain upon the terrace, Mr. Tulkinghorn appears. He comes towards them at his usual methodical pace, wearing his usual expressionless mask.

"How do you do, Mr. Tulkinghorn?" says Sir Leicester, giving him his hand.

Mr. Tulkinghorn is quite well. He walks at Sir Leicester's side along the terrace. My Lady walks upon the other side.

"We expected you before," says Sir Leicester graciously, as if to say, "Mr. Tulkinghorn, we remember your existence. We bestow a fragment of our minds upon you, sir, you see!"

Mr. Tulkinghorn says he is much obliged.

"I should have come down sooner," he explains, "but I have been much engaged with those suits between yourself and Boythorn."

"A man of a very ill-regulated mind," observes Sir Leicester with severity. "A dangerous person of low character."

"He is obstinate," says Mr. Tulkinghorn.

"It is natural to such a man to be so," says Sir Leicester, looking profoundly obstinate himself.

"The only question is," pursues the lawyer, "whether you will give up anything. I don't mean anything of importance. I mean any minor point."

"Mr. Tulkinghorn," returns Sir Leicester, "there can be no minor point between myself and Mr. Boythorn. In fact, I cannot readily conceive how *any* right of mine can be a minor point."

Mr. Tulkinghorn inclines his head. "Mr. Boythorn will give us a good deal of trouble—"

"It is the character of such a mind," Sir Leicester interrupts him, "to give trouble. But night is coming on, and my Lady will take cold. My dear, let us go in."

As they turn towards the hall-door, Lady Dedlock addresses Mr. Tulkinghorn for the first time.

"You sent me a message about the person whose writing I happened to inquire about. I had quite forgotten it. Your message reminded me of it again. I can't imagine what association I had with a hand like that, but I think I must have had some. Did you really take the trouble to find out the writer of that thing – what is it! – affidavit?"

"Yes."

"How very odd!"

They pass into a sombre breakfast-room on the ground floor, lighted in the day by two deep windows. It is now twilight. My Lady lounges in a great chair in the chimney-corner, and Sir Leicester takes another great chair opposite. The lawyer stands before the fire, shading his face. He looks at my Lady.

“Yes,” he says, “I inquired about the man, and found him. And, what is very strange, I found him dead.”

“Oh, dear me!” remonstrated Sir Leicester. Not so much shocked by the fact as by the fact of the fact being mentioned.

“I was directed to his lodging – a miserable, poverty-stricken place – and I found him dead.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Tulkinghorn,” observes Sir Leicester. “I think the less said the better.”

“Pray, Sir Leicester, let me hear the story out” (it is my Lady speaking). “It is quite a story for twilight. How very shocking! Dead?”

Mr. Tulkinghorn nods. “Whether by his own hand—”

“Really!” cries Sir Leicester.

“Do let me hear the story!” says my Lady. “Go on, Mr. Tulkinghorn.”

Sir Leicester gallantly concedes.

“I was about to say,” resumes the lawyer calmly, “that whether he had died by his own hand or not, it was beyond my power to tell you. He had unquestionably died of his own act, however, though whether deliberately or by mischance can never be known. The coroner’s jury found that he took the poison accidentally.”

“And what kind of man,” my Lady asks, “was this deplorable creature?”

“Very difficult to say,” returns the lawyer, shaking his head. “He had lived so wretchedly and was so neglected, with his wild black hair and beard, that I should have considered him the commonest of the common. The surgeon had a notion that he had once been something better.”

“What did they call the wretched being?”

“No one knew his name.”

“Not even anyone who had attended on him?”

“No one had attended on him. He was found dead. In fact, I found him.”

“Without any clue to anything more?”

“Without any; there was an old portmanteau,” says the lawyer meditatively, “but there were no papers.”

During every word of this short dialogue, Lady Dedlock and Mr. Tulkinghorn have looked very steadily at one another. Sir Leicester has looked at the fire. He now says haughtily that he trusts to hear no more about a subject so far removed from my Lady’s station.

“Certainly, a collection of horrors,” says my Lady, gathering up her furs, “but they interest one for the moment! Have the kindness, Mr. Tulkinghorn, to open the door for me.”

Mr. Tulkinghorn holds it open while she passes out, with her usual fatigued manner and insolent grace.

They meet again at dinner, and again, for many days in succession. Lady Dedlock is always the same exhausted deity, surrounded by worshippers, and terribly liable to be bored to death. Mr. Tulkinghorn is always silent, oddly out of place and yet perfectly at home. They appear to take no notice of each other. But whether each evermore watches and suspects the other, mistrustful of some great secret; and what each would give to know how much the other knows – all this is hidden, for the time, in their own hearts.

Chapter 13

Esther's Narrative

We held many consultations about what Richard was to be, but it was a long time before we seemed to make progress. Richard said he was ready for anything. When Mr. Jarndyce doubted whether he might not already be too old to enter the Navy, Richard said he had thought of that, and perhaps he was. When Mr. Jarndyce asked him what he thought of the Army, Richard said he had thought of that, too, and it wasn't a bad idea. When Mr. Jarndyce advised him to try and decide whether his old preference for the sea was a boyish inclination or a strong impulse, Richard answered, Well he really *had* tried very often, and he couldn't make it out.

"How much of this indecision of character," Mr. Jarndyce said to me, "is due to the uncertainty on which he has been thrown from his birth, I don't know; but that Chancery is responsible for some of it, I can plainly see. It has confirmed in him a habit of putting off – and trusting to chance, without knowing what chance – and dismissing everything as unsettled and confused. The character of much older people may be changed by the circumstances surrounding them. It would be too much to expect that a boy's should escape."

I felt this to be true; though I also thought it much to be regretted that Richard's education had not counteracted those influences. He had been eight years at a public school and had learnt, I understood, to make Latin verses in the most admirable manner. But I never heard that it had been anybody's business to find out what his natural bent was, or where his failings lay, or to adapt any kind of knowledge to *him*. He had been adapted to the verses and had learnt to make them to perfection; but although no doubt they were very beautiful, and very improving, I felt that Richard would have profited by some one studying him a little, instead of his studying them quite so much.

"I haven't the least idea," said Richard, "what I had better be. Except that I am quite sure I don't want to go into the Church, it's a toss-up."

"You have no inclination for the law?" suggested Mr. Jarndyce.

"I don't know that, sir!" replied Richard. "I am fond of boating. Articled clerks go a good deal on the water. It's a capital profession!"

"Surgeon—" suggested Mr. Jarndyce.

"That's the thing, sir!" cried Richard. "We have got it at last!" I doubt if he had ever thought of it before.

He was not to be laughed out of it. He said he had chosen his profession, and felt that the art of healing was the art of all others for him. I suspected that he was simply taken by the newest idea and was glad to get rid of the trouble of consideration.

Mr. Jarndyce took great pains to talk with him seriously about the matter. Richard was a little grave after these interviews, but invariably told Ada and me that it was all right, and then began to talk about something else.

“By heaven!” cried Mr. Boythorn, who interested himself strongly in the subject; “I rejoice to find a young gentleman of spirit devoting himself to that noble profession! By all that is base and despicable, the treatment of surgeons aboard ship is such that I would submit the legs of every member of the Admiralty Board to a compound fracture if the system were not wholly changed in eight and forty hours!”

“Wouldn’t you give them a week?” asked Mr. Jarndyce.

“No!” cried Mr. Boythorn firmly. “Not on any consideration! Those fellows meanly take advantage of the ardour of these gentlemen to reward the services of the best years of their lives and their long study with pittances too small even for clerks. I would have the necks of every one of them wrung!” He looked round at us with an agreeable smile, thundering, “Ha, ha, ha!”

As Richard still continued to say that he was fixed in his choice, it became advisable to take Mr. Kenge into council. Mr. Kenge, therefore, came to dinner one day, and leaned back in his chair, and turned his eye-glasses over and over, exactly as I remembered to have seen him do when I was a little girl.

“Ah!” said Mr. Kenge. “Well! A very good profession, Mr. Jarndyce.”

“It requires diligent study and preparation,” observed my guardian, with a glance at Richard.

“Truly,” said Mr. Kenge. “And Mr. Richard Carstone, who has so well acquitted himself in the classics, will no doubt apply the habits, if not the principles and practice, of that study to the more eminently practical field of action on which he enters.”

“You may rely upon it,” said Richard in his off-hand manner, “that I shall go at it and do my best.”

“Very well, Mr. Jarndyce!” said Mr. Kenge, gently nodding. “In that case we have only to inquire into the best mode of carrying out this ambition. Now, with reference to placing Mr. Richard with some eminent practitioner. Is there anyone in view at present?”

“No one, sir,” said Richard.

“Quite so!” observed Mr. Kenge. “As to situation, now. Is there any particular feeling about that?”

“N – no,” said Richard. “I should like a little variety. I mean a good range of experience.”

“I think this may be easily arranged, Mr. Jarndyce,” returned Mr. Kenge. “We have only to discover an eligible practitioner; and to observe those little formalities which are rendered necessary by our being under the guardianship of the court. We shall soon be – shall I say, ‘going at it’ – to our heart’s content. By coincidence, I have a cousin in the medical profession. He might be deemed eligible by you and might agree to this proposal.”

So it was arranged that Mr. Kenge should see his cousin. And as Mr. Jarndyce had proposed to take us to London for a few weeks, it was settled that we should make our visit at once and combine Richard's business with it.

Mr. Boythorn having left us, we took up our abode at a cheerful lodging near Oxford Street over an upholsterer's shop. London was a great wonder to us, and we were out for hours at a time, seeing the sights. We made the round of the principal theatres with great delight, and saw all the plays that were worth seeing. I mention this because it was at the theatre that I began to be made uncomfortable again by Mr. Guppy.

I was sitting in the box one night with Ada, and Richard was behind Ada's chair, when, happening to look down into the pit, I saw Mr. Guppy, with his hair flattened upon his head and woe in his face, looking up at me. I felt all through the performance that he never looked at the actors but only at me, with a carefully prepared expression of the deepest misery.

It quite spoiled my pleasure that night because it was so very embarrassing and very ridiculous. But from that time forth, we never went to the play without my seeing Mr. Guppy in the pit, always with his hair flat, his shirt-collar turned down, and a general feebleness about him. If he were not there when we went in, and I began to hope he would not come, I was certain to see him when I least expected it; and then his languishing eyes would be fixed upon me all the evening.

I really cannot express how uneasy this made me. To know that he was always gazing at me in despondency put such a constraint upon me that I did not like to laugh at the play, or move, or speak. I seemed able to do nothing naturally. I could not escape Mr. Guppy by going to the back of the box, because I knew Richard and Ada relied on having me next to them and that they could never have talked together so happily otherwise. So there I sat, not knowing where to look – for wherever I looked, I knew Mr. Guppy's eyes were following me.

Sometimes I thought of telling Mr. Jarndyce; but I feared that the young man might lose his job. Sometimes I thought of confiding in Richard, but was deterred by the possibility of their fighting. Sometimes I considered whether I should write to his mother, but I felt that opening a correspondence would make the matter worse. I always came to the conclusion, finally, that I could do nothing.

Mr. Guppy's perseverance, all this time, not only produced him regularly at the theatre, but caused him to appear in the crowd as we were coming out. After we got home, he haunted a post opposite our house. I was afraid to go near the window when I went upstairs, lest I should see him (as I did one moonlight night) leaning against the post and evidently catching cold. If Mr. Guppy had not been, fortunately for me, engaged in the daytime, I really should have had no rest from him.

While we were making this round of gaieties, in which Mr. Guppy so extraordinarily participated, the business which had helped to bring us to town was not neglected. Mr. Kenge's cousin was a Mr. Bayham Badger, who had a good practice at Chelsea and attended a large hospital besides. He was quite

willing to receive Richard into his house and to superintend his studies, and as Mr. Badger liked Richard, and as Richard said he liked Mr. Badger “well enough,” an agreement was made, the Lord Chancellor’s consent was obtained, and it was all settled.

On the day when these matters were concluded, we were invited to dine at Mr. Badger’s house. We were to be “merely a family party,” Mrs. Badger’s note said. We found Mrs. Badger to be a lady of about fifty, youthfully dressed, and of a very fine complexion.

Mr. Bayham Badger himself was a pink, fresh-faced gentleman with a weak voice, light hair, and surprised eyes, some years younger, I should say, than Mrs. Bayham Badger. He admired her exceedingly, but principally on the curious ground of her having had three husbands. We had barely taken our seats when he said to Mr. Jarndyce quite triumphantly, “You would hardly suppose that I am Mrs. Bayham Badger’s third!”

“Indeed?” said Mr. Jarndyce.

“Her third!” said Mr. Badger. “Mrs. Bayham Badger has not the appearance, Miss Summerson, of a lady who has had two former husbands?”

I said “Not at all!”

“And most remarkable men!” said Mr. Badger. “Captain Swosser of the Royal Navy, Mrs. Badger’s first husband, was a very distinguished officer indeed. The name of Professor Dingo, my immediate predecessor, is one of European reputation.”

Mrs. Badger overheard him and smiled. “I was barely twenty,” she said, “when I married Captain Swosser of the Royal Navy. On the twelfth anniversary of my wedding-day, I became the wife of Professor Dingo.”

“Of European reputation,” added Mr. Badger.

“And when Mr. Badger and myself were married,” pursued Mrs. Badger, “we were married on the same day of the year. I had become attached to the day.”

“Perhaps you may be interested, Mr. Jarndyce,” continued Mr. Bayham Badger, leading the way into the next drawing-room, “in this portrait of Captain Swosser. It was taken on his return home from the African station, where he had suffered from the fever. Mrs. Badger considers it too yellow. But it’s a very fine head!”

We all echoed, “A very fine head!”

“As for Professor Dingo. I knew him well – attended him in his last illness – a speaking likeness over the piano.”

Dinner was now announced, and we went downstairs. It was very handsomely served. But the captain and the professor still ran in Mr. Badger’s head.

“Water, Miss Summerson? Allow me! Bring me the professor’s goblet, James!”

He invited Mr. Jarndyce to take a glass of claret.

“Excuse me!” he said. “This is an occasion, and on an occasion I produce some very special claret. James, Captain Swosser’s wine!”

After dinner, when we ladies retired, Mrs. Badger gave us in the drawing-room an outline of the life of Captain Swosser before his marriage, and a minute account from the time when he fell in love with her at a ball on board the *Crippler*, when she lay in Plymouth Harbour.

“The dear old *Crippler!*” said Mrs. Badger, shaking her head. “She was a noble vessel. Captain Swosser loved that craft for my sake. When she was no longer in commission, he frequently said that if he were rich enough to buy her, he would have an inscription made on the timbers of the quarter-deck where we stood as partners in the dance.”

Mrs. Badger shook her head, sighed, and looked in the glass.

“It was a great change from Captain Swosser to Professor Dingo,” she resumed with a plaintive smile. “I felt it a good deal at first. But soon I almost forgot that I had ever been afloat, and became quite learned!”

Now, I observed that evening, as I had observed for some days past, that Ada and Richard were more than ever attached to each other’s society. I was therefore not very much surprised when we got home, and Ada and I retired upstairs, to find Ada more silent than usual, though I was not quite prepared for her coming into my arms and beginning to speak with her face hidden.

“My darling Esther!” murmured Ada. “I have a great secret to tell you!”

“What is it, Ada?”

“Oh, Esther, you would never guess!”

“Shall I try to guess?” said I.

“Oh, no! Pray don’t! It’s about – my cousin Richard!”

“Well, my own!” said I, kissing her bright hair. “And what about him?”

“Oh, Esther, you would never guess!”

It was so pretty to have her clinging to me, hiding her face, and crying in a little glow of joy and hope, that I would not help her just yet.

“He says – I know it’s very foolish, we are both so young – but he says,” with a burst of tears, “that he loves me dearly, Esther.”

“Does he indeed?” said I. “Why, my pet of pets, I could have told you that weeks and weeks ago!”

To see Ada lift up her flushed face in joyful surprise was so pleasant!

“Why, my darling,” said I, “your cousin Richard has been loving you as plainly as he could for I don’t know how long!”

“And yet you never said a word about it!” cried Ada, kissing me. “You don’t think it wrong of me, do you?”

“Not at all. And now,” said I, “I know the worst of it.”

“Oh, that’s not quite the worst of it, Esther dear!” cried Ada, holding me tighter and laying down her face again upon my breast.

“No?” said I. “Why, you never mean to say—” I was beginning in joke.

But Ada, looking up and smiling through her tears, cried, “Yes, I do! You know I do!” And then sobbed out, “With all my heart I do, Esther!”

I told her, laughing, I had known that, too! And we sat before the fire and talked until she was quiet and happy.

“Do you think my cousin John knows, dear Dame Durden?” she asked.

“Unless my cousin John is blind, my pet, I should think he knows.”

“We want to speak to him before Richard goes,” said Ada timidly, “and we wanted you to advise us. Perhaps you wouldn’t mind Richard’s coming in?”

“Oh! Richard is outside, is he, my dear?” said I.

“I am not quite certain,” returned Ada with bashful simplicity, “but I think he’s waiting at the door.”

There he was, of course. They sat on either side of me, and really seemed to have fallen in love with me instead of one another, they were so confiding and trustful. They went on in their own wild way for a little while; and then we began to consider how young they were, and how there must be a lapse of several years before this early love could come to anything, and how it could come to happiness only if it were real and lasting, and inspired them with constancy, fortitude, and perseverance for the other’s sake.

Well! Richard said that he would work his fingers to the bone for Ada, and Ada said that she would work her fingers to the bone for Richard, and they called me all sorts of endearing things, and we sat there talking half the night. Before we parted, I promised to speak to their cousin John tomorrow.

So, when tomorrow came, I went to my guardian after breakfast, in the room that was our town-substitute for the growlery.

“Guardian,” said I, “you remember the happy night when first we came down to Bleak House? When Ada was singing in the dark room?”

I wished to call to his remembrance the look he had given me then.

“Because—” said I with a little hesitation – “because Ada and Richard have fallen in love. And have told each other so.”

“Already!” cried my guardian, quite astonished.

“Yes!” said I. “And to tell you the truth, guardian, I rather expected it.”

“The deuce you did!” said he.

He sat considering for a minute or two, with his kind smile, and then asked me to let them know that he wished to see them. When they came, he encircled Ada with one arm in his fatherly way and addressed himself to Richard with a cheerful gravity.

“Rick,” said Mr. Jarndyce, “I am glad to have won your confidence. I certainly did contemplate, afar off, the possibility of you and your pretty cousin here (don’t be shy, Ada, my dear!) being in a mind to go through life together. I saw, and do see, many reasons to make it desirable. But that was afar off, Rick, afar off!”

“We look afar off, sir,” returned Richard.

“Well!” said Mr. Jarndyce. “That’s rational. Now, hear me, my dears! I might tell you that you don’t know your own minds yet, that a thousand things may happen to divert you from one another, that this chain of flowers you have taken up is very easily broken. But I will not do that. I will assume that a few years hence you will be in your hearts to one another what you are today. All I say therefore is that if you *do* change and find that you are commonplace cousins to each other, don’t be ashamed to confide in me, for there will be nothing monstrous or uncommon in it. I am only your friend and

distant kinsman. I have no power over you whatever. But I hope to retain your confidence.”

“I am very sure, sir,” returned Richard, “that I speak for Ada too when I say that you have the strongest power over us both – rooted in respect, gratitude, and affection – strengthening every day.”

“Dear cousin John,” said Ada, “all the love and duty I could ever have rendered to my father is transferred to you.”

“Come!” said Mr. Jarndyce. “Now we lift our eyes up and look hopefully at the distance! Rick, the world is before you; trust in Providence and your own efforts. Constancy in love is a good thing, but it means nothing without constancy in every kind of effort. Even with the greatest abilities, you could do nothing well without sincerely meaning it and setting about it. If you suppose that any real success can ever be gained by fits and starts, leave that wrong idea here or leave your cousin Ada here.”

“I will leave *it* here, sir,” replied Richard smiling.

“Well said!” cried Mr. Jarndyce. “She remains here, in her home with me. Love her, Rick, in your active life, and all will go well. Otherwise, all will go ill. That’s the end of my preaching. I think you and Ada had better take a walk.”

Ada tenderly embraced him, and Richard heartily shook hands with him, and then the cousins went out of the room, saying that they would wait for me.

The door stood open, and we both watched them as they passed through the sunny room and out at its farther end. Richard, with his head bent, and her hand drawn through his arm, was talking very earnestly; and Ada looked up in his face, and seemed to see nothing else. So young, so beautiful, so full of hope and promise, they went on lightly through the sunlight, passed away into the shadow and were gone. The room darkened as they went out, and the sun was clouded over.

“Am I right, Esther?” said my guardian. He was so good to ask *me* whether he was right! “Rick may gain, out of this, the quality he lacks, at the core of so much that is good!” said Mr. Jarndyce, shaking his head. “I have said nothing to Ada. She has her friend and counsellor always near.” And he laid his hand lovingly upon my head.

I was a little moved, though I did all I could to conceal it.

“Tut tut!” said he. “But we must take care, too, that our little woman’s life is not all consumed in care for others.”

“Care? My dear guardian, I believe I am the happiest creature in the world!”

“I believe so, too,” said he. “But some one may find out what Esther never will – that the little woman is to be remembered above all other people!”

I have omitted to mention that there was some one else at the doctor’s dinner party. It was not a lady. It was a gentleman, of a dark complexion – a young surgeon. He was rather reserved, but I thought him very sensible and agreeable. At least, Ada asked me if I did, and I said yes.

Chapter 14

Deportment

Richard left us on the very next evening to begin his new career, and committed Ada to my charge with great love for her and great trust in me. It touched me to reflect how they both thought of me, even at that engrossing time. I was a part of all their plans. I was to write to Richard once a week, making my faithful report of Ada, who was to write to him every alternate day. He would tell me all his labours and successes; I was to observe how resolute and persevering he would be; I was to be Ada's bridesmaid when they were married; I was to live with them afterwards and keep the keys of their house; I was to be made happy for ever.

"And if the lawsuit should make us rich, Esther – which it may, you know!" said Richard.

A shade crossed Ada's face.

"My dearest Ada," asked Richard, "why not?"

"It had better declare us poor at once," said Ada.

"Oh! I don't know about that," returned Richard, "but at all events, it won't declare anything at once. It hasn't declared anything in years."

"Too true," said Ada.

"But the longer it goes on, the nearer it must be to a settlement one way or other. Is not that reasonable?"

"You know best, Richard. But I am afraid if we trust to it, it will make us unhappy."

"My Ada, we are not going to trust to it!" cried Richard gaily. "We know better than that. We only say that if it *should* make us rich, we have no objection. The court is our grim old guardian, and whatever it gives us is our right. It is not necessary to quarrel with our right."

"No," said Ada, "but it may be better to forget all about it."

"Well, well," cried Richard, "then we will forget all about it! Dame Durden puts on her approving face, and it's done!"

"Dame Durden does approve," said I, "and she thinks you can't do better."

So, Richard said there was an end of it, and immediately began to build as many castles in the air as would man the Great Wall of China. He went away in high spirits. Ada and I, prepared to miss him very much, commenced our quieter career.

On our arrival in London, we had called at Mrs. Jellyby's but had not found her at home. Now we called again. She was not in, having gone to Mile End directly after breakfast on some Borrioboolan business. As I had not seen Peepy on our last call, I now inquired for him. He was nowhere to be found, and the cook supposed that he had "gone after the sheep." When we repeated,

with surprise, "The sheep?" she said, Oh, yes, on market days he sometimes followed them quite out of town and came back in such a state as never was!

I was sitting at the window with my guardian on the following morning, and Ada was busy writing to Richard – when Miss Jellyby was announced, and entered, leading the same Peepy, whom she had tried to make presentable by wiping the dirt into the corners of his face and making his hair very wet. Everything the dear child wore was either too large for him or too small. He had the hat of a bishop and the little gloves of a baby. His boots were like small ploughman's boots, below a very short pair of plaid drawers finished off with two different frills. Extraordinary specimens of needlework appeared on several parts of his dress, where it had been hastily mended, and I recognized the same hand on Miss Jellyby's.

She was, however, unaccountably improved in her appearance and looked very pretty. But she was conscious of poor little Peepy being a failure after all her trouble, and she showed it by the way in which she glanced first at him and then at us.

"Oh, dear me!" said my guardian. "Due east!"

Ada and I gave her a cordial welcome and presented her to Mr. Jarndyce.

"Ma's compliments," she said, "and she hopes you'll excuse her, because she's correcting proofs. She's going to put out five thousand new circulars. I have brought one of them with me. Ma's compliments." She presented it sulkily.

"Thank you," said my guardian. "I am much obliged to Mrs. Jellyby. Oh, dear me! This is a very trying wind!"

We asked Peepy if he remembered us. He retired behind his elbow at first, but relented at the sight of sponge-cake and allowed me to take him on my lap, where he sat quietly munching. Mr. Jarndyce then withdrawing, Miss Jellyby opened a conversation abruptly.

"We are going on just as bad as ever," said she. "I have no peace. Talk of Africa! I couldn't be worse off if I was a what's-his-name!"

I tried to say something soothing.

"Oh, it's of no use, Miss Summerson," exclaimed Miss Jellyby, "though I thank you all the same. I know how I am used. Peepy, go and play at Wild Beasts under the piano!"

"I shan't!" said Peepy.

"Very well, you ungrateful, naughty boy!" returned Miss Jellyby with tears in her eyes. "I'll never take pains to dress you any more."

"Yes, I will go, Caddy!" cried Peepy, so moved by his sister's vexation that he went at once.

"It seems a little thing to cry about," said poor Miss Jellyby apologetically, "but I am quite worn out. I was addressing the new circulars till two this morning. The whole thing makes my head ache till I can't see. And look at that poor unfortunate child! Was there ever such a fright as he is!"

Peepy, happily unconscious of the defects in his appearance, sat behind one of the legs of the piano, eating his cake.

“I have sent him over there,” said Miss Jellyby, “because I don’t want him to hear what I say. We really are going on worse than ever. Pa will be a bankrupt before long, and then I hope Ma will be satisfied. There’ll be nobody but Ma to thank for it.”

We said we hoped Mr. Jellyby’s affairs were not in so bad a state as that.

“It’s of no use hoping, though it’s very kind of you,” returned Miss Jellyby, shaking her head. “Pa told me only yesterday morning (and dreadfully unhappy he is) that he couldn’t weather the storm. I have no time to improve things if I knew how, and Ma don’t care about anything. I declare if I was Pa, I’d run away.”

“My dear!” said I, smiling. “Your papa, no doubt, considers his family.”

“Oh, yes, his family is all very fine, Miss Summerson,” replied Miss Jellyby; “but what comfort is his family to him? His family is nothing but bills, dirt, waste, noise, tumbles downstairs, confusion, and wretchedness. It’s like one great washing-day – only nothing’s washed!”

Miss Jellyby wiped her eyes.

“I am sure I pity Pa so much,” she said, “and am so angry with Ma that I can’t find words to express myself! However, I am not going to bear it. I won’t be a slave all my life, and I won’t submit to be proposed to by Mr. Quale. A pretty thing, indeed, to marry a philanthropist. As if I hadn’t had enough of *that!*” said poor Miss Jellyby.

I must confess that I could not help feeling rather angry with Mrs. Jellyby myself, seeing and hearing this neglected girl.

“I was almost ashamed to come here today, for I know what a figure I must seem to you two. But I made up my mind to call, as I am not likely to see you again the next time you come to town.”

She said this with such great significance that Ada and I glanced at one another, foreseeing something more.

“I know I may trust you two,” said Miss Jellyby. “You won’t betray me. I am engaged.”

“Without their knowledge at home?” said I.

“Why, Miss Summerson,” she returned fretfully, “how can it be otherwise? You know what Ma is – and I needn’t make poor Pa more miserable by telling *him*.”

“But would it not be adding to his unhappiness to marry without his knowledge, my dear?” said I.

“No,” said Miss Jellyby, softening. “I hope not. I should try to make him happy and comfortable when he came to see me, and Peepy and the others should take it in turns to come and stay with me, and have some care taken of them.”

There was a good deal of affection in poor Caddy. She cried so much over the little home-picture she had imagined that Peepy, in his cave under the piano, was touched, and lay on his back with loud lamentations. It was not until I had brought him to kiss his sister, and had shown him that Caddy was

laughing (she laughed expressly for the purpose), that we could quieten him; even then he took us in turns by the chin, smoothing our faces all over with his hand. At last we put him on a chair to look out of a window; and Miss Jellyby, holding him by one leg, resumed.

“It began in your coming to our house,” she said. “I felt I was so awkward then, that I made up my mind to be improved. I told Ma I was ashamed of myself, and I must be taught to dance. Ma looked at me in that provoking way of hers as if I wasn’t in sight, but I was quite determined to be taught to dance, and so I went to Mr. Turveydrop’s Academy in Newman Street.”

“And was it there, my dear—” I began.

“Yes,” said Caddy, “and I am engaged to Mr. Turveydrop. There are two Mr. Turveydrops, father and son. My Mr. Turveydrop is the son, of course. I only wish I had been better brought up and was likely to make him a better wife, for I am very fond of him.”

“I am sorry to hear this,” said I, “I must confess.”

“I don’t know why you should be sorry,” she retorted anxiously; “but I am engaged to Mr. Turveydrop, whether or no, and he is very fond of me. It’s still a secret, even on his side, because it might break old Mr. Turveydrop’s heart or give him a shock if he was told abruptly. Old Mr. Turveydrop is very gentlemanly. He is a widower.”

We were here interrupted by Peepy, whose leg was being unconsciously jerked like a bell-rope by his sister. I held him, and Miss Jellyby proceeded, after begging Peepy’s pardon with a kiss.

“We are to be married whenever we can,” she said, “and then I shall go to Pa at the office and write to Ma. It won’t much agitate Ma; I am only pen and ink to her. One great comfort is that I shall never hear of Africa after I am married. Young Mr. Turveydrop hates it for my sake, and old Mr. Turveydrop has never heard of it, I dare say.”

“Does old Mr. Turveydrop teach?” asked Ada.

“No, he don’t teach anything in particular,” replied Caddy. “But his deportment is beautiful. He is famous for his deportment.”

Caddy went on to say hesitantly that there was one thing more she wished us to know, and which she hoped would not offend us. It was that she had improved her acquaintance with Miss Flite, the little crazy old lady, and that she frequently went there early in the morning and met her lover for a few minutes before breakfast.

“I go there at other times,” said Caddy, “but Prince does not come then. Young Mr. Turveydrop’s name is Prince; I wish it wasn’t, because it sounds like a dog, but of course he didn’t christen himself. Old Mr. Turveydrop had him christened Prince after the Prince Regent. He adored the Prince Regent on account of his deportment. I hope you won’t think the worse of me for having made these little appointments at Miss Flite’s, because I like the poor thing for her own sake and I believe she likes me. If you could see young Mr. Turveydrop, I am sure you would think well of him. I am going there now for

my lesson. I couldn't ask you to go with me, Miss Summerson; but if you would," said Caddy, earnestly and tremblingly, "I should be very glad."

It happened that we had arranged with my guardian to go to Miss Flite's that day. We had told him of our former visit, and our account had interested him. So I proposed that she and I and Peepy should go to the academy and afterwards meet my guardian and Ada at Miss Flite's, whose name I now learnt for the first time. This was on condition that Miss Jellyby and Peepy should come back with us to dinner. We smartened Peepy up a little with some soap and water, and a hair-brush, and went out to Newman Street.

The academy was in a dingy house at the corner of an archway, with busts in all the staircase windows. In the same house there were also established, as I gathered from the plates on the door, a drawing-master, a coal-merchant, and a lithographic artist. But the biggest plate read MR. TURVEYDROP. The door was open, and the hall was blocked by a grand piano, a harp, and several other musical instruments in cases. Miss Jellyby informed me that the academy had been lent, last night, for a concert.

We went upstairs – it had been quite a fine house once – and into Mr. Turveydrop's great room. It was a bare, resounding room with benches along the walls, which were ornamented with painted lyres and little cut-glass branches for candles. Several young lady pupils were assembled; and I was looking at them when Caddy announced, "Miss Summerson, Mr. Prince Turveydrop!"

I curtsied to a little blue-eyed man with flaxen hair and curling all round his head. He had a little fiddle, called a kit, under his left arm, and its little bow in the same hand. His dancing-shoes were particularly small, and he had an innocent, feminine manner which appealed, and gave me the singular impression that he was like his mother and that his mother had not been much considered or well used.

"I am very happy to see Miss Jellyby's friend," he said, bowing low. "I had begun to fear that Miss Jellyby was not coming."

"We detained her; please receive my excuses, sir," said I.

I withdrew to a seat between Peepy and an old lady with a censorious look whose two nieces were in the class and who was very indignant with Peepy's boots. Prince Turveydrop tinkled the strings of his kit, and the young ladies stood up to dance. Just then there appeared from a side-door old Mr. Turveydrop.

He was a fat old gentleman with a false complexion, false teeth, false whiskers, and a wig. He had a fur collar, and a padded breast to his coat, which only wanted a star or a broad blue ribbon to be complete. He was pinched in, and swelled out, and got up, and strapped down, as much as he could possibly bear. He wore such a neckcloth that his chin and even his ears sunk into it. He had under his arm a hat of great size and weight, and in his hand a pair of white gloves; he stood poised on one leg in a state of elegance not to be surpassed. He had a cane, an eye-glass, a snuff-box, he had rings, he had wristbands, he had everything but any touch of nature; he was a model of deportment.

“Father! A visitor. Miss Jellyby’s friend, Miss Summerson.”

“Distinguished,” said Mr. Turveydrop.

“My father,” said the son, aside, “is a celebrated character. He is greatly admired.”

“Go on, Prince! Go on!” said Mr. Turveydrop, waving his gloves condescendingly.

At this command, the lesson went on. Prince Turveydrop sometimes played the little fiddle, dancing; sometimes played the piano, standing; sometimes hummed, while he set a pupil right; always conscientiously moved with the least proficient pupils through every step; and never rested for an instant. His distinguished father did nothing whatever but stand before the fire, a model of deportment.

“And he never does anything else,” said the old lady of the censorious look. “Yet it’s *his* name on the door-plate!”

“His son’s name is the same, you know,” said I.

“He wouldn’t let his son have any name if he could take it from him,” returned the old lady. “Look at the son’s clothes!” They certainly were threadbare – almost shabby. “Yet the father must be garnished,” said the old lady, “because of his deportment. I’d deport him! Transport him would be better!”

I asked, “Does he give lessons in deportment now?”

“Never did!” And the old lady, becoming more and more incensed against the master of deportment, gave me some details of his career.

He had married a meek little dancing-mistress, (having never in his life before done anything but deport himself), and had worked her to death, or let her work herself to death, to maintain him in those expenses which were indispensable to his position. He had found it necessary to frequent all fashionable public places at Brighton and elsewhere in the very best clothes.

To enable him to do this, the affectionate little dancing-mistress had toiled and laboured. To the last, she had believed in him. The son, inheriting his mother’s belief, had lived and grown in the same faith, and now worked for his father twelve hours a day and looked up to him with veneration.

“The airs the fellow gives himself!” said my informant, shaking her head with indignation. “He fully believes he is one of the aristocracy! And he is so condescending to his son. Oh! I could bite you!”

I could not help being amused, though I also felt real concern. My eyes were wandering from young Mr. Turveydrop working so hard, to old Mr. Turveydrop deporting himself so beautifully, when the latter came ambling up to me.

He asked me whether I conferred a charm and a distinction on London by residing in it? I did not think it necessary to reply that I was perfectly aware I should not do that, but merely told him where I did reside.

“A lady so graceful and accomplished,” he said, kissing his right glove and extending it towards the pupils, “will look leniently on the deficiencies here. We do our best to polish!”

He sat elegantly down beside me.

“To polish!” he repeated, taking a pinch of snuff and gently fluttering his fingers. “But we are not, if I may say so to one gracefully formed both by Nature and Art – we are not what we used to be in point of deportment.”

“Are we not, sir?” said I.

“We have degenerated,” he returned, shaking his head, which he could do to a very limited extent in his cravat. “Perhaps I am prejudiced. It may not be for me to say that I have been called, for some years now, Gentleman Turveydrop, or that his Royal Highness the Prince Regent did me the honour to inquire, on my removing my hat as he drove out of the Pavilion at Brighton, ‘Who is he? Why hasn’t he thirty thousand a year?’ But these are little matters of anecdote, ma’am, still repeated occasionally among the upper classes.”

“Indeed?” said I.

He replied with a high-shouldered bow. “Where what is left among us of deportment,” he added, “still lingers. England – alas, my country! – has degenerated very much. She has not many gentlemen left. We are few. I see nothing to succeed us but a race of weavers.”

“One might hope that the race of gentlemen would be perpetuated here,” said I.

“You are very good.” He smiled. “You flatter me. But, no! I have never been able to imbue my poor boy with that part of his art. He has no deportment.”

“He appears to be an excellent teacher,” I observed.

“He is. All that can be imparted, he can impart. But there are things—” He took another pinch of snuff and bowed again.

I glanced towards the centre of the room, where Miss Jellyby’s lover was undergoing his drudgery.

“Your son is indefatigable,” said I.

“He treads in the footsteps of his sainted mother. She was a devoted creature. But wooman, lovely wooman,” said Mr. Turveydrop with very disagreeable gallantry, “what a sex you are!”

I rose and joined Miss Jellyby, who was putting on her bonnet, for the lesson was over, and there was a general putting on of bonnets. When Miss Jellyby and the unfortunate Prince found an opportunity to become betrothed I don’t know, but they certainly found none on this occasion to exchange a dozen words.

“My dear,” said Mr. Turveydrop benignly to his son, “do you know the hour?”

“No, father.” The son had no watch. The father had a handsome gold one, which he pulled out with an air.

“My son, it’s two o’clock. Recollect your school at Kensington at three.”

“That’s time enough, father,” said Prince. “I can take a morsel of dinner standing and be off.”

“My dear boy,” returned his father, “you must be very quick. You will find the cold mutton on the table.”

“Thank you, father. Are *you* off now, father?”

“Yes, my dear. I suppose,” said Mr. Turveydrop, shutting his eyes modestly, “that I must show myself, as usual, about town.”

“Dine out comfortably somewhere,” said his son.

“My dear child, I intend to. I shall take my little meal, I think, at the French house, in the Opera Colonnade.”

“Good-bye, father!” said Prince.

“Good-bye, my son. Bless you!” Mr. Turveydrop said this in quite a pious manner, and it seemed to do his son good. He seemed so pleased and dutifully proud of his father that I almost felt as if it were unkind to him not to believe implicitly in his parent. I felt a liking for Prince, and compassion for him as he put away his kit and went good-humouredly to his cold mutton and his school at Kensington.

The father opened the door for us and bowed us out in a regal manner. For some moments, I was so lost in wondering if there had ever been any other gentlemen who lived and founded a reputation entirely on their deportment. Then I resolved to attend to Caddy; and we chatted all the rest of the way to Lincoln’s Inn.

Caddy told me that her lover’s education had been so neglected that it was not always easy to read his notes. But how could he be expected to be a scholar when he had passed his whole life in the dancing-school and had done nothing but teach and work, morning, noon, and night! And what did it matter? She could write letters enough for both, and it was better for him to be amiable than learned. “Besides, I’m not an accomplished girl myself,” said Caddy. “I know little enough, I am sure, thanks to Ma!

“There’s another thing I want to tell you, now we are alone,” she continued. “Miss Summerson, you know what a house ours is. It’s no use my trying to learn anything about house-keeping in our house. We live in such a state of muddle that it’s impossible. So I get a little practice with – who do you think? Poor Miss Flite! Early in the morning I help her to tidy her room and clean her birds, and I make her cup of coffee for her (of course she taught me), and I have learnt to make it so well that Prince says it’s the very best coffee he ever tasted, and would quite delight old Mr. Turveydrop, who is very particular about his coffee. I can make little puddings too; and I know a good many housekeeping things. I am not clever at my needle, yet,” said Caddy, glancing at the repairs on Peepy’s frock, “but perhaps I shall improve, and since I have been engaged to Prince and have been doing all this, I have felt better-tempered, I hope, and more forgiving to Ma. It rather put me out at first this morning to see you and Miss Clare looking so neat and pretty and to feel ashamed of Peepy and myself, but on the whole I hope I am better-tempered than I was.”

The poor girl said it from her heart, and touched mine.

“Caddy, my love,” I replied, “I begin to have a great affection for you, and I hope we shall become friends.”

“Oh, do you?” cried Caddy. “How happy that would make me!”

“My dear Caddy,” said I, “let us be friends, and often have a chat about these matters and try to find the right way through them.” Caddy was

overjoyed. I said everything I could in my old-fashioned way to comfort and encourage her.

By this time we were come to Mr. Krook's, whose private door stood open. There was a bill pasted on the door-post, announcing a room to let on the second floor. Caddy told me as we went upstairs that there had been a sudden death there and an inquest, and that our little friend had been ill of the fright. The door of the vacant room being open, we looked in. A sad and desolate place it was, a gloomy place that gave me a strange sensation of mournfulness and even dread.

"You look pale," said Caddy, "and cold!" I felt as if the room had chilled me.

My guardian and Ada were here before us, in Miss Flite's garret. They were looking at the birds, while a medical gentleman who was so good as to attend Miss Flite spoke with her cheerfully by the fire.

"I have finished my professional visit," he said, coming forward. "Miss Flite is much better and may appear in court (as her mind is set upon it) tomorrow. She has been greatly missed there, I understand."

Miss Flite dropped us a curtsy.

"Honoured, indeed," said she, "by another visit from the wards in Jarndyce! Ve-ry happy! Fitz-Jarndyce, my dear" – she had bestowed that name on Caddy, it appeared – "a double welcome!"

"Has she been very ill?" asked Mr. Jarndyce of the doctor in a whisper. She answered for herself.

"Oh, very unwell indeed," she said confidentially. "Not bodily pain, you know, so much as nervous trouble. The truth is," in a subdued voice, "we have had death here. There was poison in the house. It frightened me. Only Mr. Woodcourt knows how much. My physician, Mr. Woodcourt!"

"Miss Flite," said Mr. Woodcourt, laying his hand gently on her arm, "was alarmed by an occurrence in the house which might have alarmed a stronger person, and was made ill by the distress and agitation. She brought me here in the first hurry of the discovery, though too late for me to be of any use to the unfortunate man. I hope I have been of some small use to her."

"The kindest physician in the college," whispered Miss Flite to me. "I expect a judgment. And shall then confer estates."

"She will be as well as ever in a day or two," said Mr. Woodcourt, looking at her with an observant smile. "Have you heard of her good fortune?"

"Most extraordinary!" said Miss Flite, smiling brightly. "You never heard of such a thing, my dear! Every Saturday, Mr. Kenge or Guppy his clerk places in my hand a paper of shillings. Always the same number. Always one for every day in the week. From whence do these papers come, you say? That is the great question. Naturally. Shall I tell you what I think? I think," said she, with a very shrewd look, "that the Lord Chancellor, aware of the length of time during which the Great Seal has been open, forwards them. Until the judgment I expect is given. Now that's very creditable, you know. So delicate! Attending court the other day – I attend it regularly, with my

documents – I taxed him with it, and he almost confessed. That is, I smiled at him from my bench, and *he* smiled at me from his bench. But it's great good fortune, is it not?"

I congratulated her upon this fortunate addition to her income. I did not speculate upon its source. My guardian stood before me, contemplating the birds, and I had no need to look beyond him.

"And what do you call these little fellows, ma'am?" said he in his pleasant voice. "Have they any names?"

"I can answer for Miss Flite that they have," said I, "for she promised to tell us what they were."

"Did I?" said Miss Flite. "Who's that at my door? What are you listening at my door for, Krook?"

The old man of the house, pushing it open, appeared there with his cat at his heels.

"I warn't listening, Miss Flite," he said, "I was going to give a rap, only you're so quick!"

"Make your cat go down!" the old lady angrily exclaimed.

"Bah, bah! There ain't no danger, gentlefolks," said Mr. Krook, looking slowly and sharply at each of us in turn; "she'd never go at the birds when I was here unless I told her to."

"You will excuse my landlord," said the old lady with a dignified air. "M, quite M! What do you want, Krook?"

"Hi!" said the old man with a chuckle. "You know I am the Chancellor; and for the Chancellor not to be acquainted with a Jarndyce is queer, ain't it, Miss Flite? Your servant, sir. I know Jarndyce and Jarndyce a'most as well as you do, sir. I knowed old Squire Tom, sir. I never to my knowledge see you afore though, not even in court."

"I never go there," said Mr. Jarndyce.

"Well, perhaps it is but nat'ral in a Jarndyce, sir! You're looking at my lodger's birds, Mr. Jarndyce?" The old man had come into the room, and now looked close up into my guardian's face. "It's one of her strange ways that she'll never tell the names of these birds if she can help it." This was in a whisper. "Shall I run 'em over, Flite?" he asked aloud, winking at us.

"If you like."

The old man, looking at the cages, went through the list.

"Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Death, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon, and Spinach. That's the whole collection," said the old man, "all cooped up together, by my noble and learned brother the Chancellor."

"This is a bitter wind!" muttered my guardian.

"When my noble and learned brother gives his judgment, they're to be let go free," said Krook, winking at us again, and adding in a whisper. "And if that ever was to happen – which it won't – the birds that have never been caged would kill 'em."

“If ever the wind was in the east,” said my guardian, “I think it’s there today!”

We found it very difficult to get away from the house. It was not Miss Flite who detained us; it was Mr. Krook. He seemed unable to detach himself from Mr. Jarndyce. He proposed to show us his Court of Chancery and all the strange medley it contained. During the inspection he kept close to Mr. Jarndyce and sometimes detained him, as if he were tormented by a wish to enter upon some secret subject which he could not make up his mind to approach. He rarely removed his watchful eyes from my guardian’s face, but observed him with the slyness of an old fox and a curious expression of a sense of power.

At last, having been all over the house and having seen the whole curious stock, we came into the back of the shop. Here on an empty barrel stood on end were an ink-bottle, pens, and some dirty playbills; and against the wall were pasted several large printed alphabets.

“What are you doing here?” asked my guardian.

“Trying to learn myself to read and write,” said Krook.

“And how do you get on?”

“Slow. Bad,” returned the old man impatiently. “It’s hard at my time of life.”

“It would be easier to be taught by some one,” said my guardian.

“Aye, but they might teach me wrong!” returned the old man with a suspicious flash of his eye.

“Wrong?” said my guardian with his good-humoured smile. “Who do you suppose would teach you wrong?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Jarndyce!” replied the old man. “I don’t suppose as anybody would, but I’d rather trust my own self than another!”

His manner was strange enough to cause my guardian to ask Mr. Woodcourt, as we walked across Lincoln’s Inn together, whether Mr. Krook were really deranged, as Miss Flite suggested. The young surgeon replied no, he had seen no reason to think so. Krook was exceedingly distrustful, and generally under the influence of gin, of which he and his back-shop smelt strongly; but he did not think him mad.

On our way home, I bought Peepy a windmill – so he would sit nowhere at dinner but at my side. Caddy sat upon my other side, next to Ada, to whom we told the history of the engagement. We made much of Caddy, and Peepy too; and Caddy brightened, and my guardian was merry; and we were all very happy indeed until Caddy went home at night in a hackney-coach, with Peepy fast asleep, but holding tight to the windmill.

I have forgotten to mention that Mr. Woodcourt was the same dark young surgeon whom we had met at Mr. Badger’s. Or that Mr. Jarndyce invited him to dinner that day, and that he came. Or that when they were all gone and I said to Ada, “Now, my darling, let us have a little talk about Richard!”, Ada laughed and said—

But I don’t think it matters what my darling said. She was always merry.

Chapter 15

Bell Yard

While we were in London Mr. Jarndyce was constantly beset by excitable ladies and gentlemen. Mr. Quale, who presented himself soon after our arrival, was one of these. He seemed to brush his hair farther and farther back, until the very roots were almost ready to fly out of his head in inappeasable philanthropy. He was always ready for a testimonial. Having first seen him swallowed up in admiration of Mrs. Jellyby, I had supposed her to be the absorbing object of his devotion. I soon discovered my mistake and found him to be train-bearer to a whole procession of people.

Mrs. Pardiggle came one day for a subscription to something, and with her, Mr. Quale, who repeated everything she said to us. Mrs. Pardiggle gave my guardian a letter of introduction on behalf of her eloquent friend Mr. Gusher. With Mr. Gusher appeared Mr. Quale again. Mr. Gusher, a flabby gentleman with eyes much too small for his moon of a face, was not prepossessing; yet he was scarcely seated before Mr. Quale asked Ada and me whether he was not a great creature – which he certainly was, flabbily speaking, though Mr. Quale meant in intellect. It became clear that it was Mr. Quale's mission to be in ecstasies with everybody else's mission.

Mr. Jarndyce had fallen into this company in the tenderness of his heart and his earnest desire to do good; but he told us that he felt it to be too often an unsatisfactory company, where benevolence was spasmodic, and charity was assumed as a uniform by vain and vehement people, servile to the great, flattering to one another, and intolerable to those who were anxious to help the weak quietly, without bluster. When a testimonial was started for Mr. Quale by Mr. Gusher (who had already got one, started by Mr. Quale), and when Mr. Gusher spoke for an hour and a half on the subject to two charity schools of small boys and girls, who were requested to come forward with their halfpence, I think the wind was in the east for three whole weeks.

I mention this because I am coming to Mr. Skimpole again. It seemed to me that his off-hand professions of childishness and carelessness were a great relief to my guardian, by contrast with such things, and were the more readily believed. I should be sorry to imply that Mr. Skimpole guessed this and acted accordingly; I really never understood him well enough to know.

He had not been very well; but he now appeared one morning in his usual agreeable way and as full of pleasant spirits as ever.

Well, he said, here he was! He had been bilious, but rich men were often bilious, and therefore he had been persuading himself that he was rich. He had told his doctor, "Now, my dear doctor, it is quite a delusion on your part to suppose that you attend me for nothing. I am overwhelming you with money – in my expansive intentions – if you only knew it!" And really (he said) he thought it much the same as doing it. If he had had those bits of metal or thin

paper to which mankind attached so much importance, he would have put them in the doctor's hand. Not having them, he substituted the will for the deed. Very well! If his will were genuine, it appeared to him that it was the same as coin, and cancelled the obligation.

"It may be, partly, because I know nothing of the value of money," said Mr. Skimpole, "but I often feel this. It seems so reasonable! My butcher says to me he wants that little bill paying. I reply to the butcher, 'My good friend, if you only knew it, you are paid.'"

"But, suppose," said my guardian, laughing, "he had only meant the meat, instead of providing it?"

"My dear Jarndyce," he returned, "A butcher I once dealt with said that very thing. Says he, 'Sir, why did you eat spring lamb at eighteen pence a pound? I wish I had meant the lamb as you mean the money!' 'My good fellow,' said I, 'pray let us be reasonable. You *had* got the lamb, and I have *not* got the money. You couldn't really mean the lamb without selling it, whereas I can, and do, really mean the money without paying it!' He had not a word to say."

"Did he take no legal proceedings?" inquired my guardian.

"Yes, he did," said Mr. Skimpole. "But in that he was influenced by passion, not by reason. That reminds me of Boythorn. He writes that you and the ladies have promised him a short visit at his bachelor-house in Lincolnshire."

"He is a great favourite with my girls," said Mr. Jarndyce, "and I have promised for them."

"Nature forgot to shade Boythorn, I think," observed Mr. Skimpole to Ada and me. "A little too boisterous – like the sea. But I grant a sledge-hammering sort of merit in him!"

I should have been surprised if those two could have thought very highly of one another, Mr. Boythorn attaching so much importance to many things and Mr. Skimpole caring so little for anything. Of course I merely said that we had been greatly pleased with him.

"He has invited me," said Mr. Skimpole; "and if a child may trust himself in such hands, I shall go. He proposes to frank me down and back again. I suppose it will cost money? Shillings, or something of that sort? By the by, you remember our friend Coavinses, Miss Summerson?"

He asked me in his graceful, light-hearted manner, without the least embarrassment.

"Oh, yes!" said I.

"Coavinses has been arrested by the Great Bailiff," said Mr. Skimpole. "He is dead."

It quite shocked me to hear it, as I recalled the man sitting on the sofa that night wiping his head.

"His successor informed me of it yesterday," said Mr. Skimpole. "His successor is in my house now. He came yesterday, on my blue-eyed daughter's birthday. I put it to him, 'This is inconvenient. If you had a blue-

eyed daughter, you wouldn't like *me* to come, uninvited, on *her* birthday?' But he stayed."

Mr. Skimpole laughed at the pleasant absurdity and lightly touched the piano by which he was seated.

"And he told me," he said, playing little chords between each phrase, "that Coavinses had left. Three children. No mother. And that his profession. Being unpopular. They were at a disadvantage."

Mr. Jarndyce got up, rubbing his head, and began to walk about. Mr. Skimpole played the melody of one of Ada's favourite songs; but my guardian put his hand upon the keys and stopped him.

"I don't like this, Skimpole," he said thoughtfully.

Mr. Skimpole looked up, surprised.

"The man was necessary," pursued my guardian. "If we make such men necessary by our faults or our misfortunes, we must not revenge ourselves upon them. There was no harm in his trade. He maintained his children. One would like to know more about this."

"Oh! Coavinses?" cried Mr. Skimpole. "Nothing easier. Walk to Coavinses' headquarters."

Mr. Jarndyce nodded to us. "Come! We will walk that way, my dears."

We were quickly ready and went out with Mr. Skimpole, who quite enjoyed the expedition. It was so new and so refreshing, he said, for him to want Coavinses instead of Coavinses wanting him!

He took us, first, to Cursitor Street, Chancery Lane, where there was a house with barred windows, which he called Coavinses' Castle. On our ringing a bell, a hideous boy came out of an office and looked at us over a spiked gate.

"Who did you want?" said the boy, fitting two of the spikes into his chin.

"There was an officer, or something, here," said Mr. Jarndyce, "who is dead. I want to know his name, if you please?"

"Name of Neckett," said the boy.

"And his address?"

"Bell Yard," said the boy. "Chandler's shop, left hand side."

"Was he industrious?"

"Neckett?" said the boy. "Yes, wery much so. He was never tired of watching. He'd set at a street corner eight or ten hours at a stretch if he undertook to do it."

"He might have done worse," I heard my guardian murmur. "He might have undertaken to do it and not done it. Thank you. That's all I want."

We left the boy, and went to Bell Yard, a narrow alley a short distance away. We soon found the chandler's shop. In it was a good-natured looking old woman.

"Neckett's children?" said she in reply to my inquiry. "Yes, Surely, miss. Door right opposite the stairs." And she handed me the key.

I led the way up the dark stairs. We went as quietly as we could, but when we came to the second storey we found we had disturbed a man who was standing there looking out of his room.

“Is it Gridley that’s wanted?” he said, fixing his eyes on me with an angry stare.

“No, sir,” said I; “I am going higher up.”

He looked at Ada, and at Mr. Jarndyce, and at Mr. Skimpole, fixing the same angry stare on each. Mr. Jarndyce gave him good day.

“Good day!” he said abruptly and fiercely. He was a tall, sallow man with a careworn head, a deeply lined face, and prominent eyes. His combative, irritable manner rather alarmed me. He had a pen in his hand, and in the glimpse I caught of his room, I saw that it was covered with a litter of papers.

Leaving him there, we went up to the top room. I tapped at the door, and a little shrill voice inside said, “We are locked in.”

I applied the key and opened the door. In a poor room with a sloping ceiling and containing very little furniture was a mite of a boy, some five or six years old, nursing and hushing a heavy child of eighteen months. There was no fire, though the weather was cold; both children were wrapped in some poor shawls as a substitute. Their noses looked red and pinched and their small figures shrunken as the boy walked up and down hushing the child with its head on his shoulder.

“Who has locked you up here alone?” we asked.

“Charley,” said the boy, gazing at us.

“Is Charley your brother?”

“No. She’s my sister, Charlotte.”

“Are there any more of you besides Charley?”

“Me,” said the boy, “and Emma,” patting the limp bonnet of the child he was nursing.

“Where is Charley now?”

“Out a-washing,” said the boy, beginning to walk up and down again and trying to gaze at us at the same time.

Just then there came into the room a very little girl, childish in figure but shrewd and older-looking in the face – pretty too – wearing a bonnet much too large for her and drying her bare arms on an apron. Her fingers were white and wrinkled with washing, and she wiped soap-suds off her arms.

She had come running from some place nearby with all the haste she could. Consequently, she was out of breath and could not speak at first, as she stood panting, and wiping her arms, and looking at us.

“Oh, here’s Charley!” said the boy.

The child he was nursing stretched forth its arms and cried out to be taken. The little girl took it, and stood looking at us over the burden that clung to her affectionately.

“Is it possible,” whispered my guardian as we put a chair for the little creature to sit on, “that this child works for the rest? Look at this! For God’s sake, look at this!”

It was a thing to look at. The three children together, and two of them relying solely on the third, who was so young and yet with such an air of age and steadiness.

“Charley!” said my guardian. “How old are you?”

“Over thirteen, sir,” replied the child.

“Oh! What a great age,” said my guardian. I cannot describe the tenderness with which he spoke to her, half playfully yet compassionately.

“And do you live alone here with these babies, Charley?” said he.

“Yes, sir,” returned the child, “since father died.”

“And – Oh! Charley,” said my guardian, turning his face away for a moment, “how do you live?”

“Since father died, sir, I’ve gone out to work. I’m out washing today.”

“God help you, Charley!” said my guardian. “You’re not tall enough to reach the tub!”

“In clogs I am, sir,” she said quickly. “I’ve got a high pair as belonged to mother.”

“And when did mother die?”

“Just after Emma was born,” said the child, glancing at the face upon her bosom. “Then father said I was to be as good a mother to her as I could. And so I tried. I worked at home and did cleaning and nursing and washing for a long time before I began to go out.”

“And do you often go out?”

“As often as I can,” said Charley, smiling, “because of earning sixpences and shillings!”

“And do you always lock the babies up when you go out?”

“To keep ’em safe, sir, don’t you see?” said Charley. “Mrs. Blinder comes up now and then, and Mr. Gridley comes up sometimes, and I can run in sometimes, and they can play you know, and Tom an’t afraid of being locked up, are you, Tom?”

“No-o!” said Tom stoutly.

“When it comes on dark, the lamps are lighted down in the court, and they show up here quite bright. Don’t they, Tom?”

“Yes, Charley,” said Tom, “almost quite bright.”

“Then he’s as good as gold,” said the little creature – oh, in such a motherly, womanly way! “And when Emma’s tired, he puts her to bed. And when he’s tired he goes to bed himself. And when I come home and light the candle and has a bit of supper, he sits up again and has it with me. Don’t you, Tom?”

“Oh, yes, Charley!” said Tom. “That I do!” And either in this glimpse of the great pleasure of his life or in gratitude and love for Charley, he laid his face among the scanty folds of her frock and passed from laughing into crying.

It was the first time since our entry that a tear had been shed among these children. The little orphan girl had spoken of their father and mother as if all that sorrow were subdued by the necessity of taking courage and of

working. But now, when Tom cried, although she sat quite tranquil, I saw two silent tears fall down her face.

I stood at the window with Ada, pretending to look at the housetops, and the blackened stack of chimneys, when I found that Mrs. Blinder, from the shop below, had come panting up the stairs and was talking to my guardian.

"It's not much to forgive 'em the rent, sir," she said; "who could take it from them?"

"Well, well!" said my guardian to us two. "The time will come when this good woman will find that it *was* much, and that as she did it unto the least of these... This child," he added after a moment, "could she possibly continue this?"

"Really, sir, I think she might," said Mrs. Blinder, getting her breath by painful degrees. "She's as handy as can be. Bless you, sir, the way she tended them two children after the mother died was the talk of the yard! And it was a wonder to see her with him after he was took ill, it really was! 'Mrs. Blinder,' he said to me, as he was lying there – 'Mrs. Blinder, I see a angel sitting in this room last night along with my child, and I trust her to Our Father!'"

"He had no other job?" said my guardian.

"No, sir," returned Mrs. Blinder. "When he first came to lodge here, I didn't know what he was, and I confess that when I found out I gave him notice. It wasn't liked in the yard, nor by the other lodgers. Mr. Gridley objected to it very strong, and he is a good lodger, though his temper has been hard tried."

"So you gave him notice?" said my guardian.

"So I gave him notice. But when the time came, I was in doubts. He was punctual and diligent; he did what he had to do, sir," said Mrs. Blinder, unconsciously fixing Mr. Skimpole with her eye, "and it's something in this world even to do that."

"So you kept him after all?"

"Why, I said that if he could arrange with Mr. Gridley, I could arrange it with the other lodgers. Mr. Gridley gave his consent gruff – but he gave it. He has been kind to the children since."

"Have many people been kind to the children?" asked Mr. Jarndyce.

"Upon the whole, not so bad, sir," said Mrs. Blinder; "but certainly not so many as would have been if their father's job had been different. Mr. Coavins gave a guinea, and some neighbours came forward with a little, and – in general – not so bad. Some people won't employ her because she was a bailiff's child, and some people that do employ her maybe pay her less. But she's patient, and clever too, and always willing. So I should say, in general, not so bad, sir, but might be better."

Mrs. Blinder sat down to recover her breath fully. Mr. Jarndyce was turning to speak to us when his attention was attracted by the abrupt entrance into the room of Mr. Gridley, whom we had seen on our way up.

"I don't know what you may be doing here, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "but you'll excuse my coming in. Well, Charley! Well, Tom! Well, little one! How is it with us all today?"

He bent over the group in a caressing way and clearly was regarded as a friend by the children, though his face remained stern and his manner to us was rude.

“I don’t want to argue with you, ladies and gentlemen,” he said, taking Tom upon his knee. “I have had enough of arguing to last one man his life.”

“You have sufficient reason, I dare say,” said Mr. Jarndyce, “for being irritated—”

“There again!” exclaimed the man, becoming angry. “I am of a quarrelsome temper. I am irascible. I am not polite!”

“Not very, I think.”

“Sir,” said Gridley, putting down the child and going up to him as if he meant to strike him, “do you know anything of Courts of Equity?”

“I do, to my sorrow.”

“To your sorrow?” said the man, pausing in his wrath. “I beg your pardon. I am not polite, I know. Sir, I have been dragged for five and twenty years over burning iron. Go into the Court of Chancery yonder and ask what is one of the standing jokes that brighten up their business, and they will tell you that the best joke they have is the man from Shropshire. I,” he said passionately, “am the man from Shropshire.”

“I believe I and my family have also had the honour of giving some entertainment in the same grave place,” said my guardian composedly. “You may have heard my name – Jarndyce.”

“Mr. Jarndyce,” said Gridley, “you bear your wrongs more quietly than I can bear mine. If I took my wrongs in any other way, I should be driven mad! It is only by resenting them that I am able to keep my wits together. You may tell me that I over-excite myself. I answer that I must do it, or sink into the smiling state of the poor little mad woman that haunts the court. If I was to sit down under it, I should become imbecile.”

His passion and vehemence were most painful to see.

“Mr. Jarndyce,” he said, “consider my case. I am one of two brothers. My father (a farmer) made a will and left his farm and stock to my mother for her life. After my mother’s death, all was to come to me except a legacy of three hundred pounds that I was to pay my brother. My mother died. My brother some time afterwards claimed his legacy. I said that he had had a part of it already in board and lodging and some other things. Now mind! That was the question, and nothing else. No one disputed the will; no one disputed anything but whether part of that three hundred pounds had been already paid or not. To settle that question, my brother filed a bill, and I was obliged to go into this accursed Chancery.

“Seventeen people were made defendants to that simple suit! It first came on after two years. It was then stopped for another two years while the master inquired whether I was my father’s son, about which there was no dispute at all. He then found out that there were not defendants enough – remember, there were only seventeen! – but that we must have another who had been left out and must begin all over again. The costs at that time – before the thing was begun! – were three times the legacy. My brother would have

happily given up the legacy to escape more costs. My whole estate has gone in costs. The suit is still undecided – and here I stand, this day! Now, Mr. Jarndyce, in your suit there are thousands and thousands involved, where in mine there are hundreds. Is mine any less hard to bear, when my whole living has been thus shamefully sucked away?”

Mr. Jarndyce said that he condoled with him with all his heart about this monstrous system.

“There again!” said Mr. Gridley. “The system! I am always told, it’s the system. I can’t ask My Lord any questions, because he sits there to administer the system. I mustn’t go to Mr. Tulkinghorn the solicitor to protest, because he is not responsible. It’s the system. But I don’t know what may happen if I am carried beyond myself at last!”

I have never seen such vehemence. At last, sitting down and wiping his face, he said, “I have done! Mr. Jarndyce, I am violent, I know. I have been in prison for contempt of court. I have been in prison for threatening the solicitor. I have been in trouble, and shall be again. I was a good-enough-tempered man once, I believe. People in my part of the country say they remember me so. ‘It would be far better for you, Mr. Gridley,’ the Lord Chancellor told me last week, ‘not to waste your time here, but to stay, usefully employed, in Shropshire.’ ‘My Lord, I know it would,’ said I to him, ‘and it would have been far better for me never to have heard the name of your high office, but I can’t undo the past!’ Besides,” he added, breaking fiercely out, “I’ll shame them. To the last, I’ll show myself in that court to its shame. If I knew when I was going to die, and could be carried there, and had a voice to speak with, I would die there!”

His face did not soften, even now when he was quiet.

“I came to take these babies down to my room for an hour,” he said, “to let them play about. I didn’t mean to say all this, but it don’t much signify. You’re not afraid of me, Tom, are you?”

“No!” said Tom. “You ain’t angry with *me*.”

“You are right, my child. You’re going back, Charley? Aye? Come then, little one!” He took the youngest child on his arm. “I shouldn’t wonder if we found a ginger-bread soldier downstairs. Let’s go and look for him!”

He made a rough but respectful salutation to Mr. Jarndyce, and bowing to us, went downstairs to his room.

Upon that, Mr. Skimpole began to talk in his usual gay strain. He said it was really very pleasant to see how things adapted themselves to purposes. Here was this Mr. Gridley, a man of surprising energy – and he could easily imagine Gridley wandering about in life looking for something to expend his combativeness upon – when the Court of Chancery provided him with the exact thing he wanted. Then look at Coavinses! How delightfully poor Coavinses illustrated the same principle! He, Mr. Skimpole himself, could had dispensed with Coavinses. But all that time, he had been giving employment to a most deserving man; he had been a benefactor to Coavinses! His heart had swelled just now and the tears had come into his eyes when he

had looked round the room and thought, "I was the great patron of Coavinses, and his little comforts were my work!"

There was something so captivating and mirthful about him, that he made my guardian smile as he turned towards us from a little private talk with Mrs. Blinder. We kissed Charley, and took her downstairs with us, and watched her run away to her work: running, such a little, little creature in her womanly bonnet and apron, through the court to melt into the city's strife and sound like a dewdrop in an ocean.

Chapter Sixteen

Tom-all-Alone's

My Lady Dedlock is very restless. Today she is at Chesney Wold; yesterday she was at her house in town; tomorrow she may be abroad, for anything anyone can predict. Even Sir Leicester's gallantry cannot keep pace with her, for the gout has gripped him by both legs.

Sir Leicester views the gout as a troublesome but aristocratic demon. All the Dedlocks, in the male line, have had the gout. Other men's fathers may have died of vulgar complaints, but the Dedlock family have a higher class of illness. It has come down through the illustrious line like the silver-plate, or the place in Lincolnshire.

So Sir Leicester yields up his family legs to the family disorder as his inheritance. He feels that for a Dedlock to be laid upon his back and spasmodically stabbed in his extremities is a liberty taken somewhere, but he thinks, "We have all yielded to this; it belongs to us; and I submit myself to it."

And a good picture he makes, lying in a flush of crimson and gold in the great drawing-room before his favourite picture of my Lady, with broad strips of sunlight shining in through the long line of windows. Outside, the stately oaks, rooted in the green ground which has never known the plough, but has been a hunting-estate for centuries, bear witness to his greatness. Inside, his forefathers, looking on him from the walls, say, "Each of us was a passing reality here and left this coloured shadow of himself."

My Lady is at present represented by her portrait. She has flitted away to town, and will soon flit back here again, to the confusion of the fashionable world.

The house in town is not prepared for her reception. It is muffled and dreary. Only one powdered footman gapes disconsolate at the hall-window.

What connexion can there be between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the footman, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who swept the churchyard-step?

Jo sweeps his crossing all day long, unconscious of the link, if any link there be. He sums up his mental condition when asked a question by replying that he "don't know nothink." He knows that it's hard to keep the mud off the crossing in dirty weather, and harder still to live by doing it. Nobody taught him even that much; he found it out.

Jo lives – that is to say, Jo has not yet died – in a ruinous place known as Tom-all-Alone's. It is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by decent people, where the crazy, decaying houses were seized upon by some bold vagrants who then let them out as lodgings. Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. Like parasites on a ruined human body, a crowd of foul existence crawls in and out of gaps in walls; and coils itself to sleep, in

maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever and evil in every footprint.

Twice lately there has been a crash and a cloud of dust in Tom-all-Alone's; each time a house has fallen. These accidents have made a paragraph in the newspapers and have filled a bed or two in the nearest hospital. The gaps remain, and there are not unpopular lodgings among the rubbish. As several more houses are nearly ready to go, the next crash in Tom-all-Alone's is expected to be a good one.

This desirable property is in Chancery, of course. Whether "Tom" represents the original plaintiff in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, or whether Tom lived here when the suit had laid the street waste, or whether the title is a traditional name, perhaps nobody knows. Certainly Jo doesn't know.

"For I don't know nothink," says Jo.

It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, in utter darkness as to the meaning of those mysterious symbols over the shops, and in the windows! To see people read and write, and not to have the least idea of all that language! It must be very puzzling to see the good company going to the churches on Sundays, with their books in their hands, and to think (for perhaps Jo *does* think at odd times) what does it all mean, and how comes it that it means nothing to me? To be hustled, and jostled, and moved on; and yet to be perplexed by the feeling that I *am* here somehow, and everybody overlooked me until I became the creature that I am! It must be a strange state, not merely to be told that I am scarcely human, but to feel it! To see the horses, dogs, and cattle go by me and to know that in ignorance I belong with them and not to the superior beings whose delicacy I offend!

Jo comes out of Tom-all-Alone's, munching his dirty bit of bread. He sits down to breakfast on the door-step of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts and gives it a brush when he has finished, in return for the seat. He admires the size of the building and wonders what it's all about.

He goes to his crossing and begins to lay it out for the day. The town awakes to its daily spin and whirl; all that unaccountable reading and writing recommences. Jo and the other lower animals get on in the unintelligible mess as they can. It is market-day. The blinded oxen, over-goaded, over-driven, never guided, run into wrong places and are beaten out, and plunge red-eyed at stone walls, and often sorely hurt the innocent, and themselves. Very like Jo and his order; very like!

A band of music comes and plays. Jo listens to it. So does a drover's dog, waiting for his master outside a butcher's shop. A vagabond dog, accustomed to low company and public-houses; a terrifying dog to sheep, ready at a whistle to tear out mouthfuls of their wool; but an educated, improved dog who has been taught his duties and knows how to do them. He and Jo listen to the music, probably with much the same amount of animal satisfaction; as to awakened associations, they are probably upon a par. But, otherwise, how far above the human listener is the brute!

The day changes as it wears itself away, and becomes dark and drizzly. Jo fights it out at his crossing among the mud and wheels, the horses, whips, and umbrellas, and gets only a scanty sum to pay for the unsavoury shelter of Tom-all-Alone's. Twilight comes on; gas lamps are lit; the lamplighter, with his ladder, runs along the pavement. A wretched evening is beginning to close in.

In his chambers Mr. Tulkinghorn sits meditating an application to a magistrate tomorrow morning for a warrant. Gridley has been here today and has been alarming. He needs to be held to bail again. Mr. Tulkinghorn does not look out of the window.

And if he did, what would it be to see a woman going by? There are too many women in the world, Mr. Tulkinghorn thinks; they are at the bottom of all that goes wrong in it, although they create business for lawyers. What would it be to see a woman going by, even though she were going secretly? They are all secret. Mr. Tulkinghorn knows that very well.

But they are not all like the woman who now leaves him and his house behind, whose plain dress does not match her refined manner. She should be an upper servant by her clothing, yet in her air and step – even in the muddy streets – she is a lady. Her face is veiled, and still she betrays herself enough to make some who pass her look round sharply.

She never turns her head. Lady or servant, she has a purpose and never turns her head until she comes to the crossing where Jo plies with his broom. He crosses with her and begs. Still, she does not turn her head until she is on the other side. Then she slightly beckons to him and says, "Come here!"

Jo follows her a pace or two into a quiet court.

"Are you the boy I've read of in the papers?" she asks behind her veil.

"I don't know," says Jo. "I don't know nothink about no papers."

"Were you examined at an inquest?"

"I don't know nothink about no – where I was took by the beadle, do you mean?" says Jo. "Was the boy's name at the inkwhich Jo?"

"Yes."

"That's me!" says Jo. "You mean about the man? Him as wos dead?"

"Hush! Whisper! Yes. Did he look, when he was living, so very ill and poor?"

"Oh, jist!" says Jo.

"Did he look like *you*?" says the woman with abhorrence.

"Oh, not so bad as me," says Jo. "You didn't know him, did you?"

"How dare you ask me that?"

"No offence, my lady," says Jo humbly, for even he suspects her of being a lady.

"I am not a lady. I am a servant."

"You're a jolly servant!" says Jo in admiration.

"Listen and be silent. Stand farther away! Can you show me those places that were spoken of in the account I read? The place he wrote for, the place he died at, the place where you were taken to, and the place where he was buried?"

Jo answers with a nod for each.

“Go ahead of me and show me all those dreadful places. Stop opposite each, and don’t speak to me unless I speak to you. Don’t look back. I will pay you well.”

Jo attends closely to these words, finding them rather hard; pauses to consider their meaning; and nods his ragged head.

“I’m fly,” says Jo. “But fen larks, you know. Stow hooking it!”

“What does the horrible creature mean?” exclaims the servant, recoiling from him. “I don’t understand you. Go on! I will give you more money than you ever had in your life.”

Jo screws up his mouth into a whistle, takes his broom under his arm, and leads the way in his bare feet over the hard stones and through the mud and mire.

Cook’s Court. Jo stops. A pause.

“Who lives here?”

“Him wot give him his writing,” says Jo in a whisper without looking over his shoulder.

“Go on to the next.”

Krook’s house. Jo stops again. A longer pause.

“Who lives here?”

“*He* lived here,” Jo answers as before.

After a silence he is asked, “In which room?”

“In the back room up there. You can see the winder from this corner. That’s where I see him stritched out. This is the public-ouse where I was took to.”

“Go on to the next!”

It is a longer walk to the next, but Jo does not look round. By many devious and reeking ways, they come to the little tunnel of a court, and to the iron gate.

“He was put there,” says Jo, holding to the bars and looking in.

“Where? Oh, what a scene of horror!”

“There!” says Jo, pointing. “Over yinder. Among them piles of bones, wery nigh the top. They was obliged to stamp upon it to git it in. I could unkiver it for you with my broom if the gate was open,” giving it a shake, “but it’s always locked. Look at the rat!” cries Jo, excited. “Hi! There he goes, into the ground!”

The woman shrinks into a corner of that hideous archway, with its deadly stains contaminating her dress; and putting out her hands and passionately telling him to keep away from her, so remains for some moments. Jo stands staring until she recovers herself.

“Is this place of abomination consecrated ground?”

“I don’t know nothink of consequential ground,” says Jo.

“Is it blessed?”

“Which?” says Jo, amazed.

“Is it blessed?”

“I’m blest if I know,” says Jo, staring more than ever; “but I shouldn’t think so. It an’t done it much good if it is. Blest? I should think it was t’othered myself. But I don’t know nothink!”

The servant takes little heed of what he says. She draws off her glove to get some money from her purse. Jo silently notices how white and small her hand is and what a jolly servant she must be to wear such sparkling rings.

She drops a piece of money in his hand without touching it, shuddering as their hands approach. “Now,” she adds, “show me the spot again!”

Jo thrusts the handle of his broom between the bars of the gate, and points it out. At length, looking around, he finds that he is alone.

He holds the piece of money to the gas-light and is overpowered at finding that it is yellow – gold. He tests it with a bite, then puts it in his mouth for safety. He sweeps the step and passage with great care. His job done, he sets off for Tom-all-Alone’s, stopping in the light of many gas-lamps to produce the piece of gold and give it another look to reassure himself that it is genuine.

That evening my Lady Dedlock goes to a grand dinner and three or four balls. Sir Leicester is fidgety down at Chesney Wold; he complains to Mrs. Rouncewell that the rain makes such a monotonous pattering on the terrace that he can’t read the paper in his dressing-room.

“Sir Leicester would have done better to try the other side of the house, my dear,” says Mrs. Rouncewell to Rosa. “His dressing-room is on my Lady’s side. And in all these years I never heard the step upon the Ghost’s Walk more distinct than it is tonight!”

Chapter 17

Esther's Narrative

Richard often came to see us while we were in London (though he soon failed in his letter-writing), and with his quick abilities, his good temper, his gaiety and freshness, was always delightful. But though I liked him more and more the better I knew him, I still felt more and more how much it was to be regretted that he had been taught no habits of application. His education had enabled him to dash through his tasks with fair credit, and often with distinction, but in a fitful, dazzling way that had confirmed his reliance on those very qualities which it was most desirable to train. Those qualities were excellent servants, but very bad masters. If they had been under Richard's direction, they would have been his friends; but Richard being under their direction, they became his enemies.

I write down these opinions only because I want to be quite candid about all I thought and did. I often observed how right my guardian was in what he had said, that the uncertainties of the Chancery suit had given Richard's nature something of the careless spirit of a gamester who felt that he was part of a great gaming system.

Mr. and Mrs. Bayham Badger came one afternoon when my guardian was not at home. In the course of conversation I naturally inquired after Richard.

"Why, he is very well," said Mrs. Badger, "and a great acquisition to our society. Captain Swosser used to say of me that I was an acquisition to any society. I may render the same tribute, I am sure, to Mr. Carstone. But – you won't think me premature if I mention it?"

I said no. Ada said no, too, and looked uneasy.

"Why, you see, my dears," said Mrs. Badger, "that although I am still young – or Mr. Bayham Badger pays me the compliment of saying so –"

"Undoubtedly!" said Mr. Badger.

"– my dears, though still young, I have had many opportunities of observing young men. There were many such on board the dear old *Crippler*, I assure you. I embraced every chance of befriending the midshipmen under Captain Swosser's command. Again, with Professor Dingo."

"A man of European reputation," murmured Mr. Badger.

"When I became the wife of my dear second husband," said Mrs. Badger, "I still enjoyed opportunities of observing youth. The class attending Professor Dingo's lectures was a large one, and it became my pride, as the wife of such an eminent scientific man, to throw our house open to the students. Every Tuesday evening there was lemonade and mixed biscuits for all who chose to partake."

"Remarkable assemblies," said Mr. Badger reverentially.

“And now,” pursued Mrs. Badger, “I still have those habits of observation. And when I consider Mr. Carstone, I am very much of the opinion, my dears, that he has not chosen his profession advisedly.”

I asked Mrs. Badger why she said this.

“My dear Miss Summerson,” she replied, “Mr. Carstone is of such a very easy disposition that probably he would never think it worthwhile to mention how he really feels, but he feels languid about the profession. He has not that positive interest in it which makes it his vocation. If anything, I should say he sees it as a tiresome pursuit. Now, this is not promising. Young men like Mr. Allan Woodcourt who take a strong interest in the profession will find some reward in it through a great deal of work for a very little money. But I am quite convinced that this would never be the case with Mr. Carstone.”

“Does Mr. Badger think so too?” asked Ada timidly.

“Why,” said Mr. Badger, “to tell the truth, Miss Clare, I had not thought about it until Mrs. Badger put it in that light; but then I reached the same conclusion.”

Ada and I both felt that that it was very likely that this opinion was sound. We agreed to say nothing to Mr. Jarndyce until we had spoken to Richard; and as he was coming next evening, we resolved to have a very serious talk with him.

So after he had been a little while with Ada, I went in.

“How do you get on, Richard?” said I, and sat down on the other side of him.

“Oh! Well enough!” said Richard.

“He can’t say better than that, Esther, can he?” cried my pet triumphantly.

“Well enough?” I repeated.

“Yes,” said Richard, “well enough. It’s rather jog-trotty and humdrum. But it’ll do as well as anything else!”

“Oh! My dear Richard!” I remonstrated.

“I don’t think there’s any harm in that, Dame Durden,” said Ada, looking confidently at me across him; “if it will do as well as anything else, it will do very well, I hope.”

“Oh, yes, I hope so,” returned Richard, carelessly tossing his hair from his forehead. “After all, it may be only a kind of probation till our lawsuit is – I forgot though. I am not to mention the suit! Oh, yes, it’s all right. Let us talk about something else.”

Ada would have done so willingly. But I began again.

“No, but Richard,” said I, “and my dear Ada! Consider how important it is to you both. I think we had better talk about this, really. Mr. and Mrs. Badger were here yesterday, Richard, and they seemed to think that you had no great liking for the profession.”

“Did they though?” said Richard. “Oh! Well, the fact is, I don’t care much about it. But it don’t matter! It’ll do as well as anything else!”

“You hear him, Ada!” said I.

“The fact is,” Richard proceeded, half thoughtfully and half laughingly, “it is not quite in my way. I don’t take to it. And I get too much of Mrs. Bayham Badger’s first and second husbands.”

“I am sure *that’s* very natural!” cried Ada, quite delighted.

“Then,” pursued Richard, “it’s monotonous. Every day is the same.”

“But I am afraid,” said I, “this is an objection to all kinds of application – often to life itself.”

“Do you think so?” returned Richard. “Perhaps! Ha! Why, then, you know,” he added, suddenly becoming gay again, “like I said, it’ll do as well as anything else!”

But even Ada shook her head at this and looked serious. So I hinted to Richard that if he were sometimes a little careless of himself, I was very sure he never meant to be careless of Ada, and that he must not make light of a step that might influence both their lives.

“My dear Mother Hubbard,” he said, “I have indeed thought of that several times and have been quite angry with myself for meaning to be so much in earnest and – somehow – not exactly being so. I don’t know how it is. You have no idea how fond I am of Ada (my darling cousin, I love you so much!), but I don’t settle to constancy in other things. It’s such uphill work, and it takes such a time!” said Richard with an air of vexation.

“That may be,” I suggested, “because you don’t like what you have chosen.”

“Poor fellow!” said Ada. “I am sure I don’t wonder at it!” She rested her clasped hands upon his shoulder.

“You see, my precious girl,” said Richard, passing her golden curls through his hand, “I was a little hasty perhaps; or I misunderstood my own inclinations. I couldn’t tell till I tried. Now the question is whether it’s worth-while to undo all that has been done. It seems like making a great disturbance about nothing particular.”

“My dear Richard,” said I, “how can you say about nothing particular?”

“I mean that it *may* be nothing particular because I may never need it.”

Both Ada and I urged, in reply, that it was worth-while to undo what had been done, and that it must be undone. I asked Richard whether he had thought of any more congenial pursuit.

“Yes, I have. I have been thinking that the law is the boy for me. If I went into Kenge’s office,” said Richard, “I should have my eye on the – hum! – the forbidden ground – and should be able to study it, and master it, and satisfy myself that it was being properly conducted. I should be able to look after Ada’s interests and mine (the same thing!); and I should peg away with the most tremendous ardour.”

I was not by any means so sure of that, and I saw how his hankering after the vague things yet to come cast a shade on Ada’s face. But I thought it best to encourage him in any project of continuous exertion, and only advised him to be quite sure that his mind was made up.

“I’ll become such a lawyer as is not often seen,” said Richard. “That is, you know, if it really is worth-while, after all, to make such a disturbance about nothing particular!”

This led to our saying again, with a great deal of gravity, all that we had said already. We so strongly advised Richard to be frank and open with Mr. Jarndyce that he sought him out at once and made a full avowal.

“Rick,” said my guardian, after hearing him attentively, “we can retreat with honour, and we will. But we must be careful – for our cousin’s sake, Rick – that we make no more such mistakes. Therefore, in the matter of the law, we will have a good trial before we decide. We will look before we leap, and take plenty of time about it.”

Richard’s energy was of such an impatient and fitful kind that he would have liked nothing better than to have gone to Mr. Kenge’s office and to have entered into articles with him on the spot. Submitting, however, with a good grace, he sat down in his lightest spirits, talking as if his one unvarying purpose in life from childhood had been the law. My guardian was very kind and cordial with him, but rather grave.

When Richard had departed, Ada said, “Cousin John, I hope you don’t think the worse of Richard?”

“No, no, my love,” said he. “Don’t look unhappy.”

“Oh, I am not unhappy, cousin John!” said Ada, smiling cheerfully. “But I should be a little so if you thought the worse of Richard.”

“My dear,” said Mr. Jarndyce, “I should think the worse of him only if you were ever unhappy through his means. But, tut, all this is nothing! He has time before him, and the race to run. I think the worse of him? Not I, my loving cousin! And not you, I swear!”

“No, indeed, cousin John,” said Ada, “I am sure I could not think any ill of Richard if the whole world did. I would think better of him than at any other time!”

Quietly and honestly she said it, looking up into his face, like the picture of truth!

“I think,” said my guardian, thoughtfully regarding her, “that it must be somewhere written that the virtues of the mothers shall occasionally be visited on the children, as well as the sins of the fathers. Good night, my rosebud. Good night, little woman. Pleasant slumbers!”

This was the first time I ever saw him look at Ada with a shadow on his benevolent expression. I well remembered the look with which he had contemplated her and Richard when she was singing in the firelight, not long ago; but now his glance was changed, and was not quite so hopeful and untroubled as it had been.

Ada praised Richard more to me that night than ever she had praised him yet. She went to sleep with a little bracelet he had given her clasped upon her arm.

I was so little inclined to sleep myself that night that I sat up working. It would not be worth mentioning for its own sake, but I was wakeful and rather

low-spirited. I don't know why. At least, perhaps I do, but I don't think it matters.

At any rate, I made up my mind to be so dreadfully industrious that I would leave myself not a moment's leisure to be low-spirited. For I naturally said, "Esther! As if you had anything to make you unhappy, instead of everything to make you happy, you ungrateful heart!"

If I could have made myself go to sleep, I would have done it, but not being able to do that, I took out of my basket some needlework and sat down to it with great determination. It was necessary to count all the stitches, and I resolved to go on with it until I couldn't keep my eyes open, and then to go to bed.

I soon found myself very busy. But I had left some silk downstairs in a work-table drawer in the temporary growlery; so I took my candle and went softly down to get it.

To my great surprise, on going in I found my guardian still there, sitting looking at the ashes. He was lost in thought, his book unheeded by his side, and his face looked worn. Almost frightened by coming upon him so unexpectedly, I stood still for a moment and should have retired without speaking had he not, in running his hand abstractedly through his hair, seen me and started.

"Esther!"

I told him what I had come for.

"At work so late, my dear?"

"I am working late tonight," said I, "because I couldn't sleep and wished to tire myself. But, dear guardian, you are late too, and look weary. You have no trouble, I hope, to keep you waking?"

"None, little woman, that *you* would readily understand," said he.

He spoke in a regretful tone that was new to me.

"Remain a moment, Esther," said he. "You were in my thoughts."

"I hope I was not the trouble, guardian?"

He fell into his usual manner. The change was remarkable, and he appeared to make it by using great self-command.

"Little woman," said my guardian, "I have been thinking that you ought to know of your own history all I know. It is very little. Next to nothing."

"Dear guardian," I replied, "when you spoke to me before on that subject—"

"But since then," he gravely interposed, "I have reflected that it is perhaps my duty to tell you the little I know."

"If you think so, guardian, it is right."

"My dear, I think so now," he returned very gently and kindly. "If any real disadvantage can attach to your position, it is right that you at least should not magnify it to yourself by having vague impressions of its nature."

I sat down and said after a little effort to be calm, "One of my earliest memories is of these words: 'Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers. The time will come when you will understand this better.'"

I had covered my face with my hands in repeating the words, but I took them away now, and said that to him I owed the blessing that I had never felt shame since that time. He put up his hand as if to stop me.

“Nine years, my dear,” he said, “have passed since I received a letter from a lady living in seclusion, written with a stern passion and power unlike any I have ever read. It told me of a child, an orphan girl then twelve years old, in some such cruel words as those which you remember. It told me that the writer had bred her in secrecy from her birth, had blotted out all trace of her existence, and that if the writer were to die before the child became a woman, she would be left entirely friendless, nameless, and unknown. It asked me to consider if I would, in that case, finish what the writer had begun.”

I listened in silence and looked attentively at him.

“You yourself will recollect, my dear, the gloomy atmosphere which affected the writer, and the distorted religion which clouded her mind. I felt concerned for the little innocent creature, in her darkened life, and replied to the letter.”

I took his hand and kissed it.

“It laid the injunction on me that I should never ask to see the writer, but that I could appoint an agent whom she would see. I appointed Mr. Kenge. The lady said that her name was an assumed one, and that she was the child’s aunt. More than this she would never reveal. My dear, I have told you all.”

I held his hand for a little while in mine.

“I saw my ward oftener than she saw me,” he added, cheerily making light of it, “and I always knew she was beloved, useful, and happy. She repays me twenty-thousandfold, every hour of every day!”

“And oftener still,” said I, “she blesses the guardian who is a father to her!”

At the word father, I saw his former trouble come into his face. He subdued it as before, and it was gone in an instant; but I felt my words had given him a shock. Wondering, I inwardly repeated his words: “No trouble that I could readily understand!” No, I did not understand it. Not for many and many a day.

“Take a fatherly good night, my dear,” said he, kissing me on the forehead, “and so to rest. These are late hours for working and thinking. You do that for us all day long, little housekeeper!”

I neither worked nor thought any more that night. I opened my grateful heart to heaven in thankfulness for its care of me, and fell asleep.

We had a visitor next day. Mr. Allan Woodcourt came to take leave of us, as he had arranged to do beforehand. He was going to China and to India as a surgeon on board ship. He was to be away a long, long time.

I believe that he was not rich. All his widowed mother could spare had been spent in qualifying him for his profession. Although he was, night and day, at the service of numerous poor people and did wonders of gentleness and skill for them, he gained very little money by it. He was seven years older than I. Not that I need mention it, for it hardly seems to belong to anything.

I think – I mean, he told us – that he had been in practice three or four years and that if he could have managed three or four more, he would not have made the voyage on which he was bound. But he had no fortune or private means, and so he was going away. He had been to see us several times altogether. We thought it a pity he should go away, because he was distinguished in his art.

When he came to bid us good-bye, he brought his mother with him for the first time. She was a pretty old lady, with bright black eyes, but she seemed proud. She came from Wales and had had, a long time ago, an eminent ancestor, of the name of Morgan ap-Kerrig – of some place that sounded like Gimlet – whose relations were a sort of royal family. This ancestor appeared to have passed his life in always getting up into mountains and fighting somebody; and a bard whose name sounded like Crumlinwallinwer had sung his praises in a piece which was called, as nearly as I could catch it, Mewlinnwillinwodd.

Mrs. Woodcourt, after telling us of the fame of her great kinsman, said that no doubt wherever her son Allan went he would remember his pedigree, and would never form an alliance below it. She told him that there were many handsome English ladies in India who were looking for a husband, but that high birth must ever be the first consideration. She talked so much about birth that for a moment I half fancied, and with pain – but what an idle fancy to suppose that she could care what *mine* was!

Mr. Woodcourt seemed a little distressed by her talk, but he was too considerate to let her see it and contrived delicately to bring the conversation round to thanking my guardian for his hospitality and for the very happy hours he had passed with us. The recollection of them, he said, would go with him and would be always treasured.

And so we gave him our hands, one after another; and so he put his lips to Ada's hand – and to mine; and so he went away upon his long, long voyage!

I was very busy indeed all day and wrote directions home to the servants, and wrote notes for my guardian, and dusted his books and papers, and jingled my housekeeping keys a good deal. I was still busy, singing and working by the window, when who should come in but Caddy Jellyby, whom I had no expectation of seeing!

“Why, Caddy, my dear,” said I, “what beautiful flowers!” She had an exquisite little nosegay in her hand.

“Indeed, I think so, Esther,” replied Caddy. “They are the loveliest I ever saw.”

“Prince, my dear?” said I in a whisper.

“No,” answered Caddy, shaking her head and holding them to me to smell. “Not Prince.”

“Well, to be sure, Caddy!” said I. “You must have two lovers!”

Caddy only laughed in return, and telling me that she had come for half an hour, until Prince would be waiting for her at the corner, sat chatting with me and Ada in the window, every now and then handing me the flowers

again. At last, when she was going, she took me into my room and put them in my dress.

“For me?” said I, surprised.

“For you,” said Caddy with a kiss. “They were left behind by somebody.”

“Left behind?”

“At poor Miss Flite’s,” said Caddy. “Somebody who has been very good to her was hurrying away an hour ago to join a ship and left these flowers behind. No, no! Don’t take them out. Let the pretty little things lie here,” she said, adjusting them carefully, “because I was present myself, and I shouldn’t wonder if somebody left them on purpose!”

Chapter 18

Lady Dedlock

It was not so easy as it had appeared to arrange for Richard's making a trial at Mr. Kenge's office. Richard himself was the chief impediment. As soon as he had it in his power to leave Mr. Badger, he began to doubt whether he wanted to. He didn't know, he said, really. It wasn't a bad profession; perhaps he liked it as well as any other – suppose he gave it one more chance! Upon that, he shut himself up for a few weeks with some books and bones and seemed to acquire a great deal of information very quickly.

After about a month his fervour began to cool, and when it was quite cooled, began to grow warm again. His vacillations between law and medicine lasted so long that midsummer arrived before he finally left Mr. Badger for Messrs. Kenge and Carboy. He took great credit for being determined to be in earnest "this time." And he was so good-natured, and so fond of Ada, that it was very difficult to be displeased with him.

"As to Mr. Jarndyce," (who found the wind sticking much in the east during this time,) "he is the finest fellow in the world," Richard would say to me. "I must be careful to take myself well to task."

The idea of his taking himself well to task, with that laughing face and heedless manner and with a fancy that everything could catch and nothing could hold, was ludicrous. However, he told us sometimes that he was taking himself to task so well that he wondered his hair didn't turn grey.

It was a question much discussed where he should live in London while he studied the law, for we had now gone back to Bleak House, which was too far off to allow his coming oftener than once a week. My guardian told me that if Richard were to settle down at Mr. Kenge's he would take some apartments where we too could occasionally stay for a few days at a time; "but, little woman," he added, "he hasn't settled down there yet!"

The discussions ended in our hiring for him, by the month, a neat little furnished lodging in a quiet old house near Queen Square. He immediately began to spend all his money in buying little ornaments and luxuries for this lodging; and so often as Ada and I dissuaded him from making any unnecessary purchase, he took credit for what it would have cost and spent it on something else.

Meanwhile our visit to Mr. Boythorn's was postponed. At length Richard moved into his lodging, and was soon making energetic attempts to unravel the mysteries of the fatal lawsuit. Consequently we went on our visit without him, and my darling was delighted to praise him for being so busy.

We made a pleasant journey into Lincolnshire by the coach and had an entertaining companion in Mr. Skimpole. His furniture had been all removed, it appeared, by the person who took possession of it on his blue-eyed daughter's birthday, but he seemed quite relieved that it was gone. Chairs and

tables, he said, were wearisome and monotonous objects. How pleasant, then, to be bound to no particular chairs and tables, but to sport like a butterfly among all the furniture on hire, and to flit from rosewood to mahogany, as the humour took one!

“The oddity of the thing is,” said Mr. Skimpole, “that my chairs and tables were not paid for, and yet my landlord walks off with them as composedly as possible. Now, that seems droll! The chair merchant never engaged to pay my landlord my rent!”

“Well,” said my guardian good-humouredly, “it’s pretty clear that whoever became security for those chairs and tables will have to pay for them.”

“Exactly!” returned Mr. Skimpole. “That’s what I said to my landlord. ‘My good man, are you not aware that my excellent friend Jarndyce will have to pay for those things that you are sweeping off? Have you no consideration for *his* property?’ He hadn’t the least.”

“And refused all proposals,” said my guardian.

“I made him business proposals. I said, ‘Let us be business-like. Here is an inkstand, here are pens and paper. I have occupied your house to our mutual satisfaction until now; let us be friendly and business-like.’ He replied that he had never seen the colour of my money. ‘My amiable friend,’ said I, ‘I never have any money. I never know anything about money.’ ‘Well, sir,’ said he, ‘what do you offer if I give you time?’ ‘My good fellow,’ said I, ‘I have no idea of time; but you say you are a man of business, and whatever you can suggest to be done in a business-like way, I am ready to do. Be business-like!’ However, he wouldn’t be, and there was an end of it.”

On the journey Mr. Skimpole had a very good, child-like appetite for such refreshment as came in our way (including some choice hothouse peaches), but never thought of paying for anything. When the coachman came round for his fee, he pleasantly asked him what he considered a liberal one – and on his replying half a crown for a single passenger, said it was little enough too, and left Mr. Jarndyce to give it him.

It was delightful weather. The green corn waved so beautifully, the larks sang so joyfully, the hedges were so full of wild flowers, the trees were so thickly out in leaf, the bean-fields filled the air with such a delicious fragrance! Late in the afternoon we came to the market-town where we alighted from the coach – a dull little town with a church-spire, a market-cross, one intensely sunny street, and a pond with an old horse cooling his legs in it. At the inn we found Mr. Boythorn, on horseback, waiting with an open carriage to take us to his house a few miles off. He was overjoyed to see us.

“By heaven!” said he. “This is a most infamous coach. It is the most abominable public vehicle that ever encumbered the face of the earth. It is twenty-six minutes late! With two ladies in the coach, this scoundrel of a coachman has deliberately delayed his arrival six and twenty minutes! He ought to be put to death!”

While he said this, he handed us into the little phaeton with the utmost gentleness.

“I am sorry, ladies,” he said, “that I am obliged to conduct you nearly two miles out of the way. But our direct road lies through Sir Leicester Dedlock’s park, and in that fellow’s property I have sworn never to set foot, while I breathe!” And he broke into one of his tremendous laughs, which seemed to shake even the motionless little market-town.

“Are the Dedlocks down here, Lawrence?” said my guardian as we drove along and Mr. Boythorn trotted alongside.

“Sir Arrogant Numskull is here,” replied Mr. Boythorn. “Ha ha ha! I am glad to say, he has been laid by the heels here. My Lady,” – he made a courtly gesture as if to exclude her from any part in the quarrel – “is expected daily. Whatever can have induced that transcendent woman to marry him is an impenetrable mystery. Ha ha ha ha!”

“I suppose,” said my guardian, laughing, “*We* may set foot in the park while we are here? The prohibition does not extend to us, does it?”

“I can lay no prohibition on my guests,” said Boythorn with smiling politeness. “I am only sorry that I cannot be their escort about Chesney Wold, which is a very fine place! But, Jarndyce, if you call upon the owner while you stay with me, you are likely to have a cool reception. He carries himself as stiffly as a grandfather clock at all times – Ha ha ha! – but he will have some extra stiffness, I can promise you, for the friends of his neighbour Boythorn!”

“I shall not test it by seeing him,” said my guardian. “A sight of the grounds and perhaps a view of the house are quite enough for me.”

“Well!” said Mr. Boythorn. “I am glad of it. I am looked upon around here as a second Ajax defying the lightning. Ha ha ha ha! When I go into our little church on a Sunday, most of the congregation expect to see me drop, scorched and withered, on the pavement under the Dedlock displeasure. Ha ha ha ha! By heaven, he is the most self-satisfied and utterly brainless ass!”

On our coming to the ridge of a hill, our friend pointed out Chesney Wold. It was a picturesque old house in a fine park richly wooded, with the spire of the little church nearby.

Oh, the solemn woods over which the light and shadow travelled swiftly, as if heavenly wings were sweeping through the summer air; the smooth green slopes, the glittering water, the garden full of the richest colours, how beautiful they looked! The house, with gable and chimney, and tower and turret, and broad terrace-walk, with a great flush of roses twining among its balustrades, seemed scarcely real in the serene and peaceful hush. That struck me above all. On everything, house, garden, terrace, woods, there seemed to be such undisturbed repose.

We came into the little village and passed a small inn with the sign of the Dedlock Arms swinging over it. Mr. Boythorn exchanged greetings with a young gentleman sitting on a bench outside the inn, with fishing-tackle lying beside him.

“That’s the housekeeper’s grandson, Mr. Rouncewell,” said he, “and he is in love with a pretty girl up at the house. Lady Dedlock has taken a fancy to her and is going to keep her about her own fair person – an honour which my young friend does not at all appreciate. However, he has to make the best of it, and comes here pretty often – to fish. Ha ha ha ha!”

Mr. Boythorn dismounted at his own door and stood ready to welcome us. He lived in a pretty house, formerly the parsonage, with a lawn in front, a bright flower-garden at the side, and a well-stocked orchard and kitchen-garden in the rear.

Everything wore an aspect of maturity and abundance. The old lime-tree walk was like green cloisters, the very shadows of the cherry-trees and apple-trees were heavy with fruit, the gooseberry-bushes were so laden that their branches arched onto the earth, the strawberries and raspberries grew in profusion, and the peaches basked by the hundred on the wall. Tumbled about among the glass frames were such heaps of marrows and cucumbers that every foot of ground appeared a vegetable treasury, while the smell of herbs sweetened the air.

The house, though a little disorderly in comparison with the garden, was a real old house with seats in the chimney of the kitchen and great beams across the ceilings. On one side of it was the terrible piece of ground in dispute, where Mr. Boythorn maintained a sentry day and night, whose duty in case of aggression was to ring a large bell, and unchain a great bull-dog from his kennel to deal destruction on the enemy. Mr. Boythorn had himself painted boards with the following solemn warnings: “Beware of the bull-dog. He is most ferocious. Lawrence Boythorn.” “The blunderbuss is loaded. Lawrence Boythorn.” “Man-traps and spring-guns are set here day and night. Lawrence Boythorn.” “Take notice. Any person trespassing on this property will be punished with the utmost severity and rigour of the law. Lawrence Boythorn.”

Mr. Boythorn laughed as he showed us all these. “Let Sir Leicester Dedlock consent to decide this question by single combat,” he said, “and I will meet him with any weapon known to mankind!”

We arrived at his house on a Saturday. On the Sunday morning we all walked to the little church in the park. Entering the park near the disputed ground, we followed a pleasant footpath winding among trees until it brought us to the church-porch.

The congregation was extremely small and quite rustic, apart from a large muster of servants from the house. There were some stately footmen, and a perfect picture of an old coachman. There was a very pretty show of young women, and above them, the handsome old face and fine portly figure of the housekeeper towered pre-eminent. The pretty girl of whom Mr. Boythorn had told us was close by her, blushingly conscious of the eyes of the young fisherman, whom I discovered not far off. One handsome face, though not an agreeable one, seemed maliciously watchful of this pretty girl, and indeed of everyone there. It was a Frenchwoman’s.

As the bell was still ringing, I had leisure to glance over the church, and to think what an ancient, solemn little church it was. The windows, heavily shaded by trees, admitted a subdued light that darkened the old monuments around me, and made the sunshine in the little porch seem very bright. A stir in that direction, and the reverential awe in the rustic faces, warned me that the great people were arriving and that the service was going to begin.

“ ‘Enter not into judgment with thy servant, O Lord, for in thy sight—’ ”

Shall I ever forget the rapid beating at my heart, caused by the look I met as I stood up! Shall I ever forget the manner in which those handsome proud eyes seemed to spring out of their languor and to hold mine! It was only a moment before I cast mine down on my book; but I knew the beautiful face quite well in that short space of time.

And, very strangely, there was something quickened within me, associated with the lonely days at my godmother's; yes, even to the days when I had stood on tiptoe to dress myself at my little glass after dressing my doll. Yet I had never seen this lady's face before in all my life – I was quite sure of it.

It was easy to know that the ceremonious, gouty old gentleman, the only other person in the great pew, was Sir Leicester Dedlock, and that the lady was Lady Dedlock. But why her face should be like a broken glass to me, in which I saw confused scraps of old remembrances, and why I should be so fluttered and troubled by having casually met her eyes, I could not think.

I tried to overcome this weakness by attending to the words I heard. Strangely, I seemed to hear them, not in the reader's voice, but in the well-remembered voice of my godmother. This made me think, did Lady Dedlock's face accidentally resemble my godmother's? Maybe it did, a little; but the expression was quite different, without the stern decision of my godmother's face. The loftiness and haughtiness of Lady Dedlock's face was unlike anyone I knew. And yet I – little Esther Summerson, the child who lived a life apart and on whose birthday there was no rejoicing – seemed to arise before my own eyes, evoked out of the past by some power in this fashionable lady, whom I had never seen until that hour.

Trembling in this unaccountable agitation, I was conscious of being distressed even by the observation of the French maid, though I knew she had been looking watchfully here, and there, and everywhere. Very slowly, I at last overcame my strange emotion. After a long time, I looked towards Lady Dedlock again, before the sermon. She took no heed of me, and the beating at my heart was gone. Neither did it revive for more than a few moments when she once or twice afterwards glanced at Ada or at me.

After the service, Sir Leicester gave his arm with much gallantry to Lady Dedlock – though he could only walk with a stick – and escorted her out to their carriage. The servants then dispersed, and so did the congregation, whom Sir Leicester had contemplated (Mr. Skimpole, said to Mr. Boythorn's delight) as if he were a landed proprietor in heaven.

“He believes he is!” said Mr. Boythorn. “He firmly believes it!”

“Do you know,” pursued Mr. Skimpole unexpectedly, “it’s agreeable to me to see a man of that sort.”

“Is it!” said Mr. Boythorn.

“Say that he wants to patronize me,” pursued Mr. Skimpole. “Very well! I don’t object.”

“I do,” said Mr. Boythorn with great vigour.

“Do you really?” returned Mr. Skimpole in his easy light vein. “But that’s taking trouble, surely. And why should you take trouble? Here am I, content to receive things childishly as they fall out, and I never take trouble! I come down here, for instance, and I find a mighty potentate exacting homage. Very well! I say ‘Mighty potentate, here is my homage! It’s easier to give it than to withhold it. Here it is.’ That’s my view of such things, speaking as a child!”

“But suppose you went somewhere else tomorrow,” said Mr. Boythorn, “where there was the opposite of that fellow. How then?”

“How then?” said Mr. Skimpole. “Just the same then! I should say, ‘My esteemed Boythorn’ – to make you the personification of our imaginary friend – ‘do you object to the mighty potentate? Very good. So do I. Everybody’s business in the social system is to be agreeable. It’s a system of harmony, in short. Therefore if you object, I object. Now, excellent Boythorn, let us go to dinner!’”

“But excellent Boythorn might say,” returned our host, swelling and growing very red, “I’ll be—”

“I understand,” said Mr. Skimpole. “Very likely he would.”

“—if I *will* go to dinner!” cried Mr. Boythorn in a violent burst, striking his stick upon the ground. “And he would probably add, ‘Is there such a thing as principle, Mr. Harold Skimpole?’”

“To which Harold Skimpole would reply, you know,” he returned in his gayest manner, “‘Upon my life I have not the least idea! I don’t know what it is you call by that name. If you possess it and find it comfortable, I am quite delighted and congratulate you heartily. But I know nothing about it, I assure you; for I am a mere child, and I lay no claim to it!’ So, you see, excellent Boythorn and I would go to dinner after all!”

This was one of many little dialogues between them which I always expected to end in some violent explosion on the part of our host. But he had so high a sense of his hospitable duty, and my guardian laughed so sincerely at and with Mr. Skimpole, that matters never went beyond this point. Mr. Skimpole, who always seemed quite unconscious of having been on delicate ground, would then begin some sketch in the park which he never finished, or play fragments on the piano, or lie down on his back under a tree looking at the sky, an occupation which he said suited him exactly.

“Enterprise and effort,” he would say to us (on his back), “are delightful to me. I have the deepest sympathy with them. I lie in a shady place like this and think of adventurous spirits going to the North Pole or the tropics with admiration. Take an extreme case. Take the case of the slaves on American plantations. I dare say they are worked hard, I dare say they don’t altogether

like it; but they people the landscape for me, they give it a poetry for me, and perhaps that is one of the pleasanter objects of their existence. I shouldn't wonder if it were!"

I always wondered on these occasions whether he ever thought of Mrs. Skimpole and the children. So far as I could understand, they were rarely present in his mind at all.

A week passed; and every day had been so bright and blue that to ramble in the woods, and to see the light striking down among the leaves and sparkling in the beautiful interlacings of the shadows of the trees, while the birds poured out their songs, had been most delightful. We had one favourite spot, deep in moss and last year's leaves, where there were some felled trees. Seated among these, we looked through a green vista supported by thousands of natural columns. On Saturday we sat here, Mr. Jarndyce, Ada, and I, until we heard thunder muttering in the distance and felt large raindrops rattle through the leaves.

The storm broke so suddenly that before we reached the outskirts of the wood the thunder and lightning were frequent, and the rain came plunging through the leaves like great leaden beads. We ran out of the wood, and made for a keeper's lodge which was close at hand. We had often noticed the dark beauty of this lodge standing in a deep twilight of trees, with ivy clustered over it.

A man came to the door and set out two chairs for Ada and me. The lodge was dark within; but the lattice-windows were all thrown open, and we sat just inside the doorway watching the storm. It was grand to see how the wind awoke, and bent the trees, and drove the rain before it like a cloud of smoke; and to hear the solemn thunder and to see the lightning; while thinking with awe of the tremendous powers by which our little lives are encompassed, yet which already brought a freshness from all this rage which seemed to make creation new again.

"Is it not dangerous to sit in so exposed a place?"

"Oh, no, Esther dear!" said Ada quietly.

Ada said it to me, but I had not spoken.

The beating of my heart came back again. I had never heard the voice, as I had never seen the face, but it affected me in the same strange way. Again, in a moment, there arose before my mind innumerable pictures of myself.

Lady Dedlock had taken shelter in the lodge before our arrival and had come out of the gloom within. She stood behind my chair with her hand upon it, close to my shoulder.

"I have frightened you?" she said.

No. It was not fright. Why should I be frightened?

"I believe," said Lady Dedlock to my guardian, "I have the pleasure of speaking to Mr. Jarndyce. I recognized you in church on Sunday. I am sorry that any local disputes of Sir Leicester's should make it difficult to show you attention here."

"I am aware of the circumstances," returned my guardian with a smile, "and I am obliged to you."

She had given him her hand in an indifferent way that seemed habitual to her and spoke in a correspondingly indifferent manner, though in a very pleasant voice. She was as graceful as she was beautiful, perfectly self-possessed, and had the air, I thought, of being able to attract and interest anyone if she thought it worth her while. The keeper brought her a chair, on which she sat between us.

“Is the young gentleman settled, of whom you wrote to Sir Leicester?” she said to my guardian.

“I hope so,” said he.

She seemed to respect him. There was something very winning in her haughty manner, as she spoke to him over her shoulder.

“I presume this is your other ward in Chancery, Miss Clare?”

He presented Ada.

“But present me,” and Lady Dedlock turned full upon me, “to this young lady too!”

“Miss Summerson really is my ward,” said Mr. Jarndyce. “I am responsible to no Lord Chancellor in her case.”

“Has Miss Summerson lost both her parents?” said my Lady.

“Yes.”

“She is very fortunate in her guardian.”

Lady Dedlock looked at me, and I looked at her and said I was indeed. All at once she turned from me with a hasty air, almost expressive of displeasure or dislike, and spoke to him over her shoulder again.

“Ages have passed since we were in the habit of meeting, Mr. Jarndyce.”

“A long time. At least I thought it was a long time, until I saw you last Sunday,” he returned.

“What! Even you are a courtier, or think it necessary to become one to me!” she said with some disdain. “I have achieved that reputation, I suppose.”

“You have achieved so much, Lady Dedlock,” said my guardian, “that you pay some little penalty, I dare say. But none to me.”

“So much!” she repeated, slightly laughing. “Yes!”

With her air of superiority, and power, and fascination, she seemed to regard Ada and me as little more than children. She laughed and sat looking at the rain, self-possessed and occupied with her thoughts.

“I think you knew my sister when we were abroad together better than you know me?” she said, looking at him again.

“Yes, we happened to meet oftener,” he returned.

“We went our several ways,” said Lady Dedlock, “and had little in common even before we agreed to differ. It is to be regretted, I suppose, but it could not be helped.”

She again sat looking at the rain. The storm soon began to pass. The shower abated, the lightning ceased; the thunder rolled among the distant hills, and the sun began to glisten on the wet leaves. As we sat there silently, we saw a little pony phaeton coming towards us at a merry pace.

“The messenger is coming back, my Lady,” said the keeper, “with the carriage.”

As it drove up, we saw that there were two people inside. There alighted from it, with some cloaks and wrappers, first the Frenchwoman whom I had seen in church, and secondly the pretty girl. The Frenchwoman stepped out with a defiant confidence, the pretty girl confused and hesitating.

“What now?” said Lady Dedlock. “Two!”

“I am your maid, my Lady, at the present,” said the Frenchwoman. “The message was for the maid.”

“I was afraid you might mean me, my Lady,” said the pretty girl.

“I did mean you, child,” replied her mistress calmly. “Put that shawl on me.”

She slightly stooped her shoulders to receive it, and the pretty girl lightly dropped it in place. The Frenchwoman stood looking on with her lips very tightly set.

“I am sorry,” said Lady Dedlock to Mr. Jarndyce, “that we are not likely to renew our former acquaintance. You will allow me to send the carriage back for your two wards.”

But as he declined this offer, she took a graceful leave of Ada – none of me – put her hand upon his proffered arm, and got into the carriage.

“Come in, child,” she said to the pretty girl; “Go on!”

The carriage rolled away, and the Frenchwoman, with the wrappers she had brought hanging over her arm, remained standing there.

I suppose there is nothing pride can so little bear as another’s pride, and that she was punished for her imperious manner. Her retaliation was singular. She remained perfectly still until the carriage had turned into the drive, and then, without the least discomposure, slipped off her shoes, left them on the ground, and walked deliberately in the same direction through wet grass.

“Is that young woman mad?” said my guardian.

“Oh, no, sir!” said the keeper. “But Hortense is mortal high and passionate; and what with having notice to leave, and having others put above her, she don’t take kindly to it.”

“But why should she walk shoeless through all that water?” said my guardian.

“Why, indeed, sir, unless it is to cool her down!” said the man.

“Or unless she fancies it’s blood,” said the woman. “She’d as soon walk through that as anything else, I think, when her own blood’s up!”

We passed not far from the house a few minutes afterwards. Peaceful as it had looked when we first saw it, it looked even more so now, with a diamond spray glittering all about it, everything refreshed by the late rain, and the little carriage shining at the doorway like a fairy carriage made of silver. Very steadfastly and quietly walking towards it, went Mademoiselle Hortense, shoeless, through the wet grass.

Chapter 19

Moving On

It is the long vacation in the regions of Chancery Lane. The good ships Law and Equity, those teak-built, iron-fastened, slowly-sailing clippers are laid up. The courts are all shut; the public offices lie in a hot sleep.

The Temple, Chancery Lane, Serjeants' Inn, and Lincoln's Inn Fields are like tidal harbours at low water, where stranded proceedings, offices at anchor, and idle clerks lounging on lop-sided stools, lie high and dry upon the ooze of the long vacation. Outer doors of chambers are shut, messages and parcels are left at the Porter's Lodge by the bushel.

There is only one judge in town. Even he only comes twice a week to sit in chambers; a gentleman in white trousers and a white hat – no wig; his nose is peeling from the sun and he drinks iced ginger-beer.

The bar of England is scattered over the face of the earth. How England can get on through four long summer months without its lawyers is beside the question. Dispersed fragments of the bar are to be found on the canals of Venice, by the Nile, in the baths of Germany, and sprinkled on the sea-sand all over the English coast. Scarcely one is to be encountered in the deserted region of Chancery Lane.

It is the hottest long vacation known for many years. All the young clerks are madly in love, and pine for the beloved object at Margate, Ramsgate, or Gravesend. All the middle-aged clerks think their families too large. A shop with a sun-blind, and a watered pavement, and a bowl of goldfish in the window, is a sanctuary. Temple Bar and Fleet Street are simmering all night.

There are offices about the Inns of Court in which a man might be cool; but the little alleys outside them seem to blaze. In Mr. Krook's court, it is so hot that the people turn their houses inside out and sit in chairs upon the pavement – Mr. Krook included, who pursues his studies with his cat by his side.

Over all the legal neighbourhood there hangs, like some gigantic cobweb, the idleness and pensiveness of the long vacation. Mr. Snagsby, law-stationer, has more leisure for musing during the long vacation than at other seasons, and he says to the two apprentices, what a thing it is in such hot weather to think that you live in an island with the sea a-bowling right round you.

Guster is busy in the little drawing-room this afternoon, when Mr. and Mrs. Snagsby are to receive company. The expected guests are Mr. and Mrs. Chadband. From Mr. Chadband's being much given to describe himself as a vessel, he is occasionally mistaken by strangers for a sailor, but he is, he says, "in the ministry." Mr. Chadband is attached to no particular denomination and

is considered by his persecutors to have nothing very remarkable to say; but he has his followers, and Mrs. Snagsby is one of them.

“My little woman,” says Mr. Snagsby to the sparrows in Staple Inn, “likes to have her religion rather sharp, you see!”

So Guster prepares the drawing-room for tea. All the furniture is dusted, the best tea-service is set forth, and there is excellent provision of dainty new bread, cool fresh butter, thin slices of ham, tongue, and German sausage, and delicate little rows of anchovies nestling in parsley, eggs and hot buttered toast. For Chadband is rather a consuming vessel.

Mr. Snagsby in his best coat, looking at all the preparations, says to Mrs. Snagsby, “At what time did you expect Mr. and Mrs. Chadband, my love?”

“At six,” says Mrs. Snagsby.

Mr. Snagsby observes mildly that “it’s gone that.”

“Perhaps you’d like to begin without them,” is Mrs. Snagsby’s reproachful remark.

Mr. Snagsby does look as if he would like it, but he says, with his cough of mildness, “No, my dear, no. I merely named the time.”

“What’s time,” says Mrs. Snagsby, “to eternity?”

“Very true, my dear,” says Mr. Snagsby.

Here, Guster, who has been looking out of the bedroom window, comes flushed and rustling down the little staircase to announce that Mr. and Mrs. Chadband have appeared in the court. The bell immediately tinkles; and much discomposed in her nerves, she announces them as “Mr. and Mrs. Cheeseming, least which, I mean to say, whatsername!”

Mr. Chadband is a large yellow man with a fat smile and a general appearance of having a good deal of train oil in his system. Mrs. Chadband is a stern, severe-looking, silent woman. Mr. Chadband moves softly and cumbrously, not unlike a bear who has been taught to walk upright. He is in a perspiration about the head, and never speaks without first putting up his great hand, signalling to his hearers that he is going to edify them.

“My friends,” says Mr. Chadband, “peace be on this house! On the master thereof, on the mistress thereof! My friends, why do I wish for peace? What is peace? Is it war? No. Is it strife? No. Is it lovely, and gentle, and beautiful, and serene? Oh, yes! Therefore, my friends, I wish for peace, upon you and upon yours.”

As Mrs. Snagsby is looking deeply edified, Mr. Snagsby thinks it expedient to say amen, which is well received.

“Now, my friends,” proceeds Mr. Chadband, “since I am upon this theme—”

Guster comes in. Mrs. Snagsby, in a spectral bass voice, says, “Go away!”

“Now, my friends,” says Chadband, “since I am upon this theme, and in my lowly path improving it—”

Guster is heard unaccountably to murmur “one thousand seven hundred and eighty-two.”

Mr. Chadband, pausing with the resignation of a man accustomed to be persecuted, folds up his chin into his fat smile, and says, "Let us hear the maiden!"

"Cab number one thousand seven hundred and eighty-two, if you please, sir. Which he wish to know what the shilling ware for," says Guster, breathless.

"For?" returns Mrs. Chadband. "His fare!"

Guster replies that "he insists on one and eightpence or on summonsizing the party." Mrs. Snagsby and Mrs. Chadband are growing shrill in indignation when Mr. Chadband quiets the tumult by lifting up his hand.

"My friends," says he, "I remember a duty unfulfilled yesterday. It is right that I should be chastened in some penalty. Rachael, pay the eightpence!"

While Mr. Chadband glows with humility and train oil, Mrs. Chadband pays the money.

"My friends," says Chadband, "eightpence is not much; it might have been half a crown. O let us be joyful, joyful!"

With which remark, he stalks to the table, and before taking a chair, lifts up his hand.

"My friends," says he, "what is this which is spread before us? Refreshment. Do we need refreshment, my friends? We do. And why, my friends? Because we are but mortal, because we are but sinful, because we are but of the earth, and not of the air. Can we fly, my friends? We cannot. Why can we not fly, my friends?"

Mr. Snagsby to observe in a cheerful and rather knowing tone, "No wings." He is immediately frowned down by Mrs. Snagsby.

"I say, my friends," pursues Mr. Chadband, obliterating Mr. Snagsby's suggestion, "why can we not fly? Is it because we are meant to walk? It is. Could we walk, my friends, without strength? We could not. Our knees would double up, our ankles would turn over, and we should come to the ground. Then from whence, my friends, do we derive the strength that is necessary to our limbs? Is it," says Chadband, glancing over the table, "from bread in various forms, from butter, from eggs, from ham, from tongue, from sausage, and from such like? It is. Then let us partake of the good things which are set before us!"

Mr. Chadband, having concluded for the present, sits down at Mr. Snagsby's table and lays about him prodigiously. The conversion of food into oil of the quality already mentioned appears to be a process so inevitable for this vessel, that in eating he may be described as becoming a kind of oil mill.

At this period, Guster whispers to Mr. Snagsby that he is wanted in the shop.

"Perhaps this good company will excuse me for half a minute," says Mr. Snagsby, rising.

He descends and finds the two apprentices contemplating a police constable, who holds a ragged boy by the arm.

“Why, bless my heart,” says Mr. Snagsby, “what’s the matter!”

“This boy,” says the constable, “although he’s repeatedly told to, won’t move on—”

“I’m always a-moving on, sar,” cries the boy, wiping away his grimy tears with his arm. “I’ve always been a-moving and a-moving on, ever since I was born. Where can I possibly move to, sir, more nor I do!”

“He won’t move on,” says the constable calmly, “although he has been repeatedly cautioned, and therefore I am obliged to take him into custody. He *won’t* move on.”

“Oh, my eye! Where can I move to!” cries the boy, clutching quite desperately at his hair and beating his bare feet upon the floor of Mr. Snagsby’s passage.

“Don’t you come none of that!” says the constable, giving him a passionless shake. “My instructions are that you are to move on. I have told you so five hundred times.”

“But where?” cries the boy.

“Well! Really, constable, you know,” says Mr. Snagsby wistfully, and coughing behind his hand his cough of perplexity and doubt, “really, that does seem a question. Where, you know?”

“My instructions don’t go to that,” replies the constable. “My instructions are that this boy is to move on.”

By this time Mr. and Mrs. Chadband and Mrs. Snagsby, hearing the altercation, have appeared upon the stairs.

“The simple question is, sir,” says the constable, “whether you know this boy. He says you do.”

Mrs. Snagsby instantly cries out, “No he don’t!”

“My lit-tle woman!” says Mr. Snagsby, looking up the staircase. “My love, permit me! I do know something of this lad, and in what I know of him, I can’t say that there’s any harm; perhaps on the contrary, constable.” The law-stationer relates his Joful and woeful experience.

“Well!” says the constable, “it seems he had grounds for what he said. When I took him into custody up in Holborn, he said you knew him. A young man who was in the crowd said he was acquainted with you, and if I’d call and make the inquiry – oh! Here *is* the young man!”

Enter Mr. Guppy, who nods to Mr. Snagsby and touches his hat to the ladies on the stairs.

“I was strolling away from the office just now when I found this row going on,” says Mr. Guppy to the law-stationer, “and as your name was mentioned, I thought it was right the thing should be looked into.”

“It was very good-natured of you, sir,” says Mr. Snagsby.

“Now, I know where you live,” says the constable to Jo. “You live down in Tom-all-Alone’s. That’s a nice innocent place to live in, ain’t it?”

“I can’t go and live in no nicer place, sir,” replies Jo.

“You are very poor, ain’t you?” says the constable.

“Yes, I am indeed, sir, wery poor in gin’ral,” replies Jo.

“I leave you to judge! I shook these two half-crowns out of him,” says the constable, producing them to the company.

“They’re wot’s left, Mr. Snagsby,” says Jo, “out of a sov’ring as wos give me by a lady as sed she wos a servant and as come to my crossin one night and asked to be showd this ’ere ouse and the ouse wot him as you giv the writin to died at and the berrin-ground wot he’s berrid in. She ses to me ‘are you the boy at the inkwhich?’ I ses ‘yes.’ She ses to me she ses ‘can you show me all them places?’ I ses ‘yes I can.’ And she ses to me ‘do it’ and I dun it and she giv me a sov’ring and hooked it. And I an’t had much of the sov’ring neither,” says Jo, with dirty tears, “fur I had to pay five bob, down in Tom-all-Alone’s, afore they’d change it fur me, and then a man he thieved another five while I was asleep and another boy he thieved ninepence of it.”

“You don’t expect anybody to believe this, about the lady and the sovereign, do you?” says the constable with disdain.

“I don’t expect nothink at all, sir, much, but it’s true.”

“You see what he is!” the constable observes to the audience. “Well, Mr. Snagsby, if I don’t lock him up this time, will you engage for his moving on?”

“No!” cries Mrs. Snagsby from the stairs.

“My little woman!” pleads her husband. “Constable, I have no doubt he’ll move on. You know you really must do it, Jo.”

“I’m everyways agreeable, sir,” says the hapless Jo.

“Do it, then,” observes the constable. “You won’t get off so easy next time. Take your money. Now, the sooner you’re five mile off, the better for all parties.”

The constable bids good afternoon and walks away.

Now, Jo’s improbable story concerning the lady and the sovereign has awakened the curiosity of all the company, especially Mr. Guppy, who has an inquiring mind. He enters on a regular cross-examination of the witness, which is found so interesting by the ladies that Mrs. Snagsby politely invites him to step upstairs and drink a cup of tea.

Mr. Guppy accepting, Jo is requested to follow into the drawing-room doorway, where Mr. Guppy takes him in hand as a witness. His cross examination is both long and fruitless, but Mrs. Snagsby feels that it lifts her husband’s establishment higher up in the law. Meanwhile the vessel Chadband, being merely engaged in the oil trade, waits to be floated off.

“Well!” says Mr. Guppy. “Either this boy sticks to it like cobbler’s-wax or there is something out of the common here that beats anything that ever came into my way at Kenge and Carboy’s.”

Mrs. Chadband whispers to Mrs. Snagsby, who exclaims, “You don’t say so!”

“Mrs. Chadband – this gentleman’s wife – has known Kenge and Carboy’s office for years,” Mrs. Snagsby triumphantly explains to Mr. Guppy.

“Oh, indeed!” says Mr. Guppy.

“Before I married my present husband,” says Mrs. Chadband.

“Was you a party in any suit, ma’am?” says Mr. Guppy.

“No.”

“Perhaps you were acquainted with somebody who was a party in something, ma’am?” says Mr. Guppy.

“Not exactly that, either,” replies Mrs. Chadband, with a hard-favoured smile.

“Very good. Pray, ma’am, was it a lady of your acquaintance who had some transactions with Kenge and Carboy’s office, or was it a gentleman? Take time, ma’am. Man or woman, ma’am?”

“Neither,” says Mrs. Chadband.

“Oh! A child!” says Mr. Guppy, throwing on the admiring Mrs. Snagsby an acute professional eye. “Now, ma’am, perhaps you’ll have the kindness to tell us *what* child.”

“You have got it at last, sir,” says Mrs. Chadband with another hard-favoured smile. “Well, sir, it was before your time. I was left in charge of a child named Esther Summerson, who was put out in life by Messrs. Kenge and Carboy.”

“Miss Summerson!” cries Mr. Guppy, excited.

“Esther Summerson,” says Mrs. Chadband with austerity. “There was no *Miss* in my time. It was Esther. ‘Esther, do this!’ and she was made to do it.”

“My dear ma’am,” returns Mr. Guppy, “I received that young lady in London when she first came here. Allow me to have the pleasure of shaking your hand.”

Mr. Chadband, at last seeing his opportunity, rises.

“My friends,” says Chadband, “we have partaken in moderation” (which was certainly not the case so far as he was concerned) “of the comforts which have been provided. May this house live upon the fatness of the land; may corn and wine be plentiful therein; may it grow, may it thrive, may it prosper, may it advance, may it proceed, may it press forward! But, my friends, have we partaken of anything else? We have. My friends, of what else have we partaken? Of spiritual profit? Yes. From whence have we derived that spiritual profit? My young friend, stand forth!”

Jo gives a slouch backward, and another slouch forward.

“My young friend,” says Chadband, “you are to us a pearl, you are to us a gem, you are to us a jewel. And why?”

“I don’t know,” replies Jo. “I don’t know nothink.”

“My young friend,” says Chadband, “it is because you know nothing that you are to us a gem and jewel. For what are you, my young friend? Are you a beast of the field? No. A bird of the air? No. A fish of the sea or river? No. You are a human boy, my young friend. O glorious to be a human boy! And why glorious, my young friend? Because you are capable of receiving the lessons of wisdom which I now deliver for your good, because you are not a stick, or a staff, or a stock, or a stone, or a post, or a pillar. But you are in a state of darkness, a state of obscurity, a state of sinfulness, a state of bondage. My young friend, what is bondage? Let us, in a spirit of love, inquire.”

At this threatening stage of the discourse, Jo smears his right arm over his face and gives a terrible yawn. Mrs. Snagsby indignantly expresses her belief that he is a limb of the arch-fiend.

“My friends,” says Mr. Chadband, “it is right that I should be humbled. I stumbled, on Sabbath last, when I thought with pride of my three hours’ improving. The account is now favourably balanced: O let us be joyful, joyful!”

Great sensation on the part of Mrs. Snagsby.

“My friends,” says Chadband, “I will not proceed with my young friend now. Will you come tomorrow, my young friend, and inquire of this good lady where I am to be found to deliver a discourse unto you, and will you come like the thirsty swallow upon the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that, and upon many pleasant days, to hear discourses?” (This with a cow-like lightness.)

Jo, whose immediate object seems to be to get away on any terms, gives a shuffling nod. Mr. Guppy throws him a penny, and Mrs. Snagsby calls to Guster to see him safely out of the house. But before he goes downstairs, Mr. Snagsby loads him with some food from the table, which he carries away, hugging in his arms, down to Blackfriars Bridge.

He finds a stony corner to eat his repast; and there he sits, munching, and looking up at the great cross on the summit of St. Paul’s Cathedral. From the boy’s face one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great, confused city – so golden, so high, so far out of his reach. There he sits, the crowd flowing by him – until he is told to “move on”.

Chapter 20

A New Lodger

The long vacation saunters on like an idle river leisurely strolling down a flat country to the sea. Mr. Guppy saunters along with it congenially. He has blunted the blade of his penknife by sticking it into his desk in every direction. Not that he bears the desk any ill will, but he must do something; so he stabs his desk, and yawns.

Kenge and Carboy are out of town, and Mr. Guppy's two colleagues are away on leave. Mr. Guppy and Mr. Richard Carstone divide the dignity of the office. But Mr. Carstone is, for now, established in Kenge's room, whereat Mr. Guppy chafes. With biting sarcasm he informs his mother that he is afraid the office is hardly good enough for swells, and that if he had known there was a swell coming, he would have got it painted.

Mr. Guppy suspects everybody who occupies a stool in Kenge and Carboy's office of wanting to depose him. If he be ever asked how or why, he shuts one eye and shakes his head. On the strength of these profound views, he takes infinite pains to counterplot when there is no plot, and plays the deepest games of chess without any adversary.

Mr. Guppy is pleased, therefore, to find the newcomer constantly poring over the papers in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, for he well knows that nothing but confusion and failure can come of that. His satisfaction communicates itself to a third saunterer through the long vacation in the office: Smallweed.

Whether Young Smallweed (called Small and also Chickweed) was ever a boy is much doubted in Lincoln's Inn. He is something under fifteen and an old limb of the law. He is facetiously understood to entertain a passion for a lady at a cigar-shop and for her sake to have broken off a contract with another lady to whom he had been engaged. He is small with wizened features, but may be perceived from a considerable distance by means of his very tall hat. To become a Guppy is his ambition. He dresses like that gentleman, walks and talks like him, fouds himself entirely on him. He is honoured with Mr. Guppy's confidence and occasionally advises him, from his deep experience, on difficult points in private life.

Mr. Guppy has been lolling out of the window all morning, after several times putting his head into the iron safe with a notion of cooling it. Mr. Smallweed has been twice sent out for effervescent drinks, and has twice mixed them in the tumblers and stirred them up with the ruler. Mr. Guppy reclines his head upon the window-sill in a state of hopeless languor.

While thus looking out into the shade of Old Square, Mr. Guppy sees a manly whisker emerging from the cloistered walk below and turning towards him. A suppressed voice cries, "Hip! Gup-py!"

"Why, here's Jobling!" says Mr. Guppy. Small's head looks out too and nods to Jobling.

“Where have you sprung up from?” inquires Mr. Guppy.

“From the market-gardens down by Deptford. I can’t stand it any longer. I must enlist. I say! I wish you’d lend me half a crown. Upon my soul, I’m hungry.”

Jobling has the appearance of having run to seed in the market-gardens down by Deptford.

“Will you come and dine with me?” says Mr. Guppy, throwing out the coin, which Mr. Jobling catches. “I’ll be half an hour. I am only waiting here till the enemy goes.”

“What enemy?”

“A new one. Going to be articulated. Will you wait?”

“Can you give a fellow anything to read in the meantime?” says Mr. Jobling.

“You can have the paper,” says Mr. Guppy. “Smallweed shall bring it down. But you had better not be seen about here. Sit on our staircase and read. It’s quiet.”

Jobling nods. The sagacious Smallweed gives him the newspaper. At last the enemy retreats, and then Smallweed fetches Mr. Jobling up.

“Well, how are you?” says Mr. Guppy, shaking hands with him.

“So, so. How are you?”

Mr. Guppy replies that he is not much to boast of.

Mr. Jobling ventures to ask, “How is *she*?”

This Mr. Guppy resents as a liberty, retorting, “Jobling, there *are* chords in the human mind—” Jobling begs pardon.

“Any subject but that!” says Mr. Guppy with gloomy enjoyment.

Smallweed has written on a slip of paper, “Return immediately.” This note he inserts in the letter-box, and then putting on the tall hat at the same angle at which Mr. Guppy wears his, informs his patron that they may now leave.

They go to a neighbouring dining-house, of the class known among its frequenters as slap-bang, where the waitress, a bouncing young female of forty, is supposed to have made some impression on the susceptible Smallweed, of whom it may be remarked that he is a weird changeling to whom years are nothing. He possesses centuries of owl-like wisdom. If he ever lay in a cradle, he must have lain there in a tail-coat. He has an old, old eye, has Smallweed; and he drinks and smokes in a monkeyish way; and he is never to be taken in; and he knows all about it, whatever it is. In short, he is a kind of fossil imp brought up by the law.

Into the dining-house, Mr. Smallweed leads the way. They know him there and defer to him. It is of no use proposing to him any joint of meat unless it is the very best cut. In the matter of gravy he is adamant.

Conscious of his elfin power, Mr. Guppy consults him in the choice of that day’s banquet, appealing, “What do *you* take, Chick?” Chick preferring “veal and ham and French beans – and don’t forget the stuffing, Polly”, Mr. Guppy and Mr. Jobling give the same order. Three pint pots are added. The waitress returns bearing what is apparently a model of the Tower of Babel but

is really a pile of plates and flat tin dish-covers. Mr. Smallweed, approving, winks upon her with his ancient eye. Then the legal three appease their appetites.

Mr. Jobling is buttoned up close. His hat and coat are shiny at the seams, and he has the faded appearance of a gentleman in embarrassed circumstances; even his whiskers droop with a shabby air.

He makes such a speedy end of his plate of veal and ham, finishing it while his companions are yet midway in theirs, that Mr. Guppy proposes another.

“Thank you, Guppy,” says Mr. Jobling, “I really think I will.” Another being brought, he falls to with great goodwill.

When he is half way through this second plate and stops to take a contented pull at his pint pot and stretch out his legs, Mr. Guppy says, “You are a man again, Tony!”

“Well, not quite yet,” says Mr. Jobling. “Say, just born.”

“Will you take any other vegetables? Summer cabbage?”

“Thank you, Guppy,” says Mr. Jobling. “I really think I will.”

Order given; and cabbage produced.

“I am growing up, Guppy,” says Mr. Jobling, plying his knife and fork steadily.

“Glad to hear it.”

“In fact, I have just turned into my teens,” says Mr. Jobling. He says no more until he has finished.

“Now, Small,” says Mr. Guppy, “what would you recommend about pastry?”

“Marrow puddings,” says Mr. Smallweed instantly.

“Aye, aye!” cries Mr. Jobling with an arch look. “Thank you, Mr. Guppy, I really think I will.”

Three marrow puddings being produced, Mr. Jobling adds pleasantly that he is coming of age fast. After these come “three Cheshire cheeses,” and “three small rums.” Finally Mr. Jobling leans back and says, “I am grown up now, Guppy. I have arrived at maturity.”

“What do you think, now,” says Mr. Guppy, “about enlisting?”

“Why, even after dinner, I ask myself, What am I to do? How am I to live? If any man had told me when you and I were down in Lincolnshire, Guppy, and drove over to see that house at Castle Wold—”

Mr. Smallweed corrects him – Chesney Wold.

“Chesney Wold. If any man had told me then that I should be as hard up as I now find myself, I should have let fly at his head,” says Mr. Jobling, with an air of desperate resignation.

“Still, Tony, you were broke then,” remonstrates Mr. Guppy.

“Guppy,” says Mr. Jobling, “I will not deny it. But I trusted to things coming round.”

That popular trust in flat things coming round!

“I was confident that things would come round and be all square,” says Mr. Jobling with some vagueness of expression. “But I was disappointed.

They never did. And when it came to creditors making rows at the office and to clients complaining about trifles of borrowed money, why there was an end of that connexion. And of any new professional connexion too, for it would be mentioned in any reference and would sew me up. What's a fellow to do? I have been keeping out of the way and living cheap by the market-gardens, but what's the use of living cheap when you have got no money? You might as well live dear. What else can a fellow do, I ask you, but enlist?"

Mr. Guppy says in a gravely impressive manner, "Jobling, myself and our mutual friend Smallweed have had a little conversation on this matter since you—"

"Say, got the sack!" cries Mr. Jobling bitterly. "Say it, Guppy."

"No-o-o! Left the Inn," Mr. Smallweed delicately suggests.

"Since you left the Inn, Jobling," says Mr. Guppy; "and I have mentioned a plan to our friend Smallweed. You know Snagsby the stationer?"

"I know of him," returns Mr. Jobling. "I am not acquainted with him."

"I *am* acquainted with him," Mr. Guppy retorts. "Well, sir! I have lately become better acquainted with him through some circumstances that I need not describe. They may – or they may not – have some reference to a subject which may – or may not – have cast its shadow on my existence."

As it is Mr. Guppy's perplexing way to tempt his friends into this subject, and then to turn on them with trenchant severity about the chords in the human mind, both Mr. Jobling and Mr. Smallweed remain silent.

"Snagsby has, in busy times, a good deal of copying work to give out," continues Mr. Guppy. "He has all Tulkington's, and an excellent business besides, as Smallweed knows."

Mr. Smallweed nods.

"Now, gentlemen of the jury," says Mr. Guppy, "– I mean, Jobling – you may say this is a poor prospect of a living. But it's better than nothing, and better than enlistment. You want time for these recent affairs to blow over. You might do worse than writing for Snagsby. Secondly: you know Krook, the Chancellor, across the lane?"

"I know him by sight," says Mr. Jobling.

"And you know little Flite?"

"Everybody knows her," says Mr. Jobling.

"Very well. Now it has been one of my duties lately to pay Flite a weekly allowance, deducting from it her weekly rent, which I have paid according to my instructions to Krook himself. This has brought me into a knowledge of Krook's house and his habits. I know he has a room to let. You may live there at a very low rent under any name you like, very quietly. He'll ask no questions and would accept you as a tenant at a word from me. And I tell you another thing, Jobling," says Mr. Guppy, who has suddenly lowered his voice, "he's an extraordinary old chap – always rummaging among a litter of papers and trying to teaching himself to read and write, without getting on. It might be worth a fellow's while to look him up a bit."

"You don't mean—" Mr. Jobling begins.

“I mean,” returns Mr. Guppy, shrugging modestly, “that I can’t make him out. He’s such a deep old one, so sly and secret (though I don’t believe he is ever sober) as I never came across. Now, he has not a soul about him, and he is reported to be immensely rich; and whether he is a smuggler, or a receiver, or an unlicensed pawnbroker, or a money-lender – all of which I have thought likely – it might pay you to get to know him. I don’t see why you shouldn’t go in for it.”

Mr. Jobling, Mr. Guppy, and Mr. Smallweed all drink, slowly lean back, and look at one another.

“If I had the energy I once possessed, Tony!” says Mr. Guppy with a sigh. “But there are chords in the human mind—”

Mr. Guppy concludes by resigning the adventure to Tony Jobling and informing him that during the vacation, his purse, “as far as three or four or even five pound goes,” will be at his disposal. “For never shall it be said,” Mr. Guppy adds, “that William Guppy turned his back upon his friend!”

Mr. Jobling says with emotion, “Guppy, my trump, we have been pals now for some years!”

Mr. Guppy replies, “Jobling, we have.”

They shake hands, and Mr. Jobling adds in a feeling manner, “Thank you, Guppy, I really think I *will* take another glass for old acquaintance sake.”

“Krook’s last lodger died there,” observes Mr. Guppy casually.

“Did he though!”

“Accidental death. You don’t mind that?”

“No,” says Mr. Jobling, “I don’t mind it; but he might have died somewhere else. It’s devilish odd that he need go and die at *my* place! He wouldn’t have liked my dying at *his* place, I dare say!”

Mr. Guppy proposes to dispatch the trusty Smallweed to see if Mr. Krook is at home, so that they may complete the negotiation without delay. Smallweed puts himself under the tall hat and leaves. He soon returns with the news that Mr. Krook is at home, sitting in the back and sleeping “like one o’clock.”

“Then I’ll pay,” says Mr. Guppy, “and we’ll go and see him. Small, how much will it be?”

Mr. Smallweed instantly replies: “Four veals and hams is three shillings, and four potatoes makes three and four, and one summer cabbage is three and six, and three marrows is four and six, and six breads is five, and three Cheshires is five and three, and four half-pints of half-and-half is six and three, and four small rums is eight and three, and three Pollys is eight and six. Eight and six in half a sovereign, Polly, and eighteenpence out!”

After these stupendous calculations, Smallweed dismisses his friends with a cool nod and remains behind to take a little admiring notice of Polly, and to read the daily papers, which are so very large in proportion to himself that when he holds up the Times he disappears altogether.

Mr. Guppy and Mr. Jobling repair to the rag and bottle shop, where they find Krook still sleeping like one o’clock; that is to say, snoring with his chin upon his breast and quite insensible even to gentle shaking. On the table

beside him stand an empty gin-bottle and a glass. The unwholesome air is so stained with this liquor that even the green eyes of the cat upon her shelf look drunk.

Mr. Guppy gives the old man another shake. "Mr. Krook! Halloo, sir! Jobling, did you ever see such a stupor as this?"

"If this is his regular sleep," returns Jobling, rather alarmed, "it'll last a long time one of these days, I am thinking."

"Halloa, your lordship! Why, he might be robbed fifty times over! Open your eyes!"

At last Krook opens them, but without appearing to see his visitors. Though he crosses his legs, and folds his hands, and several times closes and opens his parched lips, he seems as insensible as before.

"He is alive, at any rate," says Mr. Guppy. "How are you, my Lord Chancellor? I have brought a friend of mine, sir, on business."

The old man still sits smacking his dry lips. After some minutes he makes an attempt to rise. They help him up, and he staggers against the wall and stares at them.

"How do you do, Mr. Krook?" says Mr. Guppy in some discomfiture. "I hope you are pretty well?"

The old man, in aiming a purposeless blow at Mr. Guppy, feebly swings himself round and comes with his face against the wall. So he remains for a minute, and then staggers to the front door. The air revives him. He comes back pretty steadily, adjusting his fur cap on his head and looking keenly at them.

"Your servant, gentlemen; I've been dozing. Hi! I am hard to wake, at times."

"Rather so, indeed, sir," responds Mr. Guppy.

The old man's eye resting on the empty bottle, he examines it, and tilts it upside down.

"I say!" he cries. "Somebody's been making free here!"

"I assure you we found it so," says Mr. Guppy. "Would you allow me to get it filled for you?"

"Yes, I would!" cries Krook in high glee. "Get it filled next door – Sol's Arms – the Lord Chancellor's fourteenpenny. Bless you, they know *me!*"

Mr. Guppy, with a nod to his friend, takes the bottle and hurries out, and hurries in again with it filled. The old man receives it like a beloved grandchild and pats it tenderly.

"But, I say," he whispers, after tasting it, "this ain't the fourteenpenny. This is eighteenpenny!"

"I thought you might like that better," says Mr. Guppy.

"You're a nobleman, sir," returns Krook with another taste.

Taking advantage of this auspicious moment, Mr. Guppy presents his friend under the name of Mr. Weevle and states the object of their visit. Krook surveys his proposed lodger and seems to approve of him.

“You’d like to see the room, young man?” he says. “It’s a good room! Been whitewashed. Been cleaned down with soft soap and soda. Hi! It’s worth twice the rent.”

The old man takes them upstairs, where indeed they do find it cleaner than it used to be and also containing some old articles of furniture. The terms are easily concluded, and it is agreed that Mr. Weevle shall move in on the morrow.

Mr. Weevle and Mr. Guppy then go to Cook’s Court, where the former is introduced to Mr. Snagsby and (more important) the interest of Mrs. Snagsby is secured. They then report progress to Smallweed, waiting at the office in his tall hat.

On the next evening, Mr. Weevle modestly appears at Krook’s, and establishes himself in his new lodging, where the two eyes in the shutters stare at him in his sleep, as if full of wonder. On the following day Mr. Weevle borrows a needle and thread from Miss Flite and a hammer from his landlord and goes to work devising apologies for curtains, and knocking up apologies for shelves, and hanging up his two teacups and milkpot on a pennyworth of little hooks, like a shipwrecked sailor making the best of it.

But what Mr. Weevle prizes most of all his few possessions is a choice collection of copper-plate impressions from that truly national work *The Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty*, representing ladies of title and fashion in every variety of smirk that art is capable of producing. With these magnificent portraits he decorates his apartment; and as *The Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty* wears every variety of fancy dress, plays every variety of musical instrument, fondles every variety of dog, and is backed up by every variety of flower-pot, the result is very imposing.

But fashion is Mr. Weevle’s weakness. To borrow yesterday’s paper and read about the brilliant meteors shooting across the fashionable sky is great consolation to him. To know what member of what distinguished circle joined it yesterday or may leave it tomorrow gives him a thrill of joy. To be informed what Galaxy marriages are in the offing, and what Galaxy rumours are circulating, is to become acquainted with the most glorious destinies of mankind.

For the rest, Mr. Weevle is a quiet lodger. In the evenings, when he is not visited by Mr. Guppy or by a small person in his likeness in a dark hat, he comes out of his dull room and talks to Krook or anyone else in the court who is disposed for conversation. Mrs. Piper, who leads the court, offers two remarks to Mrs. Perkins: firstly, that if her Johnny was to have whiskers, she could wish ’em to be like that young man’s; and secondly, “Mark my words, Mrs. Perkins, and don’t you be surprised, if that young man comes in at last for old Krook’s money!”

Chapter 21

The Smallweed Family

In a rather ill-favoured neighbourhood, the Elfin Smallweed, christened Bartholomew and known at home as Bart, passes that limited portion of his time on which the office has no claim. He dwells in a little narrow street, solitary, shady, and sad, closely bricked in on all sides like a tomb, but where there lingers the stump of an old tree whose flavour is about as fresh and natural as the Smallweed smack of youth.

There has been only one child in the Smallweed family for several generations. Little old men and women there have been, but no child, until Mr. Smallweed's grandmother became weak in her intellect and fell (for the first time) into a childish state. Mr. Smallweed's grandfather is in a helpless condition as to his lower limbs, but his mind is unimpaired. It holds, as well as it ever held, the rules of arithmetic and a small collection of the hardest facts.

The father of this pleasant grandfather was a horny-skinned, two-legged, money-getting species of spider who spun webs to catch unwary flies. The name of this old pagan's god was Compound Interest. He lived for it, married it, died of it. Meeting with a heavy loss in an honest little enterprise in which all the loss was intended to have been on the other side, he broke something – it couldn't have been his heart – and made an end of his career.

His spirit shone through his son, whom he made a clerk in a sharp scrivener's office at twelve years old. There the young gentleman improved his mind, which was of a lean and anxious character, and gradually elevated himself into the discounting profession. Going out early in life and marrying late, as his father had done before him, he too begat a lean and anxious-minded son, who in his turn became the father of Bartholomew and Judith Smallweed, twins.

During this whole time, the house of Smallweed has discarded all amusements, fairy-tales, fictions, and fables, and banished all levities whatsoever. Hence the gratifying fact that it has had no child born to it and that the complete little men and women whom it has produced bear a likeness to old monkeys with something depressing on their minds.

At the present time, in the grim, dark little parlour some feet below the level of the street, seated in two black horsehair porter's chairs, one on each side of the fire-place, the oldest Mr. and Mrs. Smallweed while away the hours. On the stove are a couple of trivets for the pots and kettles which it is Grandfather Smallweed's usual occupation to watch. Under his seat and guarded by his spindle legs is a drawer in his chair, reported to contain property to a fabulous amount. Beside him is a spare cushion, provided in order that he may have something to throw at his venerable partner whenever she mentions money – a subject on which he is particularly sensitive.

“Where’s Bart?” Grandfather Smallweed inquires of Judy, Bart’s twin sister.

“He an’t come in yet,” says Judy.

“It’s his tea-time, isn’t it?”

“Not for ten minutes.”

“Ho!” says Grandfather Smallweed. “Ten minutes.”

Grandmother Smallweed, who has been mumbling and shaking her head, hearing figures mentioned, screeches like a horrible old parrot without any plumage, “Ten ten-pound notes!”

Grandfather Smallweed immediately throws the cushion at her.

“Drat you, be quiet!” says the good old man.

This exertion recoils on Mr. Smallweed himself, throwing him back into his chair like a broken puppet. His granddaughter shakes him up again, poking and punching him like a great bolster.

Judy the twin is worthy company for these associates. She is so indubitably sister to Mr. Smallweed the younger; she so happily exemplifies the family likeness to the monkey tribe, that attired in a spangled robe and cap she might walk on top of a barrel-organ without exciting much remark. At present, however, she is dressed in a plain brown gown.

Judy never owned a doll, never heard of Cinderella, never played at any game. She once or twice fell into children’s company when she was about ten years old, but the children couldn’t get on with Judy, and Judy couldn’t get on with them. She seemed like an animal of another species, and there was instinctive repugnance on both sides. It is very doubtful whether Judy knows how to laugh.

And her twin brother likewise has learnt no games or fairy-stories. But he is better off than his sister, in that on his narrow world an opening has dawned into the broader regions inhabited by Mr. Guppy. Hence his admiration of that shining enchanter.

Judy, with a clash and clatter, sets an iron tea-tray on the table and arranges cups and saucers. She puts the bread in an iron basket, and the meagre butter in a small pewter plate. Grandfather Smallweed looks hard at the tea and asks Judy where the girl is.

“Charley, do you mean?” says Judy.

“Ha!” says Grandfather. “She eats a deal. It would be better to just pay her for her keep.”

Judy shakes her head and purses up her mouth. “She’d want sixpence a day, and we can do it for less,” says she.

“Sure?”

Judy answers with a nod and calls, as she scrapes the butter on the loaf, “Charley, where are you?” Timidly obedient, a little girl in a rough apron appears, with her hands covered with soap and water and a scrubbing brush in one of them.

“What work are you about now?” says Judy, like a sharp old woman.

“I’m a-cleaning the upstairs back room, miss,” replies Charley.

“Mind you do it thoroughly, and don’t loiter. Make haste! Go along!” cries Judy with a stamp.

As she returns to her task, her brother arrives home.

“Aye, aye, Bart!” says Grandfather Smallweed. “Been along with your friend again, Bart?”

Small nods.

“Dining at his expense, Bart?”

Small nods again.

“That’s right. Live at his expense as much as you can. That’s the only use of such a friend,” says the venerable sage.

His grandson receives this good advice with a wink and a nod and takes a chair at the tea-table. The four old faces hover over teacups like a company of ghastly cherubim, Mrs. Smallweed perpetually twitching her head and chattering and Mr. Smallweed requiring to be repeatedly shaken up.

“Yes, yes,” says the good old gentleman. “That’s fatherly advice, Bart. You never saw your father. More’s the pity. He was my true son, and died fifteen years ago.”

Mrs. Smallweed breaks out with “Fifteen hundred pound in a black box, put away and hid!” Her worthy husband immediately throws the cushion at her, crushing her against the side of her chair, and falls back in his own, overpowered. He mutters baleful and violent imprecations against Mrs. Smallweed. All this, however, is common in the Smallweed family circle. The old gentleman is merely shaken and has his internal feathers beaten up, the cushion is restored to its place beside him, and the old lady is planted in her chair again.

Some time elapses before the old gentleman is cool enough to resume his discourse, and even then he mixes it up with several expletives addressed to the partner of his bosom.

“If your father, Bart, had lived longer, he might have been worth a deal of money – you brimstone chatterer! – but just as he was beginning to build up his funds, he took ill and died of a fever – I should like to throw a cat at you instead of a cushion, you confounded fool! – and your mother, who was a prudent woman, just dwindled away after you and Judy were born – you old pig!”

Judy, not interested in what she has often heard, begins to collect leftovers of tea in a basin, and of bread-and-butter in the iron bread-basket, for the little charwoman’s evening meal.

“But your father and me were partners, Bart,” says the old gentleman, “and when I am gone, you and Judy will have all there is. You won’t want to spend it. You’ll get your living without it, and put more to it. When I am gone, Judy will go back to the flower business and you’ll stick to the law.”

One might infer from Judy’s appearance that her business rather lay with the thorns than the flowers, but she has in her time been apprenticed to the art of artificial flower-making. A close observer might perhaps detect both in her eye and her brother’s some impatience to know when their grandfather may be going, and some resentful opinion that it is time he went.

“Now, if everybody has done,” says Judy. “I’ll have that girl in to her tea. She would never leave off if she took it by herself in the kitchen.”

Charley is accordingly introduced, and under a heavy fire of eyes, sits down to her basin and her ruins of bread and butter.

“Now, don’t stare about you all afternoon,” cries Judy, stamping her foot, “but take your victuals and get back to your work.”

“Yes, miss,” says Charley.

“Don’t say yes,” returns Miss Smallweed, “for I know what you girls are. Do it without saying it, and then I may begin to believe you.”

Charley swallows a great gulp of tea in token of submission, just as there is a knock at the door.

“See who it is, and don’t chew when you open it!” cries Judy.

It is one Mr. George, it appears. Without ceremony, Mr. George walks in.

“Whew!” says Mr. George. “You are hot here. Always a fire, eh? Well! Perhaps you do right to get used to one.”

“Ho! It’s you!” cries the old gentleman. “How de do?”

“Middling,” replies Mr. George, taking a chair. “Your granddaughter I have had the honour of seeing before; my service to you, miss.”

“This is my grandson,” says old Smallweed. “You ha’n’t seen him before. He is in the law.”

“My service to him, too! He is devilish like his sister,” says Mr. George.

“And how does the world use you, Mr. George?” Grandfather Smallweed inquires, rubbing his legs.

“Pretty much as usual. Like a football.”

He is a swarthy, brown man of fifty, well made, and good looking, with curly dark hair, bright eyes, and a broad chest. His powerful, sunburnt hands have evidently been used to a pretty rough life. He sits forward on his chair. His step is measured and heavy and would go well with a weighty clash and jingle of spurs. Altogether one might guess Mr. George to have been a trooper once upon a time.

He makes a contrast to the Smallweed family. A soldier was never yet billeted upon a household more unlike him. His broad figure and their stunted forms, his large manner and their narrow pinched ways, his resounding voice and their sharp thin tones, are in the strangest opposition.

“Do you rub your legs to rub life into ’em?” he asks of Grandfather Smallweed.

“Why, it’s partly a habit, Mr. George, and it partly helps the circulation. I can carry my years. I’m older than *her*,” says Grandfather Smallweed, nodding at his wife, “the brimstone chatterer!”

“Unlucky old soul!” says Mr. George. “Don’t scold the old lady. Look at her, with her poor cap half off. Hold up, ma’am. That’s better. There we are!”

“I suppose you were an excellent son, Mr. George?” the old man hints with a leer.

The colour of Mr. George’s face rather deepens as he replies, “Why, no. I wasn’t.”

“I am astonished at it.”

“So am I. I ought to have been a good son, and I think I meant to have been one. But I wasn’t. I was a thundering bad son, and never was a credit to anybody.”

“Surprising!” cries the old man.

“However,” Mr. George resumes, “the less said about it, the better. Come! You know the agreement. Always a pipe out of the two months’ interest! Here’s the bill, and here’s the two months’ interest-money, and a devil of a scrape it is to get it together in my business.”

Mr. George sits, with his arms folded, while Grandfather Smallweed is assisted by Judy to two black leather cases out of a locked bureau, in one of which he secures the document he has just received, and from the other takes another similar document which he hands to Mr. George. As the old man inspects every letter of both documents, and as he counts the money three times over, this business takes a long time. When it is done, he says,

“Judy, see to the pipe and the glass of brandy-and-water for Mr. George.”

The twins retire together, disdainful of the visitor, but leaving him to the old man as two young cubs might leave a traveller to the parental bear.

“And there you sit, I suppose, all day long, eh?” says Mr. George.

“Just so,” the old man nods.

“Don’t you read or get read to?”

The old man shakes his head with sharp sly triumph. “No, no. We have never been readers in our family. It don’t pay. Idleness. Folly. No, no!”

“You’ll sell me up at last, I suppose, when I am a day in arrears.”

“My dear friend!” cries Grandfather Smallweed, stretching out both hands, “Never! Never! But my friend in the city that I got to lend you the money – he might!”

“Oh! You can’t answer for him?” says Mr. George, adding in an undertone, “You lying old rascal!”

“My dear friend, he is not to be depended on. He will have his bond.”

“Devil doubt him,” says Mr. George. Charley appears with a tray, on which are the clay pipe, a small paper of tobacco, and the brandy-and-water. He asks her,

“How do you come here? You haven’t got the family face.”

“I goes out to work, sir,” returns Charley.

The trooper takes her bonnet off, with a light touch for so strong a hand, and pats her on the head. “You give the house almost a wholesome look.” Then he dismisses her, lights his pipe, and drinks to Mr. Smallweed’s friend in the city – the one solitary flight of that old gentleman’s imagination.

“So you think he might be hard upon me, eh?”

“I am afraid he would. I have known him do it,” says Grandfather Smallweed incautiously, “twenty times.”

Incautiously, because his stricken better-half, who has been dozing over the fire, is instantly aroused and jabbars “Twenty thousand pounds, twenty

twenty-pound notes in a money-box, twenty guineas—” and is cut short by the flying cushion, which the visitor snatches from her face.

“You’re a brimstone idiot. You’re a brimstone scorpion! You’re a sweltering toad. You’re a chattering broomstick witch that ought to be burnt!” gasps the old man, prostrate in his chair. “My dear friend, will you shake me up a little?”

Mr. George, who has been looking at them as if he were demented, takes his venerable acquaintance by the throat on receiving this request, and dragging him upright in his chair as easily as if he were a doll, appears in two minds whether to shake him into his grave. Resisting the temptation, but agitating him enough to make his head roll like a puppet’s, he puts him smartly down in his chair again.

“O Lord!” gasps Mr. Smallweed. “Thank you, my dear friend, that’ll do.” He says this with evident apprehensions of his dear friend, who still stands over him looming larger than ever.

The alarming presence, however, subsides into its chair and falls to smoking. Meanwhile he looks at Mr. Smallweed with grave attention.

“I take it,” he says, “that I am the only man alive that gets the value of a pipe out of you?”

“Well,” returns the old man, “it’s true that I don’t see company, Mr. George, and that I don’t treat. I can’t afford it. But as you, in your pleasant way, made your pipe a condition—”

“Why, it’s not for the value of it. It was a fancy to get it out of you. To have something for my money.”

“Ha! You’re prudent, prudent, sir!” cries Grandfather Smallweed, rubbing his legs.

“Very. I always was.” Puff. “It’s a sign of my prudence that I ever found the way here.” Puff. “Also, that I am what I am.” Puff. “I am well known to be prudent,” says Mr. George, composedly smoking. “I rose in life that way.”

“Don’t be down-hearted, sir. You may rise yet.”

Mr. George laughs and drinks.

“Ha’n’t you no relations, now,” asks Grandfather Smallweed with a twinkle in his eyes, “who would pay off this little loan, or a good name or two that I could persuade my friend in the city to make you a further advance upon? Two good names would be sufficient for my friend in the city. Ha’n’t you no such relations, Mr. George?”

Mr. George replies, “If I had, I shouldn’t trouble them. I have been trouble enough in my day. A vagabond might go back to decent people that he never was a credit to and make amends by living upon them, but the best kind of amends is to keep away, in my opinion.”

Grandfather Smallweed has been gradually sliding down in his chair since his last adjustment and is now a bundle of clothes with a voice in it calling for Judy. Appearing, she shakes him up in the usual manner and is charged by the old gentleman to remain near him. For he seems wary of asking his visitor to repeat his attentions.

“Ha!” he observes. “If you could have found the captain, Mr. George, it would have been the making of you. If when you first came here, in consequence of our advertisement in the newspapers – if you could have helped us, Mr. George, it would have been the making of you.”

“I was willing enough to be ‘made,’ as you call it,” says Mr. George, smoking not quite so placidly as before, “but on the whole, I am glad I wasn’t now.”

“Why, Mr. George? In the name of brimstone, why?” says Grandfather Smallweed with exasperation.

“For two reasons, comrade. In the first place,” returns Mr. George, “you took me in. You advertised that Captain Hawdon was to hear of something to his advantage.”

“Well?” returns the old man sharply.

“Well!” says Mr. George, smoking on. “It wouldn’t have been much to his advantage to have been clapped into prison.”

“Some of his rich relations might have paid his debts. Besides, he had taken *us* in. He owed us immense sums all round. When I think of him,” snarls the old man, “I want to strangle him.” And in a sudden fury, he throws the cushion at Mrs. Smallweed, but it passes harmlessly on one side of her chair.

“I don’t need to be told,” returns the trooper, “that he carried on heavily and went to ruin. I have been at his right hand many a day when he was charging upon ruin full-gallop. I was with him when he was sick and well, rich and poor. I laid this hand upon him after he had run through everything and broken down – when he held a pistol to his head.”

“I wish he had let it off,” says the benevolent old man, “and blown his head into as many pieces as he owed pounds!”

“That would have been a smash indeed,” returns the trooper coolly. “Anyway, he had been young, hopeful, and handsome in the days gone by, and I am glad I never found him, to lead to his being imprisoned. That’s reason number one.”

“I hope number two’s as good?” snarls the old man.

“Why, no. It’s a more selfish reason. If I had found him, I must have gone to the other world to look. He was there.”

“How do you know?”

“He wasn’t here.”

“How do you know he wasn’t here?”

“Don’t lose your temper as well as your money,” says Mr. George, calmly knocking the ashes out of his pipe. “He was drowned long ago. I am convinced of it. He went over a ship’s side. Whether intentionally or accidentally, I don’t know. Perhaps your friend in the city does. Do you know what tune this is, Mr. Smallweed?” he adds after breaking off to whistle one.

“Tune!” replied the old man. “No. We never have tunes here.”

“That’s the Dead March in Saul. They bury soldiers to it, so it’s the natural end of the subject. Now, if your pretty granddaughter will take care of

this pipe for two months, we shall save the cost of one next time. Good evening, Mr. Smallweed!”

“My dear friend!” The old man gives him both his hands.

“So you think your friend in the city will be hard upon me if I fail in a payment?” says the trooper, looking down upon him like a giant.

“My dear friend, I am afraid he will.”

Mr. George laughs, and with a parting salutation to the scornful Judy, strides out of the parlour.

“You’re a damned rogue,” says the old gentleman, making a hideous grimace at the door. “But I’ll lime you, you dog, I’ll lime you!”

Mr. George strides through the streets with a massive swagger and a grave face. It is eight o’clock of the evening now. He stops by Waterloo Bridge and reads a playbill, and decides to go to Astley’s Theatre. There, he is much delighted with the horses and the feats of strength; looks at the weapons with a critical eye; disapproves of the combats as showing unskilful swordsmanship; but is touched by the sentiments.

The theatre over, Mr. George crosses the river again and makes his way to that curious region lying about the Haymarket and Leicester Square which is a centre of attraction to indifferent foreign hotels, racket-courts, swordsmen, gaming-houses, exhibitions, and a large medley of shabbiness. At the heart of this region, he arrives at a great brick building with bare walls, floors, and roof-rafters, on the front of which is painted GEORGE’S SHOOTING GALLERY, &c.

Into George’s Shooting Gallery, &c., he goes. Inside there are gaslights and two targets for rifle-shooting, and equipment for archery, fencing and boxing. None of these sports is being pursued tonight in the gallery, which is so devoid of company that a little grotesque man with a large head has it all to himself and lies asleep upon the floor.

The little man is dressed something like a gunsmith, in a green-baize apron and cap; and his face and hands are dirty with gunpowder. Not far off is the strong table with a vice upon it at which he has been working. His face is speckled on one side and crushed together: he appears to have been blown up at some odd time or times.

“Phil!” says the trooper quietly.

“All right!” cries Phil, scrambling to his feet.

“Anything been doing?”

“Flat,” says Phil. “Five dozen rifle and a dozen pistol.”

“Shut up shop, Phil!”

As Phil does so, it appears that he is lame, though able to move very quickly. On the speckled side of his face he has no eyebrow, and on the other side he has a bushy black one, which gives him a rather sinister appearance. Everything seems to have happened to his hands that could possibly take place without losing his fingers, for they are notched, seamed, and crumpled all over. He appears to be very strong and lifts heavy benches about as if he had no idea what weight was. He has a curious way of limping round the

gallery with his shoulder against the wall, which has left a smear all round the four walls.

This custodian of George's Gallery, when he has locked the great doors and turned out all the lights but one, drags out from a wooden cabin in a corner two mattresses and bedding. Once these have been drawn to opposite ends of the gallery, the trooper makes his own bed and Phil makes his.

"Phil!" says the master. "You were found in a doorway, weren't you?"

"Gutter," says Phil.

"Then vagabondizing came natural to *you* from the beginning."

"As nat'ral as possible," says Phil.

"Good night!"

"Good night, guv'ner."

Phil cannot go straight to bed, but finds it necessary to shoulder round two sides of the gallery and then veer off at his mattress. The trooper strides to his own mattress by a shorter route and goes to bed too.

Chapter 22

Mr. Bucket

In Lincoln's Inn Fields, the evening is hot, and Mr. Tulkinghorn's windows are wide open. Plenty of dust comes in at them, and plenty more has generated among his furniture and papers. It lies thick everywhere.

In his atmosphere of dust, beneath the figure of Allegory, Mr. Tulkinghorn sits at one of the open windows enjoying a bottle of old port. Though a hard-grained man, close, dry, and silent, he can enjoy old wine with the best. He has a priceless bin of port in some artful cellar under the Fields, which is one of his many secrets. When he dines alone in chambers, as he has dined today, he descends with a candle to the echoing regions below the deserted mansion, and comes back with a bottle from which he pours a radiant nectar, fifty years old, that fills the whole room with the fragrance of southern grapes.

Mr. Tulkinghorn, sitting in the twilight, enjoys his wine. As if it whispered to him of its fifty years of silence and seclusion, it shuts him up the closer. He sits, and drinks, and ponders on all the mysteries he knows, associated with darkening woods in the country, and vast blank shut-up houses in town, and perhaps sparing a thought or two for himself, and his family history, and his money, and his will – all a mystery to everyone.

But Mr. Tulkinghorn is not alone tonight. Seated at the same table, though with his chair modestly drawn a little way from it, sits a bald, mild man who coughs respectfully behind his hand when the lawyer bids him fill his glass.

"Now, Snagsby," says Mr. Tulkinghorn, "go over this odd story again."

"I remembered, sir, that you had taken an interest in that person, and I thought it possible that you might – just – wish–"

Mr. Tulkinghorn does not help him. Mr. Snagsby trails off into saying, with an awkward cough, "Excuse the liberty, sir."

"Not at all," says Mr. Tulkinghorn. "You told me, Snagsby, that you came round without mentioning your intention to your wife. That was prudent, because it's not a matter of such importance that it needs to be mentioned."

"Well, sir," returns Mr. Snagsby, "you see, my little woman is – not to put too fine a point upon it – inquisitive. My little woman has a very active mind, sir."

"Therefore you kept your visit to yourself?" says Mr. Tulkinghorn.

"Yes, sir. My little woman is at present in a pious state, and attends the Evening Exertions of the Reverend Chadband. My little woman being engaged in that way made it easier for me to step round quietly."

"Fill your glass, Snagsby."

“Thank you, sir, I am sure,” returns the stationer with his cough of deference. “This is wonderfully fine wine, sir!”

“It is fifty years old. Will you run over, once again, what the boy said?” Mr. Tulkinghorn leans back in his chair.

“With pleasure, sir.” The law-stationer repeats Jo’s statement made to the guests at his house. On coming to the end of his narrative, he gives a great start and breaks off with, “Dear me, sir, I wasn’t aware there was any other gentleman present!”

Mr. Snagsby is dismayed to see, standing attentively at a little distance from the table, a person with a hat and stick in his hand who was not there when he came in and who has not entered since. There is a wardrobe in the room, but its hinges have not creaked, nor has a step been audible. Yet this third person stands there with his hat and stick in his hands, a composed and quiet listener. He is a stoutly built, steady-looking, sharp-eyed middle-aged man in black. There is nothing remarkable about him but his ghostly manner of appearing.

“Don’t mind this gentleman,” says Mr. Tulkinghorn. “This is only Mr. Bucket.”

“Oh, indeed, sir?” returns the stationer, expressing by a cough that he is quite in the dark as to who Mr. Bucket may be.

“I wanted him to hear this story,” says the lawyer, “because he is very intelligent in such things. What do you say to this, Bucket?”

“It’s very plain, sir. If Mr. Snagsby don’t object to go down with me to Tom-all-Alone’s and point this boy out, we can have him here in a couple of hours. I can do it without Mr. Snagsby, of course, but this is the shortest way.”

“Mr. Bucket is a detective officer, Snagsby,” says the lawyer in explanation.

“Is he indeed, sir?” says Mr. Snagsby with some alarm.

“And if you have no objection to accompany Mr. Bucket to the place in question,” pursues the lawyer, “I shall feel obliged if you will do so.”

As Mr. Snagsby hesitates, Bucket reads his mind.

“Don’t you be afraid of hurting the boy,” says Bucket. “You won’t do that. We shall only bring him here to ask him a question or so, and he’ll be paid for his trouble and sent away again. It’ll be a good job for him. I promise you, as a man, that you shall see the boy sent away all right. Don’t you be afraid of hurting him.”

“Very well, Mr. Tulkinghorn!” cries Mr. Snagsby, reassured.

“And lookee here, Mr. Snagsby,” resumes Bucket, taking him by the arm, and speaking in a confidential tone. “You’re a man of the world, and a man of business, and a man of sense.”

“I am sure I am much obliged to you for your good opinion,” returns the stationer with his cough of modesty, “but—”

“That’s what you are, you know,” says Bucket. “Now, it an’t necessary to say to a man like you that it’s best and wisest to keep little matters like this quiet. Quiet!”

“Certainly, certainly,” returns the other.

“I don’t mind telling you,” says Bucket with an engaging appearance of frankness, “that as far as I can understand, there seems to be a doubt whether this dead person wasn’t entitled to a little property, and whether this female hasn’t been up to some games respecting that property, don’t you see?”

“Oh!” says Mr. Snagsby.

“Now, what *you* want,” pursues Bucket, tapping Mr. Snagsby on the breast in a comfortable manner, “is that every person should have their rights according to justice.”

“To be sure,” returns Mr. Snagsby.

“On account of which, and at the same time to oblige a good customer, you mean to go down with me, in confidence, to Tom-all-Alone’s and to keep the whole thing quiet afterwards and never mention it to anyone. That’s your intention, if I understand you?”

“You are right, sir,” says Mr. Snagsby.

“Then here’s your hat,” returns his new friend; “and if you’re ready, I am.”

They leave Mr. Tulkinghorn drinking his old wine, and go down into the streets.

“You don’t happen to know a good sort of person of the name of Gridley, do you?” says Bucket in friendly converse as they descend the stairs.

“No,” says Mr. Snagsby, considering. “Why?”

“Nothing particular,” says Bucket; “only having allowed his temper to get a little the better of him and having been threatening some respectable people, he is keeping out of the way of a warrant I have got against him.”

As they walk along, Mr. Snagsby observes that however quick their pace may be, his companion still seems in some undefinable manner to lurk and lounge; also, that whenever he is going to turn right or left, he pretends to have a fixed purpose of going straight ahead, and wheels off sharply at the very last moment.

Now and then, when they pass a police-constable on his beat, Mr. Snagsby notices that both the constable and his guide fall into a deep abstraction as they come towards each other, and appear entirely to overlook each other, and to gaze into space. In a few instances, Mr. Bucket, coming behind some under-sized young man with a shining hat on his sleek hair, almost without glancing at him touches him with his stick, upon which the young man, looking round, instantly evaporates.

When they come at last to Tom-all-Alone’s, Mr. Bucket stops for a moment at the corner and takes a lighted bull’s-eye lantern from the constable on duty there, who then accompanies him. Between his two conductors, Mr. Snagsby passes along the middle of a villainous street, undrained, unventilated, deep in black mud, and filthy, reeking with such smells and sights that he, who has lived in London all his life, can scarce believe his senses. Branching from this street and its heaps of ruins are other streets and courts so infamous that Mr. Snagsby sickens in body and mind and feels as if he were going down into the infernal gulf.

“Draw off a bit here, Mr. Snagsby,” says Bucket as a kind of shabby litter is carried towards them, surrounded by a noisy crowd. “Here’s the fever coming up the street!”

As the unseen wretch goes by, the crowd hovers round the three visitors like a dream of horrible faces and then fades away up alleys and into ruins and behind walls.

“Are those the fever-houses, Darby?” Mr. Bucket coolly asks.

Darby replies that for months, the people “have been down by dozens” and have been carried out dead and dying “like sheep with the rot.” Mr. Snagsby feels as if he can’t breathe.

Inquiry is made at various houses for a boy named Jo. Mr. Snagsby is asked whether he means Carrots, or the Colonel, or Gallows, or Young Chisel, or Terrier Tip, or Lanky, or the Brick. Mr. Snagsby describes him over and over again. Some think it must be Carrots, some say the Brick. Whenever the three are stationary, the crowd flows round them. Whenever they move, the crowd flits away up alleys, and into ruins, and behind walls, as before.

At last there is a lair found out where Toughy, or the Tough Subject, lays him down at night; it is thought that he may be Jo. The proprietress of the house says Toughy has gone to the doctor’s to get a bottle of stuff for a sick woman but will be here soon.

“And who have we got here tonight?” says Mr. Bucket, opening another door and glaring in with his lantern. “Two drunken men, eh? And two women? Are these your good men, my dears?”

“Yes, sir,” returns one of the women. “They are our husbands.”

“Brickmakers, eh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What are you doing here? You don’t belong to London.”

“No, sir. We belong to Hertfordshire.”

“Come up on the tramp?”

“We walked up yesterday. There’s no work there, but we have done no good by coming here, and shall do none, I expect.”

“*That’s* not the way to do much good,” says Mr. Bucket, turning his head towards the unconscious figures on the ground.

“It an’t indeed,” replies the woman with a sigh. “Jenny and me knows it full well.”

The room is so low that the head of the tallest visitor would touch the blackened ceiling if he stood upright. The candle burns sickly in the polluted air. There are a couple of benches and a table. The men lie asleep where they stumbled down, but the women sit by the candle. Lying in the arms of the woman who has spoken is a baby.

“What age is that little creature?” says Bucket. “It looks as if it was born yesterday.” He turns his light gently on the infant.

“He is not three weeks old yet, sir,” says the woman.

“Is he your child?”

“Mine.” The other woman stoops down and kisses it as it lies asleep.

“You seem as fond of it as if you were the mother yourself,” says Mr. Bucket.

“I was the mother of one like it, master, and it died.”

“Ah, Jenny, Jenny!” says the other woman to her. “Better so. Much better!”

“Why, you an’t such an unnatural woman, I hope,” returns Bucket sternly, “as to wish your own child dead?”

“I am not, master,” she returns. “I’d stand between it and death with my own life if I could, as true as any lady.”

“Then why do you talk in that wrong manner?” says Mr. Bucket.

“If it was never to wake no more, you’d think me mad, I should take on so,” returns the woman, her eyes filling with tears. “I know that very well. I was with Jenny when she lost hers, and I know how she grieved. But look around you at this place. Look at the boy you’re waiting for, who’s gone out to do me a good turn. Think of the children that you come across in your business, and that *you* see grow up!”

“Well, well,” says Mr. Bucket, “you train him respectable, and he’ll be a comfort to you.”

“I mean to try hard,” she answers, wiping her eyes. “But I have been a-thinking, being over-tired and ill with the ague, of all the things that’ll come in his way. My master will be against it, and he’ll be beat, and see me beat, and made to fear his home, and perhaps to stray wild. If I work for him ever so much, there’s no one to help me; and if he should be turned bad in spite of all I could do, and made hard and changed, an’t it likely I should think of him as he lies in my lap now and wish he had died!”

“There, there!” says Jenny. “Liz, you’re tired and ill. Let me take him.” In doing so, she moves the mother’s dress, but quickly readjusts it over the bruised bosom where the baby has been lying.

“It’s my dead child,” says Jenny, walking up and down as she nurses, “that makes us both love this child so dear. She thinks of its being taken away from her, and I think what fortune would I give to have my darling back. But we mean the same thing in our poor hearts!”

As Mr. Snagsby blows his nose and coughs his cough of sympathy, a step is heard outside. Mr. Bucket shines his light into the doorway and says to Mr. Snagsby, “Now, what do you say to Toughy? Will *he* do?”

“That’s Jo,” says Mr. Snagsby.

Jo stands amazed in the disk of light, trembling to think that he has offended against the law in not having moved on far enough. Mr. Snagsby, however, assuring him, “It’s only a job you will be paid for, Jo,” he recovers; and on being taken outside by Mr. Bucket, tells his tale satisfactorily.

“I have squared it with the lad,” says Mr. Bucket, returning, “and it’s all right. Now, Mr. Snagsby, we’re ready to go.”

First, Jo has to complete his errand of good nature by handing over the medicine he has been to get, which he delivers with the instruction that “it’s to be all took d’rectly.” Secondly, Mr. Snagsby has to lay upon the table half a crown. Thirdly, Mr. Bucket has to take Jo by the arm above the elbow and

walk him on before him, so that he is professionally conducted to Lincoln's Inn Fields. They give the women good night and come out once more into black and foul Tom-all-Alone's.

By the noisome ways through which they descended into that pit, they gradually emerge from it, the crowd flitting and skulking about them until it turns back, yelling like a concourse of imprisoned demons, and is seen no more. Through the clearer and fresher streets, never so clear and fresh to Mr. Snagsby's mind as now, they walk and ride to Mr. Tulkinghorn's gate.

As they ascend the dim stairs to Mr. Tulkinghorn's chambers, Mr. Bucket mentions that he has the key and that there is no need to ring. He takes time to open the door and makes some noise too. It may be that he sounds a note of preparation.

They come at last into the hall, where a lamp is burning, and so into Mr. Tulkinghorn's usual room. He is not there, but his two old-fashioned candlesticks are, and the room is reasonably light.

Mr. Bucket, still having his professional hold of Jo, goes a little way into this room, when Jo starts and stops.

"What's the matter?" says Bucket.

"There she is!" cries Jo.

"Who!"

"The lady!"

A female figure, closely veiled, stands in the middle of the room, where the light falls upon it. It is quite still and silent.

"Now, tell me," says Bucket, "how you know that to be the lady."

"I know the wale," replies Jo, staring, "and the bonnet, and the gownd."

"Be quite sure of what you say," returns Bucket, narrowly observing him. "Look again."

"I am a-looking as hard as ever I can look," says Jo with starting eyes, "and that there's the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd."

"What about those rings you told me of?" asks Bucket.

"A-sparkling all over here," says Jo, rubbing the fingers of his left hand on the knuckles of his right. The figure removes the right-hand glove and shows the hand.

Jo shakes his head. "Not rings a bit like them. Not a hand like that."

"What do you mean?" says Bucket, evidently pleased though.

"Hand was a deal whiter, and delicater, and smaller," returns Jo.

"Why, you'll tell me I'm my own mother next," says Mr. Bucket. "Do you recollect the lady's voice?"

"I think I does," says Jo.

The figure speaks. "Was it at all like this? I will speak as long as you like if you are not sure. Was it like this voice?"

Jo looks aghast at Mr. Bucket. "Not a bit!"

"Then, what," he retorts, pointing to the figure, "did you say it was the lady for?"

"Cos," says Jo with a perplexed stare, "cos that there's the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd. It is her and it an't her. It an't her hand, nor yet her

rings, nor yet her voice. But that there's the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd, and they're wore the same way wot she wore 'em, and she giv me a sov'ring and hooked it."

"Well!" says Mr. Bucket, "we haven't got much good out of *you*. However, here's five shillings for you. Take care how you spend it, and don't get yourself into trouble." Bucket puts the coins into the boy's hand and takes him out, leaving Mr. Snagsby uncomfortably alone with the veiled figure.

But on Mr. Tulkinghorn's coming into the room, the veil is raised and a good-looking Frenchwoman is revealed, though her expression is somewhat intense.

"Thank you, Mademoiselle Hortense," says Mr. Tulkinghorn with his usual equanimity. "I will give you no further trouble about this little wager."

"You will do me the kindness to remember, sir, that I am not at present employed?" says mademoiselle.

"Certainly!"

"And to give me the favour of your recommendation?"

"By all means, Mademoiselle Hortense."

"A word from Mr. Tulkinghorn is so powerful."

"It shall not be lacking, mademoiselle."

"You have my devoted gratitude, dear sir."

"Good night."

Mademoiselle goes out; and Mr. Bucket shows her downstairs.

"Well, Bucket?" says Mr. Tulkinghorn on his return.

"There an't a doubt that it was the other one with this one's dress on. The boy was exact respecting colours and everything. Mr. Snagsby, I promised you that he should be sent away all right!"

"You have kept your word, sir," returns the stationer; "and if I can be of no further use, Mr. Tulkinghorn, I think, as my little woman will be getting anxious—"

"Thank you, Snagsby," says Mr. Tulkinghorn. "I am indebted to you for the trouble you have taken."

"Not at all, sir. I wish you good night."

"You see, Mr. Snagsby," says Mr. Bucket, accompanying him to the door and shaking hands with him, "what I like in you is that when you know you have done a right thing, you put it away, and there's an end of it. That's what *you* do."

"That is certainly what I try to do, sir," returns Mr. Snagsby.

"No, you don't do yourself justice. It an't what you try to do," says Mr. Bucket, still shaking hands, "it's what you *do*."

Mr. Snagsby makes a suitable response and goes homeward so confused by the events of the evening that he is doubtful of his being awake – doubtful of the reality of the streets through which he goes. He is presently reassured by the unchallengeable reality of Mrs. Snagsby, sitting up with her head in a perfect beehive of curl-papers and night-cap. She has dispatched Guster to the police-station to tell them her husband has been made away with, and within

the last two hours has passed through every stage of swooning. But as the little woman feelingly says, many thanks she gets for it!

Chapter 23

Esther's Narrative

We came home from Mr. Boythorn's after six pleasant weeks. We were often in the park and woods, and passed the lodge where we had taken shelter; but we saw no more of Lady Dedlock, except at church on Sundays. Her face retained the same influence on me as at first. I do not quite know even now whether it was painful or pleasurable, whether it drew me towards her or made me shrink from her. I think I admired her with a kind of fear, and in her presence my thoughts always wandered back, as they had done at first, to that old time of my life.

I had a fancy, on these Sundays, that I disturbed this lady's thoughts as she influenced mine, though in some different way. But when I stole a glance at her and saw her so composed and distant, I felt this to be a foolish weakness. Indeed, I felt the whole state of my mind in reference to her to be weak and unreasonable, and I remonstrated with myself.

One day I was walking in the garden with Ada when I was told that some one wished to see me. Going into the breakfast-room, I found it to be the French maid who had cast off her shoes and walked through the wet grass on the day when it thundered.

"Mademoiselle," she began, looking fixedly at me with her too-eager eyes, "I have taken a great liberty in coming here, but you know how to excuse it, being so amiable, mademoiselle."

"No excuse is necessary," I returned, "if you wish to speak to me."

"A thousand thanks, mademoiselle. You are so amiable! Listen then, if you please. I have left my Lady. We could not agree. My Lady is so high, so very high. Pardon! It is not for me to complain of my Lady. I will not say a word more. But all the world knows that."

"Go on, if you please," said I.

"Thank you, mademoiselle. I desire to find service with a young lady who is good, accomplished, and beautiful. Ah, could I have the honour of being your domestic!"

"I am sorry—" I began.

"Do not dismiss me so soon, mademoiselle!" she said with an involuntary contraction of her fine black eyebrows. "Let me hope a moment! Mademoiselle, I know this service would be more retired and less distinguished than that which I have quitted. I know that the wages would be less. Good. I am content."

"I assure you," said I, quite embarrassed by the mere idea of having such an attendant, "that I keep no maid—"

"Ah, mademoiselle, but why not? When you can have one so devoted to you! So enchanted to serve you; so true and zealous! Mademoiselle, I wish

with all my heart to serve you. Do not speak of money at present. Take me as I am. For nothing!”

She was so singularly earnest that I drew back, almost afraid of her. She continued speaking in a rapid subdued voice, though always with a certain grace and propriety.

“Mademoiselle, I come from the South country where we are quick and where we like and dislike very strong. My Lady was too high for me; I was too high for her. It is done – finished! Receive me as your domestic, and I will serve you well. You will not repent it. Mademoiselle, I will serve you well. You don’t know how well!”

As I explained the impossibility of my engaging her (without thinking it necessary to say how very little I desired to do so), I seemed to see her as some woman from the streets of Paris in the reign of terror.

She heard me out, then said in her mildest voice, “Mademoiselle, I have received my answer! I am sorry of it. But I must go elsewhere. Will you graciously let me kiss your hand?”

She looked at me intently as she took it. “I fear I surprised you, mademoiselle, on the day of the storm?” she said.

I confessed that she had surprised us all.

“I took an oath, mademoiselle,” she said, smiling, “and I wanted to stamp it on my mind so that I might keep it faithfully. And I will! Adieu, mademoiselle!”

So ended our conference, which I was very glad to bring to a close. I supposed she went away from the village, for I saw her no more; and nothing else occurred to disturb our tranquil summer pleasures until we returned home.

At that time, and for a good many weeks afterwards, Richard was constant in his visits. Besides coming every Saturday or Sunday and staying until Monday morning, he sometimes rode out on horseback unexpectedly and passed the evening with us and rode back again early next day.

He was as vivacious as ever and told us he was very industrious, but I was not easy in my mind about him. I felt that his industry was all misdirected, and could not lead to anything but delusive hopes about the lawsuit, already the pernicious cause of so much sorrow and ruin. He had got at the core of that mystery now, he told us, and it was plain that the will under which he and Ada were to take thousands of pounds must be finally established if there were any sense or justice in the Court of Chancery – oh, what a great IF that sounded in my ears – and that could not be much longer delayed.

He had begun to haunt the court. He told us how he saw Miss Flite there daily, and how he did her little kindnesses, and how, while he laughed at her, he pitied her. But he never thought – my poor, dear, sanguine Richard, capable of so much happiness then – what a fatal link was joining his fresh youth to her faded age, and her hungry garret, and her wandering mind.

Ada loved him too well to mistrust him, and my guardian, though he frequently complained of the east wind, preserved a strict silence on the

subject. So one day when I went to London to meet Caddy Jellyby, at her request, I asked Richard to wait for me at the coach-office, so that we might have a little talk together. I found him there when I arrived, and we walked away arm in arm.

“Well, Richard,” said I, “are you beginning to feel more settled now?”

“Oh, yes, my dear!” returned Richard. “I’m all right enough.”

“But settled?” said I.

“How do you mean, settled?” returned Richard with his gay laugh.

“Settled in the law.”

“Oh, aye,” replied Richard, “I’m all right enough.”

“You said that before, my dear Richard.”

“Well! You mean, do I feel as if I were settling down?”

“Yes.”

“Why, no, I can’t say I am settling *down*,” said Richard, “because one can’t settle down while this business remains in such an unsettled state. When I say this business, of course I mean the – forbidden subject.”

“Do you think it will ever be in a settled state?” said I.

“Certainly,” answered Richard. After a moment he said in his frankest and most feeling manner, “My dear Esther, I understand you, and I wish to heaven I were a more constant sort of fellow. I don’t mean constant to Ada, for I love her better every day – but constant to myself. If I were a more constant sort of fellow, I should have held on either to Badger or to Kenge and Carboy, and should have begun to be steady by this time, and shouldn’t be in debt, and—”

“*Are* you in debt, Richard?”

“Yes,” said Richard, “A little, my dear. Also, I have taken rather too much to billiards and that sort of thing. Now the murder’s out; you despise me, Esther, don’t you?”

“You know I don’t,” said I.

“You are kinder to me than I often am to myself. My dear Esther, how *can* I be more settled? If you lived in an unfinished house, you couldn’t settle down in it; yet that’s my unhappy case. I was born into this unfinished contention with all its chances and changes, and it began to unsettle me before I knew the difference between a suit at law and a suit of clothes; and it has gone on unsettling me ever since; and I know that I am but a worthless fellow to love my cousin Ada.”

We were in a solitary place, and he put his hands before his eyes and sobbed as he said this.

“Oh, Richard!” said I. “You have a noble nature, and Ada’s love may make you worthier every day.”

“I know, my dear,” he replied, pressing my arm, “I know all that. But I have had all this upon my mind for a long time, and have often meant to speak to you, if I had the courage. I know what the thought of Ada ought to do for me, but it doesn’t. I am too unsettled even for that. I love her most devotedly, and yet I do her wrong, in doing myself wrong, every day. But it

can't last for ever. We shall come on for a final hearing and get judgment in our favour, and then you and Ada shall see what I can really be!"

It had given me a pang to hear him sob, but it was worse to see the hopeful animation with which he said these words.

"I have looked well into the papers, Esther. I have been deep in them for months," he continued, recovering his cheerfulness in a moment, "and you may rely upon it that we shall come out triumphant. As to years of delay, there has been no want of them, heaven knows! But they are coming to an end, and it will be all right at last, and then you shall see!"

I asked him when he intended to be articled in Lincoln's Inn.

"I think not at all, Esther," he returned with an effort. "I fancy I have had enough of it. Having worked at Jarndyce and Jarndyce like a galley slave, I have slaked my thirst for the law and found that I shouldn't like it. Besides, it unsettles me to be so constantly upon the scene of action. So what," continued Richard, confident again, "do I naturally turn my thoughts to?"

"I can't imagine," said I.

"It's the best thing I can do, my dear Esther, I am certain. It's not as if I wanted a profession for life. The suit will end, and then I am provided for. Now this profession is unsettled, and is therefore suited to my temporary condition. It is the army!"

"The army?"

"All I have to do is to get a commission; and – there I am, you know!" said Richard.

And then he showed me, proved by elaborate calculations in his pocket-book, that supposing he had contracted two hundred pounds of debt in six months out of the army; and that he contracted no debt at all during six months in the army – as he intended; this way he would save four hundred pounds a year, which was a considerable sum. And then he spoke so sincerely of the sacrifice he made in withdrawing himself for a time from Ada, and of the earnestness with which he hoped to repay her love, and to conquer what was amiss in himself, that he made my heart ache sorely. For, I thought, how would this end, how could this end, when all his manly qualities were touched by the fatal blight that ruined everything it rested on!

I spoke earnestly to Richard, imploring him for Ada's sake not to put any trust in Chancery. Richard readily assented, drawing the brightest pictures of the character he was to settle into – alas, when the grievous suit should loose its hold upon him! It always came back to that.

At last we arrived at Soho Square, where Caddy Jellyby was waiting for me at the garden in the centre. After a few cheerful words, Richard left us together.

"Prince has a pupil over the way, Esther," said Caddy, "and got the garden key for us. So if you will walk round here with me, we can lock ourselves in and I can tell you comfortably what I wanted to see your dear good face about."

“Very well, my dear,” said I. So Caddy, after affectionately hugging me, locked the gate, and took my arm, and we began to walk round the garden very cosily.

“You see, Esther,” said Caddy, “after you spoke to me about its being wrong to marry without Ma’s knowledge, or even to keep Ma long in the dark about our engagement, I thought it right to mention your opinions to Prince.”

“I hope he approved, Caddy?”

“Oh, my dear! I assure you he would approve of anything you could say. You have no idea what an opinion he has of you!”

“Indeed!”

“Esther, it’s enough to make anybody but me jealous,” said Caddy, laughing; “but it only makes me joyful, for you are the first friend I ever had, and the best friend I ever can have. So we talked a good deal about it, and I said to Prince, ‘As Esther is decidedly of that opinion, Prince, I am prepared to disclose the truth to Ma whenever you think proper. And I think, Prince,’ said I, ‘that Esther thinks that I should be in a more honourable position if you did the same to your papa.’”

“Yes, my dear,” said I. “Esther certainly does think so.”

“So I was right, you see!” exclaimed Caddy. “Well! This troubled Prince a good deal, because he is so considerate of the feelings of old Mr. Turveydrop; and he feared he might break his heart, or faint away if he made such an announcement. He feared old Mr. Turveydrop might consider it undutiful and might receive too great a shock. For old Mr. Turveydrop’s feelings are extremely sensitive.”

“Are they, my dear?”

“Prince says so. Now, this has caused my darling child – I didn’t mean to use the expression to you, Esther,” Caddy apologized, blushing, “but I generally call Prince my darling child.”

I laughed; and Caddy laughed and blushed, and went on.

“This has caused him weeks of uneasiness and has made him delay, from day to day. At last he said to me, ‘Caddy, if Miss Summerson, who is a great favourite with my father, could be present when I broke the subject, I think I could do it.’ So I promised I would ask you. And I made up my mind, besides,” said Caddy, looking at me hopefully but timidly, “that I would ask you afterwards to come with me to Ma. If you thought you could grant it, Esther, we should both be very grateful.”

“Let me see, Caddy,” said I, pretending to consider. “Really, I am at your service and the darling child’s, my dear, whenever you like.”

Caddy was quite transported by this reply; and so we went to Newman Street.

Prince was teaching a stubborn little girl with a sulky forehead and a dissatisfied mama. The lesson at last came to an end; and when the little girl had changed her shoes and had been wrapped in shawls, she was taken away. We then went in search of Mr. Turveydrop, whom we found, a model of deportment, on the sofa in his private apartment – the only comfortable room

in the house. He appeared to have dressed at his leisure in the intervals of a light lunch, and his elegant dressing-case, brushes, and so forth, lay about.

“Father, Miss Summerson; Miss Jellyby.”

“Charmed! Enchanted!” said Mr. Turveydrop, rising with his high-shouldered bow, kissing the tips of his left fingers. “My little retreat is made a paradise. You find us, Miss Summerson, using our little arts to polish, polish! Deportment can yet bask in the smile of beauty, my dear madam.”

He took a pinch of snuff, and added, “My dear son, you have four schools this afternoon. I would recommend a hasty sandwich.”

“Thank you, father,” returned Prince, “I will be sure to be punctual. My dear father, may I beg you to prepare your mind for what I am going to say?”

“Good heaven!” exclaimed the model, pale and aghast as Prince and Caddy, hand in hand, bent down before him. “What is this? Is this lunacy?”

“Father,” returned Prince with great submission, “I love this young lady, and we are engaged.”

“Engaged!” cried Mr. Turveydrop, reclining on the sofa and shutting out the sight with his hand. “An arrow launched at my brain by my own child!”

“We have been engaged for some time, father,” faltered Prince, “and Miss Summerson advised that we should declare the fact to you. Miss Jellyby is a young lady who deeply respects you, father.”

Mr. Turveydrop uttered a groan.

“No, pray don’t! Pray don’t, father,” urged his son. “Our first desire is to consider your comfort.”

Mr. Turveydrop sobbed.

“Pray don’t, father!” cried his son.

“Boy,” said Mr. Turveydrop, “it is well that your sainted mother is spared this pang. Strike deep, and spare not!”

“Pray don’t say so, father,” implored Prince, in tears. “It goes to my heart. I do assure you, father, that our first wish and intention is to consider your comfort. Caroline and I do not forget our duty, and with your approval, father, we will devote ourselves to making your life agreeable.”

“Strike home!” murmured Mr. Turveydrop. But he seemed to listen, I thought, too.

“My dear father,” returned Prince, “it will always be our study and our pride to provide your comforts. We shall not think of being married until it is quite agreeable to you; and when we *are* married, we shall always make you – of course – our first consideration. You must ever be the head and master here, father; and we shall exert ourselves in every possible way to please you.”

Mr. Turveydrop underwent a severe internal struggle and came upright on the sofa again, a perfect model of parental deportment.

“My son!” said Mr. Turveydrop. “My children! I cannot resist your prayer. Be happy!”

He stretched out his hand to his son, who kissed it with gratitude.

“My children,” said Mr. Turveydrop, paternally encircling Caddy with his left arm as she sat beside him, and putting his right hand gracefully on his

hip. "My son and daughter, your happiness shall be my care. I will watch over you. You shall always live with me" (meaning, of course, I will always live with you) – "this house is henceforth as much yours as mine; consider it your home. May you long live to share it with me!"

The power of his deportment was such that they were overcome with thankfulness, as if he were making some sacrifice in their favour.

"For myself, my children," said Mr. Turveydrop, "I am falling into the sere and yellow leaf, and it is impossible to say how long the last feeble traces of gentlemanly deportment may linger. But, so long, I will do my duty to society and will show myself, as usual, about town. My wants are few and simple. My little apartment here, my few essentials for dressing, my frugal morning meal, and my little dinner will suffice. I ask you to supply these requirements, and I will supply the rest."

They were overpowered afresh by his generosity.

"My son," said Mr. Turveydrop, "for those little points of deportment in which you are deficient, you may still rely on me. I have been faithful to my post since the days of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent, and I will not desert it now. For yourself, Prince, work, be industrious and earn money. Your qualities are not shining, my dear child, but they are steady and useful. And to both of you, my children, take care of my simple wants, and bless you both!"

Old Mr. Turveydrop then became so very gallant that I told Caddy we must really go at once if we were to go at all that day. So we left after a very loving farewell between Caddy and her betrothed, and during our walk she was so happy and so full of old Mr. Turveydrop's praises that I would not have said a word against him.

The Jellybys' house in Thavies Inn had bills in the windows announcing that it was to let, and it looked dirtier and gloomier than ever. The name of poor Mr. Jellyby had appeared in the list of bankrupts a day or two before, and he was shut up in the dining-room with two gentlemen and a heap of account-books, making the most desperate endeavours to understand his affairs. When Caddy took me into the dining-room by mistake, we came upon Mr. Jellyby forlornly fenced into a corner by the great dining-table and the two gentlemen, speechless.

Going upstairs to Mrs. Jellyby's room (the children were all screaming in the kitchen, and there was no servant to be seen), we found that lady opening, reading, and sorting letters, with a great pile of envelopes on the floor. She was so preoccupied that at first she did not know me.

"Ah! Miss Summerson!" she said at last. "I was thinking of something so different! I hope you are well."

I hoped in return that Mr. Jellyby was quite well.

"Why, not quite, my dear," said Mrs. Jellyby in the calmest manner. "He has been unfortunate in his affairs and is a little out of spirits. Happily for me, I am so much engaged that I have no time to think about it. We have, at present, one hundred and seventy families, Miss Summerson, either gone or going to the left bank of the Niger."

I thought of the one family so near us who were neither gone nor going to the Niger, and wondered how she could be so placid.

“You have brought Caddy back, I see,” observed Mrs. Jellyby. “It has become quite a novelty to see her here. She has almost deserted her old employment and in fact obliges me to employ a boy.”

“Ma,” returned Caddy, “surely you wouldn’t have me be a mere drudge all my life.”

“I believe, my dear,” said Mrs. Jellyby, still opening her letters, “that you have a business example before you in your mother. A mere drudge? If you had any sympathy with the destinies of the human race, it would raise you high above any such idea. But you have no such sympathy.”

“Not if it’s Africa, Ma, I have not.”

“Of course you have not. Now, if I were not happily so much engaged, Miss Summerson,” said Mrs. Jellyby, “this would distress and disappoint me. But I have so much to think of in connexion with Borrioboola-Gha that there is my remedy, you see.”

Caddy gave me a glance of entreaty, and I thought it a good opportunity to come to the subject of my visit.

“Perhaps,” I began, “you will wonder what has brought me here.”

“I am always delighted to see Miss Summerson,” said Mrs. Jellyby, sorting letters with a placid smile.

“I have come with Caddy,” said I, “because Caddy justly thinks she ought not to have a secret from her mother and fancies I shall aid her in imparting one.”

“Caddy,” said Mrs. Jellyby, pausing for a moment to shake her head, “you are going to tell me some nonsense.”

Caddy took her bonnet off, and crying, said, “Ma, I am engaged.”

“Oh, you ridiculous child!” observed Mrs. Jellyby with an abstracted air as she looked over the letter last opened; “what a goose you are!”

“I am engaged, Ma,” sobbed Caddy, “to young Mr. Turveydrop, at the academy; and old Mr. Turveydrop (who is a very gentlemanly man) has given his consent, and I beg and pray you’ll give us yours, Ma, because I never could be happy without it!”

“You see again, Miss Summerson,” observed Mrs. Jellyby serenely, “what a happiness it is to be so much occupied as I am. Here is Caddy engaged to a dancing-master’s son – mixed up with people who have no more sympathy with the destinies of the human race than she has herself! This, too, when Mr. Quale, one of the first philanthropists of our time, has mentioned to me that he might be interested in her!”

“Ma, I always hated and detested Mr. Quale!” sobbed Caddy.

“Caddy, Caddy!” returned Mrs. Jellyby. “I have no doubt you did. How could you do otherwise, being totally destitute of his sympathies! Now, if I were not occupied with public duties, these petty details might grieve me very much, Miss Summerson. But can I permit a silly proceeding on the part of Caddy (from whom I expect nothing else) to come between me and the great

African continent? No. No,” repeated Mrs. Jellyby calmly, as she opened more letters. “No, indeed.”

I was so unprepared for the perfect coolness of this reception that I did not know what to say. Poor Caddy seemed equally at a loss.

“I hope, Ma,” she sobbed at last, “you are not angry?”

“Oh, Caddy, you really are an absurd girl,” returned Mrs. Jellyby, “to ask such questions after what I have said.”

“And I hope, Ma, you give us your consent and wish us well?” said Caddy.

“You are a nonsensical child to have done anything of this kind,” said Mrs. Jellyby. “But the step is taken, and I have engaged a boy, and there is no more to be said. Now, pray, Caddy,” for Caddy was kissing her, “don’t delay me in my work, but let me clear off this batch of papers before the afternoon post comes in!”

“You won’t object to my bringing him to see you, Ma?”

“Caddy, Caddy!” said Mrs. Jellyby, quite weary of such little matters. “You must bring him some evening which is not a Parent Society night, or a Branch night. My dear Miss Summerson, it was very kind of you to come here to help out this silly girl. Good-bye!”

I was not surprised by Caddy’s being in low spirits when we went downstairs, or by her sobbing afresh on my neck, saying she would rather have been scolded than treated with such indifference, or by her confiding that she was so poor in clothes that how she was to be married creditably she didn’t know. I gradually cheered her up by dwelling on the many things she would do for her unfortunate father and for Peepy when she had a home of her own; and finally we went downstairs into the damp dark kitchen, where Peepy and his little brothers and sisters were grovelling on the stone floor and where we had a play and some fairy-tales.

From time to time I heard loud voices in the parlour overhead, and occasionally a violent tumbling about of the furniture. The last effect I am afraid was caused by poor Mr. Jellyby’s breaking away from the dining-table and making rushes at the window with the intention of throwing himself out whenever he made any new attempt to understand his affairs.

As I rode quietly home after the day’s bustle, I thought a good deal of Caddy’s engagement and felt confirmed in my hopes (in spite of the elder Mr. Turveydrop) that she would be the happier and better for it. And if there was only a slender chance of her and her husband ever finding out what the model of deportment really was, that was all for the best too, and who would wish them to be wiser? Indeed I was half ashamed of not entirely believing in him myself. And I looked up at the stars, and hoped I might always be so blest as to be useful to some one in my small way.

They were so glad to see me when I got home, as they always were, that I could have sat down and cried for joy if that would not have made me disagreeable. Everybody in the house showed me such a bright face of welcome, and spoke so cheerily, that I suppose there never was such a fortunate creature in the world.

That night Ada and my guardian asked me to tell them all about Caddy, so that I went on prosing for a long time. At last I went to my own room, quite red to think how I had been holding forth, and then I heard a soft tap at my door.

I said, "Come in!" and there came in a pretty little girl, neatly dressed in mourning, who dropped a curtsy.

"If you please, miss," said the little girl in a soft voice, "I am Charley."

"Why, so you are," said I, stooping down in astonishment and giving her a kiss. "How glad am I to see you, Charley!"

"If you please, miss, I'm your maid."

"Charley?"

"I'm a present to you, with Mr. Jarndyce's love. And oh, miss," says Charley, clapping her hands, with the tears starting down her cheeks, "Tom's at school, if you please, and learning so good! And little Emma, she's with Mrs. Blinder, miss, a-being took such care of! And they would have been there sooner, miss; only Mr. Jarndyce thought that we had better get used to parting first, we was so small. Don't cry, please, miss!"

"I can't help it, Charley."

"No, miss, nor I can't help it," says Charley. "And if you please, miss, Mr. Jarndyce's love, and he thinks you'll like to teach me now and then. And Tom and Emma and me is to see each other once a month. And I'm so happy and thankful, miss," cried Charley, "and I'll try to be such a good maid!"

"Oh, Charley dear, never forget who did all this!"

"No, miss, I never will. It was all you, miss."

"I have known nothing of it. It was Mr. Jarndyce, Charley."

"Yes, miss, but it was all done for the love of you. If you please, miss, I am a little present with his love, and it was all done for the love of you. Me and Tom was to be sure to remember it."

Charley dried her eyes and went about the room in her matronly little way, folding up everything she could lay her hands upon. Presently she came creeping back to my side and said, "Oh, don't cry, please, miss."

And I said again, "I can't help it, Charley."

And Charley said again, "No, miss, nor I can't help it." And so, after all, I did cry for joy indeed, and so did she.

Chapter 24

An Appeal Case

As soon as Richard and I had talked together, Richard communicated the state of his mind to Mr. Jarndyce. I doubt if my guardian were taken by surprise, though the news made him uneasy and disappointed. He and Richard were often closeted together, and had innumerable appointments with Mr. Kenge, and laboured through a quantity of disagreeable business. While they were thus employed, my guardian, though he suffered from the state of the wind and rubbed his head constantly, was as genial with Ada and me as at any other time, but did not speak. And since Richard would only say that everything was going on capitally and that it really was all right at last, our anxiety was not much relieved by him.

We learnt, however, as the time went on, that a new application was made to the Lord Chancellor on Richard's behalf as a ward, and that there was a quantity of talking, and that the Lord Chancellor described him in open court as a vexatious and capricious infant. The matter was adjourned and referred until Richard began to doubt whether he would enter the army before the age of seventy. At last an appointment was made for him to see the Lord Chancellor again in his private room, and there the Lord Chancellor very seriously reproved him for trifling with time and not knowing his mind; but it was settled that his application should be granted.

His name was entered at the Horse Guards as an applicant for an ensign's commission; the purchase-money was paid; and Richard, in his characteristic way, plunged into a violent course of military study and got up at five o'clock every morning to practise the broadsword exercise.

Thus, vacation succeeded term, and term succeeded vacation. We sometimes heard of Jarndyce and Jarndyce; the case came on, and it went off. Richard, who was now in an instructor's house in London, was able to be with us less frequently than before; and so time passed until the commission was obtained and Richard received directions to join a regiment in Ireland.

He arrived with the news one evening, and had a long conference with my guardian. After an hour my guardian put his head into the room where Ada and I were sitting and said, "Come in, my dears!" We went in and found Richard, whom we had last seen in high spirits, leaning on the chimney-piece looking mortified and angry.

"Rick and I," said Mr. Jarndyce, "are not quite of one mind. Come, come, Rick, put a brighter face upon it!"

"You are very hard with me, sir," said Richard. "The harder, because you have been so considerate to me in all other respects. I never could have been set right without you, sir."

"Well, well!" said Mr. Jarndyce. "I want to set you more right yet. I want to set you right with yourself."

“I hope you will excuse my saying, sir,” returned Richard, “that I think I am the best judge about myself.”

“I hope you will excuse my saying, my dear Rick,” observed Mr. Jarndyce with good humour, “that it’s quite natural in you to think so, but I don’t think so. I must do my duty, Rick.”

Ada had turned so pale that he made her sit down beside him.

“It’s nothing, my dear,” he said, “Rick and I have only had a friendly difference, which we must state to you, for you are the theme. Now you are afraid of what’s coming.”

“I am not, cousin John,” replied Ada with a smile, “if it is to come from you.”

“Thank you, my dear.” Putting his hand on hers, he said, “Do you recollect the talk we had, we four, when the little woman told me of a little love affair?”

“It is not likely that either Richard or I can ever forget your kindness that day, cousin John.”

“So much the easier for us to agree,” returned my guardian gently. “Ada, my bird, you should know that Rick has now chosen his profession for the last time. He has exhausted his money and is bound henceforward to the tree he has planted.”

“Quite true that I have exhausted my present resources, sir,” said Richard, “but that is not all I have.”

“Rick, Rick!” cried my guardian with a sudden terror in his manner. “For the love of God, don’t found a hope on the family curse! Never give one glance towards the horrible phantom that has haunted us so many years. Better to borrow, beg, or die!”

We were all startled by the fervour of this warning. Richard bit his lip and held his breath.

“Ada, my dear,” said Mr. Jarndyce, recovering his cheerfulness, “these are strong words of advice, but enough of that. All Richard had to start him in the race of life is ventured. I recommend, for his sake and your own, that he should depart from us with the understanding that there is no contract between you. I must go further. I ask you wholly to relinquish, for the present, any tie but your relationship as cousins.”

“Better to say at once, sir,” returned Richard, “that you renounce all confidence in me and that you advise Ada to do the same.”

“Better to say nothing of the sort, Rick, because I don’t mean it.”

“You think I have begun ill, sir,” retorted Richard. “I *have*, I know.”

“You have not made that beginning yet, but there is a time for all things,” said Mr. Jarndyce in an encouraging manner, “and yours is just now fully come. Make a clear beginning altogether. You two (very young, my dears) are cousins; as yet, nothing more. What more may come must come of being worked out, Rick.”

“You are very hard with me, sir,” said Richard.

“My dear boy,” said Mr. Jarndyce, “I am harder with myself when I do anything that gives you pain. You have your remedy in your own hands. Ada,

it is better for him that he should be free and that there should be no youthful engagement between you. Rick, it is better for her; you owe it to her. Come! Each of you will do what is best for the other, if not what is best for yourselves.”

“Why is it best, sir?” returned Richard. “You did not say that before.”

“I have had experience since. I don’t blame you, Rick, but I have had experience since.”

“You mean of me, sir.”

“Well! Yes, of both of you,” said Mr. Jarndyce kindly. “The time is not come for your being pledged to one another. Come, come, my young cousins, begin afresh! Bygones shall be bygones, and a new page turned for you to write your lives in.”

Richard gave an anxious glance at Ada but said nothing.

“I now affectionately advise you two to part as you came here,” said Mr. Jarndyce. “Leave all else to time, truth, and steadfastness. If you do otherwise, you will do wrong, and you will have made me do wrong in ever bringing you together.”

A long silence succeeded.

“Cousin Richard,” said Ada then, raising her blue eyes tenderly to his face, “I think no choice is left us. Your mind may be quite at ease about me, for you will leave me here under his care and will be sure that I can have nothing to wish for. I – I don’t doubt, cousin Richard,” said she, a little confused, “that you are very fond of me, and I – I don’t think you will fall in love with anybody else. But I should like you to consider well about it, as I should like you to be happy. You may trust me, cousin Richard. I am not at all changeable; but I should never blame you. Even cousins may be sorry to part; and in truth I am very sorry, Richard, though I know it’s for your welfare. I shall always think of you affectionately, and often talk of you with Esther, and – and perhaps you will sometimes think of me, cousin Richard. So now,” said Ada, giving him her trembling hand, “we are only cousins again, Richard – for the time perhaps – and I pray for a blessing on my dear cousin, wherever he goes!”

It was strange to me that Richard should not be able to forgive my guardian for holding the very same opinion of him which he himself had expressed. But it was certainly the case. I observed with great regret that from this hour he never was as free and open with Mr. Jarndyce as he had been before. Solely on his side, an estrangement began to arise between them.

He, Mr. Jarndyce, and I went to London for a week. In the business of preparation he soon lost himself, and lost even his grief at parting from Ada, who remained in Hertfordshire. He remembered her by fits and starts, with bursts of tears and self-reproaches. But in a few minutes he would recklessly conjure up some undefinable means by which they were both to be made rich and happy for ever, and would become as gay as possible.

I trotted about with him all day long, buying things which he needed. Of the things he would have bought if he had been left to himself, I say nothing.

He often talked sensibly and feelingly to me about his faults and resolutions, and seemed encouraged by our conversations.

In that week, there used to come to fence with Richard a former cavalry soldier; he was a fine bluff-looking man, of a frank free bearing, with whom Richard had practised for some months. I heard so much about him, that I was purposely in the room with my work one morning when he came.

“Good morning, Mr. George,” said my guardian. “Mr. Carstone will be here directly. Meanwhile, Miss Summerson is very happy to see you, I know. Sit down.”

He sat down, a little disconcerted by my presence, I thought.

“You are as punctual as the sun,” said Mr. Jarndyce.

“Military time, sir,” he replied. “Force of habit, sir. I am not at all business-like.”

“Yet you have a large establishment, I am told?” said Mr. Jarndyce.

“I keep a shooting gallery, sir, but not much of a one.”

“And what kind of a shot and what kind of a swordsman do you make of Mr. Carstone?” said my guardian.

“Pretty good, sir,” he replied, folding his arms upon his broad chest and looking very large. “If Mr. Carstone was to give his full mind to it, he would come out very good.”

“But he don’t, I suppose?” said my guardian.

“He did at first, sir, but not afterwards. Not his full mind. Perhaps he has something else upon it – some young lady, perhaps.” His bright dark eyes glanced at me for the first time.

“He has not me upon his mind, I assure you, Mr. George,” said I, laughing.

He reddened a little and made me a trooper’s bow. “No offence, I hope, miss.”

“Not at all,” said I. “I take it as a compliment.”

He looked at me now in three or four quick successive glances. “I beg your pardon, sir,” he said to my guardian with a manly diffidence, “but you did me the honour to mention the young lady’s name—”

“Miss Summerson.”

“Miss Summerson,” he repeated, and looked at me again.

“Do you know the name?” I asked.

“No, miss. To my knowledge I never heard it. I thought I had seen you somewhere.”

“I think not,” I returned, raising my head from my work to look at him; there was something so genuine in his speech and manner that I was glad of the opportunity. “I remember faces very well.”

“So do I, miss!” he returned, meeting my look. “Humph! What set me off, now, upon that!”

My guardian came to his rescue. “Have you many pupils, Mr. George?”

“They vary in their number, sir. Mostly they’re a small lot to live by.”

“And what type of people come to practise at your gallery?”

“All sorts, sir. Natives and foreigners. From gentlemen to apprentices. I have had Frenchwomen come, before now, and show themselves dabs at pistol-shooting. Mad people out of number, of course, but *they* go everywhere where the doors stand open.”

“People don’t come with grudges and schemes of finding live targets, I hope?” said my guardian, smiling.

“Not much, sir, though that *has* happened. Mostly they come for skill – or idleness. I beg your pardon,” said Mr. George, sitting stiffly upright, “but I believe you’re a Chancery suitor, if I have heard correct?”

“I am sorry to say I am.”

“I have had one of your compatriots in my time, sir.”

“A Chancery suitor? How was that?”

“Why, the man was so badgered and worried and tortured,” said Mr. George, “that he got out of sorts. I don’t believe he had any idea of taking aim at anybody, but he was in that condition of resentment and violence that he would come and pay for fifty shots and fire away till he was red hot. One day I said to him when there was nobody by, ‘If this practice is a safety-valve, comrade, well and good; but I’d rather you took to something else.’ He received it in very good part and left off directly. We shook hands and struck up a sort of friendship.”

“What was that man?” asked my guardian with interest.

“Why, he began as a small Shropshire farmer before they made a baited bull of him,” said Mr. George.

“Was his name Gridley?”

“It was, sir.”

I explained to him how we knew the name. He made me another soldierly bow.

“I don’t know,” he said as he looked at me, “what it is that sets me off again – but – bosh!” He passed one of his heavy hands over his crisp dark hair as if to sweep the broken thoughts out of his mind.

“I am sorry to learn that this Gridley has got into new troubles and is in hiding,” said my guardian.

“So I am told, sir,” returned Mr. George.

“You don’t know where?”

“No, sir. He will be worn out soon, I expect.”

Richard’s entrance stopped the conversation. Mr. George rose, made me another bow, and strode heavily out of the room.

This was the day appointed for Richard’s departure. I had completed all his packing; and our time was free until night, when he was to go to Liverpool and on to Holyhead. Jarndyce and Jarndyce being again expected to come on that day, Richard proposed to me that we should go down to the court and hear what passed.

As it was his last day, and he was eager to go, and I had never been there, I agreed. As we walked down to Westminster, we talked about the letters that Richard was to write to me and that I was to write to him. My guardian knew where we were going, and therefore was not with us.

When we came to the court, there was the Lord Chancellor sitting in great state on the bench, with the mace and seals on a red table below him. Below the table was a long row of solicitors, with bundles of papers at their feet; and then there were the gentlemen of the bar in wigs and gowns – some awake and some asleep. The Lord Chancellor leaned back in his easy chair; some of those who were present dozed; some read the newspapers; all seemed perfectly at their ease, in no hurry, very unconcerned and comfortable.

To see everything going on so smoothly and to think of the roughness of the suitors' lives and deaths; to see all that ceremony and to think of the waste, and want, and beggared misery it represented; to consider that while the sickness of deferred hope was raging in so many hearts, this polite show went calmly on from day to day, and year to year; to behold the Lord Chancellor and the whole array of practitioners as if nobody had ever heard that all over England the name of Chancery was a bitter jest, held in universal horror and contempt – this was so curious to me that I could not comprehend it. I sat and tried to listen, and looked about me; but there seemed to be no reality in the whole scene except poor little Miss Flite, standing on a bench.

Miss Flite soon saw us and came over. She gave me a gracious welcome to her domain. Mr. Kenge also came to speak to us: it was not a very good day for a visit, he said; but it was imposing, it was imposing.

When we had been there half an hour or so, the case in progress seemed to die out without coming to any result. The Lord Chancellor threw down a bundle of papers from his desk to the gentlemen below him, and somebody said, "Jarndyce and Jarndyce." Upon this there was a buzz, and a laugh, and a bringing in of great heaps and bags and bags full of papers.

I think it came on "for further directions" – about some bill of costs, which I found confusing enough. But I counted twenty-three gentlemen in wigs who said they were "in it," and none of them appeared to understand it much better than I. Some of them said it was this way, and some of them said it was that way, and some of them proposed to read huge volumes of affidavits, and there was more buzzing and laughing, and everybody concerned was in a state of idle entertainment, and nothing could be made of it by anybody. After an hour or so of this, it was "referred back for the present," as Mr. Kenge said, and the papers were bundled up again.

I glanced at Richard and was shocked to see the worn look of his handsome young face.

"It can't last for ever, Dame Durden. Better luck next time!" was all he said.

I had seen Mr. Guppy bringing in papers for Mr. Kenge; and he had seen me and bowed forlornly, which made me wish to get out of the court. Richard was taking me away when Mr. Guppy came up.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Carstone," said he in a whisper, "and Miss Summerson's, but there's a lady here, a friend of mine, who knows her." As he spoke, I saw before me Mrs. Rachael of my godmother's house.

"How do you do, Esther?" said she. "Do you recollect me?"

I gave her my hand and told her yes and that she was very little altered.

“I wonder you remember those times, Esther,” she returned with her old asperity. “They are changed now. Well! I am glad to see you, and glad you are not too proud to know me.” But indeed she seemed disappointed that I was not.

“Proud, Mrs. Rachael!” I remonstrated.

“I am married, Esther,” she returned, coldly correcting me, “and am Mrs. Chadband. Well! I wish you good day, and I hope you’ll do well.”

Mr. Guppy heaved a sigh in my ear and elbowed his own and Mrs. Rachael’s way through the confused crowd. Richard and I were making our way through it, and I was still in the first chill of the unexpected recognition when I saw, coming towards us, but not seeing us, Mr. George.

“George!” said Richard.

“You are well met, sir,” he returned. “And you, miss. Could you point a person out for me? I don’t understand these places. There’s a little cracked old woman, that—”

I put up my finger, for Miss Flite was close by.

“Hem!” said Mr. George. “You remember, miss, that we spoke of a certain man this morning? Gridley,” in a low whisper behind his hand.

“Yes,” said I.

“He is hiding at my place. I couldn’t mention it. He is on his last march, miss, and has a whim to see her. He says she has been almost as good as a friend to him here. I came down to look for her.”

“Shall I tell her?” said I.

“Would you be so good? It’s a providence I met you, miss; I doubt if I should have known how to get on with that lady.” He stood upright in a martial attitude as I informed little Miss Flite of the reason for his kind errand.

“My angry friend from Shropshire!” she exclaimed. “My dear, I will visit him with the greatest pleasure.”

“He is living concealed at Mr. George’s,” said I. “Hush! This is Mr. George.”

“In-deed!” returned Miss Flite. “Very proud to have the honour! A military man, my dear. A perfect general!” she whispered to me.

Poor Miss Flite deemed it necessary to be so polite, as a mark of her respect for the army, and to curtsy so very often that it was no easy matter to get her out of the court. When this was at last done, addressing Mr. George as “General,” she gave him her arm. He was so discomposed and begged me so respectfully “not to desert him” that Richard and I said we should see them safely to their destination. And as Mr. George informed us that Gridley’s mind had run on Mr. Jarndyce all afternoon, I wrote a hasty note to my guardian to say where we were gone and why. Mr. George sent it off by a ticket-porter.

We then took a hackney-coach to the neighbourhood of Leicester Square. We walked through some narrow courts, and soon came to the shooting gallery, the door of which was closed. As Mr. George pulled a bell-handle, a very respectable old gentleman with grey hair, wearing spectacles

and a broad-brimmed hat, and carrying a large gold-headed cane, addressed him.

“I ask your pardon, my good friend,” said he, “but is this George’s Shooting Gallery?”

“It is, sir,” returned Mr. George. “I am George, sir.”

“Oh, indeed?” said the old gentleman. “Then it was your young man who came for me. I am a physician and was requested – five minutes ago – to come and visit a sick man here.”

“Quite correct, sir,” said Mr. George gravely.

The door being at that moment opened by a very singular-looking little man in a green-baize apron, whose face and hands and dress were blackened all over, we passed along a dreary passage into a large building with bare brick walls where there were targets, and guns, and swords. The physician stopped, and taking off his hat, appeared to vanish by magic and to leave another and quite a different man in his place.

“Now lookee here, George,” said the man, turning quickly round upon him and tapping him on the breast with a large forefinger. “You know me, and I know you. You’re a man of the world, and I’m a man of the world. My name’s Bucket, as you are aware, and I have got a peace-warrant against Gridley. You have kept him out of the way a long time, and been artful in it, and it does you credit.”

Mr. George bit his lip and shook his head.

“Now, George, you’re a sensible man and a well-conducted man; that’s what *you* are. I don’t talk to you as a common character, because you have served your country and you know that when duty calls we must obey. Consequently you’re very far from wanting to give trouble. Phil Squod, don’t you go a-sidling round the gallery like that” – the dirty little man was shuffling about with his shoulder against the wall, and his eyes on the intruder – “because I know you and I won’t have it.”

“Phil! Be quiet,” said Mr. George.

“Yes, guv’ner.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Mr. Bucket, “I have a duty to perform. George, I know where my man is because I was on the roof last night and saw him through the skylight. He is in there, you know,” pointing; “on a sofy. Now I must see my man, and I must tell him to consider himself in custody; but you know me, and you know I don’t want to take any uncomfortable measures. You give me your word that it’s honourable between us two, and I’ll accommodate you to the utmost of my power.”

“I give it,” was the reply. “But it wasn’t handsome in you, Mr. Bucket.”

“Gammon, George! Not handsome?” said Mr. Bucket. “I don’t say it wasn’t handsome in you to keep my man so secret, do I? Be equally good-tempered to me, old boy!”

Mr. George, after a little consideration, proposed to go in first to his comrade (as he called him), taking Miss Flite with him. Mr. Bucket agreeing, they went away to the further end of the gallery, leaving us by a table covered with guns. Mr. Bucket entered into a little light conversation, asking me if I

were afraid of fire-arms, as most young ladies were; asking Richard if he were a good shot; asking Phil Squod which he considered the best of those rifles, and making himself generally agreeable.

After a time Mr. George came and said that if Richard and I had no objection to seeing his comrade, he would take a visit from us very kindly. The words had hardly passed his lips when the bell was rung and my guardian appeared, "on the chance," he observed, "of being able to do any little thing for the poor fellow." We all four went into the place where Gridley was.

It was a bare room, partitioned off from the gallery by a high screen. Overhead were the rafters, and the skylight through which Mr. Bucket had looked down. The sun was near setting, and its light came redly in above. Upon a canvas-covered sofa lay the man from Shropshire, but so changed that at first I did not recognize his colourless face.

He had been writing in his hiding-place, and still dwelling on his grievances. A table was covered with manuscripts and worn pens. He and the little mad woman were side by side; she sat on a chair holding his hand.

His voice had faded, with his strength and his anger; he was the faintest shadow of the former man from Shropshire. He spoke to my guardian.

"Mr. Jarndyce, it is very kind of you to come to see me. I am not long to be seen, I think. I am very glad to take your hand, sir. You are a good man, and I honour you."

They shook hands earnestly, and my guardian said some words of comfort to him.

"You know I made a fight for it," said Gridley, "you know I stood up against them all, you know I told them the truth to the last, and told them what they had done to me."

"You have been courageous with them many and many a time," returned my guardian.

"Sir, I have been," with a faint smile. "I told you what would come of it! Look at us!" He drew Miss Flite nearer to him. "This ends it. Of all my old associations, this one poor soul alone comes natural to me. There is a tie of many suffering years between us two, and it is the only tie I ever had on earth that Chancery has not broken."

"Accept my blessing, Gridley," said Miss Flite in tears.

"I thought, boastfully, that they never could break my heart, Mr. Jarndyce. But I am worn out. I seemed to break down in an hour. I hope they may never come to hear of it. I hope they will believe that I died defying them, as I did through so many years."

Here Mr. Bucket, who was sitting in a corner by the door, good-naturedly said, "Come, come! Don't go on in that way, Mr. Gridley. You are only a little low. We are all of us a little low sometimes. I am. Hold up! You'll lose your temper with the whole round of 'em again; and I shall take you on a score of warrants yet."

Gridley only shook his head.

"Don't shake your head," said Mr. Bucket. "Nod it; that's what I want to see you do. Why, Lord bless your soul, what times we have had together!

Haven't I seen you in the Fleet Prison over and over again for contempt? Haven't I come into court twenty afternoons to see you pin the Chancellor like a bull-dog? Hold up, Mr. Gridley, sir!"

"What are you going to do about him?" asked George in a low voice.

"I don't know yet," said Bucket in the same tone. Then he resumed his encouragement aloud: "Worn out, Mr. Gridley? After dodging me for all these weeks and forcing me to climb the roof here like a tom-cat? That ain't like being worn out! Now I tell you what you want. You want excitement, you know; that's what *you* want. You're used to it, and you can't do without it. I couldn't myself. Here's this warrant got by Mr. Tulkinghorn. What do you say to coming along with me, upon this warrant, and having a good angry argument before the magistrates? It'll do you good; it'll freshen you up. Why, I am surprised to hear a man of your energy talk of giving in. You mustn't do that. George, you lend Mr. Gridley a hand, and let's see now whether he won't be better up than down."

"He is very weak," said the trooper in a low voice.

"Is he?" returned Bucket anxiously. "I only want to rouse him. I don't like to see an old acquaintance giving in like this. It would cheer him up more than anything if I could make him angry with me."

The roof rang with a scream from Miss Flite, which still rings in my ears.

"Oh, no, Gridley!" she cried as he fell back heavily and calmly. "Not without my blessing. After so many years!"

The sun was down, the light had gradually stolen from the roof, and the shadow had crept upward. But to me the shadow of that pair, one living and one dead, fell heavier on Richard's departure than the darkness of the darkest night.

And through Richard's farewell words I heard it echoed: "Of all my old associations, this one poor soul alone comes natural to me. There is a tie of many suffering years between us two, and it is the only tie I ever had on earth that Chancery has not broken!"

Chapter 25

Mrs. Snagsby Sees It All

There is disquietude in Cook's Court. Black suspicion hides there. Mr. Snagsby is changed, and his little woman knows it.

For Tom-all-Alone's and Lincoln's Inn Fields have harnessed themselves like wild horses to the chariot of Mr. Snagsby's imagination; and Mr. Bucket drives; and the passengers are Jo and Mr. Tulkinghorn; and the whole lot whirl though the law-stationery business all round the clock. Even in the little front kitchen where the family meals are taken, it rattles away when Mr. Snagsby pauses in carving the leg of mutton and stares at the kitchen wall.

Mr. Snagsby cannot make out what it is all about. Something is wrong somewhere, but what something is the puzzle of his life. His veneration for Mr. Tulkinghorn, and his remembrance of Detective Bucket with his confidential manner, persuade him that he is a party to some dangerous secret without knowing what it is. At any moment, at any opening of the shop-door, at any pull of the bell, or any delivery of a letter, the secret may explode, and blow up – Mr. Bucket only knows whom.

For which reason, whenever an unknown man comes into the shop (as many do) and says, "Is Mr. Snagsby in?", Mr. Snagsby's heart knocks hard at his guilty breast. Men and boys persist in walking into Mr. Snagsby's sleep and terrifying him with unaccountable questions, so that often at cock-crow Mr. Snagsby finds himself in a crisis of nightmare, with his little woman shaking him awake and saying "What's the matter with the man!"

The little woman herself is not the least of his difficulties. To know that he is keeping a secret from her, like a tender tooth, which her sharpness is ever ready to twist out of his head, makes Mr. Snagsby unwilling to meet her eye.

These various signs are not lost upon the little woman. They impel her to say, "Snagsby has something on his mind!" And thus suspicion gets into Cook's Court. Suspicion leads naturally to jealousy, which is very active and nimble in Mrs. Snagsby's breast, prompting her to nocturnal examinations of Mr. Snagsby's pockets; to secret perusals of Mr. Snagsby's letters; to private researches in the ledger; to watchings at windows, listenings behind doors, and a general putting of this and that together in the wrong way.

Mrs. Snagsby is so perpetually on the alert that the house becomes ghostly with creaking boards and rustling garments. "Who was that lady – that creature?" Mrs. Snagsby repeatedly inquires of herself. "And who is that boy?" The lady being unproducable, she directs her mental eye with redoubled vigilance to the boy. And she is seized with an inspiration.

He has no respect for Mr. Chadband. No, to be sure. He was invited by Mr. Chadband to come back, and hear Mr. Chadband; and he never came!

Why did he never come? Because he was told not to come. Who told him not to come? Who? Ha, ha! Mrs. Snagsby sees it all.

But happily that boy was met by Mr. Chadband yesterday in the streets; and that boy was seized by Mr. Chadband and threatened with being delivered over to the police unless he showed the reverend gentleman where he lived and promised to appear in Cook's Court tomorrow night. Mrs. Snagsby thinks with a tight smile and a tight shake of her head that tomorrow night that boy will be here, and Mrs. Snagsby will have her eye on him and on some one else; and oh, you may walk in your secret ways (says Mrs. Snagsby with scorn), but you can't blind *me*!

Tomorrow evening comes. Comes Mr. Snagsby in his black coat; come the Chadbands; come the 'prentices and Guster, to be edified; comes at last, with his slouch and his shuffle, and his bit of fur cap in his muddy hand, Jo, the very tough subject Mr. Chadband is to improve.

Mrs. Snagsby screws a watchful glance on Jo as he is brought into the little drawing-room by Guster. He looks at Mr. Snagsby the moment he comes in. Aha! Why does he look at Mr. Snagsby? Mr. Snagsby looks at him. Mrs. Snagsby sees it all – it is as clear as crystal that Mr. Snagsby is that boy's father.

"Peace, my friends," says Chadband, rising and wiping the oil from his reverend face. "Peace be with us! My friends, why with us? Because," with his fat smile, "it cannot be against us, because it must be for us; because it does not make war like the hawk, but comes unto us like the dove. Therefore, my friends, peace be with us! My boy, come forward!"

Stretching forth his flabby paw, Mr. Chadband lays it on Jo's arm. Jo, very doubtful of his intentions, mutters, "You let me alone. I never said nothink to you."

"No, my young friend," says Chadband smoothly, "I will not let you alone. And why? Because I am a harvest-labourer, because you are delivered unto me and are become as a precious instrument in my hands. My young friend, sit upon this stool."

Jo, apparently convinced that the reverend gentleman wants to cut his hair, shields his head with both arms and is got onto the stool with great difficulty.

Mr. Chadband, retiring behind the table, holds up his bear's-paw and says, "My friends!" The 'prentices giggle internally and nudge each other. Guster falls into a vacant state, compounded of a stunned admiration of Mr. Chadband and pity for the friendless outcast. Mrs. Snagsby silently lays trails of gunpowder. Mrs. Chadband warms her knees grimly by the fire.

Mr. Chadband has a habit of fixing some member of his congregation with his eye and arguing his points with that person, who is understood to be expected to be moved to an occasional grunt, groan, or gasp, to be echoed by some elderly lady in the next pew and so communicated through a circle of the sinners present. From mere force of habit, Mr. Chadband has rested his eye on Mr. Snagsby and proceeds to make that confused and ill-starred stationer the recipient of his speech.

“We have here among us, my friends,” says Chadband, “a Gentile and a heathen. Devoid of parents, devoid of relations, devoid of flocks and herds, devoid of gold and silver and of precious stones. Now, my friends, why do I say he is devoid of these possessions? Why is he?” Mr. Chadband states the question as if he were asking Mr. Snagsby an ingenious riddle.

Mr. Snagsby, greatly perplexed by the mysterious look he received from his little woman when Mr. Chadband mentioned the word parents, remarks, “I don’t know, I’m sure, sir.” On which interruption Mrs. Chadband glares and Mrs. Snagsby says, “For shame!”

“I hear a voice,” says Chadband; “which says, ‘I don’t know.’ Then I will tell you why. I say this brother present here among us is devoid of parents, devoid of relations, devoid of flocks and herds, devoid of gold, of silver, and of precious stones because he is devoid of the light that shines in upon some of us. What is that light? What is it? I ask you, what is that light?”

Mr. Chadband pauses and addresses Mr. Snagsby. “It is the ray of rays, the sun of suns, the moon of moons, the star of stars. It is the light of Terewth.”

Mr. Chadband draws himself up and looks triumphantly at Mr. Snagsby. “Of Terewth,” he says. “I say to you, a million of times over, it is! I say to you that I will proclaim it to you, whether you like it or not, with a speaking-trumpet! I say to you that if you rear yourself against it, you shall fall, you shall be bruised, you shall be battered, you shall be smashed.”

The effect of this oratory is not only to make Mr. Chadband unpleasantly warm, but to represent the innocent Mr. Snagsby as a determined enemy to virtue. That unfortunate tradesman becomes yet more disconcerted when Mr. Chadband accidentally finishes him.

“My friends,” he resumes after dabbing his fat head, “let us inquire what is that Terewth to which I have alluded. Now, my young friends,” suddenly addressing the ’prentices and Guster, to their consternation, “what is this Terewth then? Is it deception?”

“Ah!” from Mrs. Snagsby.

“Is it suppression?”

A shiver from Mrs. Snagsby.

“Is it reservation?”

A shake of the head from Mrs. Snagsby.

“No, my friends, it is none of these. When this young heathen – who is now, my friends, asleep, the seal of indifference and perdition being set upon his eyelids – when this young hardened heathen told us a story of a lady, and of a sovereign, was that wholly the Terewth? No, my friends, no!”

Mr. Snagsby, at his little woman’s look, cowers and droops.

“Or, my juvenile friends,” says Chadband, descending to the level of their comprehension with a greasy smile, “if the master of this house was to go forth into the city and there see an eel, and was to come back, and say to the mistress of the house, ‘Sarah, rejoice with me, for I have seen an elephant!’ would *that* be Terewth?”

Mrs. Snagsby sobbing.

“Or, my juvenile friends,” says Chadband, stimulated by the sound, “if the unnatural parents of this slumbering heathen. after casting him forth to the wolves and the vultures, and the wild dogs and the young gazelles, went back to their dwellings and had their pipes, and their pots, and their flutings and dancings, would *that* be Terewth?”

Mrs. Snagsby replies by going into spasms, so that Cook’s Court echoes with her shrieks. Finally, becoming cataleptic, she has to be carried up the narrow staircase like a grand piano. After unspeakable suffering, she is pronounced, by messages from the bedroom, to be free from pain, though much exhausted; at which Mr. Snagsby, trampled and timid, ventures to come out from behind the door in the drawing-room.

By this time Jo is standing on the spot where he woke up, picking his cap and putting bits of fur in his mouth. He feels that it’s no good his trying to keep awake, for he won’t never know nothink.

“It an’t no good my waiting here no longer,” thinks Jo. “Mr. Snagsby an’t a-going to say nothink to me tonight.” And downstairs he shuffles.

But downstairs is the charitable Guster, holding the handrail of the kitchen stairs and warding off a fit induced by Mrs. Snagsby’s screaming. She has her own supper of bread and cheese to hand to Jo.

“Here’s something to eat, poor boy,” says Guster.

“Thank’ee, mum,” says Jo.

“Are you hungry?”

“Jist!” says Jo.

“What’s gone of your father and mother, eh?”

Jo stops in the middle of a bite and looks petrified. For Guster has patted him on the shoulder, and it is the first time in his life that any decent hand has been so laid upon him.

“I never know’d nothink about ’em,” says Jo.

“No more didn’t I of mine,” cries Guster. She then seems to take alarm at something and vanishes.

“Jo,” whispers the law-stationer softly as the boy lingers.

“Here I am, Mr. Snagsby!”

“There’s another half-crown, Jo. It was quite right of you to say nothing about the lady the other night. It would breed trouble. You can’t be too quiet, Jo.”

“I am fly, master!”

And so, good night.

A ghostly shade, frilled and night-capped, follows the law-stationer to the room he came from and then glides higher up. And henceforth, go where he will, he is attended by a shadow hardly less constant than his own. And into whatever secrecy his own shadow may pass, let all concerned in the secrecy beware! For the watchful Mrs. Snagsby is there too – bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, shadow of his shadow.

Chapter 26

Sharpshooters

Wintry morning, looking with dull eyes upon the neighbourhood of Leicester Square, finds its inhabitants unwilling to get out of bed. Many of them are not early risers at the brightest of times, being birds of night. Behind dingy blind and curtain, skulking under false names, false hair, false jewellery, and false histories, a colony of brigands lie asleep. Broken traitors, cowards, bullies, gamesters and swindlers; all with more cruelty in them than Nero, and more crime than in Newgate. For however bad the devil can be in a worker's smock, he is a more designing and callous devil when he calls himself a gentleman, and knows a little about promissory notes. And in such form Mr. Bucket shall find him, pervading the surrounding streets of Leicester Square.

But the wintry morning wakes him not. It wakes Mr. George of the shooting gallery and his familiar. They arise, and stow away their mattresses. Mr. George, having shaved himself before a minute looking-glass, marches out, bare-chested, to the pump in the little yard and comes back shining with yellow soap and exceedingly cold water. As he towels himself, he blows like a military diver just come up, his hair curling tighter and tighter the more he rubs it.

When Mr. George is dry, he goes to work on his head with two hard brushes, so unmercifully that Phil, shouldering his way round the gallery while sweeping it, winks with sympathy. Then Mr. George lights his pipe and marches up and down smoking, while Phil, raising a powerful odour of hot rolls and coffee, prepares breakfast.

"And so, Phil," says George after several turns in silence, "you said that you were dreaming of the country last night?"

"Yes, guv'ner."

"What was it like?"

"I hardly know, guv'ner," said Phil.

"How did you know it was the country?"

"On account of the grass, I think. And the swans upon it," says Phil after consideration.

"What were the swans doing on the grass?"

"Eating it, I expect," says Phil.

The master resumes his march, and the man resumes his preparation of breakfast. It involves little more than the broiling of a rasher of bacon at the fire in the rusty grate; but as Phil has to sidle round the gallery for every object he wants, and never brings two objects at once, it takes time.

At length the breakfast is ready. Mr. George knocks the ashes out of his pipe, and sits down to the meal. Phil sits at the extreme end of the little oblong table, taking his plate on his knees.

“Why,” says Mr. George, “I suppose you never clapped your eyes on the country, Phil?”

“I see the marshes once,” says Phil.

“Where are they?”

“I don’t know,” says Phil; “but I see ’em, guv’ner. They was flat. And misty.”

“I was born and bred in the country, Phil. There’s not a bird’s note that I don’t know,” says Mr. George. “Not many a leaf or berry that I couldn’t name. I was a real country boy, once. My good mother lived in the country.”

“She must have been a fine old lady, guv’ner,” Phil observes.

“Aye! I’ll wager that at ninety she would be near as upright as me, and near as broad across the shoulders.”

“Did she die at ninety, guv’ner?” inquires Phil.

“No. Bosh! Let her rest in peace, God bless her!” says the trooper.

“What set me on about country boys? You, to be sure! So you never clapped your eyes upon the country, eh?”

Phil shakes his head.

“Do you want to see it?”

“N-no, I don’t know as I do, particular,” says Phil.

“The town’s enough for you, eh?”

“Why, you see, commander,” says Phil, “I ain’t acquainted with anythink else, and I’m a-getting too old to take to novelties.”

“How old are you, Phil?” asks the trooper.

“I’m something with a eight in it,” says Phil. “It can’t be eighty. Nor yet eighteen. It’s betwixt ’em, somewheres.” He begins counting on his dirty fingers.

“I was just eight,” says he, “according to the parish calculation, when I went with the tinker. I was sent on a errand, and I see him a-sittin under a old buildin with a fire wery comfortable, and he says, ‘Would you like to come along a me, my man?’ I says ‘Yes.’ That was April Fool Day. I was able to count up to ten; and when April Fool Day come round again, I says to myself, ‘Now, old chap, you’re one and a eight in it.’ April Fool Day after that, I says, ‘Now, old chap, you’re two and a eight in it.’ In course of time, I come to ten and a eight in it; two tens and a eight in it. That’s how I always know there’s a eight in it.”

“Ah!” says Mr. George, resuming his breakfast. “And where’s the tinker?”

“Drink put him in the hospital, guv’ner,” Phil replies.

“And you took over the business, Phil?”

“Such as it was. It wasn’t much of a beat – a poor neighbourhood, where they uses the kettles till they’re past mending. And I couldn’t sing or play a tune like my master. All I could do was mend a pot. Besides, I was too ill-looking, and the wives complained of me. What with blowing the fire when I was young, and singeing my hair off, and having turn-ups with the tinker as I got older, whenever he was too far gone in drink – which was almost always – my beauty was wery queer, even at that time. As to since, what with a dozen

years in a forge, and being scorched in an accident at a gas-works, and being blown out of a window at the firework business, I am ugly enough for a show!”

With a perfectly satisfied manner, Phil pours another cup of coffee. “It was after the firework blow-up when I first see you, commander. You remember?”

“I remember, Phil. You were walking along in the sun.”

“Crawling, gov’ner, against a wall—”

“True, Phil – shouldering your way on—”

“In a night-cap!” exclaims Phil, excited. “And hobbling with a couple of sticks! When you stop, and says to me, ‘What, comrade! You have been in the wars!’ I was taken by surprise that a person so strong and healthy as you should stop to speak to such a limping bag of bones as I was. But you says to me, hearty, ‘What accident have you met with? You have been badly hurt. Cheer up, and tell us about it!’ Cheer up! I was cheered already! I says as much to you, you says more to me, and here I am, commander! Here I am!” cries Phil. “Let the customers take aim at me. They can’t spoil my beauty. If they want a man to box at, let ’em box at me. If they want to throw a wrestler, let ’em throw me. They won’t hurt me. I have been thrown all my life!”

With this unexpected speech, Phil Squod shoulders his way round three sides of the gallery, and tacking off at his commander, makes a butt at him with his head, intended to express devotion to his service. He then begins to clear away the breakfast.

Mr. George, after laughing and clapping him on the shoulder, helps to get the gallery into business order. He takes a turn at the dumb-bells, and deciding that he is getting “too fleshy,” engages in solitary broadsword practice. Meanwhile Phil has begun to work at his table, where he screws and unscrews, and cleans, and files, and seems to do and undo everything that can be done and undone about a gun.

They are disturbed by footsteps in the passage. There arrives a group at first sight looking like a display from the fifth of November.

A limp and ugly figure is carried in a chair by two bearers and attended by a lean female with a face like a pinched mask. As the chair is put down, the figure in it gasps,

“O Lord! Oh, dear me! I am shaken!” adding, “How de do, my dear friend, how de do?” It is Mr. Smallweed out for an airing, attended by his granddaughter Judy as body-guard.

“Mr. George, my dear friend,” says Grandfather Smallweed, “how de do? You’re surprised to see me, my dear friend. I haven’t been out for many months. It’s inconvenient – and it comes expensive. But I longed so much to see you, my dear Mr. George. How de do, sir?”

“I am well enough,” says Mr. George. “I hope you are the same.”

“You can’t be too well, my dear friend.” Mr. Smallweed takes him by both hands. “I have brought my granddaughter Judy. She longed so much to see you.”

“Hum!”

“So we got a hackney-cab, and put a chair in it, and they lifted me out of the cab and carried me here to see my dear friend! This,” says Grandfather Smallweed of one bearer, “is the driver of the cab. It is included in his fare. This person,” the other bearer, “we engaged in the street outside for twopence. Judy, give the person twopence. I was not sure you had a workman of your own here, my dear friend.”

Grandfather Smallweed looks at Phil with considerable terror; for Phil, who has never seen him before, has stopped short with a gun in his hand, with the air of a dead shot intent on picking Mr. Smallweed off like an ugly old crow.

“My dear Mr. George,” says Grandfather Smallweed, “would you be so kind as to carry me to the fire? I am an old man, and I soon chill. Oh, dear me!”

This exclamation is jerked out of him by the suddenness with which Mr. Squod catches him up, chair and all, and deposits him on the hearth-stone.

“O Lord!” says Mr. Smallweed, panting. “Oh, dear me! My dear friend, your workman is very strong – and very prompt! Oh, dear me!” He again stretches out both hands to Mr. George.

“My dear friend! And this is your establishment? It’s a delightful place. You never find that anything goes off accidentally, do you, my dear friend?” he adds uneasily.

“No, no.”

“And your workman. He – Oh, dear me! – he never lets anything off without meaning to, does he, my dear friend?”

“He has never hurt anybody but himself,” says Mr. George, smiling.

“But he might, you know. He seems to have hurt himself a good deal,” the old gentleman returns. “Mr. George, will you order him to leave his infernal fire-arms alone and go away?”

Obedient to a nod from the trooper, Phil retires to the other end of the gallery. Mr. Smallweed begins rubbing his legs.

“And you’re doing well, Mr. George?” he says to the trooper, squarely standing with his broadsword in his hand. “You are prospering?”

Mr. George answers with a cool nod, adding, “Go on. You have not come to say that, I know.”

“My dear friend! But that sword looks awful gleaming and sharp. It might cut somebody, by accident. It makes me shiver, Mr. George.”

As the trooper steps away to lay it aside, the old gentleman says to Judy, “Curse him! He owes me money, and might think of paying off old scores in this murdering place. I wish your brimstone grandmother was here, and he’d shave her head off.”

Mr. George, returning, folds his arms, and looking down at the old man, says quietly, “Now for it!”

“Ho!” cries Mr. Smallweed, rubbing his hands with an artful chuckle. “Yes. Now for what, my dear friend?”

“For a pipe,” says Mr. George, who with great composure sets his chair in the chimney-corner, fills his pipe and lights it, and starts to smoke peacefully.

Mr. Smallweed, exasperated, secretly claws the air with impotent vindictiveness. As the excellent old gentleman’s nails are long, and his hands lean and veinous, and his eyes green and watery; and as he continues to slide down in his chair and to collapse into a shapeless bundle, he becomes such a ghastly spectacle that Judy pounces at him with extreme and not entirely affectionate vigour as she sets him up again.

“If you want to converse with me,” says Mr. George, “you must speak out. If you have come to see whether there’s any property on the premises, look around; you are welcome. If you want to say something, out with it!”

“My friend in the city, Mr. George, has done a little business with a pupil of yours.”

“Has he?” says Mr. George. “I am sorry to hear it.”

“Yes, sir.” Grandfather Smallweed rubs his legs. “A fine young soldier, Mr. George, by the name of Carstone. Friends came forward and paid it all up, honourable.”

“Did they?” returns Mr. George. “Do you think your friend in the city would like a piece of advice? I advise him to do no more business in that quarter. There’s no more to be got by it. The young gentleman, to my knowledge, is brought to a dead halt.”

“No, no, my dear sir,” remonstrates Grandfather Smallweed. “Not quite a dead halt. He has good friends, and he is good for his pay, and he is good for the selling price of his commission, and he is good for his chance in a lawsuit, and he is good for his chance in a wife, and – do you know, Mr. George, I think my friend would consider the young gentleman good for something yet?” says Grandfather Smallweed, scratching his ear like a monkey.

Mr. George drums his foot on the ground as if he were not pleased with the turn the conversation has taken.

“But to pass from one subject to another,” resumes Mr. Smallweed. “To pass, Mr. George, from the ensign to the captain.”

“What are you up to now?” asks Mr. George with a frown. “What captain?”

“Our captain. Captain Hawdon.”

“Oh! That’s it, is it?” says Mr. George with a low whistle. “Well? What about it?”

“My dear friend,” returns the old man, “I was applied – Judy, shake me up a little! – I was applied to yesterday about the captain, and my opinion still is that the captain is not dead.”

“Bosh!”

“Ho!” says Grandfather Smallweed. “Now, what do you think the lawyer making the inquiries wants?”

“A job,” says Mr. George.

“Nothing of the kind!”

“Can’t be a lawyer, then,” says Mr. George, folding his arms.

“My dear friend, he is a lawyer, and a famous one. He wants to see some of Captain Hawdon’s handwriting. He don’t want to keep it. He only wants to compare it with a writing in his possession.”

“Well?”

“Well, Mr. George. Happening to remember the advertisement concerning Captain Hawdon and any information that could be given about him, he came to me – just as you did, my dear friend. So glad you came that day! Well, I have nothing but Hawdon’s signature. Plague, pestilence and famine upon him,” says the old man angrily, “I have half a million of his signatures! But you, my dear Mr. George, are likely to have some letter. Anything would suit the purpose, written in his hand.”

“Some writing in that hand,” says the trooper, pondering; “I may have. Or I may not. But I would not show it without knowing why.”

“My dear Mr. George, I have told you why.”

“Not enough,” says the trooper, shaking his head. “I must know more.”

“Then, will you come to the lawyer?” urges Grandfather Smallweed, pulling out a lean old silver watch. “I told him I might call upon him this morning. Will you come and see him, Mr. George?”

“Hum!” says he gravely. “I don’t mind that. Though why this should concern you so much, I don’t know.”

“Didn’t the Captain take us all in? Didn’t he owe us immense sums, all round? Are you ready to come, my dear friend?”

“Aye! I’ll come in a moment. I promise nothing, you know. You mean to say you’re going to give me a lift to this place, wherever it is, without charging for it?” Mr. George inquires, getting his hat and gloves.

This pleasantry so tickles Mr. Smallweed that he laughs long. But while he laughs, he glances over his shoulder at Mr. George and eagerly watches him as he unlocks a cupboard at the distant end of the gallery, takes something from the higher shelves with a rustling of paper, folds it, and puts it in his breast pocket. Then Judy pokes Mr. Smallweed, and Mr. Smallweed pokes Judy.

“I am ready,” says the trooper, coming back. “Phil, you can carry this old gentleman to his coach.”

“Oh, dear me! O Lord! Stop a moment!” says Mr. Smallweed. “He’s so very prompt! Do it carefully, my worthy man!”

Phil makes no reply, but seizing the chair and its load, bolts along the passage as if he were carrying the old gentleman to the nearest volcano. He deposits him in the cab; the fair Judy takes her place beside him, and Mr. George sits upon the box.

From time to time he peeps into the cab through the window behind him. The grim Judy is always motionless, and the old gentleman with his cap over one eye is always sliding off the seat into the straw and looking upward at him with a helpless expression.

Chapter 27

More Old Soldiers Than One

They have not far to go, for their destination is Lincoln's Inn Fields. When the driver stops his horses, Mr. George alights, and looking in at the window, says, "What, Mr. Tulkinghorn's your man, is he?"

"Yes, my dear friend. Do you know him, Mr. George?"

"Why, I have heard of him. But I don't know him."

With the trooper's help, Mr. Smallweed is carried upstairs into Mr. Tulkinghorn's great room and deposited on the rug before the fire. They are told that Mr. Tulkinghorn is not in, but will be back directly.

Mr. George is mightily curious about the room. He looks round at the old law-books, contemplates the portraits of the great clients, reads aloud the names on the boxes.

"'Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet,'" Mr. George reads thoughtfully. "Ha! 'Manor of Chesney Wold.' Humph!" He stands looking at these boxes a long while, and comes back to the fire repeating, "Sir Leicester Dedlock, of Chesney Wold, hey?"

"Worth a mint of money, Mr. George!" whispers Grandfather Smallweed, rubbing his legs.

"Who do you mean? This old gentleman, or the Baronet?"

"This gentleman."

"So I have heard; and knows a thing or two, I'll wager. Not bad quarters, either," says Mr. George, looking round again.

This reply is cut short by Mr. Tulkinghorn's arrival. Rustily dressed; in manner, close and dry. In voice, husky and low. In face, watchful behind a blind; contemptuous perhaps.

"Good morning, Mr. Smallweed!" he says. "You have brought the sergeant, I see. Sit down, sergeant." He looks with half-closed eyes to where the trooper stands, then takes his easy-chair. "Cold and raw this morning! Now, Mr. Smallweed, what does the sergeant say about this business?"

Mr. George salutes the gentleman but otherwise sits bolt upright and profoundly silent.

"What do you say, George?"

"I ask your pardon, sir," returns the trooper, "but I should wish to know what *you* say?"

"Do you mean in point of reward?"

"I mean in point of everything, sir."

This is so very trying to Mr. Smallweed's temper that he suddenly breaks out with "You're a brimstone beast!"

"I supposed, sergeant," Mr. Tulkinghorn says, "that Mr. Smallweed might have sufficiently explained the matter. You served under Captain

Hawdon at one time, and were his attendant in illness, and were rather in his confidence, I am told. That is so, is it not?"

"Yes, sir, that is so," says Mr. George.

"Therefore you may happen to have in your possession something – anything, no matter what; accounts, instructions, a letter, anything – in Captain Hawdon's writing. I wish to compare his writing with some that I have. You shall be rewarded for your trouble. Three, four, five guineas, I dare say. There is no need for you to part with the writing – though I should prefer to have it."

Mr. George says never a word. The irascible Mr. Smallweed scratches the air.

"The question is," says Mr. Tulkinghorn in his methodical, uninterested way, "first, whether you have any of Captain Hawdon's writing? Secondly, what will satisfy you for the trouble of producing it? Thirdly, you can judge for yourself whether it is at all like that," says Mr. Tulkinghorn, suddenly handing him some sheets of written paper.

Mr. George looks straight at Mr. Tulkinghorn; he does not so much as glance at the affidavit in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, that has been given to him for his inspection.

"Well?" says Mr. Tulkinghorn. "What do you say?"

"Well, sir," replies Mr. George, rising and looking immense, "I would rather, if you'll excuse me, have nothing to do with this."

Mr. Tulkinghorn, outwardly quite undisturbed, demands, "Why not?"

"Why, sir," returns the trooper, "I am not a man of business. I have no head for papers, sir."

With that, he takes three strides forward to replace the papers on the lawyer's table and three strides backward to resume his former station, where he stands perfectly upright with his hands behind him.

Under this provocation, Mr. Smallweed's favourite adjective is so close to his tongue that he begins the words "my dear friend" with "brim," thus appearing to have an impediment in his speech. Once past this difficulty, however, he exhorts his dear friend not to be rash, but to do what the gentleman requires.

Mr. Tulkinghorn merely says, "You are the best judge of your own interest, sergeant. Take care you do no harm by this." He has an appearance of perfect indifference as he looks over the papers on his table.

Mr. George looks distrustfully from one to the other.

"Will you allow me to ask why you want to see the captain's hand, if I could find any specimen of it?"

Mr. Tulkinghorn quietly shakes his head. "No. If you were a man of business, sergeant, you would not need to be informed that there are confidential reasons for many such requests in my profession. But if you are afraid of doing any injury to Captain Hawdon, you may set your mind at rest."

"Aye! He is dead, sir."

"Is he?" Mr. Tulkinghorn quietly sits down to write.

“Well, sir,” says the trooper, looking into his hat after a disconcerted pause, “I am sorry not to have given you more satisfaction. I am willing to consult with a friend of mine who has a better head for business than I have, and who is an old soldier. I – I think that might be best,” says Mr. George, passing his hand hopelessly across his brow.

Mr. Smallweed strongly urges him to consult this old soldier. Mr. Tulkinghorn says nothing either way.

“I’ll consult my friend, then, sir,” says the trooper, “and I’ll take the liberty of looking in again with the final answer in the course of the day. Mr. Smallweed, if you wish to be carried downstairs—”

“In a moment, my dear friend. Will you first let me speak a word with this gentleman in private?”

“Certainly, sir.” The trooper retires to a distant part of the room.

“If I wasn’t as weak as a brimstone baby, sir,” whispers Grandfather Smallweed, drawing the lawyer down to his level by the lapel of his coat, “I’d tear the writing away from him. He’s got it buttoned in his breast. I saw him put it there. Judy saw him put it there. Speak up, Judy!”

The old gentleman accompanies this such a thrust at his granddaughter that it is too much for his strength, and he slips out of his chair, until he is arrested by Judy, and well shaken.

“Violence will not do for me, my friend,” Mr. Tulkinghorn remarks coolly.

“No, I know, sir. But it’s galling to know he has got what’s wanted and won’t give it up. Vagabond! But never mind, sir. At the most, he has only his own way for a little while. I have him in a vice. I’ll twist him, sir. I’ll screw him. Now, my dear Mr. George,” says Grandfather Smallweed, winking at the lawyer hideously, “I am ready for your kind assistance, my excellent friend!”

Mr. Tulkinghorn, showing some shadowy sign of amusement through his self-possession, stands on the hearth-rug watching the disappearance of Mr. Smallweed and acknowledging the trooper’s parting salute with a slight nod.

Mr. George finds it difficult to get rid of the old gentleman. When he is replaced in his carriage, he retains such an affectionate hold of Mr. George’s button – having, in truth, a secret longing to rip his coat open and rob him – that some force is necessary on the trooper’s part to separate them. Then he proceeds alone in quest of his adviser.

By Whitefriars, and by Blackfriars Bridge, Mr. George sedately marches to a street of little shops lying in that tangle of roads centring in the far-famed elephant and castle. To one of the little shops in this street, which is a musician’s shop, with a few fiddles and a tambourine in the window, Mr. George directs his massive tread. He halts a few paces from it, as he sees a soldierly looking woman come forth with a small wooden tub, and commence a-whisking and a-splashing on the margin of the pavement.

Mr. George says to himself, “She’s as usual, washing greens. I never saw her when she wasn’t washing greens!”

The subject of this reflection remains unsuspecting of Mr. George's approach until she has poured the water off into the gutter, and finds him standing near her. Her reception is not flattering.

"George, I never see you but I wish you was a hundred mile away!"

The trooper, without remarking on this welcome, follows her into the shop, where the lady places her tub upon the counter, and having shaken hands with him, rests her arms upon it.

"I never," she says, "consider Matthew Bagnet safe a minute when you're near him, George. You are that restless, roving—"

"Yes! I know I am, Mrs. Bagnet. It's my nature, I suppose."

"Ah!" cries Mrs. Bagnet. "But what good will that be when your nature shall have tempted my Mat away from the musical business to New Zealand or Australey?"

Mrs. Bagnet is not an ill-looking woman. Rather large-boned, and freckled by the sun and wind, but a healthy, wholesome, active, honest-faced woman of from forty-five to fifty. Clean and economically dressed; her only ornament is her wedding-ring, around which her finger has grown to be so large since it was put on that it will never come off again.

"Mrs. Bagnet," says the trooper, "Mat will get no harm from me. You may trust me."

"Well, I think I may. But the very looks of you are unsettling," Mrs. Bagnet rejoins. "Ah, George! If you had only settled down and married Joe Pouch's widow!"

"It was a chance for me, certainly," returns the trooper half laughingly, "but I shall never settle down into a respectable man now. If I had only had the luck to meet with such a wife as Mat found!"

Mrs. Bagnet receives this compliment by flicking Mr. George in the face with a head of greens and taking her tub into the little room behind the shop.

"Why, Quebec, my poppet," says George, following at her invitation. "And little Malta, too! Come and kiss your Bluffy!"

These young ladies – not actually christened by these names, though always so called, from the places of their birth in barracks – are sitting on stools, the younger (five or six years old) learning her letters out of a penny primer, the elder (eight or nine) teaching her and sewing. Both hail Mr. George as an old friend and after some kissing and romping plant their stools beside him.

"And how's young Woolwich?" says Mr. George.

"Ah! There now!" cries Mrs. Bagnet. "Would you believe it? Got an engagement at the theayter, with his father, to play the fife in a military piece."

"Well done, my godson!" cries Mr. George, slapping his thigh. "And Mat blows away at his bassoon, and you're respectable civilians one and all. "Family people. To be sure, I don't know why I shouldn't be wished a hundred mile away, for I have not much to do with all this!"

Mr. George is becoming thoughtful, sitting before the fire in the whitewashed room, which contains nothing superfluous and has not a speck

of dust – Mr. George is becoming thoughtful, when Mr. Bagnet and young Woolwich come home. Mr. Bagnet is an ex-artilleryman, tall and upright, with shaggy eyebrows and whiskers, a bald head, and a torrid complexion. His voice, deep, and resonant, is not at all unlike the tones of his bassoon.

Both father and son salute the trooper heartily. When he says that he has come to seek advice with Mr. Bagnet, Mr. Bagnet declares that he will hear of no business until after dinner and that his friend shall first partake of boiled pork and greens. While dinner is being prepared, he and the trooper go forth to take a turn up and down the little street with measured tread and folded arms.

“George,” says Mr. Bagnet. “You know me. It’s my old girl that advises. She has the head. But I never admit to it before her. Discipline must be maintained. Wait till the greens is off her mind. Then we’ll consult. Whatever the old girl says, do it!”

“I intend to, Mat,” replies the other. “I would sooner take her opinion than that of a college.”

“College,” returns Mr. Bagnet, bassoon-like. “What college could you leave – in another part of the world – with nothing but a grey cloak and an umbrella – to make its way home to Europe? The old girl would do it tomorrow. Did it once!”

“You are right,” says Mr. George.

“What college,” pursues Bagnet, “could you set up in life – with three penn’orth of lime and fuller’s earth? That’s what the old girl started on. In the present cleaning business.”

“I am rejoiced to hear it’s thriving, Mat.”

“The old girl,” says Mr. Bagnet, “saves. Has a stocking somewhere. With money in it. I never saw it. But I know she’s got it. Wait till the greens is off her mind. Then she’ll set you up.”

“She is a treasure!” exclaims Mr. George.

“She’s more. But I never admit it before her. Discipline must be maintained. I would have been in the artillery now but for the old girl. Six years I hammered at the fiddle. Ten at the flute. The old girl said it wouldn’t do; try the bassoon. The old girl borrowed a bassoon from the bandmaster of the Rifle Regiment. I practised in the trenches. Got on, get a living by it!”

George remarks that she looks as fresh as a rose and as sound as an apple.

“The old girl,” says Mr. Bagnet, “is a thoroughly fine woman. Gets finer as she gets on. I never saw the old girl’s equal. But I never own to it before her. Discipline must be maintained!”

They walk up and down the little street, keeping step, until summoned by Quebec and Malta to do justice to the pork and greens. The table-ware is chiefly composed of utensils of horn and tin that have done duty in several parts of the world.

The dinner done, Mrs. Bagnet, assisted by the younger branches (who polish their own cups and platters, knives and forks), puts all away and sweeps the hearth, so that Mr. Bagnet and the visitor may smoke their pipes.

When Mrs. Bagnet reappears from the backyard and sits down to her needlework, then and only then – the greens being entirely off her mind – Mr. Bagnet requests the trooper to state his case.

This Mr. George does in full, appearing to address himself to Mr. Bagnet, but having an eye solely on the old girl all the time.

“That’s the whole of it, is it, George?” says Mr. Bagnet.

“That’s the whole of it.”

“You act according to my opinion?”

“I shall be guided,” replies George, “entirely by it.”

“Old girl,” says Mr. Bagnet, “give him my opinion. You know it. Tell him what it is.”

It is that he should have nothing to do with people who are too deep for him, and cannot be too careful of matters he does not understand – the plain rule is to be a party to nothing underhanded or mysterious, and never to put his foot where he cannot see the ground. This, in effect, is Mr. Bagnet’s opinion, as delivered through the old girl, and it relieves Mr. George’s mind by confirming his own opinion. He smokes another pipe and has a talk over old times with the whole Bagnet family.

Thus time draws on, until the bassoon and fife are expected at the theatre; and Mr. George takes leave of Quebec and Malta and insinuates a shilling into his godson’s pocket. It is dark when he again turns his face towards Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

“A family home,” he ruminates as he marches along, “makes a man like me look lonely. But it’s well I never married. I shouldn’t have been fit for it. I am such a vagabond still, even now, that I couldn’t keep to the gallery a month together if I didn’t camp there, gipsy fashion. Come! I disgrace nobody and encumber nobody; that’s something!”

Back in Lincoln’s Inn Fields and mounting Mr. Tulkinghorn’s stair, he finds the outer door closed and the chambers shut. The trooper is fumbling and groping about in the dark of the stairs, hoping to discover a bell-handle, when Mr. Tulkinghorn comes up the stairs (quietly, of course) and angrily asks, “Who is that? What are you doing there?”

“I ask your pardon, sir. It’s George. The sergeant.”

“And couldn’t you see that my door was locked?”

“Why, no, sir, I couldn’t,” says the trooper, rather nettled.

“Have you changed your mind? Or are you in the same mind?” Mr. Tulkinghorn demands. But he knows well enough at a glance.

“In the same mind, sir.”

“I thought so. That’s sufficient. You can go. So you are the man,” says Mr. Tulkinghorn, opening his door with the key, “in whose hiding-place Mr. Gridley was found?”

“Yes, I am the man,” says the trooper, stopping two or three stairs down. “What then, sir?”

“I don’t like your associates. A threatening, murderous, dangerous fellow.”

With these words, spoken in an unusually high tone for him, the lawyer goes into his rooms and slams the door.

Mr. George takes his dismissal in great dudgeon, the greater because a clerk coming up the stairs with a lamp has heard the last words and evidently applies them to him, by the way he studies his face. For five minutes Mr. George is in an ill humour. But he whistles that off like the rest of it and marches home to the shooting gallery.

Chapter 28

The Ironmaster

Sir Leicester Dedlock has got the better, for the time being, of the family gout and is once more upon his legs. He is at his place in Lincolnshire; but the waters lie again on the low grounds, and the cold and damp steal into Chesney Wold, and into Sir Leicester's bones. The blazing fires do not exclude the enemy. The hot-water pipes that trail themselves all over the house, the cushioned doors and windows, and the screens and curtains fail to satisfy Sir Leicester's need. Hence Lady Dedlock is expected shortly to return to town for a few weeks.

It is a melancholy truth that even great men have their poor relations; often more than their fair share. Amongst Sir Leicester's cousins are those who are so poor that one might almost think it would have been happier for them never to have been links upon the Dedlock chain of gold, but to have been made of common iron from the start and been of service.

Service, however, they may not do, being of the Dedlock dignity. So they visit their richer cousins, and get into debt when they can, and live shabbily when they can't, and ride in borrowed carriages, and sit at other people's feasts.

Sir Leicester, like a glorious spider, stretches his threads of relationship to countless cousins. But he is a kind and generous man, according to his dignified way, in the cousinship of the Nobodys; and at present, in spite of the damp, he tolerates the visit of several such cousins at Chesney Wold with the constancy of a martyr.

Of these, foremost is Volumnia Dedlock, a young lady (of sixty) who is doubly highly related, having the honour to be a poor relation, by the mother's side, to another great family. Miss Volumnia, displaying in early life a pretty talent for cutting ornaments out of coloured paper, and also for singing to the guitar in the Spanish tongue, and propounding French riddles in country houses, passed the years between twenty and forty in an agreeable manner. Lapsing then out of date, she retired to Bath, where she lives slenderly on an annual present from Sir Leicester and makes occasional resurrections in the country houses of her cousins. She has an extensive acquaintance at Bath among appalling old gentlemen with thin legs and nankeen trousers, and is of high standing in that dreary city. But she is a little dreaded elsewhere because of an indiscreet use of rouge and persistency in an old pearl necklace like a rosary of little bird's-eggs.

There is likewise the Honourable Bob Stables, who can make warm mashes for horses with the skill of a veterinary surgeon and is a better shot than most gamekeepers. He has wished for some time to serve his country in a post of good salary, unaccompanied by any trouble or responsibility. Somehow this has never been forthcoming.

The rest of the cousins are ladies and gentlemen of various ages and capacities, mostly amiable and sensible and likely to have done well enough in life if they could have overcome their cousinship. As it is, they lounge in purposeless and listless paths, quite at a loss as to how to dispose of themselves.

In this society my Lady Dedlock reigns supreme. Beautiful, elegant and accomplished, her influence in Sir Leicester's house, however haughty and indifferent her manner, is greatly to improve it and refine it. The cousins do her feudal homage; and the Honourable Bob Stables daily repeats that she is the best-groomed woman in the whole stud.

Such are the guests in the long drawing-room at Chesney Wold this dismal night. It is near bed-time. Bedroom fires blaze brightly all over the house, bedroom candlesticks bristle on the distant table by the door, and cousins yawn on ottomans. Cousins at the piano, cousins at the soda-water tray, cousins rising from the card-table, cousins gathered round the fire. Volumnia, as one of the more privileged cousins, sits in a luxurious chair between Sir Leicester and my Lady, Sir Leicester glancing, with magnificent displeasure, at the rouge and the pearl necklace.

"I occasionally meet on the staircase here," drawls Volumnia, "one of the prettiest girls, I think, that I ever saw in my life."

"A protégée of my Lady's," observes Sir Leicester.

"I thought so. I felt sure that some uncommon eye must have picked that girl out. She really is a marvel. Such bloom I never saw!"

"Indeed," remarks my Lady languidly, "if there is any uncommon eye in the case, it is Mrs. Rouncewell's. Rosa is her discovery."

"Your maid, I suppose?"

"No. My pet – secretary – messenger – I don't know what."

"You like to have her about you, as you would like to have a flower, or a bird, or anything else that was equally pretty?" says Volumnia, sympathizing. "Yes, how charming! And how well that delightful old soul Mrs. Rouncewell is looking. She must be an immense age, and yet she is so active and handsome! She is the dearest friend I have!"

Sir Leicester feels it fitting that the housekeeper of Chesney Wold should be a remarkable person. And he has a real regard for Mrs. Rouncewell and likes to hear her praised. So he says, "You are right, Volumnia," which Volumnia is extremely glad to hear.

"She has no daughter of her own, has she?"

"Mrs. Rouncewell? No, Volumnia. She has a son. Indeed, she had two."

My Lady glances wearily towards the candlesticks and heaves a noiseless sigh.

"And it is a remarkable example of the confusion into which the present age has fallen," says Sir Leicester with stately gloom, "that I have been informed by Mr. Tulkinghorn that Mrs. Rouncewell's son has been invited to go into Parliament."

Miss Volumnia utters a little sharp scream. "I never heard of such a thing! Good gracious, what is the man?" she exclaims.

“He is called, I believe – an – ironmaster.” Sir Leicester says it with gravity and doubt.

Volumnia utters another little scream.

“He has declined the proposal, if my information from Mr. Tulkinghorn is correct, as I have no doubt it is. Still,” says Sir Leicester, “that does not lessen the strangeness of it.”

Miss Volumnia rising with a look at the candles, Sir Leicester politely brings one, and lights it at my Lady’s lamp.

“I must beg you, my Lady,” he says, “to remain a few moments, for this very man arrived this evening and requested in, I am bound to say, a very becoming note, the favour of a short interview with us both on the subject of this young girl. I replied that we would see him before retiring.”

Miss Volumnia with a third little scream takes flight. The other cousins soon disperse, and Sir Leicester rings the bell.

“My compliments to Mr. Rouncewell, and say I can receive him now.”

My Lady, who has heard all this with little apparent attention, looks towards Mr. Rouncewell as he comes in. He is a little over fifty, of a good figure, like his mother, and has a clear voice, a broad forehead, and a shrewd though open face. He is a responsible-looking gentleman dressed in black, portly, but strong and active. He has a perfectly natural air and is not in the least embarrassed by the great presence into which he comes.

“Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock, I apologize for intruding on you. I will be very brief.”

The head of the Dedlocks motions him to take a seat.

“In these busy times, people like myself have so many workmen in so many places that we are always on the move.”

Sir Leicester is content enough that the ironmaster should feel that there is no hurry there, in that ancient house, rooted in that quiet park, where the elms and the shady oaks stand deep in the fern and leaves of a hundred years. Sir Leicester sits down in an easy-chair, contrasting his repose to the restless flights of ironmasters.

“Lady Dedlock has been so kind,” proceeds Mr. Rouncewell with a respectful bow, “as to place near her a young beauty of the name of Rosa. Now, my son has fallen in love with Rosa and has asked my consent to his proposing marriage to her. I have never seen Rosa until today, but I have some confidence in my son’s good sense. I find her what he represents her, to the best of my judgment; and my mother speaks of her with great commendation.”

“She in all respects deserves it,” says my Lady.

“I am happy, Lady Dedlock, that you say so. Now, my son is a very young man, and Rosa is a very young woman. As I made my way, so my son must make his; and his being married at present is out of the question. But supposing I gave my consent to his engaging himself to this pretty girl, I think I should say at once – I am sure you will understand and excuse me – I should make it a condition that she did not remain at Chesney Wold. Therefore, before speaking further with my son, I take the liberty of saying that if her

removal would be in any way inconvenient or objectionable, I will leave the matter precisely where it is.”

Not remain at Chesney Wold! Make it a condition! All Sir Leicester’s old misgivings about the people in the iron districts who do nothing but turn out to riot by torchlight come in a shower upon his indignant head.

“Am I to understand, sir,” he says, “that you consider this young woman too good for Chesney Wold or likely to be injured by remaining here?”

“Certainly not, Sir Leicester,”

“I am glad to hear it.” Sir Leicester very lofty indeed.

“Pray, Mr. Rouncewell,” says my Lady, warning Sir Leicester off with the slightest gesture of her pretty hand, as if he were a fly, “explain to me what you mean.”

“Willingly, Lady Dedlock.”

My Lady listens attentively, with composed face, but with a quick intelligence.

“I am the son of your housekeeper, Lady Dedlock, and passed my childhood about this house. My mother has lived here half a century and will die here, I have no doubt. She is one of those examples of love, attachment, and fidelity, which England may well be proud of, although such an instance bespeaks high worth on two sides – on the great side assuredly, on the small one no less assuredly.”

Sir Leicester snorts a little, but silently admits the justice of this statement.

“I wouldn’t have it supposed that I am ashamed of my mother’s position here, or lacking in respect for Chesney Wold. I certainly may have desired, Lady Dedlock, that my mother should retire and end her days with me. But as I have found that this would break her heart, I have long abandoned that idea.”

Sir Leicester very magnificent again at the notion of Mrs. Rouncewell being spirited off from her natural home to end her days with an ironmaster.

“I have been,” proceeds the visitor in a modest, clear way, “an apprentice and a workman. I have lived on workman’s wages for years, and beyond a certain point have had to educate myself. My wife was a foreman’s daughter, and plainly brought up. We have three daughters besides our son, and fortunately have been able to educate them well. It has been one of our great cares and pleasures to make them worthy of any station.”

A little boastfulness in his fatherly tone here; and more magnificence, therefore, on the part of Sir Leicester.

“All this is so frequent, Lady Dedlock, where I live, that what would be generally called unequal marriages are not so rare as elsewhere. A son will sometimes tell his father that he has fallen in love, say, with a young woman in the factory. The father, who once worked in a factory himself, may be a little disappointed at first. However, if he finds the young woman to be of unblemished character, he may have the girl educated for two years, or he may place her at the same school with his daughters, until they are of a fair

equality. I know of several such cases, my Lady, and I think they indicate to me my own course now.”

Sir Leicester’s magnificence explodes. Calmly, but terribly.

“Mr. Rouncewell,” says Sir Leicester in a stately attitude, “do you draw a parallel between Chesney Wold and a – a factory?”

“Of course the two places are very different; but for the purposes of this case, I think a parallel may be justly drawn between them.”

“Are you aware, sir, that this young woman whom my Lady has placed near her person was brought up at the village school outside the gates?”

“Sir Leicester, I am quite aware of it. A very good school it is, and handsomely supported by this family.”

“Then, Mr. Rouncewell,” returns Sir Leicester, “what you have said is incomprehensible.”

“Will it be more comprehensible, Sir Leicester, if I say,” the ironmaster is reddening a little, “that I do not regard the village school as teaching everything desirable to be known by my son’s wife?”

From the village school of Chesney Wold to the whole framework of society; to that framework cracking due to people like iron-masters getting out of the station unto which they are called – which is, according to Sir Leicester’s rapid logic, the first station in which they happen to find themselves; and from that, to their educating other people out of *their* stations, and so opening the floodgates, and all the rest of it; this is the swift progress of the Dedlock mind.

“Mr. Rouncewell, our views of duty, and of station, and of education – in short, *all* our views – are so opposed, that to prolong this discussion must be repellent to both of us. This young woman is honoured with my Lady’s notice and favour. If she wishes to withdraw herself from that favour, or to allow anyone with peculiar opinions to withdraw her from that favour, she is free to do so. We are obliged to you for the plainness with which you have spoken. We beg – if you will be so good – to leave the subject.”

The visitor pauses to give my Lady an opportunity to speak, but she says nothing. He then rises and replies, “Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock, thank you for your attention. I shall very seriously recommend my son to conquer his present inclinations. Good night!”

“Mr. Rouncewell,” says Sir Leicester, “it is late, and the roads are dark. I hope you will allow my Lady and myself to offer you the hospitality of Chesney Wold, for tonight at least.”

“I hope so,” adds my Lady.

“I am much obliged to you, but I have to travel all night in order to reach a distant part of the country for an appointment in the morning.”

The ironmaster takes his departure. My Lady goes to her boudoir, sits down thoughtfully by the fire, and looks at Rosa, writing in an inner room. Presently my Lady calls her.

“Come to me, child. Tell me the truth. Are you in love?”

“Oh! My Lady!”

My Lady, looking at the downcast and blushing face, says smiling,
“Who is it? Is it Mrs. Rouncewell’s grandson?”

“Yes, if you please, my Lady. But I don’t know that I am in love with him – yet.”

“Yet, you silly little thing! Do you know that he loves you, yet?”

“I think he likes me a little, my Lady.” And Rosa bursts into tears.

Is this Lady Dedlock standing beside the village beauty, smoothing her dark hair with that motherly touch, and watching her with eyes so full of interest? Aye, indeed it is!

“Listen to me, child. You are young and true, and I believe you are attached to me.”

“Indeed I am, my Lady.”

“And I don’t think you would wish to leave me just yet, Rosa, even for a lover?”

“Oh, no, my Lady!” Rosa looks quite frightened at the thought.

“Confide in me, my child. I wish you to be happy, and will make you so – if I can make anybody happy on this earth.”

Rosa, with fresh tears, kneels at her feet and kisses her hand. My Lady holds her hand between her own, and then gradually lets it fall, absorbed with her eyes on the fire.

In search of what? Of any hand that is no more, of any touch that might have magically changed her life? Does she listen to the Ghost’s Walk and think what step it most resembles? A man’s? A woman’s? The pattering of a little child’s feet? Some melancholy influence is upon her, or why should so proud a lady close the doors and sit alone upon the hearth so desolate?

Volumnia is away next day, and all the cousins are scattered before dinner. They are amazed to hear from Sir Leicester at breakfast-time of the opening of floodgates, and cracking of the framework of society, as manifested through Mrs. Rouncewell’s son. The cousins are really indignant; and as to Volumnia, she is as eloquent upon the theme as if there were a general rising in the north of England to obtain her rouge-pot and pearl necklace.

And thus, with a clatter of maids and valets, the cousins disperse to the four winds; and the one wintry wind that blows today shakes a shower from the trees near the deserted house, as if all the cousins had been changed into leaves.

Chapter 29

The Young Man

Chesney Wold is shut up, carpets are rolled into great scrolls, bright damask is covered in brown dust-sheets, and the Dedlock ancestors retire from the light of day again. Around the house the leaves fall thick, but never fast, for they come circling down with a dead lightness that is sombre and slow. No matter how much the gardener sweeps up, still they lie ankle-deep. Howls the shrill wind round Chesney Wold; the sharp rain beats, and the windows rattle. Mists hide in the avenues, veil the views, and move funeral-wise across the grounds. On all the house there is the cold, blank smell of a church, suggesting that the dead and buried Dedlocks walk there in the long nights and leave the flavour of their graves behind them.

But the house in town shines out awakened. As warm and bright as possible, as pleasantly scented as hothouse flowers can make it, soft and hushed so that the ticking of the clocks and the crisp burning of the fires alone disturb the stillness in the rooms, it seems to wrap Sir Leicester's chilled bones in rainbow-coloured wool. And Sir Leicester is glad to repose in dignified contentment before the great fire in the library, condescendingly perusing the backs of his books or honouring the fine arts with an approving glance. For he has his pictures, ancient and modern, of fancy Spanish or Venetian scenes.

Mr. Tulkinghorn comes and goes pretty often on estate business. He sees my Lady pretty often, too; and he and she are as composed, and as indifferent to each other, as ever. Yet it may be that my Lady fears Mr. Tulkinghorn and that he knows it. It may be that he pursues her doggedly and steadily, with no touch of remorse or pity. It may be that her beauty and state only give him the greater zest for what he is set upon and make him more inflexible. Whether or no, my Lady had better have five thousand pairs of fashionable eyes upon her, than the two eyes of this rusty lawyer with his wisp of neckcloth.

Sir Leicester sits in my Lady's room – that room in which Mr. Tulkinghorn read the affidavit in Jarndyce and Jarndyce – particularly complacent. My Lady, as on that day, sits before the fire with her screen in her hand. Sir Leicester is particularly complacent because he has found in his newspaper some congenial remarks bearing directly on the floodgates and the framework of society. He has come from the library to my Lady's room expressly to read them aloud. "The man who wrote this article," he observes, "has a well-balanced mind."

My Lady, after a languid effort to listen, or rather pretend to listen, becomes distracted and falls into a contemplation of the fire. Sir Leicester, quite unconscious, reads on, occasionally stopping to remark "Very true indeed," or "Very properly put," invariably losing his place after each observation, and going up and down the column to find it again.

He is reading with infinite gravity when the door opens, and the footman makes this strange announcement, "The young man, my Lady, of the name of Guppy."

Sir Leicester pauses, and repeats, "The young man of the name of Guppy?"

"I beg your pardon, Sir Leicester, but my Lady said she would see the young man whenever he called."

The young man of the name of Guppy stands there, much discomfited.

"It's quite right. I gave him those directions," says my Lady. "Let the young man wait."

"By no means, my Lady. I will not interrupt you." Sir Leicester gallantly retires, declining to accept a bow from the young man as he goes out and majestically supposing him to be some shoemaker.

Lady Dedlock looks imperiously at her visitor when the servant has left the room. She asks him what he wants.

"That your ladyship would have the kindness to oblige me with a little conversation," returns Mr. Guppy, embarrassed.

"You are the person who has written me so many letters?"

"Several, your ladyship, before your ladyship condescended to favour me with an answer."

"And could you not write this time?"

Mr. Guppy shakes his head.

"You have been strangely importunate. If it should appear, after all, that what you have to say does not concern me – and I don't expect that it will – you will allow me to cut you short. Say what you have to say, please."

My Lady turns herself towards the fire again, sitting almost with her back to the young man.

"With your ladyship's permission, then," says Mr. Guppy, "Hem! I am, as I told your ladyship in my first letter, in the law, and have learnt the habit of not committing myself in writing. The name of my firm is Kenge and Carboy, of Lincoln's Inn, which may not be altogether unknown to your ladyship in connexion with the case in Chancery of Jarndyce and Jarndyce."

My Lady's figure stills as if she were listening.

"I may say at once," says Mr. Guppy, a little emboldened, "it is not about Jarndyce and Jarndyce that I wish to speak to your ladyship. If it had been about Jarndyce and Jarndyce, I should have gone to your ladyship's solicitor, Mr. Tulkinghorn."

My Lady says, "You had better sit down."

"Thank you." Mr. Guppy does so. "Now, your ladyship" – he refers to a little slip of paper – "Oh, yes! – I place myself entirely in your ladyship's hands. If your ladyship was to make any complaint to Kenge and Carboy or to Mr. Tulkinghorn of this visit, I should be placed in a very disagreeable situation. Consequently, I rely upon your ladyship's honour."

My Lady, with a disdainful gesture, assures him of his being worth no complaint from her.

“Thank your ladyship,” says Mr. Guppy; “Now – dash it! I wrote down here the points I thought of touching upon, and I can’t quite make them out.” He blushes, peering at the slip of paper. “C.S. What’s C.S.? Oh! I know! I am not aware whether your ladyship ever happened to hear of, or to see, a young lady of the name of Miss Esther Summerson.”

My Lady’s eyes look at him full. “I saw a young lady of that name not long ago.”

“Now, did it strike your ladyship that she was like anybody?” asks Mr. Guppy, crossing his arms, and holding his head on one side.

“No.”

“Not like your ladyship’s family?”

“No.”

“I think your ladyship,” says Mr. Guppy, “can hardly remember Miss Summerson’s face?”

“I remember the young lady very well. What has this to do with me?”

“Your ladyship, I do assure you that having Miss Summerson’s image imprinted on my ’heart, I found, when I had the honour of going over your ladyship’s mansion of Chesney Wold recently, such a resemblance between Miss Esther Summerson and your ladyship’s own portrait that it completely knocked me over. And now I have the honour of beholding your ladyship near, it’s really more surprising than I thought.”

What a deadly look those beautiful eyes give the young man of the name of Guppy! My Lady asks him again what he supposes that this has to do with her.

“Your ladyship,” replies Mr. Guppy, again referring to his paper, “I am coming to that. Dash these notes! Oh! ‘Mrs. Chadband.’ Yes.”

My Lady reclines in her chair composedly, though with a trifle less ease than usual perhaps, and never falters in her steady gaze.

Mr. Guppy proceeds. “Your ladyship, there is a mystery about Miss Esther Summerson’s birth and bringing up. I know that fact in the way of my profession at Kenge and Carboy’s. Now, as I have already mentioned to your ladyship, Miss Summerson’s image is imprinted on my ’heart. If I could clear this mystery for her, or prove her to be well related, or find that having the honour to be a remote branch of your ladyship’s family she had a right to be made a party in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, why, Miss Summerson might look with more favour on my proposals than she has exactly done as yet. In fact, as yet she hasn’t favoured them at all.”

A kind of angry smile dawns upon my Lady’s face.

“Now, by chance,” says Mr. Guppy, “through one of those circumstances that fall in the way of us professional men, I have met the person who lived as servant with the lady who brought Miss Summerson up. That lady was a Miss Barbary, your ladyship.”

Is the dead colour on my Lady’s face reflected from her green silk screen, or is it a dreadful paleness that has fallen on her?

“Did your ladyship,” says Mr. Guppy, “ever hear of Miss Barbary?”

“I don’t know. I think so.”

“Was she at all connected with your ladyship’s family?”

My Lady’s lips move, but they utter nothing. She shakes her head.

“Not to your ladyship’s knowledge, perhaps? Ah! But might be? Very good!” says Mr. Guppy. “Now, this Miss Barbary was extremely close and secretive, and my witness never had an idea whether she possessed a single relative. On one occasion only, she confided to my witness on a single point, and she then told her that the little girl’s real name was not Esther Summerson, but Esther Hawdon.”

“My God!”

Mr. Guppy stares. Lady Dedlock sits before him in the same attitude, with her lips a little apart, her brow a little contracted, but for the moment dead. He sees a tremor pass across her frame like a ripple over water, sees her lips shake, sees her compose them by a great effort, all in a swift breath.

“Your ladyship is acquainted with the name of Hawdon?”

“I have heard it before.”

“Name of any remote branch of your ladyship’s family?”

“No.”

“Now, your ladyship,” says Mr. Guppy, “I come to the last point of the case. Your ladyship must know that there was found dead at the house of a person named Krook, near Chancery Lane, a law-writer in great distress. There was an inquest, in which this law-writer was an anonymous character, his name being unknown. But, your ladyship, I have discovered very lately that that law-writer’s name was Hawdon.”

“And what is that to me?”

“Aye, your ladyship, that’s the question! Now, your ladyship, a queer thing happened after that man’s death. A lady in disguise went to look at the scene and went to look at his grave. She hired a crossing-sweeping boy to show it her. If your ladyship would wish to have the boy produced, I can lay my hand upon him at any time.”

The wretched boy is nothing to my Lady, and she does *not* wish to have him produced.

“I assure your ladyship it’s very queer indeed,” says Mr. Guppy. “If you was to hear him tell about the rings that sparkled on her fingers when she took her glove off, you’d think it quite romantic. It was supposed, your ladyship, that Hawdon left no scrap behind him by which he could be identified. But he did. He left a bundle of old letters.”

All this time her eyes never once release him.

“They were taken and hidden. And tomorrow night, your ladyship, they will come into my possession.”

“Still I ask you, what is this to me?”

“Your ladyship, I end with that.” Mr. Guppy rises. “If you think there’s enough in this chain of circumstances to give your ladyship a family interest in going further into the case, I will bring these papers here. I don’t know what they are, except that they are old letters: I have never seen them. I will bring those papers here as soon as I get them and go over them for the first

time with your ladyship. I have told your ladyship all this in strict confidence.”

Is this the full purpose of the young man of the name of Guppy, or has he any other? Do his words disclose his full object and suspicion in coming here; or if not, what do they hide? He is a match for my Lady. That witness-box face of his tells her nothing.

“You may bring the letters,” says my Lady, “if you choose.”

“Your ladyship is not very encouraging, upon my word,” says Mr. Guppy, a little injured.

“You may bring the letters,” she repeats in the same tone, “if you please.”

“It shall be done. I wish your ladyship good day.”

On a table near her is a rich bauble of a casket. Looking at him, she unlocks it.

“Oh! I assure your ladyship I couldn’t accept anything of the kind,” says Mr. Guppy. “I wish your ladyship good day.”

So the young man makes his bow and leaves.

As Sir Leicester dozes over his newspaper in the library, is there no influence in the house to startle him, to make the very portraits frown, the very armour stir?

No. Sobs and cries are only air, and air is so shut in throughout the house in town that no vibration is carried to Sir Leicester’s ears; and yet this cry is in the house, going from a wild figure on its knees.

“O my child, my child! Not dead in the first hours of her life, as my cruel sister told me, but sternly nurtured by her, after she had renounced me and my name! O my child, O my child!”

Chapter 30

Esther's Narrative

Richard had been gone away some time when a visitor came to pass a few days with us. It was an elderly lady: Mrs. Woodcourt, who, having come from Wales to stay with Mrs. Bayham Badger, had been invited by my guardian to make a visit to Bleak House. She stayed with us nearly three weeks. She took very kindly to me and was extremely confidential, so much so that sometimes she almost made me uncomfortable. I felt it was unreasonable of me; still, I could not help it.

She was such a sharp little lady and used to sit with her hands folded, looking so very watchful while she talked that perhaps I found that rather irksome. I don't think it was her being so upright and trim, nor the expression of her face, which was very sparkling and pretty for an old lady. I don't know what it was. Or at least if I do now, I did not then. Or at least – but it doesn't matter.

When I was going upstairs to bed, she would invite me into her room, where she sat before the fire in a great chair; and, dear me, she would tell me about Morgan ap-Kerrig until I was quite low-spirited! Sometimes she recited a few verses from Crumlinwallinwer and the Mewlinwillinwodd (though I dare say these are not the right names), and would become quite fiery with the sentiments they expressed. Though I never knew what they were, being in Welsh.

“So, Miss Summerson,” she would say to me with stately triumph, “this, you see, is the fortune inherited by my son. Wherever my son goes, he can claim kindred with Ap-Kerrig. He may not have money, but he has family, my dear.”

I had my doubts of their caring for Morgan ap-Kerrig in India and China, but of course I never expressed them. I used to say it was a great thing to be so highly connected.

“It is, my dear, a great thing,” Mrs. Woodcourt would reply. “My son's choice of a wife is limited by it, but the royal family is limited in much the same manner.”

Then she would pat me on the arm. “His father, my dear,” she would say with some emotion, for she had a very affectionate heart, “was descended from a great Highland family, the MacCoorts of MacCoort. He served his king and country as an officer in the Royal Highlanders, and he died on the field. My son is one of the last representatives of two old families. With the blessing of heaven he will unite them with another old family.”

It was in vain for me to try to change the subject. Mrs. Woodcourt never would let me.

“My dear,” she said one night, “you have so much sense for your age that it is a comfort to me to talk to you about these family matters of mine. You don’t know much of my son, my dear; but you recollect him?”

“Yes, ma’am. I recollect him.”

“Now, my dear, I think you are a judge of character, and I should like to have your opinion of him.”

“Oh, Mrs. Woodcourt,” said I, “it is so difficult to give an opinion—”

“On so slight an acquaintance, my dear. That’s true.”

I didn’t mean that, because Mr. Woodcourt had been at our house a good deal and had become quite intimate with my guardian. I said so, and added that he seemed to be very clever in his profession – we thought – and that his kindness and gentleness to Miss Flite were above all praise.

“You do him justice!” said Mrs. Woodcourt, pressing my hand. “Allan is a dear fellow, and in his profession faultless. Still, I must confess he is not without faults.”

“None of us are,” said I.

“Ah! But his really are faults that he ought to correct,” returned the sharp old lady. “I am so much attached to you that I may confide in you, my dear, that he is fickleness itself. He is always paying trivial attentions to young ladies, and has been since he was eighteen. Now, my dear, he has never really cared for any of them and has never meant to express anything but good nature. Still, it’s not right, you know; is it?”

“No,” said I, as she seemed to wait for me.

“And it might lead to mistaken notions, you see, my dear.”

I supposed it might.

“I have told him many times that he really should be more careful. And he has always said, ‘Mother, I will be; but you know I mean no harm – in short, mean nothing.’ Which is very true, my dear, but is no justification. However, as he is now gone so far away, and as he will have good opportunities and introductions, we may consider this past and gone. And you, my dear,” said the old lady, all nods and smiles, “regarding your dear self, my love?”

“Me, Mrs. Woodcourt?”

“Not to be always selfish, talking of my son, who has gone to seek his fortune and to find a wife – when do you mean to seek *your* fortune and to find a husband, Miss Summerson? Now you blush!”

I don’t think I did blush. I said my present fortune perfectly contented me and I had no wish to change it.

“Shall I tell you what I always think of your future, my love?” said Mrs. Woodcourt.

“If you believe you are a good prophet,” said I.

“Why, then, it is that you will marry some one very rich and very worthy, much older – five and twenty years, perhaps – than yourself. And you will be an excellent wife, and much beloved, and very happy.”

“That is a good fortune,” said I. “But why is it to be mine?”

“My dear,” she returned, “you are so busy, and so neat, and so peculiarly situated that it is suitable, and it will come to pass. And nobody, my love, will congratulate you more sincerely on such a marriage than I shall.”

It was curious that this should make me uncomfortable, but it did. I was so ashamed of my folly that I did not like to confess it even to Ada. I would have given anything not to have been so much in the bright old lady’s confidence; it gave me the most inconsistent opinions of her. At one time I thought she was a story-teller, and next moment I believed her honest Welsh heart to be perfectly innocent and simple.

And after all, why did it matter to me? Why did I trouble myself about the harmless things she said? I was certainly very anxious that she should like me and was very glad that she did, but why should I harp afterwards, with distress and pain, on every word she said and weigh it over and over again in twenty scales? These were perplexities that I could not account for. At least, if I could – but I shall come to all that by and by.

So when Mrs. Woodcourt went away, I was sorry to lose her but relieved too. And then Caddy Jellyby came down with a packet of domestic news.

First Caddy declared that I was the best adviser that ever was known. Then she told us that she was going to be married in a month and that if Ada and I would be her bridesmaids, she was the happiest girl in the world. To be sure, this was news indeed.

It seemed that Caddy’s unfortunate papa had got over his bankruptcy and had given up everything he possessed (which was not worth much, I should think, to judge from the state of the furniture), and had satisfied his creditors that he could do no more, poor man. So he had been honourably dismissed to “the office” to begin the world again. What he did at the office, I never knew; Caddy said he was a custom-house and general agent.

They had moved to a furnished lodging in Hatton Garden (where I found the children, when I afterwards went there, cutting the horse hair out of the chair seats and choking themselves with it). Caddy had brought about a meeting between him and old Mr. Turveydrop; and poor Mr. Jellyby, being very humble and meek, had deferred to Mr. Turveydrop’s deportment so submissively that they had become excellent friends. By degrees, old Mr. Turveydrop had worked up his parental feelings to contemplating his son’s marriage and had given his gracious consent to the young couple setting up house at the academy in Newman Street.

“And your papa, Caddy. What did he say?”

“Oh! Poor Pa,” said Caddy, “only cried and said he hoped we might get on better than he and Ma had got on. He didn’t say it before Prince, but he said to me, ‘My poor girl, you have not been very well taught how to make a home for your husband, but unless you mean with all your heart to strive to do it, you had better murder him than marry him – if you really love him.’”

“And how did you reassure him, Caddy?”

“Why, it was very distressing, you know, to see poor Pa so low and hear him say such terrible things. But I told him that I did mean it with all my heart

and that I hoped our house would be a place for him to come and find some comfort and that I hoped I could be a better daughter to him there than at home. Then I mentioned Peepy's coming to stay with me, and Pa began to cry again and said the children were wild Indians. And Pa said" – here she began to sob, poor girl – "that the best thing that could happen to them was their being all tomahawked together."

Ada suggested that he did not mean it.

"No, of course not," said Caddy, "but he means that they are very unfortunate in being Ma's children and that he is very unfortunate in being Ma's husband; and I am sure that's true, though it seems unnatural to say so."

I asked Caddy if Mrs. Jellyby knew that her wedding-day was fixed.

"Oh! It's impossible to say whether she knows it or not. She has been told it often enough; but she only gives me a placid look, and then she shakes her head and says 'Oh, Caddy, what a tease you are!' and goes on with the Borrioboola letters."

"And about your wardrobe, Caddy?" said I.

"Well, my dear Esther," she returned, drying her eyes, "I must do the best I can and trust to my dear Prince not to mind my coming so shabbily to him. If it was an outfit for Borrioboola, Ma would be quite excited. Being what it is, she neither knows nor cares."

Caddy did not lack natural affection for her mother, but mentioned this with tears as an undeniable fact, which I am afraid it was. We were sorry for the poor dear girl and proposed a little scheme that made her joyful. This was her staying with us for three weeks, my staying with her for one, and our all three contriving and cutting out, and repairing, and sewing, and doing the very best we could with her stock.

My guardian being as pleased with the idea as Caddy was, we took her home next day to arrange the matter and brought her out again in triumph with her boxes and all the purchases that could be squeezed out of a ten-pound note, which Mr. Jellyby gave her. What my guardian would not have given her if we had encouraged him, it would be difficult to say, but we thought it right to ask for no more than her wedding-dress and bonnet. He agreed to this compromise, and if Caddy had ever been happy in her life, she was happy when we sat down to work.

She was clumsy enough with her needle, poor girl, and vexed at being able to do no better, but she soon began to improve rapidly. So day after day she, and my darling, and my little maid Charley, and a milliner from the town, and I, sat hard at work as pleasantly as possible.

Caddy was very anxious "to learn housekeeping," as she said. Now, mercy upon us! The idea of her learning housekeeping of a person of my vast experience was such a joke that I laughed when she proposed it. However, I said, "Caddy, you are very welcome to learn anything that you can of me, my dear," and I showed her all my books and methods and all my fidgety ways.

So what with working and housekeeping, and lessons to Charley, and backgammon in the evening with my guardian, and duets with Ada, the three

weeks slipped fast away. Then I went home with Caddy to see what could be done there, and Ada and Charley remained behind.

When I say I went home with Caddy, I mean to the furnished lodging in Hatton Garden. We went to Newman Street two or three times, where preparations were in progress too – many, I observed, for enhancing the comforts of old Mr. Turveydrop, and a few for putting the newly married couple away cheaply at the top of the house. But our aim was to make the furnished lodging decent for the wedding-breakfast and to imbue Mrs. Jellyby beforehand with some faint sense of the occasion.

The latter was the more difficult thing of the two. Mrs. Jellyby and an unwholesome boy occupied the front sitting-room, which was littered with waste-paper and documents, as an untidy stable might be littered with straw. Mrs. Jellyby sat there all day drinking strong coffee and dictating. The unwholesome boy seemed to me to be going into a decline. When Mr. Jellyby came home, he usually groaned and went down into the kitchen to get something to eat, and then went out and walked about Hatton Garden in the wet. The poor children scrambled up and tumbled down the house as they had always been accustomed to do.

I proposed to Caddy that we should make the children as happy as we could on her marriage morning in the attic where they all slept, and should confine our greatest efforts to her mama and her mama's room, and a clean breakfast.

Thinking that the display of Caddy's wardrobe would be the best means of approaching the subject, I invited Mrs. Jellyby to come and look at it spread out on Caddy's bed.

"My dear Miss Summerson," said she, rising from her desk with her usual sweetness of temper, "these are really ridiculous preparations, though you are kind to assist them. There is something so absurd to me in the idea of Caddy being married! Oh, Caddy, you silly, silly puss!"

She came upstairs with us notwithstanding and looked at the clothes in her far-off manner. She said with her placid smile, shaking her head, "My good Miss Summerson, at half the cost, this weak child might have been equipped for Africa!"

On our going downstairs again, Mrs. Jellyby asked, "Will my room be required for this troublesome business, my dear Miss Summerson? For it's quite impossible that I can put my papers away."

I said that the room would certainly be wanted and that I thought we must put the papers away somewhere.

"Well, my dear Miss Summerson," said Mrs. Jellyby, "you know best, I dare say. But I am so overwhelmed with public business, that I don't know which way to turn. We have a Ramification meeting, too, on Wednesday afternoon, and the inconvenience is very serious."

"It is not likely to occur again," said I, smiling. "Caddy will be married only once, probably."

"That's true," Mrs. Jellyby replied.

The next question was how Mrs. Jellyby should be dressed for the wedding. The state of her dresses, and the extraordinary confusion in which she kept them, added to our difficulty; but at length we devised something not very unlike what a commonplace mother might wear. Mrs. Jellyby tried on this attire in an abstracted manner, observing how sorry she was that I had not turned my thoughts to Africa.

The lodging was rather confined, but if it had been the size of Saint Paul's it would only have afforded more room to be dirty in. I believe that none of the family possessions which it had been possible to break was unbroken at this time, nothing which it had been possible to spoil was unspoil, and that no domestic object which was capable of collecting dirt was free of it.

Poor Mr. Jellyby, who very seldom spoke and almost always sat with his head against the wall, became interested when he saw that Caddy and I were attempting to establish some order, and took off his coat to help. But such wonderful things came tumbling out of the closets – bits of mouldy pie, sour bottles, letters, tea, forks, odd boots and shoes, firewood, saucepan-lids, brushes, candle ends, nutshells, dinner-mats, gloves, coffee-grounds, umbrellas – that he looked frightened, and stopped again. But he came regularly every evening and sat with his head against the wall, as though he would have helped us if he had known how.

“Poor Pa!” said Caddy to me on the night before the great day. “It seems unkind to leave him, Esther. But what could I do if I stayed? I have tidied over and over again, but it's useless. Ma and Africa, together, upset the whole house directly. Ma's ruinous to everything.”

Mr. Jellyby could not hear what she said, but he shed tears, I thought.

“My heart aches for him!” sobbed Caddy. “I can't help thinking, Esther, how dearly I hope to be happy with Prince, and how dearly Pa hoped, I dare say, to be happy with Ma. What a disappointed life!”

“My dear Caddy!” said Mr. Jellyby, looking slowly round. It was the first time, I think, I ever heard him say three words together.

“Yes, Pa!” cried Caddy, going to him and embracing him affectionately.

“My dear Caddy,” said Mr. Jellyby. “Never have—”

“Not Prince, Pa?” faltered Caddy. “Not have Prince?”

“Yes, my dear,” said Mr. Jellyby. “Have him, certainly. But, never have—”

“Don't have what, dear Pa?” asked Caddy, with her arms round his neck.

“Never have a mission, my dear child.” Mr. Jellyby groaned and laid his head against the wall again. I suppose he had been more talkative and lively once, but he seemed to have been completely exhausted long before I knew him.

I thought Mrs. Jellyby never would have stopped looking over her papers and drinking coffee that night. It was twelve o'clock before we could obtain possession of the room, and its state was so discouraging that Caddy,

who was almost tired out, sat down in the middle of the dust and cried. But she soon cheered up, and we did wonders with it before we went to bed.

In the morning it looked, by the aid of a few flowers and a quantity of soap and water, quite gay. The plain breakfast made a cheerful show, and Caddy was perfectly charming. But when my darling came, I thought – and I think now – that I never had seen such a dear face as my beautiful pet's.

We made a little feast for the children upstairs, and put Peepy at the head of the table, and we showed them Caddy in her bridal dress, and they clapped their hands and hurrahed, and Caddy cried and hugged them until we brought Prince up to fetch her away – when, I am sorry to say, Peepy bit him.

Old Mr. Turveydrop downstairs benignly blessed Caddy, giving my guardian to understand that he was making sacrifices to ensure his son's happiness.

“My dear sir,” said Mr. Turveydrop, “these young people will live with me; they shall not lack the shelter of my roof. I could have wished that my son had married into a family where there was more deportment, but the will of heaven be done!”

Mr. and Mrs. Pardiggle were there, and Mr. Quale, with his hair brushed back and his temples shining very much, was also there, not in the character of a disappointed lover, but as the accepted of a Miss Wisk. The guests were few, but were, as one might expect at Mrs. Jellyby's, all devoted to public objects.

Such a mean mission as the domestic mission was the very last thing to be endured by such a group; indeed, Miss Wisk informed us, with great indignation, that the idea of woman's mission lying chiefly in the narrow sphere of home was an outrageous slander by her tyrant, man.

But I am anticipating the conversation on the ride home, instead of first marrying Caddy. We all went to church, and Mr. Jellyby gave her away. Old Mr. Turveydrop, with his hat under his left arm, stood stiff and high-shouldered behind us bridesmaids during the ceremony, and afterwards saluted us with inexpressible deportment. Miss Wisk grimly listened to the proceedings, as part of woman's wrongs, with a disdainful face. Mrs. Jellyby, with her calm smile, looked the least concerned of all the company.

We duly came back to breakfast, and Caddy stole upstairs to hug the children again and tell them that her name was Turveydrop. But this piece of information, instead of being an agreeable surprise to Peepy, threw him on his back in such transports of kicking grief that he had to be admitted to the breakfast table. So he came down and sat in my lap; and was very good except that he brought down Noah (out of an ark I had given him) and *would* dip him head first into the wine-glasses and then put him in his mouth.

My guardian, with his sweet temper, made something agreeable even out of this ungenial company. None of them seemed able to talk about anything but his, or her, own subject; but my guardian turned it all to the honour of the occasion, and brought us through the breakfast nobly. What we should have done without him, I am afraid to think.

At last the time came when poor Caddy had to go on the hired coach that was to take her and her husband to Gravesend. It affected us to see her clinging on her mother's neck with the greatest tenderness.

"I am very sorry I couldn't go on writing from dictation, Ma," sobbed Caddy. "I hope you forgive me."

"Oh, Caddy, Caddy!" said Mrs. Jellyby. "I have told you over and over again that I have engaged a boy, and there's an end of it."

"You are sure you are not the least angry with me, Ma? Say you are sure before I go away, Ma?"

"You foolish Caddy," returned Mrs. Jellyby, "do I look angry, or have I time to be angry?"

"Take care of Pa while I am gone, Mama!"

Mrs. Jellyby positively laughed at the fancy. "You romantic child," said she, lightly patting Caddy's back. "Go along. I am excellent friends with you. Now, goodbye, Caddy, and be very happy!"

Then Caddy hung upon her father in the hall and nursed his cheek against hers as if he were some poor dull child in pain. Her father released her, took out his handkerchief, and sat down on the stairs with his head against the wall. I hope he found some consolation in walls.

And then Prince took her arm and turned with great emotion and respect to his father, whose deportment at that moment was overwhelming.

"Thank you over and over again, father!" said Prince, kissing his hand. "I am very grateful for all your kindness and consideration regarding our marriage, and so, I can assure you, is Caddy."

"Very," sobbed Caddy.

"My dear son," said Mr. Turveydrop, "and dear daughter, I have done my duty. Your constant affection will be my recompense. You will not fail in *your* duty, my son and daughter, I believe?"

"Dear father, never!" cried Prince.

"Never, dear Mr. Turveydrop!" said Caddy.

"This," returned Mr. Turveydrop, "is as it should be. My children, my home is yours, my heart is yours, my all is yours. I will never leave you; nothing but death shall part us. My dear son, you are absent for a week, I think?"

"A week, dear father."

"My dear child," said Mr. Turveydrop, "let me recommend strict punctuality. Schools, if at all neglected, are apt to take offence."

"This day week, father, we shall be home."

"Good!" said Mr. Turveydrop. "You will find fires, my dear Caroline, in your own room, and dinner prepared in my apartment. Yes, yes, Prince! You and Caroline will dine that day in my apartment. Now, bless ye!"

They drove away. But before we drove away too, I received a most unexpected compliment from Mr. Jellyby. He came up to me in the hall, took both my hands, pressed them earnestly, and opened his mouth twice. I was so sure of his meaning that I said, quite flurried, "You are very welcome, sir. Pray don't mention it!"

“I hope this marriage is for the best, guardian,” said I when we three were on our road home.

“I hope it is, little woman. We shall see.”

“Is the wind in the east today?” I ventured to ask.

He laughed and answered, “No.”

My dear girl confidently answered “No” too and shook her lovely head. “Much *you* know of east winds, my ugly darling,” said I, kissing her – I couldn’t help it.

Well! It was only their love for me, but to write it gives me pleasure. They said there could be no east wind where Somebody was; they said that wherever Dame Durden went, there was sunshine and summer air.

Chapter 31

Nurse and Patient

I had not been at home many days when one evening I went upstairs to my own room to see how Charley was getting on with her copy-book. Writing was a trying business to Charley, in whose hand a pen appeared to become perversely animated, and to go crooked and sidle into corners like a saddle-donkey. It was very odd to see what old, shrivelled letters Charley's young hand had made. Yet Charley was uncommonly expert and nimble at other things.

"Well, Charley," said I, looking at a collapsed letter O, "we are improving. If we only get to make it round, we shall be perfect."

Then I made an O, and Charley made one, and the pen twisted Charley's up into a knot.

"Never mind, Charley. We shall do it in time."

Charley laid down her pen, flexed her cramped little hand, and got up and dropped me a curtsy.

"Thank you, miss. If you please, did you know a poor person of the name of Jenny?"

"A brickmaker's wife, Charley? Yes."

"She came and spoke to me when I was out a little while ago, and said you knew her, miss. She asked me if I wasn't your maid."

"I thought she had left this neighbourhood, Charley."

"So she had, miss, but she's come back again – she and Liz. Did you know Liz, miss?"

"I think I do, Charley, though not by name."

"That's what she said!" returned Charley. "They have both come back, miss, and have been tramping high and low. And this Jenny came about the house three or four days, hoping to get a glimpse of you, miss – all she wanted, she said – but you were away. Then she saw me," said Charley with a short laugh of delight and pride, "and she thought I looked like your maid!"

"And where did you see her, Charley?" said I.

My little maid's countenance fell as she replied, "By the doctor's shop, miss." For Charley wore her black frock still.

I asked if the brickmaker's wife were ill, but Charley said no. It was some one else in her cottage, who had tramped down to Saint Albans. A poor boy, Charley said, her eyes filling with tears. No father, no mother, no any one.

"And she was getting medicine for him, Charley?"

"She said, miss, that he had once done as much for her."

My little maid's face was so eager that I had no great difficulty in reading her thoughts.

“Well, Charley,” said I, “we had better go round to Jenny’s and see what’s the matter.”

Charley brought my bonnet and veil with alacrity, and having dressed me, pinned herself into her warm shawl like a little old woman. Without saying anything to anyone, we went out.

It was a cold, wild night, and the trees shuddered in the wind. The rain had been heavy all day, although none was falling just then. The gloomy sky had partly cleared, and in the north-west, where the sun had set, there was a pale dead light both beautiful and awful, with long sullen lines of cloud waved up like a sea stricken immovable. Towards London a lurid glare overhung the dark waste.

I had no thought that night of what was soon to happen to me. But I have always remembered that when we stopped at the garden-gate to look up at the sky, I had for a moment an undefinable impression of myself as being something different from what I then was. I have ever since connected the feeling with that spot and time.

It was Saturday night, and the place was quiet. The kilns were burning, and a stifling vapour set towards us with a pale blue glare.

We came to the cottage, where there was a feeble candle in the window. We tapped at the door and went in. The mother of the little child who had died was sitting in a chair on one side of the poor fire; and opposite her, a wretched boy was cowering on the floor. He held under his arm a fragment of a fur cap; and as he tried to warm himself, he shook. The place had an unhealthy and very peculiar smell.

I had not lifted my veil when I first spoke to the woman on entering. The boy staggered up instantly and stared at me with a remarkable expression of surprise and terror. I stood still.

“I won’t go no more to the berryin ground,” muttered the boy; “I ain’t a-going there, I tell you!”

I lifted my veil and spoke to the woman. She said to me in a low voice, “Don’t mind him, ma’am,” and said to him, “Jo, Jo, what’s the matter?”

“I know wot she’s come for!” cried the boy.

“Who?”

“The lady there. She’s come to get me to go along with her to the berryin ground. I won’t go. She might go a-berryin *me*.” His shivering came on again, and he leaned against the wall.

“He has been talking off and on like this all day, ma’am,” said Jenny softly. “This is *my* lady, Jo.”

“Is it?” returned the boy, surveying me doubtfully. “She looks to me the t’other one. It ain’t the bonnet, nor yet the gown, but she looks to me the t’other one.”

My little Charley had pulled off her bonnet and shawl and now went quietly up to him and sat him down in a chair like an old nurse.

“I say!” said the boy. “Ain’t the lady the t’other lady?”

Charley shook her head as she made him as warm as she could.

“Oh!” the boy muttered. “Then I s’pose she ain’t.”

“I came to see if I could do you any good,” said I. “What is the matter?”

“I’m a-being froze,” returned the boy hoarsely, his haggard gaze wandering, “and then burnt up, and then froze, and then burnt up, ever so many times in a hour. And my head’s all sleepy – and I’m so dry – and my bones is all pain.”

“When did he come here?” I asked the woman.

“This morning, ma’am, I found him at the corner of the town. I had known him up in London. Hadn’t I, Jo?”

“Tom-all-Alone’s,” the boy replied. He began to droop and roll his head again, as if he were only half awake.

“When did he come from London?” I asked.

“Yes’day,” said the boy. “I’m a-going somewheres. I have been moved on, and moved on. Mrs. Snagsby, she’s always a-watching, and a-driving of me – they all are. And I’m a-going somewheres. She told me, down in Tom-all-Alone’s, as she came from Stolbuns, and so I took the Stolbuns Road. It’s as good as another.”

“What is to be done with him?” said I, taking the woman aside. “He could not travel in this state even if he knew where he was going!”

“I don’t know, ma’am,” she replied, glancing compassionately at him. “I’ve kept him here all day for pity’s sake, and I’ve given him broth and medicine, and Liz has gone to see if anyone will take him in; but I can’t keep him long, for if my husband was to come home and find him here, he’d be rough in putting him out. Hark! Here comes Liz!”

The other woman came hurriedly in as she spoke. She had been here and there, and had been played about from hand to hand; one official sent her to another, and the other sent her back to the first, and so on, until it appeared to me as if both must have been appointed for their skill in evading their duties.

And now she said, breathing quickly, “Jenny, your master’s on the road home, and mine too, and the Lord help the boy, for we can do no more!” They put a few halfpence into his hand, and in an oblivious way, he shuffled out of the house.

“Thank you kindly!” said Liz to Charley and me. “Jenny, dear, good night! Young lady, I’ll look down by the kiln by and by, where the boy will be most like, and again in the morning!” She hurried off, looking anxiously along the road for her drunken husband.

I was afraid of staying then. But I said to Charley that we must not leave the boy to die. Charley glided on before me, and presently we caught up with Jo, just short of the brick-kiln.

I think he must have begun his journey with some small bundle under his arm and must have had it stolen or lost it. For he still carried his wretched fragment of fur cap like a bundle, though he went bare-headed through the rain, which now fell fast. He stopped when we called to him and stood arrested in his shivering fit.

I asked him to come with us, and said we would give him shelter for the night.

“I don’t want no shelter,” he said; “I can lay amongst the warm bricks.”

“But don’t you know that people die there?” replied Charley.

“They dies everywheres,” said the boy. “They dies down in Tom-all-Alone’s in heaps.” Then he hoarsely whispered to Charley, “If she ain’t the t’other one, she ain’t the forrenner. Is there *three* of ’em then?”

Charley looked at me a little frightened. But the boy followed when I beckoned him; so I led the way straight home. The boy’s steps were uncertain and tremulous, but we had not far to go, and he made no complaint.

Leaving him in the hall for a moment, shrunk into the corner of the window-seat, I went into the drawing-room to speak to my guardian. There I found Mr. Skimpole, who had come down by the coach, as he frequently did without notice, never bringing any clothes with him, but always borrowing everything he wanted.

They came out with me to look at the boy. The servants had gathered in the hall too, and he shivered in the window-seat with Charley standing by him, like some wounded animal that had been found in a ditch.

“This is a sorrowful case,” said my guardian after asking him a question or two. “What do you say, Harold?”

“You had better turn him out,” said Mr. Skimpole.

“What do you mean?” inquired my guardian, almost sternly.

“My dear Jarndyce,” said Mr. Skimpole, “you know I am a child. But he’s not safe, you know. There’s a very bad fever about him.”

Mr. Skimpole retreated to the drawing-room again as he said this in his airy way.

“You’ll say it’s childish,” he observed, looking gaily at us. “Well, I dare say it may be; but if you put him out in the road, you only put him where he was before. He will be no worse off than he was, you know. Give him sixpence, or five shillings – and get rid of him!”

“And what is he to do then?” asked my guardian.

“Upon my life,” said Mr. Skimpole, shrugging his shoulders with his engaging smile, “I have not the least idea.”

“Now, is it not a horrible reflection,” said my guardian, walking up and down and rumpling his hair, “that if this wretched creature were a prisoner, he would be as well taken care of as any sick boy in the kingdom?”

“My dear Jarndyce,” returned Mr. Skimpole, “you’ll pardon the simplicity of the question, coming from a simple child, but why isn’t he a prisoner then? It seems to me that it would be wiser if he showed some misdirected energy that got him into prison. There would be more of an adventurous spirit in it, and a certain sort of poetry.”

“I believe,” returned my guardian, resuming his uneasy walk, “that there is not such another child on earth as yourself.”

“In the meantime,” I observed, “he is getting worse.”

“In the meantime,” said Mr. Skimpole cheerfully, “as Miss Summerson, with her practical good sense, observes, he is getting worse. Therefore I recommend your turning him out before he gets worse still.”

The amiable face with which he said it, I think I shall never forget.

“It’s growing late,” said my guardian, “and it is a very bad night, and the boy is worn out already. There is a bed in the wholesome loft-room by the stable; we had better keep him there till morning. We’ll do that.”

“Oh!” said Mr. Skimpole, with his hands upon the keys of the piano. “How I envy you your constitution, Jarndyce! You don’t mind these things; neither does Miss Summerson. You are ready at all times to do anything. Such is will! I have no will at all, and simply can’t.”

We went back into the hall and explained to Jo what we proposed, which he received with languid unconcern. The servants were anxious to help, and we soon got the loft-room ready. Some of the men carried him across the wet yard, well wrapped up. It was pleasant to observe how kind they were, frequently calling him “Old Chap.” Charley went to and fro between the loft-room and the house with such little stimulants and comforts as we thought it safe to give him.

My guardian himself saw him before he was left for the night, and returned to the growlery to write a letter on the boy’s behalf, which was to be delivered in the morning. The boy had seemed inclined to sleep, he said. They had fastened his door on the outside, in case of his being delirious, but if he made any noise he would be heard.

Mr. Skimpole was left alone all this time and entertained himself by playing snatches of pathetic airs and sometimes singing to them with great expression and feeling. When we rejoined him in the drawing-room he sang us a little ballad about a peasant boy,

*“Thrown on the wide world, doomed to wander and roam,
Bereft of his parents, bereft of a home.”*

It was a song that always made him cry, he told us. He was extremely gay all the rest of the evening, and drank to “Better health to our young friend!” whom he gaily supposed would, like Dick Whittington, become Lord Mayor of London. In that event, no doubt, he would establish the Jarndyce and Summerson Almshouses.

Charley’s last report was that the boy was quiet. I could see, from my window, the lantern they had left him burning quietly; and I went to bed happy to think that he was sheltered.

There was more movement and talking than usual before daybreak, and it awoke me. As I was dressing, I looked out of my window and asked one of our men whether there was anything wrong. The lantern was still burning in the loft-window.

“It’s the boy, miss,” said he.

“Is he worse?” I inquired.

“Gone, miss.”

“Dead!”

“Dead, miss? No. Gone clean off.”

At what time of the night he had gone, or how, or why, it seemed impossible to learn. It could only be supposed that he had got out by a trapdoor in the floor which led to an empty cart-house below. But he had shut

it down again, if that were so; and it looked as if it had not been raised. Nothing was missing.

We all yielded to the painful belief that delirium had come upon him in the night and that he had strayed away in that helpless state; all of us, that is to say, but Mr. Skimpole, who repeatedly suggested, in his usual easy light style, that it had occurred to our young friend that he was not a safe inmate, having a fever, and that he had politely taken himself off.

Every possible inquiry was made. The brick-kilns were searched and the cottages were visited, but the two women knew nothing of him, and nobody could doubt that their wonder was genuine. The night had been too wet to allow any tracing by footsteps. Hedge and ditch were examined by our men for a long distance round, lest the boy should be lying insensible or dead; but he had vanished.

The search continued for five days. It did not cease even then, but my attention was diverted into a current very memorable to me.

As Charley was writing again in my room, and as I sat opposite her, I felt the table tremble. Looking up, I saw my little maid shivering from head to foot.

“Charley,” said I, “are you cold?”

“I think I am, miss,” she replied. “I don’t know what it is. I can’t hold myself still. Don’t be uneasy, but I think I’m ill.”

I heard Ada’s voice outside, and I hurried to the door between my room and our pretty sitting-room, and locked it. Just in time, for she tapped at it and called to me to let her in.

I said, “Not now, my dearest. Go away. There’s nothing the matter; I will come to you presently.” Ah! It was a long, long time before my darling girl and I were companions again.

Charley fell ill. In twelve hours she was very ill with the smallpox. I moved her to my room, and laid her in my bed, and sat down to nurse her. I told my guardian why I felt it was necessary that I should seclude myself, and not see my darling above all. At first Ada came very often to the door, and called to me, and even reproached me with sobs and tears; but I wrote her a long letter saying that she made me anxious and unhappy, and imploring her, as she loved me, to come no nearer than the garden.

After that she came beneath the window often; and if I had learnt to love her dear sweet voice before, how did I learn to love it then, when I stood behind the window-curtain listening and replying, but not looking out! How did I learn to love it afterwards, when the harder time came!

They put a bed for me in our sitting-room; and by keeping the door wide open, I turned the two rooms into one, and kept them always fresh and airy. The servants were so good that they would all gladly have come to me at any hour, but I thought it best to choose one worthy woman who was never to see Ada and whom I could trust to come and go with all precautions. Thus I got out to take the air with my guardian when there was no fear of meeting Ada.

Poor Charley sickened and grew worse, and fell into heavy danger of death, and lay severely ill for many a long day and night. So patient she was,

so uncomplaining, that often as I sat holding her head in my arms – for she could only sleep in that attitude – I silently prayed to our Father in heaven that I might not forget the lesson which this little sister taught me.

I was very sorrowful to think that Charley's pretty looks would change and be disfigured, even if she recovered – but that thought was lost in her greater peril. When she was at the worst, she would murmur out the wanderings of her mind about her father's sick-bed and the two little children. At those times I used to think, how should I ever tell the two remaining babies that the baby who had learned to be a mother to them was dead!

There were other times when Charley knew me well and talked to me, sending her love to Tom and Emma. She would speak to me of what she had read from the Bible to her father to comfort him. But she never lost her gentle qualities.

And Charley did not die. She flutteringly and slowly turned the dangerous point, and then began to mend. I even began to hope that her appearance would remain unchanged, as I saw her growing into her old childish likeness again.

It was a great morning when I could tell Ada all this as she stood out in the garden; and it was a great evening when Charley and I at last took tea together. But on that same evening, I felt that I was stricken cold.

It was not until Charley was asleep in bed again that I began to think the contagion of her illness was upon me. I knew that I was rapidly following in her steps. I was well enough, however, to be up early in the morning, and to return my darling's cheerful blessing from the garden. But I felt as if I had been walking about the two rooms in the night, a little beside myself; and I felt confused at times – with a curious sense of fullness, as if I were becoming too large altogether.

In the evening I was so much worse that I resolved to prepare Charley. So I said, "You're getting quite strong, Charley, are you not?"

"Oh, quite!" said Charley.

"Strong enough to be told a secret, I think, Charley?"

"Quite strong enough for that, miss!" cried Charley. But her face fell when she saw the secret in *my* face; and she jumped up and fell upon my bosom, and said "Oh, miss, it's my doing! It's my doing!"

"Now, Charley," said I, "if I am to be ill, my great trust is in you. And unless you are as quiet and composed for me as you always were for yourself, you can never fulfil it, Charley."

"If you'll let me cry a little longer, miss," said Charley. "Oh, my dear! – I'll be good."

So I let Charley cry a little longer, and it did us both good.

"Trust in me now, if you please, miss," said Charley quietly. "I am listening to everything you say."

"It's very little at present, Charley. I shall tell your doctor tonight that I don't think I am well and that you are going to nurse me. In the morning, when you hear Miss Ada in the garden, if I should not be able to go to the

window as usual, do you go, Charley, and say I am asleep. At all times keep the room as I have kept it, Charley, and let no one come in.”

Charley promised, and I lay down, for I was very heavy. I saw the doctor that night and asked him to say nothing of my illness in the house yet. I have a very indistinct remembrance of that night melting into day, and of day melting into night again; but I was just able on the first morning to get to the window and speak to my darling.

On the second morning I heard her dear voice outside; and I asked Charley, with some difficulty (speech being painful), to say I was asleep. I heard Ada answer softly, “Don’t disturb her, Charley, for the world!”

I called Charley to me and gave her a last charge.

“Now, Charley, when she knows I am ill, she will try to make her way into the room. Keep her out, Charley, if you love me truly! Charley, if you let her in once, I shall die.”

“I never will!” she promised me.

“I believe it, my dear Charley. And now sit beside me for a little while, and touch me with your hand. For I cannot see you, Charley; I am blind.”

Chapter 32

The Appointed Time

It is night in Lincoln's Inn – perplexed and troublous valley of the shadow of the law – and fat candles are snuffed out in offices, and clerks have dispersed. The gates are shut; and the night-porter keeps guard in his lodge. From tiers of staircase windows clogged lamps dimly blink at the stars. In dirty upper casements, here and there, hazy little patches of candlelight reveal where some draughtsman and conveyancer still toils.

In the neighbouring court, where the Lord Chancellor of the rag and bottle shop dwells, it is time for beer and supper. Mrs. Piper and Mrs. Perkins linger on a door-step over a few parting words. Mr. Krook and his lodger, and the fact of Mr. Krook's being "continually in liquor," are, as usual, the staple of their conversation.

Now they retire; there is a sound of putting up of shutters in the court. Now the policeman begins to push at doors; to be suspicious of bundles; and to administer his beat, on the hypothesis that everyone is either robbing or being robbed.

It is a close night, with a laggard mist in the air; a fine steaming night to give the registrar of deaths some extra business. It may be something in the air, or it may be something in himself that is in fault; but Mr. Weevle, otherwise Jobling, is very ill at ease. He comes and goes between his own room and the open street door twenty times an hour. He has been doing so ever since the Chancellor shut up his shop, which he did very early tonight.

It is no surprise that Mr. Snagsby should be ill at ease too, for he always is so, under the oppressive influence of his secret. Impelled by the mystery, Mr. Snagsby haunts what seems to be its fountain-head – the rag and bottle shop. It has an irresistible attraction for him. Coming there now, he sees Mr. Weevle.

"What, Mr. Weevle?" says the stationer. "Are *you* there?"

"Aye!" says Weevle.

"Airing yourself, as I am, before you go to bed?"

"Why, the air here is not very freshening," Weevle answers.

"Very true, sir. Don't you observe," says Mr. Snagsby, pausing to sniff the air, "not to put too fine a point upon it – that you're rather greasy here, sir?"

"Why, I have noticed there is a queer flavour in the place tonight," Mr. Weevle rejoins. "I suppose it's chops at the Sol's Arms."

"Chops, eh?" Mr. Snagsby sniffs again. "Well, I suppose it is. But I should say their cook has been burning 'em, sir! And I don't think" – Mr. Snagsby wipes his mouth – "I don't think that they were quite fresh."

"That's very likely. It's a tainting sort of weather."

"It is," says Mr. Snagsby. "I find it sinking to the spirits."

“By George! It gives me the horrors,” returns Mr. Weevle.

“You live in a lonesome room, with a black past,” says Mr. Snagsby. “I couldn’t live in that room, sir. But then you didn’t see, in your room, what I saw. That makes a difference.”

“I know quite enough about it,” returns Tony.

“It’s not agreeable, is it?” pursues Mr. Snagsby. “Mr. Krook ought to consider it in the rent.”

“I doubt if he does.”

“You find the rent high, do you, sir?” returns the stationer. “It’s a curious fact, sir, that the deceased should have come and lived here, and been one of my writers, and then that you should come and live here, and be one of my writers too.”

“It’s a curious coincidence, as you say,” answers Weevle, glancing up and down the court.

“Well, Mr. Weevle, I must bid you good night. My little woman will be looking for me else.”

If Mr. Snagsby hastens home to save his little woman the trouble of looking for him, he might set his mind at rest on that score. His little woman has had her eye upon him all this time and now glides after him with a handkerchief wrapped over her head, giving Mr. Weevle a searching glance as she goes past.

“You’ll know me again, ma’am, at all events,” says Mr. Weevle to himself; “though I can’t compliment you on your appearance, with your head tied up in a bundle. Is this fellow *never* coming!”

This fellow approaches as he speaks. It is Mr. Guppy. They go quietly upstairs, and when they are shut into the back room, they speak low.

“I never had such a night in my life!” says Tony.

“What has been the matter?”

“That’s it!” says Tony. “Nothing has been the matter. But I have had the horrors falling on me as thick as hail. That there blessed candle!” He points to the taper on his table. “It has been smouldering like that ever since it was lighted.”

“Why, what’s the matter with you, Tony?” inquires Mr. Guppy.

“William Guppy,” replies the other, “I am in the downs. It’s this unbearably dull, suicidal room – and old Bogey downstairs, I suppose.” Mr. Weevle leans his head on his hand. Mr. Guppy sits down in an easy attitude.

“Wasn’t that Snagsby talking to you, Tony?”

“Yes. He was only sauntering by.”

“I thought it as well that he shouldn’t see me, so I waited till he was gone.”

“There we go again, William G.!” cried Tony. “So mysterious and secret! By George, if we were going to commit a murder, we couldn’t have more mystery about it!”

Mr. Guppy pretends to smile, and in order to change the conversation, looks round the room at the Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty, ending his

survey with the portrait of Lady Dedlock over the mantelshelf. She is shown on a terrace, with a pedestal, a vase, and a prodigious piece of fur.

“That’s very like Lady Dedlock,” says Mr. Guppy. “It’s a speaking likeness.”

“I wish it was,” growls Tony. “I should have some fashionable conversation, then.”

Mr. Guppy remonstrates. “Tony,” says he, “I can make allowances for lowness of spirits, for no man knows them better than I do, with an unrequited image imprinted on my ’heart. But I don’t think your manner is hospitable or quite gentlemanly.”

Mr. Weevle admits that he has been wrong and begs Mr. Guppy to think no more about it. Mr. Guppy, however, having got the advantage, cannot quite release it without a little more injured remonstrance.

“No! Dash it, Tony,” says that gentleman, “you really ought to be careful how you wound the feelings of a man who has an unrequited image imprinted on his ’heart. It is not *your* character to hover around one flower. The whole garden is open to you.”

“William Guppy, drop it!” entreats Tony. “And now, about this bundle of letters. Isn’t it extraordinary of Krook to have appointed midnight to hand ’em over to me?”

“Very. What did he do it for?”

“Said today was his birthday and he’d hand ’em over tonight at twelve o’clock. He’ll have drunk himself blind by that time. He has been at it all day.”

“He hasn’t forgotten the appointment, I hope?”

“He never forgets anything. I helped him to shut up his shop today and he had got the letters then in his hairy cap. He pulled it off and showed me. I heard him a little while afterwards, through the floor here, humming like the wind. He has been as quiet since as an old rat asleep in his hole.”

“Tony,” says Mr. Guppy after considering a little, “he can’t read yet, can he?”

“Read! He’ll never read. He knows most of the letters separately, but he can’t put them together. He’s too old to acquire the knack now – and too drunk.”

“Tony,” says Mr. Guppy, “how do you suppose he spelt out that name of Hawdon?”

“He never spelt it out. He just copied it, from the address of a letter, and asked me what it meant.”

“Tony, should you say that the original was a man’s writing or a woman’s?”

“Fifty to one a lady’s.”

Mr. Guppy has been biting his thumb-nail during this dialogue. As he does so, he happens to look at his coat-sleeve. He stares at it, aghast.

“Why, Tony, what on earth is going on in this house tonight? Is there a chimney on fire? See how the soot’s falling. See here, on my arm! And on the table here! Confound the stuff, it won’t blow off – smears like black fat!”

They look at one another, and Tony goes listening to the door, and a little way downstairs. Comes back and says it's all quiet.

"And it was then," resumes Mr. Guppy, still glancing with remarkable aversion at the coat-sleeve, "that he told you he had taken the bundle of letters from his lodger's portmanteau?"

"That's it," answers Tony, adjusting his whiskers. "Whereupon I wrote to you, my dear boy."

Despite assuming a light vivacious tone, Mr. Weevle looks over his shoulder, a prey to the horrors again.

"You are to bring the letters to your room to read and compare, so that you can tell him all about them. That's the arrangement, isn't it, Tony?" asks Mr. Guppy, anxiously biting his thumb-nail.

"Yes."

"I tell you what, Tony. The first thing to be done is to make another packet like the real one, so that if he should ask to see it while it's in my possession, you can show him the dummy."

"And suppose he detects the dummy, which is about five hundred times more likely than not," suggests Tony.

"Then we'll face it out. They don't belong to him, and they never did. You placed them in my hands – a legal friend of yours – for security. If he forces us to it, they'll be producible, won't they?"

"Ye-es," is Mr. Weevle's reluctant admission.

"Why, Tony," remonstrates his friend, "you don't doubt me, do you? You don't suspect any harm?"

"I don't suspect anything more than I know, William," returns the other gravely.

"And what do you know?" urges Mr. Guppy, raising his voice a little.

"I know three things. First, I know that here we are whispering in secrecy. Secondly, I don't see how it's likely to be profitable, after all."

Mr. Guppy casts up his eyes at the portrait of Lady Dedlock and replies, "Tony, leave that to your friend, who is no fool. What's that?"

"It's eleven o'clock striking by the bell of Saint Paul's. Listen and you'll hear all the bells in the city jangling."

Both sit silent, listening to the metal voices, near and distant. When these at length cease, all seems more mysterious and quiet than before. The silence seems haunted by the ghosts of sound – strange cracks and tickings, the rustling of garments that have no substance and the tread of dreadful feet that would leave no mark. The air is full of these phantoms, and the two friends look over their shoulders to see that the door is shut.

"Yes, Tony?" says Mr. Guppy, drawing nearer to the fire. "You were going to say, thirdly?"

"It's not pleasant to be plotting about a dead man in the room where he died, especially when you happen to live in it."

"But we are plotting nothing against him, Tony."

"Maybe not. Still, I don't like it."

Mr. Guppy remarks that they may be doing the deceased a service. There is an oppressive blank until Mr. Weevle stirs the fire suddenly, making Mr. Guppy start.

“Fah! Here’s more of this hateful soot hanging about,” says he. “Let us open the window and get a mouthful of air.”

He raises the sash, and they both rest on the window-sill, half in and half out of the room. The neighbouring houses are too near to allow them to see any sky without craning their necks, but lights in windows here and there, and the rolling of distant carriages, are comforting. Mr. Guppy resumes his whispering.

“By the by, Tony, I have not let Smallweed into this, you know. That grandfather of his is too keen by half. As to Krook – do you suppose he really has got hold of any other papers of importance, as he has boasted to you?”

Tony shakes his head. “I don’t know. He don’t know himself. He is always spelling out words from his papers, and chalking them on the wall, and asking what they are; but his whole stock may easily be the waste-paper he bought it as. It’s a monomania with him to think he has important documents.”

“How did he first come by that idea, though?” Mr. Guppy meditates. “He may have found papers hidden in something he bought, and may have got it into his shrewd head that they are worth something.”

“Or he may have been taken in. Or he may have been muddled by drink, and by hanging about the Lord Chancellor’s Court and hearing of documents for ever,” returns Mr. Weevle.

Mr. Guppy sitting on the window-sill, taps it thoughtfully, until he hastily draws his hand away.

“What in the devil’s name is this! Look at my fingers!”

A thick, yellow liquor defiles them, offensive to the touch and sight and more offensive to the smell. A stagnant, sickening oil that makes them both shudder.

“What have you been pouring out of the window?”

“Nothing, I swear!” cries Weevle.

And yet look here! It slowly drips and creeps away down the bricks, and lies in a little thick nauseous pool.

“This is a horrible house,” says Mr. Guppy, shutting down the window. “Give me some water or I shall cut my hand off.”

He washes and rubs and scrubs, and has just restored himself with a glass of brandy when Saint Paul’s bell strikes twelve and all those other bells strike twelve from their towers. The lodger says, “It’s the appointed time. Shall I go?”

Mr. Guppy nods.

He goes downstairs, and Mr. Guppy tries to compose himself before the fire. But in a minute or two the stairs creak and Tony comes swiftly back.

“Have you got them?”

“No. The old man’s not there.”

Weevle is so horribly frightened that his terror seizes the other, who asks loudly, "What's the matter?"

"I couldn't make him hear, and I opened the door and looked in. And the burning smell is there – and the soot is there, and the oil is there – and he is not there!" Tony ends this with a groan.

Mr. Guppy takes the light. They go down, and holding one another, push open the door of the back shop. The cat stands snarling, not at them, but at something on the ground. There is a very little fire left in the grate, but there is a smouldering, suffocating vapour in the room and a dark, greasy coating on the walls and ceiling. The chairs and table, and the bottle on the table, all stand as usual. On a chair-back hang the old man's hairy cap and coat.

"Look!" whispers the lodger, pointing at these objects with a trembling finger. "I told you so. When I saw him last, he took his cap off, took out the bundle of old letters, hung his cap on the back of the chair with his coat – and I left him turning the letters over in his hand, standing just where that crumbled black thing is upon the floor."

Is he hanging somewhere? They look up. No.

"See!" whispers Tony. "At the foot of the chair there lies a dirty bit of thin red cord. That went round the letters. He undid it slowly, leering at me, before he threw it there. I saw it fall."

"What's the matter with the cat?" says Mr. Guppy. "Look at her!"

"Mad, I think. And no wonder, in this evil place."

They advance slowly, looking at all these things. The cat is still snarling at the something on the ground before the fire. What is it? Hold up the light.

Here is a small burnt patch of flooring; here is the tinder from a little bundle of burnt paper; and here is – is it the cinder of a charred and broken log of wood, or is it coal? Oh, horror, he IS here! And this from which we run away, striking out the light and overturning one another into the street, is all that is left of him.

Help, help, help! Come and help for heaven's sake!

Plenty will come in, but none can help. The Lord Chancellor of that court has died the death of all lord chancellors in all courts where false pretences are made, and where injustice is done. Call the death by any name you will, it is the same death eternally – inborn, engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself, and that only – it is spontaneous combustion.

Chapter 33

Interlopers

Those two gentlemen who attended the last coroner's inquest at the Sol's Arms reappear in the area with surprising swiftness, make enquiries through the court, and write notes. They note down how the neighbourhood of Chancery Lane was yesterday, at about midnight, thrown into a state of the most intense excitement by an alarming and horrible discovery. They write (in as many words as possible) how a very peculiar smell was observed by the inhabitants of the court, as confirmed by two married females known as Mrs. Piper and Mrs. Perkins, who regarded the foul effluvia as being emitted from the premises of Krook. All this and a great deal more the two gentlemen write down on the spot.

The whole court is sleepless that night, and talk of nothing but the ill-fated house. Miss Flite has been bravely rescued from her chamber, as if it were in flames, and given a bed at the Sol's Arms. The Sol stays open to offer the court comfort. It has not sold so much brandy-and-water since the inquest.

Mr. Weevle and his friend Mr. Guppy are at the bar in the Sol and are worth anything to the Sol if they will only stay there.

"This is not a time," says the landlord, "to haggle about money; give your orders, gentlemen, and you're welcome to whatever you put a name to."

Thus entreated, the two gentlemen (Mr. Weevle especially) put names to so many things that in course of time they find it difficult to put a name to anything distinctly, though they still relate to all new-comers some version of the night they have had. Meanwhile, one or other of the policemen flits about the door.

Thus night pursues its leaden course, until at length with slow-retreating steps it departs. And now the neighbourhood, waking up and beginning to hear of what has happened, comes streaming in, half dressed, to ask questions.

"Good gracious, gentlemen!" says Mr. Snagsby, coming up to the policemen. "What's this I hear! Why, I was at this door last night betwixt ten and eleven o'clock talking to the young man who lodges here."

"Indeed?" returns a policeman. "You will find him next door. Now move on."

Mr. Snagsby repairs to the Sol's Arms and finds Mr. Weevle languishing over tea and toast with an expression of exhausted excitement.

"And Mr. Guppy likewise!" says Mr. Snagsby. "Dear, dear! What a fate there seems in all this! And my lit—"

Mr. Snagsby's power of speech deserts him in the formation of the words "my little woman." For that injured female walks into the Sol's Arms with her eyes fixed upon him like an accusing spirit, striking him dumb.

"My dear," says Mr. Snagsby when his tongue is loosened, "will you take anything?"

“No,” says Mrs. Snagsby.

“My love, you know these two gentlemen?”

“Yes!” says Mrs. Snagsby, still fixing him with her eye.

The devoted Mr. Snagsby cannot bear this treatment. He leads Mrs. Snagsby aside.

“My little woman, why do you look at me in that way?”

“I can’t help my looks,” says Mrs. Snagsby, “and if I could I wouldn’t.”

Mr. Snagsby, with a meek cough, rejoins, “Really, my dear? This is a dreadful mystery, my love!” still fearfully disconcerted by Mrs. Snagsby’s eye.

“It is,” returns Mrs. Snagsby, shaking her head, “a dreadful mystery.”

“My little woman,” urges Mr. Snagsby piteously, “don’t for goodness’ sake speak to me with that bitter expression! Good Lord, you don’t suppose that I would go spontaneously combusting any person, my dear?”

“I can’t say,” returns Mrs. Snagsby.

On a hasty review of his unfortunate position, Mr. Snagsby “can’t say” either. He has had something – he doesn’t know what – to do in connection with this mystery, and it is possible he may be implicated, without knowing it. He faintly wipes his forehead with his handkerchief.

“My life,” says he, “why have you come into a wine-vaults before breakfast?”

“Why do *you* come here?” inquires Mrs. Snagsby.

“My dear, merely to know the facts of the fatal accident. I should then have related them to you, my love.”

“I dare say you would! You relate everything to me, Mr. Snagsby.”

“Every – my lit—”

“I should be glad,” says Mrs. Snagsby, contemplating his confusion with a severe and sinister smile, “if you would come home with me; I think you may be safer there, Mr. Snagsby, than anywhere else.”

“My love, I am ready to go.”

Mr. Snagsby accompanies his wife from the Sol’s Arms. Before night his doubt whether he may not be responsible for some inconceivable part in the catastrophe is almost resolved into certainty by Mrs. Snagsby’s fixed gaze. He even has wandering ideas of delivering himself up to justice.

Mr. Weevle and Mr. Guppy, having taken their breakfast, step into Lincoln’s Inn to walk about the square.

“There can be no better time than the present, Tony,” says Mr. Guppy, “for a word or two between us upon a point on which we must agree.”

“Now, I tell you what, William G.!” returns the other, eyeing his companion with a bloodshot gaze. “If it’s a point of conspiracy, you needn’t take the trouble to mention it. I have had enough of that, and I ain’t going to have any more. We shall have *you* catching fire next or blowing up with a bang. I should have thought it would have been a lesson to you never to conspire any more as long as you lived.”

Mr. Guppy says, “Who’s conspiring?”

“Why, *you* are!”

“No, I am not.”

“Yes, you are!”

“Who says so?”

“I say so!”

“Oh, indeed?”

“Yes, indeed!” retorts Mr Jobling. And both being now in a heated state, they walk on silently for a while to cool down again.

“Tony,” says Mr. Guppy, “hear your friend out instead of flying at him. Your temper is hasty and you are not considerate. Although you possess all that is calculated to charm the eye—”

“Oh! Blow the eye!” cries Mr. Weevle. “Say what you have got to say!”

“Tony, I say this quite apart from any kind of conspiring. You know it is professionally arranged beforehand in all legal inquiries what facts the witnesses are to prove. Is it not desirable that we should know what facts we are to prove on the inquiry into the death of this unfortunate old gentleman?”

“What facts?”

“What we knew of his habits, when you saw him last, what his condition was then, the discovery that we made, and how we made it.”

“Yes,” says Mr. Weevle. “Those are the facts.”

“We made the discovery because he had, in his eccentric way, an appointment with you at twelve o’clock at night, when you were to explain some writing to him as you had often done before on account of his not being able to read. I, spending the evening with you, was called down – and so forth. It’s not necessary to go beyond these facts, I suppose you’ll agree?”

“I suppose not.”

“And this is not a conspiracy, perhaps?” says the injured Guppy.

“No,” returns his friend; “if it’s nothing worse than this, I withdraw the observation.”

“Now, Tony,” says Mr. Guppy, taking his arm and walking him slowly on, “I should like to know, in a friendly way, whether you have yet thought over the advantages of your continuing to live at that place?”

“What do you mean?” says Tony, stopping. “Why, I wouldn’t pass another night there for anything.”

“Not for the possibility of your never being disturbed in possession of the effects of a lone old man who seemed to have no relation in the world, and the certainty of your being able to find out what he really had got stored up there?” says Mr. Guppy, biting his thumb with vexation.

“Certainly not,” cries Mr. Weevle indignantly. “Go and live there yourself!”

While they are talking, a hackney-coach drives into the square, on the box of which sits a very tall hat. Inside the coach – which stops almost at the feet of the two friends – are the venerable Mr. Smallweed and Mrs. Smallweed, accompanied by their granddaughter Judy.

As the tall hat (surmounting Mr. Smallweed the younger) alights, Mr. Smallweed the elder pokes his head out of the window and bawls to Mr. Guppy, “How de do, sir!”

“What do Chick and his family want here, I wonder!” says Mr. Guppy.

“My dear sir,” cries Grandfather Smallweed, “would you do me a favour? Would you and your friend carry me into the public-house, while Bart and his sister bring their grandmother along?”

Mr. Guppy and his friend do so. It is well that the Sol is not far off, for Mr. Weevle has an apoplectic appearance before half the distance is accomplished. But at last the benevolent old gentleman is deposited in the parlour of the Sol’s Arms.

“Oh, Lord!” gasps Mr. Smallweed, breathless, in an arm-chair. “Oh, dear me! Oh, my bones and back! Sit down, you dancing, prancing, shambling poll-parrot! Sit down!”

This is addressed to Mrs. Smallweed, who has a tendency to amble about whenever she finds herself on her feet. Her grandchildren hold her down in the Windsor chair, her lord in the meanwhile calling her “a pig-headed jackdaw.”

“My dear sir,” Grandfather Smallweed proceeds, addressing Mr. Guppy, “there has been a calamity here. Have you heard of it?”

“Heard of it, sir! Why, we discovered it.”

“Then, my dear friends,” whines Grandfather Smallweed, putting out both his hands, “I owe you a thousand thanks for discovering the ashes of Mrs. Smallweed’s brother.”

“Eh?” says Mr. Guppy.

“Mrs. Smallweed’s brother, my dear friend – her only relation. He was not on speaking terms with us. He was eccentric. Unless he has left a will (which is not at all likely) I shall take out letters of administration. I have come down to look after the property; it must be sealed up and protected.”

“I think, Small,” says the disconsolate Mr. Guppy, “you might have mentioned that the old man was your uncle.”

“I wasn’t proud of him,” says young Smallweed.

“Besides, it was nothing to you, you know,” says Judy.

“He never saw me in his life,” observed Small.

“No, he never communicated with us,” the old gentleman strikes in, “but I have come to look after the property. We shall make good our title. It is in the hands of my solicitor, Mr. Tulkinghorn; and grass don’t grow under *his* feet, I can tell ye. Krook was Mrs. Smallweed’s only brother; he had no other relation. I am speaking of your brother, you brimstone black-beetle, that was seventy-six years of age.”

Mrs. Smallweed instantly begins to pipe up, “Seventy-six pound seven and sevenpence! Seventy-six thousand bags of money!”

“Will somebody give me a pot to throw at her?” exclaims her exasperated husband, looking about him and finding no missile within his reach. “You hag, you cat, you dog, you brimstone barker!” Here Mr. Smallweed actually throws Judy at her grandmother in default of anything else, pushing her at the old lady with such force as he can muster and then dropping into his chair in a heap.

“Shake me up, somebody, if you’ll be so good,” says the voice from within the faintly struggling bundle into which he has collapsed. “I have come to look after the property. The gallows for anybody who shall touch the property!” As his dutiful grandchildren shake him up, he repeats like an echo, “The property! Property!”

Mr. Weevle and Mr. Guppy look at each other. But there is nothing to be done. Mr. Tulkinghorn’s clerk comes down from the chambers to mention to the police that Mr. Tulkinghorn agrees it is all correct about the next of kin, and that the papers and effects will be formally taken possession of. Mr. Smallweed is permitted to visit the house and is taken upstairs into Miss Flite’s deserted room, where he looks like a hideous bird of prey newly added to her aviary.

This news is good for the Sol and keeps the court upon its mettle. Mrs. Piper and Mrs. Perkins think it hard on Mr. Weevle if there really is no will. There is one point upon which the court is particularly anxious, namely, that the fiction of a full-sized coffin should be preserved, though there is so little to put in it. Upon the undertaker’s stating in the Sol’s bar that he has received orders to construct “a six-footer,” there is much relief.

Out of the court, there is considerable excitement too; for men of science and doctors come to look, and there is more learned talk about inflammable gases and phosphuretted hydrogen than the court has ever imagined. Some of these authorities hold with indignation that the deceased had no business to die in the alleged manner; and are reminded by other authorities of a certain inquiry into the evidence for such deaths reprinted in the sixth volume of the *Philosophical Transactions*. Still they regard the late Mr. Krook’s going out of the world in such a way as wholly unjustifiable and personally offensive.

The less the court understands of all this, the more the court likes it. There comes a newspaper artist, with a foreground and figures ready drawn for anything from a wreck on the Cornish coast to a meeting in Manchester, and in Mrs. Perkins’ own room, he then and there adds in Mr. Krook’s house, as large as life; in fact, considerably larger, making it look three-quarters of a mile long by fifty yards high, at which the court is particularly charmed.

At last come the coroner and his inquiry, as before, except that the coroner tells the gentlemen of the jury that “it would seem to be an unlucky house next door, gentlemen, a fateful house; but these are mysteries we can’t account for!” After which the six-footer comes into action and is much admired.

Meanwhile Mr. Guppy has the mortification of seeing Mr. Smallweed padlocking the door, and of bitterly knowing himself to be shut out. But before these proceedings draw to a close, Mr. Guppy has something that he must say to Lady Dedlock.

So, with a sinking heart, Mr. Guppy presents himself at the town mansion at about seven o’clock in the evening and requests to see her ladyship. The footman sulkily supposes that the young man must come up into the library.

Mr. Guppy looks into the shade in all directions, discovering everywhere a certain charred little heap of coal or wood. Presently he hears a rustling. Is it—? No, it's no ghost, but fair flesh and blood.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon," Mr. Guppy stammers, very downcast. "This is an inconvenient time—"

"I told you, you could come at any time." She takes a chair, looking straight at him.

"Thank your ladyship. I – I have not got the letters that I mentioned previously."

"Have you come merely to say so?"

"Yes, your ladyship." Mr. Guppy, besides being depressed and uneasy, is put at a further disadvantage by the splendour and beauty of her appearance.

She knows its influence perfectly, has studied it too well to miss a grain of its effect on any one. As she looks at him so steadily and coldly, he feels that he has no idea of her thoughts, and also that he is being every moment, as it were, removed further and further from her.

She will not speak. So he must.

"The person I was to have had the letters from, has come to a sudden end, and—" He stops. Lady Dedlock calmly finishes the sentence.

"And the letters are destroyed with the person?"

"I believe so, your ladyship." He does not see the least sparkle of relief in her face.

"Is this all you have to say? You had better be sure that you wish to say nothing more to me, this being the last time you will have the opportunity."

Mr. Guppy is quite sure.

"That is enough. Good evening to you!" And she rings for the footman to show Mr. Guppy out.

But in that house, in that same moment, there happens to be an old man of the name of Tulkinghorn. And he comes into the library just as the young man is leaving the room.

One glance between the old man and the lady, and for an instant suspicion, eager and sharp, looks out.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Dedlock. I supposed the room was empty."

"Stay!" She negligently calls him back. "Stay here, I beg. I am going out to dinner. I have nothing more to say to this young man!"

The disconcerted young man bows, as he goes out, and cringingly hopes that Mr. Tulkinghorn is well.

"Aye, aye?" says the lawyer, looking at him from under his bent brows. "From Kenge and Carboy's, surely?"

"Yes, Mr. Tulkinghorn. Name of Guppy, sir."

"To be sure. Why, thank you, Mr. Guppy, I am very well!"

"Happy to hear it, sir." Mr. Guppy sneaks away.

Mr. Tulkinghorn hands Lady Dedlock down the staircase to her carriage. He returns rubbing his chin, and rubs it a good deal in the course of the evening.

Chapter 34

A Turn

“Now, what,” says Mr. George, “may this be? Is it blank cartridge or bullet?”

The trooper is holding an open letter, which seems to perplex him mightily. He looks at it at arm’s length, brings it close, reads it with his head on one side, contracts his eyebrows, and still cannot satisfy himself. He smooths it out upon the table, and thoughtfully walking up and down the gallery, halts before it every now and then.

Phil Squod, with the aid of a brush and paint-pot, is employed in whitening the targets, softly whistling in quick-march time.

“Phil!” The trooper beckons.

Phil approaches in his usual way, sidling off at first and then bearing down upon his commander like a bayonet-charge. Splashes of white show in high relief upon his dirty face.

“Attention, Phil! Listen to this. ‘Sir. Allow me to remind you that the bill at two months’ date drawn on yourself by Mr. Matthew Bagnet, and by you accepted, for the sum of ninety-seven pounds four shillings and ninepence, will become due tomorrow, when you will please be prepared to take up the same on presentation. Yours, Joshua Smallweed.’ What do you make of that, Phil?”

“Mischief, guv’ner.”

“Lookee, Phil,” says the trooper, sitting on the table. “I have paid half as much again as this principal in interest and one thing and another. There has always been an understanding that this bill was to be renewed. And it has been renewed no end of times.”

“I think the times is come to a end at last.”

“You do? Humph! I am much of the same mind myself.”

“Joshua Smallweed is him that was brought here in a chair?”

“The same.”

“Guv’ner,” says Phil with exceeding gravity, “he’s a leech in his actions, a snake in his twistings, and a lobster in his claws.”

“Do you know what would become of the Bagnets if I don’t pay up? They would be ruined to pay off my old scores!”

Phil is starting to reply when steps are audible in the passage without, and a cheerful voice is heard to wonder whether George is at home. Phil, with a look at his master, says, “Here’s the guv’ner, Mrs. Bagnet!” and the old girl herself, accompanied by Mr. Bagnet, appears.

The old girl is in her usual grey cloak, coarse and much worn but very clean, which is, undoubtedly, the identical garment which made its way home to Europe once in company with Mrs. Bagnet and an umbrella. The faithful umbrella is also present, though Mrs. Bagnet never puts it up, having the

greatest reliance on her well-proved cloak and hood. She generally uses the umbrella as a wand to point out joints of meat or bunches of greens in the market. Without her market-basket, a sort of wicker well, she never stirs abroad. Attended by these trusty companions, therefore, Mrs. Bagnet now arrives, fresh-coloured and bright, in George's Shooting Gallery.

"Well, George, old fellow," says she, "and how do you do, this sunshiny morning?"

Giving him a friendly shake of the hand, Mrs. Bagnet sits down. Mr. Bagnet likewise shakes hands with his old comrade and with Phil,

"Now, George," said Mrs. Bagnet briskly, "here we are, Lignum and myself" – she often speaks of her husband by this old regimental nickname, Lignum Vitae, after that toughest of timbers – "We've just looked in to make it all correct as usual about that security. Give him the new bill to sign, George."

"I was coming to you this morning," observes the trooper reluctantly.

"What's the matter, George?" asks Mrs. Bagnet. "You don't look yourself."

"I am not quite myself," returns the trooper; "I have been a little put out, Mrs. Bagnet."

Her bright quick eye catches the truth directly. "George! Don't tell me there's anything wrong about that security of Lignum's! Don't do it, George, on account of the children!"

The trooper looks at her with a troubled face.

"George," says Mrs. Bagnet, using both her arms for emphasis. "If you have allowed anything wrong to come to that security of Lignum's, and if you have put us in danger of being sold up – and I see *sold up* in your face, George, as plain as print – you have done a shameful action and have deceived us cruelly. Cruelly, George!"

Mr. Bagnet puts his large hand on top of his bald head as if to defend it from a shower and looks uneasily at Mrs. Bagnet.

"George," says that old girl, "I wonder at you! George, I am ashamed of you! I always knew you to be a rolling stone that gathered no moss, but I never thought you would have taken away what little moss there was for Bagnet and the children to lie upon. Oh, George!" Mrs. Bagnet gathers up her cloak to wipe her eyes. "How could you do it?"

Mr. George has turned quite white.

"Mat," he says in a subdued voice, addressing Mr. Bagnet but still looking at his wife, "I do hope it's not so bad as that. I certainly have, this morning, received this letter" – which he reads aloud – "but I hope it may be set right yet. What you say is true. I am a rolling stone, and I never rolled the least good to anybody. But I trust you'll look upon me as forgivingly as you can. Don't think I've kept anything from you. I haven't had the letter more than a quarter of an hour."

"Old girl," murmurs Mr. Bagnet after a short silence, "will you tell him my opinion?"

“Oh! Why didn’t he marry,” Mrs. Bagnet answers, half laughing and half crying, “Joe Pouch’s widder in North America? Then he wouldn’t have got himself into these troubles.”

“The old girl,” says Mr. Bagnet, “puts it correct – why didn’t you?”

“Well, she has a better husband by this time, I hope,” returns the trooper. “Anyhow, here I stand. You see all I have got about me. It’s not mine; it’s yours. Give the word, and I’ll sell off every morsel. If I thought it would have brought in enough, I’d have sold it all long ago. Don’t believe that I’ll leave you or yours in the lurch, Mat. I’d sell myself first.”

“Old girl,” murmurs Mr. Bagnet, “give him another bit of my mind.”

“George,” says the old girl, “you are not so much to be blamed, on full consideration, except for ever taking on this business without the means. You never ought to have asked for the security, George. But what’s done can’t be undone. You are an honourable and straightforward fellow, though a little flighty. On the other hand, it’s natural in us to be anxious with such a thing hanging over our heads. So forget and forgive all round, George. Come! Forget and forgive all round!”

Mrs. Bagnet gives him one of her honest hands and gives her husband the other.

“I do assure you both, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to discharge this obligation,” says George. “We have lived plainly enough here, Phil and I. But the gallery don’t quite do what was expected of it – in short, it’s not the mint. I thought it might steady me, and set me up, and upon my soul, I am very much obliged to you, and very much ashamed of myself.” Mr. George shakes both their hands, and then backs up a pace or two in a broad-chested attitude, as if he had made a final confession and were immediately going to be shot.

“George, hear me out!” says Mr. Bagnet, glancing at his wife. “Old girl, go on!”

Mrs. Bagnet observes that the letter must be attended to without any delay; that George and Mr. Bagnet should immediately visit Mr. Smallweed. Mr. George, assenting, puts on his hat and prepares to march with Mr. Bagnet to the enemy’s camp.

“Don’t you mind a woman’s hasty word, George,” says Mrs. Bagnet, patting him on the shoulder. “I trust my old Lignum to you, and I am sure you’ll bring him through it.”

The trooper responds that he will. Mrs. Bagnet goes home to her family, and the comrades sally forth on the hopeful errand of mollifying Mr. Smallweed.

Whether there are two people in England less likely to come satisfactorily out of any negotiation with Mr. Smallweed than this pair may be questioned. Despite their martial appearance and heavy tread, there are not two simpler children in all the Smallweedy affairs of life. As they proceed with great gravity through the streets, Mr. Bagnet speaks.

“George, you know the old girl – she’s as mild as milk. But touch her on the children or myself – and she’s off like gunpowder.”

“It does her credit, Mat!”

“George,” says Mr. Bagnet, “the old girl – can’t do anything – that don’t do her credit. Not that I ever say so. Discipline must be maintained.”

“She’s worth her weight in gold,” says the trooper.

“Far more precious – than that!”

“You are right, Mat!”

“She’s true to her colours – and stands to her arms. If the old girl fires wide – once in a way – at the call of duty – overlook it, George. For she’s loyal!”

“Why, bless her, Mat,” returns the trooper, “I think the higher of her for it!”

They arrive at Grandfather Smallweed’s house. The door is opened by Judy, who surveys them with a malignant sneer. Once she lets them in, they find Mr. Smallweed in his chair and Mrs. Smallweed obscured with the cushion like a bird that is not to sing.

“My dear friend,” says Grandfather Smallweed with his lean affectionate arms stretched forth. “How de do? Who is our friend, my dear friend?”

“Why this,” returns George, “is Matthew Bagnet, who has obliged me in that matter of ours, you know.”

“Oh! Mr. Bagnet? Hope you’re well, Mr. Bagnet!”

No chairs being offered, Mr. George brings one forward for Bagnet and one for himself.

“Judy,” says Mr. Smallweed, “bring the pipe.”

“Why,” Mr. George interposes, “I am not inclined to smoke it today. The fact is, Mr. Smallweed, that I find myself in rather an unpleasant state of mind. It appears to me, sir, that your friend in the city has been playing tricks.”

“Oh, dear no!” says Grandfather Smallweed. “He never does that!”

“I am glad to hear it, because I thought this letter might be his doing.”

Grandfather Smallweed smiles in a very ugly way in recognition of the letter.

“What does it mean?” asks Mr. George. “You know, Mr. Smallweed,” speaking as smoothly and confidentially as he can, “a good deal of money has passed between us, and we are both well aware of the understanding there has always been. I am prepared to do the usual thing to keep this matter going. I never got a letter like this from you before, and I have been a little put out by it this morning, because here’s my friend Matthew Bagnet, who, you know, had none of the money—”

“I *don’t* know it,” says the old man.

“Well!” says the trooper. “I know it.”

“Ah! Mr. Bagnet’s situation is all one, whether or no.”

The unfortunate George makes a great effort to propitiate Mr. Smallweed.

“As you say, Mr. Smallweed, here’s Matthew Bagnet liable to be fixed whether or no. Now, you see, that makes his good lady very uneasy, and me too, for he’s a steady family man, don’t you see? Now, Mr. Smallweed,” says the trooper, gaining confidence, “although you and I are good friends enough

in a certain way, I am well aware that I can't ask you to let my friend Bagnet off entirely."

"You can *ask* me anything, Mr. George." (There is an ogreish kind of jocularly in Grandfather Smallweed today.)

"And you can refuse, you mean, eh? Or perhaps your friend in the city? Ha ha ha!"

"Ha ha ha!" echoes Grandfather Smallweed, in such a very hard manner that Mr. Bagnet's natural gravity is much deepened.

"Come!" says the sanguine George. "I want to arrange this pleasantly. We'll settle the matter on the spot, if you please, Mr. Smallweed, in the usual way. And you'll ease my friend Bagnet's mind if you'll just mention to him what our understanding is."

"But I think you asked me, Mr. George, what did the letter mean?"

"Why, yes, I did."

Mr. Smallweed throws the pipe on the ground and breaks it to pieces.

"That's what it means, my dear friend. I'll smash you. I'll crumble you. I'll powder you. Go to the devil!"

The two friends rise and look at one another.

"Go to the devil!" repeats the old man. "I'll have no more of your pipe-smokings and swaggerings. You can go to my lawyer. Judy; put these blusterers out! Call in help if they don't go. Put 'em out!"

He shouts this so loudly that Mr. Bagnet, laying his hands on his comrade's shoulders, gets him outside the street door, which is instantly slammed by the triumphant Judy. Utterly confounded, Mr. George stands looking at the knocker. Mr. Bagnet, in a perfect abyss of gravity, walks up and down like a sentry, apparently revolving something in his mind.

"Come, Mat," says Mr. George, "we must try the lawyer. Now, what do you think of this rascal?"

Mr. Bagnet replies with one shake of his head, "If my old girl had been here – I'd have told him!" Then he falls into step and marches off with the trooper, shoulder to shoulder.

When they present themselves in Lincoln's Inn Fields, Mr. Tulkinghorn is engaged. He is not at all willing to see them, for when they have waited a full hour, the clerk tells them that Mr. Tulkinghorn has nothing to say to them and they had better not wait. They do wait, however, with military perseverance, and at last the bell rings again and the client comes out of Mr. Tulkinghorn's room.

The client is a handsome old lady, no other than Mrs. Rouncewell, housekeeper at Chesney Wold. She comes out of the sanctuary with an old-fashioned curtsy and softly shuts the door. The clerk steps out of his pew to show her through the outer office. The old lady is thanking him for his attention when she observes the comrades in waiting.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I think those gentlemen are military?"

Mr. George not turning round, Mr. Bagnet takes upon himself to reply, "Yes, ma'am. Formerly."

“I thought so. My heart warms, gentlemen, at the sight of you. It always does at the sight of such. God bless you, gentlemen! You’ll excuse an old woman, but I had a son once who went for a soldier. A fine handsome youth he was, and good in his bold way. I ask your pardon for troubling you, sir. God bless you, gentlemen!”

“Same to you, ma’am!” returns Mr. Bagnet with good will.

There is something very touching in the earnestness of the old lady’s voice. But Mr. George is so preoccupied that he does not look round until she has gone away and the door is closed.

“George,” Mr. Bagnet gruffly whispers. “Don’t be cast down! Cheer up, my hearty!”

The clerk having now again gone in, Mr. Tulkinghorn is heard to say with some irascibility, “Let ’em come in then!” They pass into the great room and find him standing before the fire.

“Now, what do you want? Sergeant, I told you the last time I saw you that I don’t desire your company here.”

Sergeant explains about the letter.

“I have nothing to say to you,” rejoins Mr. Tulkinghorn. “If you get into debt, you must pay your debts or take the consequences.”

Sergeant is sorry to say that he is not prepared with the money.

“Very well! Then the other man must pay it for you.”

Sergeant is sorry to add that the other man is not prepared with the money either.

“Very well! Then you must pay it between you or both be sued for it.”

The lawyer sits down and stirs the fire. Mr. George hopes he will have the goodness to—

“I tell you, sergeant, I have nothing to say to you, and I don’t want you here. This matter is not at all in my course of practice. You must go to Melchisedech’s in Clifford’s Inn.”

“I apologise, sir,” says Mr. George, “for pressing myself upon you – but would you let me say a private word to you?”

Mr. Tulkinghorn rises with his hands in his pockets and walks into a window recess. “Now! I have no time to waste.”

“Well, sir,” says Mr. George, “this man with me is the other party, and my sole object is to prevent his getting into trouble on my account. He is a most respectable man with a wife and family, formerly in the Royal Artillery—”

“My friend, I don’t care a pinch of snuff for the Royal Artillery.”

“But I care a good deal for Bagnet and his family, sir. If I could bring them through this matter, I should give up what you wanted the other day.”

“Have you got it here?”

“I have got it here, sir.”

“Sergeant,” the lawyer proceeds in his dry passionless manner, “make up your mind while I speak to you, for this is final. After I have finished speaking I have closed the subject. Understand that. You can, for a few days, leave here what you say you have brought. If you do choose to leave it here, I

can replace this matter on its old footing, and I can besides give you a written undertaking that this man Bagnet shall never be troubled until you have been proceeded against to the utmost, and your own means have been exhausted. Have you decided?"

The trooper answers with a long breath, "I must do it, sir."

So Mr. Tulkinghorn, putting on his spectacles, sits down and writes the undertaking, which he reads and explains to Bagnet, who has all this time been staring at the ceiling. The trooper then takes from his breast-pocket a folded paper, which he lays unwillingly at the lawyer's elbow. "'Tis only a letter of instructions, sir. The last I ever had from him."

Mr. Tulkinghorn opens and reads the letter; refolds it and lays it in his desk with a face as unperturbable as death.

He nods once in the same frigid and discourteous manner. "You can go. Show these men out!" Being shown out, they return to Mr. Bagnet's house to dine.

As Mrs. Bagnet serves out the boiled beef and greens, she seasons it with the best of temper. But Mr. George is unusually thoughtful and depressed. At first Mrs. Bagnet trusts to the endearments of Quebec and Malta to restore him, but finding that he is not the Bluffy of their usual frolicsome acquaintance, she withdraws them and leaves him to the domestic hearth.

He remains clouded and depressed. During the lengthy cleaning up process, when he and Mr. Bagnet are supplied with their pipes, he forgets to smoke, filling Mr. Bagnet with dismay.

Therefore when Mrs. Bagnet at last appears and sits down to her sewing, Mr. Bagnet growls, "Old girl!" and winks at her to find out what's the matter.

"Why, George!" says Mrs. Bagnet, quietly threading her needle. "How low you are!"

"Am I? Well, I am afraid I am not good company."

"He ain't well, I think, mother," says Quebec.

"George," says Mrs. Bagnet, working busily, "I hope you are not cross enough to care about what a shrill old soldier's wife said this morning."

"My kind soul of a darling," returns the trooper, "not a bit of it."

"Because truly, George, what I meant to say was that I trusted Lignum to you and was sure you'd bring him through it. And you have brought him through it, noble!"

"Thankee, my dear!" says George. "I am glad of your good opinion."

He looks at her and then at young Woolwich, sitting on his stool in the corner, and beckons him over.

"See there, my boy," says George, "there's a mother's face all bright with love of you. A little touched by the sun and the weather through following your father about and taking care of you, but as fresh and wholesome as a ripe apple on a tree."

Mr. Bagnet's expression shows the highest approval.

"The time will come, my boy," pursues the trooper, "when your mother's hair will be grey, and her forehead crossed with wrinkles, and a fine old lady she'll be then. Take care that you can think in those days, 'I never

whitened a hair of her dear head – I never marked a sorrowful line in her face!””

Mr. George rises from his chair and seats the boy beside his mother, saying, with something of a hurry, that he’ll smoke his pipe in the street.

Chapter 35

Esther's Narrative

I lay ill through several weeks, and the usual tenor of my life became like an old remembrance in the helpless inaction of a sick-room. Before many days, everything else seemed to have retired into a remote distance where there was little or no separation between the various stages of my life. In falling ill, I seemed to have crossed a dark lake and to have left all my experiences, mingled together by the great distance, on the healthy shore.

My housekeeping duties were soon as far off as the summer afternoons when I went home from school to my godmother's house. I had never known before how short life really was and into how small a space the mind could put it.

While I was very ill, the way in which these different times became confused with one another distressed my mind exceedingly. At once a child, an older girl, and a woman, I was not only oppressed by the cares of each stage, but by the great perplexity of endlessly trying to reconcile them. I suppose that few who have not been in such a condition can quite understand this.

For the same reason I am almost afraid to say that in my disorder I laboured up colossal staircases, ever striving to reach the top, and ever turned, as I have seen a worm in a garden path, by some obstruction, and labouring again. I knew perfectly at intervals that I was in my bed; and I talked with Charley, and knew her very well; yet I would find myself complaining, "Oh, more of these never-ending stairs, Charley – piled up to the sky!"

Dare I hint at that worse time when, strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or starry circle of some kind, of which I was one of the beads! And when my only prayer was to be taken off from the rest and when it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing?

I do not recall these experiences to make others unhappy or because I am now unhappy in remembering them. If we knew more of such strange afflictions we might be better able to alleviate their intensity.

The repose that followed, the long delicious sleep, the blissful rest, when in my weakness I was too calm to care even if I was dying, apart from feeling a pitying love for those I left behind – this state can be perhaps more widely understood. I was in this state when I first shrunk from the light, and knew with a boundless joy that I should see again.

I had heard my Ada crying at the door, day and night, calling to me that I was cruel and did not love her; I had heard her imploring to be let in to nurse and comfort me; but I had only said, when I could speak, "Never, my sweet girl, never!" and had reminded Charley that she was to keep my darling from

the room whether I lived or died. Charley had been true to me and had kept the door fast.

But now, my sight strengthening and the glorious light coming every day more brightly on me, I could read the letters that my dear wrote daily to me and could put them to my lips and lay my cheek upon them. I could see my little maid, so tender and careful, setting everything in order and speaking cheerfully to Ada from the open window. I could understand the stillness in the house and the thoughtfulness it expressed on the part of all those who had always been so good to me. I could weep in my exquisite joy and be as happy in my weakness as ever I had been in my strength.

By and by my strength began to be restored. Instead of lying and watching what was done for me, as if it were done for some one else, I helped it a little, and a little more, until I became useful to myself, and attached to life again.

How well I remember the pleasant afternoon when I was raised in bed with pillows for the first time to take tea with Charley! The little creature was so happy, and so busy, and stopped so often in her preparations to lay her head upon my bosom, and cry with joyful tears, that I was obliged to say, "Charley, if you go on in this way, I must lie down again, my darling, for I am weaker than I thought!"

So Charley became as quiet as a mouse about her preparations. When the pretty tea-table with its tempting delicacies, and its white cloth, and its flowers, beautifully arranged for me by Ada downstairs, was ready at the bedside, I felt steady enough to say something to Charley that had been in my thoughts.

First I complimented Charley on the room, which was airy and neat. This delighted her.

"Yet, Charley," said I, looking round, "I miss something, surely?"

Poor little Charley looked round too and pretended to shake her head.

"Are the pictures all as they used to be?" I asked her.

"Every one of them, miss," said Charley.

"And the furniture, Charley?"

"Except where I have moved it about to make more room, miss."

"And yet," said I, "I miss some familiar object. Ah, I know, Charley! It's the looking-glass."

Charley got up from the table as if she had forgotten something, and went into the next room; and I heard her sob.

I was now certain. I could thank God that it was not a shock to me. I called Charley back, and when she came, looking grieved – I took her in my arms and said, "It matters very little, Charley. I hope I can do without my old face very well."

I was presently able to sit up in a great chair and even giddily to walk into the adjoining room, leaning on Charley. The mirror was gone from its usual place, but what I had to bear was none the harder to bear for that.

My guardian had throughout wished earnestly to visit me, and there was now no good reason why I should deny him. He came in one morning, and at first could only hold me in his embrace and say, "My dear, dear girl!"

I had long known what a deep fountain of affection and generosity his heart was; and was it not worth my trivial suffering to fill such a place in it?

"Oh, yes!" I thought. "He has seen me, and is even fonder of me than he was before; and what have I to mourn for!"

He sat down by me on the sofa. For a little while he sat with his hand over his face, but when he removed it, fell into his usual pleasant manner.

"My little woman," said he, "Ada and I have been perfectly forlorn and miserable; your friend Caddy has been coming and going; everyone about the house has been utterly lost and dejected; even poor Rick has been writing – to *me* too – in his anxiety for you!"

"You speak of his writing to *you*," said I. "As if it were not natural for him to do so, guardian; as if he could write to a better friend!"

"He thinks he could, my love," returned my guardian, "to many a better. The truth is, he wrote to me under a sort of protest while unable to write to you – wrote coldly, haughtily, resentfully. Well, dearest little woman, we must forgive him. He is not to blame. Jarndyce and Jarndyce has warped him and perverted me in his eyes. I have known it do as bad deeds, and worse, many a time. If two angels were caught up in it, I believe it would change their nature."

"It has not changed yours, guardian."

"Oh, yes, it has, my dear," he said laughingly. "It has made the south wind easterly, I don't know how often. Rick goes to lawyers, and is taught to mistrust and suspect me. He hears I have conflicting interests, claims clashing against his. Whereas, heaven knows that if I could get out of those legal mountains of wiglomeration (which I can't) or could level them (which I can't either), I would do it this hour. I would rather restore to poor Rick his proper nature than be endowed with all the unclaimed money in Chancery."

"Is it possible, guardian," I asked, amazed, "that Richard can be suspicious of you?"

"Ah, my love," he said, "the subtle poison of such abuses breeds such diseases. It is not *his* fault."

"But it is a terrible misfortune, guardian."

"It is a terrible misfortune, little woman, to be ever drawn within the influences of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. I know none greater. But he has been induced to trust in that rotten reed, and it transmits rottenness to everything around him. We must be patient with poor Rick."

I expressed my wonder and regret that his benevolent intentions had prospered so little.

"We must not say so, Dame Durden," he cheerfully replied; "Ada is happier, I hope, and that is much. I did think that I and both these young creatures might be friends instead of distrustful foes and that we might prove stronger than the lawsuit. But it was too much to expect. Jarndyce and Jarndyce was the curtain round Rick's cradle."

“But, guardian, may we not hope that experience will teach him what a false and wretched thing it is?”

“We will hope so, my Esther,” said Mr. Jarndyce. “In any case we must not be hard on him. There are not many grown men, good men too, who if they were thrown into this same court would not be changed for the worse within a year. How can we stand amazed at poor Rick? A young man cannot at first believe (who could?) that Chancery is what it is. He looks to it to do something with his interests and bring them to a settlement. It procrastinates, disappoints, tries, tortures him; wears out his hopes and patience, thread by thread; but he still hankers after it, and finds his whole world treacherous and hollow. Well, well! Enough of this, my dear!”

I leaned my head upon his shoulder and loved him as if he had been my father. I resolved in my own mind to see Richard when I grew strong, and try to set him right.

“There are better subjects than these,” said my guardian, “for such a joyful time. When shall Ada come to see you, my love?”

I had been thinking of that too. I knew my loving girl would be changed by no change in my looks.

“Dear guardian,” said I, “as I have shut her out so long – though indeed, she is like the light to me—”

“I know it well, Dame Durden.”

He was so good, his touch expressed such compassion and affection, that I stopped for a little while, quite unable to go on.

“As I have kept Ada out so long,” I began afresh after a short while, “I think I should like to have my own way a little longer, guardian. It would be best to be away from here before I see her. If Charley and I were to go to some country lodging when I am strong enough, and if I had a week there to recover and to be revived by the sweet air before seeing Ada again, I think it would be better for us.”

I hope it was not weak to wish to be a little more used to my altered self before I met the dear girl I longed so ardently to see, but it is the truth. He understood me, I was sure.

“Our spoilt little woman,” said my guardian, “shall have her own way, though at the price, I know, of tears downstairs. And see here! Here is Boythorn, heart of chivalry, vowing that if you don’t go and occupy his whole house, by heaven and by earth he’ll pull it down and not leave one brick standing!”

My guardian handed me a letter without any ordinary beginning such as “My dear Jarndyce,” but rushing at once into the words, “I swear if Miss Summerson do not come down and take possession of my house, which I vacate for her this day at one o’clock,” and then with the utmost seriousness, and in the most emphatic terms, going on to make the extraordinary declaration he had quoted. We settled that I should send Mr. Boythorn a letter of thanks and accept his offer. It was a most agreeable one to me, for there was nowhere I should have liked to go so well as Chesney Wold.

“Now, little housewife,” said my guardian, looking at his watch, “you must not be tired too soon; I have only one last minute. I have another petition. Little Miss Flite, hearing that you were ill, made nothing of walking down here – twenty miles, poor soul, in dancing shoes – to inquire. It was heaven’s mercy we were at home, or she would have walked back again.”

I could not tell him heartily enough how ready I was to receive poor Miss Flite. We arranged a time for her to come out by the coach and share my early dinner. When my guardian left me, I prayed to be forgiven if I, surrounded by such blessings, had magnified to myself the little trial I had to undergo. The childish prayer of that old birthday when I had aspired to be industrious, contented, and true-hearted, and to do good to some one and win some love to myself, came back into my mind with a reproachful sense of all the happiness I had since enjoyed. I repeated the old childish prayer and found that its old peace had not departed from it.

My guardian now came every day. In a week more I could walk about our rooms and hold long talks with Ada from behind the window-curtain. Yet I never saw her, for I had not as yet the courage to look at the dear face, though I could have done so easily without her seeing me.

On the appointed day Miss Flite arrived. She ran into my room quite forgetful of her usual dignity, and crying “My dear Fitz Jarndyce!” fell upon my neck and kissed me twenty times. Then she sat shedding tears for the next ten minutes, and had to ask Charley for a pocket handkerchief.

“Tears of pleasure, my dear Fitz Jarndyce,” she was careful to explain. “Not the least pain. Pleasure to see you well again. Pleasure at having the honour of being admitted to see you. By the by, my dear, mentioning pocket handkerchiefs—”

Miss Flite here looked at Charley, who had been to meet her off the coach. Charley glanced at me and looked unwilling to pursue the suggestion.

“Ve-ry right!” said Miss Flite, “Highly indiscreet of me to mention it; but my dear Miss Fitz Jarndyce, I am afraid I am at times a little – rambling, you know.”

“What were you going to tell me?” said I, smiling, for I saw she wanted to go on.

Miss Flite looked at Charley, who said, “If you please, ma’am, you had better tell then,” gratifying Miss Flite beyond measure.

“So sagacious, our young friend,” said she to me. “Well, my dear, it’s a pretty anecdote. Nothing more. Still I think it charming. Who should follow us down the road from the coach, my dear, but a poor person in a very ungenteel bonnet—”

“Jenny, if you please, miss,” said Charley.

“Just so!” Miss Flite agreed. “Jenny. And she tells our young friend that there has been a lady with a veil inquiring at her cottage after your health, and taking a handkerchief away with her as a little keepsake merely because it was yours! Now, you know, so very prepossessing in the lady with the veil!”

I looked at Charley in some astonishment.

“If you please, miss,” said Charley, “Jenny says that when her baby died, you left a handkerchief there, and that she kept it with the baby’s little things. I think partly because it was yours, miss, and partly because it had covered the baby.”

“Exceedingly sagacious!” whispered Miss Flite.

“Well, miss,” said Charley, “that’s the handkerchief the lady took. And Jenny wants you to know that she wouldn’t have sold it for herself but that the lady took it and left some money. Jenny don’t know her at all, if you please, miss!”

“Why, who can she be?” said I.

“My love,” Miss Flite suggested with her most mysterious look, “in my opinion she’s the Lord Chancellor’s wife. I understand she leads him a terrible life. Throws his lordship’s papers into the fire, my dear, if he won’t pay the jeweller!”

I did not think very much about this lady then, for I had an impression that it might be Caddy. Besides, dinner was brought in, and I had to preside over a dish of fish, roast fowl, sweetbread, vegetables, pudding, and Madeira; and it was so pleasant to see how Miss Flite enjoyed it, that I was soon thinking of nothing else.

When we had finished, Miss Flite was so very chatty and happy that I thought I would lead her to her own history, as she was always pleased to talk about herself. I began by saying, “You have attended on the Lord Chancellor many years, Miss Flite?”

“Oh, many, many years, my dear. But I expect a judgment. Shortly.” There was some anxiety in her tone. “My father expected a judgment. My brother. My sister. They all expected a judgment. The same that I expect.”

“They are all—”

“Dead, of course, my dear,” said she.

“Would it not be wiser,” said I, “to expect this judgment no more?”

“Why, my dear,” she answered promptly, “of course it would!”

“And to attend the court no more?”

“Equally of course,” said she. “Very wearing to be always in expectation of what never comes! Wearing, I assure you, to the bone!”

She showed me her arm, and it was fearfully thin indeed.

“But, my dear,” she went on, “there’s a dreadful attraction in the place. You *can’t* leave it. And you *must* expect.”

I tried to assure her that this was not so. She heard me patiently and smilingly, but answered, “Aye, aye, aye! You think so because I am a little rambling. But, my dear, I have been there many years, and I have noticed. It’s the mace and seal upon the table. They draw people on. Draw peace and sense out of them. I have felt them even drawing my rest away in the night. Cold and glittering devils!”

She tapped me upon the arm and nodded good-humouredly.

“Let me see,” said she. “I’ll tell you my own case. Before I had ever seen them – what was it I used to do? Tambourine playing? No. Tambour work. I and my sister did tambour embroidery. Our father and our brother had

a builder's business. First, our father was drawn – slowly. In a few years he was a fierce, sour, angry bankrupt without a kind word for anyone. He had been so different, Fitz Jarndyce. He was drawn to a debtors' prison. There he died. Then our brother was drawn – swiftly – to drunkenness. And rags. And death. Then my sister was drawn. Hush! Never ask to what! Then I was ill and in misery, and heard that this was all the work of Chancery. When I got better, I went to look at the monster. And then I was drawn to stay there. I am a little rambling. But I have noticed. Fitz Jarndyce, I know what will happen. I know when the attraction has begun. I know the signs, my dear. I saw them," speaking low, "I saw them beginning in our friend the ward in Jarndyce. Let some one hold him back. Or he'll be drawn to ruin."

She looked at me in silence for some moments, with her face gradually softening into a smile. Seeming to fear that she had been too gloomy, and seeming also to lose the connexion in her mind, she said politely, "Yes, my dear, I expect a judgment shortly. Then I shall release my birds, you know, and confer estates."

Now she was quite complacent again and beamed with nods and smiles. "But, my dear," she said, gaily, "you have not congratulated me on my physician!"

I said that I did not quite know what she meant.

"My physician, Mr. Woodcourt, my dear, who was so exceedingly attentive to me."

"Mr. Woodcourt is so far away, now," said I, "that I thought the time for such congratulation was past, Miss Flite."

"But, my child," she returned, "is it possible that you don't know what has happened?"

"No," said I.

"Not what everybody has been talking of, my beloved Fitz Jarndyce!"

"No," said I. "You forget how long I have been here."

"True! Well, my dear, there has been a terrible shipwreck over in those East Indian seas."

"Mr. Woodcourt shipwrecked!"

"Don't be agitated, my dear. He is safe. An awful scene. Death in all shapes. Hundreds of dead and dying. Fire, storm, and darkness. Numbers of the drowning thrown upon a rock. Through it all, my dear physician was a hero. Calm and brave through everything. Saved many lives, never complained in hunger and thirst, took the lead, showed them what to do, tended the sick, buried the dead, and brought the poor survivors safely off at last! My dear, the creatures fell down at his feet when they got to land and blessed him. The whole country rings with it. Stay! Where's my bag of documents? I have got it there, and you shall read it!"

And I *did* read all the noble history, though very slowly and imperfectly then, for my eyes were so dimmed that I could not see the words, and I cried so much that I was many times obliged to lay down the cutting from the newspaper. I felt so triumphant to have known the man who had done such generous and gallant deeds, I so admired and loved what he had done, that I

envied the storm-worn people who had fallen at his feet and blessed him. I could myself have kneeled down then, and blessed him for being so truly good and brave. I felt that no one could honour him more than I.

My poor little visitor made me a present of the account, and rose to take her leave, lest she should miss her coach.

“My dear,” said she, “my brave physician ought to have a title bestowed upon him. And no doubt he will. You are of that opinion?”

That he well deserved one, yes. That he would ever have one, no.

“Why not, Fitz Jarndyce?” she asked rather sharply.

I said it was not the custom in England to confer titles on men distinguished by peaceful services, however good and great, unless occasionally when they consisted of making very large amounts of money.

“Why, good gracious,” said Miss Flite, “how can you say that? The greatest men of England in knowledge, imagination, active humanity, and improvement of every sort are added to its nobility!”

I am afraid she believed what she said, for there were moments when she was very mad indeed.

And now I must part with the little secret I have thus far tried to keep. I had thought, sometimes, that Mr. Woodcourt loved me and that if he had been richer he would perhaps have told me that he loved me before he went away. I had thought, sometimes, that if he had done so, I should have been glad of it.

But how much better it was now that this had never happened! What should I have suffered if I had had to write to him, and tell him that the poor face he had known was quite gone from me, and that I released him from his bondage!

Oh, it was so much better as it was! There was nothing to be undone: no chain for me to break or for him to drag; and I could go, please God, my lowly way along the path of duty, and he could go his nobler way upon its broader road; and though we were apart upon the journey, I might aspire to meet him, unselfishly, innocently, at the journey’s end.

Chapter 36

Chesney Wold

Charley and I did not set off alone upon our expedition into Lincolnshire. My guardian accompanied us, and we were two days upon the road. I found every breath of air, and every scent, and every flower and leaf, and every passing cloud, more beautiful and wonderful to me than I had ever found it yet. This was my first gain from my illness. How little I had lost, when the wide world was so full of delight for me!

Since my guardian intended to go back directly, we agreed, on our way down, a day when my dear girl should come. I wrote her a letter, which he took back with him once we had arrived at our destination.

If a good fairy had built the house for me with a wave of her wand, I could not have been more considered in it. So many preparations were made for me, and all my little tastes and likings, that I could have sat down, overcome, a dozen times. I did better than that, however, by showing them all to Charley instead. Charley's delight calmed mine; and after we had had a walk in the garden, and Charley had exhausted her whole vocabulary of admiring expressions, I was as tranquilly happy as I ought to have been.

Our host had left a note of welcome for me, as sunny as his own face, and had confided his bird to my care, which I knew to be his highest mark of confidence. I wrote a little note of thanks to him in London, telling him how all his favourite plants and trees were looking, and how the most astonishing of birds had chirped the honours of the house to me, and how, after singing on my shoulder, to the inconceivable rapture of my little maid, he was then at roost in the usual corner of his cage.

With my note sent off to the post, I made myself very busy in unpacking and arranging; and I told Charley I should want her no more that night.

For I had not yet looked in the mirror. I had always said to myself that I would begin afresh when I got here. Therefore I had wanted to be alone. I said now, "Esther, you must keep your word, my dear." I was quite resolved to keep it, but I sat down for a little while first to reflect upon all my blessings. And then I said my prayers and thought a little more.

My hair had not been cut off; it was long and thick. I let it down, and shook it out, and went up to the glass upon the dressing-table. There was a little muslin curtain drawn across it. I drew it back and stood for a moment looking through such a veil of my own hair that I could see nothing else.

Then I put my hair aside and looked at the reflection in the mirror, encouraged by seeing how placidly it looked at me. I was very much changed – oh, very, very much. At first my face was quite strange to me. Very soon it became more familiar, and then I knew the extent of the alteration. It was not like what I had expected, but I had expected nothing definite.

I had never been a beauty and had never thought myself one, but I had been very different from this. It was all gone now. Heaven was so good to me that I could let it go with a few not bitter tears and could stand there arranging my hair for the night quite thankfully.

One thing troubled me, and I considered it for a long time before I went to sleep. I had kept Mr. Woodcourt's flowers. When they were withered I had dried them and put them in a book that I was fond of. Nobody knew this, not even Ada. I was doubtful whether I had a right to preserve what he had sent to one so different – whether it was generous towards him to do it. I wished to be generous to him, even in the secret depths of my heart, which he would never know, because I could have loved him – could have been devoted to him.

At last I came to the conclusion that I might keep the flowers if I treasured them only as a remembrance of what was irrevocably past and gone, never to be looked back on any more. I hope this may not seem trivial. I was very much in earnest.

I took care to be up early in the morning and to be sitting before the glass when Charley came in on tiptoe.

“Dear, dear, miss!” cried Charley, starting. “Is that you?”

“Yes, Charley,” said I, quietly putting up my hair. “And I am very well indeed, and very happy.”

I saw it was a weight off Charley's mind, but it was a greater weight off mine. I knew the worst now and was composed to it.

Wishing to be fully re-established in my strength and good spirits before Ada came, I now laid down plans with Charley for being in the fresh air all day long. We were to be out before breakfast, and were to dine early, and were to be out again before and after dinner, and were to talk in the garden after tea, and were to explore every road, lane, and field in the neighbourhood. As to strengthening delicacies, Mr. Boythorn's good housekeeper was for ever trotting about with something to eat or drink in her hand; if I was resting in the park she would come trotting after me with a basket, her cheerful face shining.

Then there was a chubby pony with a mane all over his eyes expressly for my riding, so easy and quiet that he was a treasure. In a very few days he would come to me in the paddock when I called him, and follow me about. His name was Stubbs. Once we put him in a little chaise and drove him triumphantly through the green lanes for five miles; but just as we were extolling him to the skies, he took umbrage at the circle of little gnats around his ears, and stopped. He steadily refused to move until I gave the reins to Charley and got out and walked, when he followed me with sturdy good humour, rubbing his ear against my sleeve. The moment I left him, he stood stock still again. Consequently I was obliged to lead the way; and in this order we returned home, to the great delight of the village.

It was the most friendly of villages, I am sure, for in a week's time the people were so glad to see us go by that there were faces of greeting in every cottage. I had known many of the people before, but now the very steeple

began to wear a familiar and affectionate look. Among my new friends was an old old woman who lived in a tiny thatched and whitewashed dwelling; she had a grandson who was a sailor, and I wrote a letter to him for her. At the top of it, I drew the chimney-corner in which his old stool yet stood. This was considered by the whole village the most wonderful achievement in the world, but when an answer came back from Plymouth, in which he mentioned that he was going to take the picture all the way to America, I got all the credit that ought to have been given to the post-office.

What with being so much outside, playing with so many children, gossiping with so many people, going on with Charley's education, and writing long letters to Ada every day, I had scarcely any time to think about that little loss of mine and was almost always cheerful. If I did think of it at odd moments, I had only to be busy and forget it. I felt it more than I had hoped I should, when a child said, "Mother, why is the lady not pretty like she used to be?" But when I found the child was not less fond of me, that soon set me up again.

There were many little occurrences of consideration and delicacy. Once of these particularly touched me. I happened to stroll into the church when a marriage was just concluded, and the young couple had to sign the register.

The bridegroom made a rude cross for his mark; the bride did the same. Now, I had known the bride when I was last there, not only as the prettiest girl in the place, but as having distinguished herself in the school, and I could not help looking at her with some surprise. She came aside and whispered to me, with tears of honest love in her bright eyes, "He's a dear good fellow, miss; but he can't write yet – he's going to learn of me – and I wouldn't shame him for the world!" Why, what had I to fear, I thought, when there was this nobility in the soul of a labourer's daughter!

The healthy colour came into my new face as it had come into my old one. Charley was radiant and rosy; and we both enjoyed the whole day and slept soundly the whole night.

There was a favourite spot of mine in the park-woods of Chesney Wold where a seat commanded a lovely view. The wood had been cleared to improve this point of sight, and the landscape was so beautiful that I rested there at least once every day. A picturesque part of the Hall, called the Ghost's Walk, was seen to advantage from this higher ground; and the startling name, and the old legend about it which I had heard from Mr. Boythorn, gave it a mysterious interest. There was a bank here, too, famous for violets; and as it was Charley's delight to gather wild flowers, she took as much to the spot as I did.

The family were not at the house, I had heard, and were not expected. I was curious about the building, and often sat in this place wondering how the rooms ranged and whether any echo like a footstep really did resound at times upon the lonely Ghost's Walk. The indefinable feeling with which Lady Dedlock had impressed me may have had some influence in keeping me from the house. I am not sure. For whatever reason, I had never once gone near it, down to the day at which my story now arrives.

I was resting at my favourite point, and Charley was gathering violets a little distance away. I had been looking at the Ghost's Walk afar off when I became aware of a figure approaching through the wood. At first I could not discern what figure it was. By little and little it revealed itself to be a woman's – a lady's – Lady Dedlock's. She was alone and coming to where I sat with a much quicker step than usual, I observed to my surprise.

I was fluttered by her being unexpectedly so near (she was almost within speaking distance before I knew her) and would have risen to continue my walk. But I could not. I was rendered motionless. Not so much by her hurried gesture of entreaty, not so much by her quick advance and outstretched hands, not so much by the great change in her manner, as by a something in her face that I had pined for and dreamed of when I was a little child, something I had never seen in any face before.

A dread and faintness fell upon me, and I called to Charley. Lady Dedlock instantly stopped and changed back almost to what I had known her.

"Miss Summerson, I am afraid I have startled you," she said, now advancing slowly. "You can scarcely be strong yet. You have been very ill, I know. I have been much concerned to hear it."

I could not stir. She gave me her hand, which was deadly cold. I cannot say what was in my whirling thoughts.

"You are recovering?" she asked kindly.

"I was quite well but a moment ago, Lady Dedlock."

"Is this your young attendant?"

"Yes."

"Will you send her on before us and walk towards your house with me?"

"Charley," said I, "take your flowers home, and I will follow you directly."

Charley, with her best curtsy, went her way. Lady Dedlock sat down on the seat beside me.

I cannot tell in any words what the state of my mind was when I saw in her hand my handkerchief, with which I had covered the dead baby.

I looked at her, but I could not see her, I could not hear her, I could not draw my breath. The beating of my heart was so violent and wild that I felt as if my life were breaking from me. But when she caught me to her breast, kissed me, wept over me, and called me back to myself; when she fell down on her knees and cried to me, "Oh, my child, my child, I am your wicked and unhappy mother! Oh, try to forgive me!" – when I saw her at my feet in her great agony of mind, I felt, through all my tumult of emotion, a burst of gratitude to God that I was so changed that I never could disgrace her by any likeness. Nobody could now look at us and think of any tie between us.

I raised my mother up, praying her not to stoop before me in such affliction. I did so in broken, incoherent words, for besides the trouble I was in, it frightened me to see her at my feet. I tried to tell her that if it were for me, her child, to forgive her, I did it, and had done it, many, many years. I told her that my heart overflowed with love for her, natural love which nothing could change. That my duty was to bless and receive her, though the

whole world turned from her, and that I only asked her leave to do it. I held my mother in my embrace, and she held me in hers, and among the still woods in the silence of the summer day there seemed to be nothing but our two troubled minds that was not at peace.

“It is too late to bless and receive me,” groaned my mother, “I must travel my dark road alone, though I do not see the way before my guilty feet. This is the earthly punishment I have brought upon myself. I bear it, and I hide it. I must keep this secret, if I can, not wholly for myself. I have a husband, wretched and dishonouring creature that I am!”

These words she uttered with a suppressed cry of despair. Covering her face with her hands, she shrank down in my embrace as if she were unwilling that I should touch her; and I could not persuade her to rise. She said, no, no, no, she could only speak to me so; she must be proud everywhere else; she would be humbled and ashamed there, in the only natural moments of her life.

My unhappy mother told me that in my illness she had been nearly frantic. She had only then known that her child was living; she had never suspected it before. She had followed me down here to speak to me just once in all her life: we could never meet or communicate again.

She put into my hands a letter she had written for my reading only and said that when I had read it and destroyed it, I must evermore consider her as dead. If I could believe that she loved me, in this agony in which I saw her, she asked me to do that, for then I might think of her with greater pity. She had put herself beyond all hope and beyond all help. Whether she preserved her secret until death, or whether it came to be discovered and she brought disgrace upon her name, it was her solitary struggle always; and no affection could come near her, and nobody could help her.

“But is the secret safe now, dearest mother?”

“No,” replied my mother. “It has been very near discovery. It was saved by an accident. It may be lost by another accident, any day.”

“Do you dread a particular person?”

“Hush! Do not tremble and cry for me. I am not worthy of these tears,” said my mother, kissing my hands. “I dread one person very much. He is Sir Leicester Dedlock’s lawyer, faithful without attachment, and jealous of the profit and privilege of great houses.”

“Has he any suspicions?”

“Many.”

“Not of you?” I said alarmed.

“Yes! He is always vigilant and always near me. I may keep him at a standstill, but I can never shake him off.”

“Has he so little pity or compunction?”

“He has none. He is indifferent to everything but the acquisition of secrets and the power they give him.”

“Could you trust in him?”

“I shall never try. The dark road I have trodden for so many years will end where it will. The end may be near, it may be distant; while the road lasts, nothing turns me. I will outlive this danger, and outdie it, if I can. It has

closed around me almost as awfully as if these woods of Chesney Wold had closed around the house, but my course through it is the same.”

“Mr. Jarndyce—” I was beginning when my mother hurriedly inquired, “Does *he* suspect?”

“No, indeed!” said I. And I told her what he had related to me about his knowledge of my story. “But he is so good and sensible,” said I, “that perhaps if he knew—”

My mother raised her hand to my lips and stopped me.

“Confide fully in him,” she said. “You have my free consent – but do not tell me of it. Some pride is left in me even yet.”

Every word that was uttered in my mother’s voice, so unfamiliar and so melancholy to me, made an enduring impression on my memory. I explained, or tried to – though my agitation and distress were so great that I scarcely understood myself – how I had only hoped that Mr. Jarndyce might give her counsel and support. But my mother answered no, it was impossible; no one could help her. Through the desert that lay before her, she must go alone.

“My child, my child!” she said. “For the last time! These kisses for the last time! These arms upon my neck for the last time! We shall meet no more. I must be what I have been so long. If you hear of Lady Dedlock, brilliant, prosperous, and flattered, think of your wretched mother, conscience-stricken, underneath that mask! Think that the reality is in her suffering, in her useless remorse! Forgive her if you can, and cry to heaven to forgive her, which it never can!”

We held one another for a little while yet, but then she took my hands away, and put them back against my breast, and with a last kiss released them, and went from me into the wood. I was alone; calm and quiet below me lay the old house, with its terraces and turrets, on which there had seemed to me to be such complete repose when I first saw it, but which now looked like the un pitying watcher of my mother’s misery.

Stunned as I was, the necessity of guarding against the danger of discovery, or even of suspicion, did me service. I took what precautions I could to hide from Charley that I had been crying, and endeavoured to be careful and collected. It was a while before I could restrain bursts of grief, but after an hour or so I was better and felt that I might return.

I went home very slowly and told Charley, whom I found at the gate looking for me, that I had been tempted to extend my walk after Lady Dedlock had left me and that I was over-tired and would lie down.

Safe in my own room, I read the letter. I learnt from it – and that was much then – that I had not been abandoned by my mother. Her elder and only sister, the godmother of my childhood, discovering signs of life in me when I had been laid aside as dead, had in her stern sense of duty reared me in rigid secrecy. Until a short time back I had never, to my mother’s knowledge, breathed – had never borne a name. When she had first seen me in the church she had been startled and had thought of what her child would have been like if it had lived, but that was all.

What more the letter told me needs not to be repeated here. It has its own times and places in my story.

My first care was to burn what my mother had written. I hope it may not appear very unnatural or bad in me that I then became heavily sorrowful to think I had ever been reared. I felt as if it would have been better for many people if I had never breathed. I had a terror of myself as the danger and the possible disgrace of my own mother and of a proud family name. I was so confused and shaken that I believed I should have died at birth, and that it was wrong that I should be alive.

These are the real feelings that I had. I fell asleep worn out, and when I awoke I cried afresh to think that I was back in the world with my load of trouble for others. I was frightened of myself, thinking of the new and terrible meaning of the old words now moaning in my ear: "Your mother, Esther, was your disgrace, and you are hers. The time will come when you will understand this better, and will feel it too." With them, those other words returned, "Pray daily that the sins of others be not visited upon your head." I could not disentangle all that was about me, and I felt as if the blame and the shame were all in me.

The day waned into a gloomy evening, overcast and sad, and I still contended with the same distress. I went out alone, and walked a little in the park, watching the dark shades falling on the trees and the fitful flight of the bats. I was attracted to the house for the first time, and took the path that led close by it.

I did not dare to linger or look up, but I passed before the terrace garden with its fragrant odours, and its broad walks, and its well-kept beds; I saw how beautiful and grave it was, and how the old stone balustrades and parapets, and wide flights of shallow steps, were seamed by time and weather; and how the moss and ivy grew about them, and around the old stone sundial; and I heard the fountain falling. Then the way went by long lines of dark windows, turreted towers and porches, where stone lions and monsters bristled outside dens of shadow and snarled at the evening gloom.

From there the path wound underneath a gateway, and through a courtyard where the main entrance was (I hurried quickly on), and past the stables. Encountering presently a sweet smell of lime trees, whose rustling I could hear, I turned with the path to the south front, and there above me were the balustrades of the Ghost's Walk and one lighted window that might be my mother's.

The way was paved here, and my footsteps from being noiseless made an echoing sound upon the flagstones. I was passing quickly on, and in a few moments should have passed the lighted window, when my echoing footsteps brought it suddenly into my mind that there was a dreadful truth in the legend of the Ghost's Walk, that it was I who was to bring calamity upon the stately house and that was haunting it now. Seized with a greater terror of myself, I ran from myself and everything, retraced the way by which I had come, and never paused until I reached the lodge-gate, and the park lay black behind me.

Alone in my own room for the night, I began to know how wrong and thankless my dejected state was. But from my darling, who was coming on the morrow, I found a joyful letter, full of such loving anticipation that I must have been made of marble if it had not moved me. From my guardian, too, I found another letter, asking me to tell Dame Durden, if I should see that little woman anywhere, that they had moped most pitifully without her, that the housekeeping was going to rack and ruin, and that everybody in the house longed for her return. These letters made me think how beloved I was and how happy I ought to be; and brought me into a better condition.

For I saw very well that I could not have been intended to die, or I should never have lived. I knew I was as innocent of my birth as a queen of hers, and that before my Heavenly Father I should not be punished for birth nor a queen rewarded for it. I renewed my resolutions and prayed to be strengthened in them, pouring out my heart for myself and for my unhappy mother. The darkness of the morning passed away; and when the next day's light awoke me, it was gone.

My dear girl was to arrive at five o'clock in the afternoon. While waiting, I decided to take a walk along the road by which she was to come; so Charley and I and Stubbs made an expedition along that road and back. On our return, we held a great review of the house and garden and saw that everything was in its prettiest condition.

There were more than two hours yet before she could come, and in that interval I must confess I was nervously anxious about my altered looks. I loved my darling so well that I was more concerned for their effect on her than on anyone. I thought, would she be wholly prepared? When she first saw me, might she not be shocked? Might she look for her old Esther and not find her?

I knew the various expressions of my sweet girl's face so well, and it was such an honest face, that I was sure she could not hide that first look from me. And I considered whether, if it should show any of these meanings, as was likely, could I quite answer for myself?

Well, after last night, I thought I could. But to wait and wait, and think and think, was such bad preparation that I resolved to go along the road again and meet her. Charley approved, so I went, leaving her at home.

But before I got to the second milestone, I had been in so many palpitations from seeing dust in the distance (though I knew it could not be the coach yet) that I resolved to turn back and go home again. And when I had turned, I was in such fear of the coach coming up behind me that I ran most of the way to avoid being overtaken.

At last, when I believed there was at least a quarter of an hour more yet, Charley cried out to me, "Here she comes, miss!"

I did not mean to do it, but I ran upstairs into my room and hid behind the door. There I stood trembling, even when I heard my darling calling as she came upstairs, "Esther, my dear, my love, where are you?"

She ran in, and saw me. Ah, my angel girl! The old dear look, all love, all fondness, all affection. Nothing else in it – no, nothing, nothing!

Oh, how happy I was, down upon the floor with my sweet beautiful girl holding my scarred face to her lovely cheek, bathing it with tears and kisses, rocking me like a child, calling me by every tender name, and pressing me to her faithful heart.

Chapter 37

Jarndyce and Jarndyce

If the secret I had to keep had been mine, I must have confided it to Ada before long. But it was not mine, and I did not feel that I had a right to tell it, even to my guardian, unless some great emergency arose. It was a weight to bear alone; still my duty was plain; and although the remembrance of my mother kept me awake and made the night sorrowful, I did not yield to it at other times.

That first evening Ada asked me, over our work, if the family were at the house, and I was obliged to answer yes, I believed so, for Lady Dedlock had spoken to me in the woods. But my difficulty in answering was great, and was greater still when Ada asked me what she had said. I replied that she had been kind and interested; and Charley helped me through, unconsciously, by telling us that Lady Dedlock had only stayed at the house two nights on her way to visit some other great house and that she had left early on the morning after we had seen her.

We were to stay a month at Mr. Boythorn's. My pet had scarcely been there a bright week, when one evening, just as the candles were lighted, Charley beckoned me mysteriously out of the room.

"Oh! If you please, miss," said Charley in a whisper. "You're wanted at the Dedlock Arms."

"Why, Charley," said I, "who can possibly want me at the public-house?"

"I don't know, miss," returned Charley, "but it's a gentleman, miss, and his compliments, and will you please to come without saying anything about it. It's a message come through the landlord Mr. Grubble, miss."

Not knowing what might be the matter, I put on my bonnet, veil and shawl, and went down the little hilly street to the clean little tavern.

Mr. Grubble, a pleasant-looking, middle-aged man, was standing in his shirt-sleeves at the door waiting for me. He lifted his hat when he saw me coming, and led me to his best parlour, a neat room full of plants, a coloured print of Queen Caroline, a good many tea-trays, and two stuffed fish in glass cases.

Mr. Grubble snuffed the candle, and backed out of the room. The door of the opposite parlour opened, a quick light step came in, and who should stand before me but Richard!

"My dear Esther!" he said. "My best friend!" And he really was so warm-hearted and earnest that in the first surprise and pleasure of his brotherly greeting I could scarcely find breath to tell him that Ada was well.

"Answering my very thoughts – the same dear girl!" said Richard, leading me to a chair and sitting beside me.

I put my veil up a little way.

“Always the same dear girl!” said Richard just as heartily as before.

I put up my veil altogether, and told him how much I thanked him for his kind welcome and how greatly I rejoiced to see him, the more so because of the determination I had made in my illness, to try to set him right.

“My love,” said Richard, “there is no one with whom I wish to talk more than you, for I want you to understand me.”

“And I want you, Richard,” said I, shaking my head, “to understand some one else.”

“I suppose you mean John Jarndyce?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then I may say at once that I am glad of it, because it is on that subject that I am anxious to be understood – by *you*, my dear! I am not accountable to Mr. Jarndyce or Mr. Anybody.”

I was pained to find him taking this tone, and he observed it.

“Well, my dear,” said Richard, “we won’t go into that now. I want to appear quietly in your country-house, and give my charming cousin a surprise. I suppose your loyalty to John Jarndyce will allow that?”

“My dear Richard,” I returned, “you know you are heartily welcome!” Then I asked him how he liked his profession.

“Oh, I like it well enough!” said Richard. “It’s all right. It does as well as anything else, for a time. I don’t know that I shall care about it when I come to be settled, but I can sell out then and – however, never mind all that botheration at present.”

So young and handsome, and in all respects so perfectly the opposite of Miss Flite! And yet, in the clouded, eager, seeking look that passed over him, so dreadfully like her!

“I am in town on leave just now,” he said.

“Indeed?”

“Yes. I have run over to look after my – my Chancery interests before the long vacation,” said Richard, forcing a careless laugh. “We are beginning to spin along with that old suit at last, I promise you.”

No wonder that I shook my head!

“As you say, it’s not a pleasant subject.” Richard spoke with the same shade crossing his face as before. “Let it go to the four winds for tonight. Puff! Gone! Who do you suppose is with me? Mr. Skimpole! He does me more good than anybody. What a fascinating child it is!”

He said had been to call upon the dear old infant – so he called Mr. Skimpole – and the dear old infant had told him where we were, and had wanted to come and see us, so Richard had brought him. “And he is worth – not to say his sordid expenses – but thrice his weight in gold,” said Richard. “He is such a cheery fellow. No worldliness about him. Fresh and green-hearted!”

I certainly did not see the proof of Mr. Skimpole’s unworldliness in his having his expenses paid by Richard, but I made no remark about that. Indeed, Mr. Skimpole came in and said that he was charmed to see me, and that he had been shedding delicious tears of joy and sympathy on my account,

had never been so happy as in hearing of my progress, began to understand the mixture of good and evil in the world now, and felt that he appreciated health the more when somebody else was ill.

“My dear Miss Summerson, here is our friend Richard,” said Mr. Skimpole, “full of the brightest visions of the future, which he evokes out of the darkness of Chancery. Now that’s delightful, that’s inspiring, that’s full of poetry! In old times the woods were made joyous to the shepherd by the imaginary piping and dancing of Pan and the nymphs. Our pastoral Richard brightens the dull Inns of Court by making Fortune and her train sport through them. That’s very pleasant, you know!”

I began seriously to think that Richard could scarcely have found a worse friend. It made me uneasy that at such a time when he most required some right principle and purpose he should have at his elbow this captivating looseness and airy putting-off of everything. My guardian, experienced in the world and forced to contemplate the miserable contentions of the family misfortune, found an immense relief in Mr. Skimpole’s guileless candour; but I could not satisfy myself that it was as artless as it seemed.

They both walked back with me. Mr. Skimpole leaving us at the gate, I walked softly in with Richard and said, “Ada, my love, I have brought a gentleman to visit you.”

It was not difficult to read the blushing, startled face. She loved him dearly, and he knew it, and I knew it. It was a very transparent business, that meeting as cousins only.

Yet I was not so sure that Richard loved her dearly. He admired her very much – anyone must have – and I dare say he would have renewed their youthful engagement with great pride and ardour except that he knew she would respect her promise to my guardian. Still I had a tormenting idea that he was postponing his best truth and earnestness in this as in all things until Jarndyce and Jarndyce should be off his mind. Ah me! What Richard would have been without that blight, I never shall know now!

He told Ada, in his most ingenuous way, that he had not come in secret, but openly to see her and to see me. As the dear old infant would be with us directly, he begged that I would arrange to meet him the next morning at seven o’clock.

Mr. Skimpole soon appeared and made us merry for an hour. He requested to see little Coavinses (meaning Charley), and told her that he had given her late father all the business in his power, and that if one of her little brothers would make haste to get set up in the same profession, he hoped he should still be able to put a good deal of employment in his way.

“For I am constantly being taken in these nets,” said Mr. Skimpole, beaming at us over a glass of wine-and-water, “and am constantly being bailed out – like a boat. Somebody always does it for me. I can’t do it, you know, for I never have any money. But somebody does it. If you were to ask me who, upon my word I couldn’t tell you. Let us drink to somebody. God bless him!”

Richard was a little late the next morning, but I had not to wait for him long, and we turned into the park. The air was bright and dewy and the sky cloudless. The birds sang delightfully; the richness of the woods seemed to have increased twenty-fold since yesterday, as if in the still night Nature had been more wakeful than usual for the glory of that day.

“This is a lovely place,” said Richard, looking round. “None of the jar and discord of law-suits here! I tell you what, my dear girl, when I get affairs settled, I shall come down here and rest.”

“Would it not be better to rest now?” I asked.

“Resting *now*,” said Richard, “or doing anything definite *now*, that’s not easy. I can’t do it at least.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not, Esther. If you were living in an unfinished house, liable to have the roof put on or taken off at any time, you would find it hard to rest. So do I. Now? There’s no *now* for us suitors.”

“My dear Richard,” said I, “this is a bad beginning of our conversation.”

“I knew you would tell me so, Dame Durden.”

“Not I alone, dear Richard. It was not I who cautioned you once never to place hope or expectation on the family curse.”

“There you come back to John Jarndyce!” said Richard impatiently.

“Well! We must approach him sooner or later. My dear Esther, how can you be so blind? Don’t you see that he is an interested party and that it may be very well for him to wish me to know nothing of the suit, but that it may not be so well for me?”

“Oh, Richard,” I remonstrated, “is it possible that you can have lived under his roof and have known him, and can yet breathe such unworthy suspicions?”

He reddened deeply, as if he felt a pang of reproach. He was silent for a little while before he replied in a subdued voice, “Esther, I am sure you know that I am not a mean fellow.”

“I know it very well,” said I.

“That’s a dear girl;” retorted Richard, “it gives me comfort. I need to get some scrap of comfort out of all this business, for it’s a bad one at best.”

“I know perfectly,” said I. “I know too that such false suspicions are foreign to your nature. And we both know what so changes it.”

“Come, sister, come,” said Richard a little more gaily, “be fair. If I have the misfortune to be under that influence, so has he. If it has a little twisted me, it may have a little twisted him too. I don’t say that he is not an honourable man; I am sure he is. But this case taints everybody. You have heard him say so fifty times. Then why should *he* escape?”

“Because,” said I, “his is an uncommon character, and he has resolutely kept himself outside the circle, Richard.”

“Oh, because and because!” replied Richard in his vivacious way. “That outward indifference may be to cause other parties to become lax about their interests; and people may die off, and many things may smoothly happen that are convenient.”

I was so touched with pity for Richard that I could not reproach him any more. I remembered my guardian's gentleness towards his errors and his perfect freedom from resentment.

"Esther," Richard resumed, "I have not come here to make underhanded charges against John Jarndyce, but only to justify myself. We got on very well while I was a boy, utterly regardless of this suit; but as soon as I began to take an interest in it, then it was quite another thing. Then John Jarndyce decides that Ada and I must break off and that if I don't amend that course, I am not fit for her. Now, Esther, I don't mean to amend that course: John Jarndyce has no right to dictate those terms. Whether it pleases him or not, I must maintain my rights and Ada's. I have been thinking about it a good deal, and this is the conclusion I have come to."

Poor dear Richard! He had indeed been thinking about it a good deal. His face and manner showed that all too plainly.

"So I have written to him telling him honourably that we disagree and that we had better disagree openly. I thank him for his goodwill, and he goes his road, and I go mine. The fact is, our roads are not the same. Under one of the wills in dispute, I should take much more than he."

"I had already heard of your letter, my dear Richard," said I, "without an offended or angry word."

"Indeed?" replied Richard, softening. "I am glad I said he was an honourable man. I have never doubted it. Now, my dear Esther, I know my views appear harsh to you, and will to Ada when you tell her. But if you had gone into the case as I have, if you had only applied yourself to the papers as I did when I was at Kenge's, if you only knew how many charges and counter-charges, and suspicions and cross-suspicions, they involve, you would think me moderate."

"Perhaps so," said I. "But do you think that, among those many papers, there is much truth and justice, Richard?"

"There is truth and justice somewhere in the case, Esther—"

"Or was once, long ago," said I.

"Is – must be, somewhere," pursued Richard impetuously, "and must be brought out. To make Ada a bribe is not the way to bring it out. You say the suit is changing me; John Jarndyce says it changes everybody who has any share in it. Then the greater right I have on my side when I resolve to do all I can to bring it to an end."

"All you can, Richard! Do you think that over the years no others have done all they could?"

"It can't last for ever," returned Richard with a fierceness kindling in him. "I am young and have energy and determination. Others have only half thrown themselves into it. I devote myself to it. I make it the object of my life."

"Oh, Richard, my dear, so much the worse!"

"No, no, don't you be afraid for me," he returned affectionately. "You're a dear, good, blessed girl; but I tell you, my good Esther, when John Jarndyce

and I were on those terms which he found so convenient, we were not on natural terms.”

“Are division and animosity your natural terms, Richard?”

“No, I don’t say that. I mean that all this business puts us on unnatural terms. Another reason for urging it on! I may find out when it’s over that I have been mistaken in John Jarndyce. I may then agree with what you say today. Very well. Then I shall acknowledge it.”

Everything postponed to that imaginary time! Everything held in confusion and indecision until then!

“Now,” said Richard, “I want my cousin Ada to understand that I am not fickle, and wilful about John Jarndyce, but that I have this purpose. She has a great respect for her cousin John; and I know you will soften the course I take, even though you disapprove of it; and – and in short,” said Richard, hesitating, “I – I don’t like to represent myself in this litigious, doubting character to a confiding girl like Ada.”

I told him that he was more like himself in those latter words than in anything he had said yet.

“Why,” acknowledged Richard, “that may be true. But I shall come all right again by and by, don’t you fear?”

I asked him if this were all he wished me to tell Ada.

“Not quite,” said Richard. “I want Ada to know that if I see her seldom just now, I am looking after her interests as well as my own – we two being in the same boat – and that I hope she will not suppose from any rumours that I am light-headed or imprudent; on the contrary, I am always looking forward to the end of the suit, and always planning for it. Being of age now, I consider myself free from any accountability to John Jarndyce; but as Ada is still a ward of the court, I don’t yet ask her to renew our engagement. When she is free to act for herself, I shall be myself once more and we shall both be in very different circumstances, I believe. If you tell her all this in your considerate way, you will do me a very great service, my dear Esther; and I shall knock Jarndyce and Jarndyce on the head with greater vigour. Of course I ask for no secrecy at Bleak House.”

“Richard,” said I, “you place great confidence in me, but I fear you will not take advice from me?”

“It’s impossible that I can on this subject, my dear girl. On any other, readily.”

As if there were any other in his life! “May I ask you a question, Richard? Are you in debt again?”

“Why, of course I am,” said Richard, astonished at my simplicity. “I can’t throw myself into an object so completely without expense. You forget that under either of the wills Ada and I take something. It’s only a question between the larger sum and the smaller. I shall be within the mark any way. Bless your heart, my excellent girl,” said Richard, quite amused with me, “I shall be all right!”

I felt so deeply aware of the danger in which he stood that I tried, by every means that I could think of, to warn him. He took everything I said with

patience, but it all rebounded from him without the least effect. I determined to try Ada's influence.

So when our walk brought us round to the village again, and I went home to breakfast, I gently told Ada what reason we had to dread that Richard was losing himself and scattering his whole life to the winds. It made her very unhappy, of course, though she had a far greater reliance on his correcting his errors than I could have; and she wrote him this little letter:

My dearest cousin,

Esther has told me all you said to her this morning. I write this to repeat most earnestly all that she said to you and to let you know how sure I am that you will sooner or later find our cousin John a pattern of truth, sincerity, and goodness, when you will deeply grieve to have done him (without intending it) so much wrong.

I do not quite know how to write what I wish to say next, but I trust you will understand. I fear, my dearest cousin, that it may be partly for my sake you are now laying up so much unhappiness for yourself – and if for yourself, for me. In case this should be so, I most earnestly beg you to desist. You can do nothing for my sake that will make me half so happy as for ever turning your back upon the shadow in which we both were born.

Do not be angry with me for saying this. Pray, dear Richard, for my sake, and for your own, pray let it go for ever. We have reason to know by this time that there is no good in it and no hope, that there is nothing to be got from it but sorrow.

My dearest cousin, it is needless for me to say that you are quite free and that it is very likely you may find some one whom you will love much better than your first fancy. I would greatly prefer to follow your fortunes far and wide, however moderate or poor, and see you happy, pursuing your chosen way, than to have the hope of being rich with you (if such a thing were possible) at the cost of dragging years of anxiety and of your indifference to other aims. I know this for a certainty from my own heart.

Ever, my dearest cousin, your most affectionate

Ada

This note brought Richard to us very soon, but it made little change in him. We would see, he said, who was right and who was wrong! He was animated and glowing, as if Ada's tenderness had gratified him; but I could only hope, with a sigh, that the letter might have some stronger effect upon his mind on re-reading than it had then.

Before they left next day, I sought an opportunity of speaking to Mr. Skimpole. I delicately said that there was a responsibility in encouraging Richard.

"Responsibility, my dear Miss Summerson?" he repeated, with the pleasantest smile. "I am the last man in the world for such a thing. I never was responsible in my life – I can't be."

“I am afraid everybody is obliged to be,” said I timidly enough, he being so much older and more clever than I.

“No, really?” said Mr. Skimpole, receiving this new light with most agreeable surprise. “But every man’s not obliged to be solvent? I am not. I never was. See, my dear Miss Summerson,” he took a handful of loose silver and halfpence from his pocket, “there’s so much money. I have not an idea how much. I have not the power of counting. I dare say I owe as much as good-natured people will let me owe. If they don’t stop, why should I? There you have Harold Skimpole. If that’s responsibility, I am responsible.”

The perfect ease of manner with which he looked at me, with a smile on his refined face, almost made me feel as if we were talking about somebody else.

“Now, when you mention responsibility,” he resumed, “I must say that I never had the happiness of knowing any one so refreshingly responsible as yourself. When I see you, my dear Miss Summerson, intent upon the whole little orderly system of which you are the centre, I say to myself – *that’s* responsibility!”

I persisted, saying we all hoped he would not confirm Richard in the sanguine views he held just then.

“Most willingly,” he retorted, “if I could. But, my dear Miss Summerson, I have no art, no disguise. If he takes me by the hand and leads me in an airy procession after fortune, I must go. If he says, ‘Skimpole, join the dance!’ I must join it. Common sense wouldn’t, I know, but I have no common sense.”

It was very unfortunate for Richard, I said.

“Don’t say that,” returned Mr. Skimpole. “Let us suppose him keeping company with Common Sense – an excellent man – wrinkled – dreadfully practical – with an account book in his hand – resembling a tax-gatherer. Our dear ardent Richard says to this respectable companion, ‘I see a golden prospect before me; it’s very bright, it’s very joyous; here I go, bounding over the landscape to come at it!’ The respectable companion instantly knocks him down with the account-book; tells him that he sees no such thing; shows him it’s nothing but fees, fraud, horsehair wigs, and black gowns. Now I can’t do it. I haven’t got the account-book, I have none of the tax-gathering elements in my composition, I am not respectable, and I don’t want to be. Odd perhaps, but so it is!”

It was idle to say more, so I gave up in despair, and we joined Ada and Richard, walking ahead of us. Mr. Skimpole had been over the Hall in the morning and whimsically described the family pictures as we walked. There were such portentous shepherdesses among the past Ladies Dedlock, he told us, that peaceful crooks became weapons of assault in their hands; and a Sir Somebody Dedlock had a battle, volumes of smoke, flashes of lightning and a town on fire behind him.

I was uneasy now at any reference to the name of Dedlock, and felt it a relief when Richard, with an exclamation of surprise, hurried away to meet a stranger coming slowly towards us.

“Dear me!” said Mr. Skimpole. “Vholes!”

We asked if that were a friend of Richard’s.

“Friend and legal adviser,” said Mr. Skimpole. “Now, my dear Miss Summerson, if you want common sense, responsibility, and respectability, all united – Vholes is the man. When Richard left our friend Kenge, he took up, I believe, with Vholes. Indeed, I know he did, because I introduced them.”

“Had you known him long?” asked Ada.

“Vholes? My dear Miss Clare, I had the same acquaintance with him which I have had with several gentlemen of his profession. He had done something or other in a very civil manner – taken proceedings, I think is the expression, against me. Somebody was so good as to step in and pay the money – something and fourpence; I forget the pounds and shillings – and after that I brought them together. Vholes asked me for the introduction. Now I come to think of it,” he said with his frankest smile, “Vholes bribed me, perhaps? He gave me something and called it commission. Was it a five-pound note? Do you know, I think it must have been!”

Richard came back to us in an excited state, introducing Mr. Vholes – a sallow man with pinched lips and a red eruption here and there upon his face, tall and thin, about fifty years, high-shouldered, and stooping. Dressed in black and buttoned to the chin, he had a lifeless manner and a slow, fixed way of looking at Richard.

“I hope I don’t disturb you, ladies,” said Mr. Vholes. “I arranged with Mr. Carstone that he should always know when his cause was in the Chancellor’s paper, and being informed by one of my clerks last night that it stood, rather unexpectedly, in the paper for tomorrow, I came down in the coach to confer with him.”

“Yes,” said Richard, flushed, and looking triumphantly at Ada and me, “we don’t do these things in the old slow way. We spin along now! Mr. Vholes, we must hire something to get over to the post, and catch the mail tonight!”

“Anything you please, sir,” returned Mr. Vholes.

“Let me see,” said Richard, looking at his watch. “If I run down to the Dedlock Arms, and get my luggage, and order a gig, or a chaise, we shall have an hour before starting. I’ll come back to tea. Cousin Ada, will you and Esther take care of Mr. Vholes while I am gone?”

He was away directly, and was lost in the dusk of evening. We walked towards the house.

“Is Mr. Carstone’s presence necessary tomorrow, Sir?” said I. “Can it do any good?”

“No, miss,” Mr. Vholes replied. “I am not aware that it can. But Mr. Carstone has laid down the principle of watching his own interests, and when a client lays down his own principle, it devolves upon me to carry it out. I wish in business to be exact and open. I am a widower with three daughters and my desire is so to discharge the duties of life as to leave them a good name. This appears to be a pleasant spot, miss.”

I assented.

“I have the privilege of supporting an aged father in the Vale of Taunton and I admire that country very much. I had no idea there was anything so attractive here. My health is not good (my digestion being much impaired), and if I had only myself to consider, I should take refuge in rural habits. But with my three daughters and my aged father, I cannot afford to be selfish. It is indispensable that the mill should be always going.”

It required some attention to hear him on account of his low voice and lifeless manner. We arrived at Mr. Boythorn’s house, where the tea-table was awaiting us. Richard hurried in shortly afterwards, and leaning over Mr. Vholes’s chair, whispered something. Mr. Vholes replied aloud – or as nearly aloud I suppose as he had ever replied to anything – “You will drive, sir? It is all the same to me, sir. I am quite at your service.”

We understood that Mr. Skimpole was to occupy the two places on the coach which had been already paid for the next morning. Both Ada and I were in low spirits and very sorry to part with Richard. But Richard’s high spirits carrying everything before them, we all went out to the hill above the village, where he had ordered a gig to wait and where we found a man with a lantern standing at the head of the gaunt pale horse that had been harnessed to it.

I never shall forget those two seated side by side in the lantern’s light, Richard all flush and laughter, with the reins in his hand; Mr. Vholes quite still, black-gloved, and buttoned up, looking at him as if he were looking at his prey. I can see the whole picture of the warm dark night, the dusty road closed in by hedgerows and high trees, the gaunt pale horse, and the carriage driving away at speed.

My dear girl told me that night how Richard’s being thereafter prosperous or ruined could only make this difference to her – that the more he needed love from one unchanging heart, the more love that unchanging heart would give him. He thought of her through his present errors, and she would think of him at all times – never of herself if she could devote herself to him, never of her own delights if she could minister to his.

And she kept her word?

I look along the road before me, where the journey’s end is growing visible; and true and good above the dead sea of the Chancery suit, I think I see my darling.

Chapter 38

A Struggle

When we returned to Bleak House, we were received with an overpowering welcome. I was perfectly restored to health, and finding my housekeeping keys laid ready for me in my room, rang myself in with a merry little peal.

“Once more, duty, Esther,” said I, “and if you are not overjoyed to do it cheerfully and contentedly, you ought to be!”

The first few mornings involved so much bustle and business, settlements of accounts, repeated journeys to the growlery and rearrangements of cupboards, that I had not a moment’s leisure. But when everything was in order, I paid a short visit to London – a visit which something in the letter I had destroyed at Chesney Wold induced me to take.

I made Caddy the pretext for this visit and wrote her a note asking the favour of her company on a little business expedition. Leaving home very early, I got to London by stage-coach in good time.

Caddy, who had not seen me since her wedding-day, was so glad and so affectionate that I was half inclined to fear I should make her husband jealous. But he was just as good to me.

The elder Mr. Turveydrop was in bed, I found, and Caddy was mixing his chocolate, which a melancholy little apprentice-boy – it seemed curious to be apprenticed to the trade of dancing – was waiting to carry upstairs. Her father-in-law was extremely kind and considerate, Caddy told me, and they lived most happily together. (In other words, the old gentleman had all the good things and the good lodging, while she and her husband were poked into two corner rooms over the Mews.)

“And how is your mama, Caddy?” said I.

“Why, I hear of her, Esther,” replied Caddy, “through Pa, but I see very little of her. We are good friends, I am glad to say, but Ma thinks there is something absurd in my having married a dancing-master, and she is afraid of its extending to her.”

It struck me that if Mrs. Jellyby had discharged her own natural duties before she swept the horizon with a telescope in search of others, she would have taken the best precautions against becoming absurd; but I kept this to myself.

“And your papa, Caddy?”

“He comes here every evening, and is so fond of sitting in the corner there that it’s a treat to see him.”

“And you, Caddy,” said I, “you are always busy, I’ll be bound?”

“I am indeed,” returned Caddy, “for I am qualifying myself to give lessons. Prince’s health is not strong, and I want to assist him. What with

schools, and classes, and private pupils, and the apprentices, he really has too much to do, poor fellow!”

I asked Caddy if there were many apprentices.

“Four,” said Caddy. “They are very good children; only when they get together they *will* play instead of attending to their work. So the little boy you saw just now waltzes by himself in the kitchen, and we distribute the others over the house to practise their steps. To save expense,” she continued, “I am learning the piano, and the kit. If Ma had been like anybody else, I might have had some musical knowledge. However, I have a good ear, and I am used to drudgery – I have to thank Ma for that, at all events – and where there’s a will there’s a way, you know.”

With this, Caddy laughingly sat down at a little jingling square piano and rattled off a quadrille with great spirit. Then she blushing said, “Don’t laugh at me, please; that’s a dear girl!”

I would sooner have cried, but I did neither. I praised her with all my heart. For limited though her ambitions were, she had struck out a natural, wholesome, loving course of industry that was quite as good as a mission.

“My dear,” said Caddy, delighted, “you can’t think how you cheer me. I owe you, you don’t know how much. You recollect that first night, when I was so unpolite and inky? Who would have thought, then, of my ever teaching people to dance!”

Before we went out, we saw the apprentices at work. They were the queerest little people. Besides the melancholy boy, there were two other boys and one dirty little limp girl in a gauzy dress. Such a precocious little girl, with a dowdy bonnet, who brought her shoes in an old threadbare velvet reticule; such shabby little boys, with string and marbles in their pockets, and the most untidy legs and feet.

I asked Caddy what had made their parents choose this profession for them. Caddy said she didn’t know; perhaps they were designed for teachers, perhaps for the stage. They were all people in humble circumstances, and the melancholy boy’s mother kept a ginger-beer shop.

We danced for an hour with great gravity, the melancholy child doing wonders with his lower half, in which there appeared to be some enjoyment though it never rose above his waist. Caddy had acquired an agreeable grace and self-possession of her own, while her husband played the music. The affectation of the gauzy child, and her condescension to the boys, was a sight.

When the practice was finished, Caddy’s husband got ready to go out of town to a school, and Caddy got ready to go out with me.

“Old Mr. Turveydrop is so sorry,” she said, “that he has not finished dressing yet and cannot have the pleasure of seeing you before you go. You are such a favourite of his, Esther. It takes him a long time to dress because he has a reputation to support. You can’t think how kind he is to Pa. He talks to him of an evening about the Prince Regent, and I never saw Pa so interested.”

I asked Caddy if he induced her papa to talk much.

“No,” said Caddy, “but Pa greatly admires him, and listens, and likes it. Of course I am aware that Pa has hardly any claims to deportment, but they

get on together delightfully. I never saw Pa take snuff before, but he takes one pinch out of Mr. Turveydrop's box regularly and keeps putting it to his nose and taking it away again all evening."

That old Mr. Turveydrop should have come to the rescue of Mr. Jellyby appeared to me to be one of the pleasantest of oddities.

"As to Peepy," said Caddy with a little hesitation, "whom I was most afraid of as an inconvenience to Mr. Turveydrop – next to having any family of my own, Esther – the kindness of the old gentleman is beyond everything. He asks to see him, my dear! He lets Peepy take the newspaper up to him in bed; he gives him the crusts of his toast to eat; he sends him on little errands about the house; he tells him to come to me for sixpences. In short," said Caddy cheerily, "I am a very fortunate girl. Where are we going, Esther?"

"To the Old Street Road," said I, "where I have a few words to say to the solicitor's clerk who met me at the coach-office on the very day when I came to London and first saw you, my dear."

To the Old Street Road we went, to Mrs. Guppy's residence. Mrs. Guppy was an old lady in a large cap, with rather a red nose and an unsteady eye, but smiling all over. Her close little sitting-room was prepared for a visit, and her son was sitting at a table reading law-papers with his forefinger to his forehead.

"Miss Summerson," said Mr. Guppy, rising, "this is indeed an oasis. Mother, be so good as to put a chair for the other lady."

Mrs. Guppy, smiling incessantly, did as her son requested and then sat down in a corner.

"I took the liberty of sending you a note, sir," said I.

Mr. Guppy acknowledged this by taking it out of his breast-pocket, putting it to his lips, and returning it to his pocket with a bow. His mother was so diverted that she rolled her head as she smiled and made a silent appeal to Caddy with her elbow.

"Could I speak to you alone for a moment?" said I.

At this Mrs. Guppy rolled her head, and shook it, and put her handkerchief to her mouth, and was so unspeakably entertained altogether that it was with some difficulty that she could marshal Caddy into the adjoining room.

"Miss Summerson," said Mr. Guppy, "you will excuse the waywardness of a parent ever mindful of a son's 'appiness. My mother, though highly exasperating to the feelings, is actuated by maternal dictates."

I now put up my veil. I could hardly have believed that anybody could in a moment have turned so red or changed so much as Mr. Guppy did.

"I asked the favour of seeing you for a few moments here," said I, "in preference to calling at Mr. Kenge's, because I feared I might otherwise cause you some embarrassment, Mr. Guppy."

I caused him embarrassment enough as it was. I never saw such faltering and confusion.

“Miss Summerson,” stammered Mr. Guppy, “I – I beg your pardon, but in our profession we – we find it necessary to be explicit. There was an occasion, miss, when I – when I made a declaration which—”

Something seemed to rise in his throat that he could not swallow. He coughed, made faces, looked all round the room, coughed some more, and fluttered his papers.

“A giddy sensation has come upon me, miss,” he explained, “which rather knocks me over. I – er – by George! I – I think, miss – dear me, something bronchial – er – I think you was so good on that occasion as to repel that declaration. You – you wouldn’t perhaps object to admitting that?”

“There can be no doubt,” said I, “that I declined your proposal without any reservation, Mr. Guppy.”

“Thank you, miss,” he returned. “Er – perhaps you wouldn’t perhaps be offended if I was to mention – not that it’s necessary – but if I was to mention that such declaration on my part was terminated?”

“I quite understand that,” said I. “I admit it fully and freely.”

“Thank you,” returned Mr. Guppy. “Very honourable, I am sure. I regret that my arrangements in life, combined with circumstances over which I have no control, will put it out of my power ever to renew that offer, but it will ever be a retrospect entwined – er – with friendship’s bowers.”

“I may now perhaps mention what I wished to say to you?”

“I shall be honoured, I am sure,” said Mr. Guppy.

“You were so good as to imply, on that occasion—”

“Excuse me, miss,” said Mr. Guppy, “but we had better not travel out of the record into implication. I cannot admit that I implied anything.”

“You said on that occasion,” I recommenced, “that you might possibly have the means of advancing my interests by making discoveries about me, as an orphan girl, indebted for everything to the benevolence of Mr. Jarndyce. Now, I have come to beg you, Mr. Guppy, to have the kindness to relinquish all idea of so serving me. I have thought of this since I have been ill. I have decided, in case you should at any time recall that purpose, to come to you and assure you that you could make no discovery about me that would do me the least service or give me the least pleasure. I am acquainted with my personal history, and I can tell you that you never can advance my welfare by such means. I beg you to lay this project aside, for my peace.”

“I am bound to confess,” said Mr. Guppy, “that you express yourself, miss, with good sense and right feeling. If I mistook any intentions on your part just now, I apologise.”

“If you will allow me to finish what I have to say,” I went on, “you will do me a kindness, sir. I come to you privately because you spoke to me about the matter in a confidence which I have really wished to respect. I hope you will agree to my entreaty.”

I must do Mr. Guppy the justice of saying that he looked ashamed and very earnest when he replied with a burning face, “Upon my word and honour, Miss Summerson, I’ll act according to your wish! I’ll take my oath to it if you like. In what I promise touching the matters now in question,” he

continued rapidly, "I speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so—"

"I am quite satisfied," said I, rising, "and I thank you very much. Caddy, my dear, I am ready!"

Mr. Guppy's mother returned with Caddy, and we took our leave. Mr. Guppy saw us to the door with the air of a sleep-walker; and we left him there, staring.

But in a minute he came after us down the street without any hat, and stopped us, saying fervently, "Miss Summerson, upon my honour and soul, you may depend upon me!"

"I do," said I, "quite confidently."

"I beg your pardon, miss," said Mr. Guppy, "but this lady being present – your own witness – it might be a satisfaction to your mind (which I should wish to set at rest) if you was to repeat those admissions."

"Well, Caddy," said I, turning to her, "perhaps you will not be surprised when I tell you, my dear, that there never has been any engagement—"

"No promise of marriage whatsoever," suggested Mr. Guppy.

"No promise of marriage whatsoever," said I, "between this gentleman—"

"William Guppy, of Penton Place, Pentonville."

"Between this gentleman, Mr. William Guppy, of Penton Place, Pentonville, and myself."

"Thank you, miss," said Mr. Guppy. "Er – excuse me – lady's name?"

I gave it.

"Thank you. Much obliged."

He ran home and came running back again.

"Touching that matter, you know, I really and truly am very sorry that circumstances over which I have no control should prevent a renewal of what was terminated some time back," said Mr. Guppy forlornly and despondently, "but it couldn't be."

I replied it certainly could not. The subject did not admit of a doubt. He thanked me and ran to his mother's – and back again.

"It's very honourable of you, miss," said Mr. Guppy. "Upon my soul, you may rely upon me in every respect save and except the tender passion only!"

The struggle in Mr. Guppy's breast and the oscillations it occasioned him between his mother's door and us were sufficiently conspicuous to make us hurry away. I did so with a lightened heart; but when we last looked back, Mr. Guppy was still oscillating in the same troubled state of mind.

Chapter 39

Attorney and Client

The name of Mr. Vholes is inscribed upon a door-post in Symond's Inn, Chancery Lane – a little, pale, wall-eyed, woebegone building. Mr. Vholes's office is squeezed up in a corner and blinks at a dead wall. Three feet of knotty-floored dark passage bring the client to Mr. Vholes's jet-black door.

Mr. Vholes's chambers are on so small a scale that one clerk can open the door without getting off his stool, while the other has equal facilities for poking the fire. An unwholesome smell of mutton is due to the nightly consumption of candles and to the keeping of parchment skins in greasy drawers. The two chimneys smoke, and there is a loose surface of soot everywhere, and the dull cracked windows are always dirty and always shut.

Mr. Vholes is a very respectable man. He never takes any pleasure, which is a mark of respectability. He is reserved and serious, which is another mark of respectability. His digestion is impaired, which is highly respectable. And he has three daughters. And his father is dependent on him in the Vale of Taunton.

The one great principle of the English law is to make business for itself. There is no other principle so consistently maintained through all its narrow turnings. Viewed by this light it becomes a coherent scheme and not the monstrous maze most people think it. If they perceive that its grand principle is to make business for itself at their expense, surely they will cease to grumble.

But not perceiving this quite plainly, most people do grumble. Then this respectability of Mr. Vholes is brought into powerful play. "The social system cannot afford," Mr. Kenge will say, "to lose an order of men like Mr. Vholes. Diligent, persevering, steady, acute in business. My dear sir, I understand your feelings; but I can never raise my voice for the demolition of a class of men like Mr. Vholes."

Some authorities will remark that they don't know what this age is coming to, that we are plunging down precipices, that these changes are death to people like Vholes – a man of undoubted respectability, with a father in the Vale of Taunton, and three daughters at home. Take a few steps more in this direction, say they, and what is to become of Vholes's father? Is he to perish? And what of Vholes's daughters? In a word, Mr. Vholes is continually doing duty, like a piece of timber, to shore up some decayed foundation that has become a pitfall and a nuisance.

The Chancellor is "up" for the long vacation. Mr. Vholes, and his young client, and several blue bags hastily stuffed, have returned to the official den. Mr. Vholes, quiet and unmoved in his respectability, takes off his close black gloves as if he were skinning his hands, lifts off his tight hat and sits down at his desk. The client throws his hat and gloves anywhere, without caring where

they go; flings himself into a chair, half sighing and half groaning; rests his aching head upon his hand and looks the portrait of young despair.

“Again nothing done!” says Richard.

“Don’t say nothing done, sir,” returns the placid Vholes. “That is scarcely fair, sir!”

“Why, what *is* done?” says Richard gloomily.

“That may not be the whole question,” returns Vholes. “The question may be, what is doing?”

“And what is doing?” asks the moody client.

“A good deal is doing, sir. We have put our shoulders to the wheel, Mr. Carstone, and the wheel is going round.”

“How am I to get through the next four or five accursed months?” exclaims the young man, rising from his chair and walking about the room.

“Mr. C.,” returns Vholes, following him with his eyes wherever he goes, “your spirits are hasty. Excuse me if I recommend you not to be so impetuous, not to wear yourself out so. You should have more patience.”

“I ought to imitate you, in fact, Mr. Vholes?” says Richard, sitting down again with an impatient laugh.

“Sir,” returns Vholes, always looking at the client as if he were making a lingering meal of him with his eyes as well as with his professional appetite, “Sir, I should not have the presumption to propose myself as a model for your imitation. But I will acknowledge that I should like to impart to you a little of my – come, sir, you call it insensibility, and I have no objection – a little of my insensibility.”

“Mr. Vholes,” explains the client, somewhat abashed, “I did not mean to accuse you of insensibility.”

“I think you did, sir, very naturally,” returns the equable Vholes. “It is my duty to attend to your interests with a cool head, and I can quite understand that to your excited feelings I may appear insensible. My daughters may know me better; my aged father may know me better. But they have known me much longer than you have. Your interests demand that I should be cool and methodical, Mr. Carstone.”

Mr. Vholes fixes his charmed gaze again on his young client and proceeds in his half-audible voice, “What are you to do, sir, you inquire, during the vacation? I should hope you gentlemen of the army may find many means of amusing yourselves. If you had asked me what I was to do during the vacation, I could have answered you readily. I am to be found here, day by day, attending to your interests. That is my duty, Mr. C. Other professional men go out of town. I don’t.”

“I am perfectly aware, Mr. Vholes,” says Richard, more good-humouredly, “that you are the most reliable fellow in the world. But put yourself in my case, dragging on this dislocated life, sinking deeper and deeper into difficulty every day, continually hoping and continually disappointed, with no change for the better, and you will find it a dark-looking case sometimes, as I do.”

“You know,” says Mr. Vholes, “that I never give hopes, sir. I told you that from the first, Mr. C. Particularly in a case like this, where the greater part of the costs comes out of the estate, I never give hopes. It might seem as if costs were my object. Still, when you say there is no change for the better, I must deny that.”

“Aye?” returns Richard, brightening.

“Mr. Carstone, you are separately represented now, and no longer hidden and lost in the interests of others. *That’s* something. The suit does not sleep; we wake it up, we walk it about. *That’s* something. It’s not all Jarndyce. *That’s* something. Nobody has it all his own way now, sir. And *that’s* something, surely.”

Richard, his face flushing suddenly, strikes the desk with his clenched hand.

“Mr. Vholes! If any man had told me when I first went to John Jarndyce’s house that he was anything but a disinterested friend – I could have found no words strong enough to repel the slander. So little did I know of the world! Whereas now he has become to me the embodiment of the suit; the more I suffer, the more indignant I am with him; every new delay and disappointment is only a new injury from John Jarndyce’s hand.”

“No, no,” says Vholes. “Don’t say so. We ought to have patience. Besides, I never disparage, sir.”

“Mr. Vholes,” returns the angry client. “You know as well as I that he would have strangled the suit if he could.”

“He certainly was not active in it,” Mr. Vholes admits with an appearance of reluctance. “However, he might have had amiable intentions. Who can read the heart, Mr. C.!”

“Are not our interests conflicting? Tell me that!” says Richard.

“Mr. C.,” returns Vholes, never winking his hungry eyes, “I should be wanting in my duty as your adviser, if I said your interests are identical with the interests of Mr. Jarndyce. They are no such thing, sir.”

“Of course they are not!” cries Richard. “You found that out long ago.”

“Mr. C.,” returns Vholes, “I wish to say no more of any third party than is necessary. When Mr. Skimpole did me the honour, sir, of bringing us together, I mentioned to you that I could offer no advice while your interests were entrusted to another member of the profession. You, sir, thought fit to withdraw your interests from Kenge and Carboy’s office and to offer them to me. Those interests are now paramount in this office. During the long vacation, sir, I shall devote my leisure to studying your interests closely; and when I ultimately congratulate you, sir, on your accession to fortune, you will owe me nothing beyond whatever little balance may be then outstanding of the costs as between solicitor and client not included in the taxed costs allowed out of the estate. I pretend to no claim upon you, Mr. C., but for the zealous and active discharge of my professional duty.”

Vholes finally adds that perhaps Mr. C. will favour him with an order on his agent for twenty pounds on account.

“For there have been many little consultations of late, sir,” observes Vholes, turning over the leaves of his diary, “and these things mount up.”

The client, with his vague hopes rekindled, writes the draft, not without perplexed consideration and calculation of the date it may bear. All the while, Vholes looks at him attentively.

Lastly, the client, shaking hands, beseeches Mr. Vholes to do his utmost to “pull him through” the Court of Chancery. Mr. Vholes, who never gives hopes, answers with a smile, “You will always find me here, sir, with my shoulder to the wheel.”

Thus they part. Richard, emerging from the heavy shade of Symond’s Inn into the sunshine, walks thoughtfully on to Lincoln’s Inn, and passes under the shadow of the trees there. On many such loungers have the speckled shadows of those trees fallen; on the bent head, the bitten nail, the lingering step, the purposeless and dreamy air, the life turned sour. This lounge is not shabby yet, but that may come.

As Richard saunters away, his heart is heavy with corroding care and doubt, yet he may feel some sorrowful wonder when he recalls how different his first visit there, how different all the colours of his mind. But injustice breeds injustice; the fighting with shadows necessitates the setting up of substances to combat; from the impalpable suit which no man alive can understand, it has become a gloomy relief to turn to the palpable figure of the friend who would have saved him from this ruin, and make *him* his enemy.

Two pairs of eyes look after him, as, biting his nails and brooding, he crosses the square and is swallowed up by shadow. Mr. Guppy and Mr. Weevle have been leaning in conversation against the low stone parapet under the trees.

“William,” says Mr. Weevle, “there’s combustion going on there! It’s not spontaneous, but it’s smouldering combustion, it is.”

“Ah!” says Mr. Guppy. “He wouldn’t keep out of Jarndyce, and I suppose he’s head over heels in debt. I never knew much of him. Well, Tony, that as I was mentioning is what they’re up to.”

Mr. Guppy resettles himself against the parapet, resuming a conversation of interest.

“They are still up to it, sir,” says Mr. Guppy, “still examining papers, still going over the heaps of Krook’s rubbish. At this rate they’ll be at it these seven years.”

“And Small is helping?”

“Small left us at a week’s notice.”

“You haven’t looked in at all?”

“Tony,” says Mr. Guppy, a little disconcerted, “I don’t greatly relish the house, except in your company, and therefore I have not; and therefore I proposed this little appointment for our fetching away your things. There goes the hour! Tony—” Mr. Guppy becomes mysteriously eloquent –

“circumstances over which I have no control have made a melancholy alteration in my most cherished plans and in that unrequited image which I formerly mentioned to you. That image is shattered. My only wish now in

connexion with those objects which I had an idea of carrying out with your aid is to let 'em alone and bury 'em in oblivion. Do you think it possible, Tony, that he put those letters away anywhere, after you saw him alive, and that they were not destroyed that night?"

Mr. Weevle reflects. Shakes his head.

"Tony," says Mr. Guppy as they walk towards the court, "without entering into further explanations, I may repeat that the idol is laid low. I have no purpose now but burial in oblivion. If you was to tell me with a wink or a nod that you saw lying anywhere in your late lodgings any papers that looked like the papers in question, I would pitch them into the fire, sir."

Mr. Weevle nods. Mr. Guppy, much elevated in his own opinion by these observations, accompanies his friend with dignity to the court.

Never has the court been so full of gossip. Every morning at eight, the elder Mr. Smallweed is carried into the rag and bottle shop, accompanied by Mrs. Smallweed, Judy, and Bart; and there they remain until nine at night, rummaging and searching, digging and delving among the treasures of the late lamented. What those treasures are, they keep so secret that the court is maddened. It imagines guineas pouring out of tea-pots, and mattresses stuffed with bank-notes. Twice when the dustman is called in to carry off a cartload of old paper and broken bottles, the whole court assembles and pries into the baskets as they come forth. As Mrs. Piper and Mrs. Perkins now tell Mr. Weevle, the court is in one continual ferment.

Mr. Weevle and Mr. Guppy, with every eye in the court upon them, knock at the closed door of the late lamented's house. Contrary to the court's expectation, they are admitted and are immediately considered to mean no good.

The shutters are closed all over the house, and the ground-floor is dark enough to require candles. Introduced into the back shop by Mr. Smallweed the younger, they can at first see nothing save darkness and shadows; but they gradually discern the elder Mr. Smallweed seated in his chair upon the brink of a well of waste-paper, Judy groping therein, and Mrs. Smallweed nearby snowed up in a heap of paper fragments. They are all blackened with dust and dirt and present a fiendish appearance; while the room is more littered and dirtier, if possible, than of old. It is ghostly with traces of its dead inhabitant and even his chalked writing on the wall.

"Aha!" croaks the old gentleman. "How de do! Come to fetch your property, Mr. Weevle? That's well. Ha! Ha! We should have been forced to sell you up, sir, if you had left it here much longer. Glad to see you!"

Mr. Weevle, thanking him, looks around. So does Mr. Guppy; who starts at seeing Mr. Tulkinghorn standing in the darkness opposite with his hands behind him.

"Gentleman so kind as to act as my solicitor," says Grandfather Smallweed.

Mr. Guppy, slightly nudging his friend to take another look around, makes a shuffling bow to Mr. Tulkinghorn, who returns it with an easy, amused nod.

“A good deal of property here, sir, I should say,” Mr. Guppy observes to Mr. Smallweed.

“Rags and rubbish, my dear friend! Rags and rubbish! We are trying to make out an inventory of what’s worth anything to sell. But we haven’t come to much as yet!”

Mr. Weevle’s eye has again gone round the room and come back. “Well, sir,” says Mr. Weevle. “We won’t intrude any longer if you’ll allow us to go upstairs.”

“Anywhere, my dear sir, anywhere!”

As they go upstairs, Mr. Guppy lifts his eyebrows inquiringly and looks at Tony. Tony shakes his head. They find the old room very dull and dismal. They have a great disinclination to touch any object, and do not prolong their visit, packing up with all possible speed and never speaking above a whisper.

“Look here,” says Tony, recoiling. “Here’s that horrible cat coming in!”

Mr. Guppy retreats behind a chair. “Small told me she went leaping and tearing about that night like a dragon, and got out on the house-top, and roamed about up there for a fortnight, and then came tumbling down the chimney. Did you ever see such a brute? Shoo! Get out, you goblin!”

Lady Jane in the doorway, with her tiger snarl, shows no intention of obeying; but when Mr. Tulkinghorn stumbles over her, she spits and runs upstairs.

“Mr. Guppy,” says Mr. Tulkinghorn, “could I have a word with you?”

Mr. Guppy is engaged in collecting the Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty from the wall. “Sir,” he returns, reddening, “I wish to act with courtesy towards every member of the profession, and especially, I am sure, towards a member so distinguished as yourself. Still, Mr. Tulkinghorn, sir, I must ask that if you have any word with me, it is spoken in the presence of my friend.”

“The matter is not of that much consequence, Mr. Guppy.” Mr. Tulkinghorn pauses here to smile a dull and rusty smile. “You are a fortunate young man, sir. You have high friends, free admission to great houses, and access to elegant ladies!”

Mr. Guppy says, reddening still more, “Sir, if I attend to my profession and do what is right by Kenge and Carboy, my friends are of no consequence to them nor to anyone else. I am not under any obligation to explain myself further.”

“Quite so,” says Mr. Tulkinghorn with a calm nod. “Very good; I see by these portraits that you take a strong interest in the fashionable great, sir?”

He addresses this to the astounded Tony, who admits it.

Mr. Tulkinghorn puts his glasses to his eyes. “Who is this? ‘Lady Dedlock.’ Ha! A very good likeness in its way, but it wants force of character. Good day to you, gentlemen; good day!”

When he has walked out, Mr. Guppy, in a great perspiration, hastily takes down the rest of the Galaxy Gallery.

“Tony,” he says hurriedly, “let us be quick in getting out of this place. I cannot conceal from you, Tony, that between myself and one of the members of a swan-like aristocracy whom I now hold in my hand, there has been some

communication. I can say no more due to the oath I have taken, the shattered idol, and circumstances over which I have no control. I charge you as a friend to bury it in oblivion without a word of inquiry!”

This charge Mr. Guppy delivers in a state little short of lunacy, while his friend appears dazed down to his whiskers.

Chapter 40

National and Domestic

England has been in a dreadful state for some weeks. The Prime Minister Lord Coodle has gone out, Sir Thomas Doodle won't come in, and there being nobody in Great Britain (to speak of) except Coodle and Doodle, there has been no government. It is amazing that England has not appeared to care very much about it, but has gone on eating and drinking just the same as ever.

At last Sir Thomas Doodle has not only condescended to come in, but has done it handsomely, bringing with him all his nephews, his male cousins, and his brothers-in-law. So there is hope for the old ship yet. Doodle has found that he must throw himself upon the country, and campaign, chiefly in the form of sovereigns and beer. The London season comes to a sudden end, through all the Doodleites and Coodleites dispersing to assist in those exercises.

Hence Mrs. Rouncewell, housekeeper at Chesney Wold, foresees that the family may shortly be expected, together with a pretty large party of cousins and others who can in any way assist the great Constitutional work. And hence the stately old dame proceeds up and down the staircases, and along the galleries and passages, and through the rooms, to witness that everything is ready, floors rubbed bright, carpets spread, curtains shaken out, beds puffed, and kitchen cleared for action.

This summer evening, the preparations are complete. Dreary and solemn the old house looks, with no inhabitants except the pictured forms upon the walls. Through some of the fiery windows, which are beautiful from outside, and set, at this sunset hour, not in dull-grey stone but in a glorious house of gold, the light pours in, rich, lavish, overflowing. Then do the frozen Dedlocks thaw. Strange movements come upon their features as the shadows of leaves play there.

But the fire of the sun is dying. Shadow slowly mounts the walls, bringing the Dedlocks down like age and death. And now, upon my Lady's picture over the great chimney-piece, a weird shade falls from some old tree, as if a great arm held a veil or hood, watching an opportunity to draw it over her. Higher and darker rises the shadow on the wall – now a red gloom on the ceiling – now the fire is out.

Light mists arise, and the dew falls, and the sweet garden scents are heavy in the air. Now the woods settle into great masses as if they were each one profound tree. And now the moon rises to separate them, and to glimmer here and there in horizontal lines behind their stems, and to make the avenue a pavement of light among high cathedral arches fantastically broken.

Now the moon is high; and the great house is like a body without life. Now is the time for shadow, when every corner is a cavern and every

downward step a pit, when the stained glass is reflected in pale and faded hues upon the floors, when the armour has dull lights upon it not easily to be distinguished from stealthy movement, and when barred helmets are frightfully suggestive of heads inside. But of all the shadows in Chesney Wold, the shadow in the long drawing-room upon my Lady's picture is the first to come, its threatening hands raised up and menacing the handsome face.

"She is not well, ma'am," says a groom in Mrs. Rouncewell's room.

"My Lady not well! What's the matter?"

"Why, my Lady has been poorly, ma'am, since she was last here, and has kept her room a good deal."

"Chesney Wold, Thomas," rejoins the housekeeper with proud complacency, "will set my Lady up! There is no finer air in the world!"

Thomas may have his own personal opinions on this subject, but he forbears to express them and retires to the servants' hall. This groom is the pilot-fish before the nobler shark. Next evening, down come Sir Leicester and my Lady with their retinue, and down come the cousins and others from all the points of the compass. Thenceforth for some weeks backward and forward rush mysterious men with no names, who fly about all those parts of the country on which Doodle is at present throwing himself.

On these national occasions Sir Leicester finds the cousins useful. A better man than the Honourable Bob Stables to meet the Hunt at dinner, there could not possibly be. Better got-up gentlemen than the other cousins, to ride over to polling-booths and hustings, it would be hard to find. Volumnia is a little dim, but she is of the true descent; and there are many who appreciate her sprightly conversation, her French conundrums so old as to have become in the cycles of time almost new again. On these national occasions dancing may be a patriotic service, and Volumnia is constantly seen hopping about for the good of an ungrateful country.

My Lady takes no great pains to entertain the numerous guests, and being still unwell, rarely appears until late in the day. But at all the dismal dinners, leaden lunches, basilisk balls, and other melancholy pageants, her mere appearance is a relief. As to Sir Leicester, he is in a state of sublime satisfaction; he moves among the company, a magnificent refrigerator.

Daily the cousins trot away to hustings and polling-booths, and daily bring back reports on which Sir Leicester holds forth after dinner. Daily the restless men who have no occupation in life appear to be rather busy. Daily Volumnia has a little cousinly talk with Sir Leicester on the state of the nation, from which Sir Leicester concludes that Volumnia is a more reflecting woman than he had thought her.

"How are we getting on?" says Miss Volumnia, clasping her hands.

"Are we safe?"

The mighty business is nearly over by this time. Sir Leicester has just appeared in the long drawing-room after dinner, a bright star surrounded by clouds of cousins.

“Volumnia,” replies Sir Leicester, who has a list in his hand, “we are doing tolerably.”

“Only tolerably! At least there is no opposition to *you*,” Volumnia asserts with confidence.

“No, Volumnia. This distracted country has lost its senses in many respects, I grieve to say, but—”

“It is not so mad as that. I am glad to hear it!”

On Volumnia’s finishing the sentence, Sir Leicester graciously inclines his head. He seems to say to himself, “A sensible woman this.”

In fact, as to this question of opposition, Sir Leicester always delivers his own candidateship as a kind of handsome wholesale order to be promptly executed. Two other little seats that belong to him he treats as retail orders of less importance, merely sending down two men and signifying to the tradespeople, “You will have the goodness to make these materials into two Members of Parliament and to send them home when done.”

“I regret to say, Volumnia, that in many places the people have shown a bad spirit, and that this opposition to the government has been most determined.”

“W-r-retches!” says Volumnia.

“In many places I am shocked to have to inform you that the party has not triumphed without being put to an enormous expense,” says Sir Leicester, with swelling indignation. “Hundreds of thousands of pounds!”

If Volumnia has a fault, it is the fault of being a trifle too innocent for her age. Impelled by innocence, she asks, “What for?”

“Volumnia,” remonstrates Sir Leicester, with his utmost severity.

“No, no, I don’t mean what for,” cries Volumnia with her favourite little scream. “How stupid I am! I mean what a pity!” And she hastens to express her opinion that the shocking people ought to be tried as traitors and made to support the party.

“I am glad, Volumnia,” says Sir Leicester, “that you do mean ‘what a pity’. But as you asked me ‘what for?’ let me reply. For necessary expenses. And I trust to your good sense, Volumnia, not to pursue the subject, here or elsewhere.”

Sir Leicester feels it necessary to crush Volumnia’s enquiry because it is whispered abroad that these necessary expenses will, in some cases, be unpleasantly connected with the word *bribery*.

“I suppose,” observes Volumnia, having taken a little time to recover her spirits, “I suppose Mr. Tulkinghorn has been worked to death.”

“I don’t know why he should be,” says Sir Leicester. “He is not a candidate.”

Lady Dedlock, seated at an open window and looking out at the evening shadows, seems to attend since the lawyer’s name was mentioned.

A languid cousin with a moustache in a state of extreme debility now observes from his couch that man told him ya’sdy that Tulkinghorn had gone down t’ that iron place t’ give legal ’pinion ’bout something, and ’twould be

highly jawlly thing if Tulkinghorn should bring news that Coodle man was floored.

A footman with coffee informs Sir Leicester that Mr. Tulkinghorn has arrived and is taking dinner. My Lady turns her head, then looks out again as before.

Volumnia is charmed to hear that her delight is come. He is so original, such a stolid creature, knowing all sorts of things and never telling them! Volumnia is sure he must be a Freemason. These lively remarks the fair Dedlock delivers in her youthful manner.

“He has not been here once,” she adds, “since I came. I really had some thoughts of breaking my heart for the inconstant creature. I had almost made up my mind that he was dead.”

It may be the gathering gloom of evening, but a shade is on my Lady’s face, as if she thought, “I wish he were!”

“Mr. Tulkinghorn,” says Sir Leicester, “is always welcome here and always discreet. A very valuable person.”

The debilitated cousin supposes he is “normously rich.”

“He is, of course, handsomely paid,” says Sir Leicester, “and he associates almost on a footing of equality with the highest society.”

Everybody starts. For a gun is fired close by.

“Good gracious, what’s that?” cries Volumnia with her little withered scream.

“A rat,” says my Lady. “And they have shot him.”

Enter Mr. Tulkinghorn.

“Tulkinghorn,” says Sir Leicester. “How do you do?”

Mr. Tulkinghorn with his usual leisurely ease advances, bows to my Lady, shakes Sir Leicester’s hand, and subsides into the chair opposite the Baronet’s newspaper-table. Sir Leicester fears that my Lady, not being very well, will take cold at that open window. My Lady is obliged to him, but would rather sit there for the air. Sir Leicester rises, adjusts her scarf about her, and returns to his seat.

“Now,” says Sir Leicester. “How has that contest gone?”

“Oh, hollow from the beginning. Not a chance. They have brought in both their people. You are beaten out of all reason. Three to one.”

It is a part of Mr. Tulkinghorn’s mastery to have no political opinions; indeed, no opinions at all. Therefore he says “you” are beaten, and not “we.”

Sir Leicester is majestically angry. Volumnia never heard of such a thing.

“It’s the place, you know,” Mr. Tulkinghorn goes on, “where they wanted to put up Mrs. Rouncewell’s son.”

“A proposal which, as you informed me at the time, he had the becoming taste to decline,” observes Sir Leicester, “I cannot say that I approve of the sentiments expressed by Mr. Rouncewell when he was here, but there was a propriety in his decision which I am glad to acknowledge.”

“Ha!” says Mr. Tulkinghorn. “It did not prevent him from being very active in this election, though.”

Sir Leicester is distinctly heard to gasp. "Did I understand you? Did you say that Mr. Rouncewell had been very active in this election?"

"Uncommonly active."

"Against—"

"Oh, dear yes, against you. He is a very good speaker. Plain and emphatic. He made a damaging effect, and has great influence."

Sir Leicester is staring majestically.

"And he was much assisted," says Mr. Tulkinghorn, "by his son."

"The son who wished to marry the young woman in my Lady's service?"

"That son. He has but one."

"Then upon my honour," says Sir Leicester after a terrific pause, "upon my life, the floodgates of society are burst open, and the waters have – ah – obliterated the landmarks of the framework of the cohesion by which things are held together!"

General burst of cousinly indignation. Volumnia thinks it is really high time, you know, for somebody in power to step in and do something strong. Debilitated cousin thinks – country's going – Dayvil.

"I beg," says Sir Leicester, breathless, "that we may not comment further on this circumstance. My Lady, let me suggest in reference to that young woman—"

"I have no intention," observes my Lady from her window, "of parting with her."

"That was not my meaning," returns Sir Leicester. "I am glad to hear you say so. I would suggest that as you think her worthy of your patronage, you should exert your influence to keep her from these dangerous hands. You might point out to her that she probably would, in good time, find a husband at Chesney Wold."

These remarks he offers with his unvarying politeness and deference to his wife. She merely moves her head in reply. The moon is rising, and where she sits there is a little stream of cold pale light, in which her head is seen.

"It is worthy of remark," says Mr. Tulkinghorn, "that these people are, in their way, very proud."

"Proud?" Sir Leicester doubts his hearing.

"I should not be surprised if they abandoned the girl instead of her abandoning them, supposing she remained at Chesney Wold."

"Well!" says Sir Leicester tremulously. "You should know, Mr. Tulkinghorn. You have been among them."

"Why, Sir Leicester," returns the lawyer, "I could tell you a story – with Lady Dedlock's permission."

She nods, and Volumnia is enchanted. A story! Oh, a ghost in it, Volumnia hopes?

"No. Real flesh and blood, Miss Dedlock," says the lawyer. "Sir Leicester, these details have only lately become known to me. They exemplify what I have said. I suppress names for the present. Lady Dedlock will not think me ill-bred, I hope?"

By the light of the low fire, he can be seen looking towards the moonlight. By the light of the moon Lady Dedlock can be seen, perfectly still.

“A townsman of this Mrs. Rouncewell, a man in exactly parallel circumstances, had the good fortune to have a daughter who attracted the notice of a great lady. I speak of really a great lady, married to a gentleman of your position, Sir Leicester.”

Sir Leicester condescendingly says, “Yes, Mr. Tulkinghorn,” implying that then she must have appeared very considerable indeed in the eyes of an iron-master.

“The lady was wealthy and beautiful, and had a liking for the girl, and treated her with great kindness, and kept her always near her. Now this lady preserved a secret under all her greatness, which she had kept for many years. In fact, she had in early life been engaged to marry a young rake – a captain in the army who came to no good. She never did marry him, but she gave birth to a child of which he was the father.”

By the light of the fire he can be seen looking towards the moonlight. By the moonlight, Lady Dedlock can be seen in profile, perfectly still.

“The captain being dead, she believed herself safe; but a train of circumstances with which I need not trouble you led to discovery. As I heard it, they began in an imprudence on her own part one day when she was taken by surprise. There was great domestic trouble and amazement, you may suppose; I leave you to imagine, Sir Leicester, the husband’s grief. But that is not the point. When Mr. Rouncewell’s townsman heard of the disclosure, he no longer allowed the girl to be patronized and honoured by the lady. Such was his pride, that he indignantly took her away, as if from reproach and disgrace; as if the lady had been the commonest of commoners. That is the story. I hope Lady Dedlock will excuse its painful nature.”

Volumnia cannot believe there ever was any such lady and rejects the whole history. Sir Leicester thinks of Wat Tyler and the Peasants’ Revolt.

There is not much conversation in all, for it is late. Sir Leicester begs Mr. Tulkinghorn to ring for candles. The stream of moonlight has swelled into a lake, and then Lady Dedlock for the first time moves, and rises, coming forward to a table for a glass of water. Cousins, bat-like in the candle glare, crowd round to give it; Lady Dedlock, graceful, self-possessed, looked at by admiring eyes, passes slowly out of the long room.

Chapter 41

In Mr. Tulkinghorn's Room

Mr. Tulkinghorn arrives in his turret-room a little breathless, and with a satisfied expression. To say of a man so strictly self-repressed that he is triumphant would be to do him an injustice. He is sedately satisfied. Perhaps there is an increased sense of power upon him as he clasps his hands behind his back and walks noiselessly up and down.

There is a large writing-table in the room holding a pile of papers. The lamp is lighted, his reading-glasses lie upon the desk, and it would seem as though he had intended to give an hour or so to these documents before going to bed. But after a glance at them, he opens the French window and steps out upon the turret-top. There he again walks slowly up and down in the same attitude, subsiding from the story he has related downstairs.

Hosts of stars are visible tonight, though their brilliancy is eclipsed by the splendour of the moon. As he paces the roof-leads, he is suddenly stopped in passing his window by two eyes that meet his own across his room. He knows them well. The blood has not flushed into his face so suddenly and redly for many a long year, as when he recognizes Lady Dedlock.

He steps back into the room, and she comes in too, closing the door behind her. There is a wild disturbance – is it fear or anger? – in her eyes. In all else she looks as she looked downstairs two hours ago.

“Lady Dedlock?”

She does not speak at first, not even when she has slowly dropped into the easy-chair. They look at each other.

“Why have you told my story to so many persons?”

“Lady Dedlock, it was necessary for me to inform you that I knew it.”

“How long have you known it?”

“I have suspected it a long while – fully known it a little while.”

“Months?”

“Days.”

He stands before her with his usual formal politeness.

“Is this true concerning the poor girl?”

He slightly tilts his head, not quite understanding the question.

“You know what you related. Is it true? Do her friends know my story also? Is it the town-talk yet? Is it cried in the streets?”

So! Anger, and fear, and shame. What power this woman has to keep these raging passions down! Mr. Tulkinghorn's thoughts take such form as he looks at her, with his brows a hair's breadth more contracted than usual.

“No, Lady Dedlock. That was a hypothetical case. But it would be a real case if they knew – what we know.”

“Then they do not know it yet?”

“No.”

“Can I save the poor girl from injury before they know it?”

“Really, Lady Dedlock,” Mr. Tulkinghorn replies, “I cannot give a satisfactory opinion on that point.”

And he thinks, with attentive curiosity, as he watches the struggle in her breast, “The power and force of this woman are astonishing!”

“Sir,” she says, “I will make it plainer. I do not dispute your hypothetical case. I anticipated it, when I saw Mr. Rouncewell here. I knew very well that if he could have had the power of seeing me as I was, he would consider the poor girl tarnished by having been the subject of my patronage. But I have an interest in her, or I should rather say – no longer belonging to this place – I had, and if you can find so much consideration for me as to remember that, I will be very sensible of your mercy.”

Mr. Tulkinghorn, profoundly attentive, shrugs and contracts his eyebrows a little more.

“You have prepared me for my exposure, and I thank you for that too. Is there anything that you require of me? Is there any trouble that I can spare my husband in obtaining his release by certifying to the exactness of your discovery? I will write anything, here and now, that you will dictate. I am ready to do it.”

And she would do it, thinks the lawyer!

“I will not trouble you, Lady Dedlock. Pray spare yourself.”

“I have long expected this, as you know. I neither wish to spare myself nor to be spared. You can do nothing worse to me than you have done. Do what remains now.”

“Lady Dedlock, there is nothing to be done. I will take leave to say a few words when you have finished.”

They watch each other all this time, and the stars watch them both through the opened window. Away in the moonlight lie the woodland fields at rest, and the wide house is as quiet as the narrow grave. The grave! Where are the digger and the spade, this peaceful night, destined to add the last great secret to the many secrets of the Tulkinghorn existence?

“Of repentance or remorse or any feeling of mine,” Lady Dedlock proceeds, “I say not a word. It is not for your ears. Of other and very different things I come to speak to you. My jewels are all in their proper places of keeping. They will be found there. So, my dresses and my valuables. Some ready money I had with me, please to say, but no large amount. I did not wear my own dress, in order that I might avoid observation. I went to be lost from now on. Make this known. I leave no other charge with you.”

“Excuse me, Lady Dedlock,” says Mr. Tulkinghorn, unmoved. “I am not sure that I understand you. You want—”

“To be lost to all here. I leave Chesney Wold tonight. I go this hour.”

Mr. Tulkinghorn shakes his head.

“No, Lady Dedlock,” he very calmly replies.

“Do you know the relief that my disappearance will be? Have you forgotten the stain upon this place?”

“No, Lady Dedlock, not by any means.”

Without deigning to reply, she moves to the door when he says to her, without raising his voice, "Lady Dedlock, have the goodness to stop and hear me, or I shall ring the alarm-bell and rouse the house. And then I must speak out before every guest and servant, every man and woman, in it."

He has conquered her. She falters, trembles, and puts her hand confusedly to her head. Mr. Tulkinghorn motions to the chair. She hesitates, but he motions again, and she sits down.

"Lady Dedlock, because of my position, I must long have appeared in your eyes the natural person to make this discovery."

"Sir," she returns without looking up, "I had better have gone. I have no more to say."

"Excuse me, Lady Dedlock, but there is a little more to hear."

"I wish to hear it at the window, then. I can't breathe where I am."

As she walks that way he has an instant's misgiving that she may intend to leap over and strike her life out upon the terrace below. But a moment's observation of her figure as she stands in the window looking out at the stars reassures him. He stands a little behind her.

"Lady Dedlock, I have not yet been able to come to a decision about the course before me. I am not clear what to do or how to act next. I must request you, in the meantime, to keep your secret as you have kept it so long and not to wonder that I keep it too." He pauses. "You are honouring me with your attention?"

"I am."

"Thank you. The sole consideration in this unhappy case is Sir Leicester."

"Then why," she asks in a low voice, "do you detain me in his house?"

"Because he *is* the consideration. Lady Dedlock, I need not tell you that Sir Leicester is a very proud man, that his reliance upon you is implicit, that the fall of that moon out of the sky would not amaze him more than your fall from your high position as his wife."

She breathes quickly, but stands as unflinchingly as ever.

"I declare to you, Lady Dedlock, that with anything short of this case, I would as soon have rooted up the oldest tree on this estate as have shaken Sir Leicester's trust and confidence in you. And even now, with this case, I hesitate; because nothing can prepare him for the blow."

"Not my flight?" she returned.

"Your flight, Lady Dedlock, would spread the whole truth far and wide. It would be impossible to save the family credit for a day. It is not to be thought of."

"Go on!"

"Therefore," says Mr. Tulkinghorn, "I have much to consider. This is to be hushed up if it can be. How can it be, if Sir Leicester is driven out of his wits? If I inflicted this shock upon him tomorrow morning, how could the change in him be accounted for? What could have caused it? What could have divided you? Lady Dedlock, the street-talk would start directly, and it would

not affect you merely (whom I cannot at all consider in this business) but your husband.”

He gets plainer as he goes on, but not an atom more animated.

“There is another point of view,” he continues. “Sir Leicester is devoted to you almost to infatuation. He might not be able to overcome that infatuation, even knowing what we know. If so, it were better that he knew nothing. Better for common sense, better for him, better for me. I must take all this into account, and it makes a decision very difficult.”

She stands looking out at the same stars without a word, as if their coldness froze her.

“My experience teaches me,” says Mr. Tulkinghorn, going on in his business consideration of the matter like a machine, “that most people would do far better to leave marriage alone. It is at the bottom of three fourths of their troubles. So I thought when Sir Leicester married, and so I always have thought since. No more about that. I must now be guided by circumstances. In the meanwhile I must ask you to keep your own counsel, and I will keep mine.”

“I am to drag my present life on, at your pleasure, day by day?” she asks, still looking at the distant sky.

“Yes, I am afraid so, Lady Dedlock.”

“I am to remain on this gaudy platform on which my miserable deception has been so long acted, and it is to fall beneath me when you give the signal?” she said slowly.

“Not without warning, Lady Dedlock.”

“We are to meet as usual?”

“Precisely as usual, if you please.”

“And I am to hide my guilt, as I have done so many years?”

“As you have done so many years. Your secret can be no heavier to you than it was, and is no worse and no better than it was.”

She stands absorbed in the same frozen way for some little time before asking, “Is there anything more to be said tonight?”

“Why,” Mr. Tulkinghorn returns methodically as he softly rubs his hands, “I should like to be assured of your acquiescence in my arrangements, Lady Dedlock.”

“You have it.”

“Good. And I would wish in conclusion to remind you, as a business precaution, that I have expressly stated my sole consideration to be Sir Leicester’s feelings and honour and the family reputation. I should have been happy to have made Lady Dedlock a consideration, too, if the case had admitted of it; but unfortunately it does not.”

“I can attest your fidelity, sir.”

She turns towards the door. Mr. Tulkinghorn makes his old-fashioned bow as she passes out. It is not an ordinary look that he receives from the handsome face as it goes into the darkness, and it is not an ordinary movement, though a very slight one, that acknowledges his courtesy. But as

he reflects when he is left alone, the woman has been putting no common constraint upon herself.

He would know it all the better if he saw the woman pacing her own rooms with her hair wildly thrown back, her hands clasped behind her head, her figure twisted as if by pain. He would think so all the more if he saw the woman thus hurrying up and down for hours, without pause, followed by the faithful step upon the Ghost's Walk. But he shuts out the chilly air, draws the curtain, goes to bed, and falls asleep.

At last the stars go out; the wan day peeps in at Sir Leicester pardoning the repentant country in a majestically condescending dream; and at the cousins, and at the chaste Volumnia, dreaming of a hideous old general in Bath. Also into rooms high in the roof, and into offices in court-yards, and over stables, where humbler ambition dreams of bliss. Up comes the bright sun, drawing everything up with it – the drooping leaves and flowers, the birds and beasts, the gardeners to sweep the dewy turf, the smoke of the great kitchen fire wreathing itself high into the air. Lastly, up comes the flag over Mr. Tulkinghorn's unconscious head cheerfully proclaiming that Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock are in their happy home in Lincolnshire.

Chapter 42

In Mr. Tulkinghorn's Chambers

From the spreading oaks of the Dedlock property, Mr. Tulkinghorn transfers himself to the stale heat and dust of London. His manner of coming and going between the two places is a mystery. He walks into Chesney Wold as if it were next door to his chambers and returns to his chambers as if he had never been out of Lincoln's Inn Fields. He neither changes his dress before the journey nor talks of it afterwards. He melted out of his turret-room this morning, just as now, in the late twilight, he melts into his own square.

Like a dingy London bird, the lawyer, smoke-dried and faded, dwelling among mankind but not consorting with them, aged without experience of genial youth, comes sauntering home. In the oven made by the hot pavements and hot buildings, he is dryer than usual; and he has in his thirsty mind his mellowed port-wine half a century old.

The lamplighter is skipping up and down his ladder on Mr. Tulkinghorn's side of the Fields when the lawyer ascends his door-steps. Gliding into the dusky hall he encounters a bowing and propitiatory little man.

"Is that Snagsby?"

"Yes, sir. I hope you are well, sir. I was wishful to say a word to you, sir."

"Say it then."

"It is relating," says Mr. Snagsby in a mysterious low voice, "to the foreigner, sir!"

Mr. Tulkinghorn eyes him with some surprise. "What foreigner?"

"The foreign female, sir. French, if I don't mistake? Her that was upstairs, sir, when Mr. Bucket and me had the honour of meeting you with the sweeping-boy that night."

"Oh! Yes. Mademoiselle Hortense. And what about her, Snagsby?"

"Well, sir," returns the stationer, "it falls a little hard upon me. My domestic happiness is very great, but my little woman is rather given to jealousy. And you see, a foreign female of that genteel appearance coming into the shop, and hovering, sir – in the court – you know it is – now ain't it? I only put it to you, sir."

Mr. Snagsby says this in a very plaintive manner.

"Why, what do you mean?" asks Mr. Tulkinghorn.

"You see, sir, the foreign female caught up the word Snagsby that night, and made inquiry, and got the address and come at dinner-time. Now Guster, our young woman, is timid and has fits, and she, taking fright at the foreigner's looks – which are fierce – tumbled down the kitchen stairs. Consequently there was luckily ample occupation for my little woman, and only me to answer the shop. When the foreigner said that because she was

always refused admission to see Mr. Tulkinghorn, she would call continually until she was let in here. Since then she has been, as I said, hovering, sir” – Mr. Snagsby repeats the word with pathetic emphasis – “in the court. I shouldn’t wonder if it might have already given rise to the painfullest mistakes in the neighbours’ minds, not to mention my little woman, sir!”

Mr. Tulkinghorn has listened gravely. “And that’s all, is it, Snagsby?”

“Why yes, sir,” says Mr. Snagsby.

“I don’t know what Mademoiselle Hortense may want or mean, unless she is mad,” says the lawyer. “Well, well! This shall be stopped. If she comes again, send her here.”

Mr. Snagsby, with much bowing, takes his leave, lightened in heart. Mr. Tulkinghorn goes upstairs, saying to himself, “These women were created to give trouble the whole earth over. The mistress not being enough to deal with, here’s the maid now! But I will be short with *this* jade at least!”

So saying, Mr. Tulkinghorn unlocks his door, gropes his way into his murky rooms and lights his candles. Then he takes up his cellar-key, with which he prepares to descend to the regions of old wine. He is going towards the door with a candle in his hand when a knock comes.

“Who’s this? Aye, aye, mistress, it’s you, is it? I have just been hearing about you. Now! What do you want?”

He addresses these words to Mademoiselle Hortense. That feline personage softly closes the door before replying.

“I have had great deal of trouble to find you, sir. It has always been said to me, he is not at home, he is engage, he is this and that, he is not for you.”

“Quite right, and quite true.”

“Not true. Lies!”

Mr. Tulkinghorn involuntarily starts and falls back, though Mademoiselle Hortense, with her eyes almost shut, is only smiling contemptuously and shaking her head.

“Now, mistress,” says the lawyer, “If you have anything to say, say it.”

“Sir, you have not use me well. You have been mean and shabby. You have attrapped me – caught me – to give you information; you have asked me to show you the dress of mine my Lady must have wore that night, you have prayed me to come in it here to meet that boy. Say! Is it not?”

“You are a vixen!” Mr. Tulkinghorn looks distrustfully at her. “I paid you.”

“You paid me!” she repeats with fierce disdain. “Two sovereign! I refuse them, I despise them, I throw them from me!” Which she does, flinging them with such violence on the floor that they spin vehemently before rolling away into corners.

Mr. Tulkinghorn rubs his head. “You must be rich, my fair friend,” he composedly observes, “to throw money about in that way!”

“I *am* rich,” she returns. “I am very rich in hate. I hate my Lady, of all my heart. You know that.”

“Know it? How should I know it?”

“Because you have known it perfectly before you prayed me to give you that information. Because you have known perfectly that I was enraged!”

“Have you anything else to say, mademoiselle?”

“I am not yet placed in a situation. Find me a good one! If you cannot, then employ me to pursue her, to disgrace and to dishonour her. I will help you well, with a good will. It is what *you* do. Do I not know that?”

“You appear to know a good deal,” Mr. Tulkinghorn retorts.

“I am not so weak as to believe, like a child, that I come here in that dress only to decide a little bet, a wager!” Mademoiselle says this with bitterest and most defiant scorn.

“Now, let us see,” says Mr. Tulkinghorn, tapping his chin with the cellar-key, “how this matter stands. You come here to make a remarkably modest demand, and if it is not conceded, you will come again.”

“And again,” says mademoiselle with more tight and angry nods. “And yet again. And yet again!”

“And not only here, but you will go to Mr. Snagsby’s too, perhaps?”

“And again,” repeats mademoiselle. “And yet again. And yet again. In effect, for ever!”

“Very well. Now, Mademoiselle Hortense, let me recommend you to pick up that money of yours.”

She merely laughs and stands her ground with folded arms.

“You will not, eh?”

“No, I will not!”

“So much the poorer you! Look, mistress, this is the key of my wine-cellar. It is a large key, but the keys of prisons are larger, and their gates are very strong and heavy. I am afraid you would find it an inconvenience to have one of those keys turned upon you for any length of time. What do you think?”

“I think,” mademoiselle replies in a clear voice, “that you are a miserable wretch.”

“Probably,” returns Mr. Tulkinghorn, “But I ask what you think of prison.”

“Nothing. What does it matter to me?”

“Why, mistress, the law in England interferes to prevent any of our good English citizens from being troubled, even by a lady’s visits. And on his complaining that he is so troubled, it takes hold of the troublesome lady and shuts her up in prison. Turns the key upon her, mistress.” Illustrating with the cellar-key.

“Truly?” returns mademoiselle in the same pleasant voice. “That is droll! But still, what does it matter to me?”

“My fair friend,” says Mr. Tulkinghorn, “make another visit here, and you shall learn. If you ever present yourself uninvited here again, I will hand you over to the police. They carry troublesome people through the streets strapped down on a board, my good wench.”

“I will test you,” whispers mademoiselle. “I will see if you dare to do it!”

“And now,” proceeds the lawyer, without minding her, “you had better go. Think twice before you come here again. You were dismissed by your lady, you know, as the most unmanageable of women. Turn over a new leaf and take warning. For what I say, I mean; and what I threaten, I will do.”

She goes out and down the stairs without answering.

When she is gone, he goes down too, and returning with his cobweb-covered bottle, sits back in his chair, and devotes himself to a leisurely enjoyment of its contents.

Chapter 43

Esther's Narrative

I thought much of my living mother who had told me to consider her dead. I could not venture to approach her or write to her, for my sense of her peril was only equalled by my fears of increasing it. Knowing that my mere existence was an unforeseen danger to her, I could not always conquer that terror of myself which had seized me when I first knew the secret. At no time did I dare to utter her name. I felt as if I did not even dare to hear it. If the conversation anywhere took that direction, I tried not to hear: I mentally counted, or went out of the room.

Often I recalled the tones of my mother's voice, and wondered whether I should ever hear it again as I so longed to do. I passed and repassed the door of her house in town, loving it, but afraid to look at it; once I sat in the theatre when my mother was there and she saw me, when we were so wide asunder that any link between us seemed a dream. It is all, all over now.

When we were settled at home again, Ada and I had many conversations with my guardian about Richard. My dear girl was deeply grieved that he should do their kind cousin so much wrong, but she was so faithful to Richard that she could not bear to blame him. My guardian was aware of it.

"Rick is mistaken, my dear," he would say to her. "Well, well! We have all been mistaken over and over again. We must trust to you and time to set him right."

We knew afterwards what we suspected then, that he had often tried to open Richard's eyes. That he had written to him, gone to him, talked with him, tried every gentle and persuasive art his kindness could devise. Our poor Richard was deaf and blind to all. If he were wrong, he would make amends when the Chancery suit was over. Let him work the suit out. This was his unvarying reply. Jarndyce and Jarndyce had obtained possession of his whole nature.

I mentioned to my guardian my doubts of Mr. Skimpole as a good adviser for Richard.

"Adviser!" returned my guardian, laughing, "My dear, who would ask advice from Skimpole?"

"Encourager would perhaps have been a better word," said I.

"Encourager!" returned my guardian. "Such an unworldly, uncalculating, gossamer creature is a relief, an amusement to Richard. But as to advising or encouraging anybody, it is simply not to be thought of in such a child as Skimpole."

"Pray, cousin John," said Ada, "what made him such a child?"

"Why," he slowly replied, rubbing his head, "he is all sentiment, and – susceptibility, and – imagination. And these qualities are not regulated in him,

somehow. I suppose in his youth he was given too little training that would have balanced and adjusted them, and so he became what he is.”

Ada, glancing at me, said she thought it was a pity he should be an expense to Richard.

“So it is,” returned my guardian hurriedly. “That must not be. I must prevent it. That will never do.”

And I said I thought it was to be regretted that he had ever introduced Richard to Mr. Vholes for a present of five pounds.

“Did he?” said my guardian with a passing shade of vexation on his face. “But there you have the man! He has no idea of the value of money. He told you himself, I’ll be bound, my dear?”

“Oh, yes!” said I.

“Exactly!” cried my guardian, quite triumphant. “There you have the man! If he was conscious of any harm in it, he wouldn’t tell it. He tells it as he does it, in mere simplicity. But you shall see him in his own home, and then you’ll understand him better. We must pay a visit to Harold Skimpole and caution him on these points. Lord bless you, my dears, an infant, an infant!”

So, soon afterwards, we went into London and presented ourselves at Mr. Skimpole’s door.

He lived in a place called the Polygon, in Somers Town, where there were at that time a number of poor Spanish refugees walking about in cloaks, smoking little cigars. Whether he was a better tenant than one might have supposed, in consequence of his friend Somebody always paying his rent, I don’t know; but he had occupied the same house some years. It was in a dilapidated state. Two or three of the area railings were gone, the knocker was loose, the bell-handle had been pulled off, and dirty footprints on the steps were the only signs of its being inhabited.

A slatternly girl who seemed to be bursting out at the rips in her gown like an over-ripe berry answered our knock by opening the door a very little way. As she knew Mr. Jarndyce (indeed Ada and I both thought that she evidently associated him with the receipt of her wages), she immediately relented and allowed us to pass in.

We went upstairs to the first floor, still seeing no other furniture than the dirty footprints. Mr. Jarndyce entered a room, and we followed. It was dingy and not at all clean, but furnished with an odd kind of shabby luxury, with a large footstool, a sofa, and plenty of cushions, an easy-chair, a piano, books, drawing materials, music, newspapers, and a few sketches. A broken pane of glass in one of the dirty windows was papered over, but there was a little plate of hothouse nectarines on the table, and another of grapes, and another of sponge-cakes, and there was a bottle of light wine.

Mr. Skimpole himself reclined upon the sofa in a dressing-gown, drinking coffee from an old china cup – it was then about mid-day – and looking at a collection of wallflowers in the balcony. He rose and received us in his usual airy manner.

“Here I am, you see!” he said when we were seated, not without some difficulty, most of the chairs being broken. “Here I am! This is my frugal

breakfast. Some men want legs of beef and mutton for breakfast; I don't. Give me my peach, my cup of coffee, and my claret; I am content."

"This is our friend's sanctum, his studio," said my guardian to us.

"Yes," said Mr. Skimpole, turning his bright face about, "this is the bird's cage. This is where the bird lives and sings. They pluck his feathers now and then and clip his wings, but he sings, he sings!"

He handed us the grapes, repeating in his radiant way, "He sings!"

"These are very fine," said my guardian. "A present?"

"No," he answered. "Some amiable gardener sells them. His man wanted to know, when he brought them last evening, whether he should wait for the money. 'Really, my friend,' I said, 'I think not – if your time is of any value to you.' I suppose it was, for he went away."

My guardian looked at us with a smile, as though he asked us, "Is it possible to be worldly with this baby?"

"This is a day," said Mr. Skimpole, gaily taking a little claret, "that will ever be remembered here. We shall call it Saint Clare and Saint Summerson day. You must see my daughters. I have a blue-eyed daughter who is my Beauty daughter, I have a Sentiment daughter, and I have a Comedy daughter. You must see them all. They'll be enchanted."

He was going to summon them when my guardian asked him to pause a moment, as he wished to say a word to him first.

"My dear Jarndyce," he cheerfully replied, going back to his sofa, "as many moments as you please. Time is no object here."

"Now, Harold," my guardian began, "the word I have to say relates to Rick."

"The dearest friend I have!" returned Mr. Skimpole cordially. "I suppose he ought not to be my dearest friend, as he is not on terms with you. But I can't help it; he is full of youthful poetry, and I love him."

The engaging frankness with which he declared this captivated my guardian, if not, for the moment, Ada too.

"You are welcome to love him as much as you like," returned Mr. Jarndyce, "but we must save his pocket, Harold."

"Oh!" said Mr. Skimpole. "His pocket? Now you are coming to what I don't understand." Dipping one of the cakes in his claret, he shook his head and smiled at us as if predicting that he never could be made to understand.

"If you go with him here or there," said my guardian plainly, "you must not let him pay for you both."

"My dear Jarndyce," returned Mr. Skimpole genially, "what am I to do? If he takes me anywhere, I must go. And how can I pay? I never have any money. If I had any money, I don't know anything about it. Suppose the man says to me seven and sixpence? I know nothing about seven and sixpence. I don't understand it."

"Well," said my guardian, by no means displeased with this artless reply, "if you do any journeying with Rick, you must borrow the money from me (without telling him), and leave the calculation to him."

“My dear Jarndyce,” returned Mr. Skimpole, “I will do anything to give you pleasure, but upon my word, I thought Mr. Carstone was immensely rich. I thought he had only to sign a bond, or a draft, or a cheque, or something, to bring down a shower of money.”

“Indeed it is not so, sir,” said Ada. “He is poor.”

“No, really?” returned Mr. Skimpole with his bright smile. “You surprise me.”

“And not being the richer for trusting in a rotten reed,” said my guardian, laying his hand emphatically on the sleeve of Mr. Skimpole’s dressing-gown, “be very careful not to encourage him in that reliance, Harold.”

“My dear good friend,” returned Mr. Skimpole, “how can I do that? It’s business, and I don’t know business. It is he who encourages me. He emerges from great feats of business, and calls upon me to admire them. I do admire them. But I know nothing about them, and I tell him so.”

The helpless light-hearted candour with which he said this seemed to prove my guardian’s case. When he was present, it seemed unlikely that he could design, conceal, or influence anything; and yet when he was not present, the more likely it seemed, and the less agreeable it was to think of his having anything to do with anyone for whom I cared.

Mr. Skimpole then left the room with a radiant face to fetch his daughters (his sons had run away at various times). He came back bringing with him three young ladies and Mrs. Skimpole, who had once been a beauty but was now a delicate invalid suffering under a complication of disorders.

“This,” said Mr. Skimpole, “is my Beauty daughter, Arethusa – plays and sings odds and ends like her father. This is my Sentiment daughter, Laura – plays a little but don’t sing. This is my Comedy daughter, Kitty – sings a little but don’t play. We all draw a little and compose a little, and none of us have any idea of time or money.”

Mrs. Skimpole sighed, I thought, as if she would have been glad to strike out this item in the family attainments.

“In this family,” said Mr. Skimpole, “we are all children, and I am the youngest.”

The daughters, who appeared to be very fond of him, were amused by this droll fact, particularly the Comedy daughter.

“My dears, it is true,” said Mr. Skimpole, “is it not? Now, here is Miss Summerson with a knowledge of details perfectly surprising. It will sound very strange to Miss Summerson, I dare say, that we know nothing about chops in this house. But we don’t, not the least. We can’t cook anything whatever. A needle and thread we don’t know how to use. We admire the people who possess the practical wisdom we want, but we don’t quarrel with them. Then why should they quarrel with us? Live and let live, we say to them. Live upon your practical wisdom, and let us live upon you!”

He laughed, but as usual seemed quite candid and really to mean what he said.

“We have sympathy, my roses,” said Mr. Skimpole, “sympathy for everything. Have we not?”

“Oh, yes, papa!” cried the three daughters.

“We are capable of looking on and of being interested,” said Mr. Skimpole, “in this hurly-burly of life, and we *do* look on, and we *are* interested. What more can we do? Here is my Beauty daughter, married these three years. Now I dare say her marrying another child, and having two more, was all wrong in point of economy, but it was very agreeable. Her young husband and their young fledglings have their nest upstairs.”

She looked very young indeed to be the mother of two children, and I could not help pitying both her and them. It was evident that the three daughters had grown up with just as little haphazard instruction as qualified them to be their father’s playthings.

Ada and I conversed with these young ladies and found them wonderfully like their father. In the meanwhile Mr. Jarndyce (who had been rubbing his head to a great extent, and hinted at a change in the wind) talked with Mrs. Skimpole in a corner, where we could not help hearing the chink of money. Mr. Skimpole had volunteered to go home with us and had withdrawn to dress himself for the purpose.

“My roses,” he said when he came back, “take care of mama. She is poorly today. By going home with Mr. Jarndyce for a day or two, I shall hear the larks sing and preserve my amiability. It has been tried, you know, and would be tried again if I remained at home.”

“That bad man!” said the Comedy daughter.

“At the very time when he knew papa was lying ill by his wallflowers,” Laura complained.

“And when the smell of hay was in the air!” said Arethusa.

“It showed a want of poetry in the man,” Mr. Skimpole assented, with perfect good humour. “My daughters have taken great offence,” he explained to us, “at an honest man—”

“Not honest, papa!” they protested.

“At a rough kind of fellow,” said Mr. Skimpole, “who is a baker in this neighbourhood and from whom we borrowed a couple of arm-chairs. We wanted a couple of arm-chairs, and we hadn’t got them, and therefore of course we looked for a man who had got them, to lend them. Well! This morose person lent them, and we wore them out. When they were worn out, he wanted them back. He had them back, and he objected to their being worn. I reasoned with him, and pointed out his mistake. I said, ‘Don’t you know that these arm-chairs were borrowed to be sat upon?’ He was unreasonable and used intemperate language. I patiently appealed to him. I said, ‘My good man, we are all children of one great mother, Nature. I entreat you, by our brotherhood, not to stand before me in the absurd figure of an angry baker!’ But he did,” said Mr. Skimpole in playful astonishment. “And therefore I am very glad to get out of his way and to go home with my friend Jarndyce.”

It seemed to escape his consideration that Mrs. Skimpole and the daughters remained behind to encounter the baker, but this was so old a story

to all of them that it had become a matter of course. He took leave of his family with an airy tenderness and rode away with us.

I could have no anticipation that something very startling and memorable was to happen before this day was out. Our guest was in such spirits on the way home that I could do nothing but wonder at him; and Ada yielded to the same fascination. In no way wearied by the journey, Mr. Skimpole was in the drawing-room before any of us; and I heard him at the piano while I was looking after my housekeeping, singing refrains of barcaroles and drinking songs.

We were all assembled shortly before dinner, and he was still at the piano idly picking out little strains of music, when a calling-card was brought in and my guardian read aloud in a surprised voice, "Sir Leicester Dedlock!"

The visitor was in the room before I had the power to stir. I had not even the presence of mind, in my giddiness, to retire to the window with Ada, or to know where the window was. I heard my name and found that my guardian was presenting me before I could move.

"Pray be seated, Sir Leicester."

"Mr. Jarndyce," said Sir Leicester as he bowed and seated himself, "I do myself the honour of calling here—"

"You do *me* the honour, Sir Leicester."

"Thank you – of calling here on my way from Lincolnshire to express my regret that any cause of complaint I may have against a gentleman who has been your host, should have prevented you, and the ladies under your charge, from visiting my house, Chesney Wold."

"You are exceedingly obliging, Sir Leicester, and on behalf of those ladies, I thank you."

"It is possible, Mr. Jarndyce, that the gentleman to whom I have referred may have led you to believe that you would not have been received at my house with courtesy. I beg to observe, sir, that the fact is the reverse. It has given me pain, Mr. Jarndyce, to learn from the housekeeper at Chesney Wold that a gentleman who was with you, and who would appear to possess a cultivated taste for the fine arts, was likewise deterred from examining the family pictures with that leisure which he might have desired to bestow upon them." Here he produced a card and read, with much gravity, through his eye-glass, "Mr. Herald – Harold – Skumpling – I beg your pardon – Skimpole."

"This is Mr. Harold Skimpole," said my guardian, surprised.

"Oh!" exclaimed Sir Leicester. "I am happy to meet Mr. Skimpole. I hope, sir, that when you again find yourself in my part of the county, you will be under no similar sense of restraint."

"You are very obliging, Sir Leicester. I shall certainly give myself the pleasure of another visit to your beautiful house. The owners of such places as Chesney Wold," said Mr. Skimpole with his usual easy air, "are public benefactors. They are good enough to maintain a number of delightful objects for the admiration and pleasure of us poor men; and not to reap all the pleasure that they yield is to be ungrateful to our benefactors."

Sir Leicester seemed to approve of this sentiment highly. "An artist, sir?"

"No," returned Mr. Skimpole. "A perfectly idle man. A mere amateur."

Sir Leicester seemed to approve of this even more. He hoped he might have the good fortune to be at Chesney Wold when Mr. Skimpole next came into Lincolnshire. Mr. Skimpole professed himself much honoured.

"Mr. Skimpole mentioned to the housekeeper," pursued Sir Leicester, "that he had been staying with Mr. Jarndyce."

"That is, when I walked through the house the other day, on the occasion of my going down to visit you," Mr. Skimpole airily explained to us.

"Hence I became aware of the circumstance. That this should have happened to Mr. Jarndyce, a gentleman with some distant connexion to Lady Dedlock, and for whom she entertains a high respect, does, I assure you, give me pain."

"Pray say no more about it, Sir Leicester," returned my guardian.

I had not once looked up. It surprises me to find that I can recall the conversation, for my mind was so confused and the gentleman's presence so distressing that I thought I understood nothing through the rushing in my head and the beating of my heart.

"I mentioned the subject to Lady Dedlock," said Sir Leicester, rising, "and she informed me that she had had the pleasure of exchanging a few words with Mr. Jarndyce and his wards on an accidental meeting. Permit me, Mr. Jarndyce, to repeat to yourself, and to these ladies, the assurance I have already given Mr. Skimpole."

Sir Leicester Dedlock took his leave with great ceremony. I got to my own room with all possible speed and remained there until I had recovered my self-command. I was thankful to find when I went downstairs that they only rallied me for having been shy before the great Lincolnshire baronet.

But I had made up my mind that I must tell my guardian what I knew. The possibility of my being brought into contact with my mother, of my being taken to her house, was so painful that I felt I could no longer guide myself without his assistance.

When we had retired for the night, and Ada and I had had our usual talk, I went and sought my guardian among his books. I knew he always read at that hour, and as I drew near I saw the light shining out into the passage from his reading-lamp.

"May I come in, guardian?"

"Surely, little woman. What's the matter?"

"Nothing is the matter. I thought I would like to take this quiet time of saying a word to you about myself."

He shut his book, and turned his kind attentive face towards me. I could not help observing that it wore that curious expression I had seen in it once before – on that night when he had said that he was in no trouble which I could readily understand.

"What concerns you, my dear Esther," said he, "concerns us all. You cannot be more ready to speak than I am to hear."

“I know that, guardian. But I have such need of your advice and support tonight – ever since the visitor was here today.”

“Sir Leicester Dedlock?”

“Yes.”

He sat looking at me with an air of the profoundest astonishment. “Why, Esther,” said he, breaking into a smile, “our visitor and you are the two last persons on earth I should have thought of connecting together!”

“Oh, yes, guardian. And I too, but a little while ago.”

The smile passed from his face, and he became grave. He crossed to the door to see that it was shut and resumed his seat before me.

“Guardian,” said I, “do you remember, when we were overtaken by the thunder-storm, Lady Dedlock’s speaking to you of her sister?”

“Of course.”

“And reminding you that she and her sister had gone their different ways?”

“Yes.”

“Why did they separate, guardian?”

His face altered as he looked at me. “My child, what questions are these! I never knew. No one but themselves ever did know, I believe. Who could tell what the secrets of those two handsome and proud women were! You have seen Lady Dedlock. If you had ever seen her sister, you would know her to have been as resolute and haughty as she.”

“Oh, guardian, I have seen her many a time!”

“Seen her?” He paused a little, biting his lip. “Then, Esther, when you spoke to me long ago of Boythorn, and when I told you that he was all but married once – did you know it all, and know who the lady was?”

“No, guardian,” I returned.

“It was Lady Dedlock’s sister.”

“Guardian, pray tell me, why were *they* parted?”

“It was her act, and she kept its motives secret. He afterwards did wonder if some quarrel with her sister had wounded her haughty spirit beyond all reason, but she wrote to tell him that from that date she died to him, and that she resolved on this through her knowledge of his proud temper and his sense of honour. In consideration for those points in him, and also in herself, she made the sacrifice, she said. He never heard of her from that hour. Nor did anyone.”

“Oh, guardian, what have I done!” I cried, giving way to my grief; “what sorrow have I innocently caused! Innocently, but most surely. That secluded sister is my first remembrance.”

“No!” he cried, starting.

“Yes, guardian, yes! And *her* sister is my mother!”

I would have told him all my mother’s letter, but he would not hear it then. He spoke so tenderly and wisely to me, that, full as I had been with fervent gratitude towards him through so many years, I believed I had never loved him so dearly, never thanked him in my heart so fully, as I did that night.

And when he had taken me to my room and kissed me at the door, and when at last I lay down to sleep, my thought was how could I ever be busy enough, good enough, forgetful enough of myself, devoted enough to him, and useful enough to others, to show him how I blessed and honoured him.

Chapter 44

The Letter and the Answer

My guardian called me into his room next morning, and then I told him what had been left untold on the previous night. There was nothing to be done, he said, but to keep the secret and to avoid another such encounter as that of yesterday. He understood my feeling and entirely shared it. He knew something of Mr. Tulkinghorn, both by sight and reputation, and it was certain that he was a dangerous man. Whatever happened, he repeatedly impressed upon me with anxious affection and kindness, I was innocent.

“Nor do I understand,” said he, “that any doubts tend towards you, my dear.”

“Not with the lawyer,” I returned. “But I am anxious about two other people.” Then I told him about Mr. Guppy, who I feared might have guessed, but in whose silence after our last interview I expressed perfect confidence.

“Well,” said my guardian. “Then we may dismiss him for the present. Who is the other?”

I called to his recollection the French maid and the eager offer of service she had made to me.

“Ha!” he returned thoughtfully. “That is a more alarming person than the clerk. But after all, my dear, she merely proposed herself for your maid, you know. She did nothing more.”

“Her manner was strange,” said I.

“Yes, and her manner was strange when she took her shoes off and walked through the grass,” said my guardian. “It would be useless self-distress to reckon up such chances and possibilities. Be hopeful, little woman. You can be nothing better than yourself; be that, as you were before you had this knowledge. It is the best you can do for everybody’s sake. I, sharing the secret with you—”

“And lightening it, guardian, so much,” said I.

“—will be attentive to what passes in that family, so far as I can. And if the time should come when I can stretch out a hand to render the least service to one whom it is better not to name even here, I will not fail to do it for her dear daughter’s sake.”

I thanked him with my whole heart. What could I ever do but thank him! I was going out at the door when he asked me to stay a moment. Quickly turning round, I saw that same expression on his face again; and all at once, I don’t know how, I understood it.

“My dear Esther,” said my guardian, “I have long had something in my thoughts that I have wished to say to you.”

“Indeed?”

“I have had some difficulty in approaching it. Would you object to my writing it?”

“Dear guardian, how could I object to your writing anything for me to read?”

“Then see, my love,” said he with his cheery smile, “do I seem at this moment as open, honest and old-fashioned as usual?”

I answered in all earnestness, “Quite.” With truth, for his momentary hesitation was gone.

“Can you fully trust me, and thoroughly rely on me, Esther?”

“Most thoroughly,” said I with my whole heart.

“My dear girl,” returned my guardian, “give me your hand.”

He took it in his, holding me lightly with his arm, and looking down into my face with the protecting manner which had made that house my home – said, “You have wrought changes in me, little woman, since the winter day in the stage-coach. You have done me a world of good since that time.”

“Ah, guardian, what have you done for me since that time!”

“But,” said he, “that is not to be remembered now.”

“It never can be forgotten.”

“Yes, Esther,” said he with a gentle seriousness, “it is to be forgotten now, for a while. You are only to remember now that nothing can change me as you know me. Can you feel quite assured of that, my dear?”

“I can,” I said.

“That’s much,” he answered. “All the same, I will not write this something in my thoughts until you have quite resolved within yourself that nothing can change me as you know me. If you doubt that in the least degree, I will never write it. If you are sure of that, send Charley to me in one week – ‘for the letter.’ But if you are not quite certain, never send for it.”

“Guardian,” said I, “I am already certain. I shall send Charley for the letter.”

He shook my hand and said no more. Nor was any more said about this conversation all week. When the appointed night came, I said to Charley, “Go and knock at Mr. Jarndyce’s door, Charley, and say you have come from me for the letter.”

Charley went up the stairs and along the passages. The zig-zag way about the old house seemed very long in my listening ears that night. She came back with the letter and laid it on the table and went to bed, and I sat looking at it without taking it up, thinking of many things.

I began with my overshadowed childhood, and passed through those timid days to the heavy time when my aunt lay dead, with her resolute face so cold and set. I passed to the altered days when I was so blest as to find friends around me, and to be beloved. I came to the time when I first saw my dear girl and was received into that sisterly affection which was the grace and beauty of my life. I recalled the first bright gleam of welcome which had shone out of those very windows upon our expectant faces on that cold bright night, and which had never paled. I went through my illness and recovery, I thought of myself so altered and of those around me so unchanged; and all this happiness shone like a light from one central figure, represented before me by the letter on the table.

I opened it and read it. It was so impressive in its love for me, and in the unselfish consideration it showed for me in every word, that my eyes were too often blinded to read much at a time. But I read it through three times before I laid it down. I had thought beforehand that I knew its purport, and I did. It asked me, would I be the mistress of Bleak House.

It was not a love letter, though it expressed so much love, but was written just as he would at any time have spoken to me. I saw his face, and heard his voice, and felt his kind manner in every line. It addressed me as if our places were reversed, as if all the good deeds had been mine and all the feelings they had awakened his.

It dwelt on my being young, and he past the prime of life; on his writing to me with a silvered head. It told me that I would gain nothing by such a marriage and lose nothing by rejecting it, for no new relation could enhance the tenderness in which he held me, and whatever my decision was, he was certain it would be right. But he had considered this step anew since our late confidence and had decided on taking it. I was always to remember that I owed him nothing and that he was my debtor.

He had often thought of our future, and foreseeing that the time must come, perhaps very soon, when Ada (now nearly of age) would leave us, and when our present mode of life must be broken up, had reflected on this proposal. If I felt that I could happily become the dear companion of his remaining life, even then he could not have me bind myself irrevocably while this letter was yet so new to me, but I must have ample time for reconsideration. Meanwhile, let him be unchanged in his old relation, in his old manner, in the old name by which I called him. And as to his bright Dame Durden and little housekeeper, she would ever be the same, he knew.

This was the substance of the letter. But he did not hint that when I had been better looking he had had this same step in his thoughts and had refrained from it. That when my old face was gone from me, and I had no attractions, he could love me just as well as in my fairer days. That the discovery of my birth gave him no shock. That his generosity rose above my disfigurement and my inheritance of shame.

But I knew it, I knew it well now. It came upon me as the close of the history I had been remembering, and I felt that I had but one thing to do. To devote my life to his happiness was to thank him poorly, and what had I wished for the other night but some new means of thanking him?

Still I cried very much, not only in the fullness of my heart after reading the letter, not only in the strangeness of the prospect – but as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost to me. I was very happy, very thankful, very hopeful; but I cried very much.

By and by I went to my old glass. My eyes were red and swollen, and I said, “Oh, Esther, can that be you!” I am afraid the face in the glass was going to cry again at this reproach, but I held up my finger at it, and it stopped.

“That is more like it!” said I, beginning to let down my hair. “When you are mistress of Bleak House, you are to be as cheerful as a bird. In fact, you are always to be cheerful; so let us begin for once and for all.”

When I went on with my hair I sobbed a little still, but that was because I had been crying, not because I was crying then.

“And so Esther, my dear, you are happy for life. Happy with your best friends, happy in your old home, happy in the power of doing a great deal of good, and happy in the undeserved love of the best of men.”

I thought, all at once, if my guardian had married some one else, how should I have felt, and what should I have done! That would have been a change indeed. It presented my life in such a new and blank form that I gave my housekeeping keys a kiss before I laid them down in their basket again.

Then I went on to think how often had I considered within myself that the deep traces of my illness and the circumstances of my birth were only new reasons why I should be busy and useful. This was a good time, to be sure, to sit down morbidly and cry! As to its seeming at all strange to me at first, why should it seem strange? Other people had thought of such things, if I had not.

“Don’t you remember, my plain dear,” I asked myself, “what Mrs. Woodcourt said, before those scars were there, about your marrying—”

Perhaps the name brought them to my remembrance. The dried remains of the flowers. They had only been preserved in memory of something wholly past and gone, but it would be better not to keep them now.

They were in a book, which was in the next room – our sitting-room, dividing Ada’s chamber from mine. I took a candle and went softly in to fetch it from its shelf. I saw my beautiful darling, through the open door, lying asleep, and I stole in to kiss her.

It was weak in me, I know; but I dropped a tear upon her dear face, and another. Weaker than that, I took the withered flowers out and put them for a moment to her lips. I thought about her love for Richard, though, indeed, the flowers had nothing to do with that. Then I took them into my own room and burned them at the candle, and they were dust in an instant.

On entering the breakfast-room next morning, I found my guardian just as usual, quite as frank, open and free. There being not the least constraint in his manner, there was none (I think) in mine. About the letter, he said not a word.

So, on the next morning, and the next, and for at least a week, over which time Mr. Skimpole prolonged his stay. I expected, every day, that my guardian might speak to me about the letter, but he never did.

I thought then, growing uneasy, that I ought to write an answer. I tried over and over again in my own room at night, but I could not write an answer that began like a good answer, so I thought each night I would wait one more day. And I waited seven more days, and he never said a word.

At last, Mr. Skimpole having departed, we three were one afternoon going out for a ride; and I, being ready before Ada, came upon my guardian, standing at the drawing-room window looking out.

He turned and said, smiling, “Aye, it’s you, little woman, is it?”

I had made up my mind to speak to him now. In short, I had come down on purpose. “Guardian,” I said, rather hesitating and trembling, “when would you like to have the answer to the letter Charley came for?”

“When it’s ready, my dear,” he replied.

“I think it is ready,” said I.

“Is Charley to bring it?” he asked pleasantly.

“No. I have brought it myself, guardian,” I returned.

I put my two arms round his neck and kissed him, and he said was this the mistress of Bleak House, and I said yes; and it made no difference presently, and we all went out together, and I said nothing to my precious pet about it.

Chapter 45

In Trust

One morning when my beauty and I were walking round the garden I happened to turn my eyes towards the house and saw a long thin shadow going in which looked like Mr. Vholes. Ada had been telling me only that morning of her hopes that Richard's ardour in the Chancery suit might lessen; and therefore I said nothing about Mr. Vholes's shadow.

Presently Charley came out saying, "Oh, please, miss, would you step in and speak to Mr. Jarndyce!"

I made haste inside and found my guardian and Mr. Vholes looking at one another across a table, the one so broad and upright and the other so narrow and stooping, the one speaking in such a rich ringing voice and the other in such a gasping, fish-like manner that I thought I never had seen two people so unmatched.

"You know Mr. Vholes, my dear," said my guardian. Mr. Vholes rose, gloved and buttoned up as usual, and seated himself again.

"Mr. Vholes," said my guardian, eyeing his black figure as if he were a bird of ill omen, "has brought an ugly report of our most unfortunate Rick."

I sat down between them; Mr. Vholes remained immovable, except that he secretly picked at one of the red pimples on his yellow face with his black glove.

"And as Rick and you are good friends, I should like to know what you think, my dear," said my guardian.

Mr. Vholes explained. "I have been saying that Mr. C.'s circumstances are at present in an embarrassed state, owing to the peculiar nature of liabilities Mr. C. has incurred and the means he has of meeting the same. I have staved off many little matters for Mr. C., but there is a limit to staving off, and we have reached it. I have made some advances out of pocket to accommodate these unpleasantnesses, but I necessarily look to being repaid, for I do not pretend to be wealthy, and I have a father to support in the Vale of Taunton, besides three dear girls at home. My apprehension is that it may end in Mr. C wishing to part with his commission."

"Imagine the poor fellow without even his present resource," said my guardian to me. "Yet what can I do? You know him, Esther. He would never accept help from me now."

Mr. Vholes hereupon addressed me again.

"What Mr. Jarndyce remarks, miss, is the difficulty. I do not see that anything is to be done. I merely come down here and mention it in confidence, in order that everything may be openly carried on. I desire to leave a good name behind me. If I consulted merely my own interests with Mr. C., I should not be here. I have no interest in it except as a member of society and a father – and a son."

It appeared to us that Mr. Vholes sought to divide the responsibility, such as it was, of knowing Richard's situation. I could only suggest that I should go down to Deal, where Richard was then stationed, and see him, and try if possible to avert the worst. I took my guardian aside to propose this.

The fatigue of the journey formed an immediate objection on my guardian's part, but as I was happy to go, I got his consent. We had then merely to dispose of Mr. Vholes.

"Well, sir," said Mr. Jarndyce, "Miss Summerson will communicate with Mr. Carstone. You will allow me to order you lunch after your journey, sir."

"I thank you, Mr. Jarndyce," said Mr. Vholes, "but no, not a morsel. My digestion is much impaired. If I was to partake of solid food at this period of the day, I don't know what the consequences might be. Sir, I will now take my leave."

"I wish we could all take our leave, Mr. Vholes," returned my guardian bitterly, "of a cause you know of."

Mr. Vholes slowly shook his head. "We who aim to be looked upon as respectable practitioners, sir, can but put our shoulders to the wheel. You will not refer to me, miss, in communicating with Mr. C.?"

I said I would be careful not to.

"Just so, miss. Good morning, Mr. Jarndyce." Mr. Vholes put his dead glove, which scarcely seemed to have any hand in it, on my fingers, and then on my guardian's fingers, and took his long thin shadow away.

Of course it became necessary to tell Ada where I was going and why, and of course she was anxious and distressed. But she was too true to Richard to say anything but words of pity, and in a more loving spirit still – my dear devoted girl! – she wrote him a long letter, of which I took charge.

Charley was to be my travelling companion, though I am sure I needed none. We secured two places in the mail-coach, and at our usual bed-time, Charley and I were rolling away seaward with the Kentish letters.

It was a night's journey, but we had the mail-coach to ourselves and did not find the night very tedious. As I considered it, at one time my journey looked hopeful, and at another hopeless. In what state I should find Richard, what I should say to him, and what he would say to me occupied my mind by turns; and the wheels seemed to play one tune over and over again all night.

At last we came into the narrow streets of Deal, and very gloomy they were upon a raw misty morning. The long flat beach, with its little irregular houses, and its litter of capstans, and great boats, and sheds, and gravelly waste places overgrown with grass and weeds, wore as dull an appearance as any place I ever saw. The sea was heaving under a thick white fog; and nothing else was moving but a few early ropemakers, who, with the yarn twisted round their bodies, looked as if, tired of their state of existence, they were spinning themselves into cords.

But when we got into a warm room in an excellent hotel and sat down to an early breakfast (for it was too late to think of going to bed), Deal began to look more cheerful. Our little room was like a ship's cabin, and that delighted

Charley. Then the fog began to rise like a curtain, and numbers of ships unexpectedly appeared. Some were of grand size – one was a large Indiaman just come home; and when the sun shone through the clouds, making silvery pools in the dark sea, the way in which these ships brightened, and changed, amid a bustle of boats pulling between them and the shore, was most beautiful.

The large Indiaman was our great attraction because she had come in during the night. She was surrounded by boats, and we said how glad the people on board must be to come ashore. Charley was curious about the voyage, and about the heat in India, and the serpents and the tigers; so I told her what I knew on those points. I told her, too, how people in such voyages were sometimes wrecked and cast on rocks, where they were saved by the courage and humanity of one man. And I told her how we knew at home of such a case.

I had thought of sending Richard a note saying I was there, but it seemed better to go to him without preparation. As he lived in barracks I was a little doubtful whether this was feasible, but we went out to reconnoitre. Peeping in at the gate of the barrack-yard, we found everything very quiet, and I asked a sergeant standing on the guardhouse-steps where he lived. He sent a man to show me, who went up some stairs, and knocked at a door, and left us.

“Now then!” cried Richard from within. So I left Charley in the little passage, and said, “Can I come in, Richard? It’s only Dame Durden.”

He was writing at a table, with a great confusion of clothes, books, boots and portmanteaus strewn all about the floor. He was only half dressed – in plain clothes, not in uniform – and his hair was unbrushed. He looked as wild as his room. He heartily welcomed me and caught me in his arms in a moment. Dear Richard! He was ever the same to me. Down to the end, he always received me with something of his old merry boyish manner.

“Good heavens, my dear little woman,” said he, “how do you come here? Nothing the matter? Ada is well?”

“Quite well. Lovelier than ever, Richard!”

“Ah!” he said. “My poor cousin! I was writing to you, Esther.”

So worn and haggard he looked, leaning back in his chair and crushing the sheet of paper in his hand!

“Am I not to read it after all?” I asked.

“Oh, my dear,” he returned with a hopeless gesture. “You may read it in the whole room. It is all over here.”

I told him that I had heard by chance of his being in difficulty and had come to consult with him what could best be done.

“Like you, Esther, but useless, and so *not* like you!” said he with a melancholy smile. “I am away on leave this day – and I am selling out. Well! So this calling follows the rest. I only want to have been in the church to have made the round of all the professions.”

“Richard,” I urged, “it is not so hopeless as that?”

“Esther,” he returned, “it is indeed. Apart from debts and all such drawbacks, I am not fit even for this employment. I have no care, no heart, no

soul, but for one thing. Why, how could I have gone abroad, if I were ordered? How could I trust even Vholes unless I was at his back!”

I suppose he knew by my face what I was about to say, but he caught the hand I had laid upon his arm and touched my own lips with it to prevent me from going on.

“No, Dame Durden! Two subjects I forbid. The first is John Jarndyce. The second, you know what. Call it madness, but it is the one object I have to pursue. It is a pity I ever was prevailed upon to turn out of my road. It would be wisdom to abandon it now, after all the time and pains I have bestowed upon it! Oh, yes, true wisdom. It would be very agreeable, too, to some people; but I never will.”

Seeing the mood he was in, I thought it best not to oppose him. I took out Ada’s letter and put it in his hand.

He began to read. He had not read far when he rested his head upon his hands to hide his face from me. In a little while he rose as if the light were bad and went to the window. He finished reading it there, with his back towards me, and after he had finished and had folded it up, stood there for some minutes. When he came back to his chair, I saw tears in his eyes.

“Of course, Esther, you know what she says here?” He spoke in a softened voice.

“Yes, Richard.”

“She offers me the little inheritance she is certain of so soon – and begs and prays me to take it, set myself right with it, and remain in the army.”

“I know your welfare to be the dearest wish of her heart,” said I. “And, oh, my dear Richard, Ada’s is a noble heart.”

“I am sure it is. I – I wish I was dead!”

He went back to the window, and laying his arm across it, leaned his head down on his arm. It greatly affected me to see him so, but I remained silent. I was not at all prepared for his rousing himself out of this emotion to a new sense of injury.

“And this is the heart that John Jarndyce stepped in to estrange from me,” said he indignantly. “And the dear girl makes me this generous offer from under the same John Jarndyce’s roof, and with his gracious consent and connivance, I dare say, as a new means of buying me off.”

“Richard!” I cried out, rising hastily. “I will not hear you say such shameful words!” I was very angry with him indeed, for the first time in my life, but it only lasted a moment. When I saw his worn young face looking at me as if he were sorry, I put my hand on his shoulder and said, “If you please, my dear Richard, do not speak in such a tone to me. Consider!”

He begged my pardon a thousand times. At that I laughed, but trembled a little too, for I was rather fluttered after being so fiery.

“To accept this offer, my dear Esther,” said he, sitting down beside me, “is, I need not say, impossible. Besides, it is all over here. I have done with the red coat, believe me. But it is some satisfaction, in the midst of my troubles, to know that I am pressing Ada’s interests in pressing my own.”

Vholes has his shoulder to the wheel, urging it on as much for her as for me, thank God!”

His sanguine hopes were rising and lighting up his features, but they made his face more sad to me than it had been before.

“No, no!” cried Richard exultingly. “If every farthing of Ada’s little fortune were mine, no part of it should be spent in keeping me in a profession I am weary of. It should be devoted to what promises a better return, and where she has a larger stake. Don’t be uneasy for me! I shall now have only one thing on my mind, and Vholes and I will work it. I shall be able to deal with some small usurers who will hear of nothing but their bond now – Vholes says so. Come, come! You shall carry a letter to Ada from me, Esther, and you must both of you be more hopeful of me and not believe that I am quite cast away just yet, my dear.”

I will not repeat what I said to Richard. I know it was tiresome, and nobody is to suppose for a moment that it was at all wise. It only came from my heart. He heard it patiently and feelingly, but I saw that on the two subjects he had reserved it was at present hopeless to intervene. I saw too that it was even more mischievous to use persuasion with him than to leave him as he was.

Therefore I was driven at last to asking Richard if he would mind convincing me that it really was all over there. He showed me a letter making it quite plain that his retirement was arranged. I found that Mr. Vholes had been in consultation with him throughout. Beyond ascertaining this, and having brought Ada’s letter, and being (as I was going to be) Richard’s companion back to London, I had done no good by coming down. Admitting this to myself with a reluctant heart, I said I would return to the hotel and wait until he joined me there. Then Charley and I went back along the beach.

There was a crowd of people in one spot, surrounding some naval officers who were landing from a boat, and pressing about them with unusual interest. I said to Charley this would be one of the great Indiaman’s boats, and we stopped to look.

The gentlemen came up from the waterside, speaking good-humouredly to each other and glancing around as if they were glad to be in England again.

“Charley, Charley,” said I, “come away!” And I hurried on so swiftly that my little maid was surprised.

It was not until we were shut up in our cabin-room and I had had time to take breath that I began to think why I had made such haste. In one of the sunburnt faces I had recognized Mr. Allan Woodcourt, and I had been afraid of his recognizing me. I had been unwilling that he should see my altered looks. I had been taken by surprise, and my courage had quite failed me.

But I knew this would not do, and I now said to myself, “My dear, there is no reason why it should be worse for you now than it ever has been. What you were last month, you are today.” I was in a great tremble and at first was quite unable to calm myself; but I got better, and I was very glad to know it.

The party came to the hotel. I heard them speaking on the staircase. I knew their voices again – I mean I knew Mr. Woodcourt’s. It would still have

been a great relief to me to have gone away without making myself known, but I was determined not to do so.

I untied my bonnet and put my veil half down, and wrote on one of my cards that I happened to be there with Mr. Richard Carstone, and I sent it in to Mr. Woodcourt. He came immediately. I told him I was rejoiced to be by chance among the first to welcome him home to England. And I saw that he was very sorry for me.

“You have been in shipwreck and peril since you left us, Mr. Woodcourt,” said I, “but we can hardly call that a misfortune which enabled you to be so useful and so brave. We read of it with the truest interest. Miss Flite told me of it, when I was recovering from my severe illness.”

“Ah! Little Miss Flite!” he said. “She lives the same life yet?”

“Just the same.”

I was so comfortable with myself now as not to mind the veil and to be able to put it aside.

“Her gratitude to you, Mr. Woodcourt, is delightful. She is a most affectionate creature.”

“You – you have found her so?” he returned. “I – I am glad of that.” He was so very sorry for me that he could scarcely speak.

“I assure you,” said I, “that I was deeply touched by her sympathy.”

“I was grieved to hear that you had been very ill. But you have quite recovered?”

“I have quite recovered my health and my cheerfulness,” said I. “You know how good my guardian is and what a happy life we lead, and I have everything to be thankful for and nothing in the world to desire.”

I felt as if he had greater pity for me than I had ever had for myself. It inspired me with new fortitude and new calmness to find that it was I who needed to reassure him. I spoke to him of his voyages, and of his future plans, and of his probable return to India. He said that was very doubtful. He had gone out a poor ship’s surgeon and had come home no richer.

While we were talking, and when I was glad to believe that I had alleviated the shock he had had in seeing me, Richard came in. They met with cordial pleasure.

I saw that after their first greetings were over, and when they spoke of Richard’s career, Mr. Woodcourt perceived that all was not going well with him. He frequently glanced at his face as if there were something in it that gave him pain, and more than once he looked towards me as though he sought to ascertain whether I knew what the truth was. Yet Richard was in one of his sanguine states and in good spirits, and was thoroughly pleased to see Mr. Woodcourt, whom he had always liked.

Richard proposed that we all should go to London together; but Mr. Woodcourt, having to remain by his ship a little longer, could not join us. He dined with us, however, and became so much more like what he used to be that I was still more at peace to think I had been able to soften his regrets. Yet he was concerned about Richard. When Richard ran down to look after his luggage, he spoke to me about him.

I was not sure that I had a right to tell his whole story, but I referred in a few words to his estrangement from Mr Jarndyce and to his being entangled in the ill-fated Chancery suit. Mr. Woodcourt listened with interest and regret.

“He is changed,” he said, shaking his head.

I felt the blood rush into my face for the first time, but it was only an instantaneous emotion. I turned my head aside, and it was gone.

“It is not,” said Mr. Woodcourt, “so much a physical change, as there being upon his face such a singular expression. One cannot say that it is all anxiety or all weariness; yet it is both, and like ungrown despair.”

“You do not think he is ill?” said I.

“No. He looked robust in body.”

“Yet we know that he cannot be at peace in mind. Mr. Woodcourt, you are going to London?”

“Tomorrow or the next day.”

“There is nothing Richard needs so much as a friend. He always liked you. Pray see him when you get there. Pray help him sometimes with your companionship if you can. You cannot think how Ada, and Mr. Jarndyce, and even I – how we should all thank you, Mr. Woodcourt!”

“Miss Summerson,” he said, more moved than he had been from the first, “before heaven, I will be a true friend to him! I will accept him as a sacred trust.”

“God bless you!” said I, with my eyes filling fast. “Ada loves him – we all love him, but Ada loves him as we cannot. I will tell her what you say. Thank you, and God bless you!”

Richard came back as we finished exchanging these hurried words and gave me his arm to take me to the coach.

“Woodcourt,” he said, “pray let us meet in London!”

“I have scarcely a friend there now but you. Where shall I find you?”

“Why, I must get a lodging of some sort,” said Richard, pondering. “Say at Vholes’s, Symond’s Inn.”

“Good! Without loss of time.”

They shook hands heartily. When I was seated in the coach and Richard was standing in the street, Mr. Woodcourt laid his friendly hand on Richard’s shoulder and looked at me. I understood him and waved mine in thanks.

And in his last look as we drove away, I saw that he was very sorry for me. I was glad to see it. I felt for my old self as the dead may feel if they ever revisit these scenes. I was glad to be tenderly remembered, to be gently pitied, not to be quite forgotten.

Chapter 46

Stop Him!

Darkness rests upon Tom-All-Alone's. Since the sun went down last night, the darkness has gradually swelled until it fills every void in the place. For a time there were some dungeon lights burning. But they are blotted out. The moon has eyed Tom with a dull cold stare; but she has passed on and is gone. The blackest nightmare in the infernal stables grazes on Tom-all-Alone's, and Tom is fast asleep.

Much mighty speech-making there has been, both in and out of Parliament, concerning Tom, and how Tom shall be got right. Whether he shall be put into the main road by constables, or by beadles, or by churches; or whether he shall be put to stone-breaking instead. One thing is perfectly clear: that Tom can and will only be reclaimed according to somebody's theory but nobody's practice. And in the meantime, Tom goes to perdition.

But he has his revenge. Even the winds are his messengers, sending his infection and contagion everywhere. There is not an atom of Tom's slime, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, but shall work its retribution through every order of society up to the proudest of the proud and the highest of the high. And thus Tom has his revenge.

Now, as day begins to break, a brown sunburnt gentleman, who appears to be wandering abroad because of some inaptitude for sleep, strolls there at this quiet time. He often pauses and looks about him curiously. Nor is he merely curious, for in his bright dark eye there is compassionate interest; he seems to understand such wretchedness and to have studied it before.

On the banks of the stagnant channel of mud which is the main street of Tom-all-Alone's, nothing is to be seen but the crazy houses, shut up and silent. No waking creature save himself appears except for a solitary woman sitting on a door-step. He observes that she has journeyed a long distance and is footsore and travel-stained. She sits on the door-step with her elbow on her knee and her head upon her hand. Beside her is a canvas bag, or bundle. She is dozing, for she gives no heed to his steps as he approaches.

The broken footway is so narrow that when Allan Woodcourt comes to the woman, he has to turn into the road to pass her. Looking down at her face, his eye meets hers, and he stops.

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Do you want to be let in?"

"I'm waiting till they get up at another house – a lodging-house – not here," the woman patiently returns.

"I am afraid you are tired. I am sorry to see you sitting in the street."

"Thank you, sir. It don't matter."

A habit in him of speaking to the poor and of avoiding condescension has put him on good terms with the woman easily.

“Let me look at your forehead,” he says, bending down. “I am a doctor. Don’t be afraid. I won’t hurt you.”

He knows that by touching her with his skilful hand he can soothe her more readily. She says, “It’s nothing”; but he has scarcely laid his fingers on the wounded place when she lifts it up to the light.

“Aye! A bad bruise, and the skin broken. This must be very sore.”

“It do ache a little, sir,” returns the woman with a started tear upon her cheek.

“Let me try to make it more comfortable.”

He cleanses the injured place and dries it with his handkerchief, and having carefully examined it, takes a small case from his pocket, dresses it, and binds it up. While he is thus employed, he says, “And so your husband is a brickmaker?”

“How do you know that, sir?” asks the woman, astonished.

“Why, I suppose so from the colour of the clay upon your bag and your dress. And I know brickmakers go about doing piecework in different places. I am sorry to say I have known them be cruel to their wives too.”

The woman hastily lifts up her eyes as if she would deny it; but seeing his busy and composed face, she quietly drops them again.

“Where is he now?” asks the surgeon.

“He got into trouble last night, sir; but he’ll look for me at the lodging-house.”

“He will get into worse trouble if he often misuses his heavy hand as he has misused it here. But you forgive him, brutal as he is, and I say no more of him. You have no young child?”

The woman shakes her head. “One as I calls mine, sir, but it’s Liz’s.”

“Your own is dead. I see! Poor little thing!”

By this time he has finished and is shutting up his case. “I suppose you have some settled home. Is it far from here?” he asks as she gets up and curtsys.

“It’s a good twenty mile from here, sir. At Saint Albans. You know Saint Albans, sir? I thought you gave a start like, as if you did.”

“Yes, I know something of it. Have you money for your lodging?”

“Yes, sir,” she says, “really and truly.” And she shows it. He tells her, in acknowledgment of her thanks, that she is very welcome, and walks away. Tom-all-Alone’s is still asleep, and nothing is astir.

Yes, something is! He sees a ragged figure coming very cautiously along, crouching close to the soiled walls, furtively thrusting a hand before it. It is the figure of a youth whose face is hollow and whose eyes have an emaciated glare. Intent on getting along unseen, he shades his face with his ragged elbow as he passes, and goes creeping on with his anxious hand before him and his shapeless clothes hanging in shreds. Clothes made for what purpose, or of what material, it would be impossible to say. They look like a bundle of rank leaves that rotted long ago.

Allan Woodcourt pauses to look after him and note all this, with a shadowy belief that he has seen the boy before, although he cannot recall how or where. He imagines that he must have seen him in some hospital or refuge.

He is gradually emerging from Tom-all-Alone's in the morning light, thinking about it, when he hears running feet behind him, and looking round, sees the boy racing towards him at great speed, followed by the woman.

"Stop him, stop him!" cries the woman, almost breathless.

He darts across the road into the boy's path, but the boy is quicker than he, dives under his hands, comes up half-a-dozen yards beyond him, and darts away again.

Still the woman follows, crying, "Stop him, sir, pray stop him!" Allan, thinking that the boy may have just robbed her of her money, follows in chase and runs the boy down a dozen times; but each time he ducks and dives away. The pursuer cannot resolve to strike him, and so the grimly ridiculous pursuit continues.

At last the fugitive, hard-pressed, takes to a narrow passage and a court which has no way out. Here, against a hoarding of decaying timber, he is brought tumbling down, lying gasping at his pursuer, who stands and gasps at him until the woman comes up.

"Oh, Jo!" cries the woman. "I have found you at last!"

"Jo," repeats Allan, looking at him with attention. "Jo! To be sure! I recollect this lad some time ago being brought before the coroner."

"Yes, I see you once afore at the inkwhich," whimpers Jo. "What of that? Can't you never let such an unfortnet as me alone? An't I unfortnet enough for you yet? How unfortnet do you want me fur to be? I've been a-chivied and a-chivied till I'm worritted to skins and bones. The inkwhich warn't *my* fault. I done nothink. He wos wery good to me, he wos; he wos the only one I knowed to speak to, as ever come across my crossing. It ain't wery likely I should want him to be inkwiched. I only wish I wos, myself."

He says it with such a pitiable air, and his grimy tears appear so real, and he lies in the corner so like a growth of fungus that Allan Woodcourt is softened towards him. He says to the woman, "What has he done?"

To which she only replies, shaking her head at the prostrate figure, "Oh, you Jo, you Jo. I have found you at last!"

"What has he done?" says Allan. "Has he robbed you?"

"No, sir, no. He did nothing but what was kind-hearted by me, and that's the wonder of it. He was along with me, sir, down at Saint Albans, ill, and a young lady, Lord bless her, took pity on him when I durstn't, and took him home—"

Allan shrinks back with a sudden horror.

"Yes, sir, yes. Took him home, and made him comfortable, and like a thankless monster he ran away in the night and never has been seen or heard of since till now. And that young lady that was such a pretty dear caught his illness, lost her beautiful looks, and wouldn't hardly be known for the same young lady now if it wasn't for her angel temper and her sweet voice. You

ungrateful wretch, do you know that this is all along of you?" demands the woman.

The boy, stunned by what he hears, falls to smearing his dirty forehead with his dirty palm, and to staring at the ground, and to shaking from head to foot.

"Richard told me—" Allan falters. "I mean, I have heard of this – don't mind me for a moment."

He turns away and stands for a while looking out at the passage. When he comes back, he has recovered his composure, except that he struggles against an avoidance of the boy.

"You hear what she says. But get up, get up!"

Jo, shaking and chattering, slowly rises and stands against the hoarding, rubbing one foot with the other.

"Have you been here ever since?"

"Wishermaydie if I seen Tom-all-Alone's till this blessed morning," replies Jo hoarsely.

"Why have you come here now?"

Jo looks round, and finally answers, "I don't know how to do nothink, and I can't get nothink to do. I'm verry poor and ill, and I thought I'd come back here when there warn't nobody about, and lay down and hide somewheres till arter dark, and then go and beg a trifle of Mr. Sangsby."

"Where have you come from?"

Jo looks all round the court again. "Tramp then," he says at last.

"Now tell me," proceeds Allan, making a strong effort to overcome his repugnance, "tell me how it came about that you left that house when the good young lady had taken you home."

Jo excitedly declares that he never known about the young lady, that he never went fur to hurt her, that he would sooner have hurt his own self, and that she wos verry good to him, she wos. He winds up with some miserable sobs.

Allan Woodcourt sees that this is not a sham, and makes himself touch him. "Come, Jo. Tell me."

"No. I dustn't," says Jo.

"But I must know. Come, Jo."

Jo looks round the court again, and says in a low voice, "Well, I'll tell you. I was took away. There!"

"Took away? In the night?"

"Ah!" Jo is very apprehensive of being overheard.

"Who took you away?"

"I dustn't name him, sir," says Jo.

"You may trust me. No one else shall hear."

"Ah, but *he* might hear," replies Jo, shaking his head fearfully.

"Why, he is not in this place."

"Oh, ain't he though?" says Jo. "He's in all manner of places, all at once."

Allan looks at him in perplexity, until Jo at last desperately whispers a name in his ear.

“Aye!” says Allan. “Why, what had you been doing?”

“Nothink, sir. Never done nothink to get myself into no trouble, ’sept in not moving on and the inkwhich. But I’m a-moving on now. I’m a-moving on to the berryin ground.”

“No, no, we will try to prevent that. But what did he do with you?”

“Put me in a horsepittle,” replied Jo, whispering, “till I was discharged, then giv me a little money – four half-crowns – and ses ‘Hook it! Nobody wants you here,’ he ses. ‘You go and tramp,’ he ses. ‘You move on well out of London, or you’ll repent it.’ So I shall.”

Allan considers a little, then turning to the woman says, “He is not so ungrateful as you supposed. He had a reason for going away.”

“Thankee, sir, thankee!” exclaims Jo. “There now!”

“Now, Jo,” says Allan, “come with me and I will find you a better place than this to lie down and hide in. You will not run away, I know very well, if you make me a promise.”

“I won’t, not unless I wos to see *him* a-coming, sir.”

“Very well. I take your word. The town will be awake in another hour. Come along. Good day again, my good woman.”

“Good day again, sir, and I thank you kindly.”

Jo, repeating, “Tell the young lady as I never went fur to hurt her!” nods and shambles and shivers, and smears and blinks, and half laughs and half cries a farewell to her, and takes his creeping way along after Allan Woodcourt. In this way, the two come up out of Tom-all-Alone’s into the broad rays of the sunlight and the purer air.

Chapter 47

Jo's Will

As Allan Woodcourt and Jo proceed along the streets in the morning light, Allan revolves in his mind where he shall bestow his companion.

"It surely is a strange fact," he considers, "that in the heart of a civilized world this creature in human form should be more difficult to dispose of than an unowned dog."

He looks behind him often to assure himself that Jo is still following, and sees him making his way with his wary hand from brick to brick and from door to door.

A breakfast-stall at a street-corner suggests the first thing to be done. Allan stops there and beckons Jo, who comes shuffling up, slowly scooping the knuckles of his right hand round and round in the hollowed palm of his left, like a dirty pestle and mortar. When food is set before him, he begins to gulp the coffee and to gnaw the bread and butter, looking anxiously about in all directions, like a scared animal.

But he is so sick and miserable that even hunger has abandoned him.

"I thought I was amost a-starvin, sir," says Jo, soon putting down his food, "but I don't care for eating." And he stands shivering and looking at the breakfast wonderingly.

Allan Woodcourt lays his hand upon his pulse and on his chest. "Draw breath, Jo!"

"It draws," says Jo, "as heavy as a cart." He might add, "And rattles like it," but he only mutters, "I'm a-moving on, sir."

Allan Woodcourt looks about for an apothecary's shop. There is none at hand, but at a tavern he obtains a little measure of wine and gives the lad some of it. Jo begins to revive almost as soon as it passes his lips.

"We may repeat that dose, Jo," observes Allan. "So! Now we will take five minutes' rest, and then go on again."

As he sits on the bench in the pale sunshine, Jo's face brightens somewhat; and by little and little he eats the slice of bread he had laid down. Seeing these signs of improvement, Allan talks to him and hears to his wonder the adventure of the lady in the veil. Jo munches as he slowly tells it. When he has finished his story and his bread, they go on again.

Hoping to find a temporary place of refuge for the boy with his old patient, zealous little Miss Flite, Allan leads the way to the court where he and Jo first met. But all is changed at the rag and bottle shop; Miss Flite no longer lodges there; it is shut up; and a hard-featured female, no other than Judy, is tart and spare in her replies.

These inform the visitor that Miss Flite and her birds are lodging with a Mrs. Blinder, in Bell Yard. Allan goes to that place, where Miss Flite comes running downstairs with tears of welcome and with open arms.

“My dear physician!” cries Miss Flite. “My distinguished, honourable officer!” Allan patiently waits until she has no more raptures to express, then points out Jo, trembling in a doorway, and tells her how he comes there.

“Where can I lodge him hereabouts for the present? You have a fund of knowledge and good sense and can advise me.”

Miss Flite, mighty proud of the compliment, considers. Mrs. Blinder is entirely let, and she herself occupies poor Gridley’s room. “Gridley!” exclaims Miss Flite, clapping her hands. “Gridley! To be sure! General George will help us out.”

It is hopeless to ask for any information about General George, as Miss Flite has already run upstairs to put on her pinched bonnet and her poor little shawl and to arm herself with her reticule of documents. But as she informs her physician that General George knows her dear Fitz Jarndyce and takes a great interest in her, Allan thinks that they may be in the right way. So he tells Jo that this walking about will soon be over. Fortunately the general’s shooting gallery is not far.

From its exterior, Allan Woodcourt augurs well. He also sees promise in the figure of Mr. George himself, striding towards them with his pipe in his mouth, and his muscular arms weightily asserting themselves through his light shirt-sleeves.

“Your servant, sir,” says Mr. George with a military salute. Good-humouredly smiling, he then defers to Miss Flite, as, with great stateliness, she performs the ceremony of introduction.

“Your servant, sir! A sailor, I believe?” says Mr. George.

“I am proud to find I have the air of one,” returns Allan; “but I am only a sea-going doctor.” He proceeds to tell him all he knows about Jo, to which the trooper listens with a grave face.

“That’s the lad, sir, is it?” he inquires.

“That’s he,” says Allan. “I am unwilling to place him in a hospital, because I foresee that he would not stay there long even if he could be got there. The same objection applies to a workhouse, which is a system that I don’t take kindly to.”

“No man does, sir,” returns Mr. George.

“I am convinced that he would not remain in either place, because he is possessed by an extraordinary terror of this person who ordered him to keep out of the way; he believes this person to be everywhere.”

“Is that person’s name a secret, sir?”

“His name is Bucket.”

“Bucket the detective, sir?”

“The same man.”

“The man is known to me, sir,” returns the trooper, “and he undoubtedly is a – rum customer.”

“Now, I wish Mr. Jarndyce and Miss Summerson to know that Jo has reappeared, and to be able to speak with him if they should wish. Therefore I want to get him into any poor lodging kept by decent people. Decent people and Jo, Mr. George,” says Allan, “have not been much acquainted, as you see.

Hence the difficulty. Do you happen to know anyone in this neighbourhood who would receive him for a while on my paying for him beforehand?"

As he asks, he becomes aware of a little man standing at the trooper's elbow and looking up, with an oddly twisted figure and countenance, into the trooper's face. After a few more puffs at his pipe, the trooper looks down at the little man, who winks.

"Well, sir," says Mr. George, "I can assure you that I would willingly be knocked on the head at any time if it would be at all agreeable to Miss Summerson, and would do that young lady any service, however small. We are naturally in the vagabond way here, sir, myself and Phil. You see what the place is. You are welcome to a quiet corner of it for the boy. No charge made, except for rations. We are not in a flourishing state here; we are liable to be tumbled out at a moment's notice. However, sir, such as the place is, and so long as it lasts, it is at your service. I take it for granted, sir," he adds, "that there is no present infection about this unfortunate subject?"

Allan is quite sure of it. "Still I am bound to tell you," he adds, "that the boy is deplorably low and that he may be too far gone to recover."

"Do you consider him in present danger, sir?" inquires the trooper.

"Yes, I fear so."

"Then, sir," returns the trooper decisively, "the sooner he comes out of the street, the better. Phil! Bring him in!"

Mr. Squod tacks out on one side to do so; and Jo is brought in. He is not one of Mrs. Jellyby's lambs of Borrioboola-Gha; he is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is the ordinary home-made article. Dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses; homely filth begrimes him, homely parasites devour him, homely rags are on him; native ignorance sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts.

He shuffles slowly into Mr. George's gallery and stands huddled, looking all about the floor. He seems to know that they have an inclination to shrink from him, partly for what he is and partly for what he has caused. He, too, shrinks from them. He is not of the same order of things, not of the same place in creation. He is of no order and no place, neither of the beasts nor of humanity.

"Look here, Jo!" says Allan. "This is Mr. George."

Jo looks up for a moment, and then down again.

"He is a kind friend to you, for he is going to give you lodging room here."

Jo makes a scoop with one hand, which is supposed to be a bow. After some backing and changing of the foot on which he rests, he mutters that he is "wery thankful."

"You are quite safe here. All you have to do at present is to get strong. And mind you tell us the truth here, Jo."

"Wishermaydie if I don't, sir," says Jo. "I never was in no trouble at all, sir, 'sept not knowin' nothink and starvation."

"Look here," says Mr. George. He leads them to the other end of the gallery and opens one of the little cabins. "Here is a mattress, and here you

may rest. Don't you be alarmed if you hear shots; they'll be aimed at the target, and not you. Now, there's another thing I would recommend, sir," says the trooper, turning to his visitor. "Phil, come here!"

Phil bears down upon them in his usual manner. "Here is a man, sir, who was found, when a baby, in the gutter. Consequently, he takes a natural interest in this poor creature, don't you, Phil?"

"Certainly, gov'ner," is Phil's reply.

"Now I was thinking, sir," says Mr. George, "that if this man was to take him to a bath and was to lay out a few shillings in getting him some clothing—"

"Mr. George," returns Allan, taking out his purse, "it is the very favour I would have asked."

Phil Squod and Jo are sent out immediately on this work of improvement. Miss Flite, quite enraptured by her success, returns to her court, having great fears that her friend the Chancellor may give the judgment she has so long expected in her absence. Allan goes out to buy some medicines, and returns to find the trooper walking up and down the gallery. Falling into step, he walks with him.

"I take it, sir," says Mr. George, "that you know Miss Summerson pretty well?"

"Yes."

"Excuse the curiosity," says Mr. George. "I thought you might take an interest in this poor creature because Miss Summerson had taken an interest in him. 'Tis *my* case, sir, I assure you."

"And mine, Mr. George."

The trooper looks sideways at Allan's sunburnt cheek and bright dark eye, and seems to approve of him.

"Since you have been out, sir, I have been thinking that I know the rooms in Lincoln's Inn Fields, where Bucket took the lad, according to his account. It's Tulkynghorn. That's the name, sir. I know the man, sir. To my sorrow."

"What kind of man is he?" asks Allan.

The trooper folds his arms on his square chest so angrily that his face flushes all over. "He is a confoundedly bad kind of man. A slow-torturing kind of man. He is no more like flesh and blood than a rusty old carbine is. He has caused me more restlessness and uneasiness and dissatisfaction with myself than all other men put together!"

"I am sorry," says Allan, "to have touched so sore a place."

"Sore?" The trooper plants his legs wider apart. "You shall judge, sir. He has got a power over me. He is the man I spoke of just now as being able to tumble me out of this place. He keeps me on a constant see-saw. If I have a payment to make him, he don't see me – passes me on to Melchisedech's in Clifford's Inn. Melchisedech's passes me back again to him. Why, I spend half my life now loitering and dodging about his door. What does he care? Nothing. He chafes and goads me till – Bah! I am forgetting myself. Mr. Woodcourt," says the trooper; "but I am glad I shall never have the chance of

setting spurs to my horse and riding at him in a fair field. For if I had that chance – he'd go down, sir!"

Mr. George wipes his forehead on his shirt-sleeve, and whistles his impetuosity away with the national anthem, but some shakings of his head and heavings of his chest still linger. Allan Woodcourt has not much doubt about the going down of Mr. Tulkinghorn on the field referred to.

Jo and Phil presently return, and the careful Phil helps Jo to his bed. To him Allan confides all needful instructions. Then he repairs to his lodgings to dress and breakfast, and without seeking rest, goes away to Mr. Jarndyce to communicate his discovery.

Mr. Jarndyce returns with him, confidentially telling him that there are reasons for keeping this matter very quiet. To Mr. Jarndyce, Jo repeats what he said in the morning, without any variation. Only that cart of his is heavier to draw, and draws with a hollower sound.

"Let me lay here quiet and not be chivied no more," falters Jo, "and be so kind as jist to say to Mr. Sangsby that Jo, wot he known once, is a-moving on right forards with his duty, and I'll be wery thankful."

He makes so many of these references to the law-stationer over a day or two that Allan, after conferring with Mr. Jarndyce, good-naturedly resolves to call in Cook's Court.

At Cook's Court he finds Mr. Snagsby behind his counter in his grey coat and sleeves, inspecting an immense desert of parchment. Mr. Snagsby greets the stranger with his cough of business.

"You don't remember me, Mr. Snagsby?"

The stationer's heart begins to thump heavily. It is all he can do to answer, "No, sir, I can't say I do. I don't think that I ever saw you before, sir."

"Twice before," says Allan Woodcourt. "Once at a poor bedside, and once—"

"It's come at last!" thinks the afflicted stationer, as recollection breaks upon him. But he has sufficient presence of mind to conduct his visitor into the little counting-house and to shut the door.

"Would you make the attempt," says Mr. Snagsby in a melancholy whisper, "to speak as low as you can? For my little woman is a-listening somewheres! I never had a secret of my own, sir. I have never once attempted to deceive my little woman since she named the day. I couldn't have done it. Whereas, nevertheless, I find myself wrapped round with secrecy and mystery, till my life is a burden to me."

His visitor professes his regret to hear it and asks him does he remember Jo. Mr. Snagsby answers with a suppressed groan, oh, don't he!

"You couldn't name a human being – except myself – that my little woman is more set against than Jo," says Mr. Snagsby.

Allan asks why.

"Why?" repeats Mr. Snagsby, in his desperation clutching at the clump of hair at the back of his bald head. "How should I know why? A certain person charges me, in the solemnest way, not to talk of Jo to anyone, even my little woman. Then comes another certain person, in the person of yourself,

and charges me, in an equally solemn way, not to mention Jo to that other certain person. Why, this is Bedlam, sir!" says Mr. Snagsby.

But being tender-hearted and affected by the account he hears of Jo's condition, he readily engages to call round early in the evening if he can manage it quietly. He calls round when the evening comes, but it may turn out that Mrs. Snagsby is as quiet a manager as he.

Jo is very glad to see his old friend and says it is uncommon kind of Mr. Sangsby to come so far out of his way on accounts of sich as him. Mr. Snagsby, touched, immediately lays upon the table half a crown, that magic balsam of his for all kinds of wounds.

"And how do you find yourself, my poor lad?" inquires the stationer.

"I am in luck, Mr. Sangsby, I am," returns Jo, "and don't want for nothink. I'm more cumfbler nor you can't think. Mr. Sangsby! I'm wery sorry that I done it, but I didn't go fur to do it, sir."

The stationer softly lays down another half-crown and asks him what he is sorry for having done.

"Mr. Sangsby," says Jo, "I went and giv a illness to the lady as wos and yit as warn't the t'other lady, and none of 'em never says nothink to me for having done it, on accounts of their being ser good. The lady come herself and see me yesday, and she ses, 'Ah, Jo! We thought we'd lost you, Jo!' she ses. And she sits down a-smilin so quiet, and don't pass a word upon me for having done it, she don't, and I turns agin the wall, I doos, Mr. Sangsby. And Mr. Jarnders, I see him a-forced to turn away hissself. And Mr. Woodcot, he come fur to giv me somethink fur to ease me, wot he's allus a-doin' day and night, and wen he come a-bending over me, I see his tears a-fallin, Mr. Sangsby."

The softened stationer deposits another half-crown on the table.

"Wot I was a-thinkin on, Mr. Sangsby," proceeds Jo, "wos, as you wos able to write wery large, p'raps?"

"Yes, Jo," returns the stationer.

Jo laughs with pleasure. "Wot I wos a-thinking then, Mr. Sangsby, wos, that when I wos moved on as fur as ever I could, whether you might be so good p'raps as to write out, wery large so that anyone could see it anywheres, as that I wos wery truly hearty sorry that I done it and that I never went fur to do it, and that though I didn't know nothink at all, I knowd as Mr. Woodcot wos allus grieved over it, and that I hoped as he'd be able to forgive me. If the writin could be made to say it wery large, he might."

"It shall say it, Jo. Very large."

Jo laughs again. "Thankee, Mr. Sangsby. It's wery kind of you, sir, and it makes me more cumfbler nor I was afore."

The meek little stationer, with a broken and unfinished cough, slips down his fourth half-crown – and departs. And Jo and he, upon this little earth, shall meet no more.

For the cart so hard to draw is near its journey's end and drags over stony ground. It labours up the broken steps, shattered and worn. Not many times can the sun rise and behold it still upon its weary road.

Phil Squod, with his smoky gunpowder visage, both acts as nurse and works as armourer at his little table in a corner, often looking round and saying with a nod of his green-baize cap, "Hold up, my boy! Hold up!"

There, too, is Mr. Jarndyce many a time, and Allan Woodcourt almost always, both thinking how strangely fate has entangled this rough outcast in the web of very different lives. The trooper is a frequent visitor, filling the doorway with his athletic figure and seeming to shed down temporary vigour upon Jo, who never fails to speak more robustly in answer to his cheerful words.

Jo is in a sleep or in a stupor today, and Allan Woodcourt, newly arrived, stands by him, looking down upon his wasted form. After a while he softly sits upon the bedside and touches his chest and heart. The cart has very nearly given up, but labours on a little more.

The trooper stands in the doorway, still and silent. Phil has stopped with his hammer in his hand. Mr. Woodcourt looks round, and glancing significantly at the trooper, signs to Phil to carry his table out. When the hammer is next used, there will be a speck of rust upon it.

"Well, Jo! What is the matter? Don't be frightened."

"I thought," says Jo, who has started and is looking round, "I thought I was in Tom-all-Alone's agin. Ain't there nobody here but you, Mr. Woodcot?"

"Nobody."

"And I ain't took back to Tom-all-Alone's. Am I, sir?"

"No."

Jo closes his eyes, muttering, "I'm wery thankful."

After watching him closely a little while, Allan puts his mouth very near his ear and says low to him, "Jo! Did you ever know a prayer?"

"Never knowd nothink, sir. Mr. Chadband he wos a-prayin wunst at Mr. Sangsby's, but he sounded as if he wos a-speakin to hisself, and not to me. He prayed a lot, but I couldn't make out nothink on it. I never knowd what it wos all about."

It takes him a long time to say this. After a short relapse into sleep or stupor, he makes a sudden, strong effort to get out of bed.

"Stay, Jo! What now?"

"It's time for me to go to that there berryin ground, sir," he returns with a wild look.

"Lie down, and tell me. What burying ground, Jo?"

"Where they laid him as wos wery good to me, wery good to me indeed, he wos. It's time fur me to go down to that there berryin ground, sir, and ask to be put along with him. He used fur to say to me, 'I am as poor as you today, Jo,' he ses. I wants to tell him that I am as poor as him now and have come there to be laid along with him."

"By and by, Jo. By and by."

"Ah! Will you promise to have me took there, sir, and laid along with him?"

"I will, indeed."

“Thankee, sir. They’ll have to get the key of the gate, for it’s allus locked. And there’s a step there, as I used for to clean with my broom. It’s turned wery dark, sir. Is there any light a-comin?”

“It is coming fast, Jo.”

Fast. The cart is shaken all to pieces, and the rugged road is very near its end.

“Jo, my poor fellow!”

“I hear you, sir, in the dark, but I’m a-gropin – a-gropin – let me catch hold of your hand.”

“Jo, can you say what I say?”

“I’ll say anythink as you say, sir, for I knows it’s good.”

“Our Father.”

“Our Father! Yes, that’s wery good, sir.”

“Which art in heaven.”

“Art in heaven – is the light a-comin, sir?”

“It is close at hand. Hallowed be thy name!”

“Hallowed be – thy—”

The light is come.

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, right reverends and wrong reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day.

Chapter 48

Closing In

The place in Lincolnshire has shut its many eyes again, and the house in town is awake. In Lincolnshire the Dedlocks of the past doze in their picture-frames. In town the Dedlocks of the present rattle in their carriages through the darkness of the night, and the Dedlock footmen loll away the drowsy mornings in the little windows of the hall. The fashionable world – tremendous orb, nearly five miles round – is in full swing.

Where the throng is thickest, where the lights are brightest, Lady Dedlock is. From the shining heights she has conquered, she is never absent. Though she has no assurance that what she is to those around her, she will remain another day, it is not in her nature to yield or to droop. They say that she has lately grown more handsome and more haughty.

Mr. Tulkinghorn says nothing. Now, as before, he is to be found in doorways, receiving patronage from the peerage and making no sign. Of all men he is still the last who might be supposed to have any influence upon my Lady. Of all women she is still the last who might be supposed to have any dread of him.

One thing has been much on her mind since their interview in his turret-room at Chesney Wold. She is now decided.

It is afternoon. The footmen, exhausted by looking out of windows, are reposing in the hall and hang their heavy powdered heads like overblown sunflowers. Sir Leicester, in the library, has fallen asleep over the report of a Parliamentary committee. My Lady sits in the room in which she gave audience to the young man of the name of Guppy. Rosa is with her and has been reading to her. Rosa is now at work upon embroidery, and my Lady watches her in silence.

“Rosa.”

The pretty village face looks brightly up. Then, seeing how serious my Lady is, looks puzzled and surprised.

“Is the door shut?”

Yes. She looks yet more surprised.

“I am about to place confidence in you, child, for I know I may trust your attachment, if not your judgment. Say nothing to anyone of what passes between us.”

Rosa promises earnestly to be trustworthy.

“Do you know,” Lady Dedlock asks her, “that I am different to you from what I am to anyone?”

“Yes, my Lady. Much kinder. But I often think I know you as you really are.”

“You think so? Poor child!”

She says it with a kind of scorn – though not of Rosa – and sits brooding.

“Do you think, Rosa, you are any relief or comfort to me? Do you suppose it gives me pleasure to have you near me?”

“I don’t know, my Lady. I hope and wish it was so.”

“It is so, little one.”

The pretty face is checked in its flush of pleasure by the dark expression on the handsome face before it. It looks timidly for an explanation.

“And if I were to say today, ‘Go! Leave me!’ it would give me great pain, child, and leave me very solitary.”

“My Lady! Have I offended you?”

“In nothing. Come here.”

Rosa bends down on the footstool at my Lady’s feet. My Lady lays her hand upon her dark hair and gently keeps it there.

“I told you, Rosa, that I wished you to be happy and that I would make you so if I could. I cannot. There are reasons now known to me, reasons in which you have no part, which mean it is far better for you that you should not remain here. I have decided that you shall not stay. I have written to the father of your lover, and he will be here today. All this I have done for your sake.”

The weeping girl covers her hand with kisses and says what shall she do, when they are separated! Her mistress kisses her on the cheek.

“Be happy, child. Be beloved and happy!”

“Ah, my Lady, I have sometimes thought – forgive me – that *you* are not happy.”

“I!”

“Pray let me stay a little while!”

“I have said, my child, that what I do, I do for your sake, not my own. It is done. What I am towards you, Rosa, is what I am now – not what I shall be in a little while. Remember this, and keep my confidence, for my sake!”

She leaves the room. Late in the afternoon, when she next appears upon the staircase, she is in her haughtiest and coldest state.

Mr. Rouncewell has arrived. Mr. Rouncewell is not in the library, but she goes to the library. Sir Leicester is there, and she wishes to speak to him first.

“Sir Leicester, I am desirous – but you are engaged.”

Oh, dear no! Only Mr. Tulkinghorn. Always at hand. Haunting every place.

“I beg your pardon, Lady Dedlock. Will you allow me to retire?”

With a look that plainly says, “You know you have the power to remain if you will,” she tells him it is not necessary. Mr. Tulkinghorn retires into a window opposite. Interposed between her and the fading light of day in the quiet street, his shadow falls upon her, and he darkens all before her.

It is a dull street at the best of times, a street of dismal grandeur, with a complicated garnish of iron-work that entwines itself over the flights of steps, and here and there a weak little iron hoop, sacred to the memory of departed

oil-lamps. Therefore there is not much that Lady Dedlock could wish to see through the window in which Mr. Tulkinghorn stands. And yet she sends a look in that direction as if it were her heart's desire to have him moved out of the way.

Sir Leicester begs his Lady's pardon. She was about to say?

"Only that Mr. Rouncewell is here (he has called by my appointment) and that we had better make an end of the question of that girl. I am tired to death of the matter. Will you tell them to send him up?"

Sir Leicester tells the footman, "Request the iron gentleman to walk this way."

When he comes, Sir Leicester receives him graciously.

"I hope you are well, Mr. Rouncewell. Be seated. My Lady was desirous to speak with you. Hem!"

"I shall be very happy," returns the iron gentleman, "to give my best attention to anything Lady Dedlock does me the honour to say."

As he turns towards her, he finds she seems less agreeable than on the former occasion. A distant supercilious air makes a cold atmosphere about her, which does not encourage openness.

"Pray, sir," says Lady Dedlock listlessly, "may I be allowed to inquire whether anything has passed between you and your son respecting your son's fancy?"

"If my memory serves me, Lady Dedlock, I said that I should seriously advise my son to conquer that – fancy."

"And did you?"

"Of course I did."

Sir Leicester gives an approving nod.

"And pray has he done so?"

"Lady Dedlock, I fear not."

"Because," proceeds my Lady, "I have been thinking of the subject, which is tiresome to me."

"I am very sorry, I am sure."

"And also of what Sir Leicester said upon it, in which I quite concur. If you cannot assure us that this fancy is at an end, I have come to the conclusion that the girl had better leave me. She had better go."

"Excuse me, my Lady," Sir Leicester considerately interposes, "but perhaps this may be doing an injury to the young woman which she has not deserved. It is her good fortune it is to have attracted the favour of an eminent lady and to live surrounded by great advantages. Should the young woman be deprived of these advantages simply because she has attracted the notice of Mr Rouncewell's son? Now, has she deserved this punishment?"

"I beg your pardon," interposes Mr. Rouncewell. "Pray dismiss that from your consideration. You may recollect that my first thought in the affair was directly opposed to her remaining here."

Dismiss the Dedlock patronage from consideration? Oh! Sir Leicester can scarcely believe his ears.

“It is not necessary,” observes my Lady in her coldest manner, “to enter into these matters. The girl is a very good girl; I have nothing whatever to say against her, but she is so far insensible to her many advantages that she is in love – or supposes she is, poor little fool – and unable to appreciate them.”

In that case, Sir Leicester entirely agrees with my Lady. The young woman had better go.

“I have told her so,” says Lady Dedlock languidly. “Mr. Rouncewell, would you wish to have her sent back to the village, or would you like to take her with you?”

“I should prefer the course which will the soonest relieve you of the incumbrance.”

“Do I understand that you will take her with you?”

The iron gentleman makes an iron bow.

“Sir Leicester, will you ring?” Mr. Tulkinghorn steps forward from his window and pulls the bell. “I had forgotten you. Thank you.” The footman is instructed to bring Rosa.

Rosa has been crying and is still in distress. On her coming in, the ironmaster leaves his chair, and takes her arm in his.

“You are taken charge of, you see,” says my Lady in her weary manner, “and are going away well protected. I have mentioned that you are a very good girl, and you have nothing to cry for.”

“She seems after all,” observes Mr. Tulkinghorn, “as if she were crying at going away.”

“Why, she is not well-bred, you see,” returns Mr. Rouncewell with some quickness, as if he were glad to have the lawyer to retort upon, “and she is an inexperienced little thing and knows no better. If she had remained here, sir, she would have improved, no doubt.”

“No doubt,” is Mr. Tulkinghorn’s composed reply.

Rosa sobs out that she is very sorry to leave my Lady, and that she was happy at Chesney Wold, and that she thanks my Lady over and over again.

“Out, you silly little puss!” says the ironmaster, though not angrily. “Have a spirit, if you’re fond of Watt!”

My Lady merely waves her off with indifference, saying, “There, there, child! You are a good girl. Go away!” Mr. Tulkinghorn, an indistinct form against the dark street now dotted with lamps, looms in my Lady’s view, bigger and blacker than before.

“Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock,” says Mr. Rouncewell, “I can very well understand, I assure you, how tiresome so small a matter must have become to Lady Dedlock. I only regret that I did not at first quietly exert my influence to take my young friend here away without troubling you. I hope you will excuse my want of acquaintance with the polite world.”

Sir Leicester stands to return his parting salutation, and Mr. Rouncewell and Rosa leave the house.

Then lights are brought in, discovering Mr. Tulkinghorn still standing in his window with his hands behind him and my Lady still sitting with his figure before her. She is very pale. Mr. Tulkinghorn thinks, “The power of

this woman is astonishing. She has been acting a part the whole time.” But he can act a part too – his one unchanging character – and as he holds the door open for her to leave the room, fifty pairs of eyes should find no flaw in him.

Lady Dedlock dines alone in her room today. Sir Leicester has a political meeting. She asks, still deadly pale, whether he is gone out? Yes. Whether Mr. Tulkinghorn is gone yet? No. Presently she asks again, is he gone *yet*? No. What is he doing? The footman thinks he is writing letters in the library. Would my Lady wish to see him? Anything but that.

But he wishes to see my Lady. Within a few more minutes he sends his respects, and could my Lady receive him for a word or two? He comes in apologizing for intruding. When they are alone, my Lady waves her hand to dispense with such mockeries.

“What do you want, sir?”

“Why, Lady Dedlock,” says the lawyer, taking a chair, “I am rather surprised by the course you have taken.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes, decidedly. I was not prepared for it. I consider it a departure from our agreement and your promise. It puts us in a new position, Lady Dedlock. I feel myself under the necessity of saying that I don’t approve of it.”

He looks at her, with his hands on his knees. Imperturbable as he is, there is still an indefinable freedom in his manner which is new and which does not escape her observation.

“I do not quite understand you.”

“Oh, I think you do. Come, come, Lady Dedlock, we must not parry now. You know you like this girl.”

“Well, sir?”

“And you know – and I know – that you have not sent her away for the reasons you said, but to separate her from any reproach and exposure that hang over yourself.”

“Well, sir?”

“Well, Lady Dedlock,” returns the lawyer, crossing his legs, “I object to that. I consider that a dangerous proceeding, calculated to awaken speculation, doubt, and rumour. Besides, it is a violation of our agreement. You were to be exactly what you were before. Whereas you have been this evening very different, Lady Dedlock, transparently so!”

“If, sir,” she begins, “in my knowledge of my secret—” But he interrupts her.

“Now, Lady Dedlock, this is a matter of business. It is no longer your secret. That is your mistake. It is my secret, in trust for Sir Leicester and the family. If it were your secret, Lady Dedlock, we should not be holding this conversation.”

“That is very true. If in my knowledge of *the* secret I do what I can to spare an innocent girl from my impending shame (especially, remembering your own reference to her when you told my story at Chesney Wold), I act upon a resolution I have taken. Nothing in the world could shake it.” This she says with no more outward passion than himself.

“Really? Then you see, Lady Dedlock, you are not to be trusted. You have put the case in a perfectly plain way, and you are not to be trusted.”

“Perhaps you may remember that I expressed some anxiety on this same point when we spoke at Chesney Wold?”

“Yes,” says Mr. Tulkinghorn, coolly getting up. “I recollect, Lady Dedlock, that you referred to the girl, but our arrangement altogether forbade any action on your part. As to sparing the girl, of what value is she? Lady Dedlock, here is a family name compromised. One might have supposed that the course was straight on, neither to the right nor to the left, sparing nothing, treading everything under foot.”

She lifts up her eyes and looks at him with a stern expression. “This woman understands me,” Mr. Tulkinghorn thinks as she lets her glance fall again. “*She* cannot be spared. Why should she spare others?”

For a little while they are silent. Lady Dedlock rises from the table and reclines in a lounging-chair, shading her face. Her manner is thoughtful, gloomy, concentrated. “This woman,” thinks Mr. Tulkinghorn, “is a study.”

He studies her at his leisure. She too studies something at her leisure. She is not the first to speak. At last he is driven to break the silence.

“Lady Dedlock, the most disagreeable part of this business interview remains, but it is business. Our agreement is broken. A lady of your sense and strength of character will be prepared for my now declaring it void and taking my own course.”

“I am quite prepared.”

Mr. Tulkinghorn inclines his head. “That is all I have to say, Lady Dedlock.”

As he is leaving the room she asks, “This is the notice I was to receive? I wish not to misunderstand you.”

“Not exactly, Lady Dedlock. But virtually the same.”

“Do you think of undeceiving Sir Leicester tonight?”

“No,” says Mr. Tulkinghorn with a slight smile. “Not tonight.”

“Tomorrow?”

“I had better not answer that question, Lady Dedlock. It may be tomorrow. I would rather say no more. I wish you good evening.”

As he walks silently to the door she stops him once again.

“Do you intend to remain in the house? I heard you were writing in the library. Are you going to return there?”

“Only for my hat. I am going home.”

She bows her eyes rather than her head, and he withdraws. Outside the room he looks at his watch and then at a splendid clock upon the staircase.

“And what do *you* say?” Mr. Tulkinghorn inquires of it.

If it said now, “Don’t go home!” what a famous clock would it be hereafter. With its sharp clear bell it strikes three quarters after seven and ticks on.

“Why, you are worse than I thought you,” mutters Mr. Tulkinghorn in reproof to his watch. “Two minutes wrong.” What a watch it would be if it ticked in answer, “Don’t go home!”

He passes out into the streets and walks on, under the shadow of the lofty houses, many of whose mysteries and mortgages are treasured up within his old black waistcoat. He is in the confidence of the very bricks and mortar. Yet there is not a voice in a mile of them to whisper, "Don't go home!"

Through the stir and motion of the streets; through the roar and jar of many vehicles, many feet, many voices; with the blazing shop-lights lighting him, and the crowd pressing him on, he is pitilessly urged upon his way, and nothing meets him murmuring, "Don't go home!"

Arrived at last in his dull room, he lights his candles. The moon is rising over the great wilderness of London. The stars are shining as they shone above the turret-leads at Chesney Wold.

This woman, as he has of late been accustomed to call her, looks out upon them. Her soul is turbulent within her; she is sick at heart and restless. The large rooms are too cramped and close. She cannot endure their restraint and will walk alone in a neighbouring garden.

Loosely muffled, she goes out into the moonlight. A footman opens the garden-gate, delivers the key into his Lady's hands and is bidden to go back. She will walk there some time to ease her aching head. She may be an hour, she may be more. The gate shuts with a clash.

A fine night, and a bright large moon, and multitudes of stars. Mr. Tulkinghorn, in repairing to his cellar, has to cross a little prison-like yard. He looks up casually, thinking what a fine night, and what a quiet night, too.

A very quiet night. Not only is it a still night on dusty high roads and hill-summits; not only is it a still night in gardens and in woods, and on the river where the water-meadows are fresh and green, until it mingles with the ever-heaving sea; not only is it a still night on the deep; but even on this stranger's wilderness of London there is some rest. Its steeples and towers and its one great dome grow more ethereal; the noises of the streets are softened, and the footsteps on the pavements pass tranquilly away. In Mr. Tulkinghorn's room, every noise is merged, this moonlit night, into a distant ringing hum, as if the city were a vast glass, vibrating.

What's that? Who fired a gun or pistol? Where was it?

The few pedestrians start, stop, and stare about them. Some windows and doors are opened, and people come out to look. It was a loud report and echoed heavily. It has aroused all the dogs in the neighbourhood, who bark. The hum from the streets, likewise, seems to swell into a shout. But it is soon over. When it has ceased, the fine night, the bright large moon, and multitudes of stars are left at peace again.

Has Mr. Tulkinghorn been disturbed? His windows are dark and quiet, and his door is shut. It must be something unusual indeed to bring him out of his shell. Nothing is heard of him, nothing is seen of him.

But a little after day-break come people to clean the rooms. And looking down upon the floor, one person shrieks and flies. The others, looking in, shriek and fly too, and there is an alarm in the street.

What does it mean? No light is admitted into the darkened chamber. People enter, treading softly but heavily. There is whispering and wondering

all day, strict search of every corner, careful tracing of steps, and careful noting of the position of every article of furniture.

On the table is a bottle (nearly full of wine), a glass and two candles that were blown out suddenly soon after being lighted. There is an empty chair and a stain upon the ground before it.

It shall happen surely, through many years to come, that ghostly stories shall be told of the stain upon the floor, so easy to be covered, so hard to be got out. For Mr. Tulkinghorn's time is over for evermore. He is lying face downward on the floor, shot through the heart.

Chapter 49

Dutiful Friendship

A great annual occasion has come round in the house of Mr. Matthew Bagnet: the celebration of a birthday in the family.

It is not Mr. Bagnet's birthday, nor the birthday of one of the three children. Those occasions are kept with some marks of distinction, but they rarely overleap the bounds of happy returns and a pudding. It is the old girl's birthday, and that is the greatest holiday and reddest-letter day in Mr. Bagnet's calendar.

The auspicious event is always commemorated according to certain customs settled by Mr. Bagnet some years since. Mr. Bagnet, being deeply convinced that to have a pair of fowls for dinner is the highest pitch of imperial luxury, invariably goes forth himself very early in the morning to buy a pair. He is, as invariably, taken in by the vendor and sold the oldest inhabitants of any chicken-coop in Europe.

Returning with these triumphs of toughness tied up in a handkerchief, he casually invites Mrs. Bagnet to declare at breakfast what she would like for dinner. Mrs. Bagnet, by a coincidence never known to fail, replying fowls, Mr. Bagnet instantly produces his bundle from a place of concealment amidst general amazement and rejoicing. He further requires that the old girl shall do nothing all day but sit in her very best gown and be served by himself and the young people. As he is not illustrious for his cookery, this may be supposed to be a matter of state rather than enjoyment on the old girl's part, but she keeps her state with all imaginable cheerfulness.

On this present birthday, Mr. Bagnet has bought two specimens of poultry; he has amazed and rejoiced the family by their production; he is himself directing the roasting; and Mrs. Bagnet, with her fingers itching to prevent what she sees going wrong, sits in her gown of ceremony, an honoured guest.

Quebec and Malta lay the cloth for dinner, while Woolwich, serving under his father, keeps the fowls revolving on the spit. To these young scullions Mrs. Bagnet occasionally imparts a wink, or a shake of the head, or a crooked face, as they make mistakes.

"At half after one." Says Mr. Bagnet. "To the minute. They'll be done."

Mrs. Bagnet, with anguish, beholds one of them at a standstill before the fire and beginning to burn.

"You shall have a dinner, old girl," says Mr. Bagnet. "Fit for a queen."

Mrs. Bagnet smiles, but to the perception of her son, betrays so much uneasiness that he stares at her, more oblivious of the fowls than before. Fortunately his elder sister perceives the cause of Mrs. Bagnet's agitation and with an poke recalls him. The fowls going round again, Mrs. Bagnet closes her eyes in relief.

“George will look us up,” says Mr. Bagnet. “At half after four. How many years, old girl. Has George looked us up. This afternoon?”

“Ah, Lignum, Lignum, as many as make an old woman of a young one, I think,” returns Mrs. Bagnet, laughing.

“Old girl,” says Mr. Bagnet, “never mind. You’d be as young as ever you was. If you wasn’t younger. Which you are. As everybody knows.”

“Do you know, Lignum,” says Mrs. Bagnet, “I begin to think George is in the roving way again.”

“George,” returns Mr. Bagnet, “will never desert. And leave his old comrade. In the lurch. Don’t be afraid of it.”

“No, Lignum. I don’t say he will. But if he could get over this money trouble of his, I believe he would be off. He seems to be getting a little impatient and restless. He seems put out.”

“He’s extra-drilled,” says Mr. Bagnet. “By a lawyer. Who would put the devil out.”

“There’s something in that,” his wife agrees.

Further conversation is prevented, as Mr. Bagnet needs to direct the whole force of his mind to the dinner, which is a little endangered by the fowls not yielding any gravy. With a similar perverseness, the potatoes crumble in the process of peeling. The legs of the fowls, too, are extremely scaly. Overcoming these disadvantages to the best of his ability, Mr. Bagnet at last serves up and they sit down at table.

It is well for the old girl that she has but one birthday in a year, for two such indulgences might be harmful. Every kind of tendon and ligament that poultry possesses is developed in these specimens in the singular form of guitar-strings. Their legs are as hard as if they devoted their long and arduous lives to walking matches. But Mr. Bagnet, unconscious of these little defects, sets his heart on Mrs. Bagnet eating a severe quantity of the delicacies before her; and as that good old girl would not cause him a moment’s disappointment, she imperils her digestion fearfully. How young Woolwich cleans the chicken drum-sticks, his anxious mother is at a loss to understand.

The old girl has another trial to undergo after the meal, in sitting in state to see the room cleared, the hearth swept, and the dinner-service washed and polished in the backyard. The great delight and energy with which the two young ladies apply themselves to these duties inspire the highest hopes for the future, but some anxiety for the present. The saturation of the young ladies is almost too moving for Mrs. Bagnet to look upon with calmness.

At last the various cleansing processes are triumphantly completed; Quebec and Malta appear in fresh attire, smiling and dry; pipes, tobacco, and something to drink are placed upon the table; and the old girl enjoys the first peace of mind she ever knows on the day of this delightful entertainment.

When Mr. Bagnet takes his usual seat, the hands of the clock are very near to half-past four; and he announces, “George! Military time.”

George arrives, and has hearty congratulations for the old girl.

“But, George, old man!” cries Mrs. Bagnet, looking at him curiously. “What’s come to you? You are so white – and look so shocked. Now don’t he, Lignum?”

“George,” says Mr. Bagnet, “tell the old girl. What’s the matter.”

“I didn’t know I looked white,” says the trooper, passing his hand over his brow, “and I didn’t know I looked shocked. But the truth is, that boy who was taken in at my place died yesterday afternoon, and it has rather knocked me over.”

“Poor creature!” says Mrs. Bagnet.

“I didn’t mean to say anything about it, for it’s not birthday talk,” says the trooper, making himself speak more gaily, “but you’re so quick, Mrs. Bagnet.”

“You’re right. The old girl,” says Mr. Bagnet, “is as quick. As gunpowder.”

“She’s the subject of the day, and we’ll stick to her,” cries Mr. George. “See here, I have brought a little brooch as a keepsake, Mrs. Bagnet.”

Mr. George produces his present, which is greeted with admiring clappings by the young family.

“Old girl,” says Mr. Bagnet. “Tell him my opinion of it.”

“Why, it’s a wonder, George!” Mrs. Bagnet exclaims. “It’s the beautifullest thing that ever was seen!”

“Good!” says Mr. Bagnet. “My opinion.”

“It’s so pretty, George,” cries Mrs. Bagnet, turning it over, “that it seems too choice for me.”

“Bad!” says Mr. Bagnet. “Not my opinion.”

“A hundred thousand thanks, old fellow,” says Mrs. Bagnet, her eyes sparkling with pleasure and her hand stretched out to him; “and though I have been a crossgrained soldier’s wife to you sometimes, George, we are as strong friends as ever can be. Now you shall fasten it on yourself, for good luck, George.”

But the trooper’s hand shakes, and the brooch falls off. “Would anyone believe this?” says he, catching it as it drops. “I am so out of sorts that I bungle an easy job like this!”

Mrs. Bagnet concludes that for such a case there is no remedy like a pipe, and fastening the brooch herself, causes the trooper to sit in his usual snug place and the pipes to be got into action.

“The blues have got too many for me,” admits George. “Here was this poor lad dying, and I was not able to help him.”

“What do you mean, George? You did help him. You took him under your roof.”

“I helped him so far, but that’s little. And then, it made me remember Gridley. His was a bad case too, in a different way. Then the two got mixed up in a my mind with a flinty old rascal who had to do with both. Hard, indifferent, taking everything so evenly – it made flesh and blood tingle, I do assure you.”

“My advice to you,” returns Mrs. Bagnet, “is to light your pipe and tingle that way. It’s wholesomer and comfortabler.”

“You’re right,” says the trooper, “and I’ll do it.”

So he does it. Once George’s pipe is in a glow, Mr. Bagnet proceeds to the toast of the evening.

“George. Woolwich. Quebec. Malta. This is her birthday. Take a day’s march. And you won’t find such another. Here’s to her!”

The toast having been drunk with enthusiasm, Mrs. Bagnet returns thanks in a neat address of equal brevity: “And wishing yours!” which she follows up with a nod at everybody and a swig of the mixture. This she again follows up by the wholly unexpected exclamation, “Here’s a man!”

Here *is* a man, much to everyone’s astonishment, looking in at the parlour-door. He is a sharp-eyed man – a quick keen man – and he takes in everybody’s look at him, all at once, in a remarkable manner.

“George,” says the man, nodding, “how do you find yourself?”

“Why, it’s Bucket!” cries Mr. George.

“Yes,” says the man, coming in and closing the door. “I was going down the street here when I happened to stop and look in at the musical instruments in the shop-window – a friend of mine is in want of a second-hand cello – and I saw a party enjoying themselves, and I thought it was you in the corner. How goes the world with you, George? And with you, ma’am? And with you, governor? And Lord,” says Mr. Bucket, opening his arms, “here’s children too! Give us a kiss, my pets. No occasion to inquire who *your* father and mother is. Never saw such a likeness in my life!”

Mr. Bucket, not unwelcome, has sat himself down next to Mr. George and taken Quebec and Malta on his knees. “Lord bless you, how healthy you look! And what may be the ages of these two, ma’am? I should put ’em at about eight and ten.”

“You’re very near, sir,” says Mrs. Bagnet.

“I generally am near,” returns Mr. Bucket, “being so fond of children. And what do you call these, my darling?” he pursues, pinching Malta’s cheeks. “These are peaches, these are. Bless your heart! And do you think father could recommend a second-hand cello for Mr. Bucket’s friend, my dear? My name’s Bucket. Ain’t that a funny name?”

These blandishments have entirely won the family heart. Mrs. Bagnet fills a pipe and a glass for Mr. Bucket and she tells him that as a friend of George’s she is particularly glad to see him this evening, for George has not been in his usual spirits.

“Not in his usual spirits?” exclaims Mr. Bucket. “Why, what’s the matter, George? What should you be out of spirits for? You haven’t got anything on your mind, you know.”

“Nothing particular,” returns the trooper.

“I should think not,” rejoins Mr. Bucket. “What could you have on your mind, you know! These pets’ll be upon the minds of some of the young fellows, some of these days. I ain’t much of a prophet, but I can tell you that, ma’am.”

Mrs. Bagnet, quite charmed, hopes Mr. Bucket has a family of his own.

“There, ma’am!” says Mr. Bucket. “No, I haven’t. My wife and a lodger constitute my family. Mrs. Bucket is as fond of children as myself and as wishful to have ’em, but no. So it is. Man must not repine. What a very nice backyard, ma’am! Any way out of that yard, now?”

There is no way out of that yard.

“Well, I don’t know as I ever saw a backyard that took my fancy more,” says Mr. Bucket. “Would you allow me to look at it? Thank you. No, I see there’s no way out. But what a very good-proportioned yard it is!”

Mr. Bucket returns to his chair and pats Mr. George affectionately on the shoulder.

“How are your spirits now, George?”

“All right now,” returns the trooper.

“That’s your sort!” says Mr. Bucket. “A man of your fine figure and constitution has no right to be out of spirits. And you haven’t got anything on your mind, you know, George! And this is your brother, is it, my dears?” he says to Quebec and Malta, referring to young Woolwich. “Half-brother, I mean to say. For he’s too old to be your boy, ma’am.”

“He is not anybody else’s,” returns Mrs. Bagnet, laughing.

“Well, you do surprise me! Yet he’s like you, there’s no denying!”

Mrs. Bagnet informs him that the boy is George’s godson.

“Is he?” rejoins Mr. Bucket cordially. “I must shake hands with George’s godson. And what do you intend to make of him, ma’am? Does he show any turn for any musical instrument?”

Mr. Bagnet suddenly interposes, “Plays the fife. Beautiful.”

“Would you believe it, governor,” says Mr. Bucket, struck by the coincidence, “that when I was a boy I played the fife myself? ‘British Grenadiers’ – there’s a tune to warm an Englishman up! Could you give us ‘British Grenadiers,’ my fine fellow?”

Nothing could be more acceptable to the little circle. Woolwich immediately fetches his fife and performs the stirring melody, while Mr. Bucket beats time and comes in sharp with the chorus, “British Gra-a-anadeers!” In short, he shows so much musical taste that Mr. Bagnet actually takes his pipe from his lips to express his conviction that he is a singer. Mr. Bucket modestly confesses, and is asked to sing. He complies and gives them “Believe Me, if All Those Endearing Young Charms.”

This sparkling stranger is such a new and agreeable feature in the evening that Mr. George begins, in spite of himself, to be rather proud of him. He is so friendly, is a man of so many resources, and so easy to get on with, that Mr. Bagnet asks for the honour of his company on the old girl’s next birthday. On discovering the nature of the occasion, Mr. Bucket drinks to Mrs. Bagnet with warmth, makes a memorandum of the day in a large black pocket-book, and breathes a hope that Mrs. Bucket and Mrs. Bagnet may before then become, in a manner, sisters.

It is natural that he, in his turn, should remember the friend to whom he is indebted for this acquaintance. And he does. He keeps very close to him.

He waits to walk home with him. At length Mr. George rises to depart. At the same moment Mr. Bucket also rises. He remembers the commission he has undertaken.

“Respecting that second-hand cello, governor – could you recommend me such a thing?”

“Scores,” says Mr. Bagnet.

“I am obliged to you,” returns Mr. Bucket, squeezing his hand. “A good tone, mind you! And you needn’t commit yourself to too low a figure, governor. I don’t want to pay too large a price for my friend, but I want you to have your proper percentage. That is only fair. Suppose I was to look in, say, at half arter ten tomorrow morning?”

Nothing easier. Mr. and Mrs. Bagnet engage to have the information ready and even hint at having a small stock of instruments collected there for approval.

“Thank you,” says Mr. Bucket. “Good night, ma’am. Good night, governor. Good night, darlings. I am much obliged to you for one of the pleasantest evenings I ever spent in my life.”

So they part with many expressions of goodwill on both sides. “Now George, old boy,” says Mr. Bucket, taking his arm at the shop-door, “come along!” As they go away down the little street, Mrs. Bagnet remarks that Mr. Bucket “almost clings to George, and seems to be really fond of him.”

The neighbouring streets being narrow and ill-paved, it is a little inconvenient to walk there two abreast. Mr. George proposes to walk singly. But Mr. Bucket, without relinquishing his friendly hold, replies, “Wait half a minute, George. I wish to speak to you first.” He twists him into a public-house and into a parlour, where he confronts him and claps his own back against the door.

“Now, George,” says Mr. Bucket, “duty is duty, and friendship is friendship. I never want the two to clash if I can help it. I have endeavoured to make things pleasant tonight, but you must consider yourself in custody, George.”

“Custody? What for?” returns the trooper, thunderstruck.

“Now, George,” says Mr. Bucket, “it’s my duty to inform you that any observations you may make will be liable to be used against you. Therefore, George, be careful what you say. You don’t happen to have heard of a murder?”

“Murder!”

“Now, George,” says Mr. Bucket, “bear in mind what I’ve said to you. I ask you nothing. You’ve been in low spirits this afternoon. I say, you don’t happen to have heard of a murder?”

“No. Where has there been a murder?”

“Now, George,” says Mr. Bucket, “don’t you go and commit yourself. There has been a murder in Lincoln’s Inn Fields – gentleman of the name of Tulkinghorn. He was shot last night. I want you for that.”

The trooper sinks upon a seat, and great drops start out upon his forehead, and a deadly pallor overspreads his face.

“Bucket! It’s not possible that Mr. Tulkinghorn has been killed and that you suspect *me*?”

“George,” returns Mr. Bucket, his forefinger wagging, “it is certainly possible, because it’s the case. This deed was done last night at ten o’clock. Now, you know where you were last night at ten o’clock, and you’ll be able to prove it, no doubt.”

“Last night! Last night?” repeats the trooper thoughtfully. Then it flashes upon him. “Why, great heaven, I was there last night!”

“So I have understood, George,” returns Mr. Bucket with great deliberation. “You’ve been seen hanging about the place, and you’ve been heard more than once in a wrangle with him, and it’s possible – I don’t say it’s certainly so, mind you, but it’s possible – that he may have been heard to call you a threatening, murdering, dangerous fellow.”

The trooper gasps.

“Now, George,” continues Mr. Bucket, putting his hat upon the table, “my wish is, as it has been all the evening, to make things pleasant. There’s a reward out, of a hundred guineas, offered by Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet. You and me have always been pleasant together; but I have got a duty to discharge; and if that hundred guineas is to be made, it may as well be made by me as any other man. On all of which accounts, I hope it was clear to you that I must arrest you. Am I to call in any assistance, or is it done?”

Mr. George has recovered himself and stands up like a soldier. “Come,” he says; “I am ready.”

“Wait a bit!” Mr. Bucket takes from his pocket a pair of handcuffs. “This is a serious charge, George, and such is my duty.”

The trooper flushes angrily and hesitates, but holds out his two hands. “There! Put them on!”

Mr. Bucket adjusts them. “Are they comfortable? If not, say so, for I wish to make things as pleasant as is consistent with my duty. They’ll do? Very well! Now, you see, George” – he takes a cloak from a corner and adjusts it about the trooper’s neck – “I was mindful of your feelings when I come out, and brought this on purpose. There! Who’s the wiser?”

“Only I,” returns the trooper. “Do me one more good turn and pull my hat over my eyes.”

Mr. Bucket complies, puts his own hat on, and conducts his prize into the streets, the trooper marching on as steadily as usual, and Mr. Bucket steering him with his elbow over the crossings and up the turnings.

Chapter 50

Esther's Narrative

When I came home from Deal I found a note from Caddy, informing me that her health, which had been for some time very delicate, was worse and that she would be very glad if I would go to see her. It was a short note, written from her bed.

Caddy was now the mother, and I the godmother, of such a poor little baby – such a tiny old-faced mite, with a little lean, long-fingered hand always clenched under its chin. It would lie in this attitude all day, with its bright specks of eyes open, wondering (I used to imagine) how it came to be so small and weak. Whenever it was moved it cried, but at all other times it lay quiet. It had curious little dark marks under its eyes, and was quite a piteous sight. But Caddy was devoted to it, and full of projects for little Esther's education, and little Esther's marriage, and even for her own old age as the grandmother of little Esther's little Esthers.

To return to the letter. Caddy had a superstition about me: she almost believed that I did her good whenever I was near her. Now although this was a fancy, still it might have the force of a fact when she was ill. Therefore I set off to Caddy, with my guardian's consent; and she and Prince made so much of me that there never was anything like it.

Next day and the day after, I went again to sit with her. It was a very easy journey, for I had only to rise a little earlier in the morning, and attend to housekeeping matters before leaving home.

But when I had made these three visits, my guardian said, on my return at night, "Now, little woman, this will never do. Constant travel will wear out a Dame Durden. We will go to London for a while, to our old lodgings."

"Not for me. I never feel tired, dear guardian," said I, which was strictly true. I was only too happy to be in such demand.

"For me then," returned my guardian, "or for Ada. It is somebody's birthday tomorrow, I think."

"Truly I think it is," said I, kissing my darling, who would be twenty-one tomorrow.

"Well," observed my guardian, "that's a great occasion and will give my fair cousin some necessary business to transact, and will make London more convenient for all of us. How have you left Caddy?"

"Very unwell, guardian. I fear it will be some weeks before she regains her health and strength."

"Ah!" He began to walk about the room with his hands in his pockets. "Now, what do you say about her doctor? Is he a good doctor, my love?"

I confessed that Prince and I had agreed only that day that we would like his opinion to be confirmed by some one.

"Well, you know," returned my guardian quickly, "there's Woodcourt."

I was rather taken by surprise; and, for a moment, confused.

“You don’t object to him, little woman?”

“Oh no!”

“And you don’t think the patient would object to him?”

I had no doubt that she would like him very much, for she had seen him often in his kind attendance on Miss Flite.

“Very good,” said my guardian. “He has been here today, my dear, and I will see him about it tomorrow.”

I felt in this short conversation – though she was quiet – that my dear girl remembered how merrily she had clasped me round the waist when Caddy had brought me the little parting token of the flowers. This made me feel that I ought to tell her, and Caddy too, that I was going to be the mistress of Bleak House, and that if I avoided that disclosure any longer I might become less worthy in my own eyes of its master’s love.

Therefore, when we went upstairs and had waited until the clock struck twelve so that I might be the first to wish my darling a happy birthday, I set before her the goodness and honour of her cousin John and the happy life that was in store for me. If ever my darling were fond of me, she was surely fondest of me that night. And I was so rejoiced to know it and so comforted that I was ten times happier than I had been before.

Next day we went to London. In half an hour we were quietly established in our old lodging, as if we had never gone away. Mr. Woodcourt dined with us to celebrate my darling’s birthday, and we were as pleasant as we could be without Richard there.

After that day I was for some eight weeks very much with Caddy, and so I saw less of Ada than at any other time since we had first come together, except the time of my own illness. Ada often came to Caddy’s, but our function there was to amuse and cheer her, and we did not talk in our usual confidential manner. Caddy’s rest was broken by pain, and I often remained to nurse her.

What a good creature Caddy was! So self-denying, so uncomplaining, so anxious to get well on her family’s account, so afraid of giving trouble; I had never known the best of her until now. It seemed curious that her pale face and helpless figure should be lying there day after day where dancing was the business of life, where the apprentices began early every morning in the ball-room, and the untidy little boy waltzed by himself in the kitchen.

At Caddy’s request I re-arranged her apartment, and pushed her, couch and all, into a lighter and more airy corner; then, every day, I used to lay my small namesake in her arms and sit down to chat or sew or read to her. At one of these quiet times I told Caddy about Bleak House.

We had other visitors besides Ada. First of all we had Prince, who in his hurried intervals of teaching used to come softly in and sit down with a face of loving anxiety. However Caddy felt, she always declared to Prince that she was almost well. This would put Prince in such good spirits that he would sometimes take the kit from his pocket and play a chord or two to astonish the baby, who never noticed it at all.

Then there was Mrs. Jellyby. She would come occasionally, with her usual distracted manner, and sit calmly looking miles beyond her grandchild as if her attention were absorbed by a young Borrioboolan on its native shores. As bright-eyed and serene as ever, she would say, "Well, Caddy, child, and how do you do today?" And then would sit amiably smiling and taking no notice of the reply.

Then there was old Mr. Turveydrop, who was from morning to night the subject of innumerable precautions. If the baby cried, it was nearly stifled lest the noise should make him uncomfortable. If Caddy required any little comfort that the house contained, she first carefully discussed whether he was likely to require it too. In return for this consideration he would come into the room once a day, showing her condescension and graceful patronage.

"My Caroline," he would say, "Tell me that you are better today."

"Oh, much better, thank you, Mr. Turveydrop," Caddy would reply.

"Delighted! Enchanted! And our dear Miss Summerson." Here he would kiss his fingers to me, though I am happy to say he had ceased to be particular in his attentions since I had been so altered.

"We must take care of our dear Caroline, Miss Summerson. We must nourish her. My dear Caroline" – he would turn to his daughter-in-law with infinite generosity – "want for nothing, my love. Everything this house contains is at your service, my dear. Do not," he would sometimes add in a burst of deportment, "even allow my simple requirements to be considered if they should at any time interfere with your own, my Caroline."

Several times both Caddy and her husband were melted to tears by these affectionate self-sacrifices.

"Nay, my dears," he would remonstrate; and when I saw Caddy's thin arm about his fat neck as he said it, I would be melted too, though not for the same reason. "Nay, nay! I have promised never to leave ye. Be dutiful and affectionate towards me, and I ask no other return. Now, bless ye! I am going to the Park."

There he would take the air and get an appetite for his hotel dinner. I hope I do old Mr. Turveydrop no wrong, but I never saw any better traits in him than these, except that he certainly conceived a liking for Peepy and would take the child out walking with great pomp. Even so, before Peepy was sufficiently decorated to walk hand in hand with the professor of deportment, he had to be newly dressed, at the expense of Caddy and her husband, from top to toe.

Last of our visitors was Mr. Jellyby. When he used to come in of an evening, and ask Caddy in his meek voice how she was, and then sit down quietly with his head against the wall, I liked him very much. If he found me bustling about doing any little thing, he sometimes half took his coat off, as if with an intention of helping; but he never got any further. His sole occupation was to sit with his head against the wall, looking hard at the thoughtful baby; and I almost fancied that they understood one another.

Mr. Woodcourt was now Caddy's regular attendant. He was so gentle, so skilful, and so unwearying that she soon began to improve under his care. I

saw a good deal of Mr. Woodcourt during this time, although I often slipped home at the hours when he was expected, knowing Caddy to be safe in his hands. We frequently met, notwithstanding. I was quite reconciled to myself now, but I still felt glad to think that he was sorry for me. He helped Dr. Badger in his professional engagements, and had as yet no settled projects for the future.

It was when Caddy began to recover that I began to notice a change in my dear Ada. It seemed she was not so frankly cheerful with me as she used to be. Her tenderness for me was as loving and true as ever; but there was a quiet sorrow about her, in which I traced some hidden regret.

Now, I could not understand this, and I was so anxious for the happiness of my own pet that it caused me some uneasiness. At length, feeling sure that Ada was suppressing something from me lest it should make me unhappy too, I thought she might be grieved – for me – by what I had told her about Bleak House.

How I persuaded myself that this was likely, I don't know. I was not grieved for myself: I was quite contented. Still, I believed that Ada might be thinking of what once was, but was now all changed.

What could I do to reassure my darling? Well! I could only be as brisk and busy as possible. As Caddy's illness had certainly interfered with my home duties, I resolved to be doubly diligent and gay. So I went about the house humming all the tunes I knew, and I sat working and working in a desperate manner, and I talked and talked, morning, noon, and night.

And still there was the same shade between me and my darling.

"So, Dame Trot," observed my guardian one night when we were all three together, "so Woodcourt has restored Caddy to the full enjoyment of life again?"

"Yes," I said; "and to be repaid by such gratitude as hers is to be made rich, guardian."

"I wish it could! We would make him truly rich if we knew how. Would we not, little woman?"

I laughed as I sewed and replied that I was not sure about that, for it might spoil him, and he might not be so useful.

"True," said my guardian. "I had forgotten that. But we would agree to make him rich enough to live, I suppose? Rich enough to work with tolerable peace of mind? Rich enough to have his own happy home and his own household gods – and household goddess, too, perhaps?"

That was quite another thing, I said. We must all agree in that.

"To be sure," said my guardian. "I have a great regard for Woodcourt; and I have been asking him delicately about his plans. It is difficult to offer aid to such an independent man; and yet I would be glad to do it if I knew how. He seems half inclined for another voyage. But that appears like casting such a man away."

"It might open a new world to him," said I.

"So it might, little woman," my guardian assented. "I doubt if he expects much of the old world. Do you know I have fancied that he sometimes feels

some particular disappointment or misfortune encountered in it. You never heard of anything of that sort?"

I shook my head.

"Humph," said my guardian. "I am mistaken, I dare say." As there was a little pause here, I hummed an air as I worked which was a favourite with my guardian.

"And do you think Mr. Woodcourt will make another voyage?" I asked him when I had hummed it quietly all through.

"I don't quite know, my dear, but I should say it was likely."

"I am sure he will take the best wishes of all our hearts with him wherever he goes," said I; "and though they are not riches, he will never be the poorer for them, guardian, at least."

"Never, little woman," he replied.

I was sitting in my usual place, which was now beside my guardian's chair. That had not been my usual place before the letter, but it was now. I looked up to Ada, who was sitting opposite, and I saw that her eyes were filled with tears. I felt that I had only to be placid and merry once for all to set her loving heart at rest.

So I made my sweet girl lean upon my shoulder – little thinking what was heavy on her mind! – and I said she was not quite well, and put my arm about her, and took her upstairs.

"Oh, my dear good Esther," said Ada, "if I could only make up my mind to speak to you and my cousin John when you are together!"

"Why, my love!" I remonstrated. "Ada, why should you not speak to us!"

Ada only dropped her head and pressed me closer to her heart.

"You surely don't forget, my beauty," said I, smiling, "what quiet, old-fashioned people we are and how I have settled down to be the discreetest of dames? You don't forget how happily and peacefully my life is all marked out for me, and by whom?"

"No, never, Esther."

"Why then, my dear," said I, "there can be nothing amiss. Why should you not speak to us?"

"Nothing amiss, Esther?" returned Ada. "Oh, when I think of all these years, and of his fatherly care and kindness, and of the old relations among us, and of you, what shall I do, what shall I do!"

I looked at my child in some wonder, but I thought it better not to answer otherwise than by cheering her with many little recollections of our life together. When she lay down to sleep, and not before, I returned to my guardian to say good night, and then I came back to Ada and sat near her for a little while.

She was asleep, and I thought as I looked at her that she was a little changed. Something in the familiar beauty of her face looked different to me. My guardian's old hopes of her and Richard arose sorrowfully in my mind, and I said to myself, "She has been anxious about him," and I wondered how that love would end.

When I had come home from Caddy's while she was ill, I had often found Ada at her needlework, and she had always put her work away, and I had never known what it was. Some of it now lay in a drawer near her, which I did not open. But I wondered what the work could be, for it was evidently nothing for herself.

And I noticed as I kissed my dear that she lay with one hand under her pillow so that it was hidden.

How much less amiable I must have been than I thought, to be so preoccupied with my own cheerfulness and contentment as to think that it only rested with me to put my dear girl right and set her mind at peace!

But I lay down, self-deceived, in that belief. And I awoke in it next day to find that there was still the same shade between me and my darling.

Chapter 51

Enlightened

When Mr. Woodcourt arrived in London, he went the same day to Mr. Vholes's in Symond's Inn. For after I entreated him to be a friend to Richard, he never forgot or neglected his promise.

He found Mr. Vholes in his office and informed him that he had called there to learn Richard's address.

"Just so, sir," said Mr. Vholes. "Mr. C.'s address is not a hundred miles from here. Would you take a seat, sir?"

Mr. Woodcourt thanked Mr. Vholes, but he had no business beyond what he had mentioned.

"Just so, sir. I am aware, sir," said Mr. Vholes, "that you have influence with Mr. C."

"I was not aware of it myself," returned Mr. Woodcourt; "but I suppose you know best."

"Sir," rejoined Mr. Vholes, "it is a part of my professional duty to know best and to understand a gentleman who confides his interests to me. In my professional duty I shall not be wanting, sir."

Mr. Woodcourt again mentioned the address.

"Bear with me for a moment, Sir. Mr. C. is playing for a considerable stake, and cannot play without money. Now, sir, upon the chances of Mr. C.'s game I express no opinion. It might be wise of him; it might not. I say nothing. No, sir," said Mr. Vholes, bringing his hand flat down upon his desk, "nothing."

"You seem to forget," returned Mr. Woodcourt, "that I ask you to say nothing and have no interest in anything you say."

"Pardon me, sir!" retorted Mr. Vholes. "You do yourself an injustice. You are interested in anything that relates to your friend."

"Well," replied Mr. Woodcourt, "that may be. I am particularly interested in his address."

"The number, sir," said Mr. Vholes, "I believe I have already mentioned. If Mr. C. is to continue to play for this considerable stake, sir, he must have funds. Understand me! There are funds in hand at present. But for the onward play, more funds must be provided. Without funds I shall always be happy to act for Mr. C. to the extent of all such costs as are safe to be allowed out of the estate. I could not go beyond that, sir, without wronging my three dear girls or my venerable father, who is entirely dependent on me, in the Vale of Taunton. Whereas, sir, my resolution is to wrong no one."

Mr. Woodcourt rather sternly rejoined that he was glad to hear it.

"I wish, sir," said Mr. Vholes, "to leave a good name behind me. Therefore I openly state how Mr. C. is situated."

"And his address, Mr. Vholes?"

“Sir,” returned Mr. Vholes, “it is next door, on the second storey. Mr. C. desires to be near his professional adviser.”

Mr. Woodcourt wished Mr. Vholes good day and went in search of Richard, the change in whose appearance he began to understand now all too well.

He found him in a dull, faded room, sitting with a book before him, from which his eyes and thoughts were far astray. As the door chanced to be open, Mr. Woodcourt was in his presence for some moments without being perceived, and he told me that he never could forget the haggardness of his face and the dejection of his manner before he was aroused.

“Woodcourt, my dear fellow,” cried Richard, starting up with extended hands, “you come upon my vision like a ghost.”

“A friendly one,” he replied. “How does the mortal world go?”

“Badly enough, and slowly enough,” said Richard, “at least the Chancery part of it.”

“I never heard,” returned Mr. Woodcourt, shaking his head, “of its going well yet.”

“Nor I,” said Richard moodily. “Who ever did?” He brightened again in a moment and said with his natural openness, “Woodcourt, you must know that I have done no good this long time. I have not intended to do much harm, but I seem to have been capable of nothing else. Maybe I should have kept out of the net, but I think not, though I dare say you will hear a very different opinion. I am afraid I have wanted an object; but I have an object now – or it has me – and it is too late to discuss it. Take me as I am, and make the best of me.”

“A bargain,” said Mr. Woodcourt. “Do as much by me in return.”

“Oh! You,” returned Richard, “you can strike a purpose out of anything.”

They shook hands laughingly, but in deep earnestness.

“You come as a godsend,” said Richard, “for I have seen nobody here yet but Vholes. Woodcourt, there is one subject I should like to mention. You know, I dare say, that I have an attachment to my cousin Ada?”

Mr. Woodcourt replied that I had hinted as much.

“Now pray,” returned Richard, “don’t suppose that I am splitting my head and half breaking my heart over this miserable Chancery suit for my own interests alone. Ada’s are bound up with mine; they can’t be separated; Vholes works for both of us. Do think of that!”

Mr. Woodcourt assured him that he did.

“You see,” said Richard, “to an upright fellow like you, I cannot bear the thought of appearing selfish and mean. I want to see Ada righted, as well as myself!”

Afterwards, when Mr. Woodcourt told me of this first visit to Symond’s Inn, he particularly dwelt upon Richard’s anxiety on this point. It revived my fear that my dear girl’s little property would be absorbed by Mr. Vholes. It was just as I began to take care of Caddy that the meeting took place; and I

now return to the time when Caddy had recovered and the shade was still between me and my darling.

I proposed to Ada that morning that we should go and see Richard. It surprised me to find that she hesitated.

“My dear,” said I, “you have not had any quarrel with Richard since I have been so much away?”

“No, Esther.”

“Not heard of him, perhaps?” said I.

“Yes, I have heard of him,” said Ada.

Such tears in her eyes, and such love in her face. I could not make my darling out. Should I go to Richard’s by myself? I said. No, Ada thought she had better go with me. Should we go now? Yes, let us go now. Well, I could not understand my darling!

It was a sombre day, and drops of chill rain fell at intervals: one of those colourless days when everything looks heavy and harsh. I fancied my beautiful girl quite out of place in the rugged streets, and I thought there were more funerals passing along the dismal pavements than I had ever seen before.

We had first to find Symond’s Inn. Ada said she thought it was near Chancery Lane. So to Chancery Lane we went, and there, sure enough, we saw it written up. Symond’s Inn.

We had next to find out the number. “Mr. Vholes’s office is next door,” I recollected. Upon which Ada said, perhaps that was Mr. Vholes’s office in the corner. And it was.

Then came the question, which of the two next doors? I was going for the one, and my darling was going for the other; and my darling was right again. So up we went to the second storey, when we came to Richard’s name in great white letters on a hearse-like panel.

I should have knocked, but Ada said perhaps we had better turn the handle and go in. Thus we found Richard, poring over a table covered with dusty bundles of papers. Wherever I looked I saw the ominous words repeated: Jarndyce and Jarndyce.

He received us very affectionately, and we sat down. “If you had come a little earlier,” he said, “you would have found Woodcourt here. There never was such a good fellow. And he is so cheery, so fresh, so sensible, so – everything that I am not, that the place brightens whenever he comes, and darkens whenever he goes again.”

“God bless him,” I thought, “for his truth to me!”

“He is not so sanguine, Ada,” continued Richard, casting his dejected look over the bundles of papers, “as Vholes and I are usually, but he is only an outsider and is not in the mysteries. He can’t be expected to know much of such a labyrinth.”

As his look wandered over the papers again, I noticed how sunken and large his eyes appeared, how dry his lips were, and how his finger-nails were all bitten away.

“Is this a healthy place to live, Richard, do you think?” said I.

“Why,” answered Richard with his old gay laugh, “it is neither rural nor cheerful; but it’s well enough for now. It’s near the offices and Vholes.”

“Perhaps,” I hinted, “a change from both—”

“Might do me good?” said Richard, forcing a laugh. “I shouldn’t wonder! But it can only go one way now – one of two ways, I should say. Either the suit must be ended, Esther, or the suitor. But it shall be the suit, my dear girl, the suit!”

These latter words were addressed to Ada, who was sitting nearest to him, with her face turned away from me. She remained silent.

“We are doing very well,” pursued Richard. “Vholes will tell you so. We are really spinning along. Ask Vholes. We are giving them no rest. We shall rouse up that nest of sleepers, mark my words!”

His hopefulness had long been more painful to me than his despondency; it was so unlike hopefulness, had something so fierce in its determination to be it, was so hungry and eager, and yet so conscious of being forced. But it was far more distressing now than it used to be. Even if the fatal cause could have been ended in that hour, I felt that the traces of the anxiety, self-reproach, and disappointment it had caused him would have remained upon his features to the hour of his death.

“The compassionate face of our dear little woman,” said Richard, “is so like the face of old days—”

Ah! No. I smiled and shook my head.

“—So exactly like the face of old days,” said Richard cordially, “that I can’t pretend with her. I fluctuate a little; that’s the truth. Sometimes I hope, my dear, and sometimes I – don’t quite despair, but nearly. I get so tired!”

Walking across the room, he sunk upon the sofa. “I get,” he repeated gloomily, “so tired. It is such weary, weary work!”

My darling rose, put off her bonnet, kneeled down beside him with her golden hair falling like sunlight on his head, clasped her two arms round his neck, and turned her face to me. Oh, what a loving and devoted face I saw!

“Esther, dear,” she said very quietly, “I am not going home again.”

A light shone in upon me all at once.

“Never any more. I am going to stay with my dear husband. We have been married above two months. Go home without me, my own Esther; I shall never go home any more!” With those words my darling drew his head down on her breast and held it there. And if ever in my life I saw a love that nothing but death could change, I saw it then before me.

“Speak to Esther, my dearest,” said Richard, breaking the silence presently. “Tell her how it was.”

I folded her in my arms. We neither of us spoke, but with her cheek against my own I wanted to hear nothing. “My pet,” said I. “My love. My poor, poor girl!” I pitied her so much. I was very fond of Richard, but still I pitied her so much.

“Esther, will you forgive me? Will my cousin John forgive me?”

“My dear,” said I, “do not doubt it for a moment.” And as to me – why, what had I to forgive!

I dried my sobbing darling's eyes and sat beside her on the sofa, and Richard sat on my other side; and they told me between them how it was.

"All I had was Richard's," Ada said; "and Richard would not take it, Esther, and what could I do but be his wife when I loved him dearly!"

"And you were so fully occupied, excellent Dame Durden," said Richard, "that how could we speak to you at such a time! So we went out one morning and were married."

"And when it was done, Esther," said my darling, "I was always thinking how to tell you. I did not know what to do, and I fretted very much."

How selfish I must have been not to have thought of this before! I was so sorry, and yet I was so fond of them and so glad that they were fond of me; I never had experienced such painful and pleasurable emotion at once. But I was not there to darken their way; I did not do that.

My darling took her wedding-ring from her bosom, and kissed it, and put it on. Then I remembered last night, and told Richard that since her marriage she had worn it at night when there was no one to see – for I had seen her hand concealed under her pillow and had little thought why. Then they began telling me how it was all over again, and I began to be sorry and glad again, and foolish again, and to hide my plain old face as much as I could lest I should put them out of heart.

When the time came for me to return it was the worst of all, for then my darling completely broke down. She clung round my neck, saying what should she do without me! Nor was Richard much better; and as for me, I should have been the worst of the three if I had not severely said to myself, "Now Esther, if you do, I'll never speak to you again!"

"Why, I declare," said I, "I never saw such a wife. I don't think she loves her husband at all. Here, Richard, take my child, for goodness' sake." But I held her tight, and could have wept over her I don't know how long.

"I am only going away to come back tomorrow," said I, "and I shall be always coming backwards and forwards until Symond's Inn is tired of the sight of me. So I shall not say good-bye, Richard, when I am coming back so soon!"

I had given my darling to him now, and I meant to go; but I lingered for one more look of the precious face which it seemed to rive my heart to turn from.

So I said (in a merry, bustling manner) that unless they gave me some encouragement to come back, I was not sure that I would, upon which my dear girl looked up, faintly smiling through her tears, and I folded her lovely face between my hands, and gave it one last kiss, and laughed, and ran away.

And when I got downstairs, oh, how I cried! It almost seemed that I had lost my Ada for ever. I was so lonely and so blank without her, and it was so desolate to be going home without her there that for a little while I walked up and down in a dim corner sobbing and crying.

I came to myself by and by, after a little scolding, and took a coach home. The poor boy whom I had found at St. Albans had reappeared a short time before and was lying at the point of death; my guardian had gone out to

inquire about him and did not return to dinner. Being quite alone, I cried a little again.

It was only natural that I should not be quite accustomed to the loss of my darling yet. But my mind dwelt so much upon the uncongenial scene in which I had left her, and I so longed to be near her and taking some sort of care of her, that I determined to go back in the evening only to look up at her windows.

It was foolish, I dare say, but it did not seem so to me then. I took Charley into my confidence, and we went out at dusk. It was dark when we came to the new home of my dear girl, and there was a light behind the yellow blinds. We walked past cautiously three or four times, looking up, and narrowly missed meeting Mr. Vholes, whose lank black figure came out of his office while we were there. I thought of the youth and love and beauty of my dear girl, shut up in such an ill-assorted refuge.

It was very solitary, and I did not doubt that I might safely steal upstairs. I left Charley below and went up with a light foot. I listened for a few moments, and in the musty rotting silence of the house believed that I could hear the murmur of their young voices. I put my lips to the hearse-like panel of the door as a kiss for my dear and came quietly down again, thinking that one of these days I would confess to the visit.

And it really did me good, for though nobody but Charley and I knew anything about it, I somehow felt as if it had diminished the separation between Ada and me. I went back all the better for that hovering about my darling.

My guardian had come home and was standing thoughtfully by the dark window. When I went in, he caught the light upon my face.

“Little woman,” said he, “you have been crying.”

“Why, yes, guardian,” said I, “I am afraid I have been, a little. Ada has been in such distress, and is so very sorry, guardian.”

I put my arm on the back of his chair, and I saw in his glance that my words and my look at her empty place had prepared him.

“Is she married, my dear?”

I told him all about it and how her first entreaties had referred to his forgiveness.

“She has no need of it,” said he. “Heaven bless her and her husband!” But just as my first impulse had been to pity her, so was his. “Poor girl, poor girl! Poor Rick! Poor Ada!”

Neither of us spoke after that, until he said with a sigh, “Well, well, my dear! Bleak House is thinning fast.”

“But its mistress remains, guardian.” Though I was timid about saying it, I ventured because of his sorrowful tone. “She will do all she can to make it happy,” said I.

“She will succeed, my love!” He turned his old bright fatherly look upon me, laid his hand on my hand in his old way, and said again, “She will succeed, my dear. Nevertheless, Bleak House is thinning fast, O little woman!”

I was sorry presently that this was all we said. I was rather disappointed. I feared I might not quite have been all I had meant to be since the letter and the answer.

Chapter 52

Obstinacy

Only two days later, at breakfast time, Mr. Woodcourt came in haste with the astounding news that a terrible murder had been committed for which Mr. George was in custody. When he told us that a large reward was offered by Sir Leicester Dedlock for the murderer's apprehension, I did not understand why; but a few more words explained to me that the murdered person was Sir Leicester's lawyer, and immediately my mother's dread of him rushed into my remembrance.

This unforeseen and violent removal of one whom she had long distrusted, dreading him as a dangerous and secret enemy, appeared so awful that my first thoughts were of her. How appalling to hear of such a death and be able to feel no pity! How dreadful to remember, perhaps, that she had sometimes even wished the old man away!

Such crowding reflections made me so distressed and agitated that I could scarcely keep my place at the table. I was quite unable to follow the conversation until I had had a little time to recover. But when I came to myself and found that they were earnestly speaking of the suspected man, recalling our favourable impressions of him, my interest and my fears were strongly aroused in his behalf.

"Guardian, you don't think it possible that Mr. George is guilty?"

"My dear, I *can't* think so. This man whom we have seen so open-hearted and compassionate, who with the might of a giant has the gentleness of a child, this man guilty of such a crime? I can't believe it!"

"And I can't," said Mr. Woodcourt. "Still, some appearances are against him. He bore an animosity towards the deceased gentleman. He has openly mentioned it in many places. He is said to have expressed himself violently towards him. He admits that he was alone on the scene of the murder within a few minutes of its commission. I sincerely believe him to be innocent, but these are all reasons for suspicion falling upon him."

"True," said my guardian.

I felt, of course, that we must admit the full force of the circumstances against him. Yet I knew (I could not help saying) that their weight would not induce us to desert him in his need.

"Heaven forbid!" returned my guardian. "We will stand by him, as he himself stood by the two poor creatures who are gone." He meant Mr. Gridley and the boy, to both of whom Mr. George had given shelter.

Mr. Woodcourt then told us that the trooper's man Phil Squod had been with him before day, after wandering about the streets all night like a distracted creature; and that the trooper was anxious that we should not suppose him guilty. Mr. Woodcourt had promised to come to our house very

early in the morning; he added that he was now upon his way to see Mr. George in prison.

My guardian said directly he would go too. Now, besides my liking for the retired soldier, I had that secret interest in what had happened. I felt as if it came near to me. It seemed to become personally important to me that the truth should be discovered and that no innocent people should be suspected.

In a word, I felt as if it were my duty to go with them. My guardian did not seek to dissuade me, and I went.

It was a large prison with many identical courts and passages, and with no weed or blade of grass. In an arched room by himself, like a cellar upstairs, with massive iron window-bars and a black iron-bound door, we found the trooper.

When he saw us, he stepped forward with his usual heavy tread, and made a slight bow. But I advanced, putting out my hand to him.

“This is a load off my mind, I do assure you, miss and gentlemen,” said he, saluting us and drawing a long breath. “This is an even rougher place than my gallery to receive a lady, but I know Miss Summerson will make the best of it.”

I sat down on the bench, which seemed to give him great satisfaction.

“Now, George,” observed my guardian, “we require no new assurances on your part.”

“Thank you, sir, with all my heart. If I was not innocent of this crime, I couldn’t look at you and keep my secret to myself. I feel your visit very deeply.”

He laid his hand on his broad chest and bent his head, expressing a great amount of natural emotion by these simple means.

“First,” said my guardian, “is there anything we can do for your personal comfort, George?”

“Well, sir,” replied George, thinking, “I am obliged to you, but since tobacco is against the rules, I can’t say that there is.”

“If you think of anything, George, let us know.”

“Thank you, sir. Howsoever,” observed Mr. George with one of his sunburnt smiles, “a man who has been knocking about the world in a vagabond way as long as I have gets on well enough in a place like this.”

“Next, as to your case,” observed my guardian. “How does it stand now?”

“Why, sir, it is under remand at present. Bucket tells me that he will probably apply for a series of remands until the case is more complete. How it is to be made more complete I don’t see, but I dare say Bucket will manage it somehow.”

“Why, heaven save us, man,” exclaimed my guardian, “you talk as if you were somebody else!”

“No offence, sir,” said Mr. George. “But I don’t see how an innocent man is to cope with this kind of thing without knocking his head against the walls, unless he takes that point of view.”

“True enough,” returned my guardian. “But even an innocent man must defend himself.”

“Certainly, sir. And I have done so. I have stated my innocence to the magistrates, and have said I know nothing about it. What more can I do? It’s the truth.”

“But the mere truth won’t do,” rejoined my guardian. “You must have a lawyer. We must engage a good one for you.”

“I ask your pardon, sir,” said Mr. George with a step backward. “I am obliged. But I must decidedly beg to be excused from anything of that sort.”

“You won’t have a lawyer?”

“No, sir.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t take kindly to the breed,” said Mr. George. “Gridley didn’t. I object to the breed, sir.”

It was in vain that we all three endeavoured to persuade him; he listened with that gentleness which went so well with his bluff bearing, but was unshaken by our arguments.

“You see,” he said, “I have been handcuffed and brought here. I am a marked and disgraced man. My shooting gallery is rummaged, high and low, by Bucket; such property as I have is turned this way and that; and here I am! I don’t particular complain of that. Though it is through no immediate fault of mine, I can understand that if I hadn’t gone into the vagabond way in my youth, this wouldn’t have happened. It *has* happened: then comes the question how to meet it.”

He rubbed his forehead for a moment and thought a bit; then he resumed.

“Now, the unfortunate deceased was himself a lawyer and had a pretty tight hold of me. I don’t wish to rake up his ashes, but he had a devil of a tight hold of me. I don’t like his trade the better for that. But suppose I had killed him. with one of those pistols that Bucket has found at my place, which have always been there. What should I have done as soon as I was here? Got a lawyer.”

He stopped on hearing someone at the locks and bolts and did not resume until the door had been opened and was shut again. For what purpose opened, I will mention presently.

“Say I am innocent and I get a lawyer. He would be as likely to believe me guilty as not. What would he do? Act as if I was – shut my mouth, tell me not to commit myself, and get me off perhaps! But, Miss Summerson, I would rather be hanged! I must come off clear and full or not at all. If they can’t make me innocent out of the whole truth, they are not likely to do it out of anything less. And if they are, it’s worth nothing to me.”

He paced back to the table and finished his speech.

“I thank you, miss and gentlemen both, for your attention. I have a blunt broadsword kind of a mind, and have never done well in life beyond my duty as a soldier; and if the worst comes after all, I shall reap pretty much as I have

sown. No relations will be disgraced by me or made unhappy for me, and – and that’s all I’ve got to say.”

The door had been opened to admit another soldierly-looking man and a weather-tanned, bright-eyed wholesome woman with a basket, who had been exceedingly attentive to all Mr. George had said. Mr. George had received them with a familiar nod and a friendly look. He now shook them cordially by the hand and said, “Miss Summerson and gentlemen, this is an old comrade of mine, Matthew Bagnet, and his wife, Mrs. Bagnet.”

Mr. Bagnet made us a stiff military bow, and Mrs. Bagnet dropped us a curtsy.

“Real good friends of mine, they are,” said Mr. George. “It was at their house I was taken.”

“With a second-hand cello,” Mr. Bagnet put in, twitching his head angrily.

“Mat,” said Mr. George, “you have heard pretty well all I have been saying. I know it meets your approval?”

“Old girl,” said Mr. Bagnet, “Tell him. Whether or not. It meets my approval.”

“Why, George,” exclaimed Mrs. Bagnet, who had been unpacking her basket, in which there was a piece of cold pickled pork, a little tea and sugar, and a brown loaf, “you ought to know it don’t. You ought to know it’s enough to drive a person wild to hear you. You won’t be got off this way, or that way? It’s stuff and nonsense, George. Why, you should have a dozen lawyers if the gentleman recommended them to you.”

“This is a very sensible woman,” said my guardian. “I hope you will persuade him, Mrs. Bagnet.”

“Persuade him, sir?” she returned. “Lord bless you, no. You don’t know George. As self-willed and as determined a man, in the wrong way, as ever put a human creature under heaven out of patience! Don’t I know you, George! You don’t mean to set up for a new character with me after all these years, I hope?”

At her friendly indignation, her husband shook his head at the trooper as a silent recommendation to him to yield. Mrs. Bagnet looked at me; and I understood from the play of her eyes that she wished me to do something, though I did not comprehend what.

“But I have given up talking to you, old fellow,” said Mrs. Bagnet, looking at me again; “and when ladies and gentlemen know you as well as I do, they’ll give up talking to you too. If you are not too headstrong to accept a bit of dinner, here it is.”

“I accept it with thanks,” returned the trooper.

“Do you indeed?” said Mrs. Bagnet. “I wonder you don’t starve in your own way also. It would be like you.” Here she again looked at me, and I now perceived from her glances at the door that she wished us to retire and to wait for her outside the prison. Communicating this by similar means to my guardian and Mr. Woodcourt, I rose.

“We hope you will think better of it, Mr. George,” said I, “and we shall come to see you again, trusting to find you more persuadable. And please to consider that the clearing up of this mystery and the discovery of the real criminal may be of great importance to others besides yourself.”

He heard me respectfully but without much heeding these words, which I spoke as I was already on my way to the door. He was observing my height and figure, which seemed to catch his attention.

“‘Tis curious,” said he. “And yet I thought so at the time!”

My guardian asked him what he meant.

“Why, sir,” he answered, “when my ill fortune took me to the dead man’s staircase on the night of his murder, I saw a shape so like Miss Summerson’s go by me in the dark that I had half a mind to speak to it.”

For an instant I felt such a shudder as I never felt before or since and hope I shall never feel again.

“It came downstairs as I went up,” said the trooper, “and crossed the moonlighted window with a black fringed mantle on. Miss Summerson looked so like it that it came into my head.”

I cannot define the feelings that arose in me after this; but my determination to follow the investigation increased, and I was indignantly sure of there being no possible reason for my being afraid.

We three went out of the prison and walked up and down a short distance from the gate. Soon Mr. and Mrs. Bagnet came out and joined us.

There were tears in Mrs. Bagnet’s eyes, and her face was flushed.

“I didn’t let George see what I thought about it, you know, miss,” she said when she came up, “but he’s in a bad way, poor old fellow!”

“Not with care and prudence and good help,” said my guardian.

“A gentleman like you ought to know best, sir,” returned Mrs. Bagnet, hurriedly drying her eyes, “but I am uneasy for him. He has been so careless and said so much that he never meant. The gentlemen of the juries might not understand him as Lignum and me do. And then so many circumstances have happened bad for him, and so many people will be brought forward to speak against him, and Bucket is so deep. Just come into the corner and I’ll tell you!”

Mrs. Bagnet hurried us into a secluded corner. “You could as soon move Dover Castle as move George on this point, miss, unless you had got a new power to move him with. And I have got it!”

“You are a jewel of a woman,” said my guardian. “Go on!”

“Now, what he says concerning no relations is all bosh. They don’t know of him, but he does know of them. He once spoke to my Woolwich about whitening and wrinkling mothers’ heads. For fifty pounds he had seen his mother that day. She’s alive and must be brought here straight! Lignum, you take care of the children, and give me the umbrella! I’m away to Lincolnshire to bring that old lady here.”

“But, bless the woman,” cried my guardian, “how is she going? What money has she got?”

Mrs. Bagnet brought forth a leather purse in which she hastily counted a few shillings.

“I’m a soldier’s wife and accustomed to travel my own way. Lignum, old boy,” kissing him, “one for yourself, three for the children. Now I’m away into Lincolnshire after George’s mother!”

And she actually set off while we three stood looking at one another in amazement. She trudged away in her grey cloak at a sturdy pace, turned the corner, and was gone.

“Mr. Bagnet,” said my guardian. “Do you mean to let her go in that way?”

“Can’t help it,” he returned. “Made her way home once from another quarter of the world. With the same grey cloak. And same umbrella. Whatever the old girl says, do it! Whenever the old girl says, *I’ll* do it, she does it.”

“Then she is as honest as she looks,” rejoined my guardian.

“She’s Colour-Sergeant of the Nonpareil battalion,” said Mr. Bagnet. “And there’s not such another. But I never own to it before her. Discipline must be maintained.”

Chapter 53

The Track

Mr. Bucket and his fat forefinger are much in consultation together at present. When Mr. Bucket is considering a matter of this pressing interest, the fat forefinger is in frequent use. He puts it to his ears; he puts it to his lips; he rubs it over his nose; he shakes it before a guilty man.

Mr. Bucket pervades a vast number of houses and strolls about an infinity of streets, to outward appearance rather languishing for want of an object. He is in the friendliest condition towards others and will drink with most of them. He is free with his money, affable in his manners, innocent in his conversation – but through the placid stream of his life there glides an under-current of forefinger.

Mr. Bucket is here today and gone tomorrow – and then here again the next day. This evening he will be casually looking past the door of Sir Leicester Dedlock's house in town; and tomorrow morning he will be walking on the turrets at Chesney Wold, where once the deceased old man walked. Drawers, desks, pockets, all things belonging to Tulkinghorn, Mr. Bucket examines.

Mr. Bucket at present does not go home. Though in general he highly appreciates the society of Mrs. Bucket – a lady of a natural detective genius, which if it had been improved by professional exercise, might have done great things, but which has paused at the level of a clever amateur – he holds himself aloof for now. Mrs. Bucket is dependent on their lodger (fortunately an amiable lady in whom she takes an interest) for companionship.

A great crowd assembles in Lincoln's Inn Fields on the day of the funeral. Sir Leicester Dedlock attends; there are only three other human followers, but the amount of inconsolable carriages is immense. The peerage contributes more four-wheeled affliction than has ever been seen in that neighbourhood. All the state coachmen in London seem plunged into mourning.

Quiet among the undertakers, Mr. Bucket sits concealed in one of the inconsolable carriages and at his ease surveys the crowd keenly through the blinds. He looks here and there, up and down, now at the house windows, now along the people's heads; nothing escapes him.

“And there you are, my partner, eh?” says Mr. Bucket to himself, meaning Mrs. Bucket, stationed, by his favour, on the steps of the deceased's house. “And very well indeed you are looking, Mrs. Bucket!”

The procession has not started yet, but is waiting for the coffin to be brought out. Mr. Bucket uses his two fat forefingers to hold the window a hair's breadth open while he looks.

And it says a great deal for his attachment as a husband, that he is still occupied with Mrs. B. “There you are, my partner, eh?” he murmuringly

repeats. "And our lodger with you. I see you, Mrs. Bucket; I hope you're well, my dear!"

Not another word does Mr. Bucket say, but sits with most attentive eyes until the coffin is brought down and the procession moves, and his view is changed. After which he composes himself for an easy ride and takes note of the fittings of the carriage in case he should ever find such knowledge useful.

Mr. Bucket glides from the carriage when the right opportunity arrives. He makes for Sir Leicester Dedlock's, which is at present a sort of home to him, where he comes and goes as he likes at all hours, where he is always welcome, and walks in an atmosphere of mysterious greatness.

Mr. Bucket has a key and can pass in at his pleasure. As he is crossing the hall, a footman informs him, "Here's another letter for you, Mr. Bucket, come by post."

"Another one, eh?" says Mr. Bucket. He goes on, letter in hand.

Now although Mr. Bucket walks upstairs to a little room in the library with the face of a man who receives scores of letters every day, his life does not involve much correspondence. He is no great scribe, and discourages letters from others as being too artless and direct a way of doing delicate business. He often sees damaging letters produced in evidence and reflects that it was naive to write them. For these reasons he has very little to do with letters, either as sender or receiver. And yet he has received half-a-dozen within the last twenty-four hours.

"And this," says Mr. Bucket, spreading it out on the table, "is in the same hand, and consists of the same two words."

He locks the door, takes out his black pocket-book, lays another letter by it, and reads, boldly written in each: "Lady Dedlock."

"Yes, yes," says Mr. Bucket. "But I could have made the money without this anonymous information."

Having put the letters in his book, he unlocks the door just in time to admit his dinner, which is brought in with a decanter of sherry. Mr. Bucket fills and empties his glass with a smack of his lips and is proceeding with his refreshment when an idea enters his mind.

Mr. Bucket softly opens the door between that room and the next and looks in. The library is deserted, and the fire is sinking low. Mr. Bucket's eye alights upon a table where letters are usually put as they arrive. Several letters for Sir Leicester are upon it. Mr. Bucket draws near and examines the directions.

"No," he says, "there's none in that hand. It's only me as is written to. I can break it to Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, tomorrow."

With that he returns to finish his dinner with a good appetite, and after a light nap, is summoned into the drawing-room. Sir Leicester has received him there these several evenings past to know whether he has anything to report. The debilitated cousin and Volumnia are in attendance.

"Have you anything new to communicate, officer?" inquires Sir Leicester. "Do you wish to hold any conversation with me in private?"

"Not tonight, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet."

“Because my time,” pursues Sir Leicester, “is wholly at your disposal with a view to the vindication of the outraged majesty of the law.”

Mr. Bucket coughs and glances at Volumnia, rouged and necklaced, as though to respectfully observe, “I do assure you, you’re a pretty creetur. I’ve seen hundreds worse looking at your time of life, I have indeed.”

The fair Volumnia pauses in her writing to adjust the pearl necklace. Mr. Bucket prices that decoration in his mind and thinks it as likely as not that Volumnia is writing poetry.

“I am prepared to defray all costs,” pursues Sir Leicester, “to enable you to exercise your utmost skill in this atrocious case. Let no expense be a consideration.”

Mr. Bucket makes a bow.

“I declare,” says Sir Leicester, his voice trembling and tears in his eyes, “I solemnly declare that until this crime is solved and punished, I almost feel as if there were a stain upon my name. A gentleman who has devoted a large portion of his life to me, who has sat at my table and slept under my roof, is struck down within an hour of his leaving my house. He may have been followed from my house, even marked because of his association with my house – which may have suggested his possessing greater wealth than his own appearance would have indicated. If I cannot with my influence bring the perpetrators of the crime to light, I fail in my respect for that gentleman’s memory.”

While he says this with great emotion, Mr. Bucket glances at him with an observant gravity in which there might be a touch of compassion.

“If it were my brother who had committed this horrible and audacious crime,” continues Sir Leicester, “I would not spare him.”

Mr. Bucket looks very grave. Volumnia remarks of the deceased that he was the trustiest and dearest person!

“You must feel it as a deprivation to you, miss,” replies Mr. Bucket soothingly.

Volumnia indicates that her sensitive mind is fully made up never to get over it, that her nerves are unstrung for ever, and that she does not expect ever to smile again. Are they are going to convict, or whatever it is, that dreadful soldier? Did he have any accomplices, or whatever the thing is called?

“Why you see, miss,” returns Mr. Bucket, bringing the finger into persuasive action, “it ain’t easy to answer those questions. Not at the present moment. I’ve kept myself on this case, morning, noon, and night. I could answer your questions, miss, but duty forbids it. Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, will very soon be made acquainted with all that has been traced. And I hope that he may find it” – Mr. Bucket again looks grave – “to his satisfaction.”

The debilitated cousin only hopes some fella’ll be executed – zample. Far better hang wrong fella than no fella.

“In fact, Volumnia,” proceeds Sir Leicester, “it is not advisable to ask the officer any such questions. He is the best judge of his own responsibility.

And it does not become us, who assist in making the laws, to interfere with those who carry them into execution.”

“Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet,” says Mr. Bucket, “I have no objections to telling this lady, with your leave, that I look upon the case as pretty well complete. It is a beautiful case, and what little is wanting to complete it, I expect to be able to supply in a few hours.”

“I am very glad indeed to hear it,” says Sir Leicester. “Highly creditable to you.”

“Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet,” returns Mr. Bucket very seriously, “I hope it may do me credit and prove satisfactory to all. When I depict it as a beautiful case, you see, miss,” he goes on, “I mean from my point of view. As considered from other points of view, such cases will always involve some unpleasantness. Very strange things come to our knowledge in families, miss.”

Volumnia, with her innocent little scream, supposes so.

“Aye, even in high families, in great families,” says Mr. Bucket, gravely eyeing Sir Leicester.

Sir Leicester, deeming it time to dismiss the officer, here majestically interposes with, “Very good. Thank you!” and with a wave of his hand.

Mr. Bucket (still grave) inquires if tomorrow morning would suit, if he is then as for’ard as he expects to be.

Sir Leicester replies, “All times are alike to me.” Mr. Bucket bows and is withdrawing when a forgotten point occurs to him.

“Might I ask, by the by, who posted the reward-bill on the staircase?”

“I ordered it to be put up there,” replies Sir Leicester.

“Would it be considered a liberty, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, if I was to ask you why?”

“Not at all. I chose it as a conspicuous part of the house. I wish my people to be impressed with the enormity of the crime, the determination to punish it, and the hopelessness of escape.”

Mr. Bucket repeats his bows and withdraws. Soon he is standing before the bright hall-fire, admiring the footman.

“Why, you’re six foot two, I suppose?” says Mr. Bucket.

“Three,” says the footman.

“Are you so much? But then, you see, you’re broad in proportion and don’t look it. A Royal Academy sculptor would pay something handsome to make a drawing of your proportions for the marble. My Lady’s out, ain’t she?”

“Out to dinner.”

“Goes out pretty well every day, don’t she?”

“Yes.”

“Not to be wondered at!” says Mr. Bucket. “Such a fine woman as her. My Lady in a good temper?”

“As good as you can expect.”

“Ah!” says Mr. Bucket. “A little spoilt? A little capricious? Lord! What can you anticipate when they’re so handsome as that? And we like ’em all the better for it, don’t we?”

The footman, with his hands in his pockets, can’t deny it. Come the roll of wheels and a violent ringing at the bell. “Talk of the angels,” says Mr. Bucket. “Here she is!”

The doors are thrown open, and she passes through the hall. Still very pale, she is dressed in slight mourning and wears two beautiful bracelets. Either their beauty or the beauty of her arms is particularly attractive to Mr. Bucket. He looks at them with an eager eye.

Noticing him, she turns an inquiring look on the manservant.

“Mr. Bucket, my Lady.”

Mr. Bucket bows and comes forward, passing his forefinger over his mouth.

“Are you waiting to see Sir Leicester?”

“No, my Lady, I’ve seen him!”

“Have you anything to say to me?”

“Not just at present, my Lady.”

“Have you made any new discoveries?”

“A few, my Lady.”

This is merely in passing. She scarcely makes a stop, and sweeps upstairs alone. Mr. Bucket watches her as she goes up the steps, past the printed bill, which she looks at going by, and out of view.

“She’s a lovely woman, she really is,” says Mr. Bucket to the footman. “Don’t look quite healthy though.”

Suffers much from headaches, he is informed.

Really? That’s a pity! Walking, Mr. Bucket would recommend for that. Well, she tries walking, the footman rejoins. Walks sometimes for two hours when she has them bad. By night, too.

“When it’s moonlight, though?”

Oh, yes.

“Now I think of it,” says Mr. Bucket, warming his hands at the blaze, “she went out walking the very night of this business.”

“To be sure she did! I let her into the garden over the way.”

“Certainly. I saw you doing it.”

“I didn’t see *you*,” says the footman.

“I was rather in a hurry,” returns Mr. Bucket, “for I was going to visit a aunt of mine that lives at Chelsea – ninety year old. Yes, I chanced to be passing at the time. Let’s see. What time might it be? It wasn’t ten.”

“Half-past nine.”

“So it was. And if I don’t deceive myself, my Lady was muffled in a loose black mantle, with a deep fringe to it?”

Of course she was.

Of course. Mr. Bucket must return to a little work upstairs, but he shakes hands in acknowledgment of his agreeable conversation before he goes.

Chapter 54

Springing a Mine

Refreshed by sleep, Mr. Bucket rises and prepares for a field-day. He lays in a breakfast of two mutton chops as a foundation to work upon, together with tea, eggs, toast, and marmalade. He instructs the footman “just to mention quietly to Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, that whenever he’s ready for me, I’m ready for him.” A gracious message being returned that Sir Leicester will be in the library within ten minutes, Mr. Bucket goes there and stands before the fire with his finger on his chin, looking at the blazing coals.

Thoughtful Mr. Bucket is, but composed, sure, confident. Not in the least anxious or disturbed is he when Sir Leicester appears, but he eyes the baronet as he comes slowly to his easy-chair with that observant gravity of yesterday, in which there might have been a touch of compassion.

“I am sorry to have kept you waiting, officer, but I am rather later than my usual hour this morning. I am not well. I am subject to – gout – and recent circumstances have brought it on.”

As Sir Leicester takes his seat with some difficulty and with an air of pain, Mr. Bucket draws a little nearer.

“I am not aware, officer,” Sir Leicester observes, raising his eyes to his face, “whether you wish us to be alone.”

“Why, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet,” returns Mr. Bucket with his head on one side and his forefinger at one ear like an earring, “we can’t be too private just at present. I was on the point of asking your permission to turn the key in the door.”

“By all means.”

Mr. Bucket skilfully takes that precaution, adjusting the key in the lock so that no one shall peep in from outside.

“Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, I mentioned yesterday evening that I wanted very little to complete this case. I have now completed it and collected proof against the person who did this crime.”

“Against the soldier?”

“No, Sir Leicester Dedlock; not the soldier.”

Sir Leicester looks astounded and inquires, “Is the man in custody?”

Mr. Bucket tells him, after a pause, “It was a woman.”

Sir Leicester leans back in his chair, and breathlessly ejaculates, “Good heaven!”

“Now, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet,” Mr. Bucket begins, “it’s my duty to prepare you for a train of circumstances that may, and I go so far as to say that will, give you a shock. But you are a gentleman, and a gentleman can bear a shock. A gentleman can make up his mind to stand up against almost any blow. Why, take yourself, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet. If there’s a blow to be inflicted on you, you bear it well on your ancestors’ accounts, and

to maintain the family credit. That's the way you argue, and that's the way you act, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet."

Sir Leicester, leaning back in his chair and grasping its arms, sits looking at him with a stony face.

"Now, Sir Leicester Dedlock," proceeds Mr. Bucket, "let me beg you not to trouble your mind as to anything having come to *my* knowledge. I know so much about so many characters, high and low, that another piece of information don't signify a straw. I don't suppose there's a move on the board that would surprise me. Therefore, don't let yourself be put out of the way because of my knowing anything of your family affairs."

"I thank you for your preparation," returns Sir Leicester after a silence. "Be so good as to go on. Take a seat, if you have no objection."

None at all. Mr. Bucket brings a chair. "Now, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, with this short preface I come to the point. Lady Dedlock—"

Sir Leicester raises himself in his seat and stares at him fiercely. Mr. Bucket brings the fore-finger into play.

"Lady Dedlock, you see she's universally admired," says Mr. Bucket.

"I would greatly prefer, officer," Sir Leicester returns stiffly, "my Lady's name being entirely omitted from this discussion."

"So would I, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, but – it's impossible. What I have got to say is about her ladyship. She is the pivot it all turns on."

"Officer," retorts Sir Leicester with a fiery eye and a quivering lip, "do your duty, but be careful not to overstep it. I would not endure it. My Lady's name is not a name for common persons to trifle with!"

"Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, I say what I must say, and no more."

"I hope it may prove so. Very well. Go on, sir!" Glancing at the angry eyes which now avoid him and at the angry figure trembling from head to foot, Mr. Bucket feels his way with his forefinger and in a low voice proceeds.

"Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, it becomes my duty to tell you that the deceased Mr. Tulkinghorn long had mistrusts and suspicions of Lady Dedlock."

"If he had dared to breathe them to me, sir – which he never did – I would have killed him myself!" exclaims Sir Leicester, striking his hand upon the table. But in the very act he stops, fixed by the knowing eyes of Mr. Bucket, whose forefinger is slowly going and who shakes his head.

"Sir Leicester Dedlock, the deceased Mr. Tulkinghorn was deep, and what he fully had in his mind in the very beginning I can't say. But I know from his lips that he long ago suspected Lady Dedlock of having discovered, through the sight of some handwriting, the existence, in great poverty, of a certain person who had been her lover before you courted her and who ought to have been her husband."

Mr. Bucket stops and deliberately repeats, "Ought to have been her husband, not a doubt about it. I know from his lips that when that person soon afterwards died, Mr. Tulkinghorn suspected Lady Dedlock of visiting his wretched lodging and his wretched grave, alone and in secret. I know from

my own inquiries and through my eyes that Lady Dedlock did make such a visit in the dress of her maid. I confronted the maid in the chambers in Lincoln's Inn Fields with a witness who had been Lady Dedlock's guide, and there couldn't be the shadow of a doubt that she had worn the young woman's dress, unknown to her.

"Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, I did endeavour yesterday to pave the way towards these unpleasant disclosures by saying that strange things happen even in high families sometimes. All this, and more, has happened in your own family. It's my belief that Mr. Tulkinghorn followed up these inquiries to the hour of his death and that he and Lady Dedlock even had an argument on the matter that very night. Now, only you put that to Lady Dedlock, Sir, and ask her ladyship whether she didn't go down to his chambers with the intention of saying something further to him, dressed in a loose black mantle with a deep fringe to it."

Sir Leicester sits like a statue, gazing at the cruel finger that is probing the life-blood of his heart.

"If her ladyship makes any difficulty about admitting of it, you tell her that it's no use, that Inspector Bucket knows it, and knows that she passed the soldier on the staircase. Now, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, why do I relate all this?"

Sir Leicester, who has covered his face with his hands, uttering a single groan, requests him to pause for a moment. By and by he takes his hands away in such dignity and outward calmness, though his face is as white as his hair, that Mr. Bucket is a little awed by him. Something frozen and fixed is upon his manner, over and above its usual shell of haughtiness, and Mr. Bucket soon detects an unusual slowness in his speech, with now and then a curious trouble in beginning, which makes him utter inarticulate sounds. With such sounds he now breaks silence, saying that he does not comprehend why a gentleman so faithful as the late Mr. Tulkinghorn should have told him nothing of this painful, this overwhelming, this incredible information.

"Again, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet," returns Mr. Bucket, "put it to her ladyship to clear that up. You'll find, or I'm much mistaken, that Mr. Tulkinghorn intended to communicate the whole to you as soon as he considered it ripe, and further, that he had told her ladyship so. Why, he might have been going to reveal it the very next morning!"

At this point a considerable noise of voices is heard in the hall. Mr. Bucket goes to the library-door, softly unlocks and opens it, and listens again. Then he draws in his head and whispers hurriedly but composedly, "Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, this unfortunate family affair has taken air, as I expected it might. The chance to hush it is to let in these people who are wrangling with your footmen. Would you mind sitting quiet – on the family account – while I reckon 'em up? And would you just throw in a nod when I seem to ask you for it?"

Sir Leicester indistinctly answers, "The best you can!" and Mr. Bucket slips down into the hall. He soon returns with two footmen, who bear between them a chair in which is an incapable old man. Another man and two women

come behind. Directing the placing of the chair in an affable manner, Mr. Bucket dismisses the footmen and locks the door again. Sir Leicester looks on with an icy stare.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen,” says Mr. Bucket in a confidential voice. “I am Inspector Bucket, Detective. Now, you wanted to see Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet. Well! You do see him, and mind you, it ain’t everyone as is admitted to that honour. Your name, old gentleman, is Smallweed; I know it well.”

“And you never heard any harm of it!” cries Mr. Smallweed in a shrill loud voice.

“You ain’t in the habit of conversing with a deaf person, are you?” asks Mr. Bucket.

“Yes,” snarls Mr. Smallweed, “my wife’s deaf.”

“As she ain’t here, just pitch your voice an octave or two lower, will you, and it’ll do you more credit,” says Mr. Bucket. “This other gentleman is in the preaching line, I think?”

“Name of Chadband,” Mr. Smallweed says, in a much lower key.

“And Mrs. Chadband, no doubt?”

“And Mrs. Snagsby.” Mr. Smallweed introduces them.

“Husband a law-stationer and a friend of my own,” says Mr. Bucket. “Love him like a brother! Now, what’s up?”

“Do you mean what business have we come upon?” Mr. Smallweed asks, a little dashed.

“Ah! You know what I mean. Let us hear what it’s all about in the presence of Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet.”

Mr. Smallweed, beckoning Mr. Chadband, consults with him in a whisper. Mr. Chadband, expressing a considerable amount of oil from his forehead, says aloud, “You first!”

“I was the client and friend of Mr. Tulkinghorn,” pipes Grandfather Smallweed. “I did business with him. I was useful to him, and he was useful to me. Krook, dead and gone, was my brother-in-law. I come into Krook’s property. I examined all his papers. There was a bundle of letters belonging to a dead and gone lodger as was hid away at the back of a shelf in the side of the cat’s bed. Mr. Tulkinghorn got ’em, but I looked ’em over first. I’m a man of business, and I took a squint at ’em. They was letters from the lodger’s sweetheart, and she signed Honoria. Dear me, that’s not a common name, Honoria, is it? There’s no lady in this house that signs Honoria, is there? Oh, no, I don’t think so!”

Here Mr. Smallweed is seized with a fit of coughing in the midst of his triumph.

“Now, when you’re ready,” says Mr. Bucket after awaiting his recovery, “to come to anything that concerns Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, here the gentleman sits, you know.”

“Haven’t I come to it, Mr. Bucket?” cries Grandfather Smallweed. “Isn’t the gentleman concerned yet? Not with Captain Hawdon, and his ever affectionate Honoria, and their child into the bargain? Come, then, I want to

know where those letters are. I won't have 'em disappear. I handed 'em over to my friend and solicitor, Mr. Tulkinghorn, not to anybody else."

"Why, he paid you for them, you know, and handsome too," says Mr. Bucket.

"I don't care for that. I want to know who's got 'em. And I tell you what we want, Mr. Bucket. We want more search-making into this murder. We know where the motive was, and you have not done enough. If George the vagabond dragoon had any hand in it, he was only an accomplice, and was set on. You know what I mean."

"Now I tell you what," says Mr. Bucket, instantaneously altering his manner, "I am damned if I am a-going to have my case spoilt, or interfered with, by any human being in creation. You want more search-making! You do? Do you see this hand, and do you think that I don't know the right time to stretch it out and put it on the arm that fired that shot?"

Such is the dread power of the man that Mr. Smallweed begins to apologize. Mr. Bucket, dismissing his sudden anger, stops him.

"The advice I give you is, don't you trouble your head about the murder. That's my affair. You'll read something about it in the newspapers before long. Now about those letters. You want to know who's got 'em. I have got 'em."

Mr. Bucket produces a little bundle from a mysterious part of his coat.

"What have you got to say next?" asks Mr. Bucket.

"I want five hundred pound."

"No, you don't; you mean fifty," says Mr. Bucket humorously.

It appears, however, that Mr. Smallweed means five hundred.

"I am deputed by Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, to consider (without promising anything) this bit of business," says Mr. Bucket – Sir Leicester mechanically bows his head – "and you ask me to consider a proposal of five hundred pounds. Why, it's an unreasonable proposal! Hadn't you better say two fifty?"

Mr. Smallweed is quite clear that he had better not.

"Then," says Mr. Bucket, "let's hear Mr. Chadband."

Thus invited, Mr. Chadband steps forth, and after a little sleek smiling and a little oil-grinding with the palms of his hands, delivers himself as follows.

"My friends, we are now – Rachael, my wife, and I – in the mansions of the rich and great. Why are we now in the mansions of the rich and great, my friends? Is it because we are invited? Because we are bidden to feast with them, because we are bidden to rejoice with them, because we are bidden to play the lute with them, because we are bidden to dance with them? No. Then why are we here, my friends? Air we in possession of a sinful secret, and do we require corn, and wine, and oil, or what is much the same thing, money, for the keeping thereof? Probably so, my friends."

"You're a man of business, you are," returns Mr. Bucket, very attentive, "and you're going on to mention what the nature of your secret is."

“Let us then, my brother, in a spirit of love,” says Mr. Chadband with a cunning eye, “proceed unto it. Rachael, my wife, advance!”

Mrs. Chadband jostles her husband into the background and confronts Mr. Bucket with a hard, frowning smile.

“I helped to bring up Miss Hawdon, her ladyship’s daughter,” she says. “I was in the service of her ladyship’s sister, who was very sensitive to the disgrace her ladyship brought upon her, and gave out, even to her ladyship, that the child was dead when she was born. But she’s alive, and I know her.” With these words, and a laugh, and laying a bitter stress on the word “ladyship,” Mrs. Chadband folds her arms and looks implacably at Mr. Bucket.

“I suppose now,” returns that officer, “*you* will be expecting twenty pounds or so?”

Mrs. Chadband merely laughs and contemptuously tells him he can “offer” twenty pence.

“My friend the law-stationer’s good lady, over there,” says Mr. Bucket, luring Mrs. Snagsby forward with his finger. “What may *your* game be, ma’am?”

Mrs. Snagsby is at first prevented, by tears and lamentations, from stating the nature of her game, but by degrees it confusedly comes to light that she is a woman overwhelmed with injuries and wrongs, whom Mr. Snagsby has deceived, and whose chief comfort has been the sympathy of the late Mr. Tulkinghorn, to whom she has carried all her woes. Everybody it appears, the present company excepted, has plotted against Mrs. Snagsby’s peace. Mr. Guppy, Mr. Weevle, Krook, deceased, and Jo, deceased; and they were “all in it.” In what, Mrs. Snagsby does not say, but she knows that Jo was Mr. Snagsby’s son, “as well as if a trumpet had spoken it,” and she followed Mr. Snagsby when he went on his last visit to the boy, and if he was not his son why did he go?

The one occupation of her life has been, for some time back, to follow Mr. Snagsby everywhere; and every circumstance has been most suspicious. She has pursued her object of confounding her false husband, night and day. Thus she brought the Chadbands and Mr. Tulkinghorn together, in order to lead to Mr. Snagsby’s full exposure and a matrimonial separation.

Mrs. Snagsby has no pecuniary motive whatever, no scheme or project but the one mentioned, in this ceaseless working of her mill of jealousy.

While she is speaking – and it takes some time – Mr. Bucket bestows his shrewd attention on the Chadbands and Mr. Smallweed. Sir Leicester Dedlock remains icily immovable, except that he once or twice looks towards Mr. Bucket, as if relying on that officer alone of all mankind.

“Very good,” says Mr. Bucket. “Now, I, being deputed by Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, to look into this little matter,” again Sir Leicester mechanically bows, “can give it my full attention. Now I won’t allude to conspiring to extort money or anything of that sort, because we are men and women of the world here, and our object is to make things pleasant. But I tell

you what I *do* wonder at; that you should make such a noise below in the hall. It was so opposed to your interests.”

“We wanted to get in,” pleads Mr. Smallweed.

“Why, of course you wanted to get in,” Mr. Bucket asserts with cheerfulness; “but an old gentleman with his wits sharpened, as I have no doubt yours are, ought to consider that he needs to keep such a business secret! You see your temper got the better of you; that’s where you lost ground,” says Mr. Bucket in a friendly way.

“I only said I wouldn’t go unless one of the servants came up to Sir Leicester Dedlock,” returns Mr. Smallweed.

“That’s it! Now, shall I ring for them to carry you down?”

“When are we to hear more of this?” Mrs. Chadband sternly demands.

“Bless your heart for a true woman! Always curious!” replies Mr. Bucket with gallantry. “I shall have the pleasure of giving you a call tomorrow or next day – not forgetting Mr. Smallweed and his proposal of two fifty.”

“Five hundred!” exclaims Mr. Smallweed.

“All right! Nominally five hundred.” Mr. Bucket has his hand on the bell-rope. “Shall I wish you good day for the present?”

Nobody objecting, he does it, and the party retire. Mr. Bucket follows them to the door, and returning, says, “Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, it’s for you to consider whether or not to buy this up. I should recommend, on the whole, it’s being bought up myself; and I think it may be bought pretty cheap. You see, that little pickled cucumber of a Mrs. Snagsby has been used by all sides and has done a deal more harm in bringing odds and ends together than if she had meant it. Mr. Tulkinghorn, he held all these horses in his hand and could have drove ’em his own way, I haven’t a doubt; but now they are all dragging and pulling their own ways. So it is, and such is life. Now, with regard to the party to be apprehended.”

Sir Leicester seems to wake, and he looks intently at Mr. Bucket as Mr. Bucket refers to his watch.

“The party to be apprehended is now in this house,” proceeds Mr. Bucket, “and I’m about to take her into custody in your presence. Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, don’t you say a word. There’ll be no noise and no disturbance at all. I’ll come back in the course of the evening, if agreeable to you, and endeavour to meet your wishes respecting this unfortunate family matter and the best way of keeping it quiet. Now, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, don’t you be nervous. You shall see the whole case clear.”

Mr. Bucket rings for the footman, briefly whispers to him, and stands behind the door with his arms folded. After a suspense of a minute or two a Frenchwoman enters. Mademoiselle Hortense.

The moment she is in the room Mr. Bucket claps the door to and puts his back against it. She turns, and sees Sir Leicester Dedlock in his chair.

“I ask you pardon,” she mutters hurriedly. “They tell me there was no one here.”

Her step towards the door brings her front to front with Mr. Bucket. Suddenly a spasm shoots across her face and she turns deadly pale.

“This is my lodger, Sir Leicester Dedlock,” says Mr. Bucket, nodding at her. “This foreign young woman has been my lodger for some weeks back.”

“What do Sir Leicester care for that, you think, my angel?” returns mademoiselle in a jocular way.

“Why, my angel,” returns Mr. Bucket, “we shall see.”

Mademoiselle Hortense eyes him with a scowl, which gradually changes into a smile of scorn, “You are very mysterieuse. Are you drunk?”

“Tolerable sober, my angel,” returns Mr. Bucket.

“I arrive at this so detestable house with your wife. Your wife have left me since some minutes. They tell me downstairs that your wife is here. I come here, and your wife is not here. What is this fool’s play, then?” mademoiselle demands, with her arms composedly crossed, but with something in her dark cheek beating like a clock.

Mr. Bucket merely shakes the finger at her.

“Ah, my God, you are an unhappy idiot!” cries mademoiselle with a toss of her head and a laugh. “Leave me to pass downstairs, great pig.” She stamps her foot.

“Now, mademoiselle,” says Mr. Bucket in a cool determined way, “you go and sit down upon that sofa.”

“Why?”

“Because I take you into custody on a charge of murder, and you don’t need to be told it. Now, I want to be polite if I can. It depends on you. So I recommend you, as a friend, to go and sit down upon that sofa.”

Mademoiselle complies, saying, while that something in her cheek beats fast and hard, “You are a devil.”

“Now, I’ll give you a piece of advice,” Mr. Bucket proceeds, “and it’s this: don’t you talk too much. You’re not expected to say anything here. The less you *parlay* the better, you know.” Mr. Bucket is very complacent over this French explanation.

Mademoiselle, with a tigerish expansion of the mouth and her black eyes darting fire upon him, sits upright and rigid on the sofa, with her hands clenched.

“Now, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet,” says Mr. Bucket, and from this time forth the finger never rests, “this young woman, my lodger, was her ladyship’s maid; and this young woman, besides being extraordinary vehement against her ladyship after being discharged—”

“Lie!” cries mademoiselle. “I discharge myself.”

“Now, why don’t you take my advice?” returns Mr. Bucket in an impressive, almost imploring, tone. “You’ll say something that’ll be used against you, you know.”

“Discharge by her ladyship!” cries mademoiselle furiously. “A pretty ladyship! Why, I r-r-r-ruin my character by remaining with a ladyship so infame!”

“Upon my soul I wonder at you!” Mr. Bucket remonstrates. “I thought the French were a polite nation, I did, really. To go on like that before Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet!”

“I spit upon his house, upon his name,” cries mademoiselle. “Oh, a great man! Oh, yes, superb! Bah!”

“Well, Sir Leicester Dedlock,” proceeds Mr. Bucket, “this intemperate foreigner also angrily took it into her head that she had established a claim upon Mr. Tulkinghorn, deceased, by attending at his chambers, though she was liberally paid for her time.”

“Lie!” cries mademoiselle. “I ref-use his money all togezzer.”

“If you will parlay, you know,” says Mr. Bucket, “you must take the consequences. Now, whether she became my lodger, Sir Leicester Dedlock, with any deliberate intention then of doing this deed and blinding me, I give no opinion on; but she lodged in my house at the time that she was hovering about the chambers of Mr. Tulkinghorn, and likewise persecuting an unfortunate stationer.”

“Lie!” cries mademoiselle.

“The murder was committed, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, and you know under what circumstances. Now, I was sent for. I examined the place, and the body, and the papers, and everything. I took George into custody as having been seen hanging about there on the night of the murder, also as having been overheard in high words with the deceased on former occasions. If you ask me, Sir Leicester Dedlock, whether I believed George to be the murderer, I tell you candidly no, but he might be, notwithstanding, and it was my duty to get him kept under remand. Now, observe!”

As Mr. Bucket bends forward in some excitement – for him – Mademoiselle Hortense fixes her black eyes upon him with a dark frown and sets her dry lips firmly together.

“I went home at night and found this young woman having supper with my wife, Mrs. Bucket. She had made a mighty show of being fond of Mrs. Bucket from her first offering herself as our lodger, but that night overdid it. Likewise she overdid her respect for the lamented memory of the deceased Mr. Tulkinghorn. It flashed upon me, as I sat opposite to her at the table and saw her with a knife in her hand, that she had done it!”

Mademoiselle is hardly audible in straining through her teeth the words, “You are a devil.”

“Now where,” pursues Mr. Bucket, “had she been on the night of the murder? She had been to the theayter. (She really was there, I have since found, both before the deed and after it.) I knew I had an artful customer to deal with and that proof would be very difficult; and I laid a trap for her. When I went upstairs to bed, I told Mrs. Bucket all about it. Mrs. Bucket is a woman in fifty thousand! I asked Mrs. Bucket to throw this young woman off her guard, with accounts of my suspicions against George; and to keep watch upon her night and day. And Mrs. Bucket has acted up to it glorious!”

“Lies!” mademoiselle interposes. “All lies, my friend!”

“Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, what does this lady try to do? Don’t let it give you a turn – to throw the murder on her ladyship.”

Sir Leicester rises from his chair and staggers down again.

“And she got encouragement in it from hearing that I was always here. Now, in this pocket-book of mine, Sir Leicester Dedlock, are letters sent to me, each with the two words ‘Lady Dedlock.’ This one came this very morning, with the three words ‘Lady Dedlock, Murderess’ in it. These letters have been falling about like a shower of lady-birds. Mrs. Bucket, from her spy-place, saw them written. She watched the posting of ’em every one by this young woman, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet!” Mr. Bucket is triumphant in his admiration of his lady’s genius.

The very atmosphere mademoiselle breathes seems to narrow and contract about her as if a close net were being pulled around her breathless figure.

“There is no doubt that her ladyship was on the spot at the eventful time,” says Mr. Bucket, “and my foreign friend here saw her. Her ladyship and George and my foreign friend were all pretty close on one another’s heels.”

“These are very long lies,” mademoiselle interposes. “You prose great deal. Is it that you have almost finished?”

“Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet,” proceeds Mr. Bucket, “the last point in the case shows the necessity of never doing a thing in a hurry. I watched this young woman yesterday without her knowledge when she was looking at the funeral, in company with my wife; and I saw such an expression in her face, that if I had been less experienced, I should have arrested her then, certain. What should I have lost? Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, I should have lost the weapon. My prisoner here proposed to Mrs. Bucket, after the funeral, that they should go a little ways into the country and take tea at a house of entertainment. Now, near that place there’s a pond. At tea, my prisoner got up to fetch her pocket handkercher from the bedroom; she was rather a long time gone and came back a little breathless. As soon as they came home this was reported to me by Mrs. Bucket, along with her suspicions. I had the water dragged by moonlight, and the pocket pistol was brought up. Now, my dear, hold that hand steady, and I shan’t hurt you!”

In a trice Mr. Bucket snaps a handcuff on her wrist. “That’s one,” he says. “Now the other, darling. Two, and all told!”

He rises; she rises too. “Where,” she asks, “is your false, your treacherous, cursed wife?”

“She’s gone to the Police Office,” returns Mr. Bucket. “You’ll see her there, my dear.”

“I would like to tear her limb from limb!” exclaims Mademoiselle Hortense, panting tigress-like.

“Bless you, darling,” says Mr. Bucket with the greatest composure. “You have your bonnet? Come along!”

“You can do as you please with me. It is but the death, it is all the same. Let us go, my angel. Adieu, you old man. I pity you, and I despise you!”

With these last words she snaps her teeth together as if her mouth closed with a spring. Mr. Bucket gets her out in a manner peculiar to himself, enfolding her like a cloud, and hovering away with her.

Sir Leicester, left alone, remains seated as though he were still listening. At length he gazes round the empty room, rises unsteadily to his feet and walks a few steps, supporting himself by the table. Then he stops, and with more of those inarticulate sounds, lifts up his eyes and seems to stare at something.

Heaven knows what he sees. The green woods of Chesney Wold, the noble house, the pictures of his forefathers; thousands of fingers pointing at him, thousands of faces sneering. But there is one shadow to which alone he addresses his tearing of his white hair and his extended arms.

It is she whom he has loved, admired, honoured, and set up for the world to respect. It is she who, at the core of all the constrained formalities of his life, has been a stock of living tenderness and love. He cannot bear to look upon her cast down from the high place she has graced so well.

And even as he sinks down to the ground, he can yet pronounce her name with something like distinctness in the midst of those intrusive sounds, and in a tone of mourning and compassion rather than reproach.

Chapter 55

Flight

Inspector Bucket has not yet struck his great blow, as just now chronicled, but is still asleep, when through the night and along the freezing wintry roads a chaise and pair comes out of Lincolnshire, making its way towards London.

Railroads shall soon traverse all this country, and with a rattle and glare the train shall shoot like a meteor over the wide night-landscape; but as yet such things are non-existent in these parts. Along the freezing roads, and through the night, the post-chaise makes its way without a railroad on its mind.

Mrs. Rouncewell, housekeeper at Chesney Wold, sits within the chaise; and by her side sits Mrs. Bagnet with her grey cloak and umbrella. The old girl would prefer to be up in front, exposed to the weather, but Mrs. Rouncewell is too thoughtful of her comfort to propose it. The old lady cannot make enough of the old girl. She sits, in her stately manner, holding her hand, and puts it often to her lips. "You are a mother, my dear soul," says she, "and you found my George's mother!"

"Why," returns Mrs. Bagnet, "when George said to my Woolwich that when he grew to be a man, he hoped he would have never brought a sorrowful line into his mother's face or turned a hair of her head grey, then I felt sure that something fresh had brought his own mother into his mind. He had often told me that he had behaved bad to her."

"Never, my dear!" returns Mrs. Rouncewell, bursting into tears. "He was always loving to me, was my George! But he had a bold spirit, and he ran a little wild and went for a soldier. When he didn't rise to be an officer, I know he considered he had disgraced us. For he had a lion heart, had my George, always, from a baby!"

The old lady recalls, all in a tremble, what a fine, likely lad he was; how they all took to him down at Chesney Wold; how Sir Leicester took to him; the dogs took to him; even the people who had been angry with him forgave him the moment he was gone, poor boy. And now to see him in a prison! The quaint, upright, old-fashioned figure bends under its load of affectionate distress.

Mrs. Bagnet, with the instinctive skill of a good warm heart, leaves the old housekeeper to her emotions for a little while, and presently chirps up in her cheery manner.

"So I says to George when I goes to call him in to tea, 'What ails you this afternoon, George?' 'Why, Mrs. Bagnet,' says George, 'I am melancholy and penitent this afternoon. If I ever get to heaven it won't be for being a good son to a widowed mother; I say no more.' Now, ma'am, I draw it out of George how he comes to have such things on his mind. Then George tells me

that he has seen by chance, at the lawyer's office, a fine old lady that has brought his mother plain before him. So I says to George, who is this old lady? And George tells me it's Mrs. Rouncewell, housekeeper for half a century to the Dedlock family down at Chesney Wold in Lincolnshire. George is a Lincolnshire man, and I says to my old Lignum that night, 'Lignum, that's his mother for five and forty pound!'"

"Bless you, and thank you," says Mrs. Rouncewell.

"No thanks to me, I am sure!" cries Mrs. Bagnet. "Mind, ma'am, what you had best do is to make George have every sort of help to clear himself of a charge of which he is innocent. It won't do to have truth and justice on his side; he must have lawyers," exclaims the old girl, apparently persuaded that the latter have dissolved partnership with truth and justice for ever.

"He shall have all the help that can be got for him, my dear," says Mrs. Rouncewell. "I will thankfully spend all I have to get it. Sir Leicester will do his best, the whole family will do their best. I – I know something, my dear; and will make my own appeal, as his mother."

The extreme disquietude of the old housekeeper in saying this, her broken words, and her wringing of her hands make a powerful impression on Mrs. Bagnet, but she assumes they are through sorrow for her son's condition. And yet Mrs. Bagnet wonders why Mrs. Rouncewell should murmur so distractedly, "My Lady, my Lady!" over and over again.

The frosty night wears away, and the dawn breaks, and the post-chaise comes rolling on through the early mist. The travellers reach London and alight. When they set out for the prison, the old lady looks staid and calm again, although her heart beats fast.

Approaching the cell, they find a warder coming out. He allows them to enter and shuts the door.

So George, who is writing at his table, supposing himself to be alone, does not raise his eyes. The old housekeeper looks at him. Only her fluttering hands give utterance to her emotions. But they are very eloquent. Mrs. Bagnet understands them. They speak of gratitude, of joy, of grief, of hope; of a better son loved less, and this son loved so fondly and so proudly; and Mrs. Bagnet's eyes brim up with tears.

"George Rouncewell! Oh, my dear child, turn and look at me!"

The trooper starts up, clasps his mother round the neck, and falls down on his knees before her. He puts his hands together as a child does when it says its prayers, and raising them towards her breast, bows down his head, and cries.

"My George, my dearest son! Always my favourite, where have you been these cruel years? Grown such a fine strong man, too, as I knew you must be, if it pleased God you were alive!"

They can say nothing for a time. Mrs. Bagnet wipes her eyes with her serviceable grey cloak, and quite enjoys herself like the best of old girls she is.

"Mother," says the trooper when they are more composed, "forgive me."

Forgive him! She does it with all her heart and soul. She has always done it. He has always been her beloved son George.

“Mother, I have been a trouble to you, and I have my reward. When I left home I didn’t care much, mother – I enlisted making believe that I cared for nobody, no not I, and that nobody cared for me.”

The trooper has dried his eyes, but speaks with an occasional half-stifled sob.

“So I wrote a line home, mother, as you know, to say I had enlisted under another name, and I went abroad. I always thought I would write home next year, when I might be better off; and when that year was done, the next year. So on, from year to year, till I began to get older, and to ask myself why I should ever write.”

“Not to ease my mind, George? Not a word to your loving mother, who was growing older too?”

This almost overturns the trooper afresh. He clears his throat.

“Heaven forgive me, mother, but I thought there would be small consolation then in hearing anything about me. I read in the papers now and then that my brother was becoming prosperous and famous. There was I, a roving dragoon, all my advantages thrown away, all my little learning unlearnt. What business had I to make myself known? What good could come of it? The worst was past with you, mother. I knew by that time how you had mourned for me, and wept for me, and prayed for me; and the pain was over, or was softened, and I was better in your mind as it was.”

The old lady sorrowfully shakes her head.

“I don’t say that it was so, mother, but that I made it out to be so. How could you respect an idle dragooning chap who was a discredit to himself? How could I look my brother’s children in the face and pretend to set them an example?”

Mrs. Rouncewell glances at the old girl with knowing pride. The old girl relieves her feelings by giving the trooper a great poke between the shoulders with her umbrella.

“This was the way I brought myself to think, mother, that I had best lie upon that bed I had made, and die upon it. And I should have done it but for my old comrade’s wife here. But I thank her. Thank you, Mrs. Bagnet, with all my heart.”

To which Mrs. Bagnet responds with two pokes.

And now the old lady tells her son George, her own dear recovered boy, her joy and pride, the light of her eyes, that he must yield up his case to the greatest lawyers that can be got, that he must not be self-willed, but must promise to think only of his poor old mother’s anxiety and suffering until he is released, or he will break her heart.

“Mother,” returns the trooper, stopping her with a kiss; “tell me what I shall do, and I’ll do it. Mrs. Bagnet, you’ll take care of my mother, I know?”

A very hard poke from the old girl’s umbrella.

“If you’ll acquaint her with Mr. Jarndyce and Miss Summerson, they will give her the best advice and assistance.”

“And, George,” says the old lady, “we must send for your brother. He is a sensible sound man, as they tell me, out in the world beyond Chesney Wold, my dear, though I don’t know much of it myself.”

“Mother,” returns the trooper, “grant me one great favour. Don’t let my brother know of me. I can’t bear it; he has proved himself so different from me and has done so much to raise himself while I’ve been soldiering that I can’t see him here, under this charge. Keep my secret from him, mother.”

“But not always, dear George?”

“Why, mother, perhaps not for always, but for now, I entreat you. If it’s ever broke to him that his rip of a brother has turned up, I don’t know how he would react,” says the trooper, shaking his head very doubtfully.

His mother yields to what he asks, and he thanks her kindly.

“In all other respects, my dear mother, I’ll be as obedient as you can wish. I am ready even now for the lawyers. I have been drawing up,” he glances at his writing on the table, “an exact account of what I knew of the deceased and how I came to be involved in this unfortunate affair. It’s plain and regular; not a word in it but the facts. I intended to read it when I was called upon to speak in my defence.”

Time passing, Mrs. Bagnet proposes a departure. Again and again the old lady hangs upon her son’s neck, and again and again the trooper holds her to his broad chest.

“I am going to the town house, my dear, the family house,” Mrs. Rouncewell says.

“Will you see my mother safe there, Mrs. Bagnet? Take my gratitude along with you, and I wish it was ten thousand pound in gold, my dear!” So saying, the trooper puts his lips to the old girl’s tanned forehead, and the door shuts upon him in his cell.

They take a coach to the Dedlock mansion; where, jumping out cheerfully and handing Mrs. Rouncewell up the steps, the old girl shakes hands and trudges off to the bosom of her own family.

My Lady is in the room in which she held her last conference with the murdered man, and is looking at the spot where he stood upon the hearth, when a tap comes at the door. It is Mrs. Rouncewell. What has brought Mrs. Rouncewell to town so unexpectedly?

“Trouble, my Lady. Sad trouble. Oh, my Lady, may I beg a word with you?”

What makes this tranquil old woman tremble so? Why does she falter in this manner and look at Lady Dedlock with such strange mistrust?

“What is the matter? Sit down and take your breath.”

“Oh, my Lady, my Lady. I have found my son – my youngest, who went away for a soldier so long ago. And he is in prison.”

“What for?”

“Charged with a murder, my Lady, of which he is as innocent as I am. Accused of the murder of Mr. Tulkinghorn.”

What does she mean by this look and this imploring gesture? Why does she come so close? What is the letter that she holds?

“Lady Dedlock, my dear Lady, my kind Lady! You must have a heart to feel for me. I was in this family before you were born. I am devoted to it. But think of my dear son wrongfully accused.”

“I do not accuse him.”

“No, my Lady, no. But others do, and he is in prison and in danger. Oh, Lady Dedlock, if you can say but a word to help to clear him, say it!”

What delusion can this be? What power does she suppose her Lady has? Her Lady’s handsome eyes regard her with astonishment, almost with fear.

“My Lady, when I came away last night from Chesney Wold, the step upon the Ghost’s Walk was so constant that I never heard the like in all these years. Night after night, as it has fallen dark, the sound has echoed through your rooms, but last night it was awfulest. And as it fell dark last night, my Lady, I got this letter.”

“What letter?”

“Hush! Hush!” The housekeeper looks round and answers in a frightened whisper, “My Lady, I have not breathed a word of it, I don’t believe what’s written in it, I am certain that it is not true. But my son is in danger, and you must have a heart to pity me. If you know anything that is not known to others, if you have any clue at all, and any reason for keeping it in your own breast, oh, my dear Lady, think of me, and let it be known! Pray, oh, pray, think of your faithful servant, and help to clear my son! My Lady, I pray you not to be scornful of us if you can do us any justice at this fearful time!”

Lady Dedlock takes the letter from her hand.

“Am I to read this?”

“When I am gone, my Lady, if you please.”

“I know of nothing I keep back that can affect your son. I have never accused him.”

The old housekeeper leaves her with the letter in her hand. In truth she is not a hard lady naturally. But she is long accustomed to suppress emotion, long schooled to shut up the natural feelings of the heart like flies in amber.

She opens the letter. Spread out upon the paper is a printed account of the discovery of the body as it lay face downward on the floor; and underneath is written her own name, with the word “murderess” attached.

It falls out of her hand. How long it may have lain upon the ground she knows not, but it lies where it fell when a servant stands before her announcing the young man of the name of Guppy.

“Let him come in!”

He comes in. Holding the letter, which she has picked up, she tries to collect her thoughts. In Mr. Guppy’s eyes she is the same proud, chilling Lady Dedlock.

“Your ladyship may not be at first disposed to excuse this visit, but I hope when I mention my motives your ladyship will not find fault with me,” says Mr. Guppy.

“Do so.”

“Thank your ladyship. I ought to explain,” Mr. Guppy sits on the edge of a chair, “that Miss Summerson, whose image was at one period of my life imprinted on my heart until erased by circumstances over which I had no control, told me recently that she particularly wished me to take no steps in any manner relating to her. And Miss Summerson’s wishes being to me a law, I consequently never expected to have the honour of waiting on your ladyship again.”

And yet he is here now, Lady Dedlock moodily reminds him.

“And yet I am here now,” Mr. Guppy admits. “But it is no personal affair of mine that brings me here. If it was not for my promise to Miss Summerson, I shouldn’t have darkened these doors again.”

Mr. Guppy considers this a favourable moment for sticking up his hair with both hands.

“Your ladyship may remember that the last time I was here I run against a party very eminent in our profession whose loss we all deplore. That party certainly did from that time cut in against me in a way that I will call sharp practice. Indeed, it has been so hard to have any idea what that party was up to that I was gravelled. However, with the exertion of my humble abilities, and with the help of a friend by the name of Mr. Tony Weevle, I have now reasons for an apprehension as to which I come to put your ladyship upon your guard. First, may I ask your ladyship whether you have had any strange visitors this morning?”

“No!”

“Then I assure your ladyship that such visitors have been here, because I saw them at the door, and took time to avoid them.”

“I do not understand you. What do you mean?”

“Your ladyship, I strongly suspect that those letters I was to have brought to your ladyship were not destroyed when I supposed they were. That if there was anything to be blown open, it is blown upon. That the visitors I mentioned have been here this morning to make money of it.”

Mr. Guppy rises.

“Your ladyship, I have followed Miss Summerson’s wishes in letting things alone and in undoing what I had begun to do. I now take my farewell of your ladyship, and assure you that there’s no danger of your ever being waited on by me again.”

When he has been gone a little while, she rings her bell.

“Where is Sir Leicester?”

The footman reports that he is shut up in the library alone.

“Has he had any visitors this morning?”

Several, on business.

So! All is broken down. Her husband knows his wrongs, her shame will be published – may be spreading now – and in addition to the thunderbolt so long foreseen by her, she is denounced by an invisible accuser as the murderess of her enemy.

Mr. Tulkinghorn was her enemy, and she has often wished him dead. This dreadful accusation comes upon her like a new torment at his lifeless

hand. And when she recalls how she was secretly at his door that night, she shudders as if the hangman's hands were at her neck.

She hurries to and fro, flings herself down upon the couch, and rocks and moans. The horror that is upon her is unutterable. If she really were the murderess, it could hardly be more intense. Although she felt a wicked relief in the death of her enemy, what was it but the key-stone of a gloomy arch removed, and now the arch begins to fall in a thousand fragments!

Thus, a terrible impression steals upon her that there is no escape except in death. Her shame, her dread, remorse, and misery, overwhelm her; and even her strength of self-reliance is overturned and whirled away like a leaf before a mighty wind.

She hurriedly addresses this note to her husband, seals it, and leaves it on her table:

“If I am sought for, or accused of, his murder, believe that I am wholly innocent. Believe no other good of me, for I am innocent of nothing else that you have heard. He prepared me, on that fatal night, for his disclosure of my guilt to you. After he had left me, I went out to follow him and make one last petition that he would not protract the dreadful suspense on which I have been racked by him – you do not know how long – but would mercifully strike next morning.

“I found his house dark and silent. I rang twice at his door, but there was no reply, and I came home.

“I have no home left. I will encumber you no more. May you, in your just resentment, be able to forget the unworthy woman on whom you have wasted a most generous devotion – who feels deep shame – and who writes this last adieu.”

She dresses quickly, leaves all her jewels and her money, listens, goes downstairs at a moment when the hall is empty, opens and shuts the great door, and flutters away in the shrill frosty wind.

Chapter 56

Pursuit

Impassive, as behoves its high breeding, the Dedlock town house stares at the other houses in the street of dismal grandeur and gives no outward sign of anything wrong within. Hours pass before its exalted dullness is disturbed. But Volumnia the fair, becoming bored, ventures at length to the library for change of scene. Her gentle tapping at the door producing no response, she opens it and peeps in; seeing no one there, enters.

She takes the opportunity of hovering over her kinsman's letters and papers like a bird, taking a short peck at this document and a blink at that document with her head on one side, hopping about from table to table in an inquisitive and restless manner. In the course of these researches she stumbles over something, and turning, sees her kinsman lying on the ground like a felled tree.

Volumnia's pet little scream acquires a considerable increase of reality from this surprise, and the house is quickly in commotion. Servants tear up and down stairs, bells are violently rung, doctors are sent for, and Lady Dedlock is sought, but not found. Her letter to Sir Leicester is discovered on her table, but it is doubtful yet whether he has not received another missive summoning him to another world,

They lay him down upon his bed, fan him, put ice to his head, and try every means of restoration. The day has gone, and it is night before his stertorous breathing lulls or his fixed eyes show any consciousness of the candle that is passed before them. But by and by he nods or moves his eyes or even his hand in token that he hears and comprehends.

He fell down, this morning, a handsome stately gentleman. He lies upon his bed, an aged man with sunken cheeks, the decrepit shadow of himself. His voice was rich and mellow and self-important. But now he can only whisper mere jumble and jargon.

His faithful housekeeper stands at his bedside. It is the first act he notices, and he clearly derives pleasure from it. After vainly trying to make himself understood in speech, he makes signs for a pencil. At last his old housekeeper makes out what he wants and brings in a slate.

He slowly scrawls upon it in a strange hand, "Chesney Wold?"

No, she tells him; he is in London. He was taken ill in the library this morning.

"It is not an illness of any serious consequence, Sir Leicester. You will be much better tomorrow." This, with the tears coursing down her fair old face.

After looking all round the bed where the doctors stand, he writes, "My Lady."

“My Lady went out, Sir Leicester, before you were taken ill, and don’t know of your illness yet.”

He points again, in great agitation, at the two words. They try to quiet him, but he points again with increased agitation. On their looking at one another, not knowing what to say, he takes the slate once more and writes “My Lady. For God’s sake, where?” And makes an imploring moan.

It is thought better that his old housekeeper should give him Lady Dedlock’s letter. She opens it for him and holds it out. Having read it twice by a great effort, he turns it down so that it shall not be seen and lies moaning. He passes into a kind of swoon, and it is an hour before he opens his eyes.

He signs for the slate again, but the word he wants to write he cannot remember. His anxiety, his eagerness, and affliction are pitiable to behold. It seems as if he must go mad in his need for haste and his inability to express what or who he wants. He has written the letter B, and there stopped. Of a sudden, he puts Mr. before it. The old housekeeper suggests Bucket. Thank heaven! That’s his meaning.

Mr. Bucket is downstairs. Shall he come up?

There is no possibility of misconstruing Sir Leicester’s burning wish to see him, or the desire he signifies to have the room cleared of everyone but the housekeeper. It is speedily done, and Mr. Bucket appears.

“Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, I’m sorry to see you like this.”

Sir Leicester puts the letter in his hands and looks intently in his face while he reads it. A new intelligence comes into Mr. Bucket’s eye as he reads on; he indicates that he understands it.

Sir Leicester writes upon the slate. “Full forgiveness. Find—” Mr. Bucket stops his hand.

“I’ll find her. But my search must begin at once. Not a minute must be lost.”

With the quickness of thought, he follows Sir Leicester Dedlock’s look towards a little box upon a table.

“Shall I bring it here, Sir Leicester? Certainly. Open it with one of these here keys? Take the notes out? So I will. Count ’em? That’s one sixty. Take ’em for expenses? That I’ll do. Don’t spare money? No, I won’t.”

The speed of Mr. Bucket’s interpretation is little short of miraculous. Mrs. Rouncewell, who holds the light, is giddy as he starts up for his journey.

“You’re George’s mother, old lady, I believe?” says Mr. Bucket aside, with his hat already on and buttoning his coat.

“Yes, sir, I am his distressed mother.”

“So I thought. Well, then, I’ll tell you something. Your son’s all right. Now, don’t you begin a-crying, because what you’ve got to do is to take care of Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, and you won’t do that by crying. As to your son, he sends his loving duty. He’s discharged honourable, with no more stain on his character than there is on yours. He’s a fine-made man, and you’re a fine-made old lady, a true mother and son, the pair of you. Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, what you’ve trusted to me I’ll go through with. I

shan't rest till I have found what I go in search of. Say everything as is kind and forgiving on your part? Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, I will."

With this, Mr. Bucket goes quietly out.

He first takes himself to Lady Dedlock's rooms and looks all over them for anything that may help him. The rooms are in darkness now; Mr. Bucket locks himself in, and holds a light above his head.

"A spicy boudoir, this," says Mr. Bucket. "Must have cost a sight of money!"

He has opened a dainty little chest in an inner drawer. His great hand, turning over some gloves, comes upon a white handkerchief.

"Hum! Let's have a look at *you*," says Mr. Bucket, putting down the light. "What should *you* be kept by yourself for? What's *your* motive? Are you her ladyship's property, or somebody else's? You've got a mark upon you somewheres or another, I suppose?"

He finds it as he speaks: "Esther Summerson."

"Oh!" says Mr. Bucket, pausing. "Come, I'll take *you*."

He completes his observations carefully, leaves everything else precisely as he found it, and glides away into the street. He sets off to the nearest coach-stand, picks out a horse, and directs to be driven to the shooting gallery. Mr. Bucket does not claim to be a scientific judge of horses, but he remarks that when he sees a horse as can go, he knows him.

His knowledge is not at fault tonight. Clattering over the stones at a dangerous pace, yet thoughtfully watching with keen eyes every slinking creature whom he passes in the midnight streets, where the snow lies thin, he dashes to his destination at such a speed that when he stops the horse half smothers him in a cloud of steam.

He runs up the entry and finds the trooper smoking his pipe.

"I haven't a word to spare, George. Now, honour! All to save a woman. Miss Summerson that was here when Gridley died – where does she live?"

The trooper gives him the address, near Oxford Street.

"You won't repent it, George. Good night!"

He is off again, and gallops away in another cloud of steam.

Mr. Jarndyce, the only person up in the house, is just going to bed when he hears the rapid ringing at the bell, and comes down to the door in his dressing-gown.

"Don't be alarmed, sir." In a moment his visitor is in the hall, has shut the door, and stands with his hand upon the lock. "I've had the pleasure of seeing you before. Inspector Bucket. Look at this handkerchief, sir, Miss Esther Summerson's. Found it myself put away in a drawer of Lady Dedlock's, quarter of an hour ago. Not a moment to lose. Matter of life or death. You know Lady Dedlock?"

"Yes."

"There has been a discovery there today. Family affairs have come out. Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, has had a fit – apoplexy or paralysis – and precious time has been lost. Lady Dedlock disappeared this afternoon and left a letter for him that looks bad. Run your eye over it. Here it is!"

Mr. Jarndyce, having read it, asks him what he thinks.

“I don’t know. It looks like suicide. Anyways, there’s more danger of that, every minute. Now, Mr. Jarndyce, I am employed by Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, to follow her and find her, to save her and take her his forgiveness. I have money, but I want something else. I want Miss Summerson.”

Mr. Jarndyce in a troubled voice repeats, “Miss Summerson?”

“Now, Mr. Jarndyce” – Mr. Bucket has read his face with the greatest attention – “I speak to you as a humane gentleman. If ever delay was dangerous, it’s dangerous now. Eight or ten hours have been lost since Lady Dedlock disappeared. I am charged to find her. I am Inspector Bucket. Besides all the rest that’s heavy on her, she has upon her, as she believes, suspicion of murder. If I follow her alone, she may be driven to desperation. But if I follow her in company with a young lady that she has a tenderness for – I ask no question, and I say no more than that – she will give me credit for being friendly. Time flies; it’s getting on for one o’clock.”

Mr. Jarndyce begs him to remain there while he speaks to Miss Summerson. Mr. Bucket says he will, but does no such thing, following upstairs instead and keeping his man in sight. He lurks in the gloom of the staircase while they confer. Mr. Jarndyce comes down and tells him that Miss Summerson will join him directly and will accompany him where he pleases. Mr. Bucket, satisfied, expresses high approval and awaits her coming at the door.

There he mounts a high tower in his mind and looks out far and wide. Many solitary figures he perceives creeping through the streets; many solitary figures out on heaths, and lying under haystacks. But the figure that he seeks is not among them. Other solitaires he imagines, looking over bridges; and in shadowed places down by the river; and a dark, dark, shapeless object drifting with the tide, more solitary than all, clings with a drowning hold on his attention.

Where is she? Living or dead, where is she? On the waste where the brick-kilns are burning with a pale blue flare, where the clay and water are hard frozen and the mill in which the gaunt blind horse goes round all day looks like an instrument of torture – traversing this deserted, blighted spot there is a lonely figure with the sad world to itself, pelted by the snow and driven by the wind. It is the figure of a woman; but it is miserably dressed, and no such clothes ever came through the hall of the great Dedlock mansion.

Chapter 57

Esther's Narrative

I was asleep when my guardian knocked at the door of my room and begged me to get up directly. He told me that there had been a discovery at Sir Leicester Dedlock's. That my mother had fled, that a person was now at our door who was empowered to convey to her assurances of protection and forgiveness if he could possibly find her; and that I was asked to accompany him in the hope that my entreaties might succeed with her if his failed. Something to this general purpose I made out, but I was thrown into such a tumult of alarm and hurry and distress that I did not seem, to myself, fully to recover my right mind until hours had passed.

But I dressed and wrapped up without waking Charley and went down to Mr. Bucket. My guardian explained how it was that he had thought of me; and Mr. Bucket, in a low voice, read to me a letter that my mother had left upon her table. Within ten minutes of waking I was sitting beside him, rolling swiftly through the streets.

His manner was very keen, and yet considerate when he asked me some questions. These were whether I had had much communication with my mother (to whom he only referred as Lady Dedlock), when and where I had spoken with her last, and how she had become possessed of my handkerchief. Then he asked me to consider whether I knew of anyone, no matter where, in whom she might be at all likely to confide. I could think of no one but my guardian. But by and by Mr. Boythorn came into my mind, and I mentioned his name.

My companion considered for a few moments before telling me that he had decided how to proceed. He was quite willing to tell me his plan, but I did not feel clear enough to understand it.

We had not driven very far from our lodgings when we stopped in a side-street at a police station. Mr. Bucket took me in and sat me in an armchair by a bright fire. It was now past one, as I saw by the clock. Two police officers were quietly writing at a desk; and the place seemed very quiet altogether, except for some beating and calling out at distant doors, to which nobody paid any attention.

A third man in uniform, whom Mr. Bucket spoke with, went out; and then one of the two others wrote out a description of my mother from Mr. Bucket's subdued dictation. Mr. Bucket read it to me, and it was very accurate indeed.

The second officer called in another man in uniform, who took it away. All this was done without the waste of a moment; yet nobody was at all hurried. The two officers resumed their former quiet work of writing with neatness and care. Mr. Bucket thoughtfully came and warmed himself at the fire.

“Are you well wrapped up, Miss Summerson?” he asked me. “It’s a desperate sharp night for a young lady to be out in.”

I told him I cared for no weather and was warmly clothed.

“It may be a long job,” he observed; “but if it ends well, never mind, miss.”

“I pray to heaven it may end well!” said I.

He nodded comfortingly. “Don’t you fret yourself. You keep yourself cool and equal for anything that may happen.”

He was really very kind and gentle, and as he stood before the fire I felt a confidence in his wisdom which reassured me. It was not yet a quarter to two when I heard wheels outside.

“Now, Miss Summerson,” said he, “we are off, if you please!”

We found at the door a phaeton with a postilion and post horses. Mr. Bucket handed me in and took his own seat on the box. He took a lantern, gave a few directions to the driver, and we rattled away.

I was far from sure that I was not in a dream. We rattled through such a labyrinth of streets that I soon lost all idea of where we were, except that we had crossed and re-crossed the river, and seemed to be in a waterside neighbourhood of narrow streets chequered by docks and bridges and high piles of warehouses.

At length we stopped near the river; and I saw my companion conferring with several men who looked like a mixture of police and sailors. Against the mouldering wall by which they stood, there was a bill, on which I could discern the words, “Found Drowned”.

What I suffered in that dreadful spot I never can forget. And still it was like the horror of a dream. A man dark and muddy, in long sodden boots, was called out of a boat and whispered with Mr. Bucket, who went away with him down some slippery steps – as if to look at something secret that he had to show. They came back, wiping their hands upon their coats, after turning over something wet; but thank God it was not what I feared!

After some further conference, Mr. Bucket (whom everybody seemed to know and defer to) went through a door with the others and left me in the carriage, while the driver walked up and down by his horses to warm himself. The tide was coming in; I could hear it break at the end of the alley with a little rush towards me, and the thought shuddered through me that it would cast my mother at the horses’ feet.

Mr. Bucket came out again, and once more took his seat. “Don’t you be alarmed, Miss Summerson, on account of our coming down here,” he said. “I only want to have everything in train. Get on, my lad!”

We appeared to retrace the way we had come. We called at another police station for a minute and crossed the river again. My companion, wrapped up on the box, never relaxed in his vigilance. When we crossed the bridge he stood up to look over the parapet; he alighted and went back after a shadowy female figure that flitted past us; and he gazed into the profound black pit of water with a face that made my heart die within me.

The river had a fearful look, so overcast and secret, creeping away so fast between the low flat lines of shore – so heavy with indistinct and awful shapes, so death-like and mysterious. I have seen it many times since then, but never free from the impressions of that journey. In my memory the lights upon the bridge are always burning dim, the cutting wind is eddying, the monotonous wheels are whirling on, and the light of the carriage-lamps reflected back looks palely in upon me like a face rising out of the dreaded water.

Clattering through the empty streets, at length we began to leave the houses behind. After a while I recognized the familiar way to Saint Albans. At Barnet fresh horses were ready for us, and we changed and went on. It was very cold indeed, and the open country was white with snow, though none was falling then.

“An old acquaintance of yours, this road, Miss Summerson,” said Mr. Bucket cheerfully.

“Yes. Have you gathered any news?”

“None that can be quite depended on,” he answered, “but it’s early times as yet.”

He had gone into every public-house where there was a light, and had talked to the turnpike-keepers. I had heard him chinking money, and making himself agreeable and merry everywhere; but whenever he took his seat upon the box again, his face resumed its watchful steady look.

With all these stoppages, it was between five and six o’clock, and we were still a few miles short of Saint Albans, when he came out of one of these public-houses and handed me in a cup of tea.

“Drink it, Miss Summerson, it’ll do you good. You’re beginning to get more yourself now, ain’t you?”

I thanked him and said I hoped so.

“You was what you may call stunned at first,” he returned; “and no wonder! Don’t speak loud, my dear. It’s all right. She’s on ahead.”

I don’t know what joyful exclamation I made or was going to make, but he put up his finger and I stopped myself.

“Passed through here on foot this evening about eight or nine. I heard of her first at the archway toll, over at Highgate. Traced her all along, on and off. Picked her up at one place, and dropped her at another; but she’s before us now, safe. Now, off at a gallop!”

We were soon in Saint Albans and alighted a little before day, when I was just beginning to arrange and comprehend the events of the night. Leaving the carriage at the posting-house and ordering fresh horses to be ready, my companion gave me his arm, and we went towards Bleak House.

“As this is your regular home, Miss Summerson,” he observed, “I should like to know whether you’ve been asked for by any stranger answering the description. I don’t much expect it, but it might be.”

As we ascended the hill, he looked about him with a sharp eye – the day was now breaking – and reminded me that I had come down it one night with my little servant and poor Jo.

“When you passed a man upon the road, just yonder, that was me,” said Mr. Bucket.

Seeing my surprise, he went on, “I drove down in a gig that afternoon to look for that boy. Making inquiry about him in the town, I soon heard what company he was in and was coming among the brick-fields to look for him, when I observed you bringing him home here.”

“Had he committed any crime?” I asked.

“None was charged against him,” said Mr. Bucket. “What I wanted him for was in connexion with keeping this matter of Lady Dedlock quiet. He had been making his tongue more free than welcome; and it wouldn’t do to have him playing those games. So having warned him out of London, I made an afternoon of it to warn him to keep out of it.”

“Poor creature!” said I.

“Poor enough,” assented Mr. Bucket, “and trouble enough. I was disturbed when I found him taken up by your establishment, I do assure you, for there was no end to his tongue. He might as well have been born with a yard and a half of it.”

Although I remember this conversation now, my head was in confusion at the time. I understood, however, that he entered into these details to divert me. With the same kind intention, he spoke to me of indifferent things while we turned in at the garden-gate.

“Ah!” said Mr. Bucket. “Here we are, and a nice retired place it is. They’re early with the kitchen fire, and that denotes good servants. But what you’ve always got to be careful of with servants is who comes to see ’em; you never know what they’re up to if you don’t know that.”

We were now in front of the house; he looked attentively at the gravel for footprints before he raised his eyes to the windows.

“Do you generally put that elderly young gentleman in the same room when he’s on a visit here, Miss Summerson?” he inquired.

“You know Mr. Skimpole!” said I.

“What do you call him again?” returned Mr. Bucket, bending down his ear. “Skimpole, is it? I’ve often wondered what his name might be. Skimpole. Not John, I should say?”

“Harold.”

“Harold. Yes. He’s a queer bird is Harold,” said Mr. Bucket, eyeing me with great expression.

“He is a singular character,” said I.

“No idea of money,” observed Mr. Bucket. “He takes it, though! It was him as pointed out to me where the boy was. I just pitched up a morsel of gravel at that window where I saw a shadow. As soon as Harold opens it and I see him, thinks I, you’re the man for me. So I smoothed him down a bit about its being regrettable that charitable young ladies should harbour vagrants; and then I said I should pay a five pound note if I could take away the boy without causing any noise or trouble. Then says he, lifting up his eyebrows in the gayest way, ‘I’m a mere child in such matters, my friend, and have no idea of money.’ Being now quite sure he was the man for me, I wrapped the note

round a little stone and threw it up to him. Well! He laughs and beams, and looks as innocent as you like, and says, 'But I don't know the value of these things. What am I to do with this?' 'Spend it, sir,' says I. He told me where to find the boy."

I regarded this as very treacherous of Mr. Skimpole.

"Miss Summerson, I'll give you a piece of advice," returned Mr. Bucket. "Whenever a person says to you that they are innocent concerning money, look well after your own money, for they are dead certain to collar it if they can. Whenever a person proclaims to you 'In worldly matters I'm a child,' consider that that person is only a-crying off from being held accountable and that you have got that person's number, and it's Number One. With which caution, my dear, I take the liberty of pulling this here bell, and so go back to our business."

The whole household were amazed to see me at that time in the morning; and their surprise was not diminished by my inquiries. No one, however, had been there.

"Then, Miss Summerson," said my companion, "we can't be too soon at the cottage where those brickmakers are to be found. Most inquiries there I leave to you, if you'll be so good as to make 'em. The naturalest way is the best way, and your own way."

We set off again immediately. On arriving at the cottage, we found it shut up and apparently deserted, but one of the neighbours who knew me came out and informed me that the two women and their husbands now lived together in another house near the ground where the kilns were and where the long rows of bricks were drying. We found this place a few hundred yards away; and as the door stood ajar, I pushed it open.

There were only three of them sitting at breakfast, the child lying asleep on a bed in the corner. It was Jenny, the mother of the dead child, who was absent. The other woman rose on seeing me; and the men, though they were sulky and silent, gave me morose nods of recognition. I was surprised to see that the woman evidently knew Mr. Bucket.

I sat down on a stool near the fire, and Mr. Bucket took a corner of the bedstead. Now that I had to speak, I became conscious of feeling hurried and giddy. It was very difficult to begin, and I could not help bursting into tears.

"Liz," said I, "I have come a long way in the night and through the snow to inquire after a lady—"

"Who has been here, you know," Mr. Bucket struck in. "The lady that was here last night, you know."

"And who told you as there was anybody here?" inquired Jenny's husband.

"A person called Jackson, with a blue welveteen waistcoat with a double row of mother of pearl buttons," Mr. Bucket answered.

"He had better mind his own business, whoever he is," growled the man.

The woman stood faltering, looking at me. I thought she would have spoken to me privately if she had dared. She was still in this attitude of uncertainty when her husband, who was eating with a lump of bread in one

hand and his clasp-knife in the other, struck the knife violently on the table and told her with an oath to mind her own business and sit down.

“I should like to have seen Jenny very much,” said I, “for I am sure she would have told me all she could about this lady, whom I am very anxious indeed to overtake. Will Jenny be here soon? Where is she?”

The woman had a great desire to answer, but the man, with an oath, openly kicked at her foot with his heavy boot. After a dogged silence Jenny’s husband turned his shaggy head towards me.

“I’m not partial to gentlefolks coming into my place, miss. I let their places be, and it’s curious they can’t let my place be. However, I’m agreeable to make you a civil answer. Will Jenny be here soon? No she won’t. Where is she? She’s gone up to Lunnun.”

“Did she go last night?” I asked.

“She went last night,” he answered with a sulky jerk of his head.

“But was she here when the lady came? And what did the lady say to her? And where is the lady gone? I beg and pray you to be so kind as to tell me,” said I, “for I am in great distress to know.”

“If my master would let me speak, and not say a word of harm—” the woman timidly began.

“Your master,” said her husband with slow emphasis, “will break your neck if you meddle with wot don’t concern you.”

After another silence, Jenny’s husband said,

“Yes, Jenny was here when the lady come. The lady said, ‘You remember me as come one time to talk to you about the young lady as had been a-wisiting of you? You remember I gave you somethink handsome for a handkercher wot she had left?’ Ah, she remembered. Well, then, wos that young lady up at the house now? No, she warn’t. Well, then, could the lady rest herself for a hour or so. Yes she could, and so she did. Then she went – it might be at twenty minutes past eleven, and it might be at twenty minutes past twelve; we ain’t got no watches here to know the time by. Where did she go? I don’t know. She went one way, and Jenny went another; one went right to Lunnun, and t’other went right from it. That’s all.”

The other man repeated, “That’s all.”

“Was the lady crying?” I inquired.

“Not as I see.”

The woman sat with her eyes upon the ground. Her husband had kept his hammer-like hand upon the table as if ready to execute his threat if she disobeyed him.

“I hope you will not object to my asking your wife,” said I, “how the lady looked.”

“Come, then!” he gruffly cried to her. “Cut it short and tell her.”

“Very bad,” replied the woman. “Pale and exhausted.”

“Did she speak much?”

“Not much, but her voice was hoarse.”

She answered, looking all the while at her husband for permission.

“Was she faint?” said I. “Did she eat or drink here?”

“Go on!” said the husband. “Tell her.”

“She had a little water, miss, and Jenny fetched her some bread and tea. But she hardly touched it.”

“And when she went from here,” I was proceeding, when Jenny’s husband impatiently took me up.

“When she went from here, she went right away north by the high road. Ask on the road if you doubt me. Now, there’s the end. That’s all.”

I glanced at my companion, and finding that he had already risen to depart, thanked them, and took my leave. The woman looked full at Mr. Bucket as he went out, and he looked full at her.

“Now, Miss Summerson,” he said to me as we walked quickly away. “They’ve got her ladyship’s watch.”

“You saw it?” I exclaimed.

“As good as saw it,” he returned. “Else why should he talk about his ‘twenty minutes past’ and about his having no watch? Twenty minutes! He don’t usually cut his time so fine as that. I think her ladyship gave it him. Now, why?”

He repeated this question to himself several times as we hurried on.

“If time could be spared,” said Mr. Bucket, “which it can’t, I might get it out of that woman; but they are keeping a close eye upon her, and a poor creetur like her, though beaten and kicked and bruised from head to foot, will stand by the husband that ill uses her through thick and thin. There’s something kept back. It’s a pity we didn’t see the other woman.”

I regretted it exceedingly.

“It’s possible, Miss Summerson,” said Mr. Bucket, pondering on it, “that her ladyship sent her to London with some word for you, and it’s possible that her husband got the watch to let her go. It’s not so plain as to please me, but it’s possible. Now, I don’t take kindly to laying out the money of Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, on these roughs, and I don’t see the usefulness of it at present. No! So far our road, Miss Summerson, is straight ahead!”

We called home once more so that I might send a hasty note to my guardian, and then we hurried back to the carriage, and were soon on the road again.

It had set in snowing at daybreak, and it now snowed hard. We could see only a very little way in any direction. Although it was extremely cold, the snow was but partially frozen, and it churned – with a sound as if it were a beach of small shells – under the hoofs of the horses into mire and water. They sometimes slipped and floundered until we were obliged to stop to rest them. One horse fell three times in this first stage, and trembled so that the driver had to dismount from his saddle and lead him.

I could eat nothing and could not sleep, and I grew so nervous at these delays that I had an unreasonable desire to get out and walk. Yielding to my companion’s better sense, however, I remained where I was. All this time he was up and down at every house we came to, addressing people whom he had never beheld before as old acquaintances, running in to warm himself at every fire, talking and drinking and shaking hands at every bar and tap, friendly

with every waggoner, wheelwright, blacksmith, and toll-taker, always mounting to the box again with his watchful, steady face and his "Get on, my lad!"

At the next change of horses he came from the stable-yard, with the wet snow encrusted upon him, and spoke to me at the carriage side.

"Keep up your spirits. It's certainly true that she came here, Miss Summerson. There's not a doubt of the dress, and the dress has been seen here."

"Still on foot?" said I.

"Yes. I think the Mr. Boythorn you mentioned must be the point she's aiming at, and yet I don't like his living in her own part of the country."

"I know so little," said I. "There may be some one else nearer here, of whom I never heard."

"That's true. But whatever you do, don't you fall a-crying, my dear; and don't you worry no more than you can help. Get on, my lad!"

The sleet fell all that day unceasingly and thick mist came on early. Such roads I had never seen. I sometimes feared we had missed the way and got into the ploughed grounds or the marshes. It felt as if we had been out for a very long time, and I seemed, in a strange way, never to have been free from the anxiety under which I then laboured.

As we advanced, I began to feel misgivings that my companion lost confidence. He looked graver when he sat by himself on the box. I saw his finger uneasily going across and across his mouth during the whole of one long weary stage. I overheard him asking the drivers of coaches coming towards us what passengers they had passed. Their replies did not encourage him. He always gave me a reassuring lift of his eyelid as he got upon the box again, but he seemed perplexed now when he said, "Get on, my lad!"

At last he told me that he had lost the track of the dress so long that he began to be surprised. It had disappeared in an unaccountable manner. But I was not to be down-hearted, he told me, for it was as likely as not that the next stage might set us right again.

The next stage, however, ended with no new clue. There was a spacious inn here, a comfortable substantial building, and as we drove in under a large gateway a landlady and her pretty daughters came to the carriage-door, entreating me to alight and refresh myself while the horses were made ready. They took me upstairs to a warm room and left me there.

It was at the corner of the house, I remember, looking two ways: on one side to a stable-yard with the road beyond it; on the other side to a wood of dark pine-trees. Their branches were encumbered with snow, and it silently dropped off in wet heaps while I stood at the window. Night was setting in. As I looked among the stems of the trees, I thought of the motherly face that had just now welcomed me with her daughters and of *my* mother lying down in such a wood to die.

I was frightened when I found them all around me, but I remembered that before I fainted I tried very hard not to do it. They cushioned me up on a large sofa by the fire, and the landlady told me that I must travel no further

tonight, but must go to bed. But this put me into such a tremble lest they should detain me there that she compromised for a rest of half an hour.

A good endearing creature she was; she and her three girls, all busy about me. I was to take hot soup and broiled fowl, while Mr. Bucket dried himself and dined elsewhere; but when it was brought to me I could not eat, though I was very unwilling to disappoint them. However, I could take some toast and hot wine-and-water, which made some recompense.

At the half-hour's end the carriage came rumbling under the gateway, and they took me down, warmed, refreshed, and comforted by kindness. After I had got in and had taken a grateful leave of them all, the youngest daughter reached in, and kissed me. I have never seen her since then, but I think of her to this hour as my friend.

The fire-lit windows, looking so bright and warm from outside, were soon gone, and again we were crushing and churning the loose snow. The stage was only nine miles; and my companion was as vigilant as ever and as quickly down and up again when we came to any house or person. He had lighted his lantern, and every now and then he turned it upon me to see that I was doing well.

We came to the end of the stage, and still the lost trace was not recovered. I looked at him anxiously when we stopped to change, but I knew by his grave face that he had heard nothing. An instant afterwards, as I leaned back in my seat, he looked in, with his lantern in his hand, an excited and quite different man.

"What is it?" said I, starting. "Is she here?"

"No, no, my dear. Nobody's here. But I've got it!"

The crystallized snow was in his eyelashes and his hair. He had to shake it from his face before he spoke.

"Now, Miss Summerson," said he, "don't you be disappointed at what I'm a-going to do. You know me. I'm Inspector Bucket, and you can trust me. Four horses out there for the next stage up! Quick!"

A man came running out of the stables to know if he meant up or down.

"Up, I tell you! Up!"

"Up?" said I, astonished. "To London! Are we going back?"

"Miss Summerson," he answered, "straight back as a die. Don't be afraid. I'll follow the other, by G__!"

"The other?"

"You called her Jenny, didn't you? I'll follow *her*!"

"You will not desert the lady we are in search of; you will not abandon her on such a night and in such a state of mind!" said I, in an agony, and grasping his hand.

"You are right, my dear, I won't. But I'll follow the other. Look alive with them horses. My darling, don't you be afraid!"

I was bewildered by the sudden change. But our horses were put to with great speed.

“My dear,” said Mr. Bucket, looking in again, “don’t you fret and worry yourself. I say nothing else at present; but you know me, my dear, don’t you?”

I tried to say that he was far more capable than I of deciding what we ought to do, but was he sure that this was right? Could I not go forward by myself in search of – I grasped his hand again in my distress and whispered – of my own mother?

“My dear,” he answered, “would I put you wrong, do you think? You keep up as good a heart as you can, and rely upon me for standing by you. Off she goes. Get on, my lads!”

We were again upon the melancholy road by which we had come, tearing up the miry sleet and thawing snow like a waterwheel.

Chapter 58

A Wintry Day and Night

Still impassive, as behoves its breeding, the Dedlock town house bears its usual appearance of dismal grandeur. It is given out that my Lady has gone down into Lincolnshire, but is expected to return presently.

Rumour, however, persists in flitting and chattering about town. It knows that poor Sir Leicester has been sadly used. It hears, my dear child, all sorts of shocking things. It makes the world of five miles round quite merry. By half-past five in the afternoon, it has even elicited a new remark from the Honourable Mr. Stables, which bids fair to outshine the old one. This sparkling sally is to the effect that although he always knew she was the best-groomed woman in the stud, he had no idea she was a bolter. It is immensely well received in turf-circles.

She is discussed by her dear friends with all the genteelest slang in vogue, with the last new word, the last new manner, the last new drawl, and the perfection of polite indifference. And even people who know nothing about her think it essential to pretend that she is their topic too, and to retail her at second-hand with the last new word and the last new drawl, and all the rest of it.

So goes the wintry day outside the Dedlock mansion. How within it?

Sir Leicester, lying in his bed, can speak a little, though with difficulty and indistinctness. He is told to rest, and they have given him some opiate to lull his pain, for his gout is very hard with him. He is never asleep, though sometimes he falls into a dull waking doze. He caused his bedstead to be moved nearer to the window when he heard it was inclement weather, so he can see the driving snow and sleet. He watches it as it falls, throughout the whole wintry day.

Upon the least noise in the house, which is kept hushed, his hand is at the pencil. The old housekeeper, sitting by him, knows what he would write and whispers, "No, he has not come back yet, Sir Leicester. It was late last night when he went. He has been only a little time gone yet."

He withdraws his hand and falls to looking at the sleet and snow again until they seem to fall so thick and fast that he is obliged to close his eyes for a minute on the giddy whirl of white flakes.

The day is not yet far spent when he conceives it to be necessary that her rooms should be prepared for her. It is very cold and wet. Let there be good fires. Let them know that she is expected. He writes this on his slate, and Mrs. Rouncewell with a heavy heart obeys.

"For I dread, George," the old lady says to her son, "I dread that my Lady will never more set foot within these walls. Nor yet within the walls of Chesney Wold, my dear."

"But why, mother?"

“When I saw my Lady yesterday, George, she looked to me as if the step on the Ghost’s Walk had almost walked her down.”

“Come, come! You alarm yourself with old-story fears, mother.”

“No, I don’t, my dear. It’s going on for sixty year that I have been in this family, and I never had any fears for it before. But it’s breaking up, my dear.”

“I hope not, mother.”

“I am thankful I have lived long enough to be with Sir Leicester now, for I know I am a welcomer sight to him than anybody else in my place would be. But the step on the Ghost’s Walk will walk my Lady down, George; it has been many a day behind her, and now it will pass her and go on.”

“Are these her rooms?”

“These are my Lady’s rooms, just as she left them.”

“Why, now,” says the trooper, glancing round him and speaking in a lower voice, “I begin to understand how you come to think as you do, mother. Rooms get an awful look about them when they are fitted up for one person, who is away under a shadow, God knows where.”

He is right. My Lady’s room has a hollow and abandoned look; dark and cold as the wintry day is, it is darker and colder in these deserted chambers than in many a poor hut. Though the servants heap fires in the grates, there is a heavy cloud upon the rooms which no light will dispel.

When the preparations are complete, Mrs. Rouncewell returns upstairs. Volumnia has taken her place by Sir Leicester’s bed, though pearl necklaces and rouge pots are indifferent comforts to the invalid. Volumnia, not knowing what is the matter, has resorted to distracting smoothings of the bed-linen, elaborate tiptoe-ing around, and one exasperating whisper of, “He is asleep.” Which has caused Sir Leicester to have indignantly written on the slate, “I am not.”

Yielding, therefore, to the quaint old housekeeper, Volumnia sits at a table, sympathetically sighing. Sir Leicester watches the sleet and snow and listens for the returning steps that he expects. His valet has made him as presentable as the circumstances will allow. He is propped with pillows, his grey hair is brushed, his linen neatly arranged, and he is wrapped in a dressing-gown. His eye-glass and his watch are ready to his hand. It is necessary that he should be seen as little as may be. Women will talk, and Volumnia is no exception. He keeps her here to prevent her talking somewhere else. He is very ill, but he makes his stand against distress of mind and body most courageously.

The fair Volumnia, being one of those sprightly girls who cannot long continue silent without seizure by the dragon Boredom, soon indicates the approach of that monster with a series of yawns. Finding it impossible to suppress the yawns except by conversation, she compliments Mrs. Rouncewell on her son, declaring that he positively is one of the finest figures she ever saw and as soldierly a looking person, she should think, as what’s his name, who was killed at Waterloo.

Sir Leicester hears this tribute with so much surprise that Mrs. Rouncewell needs to explain.

“Miss Dedlock don’t speak of my eldest son, Sir Leicester, but my youngest. I have found him. He has come home.”

“George? Your son George is come home, Mrs. Rouncewell?”

The old housekeeper wipes her eyes. “Thank God. Yes, Sir Leicester.”

Does this discovery of some one lost come upon him as a strong confirmation of his hopes? He is determined to speak now, and he does. In a thick crowd of sounds, but still intelligibly enough to be understood.

“Why did you not tell me, Mrs. Rouncewell?”

“It happened only yesterday, Sir Leicester, and I doubted your being well enough to be talked to of such things.”

Besides, the giddy Volumnia now remembers with a little scream that George’s presence was meant to be a secret. But Mrs. Rouncewell protests warmly that of course she would have told Sir Leicester as soon as he was better.

“Where is George, Mrs. Rouncewell?” asks Sir Leicester,

Mrs. Rouncewell admits that he is in the house.

“Bring him here directly.”

The old lady goes; and Sir Leicester, with such power of movement as he has, arranges himself a little to receive him. When he has done so, he looks out again at the falling sleet and snow and listens again for the returning steps. Straw has been laid in the street to deaden the noises there, and she might be driven to the door without his hearing wheels.

He is lying thus when the housekeeper returns, accompanied by her trooper son. Mr. George approaches softly to the bedside, makes his bow, squares his chest, and stands, with his face flushed, very heartily ashamed of himself.

“Good heaven, it is really George Rouncewell!” exclaims Sir Leicester. “Do you remember me, George?”

The trooper needs to work out what he has said, but being a little helped by his mother, he replies, “I must have a very bad memory, indeed, Sir Leicester, if I failed to remember you.”

“When I look at you, George Rouncewell,” Sir Leicester observes with difficulty, “I see something of a boy at Chesney Wold – I remember well.”

Tears come into his eyes, and then he looks at the sleet and snow again.

“I ask your pardon, Sir Leicester,” says the trooper, “but would you let me raise you up? You would lie easier, Sir Leicester, if you would allow me to move you.”

“If you will be so good.”

The trooper takes him in his arms like a child, lightly raises him, and turns him more towards the window.

“Thank you. You have your mother’s gentleness,” returns Sir Leicester, “and your own strength.”

He signs to him not to go away. George quietly remains at the bedside, waiting to be spoken to.

“Why did you wish for secrecy?” It takes Sir Leicester some time to ask this.

“Truly I am not much to boast of, Sir Leicester, and I – I hope to be allowed to remain unknown in general. I should think it would be universally agreed, Sir Leicester, that I am not much to boast of.”

“You have been a soldier,” observes Sir Leicester, “and a faithful one.”

George makes his military bow. “I have done my duty, and it was the least I could do.”

“You find me far from well, George Rouncewell. I have had a sudden and bad attack. Something that deadens,” trying to pass one hand down one side, “and confuses,” touching his lips.

George, with a look of sympathy, makes another bow. The different times when they were both younger men at Chesney Wold arise before them and soften both.

Sir Leicester tries to raise himself among his pillows a little more. George, observing this, takes him in his arms again and places him as he desires to be.

“Thank you, George. You are another self to me. You have often carried my spare gun at Chesney Wold, George. You are familiar to me in these strange circumstances, very familiar.”

George has put Sir Leicester’s sounder arm over his shoulder in lifting him up, and Sir Leicester is slow in drawing it away again as he says these words.

“I was about to add,” he goes on, “that this attack was unfortunately simultaneous with a slight misunderstanding between my Lady and myself – not a disagreement, but a misunderstanding which deprives me, for a little while, of my Lady’s society. She has found it necessary to make a journey – I trust will shortly return. Volumnia, do I make myself intelligible?”

Volumnia understands him perfectly, and in truth he speaks more clearly than could have been supposed possible a minute ago. The effort by which he does so is written in his face. Nothing but the strength of his purpose enables him to make it.

“Therefore, Volumnia, I desire to say in your presence – and in the presence of my faithful old friend, Mrs. Rouncewell, and her son George – in case I should relapse, in case I should lose both my speech and the power of writing—”

The old housekeeper weeping silently; Volumnia in the greatest agitation; the trooper with his arms folded and his head a little bent, respectfully attentive.

“Therefore I desire to say, and to call you all to witness that I am on unaltered terms with Lady Dedlock. That I have no cause whatever of complaint against her. That I have ever had the strongest affection for her, and retain it undiminished. Say this to her, and to everyone.”

Volumnia tremblingly protests that she will obey.

“My Lady is too high in position, too handsome, too accomplished, not to have her enemies. Let it be known to them, that being of sound mind and understanding, I revoke no favour from her. I am on unaltered terms with her, and I retract no act I have done for her advantage and happiness.”

His formal array of words is serious and affecting. His noble earnestness, his gallant shielding of her, his generous conquest of his own pride for her sake, are honourable, manly, and true.

Overpowered by his exertions, he lays his head back on his pillows and closes his eyes for a minute, then resumes his watching of the weather. The trooper has become installed as necessary to him. Nothing has been said, but it is understood. He mounts guard behind his mother's chair.

The day is now beginning to decline. The mist and the sleet are darker, and the blaze begins to tell more vividly upon the walls and furniture. The gloom grows; the world begins to go home, to dress, to dine, to discuss its dear friend, as already mentioned.

Now does Sir Leicester become worse; restless, uneasy, and in great pain. Volumnia, lighting a candle, is told to put it out again, for it is not yet dark enough. Yet it is very dark by now. By and by she tries again. No! Put it out. It is not yet dark enough.

His old housekeeper realises that he is striving to uphold the fiction that it is not growing late.

"Dear Sir Leicester, my honoured master," she softly whispers, "I must beg and pray that you will not lie here in the lone darkness watching and waiting. Let me draw the curtains, and light the candles, and make things more comfortable about you. The church-clocks will strike the hours just the same, Sir Leicester, and the night will pass away just the same. My Lady will come back, just the same."

"I know it, Mrs. Rouncewell, but I am weak – and he has been so long gone."

"Not twenty-four hours yet, Sir Leicester."

"But that is a long time. Oh, it is a long time!"

He says it with a groan that wrings her heart.

She thinks his tears too sacred to be seen, even by her. Therefore she sits in the darkness for a while without a word, then gently begins to move about, stirring the fire. Finally he tells her, with recovered self-command, "As you say, Mrs. Rouncewell, it is getting late. Light the room!"

But they find that he brightens when a quiet pretence is made of looking at the fires in her rooms and being sure that everything is ready to receive her. Poor pretence as it is, it keeps up hope within him.

Midnight comes, and with it the same blank. The carriages in the streets are few, and other late sounds there are none. It is so still that listening to the intense silence is like looking at intense darkness.

The servants are dismissed to bed, and only Mrs. Rouncewell and George keep watch in Sir Leicester's room. As the night lags on – or rather when it seems to stop altogether, between two and three o'clock – they find a restless craving on him to know about the weather. Hence George, patrolling regularly every half-hour to the rooms so carefully looked after, extends his march to the hall-door, looks around, and brings back the best report he can make of the worst of nights, the sleet still falling and the stone footways lying ankle-deep in icy sludge.

Volumnia, up in her room, is a prey to horrors of many kinds. Not least among them, possibly, is a horror of what may befall her little income in the event, as she expresses it, “of anything happening” to Sir Leicester. Anything, in this sense, meaning one thing only.

An effect of these horrors is that Volumnia finds she cannot go to bed in her own room, but must come forth with her fair head tied up in a shawl, and parade the mansion like a ghost, particularly haunting the warm rooms prepared for one who still does not return. Volumnia is attended by her maid, who is extremely cold, very sleepy, and does not have a sweet expression on her face.

The periodical visits of the trooper to these rooms, however, is an assurance of protection and company both to mistress and to maid. Whenever he is heard advancing, they both make some little decorative preparation to receive him.

“How is Sir Leicester now, Mr. George?” inquires Volumnia, adjusting her shawl.

“Much the same, miss. He is very low and ill, and he even wanders a little sometimes.”

“Has he asked for me?” inquires Volumnia tenderly.

“Why, no, I can’t say he has, miss.”

“This is a truly sad time, Mr. George.”

“It is indeed, miss. Hadn’t you better go to bed?”

“You had better go to bed, Miss Dedlock,” says the maid sharply.

But Volumnia answers No! No! She may be asked for at a moment’s notice. She never should forgive herself “if anything was to happen” and she was not on the spot. She declines to answer her maid’s question on how the spot comes to be there, and not in her room, but staunchly declares that on the spot she will remain. Volumnia further states that she has not “closed an eye” – as if she had twenty or thirty – though she indisputably opened two just five minutes ago.

But when it comes to four o’clock, and still the same blank, Volumnia’s constancy begins to fail her, or rather it begins to strengthen, for she now considers that it is her duty to be ready for the morrow, when much may be expected of her. So when the trooper reappears with his, “Hadn’t you better go to bed, miss?” she meekly rises and says, “Do with me what you think best!”

Mr. George thinks it best to escort her to the door of her chamber, and the maid thinks it best to hustle her into bed with mighty little ceremony. Accordingly, these steps are taken; and now the trooper, in his rounds, has the house to himself.

There is no improvement in the weather. From every ledge and post and pillar drips the thawed snow. It is falling still; upon the roof, upon the skylight, even through the skylight, and drip, drip, drip, with the regularity of the Ghost’s Walk, on the stone floor below.

The trooper goes up the stairs and through the chief rooms, holding up his light at arm’s length. Thinking of his varied fortunes within the last few

weeks, and of his rustic boyhood, two periods of his life so strangely brought together now; thinking of the murdered man; thinking of the lady who has disappeared from these very rooms; thinking of the master of the house upstairs, he looks here and looks there, and reflects how he might see something now, which it would tax his boldness to walk up to. But it is all blank, blank as the oppressive silence.

“All is still ready, George Rouncewell?”

“Quite orderly and right, Sir Leicester.”

“No word of any kind?”

The trooper shakes his head.

“No letter that can possibly have been overlooked?”

But he knows there is no such hope and lays his head down without looking for an answer.

George Rouncewell lifts him into easier positions through the long remainder of the blank wintry night, and extinguishes the light and opens the curtains at the first late break of day. The day comes like a phantom. Cold, colourless, and vague, it sends a warning streak before it of a deathlike hue, as if it cried out, “Look what I bring you who watch there! Who will tell him?”

Chapter 59

Esther's Narrative

It was three o'clock in the morning when London at last began to close us in with streets. We had made our way along roads in a far worse condition than on the previous day; but my companion's energy never slackened. Whenever the horses had stopped exhausted half-way up hills, or had slipped and become entangled with the harness, he and his little lantern had been always ready, and when the mishap was set right, he said the same cool, "Get on, my lads!"

I could not account for his confidence on our journey back. He never even stopped to make an inquiry until we were within a few miles of London. Thus we came, between three and four o'clock in the morning, into Islington.

I will not dwell on the anxiety with which I reflected that we were leaving my mother farther and farther behind every minute. I hoped that he must be right in following this woman, but I tormented myself with questioning it during the whole journey. I wondered what was to compensate us for this loss of time; my mind was quite tortured by dwelling on such reflections.

We stopped in a high-street by a coach-stand. My companion paid our two drivers, and giving them some brief directions about the carriage, lifted me out of it and into a hackney-coach.

"Why, my dear!" he said. "How wet you are!"

I had not been conscious of it. But the melted snow had found its way into the carriage, and I had got out two or three times when a fallen horse was plunging and had to be got up, and the wet had penetrated my dress. I assured him it was no matter, but the driver ran down the street to his stable to fetch an armful of clean dry straw. They strewed it well about me, and I found it warm and comfortable.

"Now, my dear," said Mr. Bucket, with his head in at the window, "We're a-going to mark this person down. It may take a little time, but you don't mind that. You're pretty sure that I've got a reason. Ain't you?"

I assured him that I had confidence in him.

"So you may have, my dear," he returned. "Lord! You're no trouble at all. I never see a young woman conduct herself like you have. You're a pattern, you know, that's what you are," said Mr. Bucket warmly.

I told him I was very glad to have been no hindrance to him.

"My dear," he returned, "when a young lady is as mild as she's game, and as game as she's mild, that's all I ask, and more than I expect. She then becomes a queen, and that's about what you are yourself."

With these encouraging words he got upon the box, and we once more drove away. Where we drove I did not know, but we appeared to seek out the narrowest and worst streets in London.

Sometimes we emerged upon a wider thoroughfare or came to a larger, well-lit building. Then we stopped at police offices, and I saw him in consultation with others. Sometimes he would get down by an archway or at a street corner and mysteriously show the light of his little lantern. This would attract similar lights from various dark quarters, like so many insects, and a fresh consultation would be held. By degrees we appeared to contract our search within narrower limits. At last we stopped for a rather long conversation with a single police officer, which I supposed to be satisfactory from Mr. Bucket's manner of nodding. When it was finished he came to me looking very busy.

"Now, Miss Summerson," he said to me, "you won't be alarmed whatever happens, I know. We have marked this person down, and you may be of use to me. Would you walk a little way?"

Of course I got out directly and took his arm.

"It ain't so easy to keep your feet," said Mr. Bucket, "but take time."

"Are we in Holborn?" I asked him, as we crossed the street.

"Yes. Do you know this turning?"

"It looks like Chancery Lane."

"So it is, my dear," said Mr. Bucket.

We turned down it, and as we went shuffling through the sleet, I heard the clocks strike half-past five. We passed on as quickly as we could, when someone coming towards us on the narrow pavement, wrapped in a cloak, stopped and stood aside to give me room. I heard an exclamation of wonder and my own name; it was Mr. Woodcourt.

It was so unexpected and so – I don't know what to call it, whether pleasant or painful – after my feverish wandering journey, and in the midst of the night, that I could not keep back the tears from my eyes. It was like hearing his voice in a strange country.

"My dear Miss Summerson, that you should be out at this hour, and in such weather!"

He had heard from my guardian of my having been called away on some uncommon business. I told him that we had just left a coach and were going – I looked at my companion.

"Why, you see, Mr. Woodcourt" – he had caught the name from me – "we are a-going into the next street. Inspector Bucket."

Mr. Woodcourt had hurriedly taken off his cloak and was putting it about me.

"That's a good move," said Mr. Bucket, assisting him.

"May I go with you?" said Mr. Woodcourt, I don't know whether to me or to my companion.

"Why, Lord!" exclaimed Mr. Bucket. "Of course you may."

They took me between them, wrapped in the cloak.

"I have just left Richard," said Mr. Woodcourt. "I have been sitting with him since ten o'clock last night."

"Oh, dear me, he is ill!"

“No, no; not ill, but not quite well. He was depressed and faint – you know he gets so worried and so worn sometimes – and Ada sent word to me. Well! Richard revived so much after a little while, and Ada was so happy and so convinced of its being my doing, though God knows I had little enough to do with it, that I remained with him until he had been fast asleep some hours. As fast asleep as she is now, I hope!”

His friendly and familiar way of speaking of them, his unaffected devotion to them, and the comfort he was to my darling; could I separate all this from his promise to me? I recalled the words he said to me when he was so moved by the change in my appearance: “I will accept him as a sacred trust!”

We now turned into another narrow street. “Mr. Woodcourt,” said Mr. Bucket, who had eyed him closely as we came along, “our business takes us to a law-stationer’s here, a certain Mr. Snagsby’s. What, you know him, do you?” He was so quick that he saw it in an instant.

“Yes, I know a little of him and have called upon him here.”

“Indeed, sir?” said Mr. Bucket. “Then may I leave Miss Summerson with you for a moment while I go and have a word with him?”

The last police-officer with whom he had conferred was standing silently behind us. I was not aware of it until he struck in, on my saying I heard some one crying.

“Don’t be alarmed, miss,” he returned. “It’s Snagsby’s servant.”

“Why, you see,” said Mr. Bucket, “the girl’s subject to fits, and has ’em bad tonight. A most contrary circumstance it is, for I want certain information out of that girl.”

“At all events, they wouldn’t be up if it wasn’t for her, Mr. Bucket. She’s been at it pretty well all night, sir,” said the other man.

I could faintly hear crying and moaning from the house. Mr. Bucket went up to the door with his lantern and knocked twice. The door was opened and he went in, leaving us standing in the street.

“Miss Summerson,” said Mr. Woodcourt, “if I may remain near you without obtruding on your confidence, pray let me do so.”

“You are truly kind,” I answered. “I wish to keep no secret of my own from you; if I keep any, it is another’s.”

“I quite understand.”

After a short time the door opened again, and Mr. Bucket advanced towards us.

“Please to come in, Miss Summerson,” he said, “and sit down by the fire. Mr. Woodcourt, I understand you are a medical man. Would you look to this girl and see if anything can be done to bring her round? She has a letter somewhere that I particularly want. It’s not in her box, and I think it must be about her; but she is so twisted and clenched up that she is difficult to handle without hurting.”

We all three went into the house together. Behind the door stood a scared, sorrowful-looking little man in a grey coat who spoke meekly and politely.

“Downstairs, if you please, Mr. Bucket,” said he. “The lady will excuse the front kitchen; we use it as our workaday sitting-room. The back is Guster’s bedroom, and in it she’s a-carrying on, poor thing, to a frightful extent!”

We went downstairs with Mr. Snagsby. In the front kitchen, sitting by the fire, was Mrs. Snagsby, with very red eyes and a very severe expression.

“My little woman,” said Mr. Snagsby, entering behind us, “here is Inspector Bucket, Mr. Woodcourt, and a lady.”

She looked very much astonished, and looked particularly hard at me.

“My little woman,” said Mr. Snagsby, sitting down by the door, “you may ask why Inspector Bucket, Mr. Woodcourt, and a lady call upon us at the present hour. I don’t know. I have not the least idea. In fact, I’d rather not be told.”

He appeared so miserable, sitting with his head upon his hand, and I appeared so unwelcome, that I was going to offer an apology when Mr. Bucket spoke.

“Now, Mr. Snagsby,” said he, “you go along with Mr. Woodcourt to look after your Guster—”

“My Guster, Mr. Bucket!” cried Mr. Snagsby. “Go on, sir. I shall be charged with that next.”

“And hold the candle,” pursued Mr. Bucket, “or make yourself useful in any way you’re asked. You’re a humane man, you know, and you’ve got the sort of heart that can feel for another. Mr. Woodcourt, would you kindly see to her, and if you can get that letter from her, let me have it as soon as you can?”

As they went out, Mr. Bucket made me sit down by the fire and take off my wet shoes, which he turned up to dry upon the fender, talking all the time.

“Don’t you be put out, miss, by the lack of a hospitable look from Mrs. Snagsby there, because she’s under a mistake altogether. She’ll find that out sooner than will be agreeable to a lady of her generally correct thinking, because I’m a-going to explain it to her.” Here, standing on the hearth with his wet hat and shawls in his hand, he turned to Mrs. Snagsby.

“Now, the first thing that I say to you, as a married woman possessing what you may call charms, you know – ‘Believe Me, if All Those Endearing,’ and cetra – charms that ought to give you confidence in yourself – is, that you’ve done it.”

Mrs. Snagsby looked rather alarmed, and faltered, what did Mr. Bucket mean?

“What does Mr. Bucket mean?” he repeated, and I saw by his face that all the time he talked he was listening for the discovery of the letter. “I’ll tell you what he means, ma’am. Go and see *Othello* acted. That’s the tragedy for you.”

Mrs. Snagsby asked why.

“Why?” said Mr. Bucket. “Because you’ll come to that if you don’t look out. Why, at this very moment, I know what your mind’s not wholly free from respecting this young lady. But shall I tell you who this young lady is? Now,

come, you're what I call an intellectual woman. You know me, and you recollect where you saw me last, and what was talked of in that circle. Don't you? Yes! Very well. This young lady is that young lady."

Mrs. Snagsby appeared to understand the reference better than I did.

"And the boy Jo was mixed up in the same business, and no other; and the law-writer that you know of was mixed up in the same business, and no other; and your husband, with no more knowledge of it than your great grandfather, was mixed up (by Mr. Tulkinghorn, deceased) in the same business, and no other; and the whole throng of people was mixed up in the same business, and no other. And yet a married woman, possessing your attractions, shuts her eyes and goes and runs her delicate-formed head against a wall. Why, I am ashamed of you! (I expected Mr. Woodcourt might have got it by this time.)"

Mrs. Snagsby shook her head and put her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Is that all?" said Mr. Bucket excitedly. "No. See what happens.

Another person mixed up in that business and no other, a person in a wretched state, comes here tonight and is seen a-speaking to your maid-servant; and between her and your maid-servant there passes a paper that I would give a hundred pound for, down. What do you do? You hide and you watch 'em, and you pounce upon that maid-servant – knowing what a little thing will bring on her fits – with that severity that, by the Lord, she goes off and keeps off, when a life may be hanging upon that girl's words!"

He so thoroughly meant what he said that I involuntarily clasped my hands and felt the room turning away from me. But then Mr. Woodcourt came in, put a paper into his hand, and went away again.

"Now, Mrs. Snagsby, the only amends you can make," said Mr. Bucket, rapidly glancing at it, "is to let me speak a word to this young lady in private here. And if you know of any help that you can give to that gentleman in the next room or can think of anything that's likely to bring the girl round, do your best!" In an instant she was gone, and he had shut the door. "Now, my dear, you're steady and quite sure of yourself?"

"Quite," said I.

"Whose writing is that?"

It was my mother's. Pencil-writing, on a crushed and torn piece of paper, blotted with wet. Folded, and addressed to me at my guardian's.

"If you are firm enough to read it to me, do!" he said.

It had been written in portions, at different times. I read what follows:

I came to the cottage with two objects. First, to see the dear one, if I could, once more – but only to see her – not to speak to her or let her know that I was near. The other object, to elude pursuit and to be lost. Do not blame the mother for her share. She helped me on my strongest assurance that it was for the dear one's good. You remember her dead child. The men's consent I bought, but her help was freely given.

“‘I came.’ That was written when she rested there,” said my companion. “I was right.”

The next was written at another time:

I have wandered a long distance, and for many hours, and I know that I must soon die. These streets! I have no purpose but to die. When I left, I had a worse, but I am saved from adding that guilt to the rest. Cold, wet, and fatigue are sufficient causes for my being found dead, but I shall die of others, though I suffer from these. It was right that I should die of terror and my conscience.

“Take courage,” said Mr. Bucket. “There’s only a few words more.”

Those, too, were written at another time. To all appearance, almost in the dark:

I have done all I could do to be lost. I shall be soon forgotten thus, and shall disgrace him least. I have nothing about me by which I can be recognized. This paper I part with now. The place where I shall lie down, if I can get so far, has been often in my mind. Farewell. Forgive.

Mr. Bucket, supporting me with his arm, lowered me gently into my chair. “Cheer up! Don’t think me hard with you, my dear, but as soon as you feel equal to it, get your shoes on and be ready.”

I did as he required, but I was left there a long time, praying for my unhappy mother. They were all occupied with the poor girl, and I heard Mr. Woodcourt speaking to her. At length he came in with Mr. Bucket and said that as it was important to address her gently, he thought it best that I should ask her for whatever information we desired. She could now reply to questions if she were soothed and not alarmed.

The questions, Mr. Bucket said, were how she came by the letter, what passed between her and the person who gave her the letter, and where the person went. I went into the next room with them.

The poor girl was sitting on the floor. She looked weak, but she had a plaintive and a good face, though it was still a little wild. I kneeled on the ground beside her and put her poor head upon my shoulder, whereupon she drew her arm round my neck and burst into tears.

“My poor girl,” said I, laying my face against her forehead, for indeed I was crying too, and trembling, “it seems cruel to trouble you now, but more depends on our knowing something about this letter than I could tell you in an hour.”

She began piteously declaring that she didn’t mean any harm, she didn’t mean any harm, Mrs. Snagsby!

“We are all sure of that,” said I. “But pray tell me how you got it.”

“Yes, dear lady. I’ll tell true, indeed.”

“I am sure of that,” said I. “How was it?”

“I had been out on an errand, quite late; and when I came home, I found a common-looking person, all wet and muddy, looking up at our house. When she saw me coming in, she said did I live here. And I said yes, and she said she knew only one or two places about here, but had lost her way and couldn’t find them. Oh, what shall I do! They won’t believe me! She didn’t say any harm to me, and I didn’t say any harm to her, indeed, Mrs. Snagsby!”

It was necessary for her mistress to comfort her – which she did, I must say, with a good deal of contrition.

“She was so faint,” cried the girl, “and lame, and miserable, oh so wretched, that if you had seen her, Mr. Snagsby, you’d have given her half a crown, I know!”

“Well, Guster, my girl,” said he, not knowing what to say. “I hope I should.”

“And yet she was well spoken,” said the girl, looking at me with wide open eyes. “And she said to me, did I know the way to the burying ground? And I asked her which burying ground. And she said, the poor burying ground not very far from here, where there was an archway, and a step, and an iron gate.”

As I soothed her to go on, I saw that Mr. Bucket received this with a look of alarm.

“Oh, dear, dear!” cried the girl. “What shall I do, what shall I do! She meant the burying ground where the man was buried that took the sleeping-stuff – that you told us of, Mr. Snagsby. Oh, I am frightened again. Hold me!”

“You are so much better now,” said I. “Pray, pray tell me more.”

“Yes, I will! But don’t be angry with me, that’s a dear lady.”

Angry with her, poor soul!

“So she said, could I tell her how to find it, and I said yes, and I told her; and she looked at me almost as if she was blind. And so she took out the letter, and showed it me, and said would I take it from her, and send it. And I said yes, if it was no harm, and she said no – no harm. And so I took it from her, and she said she had nothing to give me, and I said I was poor myself and wanted nothing. And so she said God bless you, and went.”

“And did she go—”

“Yes!” cried the girl. “She went the way I had shown her. Then I came in, and Mrs. Snagsby came behind me from somewhere and laid hold of me, and I was frightened.”

Mr. Woodcourt took her kindly from me. Mr. Bucket wrapped me up, and immediately we were in the street. Mr. Woodcourt hesitated, but I said, “Don’t leave me now!” and Mr. Bucket added, “You’ll be better with us, we may want you; don’t lose time!”

I have the most confused impressions of that walk. I recollect that it was neither night nor day, that morning was dawning but the street-lamps were not yet put out, and that the sleet was still falling. I recollect the clogged and bursting gutters and water-spouts, the mounds of blackened ice and snow over which we passed, the narrowness of the streets. I remember the stained house-fronts put on human shapes and looked at me, that great water-gates seemed

to be opening and closing in my head or in the air, and that the unreal things were more substantial than the real.

At last we stood under a dark and miserable covered way, where one lamp was burning over an iron gate. The gate was closed. Beyond it was a burial ground, where I could dimly see heaps of dishonoured graves and stones, hemmed in by filthy houses with a few dull lights in their windows. On the step at the gate, drenched in the fearful wet of such a place, I saw, with a cry of pity and horror, a woman lying – Jenny, the mother of the dead child.

I ran forward, but they stopped me, and Mr. Woodcourt entreated me with the greatest earnestness, even with tears, to listen for an instant to what Mr. Bucket said. I did so.

“Miss Summerson, you’ll understand me, if you think a moment. They changed clothes at the cottage.”

They changed clothes at the cottage. I could repeat the words in my mind, and I knew what they meant of themselves, but I attached no meaning to them in any other connexion.

“And one returned,” said Mr. Bucket, “and one went on. And the one that went on only went on a certain way agreed upon to deceive and then turned across country and went home. Think a moment!”

I could repeat this in my mind too, but I had not the least idea what it meant. I saw before me, lying on the step, the mother of the dead child, who had so lately spoken to my mother. She lay there, a distressed, unsheltered, senseless creature. She who had brought my mother’s letter, who could give me the only clue to where my mother was; she, who was to guide us to rescue my mother; she lay there, and they stopped me! I saw but did not comprehend the solemn and compassionate look in Mr. Woodcourt’s face. I saw but did not comprehend his touching the inspector to keep him back.

I heard it said between them, “Shall she go?”

“She had better go. Her hands should be the first to touch her. They have a higher right than ours.”

I passed on to the gate and stooped down. I lifted the heavy head, put the long dank hair aside, and turned the face. And it was my mother, cold and dead.

Chapter 60

Perspective

I proceed to other passages of my narrative. From the goodness of all about me I derived much consolation; and I have already said so much about myself that I will not dwell upon my sorrow.

I had an illness, but it was not a long one. During this time, we were in London; Mrs. Woodcourt had come, on my guardian's invitation, to stay with us. When my guardian thought me well and cheerful enough to talk with him in our old way, I resumed my work and my chair beside his. We were alone.

"Dame Trot," said he, "welcome to the growlery again, my dear. I have a scheme, little woman. I propose to remain here, perhaps for six months, perhaps more. Quite to settle here for a while, in short."

"And in the meanwhile leave Bleak House?" said I.

"Bleak House," he returned, "must learn to take care of itself."

I thought he sounded sorrowful, but looking up I saw his kind face lighted up by its pleasantest smile.

"Bleak House," he said, "is a long way from Ada, my dear, and Ada stands much in need of you. I wish to hear as often of Ada as I can while I am estranged from poor Rick. And of him too, poor fellow."

"Have you seen Mr. Woodcourt this morning, guardian?"

"I see Mr. Woodcourt every morning, Dame Durden."

"Does he still say the same of Richard?"

"Just the same. He believes he has no direct bodily illness; yet he is not easy about him. Who *can* be?"

My dear girl had been to see us lately every day, sometimes twice a day. But we had foreseen that this would only last until I was quite myself. Her fervent heart was as full of affection and gratitude towards her cousin John as ever, but on the other hand she felt it her duty to Richard to be sparing of her visits to our house. My guardian had soon perceived this and had tried to tell her that he thought she was right.

"Dear, unfortunate, mistaken Richard," said I. "When will he awake from his delusion!"

"Not yet, my dear," replied my guardian. "The more he suffers, the more averse he will be to me, having made me the main cause of his suffering."

"So unreasonably!"

"Ah, Dame Trot," returned my guardian, "what shall we find reasonable in Jarndyce and Jarndyce! Unreason and injustice from beginning to end – if it ever has an end – how should poor Rick pluck reason out of it?"

His gentleness and consideration for Richard so touched me that I fell silent.

"Well, well, little woman! To go on, my dear. This rock we must leave to time and chance. We must not shipwreck Ada upon it. She cannot afford

the chance of another separation from a friend. Therefore I have begged of Woodcourt, and now beg of you, not to raise this subject with Rick. Let it rest. Sooner or later, he will see me with clearer eyes. I can wait.”

But I had already discussed it with Rick, I confessed; and so, I thought, had Mr. Woodcourt.

“So he tells me,” returned my guardian. “Very good. He has made his protest, and Dame Durden has made hers; and there is nothing more to be said about it. Now I come to Mrs. Woodcourt. How do you like her, my dear?”

In answer to this abrupt question, I said I liked her very much and thought she was more agreeable than she used to be.

“I think so too,” said my guardian. “Not so much of Morgan ap – what’s his name?”

That was what I meant, I acknowledged, harmless though he was.

“Then, little woman, can I keep Mrs. Woodcourt here for a little while?” My guardian looked at me, waiting for what I had to say.

I had nothing to say. I had an undefined impression that it might have been better if we had had some other guest, but I could hardly have explained why even to myself.

“You see,” said my guardian, “Woodcourt can come here to see her as often as he likes, which is agreeable to them both; and she is familiar to us and fond of you.”

Yes. That was undeniable. I had nothing to say against it, but I was not quite easy in my mind.

“It is a very good plan, dear guardian.”

“Sure, little woman?”

Quite sure. I urged myself to think, and I was quite sure.

“Good,” said my guardian. “It shall be done. Carried unanimously.”

“Carried unanimously,” I repeated, going on with my work.

It was a cover for his book-table that I happened to be embroidering. I showed it to him now, and he admired it highly. After I had explained the pattern to him, I thought I would go back to our last theme.

“You said, dear guardian, when we spoke of Mr. Woodcourt earlier, that you thought he would give a long trial to another country. Has he decided to do so?”

“I rather think not.”

“Some other prospect has opened to him, perhaps?” said I.

“Why – yes – perhaps,” returned my guardian, in a very deliberate manner. “In about six months, a doctor for the poor is to be appointed in Yorkshire. It is a thriving place, pleasantly situated – town and country, mill and moor – and seems to present an opening for such a man. I mean a man whose hopes and aims may sometimes lie above the ordinary level, but to whom the ordinary level will be high enough after all if it should prove to be a way of usefulness and good service. The ambition that calmly trusts itself to such a road is the kind I care for. It is Woodcourt’s kind.”

“And will he get this appointment?”

“Why, little woman,” returned my guardian, smiling, “not being an oracle, I cannot confidently say, but I think so. His reputation stands very high; there were people from that part of the country in the shipwreck. You must not suppose it to be a fine endowment. There will be a great amount of work and a small amount of pay; but better things will gather about it, it may be hoped.”

“The poor of that place will have reason to bless the choice if it falls on Mr. Woodcourt, guardian.”

“You are right, little woman.”

We said no more about it, nor about the future of Bleak House.

I now began to visit my dear girl every day in the dull dark corner where she lived. Whenever I had an hour or so to spare, I put on my bonnet and bustled off to Chancery Lane. They were both so glad to see me at all hours, that I had no fear of becoming troublesome just yet.

On these occasions I frequently found Richard absent. At other times he would be writing or reading at that table of his, always covered with papers. Sometimes I would find him lingering at the door of Mr. Vholes’s office, or lounging about the neighbourhood and biting his nails. I often met him wandering in Lincoln’s Inn, near the place where I had first seen him, but oh, how different!

I knew that the money Ada brought him was melting away. It was not a large amount in the beginning; he had married in debt, and I heard that Mr. Vholes’s shoulder was still at the wheel. My dear made the best of housekeepers and tried hard to save, but they were getting poorer every day.

She shone in the miserable corner like a beautiful star. She adorned and graced it so that it became another place. Paler than she had been at home, and a little quieter than before, her face was so unshadowed that I half believed she was blinded by her love for Richard to his ruinous career.

I went one day to dine with them while I was under this impression. As I turned into Symond’s Inn, I met little Miss Flite coming out. She had been to make a stately call upon the wards in Jarndyce, as she still called them, and had derived the highest gratification from that ceremony. Ada had already told me that she called every Monday at five o’clock, with one little extra white bow in her bonnet, and with her bag of documents on her arm.

“My dear!” she began. “How do you do! And you are going to visit our interesting Jarndyce wards? To be sure! Our beauty is at home, my dear, and will be charmed to see you.”

“Then Richard is not come in yet?” said I.

“No, he has had a long day in court. I left him there with Vholes. You don’t like Vholes, I hope? Dan-gerous man!”

“I am afraid you see Richard there oftener than ever now,” said I.

“My dearest,” returned Miss Flite, “daily and hourly. Next to myself he is the most constant suitor in court. He begins quite to amuse our little party. And I must tell you a secret. I have made him my executor. Appointed him. In my will. Ye-es.”

“Indeed?” said I.

“Ye-es,” repeated Miss Flite. “I have reflected that if I should wear out, he will be able to watch that judgment. Being so very regular in his attendance. I did at one time mean to appoint poor Gridley. Also very regular, most exemplary! But he wore out, poor man, so I have appointed his successor. This is in confidence.”

Her face clouded as she went on.

“Another secret, my dear. I have added to my collection of birds. Two more. I call them the Wards in Jarndyce. They are caged up with all the others. With Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Death, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon, and Spinach!”

The poor soul kissed me with the most troubled look I had ever seen in her and went her way. Her fearful manner of running over the names of her birds quite chilled me.

This was not a cheering preparation for my visit, and I could have dispensed with the company of Mr. Vholes, when Richard shortly brought him to share our dinner. Although it was a very plain one, Ada and Richard were for some minutes both out of the room preparing it. Mr. Vholes took that opportunity of holding a little conversation in a low voice with me.

“I hope Mr. Jarndyce is as well as his friends could wish him?”

I thanked Mr. Vholes and said he was quite well.

“I have not the pleasure to be admitted among the number of his friends myself,” said Mr. Vholes, “and I am aware that the gentlemen of our profession are sometimes regarded in such quarters with an unfavourable eye. Our plain course, however, is to have everything openly carried on. How do you find Mr. C. looking, Miss Summerson?”

“He looks very ill. Dreadfully anxious.”

“Just so,” said Mr. Vholes.

He stood feeling the pimples on his face as if they were ornaments and speaking evenly as though there were not a human passion in his nature.

“Mr. Woodcourt attends on Mr. C., I believe?” he resumed.

“Mr. Woodcourt is his disinterested friend,” I answered.

“But I mean in medical attendance.”

“That can do little for an unhappy mind,” said I.

“Just so,” said Mr. Vholes.

So slow, so eager, so bloodless and gaunt, I felt as if there were something of the vampire in him.

“Miss Summerson,” said Mr. Vholes, very slowly rubbing his gloved hands, “this was an ill-advised marriage of Mr. C.’s.”

I begged he would excuse me from discussing it. They had been engaged when they were both very young, I told him (a little indignantly) and when the prospect before them was much fairer and brighter. When Richard had not yielded himself to the unhappy influence which now darkened his life.

“Just so,” assented Mr. Vholes again. “Still, with a view to everything being openly carried on, I will observe that I consider this a very ill-advised marriage indeed.”

“It would become a very different marriage, a much happier and better marriage,” said I, “if Richard were persuaded to turn his back on the fatal pursuit in which you are engaged with him.”

Mr. Vholes, with a noiseless cough – or rather gasp – into one of his black gloves, inclined his head as if he did not wholly dispute it.

“Miss Summerson,” he said, “it may be so; and I freely admit that the young lady is a highly genteel young lady, and is considered a beauty (I have heard) among the clerks in the Inn. In reference to Mr. C.’s pursuit of his interests—”

“Oh! His interests, Mr. Vholes!”

“In reference to Mr. C.’s pursuit of his interests, I mentioned to you, Miss Summerson, the first time I had the pleasure of seeing you, that Mr. C. wished to watch his own interests, and that it devolved upon me to carry out his wish. I do carry it out. But I will not smooth things over to any connexion of Mr. C.’s on any account. As open as I was to Mr. Jarndyce, I am to you. I openly say, unpalatable as it may be, that I consider Mr. C.’s affairs in a very bad way, that I consider Mr. C. himself in a very bad way, and that I regard this as an exceedingly ill-advised marriage. Thank you very much, sir!”

He broke off thus in answer to Richard, who addressed him as he came into the room. We sat down to dinner, and I observed Richard anxiously. I thought him thin and languid, slovenly in his dress, abstracted in his manner, forcing his spirits up now and then, and at other times relapsing into a dull thoughtfulness. About his large bright eyes that used to be so merry there was a restlessness that changed them altogether. I cannot say that he looked old. There is a ruin of youth which is not like age, and into such a ruin Richard’s youthful beauty had all fallen away.

He ate little and seemed indifferent to his food, was more impatient than he used to be, and was quick even with Ada. I thought at first that his old light-hearted manner was all gone, but it shone out of him sometimes, just as occasionally little momentary glimpses of my own face looked out from the mirror. His laugh had not quite left him either, but it was like the echo of a joyful sound.

Yet he was as glad as ever to have me there, and we talked of the old times pleasantly. These did not appear to be interesting to Mr. Vholes, though he occasionally made a gasp which I believe was his smile. He rose shortly after dinner and said he would retire to his office.

“Always devoted to business, Vholes!” cried Richard.

“Yes, Mr. C.,” he returned, “the interests of clients are never to be neglected, sir.”

Richard saw him out. On his return he told us that Vholes was a good fellow, a very good fellow indeed! He was so defiant about it that it struck me he had begun to doubt Mr. Vholes.

Then he threw himself on the sofa, tired out; and Ada and I tidied up. My dear girl had a cottage piano there and quietly sat down to sing some of Richard's favourites, the lamp being first removed, as he complained of its hurting his eyes.

I sat between them, at my dear girl's side, and felt very melancholy listening to her sweet voice. I think Richard did too; I think he darkened the room for that reason. She had been singing some time when Mr. Woodcourt came in. He sat down by Richard and half playfully, half earnestly, quite naturally and easily, found out how he felt and where he had been all day. Presently he proposed to accompany him in a short walk, as it was a moonlight airy night; and they went out together.

They left my dear girl sitting at the piano with me beside her. I drew my arm round her waist. She put her left hand in mine, but kept her right upon the keys, without striking any note.

"Esther, my dearest," she said, "Richard is never so well as when he is with Allan Woodcourt. We have to thank you for that."

I pointed out how this could scarcely be, because Mr. Woodcourt had always liked Richard, and Richard had always liked him.

"True," said Ada, "but that he is such a devoted friend to us we owe to you."

I thought it best to say no more about it. I felt her trembling.

"Esther, my dearest, I want to be a good wife. You shall teach me."

I teach! I said no more, for I noticed the hand that was fluttering over the keys, and I knew she had something more to say to me.

"When I married Richard I was aware of what was before him. I had never known any trouble or anxiety, but I understood the danger he was in, dear Esther."

"I know, my darling."

"When we were married I hoped that I might be able to convince him of his mistake, that he might not pursue it all the more desperately for my sake. But if I had not had that hope, I would have married him just the same! My dearest Esther, I see what you see and fear what you fear. No one can understand him better than I do. The greatest wisdom that ever lived in the world could scarcely know Richard better than my love does."

She spoke so modestly and softly and her trembling hand expressed such agitation as it moved to and fro upon the silent notes! My dear, dear girl!

"I see him at his worst every day. I know every change of his face. But when I married Richard I was quite determined, Esther, if heaven would help me, never to show him that I grieved for what he did and so make him more unhappy. I want him to find no trouble in my face. I want him, when he looks at me, to see what he loved in me. I married him to do this, and this supports me."

I felt her trembling more. I waited for what was yet to come, and I now thought I began to know what it was.

"And something else supports me, Esther."

She stopped a minute.

“In a little while, I don’t know what great aid may come to me. When Richard turns his eyes upon me then, there may be something lying on my breast with greater power than mine to show him his true course and win him back.”

Her hand stopped now. She clasped me in her arms, and I clasped her in mine.

“I look forward through years and years, Esther, and think that a beautiful daughter may be a blessing to him. Or that a generous brave man, as handsome as he used to be, as hopeful, and far more happy, may walk in the sunshine with him, honouring his grey head!”

Oh, my sweet girl, what a heart was that which beat so fast against me!

“These hopes uphold me, my dear Esther – though sometimes even they depart before a dread that arises when I look at Richard.”

I tried to cheer my darling, and asked her what it was. Sobbing and weeping, she replied, “That he may not live to see his child.”

Chapter 61

A Discovery

The days when I visited that miserable corner which my dear girl brightened can never fade in my remembrance. I never wish to see it now; I have been there only once since, but in my memory there is a mournful glory shining on the place which will shine for ever.

Not a day passed without my going there. At first I found Mr. Skimpole there, on two or three occasions, idly playing the piano and talking in his usual vivacious strain. Now, besides my fear of his making Richard poorer, I felt as if his careless gaiety was inconsistent with what I knew of the depths of Ada's life. I clearly perceived that Ada shared my feelings. I therefore resolved to make a private visit to Mr. Skimpole and try delicately to explain myself.

I set off one morning, accompanied by Charley. As I approached the Skimpole house, I was strongly inclined to turn back, for I felt what a desperate attempt it was to make an impression on Mr. Skimpole and how extremely likely it was that he would defeat me. However, I thought that being there, I would go through with it. I knocked with a trembling hand at Mr. Skimpole's door – literally with a hand, for the knocker was gone – and after a while gained admission from an Irishwoman who was in the yard.

Mr. Skimpole, lying on the sofa in his room, playing the flute, was enchanted to see me. Who would I prefer for mistress of the ceremonies? he asked. Would I have his Comedy daughter, his Beauty daughter, or his Sentiment daughter? Or all three at once in a perfect nosegay?

I replied, half defeated already, that I wished to speak to himself only.

"My dear Miss Summerson, most joyfully! Of course it's not business. Then it's pleasure!"

I said it certainly was not business that I came upon, but it was not quite a pleasant matter.

"Then, my dear Miss Summerson," said he with the frankest gaiety, "don't allude to it. Why should you allude to anything that is not a pleasant matter? I never do. So let us talk of something else."

Although I was embarrassed, I took courage to say that I still wished to pursue the subject.

"Mr. Skimpole," said I, "I think you ought most seriously to know that Richard is poorer than he was."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Skimpole. "So am I, they tell me."

"And in very embarrassed circumstances."

"Parallel case, exactly!" said Mr. Skimpole with a delighted face.

"This naturally causes Ada much anxiety, and as I think she is less anxious when no claims are made upon her by visitors, it has occurred to me to take the liberty of saying that – if you would – not—"

I was coming to the point with great difficulty when he took me by both hands with a radiant face and anticipated it.

“Not go there? Certainly not, my dear Miss Summerson, most assuredly not. When I go anywhere, I go for pleasure. I don’t go anywhere for pain. Now, I have had very little pleasure at our dear Richard’s lately, and your wisdom shows why. Our young friends, losing the youthful poetry which was once so captivating in them, begin to think, ‘This is a man who wants pounds.’ So I am; I always want pounds, because tradespeople always want them from me. Next, our young friends begin to think, becoming mercenary, ‘This is the man who borrowed pounds,’ which I did. So our young friends, reduced to prose (which is much to be regretted), degenerate in their power of imparting pleasure to me. Why should I go to see them, therefore? Absurd!”

This he said with a smile of disinterested benevolence quite astonishing.

“Besides,” he went on in his light-hearted tone, “if I don’t go anywhere for pain, why should I go anywhere to be the cause of pain? If I went to see our young friends in their present ill-regulated state of mind, I should give them pain. They might say, ‘This is the man who had pounds and who can’t pay pounds,’ which I can’t, of course! Then kindness requires that I shouldn’t go near them – and I won’t.”

He finished by genially kissing my hand and thanking me. I was much disconcerted, but I reflected that if the main point were gained, it mattered little how. I had determined to mention something else, however.

“Mr. Skimpole,” said I, “I must take the liberty of saying before I go that I was much surprised to learn recently that you knew with whom that poor boy left Bleak House, and that you accepted money on that occasion. I have not mentioned it to my guardian, for I fear it would hurt him; but I may say to you that I was much surprised.”

“No? Really, my dear Miss Summerson?” He thought about it with a whimsical expression, then said in his most engaging manner, “You know what a child I am. Why surprised?”

I gave him to understand in the gentlest words I could use that he seemed to have disregarded several moral obligations. He was much amused and interested when he heard this and said, “No, really?” with ingenuous simplicity.

“You know that responsibility is a thing that has always been above me – or below me,” said Mr. Skimpole. “I don’t even know which; but as I understand the way in which my dear Miss Summerson puts this case, I should imagine it was chiefly a question of money?”

I incautiously assented to this.

“Ah! Then you see,” said Mr. Skimpole, shaking his head, “I am hopeless of understanding it.”

I suggested, as I rose to go, that it was not right to betray my guardian’s confidence for a bribe.

“My dear Miss Summerson, I can’t be bribed. I don’t attach any value to money. I don’t know about it, I don’t want it. How can I be bribed?”

I showed that I was of a different opinion, though I was not able to argue.

“On the contrary,” said Mr. Skimpole, “I am above the rest of mankind in such a case as that. I am as free as the air. Observe the case, my dear Miss Summerson. Here is a boy received into the house and put to bed in a state that I strongly object to. A man arrives – like the house that Jack built. Here is the man who demands the boy who is received into the house and put to bed in a state that I strongly object to. Here is a bank-note produced by the man who demands the boy who is received into the house and put to bed in a state that I strongly object to. Here is the Skimpole who accepts the bank-note produced by the man who demands the boy who is received into the house and put to bed in a state that I strongly object to. Should the Skimpole have refused the note? Skimpole protests to Bucket, ‘What’s this for? I don’t understand it, take it away.’ Bucket still entreats Skimpole to accept it. Skimpole reasons with himself, this is a police-officer, an intelligent man, useful to society. If it is blameable in Skimpole to take the note, it is blameable in Bucket to offer the note – much more blameable, because he is the knowing man. Now, Skimpole wishes to think well of Bucket. And he does. And that’s all he does!”

I had nothing to offer in reply and therefore took my leave. As it so happened that I never saw Mr. Skimpole again, I may at once finish what I know of his history. A coolness arose between him and my guardian, based principally on his having heartlessly disregarded my guardian’s entreaties (as we afterwards learned from Ada) in reference to Richard. He died some five years afterwards and left a diary behind him, which was published and which showed him to have been the victim of a part of mankind combining against an amiable child. It was considered very pleasant reading, but I never read more of it myself than the sentence on which I chanced to light on opening the book. It was this: “Jarndyce, in common with most other men I have known, is the incarnation of selfishness.”

And now I come to a part of my story touching myself, and for which I was quite unprepared. Whatever little lingerings may have now and then revived in my mind associated with my poor old face had only revived as a part of my life that was gone, like my childhood.

The months were gliding away, and my dear girl was the same beautiful star in the miserable corner. Richard, more worn and haggard, haunted the court day after day, listlessly sitting there even when he knew there was no remote chance of the suit being mentioned.

So completely was he absorbed in his fixed idea that he used to avow in his cheerful moments that he should never have breathed the fresh air now “but for Woodcourt.” It was only Mr. Woodcourt who could occasionally divert his attention for a few hours at a time and rouse him, even when he sunk into a lethargy that alarmed us greatly, and that returned more frequently as the months went on.

My dear girl was right in saying that he pursued his errors the more desperately for her sake. I have no doubt that his desire to retrieve what he

had lost was made the more intense by his grief for his young wife, and became like the madness of a gamester.

I was at their lodgings, as I have mentioned, at all hours. When I was there at night, I generally went home with Charley in a coach; sometimes my guardian would meet me, and we would walk home together.

One evening he had arranged to meet me at eight o'clock. I could not leave quite punctually, for I was working for my dear girl and had a few stitches to finish; but within a few minutes of the hour I bundled up my little work-basket, gave my darling my last kiss for the night, and hurried downstairs. Mr. Woodcourt went with me, as it was dusk.

When we came to the usual place of meeting, my guardian was not there. We waited half an hour, walking up and down, but there were no signs of him. We agreed that he was either prevented from coming or that he had come and gone away, and Mr. Woodcourt proposed to walk home with me.

It was the first walk we had ever taken together. We spoke of Richard and Ada the whole way. I did not thank him in words for what he had done, but I hoped he might understand what I felt so strongly.

Arriving at home and going upstairs, we found that my guardian was out and that Mrs. Woodcourt was out too. We were standing by the open window looking down into the street when Mr. Woodcourt spoke to me. I learned in a moment that he loved me. I learned in a moment that my scarred face was all unchanged to him. I learned in a moment that what I had thought was pity and compassion was devoted, generous, faithful love. Oh, too late to know it now, too late, too late. That was the first ungrateful thought I had. Too late.

"When I returned," he told me, "when I came back, no richer than when I went away, and found you newly risen from a sick bed, yet so inspired by sweet consideration for others and so free from a selfish thought—"

"Oh, Mr. Woodcourt, stop, stop!" I entreated him. "I had many selfish thoughts at that time, many!"

"Heaven knows, beloved of my life," said he, "that my praise is not a lover's praise, but the truth. You do not know how many hearts Esther touches and awakens, what sacred admiration and what love she wins."

"Oh, Mr. Woodcourt," cried I, "it is a great thing to win love! I am proud of it, and honoured by it; and the hearing of it causes me to shed these tears of mingled joy and sorrow – joy that I have won it, sorrow that I have not deserved it better; but I am not free to think of yours."

I said it with a stronger heart, for when I heard his praise I aspired to be more worthy of it. It was not too late for *that*. Although I closed this unforeseen page in my life tonight, I felt I could be worthier of it all through my life. And it was a comfort to me, and an impulse to me, and I felt a dignity rise up within me that was gained from him.

He broke the silence.

"Dear Esther, if you are not free to think of my love, I will not urge it. Let me only tell you that the fond idea of you which I took abroad was exalted to the heavens when I came home. I have always hoped to tell you this. I have

always feared that I should tell it you in vain. My hopes and fears are both fulfilled tonight. I distress you. I have said enough.”

Something seemed to pass into my place that was like the angel he thought me, and I felt so sorrowful for the loss he had sustained! I wished to help him in his trouble.

“Dear Mr. Woodcourt,” said I, “before we part tonight, something is left for me to say. I never could say it as I wish – but – but I shall treasure the memory of your generosity to my dying hour. I know full well how changed I am. I know what a noble love that is which is so faithful. What you have said to me could have affected me so much from no other lips, for there are none that could give it such a value to me. It shall not be lost. It shall make me better.”

He covered his eyes with his hand and turned away his head. How could I ever be worthy of those tears?

“If I am ever better than I used to be,” I said, “believe that it will have sprung up from tonight and that I owe it to you. And never believe, dear Mr. Woodcourt, never believe that I forget this night or that while my heart beats it can be insensible to the pride and joy of having been beloved by you.”

He took my hand and kissed it. He was like himself again, and I felt still more encouraged.

“I am induced by what you said just now,” said I, “to hope that you have succeeded in your endeavour.”

“I have,” he answered. “With help from Mr. Jarndyce, I have succeeded.”

“Heaven bless him for it,” said I, giving him my hand; “and heaven bless you in all you do!”

“I shall do it better for the wish,” he answered; “it will make me enter on these new duties as on another sacred trust from you.”

“Ah! Richard!” I exclaimed involuntarily, “What will he do when you are gone!”

“I am not required to go yet; I would not desert him, dear Miss Summerson, even if I were.”

One other thing I needed to touch upon before he left me.

“Mr. Woodcourt,” said I, “you will be glad to know before I say good night that in the future, which is clear and bright before me, I am most happy, most fortunate, have nothing to regret or desire.”

It was indeed a gladness to him, he replied.

“From my childhood I have been,” said I, “the object of the untiring goodness of the best of human beings, to whom I am bound by every tie of attachment, gratitude, and love.”

“I share those feelings,” he returned. “You speak of Mr. Jarndyce.”

“You know his virtues well,” said I, “but few can know the greatness of his character as I know it. All its highest and best qualities have been revealed to me in the shaping out of that future in which I am so happy. And if your highest homage and respect had not been his already, they would have been his, I think, on this assurance, for my sake.”

He fervently replied that indeed they would have been. I gave him my hand again.

“Good night,” I said, “Good-bye.”

“The first until we meet tomorrow, the second as a farewell to this theme between us for ever.”

“Yes.”

“Good night; good-bye.”

He left me, and I stood at the dark window watching the street. His love, in all its constancy and generosity, had come so suddenly upon me that he had not left me a minute before my fortitude gave way and the street was blotted out by my rushing tears.

But they were not tears of regret and sorrow. No. He had called me the beloved of his life and had said I would evermore be dear to him, and I felt as if my heart would not hold the triumph of having heard those words. My first wild thought had died away. It was not too late to hear them, for it was not too late to be animated by them to be good, true, grateful, and contented. How easy my path, how much easier than his!

Chapter 62

Another Discovery

I had not the courage to see anyone that night, not even myself. I went up to my room in the dark, and prayed in the dark, and lay down in the dark to sleep. I had no need of any light to read my guardian's letter by, for I knew it by heart. I took it from the place where I kept it, and repeated its contents by its own clear light of integrity and love, and went to sleep with it on my pillow.

I was up very early in the morning and called Charley to come for a walk. We bought flowers for the breakfast-table, and came back and arranged them, and had Charley's lesson before breakfast, and were as busy as possible. When my guardian appeared he said, "Why, little woman, you look fresher than your flowers!" And Mrs. Woodcourt translated a passage from the Mewlinnwillinwodd about my being like a mountain with the sun upon it.

This was all so pleasant that I hope it made me still more like the mountain than before. After breakfast I waited until I saw my guardian in his own room – the room of last night. Then I made an excuse to go in with my housekeeping keys, shutting the door after me.

"Well, Dame Durden?" said my guardian, who was writing. He laid down his pen and leaned back in his chair looking at me. I have often spoken of his bright face, but I thought I had never seen it look so bright and good. There was a high happiness upon it which made me think, "He has been doing some great kindness this morning."

He had never yet altered his old manner. I loved it and him so much that when I now went up to him and took my usual chair at his side, I hardly liked to disturb it by laying my hand on his breast. But his manner did not change at all.

"Dear guardian," said I, "I want to speak to you. Have I been remiss in anything, since – since I brought the answer to your letter, guardian?"

"You have been everything I could desire, my love."

"I am very glad indeed to hear that," I returned. "You know, you said to me, was this the mistress of Bleak House. And I said, yes."

"Yes," said my guardian, nodding. He had put his arm about me as if there were something to protect me from and looked in my face, smiling.

"Since then," said I, "we have never spoken on the subject except once."

"And then I said Bleak House was thinning fast; and so it was, my dear."

"And I said," I timidly reminded him, "but its mistress remained."

He still held me in the same protecting manner and with the same bright goodness in his face.

"Dear guardian," said I, "I know how considerate you have been. As so much time has passed, and as you spoke only this morning of my being so

well again, perhaps I ought to renew the subject. I will be the mistress of Bleak House when you please.”

“See,” he returned gaily, “what a sympathy there must be between us! When you came in, my mind was full of the same thing. When shall we give Bleak House its mistress, little woman?”

“When you please.”

“Next month?”

“Next month, dear guardian.”

“The day on which I take the happiest and best step of my life – the day on which I give Bleak House its little mistress – shall be next month then,” said my guardian.

I put my arms round his neck and kissed him just as I had done on the day when I brought my answer.

A servant came to the door to announce Mr. Bucket, which was quite unnecessary, for Mr. Bucket was already looking in over her shoulder.

“Mr. Jarndyce and Miss Summerson,” said he, rather out of breath, “with apologies for intruding, will you allow me to order up a person that’s on the stairs and that objects to being left there in case of us talking about him in his absence? Thank you. Be so good as to chair that there member in this direction, will you?” said Mr. Bucket, beckoning over the banisters.

This singular request produced an old man in a black skull-cap, unable to walk, who was carried up by a couple of bearers and deposited near the door. Mr. Bucket immediately got rid of the bearers, mysteriously shut the door, and bolted it.

“Now, Mr. Jarndyce,” he began, with a flourish of his finger, “this gentleman’s name is Smallweed. He’s what you may call a dealer in bills. I’ve been negotiating with this gentleman on behalf of Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, and one way and another I’ve been in and out and about his premises a good deal. His premises were formerly occupied by Krook – whom you saw in his lifetime if I don’t mistake?”

My guardian replied, “Yes.”

“Well! You are to understand,” said Mr. Bucket, “that this gentleman he come into Krook’s property, and a good deal of magpie property there was. Vast lots of waste-paper. Lord bless you, of no use to nobody!”

Mr. Smallweed suspiciously watched his face with the closest attention.

“Among them odd heaps of old papers, this gentleman naturally begins to rummage,” said Mr. Bucket.

“To which? Say that again,” cried Mr. Smallweed in a shrill, sharp voice.

“To rummage,” repeated Mr. Bucket. “Being a prudent man, you begin to rummage among the papers as you have come into; don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” cried Mr. Smallweed.

“Of course you do,” said Mr. Bucket conversationally. “And so you chance to find, you know, a paper with the signature of Jarndyce to it. Don’t you?”

Mr. Smallweed glanced with a troubled eye at us and grudgingly nodded.

“And coming to look at that paper at your full leisure – all in good time – what do you find it to be but a will, you see. That’s the humour of it,” said Mr. Bucket with the lively air of recalling a joke, which Mr. Smallweed did not share; “what do you find it to be but a will?”

“I don’t know that it’s good as a will or as anything else,” snarled Mr. Smallweed.

Mr. Bucket eyed the old man for a moment as if he were disposed to pounce upon him; nevertheless, he continued to bend over him with the same agreeable air.

“Notwithstanding which,” said Mr. Bucket, “you get a little doubtful and uncomfortable in your mind about it. And as you’ve heard a good deal mentioned regarding a celebrated Chancery will case of the same name, and as you know how Krook was for buying all manner of old papers, and always a-going to teach himself to read, you begin to think – and you never was more correct in your born days – ‘By heaven, if I don’t look about me, I may get into trouble regarding this will.’”

“Mind how you put it, Bucket,” cried the old man anxiously with his hand at his ear. “Speak up; none of your brimstone tricks. Pick me up; I want to hear better.”

Mr. Bucket picked him up at a dart. As soon as he could be heard through Mr. Smallweed’s coughing and his cries of “Oh, my bones!” Mr. Bucket proceeded in the same convivial manner.

“So you take me into your confidence, don’t you?”

I think it would be impossible to make an admission with more ill will than Mr. Smallweed when he admitted this, as if Mr. Bucket was the very last person he would have taken into his confidence if he could have kept him out of it.

“And I go into the business with you very pleasantly; and I confirm you in your well-founded fears that you will get yourself into trouble if you don’t come out with that there will,” said Mr. Bucket emphatically; “and accordingly you arrange with me that it shall be delivered up to Mr. Jarndyce, on no conditions. If it should prove to be valuable, you’re trusting yourself to him for your reward; that’s about where it is, ain’t it?”

“That’s what was agreed,” Mr. Smallweed assented with the same bad grace.

“In consequence of which,” said Mr. Bucket, “the only thing that remains for you to do is just to hand it over!”

The paper was produced with much reluctance and many declarations on the part of Mr. Smallweed that he was a poor industrious man and that he hoped he would not lose by his honesty. He very slowly took from a breast-pocket a stained, discoloured paper which was a little burnt at the edges. Mr. Bucket transferred this paper, with the dexterity of a conjuror, from Mr. Smallweed to Mr. Jarndyce.

As he gave it to my guardian, he whispered, "They hadn't settled how to make money from it. Quarrelled about it. I laid out twenty pound upon it. Lord! There ain't one of the family that wouldn't sell the other for a pound or two."

"Mr. Bucket," said my guardian aloud, "whatever the worth of this paper may be, my obligations to you are great; and if it is of any value, I shall see Mr. Smallweed rewarded accordingly."

"Not according to your merits, you know," said Mr. Bucket in friendly explanation to Mr. Smallweed. "Don't you be afraid of that. According to its value."

"You may observe, Mr. Bucket," said my guardian, "that I abstain from examining this paper myself. The plain truth is, I have forsworn the whole business, and my soul is sick of it. But I will immediately place the paper in the hands of my solicitor, and its existence shall be made known without delay to all other parties interested."

"Mr. Jarndyce can't say fairer than that, you understand," observed Mr. Bucket to his fellow-visitor. "And now we may chair you home again."

He unbolted the door, called in the bearers, wished us good morning, and went his way.

We went our way too, to Lincoln's Inn, as quickly as possible. We found Mr. Kenge in his dusty room. Chairs were placed for us by Mr. Guppy, while Mr. Kenge expressed his surprise and gratification at the unusual sight of Mr. Jarndyce in his office.

"Mr. Kenge," began my guardian, "before I lay this paper on your desk, let me tell you how it has come into my hands." He did so shortly and plainly.

Mr. Kenge did not at first seem to attach much importance to the paper, but when he saw it he appeared more interested, and when he had opened it and read a little, he became amazed.

"Mr. Jarndyce," he said, "you have perused this?"

"Not I!" returned my guardian.

"But, my dear sir," said Mr. Kenge, "it is a will of later date than any in the suit. It appears to be all in the testator's handwriting. It is duly witnessed. And even if intended to be cancelled, as might be supposed from these marks of fire, it is *not* cancelled. Here it is, a perfect instrument!"

"Well!" said my guardian. "What is that to me?"

"Mr. Guppy!" cried Mr. Kenge, raising his voice. "Go seek Mr. Vholes of Symond's Inn. My compliments. Glad to speak with him."

Mr. Guppy disappeared.

"If you had perused this document, Mr. Jarndyce, you would have seen that it reduces your interest considerably, though still leaving it a very handsome one," said Mr. Kenge, waving his hand blandly. "You would further have seen that the interests of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Carstone are very materially advanced by it."

"Kenge," said my guardian, "if all the wealth that the suit brought into this vile court of Chancery could fall to my two young cousins, I should be

well contented. But do you ask me to believe that any good is to come of Jarndyce and Jarndyce?"

"Oh, really, Mr. Jarndyce! My dear sir, this is a very great country, a very great country. Its system of equity is a very great system, a very great system. Really, really!"

My guardian said no more, and Mr. Vholes arrived.

"How do you do, Mr. Vholes? Will you be so good as to take a chair and look over this paper?"

Mr. Vholes did so. He was not excited by it, but he was not excited by anything. When he had well examined it, he retired with Mr. Kenge into a window, and spoke to him at some length. I was not surprised to observe Mr. Kenge inclined to dispute what he said, for I knew that no two people ever did agree about anything in Jarndyce and Jarndyce. But he seemed to get the better of Mr. Kenge in a conversation that included the words "Receiver-General," "Accountant-General," "report," "estate," and "costs." When they had finished, they came back to Mr. Kenge's table and spoke aloud.

"Well! But this is a very remarkable and important document, Mr. Vholes," said Mr. Kenge.

Mr. Vholes said, "Very much so."

"And as you say, Mr. Vholes, when the cause appears next term, this document will be an unexpected and interesting feature in it," said Mr. Kenge, looking loftily at my guardian.

"And when is next term?" asked my guardian, rising.

"Next month," said Mr. Kenge. "Of course we shall at once proceed to do what is necessary with this document; and you will receive our usual notification of the cause being in the paper."

"To which I shall pay, of course, my usual attention."

"Still bent, my dear sir, on echoing a popular prejudice?" said Mr. Kenge, showing us to the door, "This is a great country, and a great system, Mr. Jarndyce, and would you wish a great country to have a little system? Now, really, really!"

Chapter 63

Steel and Iron

George's Shooting Gallery is to let, and the stock is sold off, and George himself is at Chesney Wold attending on Sir Leicester in his rides, and riding very near because of the uncertain hand with which Sir Leicester guides his horse. But today George is not so occupied. He is journeying today into the iron country farther north.

As he comes into the iron country, the fresh green woods are left behind; and coal pits and ashes, high chimneys and red bricks, and a heavy cloud of smoke become the features of the scenery. The trooper rides looking about him, looking for something he has come to find.

At last, on the black canal bridge of a busy town, with more fires and smoke than he has seen yet, the trooper, dark with dust, stops his horse and asks a workman does he know the name of Rouncewell thereabouts.

"Why, master, 'tis well known. The bank, the factory, or the house?"

"Hum! Rouncewell's is so great apparently," mutters the trooper, stroking his chin, "that I have half a mind to go back again. Why, I don't know. Should I find Mr. Rouncewell at the factory, do you think?"

"'Tain't easy to say – you might find either him or his son there, if he's in town; but his contracts take him away."

And which is the factory? Why, he sees those tall chimneys? Let him keep his eye on those, going on straight, and presently he'll see 'em down a turning on the left, shut in by a great brick wall. That's Rouncewell's.

The trooper thanks his informant and rides slowly on. He puts up his horse at a public-house where some of Rouncewell's factory-hands are dining, as the ostler tells him. They have just knocked off for dinner-time and seem to be invading the whole town. They are very sinewy and strong, and sooty too.

He comes to a gateway in the brick wall, looks in, and sees a great perplexity of iron lying about in a vast variety of shapes – in bars, sheets, tanks, boilers, axles, wheels, cogs and rails; mountains of it broken up and rusty; distant furnaces glow, and bright fireworks shower under the blows of the steam-hammer. There is an iron taste, an iron smell, and a Babel of iron sounds.

"This is a place to make a man's head ache!" says the trooper. "Who comes here? He looks very like me before I was set up. This ought to be my nephew. Excuse me, sir. Young Mr. Rouncewell, I believe?"

"Yes, sir. Were you looking for anyone?"

"I was looking for your father, sir. I wish to have a word with him."

The young man leads the way to the office. "Devilish like me!" thinks the trooper as he follows. They come to a building in the yard with an office

on an upper floor. At the sight of the gentleman in the office, Mr. George turns very red.

“What name shall I say to my father?” asks the young man.

George in desperation answers “Steel,” and is so presented. He is left alone with the gentleman in the office, who sits at a table with account-books before him. Tumbled together on the table are some pieces of iron, purposely broken to be tested in various capacities. There is iron-dust on everything; and the smoke is seen through the windows rolling heavily out of the tall chimneys.

“I am at your service, Mr. Steel,” says the gentleman.

“Well, Mr. Rouncewell,” George replies, leaning forward and very chary of meeting his brother’s eye, “I may not be fully welcome. I have served as a dragoon in my day, and a comrade of mine was a brother of yours. I believe you had a brother who gave his family some trouble, and ran away, and never did any good but in keeping away?”

“Are you quite sure,” returns the ironmaster in an altered voice, “that your name is Steel?”

The trooper falters and looks at him. His brother starts up, calls him by his name, and grasps him by both hands.

“You are too quick for me!” cries the trooper with the tears springing out of his eyes. “How do you do, my dear old fellow? I never could have thought you would have been half so glad to see me as all this.”

They embrace each other, the trooper still protesting that he never thought his brother would have been half so glad to see him as all this!

“So far from it,” he declares, after a full account of what has preceded his arrival, “I had very little idea of making myself known. I thought if you reacted forgivingly to my name I might get myself up to the point of writing a letter. But I should not have been surprised, brother, if you had considered it unwelcome news to hear of me.”

“We will show you at home what kind of news we think it, George,” returns his brother. “You could not have arrived on a better day. I make an agreement with my son Watt today that on this day twelvemonth he shall marry as pretty and good a girl as you have seen in all your travels. She goes to Germany tomorrow with one of your nieces for a little polishing up in her education. We make a feast of the event, and you will be the hero of it.”

Mr. George is so entirely overcome that at first he resists the proposed honour. Being overborne, however, by his brother and his nephew, he is taken home to an elegant house which shows a pleasant mixture of the originally simple habits of the father and mother with the higher fortunes of their children.

Here Mr. George is much dismayed by the graces and affection of his nieces and by the beauty of Rosa, his niece that is to be. He is sorely taken aback, too, by the dutiful behaviour of his nephew and has a woeful consciousness of being a scapegrace. However, there is great rejoicing and a very hearty company, and Mr. George comes bluff and martial through it all.

His pledge to be present at the marriage is received with universal favour. A whirling head has Mr. George that night when he lies down in bed.

The brothers are closeted next morning in the ironmaster's room. The elder is proceeding, in his sensible way, to show how he thinks he may place George in his business, when George squeezes his hand and stops him.

"Brother, I thank you a million times for your welcome, and a million times more for your brotherly intentions. But my plans are made. Before I say a word about them, I wish to consult you upon one family point. How," says the trooper, folding his arms firmly, "how is my mother to be got to scratch me?"

"I am not sure that I understand you, George," replies the ironmaster. "Scratch you out of her will, you mean?"

"Of course I do. I have not sneaked home to rob your children of their rights. I, who forfeited mine long ago! If I am to hold up my head, I must be scratched."

"George," replies the ironmaster deliberately, "look at our mother, recall her emotion when she recovered you. Do you believe anything in the world would induce her to take such a step against her favourite son? No, George! You must make up your mind to remain unscratched, I think." There is an amused smile on the ironmaster's face as he watches his brother, who is pondering, deeply disappointed. "I think you may manage almost as well as if the thing were done, though."

"How, brother?"

"You can dispose by will of anything you have the misfortune to inherit in any way you like, you know."

"That's true!" says the trooper, pondering again. "Would you mind mentioning that, brother, to your wife and family?"

"Not at all."

"You wouldn't object to say, perhaps, that although an undoubted vagabond, I am a vagabond of the harum-scarum type, and not of the mean sort?"

The ironmaster, repressing his smile, assents.

"Thank you. It's a weight off my mind," says the trooper, "though I had set my heart on being scratched, too!"

The brothers are very like each other, sitting face to face; but a certain massive simplicity is all on the trooper's side.

"Well," he proceeds, "next and last, those plans of mine. You have been so brotherly as to propose to me to fall in here, and I thank you heartily," shaking him a long time by the hand. "But the truth is, brother, I am a kind of weed, and it's too late to plant me in a regular garden. It is not to be done, sir! Whereas, on the other hand, I am able to be of some use to Sir Leicester Dedlock since his illness, and he would rather have that help from our mother's son than from anybody else."

"Well, my dear George," returns the other with a very slight shadow upon his open face, "if you prefer to serve in Sir Leicester Dedlock's household brigade—"

“There it is, brother,” cries the trooper, stopping him. “You don’t take kindly to that idea; I don’t mind it. Everything about you is in perfect order and discipline; everything about me requires to be kept so. I shall get on best at Chesney Wold, where there’s more room for a weed than there is here; and the dear old lady will be made happy besides. Therefore I accept Sir Leicester Dedlock’s proposals. I thank you heartily again and am proud to think of the Rouncewells as they’ll be founded by you.”

“You know yourself, George,” says the elder brother, returning the grip of his hand, “and perhaps you know me better than I know myself. Take your way, so long as we don’t lose one another again.”

“No fear of that!” returns the trooper. “Now, before I go home, brother, I will ask you – if you’ll be so good – to look over a letter for me. I brought it with me to send from these parts, as Chesney Wold might be a painful name just now to the person it’s written to. I am not much accustomed to correspondence, and I want this letter to be both straightforward and delicate.”

Herewith he hands a letter, closely written in a neat round hand, to the ironmaster, who reads as follows:

Miss Esther Summerson,

Inspector Bucket having informed me of a letter to myself being found among the papers of a certain person, I take the liberty to make known to you that it was but a few lines of instruction from abroad, about when and where to deliver an enclosed letter to a young and beautiful lady, then unmarried, in England. I duly observed the same.

I further take the liberty to make known to you that it was got from me as a proof of handwriting only and that otherwise I would not have given it up, unless shot through the heart.

I further take the liberty to mention that if I could have supposed a certain unfortunate gentleman to have been living, I never could have rested until I had discovered him and shared my last farthing with him. But he was reported drowned, and assuredly went over the side of a transport-ship at night in an Irish harbour within a few hours of her arrival from the West Indies, as I have myself heard both from officers and men on board.

I further take the liberty to state that in my humble quality as one of the rank and file, I am, and shall ever be, your thoroughly devoted and admiring servant.

I have the honour to be,
George

“A little formal,” observes the elder brother, refolding it with a puzzled face.

“But nothing that might not be sent to a modest young lady?” asks the younger.

“Nothing at all.”

Therefore it is deposited for posting among the iron correspondence of the day. This done, Mr. George takes a hearty farewell of the family and prepares to saddle. His brother, however, unwilling to part with him so soon, proposes to ride with him to the inn where he will rest for the night, and there remain with him until morning.

The offer, gladly accepted, is followed by a pleasant ride, a pleasant dinner, and a pleasant breakfast, all in brotherly communion. Then they once more shake hands and part, the ironmaster turning his face to the smoke and fires, and the trooper to the green country. Early in the afternoon the subdued sound of his heavy military trot is heard on the turf in the avenue, as he rides on under the old elm-trees.

Chapter 64

Esther's Narrative

Soon after that conversation with my guardian, he put a sealed paper in my hand one morning and said, "This is for next month, my dear." I found in it two hundred pounds.

I now began quietly to make necessary preparations, arranging my wardrobe to please my guardian's taste. I did it so quietly because I was not quite free from my old apprehension that Ada would be rather sorry and because my guardian was so quiet himself. I had no doubt that we should be married in the most private and simple manner. Perhaps I should only have to say to Ada, "Would you like to come and see me married tomorrow, my pet?" Perhaps I might not find it necessary to say anything about it until it was over. I thought that if I were to choose, I would like this best.

The only exception I made was Mrs. Woodcourt. I told her that I was going to be married to my guardian and that we had been engaged some time. She highly approved. She could never do enough for me and was remarkably softened now in comparison to when we first knew her.

Of course this was not a time to neglect my guardian, nor my darling. So I had plenty of occupation, which I was glad of; and as to Charley, she was absolutely not to be seen for needlework. To surround herself with great heaps of it, and do a little, and spend a great deal of time in staring at what there was to do, and persuade herself that she was going to do it, were Charley's great dignities and delights.

Meanwhile, I could not agree with my guardian on the subject of the will, for I had some hopes of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Which of us was right will soon appear, but I certainly did encourage expectations. In Richard, the discovery buoyed him up for a little time, but hope seemed to make him feverish and anxious. From something my guardian said one day when we were talking about this, I understood that my marriage would not take place until after the Chancery term-time; and I thought how rejoiced I should be if I could be married when Richard and Ada were a little more prosperous.

The term was very near indeed when my guardian was called up to Yorkshire on Mr. Woodcourt's business. He had told me beforehand that his presence there would be necessary. I had just come in one night from my dear girl's and was sitting in the midst of all my new clothes, looking at them and thinking, when a letter from my guardian was brought to me. It asked me to join him in the country and mentioned by which stage-coach I should have to leave town in the morning. It added in a postscript that I would not be long away from Ada.

I had not expected a journey at that time, but I set off as appointed early next morning. I travelled all day, wondering what I could be wanted for; now

I thought it might be for this purpose, and now I thought it might be for that, but I was never near the truth.

It was night when I came to my journey's end and found my guardian waiting for me. This was a great relief, for towards evening I had begun to fear (as his letter was a very short one) that he might be ill. However, when I saw his genial face at its brightest and best, I said to myself, he has been doing some great kindness. Not that there was anything unusual in that.

Supper was ready at the hotel, and when we were alone at the table he said, "Full of curiosity, no doubt, little woman, to know why I have brought you here?"

"Well, guardian," said I, "I am a little curious."

"Then, my love," he returned gaily, "I won't wait until tomorrow to tell you. I have very much wished to express to Woodcourt, somehow, my sense of his services and value to us all. When it was decided that he should settle here, it came into my head that I might ask him to accept some suitable little place to live. I therefore caused such a house to be looked for, and one was found on very easy terms, and I have been making it habitable. However, when I walked over it the day before yesterday, I found that I was not housekeeper enough to know whether things were all as they ought to be. So I sent off for the best little housekeeper that could possibly give me her advice. And here she is," said my guardian, "laughing and crying both together!"

Because he was so dear, so good, so admirable. I tried to tell him this, but I could not say a word.

"Tut, tut!" said my guardian. "You make too much of it, little woman. Why, how you sob, Dame Durden, how you sob!"

"It is with pleasure, guardian – with a heart full of thanks."

"Well, well," said he. "I am delighted that you approve. I meant it as a pleasant surprise for the little mistress of Bleak House."

I kissed him and dried my eyes. "I know!" said I. "I have seen this in your face a long while."

When I went to bed, I am bound to confess that I cried; but I hope it was with pleasure, though I am not quite sure it was. I repeated every word of the letter twice over.

After breakfast we went out arm in arm to see the house of which I was to give my mighty housekeeping opinion. We entered a flower-garden by a gate in a side wall, and the first thing I saw was that the beds and flowers were all laid out according to the manner of my beds and flowers at home.

"You see, my dear," observed my guardian, standing still with a delighted face to watch my looks, "knowing there could be no better plan, I borrowed yours."

We went on by a pretty little orchard, where the cherries were nestling among the green leaves, to the house itself – a rustic cottage of small rooms; but such a lovely place, so tranquil and so beautiful, with such a rich and smiling country spread around it; and across a meadow the cheerful town, where cricket-players were assembling in bright groups. As we went through the pretty rooms, out at the little rustic verandah doors, and underneath the

tiny wooden colonnades garlanded with woodbine, jasmine, and honeysuckle, I saw *my* little tastes and fancies, *my* odd ways everywhere.

I could not say enough in admiration, but one secret doubt arose in my mind. I thought, oh, would he be the happier for it? Because although I was not what he thought me, still he loved me very dearly, and it might remind him mournfully of what he believed he had lost. I did not wish him to forget me – but my way was easier than his, and I could have reconciled myself even to that if he had been the happier for it.

“And now, little woman,” said my guardian, whom I had never seen so proud and joyful, “now, last of all, for the name of this house.”

“What is it called, dear guardian?”

“My child,” said he, “come and see.”

He took me to the porch, and showed me, written over it, *Bleak House*.

He led me to a seat among the leaves. Sitting down beside me and taking my hand, he said, smiling, “My darling girl, I wish for your happiness. When I wrote you the letter to which you brought the answer, I had my own happiness too much in view, for I had dreamed of making you my wife; but I had yours in view too. You are following what I say, my child?”

I was cold, and I trembled violently. As I sat looking at him in the sun’s rays, softly shining through the leaves upon his bare head, I felt as if the brightness on him must be like the brightness of the angels.

“Hear me, my love, but do not speak. When it was that I began to doubt whether what I had done would really make you happy is no matter. Woodcourt came home, and I soon had no doubt at all.”

I clasped him round the neck and hung my head upon his breast and wept.

“Rest confidently here, my child,” said he, pressing me gently to him. “I am your guardian and your father now.”

Soothingly, like the gentle rustling of the leaves; and radiantly, like the sunshine, he went on.

“Understand me, my dear girl. I had no doubt of your being contented with me, being so dutiful and so devoted; but I saw with whom you would be happier. Well! I have long been in Allan Woodcourt’s confidence, although he was not, until yesterday, in mine. But I would not have a jot of my dear girl’s virtues unobserved and unhonoured; I would not have her admitted on sufferance into the line of Morgan ap-Kerrig, no, not for the weight in gold of all the mountains in Wales!”

He stopped to kiss me on the forehead, and I sobbed afresh. For I felt as if I could not bear the painful delight of his praise.

“Hush, little woman! Don’t cry; this is to be a day of joy. I have looked forward to it,” he said exultingly, “for months on months! A few words more, Dame Trot. Determined not to throw away one atom of my Esther’s worth, I took Mrs. Woodcourt into a separate confidence. ‘Now, madam,’ said I, ‘I clearly perceive that your son loves my ward. I am very sure that my ward loves your son, but will sacrifice her love to duty and affection, so completely and religiously, that you should never suspect it though you watched her night

and day.’ Then I told her all our story. ‘Now, madam,’ said I, ‘come you, knowing this, and live with us. Come and see my child; set what you see against her pedigree, which is this’ – for I scorned to mince words – ‘and tell me what is the true legitimacy.’ Why, honour to her old Welsh blood, my dear,” cried my guardian with enthusiasm, “her heart beats no less warmly, no less lovingly, towards Dame Durden than my own!”

He tenderly raised my head, and as I clung to him, kissed me in his old fatherly way again.

“One more last word. When Allan Woodcourt spoke to you, my dear, he spoke with my knowledge and consent – but I gave him no encouragement. He was to come and tell me all that passed, and he did. I have no more to say. My dearest, Allan Woodcourt stood beside your father when he lay dead – stood beside your mother. This is Bleak House. This day I give this house its little mistress; and before God, it is the brightest day in all my life!”

He rose and raised me with him. We were no longer alone. My husband – I have called him by that name seven happy years now – stood at my side.

“Allan,” said my guardian, “take from me a willing gift, the best wife that ever man had. I know you deserve her! Take with her the little home she brings you. You know what she will make it, Allan; you know what she has made its namesake. Let me share its happiness sometimes, and what do I sacrifice? Nothing, nothing.”

He kissed me once again, and now the tears were in his eyes as he said more softly, “Esther, my dearest, I know that my mistake has caused you some distress. Forgive your old guardian, in restoring him to his old place in your affections. Allan, take my dear.”

He moved away from under the green roof of leaves, and stopping in the sunlight outside said cheerfully, “I shall be found about here somewhere. It’s a west wind, little woman! Let no one thank me any more, for I am going to revert to my bachelor habits, and if anybody disregards this warning, I’ll run away and never come back!”

What happiness was ours that day, what gratitude, what bliss! We were to be married before the month was out, but when we were to come and live in our own house was to depend on Richard and Ada.

We all three went home together next day. As soon as we arrived in town, Allan went straight to see Richard and to carry our joyful news to him and my darling. Late as it was, I meant to go to her for a few minutes, but I went home with my guardian first to make his tea for him and to occupy the old chair by his side, for I did not like to think of its being empty so soon.

At home we found that a young man had called three times in the course of that day to see me, and had left word that he would call again that evening. He had left his card three times. Mr. Guppy.

As I naturally speculated on the object of these visits, I told my guardian of Mr. Guppy’s old proposal and his subsequent retraction.

“After that,” said my guardian, “we will certainly receive this hero.” So when Mr. Guppy came again, he was shown in.

He was embarrassed when he found my guardian with me, but recovered himself and said, "How de do, sir?"

"How do you do, sir?" returned my guardian.

"Thank you, sir, I am tolerable," returned Mr. Guppy. "Will you allow me to introduce my mother, Mrs. Guppy, and my particular friend, Mr. Weevle, that is to say, Jobling."

My guardian begged them to be seated, and they all sat down.

"Tony," said Mr. Guppy to his friend after an awkward silence. "Will you open the case?"

"Do it yourself," returned the friend rather tartly.

"Well, Mr. Jarndyce, sir," Mr. Guppy began, while his mother nudged Mr. Jobling with her elbow and winked at me in a most remarkable manner, "I had an idea that I should see Miss Summerson by herself. But Miss Summerson has mentioned to you, perhaps, that something has passed between us on former occasions?"

"She has," returned my guardian, smiling.

"That," said Mr. Guppy, "makes matters easier. Sir, I have come out of my articles at Kenge and Carboy's, and I am now admitted on the roll of attorneys and have taken out my certificate. I have no capital myself, but my mother has a small annuity" – here his mother rolled her head and again winked at me – "and I have taken a 'ouse in the locality of Lambeth, and intend setting up professionally for myself there forthwith."

Here Mr. Guppy's mother began smiling waggishly at anybody who would look at her.

"It's a six-roomer, exclusive of kitchens," said Mr. Guppy, "and in the opinion of my friends, a commodious tenement. My friend Jobling will assist me in the capacity of clerk and will live in the 'ouse. Likewise my mother; and consequently there will be no want of society. My friend Jobling is naturally aristocratic by taste, and fully backs me in the intentions I am now developing."

Mr. Jobling said "Certainly," and withdrew a little from Mrs. Guppy's elbow.

"Now, you may know, sir," said Mr. Guppy, "that Miss Summerson's image was formerly imprinted on my 'eart and that I made her a proposal of marriage."

"That I have heard," returned my guardian.

"Circumstances over which I had no control weakened the impression of that image for a time. At which time Miss Summerson's conduct was highly genteel and generous."

My guardian patted me on the shoulder and seemed much amused.

"Now, sir," said Mr. Guppy, "I wish to prove to Miss Summerson that I can rise to a height of which perhaps she hardly thought me capable. I find that the image which I supposed had been eradicated from my 'eart is *not* eradicated. Yielding to it, I am willing to overlook the circumstances over which none of us have had any control and to renew my proposals to Miss Summerson."

“I take upon myself, sir,” said my guardian, laughing as he rang the bell, “to reply to your proposals on behalf of Miss Summerson. She is very sensible of your handsome intentions, and wishes you good evening, and wishes you well.”

“Oh!” said Mr. Guppy with a blank look. “Is that acceptance, or rejection, or consideration?”

“Rejection, if you please,” returned my guardian.

Mr. Guppy looked incredulously at his friend, and at his mother, who suddenly turned very angry.

“Why, get along with you,” said she to my guardian, “what do you mean? Ain’t my son good enough for you? Get out with you!”

“My good lady,” returned my guardian, “it is hardly reasonable to ask me to get out of my own room.”

“I don’t care for that,” said Mrs. Guppy. “Get out with you. If we ain’t good enough for you, go and find somebody that is.”

I was quite unprepared for the rapid manner in which Mrs. Guppy’s jocularly changed.

“Why don’t you get out?” she said. “What are you stopping here for?”

“Mother,” interposed her son, “will you hold your tongue?”

“No, William, I won’t!”

However, Mr. Guppy and Mr. Jobling together closed on her and took her, very much against her will, downstairs, her voice rising as she got lower, and insisting that we should immediately get out.

Chapter 65

Beginning the World

The Chancery term had commenced, and Mr. Kenge told us that the cause would come on in two days. As I had sufficient hopes of the will to be in a flutter about it, Allan and I agreed to go down to the court that morning. Richard was extremely agitated and was so weak and low that my dear girl indeed required support. But she looked forward to the child that was to come, and never drooped.

The Court of Chancery was to be held at Westminster Hall. As we were walking along, planning what we should do for Richard and Ada, I heard somebody calling "Esther! My dear Esther!" And there was Caddy, with her head out of the window of a little carriage which she hired now to go about in to her pupils. I had written her a note to tell her of all that my guardian had done, but had not had a moment to go and see her.

Of course we turned back, and the affectionate girl was in such rapture, and was so overjoyed to talk about the night when she brought me the flowers, and was calling me all kinds of precious names, that I was obliged to get into the little carriage and calm her down by letting her say what she liked. Allan, standing at the window, was as pleased as Caddy; and I came away laughing, and red.

This made us some quarter of an hour late, and when we came to Westminster Hall the day's business was begun. Worse than that, we found such an unusual crowd in the Court of Chancery that it was full to the door, and we could neither see nor hear what was passing within. It appeared to be something droll, for occasionally there was a laugh and a cry of "Silence!" The professional gentlemen were very merry about it, for there were several young lawyers quite doubled up.

We asked a gentleman nearby if he knew what cause was on. He told us Jarndyce and Jarndyce. We asked him if he knew what was happening in it. He said, no he did not, nobody ever did, but as well as he could make out, it was over. Over for the day? we asked him. No, he said, over for good.

Over for good!

We looked at one another lost in amazement. Could it be possible that the will had set things right at last and that Richard and Ada would be rich? It seemed too good to be true. Alas, it was!

People now came streaming out looking flushed and hot and exceedingly amused, more like people coming out from a farce or a juggler than from a court of justice. We stood aside, watching, and presently great bundles of paper began to be carried out, which the bearers staggered under, and threw down anyhow, on the Hall pavement, while they went back to bring out more. Even these clerks were laughing. We glanced at the papers, and saw Jarndyce and Jarndyce everywhere.

Then we perceived Mr. Kenge coming out of court with affable dignity, listening to Mr. Vholes. Mr. Vholes was the first to see us. "Here is Miss Summerson, sir," he said. "And Mr. Woodcourt."

"Oh, indeed! Yes," said Mr. Kenge, raising his hat. "How do you do? Mr. Jarndyce is not here?"

No. He never came there, I reminded him.

"Really," returned Mr. Kenge, "it is as well that he is not here today, for his opinion might have been strengthened, perhaps."

"Pray what has been done today?" asked Allan.

"What has been done," repeated Mr. Kenge. "Quite so. Not much. We have been checked upon the threshold."

"Is this will considered genuine, sir?" said Allan.

"We have not gone into that," said Mr. Kenge.

"We have not gone into that," repeated Mr. Vholes like a dull echo.

"Reflect, Mr. Woodcourt," observed Mr. Kenge smoothly, "that this has been a great cause, a protracted and complex cause. Jarndyce and Jarndyce has been termed a monument of Chancery practice."

"And patience has sat upon it a long time," said Allan.

"Indeed, sir," returned Mr. Kenge. "Further reflect, Mr. Woodcourt, that on the numerous difficulties in this great cause, there has been expended study, ability, eloquence, knowledge, and high intellect. For many years, the flower of the bar has been lavished upon Jarndyce and Jarndyce. And this great public benefit must be paid for, sir."

"Mr. Kenge," said Allan. "Do I understand that the whole estate is found to have been absorbed in costs?"

"Hem! I believe so," returned Mr. Kenge.

"I believe so," said Mr. Vholes.

"And that thus the suit lapses and melts away?"

"Probably," returned Mr. Kenge. "Mr. Vholes?"

"My dearest life," whispered Allan, "this will break Richard's heart!"

There was such a shock of apprehension in his face, and I too had seen so much of Richard's gradual decay, that what my dear girl had said to me in her foreboding love sounded like a knell in my ears.

"If you should be wanting Mr. C., sir," said Mr. Vholes, "you'll find him in court. I left him there resting. Good day." He hastened after Mr. Kenge, and his black buttoned-up unwholesome figure glided away.

"My dear love," said Allan, "leave him to me, for a little while. Go home, and come to Ada's by and by!"

Hurrying home, I found my guardian and told him the news.

"Little woman," said he, quite unmoved for himself, "to have done with the suit on any terms is a blessing. But my poor young cousins!"

We talked about them all morning, discussing what it was possible to do. In the afternoon my guardian walked with me to Symond's Inn and I went upstairs. When my darling heard my footsteps, she came out and threw her arms round my neck.

Composing herself, she said that Richard had asked for me. Allan had found him sitting in the corner of the court, she told me, like a stone figure. On being roused, he had broken away as if he would have spoken fiercely to the judge. He was stopped by his mouth being full of blood, and Allan had brought him home.

He was lying on a sofa with his eyes closed when I went in. The room was darkened, and was very orderly and quiet. Allan stood watching him gravely. Richard's face appeared to be quite without colour, and I fully saw, for the first time, how worn away he was. But he looked handsomer than I had seen him look for many a day.

I sat down by his side. Opening his eyes, he said in a weak voice, but with his old smile, "Dame Durden, kiss me, my dear!"

It was a great comfort and surprise to me to find him cheerful and looking forward. He was happier, he said, in our intended marriage than he could say. My husband had been a guardian angel to him and Ada, and he blessed us both. I almost felt as if my own heart would have broken when I saw him take my husband's hand and hold it to his breast.

We spoke of the future as much as possible, and he said several times that he must be present at our marriage if he could stand upon his feet. Ada would contrive to take him, somehow, he said.

"Yes, surely, dearest Richard!" But as my darling answered him thus, so serene and beautiful – I knew – I knew!

It was not good for him to talk too much. Sitting beside him, I made a pretence of sewing for my dear, as he always used to joke about my being busy. Ada leaned upon his pillow, holding his head upon her arm. He dozed often, and whenever he awoke, said first of all, "Where is Woodcourt?"

Evening had come on when I lifted up my eyes and saw my guardian standing in the little hall.

"Who is that, Dame Durden?" Richard asked me.

I looked to Allan for advice, and as he nodded, bent over Richard and told him. My guardian came softly in and laid his hand on Richard's.

"Oh, sir," said Richard, "you are a good man, you are a good man!" and burst into tears for the first time.

My guardian sat down in my place, keeping his hand on Richard's.

"My dear Rick," said he, "the clouds have cleared away, and it is bright now. We can see now. We were all bewildered, Rick, more or less. What matters! And how are you, my dear boy?"

"I am very weak, sir, but I hope I shall be stronger. I have to begin the world."

"Aye, truly; well said!" cried my guardian.

"I will not begin it in the old way now," said Richard with a sad smile. "I have learned a lesson now, sir. It was a hard one, but I have learned it."

"Well, well," said my guardian, comforting him; "well, well, dear boy!"

"I was thinking, sir," resumed Richard, "that there is nothing I should so much like as to see as their house – Dame Durden's and Woodcourt's house.

If I could be moved there, I feel as if I should get well there sooner than anywhere.”

“Why, she and I have been thinking so too, Rick,” said my guardian, “and we have been talking of it this very day. I dare say her husband won’t object. What do you think?”

Richard smiled.

“I think of Ada,” he said, “and have thought of her very much. See her here, sir, bending over this pillow when she has so much need to rest upon it herself, my dear love!”

He clasped her in his arms, and none of us spoke until he gradually released her.

“When I get to the new Bleak House,” said Richard, “I shall have much to tell you, sir. They have told me how you planned it. It will be like coming to the old Bleak House again.”

“And you will come there too, I hope, Rick. I am a solitary man now, you know, and it will be a kindness to visit me.”

“It was a troubled dream?” said Richard, clasping my guardian’s hands.

“Nothing more, Rick; nothing more.”

“And you can forgive and pity the dreamer, and be lenient when he wakes?”

“Indeed I can. What am I but another dreamer, Rick?”

“I will begin the world!” said Richard with a light in his eyes.

My husband drew a little nearer towards Ada, and I saw him solemnly lift up his hand to warn my guardian.

“When shall I go to that pleasant country where the old times are, where I shall have strength to tell what Ada has been to me, where I shall be able to recall my many faults and blindnesses, where I shall prepare myself to be a guide to my unborn child?” said Richard. “When shall I go?”

“Dear Rick, when you are strong enough,” returned my guardian.

“Ada, my darling!”

He sought to lift himself a little. Allan raised him so that she could hold him.

“I have done you many wrongs, my own. I have married you to poverty and trouble, I have scattered your means to the winds. You will forgive me all this, my Ada, before I begin the world?”

A smile irradiated his face as she bent to kiss him. He slowly laid his face down upon her bosom, drew his arms closer round her neck, and with one parting sob began the world.

Not this world, oh, not this! The world that sets this right.

Chapter 66

Down in Lincolnshire

There is a hush upon Chesney Wold in these altered days. The handsome Lady Dedlock lies in the mausoleum in the park, where the trees arch darkly overhead, and the owl at night makes the woods ring; but where and how she died, is all mystery. Some of her old friends did occasionally say that they wondered that the ashes of the Dedlocks, entombed in the mausoleum, never rose against the profanation of her company. But the dead-and-gone Dedlocks take it very calmly.

Winding by the bridle-road among the trees, comes sometimes to this lonely spot the sound of horses' hoofs. Then may be seen Sir Leicester – bent, and almost blind, but of worthy presence yet – riding with a stalwart man beside him. When they come to a certain spot before the mausoleum, Sir Leicester's horse stops of his own accord, and Sir Leicester, pulling off his hat, is still for a few moments before they ride away.

War rages yet with the audacious Boythorn, though uncertainly, flickering like an unsteady fire. When Sir Leicester came down to Lincolnshire for good, Mr. Boythorn showed a desire to abandon his right of way and do whatever Sir Leicester wished. Sir Leicester was so magnificently aggrieved by this, that Mr. Boythorn found himself needing to commit a flagrant trespass to restore his neighbour to himself. So Mr. Boythorn continues to post tremendous placards on the disputed thoroughfare and to hold forth vehemently against Sir Leicester in his own home; he also defies him as of old in church by seeming blandly unconscious of his existence.

But when he is most ferocious towards his old foe, he is really most considerate, and Sir Leicester little supposes how much he is humoured. Little, too, does he think how near together he and his antagonist have suffered in the fortunes of two sisters, and his antagonist is not the man to tell him. So the quarrel goes on to the satisfaction of both.

In one of the park lodges, within sight of the house, the stalwart man, the trooper formerly, is housed. Some relics of his old calling hang upon the walls, and a little lame man about the stable-yard keeps these gleaming bright. A busy little man he is, polishing anything that will take a polish; he answers to the name of Phil.

Good it is to see the grand old housekeeper going to church on her son's arm and to observe their manner towards Sir Leicester, and his towards them. They have visitors in the high summer weather, when a grey cloak and umbrella are seen among the leaves; when two young ladies are occasionally found gambolling in the park; and when the smoke of two pipes wreathes away into the fragrant evening air from the trooper's door. Then is a fife heard within the lodge on the inspiring topic of the "British Grenadiers"; and

a gruff voice is heard to say, while two men pace together up and down, "But I never own to it before the old girl. Discipline must be maintained."

The greater part of the house is shut up; yet Sir Leicester holds state in the long drawing-room, and reposes in his old place before my Lady's picture. The light of the drawing-room seems gradually contracting and dwindling until it shall be no more. Soon, in truth, it will be all extinguished for Sir Leicester; and the damp door in the mausoleum will have opened and received him.

Volumnia reads to Sir Leicester in the long evenings and is driven to various artifices to conceal her yawns, of which the chief is the insertion of her pearl necklace between her rosy lips. Long-winded treatises on politics are the staple of her reading. Sir Leicester does not appear to follow it very closely, although he always comes wide awake the moment Volumnia ventures to leave off, and begs with some displeasure to know if she finds herself fatigued. However, Volumnia, in the course of her bird-like hopping about and pecking at papers, has found a memorandum concerning herself in the event of "anything happening" to her kinsman, which is handsome compensation.

The only great occasions for Volumnia in this changed aspect of the place are the rare occasions of a public ball. Then, indeed, she comes out in fairy form and proceeds with joy under cousinly escort to the exhausted old assembly-room, fourteen heavy miles off. Then, indeed, she captivates all hearts by her girlish vivacity, and by her skipping about through the mazes of the dance.

For the rest, Lincolnshire life to Volumnia is a vast blank of overgrown house looking out upon trees, sighing and wringing their hands in monotonous depressions. A labyrinth of grandeur; a waste of unused passages and staircases in which to drop a comb upon a bedroom floor at night is to send a stealthy footfall on an errand through the house. A place where few people care to go about alone, where a maid screams if an ash drops from the fire, takes to crying at all times, becomes the victim of a low disorder of the spirits, and gives notice and departs.

Thus Chesney Wold. With so much of itself abandoned to darkness and vacancy; with so little change, so sombre and motionless always – no flag flying by day, no rows of lights sparkling by night; with no family to come and go, no visitors, no stir of life about it – passion and pride have died away from the place in Lincolnshire and yielded it to dull repose.

Chapter 67

The Close of Esther's Narrative

Full seven happy years I have been the mistress of Bleak House. My last few words are soon penned; then I and the unknown friend to whom I write will part for ever.

They gave my darling into my arms, and through many weeks I never left her. The little child who was to have done so much was born before the turf was planted on its father's grave. It was a boy; and we called him Richard.

The help that my dear counted on did come to her, though it came, in the eternal wisdom, for another purpose. To bless and restore his mother, not his father, was the errand of this baby, and its power was mighty. When I saw how the weak little hand could heal my darling's heart and raise hope within her, I felt a new sense of the tenderness of God.

They throve, and soon I saw my dear girl walk in my country garden with her infant in her arms. I was married then. I was the happiest of the happy.

It was at this time that my guardian joined us and asked Ada when she would come home.

"Both houses are your home, my dear," said he, "but the older Bleak House claims priority. When you and my boy are strong enough to do it, come and take possession of your home."

Ada called him "her dearest cousin, John." But he said, no, it must be guardian now. He was her guardian, and the boy's; she has called him guardian ever since. The children know him by no other name. I say the children; I have two little daughters.

It is difficult to believe that Charley is married to a miller in our neighbourhood; yet so it is; and even now, looking up from my desk as I write early in the morning at my window, I see the very mill beginning to go round. I hope the miller will not spoil Charley; but he is very fond of her, and Charley is rather vain of such a match, for he is well to do and was in great request. Little Emma, Charley's sister, is now exactly what Charley used to be. As to Tom, Charley's brother, he is apprenticed to the miller, and is a good bashful fellow, always falling in love with somebody and being ashamed of it.

Caddy passed her last holidays with us and was perpetually dancing in and out of the house with the children as if she had never given a dancing-lesson in her life. Caddy keeps her own little carriage now, and lives two miles west of her former house. She works very hard, but she is more than contented. Mr. Jellyby spends his evenings at her new house with his head against the wall as he used to do in her old one. Mrs. Jellyby was understood to suffer great mortification from her daughter's ignoble marriage and

pursuits, but I hope she got over it in time. Caddy's poor little girl is not such a mite now, but she is deaf and dumb. I believe there never was a better mother than Caddy, who learns innumerable deaf and dumb arts to soften the affliction of her child.

As for Peepy, he is in the Custom House, and doing extremely well. Old Mr. Turveydrop, very apoplectic, still exhibits his deportment about town, and enjoys himself in the old manner. He is constant in his patronage of Peepy and is understood to have bequeathed him a favourite French clock, which is not his property.

With the first money we saved at home, we added to our pretty house by building a little growlery expressly for my guardian, which we inaugurated with great splendour the next time he came down to see us. I try to write all this lightly, but when I write of him, my tears will have their way.

I never look at him but I hear our poor dear Richard calling him a good man. To Ada and her pretty boy, he is the fondest father; to me he is what he has ever been, and what name can I give to that? He is my husband's best and dearest friend, he is our children's darling, he is the object of our deepest love and veneration. Yet while I feel as if he were a superior being, I am so familiar and easy with him that I almost wonder at myself.

I have never known the wind to be in the east for a single moment since the day when he took me to the porch to read the name. I remarked to him once that the wind seemed never in the east now, and he said, no, truly; it had finally departed from that quarter on that very day.

I think my darling girl is more beautiful than ever. The sorrow that has been in her face – for it is not there now – seems to have given its innocent expression a diviner quality. Sometimes when I raise my eyes and see her in the black dress that she still wears, teaching my Richard, I feel as if it were so good to know that she remembers her dear Esther in her prayers.

I call him my Richard! But he says that he has two mamas, and I am one.

We are not rich in the bank, but we have quite enough. I never walk out with my husband but I hear the people bless him. I never go into a house without hearing his praises or seeing them in grateful eyes. Every day he alleviates pain and soothes some fellow-creature in the time of need. Is not this to be rich?

The people even praise me as the doctor's wife. As I go about, they make so much of me that I am quite abashed. I owe it all to him, my love, my pride! They like me for his sake, as I do everything I do in life for his sake.

A night or two ago, after bustling about preparing for my darling and my guardian and little Richard, who are coming tomorrow, I was sitting out in the porch when Allan came home.

He said, "My precious little woman, what are you doing here?"

And I said, "The moon is shining so brightly, Allan, and the night is so delicious, that I have been sitting here thinking."

"What have you been thinking about, my dear?" said Allan.

“I am almost ashamed to tell you, but I will. I have been thinking about my old looks – such as they were.”

“And what have you been thinking about them, my busy bee?” said Allan.

“I have been thinking that it seems impossible that you could have loved me any better, even if I had retained them.”

“Such as they were?” said Allan, laughing.

“Such as they were, of course.”

“My dear Dame Durden,” said Allan, drawing my arm through his, “do you ever look in the glass?”

“You know I do; you see me do it.”

“And don’t you know that you are prettier than you ever were?”

“I did not know that. But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen, and that they can very well do without much beauty in me – even supposing–”

The End

Notes on some Aspects of Bleak House

The Court of Chancery

The Court of Chancery was a division of the British High Court of Justice. It became established in the 15th Century as a court of equity, to decide cases that could not be dealt with in the courts of common law. The Court of Chancery was presided over by the Lord Chancellor, and dealt with cases involving (amongst other things) wills, trusts, injunctions and contracts involving disputes about money. By the time Dickens was writing, the Court of Chancery had become well-known for delay, expense and injustice. It was fused into the High Court of Justice in the Judicature Act of 1873.

Esther's Parents

The full story of Esther's parents is not spelt out by Dickens, but is presented piecemeal for the reader to stitch together. To summarise:

Esther's mother was called Honoria; her original surname is uncertain. Honoria's older sister, though known to Esther as Miss Barbary, seems to have assumed this name (as related by John Jarndyce in chapter 17.) As a young woman, Honoria became engaged to a military officer, Captain James Hawdon, who was evidently a generous but spendthrift man. It seems that after she became pregnant with his child, he sailed with his troops to the West Indies. On his return he was (according to Mr. George in chapter 63) lost over the side of the army transport-ship off the Irish coast, and was assumed dead.

Honoria gave birth to their child, Esther, at her elder sister's house; the baby was unresponsive on its birth and Honoria was told by her sister that it had died. In the belief that her fiancé was also dead, she went on to marry Sir Leicester Dedlock, twenty years her senior. The first time she realised that the child had lived was when Mr Guppy revealed to her that Esther Summerson's real name was Esther Hawdon (in chapter 29.)

Honoria's older sister had been engaged to Mr Boythorn, but broke off that engagement abruptly without explanation in order to raise Esther. Hence her bitterness; she sacrificed her own chance of marriage in order that her sister might go on to have a untainted future.

Captain Hawdon survived his shipwreck and returned, it is not known how or when, to England. It is to be presumed that by the time of his return Honoria

had married Sir Leicester. To approach her or even to assume his old identity could have brought her disgrace; so Hawdon lived in poverty and obscurity, under the assumed name Nemo (meaning Nobody.) A year and a half before the main events of the book, he took lodgings with Krook; he made a meagre living as a copier, took opium, and died of an overdose.

Esther's disease

Dickens does not give a name to the disease which strikes Esther down, makes her temporarily blind and disfigures her face. However, from his description it is clear that the illness is smallpox (and it is named as such in this abridgment).

Although it was eradicated in the 1970s by a global vaccination program, in nineteenth century Britain smallpox was relatively common, and proved fatal in about 30% of cases. The incubation period was from 7 to 17 days. [1] (In *Bleak House*, Charley develops the symptoms 6 days after her first contact with the sick Jo.)

Symptoms started with fever and aching, and progressed with a rash over the whole body which frequently left permanent and severe scarring. The lesions had a distinctive odour, which is mentioned by Dickens in Chapter 31 as “an unhealthy and very peculiar smell.” Esther's fear of permanent blindness was well-founded: up to 9% of patients suffered ocular complications of various kinds, including infection, corneal ulceration and keratitis, sometimes resulting in blindness. [2]

[1]

<https://www.who.int/csr/disease/smallpox/faq/en/> (World Health Organisation)

[2]

Richard D. Semba, MD, MPH

‘The Ocular Complications of Smallpox and Smallpox Immunization’

Arch Ophthalmol. 2003;121(5):715-719.

Online at

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamaophthalmology/fullarticle/415346>

Harold Skimpole

Harold Skimpole, who seems on his first introduction in *Bleak House* a diverting source of humour, is revealed by the end of the book as a self-serving and sinister character. Skimpole was widely believed to have been

modelled on the poet and essayist Leigh Hunt (1784 – 1859); a belief which Dickens did little to dispel at the time, although he denied that Skimpole's treachery had anything to do with Hunt.

Leigh Hunt was a well-known literary figure and prolific author who published a number of magazines. A light-hearted optimist, he took great pleasure in literature, drama, music and friendship, but also gained a reputation as a chronic debtor who sponged on his friends. However, as well as being a talented writer, Hunt was a strong supporter of other writers – notably Keats and the Romantic poets – and worked hard throughout his life; these aspects of his character were entirely omitted from Dickens's portrait.

Spontaneous human combustion

Unexplained deaths by burning, like those of Krook in *Bleak House*, have been recorded since the 18th century. Dickens appeared to have been fascinated by the phenomenon and evidently believed that the source of the combustion was within the body itself. Modern opinion is divided as to the true cause of apparent spontaneous combustion, citing the frequent presence of nearby fires, alcohol, grease and candles in such cases.

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Abridgements are by Emma Laybourn MA PGCE.

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