A Tale of Two Cities: Part 01

Charles Dickens
A TALE OF TWO CITIES.

In Three Books.

BY CHARLES DICKENS.

BOOK the First. RECALLED TO LIFE.

CHAPTER I. THE PERIOD.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

There were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face, on the throne of England; there were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face, on the throne of France. In both countries it was clearer than crystal to the lords of the State preserves of leaves and fishes, that things in general were settled for ever.

It was the year of Our Lord one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five. Spiritual revelations were conceded to England at that favoured period, as at this. Mrs. Southcott had recently attained her five-and-twentieth blessed period, as at this. Mrs. Southcott had recently attained her five-and-twentieth blessed birthday, of whom a prophetic private in the Life Guards had heralded the sublime appearance of its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Even the Cock-lane ghost had been laid only a round dozen of years, after rapping out its messages as the spirits of this very year last past (supernaturally deficient in originality) rapped out theirs. Mere messages in the earthly order of events had lately come to the English Crown and People, from a congress of British subjects in America: which, strange to relate, have proved more important to the human race than any communications yet received through any of the chickens of the Cock-lane brood.

France, less favoured on the whole as to matters spiritual than her sister in the shield and trident, rolled with exceeding smoothness down hill, making paper money and spending it. Under the guidance of her Christian pastors, she entertained herself, besides, with such humane achievements as sentencing a youth to have his hands cut off, his tongue torn out with pincers, and his body burned alive, because he had not knelted down in the rain to do honour to a dirty procession of monks which passed within his view, at a distance of some fifty or sixty yards. It is likely enough that, rooted in the woods of France and Norway, there were growing trees, when that sufferer was put to death, already marked by the Woodman, Fate, to come down and be sawn into boards, to make a certain movable framework with a sack and a knife in it, terrible in history. It is likely enough that in the rough outhouses of some tillers of the heavy lands adjacent to Paris, there were sheltered from the weather that very day, rude carts, besmeared with rustie mire, snuffed about by pigs, and rosted in by poultry, which the Farmer, Death, had already set apart to be his tumbrils of the Revolution. But, that Woodman, and that Farmer, though they work unceasingly, work silently, and no one heard them as they went about with muffled tread: the rather, forasmuch as to entertain any suspicion that they were awake, was to be atheistical and traitorous.

In England, there was scarcely an amount of order and protection to justify much national boasting. During burglaries by armed men, and highway robberies, took place in the capital itself every night; families were publicly cautioned not to go out of town without removing their fur-, which the Farmer, Death, had already set apart to be his tumbrils of the Revolution. But, that Woodman, and that Farmer, though they work unceasingly, work silently, and no one heard them as they went about with muffled tread: the rather, forasmuch as to entertain any suspicion that they were awake, was to be atheistical and traitorous.
A clammy and intensely cold mist, it made its way up the hill, and it had roamed in its forlornness up the hill, and the senger might, and was disturbed in mind. Whenever the leader made this speech, and everything upon it—like an unusually emulous intent of taking it back to Blackheath. Drawing the coach across the road, with the horses stopped to breathe, as a highwayman. The emphatic horse, cut short by the whip in the brain, and the guard, they all suspected everybody else, and the coachman was sure of nothing but the horses; as to which cattle he could with a clear conscience have taken his oath on the two Testaments that they were not fit for the journey.

"Wo-ho!" said the coachman. "So, then! One more pull and you're at the top and be damned to you, for I have had trouble enough to get you to it!—Joe!"

"Halloa!" the guard replied.

"What o'clock do you make it, Joe?"

"Ten minutes past eleven."

"My blood!" ejaculated the vexed coachman.

"and not atop of Shooter's yet! Tst! Yah! Get on with you!"

The emphatic horse, cut short by the whip in a most decided negative, made a scramble for it, and the three other horses followed suit. Once more, the Dover mail struggled on, with the jack-boots of its passengers squashing along by its side. They had stopped when the coach stopped, and they kept close company with it. If any one of the three had had the hardihood to propose to another to walk a little ahead into the mist and darkness, he would have put himself in a fair way of getting shot instantly as a highwayman.

The last burst carried the mail to the summit of the hill. The horses stopped to breathe again, and the guard got down to skid the wheel for the descent, and open the coach door to let the passengers in.
"I know this messenger, guard," said Mr. Lorry, getting down into the road—assisted from behind more swiftly than politely by the other two passengers, who immediately scrambled into the coach, shut the door, and pulled up the window. "He may come close; there's nothing wrong."

"I hope there ain't, but I can't make so 'Nation sure of that," said the guard, in gruff soliloquy. "Hallo you!"

"Well! And hallo you!" said Jerry, more hoarsely than before.

"Come on at a footpace; dy'e mind me? And if you've got holsters to that saddle o' yers, don't let me see your hand go nigh 'em. For I'm a devil at a quick mistake, and when I make one it takes the form of Lead. So now let's look at you."

The figures of a horse and rider came slowly through the eddying mist, and came to the side of the mail, where the passengers were now making a general pretence of being asleep. With no more definite purpose than to escape the hazard of originating any other kind of action.

The watchful guard, with his right hand on the stock of his raised blunderbuss, his left hand on the barrel, and his eye on the horseman, answered curtly, "Sir."

"There is nothing to apprehend. I belong to Tellson's Bank. You must know Tellson's Bank in London. I am going to Paris on business. A crown to drink. I may read this?"

"If so be as you're quick, sir." The rider's horse was blown, and both horse and rider were covered with mud, from the hoofs of the horse to the last of the man.

"Guard!" said the passenger, in a tone of quiet business confidence. The guard turned round, and looked back, without contradicting.

"What passenger?"

"A despatch sent after you from over yonder T. and Co."

"What is the matter?"

"Yes, Mr. Lorry."

"What is the matter?"

"A despatch sent after you from over yonder T. and Co."
up inside, keep the flint and steel sparks well off
the straw, and get a light with tolerable safety
and ease (if he were lucky) in five minutes.

"Tom!" softly over the coach-roof.

"Hallo, Joe."

"Did you hear the message?"

"I did, Joe."

"What did you make of it, Tom?"

"Nothing at all, Joe."

"That's a coincidence, too," the guard mused,
"for I made the same of myself."

Jerry, left alone in the mist and darkness, dis-
mounted meanwhile, not only to ease his spent
horse, but to wipe the mud from his face, and
shake the wet out of his hat-brim, which might
be capable of holding about half a gallon.
After standing with the bridle over his heavily-
splashed arm, until the wheels of the mail
were no longer within hearing and the night was quite
still again, he turned to walk down the hill.

"After that gallop from Temple-bar, old lady, I won't trust your fore-legs till I get you
no longer within hearing and the night was quite
still again, he turned to walk down the hill.

"Nothing at all, Joe." said the messenger, harping
on one theme as he rode. "It wouldn't do for
you, Jerry. Jerry, you honest tradesman, it
wouldn't suit your line of business! Re-
called! Bust me if I don't think he'd been
a drinking!"

His message perplexed his mind to that de-
gree that he was faint, several times, to take off
his hat to scratch his head. Except on the
crown, which was raggedly bald, he had stiff,
black hair, standing jaggedly all over it, and
growing down-dill almost to his broad, blunt
nose. It was so like smith's work, so much
more like the top of a strongly spiked wall than
a head of hair, that the best of players at leap-
frog might have declined him, as the most dan-
gerous man in the world to go over.

While he trotted back with the message he
was to deliver to the night watchman in his box
at the door of Tellson's Bank, by Temple-bar,
who was to deliver it to greater authorities
within, the shadows of the night took such
shapes to him as arose out of the message, and
took such shapes to the mare as arose out of
her private topics of uneasiness. They seemed
to be numerous, for she shied at every shadow
on the road.

What time, the mail-coach lumbered, jolted,
rattled, and bumped upon its tedious way, with
its three fellow inscrutables inside. To whom,
likewise, the shadows of the night revealed
themselves, in the forms their dozing eyes and
wandering thoughts suggested.

Tellson's Bank had a run upon it in the mail.
As the bank passenger—with an arm drawn
through the leather strap, which did what lay
in it to keep him from pounding against the
next passenger, and driving him into his corner,
whenever the coach got a special jolt—nodded
in his place with half-shut eyes, the little coach-
windows, and the coach-lamp dimly gleaming
through them, and the bulky bundle of opposite
passenger, became the bank, and did a great stroke
of business. The rattle of the harness was the chink of money, and more drafts were
honoured in five minutes than even Tellson’s, with all its foreign and home connexion, ever paid in thrice the time. Then, the strong-rooms underground, at Tellson’s, with such of their valuable stores and secrets as were known to the passenger (and it was not a little that he knew about them), opened before him, and he went in among them with the great keys and the feebly-burning candle, and found them safe, and strong, and sound, and still, just as he had last seen them.

But, though the bank was almost always with him, and though the coach (in a confused way, like the presence of pain under an opiate), was always with him, there was another current of impression that never ceased to run, all through the night. He was on his way to dig some one out of a grave.

Now, which of the multitude of faces that showed themselves before him was the true face of the buried person, the shadows of the night did not indicate; but they were all the faces of a man of five-and-forty by years, and they differed principally in the passions they expressed, and in the ghastliness of their worn and wasted state. Pride, contempt, defiance, stubbornness, submission, lamentation, succeeded one another; so did varieties of sunk check, cadaverous colour, emaciated hands and figures. But the face was in the main one face, and every head was prematurely white. A hundred times the dozing passenger inquired of this spectre:

“Buried how long?”

The answer was always the same: “Almost eighteen years.”

“You had abandoned all hope of being dug out?”

“Long ago.”

“You know that you are recalled to life?”

“They tell me so.”

“I hope you care to live?”

“I can’t say.”

“Shall I show her to you? Will you come and see her?”

The answers to this question were various and contradictory. Sometimes the broken reply was, “Wait! It would kill me if I saw her too soon.” Sometimes, it was given in a tender rain of tears, and then it was, “Take me to her.” Sometimes, it was staring and bewildered, and then it was, “I don’t know her. I don’t understand.”

After such imaginary discourse, the passenger in his fancy would dig, and dig, dig—now, with a spade, now with a great key, now with his hands—to dig this wretched creature out. Get out at last, with earth hanging about his face and hair, he would suddenly fall away to dust. The passenger would then start to himself, and lower the window, to get the reality of mist and rain on his cheeks.

Yet even when his eyes were opened on the mist and rain, on the moving patch of light from the lamps, and the hedge at the roadside retreating by jerks, the night shadows outside the coach would fall into the train of the night sha-dows within. The real Banking-house by Temple-bar, the real business of the past day, the real strong-rooms, the real express sent after him, and the real message returned, would all be there.

Out of the midst of them, the ghastly face would rise, and he would assent it again.

“Buried how long?”

“Almost eighteen years.”

“I hope you care to live?”

“I can’t say.”

Dig—dig—dig—until an impatient movement from one of the two passengers would admonish him to pull up the window, draw his arm securely through the leather strap, and speculate upon the two slumbering forms, until his mind lost its hold of them, and they again slid away into the bank and the grave.

“Buried how long?”

“Almost eighteen years.”

“You had abandoned all hope of being dug out?”

“Long ago.”

The words were still in his hearing as just spoken—distinctly in his hearing as ever spoken words had been in his life—when the weary passenger started to the consciousness of daylight, and found that the shadows of the night were gone.

He lowered the window, and looked out at the rising sun. There was a ridge of ploughed land, with a plough upon it where it had been left last night when the horses were unyoked; beyond, a quiet coppice-wood, in which many leaves of burning red and golden yellow still remained upon the trees. Though the earth was cold and wet, the sky was clear, and the sun rose bright, placid, and beautiful.

“Eighteen years!” said the passenger, looking at the sun. “Gracious Creator of Day! To be buried alive for eighteen years!”

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