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A Tale of Two Cities: Part 12

Charles Dickens

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A TALE OF TWO CITIES.
In Three Books.
BY CHARLES DICKENS.

BOOK THE SECOND. THE GOLDEN THREAD.
CHAPTER XII. THE FELLOW OF DELICACY.

Mr. Stryver having made up his mind to that magnanimous bestowal of good fortune on the doctor's daughter, resolved to make her happiness known to her before he left town for the Long Vacation. After some mental debating of the point, he came to the conclusion that it would be as well to get all the preliminaries done with, and they could then arrange at their leisure whether he should give her his hand a week or two before Michaelmas Term, or in the little Christmas vacation between it and Hilary.

As to the strength of his case, he had not a doubt about it, but clearly saw his way. Argued with the jury on substantial worldly grounds—the only grounds ever worth taking into account—it was a plain case, and had not a weak spot in it. He called himself for the plaintiff, there was no getting over his evidence, the counsel for the defendant threw up his brief, and the jury did not even turn to consider.

Accordingly, Mr. Stryver inaugurated the Long Vacation with a formal proposal to take Miss Manette to Vauxhall Gardens; that failing, to Ranelagh; that unaccountably failing too, it behoved him to present himself in Soho, and there declare his noble mind.

Towards Soho, therefore, Mr. Stryver shouldered his way from the Temple, while the bloom of the Long Vacation's infancy was still upon it. Anybody who had seen him projecting himself into Soho while he was yet on Saint Dunstan's side of Temple Bar, bursting in his full-blown way along the pavement, to the jostlement of weaker people, might have seen how safe and strong he was.

His way taking him past Tellson's, and he both banking at Tellson's and knowing Mr. Lorry as the intimate friend of the Manettes, it entered Mr. Stryver's mind to enter the bank and reveal to Mr. Lorry the brightness of the Soho horizon. So, he pushed open the door with the weak rattle in its throat, stumbled down the two steps, got past the two ancient cashiers, and shouldered himself into the musty back closet where Mr. Lorry sat at great books ruled for figures, with perpendicular iron bars to his window as if that were ruled for figures too, and everything under the clouds were a sum.

"Halloa!" said Mr. Stryver. "How do you do? I hope you are well?"

It was Stryver's grand peculiarity that he always seemed too big for any place, or space. He was so much too big for Tellson's that old clerks in distant corners looked up with looks of remonstrance, as though he squeezed them against the wall. The House itself, magnificently reading the paper quite in the far-off perspective, lowered displeased, as if the Stryver head had been butted into its responsible waistcoat.

The discreet Mr. Lorry said, in a sample tone of the voice he would recommend under the circumstances, "How do you do, Mr. Stryver? How do you do, sir?" and shook hands. There was a peculiarity in his manner of shaking hands, always to be seen in any clerk at Tellson's who shook hands with a customer when the House pervaded the air. He shook in a self-abnegating way, as one who shook for Tellson and Co.

"Can I do anything for you, Mr. Stryver?" asked Mr. Lorry, in his business character.

"Why, no thank you; this is a private visit to yourself, Mr. Lorry; I have come for a private word."

"Oh indeed!" said Mr. Lorry, rubbing his chin, and looking at his visitor dubiously.

"Oh dear you, sir? What may your meaning be, Mr. Lorry?"

"My meaning?" answered the man of business, "is, of course, friendly and appreciative, and that it does you the greatest credit, and—in short, my meaning is everything you could desire. But—\"
really, you know, Mr. Stryver —" Mr. Lorry paused, and shook his head at him in the oddest manner, as if he were compelled against his will to add, internally, "you know there really is much too much of you!" "Well!" said Stryver, slapping the desk with his contentious hand, opening his eyes wider, and taking a long breath, "if I understand you, Mr. Lorry, I'll be hanged!" Mr. Lorry adjusted his little wig at both ears as a means towards that end, and bit the feather of a pen. "D—n it all, sir!" said Stryver, staring at him, "am I not eligible?" "Oh, dear yes! Yes, oh yes, you're eligible!" said Mr. Lorry. "If you say eligible, you are eligible." "Am I not prosperous?" asked Stryver. "Oh! if you come to prosperous, you are prosperous," said Mr. Lorry. "And advancing?" "If you come to advancing, you know," said Mr. Lorry, delighted to be able to make another admission, "nobody can doubt that." "Then what on earth is your meaning, Mr. Lorry?" demanded Stryver, perceptibly crest-fallen. "Well! I—— Were you going there now?" asked Mr. Lorry. "Straight!" said Stryver, with a plump of his fist on the desk. "Then I think I wouldn't, if I was you." "Why?" said Stryver. "Now, I'll put you in a corner," forensically shaking a forefinger at him. "You are a man of business and bound to have a reason. State your reason. Why wouldn't you go?" "Because," said Mr. Lorry, "I wouldn't go on such an object without having some cause to believe that I should succeed."

"D—n me!" cried Stryver, "but this beats my teeth with it, which probably gave him toothache. He broke the awkward silence by little while, and then stood hitting a tune out of his teeth with it, which probably gave him toothache. He broke the awkward silence by

"This is something new to me, Mr. Lorry. You deliberately advise me not to go up to him and offer myself—myself, Stryver of the Kings Bench bar?"

"Do you ask me for my advice, Mr. Stryver? Yes I do."

"Very good. Then I give it, and you repeated it correctly." "And all I can say of it, it," laughed Stryver, with a vexed laugh, "that this—ha, ha—everywhere, past, present, and to come."

"Now understand me," pursued Mr. Lorry, "As a man of business, I am not justified in saying anything about this matter, for, as a man of business, I know nothing of it. For an old fellow, who has carried Miss Manette in his arms, who is the trusted friend of Miss Manette and of her father too, and who has a deep affection for them both, I have spoken in confidence is not of my seeking, recalled. Do you think I may not be right?"

"Not I!" said Stryver, whispering, "I undertake to find third parties in common sense. I can only find it for myself. I supply this in certain quarters; you suppose minor lace and butter nonsense. It's new to me, but you are right, I dare say."

"What I suppose, Mr. Stryver, I don't characterise for myself. And understood as sir," said Mr. Lorry, quickly flushing again. "As a man of business, I speak of success with the young lady, and when I speak of causes and reasons to make success probable, I speak of causes and reasons that will tell as such with the young lady. The young lady, my good sir," said Mr. Lorry, mildly tapping the Stryver arm, "the young lady. The young lady goes before all."

"Then you mean to tell me, Mr. Lorry," said Stryver, squaring his elbows, "that it is your deliberate opinion that the young lady at present in question is a mining fool?"

"Not exactly so. I mean to tell you, Mr. Stryver," said Mr. Lorry, reddening, "that I will hear no disrespectful word of that young lady from any lips; and that if I know any man—which I hope I do not—whose taste was so coarse, and whose temper was so overbearing, that he could not restrain himself from speaking disrespectfully of that young lady at this desk, I will not even Tellson's should prevent my giving him a piece of my mind."

The necessity of being angry in a suppression tone had put Mr. Stryver's blood-vessels into a dangerous state when it was his turn to be angry. Mr. Lorry's veins, methodical as their courses could usually be, were in no better state now than his was his turn.

"That is what I mean to tell you, sir," said Mr. Lorry. "Pray let there be no mistake about it."

Mr. Stryver sunk the end of a ruler a little while, and then stood hitting a tune out of his teeth with it, which probably gave him toothache. He broke the awkward silence by

...
dissatisfied with it, you can but test its soundness for yourself; if, on the other hand, you should be satisfied with it, and it should be what it now is, it may spare all sides what is best spared. What do you say?"

"How long would you keep me in town?"

"Oh! It is only a question of a few hours. I could go to Soho this evening, and come to your chambers afterwards."

"Then I say yes," said Stryver: "I won't go up there now, I am not so hot upon it as that comes to; I say yes, and I shall expect you to look in tonight. Good morning."

Then Mr. Stryver turned and bustled out of the Bank, causing such a concussion of air on his passage through, that to stand up against it bowing behind the two counters, required the utmost remaining strength of the two ancient clerks. Those venerable and feeble persons were always seen by the public in the act of bowing, and were popularly believed, when they had bowed a customer out, still to keep on bowing in the empty office until they bowed another customer in.

The barrister was keen enough to divine that the banker would not have gone so far in his expression of opinion on any less solid ground than moral certainty. Unprepared as he was for the large pill he had to swallow, he got it down.

When it was down, "my way out of this, is to bring him round to the question," said Stryver, shaking his forensic forefinger at the Temple in general, "and, between ourselves, I am by no means certain, on reflection, that I ever should have committed myself to that extent. Mr. Lorry, you cannot control the mingling vanities and grillinesses of empty-headed girls; you must not expect to do it, or you will always be disappointed. Now, pray say no more about it. I tell you, I regret it on account of others, but I am satisfied on my own account. And I am really very much obliged to you for allowing me to sound you, and for giving me your advice; you know the young lady better than I do; you were right, it never would have done."

Mr. Lorry was so taken aback, that he looked quite stupidly at Mr. Stryver shouldering him towards the door, with an appearance of showering generosity, forbearance, and good-will, on him in the empty office until they bowed another customer in.

"I dare say not," rejoined Stryver, nodding his head in a smoothing and final way; "no, it doesn't; I assure you it doesn't."

Mr. Stryver was lying back on his sofa, winking at his ceiling. If Sydney Carton ever shone anywhere, he certainly never shone in the house of Doctor Manette. He had been there often, during a whole year, and had always been the same moody and morose lounger there. When he cared to talk, he talked well; but, the cloud of caring for nothing, which overshadowed him with such a fatal darkness, was very rarely pierced by the light within him.

And yet he did care something for the streets that environed that house, and for the senseless stones that made their pavements. Many a night he vaguely and unhappily wandered there, when wine had brought no transitory gladness to him; many a dreary daybreak revealed his solitary figure lingering there, and still lingering there when the first beams of the sun brought into strong relief, removed beauties of architecture in spires of churches and lofty buildings, as perhaps the quiet time brought some sense of better things, else forgotten and unattainable, into his mind. Of late, the once cherished bed in the Temple court had known him more scantily than ever; and often when he had thrown himself upon it no longer than a few
minutes, he had got up again, and haunted that neighbourhood.

In a day in August, when Mr. Stryver (after notifying to his jackal that "he had thought better of that marrying matter") had carried his delicacy into Devonshire, and when the sight and scent of flowers in the City streets had some waifs of goodness in them for the worst, of health for the sickliest, and of youth for the oldest, Sydney's feet still trod those stones. From being irresolute and purposeless his feet became animated by an intention, and, in the working out of that intention, they took him to the Doctor's door.

He was shown up-stairs, and found Lucie at her work, alone. She had never been quite at ease with him, and received him with some little embarrassment as he seated himself near her table. But, looking up at his face in the interchange of the first few commonplaces, she observed a change in it.

"I fear you are not well, Mr. Carton!"

"No, the life I lead, Miss Manette, is not conducive to health. What is to be expected of, or by, such profligates?"

"Is it not—forgive me; I have begun the question on my lips—a pity to live no better life?"—

"God knows it is a shame!"

"Then why not change it?"

Looking gently at him again, she was surprised and saddened to see that there were tears in his eyes. There were tears in his voice too, as he answered:

"It is too late for that. I shall never be better than I am. I shall sink lower, and be worse."

He leaned an elbow on her table, and covered his eyes with his hand. The table trembled in the silence that followed.

She had never seen him softened, and was much distressed. He knew her to be so, with-out looking at her, and said:

"Pray forgive me, Miss Manette. I break down before the knowledge of what I want to say to you. Will you hear me?"

"If it will do you any good. Mr. Carton, if it is not—forgive me; I have begun the question on my lips—a pity to live no better life?"

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"Pray forgive me, Miss Manette. I break down before the knowledge of what I want to say to you. Will you hear me?"

"If it will do you any good. Mr. Carton, if it would make you happier, it would make me very glad!"

"God bless you for your sweet compassion!"

He unshaded his face after a little while, and spoke steadily.

"Don't be afraid to hear me. Don't shrink from anything I say. I am like one who died young. All my life might have been."

"No, Mr. Carton. I am sure that the best part of it might still be; I am sure that you might be much, much, worthier of yourself."

"Say of you, Miss Manette, and although I know better—although in the mystery of my own wretched heart I know better—I shall never forget it!"

She was pale and trembling. He came to her relief with a fixed despair of himself which made the interview unlike any other that could have been held.

"If it had been possible, Miss Manette, that you could have returned the love of the man you see before you—self-flung away, wasted, drunk, poor creature of misery as you know him to be—he would have been so much worse this day and hour, in spite of his hopes, that he would bring you to misery, beg you to sorrow and repentance, blight your grace, pull you down with him. I love you very well that you have no tenderness for me; I ask for none; I am even thankful that I cannot be."

"Without it, can I not save you, Mr. Carton? Can I not recall you—forgive me again?—do not change your better course? Can I in no way repay your confidence? I know this is a confidence," he modestly said, after a little hesitation, and a earnest tears, "I know you would up the no one else. Can I turn it to no good account for yourself, Mr. Carton?"

He shook his head.

"To none. No, Miss Manette, to none. I will bear the through a very little men therI can ever do for me is done. I wish you to think that you have been the last dream of mine."

In my degradation, I have not been so degenerate but that the sight of you with your father and this home made such a home by you, has set old shadows that I thought had died out of me. Since I knew you, I have been tortured with a remorse that I thought would never move me again, and have heard whispers from its voices impelling me upward, that I thought were silent for ever. I have had transformed an striving afresh, beginning anew, shaking of sloth and sensuality, and fighting out the doomed fight. A dream, all a dream, that ends in nothing, and leaves the sleeper where he lay, silent for ever. I have had unformed ins quickening nothing, lighting nothing, doing nothing, idly burning away."—

"Since it is my misfortune, Mr. Carton,--have made you more unhappy than you were before you knew me."

"Don't say that, Miss Manette, for you will have reclaimed me, if anything could. I think not be the cause of my becoming worse."

"Since the state of your mind that you describe, is, at all events, attributable to some influence of mine—this is what I mean, if I can make it plain—can I use no influence to serve your? Have I no power for good, with you, at all?"

"The utmost good that I am capable of, Miss Manette, I have come here to realise. Let me carry through the rest of my misfortune in life, the remembrance that I opened my last to you, last of all the world; and that there was something left in me at this time which you could depre and pity."

ALL THE YEAR ROUND.
"Which I entreated you to believe, again and again, most fervently, with all my heart, was capable of better things, Mr. Carton!"

"Entreat me to believe it no more, Miss Manette. I have proved myself, and I do better."

"If that will be a consolation to you, yes."

"Not even by the dearest one ever to be known to you?"

"Mr. Carton," she answered, after an agitated pause, "the secret is yours, not mine; and I promise to respect it."

"Thank you. And again, God bless you!"

"Be comforted!" he said, "I am not otherwise than it is henceforth. In the hour of my death, I shall hold sacred the one good remembrance—and shall thank and bless you for it—that my last avowal of myself was made to you, and that my name, and faults, and miseries, were gently eased in your heart. May it otherwise be light and happy?"

"He was so unlike what he had ever shown himself to be, and it was so sad to think how much he had thrown away, and how much he every day kept down and perverted, that Lucie Manette went mournfully for him as he stood looking back at her."

"Be comforted!" he said, "I am not worth such feeling, Miss Manette. An hour or two hence, and the low companions and low habits that I scorn but yield to, will render me less worth such tears as those, than any wretch who creeps along the streets. Be comforted!"

"By some remote date there uprose on the earth's surface from out the waters, a lofty wall, running in the direction of from east to west, and joined at its western extremity by another similar mighty wall, running from north to south, and so forming a right-angled corner. Those two broad, solid walls are the Alps. From the southern end of the second wall, there started a third and lesser wall (but still of respectable dimensions), the Apennines, running from west to east for a time, and then starting off south-eastwards to follow their own independent course, and afterwards form the backbone of Italy. The foot of the walls, whose mass extended backward over what is now Savoy and Switzerland, was doubtless bathed by the primeval ocean. So that the enclosure formed by these three boundaries, till the Apennines took their decided bend, was a vast arm of the sea, or estuary, open to what is now the Adriatic, at the eastern end. Then came earthquakes, and steam explosions, and catastrophes of rain, splintering the tops of the walls, rolling their fragments into the estuary, and so helping to fill it up. As yet, Frost had not appeared on earth. Afterwards he came: and then his glaciers brought down innumerable boulders, great and small; and the chips, and