A Tale of Two Cities: Part 15

Charles Dickens
leisure had the stone faces, now, for listening to the whispering trees. Such ample miles of avenue by the wayside, slowly tending towards that point of the compass where the chateau of Monsieur the Marquis, now in his grave, listened to the whispering trees. Such ample leisure had the stone faces, now, for listening to the whispering trees. Such ample leisure had the stone faces, now, for listening to the whispering trees.

The Defarges, husband and wife, came lumbering under the starlight, in their public vehicle, to that gate of Paris whereunto their journey naturally tended. There was the usual stoppage at the barrier guard-house, and the usual lanterns came glancing forth for the usual examination and inquiry. Monsieur Defarge alighted: knowing one or two of the soldiery there, and one of the police. The latter he was intimate with, and affectionately embraced.

When Saint Antoine had again enfolded the Defarges in his dusky wings, and they, having finally alighted near the Saint’s boundaries, were picking their way on foot through the black mud and offal of his streets, Madame Defarge spoke to her husband:

"Say then, my friend; what did Jacques of the police tell thee?"

"Very little to-night, but all he knows. There is another spy commissioned for our quarter. There may be many more, for all that he can say, but he knows of one."

"Eh well!" said Madame Defarge, raising her eyebrows with a cool business air. "It is necessary to register him. How do they call that man?"

"He is English."

"So much the better. His name?"

"Barsad," said Defarge, making it French by pronunciation. "But, he had been so careful to get it accurately, that he then spelt it with perfect correctness."

"Barsad," repeated madame. "Good. Christian name?"

"John."

"John Barsad," repeated madame, after murmuring it once to herself. "Good. His appearance; is it known?"

"Age, about forty years; height, about five feet nine; black hair; complexion dark; generally, rather handsome visage; eyes dark, face thin, long, and hollow; nose aquiline, but not straight, having a peculiar inclination towards the left cheek; expression, therefore, sinister."

"Eh my faith. It is a portrait!" said madame, laughing. "He shall be registered tomorrow."

They turned into the wine-shop, which was closed (for it was midnight), and where Madame...
Defarge immediately took her post at her desk, counted the small moneys that had been taken during her absence, examined the stock, went through the entries in the book, made other entries of her own, checked the serving-man in every possible way, and finally dismissed him to bed. Then she turned out the contents of the bowl of money for the second time, and began knotting them up in her handkerchief, in a chain of separate knots, for safe keeping through the night. All this while, Defarge, with his pipe in his mouth, walked up and down, complacently admiring, but never interfering; in which condition, indeed, as to the business and his domestic affairs, he walked up and down through life.

The night was hot, and the shop, close shut and surrounded by so foul a neighbourhood, was ill-smelling. Monsieur Defarge’s olfactory sense was by no means delicate, but the stock of wine smelt much stronger than it ever tasted, and so did the stock of rum and brandy and aniseed. He whisked the compound of scents away, as he put down his smoked-out pipe.

"Are you fatigued," said Madame, raising her glance as she knotted the money. "There are only the usual odours."

"I am a little tired," her husband acknowledged.

"You are a little depressed, too," said Madame, whose quick eyes had never been so intent on the accounts, but they had had a ray or two for him. "Oh, the men, the men!"

"But my dear," began Defarge.

"But my dear!" repeated Madame, nodding firmly: "but my dear! You are faint of heart, are you?"

"Well, then," said Defarge, as if a thought were working out of his brain. "It is a long time?"

"It is a long time," repeated his wife: "and when is it not a long time? Vengeance and retribution require a long time; it is the rule.

"It does not take a long time to strike a man with Lightning," said Defarge. "How long," demanded Madame, composedly, "does it take to make and store the Lightning?"

Tell me?"

Defarge raised his forehead thoughtfully, as if there were something in that, too.

"It does not take a long time," said Madame, "for an earthquake to swallow a town. Eh well! Tell me how long it takes to prepare the earthquake?"

"A long time, I suppose," said Defarge.

"But when it is ready, it takes place, and grinds to pieces everything before it. In the mean time, it is always preparing, though it is not seen or heard. That is your consolation. Keep it?"

She tied a knot with flashing eyes, as if it thrilled her a foe.

"I tell thee," said Madame, extending her right hand, for emphasis, "that although it is a long time on the road, it is on the road and coming. I tell thee it never retreats, and never stops. I tell thee it is always advancing. Look around and consider the lives of all the world that we know, consider the faces of all the world that we know, consider the rage and discontent to which the Jacquerie addresses itself with more and more of certainty every hour. Can such things last? Nah! I mock you."

"My brave Wife?" returned Defarge, standing before her with his head a little bent, and his hands clasped at his back, like a docile and attentive pupil before his catechist. "I do not question all this. But it has lasted a long time, and it is possible—you know well, my wife, it is possible—that it may not come, during our lives."

"Eh well! How then?" demanded Madame, tying another knot, as if there were another enemy strangled.

"Well?" said Defarge, with a half complaining and half apologetic shrug. "We shall see the triumph.

"We shall have helped it," returned Madame, with her extended hand in strong action. "You thing that we did is done in vain. I believe, with all my soul, that we shall see the triumph. But even if not, even if I knew certainly not, shorn of the neck of an aristocrat and tyrant, and still I would—"

There, Madame, with her teeth set, tied a very terrible knot indeed.

"Hold!" cried Defarge, reeling a little as if he felt charged with cowardly. "I too, my dear, will stop at nothing."

"Yes! But it is your weakness, that you sometimes need to see your victim and your opportunity, to sustain you. Sustain yourself without that. When the time comes, let loose a tiger and a devil; but wait for the time when the tiger and the devil chained—not shorn—yet always ready."

Madame enforced the conclusion of this piece of advice by striking her little finger with her chain of money as if she knocked its brains out, and then gathering the heavy handkerchief under her arm in a serene manner, and observing that it was time to go to bed.

Next morning saw the admirable woman in her usual place in the wine-shop, knitting away assiduously. A rose lay beside her, and if she now and then glanced at the flower, it was with no infraction of her usual preoccupied air. There were a few customers, drinking or not drinking, standing or seated, sprinkled about. The day was very hot, and heaps of flies, who were extending their inquisitive and adventurous perceptions into all the glutinous little glasses near Madame, fell dead at the bottom. Their decease made no impression on the other flies out promenading, who looked at them in the coolest manner (as if they themselves were elephants, or something as far removed), until they met the same fate. Curious to consider how heedless flies are!—perhaps they thought as much at Court that sunny summer day.

A figure entering at the door threw a shadow on Madame Defarge who was busy at her work. She laid down her knitting, and began to pin her rose in her head-dress, before she looked at the figure.
It was curious. The moment Madame Defarge took up the rose, the customers ceased talking, and began gradually to drop out of the wine-shop.

"Good day, madame," said the new comer.

"Good day," returned Madame Defarge.

She said it aloud, but added to herself, as she resumed her knitting: "Hah! Good day, age about forty, height about five feet nine, black hair, generally rather handsome visage, complexion dark, eyes dark, thin long and sallow face, aquiline nose but not straight, having a peculiar inclination towards the left cheek which imparts a sinister expression! Good day, one and all!"

"Have the goodness to give me a little glass of old cognac, and a mouthful of cool fresh water, madame."

Madame complied with a polite air.

"Marvelous cognac, this, madame!"

It was the first time it had ever been so compliments, and Madame Defarge knew enough of its antecedents to know better. She said, however, that the cognac was flattened, and took up her knitting. The visitor watched her fingers for a few moments, and took the opportunity of observing the place in general.

"You knit with great skill, madame."

"I am accustomed to it."

"A pretty pattern too!"

"You think so?" said Madame Defarge, looking at him with a smile.

"Decidedly. May one ask what it is for?"

"Pastime," said Madame, still looking at him with a smile, while her fingers moved nimbly. "Not for use?"

"That depends. I may find a use for it, one day. If I do—well," said Madame, drawing a breath and holding her head with a stern kind of composure, "I'll use it."

It was remarkable; but, the taste of Saint Antoine seemed to be decidedly opposed to a rose on the head-dress of Madame Defarge. Two men had entered separately, and had been about to order drink, when, catching sight of that novelty, they faltered, made a pretence of looking about as if for some friend who was not there, and went away. Nor, of those who had been there when this visitor entered, was there one left. They had all dropped off. The spy had kept his eyes open, but had been able to detect no sign. They had lounged away in a poverty-stricken, purposeless, accidental manner, quite natural and unimpeachable.

"Jons," thought Madame, checking off her work as her fingers knitted, and her eyes looked at the stranger. "Stay long enough, and I shall knit 'Barsad' before you go."

"You have a husband madame?"

"I have."

"Children?"

"No children."

"Business seems bad?"

"Business is very bad; the people are so oppressed."

"Ah, the unfortunate, miserable people! So oppressed too—as you say."

"As you say," replied Madame, correcting him, and deftly knitting an extra something into his name that boded him no good.

"Pardon me; certainly it was I who said so, but you naturally think so. Of course."

"I think?" returned Madame, in a high voice. "I and my husband have enough to do to keep this wine-shop open, without thinking. All we think, here, is, how to live. That is the subject we think of, and it gives us, from morning to night, enough to think about, without embarrasing our heads concerning others. I think for others? No, no."

The spy, who was there to pick up any crumbs he could find or make, did not allow his baffled state to express itself in his sinister face; but, stood with an air of gossiping gallantry, leaning his elbow on Madame Defarge's little counter, and occasionally sipping his cognac.

"A bad business this, madame, of Gaspard's execution. Ah! the poor Gaspard!" With a sigh of great compassion.

"My faith!" returned Madame, coolly and lightly, "if people use knives for such purposes, they have to pay for it. He knew beforehand what the price of his luxury was; he has paid the price."

"I believe," said the spy, dropping his soft voice to a tone that invited confidence, and expressing an injured revolutionary susceptibility in every muscle of his wicked face: "I believe there is much compassion and anger in this neighbourhood, touching the poor fellow? Between ourselves."

"Is there?" asked Madame, vacantly. "Is there not?"

"—Here is my husband!" said Madame Defarge.

As the keeper of the wine-shop entered at the door, the spy saluted him by touching his hat, and saying, with an engaging smile, "Good day, Jacques!" Defarge stopped short, and stared at him.

"Good day, Jacques!" the spy repeated; with not quite so much confidence, or quite so easy a smile under the stare.

"You deceive yourself, monsieur," returned the keeper of the wine-shop. "You mistake me for another. That is not my name. I am Ernest Defarge."

"It is all the same," said the spy, airily, but discontented too; "good day!"

"Good day!" answered Defarge, dryly.

"I was saying to madame, with whom I had the pleasure of chatting when you entered, that they tell me there is—and no wonder!—much sympathy and anger in Saint Antoine, touching the unhappy fate of poor Gaspard."

"No one has told me so," said Defarge, shaking his head; "I know nothing of it."

Having said it, he passed behind the little counter, and stood with his hand on the back of his wife's chair, looking over that barrier at the person to whom they were both opposed, and whom either of them would have adored with the greatest satisfaction.

The spy, well used to his business, did not...
...change his unconscious attitude, but drained his little glass of cognac, took a sip of fresh water, and asked for another glass of cognac. Madame Defarge poured it out for him, took to her knitting again, and hummed a little song over it.

"You seem to know this quarter well; that is to say, better than I do?" observed Defarge.

"Not at all, but I hope to know it better. I am so profoundly interested in its miserable inhabitants."

"Bah!" muttered Defarge.

"The pleasure of conversing with you, Monsieur Defarge, recalls to me," pursued the spy, "that I have the honour of resembling some interesting associations with your name."

"Indeed?" said Defarge, with much indifference.

"Yes indeed. When Doctor Manette was released, you his old domestic had the charge of him, I know. He was delivered to you. You see I am informed of the circumstances?"

"Such is the fact, certainly," said Defarge. He had had it conveyed to him, in an accidental touch of his wife's elbow as she knitted and warbled, that he was ancestry with good answer, but always with brevity.

"It was to you," said the spy, "that his daughter came; and it was from your care that his daughter took him, accompanied by a neat brown monsieur; how is he called?—in a little wig—Lorry—of the bank of Tellson and Company—over to England."

"Such is the fact," repeated Defarge. "Very interesting remembrances!" said the spy. "I have known Doctor Manette and his daughter, in England."

"Yes?" said Defarge.

"You don't hear much about them now," said madame. "They are married."

"No," said Defarge.

"In effect," madame struck in, looking up from her work and her little song, "we never bear about them. We received the news of their safe arrival, and perhaps another letter or two; but since then, they have gradually taken their road in life—we, ours—and we have held no correspondence."

"Perfectly so, madame," replied the spy. "How is it going to be married."

"Going?" echoed madame. "She was pretty enough to have been married long ago. You English are cold, it seems to me."

"Oh! You know I am English?"

"I perceive your tongue is," returned madame; "and what the tongue is, I suppose the man is?"

He did not take the identification as a compliment; but, he made the best of it, and turned it off with a laugh. After sipping his cognac to the end, he added:

"Yes, Miss Manette is going to be married. But not to an Englishman; to one who, like herself, is French by birth. And speaking of Gaspard (ah, poor Gaspard! It was cruel, cruel!), it is a curious thing that she is going to marry the nephew of Monsieur the Marquis, for whom (Gaspard was exalted to that height of so many feet; in other words, the present Marquis. But he lives unknown in England, he is no Marquis there; he is Mr. Charles Darnay. D'Aulnais is the name of his mother's family."

Madame Defarge knitted steadily, but the intelligence had a palpable effect upon her husband. Do what he would, behind the little counter, as to the striking of a light and the lighting of his pipe, he was troubled, and his hand was not trustworthy. The spy would have been no spy if he had failed to see it, or to record it in his mind.

Having made, at least, this one hit, whatever it might prove to be worth, and no customers coming in to help him to any other, Mr. Barsal paid for what he had drank, and took his leave; taking occasion to say, in a genteel manner, before he departed, that he looked forward to the pleasure of seeing Monsieur and Madame Defarge again. After he had emerged into the outer presence of Saint Antoine, the husband and wife remained exactly as he had left them, lest he should come back.

"Can it be true," said Defarge, in a low voice, nearing his wife as he stood smoking with his hand on the back of her chair, "what he has said of Ma'masse Manette?"

"As he has said it," returned madame, lifting her eyebrows a little, "it is probably false. But it may be true."

"If it is?" Defarge began; and stopped.

"If it is?" repeated his wife.

"—And if it does come, while we live to see it triumph—I hope, for her sake, Destiny will keep her husband out of France."

"Her husband's destiny," said Madame Defarge, with her usual composure, "will take him where he is to go, and will lead him to the end that is to end him. That is all I know."

"But it is very strange—now, at least it is not very strange?"—said Defarge, rather pleading with his wife to induce her to admit it, "that, after all our sympathy for Monsieur her father and herself, her husband's name should be proscribed under your hand at this moment, by the side of that infernal dog's who has just left us?"

"Stranger things than that, will happen when it does come," answered madame. "I leave them both here, of a certainty; and they are both here for their merits; that is enough."

She rolled up her knitting when she had said those words, and presently took the rose out of the handkerchief that was wound about her head. Either Saint Antoine had an instinctive sense that the objectionable decoration was gone, or Saint Antoine was on the watch for its disappearance; howbeit, the Saint took courage and came to the end that is to end him. Either Saint Antoine had an instinctive sense that the objectionable decoration was gone, or Saint Antoine was on the watch for its disappearance; howbeit, the Saint took courage and came to the corners of vile streets and courts, for a breath of air, Madame Defarge with her work in her hand was accustomed to pass from place to place and from group to group: a Missionary..."
—there were many like her—such as the world will do well never to breed again. All the women knitted. They knitted worthless things; but, the mechanical work was a mechanical substitute for eating and drinking; the hands were for the jaws and the digestive apparatus; if the bony fingers had been still, the stomachs would have been more famine-pinched.

But, as the fingers went, the eyes went, and the thoughts. And as Madame Defarge moved on from group to group, all three went quicker and fiercer among every little knot of women that she had spoken with, and left behind.

Her husband smoked at his door, looking after her with admiration. "A great woman," said he, "a strong woman, a grand woman, a frightfully grand woman!"

Darkness closed around, and then came the ringing of church bells and the distant beating of the drums, "which renders," says the Rev. M. J. Berkeley, "one or two species, known under the common name of dry-rot, such a dreadful plague in ships and buildings." This disease, once established, spreads with wonderful rapidity; and Professor Barnett records the following instance of the speed with which a building may be destroyed by this insidious enemy. "I knew," he says, "a house into which the rot made its way. It suffered least, and which I still retain, having rendered it unsafe to go from the ground-floor to the bedrooms. Every precaution was taken to remove the decaying timbers when the new work was done; yet the dry-rot so rapidly gained strength, that the house was ultimately pulled down. Some of my books which suffered least, and which I still retain, bear mournful impressions of its ruthless hand; others were so much affected that the leaves resembled tinder, and, when the volumes were opened, fell out in dust or fragments."

A species of fungus called racodium is somewhat bacchanalian in its tastes, and to gratify them pays frequent visits to cellars and places like the London Docks, where it is said "he pays his unwelcome visits, and is in even worse odour than the exciseman." An instance is related of a gentleman who, having a cask of wine rather too sweet for immediate use, directed that it should be placed in a cellar, that the saccharine it contained might be decomposed by age; at the end of three years he directed his butler to ascertain the state of the wine, when, on attempting to open the cellar door, it was found to be impossible, on account of some powerful obstacle. The door being cut down, the cellar was found to be completely filled with a fungous production, so firm that it was necessary to use an axe for its removal. This appeared to have grown from, or to have been nourished by, the decomposing particles of the wine, the cask being empty, and carried up to the ceiling, where it was supported by the fungus.