A Tale of Two Cities: Part 18

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

BOOK THE SECOND. THE GOLDEN THREAD.
CHAPTER XXI. ECHOING FOOTSTEPS.

A wonderful corner for echoes, it had been remarked, that corner where the Doctor lived. Ever busily winding the golden thread which bound her husband, and her father, and herself, and her old directress and companion, in a life of quiet bliss, Lucie sat in the still house in the tranquilly resounding corner, listening to the echoing footsteps of years.

At first, there were times, though she was a perfectly happy young wife, when her work would slowly fall from her hands, and her eyes would be dimmed. For, there was something coming in the echoes, something light, afar off, and scarcely audible yet, that stirred her heart too much. Fluttering hopes and doubts—hopes, of a love as yet unknown to her; doubts, of her remaining upon earth, to enjoy that new delight—divided her breast. Among the echoes then, there would arise the sound of footsteps at her own early grave; and thoughts of the husband whom little Lucie held out her chubby arms, and who would slowly fall from her hands, and her eyes would be dimmed. For, there was something coming in the echoes, something light, afar off, and scarcely audible yet, that stirred her heart too much.

That time passed, and her little Lucie lay on her bosom. Then, among the advancing echoes, there was the tread of her tiny feet and the sound of her prattling words. Let greater echoes resound as they would, the young mother at the cradle side could always hear those coming. They came, and the shabby house was sunny with a child's laugh, and the Divine friend of children, to whom in her trouble she had confided her, seemed to take her child in his arms, as He took the child of old, and made it a sacred joy to her.

Ever busily winding the golden thread that bound them all together, weaving the service of her happy influence through the tissue of all their lives, and making it predominate nowhere, Lucie heard in the echoes of years none but friendly and soothing sounds. Her husband's step was strong and prosperous among them; her father's, firm and equal. Lo, Miss Pross, in harness of string, awaking the echoes, as an unruly charger whip-corrected, snorting and pawing the earth under the plane-tree in the garden!

Even when there were sounds of sorrow among the rest, they were not harsh nor cruel. Even when golden hair, like her own, lay in a halo on a pillow round the worn face of a little boy, and he said, with a radiant smile, "Dear papa and mamma, I am very sorry to leave you both, and to leave my pretty sister; but I am called, and I must go!" those were not tears of agony that wetted his young mother's cheek, as the spirit departed from her embrace that had been entrusted to it. Suffer them and forbid them not. They see my Father's face. O Father, blessed words!

Thus, the rustling of an Angel's wings got blended with the other echoes, and they were not wholly of earth, but had in them that breath of Heaven. Signs of the winds that blew over a little garden-tomb were mingled with them also, and both were audible to Lucie, in a hushed murmur—like the breathing of a summer sea asleep upon a sandy shore—as the little Lucie, comically studious at the task of the morning, or dressing a doll at her mother's footstool, chattered in the tongues of the Two Cities that were blended in her life.

The echoes rarely answered to the actual tread of Sydney Carton. Some half-dozen times a year, at most, he claimed his privilege of coming in uninvited, and would sit among them through the evening as he had once done often. He never came there, heated with wine. And one other thing regarding him was whispered in the echoes, which has been whispered by all true echoes for ages and ages.

No man ever really loved a woman, lost her, and knew her with a blameless though an unchanged mind, when she was a wife and mother, but her children had a strange sympathy with him—an instinctive delicacy of pity for him. What fine hidden sensibilities are touched in such a case, no echoes tell; but, it is so, and it was so here. Carton was the first stranger to whom little Lucie held out her chubby arms, and he kept his place with her as she grew. The little boy had spoken of him, almost at the last. "Poor Carton! Kiss him for me!"

Mr. Stryver shouldered his way through the law, like some great engine forcing itself through turbid water, and dragged his useful friend in his wake, like a boat towed astern. As the boat so favoured is usually in a rough plight...
On a night in mid-July, one thousand seven hundred and eighty-nine, Mr. Lorry came late, from Tellson’s, and sat himself down by Lucie and her husband in the dark window, which was a hot, wild night, and they were all there, reminded of the old Sunday night when they had looked at the lightning from the same place.

"I began to think," said Mr. Lorry, putting his brown wig back, "that I should have to run the night at Tellson’s. We have been all of business all day, that we have not known what to do first, or which way to turn. There was an uneasiness in Paris, that we have not had a run of confidence upon us! Our customers now, there, seem not to be able to confide their property to us fast enough. There is posing and panicking among some of them for sending it to England."

"That has a bad look," said Darnay.

"A bad look, you say, my dear Darnay? But we don’t know what reason there is in it. People are so unreasonable! Some of us are blooded, and getting old, and we really are troubled out of the ordinary course value at occasion.

"Still," said Darnay, "you know how gay and threatening the sky is."

"I know that, to be sure," answered Mr. Lorry, trying to persuade himself that his temper was soured, and that he grudged, "that I am determined to be peevish after the day’s botheration. Where is Manteze?"

"Here he is," said the Doctor, entering in a dark room at the moment.

"I am quite glad you are at home; for the hurries and forebodings by which I have been surrounded all day long, have made me somewhat without reason. You are not going out, hope?"

"No; I am going to play backgammon with you, if you like," said the Doctor.

"I don’t think I do like, if I may speak my mind. I am not fit to be pitted out all day, and I am not as young as I was! My tea, my dear? Thank you. Not a theory; it is a fancy, then, my wise pet," said Mr. Lorry, putting her hand. "They are very nervous and very loud, though, are they not? Only hear them!"

"And sleeping soundly."

"That’s right; all safe and well! I don’t know why anything should be otherwise. I have been so put out all day, and I am not as you were! My tea, my dear? Thank you. Nor can you take your place in the circle, and let us sit quiet, and hear the echoes about while we have your theory."

"Not a theory; it was a fancy."

"A fancy, then, my wise pet," said Mr. Lorry.

"As of a great storm in France with a dreadful sea rising.
The Bastille! — which you prefer—work!" Thus Defarge of the wine-shop, still at his gun, which had long grown hot.

"To me, women!" cried Madame Defarge. "What! We can kill as well as the men when the place is taken!" And to her, with a shrill thirsty cry, trooping women variously armed, but all armed alike in hunger and revenge.

Cannon, muskets, fire and smoke; but, still the deep ditch, the single drawbridge, the massive stone walls, and the eight great towers. Slight displacements of the raging sea, made by the falling wounded. Flashing weapons, blazing torches, smoking waggon-loads of wet straw, hard work at neighbouring barricades in all directions, shrieks, volleys, execrations, bravery without stint, boom smash and rattle, and the furious sounding of the living sea; but, still the deep ditch, and the single drawbridge, and the massive stone walls, and the eight great towers, and still Defarge of the wine-shop at his gun, grown doubly hot by the service of Four fierce hours.

A white flag from within the fortress, and a parley—this dimly perceptible through the raging storm, nothing audible in it—suddenly the sea rose immeasurably wider and higher, and swept Defarge of the wine-shop over the lowered drawbridge, past the massive stone outer walls, in among the eight great towers surrendered!

So resistless was the force of the ocean bearing him on, that even to draw his breath or turn his head was as impracticable as if he had been struggling in the surf of the South Sea, until he was landed in the outer court-yard of the Bastille. There, against an angle of a wall, he made a struggle to look about him. Jacques Three was nearly at his side; Madame Defarge, still head- ing some of her women, was visible in the inner distance, and her knife was in her hand. Everywhere was tumult, exultation, deafening and maniacal bewilderment, astounding noise, yet furious dumb-show.

"The Prisoners!"
"The Records!"
"The secret cells!"
"The instruments of torture!"
"The Prisoners!"

Of all these cries, and ten thousand incoherencies, "The Prisoners!" was the cry most taken up by the sea that rushed in, as if there were an eternity of people, as well as of time and space. When the foremost billows rolled past,
The man obeyed, and Defarge followed the light closely with his eyes.

"Stop!—Look here, Jacques!" croaked Jacques Three, as he ran greedily.

"A. M. !" he said, breathless.

"Alexandre Manette," said Defarge in his ear, following the letters with his swart finger, deeply engrained with gunpowder. "And here he wrote 'a poor physician.' And is he, without doubt, who scratched a calendar in this stone. What is that in your hand? a crowbar? Give it me!"

He had still the linstock of his gun in his own hand. He made a sudden exchange of the two instruments, and turning on the wormeaten stool and table, beat them to pieces in a few blows.

"Hold the light higher!" he said, walking to the turnkey. "Look among those regiments with care, Jacques. And see! Here is my knife," throwing it to him; "rip open that chimney, struck and prised at its sides with a crowbar, and worked at the iron grating across it. In a few minutes, some mortar set off came dropping down, which he avoided so as to avoid; and in it, and in the old woodashes, and in a crevice in the chimney into which his weapon had slipped or wrought itself, he groped with a cautious touch.

"Nothing in the wood, and nothing in the straw, Jacques?"

"Nothing!"

"Let us collect them together, in the middle of the cell. So! Light them, you!"

The turnkey fired the little pile, which blazed high and hot. Stooping again to come out at the low-arched door, they left it burning, and retraced their way to the court-yard: seeming to recover their sense of hearing as they came down, until they were in the raging flood once more.

They found it surging and tossing, in quest of the turnkey himself. Saint Antoine was clamorous to have its wine-shop-keeper foremost in the guard upon the governor who had defended the Bastille and shot the people. Otherwise, the governor would not be marched to the Hotel de Ville for judgment. Otherwise, the governor would escape, and the people's blood (suddenly of some value, after many years of worthlessness) be unavenged.

In the howling universe of passion and contention that seemed to encompass this grim old officer conspicuous in his grey coat and red decoration, there was but one quite steady figure, and that was
a woman’s. “See, there is my husband!” she cried, pointing him out. “See Defarge!” She stood immovable close to the grim old officer, and remained immovable close to him; remained immovable close to him through the streets, as Defarge and the rest bore him along; remained immovable close to him when he was got near his destination, and began to be struck at from behind; remained immovable close to him when the long-gathering rain of stabs and blows fell heavy; was so close to him when he dropped dead under it, that, suddenly animated, she put her foot upon his neck, and with her cruel knife—long ready—hewed off his head.

The hour was come, when Saint Antoine was to execute his horrible idea of hoisting up men to joyed around them were lost spirits. Other, and furious expression was in vivid life, there burst their tomb, were carried high over head: that never did sea roll which bore more me-

But, in the ocean of faces where every fierce and furious expression was in vivid life, there were two groups of faces—each seven in number—so fixedly contrasting with the rest, not unfrequently, with human corpses, over whom forcing rain of stabs and blows fell heavy; the shoe of Madame Defarge where she had trodden on the body to steady it for mutilation. “Lower the lamp yonder?” cried Saint Antoine, after glaring round for a new means of death; the lifting up of his soldiers to be left on guard!” The swinging sentinel was posted, and the sea rushed on.

The sea of black and threatening waters, and of destructive upheavings of wave against wave, whose depths were yet unfathomed and whose furies were yet unknown. The remorseless sea, whose depths were yet unfathomed and whose

The season had been a very trying one for the natives, nearly all their grain crops in that part of the continent having perished for want of the usual periodic supply of moisture.

The sun had set heavily behind a range of low hills topped with mango tops, after one of those oppressively hot days known only in India during the dry season. The sky was of a deep coppery hue, without one fleecy cloud to relieve its intensely fiery sameness. Not one of the parched leaves in the jungle moved; nor did there appear to be a single living creature for miles, save myself, as I rode slowly towards a little seaport town in Western India. The season had been a very trying one for the natives, nearly all their grain crops in that part of the continent having perished for want of the usual periodic supply of moisture.

In the opening of the monsoon the rain had fallen very heavily, had swollen the streams, filled the few imperfectly formed bunds or reservoirs to overflowing, and these, not sufficiently strengthened and mostly out of repair, had flooded the entire country for many miles, and, when the season of drought arrived, were of course empty. Deprived of the ordinary means of irrigating their lands, the ryots had beheld with dismay the setting in of an unusually hot and dry season. The grain crops had indeed come up after a fashion, but rapidly fell away before the hot blast of the sirocco months, and left the bewildered villagers without the means of support.

In many of the villages through which I passed I had not seen half a dozen inhabitants; and, the few I had seen, appeared emaciated to the last degree. Hunger was stamped on their haggard countenances, children lay exhausted and dying at the doors of some of the miserable huts. All work appeared to be abandoned. Fields lay sterile, burnt up by the scorching heat; gardens, with a few exceptions, were withered and brown, as blasted by lightning; the nullahs were quite dry; the small rivers crept shudderingly over their pebbly beds with scarcely sufficient water to keep themselves moving. The roads were strewn with dead cattle; and, not unfrequently, with human corpses, over whom scores of birds of prey were hovering, to whom this season of affliction was an unexpected boon.

Passing through these scenes in the country, I was prepared for what I beheld in the town. The same deep lines of hunger were stamped upon the countenances; but, unlike the inhabitants of other places, the people were flocking through the streets in sad and melancholy throngs, in one direction. Mothers were dragging their children after them, scarcely able to support their own tottering steps. Fathers were passing outwards with uncertain haste, carrying young squalling infants in their arms.

As I drew near the sea-beach the eager throngs appeared to thicken, and looks of startled excitement in their faces told of some import-