A Tale of Two Cities: Part 19

Charles Dickens
Haggard Saint Antoine had had only one exultant week, in which to soften his modicum of hard and bitter bread to such extent as he could, with the relish of fraternal embraces and congratulations, when Madame Defarge sat at her counter, as usual, presiding over the customers. Madame Defarge wore no rose in her head, for the great brotherhood of Spies had become, even in one short week, extremely chary of trusting themselves to the saint’s mercies. The lamps across his streets had a portentously elastic swing with them.

Madame Defarge, with her arms folded, sat in the morning light and heat, contemplating the wine-shop and the street. In both, there were several knots of loungers, squalid and miserable but now with a manifest sense of power enthroned on their distress. The raggiest night-cap, awry on the wretchedest head, had this crooked significance in it: “I know how hard it has grown for me, the wearer of this, to support Me in myself; but do you know how easy it has grown for me, the wearer of this, to destroy life in you? Every lean bare arm, that had been without work before, had this work always ready for it now, that it could strike. The fingers of the knitting women were vicious, with the experience that they could tear. There was a change in the appearance of Saint Antoine; the image had been hammering into this for hundreds of years, and the last finishing blows had told mightily on the expression.

Madame Defarge sat observing it, with such suppressed approval as was to be desired in the leader of the Saint Antoine women. One of her sisterhood knitted beside her. The short rather plump wife of a starved grocer, and the mother of two children withal, this lieutenant had already earned the complimentary name of The Vengeance.

“Hark said the Vengeance. “Listen then! Who comes?”

As if a train of powder laid from the outermost bound of the Saint Antoine Quarter to the wine-shop door, had been suddenly fired, a fast-spreading murmur came rushing along.

“It is Defarge,” said madame. “Silence, patriots!”

Defarge came in breathless, pulled off a red cap he wore, and looked round him. “Listen, everywhere!” said madame again. “Listen to him!” Defarge stood, panting, against a background of eager eyes and open mouths, formed outside the door; all those within the wine-shop had sprung to their feet.

“How, then?” cried madame, contemptuously. “The other world?”

“Does everybody here recall old Foulon, who told the famished people that they might eat grass, and who died, and went to Hell?”

Everybody! from all throats. “The news is of him. He is among us!”

“Among us?” from the universal throat again. “And dead?”

“Not dead! He feared us so much—and with reason—that he caused himself to be represented as dead, and had a grand mock-funeral. But they have found him alive, hiding in the country, and have brought him in. I have seen him but now, on his way to the Hôtel de Ville, a prisoner. I have said that he had reason to fear us. Say all! Had he reason?”

Wretched old sinner of more than threescore years and ten, if he had never known it yet, he would have known it in his heart of hearts if he could have heard the answering cry. Wretched old sinner of more than threescore years and ten, if he had never known it yet, he would have known it in his heart of hearts if he could have heard the answering cry.

A moment of profound silence followed. Defarge and his wife looked steadfastly at one another. The Vengeance stopped, and the jar of a drum was heard as she moved it at her feet behind the counter. “Patriots!” said Defarge, in a determined voice, “are we ready?”

Instantly Madame Defarge’s knife was in her girdle; the drum was beaten by a drummer; the jar of a drum was heard as she moved it at her feet behind the counter.

“Patriots!” said Defarge, in a determined voice, “are we ready?”

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hold occupations as their bare poverty yielded, from their children, from their aged and their starved. Being on the bare ground finished and naked, they ran out with streaming hair, urging one another, and themselves, to madness with the wildest cries and actions. Villain Foulon taken, my sister! Old Foulon taken, my mother! Miscreant Foulon taken, my daughter! Then, a score of others ran into the midst of these, beating their breasts, tearing their hair, and screaming, Foulon alive! Foulon who told the starving people they might eat grass! Foulon who told my old father that he might eat grass, when I had no bread to give him! Foulon who told my baby it might suck grass, when these breasts were dry with want! O mother of God, this Foulon! O Heaven, our suffering! Hear me, my dead baby and my withered father: I swear on my knees, on these stones, to avenge you on Foulon! Husbands, and brothers, and young men, Give us the blood of Foulon, Give us the head of Foulon, Give us the heart of Foulon, Give us the body and soul of Foulon, Renal Foulon to pieces, and dig him into the ground, that grass may grow from him! With these cries, numbers of the women, lashed into blind frenzy, whirled about, striking and tearing at their own friends until they dropped in a passionate swoon, and were only saved by the men belonging to them from being trampled under foot.

Nevertheless, not a moment was lost; not a word was wasted. This Foulon was at the Hotel de Ville, and might be rescued. Never, if Saint Antoine knew his own sufferings, insults, and wrongs! Armed men and women flocked out of the Quarter so fast, and drew even these last dregs after them with such a force of suction, that within a quarter of an hour there was not a human creature in Saint Antoine's bosom but a few old cronies and the waiting children.

No. They were all by that time choking the air. The examination where this old man, ugly and wicked, was, and overflowing into the adjacent open space and streets. The Defarges, husband and wife, The Vengeance, and Jacques Three, were in the first press, and at no great distance from him in the Hall.

"See!" cried madame, pointing with her knife. "See the old villain bound with ropes. That was well done to tie a bunch of grass upon his back. Ha, ha! That was well done. Let him eat it now!" Madame put her knife under her arm, and clapped her hands as at a play.

The people immediately behind Madame Defarge, explaining the cause of her satisfaction to those behind them, and those again explaining to others, and those to others, the neighbouring streets resounded with the clapping of hands. Similarly, during two or three hours of drudgery, and the winnowing of many bushels of words, Madame Defarge's frequent expressions of impatience were taken up, with marvellous quickness, at a distance: the more readily, because certain men who had by some wonderful exercise of agility climbed up the external architecture to look in from the windows, knew Madame Defarge well, and acted as a telegraph between her and the crowd outside the building.

At length, the sun rose so high that it struck a kindly ray, as of hope or protection, directly down upon the old prisoner's head. The face was too much to bear; in an instant the barrier of dust and chaff that had stood surprisingly long, went to the winds, and Saint Antoine had got him!

It was known directly, to the farthest confines of the crowd. Defarge had but sprung over a railing and a table, and folded the miserable wretch in a deadly embrace—Madame Defarge had but followed and turned her head in one of the ropes with which he was tied—The Vengeance and Jacques Three were not yet up with them, and the men at the windows had not yet swooped into the Hall, like birds of prey from their high perches—when the cry seemed to go up, all over the city, "Bring him out! Bring him to the lamp!"

Down, and up, and head foremost on the steps of the building; now, on his knees, now, on his feet; now, on his back; dragged and struck at, and stifled by the bunches of grass and straw that were thrust into his face by hundreds of hands; torn, bruised, panting, yet always entreating and beseeching for mercy; now, full of violence agony of action, with a small clear space above him as the people drew one another back that they might see; now, a log of dead wood swung through a forest of legs; he was hauled to the nearest street corner where one of the fire-lamps swung, and there Madame Defarge sat him go—as a cat might have done to a mouse—and silently and compositionely looked at him while they made ready, and while he begged her: the women passionately scourging him the time, and the men sternly calling out to have him killed with grass in his mouth. One, he went aloft, and the rope broke, and they caught him shrieking; twice, he went aloft, and the rope broke, and they caught him shrieking; once, the rope was merciful and held him, and his head was soon upon a pike, with grass enough in his mouth for all Saint Antoine to dance at the sight of.

Now was this the end of the day's bad work in Saint Antoine so shocked and danced his angry blood up, that it boiled again, on hearing that the day closed in that the son-in-law of the despoiler had been brought to the Hall of examination where this old man, ugly and wicked, was, and overflowing into the adjacent open space and streets. The Defarges, husband and wife, The Vengeance, and Jacques Three, were in the first press, and at no great distance from him in the Hall.

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time by embracing one another on the triumphs of the day, and achieving them again in gossip. Gradually, these strings of ragged people shortened and frayed away; and then poor lights began to shine in high windows, and slender fires were made in the streets, at which neighbours cooked in common, afterwards supping at their doors.

Scanty and insufficient suppers those, and innocent of meat, as of most other sauce to wretched bread. Yet, human fellowship infused some nourishment into the flinty viands, and struck some sparks of cheerfulness out of them. Fathers and mothers who had had their full share in the worst of the day, played gently with their meagre children; and lovers, with such a world around them and before them, loved and hoped.

It was almost morning, when Defarge's wine-shop parted with its last knot of customers, and Monsieur Defarge said to Madame: "Eh well!" returned Madame. "Almost." Monsieur Defarge said: "And his poor reduced body, together. The Vengeance slept with her starved grocer, and the drum was at rest. The Vengeance, as eastsidem of the drum, could have wakened him up and had the same speech out of him as before the Bastille fell, or old Foulon was seized; not so with the hoarse tones of the man and women in Saint Antoine's bosom.

CHAPTER XXIII. FIRE RISES.

There was a change on the village where the fountain fell, and where the mender of roads went forth daily to hammer out of the stones on the highway such morsels of bread as might serve for patches to hold his poor ignorant soul and his poor reduced body, together. The prison on the crag was not so dominant as it had been, there were soldiers to guard it, but not one of them knew what his men would do—beyond this; that it would probably not be what he was ordered.

Far and wide, lay a ruined country, yielding nothing but desolation. Every green leaf, every blade of grass and blade of grain, was as shrivelled and poor as the miserable people. Everything was bowed down, dejected, oppressed, and broken. Habitations, fences, domesticated animals, men, women, children, and the soil that bore them—all worn out.

Monsieur Defarge (often a most worthy individual gentleman) was a national blessing, gave a chivalrous tone to things, was a polite example of luxurious and shining life, and a great deal more to equal purpose; nevertheless, Monsieur Defarge as a class had, somehow or other, brought things to a state of barbarous and barren wilderness. No. The change consisted in the appearance of strange faces of low caste, rather than in the disappearance of the high-caste, chiselled, and otherwise beautified and beautifying features of Monseigneur.

For, in these times, as the mender of roads worked, solitary, in the dust, not often troubling himself to reflect that dust he was and to dust he must return, being for the most part too much occupied in thinking how little he had for supper and how much more he would eat if he had it—in these times, as he raised his eyes from his lonely labour and viewed the prospect, he would see some rough figure approaching on foot, the face of which was once a rarity in those parts, but was now a frequent presence. As it advanced, he would see in front of him, as he sat on his heap of stones under a bank, taking such shelter as he could get from a shower of hail.

The man looked at him, looked at the village in the hollow, at the mill, and at the prison on the crag. When he had identified these objects in what bewildered mind he had, he said, in a dialect that was just intelligible:

"How goes it, Jacques?"
"All well, Jacques."
"Touch then!"
They joined hands, and the man sat down on the heap of stones.

"No dinner?"
"Nothing but supper now," said the mender of roads, with a hungry face.
"It is the fashion," groaned the man. "I meet no dinner anywhere.

He took out a blackened pipe, filled it, lighted it with flint and steel, pulled at it until it was in a bright glow; then, suddenly held it from him and dropped something into it from between his fingers and thumb, that blazed and went out in a puff of smoke. "Touch then." It was the turn of the
mender of roads to say it this time, after ob-
serving these operations. They again joined
hands.
"Tonight?" said the mender of roads.
"To-night," said the man, putting the pipe
in his mouth.
"Where?"
"Here."
He and the mender of roads sat on the heap
of stones, and looked silently at one another, with
the hail driving in between them like a pignon
charge of bayonets, until the sun began to clear
over the village.
"Show me!" said the traveller then, moving
to the brow of the hill.
"See!" returned the mender of roads, with
extended finger. "You go down here, and
straight through the street, and past the foun-
dainties.
To the Devil with all that!" interrupted
the other, rolling his eye over the landscape.
"I go through no streets and past no foun-
tains. Well?"
"Well! About two leagues beyond the sum-
tum of that hill above the village."
"Good. When do you cease to work?"
"At sunset."
"Will you wake me, before departing? I
have walked two nights without resting. Let
me finish my pipe, and I shall sleep like a child.
Will you wake me?"
"Surely."
The wayfarer snooked his pipe out, put it in
his breast, slipped off his great wooden shoes,
and lay down on his back on the heap of stones.
He was fast asleep directly.
As the road-mender plied his dusty labour,
and the hail-clouds, rolling away, revealed bright
bars and streaks of sky which were responded
to by silver gleams upon the landscape, the little
man (who wore a red cap now, in place of his
shaggy black one) seemed fascinated by the figure on
the heap of stones. His eyes were so often
Drawbridges, seemed, to the mender of roads to
have grown by the fountain below, and sent
word to the sacristan who kept the keys of the
church, that there might be need to ring the
church bells.
"Two leagues beyond the summit of the hill?"
"About."
"About. Good!"
The mender of roads went home, with the tale
of all that going on before him according to the set of the
wind, and was soon at the fountain, cleaning
himself in among the lean kine brought there to
drink, and appearing even to whisper to them in
his whispering to all the village. When the
village had taken its poor supper, it did not
creppe to bed, as it usually did, but came out of
doors again, and remained there. A curious
contagion of whispering was upon it, and also
when it gathered together at the fountain in
the dark, another curious contagion of looking ex-
pectantly at the sky in one direction only.
Monsieur Gabelle, chief functionary of the
place, became uneasy; went out on his house-
top alone, and looked in that direction to
 glanced down from behind his chimney at the
darkening faces by the fountain below, and sent
word to the sacristan who kept the keys of the
east, West, North, and South, through the
woods, four heavy-treading, unkempt figures
striding on cautiously to come together in the
courtyard. Four lights broke out there, and
 moved away in different directions, and all was
black again.
But, for not long. Presently, the château
began to make itself strangely visible by some
light of its own, as though it were glowing
luminous. Then, a flickering streak played be-
hind the architecture of the front, picking out
transparent places, and showing where the
figures, stopped by no obstacle, tended to
centres all over France.
The man slept on, indifferent to showers of
hail and intervals of brightness, to sunshine on
his face and shadow, to the pattering lumps of
dull ice on his body and the diamonds into
which the sun changed them, until the sun was
low in the west, and the sky was glowing. Then,
the mender of roads having got his tools toge-
ther and all things ready to go down into the
village, roused him.
"Good!" said the sleeper, rising on his elbow.
"Two leagues beyond the summit of the hill?"
"About."
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The wayfarer smoked his pipe out, put it in
his breast, slipped off his great wooden shoes,
and lay down on his back on the heap of stones.
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The night deepened. The trees environs the
old château, keeping its solitary state apart,
moved on a rising wind, as though they had
shivered the pile of building massive and dark in
the gloom. Up the two terrace lights of steps
the rain ran wildly, and beat at the great door
of stones, among the old spears and knives, and passed
lamenting up the stairs, and shook the curtains
of the bed where the last Marquis had slept.
Up the two terrace flights of steps in the
tower of the old château, keeping its solitary state apart,
looked in that direction too; when it gathered together at the fountain
and took its poor supper, it did not
crepe to bed, as it usually did, but came out of
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was saddling of a horse and riding away. There was spurring and splashing through the darkness, and bridle was drawn in the space by the village fountain, and the horse in a foam stood at Monsieur Gabelle's door. “Help, Gabelle! Help every one!” The tocsin rang impatiently, but other help (if there were any) there was none. The mender of roads, and two hundred and fifty particular friends, stood with folded arms at the fountain, looking at the pillar of fire in the sky. “It must be forty feet high,” said they, grimly; and never moved.

The rider from the chateau, and the horse in a foam, clattered away through the village, and galloped up the stony steep, to the prison on the crag. At the gate, a group of officers were looking at the fire; removed from them, a group of soldiers. “Help, gentlemen-officers! The chateau is on fire; valuable objects may be burned. The altitude of the gallows that would turn to water and quench it, no functionary, by any stretch of mathematics, was able to calculate successfully.

The chateau was left to itself to flame and burn. In the roaring and raging of the conflagration, a wind, driving straight from the infernal regions, seemed to be blowing the edifice away. With the rising and falling of the blaze, the stone faces showed as if they were in torment. When great masses of stone and timber fell, the face with the two dints in the nose became obscured; anon, a figure of the smoke again, as if it were the face of the cruel Marquis, burning at the stake and contending with the fire.

The chateau burned; the nearest trees, laid hold of by the fire, scorched and shrivelled; trees at a distance, fired by the four fierce figures, begirt the blazing edifice with a new forest of smoke. Molten lead and iron boiled in the marble basin of the fountain; the water ran dry; the extinguisher tops of the towers vanished like ice before the heat, and trickled down into four ragged wells of flame. Great rents and splits branched out in the solid walls, like crystallisation; stupidised birds wheeled about, and dropped into a furnace; four fierce figures trudged away, East, West, North, and South, along the night-enshrouded roads, guided by the beacon they had lighted, towards their next destination. The illuminated village had seized hold of the tocsin, and abolishing the lawful ringer, rang for joy.

Not only that; but, the village, light-headed with famine, fire, and bell-ringing, and beholding itself that Monsieur Gabelle had to do with the collection of rent and taxes—though it was but a small instalment of taxes, and no rent at all, that Gabelle had got in in those latter days—became impatient for an interview with him, and, surrounding his house, summoned him to come forth for personal conference. Whereupon, Monsieur Gabelle did heavily bar his door, and retire to hold counsel with himself. The result of that conference was, that Gabelle again withdrew himself to his house-top behind his stack of chimneys; this time resolved, if his door were broken in (he was a small Southern man of retaliative temperament), to pitch himself head foremost over the parapet, and crush a man or two below.

Probably, Monsieur Gabelle passed a long night up there, with the distant chateau for fire and candle, and the beating at his door, combined with the joy-ringing, for music; not to mention his having an ill-omened lamp slung across the road before his posting-house gate, which the village showed a lively inclination to displace in his favour. A trying suspense, to be passing a whole summer night on the brink of the black ocean, ready to take that plunge into it upon which Monsieur Gabelle had resolved! But, the friendly dawn appearing at last, and the rush-candles of the village guttering out, the people happily dispersed, and Monsieur Gabelle came down, bringing his life with him for that while.

Within a hundred miles, and in the light of other fires, there were other functionaries less fortunate, that night and other nights, whom the rising sun found hanging across one-peaceful streets, where they had been born and bred; also, there were other villagers and townspeople less fortunate than the mender of roads and his fellows, upon whom the functionaries and soldiery turned with success, and whom they strung up in their turn. But, the fierce figures were steadily wending East, West, North, and South, be that as it would; and whoever hung, across the road before his posting-house gate, was saddled of a horse and riding away. There was spurring and splashing through the darkness, and bridle was drawn in the space by the village fountain, and the horse in a foam stood at Monsieur Gabelle’s door. “Help, Gabelle! Help every one!” The tocsin rang impatiently, but other help (if there were any) there was none. The mender of roads, and two hundred and fifty particular friends, stood with folded arms at the fountain, looking at the pillar of fire in the sky. “It must be forty feet high,” said they, grimly; and never moved.

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FAIRY RINGS.

Funguses are everywhere.8 Spreading from one end of the land to the other, they assert their dominion from cellar to garret: some even preferring to leave this earth, have been found suspended, like Mahomet’s coffin, between it and the stars, on the highest pinnacle of Saint Paul’s. Few persons imagine that the delicious mushroom, the poisonous toad-stool, or the puff-balls of our pastures, bear any relationship to the mouthliness and mildew which so