A Tale of Two Cities: Part 20

Charles Dickens

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Is such risings of fire and risings of sea—the firm earth shaken by the rushes of an angry ocean which had now no ebb but was always on the flow, higher and higher, to the terror and wonder of the beholders on the shore—three years of tempest were consumed. Three more birthdays of little Lucie had been woven by the golden thread into the peaceful tissue of the life of her home.

Many a night and many a day had its inmates listened to the echoes in the corner, with hearts that failed them when they heard the thronging feet. For, the footsteps had become to their minds as the footsteps of a people, tumultuous under a red flag and with their country declared in danger, changed into wild beasts, by terrible enchantment long persisted in.

Tellson’s was a munificent house, and extended great liberality to old customers who had fallen from their high estate. Again: Tellson’s was at that time, as to French intelligence, a kind of High Exchange; and this was so well known to the public, and the inquiries made there were in consequence so numerous, that Tellson’s some time, as was most to be relied upon, came quickest.

As was natural, the head-quarters and great gathering-place of Monseigneur, in London, was Tellson’s Bank. Spirits are supposed to haunt the places where their bodies most resorted, and Monseigneur without a guinea haunted the spot where his guineas used to be. Moreover, it was the spot to which such French intelligence as was most to be relied upon, came quickest.

Once, on a steaming, misty afternoon, Mr. Lorry sat at his desk, and Charles Darnay stood leaning on it, talking with him in a low voice. The penitentiary den once set apart for interviews with the Lord’s Prayer backwards for a great hour or so of the time of closing.

The shining Bull’s Eye of the Court was gone, or it would have been the mark for a hurricane of national bullets. It had never been a good eye to see with—had long had the more in it of Lucifer’s pride, Sardanapalus’s luxury, and a mole’s blindness—but it had dropped out and was gone. The Court, from that expanse of cornet ring to its innermost rotten ring of intrigue, corruption, and dissimulation, was all gone together. Royalty was gone; had been besieged in its Palace and “suspended,” when the last tidings came over.

The August of the year one thousand seven hundred and ninety-two was come, and Monseigneur was by this time scattered far and wide.
send somebody from our House here to our House there, who knows the city and the business, of old, and is in Tellson's confidence. As to the uncertain travelling, the long journey, and the winter weather, if I were not prepared to submit myself to a few inconveniences for the sake of Tellson's, after all these years, who ought to be?

"I wish I were going myself," said Charles Darnay, somewhat restlessly, and like one thinking aloud.

"Indeed! You are a pretty fellow to object and advise!" exclaimed Mr. Lorry. "You wish you were going yourself? And you a Frenchman born? You are a wise counsellor."

"My dear Mr. Lorry, it is because I am a Frenchman born, that the thought (which I did not mean to utter here, however) has passed through my mind often. One cannot help thinking, having had some sympathy for the miserable people, and having abandoned something to them," he spoke here in his former thoughtful manner, "that one might be listened to, and might have the power to persuade to some restraint. Only last night, after you had left us, when I was talking to Lucie—"

"Lorry repeated. "Yes. I wonder you are not ashamed to mention the name of Lucie!"

"Wishing you were going to France at this time of day!"

"However, I am not going," said Charles Darnay, with a smile. "It is more to the purpose that you say you are.

"And I am, in plain reality. The truth is, my dear Charles," Mr. Lorry glanced at the House again, "you can have no conception of the difficulty with which our business is transacted, and of the peril in which our books and papers over yonder are involved. The Lord above knows what the compromising consequences would be to numbers of people, if some of our documents were seized or destroyed; and they might be, at any time, you know, for who can say that Paris is not set afire to-day, or sacked to-morrow! Now, a judicious selection from these with the least possible delay, and the burying of them, or otherwise getting of them out of harm's way, is within the power (without loss of precious time) as in business-like Old England; but now, everything is stopped."

"And do you really go tonight?"

"I really go to-night, for the case has become too pressing to admit of delay."

"And do you take no one with you?"

"All sorts of people have been proposed to me, but I will have nothing to say to any of them. I intend to take Jerry. Jerry has my body-guard on Sunday nights for a long past, and I am used to him. Nobody will peep Jerry of being anything but an honest fellow, or of having any design in his head but to fly at anybody who touches him."

"I must say again that I hear the gallantry of your gallantry and youthfulness."

"I must say again, nonsense, nonsense!"

"When I have executed this little commission, I shall, perhaps, accept Tellson's proposal to retire from the Bar, and live at my ease. Time enough, though, to think about growing old."

"This dialogue had taken place at Mr. Lorry's usual desk, with Monsieurngue swarming within a yard or two of it, boastful of what he would do to avenge himself on the assiduous noble. It was too much the way of persons under his reverses as a refugee, not to moth much too much the way of native British spirits. It were the one only harvest ever known on the skies that had not been sown—as if that had ever been done, or omitted to be done—had led to it—as if observers of the wise millions in France, and of the misused and wasted resources that should have here made the prosperous, had not seen it inevitably coming years before, and had not in plain words revealed what they saw. Such vapouring, combined with the extravagant plots of Monseigneur, his devices for blowing the people out of their heads, and doing without them, and employing without them, and for some latent uneasiness in his mind, which had made Charles Darnay restless, and which kept him so."

"Among the talkers, was Spyxer, of the Bench Bar, far on his way to state promotion."

"The House approached Mr. Lorry, and laying his head hanging on by a single hair as he passed the Barriers. As usual, time, our parched would consolate us as in business-like Old England; but now, everything is stopped."

"Tellson's, after all these years, who ought to be?"

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"The House approached Mr. Lorry, and laying
and you ask me why I am sorry that a man who instructs youth knows him? Well, but I'll answer you. I am sorry, because I believe there is contamination in such a soured one. That's why.

Mindful of the secret, Darnay with great difficulty checked himself, and said: "You may not understand the gentleman."

"I understand how to put you in a corner, Mr. Darnay," said Bully Stryver, "and I'll do it."

"If this fellow is a gentleman, I don't understand him. You may tell him so, with my compliments. You may also tell him, from me, that after abandoning his worldly goods and position to this butcherly mob, I wonder he is not at the head of them. But, no, gentlemen," said Stryver, looking all round, and snapping his fingers, "I know something of human nature, and I tell you that you'll never find a fellow like this fellow, trusting himself to the mercies of such precious protégés. No, gentlemen; he'll always show 'em a clean pair of heels very early in the season, and sneak away."

With those words, and a final snap of his fingers, Mr. Stryver shouldered himself into Fleet-street, amidst the general approbation of his hearers. Mr. Lorry and Charles Darnay were left alone at the desk, in the general departure from the Bank.

"Will you take charge of the letter?" said Mr. Lorry. "You know where to deliver it?"

"I do."

"Will you undertake to explain that we suppose it to have been addressed here, on the chance of our knowing where to forward it, and that it has been here some time?"

"I will do so. Do you start for Paris from here?"

"From here, at eight."

"I will come back, to see you off."

Very ill at ease with himself, and with Stryver and most other men, Darnay made the best of his way into the quiet of the Temple, opened the letter, and read it. These were its contents:


MONSIEUR HERETOFORE THE MARQUIS.

After having long been in danger of my life at the hands of the village, I have been seized, with great violence and indignity, and brought a long journey on foot to Paris. On the road I have suffered a great deal. Nor is that all; my house has been destroyed—razed to the ground.

The crime for which I am imprisoned, Monsieur heretofore the Marquis, and for which I shall be summoned before the tribunal, and shall lose my life (without your so generous help), is, they tell me, treason against the majesty of the people, in that I have acted against them for an emigrant. It is in vain I represent that I have acted for them, and not against, according to your commands. It is in vain I represent that, before the sequestration of emigrant property, I had remitted the impost they had ceased to pay; that I had collected no rent; that I had had recourse to no process. The only response is, that I
have acted for an emigrant, and where is that emigrant?

"Ah! most gracious Monsieur heretofore the Marquis, where is that emigrant! I cry in my sleep where is he! I demand of Heaven, will he not come to deliver me! No answer. Ah Monsieur heretofore the Marquis, I send my desolate cry across the sea, hoping it may perhaps reach your ears through the great bank of
tilson known at Paris!

"For the love of Heaven, of justice, of generosity, of the honour of your noble name, I supplicate you, Monsieur heretofore the Marquis, to succour and release me. My fault is, that I have been true to you. O Monsieur heretofore the Marquis, I pray you be you true to me!

"From this prison here of horror, whence I every hour tend nearer and nearer to destruction, I send you, Monsieur heretofore the Marquis, the assurance of my dolorous and unhappy service.

"Your afflicted,

"GABELLE.

The latent uneasiness in Darnay's mind was roused to vigorous life by this letter. The peril of an old servant and a good one, whose only crime was fidelity to himself and his family, stared him so reproachfully in the face, that, as he walked to and fro in the Temple considering what to do, he almost hid his face from the passers-by.

He knew very well, that in his horror of the deed which had culminated the bad deeds and bad reputation of the old family house, in his resentful suspicions of his uncle, and in the aversion with which his conscience regarded the crumbling fabric that he was supposed to uphold, he had acted imperfectly. He knew very well, that in his love for Lucie, his renunciation of his old life, the necessity of being always actively employed, had meant to do it, and that it had never been done.

The happiness of his own chosen English home, the necessity of being always actively employed, the swift changes and troubles of the time which had followed on one another so fast, that the events of this week annihilated the immature plans of last week, and the events of the week following made all new again; he knew very well, that to the force of these circumstances he had yielded—not without disquiet, but still without continuous and accumulating resistance. That he had watched the times for a time of action, and that they had shifted and struggled until the time had gone by, and the nobility were troopimg from France by every highway and by-way, and their property was in course of confiscation and destruction, and their very names were blotting out, was as well known to himself as it could be to any new authority in France that might impeach him for it.

But, he had oppressed no man, he had imprisoned no man; he was so far from having hardly exacted payment of his dues, that he had relinquished them of his own will, thrown himself on a world with no favour in it for his own private place there, and earned his bread. Monsieur Gabelle had held the monstrous and involved estate on written instruc-
tions to spare the people; to give them was little there was to give—such fuel as the creditors would let them have in the winter, and such produce as could be saved from the same grip in the summer—and no doubt he put the fact in plea and proof, for his own safety, so that it could not but appear now.

This favoured the desperate resolution Darnay had begun to make, that he would go to Paris.

Yes. Like the mariner in the old story, the winds and streams had driven him within the influence of the Loadstone Rock, and it was drawing in to itself, and he must go. Everything that arose before his mind drifted him on, faster and faster, more and more steadily, to the term attraction. His latent uneasiness had been, that bad aims were being worked out in his own happy land by bad instruments, and that he could not fail to know that he was better far than they, was not there, trying to do nothing to stay bloodshed, and assert the claims of mercy and humanity. With this uneasiness his mind, and half reproaching him, he had been urged to the pointed comparison of himself with the honest gentleman in whom duty was so strong; was in comparison (injurious to himself), had instantly followed the snears of Monseigneur, which still stung him bitterly, and those of Stryver, which above all were coarse and glaring, for old men.

Upon those, had followed Gabelle's letter and the appeal of an innocent prisoner, in danger of death, to his justice, honour, and good name. His resolution was made. He must go to Paris.

Yes. The Loadstone Rock was drawing in to itself, and he must sail on, until he struck. He knew no rock; he saw hardly any danger. The temptation with which he had done what he had done, even although he had left it himself, presented it before him in an aspect that would be gratefully acknowledged in France as a presenting himself to assert it. Then, his glorious vision of doing good, which was so often presented it before him, in the sanguine mirage of so many good men, arose before him, and he even saw him under the illusion with some influence to guide the raging Revolution that was running so fiercely wild.

As he walked to and fro with his resolution made, he considered that neither Lucie nor his father must know of it, until he was gone. Lucie should be spared the pain of separation, and her father, always reluctant to turn his thoughts towards the dangerous ground of a step taken, and not in the balance of incompleteness and doubt. How much of the incompleteness of his situation was referable to her father through the painful anxiety to avoid new old associations of France in his mind, he
not discuss with himself. But, that circumstance too, had had its influence in his course.

He walked to and fro in the greatest hurry, until it was time to return to Tellson’s, and take leave of Mr. Lorry. As soon as he arrived in Paris he would present himself to this old friend, but he must say nothing of his intention now.

A carriage with post-horses was ready at the Bank door, and Jerry was booted and equipped.

“I have delivered that letter,” said Charles Darnay to Mr. Lorry. “I would not consent to your being charged with any written answer, but perhaps you will take a verbal one?”

“That I will, and readily,” said Mr. Lorry, “if it is not dangerous.”

“Not at all. Though it is to a prisoner in the Abbaye.”

“What is his name?” said Mr. Lorry, with his open pocket-book in his hand.

“Gabriel.”

“Gabriel. And what is the message to the unfortunate Gabriel in prison?”

“Simply, ‘that he has received the letter, and will come.’”

“Any time mentioned?”

“He will start upon his journey to-morrow night.”

“Any person mentioned?”

“No.”

He helped Mr. Lorry to wrap himself in a number of coats and cloaks, and went out with him from the warm atmosphere of the old bank, into the misty air of Fleet-street. “My love to Lucie, and to little Lucie,” said Mr. Lorry, at parting, “and take precious care of them till I come back.” Charles Darnay shook his head doubtfully, as the carriage rolled away.

That night—it was the fourteenth of August—he sat up late, and wrote two fervent profound letters with a trusty porter, to be delivered half an hour before midnight, and no sooner; took horse for Dover; and began his journey. “For the love of Heaven, of justice, of generosity, of the honour of your noble name!” was the poor prisoner’s cry with which he strengthened his sinking heart, as he left all that was dear on earth behind him, and floated away for the Loadstone Rock.

THE END OF THE SECOND BOOK.

NORTH-ITALIAN CHARACTER.

Now that there appears to be a chance of testing by experiment the possibility of North-Italian independence, a looker-on will be curious to know what promise is afforded by the character and habits of the people themselves. For men can observe what is going on in the world, or can reflect on the chapters of history they have read, without coming to the conclusion that each distinct nation is specially suited to live under some one special form of government.

Of what are the North-Italians capable? England, and her numerous progeny, must and will have self-government. The French, on the contrary, never do so well as when their vessel of state is steered by a firm, a capable, and even a severe pilot. They are too explosive, too deficient in sang-froid and self-restraint, to bear, without danger, the excitement of parliamentary debate and of an unfettered press; they are too vain, too ambitious individually, too fond of distinction, and, at the same time, too richly gifted with personal talent, to work out fairly the theoretical equality implied by a republic. Under a Louis XIV., or a Bonaparte, they flourish and thrive. They bear blossoms and fruit. If the history of the modern Italians indicates anything, it would seem to show that an oligarchy is their most congenial political element. The republics of Genoa and Venice, with their Councils of Ten, were always jealous and exclusive aristocracies. The Papedom was, and is, an aristocracy of Prelates and Cardinals. The Pope himself may, by chance, be a man of ability; more frequently he has been a man of taste, and of good intentions. But what sort of head was required by the princes of the Church, as a general rule, is evident from the fact that it was possible for a candidate for the Papal throne to secure his election by assuming crutches, decrepitude, and the stoop of extreme old age, casting them off afterwards with the sarcastic remark that each distinct nation is specially suited to live under some one special form of government.

The unseen force was drawing him fast to itself, now, and all the tides and winds were setting straight and strong towards it. He left his two letters with a trusty porter, to be delivered half an hour before midnight, and no sooner; took horse for Dover; and began his journey. “For the love of Heaven, of justice, of generosity, of the honour of your noble name!” was the poor prisoner’s cry with which he strengthened his sinking heart, as he left all that was dear on earth behind him, and floated away for the Loadstone Rock.

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ALL THE YEAR ROUND. [September 10, 1859.]

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