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A Tale of Two Cities: Part 30

Charles Dickens

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

BOOK THE THIRD.

The Track of a Storm.

CHAPTER XIV.
The Knitting Done.

In that same juncture of time when the Fifty-Two awaited their fate, Madame Defarge held darkly ominous council with The Vengeance and Jacques Three of the Revolutionary Jury. Not in the wine-shop did Madame Defarge confer with these ministers, but in the shed of the wood-sawyer, erst a mender of roads. The sawyer himself did not participate in the conference, but abided at a little distance, like an outer satellite who was not to speak until required, or to offer an opinion until invited.

"But our Defarge," said Jacques Three, "is undoubtedly a good Republican? Eh?"

"There is no better," the voluble Vengeance protested in her shrill notes, "in France."

"In a word," said Madame Defarge, coming out of her short abstraction, "I cannot trust my husband in this matter. Not only do I feel since last night, that I dare not confide to him the details of my projects; but also I feel that if I delay, there is danger of his giving warning, and then they might escape."

"That must never be," croaked Jacques Three; "no one must escape. We have not half enough as it is. We ought to have six score a day."

"In a word," Madame Defarge went on, "my husband has not my reason for pursuing this family to annihilation, and I have not his reason for regarding this Doctor with any sensibility. I must act for myself, therefore. Come hither, little citizen."

The wood-sawyer, who held her in the respect, and himself in the submission, of mortal fear, advanced with his hand to his red cap.

"Touching those signals, little citizen," said Madame Defarge, sternly, "that she made to the prisoners; you are ready to bear witness to them this very day?"

"Ay, ay, why not!" cried the sawyer.

"Every day, in all weathers, from two to four, always signalling, sometimes with the little one, sometimes without. I know what I know, I have seen with my eyes."

He made all manner of gestures while he spoke, as if in incidental imitation of some few of the great diversity of signals that he had never seen.

"Clearly plots," said Jacques Three. "Translucently!"

"There is no doubt of the Jury?" inquired Madame Defarge, sternly, "that she made to the prisoners; you are ready to bear witness to them this very day?"

"Ay, ay, why not!" cried the sawyer.

"Every day, in all weathers, from two to four, always signalling, sometimes with the little one, sometimes without. I know what I know, I have seen with my eyes."

He made all manner of gestures while he spoke, as if in incidental imitation of some few of the great diversity of signals that he had never seen.

"Clearly plots," said Jacques Three. "Transparently!"

"There is no doubt of the Jury?" inquired Madame Defarge, letting her eyes turn to him with a gloomy smile.

"Rely upon the patriotic Jury, dear citizen. I answer for my fellow-Jurymen."

"Now, let me see," said Madame Defarge, pondering again. "Can I spare this Doctor to my husband? I have no feeling either way. Can I spare him?"

"He would count as one head," observed Jacques Three, in a low voice. "We really have not heads enough; it would be a pity, I think."

"He was signalling with her when I saw her," argued Madame Defarge; "I cannot speak of one without the other; and I must not
be silent, and trust the case wholly to him, this little citizen here. For, I am not a bad witness. The Vengeance and Jacques Three vied with each other in their fervent protestations that she was the most admirable and marvellous of witnesses. The little citizen, not to be undone, declared her to be a celestial witness.

"He must take his chance," said Madame Defarge. "No; I cannot spare him! You are engaged at three o'clock; you are going to see the hitch of to-day executed. — You?"

The question was addressed to the wood-sawyer, who hurriedly replied in the affirmative: seizing the occasion to add that he was the most ardent of Republicans, and that he would be in effect the most desolate of Republicans, if anything prevented him from enjoying the pleasure of smoking his afternoon pipe in the contemplation of the droll national barber. He was so very conscientious herein, that he might have been suspected (perhaps was, by the dark eyes that looked contemptuously at him out of Madame Defarge's head) of having his small individual fears for his own personal safety, every hour in the day.

"I," said Madame, "am equally engaged at the same place. After it is over,—say at eight to-night—come you to me, in Saint Antoine, and we will give information against these people, engaged at three o'clock; you are going to see the hitch of to-day executed. — You?"

The wood-sawyer said he would be proud and flattered to attend the citizenship. The citizenship looking at him, he became embarrassed, evaded her glance as a small dog would have done, pranced about among his wood, and hid his confusion over the handle of his saw.

"Let me see you," said Madame Defarge, beckoning the Juryman and The Vengeance a little nearer to the door, and there expounded her farther views to them thus:

"She will now be at home, awaiting the moment of his death. She will be mourning and grieving. She will be in a state of mind to impinge the justice of the Republic. She will be full of sympathy with its enemies. I will go to her."

"What an admirable woman; what an adorable woman!" exclaimed Jacques Three, rapturously. "Ah, my cherished!" cried The Vengeance, and embraced her.

"Take you my knitting," said Madame Defarge, placing it in her lieutenant's hands, "and have it ready for me in my usual seat. Keep me my usual chair. Go you there, straight, for there will probably be a greater concourse than usual, to-day."

"I willingly obey the orders of my Chief," said The Vengeance, with alacrity, and kissing her cheek. "You will not be late?"

"I shall be there before the commencement."

"And before the tumults arrive. Be sure you are there, my soul," said The Vengeance, calling her by her title, for she had already turned into the street, "before the tumults arrive!"

Madame Defarge slightly waved her hand, to imply that she heard, and might be relied upon to arrive in good time, and so went through the wood, and round the corner of the prison wall. The Vengeance and the Juryman, looking after her as she walked away, were highly appreciative of her fine figure, and her superb naval endowments.

There were many women at that time, upon whom the time had a dreadfully disfiguring hand, but, there was not one among them more to be dreaded than this ruthless woman, now taking her way along the streets. Of a strong and fearless character, of shrewd sense and readiness, of great determination, of that kind of beauty which not only seems to impart to its possessor firmness and minuteness, but to strike into other an instinctive recognition of those qualities; the troubled times had developed her into a tyrant. She was absolutely without pity. If she had ever been the virtu in her, it had quite gone out of her.

It was nothing to her, that an innocent man was to die for the sins of his forefathers; she saw, not him, but them. It was nothing to her, that his wife was to be made a widow and her daughter an orphan; that was insufficient punishment, because they wore her natural enemies and her prey. She had no right to live. To appeal to her, was made hopeless for her having, sense of pity, even for herself. If she had been laid low in the streets, in any of the many encounters in which she had been engaged, she had never pitied herself; neither, if she had been ordered to the axe to-morrow, would she have gone to it with any softer feeling than a fierce desire to change places with the man who sent her there.

Such a heart Madame Defarge carried under her rough robe. Carelessly worn, it was a becoming robe enough, in a certain weird way, and her dark hair looked rich under her coarse hood, bare-footed and bare-legged, on the brown sand, Madame Defarge took her way along the streets.

Now, when the journey of the travelling coach, at that very moment waiting for the completion of its load, had been planned out last night, the difficulty of taking Miss Pross in it had much engaged Mr. Lorry's attention. It was not merely desirable to avoid overloading the coach, but it was of the highest importance that the time occupied in examining it, and its passengers, should be reduced to the utmost; since their escape might depend on the saving of only a few seconds here and there. Firstly, he had proposed, after cautious consideration, that Miss Pross and Jerry, who were at liberty
to leave the city, should leave it at three o'clock, in the lightest-wheeled conveyance known to that period. Unencumbered with luggage, they would soon overtake the coach, and, passing it and preceding it on the road, would order horses in advance, and greatly facilitate its progress during the precious hours of the night, when delay was the most to be dreaded.

Seeing in this arrangement the hope of rendering real service in that pressing emergency, Miss Pross hailed it with joy. She and Jerry had beheld the coach start, had known who it was that Solomon brought, and had passed some ten minutes in tortures of suspense, and were now concluding their arrangements to follow the coach, even as Madame Defarge, taking her way through the streets, now drew nearer and nearer to the else-deserted lodging in which they held their consultation.

"Now what do you think, Mr. Cruncher," said Miss Pross, whose agitation was so great that she could hardly speak, or form any plan. "Are you capable of forming any plan?" she asked. "I am so distracted with fear and hope for our precious creatures," said Miss Pross, still wildly crying. "That I am incapable of forming any plan. Are you capable of forming any plan, my dear good Mr. Cruncher?"

"Respectin' a future spear o' life, miss," returned Mr. Cruncher, "I hope so. Respectin' our present use o' this here blessed old head o' mine, I think not. Would you do me the favour, miss, to take notice o' two promises and wows wot it is my wishes fur to record in this here crisis?"

"Oh, for gracious sake!" cried Miss Pross, still wildly crying. "Record them at once, and get them out of the way, like an excellent man." "First," said Mr. Cruncher, who was all in a tremble, and who spoke with an ashy and solemn visage, "them poor things well out o' this, never no more will I do it, never no more!"

"I am quite sure, Mr. Cruncher," returned Miss Pross, "that you never will do it again, whatever it is, and that you will never interfere with Mrs. Cruncher's flopping, never no more!"

"Whatever housekeeping arrangement that may be," said Miss Pross, striving to dry her eyes and compose herself, "I have no doubt it is best that Mrs. Cruncher should have it entirely under her own superintendence—O my poor darlings!"

"I go so far as to say, miss, moreover," proceeded Mr. Cruncher, with a most alarming tendency to hold forth as from a pulpit—an and let my words be took down and took to Mrs. Cruncher through yourself—that wet my opinions respecting flopping has undergone a change, and that wet I only hope with all my heart as Mrs. Cruncher may be a flopping at the present time."

"There, there, there! I hope she is, my dear man," cried the distracted Miss Pross, "and I hope she finds it answering her expectations."

"Forbid it," proceeded Mr. Cruncher, with additional solemnity, additional showiness, and additional tendency to hold forth and hold out, as anything wet I have ever said or done should be visited on my earnest wishes for them; poor creatures now! Forbid it as we shouldn't all stop (if it was anyways convenient) to get 'em out o' this here dismal risk! Forbid it, miss! Wot I say, for—and it?" This was Mr. Cruncher's conclusion after a protracted but vain endeavour to find a better one.

And still Madame Defarge, pursuing her way along the streets, came nearer and nearer. "If we ever get back to our native land," said Miss Pross, "you may rely upon my telling Mrs. Cruncher as much as I may be able to remember and understand of what you have so impressively said; and at all events you may be sure that I shall bear witness to your being thoroughly in earnest at this dreadful time. Now, pray let us think! My esteemed Mr. Cruncher, let us think!"

Still, Madame Defarge, pursuing her way along the streets, came nearer and nearer. "If you were to go before," said Miss Pross, "you may rely upon my telling Mrs. Cruncher as much as I may be able to remember and understand of what you have so impressively said; and at all events you may be sure that I shall bear witness to your being thoroughly in earnest at this dreadful time. Now, pray let us think! My esteemed Mr. Cruncher, let us think!"

"Where could you wait for me?" asked Miss Pross.

Mr. Cruncher was so bewildered that he could think of no locality but Temple Bar. Alas, Temple Bar was hundreds of miles away, and Madame Defarge was drawing very near in deed.

"By the cathedral door," said Miss Pross. "Would it be much out of the way, to take me in, near the great cathedral door between the two towers?"

"No, miss," answered Mr. Cruncher.

"Then, like the best of men," said Miss Pross, "go to the post-house straight, and make that change."

"I am doubtful," said Mr. Cruncher, hesitating and shaking his head, "about leaving of you, you see. We don't know what may happen."

"Heaven knows we don't," returned Miss Pross, "but have no fear for me. Take me in at the cathedral, at Three o'Clock or as near it as you can, and I am sure it will be better than our going from here. I feel certain of it. There! Bless you, Mr. Cruncher! Think—"
not of me, but of the lives that may depend on both of us!"

This exordium, and Miss Pross's two hands in quite agonised entirety clasping his, decided Mr. Cruncher. With an encouraging nod or two, he immediately went out to alter the arrangements, and left her by herself to follow water that she had proposed.

The having originated a precaution which was already in course of execution, was a great relief to Miss Pross. The necessity of composing her appearance so that it should attract no special notice in the streets, was another relief. She looked at her watch, and it was twenty minutes past two. She had no time to lose, but must get ready at once.

A贿it, in her extreme perturbation, of the loneliness of the deserted rooms, and of half-imagined faces peeping from behind every open door in them, Miss Pross got a basin of cold water and began laving her eyes, which were swollen and red. Haunted by her feverish apprehensions, she could not bear to have her sight obscured for a minute at a time by the dripping water, but constantly paused and looked around to see that there was no one watching her. In one of these pauses she recoiled and cried out, for she saw a figure standing in the room.

The basin fell to the ground broken, and the water flowed to the feet of Madame Defarge. By strange stern ways, and through much staining blood, those feet had come to meet that woman. "Woman imbecile and pig-like!" said Madame Defarge, frowning. "Take no answer from you! I demand to see her. Either tell her that I demand to see her, or stand out of the way of the door and let me go to her!"

"But, her courage was of that emotional nature that it brought the irrepressible tears into her eyes. This was a courage that Madame Defarge so little comprehended as to mistake for weakness. "Ha, ha!" she laughed, "you poor wretch! What are you worth? I address my- self to that Doctor."

"On my way yonder," said Madame Defarge, with a slight movement of her hand towards the fatal spot, "where they reserve my chair and my knitting for me, I am come to make my compliments to her in passing. I wish to see her.

"I know that your intentions are evil," said Miss Pross, "and you may depend upon it, I'll hold my own against them."

Each spoke in her own language; neither of them the other's words; both was very watchful, and intent to deduce from look and manner, what the unintelligible words meant.

"It will do her no good to keep herself concealed from me at this moment," said Madame Defarge. "Good patriots will know what that means. Let me see her. Go and tell her that I wish to see her. Do you hear?"

"If those eyes of yours were bed-winchels," returned Miss Pross, "and I was an English four-poster, they shouldn't loose a splinter of me. No, you wicked foreign woman; I am your master."

Madame Defarge was not likely to follow these idiomatic remarks in detail; but, she so far understood them as to perceive that she was set at naught.

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"The wife of Evremonde; where is she?"

It flashed upon Miss Pross's mind that the doors were all standing open, and would suggest the light. Her first act was to shut them. There were four in the room, and she shut them all. She then placed herself before the door of the chamber which Lucie had occupied.

Madame Defarge's dark eyes followed her through this rapid movement, and rested on her when it was finished. Miss Pross had nothing beautiful about her; years had not tamed the wildness, or softened the grimness, of her appearance; but, she too was a determined woman in her different way, and she measured Madame Defarge with her eyes, every inch.

"You might, from your appearance, be the wife of Lucifer," said Miss Pross, in her breathing. "Nevertheless, you shall not get the better of me. I am an Englishwoman."

Madame Defarge looked at her scornfully, but still with something of Miss Pross's own perception that they two were at bay. She saw a tall, hard, wiry woman before her, as Mr. Lorry had seen in the same figure a woman with a strong hand, in the years gone by. She knew full well that Miss Pross was the family's devoted friend; Miss Pross knew full well that Madame Defarge was the family's malevolent enemy.
voice and called out, "Citizen Doctor! Wife of Evremonde! Child of Evremonde! Any person but this miserable fool, answer the Citizensness Defarge!"

Perhaps the following silence, perhaps some latent disclosure in the expression of Miss Pross's face, perhaps a sudden misgiving apart from either suggestion, whispered to Madame Defarge that they were gone. Three of the doors she opened swiftly, and looked in.

"These rooms are all in disorder, there has been hurried packing, there are odds and ends upon the ground. There is no one in that room behind you! Let me look."

"Never!" said Miss Pross, who understood the remonstrance perfectly and as Madame Defarge understood the answer.

"If they are not in that room, they are gone, and can be pursued and brought back," said Madame Defarge to herself.

"As long as you don't know whether they are in that room or not, you are uncertain what to do," said Miss Pross to herself; "and you shall not know that, if I can prevent your knowing it; and know that, or not know that, you shall not leave here while I can hold you.

"I have been in the streets from the first, nothing has stopped me, I will tear you to pieces but I will have you from that door," said Madame Defarge.

"We are alone at the top of a high house in a solitary court-yard, we are not likely to be heard, and I pray for... to keep you here while every minute you are here is worth a hundred thousand guineas to my darling," said Miss Pross.

Madame Defarge made at the door. Miss Pross, on the instinct of the moment, seized her round the waist in both her arms, and held her round the waist, and clung to her with more than the hold of a drowning woman.

Soon, Madame Defarge's hands ceased to strike, and felt at her encircled waist. "It is under my arm," said Miss Pross, "I won't draw it. I'll hold you till one or other of us faints or dies!"

"If she don't hear the roll of those dreadful carts, now very nigh their journey's end," said
Mr. Cruncher, glancing over his shoulder, "It's my opinion that indeed she never will hear anything else in this world."

And indeed she never did.

GOOD SAMARITANS.

Women and children under five years old form several hundred thousand more than half the London population. Women and young children, all the world over, are more numerous than men. Wherever they may be, or whatever they may do, they are in man's opinion a peculiar people. Among the clumsiest male stammerers of ignorance, the women move, knowing more than their lords, talking a dozen times as much, but uttering far less of what is in them.

We laugh at the woman's tongue, and wonder when a woman keeps a secret; but every true woman keeps a box of choice reserves for her own private indulgence. The man's mysteries are not hers; if he cannot keep them to himself let him expect them to be blown abroad. Her own oaths of love, of loss, of self-denial, of unsuspected suffering, no woman exposes altogether, even to her nearest friend. There never lived a husband happy in the true love of his wife, who fairly knew all the depths of her mind about him. Every man profits stupidly by the wise little perceptions that arise so quietly and have no utterance except in deeds, of which we vaguely ascribe the fitness to a special faculty called woman's tact. Women, in short, keep to themselves four-fifths of the secrets of society, and do it with a winning air of frankness all their own. A man with a secret will be stony or portentous, or provokingly suggestive; he will keep his mouth shut ostentatiously. A woman is too absolutely secret to set up a public mystery—but whatever may be done, according to the present average, a woman lives a little longer than a man.

A dozen years ago, the founders of the Samaritan Free Hospital for Women and Young Children, in Great Ormond-street, was a large hole in our manners as a nation. We are not so civilized as we suppose ourselves to be if, instead of understanding that we ought to maintain in London five such hospitals, we should allow even this one to languish half supported.

Women have also their peculiar diseases, but for a woman's hospital the demand is not, as for a child's hospital, absolute and urgent. Little children, who should have their three-score years before them, perish by millions because of our great want of understanding, and death says especially upon the young. But women sick as men sicken; their obvious peculiarities of constitution require study—special heed to them produces larger understanding of their treatment—but whatever may be done, according to the present average, a woman lives a little longer than a man.

Among the uneducated poor, this difference between the woman and the man is most conspicuous. The innate powers of her sex place her at once upon an eminence which man can only reach by education. She must needs often be tied to one in whom there is not the grain of understanding requisite to the formation of true sympathy. By far the greater number of the wives of unskilled labourers and mechanics live more or less happily, and more or less conscious of the hidden life within them, having such a seal upon their minds and hearts. Let them fall sick and the truth of this is evident. The sick woman becomes nervous and sensitive. Though she may be surrounded with all that a man's wit and wealth and love can furnish, she will generally crave for more and more assurance that her heart's desire for sympathy is satisfied. The child living on love, dependent, under Heaven, for all things from day to day upon the tenderness of those about it, craves, not less than a woman, for the kind word and the understanding look. Depressed by sickness, either a woman or a child, away from home in the hospital bed, needs, in fact, more than the fine skill and the rough kindness that are abundantly sufficient for a man.

But a child's ailments and diseases often are peculiar to itself. Diseases, also, which are common to the child and the adult, take in the child a peculiar course, require a special habitat of observation, and an extreme vigilance. There might most reasonably be a body of physicians wholly devoted to the treatment of diseases in children. There must reasonably be hospitals devoted specially to such a purpose, and indeed been made to need it, and sprung up before the foundation of the Hospital for Sick Children, in Great Ormond-street, was a large hole in our manners as a nation. We are not so civilized as we suppose ourselves to be if, instead of understanding that we ought to maintain in London five such hospitals, we should allow even this one to languish half supported.

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