

As he watched Little Dorrit day after day, Arthur became curious about her. He began to wonder if she was connected with his father's secret. He decided to find out about Little Dorrit, and learn more of her story.

CHAPTER TWO

The Child of the Marshalsea

Not far from London Bridge, behind high walls with fierce iron spikes on the top, stood the Marshalsea Prison. Twenty-three years before, Mr William Dorrit had passed through its gates for the first time when his business failed and he lost all his money. Most prisoners left the Marshalsea after a few months, but Mr Dorrit was unable to pay his debts, and lived year after year in the prison, until the other prisoners began to call him 'the Father of the Marshalsea'.

Mr Dorrit's wife, his daughter Fanny, and his son Tip had come to live in the prison with him, and his younger daughter, Amy, was born there. But when Amy was only eight years old, her mother died.

Fanny became a wild girl, and Tip lazy; he went from job to job, saying that he was tired of everything, and at last became a debtor at the prison himself. But something in Amy, patient and serious, made her want to be useful for the family. She knew well that her father, who was so broken that he was the Father of the Marshalsea, could be no father to his own children. And so she learned to sew and began to go out to work. This Child of the Marshalsea grew into a woman, with no friend to help her, and soon became the head of the fallen Dorrit family.

This, then, was the life of Amy, known to all as Little Dorrit, who was now going home from Mrs Clennam's house on a dull September evening, watched from a distance by Arthur Clennam. She walked through the

darkening streets and across London Bridge, then turned in through the heavy wooden gate of the Marshalsea.

Arthur stood in the street outside, and waited to ask someone what the place was. A few people had already walked past him, too busy to stop, when an old man came slowly along the street and stopped to go through the gate. He was dirtily and poorly dressed in an old coat, once blue, which reached to his ankles and buttoned to his chin. He wore a broken old hat over a confusion of grey hair; and his trousers were so long and loose, and his shoes so large, that he moved slowly along like an elephant.

'Excuse me, sir,' Arthur said. 'What is this place?'

The old man stopped and looked at Arthur with weak grey eyes.

'This place?' replied the old man. 'This is the Marshalsea.'

'The debtors' prison! Can anyone go in and visit the prisoners?'

'Anyone can go in,' said the old man, adding plainly, 'but not everyone can go out.'

'May I ask you one more question?' said Arthur. 'Do you know the name Dorrit here?'

'My name, sir,' replied the old man, most unexpectedly, 'is Dorrit.'

Arthur took off his hat. 'May I just say a few words? I was not expecting this at all. I have recently come home after many years abroad. I have seen at my mother's - Mrs Clennam's - a young woman working, who is spoken of only as Little Dorrit. I have felt sincerely interested in her, and have wanted very much to know something more about her. I saw her go in at that gate, not a minute before you came.'

'Then you must come with me,' said the old man, in a weak and trembling voice. 'The young woman whom you saw go in here is my brother's child, Amy. My brother is William Dorrit; I am Frederick. I am a musician at a theatre and I help my brother as much as I can.'

He went through the gate and across the yard, and Arthur walked with him.

'My brother,' said the old man, 'has been here many years. Please say nothing about my niece working for your mother.'

The night was now dark, and the prison lamps in the yard and the candles in the prison windows did not seem to make it lighter. A few people stood about, talking quietly, but most of the prisoners were inside.

Frederick Dorrit turned in at one of the doors, went up the stairs, and paused for a moment before opening a door on the second floor. At once, Arthur saw Little Dorrit, and at once he understood why she always ate her dinner alone at his mother's house. She had brought the meat home and was warming it over the fire for her father. Her father, wearing an old grey gown and a black cap, sat at the table waiting for his supper. There was a clean cloth on the table, with a knife, fork and spoon, salt, and a glass on it.

Little Dorrit looked up and her face turned pale.

'This gentleman is Mr Clennam, son of Amy's friend,' Frederick told his brother. 'He was at the gate and wanted to come and greet you.' He turned to Arthur. 'This is my brother William, sir.'

'I have great respect for your daughter,' said Arthur, unsure what to say. 'That is why I wanted to meet you.'

But Mr Dorrit accepted the visitor easily. 'Mr Clennam, you are welcome, sir. Please sit down.' His voice was soft but proud. 'I have welcomed many gentlemen to these walls. Perhaps my daughter Amy has mentioned that I am the Father of this place. You know, I am sure, that my daughter Amy was born here. A good girl, sir, a dear girl; for many years a comfort and support to me. Amy, my dear, put the dish on the table. Will you join me, sir?'

'Thank you,' said Arthur. 'Nothing for me.'

Arthur was astonished at the man's manner. He did not seem to think that talking so freely about the family history might make his daughter feel uncomfortable.

Little Dorrit filled her father's glass with water, put his supper on the table, and sat down beside him while he ate. The way she looked at her father, half proud of him, half ashamed of him, all loving, went deep into Arthur's heart.

'Everyone who comes to the Marshalsea visits me. As many as forty or fifty in a day,' said Mr Dorrit, anxiously pushing his knife and fork around his plate. 'You must know, Mr Clennam,' went on the Father of the Marshalsea, 'that sometimes people who come here offer a little - something - to the Father of the place.'

Little Dorrit looked down, and put her hand anxiously on her father's arm. Mr Dorrit's voice was still soft, but it became more hesitant. 'It is generally - ha - money. And it is - it is often - hem - acceptable. Yes, very acceptable. Only last month, a gentleman visited me and offered me - ahem - two guineas.'

Arthur was wondering what to say when a bell began to ring and footsteps came up to the door. A pretty woman and a young man stood there.

'Mr Clennam, this is Fanny, my older daughter, and my son, Tip,' said Mr Dorrit. 'The bell is a signal for visitors to leave the prison, and so they have come to say good night.'

'I only want my clean dress from Amy,' said Fanny.

'And I want my clothes,' said Tip.

Little Dorrit opened a drawer and brought out two little piles of clothes, which she gave to her brother and sister.

'Mended?' Arthur heard the sister ask in a whisper.

'Yes,' answered Little Dorrit.

While they were talking, Arthur stood up and looked around the room. Although it was small and poorly furnished, it was neat and even comfortable. Everything in it was shabby but clean.

The bell went on ringing, and Fanny hurried out of the room. 'Now, Mr Clennam,' said Frederick as he followed her, 'we must go quickly, sir, or we will be locked inside.'

Little Dorrit had left the room after the others, and Arthur now turned to the Father of the Marshalsea and put something into his hand.

'Mr Clennam,' said the Father. 'I am deeply, deeply -'

But Arthur had gone downstairs with great speed. He saw Little Dorrit by the gate.

'Please forgive me,' he said, 'for speaking to you here. Please forgive me for coming here at all! I followed you tonight because I want to help you and your family in some way. I could not speak to you at my mother's house.'

Little Dorrit looked a little afraid. 'You are very good, sir. But I... I wish you hadn't followed me. Mrs Clennam has been very kind to give me work, and I don't want to have a secret from her.'

'Have you known my mother long?' asked Arthur.

'Two years, I think. We have a friend, Father and I- Mr Plornish. I wrote out notices which said that I was available for sewing work, and Mr Plornish gave them to people for me. That's how your mother found me. She doesn't know that I live in the prison.'

Little Dorrit was trembling and anxious. The bell stopped ringing. 'You must go, sir. The gate will be locked!' And she turned away to go back to her father.

That night, as Arthur tried to sleep, he wondered if his mother had a reason for helping Little Dorrit. Perhaps something she or his father had done had made William Dorrit fall so low. Was this the secret that had made his father feel guilty?

The next day, Arthur went again to the Marshalsea Prison and walked up and down outside the tall walls, waiting for the gate to open. Little Dorrit soon appeared, in her usual plain dress and with her usual shy manner.

'Will you allow me to walk with you this morning?' asked Arthur. 'I can speak to you as we walk.'

Little Dorrit looked anxious, but said, 'If you wish.'

The morning was windy, and the streets were miserably muddy, but no rain fell as they walked. Little Dorrit seemed so young in Arthur's eyes that at times he thought of her almost as a child.

'You spoke so sincerely last night, sir, and I found afterwards that you had been so generous to my father. I want to thank you, and I want to say to you...' She hesitated and trembled, and tears rose in her eyes.

'To say to me...?'

'That I hope you will not misunderstand my father. Don't judge him, sir, as you would judge others outside the gates. He has been there so long!'

'I will never judge him unfairly, believe me,' Arthur promised. 'May I ask you a little more about your father? Does he owe money to many people? Do you know who is the most important of his creditors?'

'I used to hear long ago of Mr Tite Barnacle,' Little Dorrit said, after some thought. 'He's very important in the Circumlocution Office.'

'It can do no harm,' thought Arthur, 'if I see this Mr Barnacle.'

'Ah!' said Little Dorrit, shaking her head. She seemed to know what he was thinking. 'Many people used to think once of getting my poor father out, but you don't know how hopeless it is. And if he did get out, where could he live, and how could he live? He might not be strong enough for life outside the Marshalsea.'

Little Dorrit could not stop her tears, full of love and kindness, from falling. 'He would hate to know that I earn a little money! Such a good, good father!'

Arthur waited for these sudden feelings to pass a little before he spoke. 'You would be glad if your brother were free?'

'Oh, very, very glad, sir!'

'Well, we will hope for him. You told me last night of a friend you have?'

'Yes, sir, Mr Plornish. He lives in the last house at Bleeding-Heart Yard.'

Arthur took down the address, and gave his own address to Little Dorrit.

'Mr Plornish is one friend,' he said. 'And please believe that you have another friend now, too.'

'You are truly kind to me, sir.'

They walked back through the miserable, muddy streets, past crowds of dirty, shabby people. There was nothing pleasant about it at all. But to Arthur, it seemed a special walk, with that thin, careful little creature beside him.

CHAPTER THREE

The Circumlocution Office

The Circumlocution Office was the most important department in the government. Whatever needed doing, the Circumlocution Office knew best how not to do it! All the business of the country went into the Circumlocution Office - but most business never came out.

A few days after his conversation with Little Dorrit, Arthur found himself at the Circumlocution Office for the fifth time that week, asking for Mr Tite Barnacle. Mr Tite Barnacle was the head of this great office. Arthur had already spent one morning waiting for Mr Barnacle in a hallway, one in a waiting room, one in a small office, and one in a cold passage. On the fifth day, Mr Tite Barnacle was not busy; this time, he was absent. However, his son, Barnacle Junior, was available.

The young gentleman was standing in front of the fire in his father's office. It was a comfortable room, with a thick carpet and a leather-covered desk.

'Oh, I say! Look here! My father won't be in today,' said Barnacle Junior. He was a thin, young man with a little beard. 'Is there anything I can do?'

'Thank you,' said Arthur. 'I met a debtor in the Marshalsea Prison: Mr Dorrit. He has been there many years, and I wish to help him, if possible. I want to ask your father if he is one of Mr Dorrit's creditors.'

'I say! You must apply to the proper office here,' said Barnacle Junior.

'Tell me the proper office and I will go there,' said Arthur.

Arthur was sent from one office to the next, and finally given a pile of papers to take away with him. He took the papers miserably and walked slowly down the long stone passage that led out of the Circumlocution Office.

As he went through the building's front doors, Arthur was surprised to see Mr Meagles walking out in front of him. He was talking angrily to a

friend.

'Mr Clennam!' said Mr Meagles when he saw Arthur, and his face slowly became more cheerful. 'I am glad to see you.'

'I am pleased to see you, too. How is Mrs Meagles? And your daughter?'

'They are as well as possible. I only wish you had found me in a better temper. Come and take a walk in the park with us, and I will tell you about this friend of mine. He is Daniel Doyce, an engineer and an inventor.'

The man was short and square, with grey hair and deep lines in his face.

'Twelve years ago, Daniel created an invention that could be very important to this country. He went to the Circumlocution Office to tell them about it - and they laughed at him, and sent him from one department to another. No one there understands how important it is. He was made to feel like someone who has done something wrong!'

'I am not surprised, after my own experiences at the Circumlocution Office,' said Arthur.

Doyce smiled. 'I should not have come here at all. I know of a hundred other people who have had the same experience, and I ought to have realized that this would happen. But I am very grateful to Mr Meagles here. He has supported me many times, in many ways.'

'Nonsense!' said Mr Meagles, whose temper had begun to cool a little. 'Now come, come! We won't make things better by feeling annoyed. Let's go back to your factory, Doyce. Mr Clennam, will you come with us to Bleeding-Heart Yard?'

'Bleeding-Heart Yard!' said Arthur. 'I want to go there myself, in fact.'

'Even better, then,' said Mr Meagles. 'Come along!'

And so the three of them walked through the shabby streets to Bleeding-Heart Yard. The Yard was reached by going down some steps. At one end of the yard stood Doyce's factory, and at the other end there were some tall chimneys, and big houses. The houses had once been grand, but were now divided up as homes for poor people.

Arthur looked around for the home of Mr Plornish, and saw the name on a sign above a gateway. It was the last house in the yard, as Little Dorrit had described it. Arthur said goodbye to Doyce and Meagles, and knocked at Mr Plornish's house. A fresh-faced, sandy-haired man of about thirty opened the door.

'Mr Plornish, I have come to talk to you about the Dorrit family,' said Arthur. 'Miss Dorrit told me you helped her.'

'Mr Clennam, is it?' said Mr Plornish. 'Yes, she's talked about you. Come in, sir.'

Mr Plornish led the way into a small, dark front room, and when they were sitting down, Arthur began to speak. 'I know that Miss Dorrit's brother is now a prisoner in the Marshalsea. I would like to pay his debts so that he can be released, but I want this to be a secret. Could you arrange it for me, and tell him that his debt has been paid by someone that you cannot name? Say that it is a friend who hopes that for his sister, if for no one else, he will use his freedom wisely.'

'I shall do just as you have asked, sir.'

'And if you can think how I could be useful to Miss Dorrit, in any way, I would be very grateful to you.'

'It will be a pleasure, sir,' said Mr Plornish. And, since Mr Plornish was eager to arrange things as quickly as possible, they then rode in a coach together towards the Marshalsea Prison, where Arthur left him before returning home.

After he had spent several more days at the Circumlocution Office, Arthur Clennam realized that William Dorrit's case was indeed a hopeless one. There was no way he could see of helping the Father of the Marshalsea to freedom. He thought about this one evening as he sat in his hotel in Covent Garden. Then he began to think about his own life, and all he had missed. He had a warm and sympathetic heart, and he felt sad to think about his life of loneliness.

'An unhappy childhood; long, lonely years abroad; and now home to England,' he said sadly to himself. 'What have I found?'

Just then, there was a gentle knock at his door, and it opened softly. A voice said quietly, 'Mr Clennam, it is me, Little Dorrit.' The words seemed to answer his question.

Arthur stood up and looked at her with his serious smile. 'My poor child! It is late and I have no fire - and it is so cold.' He made her sit in the chair nearest the fire, then brought wood and heaped it on. Soon, the fire was burning bright.

'I always think of you as Little Dorrit,' said Arthur. 'May I call you that?'

'Thank you, sir. I like it better than any name,' she said. 'I have come to tell you, sir, that my brother is free. Mr Plornish says that I can never know who paid his debts, and never thank the generous gentleman.'

'He would probably need no thanks,' said Arthur. 'He would probably be thankful that he had been able to help Little Dorrit a little, because she deserves it so much.'

Little Dorrit was trembling. 'If I knew him, and I might, I would tell him that he is very, very kind. If I knew him, I would go on my knees to thank him.'

'There, there, Little Dorrit,' he said gently.

There was fruit and cake on the table, and Arthur moved it towards her.

'Thank you, but I am not hungry,' she said. 'There was another thing I wanted to say. You wrote my father a note, saying you are coming to visit him tomorrow. Please, Mr Clennam, don't let him ask for money. Don't give it to him. You will be able to think better of him, if you don't.'

Arthur saw tears shining in her anxious eyes. 'If that is what you wish,' he said.

'Thank you, sir! I decided I had to speak to you. Not because I am ashamed of him,' she added, drying her tears quickly, 'but because I know him better than anyone does, and love him, and am proud of him.'

And then, Little Dorrit was suddenly anxious to leave and return to her father.

One Saturday morning not long after this, Arthur set out for Twickenham, where Mr Meagles lived. Mr Meagles had invited Arthur to come and stay with him and his family for the night, and as the weather was fine and dry, Arthur decided to walk.

He had crossed Putney Heath when he noticed Daniel Doyce walking ahead of him.

'How do you do, Mr Doyce,' called Arthur, catching up with him. 'I'm glad to see you.'

'Ha! Mr Clennam!' said Doyce. 'I hope we're going to the same place?'

'Twickenham? I'm glad to hear it.'

They walked on together, and were soon deep in conversation. Doyce was a man of good sense and confidence, who combined new ideas with patience and hard work. He told Arthur that he had worked and studied with an engineer when he was a young man. He had had a job offer in France,

and had gone from there to Germany and then to Russia, where he had done very well indeed. When he came home to London, he had worked successfully - until he went to the Circumlocution Office, hoping that they would be interested in his invention, and was sent away.

'Do you have a partner in your business, Mr Doyce?' Arthur asked.

'Not at the moment,' he replied. 'I had one when I first went into it, but he has been dead for some years now. I didn't want to find another partner for a while, but there's more to do now and I can't manage everything. I'm hoping to talk about it this weekend with my friend and protector Mr Meagles.'

The Meagles's home was a pretty brick house by the river, with handsome trees all around it in a beautiful garden. As soon as Doyce rang the bell at the gate, Mr Meagles came out, followed closely by Mrs Meagles and Pet.

'Here we are, you see,' said Mr Meagles, 'in our own home. Not like Marseille, eh? We are delighted to see you, Mr Clennam, delighted.'

'I have not had such a pleasant greeting since we last walked up and down looking at the Mediterranean,' said Arthur. Then, remembering what Little Dorrit had said to him in his own room, he added, 'Except once.'

Mr Meagles led the way into the house. 'Come! You've had a long walk. You'll be glad to get your boots off.'

The house was as pretty inside as it was outside; and perfectly well arranged and comfortable. The day passed pleasantly, and dinner that evening was very enjoyable indeed. They had so many places and people to talk about, and they were all so easy and cheerful together. After dinner, they had some games, and Pet played the piano, but when the others went up to their rooms, Arthur waited to speak to Mr Meagles.

'I've recently stopped working in my mother's business,' he told him, 'and now I wish to find a new job. As we walked here today, Mr Doyce mentioned that he's looking for a business partner and he's going to take