

A Tale of Two Cities

By

Charles Dickens

Book 3: The Track of the Storm

Chapter 12: Darkness

Sydney Carton paused in the street, not quite decided where to go. “At Tellson’s banking-house at nine,” he said, with a musing face. “Shall I do well, in the mean time, to show myself? I think so. It is best that these people should know there is such a man as I here; it is a sound precaution, and may be a necessary preparation. But care, care, care! Let me think it out!”

Checking his steps which had begun to tend towards an object, he took a turn or two in the already darkening street, and traced the thought in his mind to its possible consequences. His first impression was confirmed. “It is best,” he said, finally resolved, “that these people should know there is such a man as I here.” And he turned his face towards Saint Antoine.

Defarge had described himself, that day, as the keeper of a wine-shop in the Saint Antoine suburb. It was not difficult for one who knew the city well, to find his house without asking any question. Having ascertained its situation, Carton came out of those closer streets again, and dined at a place of refreshment and fell sound asleep after dinner. For the first time in many years, he had no strong drink. Since last night he had taken nothing but a little light thin wine, and last night he had dropped the brandy slowly down on Mr. Lorry’s hearth like a man who had done with it.

It was as late as seven o'clock when he awoke refreshed, and went out into the streets again. As he passed along towards Saint Antoine, he stopped at a shop-window where there was a mirror, and slightly altered the disordered arrangement of his loose cravat, and his coat-collar, and his wild hair. This done, he went on direct to Defarge's, and went in.

There happened to be no customer in the shop but Jacques Three, of the restless fingers and the croaking voice. This man, whom he had seen upon the Jury, stood drinking at the little counter, in conversation with the Defarges, man and wife. The Vengeance assisted in the conversation, like a regular member of the establishment.

As Carton walked in, took his seat and asked (in very indifferent French) for a small measure of wine, Madame Defarge cast a careless glance at him, and then a keener, and then a keener, and then advanced to him herself, and asked him what it was he had ordered.

He repeated what he had already said.

"English?" asked Madame Defarge, inquisitively raising her dark eyebrows.

After looking at her, as if the sound of even a single French word were slow to express itself to him, he answered, in his former strong foreign accent. "Yes, madame, yes. I am English!"

Madame Defarge returned to her counter to get the wine, and, as he took up a Jacobin journal and feigned to pore over it puzzling out its meaning, he heard her say, "I swear to you, like Evremonde!"

Defarge brought him the wine, and gave him Good Evening.

"How?"

“Good evening.”

“Oh! Good evening, citizen,” filling his glass. “Ah! and good wine. I drink to the Republic.”

Defarge went back to the counter, and said, “Certainly, a little like.” Madame sternly retorted, “I tell you a good deal like.” Jacques Three pacifically remarked, “He is so much in your mind, see you, madame.” The amiable Vengeance added, with a laugh, “Yes, my faith! And you are looking forward with so much pleasure to seeing him once more tomorrow!”

Carton followed the lines and words of his paper, with a slow forefinger, and with a studious and absorbed face. They were all leaning their arms on the counter close together, speaking low. After a silence of a few moments, during which they all looked towards him without disturbing his outward attention from the Jacobin editor, they resumed their conversation.

“It is true what madame says,” observed Jacques Three. “Why stop? There is great force in that. Why stop?”

“Well, well,” reasoned Defarge, “but one must stop somewhere. After all, the question is still where?”

“At extermination,” said madame.

“Magnificent!” croaked Jacques Three. The Vengeance, also, highly approved.

“Extermination is good doctrine, my wife,” said Defarge, rather troubled; “in general, I say nothing against it. But this Doctor has

suffered much; you have seen him to-day; you have observed his face when the paper was read.”

“I have observed his face!” repeated madame, contemptuously and angrily. “Yes. I have observed his face. I have observed his face to be not the face of a true friend of the Republic. Let him take care of his face!”

“And you have observed, my wife,” said Defarge, in a deprecatory manner, “the anguish of his daughter, which must be a dreadful anguish to him!”

“I have observed his daughter,” repeated madame; “yes, I have observed his daughter, more times than one. I have observed her to-day, and I have observed her other days. I have observed her in the court, and I have observed her in the street by the prison. Let me but lift my finger —!” She seemed to raise it (the listener’s eyes were always on his paper), and to let it fall with a rattle on the ledge before her, as if the axe had dropped.

“The citizeness is superb!” croaked the Juryman.

“She is an Angel!” said The Vengeance, and embraced her.

“As to thee,” pursued madame, implacably, addressing her husband, “if it depended on thee — which, happily, it does not — thou wouldst rescue this man even now.”

“No!” protested Defarge. “Not if to lift this glass would do it! But I would leave the matter there. I say, stop there.”

“See you then, Jacques,” said Madame Defarge, wrathfully; “and see you, too, my little Vengeance; see you both! Listen! For other crimes as tyrants and oppressors, I have this race a long time on my register, doomed to destruction and extermination. Ask my husband, is that so.”

“It is so,” assented Defarge, without being asked.

“In the beginning of the great days, when the Bastille falls, he finds this paper of to-day, and he brings it home, and in the middle of the night when this place is clear and shut, we read it, here on this spot, by the light of this lamp. Ask him, is that so.”

“It is so,” assented Defarge.

“That night, I tell him, when the paper is read through, and the lamp is burnt out, and the day is gleaming in above those shutters and between those iron bars, that I have now a secret to communicate. Ask him, is that so.”

“It is so,” assented Defarge again.

“I communicate to him that secret. I smite this bosom with these two hands as I smite it now, and I tell him, `Defarge, I was brought up among the fishermen of the sea-shore, and that peasant family so injured by the two Evremonde brothers, as that Bastille paper describes, is my family. Defarge, that sister of the mortally wounded boy upon the ground was my sister, that husband was my sister’s husband, that unborn child was their child, that brother was my brother, that father was my father, those dead are my dead, and that summons to answer for those things descends to me!’ Ask him, is that so.”

“It is so,” assented Defarge once more.

“Then tell Wind and Fire where to stop,” returned madame; “but don’t tell me.”

Both her hearers derived a horrible enjoyment from the deadly nature of her wrath—the listener could feel how white she was, without seeing her

—and both highly commended it. Defarge, a weak minority, interposed a few words for the memory of the compassionate wife of the Marquis; but only elicited from his own wife a repetition of her last reply. “Tell the Wind and the Fire where to stop; not me!”

Customers entered, and the group was broken up. The English customer paid for what he had had, perplexedly counted his change, and asked, as a stranger, to be directed towards the National Palace. Madame Defarge took him to the door, and put her arm on his, in pointing out the road. The English customer was not without his reflections then, that it might be a good deed to seize that arm, lift it, and strike under it sharp and deep.

But, he went his way, and was soon swallowed up in the shadow of the prison wan. At the appointed hour, he emerged from it to present himself in Mr. Lorry’s room again, where he found the old gentleman walking to and fro in restless anxiety. He said he had been with Lucie until just now, and had only left her for a few minutes, to come and keep his appointment. Her father had not been seen, since he quitted the banking-house towards four o’clock. She had some faint hopes that his mediation might save Charles, but they were very slight. He had been more than five hours gone: where could he be?

Mr. Lorry waited until ten; but, Doctor Manette not returning, and he being unwilling to leave Lucie any longer, it was arranged that he should go back to her, and come to the banking-house again at midnight. In the meanwhile, Carton would wait alone by the fire for the Doctor.

He waited and waited, and the clock struck twelve; but Doctor Manette did not come back. Mr. Lorry returned, and found no tidings of him, and brought none. Where could he be?

They were discussing this question, and were almost building up some weak structure of hope on his prolonged absence, when they heard him

on the stairs. The instant he entered the room, it was plain that all was lost.

Whether he had really been to any one, or whether he had been all that time traversing the streets, was never known. As he stood staring at them, they asked him no question, for his face told them everything.

“I cannot find it,” said he, “and I must have it. Where is it?”

His head and throat were bare, and, as he spoke with a helpless look straying all around, he took his coat off, and let it drop on the floor.

“Where is my bench? I have been looking everywhere for my bench, and I can’t find it. What have they done with my work? Time presses: I must finish those shoes.”

They looked at one another, and their hearts died within them.

“Come, come!” said he, in a whimpering miserable way; “let me get to work. Give me my work.”

Receiving no answer, he tore his hair, and beat his feet upon the ground, like a distracted child.

“Don’t torture a poor forlorn wretch,” he implored them, with a dreadful cry; “but give me my work! What is to become of us, if those shoes are not done to-night?”

Lost, utterly lost!

It was so clearly beyond hope to reason with him, or try to restore him, that—as if by agreement—they each put a hand upon his shoulder, and soothed him to sit down before the fire, with a promise that he should have his work presently. He sank into the chair, and brooded over the

embers, and shed tears. As if all that had happened since the garret time were a momentary fancy, or a dream, Mr. Lorry saw him shrink into the exact figure that Defarge had had in keeping.

Affected, and impressed with terror as they both were, by this spectacle of ruin, it was not a time to yield to such emotions. His lonely daughter, bereft of her final hope and reliance, appealed to them both too strongly. Again, as if by agreement, they looked at one another with one meaning in their faces. Carton was the first to speak:

“The last chance is gone: it was not much. Yes; he had better be taken to her. But, before you go, will you, for a moment, steadily attend to me? Don’t ask me why I make the stipulations I am going to make, and exact the promise I am going to exact; I have a reason— a good one.”

“I do not doubt it,” answered Mr. Lorry. “Say on.”

The figure in the chair between them, was all the time monotonously rocking itself to and fro, and moaning. They spoke in such a tone as they would have used if they had been watching by a sick-bed in the night.

Carton stooped to pick up the coat, which lay almost entangling his feet. As he did so, a small case in which the Doctor was accustomed to carry the lists of his day’s duties, fell lightly on the floor. Carton took it up, and there was a folded paper in it. “We should look at this!” he said. Mr. Lorry nodded his consent. He opened it, and exclaimed, “Thank GOD!”

“What is it?” asked Mr. Lorry, eagerly.

“A moment! Let me speak of it in its place. First,” he put his hand in his coat, and took another paper from it, “that is the certificate which enables me to pass out of this city. Look at it. You see— Sydney Carton, an Englishman?”

Mr. Lorry held it open in his hand, gazing in his earnest face.

“Keep it for me until to-morrow. I shall see him to-morrow, you remember, and I had better not take it into the prison.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know; I prefer not to do so. Now, take this paper that Doctor Manette has carried about him. It is a similar certificate, enabling him and his daughter and her child, at any time, to pass the barrier and the frontier! You see?”

“Yes!”

“Perhaps he obtained it as his last and utmost precaution against evil, yesterday. When is it dated? But no matter; don’t stay to look; put it up carefully with mine and your own. Now, observe! I never doubted until within this hour or two, that he had, or could have such a paper. It is good, until recalled. But it may be soon recalled, and, I have reason to think, will be.”

“They are not in danger?”

“They are in great danger. They are in danger of denunciation by Madame Defarge. I know it from her own lips. I have overheard words of that woman’s, to-night, which have presented their danger to me in strong colours. I have lost no time, and since then, I have seen the spy. He confirms me. He knows that a wood-sawyer, living by the prison wall, is under the control of the Defarges, and has been rehearsed by Madame Defarge as to his having seen Her”—he never mentioned Lucie’s name—”making signs and signals to prisoners. It is easy to foresee that the pretence will be the common one, a prison plot, and that it will involve her life—and perhaps her child’s—and perhaps her

father's—for both have been seen with her at that place. Don't look so horrified. You will save them all."

"Heaven grant I may, Carton! But how?"

"I am going to tell you how. It will depend on you, and it could depend on no better man. This new denunciation will certainly not take place until after to-morrow; probably not until two or three days afterwards; more probably a week afterwards. You know it is a capital crime, to mourn for, or sympathise with, a victim of the Guillotine. She and her father would unquestionably be guilty of this crime, and this woman (the inveteracy of whose pursuit cannot be described) would wait to add that strength to her case, and make herself doubly sure. You follow me?"

"So attentively, and with so much confidence in what you say, that for the moment I lose sight," touching the back of the Doctor's chair, even of this distress."

"You have money, and can buy the means of travelling to the seacoast as quickly as the journey can be made. Your preparations have been completed for some days, to return to England. Early to-morrow have your horses ready, so that they may be in starting trim at two o'clock in the afternoon."

"It shall be done!"

His manner was so fervent and inspiring, that Mr. Lorry caught the flame, and was as quick as youth.

"You are a noble heart. Did I say we could depend upon no better man? Tell her, to-night, what you know of her danger as involving her child and her father. Dwell upon that, for she would lay her own fair head beside her husband's cheerfully." He faltered for an instant; then went on as before. "For the sake of her child and her father, press upon her the

necessity of leaving Paris, with them and you, at that hour. Tell her that it was her husband's last arrangement. Tell her that more depends upon it than she dare believe, or hope. You think that her father, even in this sad state, will submit himself to her; do you not?"

"I am sure of it."

"I thought so. Quietly and steadily have all these arrangements made in the courtyard here, even to the taking of your own seat in the carriage. The moment I come to you, take me in, and drive away."

"I understand that I wait for you under all circumstances?"

"You have my certificate in your hand with the rest, you know, and will reserve my place. Wait for nothing but to have my place occupied, and then for England!"

"Why, then," said Mr. Lorry, grasping his eager but so firm and steady hand, "it does not all depend on one old man, but I shall have a young and ardent man at my side."

"By the help of Heaven you shall! Promise me solemnly that nothing will influence you to alter the course on which we now stand pledged to one another."

"Nothing, Carton."

"Remember these words to-morrow: change the course, or delay in it—for any reason—and no life can possibly be saved, and many lives must inevitably be sacrificed."

"I will remember them. I hope to do my part faithfully."

"And I hope to do mine. Now, good bye!"

Though he said it with a grave smile of earnestness, and though he even put the old man's hand to his lips, he did not part from him then. He helped him so far to arouse the rocking figure before the dying embers, as to get a cloak and hat put upon it, and to tempt it forth to find where the bench and work were hidden that it still moaningly besought to have. He walked on the other side of it and protected it to the courtyard of the house where the afflicted heart—so happy in the memorable time when he had revealed his own desolate heart to it—outwatched the awful night. He entered the courtyard and remained there for a few moments alone, looking up at the light in the window of her room. Before he went away, he breathed a blessing towards it, and a Farewell.