

Great Expectations
by
Charles Dickens

Chapter 42

“Dear boy and Pip’s comrade. I am not a-going fur to tell you my life, like a song or a story-book. But to give it you short and handy, I’ll put it at once into a mouthful of English. In jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail. There, you got it. That’s my life pretty much, down to such times as I got shipped off, arter Pip stood my friend.

“I’ve been done everything to, pretty well – except hanged. I’ve been locked up, as much as a silver tea-kettle. I’ve been carted here and carted there, and put out of this town and put out of that town, and stuck in the stocks, and whipped and worried and drove. I’ve no more notion where I was born, than you have – if so much. I first become aware of myself, down in Essex, a thieving turnips for my living. Summun had run away from me – a man – a tinker – and he’d took the fire with him, and left me wery cold.

“I know’d my name to be Magwitch, chrisen’d Abel. How did I know it? Much as I know’d the birds’ names in the hedges to be chaffinch, sparrer, thrush. I might have thought it was all lies together, only as the birds’ names come out true, I supposed mine did.

“So fur as I could find, there warn’t a soul that see young Abel Magwitch, with us little on him as in him, but wot caught fright at him, and either drove him off, or took him up. I was took up, took up, took up, to that extent that I reg’larly grow’d up took up.

“This is the way it was, that when I was a ragged little creetur as much to be pitied as ever I see (not that I looked in the glass, for there warn’t many insides of furnished houses known to me), I got the name of being hardened. “This is a terrible hardened one,” they says to prison visitors, picking out me. “May be said to live in jails, this boy. “Then they looked at me, and I looked at them, and they measured my head, some on ‘em – they had better a-measured my stomach – and others on ‘em giv me tracts what I couldn’t read, and made me speeches what I couldn’t

understand. They always went on agen me about the Devil. But what the Devil was I to do? I must put something into my stomach, mustn't I? – Howsomever, I'm a getting low, and I know what's due. Dear boy and Pip's comrade, don't you be afeerd of me being low.

“Tramping, begging, thieving, working sometimes when I could – though that warn't as often as you may think, till you put the question whether you would ha' been over-ready to give me work yourselves – a bit of a poacher, a bit of a labourer, a bit of a waggoner, a bit of a haymaker, a bit of a hawker, a bit of most things that don't pay and lead to trouble, I got to be a man. A deserting soldier in a Traveller's Rest, what lay hid up to the chin under a lot of tatures, learnt me to read; and a travelling Giant what signed his name at a penny a time learnt me to write. I warn't locked up as often now as formerly, but I wore out my good share of keymetal still.

“At Epsom races, a matter of over twenty years ago, I got acquainted wi' a man whose skull I'd crack wi' this poker, like the claw of a lobster, if I'd got it on this hob. His right name was Compeyson; and that's the man, dear boy, what you see me a-pounding in the ditch, according to what you truly told your comrade arter I was gone last night.

“He set up fur a gentleman, this Compeyson, and he'd been to a public boarding-school and had learning. He was a smooth one to talk, and was a dab at the ways of gentlefolks. He was good-looking too. It was the night afore the great race, when I found him on the heath, in a booth that I know'd on. Him and some more was a sitting among the tables when I went in, and the landlord (which had a knowledge of me, and was a sporting one) called him out, and said, ‘I think this is a man that might suit you’ – meaning I was.

“Compeyson, he looks at me very noticing, and I look at him. He has a watch and a chain and a ring and a breast-pin and a handsome suit of clothes.

””To judge from appearances, you're out of luck,’ says Compeyson to me.

””Yes, master, and I've never been in it much.’ (I had come out of Kingston Jail last on a vagrancy committal. Not but what it might have

been for something else; but it warn't.)

””Luck changes,’ says Compeyson; ‘perhaps yours is going to change.’

“I says, ‘I hope it may be so. There’s room.’

””What can you do?’ says Compeyson.

””Eat and drink,’ I says; ‘if you’ll find the materials.’

“Compeyson laughed, looked at me again very noticing, giv me five shillings, and appointed me for next night. Same place.

“I went to Compeyson next night, same place, and Compeyson took me on to be his man and pardner. And what was Compeyson’s business in which we was to go pardners? Compeyson’s business was the swindling, handwriting forging, stolen bank-note passing, and such-like. All sorts of traps as Compeyson could set with his head, and keep his own legs out of and get the profits from and let another man in for, was Compeyson’s business. He’d no more heart than a iron file, he was as cold as death, and he had the head of the Devil afore mentioned.

“There was another in with Compeyson, as was called Arthur – not as being so chrisen’d, but as a surname. He was in a Decline, and was a shadow to look at. Him and Compeyson had been in a bad thing with a rich lady some years afore, and they’d made a pot of money by it; but Compeyson betted and gamed, and he’d have run through the king’s taxes. So, Arthur was a-dying, and a-dying poor and with the horrors on him, and Compeyson’s wife (which Compeyson kicked mostly) was a-having pity on him when she could, and Compeyson was a-having pity on nothing and nobody.

“I might a-took warning by Arthur, but I didn’t; and I won’t pretend I was partick’ler – for where ‘ud be the good on it, dear boy and comrade? So I begun wi’ Compeyson, and a poor tool I was in his hands. Arthur lived at the top of Compeyson’s house (over nigh Brentford it was), and Compeyson kept a careful account agen him for board and lodging, in case he should ever get better to work it out. But Arthur soon settled the account. The second or third time as ever I see him, he come a-tearing down into Compeyson’s parlour late at night, in only a flannel gown,

with his hair all in a sweat, and he says to Compeyson's wife, 'Sally, she really is upstairs alonger me, now, and I can't get rid of her. She's all in white,' he says, 'wi' white flowers in her hair, and she's awful mad, and she's got a shroud hanging over her arm, and she says she'll put it on me at five in the morning.'

"Says Compeyson: 'Why, you fool, don't you know she's got a living body? And how should she be up there, without coming through the door, or in at the window, and up the stairs?'

"I don't know how she's there,' says Arthur, shivering dreadful with the horrors, 'but she's standing in the corner at the foot of the bed, awful mad. And over where her heart's brook – you broke it! – there's drops of blood.'

"Compeyson spoke hardy, but he was always a coward. 'Go up alonger this drivelling sick man,' he says to his wife, 'and Magwitch, lend her a hand, will you?' But he never come nigh himself.

"Compeyson's wife and me took him up to bed agen, and he raved most dreadful. 'Why look at her!' he cries out. 'She's a-shaking the shroud at me! Don't you see her? Look at her eyes! Ain't it awful to see her so mad?' Next, he cries, 'She'll put it on me, and then I'm done for! Take it away from her, take it away!' And then he caught hold of us, and kep on a-talking to her, and answering of her, till I half believed I see her myself.

"Compeyson's wife, being used to him, giv him some liquor to get the horrors off, and by-and-by he quieted. 'Oh, she's gone! Has her keeper been for her?' he says. 'Yes,' says Compeyson's wife. 'Did you tell him to lock her and bar her in?' 'Yes.' 'And to take that ugly thing away from her?' 'Yes, yes, all right.' 'You're a good creetur,' he says, 'don't leave me, whatever you do, and thank you!'

"He rested pretty quiet till it might want a few minutes of five, and then he starts up with a scream, and screams out, 'Here she is! She's got the shroud again. She's unfolding it. She's coming out of the corner. She's coming to the bed. Hold me, both on you – one of each side – don't let her touch me with it. Hah! she missed me that time. Don't let her throw it over my shoulders. Don't let her lift me up to get it round me. She's

lifting me up. Keep me down!’ Then he lifted himself up hard, and was dead.

“Compeyson took it easy as a good riddance for both sides. Him and me was soon busy, and first he swore me (being ever artful) on my own book – this here little black book, dear boy, what I swore your comrade on.

“Not to go into the things that Compeyson planned, and I done – which ‘ud take a week – I’ll simply say to you, dear boy, and Pip’s comrade, that that man got me into such nets as made me his black slave. I was always in debt to him, always under his thumb, always a-working, always a-getting into danger. He was younger than me, but he’d got craft, and he’d got learning, and he overmatched me five hundred times told and no mercy. My Missis as I had the hard time wi’ – Stop though! I ain’t brought her in—”

He looked about him in a confused way, as if he had lost his place in the book of his remembrance; and he turned his face to the fire, and spread his hands broader on his knees, and lifted them off and put them on again.

“There ain’t no need to go into it,” he said, looking round once more. “The time wi’ Compeyson was a’most as hard a time as ever I had; that said, all’s said. Did I tell you as I was tried, alone, for misdemeanour, while with Compeyson?”

I answered, No.

“Well!” he said, “I was, and got convicted. As to took up on suspicion, that was twice or three times in the four or five year that it lasted; but evidence was wanting. At last, me and Compeyson was both committed for felony – on a charge of putting stolen notes in circulation – and there was other charges behind. Compeyson says to me, ‘Separate defences, no communication,’ and that was all. And I was so miserable poor, that I sold all the clothes I had, except what hung on my back, afore I could get Jagers.

“When we was put in the dock, I noticed first of all what a gentleman Compeyson looked, wi’ his curly hair and his black clothes and his

white pocket-handkercher, and what a common sort of a wretch I looked. When the prosecution opened and the evidence was put short, aforehand, I noticed how heavy it all bore on me, and how light on him. When the evidence was giv in the box, I noticed how it was always me that had come for'ard, and could be swore to, how it was always me that the money had been paid to, how it was always me that had seemed to work the thing and get the profit. But, when the defence come on, then I see the plan plainer; for, says the counsellor for Compeyson, 'My lord and gentlemen, here you has afore you, side by side, two persons as your eyes can separate wide; one, the younger, well brought up, who will be spoke to as such; one, the elder, ill brought up, who will be spoke to as such; one, the younger, seldom if ever seen in these here transactions, and only suspected; t'other, the elder, always seen in 'em and always wi'his guilt brought home. Can you doubt, if there is but one in it, which is the one, and, if there is two in it, which is much the worst one?' And such-like. And when it come to character, warn't it Compeyson as had been to the school, and warn't it his schoolfellows as was in this position and in that, and warn't it him as had been know'd by witnesses in such clubs and societies, and nowt to his disadvantage? And warn't it me as had been tried afore, and as had been know'd up hill and down dale in Bridewells and Lock-Ups? And when it come to speech-making, warn't it Compeyson as could speak to 'em wi' his face dropping every now and then into his white pocket-handkercher – ah! and wi' verses in his speech, too – and warn't it me as could only say, 'Gentlemen, this man at my side is a most precious rascal'? And when the verdict come, warn't it Compeyson as was recommended to mercy on account of good character and bad company, and giving up all the information he could agen me, and warn't it me as got never a word but Guilty? And when I says to Compeyson, 'Once out of this court, I'll smash that face of yourn!' ain't it Compeyson as prays the Judge to be protected, and gets two turnkeys stood betwixt us? And when we're sentenced, ain't it him as gets seven year, and me fourteen, and ain't it him as the Judge is sorry for, because he might a done so well, and ain't it me as the Judge perceives to be a old offender of wiolent passion, likely to come to worse?"

He had worked himself into a state of great excitement, but he checked it, took two or three short breaths, swallowed as often, and stretching out his hand towards me said, in a reassuring manner, "I ain't a-going to be low, dear boy!"

He had so heated himself that he took out his handkerchief and wiped his face and head and neck and hands, before he could go on.

“I had said to Compeyson that I’d smash that face of his, and I swore Lord smash mine! to do it. We was in the same prison-ship, but I couldn’t get at him for long, though I tried. At last I come behind him and hit him on the cheek to turn him round and get a smashing one at him, when I was seen and seized. The black-hole of that ship warn’t a strong one, to a judge of black-holes that could swim and dive. I escaped to the shore, and I was a hiding among the graves there, envying them as was in ‘em and all over, when I first see my boy!”

He regarded me with a look of affection that made him almost abhorrent to me again, though I had felt great pity for him.

“By my boy, I was giv to understand as Compeyson was out on them marshes too. Upon my soul, I half believe he escaped in his terror, to get quit of me, not knowing it was me as had got ashore. I hunted him down. I smashed his face. ‘And now,’ says I ‘as the worst thing I can do, caring nothing for myself, I’ll drag you back.’ And I’d have swum off, towing him by the hair, if it had come to that, and I’d a got him aboard without the soldiers.

“Of course he’d much the best of it to the last – his character was so good. He had escaped when he was made half-wild by me and my murderous intentions; and his punishment was light. I was put in irons, brought to trial again, and sent for life. I didn’t stop for life, dear boy and Pip’s comrade, being here.”

“He wiped himself again, as he had done before, and then slowly took his tangle of tobacco from his pocket, and plucked his pipe from his button-hole, and slowly filled it, and began to smoke.

“Is he dead?” I asked, after a silence.

“Is who dead, dear boy?”

“Compeyson.”

“He hopes I am, if he’s alive, you may be sure,” with a fierce look. “I

never heerd no more of him.”

Herbert had been writing with his pencil in the cover of a book. He softly pushed the book over to me, as Provis stood smoking with his eyes on the fire, and I read in it:

“Young Havisham’s name was Arthur. Compeyson is the man who professed to be Miss Havisham’s lover.”

I shut the book and nodded slightly to Herbert, and put the book by; but we neither of us said anything, and both looked at Provis as he stood smoking by the fire.