

Audio Transcript: 'The Bastille Prisoner'

'The Bastille Prisoner.' Chapter Two.

A large cask of wine had been dropped and broken, in the street. The accident had happened in getting it out of a cart; the cask had tumbled out with a run, the hoops had burst, and it lay on the stones just outside the door of the wine-shop, shattered like a walnut-shell.

All the people within reach had suspended their business, or their idleness, to run to the spot and drink the wine. The rough, irregular stones of the street had dammed it into little pools and these were surrounded, each by its own jostling group or crowd, according to its size. There was no drainage to carry off the wine, and not only did it all get taken up, but so much mud got taken up along with it, that one

might have supposed there had been a scavenger in the street, if anybody acquainted with it could have believed in such a miraculous presence.

The wine was red wine, and had stained the ground of the narrow street in the suburb of Saint Antoine, in Paris, where it was spilled. It had stained many hands, too, and many faces, and many naked feet, and many wooden shoes. The hands of the man who sawed the wood, left red marks on the billets; and the forehead of the woman who nursed her baby, was stained with the stain of the old rag she wound about her head again. Those who had been greediest had acquired a tigerish smear about the mouth; and one tall joker so besmirched, his head more out of a long squalid bag of a nightcap than in it, scrawled upon a wall with his finger dipped in muddy wine-lees--BLOOD.

The time was to come, when that wine too would be spilled on the street-stones, and when the stain of it would be red upon many there. But that time was not come yet; and every wind that blew over France shook the rags of the scarecrow people in vain, for the birds, fine of song and feather, took no warning.

Monsieur Defarge, the wine-shop keeper was a martial-looking dark man with good eyes and a good bold breadth between them. He rolled his eyes about his shop until they rested upon an elderly gentleman and a young lady, who were seated in a corner.

Other company were there: playing cards, playing dominoes, standing by the counter lengthening out a short supply of wine. He took notice that the elderly gentleman said in a look to the young lady, "This is our man."

"What the devil do YOU do in that galley there?"
said Monsieur Defarge to himself; "I don't know you."

The elderly gentleman advanced and begged the
favour of a word.

"Willingly, sir," Monsieur Defarge stepped with him
to the door.

Their conference was very short, but very decided.
Almost at the first word, Monsieur Defarge started
and became deeply attentive. It had not lasted a
minute, when he nodded and went out. The
gentleman then beckoned to the young lady, and
they, too, went out.

Mr. Jarvis Lorry and Miss Manette, emerging from
the wine-shop thus, joined Monsieur Defarge in the
doorway opening from a nauseous little black
courtyard which was the general public entrance to a

great pile of house, inhabited by a great number of people. In the gloomy tile-paved entry to the gloomy tile-paved staircase, Monsieur Defarge bent down on one knee to the child of his old master, and put her hand to his lips.

"It is very high; it is a little difficult. Better to begin slowly." Thus, Monsieur Defarge, in a stern voice, to Mr. Lorry, as they began ascending the stairs.

"Is he alone?"

"Alone! God help him, who should be with him!"

"Is he always alone, then?"

"Yes."

"Of his own desire?"

"Of his own necessity. As he was, when I first saw him after they found me and demanded to know if I

would take charge of him, and, at my peril be discreet--as he was then, so he is now."

"He is greatly changed?"

"Changed!"

No direct answer could have been half so forcible.

Mr. Lorry's spirits grew heavier and heavier, as he and his two companions ascended higher and higher.

At last, high up, they stopped for the third time.

There was yet an upper staircase to be ascended before the garret story was reached. The keeper of the wine-shop, always going a little in advance, and always going on the side which Mr. Lorry took, as though he dreaded to be asked any question by the young lady, turned himself about here, and, carefully

feeling in the pockets of the coat he carried over his shoulder, took out a key.

"The door is locked then, my friend?"

"Ay. Yes,"

"You think it necessary to keep the unfortunate gentleman so retired?"

"I think it necessary to turn the key."

"Why?"

"Why! Because he has lived so long, locked up, that he would be frightened-rave-tear himself to pieces-die-come to I know not what harm--if his door was left open."

"Is it possible!"

"Is it possible! Yes. And a beautiful world we live in, when it IS possible, and when many other such things are possible, and not only possible, but done--"

done, see you!--under that sky there, every day.

Long live the Devil. Let us go on."

This dialogue had been held in so low a whisper, that not a word of it had reached the young lady's ears. But, by this time she trembled under such strong emotion, and her face expressed such deep anxiety, and, above all, such terror, that Mr. Lorry felt it incumbent on him to speak a word of reassurance.

"Courage, dear miss! Courage! The worst will be over in a moment; it is but passing the room-door, and the worst is over. Then, all the good you bring to him, all the relief, all the happiness you bring to him, begin. Let our good friend here, assist you on that side. That's well, friend Defarge. Come, now.

Business, business!"

They went on slowly and softly until they reached the top.

There, with a gesture to keep them back, Defarge stooped, and looked in through a crevice in the wall beside a door. Soon raising his head again, he struck twice or thrice upon the door - evidently with no other object than to make a noise there. Then, he put the key into the lock, and turned it as heavily as he could.

The door slowly opened inward under his hand, and he looked into the room and said something. A faint voice answered something. Little more than a single syllable could have been spoken on either side. He then looked back over his shoulder, and beckoned them to enter.

The garret, built to be a dry depository for firewood and the like, was dim and dark: for, the window was in truth a door in the roof, with a little crane over it for the hoisting up of stores from the street: unglazed, and closing up the middle in two pieces, like any other door of French construction. To exclude the cold, one half of this door was fast closed, and the other was opened but a very little way. Such a scanty portion of light was admitted through these means, that it was difficult, on first coming in, to see anything; and long habit alone would have formed in any one, the ability to do work requiring nicety in such obscurity. Yet, work of that kind was being done in the garret; for, with his back towards the door, and his face towards the window where the keeper of the wine-shop stood looking at him, a

white-haired man sat on a low bench, stooping forward and very busy, making shoes.