

Chapter XXI - Little Em'ly

There was a servant in that house, a man who, I understood, was usually with Steerforth, and had come into his service at the University, who was in appearance a pattern of respectability. I believe there never existed in his station a more respectable-looking man. He was taciturn, soft-footed, very quiet in his manner, deferential, observant, always at hand when wanted, and never near when not wanted; but his great claim to consideration was his respectability. He had not a pliant face, he had rather a stiff neck, rather a tight smooth head with short hair clinging to it at the sides, a soft way of speaking, with a peculiar habit of whispering the letter S so distinctly, that he seemed to use it oftener than any other man; but every peculiarity that he had he made respectable. If his nose had been upside-down, he would have made that respectable. He surrounded himself with an atmosphere of respectability, and walked secure in it. It would have been next to impossible to suspect him of anything wrong, he was so thoroughly respectable. Nobody could have thought of putting him in a livery, he was so highly respectable. To have imposed any derogatory work upon him, would have been to inflict a wanton insult on the feelings of a most respectable man. And of this, I noticed- the women-servants in the household were so intuitively conscious, that they always did such work themselves, and generally while he read the paper by the pantry fire.

Such a self-contained man I never saw. But in that quality, as in every other he possessed, he only seemed to be the more respectable. Even the fact that no one knew his Christian name, seemed to form a part of his respectability. Nothing could be objected against his surname, Littimer, by which he was known. Peter might have been hanged, or Tom transported; but Littimer was perfectly respectable.

It was occasioned, I suppose, by the reverend nature of respectability in the abstract, but I felt particularly young in this man's presence. How old he was himself, I could not guess - and that again went to his credit on the same score; for in the calmness of respectability he might have numbered fifty years as well as thirty.

Littimer was in my room in the morning before I was up, to bring me that reproachful shaving-water, and to put out my clothes. When I undrew the curtains and looked out of bed, I saw him, in an equable temperature of respectability, unaffected by the east wind of January, and not even breathing frostily, standing my boots right and left in the first dancing position, and blowing specks of dust off my coat as he laid it down like a baby.

I gave him good morning, and asked him what o'clock it was. He took out of his pocket the most respectable hunting-watch I ever saw, and

preventing the spring with his thumb from opening far, looked in at the face as if he were consulting an oracular oyster, shut it up again, and said, if I pleased, it was half past eight.

'Mr Steerforth will be glad to hear how you have rested, sir.'

'Thank you,' said I, 'very well indeed. Is Mr Steerforth quite well?'

'Thank you, sir, Mr Steerforth is tolerably well.' Another of his characteristics - no use of superlatives. A cool calm medium always.

'Is there anything more I can have the honour of doing for you, sir? The warning-bell will ring at nine; the family take breakfast at half past nine.'

'Nothing, I thank you.'

'I thank YOU, sir, if you please'; and with that, and with a little inclination of his head when he passed the bed-side, as an apology for correcting me, he went out, shutting the door as delicately as if I had just fallen into a sweet sleep on which my life depended.

Every morning we held exactly this conversation: never any more, and never any less: and yet, invariably, however far I might have been lifted out of myself over-night, and advanced towards maturer years, by Steerforth's companionship, or Mrs Steerforth's confidence, or Miss Dartle's conversation, in the presence of this most respectable man I became, as our smaller poets sing, 'a boy again'. He got horses for us; and Steerforth, who knew everything, gave me lessons in riding. He provided foils for us, and Steerforth gave me lessons in fencing - gloves, and I began, of the same master, to improve in boxing. It gave me no manner of concern that Steerforth should find me a novice in these sciences, but I never could bear to show my want of skill before the respectable Littimer. I had no reason to believe that Littimer understood such arts himself; he never led me to suppose anything of the kind, by so much as the vibration of one of his respectable eyelashes; yet whenever he was by, while we were practising, I felt myself the greenest and most inexperienced of mortals.

I am particular about this man, because he made a particular effect on me at that time, and because of what took place thereafter.

The week passed away in a most delightful manner. It passed rapidly, as may be supposed, to one entranced as I was; and yet it gave me so many occasions for knowing Steerforth better, and admiring him more in a thousand respects, that at its close I seemed to have been with him for a much longer time. A dashing way he had of treating me like a plaything, was more agreeable to me than any behaviour he could

have adopted. It reminded me of our old acquaintance; it seemed the natural sequel of it; it showed me that he was unchanged; it relieved me of any uneasiness I might have felt, in comparing my merits with his, and measuring my claims upon his friendship by any equal standard; above all, it was a familiar, unrestrained, affectionate demeanour that he used towards no one else. As he had treated me at school differently from all the rest, I joyfully believed that he treated me in life unlike any other friend he had. I believed that I was nearer to his heart than any other friend, and my own heart warmed with attachment to him. He made up his mind to go with me into the country, and the day arrived for our departure. He had been doubtful at first whether to take Littimer or not, but decided to leave him at home. The respectable creature, satisfied with his lot whatever it was, arranged our portmanteaux on the little carriage that was to take us into London, as if they were intended to defy the shocks of ages, and received my modestly proffered donation with perfect tranquillity.

We bade adieu to Mrs Steerforth and Miss Dartle, with many thanks on my part, and much kindness on the devoted mother's. The last thing I saw was Littimer's unruffled eye; fraught, as I fancied, with the silent conviction that I was very young indeed.

What I felt, in returning so auspiciously to the old familiar places, I shall not endeavour to describe. We went down by the Mail. I was so concerned, I recollect, even for the honour of Yarmouth, that when Steerforth said, as we drove through its dark streets to the inn, that, as well as he could make out, it was a good, queer, out-of-the-way kind of hole, I was highly pleased. We went to bed on our arrival (I observed a pair of dirty shoes and gaiters in connexion with my old friend the Dolphin as we passed that door), and breakfasted late in the morning. Steerforth, who was in great spirits, had been strolling about the beach before I was up, and had made acquaintance, he said, with half the boatmen in the place. Moreover, he had seen, in the distance, what he was sure must be the identical house of Mr Peggotty, with smoke coming out of the chimney; and had had a great mind, he told me, to walk in and swear he was myself grown out of knowledge.

'When do you propose to introduce me there, Daisy?' he said. 'I am at your disposal. Make your own arrangements.'

'Why, I was thinking that this evening would be a good time, Steerforth, when they are all sitting round the fire. I should like you to see it when it's snug, it's such a curious place.'

'So be it!' returned Steerforth. 'This evening.'

'I shall not give them any notice that we are here, you know,' said I, delighted. 'We must take them by surprise.'

'Oh, of course! It's no fun,' said Steerforth, 'unless we take them by surprise. Let us see the natives in their aboriginal condition.'

'Though they ARE that sort of people that you mentioned,' I returned.

'Aha! What! you recollect my skirmishes with Rosa, do you?' he exclaimed with a quick look. 'Confound the girl, I am half afraid of her. She's like a goblin to me. But never mind her. Now what are you going to do? You are going to see your nurse, I suppose?'

'Why, yes,' I said, 'I must see Peggotty first of all.'

'Well,' replied Steerforth, looking at his watch. 'Suppose I deliver you up to be cried over for a couple of hours. Is that long enough?'

I answered, laughing, that I thought we might get through it in that time, but that he must come also; for he would find that his renown had preceded him, and that he was almost as great a personage as I was.

'I'll come anywhere you like,' said Steerforth, 'or do anything you like. Tell me where to come to; and in two hours I'll produce myself in any state you please, sentimental or comical.'

I gave him minute directions for finding the residence of Mr Barkis, carrier to Blunderstone and elsewhere; and, on this understanding, went out alone. There was a sharp bracing air; the ground was dry; the sea was crisp and clear; the sun was diffusing abundance of light, if not much warmth; and everything was fresh and lively. I was so fresh and lively myself, in the pleasure of being there, that I could have stopped the people in the streets and shaken hands with them.

The streets looked small, of course. The streets that we have only seen as children always do, I believe, when we go back to them. But I had forgotten nothing in them, and found nothing changed, until I came to Mr Omer's shop. OMER AND Joram was now written up, where OMER used to be; but the inscription, DRAPER, TAILOR, HABERDASHER, FUNERAL FURNISHER, &c., remained as it was.

My footsteps seemed to tend so naturally to the shop door, after I had read these words from over the way, that I went across the road and looked in. There was a pretty woman at the back of the shop, dancing a little child in her arms, while another little fellow clung to her apron. I had no difficulty in recognizing either Minnie or Minnie's children. The glass door of the parlour was not open; but in the workshop

across the yard I could faintly hear the old tune playing, as if it had never left off.

'Is Mr Omer at home?' said I, entering. 'I should like to see him, for a moment, if he is.'

'Oh yes, sir, he is at home,' said Minnie; 'the weather don't suit his asthma out of doors. Joe, call your grandfather!'

The little fellow, who was holding her apron, gave such a lusty shout, that the sound of it made him bashful, and he buried his face in her skirts, to her great admiration. I heard a heavy puffing and blowing coming towards us, and soon Mr Omer, shorter-winded than of yore, but not much older-looking, stood before me.

'Servant, sir,' said Mr Omer. 'What can I do for you, sir?' 'You can shake hands with me, Mr Omer, if you please,' said I, putting out my own. 'You were very good-natured to me once, when I am afraid I didn't show that I thought so.'

'Was I though?' returned the old man. 'I'm glad to hear it, but I don't remember when. Are you sure it was me?'

'Quite.'

'I think my memory has got as short as my breath,' said Mr Omer, looking at me and shaking his head; 'for I don't remember you.'

'Don't you remember your coming to the coach to meet me, and my having breakfast here, and our riding out to Blunderstone together: you, and I, and Mrs Joram, and Mr Joram too - who wasn't her husband then?'

'Why, Lord bless my soul!' exclaimed Mr Omer, after being thrown by his surprise into a fit of coughing, 'you don't say so! Minnie, my dear, you recollect? Dear me, yes; the party was a lady, I think?'

'My mother,' I rejoined.

'To - be - sure,' said Mr Omer, touching my waistcoat with his forefinger, 'and there was a little child too! There was two parties. The little party was laid along with the other party. Over at Blunderstone it was, of course. Dear me! And how have you been since?'

Very well, I thanked him, as I hoped he had been too.

'Oh! nothing to grumble at, you know,' said Mr Omer. 'I find my breath gets short, but it seldom gets longer as a man gets older. I take it as it comes, and make the most of it. That's the best way, ain't it?'

Mr Omer coughed again, in consequence of laughing, and was assisted out of his fit by his daughter, who now stood close beside us, dancing her smallest child on the counter.

'Dear me!' said Mr Omer. 'Yes, to be sure. Two parties! Why, in that very ride, if you'll believe me, the day was named for my Minnie to marry Joram. 'Do name it, sir,' says Joram. 'Yes, do, father,' says Minnie. And now he's come into the business. And look here! The youngest!'

Minnie laughed, and stroked her banded hair upon her temples, as her father put one of his fat fingers into the hand of the child she was dancing on the counter.

'Two parties, of course!' said Mr Omer, nodding his head retrospectively. 'Ex-actly so! And Joram's at work, at this minute, on a grey one with silver nails, not this measurement' - the measurement of the dancing child upon the counter - 'by a good two inches. - Will you take something?'

I thanked him, but declined.

'Let me see,' said Mr Omer. 'Barkis's the carrier's wife - Peggotty's the boatman's sister - she had something to do with your family? She was in service there, sure?'

My answering in the affirmative gave him great satisfaction.

'I believe my breath will get long next, my memory's getting so much so,' said Mr Omer. 'Well, sir, we've got a young relation of hers here, under articles to us, that has as elegant a taste in the dress-making business - I assure you I don't believe there's a Duchess in England can touch her.'

'Not little Em'ly?' said I, involuntarily.

'Em'ly's her name,' said Mr Omer, 'and she's little too. But if you'll believe me, she has such a face of her own that half the women in this town are mad against her.'

'Nonsense, father!' cried Minnie.

'My dear,' said Mr Omer, 'I don't say it's the case with you,' winking at me, 'but I say that half the women in Yarmouth - ah! and in five mile round - are mad against that girl.'

'Then she should have kept to her own station in life, father,' said Minnie, 'and not have given them any hold to talk about her, and then they couldn't have done it.'

'Couldn't have done it, my dear!' retorted Mr Omer. 'Couldn't have done it! Is that YOUR knowledge of life? What is there that any woman couldn't do, that she shouldn't do - especially on the subject of another woman's good looks?'

I really thought it was all over with Mr Omer, after he had uttered this libellous pleasantry. He coughed to that extent, and his breath eluded all his attempts to recover it with that obstinacy, that I fully expected to see his head go down behind the counter, and his little black breeches, with the rusty little bunches of ribbons at the knees, come quivering up in a last ineffectual struggle. At length, however, he got better, though he still panted hard, and was so exhausted that he was obliged to sit on the stool of the shop-desk.

'You see,' he said, wiping his head, and breathing with difficulty, 'she hasn't taken much to any companions here; she hasn't taken kindly to any particular acquaintances and friends, not to mention sweethearts. In consequence, an ill-natured story got about, that Em'ly wanted to be a lady. Now my opinion is, that it came into circulation principally on account of her sometimes saying, at the school, that if she was a lady she would like to do so-and-so for her uncle - don't you see? - and buy him such-and-such fine things.'

'I assure you, Mr Omer, she has said so to me,' I returned eagerly, 'when we were both children.'

Mr Omer nodded his head and rubbed his chin. 'Just so. Then out of a very little, she could dress herself, you see, better than most others could out of a deal, and that made things unpleasant. Moreover, she was rather what might be called wayward - I'll go so far as to say what I should call wayward myself,' said Mr Omer; '- didn't know her own mind quite - a little spoiled - and couldn't, at first, exactly bind herself down. No more than that was ever said against her, Minnie?'

'No, father,' said Mrs Joram. 'That's the worst, I believe.'

'So when she got a situation,' said Mr Omer, 'to keep a fractious old lady company, they didn't very well agree, and she didn't stop. At last she came here, apprenticed for three years. Nearly two of 'em are over,

and she has been as good a girl as ever was. Worth any six! Minnie, is she worth any six, now?'

'Yes, father,' replied Minnie. 'Never say I detracted from her!'

'Very good,' said Mr Omer. 'That's right. And so, young gentleman,' he added, after a few moments' further rubbing of his chin, 'that you may not consider me long-winded as well as short-breathed, I believe that's all about it.'

As they had spoken in a subdued tone, while speaking of Em'ly, I had no doubt that she was near. On my asking now, if that were not so, Mr Omer nodded yes, and nodded towards the door of the parlour. My hurried inquiry if I might peep in, was answered with a free permission; and, looking through the glass, I saw her sitting at her work. I saw her, a most beautiful little creature, with the cloudless blue eyes, that had looked into my childish heart, turned laughingly upon another child of Minnie's who was playing near her; with enough of wilfulness in her bright face to justify what I had heard; with much of the old capricious coyness lurking in it; but with nothing in her pretty looks, I am sure, but what was meant for goodness and for happiness, and what was on a good and happy course.

The tune across the yard that seemed as if it never had left off - alas! it was the tune that never DOES leave off - was beating, softly, all the while.

'Wouldn't you like to step in,' said Mr Omer, 'and speak to her? Walk in and speak to her, sir! Make yourself at home!'

I was too bashful to do so then - I was afraid of confusing her, and I was no less afraid of confusing myself.- but I informed myself of the hour at which she left of an evening, in order that our visit might be timed accordingly; and taking leave of Mr Omer, and his pretty daughter, and her little children, went away to my dear old Peggotty's.

Here she was, in the tiled kitchen, cooking dinner! The moment I knocked at the door she opened it, and asked me what I pleased to want. I looked at her with a smile, but she gave me no smile in return. I had never ceased to write to her, but it must have been seven years since we had met.

'Is Mr Barkis at home, ma'am?' I said, feigning to speak roughly to her.

'He's at home, sir,' returned Peggotty, 'but he's bad abed with the rheumatics.'

'Don't he go over to Blunderstone now?' I asked.

'When he's well he do,' she answered.

'Do YOU ever go there, Mrs Barkis?'

She looked at me more attentively, and I noticed a quick movement of her hands towards each other.

'Because I want to ask a question about a house there, that they call the - what is it? - the Rookery,' said I.

She took a step backward, and put out her hands in an undecided frightened way, as if to keep me off.

'Peggotty!' I cried to her.

She cried, 'My darling boy!' and we both burst into tears, and were locked in one another's arms.

What extravagances she committed; what laughing and crying over me; what pride she showed, what joy, what sorrow that she whose pride and joy I might have been, could never hold me in a fond embrace; I have not the heart to tell. I was troubled with no misgiving that it was young in me to respond to her emotions. I had never laughed and cried in all my life, I dare say - not even to her - more freely than I did that morning.

'Barkis will be so glad,' said Peggotty, wiping her eyes with her apron, 'that it'll do him more good than pints of liniment. May I go and tell him you are here? Will you come up and see him, my dear?'

Of course I would. But Peggotty could not get out of the room as easily as she meant to, for as often as she got to the door and looked round at me, she came back again to have another laugh and another cry upon my shoulder. At last, to make the matter easier, I went upstairs with her; and having waited outside for a minute, while she said a word of preparation to Mr Barkis, presented myself before that invalid.

He received me with absolute enthusiasm. He was too rheumatic to be shaken hands with, but he begged me to shake the tassel on the top of his nightcap, which I did most cordially. When I sat down by the side of the bed, he said that it did him a world of good to feel as if he was driving me on the Blunderstone road again. As he lay in bed, face upward, and so covered, with that exception, that he seemed to be nothing but a face - like a conventional cherubim - he looked the queerest object I ever beheld.

'What name was it, as I wrote up in the cart, sir?' said Mr Barkis, with a slow rheumatic smile.

'Ah! Mr Barkis, we had some grave talks about that matter, hadn't we?'

'I was willin' a long time, sir?' said Mr Barkis.

'A long time,' said I.

'And I don't regret it,' said Mr Barkis. 'Do you remember what you told me once, about her making all the apple parsties and doing all the cooking?'

'Yes, very well,' I returned.

'It was as true,' said Mr Barkis, 'as turnips is. It was as true,' said Mr Barkis, nodding his nightcap, which was his only means of emphasis, 'as taxes is. And nothing's truer than them.'

Mr Barkis turned his eyes upon me, as if for my assent to this result of his reflections in bed; and I gave it.

'Nothing's truer than them,' repeated Mr Barkis; 'a man as poor as I am, finds that out in his mind when he's laid up. I'm a very poor man, sir!'

'I am sorry to hear it, Mr Barkis.'

'A very poor man, indeed I am,' said Mr Barkis.

Here his right hand came slowly and feebly from under the bedclothes, and with a purposeless uncertain grasp took hold of a stick which was loosely tied to the side of the bed. After some poking about with this instrument, in the course of which his face assumed a variety of distracted expressions, Mr Barkis poked it against a box, an end of which had been visible to me all the time. Then his face became composed.

'Old clothes,' said Mr Barkis.

'Oh!' said I.

'I wish it was Money, sir,' said Mr Barkis.

'I wish it was, indeed,' said I.

'But it AIN'T,' said Mr Barkis, opening both his eyes as wide as he possibly could.

I expressed myself quite sure of that, and Mr Barkis, turning his eyes more gently to his wife, said:

'She's the usefulest and best of women, C. P. Barkis. All the praise that anyone can give to C. P. Barkis, she deserves, and more! My dear, you'll get a dinner today, for company; something good to eat and drink, will you?'

I should have protested against this unnecessary demonstration in my honour, but that I saw Peggotty, on the opposite side of the bed, extremely anxious I should not. So I held my peace.

'I have got a trifle of money somewhere about me, my dear,' said Mr Barkis, 'but I'm a little tired. If you and Mr David will leave me for a short nap, I'll try and find it when I wake.'

We left the room, in compliance with this request. When we got outside the door, Peggotty informed me that Mr Barkis, being now 'a little nearer' than he used to be, always resorted to this same device before producing a single coin from his store; and that he endured unheard-of agonies in crawling out of bed alone, and taking it from that unlucky box. In effect, we presently heard him uttering suppressed groans of the most dismal nature, as this magpie proceeding racked him in every joint; but while Peggotty's eyes were full of compassion for him, she said his generous impulse would do him good, and it was better not to check it. So he groaned on, until he had got into bed again, suffering, I have no doubt, a martyrdom; and then called us in, pretending to have just woke up from a refreshing sleep, and to produce a guinea from under his pillow. His satisfaction in which happy imposition on us, and in having preserved the impenetrable secret of the box, appeared to be a sufficient compensation to him for all his tortures.

I prepared Peggotty for Steerforth's arrival and it was not long before he came. I am persuaded she knew no difference between his having been a personal benefactor of hers, and a kind friend to me, and that she would have received him with the utmost gratitude and devotion in any case. But his easy, spirited good humour; his genial manner, his handsome looks, his natural gift of adapting himself to whomsoever he pleased, and making direct, when he cared to do it, to the main point of interest in anybody's heart; bound her to him wholly in five minutes. His manner to me, alone, would have won her. But, through all these causes combined, I sincerely believe she had a kind of adoration for him before he left the house that night.

He stayed there with me to dinner - if I were to say willingly, I should not half express how readily and gaily. He went into Mr Barkis's room like light and air, brightening and refreshing it as if he were healthy weather. There was no noise, no effort, no consciousness, in anything he did; but in everything an indescribable lightness, a seeming impossibility of doing anything else, or doing anything better, which was so graceful, so natural, and agreeable, that it overcomes me, even now, in the remembrance.

We made merry in the little parlour, where the Book of Martyrs, unthumbed since my time, was laid out upon the desk as of old, and where I now turned over its terrific pictures, remembering the old sensations they had awakened, but not feeling them. When Peggotty spoke of what she called my room, and of its being ready for me at night, and of her hoping I would occupy it, before I could so much as look at Steerforth, hesitating, he was possessed of the whole case.

'Of course,' he said. 'You'll sleep here, while we stay, and I shall sleep at the hotel.'

'But to bring you so far,' I returned, 'and to separate, seems bad companionship, Steerforth.'

'Why, in the name of Heaven, where do you naturally belong?' he said. 'What is 'seems', compared to that?' It was settled at once.

He maintained all his delightful qualities to the last, until we started forth, at eight o'clock, for Mr Peggotty's boat. Indeed, they were more and more brightly exhibited as the hours went on; for I thought even then, and I have no doubt now, that the consciousness of success in his determination to please, inspired him with a new delicacy of perception, and made it, subtle as it was, more easy to him. If anyone had told me, then, that all this was a brilliant game, played for the excitement of the moment, for the employment of high spirits, in the thoughtless love of superiority, in a mere wasteful careless course of winning what was worthless to him, and next minute thrown away - I say, if anyone had told me such a lie that night, I wonder in what manner of receiving it my indignation would have found a vent! Probably only in an increase, had that been possible, of the romantic feelings of fidelity and friendship with which I walked beside him, over the dark wintry sands towards the old boat; the wind sighing around us even more mournfully, than it had sighed and moaned upon the night when I first darkened Mr Peggotty's door.

'This is a wild kind of place, Steerforth, is it not?'

'Dismal enough in the dark,' he said: 'and the sea roars as if it were hungry for us. Is that the boat, where I see a light yonder?' 'That's the boat,' said I.

'And it's the same I saw this morning,' he returned. 'I came straight to it, by instinct, I suppose.'

We said no more as we approached the light, but made softly for the door. I laid my hand upon the latch; and whispering Steerforth to keep close to me, went in.

A murmur of voices had been audible on the outside, and, at the moment of our entrance, a clapping of hands: which latter noise, I was surprised to see, proceeded from the generally disconsolate Mrs Gummidge. But Mrs Gummidge was not the only person there who was unusually excited. Mr Peggotty, his face lighted up with uncommon satisfaction, and laughing with all his might, held his rough arms wide open, as if for little Em'ly to run into them; Ham, with a mixed expression in his face of admiration, exultation, and a lumbering sort of bashfulness that sat upon him very well, held little Em'ly by the hand, as if he were presenting her to Mr Peggotty; little Em'ly herself, blushing and shy, but delighted with Mr Peggotty's delight, as her joyous eyes expressed, was stopped by our entrance (for she saw us first) in the very act of springing from Ham to nestle in Mr Peggotty's embrace. In the first glimpse we had of them all, and at the moment of our passing from the dark cold night into the warm light room, this was the way in which they were all employed: Mrs Gummidge in the background, clapping her hands like a madwoman.

The little picture was so instantaneously dissolved by our going in, that one might have doubted whether it had ever been. I was in the midst of the astonished family, face to face with Mr Peggotty, and holding out my hand to him, when Ham shouted:

'Mas'r Davy! It's Mas'r Davy!'

In a moment we were all shaking hands with one another, and asking one another how we did, and telling one another how glad we were to meet, and all talking at once. Mr Peggotty was so proud and overjoyed to see us, that he did not know what to say or do, but kept over and over again shaking hands with me, and then with Steerforth, and then with me, and then ruffling his shaggy hair all over his head, and laughing with such glee and triumph, that it was a treat to see him.

'Why, that you two gent'lmen - gent'lmen growed - should come to this here roof tonight, of all nights in my life,' said Mr Peggotty, 'is such a thing as never happened afore, I do rightly believe! Em'ly, my darling, come here! Come here, my little witch! There's Mas'r Davy's friend, my

dear! There's the gent'lman as you've heerd on, Em'ly. He comes to see you, along with Mas'r Davy, on the brightest night of your uncle's life as ever was or will be, Gorm the t'other one, and horroar for it!

After delivering this speech all in a breath, and with extraordinary animation and pleasure, Mr Peggotty put one of his large hands rapturously on each side of his niece's face, and kissing it a dozen times, laid it with a gentle pride and love upon his broad chest, and patted it as if his hand had been a lady's. Then he let her go; and as she ran into the little chamber where I used to sleep, looked round upon us, quite hot and out of breath with his uncommon satisfaction.

'If you two gent'lmen - gent'lmen growed now, and such gent'lmen -' said Mr Peggotty.

'So th' are, so th' are!' cried Ham. 'Well said! So th' are. Mas'r Davy bor' - gent'lmen growed - so th' are!'

'If you two gent'lmen, gent'lmen growed,' said Mr Peggotty, 'don't excuse me for being in a state of mind, when you understand matters, I'll arks your pardon. Em'ly, my dear! - She knows I'm a going to tell,' here his delight broke out again, 'and has made off. Would you be so good as look arter her, Mawther, for a minute?'

Mrs Gummidge nodded and disappeared.

'If this ain't,' said Mr Peggotty, sitting down among us by the fire, 'the brightest night o' my life, I'm a shellfish - biled too - and more I can't say. This here little Em'ly, sir,' in a low voice to Steerforth, '- her as you see a blushing here just now -'

Steerforth only nodded; but with such a pleased expression of interest, and of participation in Mr Peggotty's feelings, that the latter answered him as if he had spoken.

'To be sure,' said Mr Peggotty. 'That's her, and so she is. Thankee, sir.'

Ham nodded to me several times, as if he would have said so too.

'This here little Em'ly of ours,' said Mr Peggotty, 'has been, in our house, what I suppose (I'm a ignorant man, but that's my belief) no one but a little bright-eyed creetur can be in a house. She ain't my child; I never had one; but I couldn't love her more. You understand! I couldn't do it!'

'I quite understand,' said Steerforth.

'I know you do, sir,' returned Mr Peggotty, 'and thankee again. Mas'r Davy, he can remember what she was; you may judge for your own self what she is; but neither of you can't fully know what she has been, is, and will be, to my loving art. I am rough, sir,' said Mr Peggotty, 'I am as rough as a Sea Porkypine; but no one, unless, mayhap, it is a woman, can know, I think, what our little Em'ly is to me. And betwixt ourselves,' sinking his voice lower yet, 'that woman's name ain't Missis Gummidge neither, though she has a world of merits.' Mr Peggotty ruffled his hair again, with both hands, as a further preparation for what he was going to say, and went on, with a hand upon each of his knees:

'There was a certain person as had know'd our Em'ly, from the time when her father was drownded; as had seen her constant; when a babby, when a young gal, when a woman. Not much of a person to look at, he warn't,' said Mr Peggotty, 'something o' my own build - rough - a good deal o' the sou'-wester in him - wery salt - but, on the whole, a honest sort of a chap, with his art in the right place.'

I thought I had never seen Ham grin to anything like the extent to which he sat grinning at us now.

'What does this here blessed tarpaulin go and do,' said Mr Peggotty, with his face one high noon of enjoyment, 'but he loses that there art of his to our little Em'ly. He follers her about, he makes hissself a sort o' servant to her, he loses in a great measure his relish for his wittles, and in the long-run he makes it clear to me wot's amiss. Now I could wish myself, you see, that our little Em'ly was in a fair way of being married. I could wish to see her, at all ewents, under articles to a honest man as had a right to defend her. I don't know how long I may live, or how soon I may die; but I know that if I was capsized, any night, in a gale of wind in Yarmouth Roads here, and was to see the town-lights shining for the last time over the rollers as I couldn't make no head against, I could go down quieter for thinking 'There's a man ashore there, iron-true to my little Em'ly, God bless her, and no wrong can touch my Em'ly while so be as that man lives.'

Mr Peggotty, in simple earnestness, waved his right arm, as if he were waving it at the town-lights for the last time, and then, exchanging a nod with Ham, whose eye he caught, proceeded as before.

'Well! I counsels him to speak to Em'ly. He's big enough, but he's bashfuller than a little un, and he don't like. So I speak. 'What! Him!' says Em'ly. 'Him that I've know'd so intimate so many years, and like so much. Oh, Uncle! I never can have him. He's such a good fellow!' I gives her a kiss, and I says no more to her than, 'My dear, you're right to speak out, you're to choose for yourself, you're as free as a little bird.' Then I aways to him, and I says, 'I wish it could have been so,

but it can't. But you can both be as you was, and wot I say to you is, Be as you was with her, like a man.' He says to me, a-shaking of my hand, 'I will!' he says. And he was - honourable and manful - for two year going on, and we was just the same at home here as afore.'

Mr Peggotty's face, which had varied in its expression with the various stages of his narrative, now resumed all its former triumphant delight, as he laid a hand upon my knee and a hand upon Steerforth's (previously wetting them both, for the greater emphasis of the action), and divided the following speech between us:

'All of a sudden, one evening - as it might be tonight - comes little Em'ly from her work, and him with her! There ain't so much in that, you'll say. No, because he takes care on her, like a brother, arter dark, and indeed afore dark, and at all times. But this tarpaulin chap, he takes hold of her hand, and he cries out to me, joyful, 'Look here! This is to be my little wife!' And she says, half bold and half shy, and half a laughing and half a crying, 'Yes, Uncle! If you please.' - If I please!' cried Mr Peggotty, rolling his head in an ecstasy at the idea; 'Lord, as if I should do anythink else! - 'If you please, I am steadier now, and I have thought better of it, and I'll be as good a little wife as I can to him, for he's a dear, good fellow!' Then Missis Gummidge, she claps her hands like a play, and you come in. Theer! the murder's out!' said Mr Peggotty - 'You come in! It took place this here present hour; and here's the man that'll marry her, the minute she's out of her time.'

Ham staggered, as well he might, under the blow Mr Peggotty dealt him in his unbounded joy, as a mark of confidence and friendship; but feeling called upon to say something to us, he said, with much faltering and great difficulty:

'She warn't no higher than you was, Mas'r Davy - when you first come - when I thought what she'd grow up to be. I see her grown up - gent'lmen - like a flower. I'd lay down my life for her - Mas'r Davy - Oh! most content and cheerful! She's more to me - gent'lmen - than - she's all to me that ever I can want, and more than ever I - than ever I could say. I - I love her true. There ain't a gent'lman in all the land - nor yet sailing upon all the sea - that can love his lady more than I love her, though there's many a common man - would say better - what he meant.'

I thought it affecting to see such a sturdy fellow as Ham was now, trembling in the strength of what he felt for the pretty little creature who had won his heart. I thought the simple confidence reposed in us by Mr Peggotty and by himself, was, in itself, affecting. I was affected by the story altogether. How far my emotions were influenced by the recollections of my childhood, I don't know. Whether I had come there with any lingering fancy that I was still to love little Em'ly, I don't

know. I know that I was filled with pleasure by all this; but, at first, with an indescribably sensitive pleasure, that a very little would have changed to pain.

Therefore, if it had depended upon me to touch the prevailing chord among them with any skill, I should have made a poor hand of it. But it depended upon Steerforth; and he did it with such address, that in a few minutes we were all as easy and as happy as it was possible to be.

'Mr Peggotty,' he said, 'you are a thoroughly good fellow, and deserve to be as happy as you are tonight. My hand upon it! Ham, I give you joy, my boy. My hand upon that, too! Daisy, stir the fire, and make it a brisk one! and Mr Peggotty, unless you can induce your gentle niece to come back (for whom I vacate this seat in the corner), I shall go. Any gap at your fireside on such a night - such a gap least of all - I wouldn't make, for the wealth of the Indies!'

So Mr Peggotty went into my old room to fetch little Em'ly. At first little Em'ly didn't like to come, and then Ham went. Presently they brought her to the fireside, very much confused, and very shy, - but she soon became more assured when she found how gently and respectfully Steerforth spoke to her; how skilfully he avoided anything that would embarrass her; how he talked to Mr Peggotty of boats, and ships, and tides, and fish; how he referred to me about the time when he had seen Mr Peggotty at Salem House; how delighted he was with the boat and all belonging to it; how lightly and easily he carried on, until he brought us, by degrees, into a charmed circle, and we were all talking away without any reserve.

Em'ly, indeed, said little all the evening; but she looked, and listened, and her face got animated, and she was charming. Steerforth told a story of a dismal shipwreck (which arose out of his talk with Mr Peggotty), as if he saw it all before him - and little Em'ly's eyes were fastened on him all the time, as if she saw it too. He told us a merry adventure of his own, as a relief to that, with as much gaiety as if the narrative were as fresh to him as it was to us - and little Em'ly laughed until the boat rang with the musical sounds, and we all laughed (Steerforth too), in irresistible sympathy with what was so pleasant and light-hearted. He got Mr Peggotty to sing, or rather to roar, 'When the stormy winds do blow, do blow, do blow'; and he sang a sailor's song himself, so pathetically and beautifully, that I could have almost fancied that the real wind creeping sorrowfully round the house, and murmuring low through our unbroken silence, was there to listen.

As to Mrs Gummidge, he roused that victim of despondency with a success never attained by anyone else (so Mr Peggotty informed me),

since the decease of the old one. He left her so little leisure for being miserable, that she said next day she thought she must have been bewitched.

But he set up no monopoly of the general attention, or the conversation. When little Em'ly grew more courageous, and talked (but still bashfully) across the fire to me, of our old wanderings upon the beach, to pick up shells and pebbles; and when I asked her if she recollected how I used to be devoted to her; and when we both laughed and reddened, casting these looks back on the pleasant old times, so unreal to look at now; he was silent and attentive, and observed us thoughtfully. She sat, at this time, and all the evening, on the old locker in her old little corner by the fire - Ham beside her, where I used to sit. I could not satisfy myself whether it was in her own little tormenting way, or in a maidenly reserve before us, that she kept quite close to the wall, and away from him; but I observed that she did so, all the evening.

As I remember, it was almost midnight when we took our leave. We had had some biscuit and dried fish for supper, and Steerforth had produced from his pocket a full flask of Hollands, which we men (I may say we men, now, without a blush) had emptied. We parted merrily; and as they all stood crowded round the door to light us as far as they could upon our road, I saw the sweet blue eyes of little Em'ly peeping after us, from behind Ham, and heard her soft voice calling to us to be careful how we went.

'A most engaging little Beauty!' said Steerforth, taking my arm. 'Well! It's a quaint place, and they are quaint company, and it's quite a new sensation to mix with them.'

'How fortunate we are, too,' I returned, 'to have arrived to witness their happiness in that intended marriage! I never saw people so happy. How delightful to see it, and to be made the sharers in their honest joy, as we have been!'

'That's rather a chuckle-headed fellow for the girl; isn't he?' said Steerforth.

He had been so hearty with him, and with them all, that I felt a shock in this unexpected and cold reply. But turning quickly upon him, and seeing a laugh in his eyes, I answered, much relieved:

'Ah, Steerforth! It's well for you to joke about the poor! You may skirmish with Miss Dartle, or try to hide your sympathies in jest from me, but I know better. When I see how perfectly you understand them, how exquisitely you can enter into happiness like this plain fisherman's, or humour a love like my old nurse's, I know that there is

not a joy or sorrow, not an emotion, of such people, that can be indifferent to you. And I admire and love you for it, Steerforth, twenty times the more!

He stopped, and, looking in my face, said, 'Daisy, I believe you are in earnest, and are good. I wish we all were!' Next moment he was gaily singing Mr Peggotty's song, as we walked at a round pace back to Yarmouth.