

Chapter XXX - A Loss

I got down to Yarmouth in the evening, and went to the inn. I knew that Peggotty's spare room - my room - was likely to have occupation enough in a little while, if that great Visitor, before whose presence all the living must give place, were not already in the house; so I betook myself to the inn, and dined there, and engaged my bed.

It was ten o'clock when I went out. Many of the shops were shut, and the town was dull. When I came to Omer and Joram's, I found the shutters up, but the shop door standing open. As I could obtain a perspective view of Mr Omer inside, smoking his pipe by the parlour door, I entered, and asked him how he was.

'Why, bless my life and soul!' said Mr Omer, 'how do you find yourself? Take a seat. - Smoke not disagreeable, I hope?'

'By no means,' said I. 'I like it - in somebody else's pipe.'

'What, not in your own, eh?' Mr Omer returned, laughing. 'All the better, sir. Bad habit for a young man. Take a seat. I smoke, myself, for the asthma.'

Mr Omer had made room for me, and placed a chair. He now sat down again very much out of breath, gasping at his pipe as if it contained a supply of that necessary, without which he must perish.

'I am sorry to have heard bad news of Mr Barkis,' said I.

Mr Omer looked at me, with a steady countenance, and shook his head.

'Do you know how he is tonight?' I asked.

'The very question I should have put to you, sir,' returned Mr Omer, 'but on account of delicacy. It's one of the drawbacks of our line of business. When a party's ill, we can't ask how the party is.'

The difficulty had not occurred to me; though I had had my apprehensions too, when I went in, of hearing the old tune. On its being mentioned, I recognized it, however, and said as much.

'Yes, yes, you understand,' said Mr Omer, nodding his head. 'We dursn't do it. Bless you, it would be a shock that the generality of parties mightn't recover, to say 'Omer and Joram's compliments, and how do you find yourself this morning?' - or this afternoon - as it may be.'

Mr Omer and I nodded at each other, and Mr Omer recruited his wind by the aid of his pipe.

'It's one of the things that cut the trade off from attentions they could often wish to show,' said Mr Omer. 'Take myself. If I have known Barkis a year, to move to as he went by, I have known him forty years. But I can't go and say, 'how is he?''

I felt it was rather hard on Mr Omer, and I told him so.

'I'm not more self-interested, I hope, than another man,' said Mr Omer. 'Look at me! My wind may fail me at any moment, and it ain't likely that, to my own knowledge, I'd be self-interested under such circumstances. I say it ain't likely, in a man who knows his wind will go, when it DOES go, as if a pair of bellows was cut open; and that man a grandfather,' said Mr Omer.

I said, 'Not at all.'

'It ain't that I complain of my line of business,' said Mr Omer. 'It ain't that. Some good and some bad goes, no doubt, to all callings. What I wish is, that parties was brought up stronger-minded.'

Mr Omer, with a very complacent and amiable face, took several puffs in silence; and then said, resuming his first point:

'Accordingly we're obleeged, in ascertaining how Barkis goes on, to limit ourselves to Em'ly. She knows what our real objects are, and she don't have any more alarms or suspicions about us, than if we was so many lambs. Minnie and Joram have just stepped down to the house, in fact (she's there, after hours, helping her aunt a bit), to ask her how he is tonight; and if you was to please to wait till they come back, they'd give you full partic'lars. Will you take something? A glass of srub and water, now? I smoke on srub and water, myself,' said Mr Omer, taking up his glass, 'because it's considered softening to the passages, by which this troublesome breath of mine gets into action. But, Lord bless you,' said Mr Omer, huskily, 'it ain't the passages that's out of order! 'Give me breath enough,' said I to my daughter Minnie, 'and I'll find passages, my dear.'

He really had no breath to spare, and it was very alarming to see him laugh. When he was again in a condition to be talked to, I thanked him for the proffered refreshment, which I declined, as I had just had dinner; and, observing that I would wait, since he was so good as to invite me, until his daughter and his son-in-law came back, I inquired how little Emily was?

'Well, sir,' said Mr Omer, removing his pipe, that he might rub his chin: 'I tell you truly, I shall be glad when her marriage has taken place.'

'Why so?' I inquired.

'Well, she's unsettled at present,' said Mr Omer. 'It ain't that she's not as pretty as ever, for she's prettier - I do assure you, she is prettier. It ain't that she don't work as well as ever, for she does. She WAS worth any six, and she IS worth any six. But somehow she wants heart. If you understand,' said Mr Omer, after rubbing his chin again, and smoking a little, 'what I mean in a general way by the expression, 'A long pull, and a strong pull, and a pull altogether, my hearties, hurrah!' I should say to you, that that was - in a general way - what I miss in Em'ly.'

Mr Omer's face and manner went for so much, that I could conscientiously nod my head, as divining his meaning. My quickness of apprehension seemed to please him, and he went on: 'Now I consider this is principally on account of her being in an unsettled state, you see. We have talked it over a good deal, her uncle and myself, and her sweetheart and myself, after business; and I consider it is principally on account of her being unsettled. You must always recollect of Em'ly,' said Mr Omer, shaking his head gently, 'that she's a most extraordinary affectionate little thing. The proverb says, 'You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.' Well, I don't know about that. I rather think you may, if you begin early in life. She has made a home out of that old boat, sir, that stone and marble couldn't beat.'

'I am sure she has!' said I.

'To see the clinging of that pretty little thing to her uncle,' said Mr Omer; 'to see the way she holds on to him, tighter and tighter, and closer and closer, every day, is to see a sight. Now, you know, there's a struggle going on when that's the case. Why should it be made a longer one than is needful?'

I listened attentively to the good old fellow, and acquiesced, with all my heart, in what he said.

'Therefore, I mentioned to them,' said Mr Omer, in a comfortable, easy-going tone, 'this. I said, 'Now, don't consider Em'ly nailed down in point of time, at all. Make it your own time. Her services have been more valuable than was supposed; her learning has been quicker than was supposed; Omer and Joram can run their pen through what remains; and she's free when you wish. If she likes to make any little arrangement, afterwards, in the way of doing any little thing for us at home, very well. If she don't, very well still. We're no losers, anyhow.'

For - don't you see,' said Mr Omer, touching me with his pipe, 'it ain't likely that a man so short of breath as myself, and a grandfather too, would go and strain points with a little bit of a blue-eyed blossom, like her?'

'Not at all, I am certain,' said I.

'Not at all! You're right!' said Mr Omer. 'Well, sir, her cousin - you know it's a cousin she's going to be married to?'

'Oh yes,' I replied. 'I know him well.'

'Of course you do,' said Mr Omer. 'Well, sir! Her cousin being, as it appears, in good work, and well to do, thanked me in a very manly sort of manner for this (conducting himself altogether, I must say, in a way that gives me a high opinion of him), and went and took as comfortable a little house as you or I could wish to clap eyes on. That little house is now furnished right through, as neat and complete as a doll's parlour; and but for Barkis's illness having taken this bad turn, poor fellow, they would have been man and wife - I dare say, by this time. As it is, there's a postponement.'

'And Emily, Mr Omer?' I inquired. 'Has she become more settled?'

'Why that, you know,' he returned, rubbing his double chin again, 'can't naturally be expected. The prospect of the change and separation, and all that, is, as one may say, close to her and far away from her, both at once. Barkis's death needn't put it off much, but his lingering might. Anyway, it's an uncertain state of matters, you see.'

'I see,' said I.

'Consequently,' pursued Mr Omer, 'Em'ly's still a little down, and a little fluttered; perhaps, upon the whole, she's more so than she was. Every day she seems to get fonder and fonder of her uncle, and more loth to part from all of us. A kind word from me brings the tears into her eyes; and if you was to see her with my daughter Minnie's little girl, you'd never forget it. Bless my heart alive!' said Mr Omer, pondering, 'how she loves that child!'

Having so favourable an opportunity, it occurred to me to ask Mr Omer, before our conversation should be interrupted by the return of his daughter and her husband, whether he knew anything of Martha.

'Ah!' he rejoined, shaking his head, and looking very much dejected. 'No good. A sad story, sir, however you come to know it. I never thought there was harm in the girl. I wouldn't wish to mention it

before my daughter Minnie - for she'd take me up directly - but I never did. None of us ever did.'

Mr Omer, hearing his daughter's footstep before I heard it, touched me with his pipe, and shut up one eye, as a caution. She and her husband came in immediately afterwards.

Their report was, that Mr Barkis was 'as bad as bad could be'; that he was quite unconscious; and that Mr Chillip had mournfully said in the kitchen, on going away just now, that the College of Physicians, the College of Surgeons, and Apothecaries' Hall, if they were all called in together, couldn't help him. He was past both Colleges, Mr Chillip said, and the Hall could only poison him.

Hearing this, and learning that Mr Peggotty was there, I determined to go to the house at once. I bade good night to Mr Omer, and to Mr and Mrs Joram; and directed my steps thither, with a solemn feeling, which made Mr Barkis quite a new and different creature.

My low tap at the door was answered by Mr Peggotty. He was not so much surprised to see me as I had expected. I remarked this in Peggotty, too, when she came down; and I have seen it since; and I think, in the expectation of that dread surprise, all other changes and surprises dwindle into nothing.

I shook hands with Mr Peggotty, and passed into the kitchen, while he softly closed the door. Little Emily was sitting by the fire, with her hands before her face. Ham was standing near her.

We spoke in whispers; listening, between whiles, for any sound in the room above. I had not thought of it on the occasion of my last visit, but how strange it was to me, now, to miss Mr Barkis out of the kitchen!

'This is very kind of you, Mas'r Davy,' said Mr Peggotty.

'It's oncommon kind,' said Ham.

'Em'ly, my dear,' cried Mr Peggotty. 'See here! Here's Mas'r Davy come! What, cheer up, pretty! Not a wured to Mas'r Davy?'

There was a trembling upon her, that I can see now. The coldness of her hand when I touched it, I can feel yet. Its only sign of animation was to shrink from mine; and then she glided from the chair, and creeping to the other side of her uncle, bowed herself, silently and trembling still, upon his breast.

'It's such a loving art,' said Mr Peggotty, smoothing her rich hair with his great hard hand, 'that it can't abear the sorrer of this. It's nat'ral in young folk, Mas'r Davy, when they're new to these here trials, and timid, like my little bird, - it's nat'ral.'

She clung the closer to him, but neither lifted up her face, nor spoke a word.

'It's getting late, my dear,' said Mr Peggotty, 'and here's Ham come fur to take you home. Theer! Go along with t'other loving art! What' Em'ly? Eh, my pretty?'

The sound of her voice had not reached me, but he bent his head as if he listened to her, and then said:

'Let you stay with your uncle? Why, you doen't mean to ask me that! Stay with your uncle, Moppet? When your husband that'll be so soon, is here fur to take you home? Now a person wouldn't think it, fur to see this little thing alongside a rough-weather chap like me,' said Mr Peggotty, looking round at both of us, with infinite pride; 'but the sea ain't more salt in it than she has fondness in her for her uncle - a foolish little Em'ly!'

'Em'ly's in the right in that, Mas'r Davy!' said Ham. 'Lookee here! As Em'ly wishes of it, and as she's hurried and frightened, like, besides, I'll leave her till morning. Let me stay too!'

'No, no,' said Mr Peggotty. 'You doen't ought - a married man like you - or what's as good - to take and hull away a day's work. And you doen't ought to watch and work both. That won't do. You go home and turn in. You ain't afeerd of Em'ly not being took good care on, I know.'

Ham yielded to this persuasion, and took his hat to go. Even when he kissed her - and I never saw him approach her, but I felt that nature had given him the soul of a gentleman - she seemed to cling closer to her uncle, even to the avoidance of her chosen husband. I shut the door after him, that it might cause no disturbance of the quiet that prevailed; and when I turned back, I found Mr Peggotty still talking to her.

'Now, I'm a going upstairs to tell your aunt as Mas'r Davy's here, and that'll cheer her up a bit,' he said. 'Sit ye down by the fire, the while, my dear, and warm those mortal cold hands. You doen't need to be so fearsome, and take on so much. What? You'll go along with me? - Well! come along with me - come! If her uncle was turned out of house and home, and forced to lay down in a dyke, Mas'r Davy,' said Mr Peggotty, with no less pride than before, 'it's my belief she'd go along

with him, now! But there'll be someone else, soon, - someone else, soon, Em'ly!

Afterwards, when I went upstairs, as I passed the door of my little chamber, which was dark, I had an indistinct impression of her being within it, cast down upon the floor. But, whether it was really she, or whether it was a confusion of the shadows in the room, I don't know now.

I had leisure to think, before the kitchen fire, of pretty little Emily's dread of death - which, added to what Mr Omer had told me, I took to be the cause of her being so unlike herself - and I had leisure, before Peggotty came down, even to think more leniently of the weakness of it: as I sat counting the ticking of the clock, and deepening my sense of the solemn hush around me. Peggotty took me in her arms, and blessed and thanked me over and over again for being such a comfort to her (that was what she said) in her distress. She then entreated me to come upstairs, sobbing that Mr Barkis had always liked me and admired me; that he had often talked of me, before he fell into a stupor; and that she believed, in case of his coming to himself again, he would brighten up at sight of me, if he could brighten up at any earthly thing.

The probability of his ever doing so, appeared to me, when I saw him, to be very small. He was lying with his head and shoulders out of bed, in an uncomfortable attitude, half resting on the box which had cost him so much pain and trouble. I learned, that, when he was past creeping out of bed to open it, and past assuring himself of its safety by means of the divining rod I had seen him use, he had required to have it placed on the chair at the bed-side, where he had ever since embraced it, night and day. His arm lay on it now. Time and the world were slipping from beneath him, but the box was there; and the last words he had uttered were (in an explanatory tone) 'Old clothes!'

'Barkis, my dear!' said Peggotty, almost cheerfully: bending over him, while her brother and I stood at the bed's foot. 'Here's my dear boy - my dear boy, Master Davy, who brought us together, Barkis! That you sent messages by, you know! Won't you speak to Master Davy?'

He was as mute and senseless as the box, from which his form derived the only expression it had.

'He's a going out with the tide,' said Mr Peggotty to me, behind his hand.

My eyes were dim and so were Mr Peggotty's; but I repeated in a whisper, 'With the tide?'

'People can't die, along the coast,' said Mr Peggotty, 'except when the tide's pretty nigh out. They can't be born, unless it's pretty nigh in - not properly born, till flood. He's a going out with the tide. It's ebb at half-arter three, slack water half an hour. If he lives till it turns, he'll hold his own till past the flood, and go out with the next tide.'

We remained there, watching him, a long time - hours. What mysterious influence my presence had upon him in that state of his senses, I shall not pretend to say; but when he at last began to wander feebly, it is certain he was muttering about driving me to school.

'He's coming to himself,' said Peggotty.

Mr Peggotty touched me, and whispered with much awe and reverence. 'They are both a-going out fast.'

'Barkis, my dear!' said Peggotty.

'C. P. Barkis,' he cried faintly. 'No better woman anywhere!'

'Look! Here's Master Davy!' said Peggotty. For he now opened his eyes.

I was on the point of asking him if he knew me, when he tried to stretch out his arm, and said to me, distinctly, with a pleasant smile:

'Barkis is willin!'

And, it being low water, he went out with the tide.