

Chapter XXXII - The Beginning Of A Long Journey

What is natural in me, is natural in many other men, I infer, and so I am not afraid to write that I never had loved Steerforth better than when the ties that bound me to him were broken. In the keen distress of the discovery of his unworthiness, I thought more of all that was brilliant in him, I softened more towards all that was good in him, I did more justice to the qualities that might have made him a man of a noble nature and a great name, than ever I had done in the height of my devotion to him. Deeply as I felt my own unconscious part in his pollution of an honest home, I believed that if I had been brought face to face with him, I could not have uttered one reproach. I should have loved him so well still - though he fascinated me no longer - I should have held in so much tenderness the memory of my affection for him, that I think I should have been as weak as a spirit-wounded child, in all but the entertainment of a thought that we could ever be re-united. That thought I never had. I felt, as he had felt, that all was at an end between us. What his remembrances of me were, I have never known - they were light enough, perhaps, and easily dismissed - but mine of him were as the remembrances of a cherished friend, who was dead.

Yes, Steerforth, long removed from the scenes of this poor history! My sorrow may bear involuntary witness against you at the judgement Throne; but my angry thoughts or my reproaches never will, I know!

The news of what had happened soon spread through the town; insomuch that as I passed along the streets next morning, I overheard the people speaking of it at their doors. Many were hard upon her, some few were hard upon him, but towards her second father and her lover there was but one sentiment. Among all kinds of people a respect for them in their distress prevailed, which was full of gentleness and delicacy. The seafaring men kept apart, when those two were seen early, walking with slow steps on the beach; and stood in knots, talking compassionately among themselves.

It was on the beach, close down by the sea, that I found them. It would have been easy to perceive that they had not slept all last night, even if Peggotty had failed to tell me of their still sitting just as I left them, when it was broad day. They looked worn; and I thought Mr Peggotty's head was bowed in one night more than in all the years I had known him. But they were both as grave and steady as the sea itself, then lying beneath a dark sky, waveless - yet with a heavy roll upon it, as if it breathed in its rest - and touched, on the horizon, with a strip of silvery light from the unseen sun.

'We have had a mort of talk, sir,' said Mr Peggotty to me, when we had all three walked a little while in silence, 'of what we ought and doesn't ought to do. But we see our course now.'

I happened to glance at Ham, then looking out to sea upon the distant light, and a frightful thought came into my mind - not that his face was angry, for it was not; I recall nothing but an expression of stern determination in it - that if ever he encountered Steerforth, he would kill him.

'My dooty here, sir,' said Mr Peggotty, 'is done. I'm a going to seek my -'
' he stopped, and went on in a firmer voice: 'I'm a going to seek her. That's my dooty evermore.'

He shook his head when I asked him where he would seek her, and inquired if I were going to London tomorrow? I told him I had not gone today, fearing to lose the chance of being of any service to him; but that I was ready to go when he would.

'I'll go along with you, sir,' he rejoined, 'if you're agreeable, tomorrow.'

We walked again, for a while, in silence.

'Ham,' he presently resumed, 'he'll hold to his present work, and go and live along with my sister. The old boat yonder -'

'Will you desert the old boat, Mr Peggotty?' I gently interposed.

'My station, Mas'r Davy,' he returned, 'ain't there no longer; and if ever a boat foundered, since there was darkness on the face of the deep, that one's gone down. But no, sir, no; I doesn't mean as it should be deserted. Fur from that.'

We walked again for a while, as before, until he explained:

'My wishes is, sir, as it shall look, day and night, winter and summer, as it has always looked, since she fust know'd it. If ever she should come a wandering back, I wouldn't have the old place seem to cast her off, you understand, but seem to tempt her to draw nigher to 't, and to peep in, maybe, like a ghost, out of the wind and rain, through the old winder, at the old seat by the fire. Then, maybe, Mas'r Davy, seein' none but Missis Gummidge there, she might take heart to creep in, trembling; and might come to be laid down in her old bed, and rest her weary head where it was once so gay.'

I could not speak to him in reply, though I tried.

'Every night,' said Mr Peggotty, 'as reg'lar as the night comes, the candle must be stood in its old pane of glass, that if ever she should see it, it may seem to say 'Come back, my child, come back!' If ever there's a knock, Ham (partic'ler a soft knock), arter dark, at your

aunt's door, doesn't you go nigh it. Let it be her - not you - that sees my fallen child!

He walked a little in front of us, and kept before us for some minutes. During this interval, I glanced at Ham again, and observing the same expression on his face, and his eyes still directed to the distant light, I touched his arm.

Twice I called him by his name, in the tone in which I might have tried to rouse a sleeper, before he heeded me. When I at last inquired on what his thoughts were so bent, he replied:

'On what's afore me, Mas'r Davy; and over yon.' 'On the life before you, do you mean?' He had pointed confusedly out to sea.

'Ay, Mas'r Davy. I doesn't rightly know how 'tis, but from over yon there seemed to me to come - the end of it like,' looking at me as if he were waking, but with the same determined face.

'What end?' I asked, possessed by my former fear.

'I doesn't know,' he said, thoughtfully; 'I was calling to mind that the beginning of it all did take place here - and then the end come. But it's gone! Mas'r Davy,' he added; answering, as I think, my look; 'you han't no call to be afeerd of me: but I'm kiender muddled; I don't fare to feel no matters,' - which was as much as to say that he was not himself, and quite confounded.

Mr Peggotty stopping for us to join him: we did so, and said no more. The remembrance of this, in connexion with my former thought, however, haunted me at intervals, even until the inexorable end came at its appointed time.

We insensibly approached the old boat, and entered. Mrs Gummidge, no longer moping in her especial corner, was busy preparing breakfast. She took Mr Peggotty's hat, and placed his seat for him, and spoke so comfortably and softly, that I hardly knew her.

'Dan'l, my good man,' said she, 'you must eat and drink, and keep up your strength, for without it you'll do nowt. Try, that's a dear soul! An if I disturb you with my clicketten,' she meant her chattering, 'tell me so, Dan'l, and I won't.'

When she had served us all, she withdrew to the window, where she sedulously employed herself in repairing some shirts and other clothes belonging to Mr Peggotty, and neatly folding and packing them in an old oilskin bag, such as sailors carry. Meanwhile, she continued talking, in the same quiet manner:

'All times and seasons, you know, Dan'l,' said Mrs Gummidge, 'I shall be allus here, and everythink will look accordin' to your wishes. I'm a poor scholar, but I shall write to you, odd times, when you're away, and send my letters to Mas'r Davy. Maybe you'll write to me too, Dan'l, odd times, and tell me how you fare to feel upon your lone lorn journies.'

'You'll be a solitary woman heer, I'm afeerd!' said Mr Peggotty.

'No, no, Dan'l,' she returned, 'I shan't be that. Doen't you mind me. I shall have enough to do to keep a Beein for you' (Mrs Gummidge meant a home), 'again you come back - to keep a Beein here for any that may hap to come back, Dan'l. In the fine time, I shall set outside the door as I used to do. If any should come nigh, they shall see the old widder woman true to 'em, a long way off.'

What a change in Mrs Gummidge in a little time! She was another woman. She was so devoted, she had such a quick perception of what it would be well to say, and what it would be well to leave unsaid; she was so forgetful of herself, and so regardful of the sorrow about her, that I held her in a sort of veneration. The work she did that day! There were many things to be brought up from the beach and stored in the outhouse - as oars, nets, sails, cordage, spars, lobster-pots, bags of ballast, and the like; and though there was abundance of assistance rendered, there being not a pair of working hands on all that shore but would have laboured hard for Mr Peggotty, and been well paid in being asked to do it, yet she persisted, all day long, in toiling under weights that she was quite unequal to, and fagging to and fro on all sorts of unnecessary errands. As to deploring her misfortunes, she appeared to have entirely lost the recollection of ever having had any. She preserved an equable cheerfulness in the midst of her sympathy, which was not the least astonishing part of the change that had come over her. Querulousness was out of the question. I did not even observe her voice to falter, or a tear to escape from her eyes, the whole day through, until twilight; when she and I and Mr Peggotty being alone together, and he having fallen asleep in perfect exhaustion, she broke into a half-suppressed fit of sobbing and crying, and taking me to the door, said, 'Ever bless you, Mas'r Davy, be a friend to him, poor dear!' Then, she immediately ran out of the house to wash her face, in order that she might sit quietly beside him, and be found at work there, when he should awake. In short I left her, when I went away at night, the prop and staff of Mr Peggotty's affliction; and I could not meditate enough upon the lesson that I read in Mrs Gummidge, and the new experience she unfolded to me.

It was between nine and ten o'clock when, strolling in a melancholy manner through the town, I stopped at Mr Omer's door. Mr Omer had

taken it so much to heart, his daughter told me, that he had been very low and poorly all day, and had gone to bed without his pipe.

'A deceitful, bad-hearted girl,' said Mrs Joram. 'There was no good in her, ever!'

'Don't say so,' I returned. 'You don't think so.'

'Yes, I do!' cried Mrs Joram, angrily.

'No, no,' said I.

Mrs Joram tossed her head, endeavouring to be very stern and cross; but she could not command her softer self, and began to cry. I was young, to be sure; but I thought much the better of her for this sympathy, and fancied it became her, as a virtuous wife and mother, very well indeed.

'What will she ever do!' sobbed Minnie. 'Where will she go! What will become of her! Oh, how could she be so cruel, to herself and him!'

I remembered the time when Minnie was a young and pretty girl; and I was glad she remembered it too, so feelingly.

'My little Minnie,' said Mrs Joram, 'has only just now been got to sleep. Even in her sleep she is sobbing for Em'ly. All day long, little Minnie has cried for her, and asked me, over and over again, whether Em'ly was wicked? What can I say to her, when Em'ly tied a ribbon off her own neck round little Minnie's the last night she was here, and laid her head down on the pillow beside her till she was fast asleep! The ribbon's round my little Minnie's neck now. It ought not to be, perhaps, but what can I do? Em'ly is very bad, but they were fond of one another. And the child knows nothing!'

Mrs Joram was so unhappy that her husband came out to take care of her. Leaving them together, I went home to Peggotty's; more melancholy myself, if possible, than I had been yet.

That good creature - I mean Peggotty - all untired by her late anxieties and sleepless nights, was at her brother's, where she meant to stay till morning. An old woman, who had been employed about the house for some weeks past, while Peggotty had been unable to attend to it, was the house's only other occupant besides myself. As I had no occasion for her services, I sent her to bed, by no means against her will, and sat down before the kitchen fire a little while, to think about all this.

I was blending it with the deathbed of the late Mr Barkis, and was driving out with the tide towards the distance at which Ham had

looked so singularly in the morning, when I was recalled from my wanderings by a knock at the door. There was a knocker upon the door, but it was not that which made the sound. The tap was from a hand, and low down upon the door, as if it were given by a child.

It made me start as much as if it had been the knock of a footman to a person of distinction. I opened the door; and at first looked down, to my amazement, on nothing but a great umbrella that appeared to be walking about of itself. But presently I discovered underneath it, Miss Mowcher.

I might not have been prepared to give the little creature a very kind reception, if, on her removing the umbrella, which her utmost efforts were unable to shut up, she had shown me the 'volatile' expression of face which had made so great an impression on me at our first and last meeting. But her face, as she turned it up to mine, was so earnest; and when I relieved her of the umbrella (which would have been an inconvenient one for the Irish Giant), she wrung her little hands in such an afflicted manner; that I rather inclined towards her.

'Miss Mowcher!' said I, after glancing up and down the empty street, without distinctly knowing what I expected to see besides; 'how do you come here? What is the matter?' She motioned to me with her short right arm, to shut the umbrella for her; and passing me hurriedly, went into the kitchen. When I had closed the door, and followed, with the umbrella in my hand, I found her sitting on the corner of the fender - it was a low iron one, with two flat bars at top to stand plates upon - in the shadow of the boiler, swaying herself backwards and forwards, and chafing her hands upon her knees like a person in pain.

Quite alarmed at being the only recipient of this untimely visit, and the only spectator of this portentous behaviour, I exclaimed again, 'Pray tell me, Miss Mowcher, what is the matter! are you ill?'

'My dear young soul,' returned Miss Mowcher, squeezing her hands upon her heart one over the other. 'I am ill here, I am very ill. To think that it should come to this, when I might have known it and perhaps prevented it, if I hadn't been a thoughtless fool!'

Again her large bonnet (very disproportionate to the figure) went backwards and forwards, in her swaying of her little body to and fro; while a most gigantic bonnet rocked, in unison with it, upon the wall.

'I am surprised,' I began, 'to see you so distressed and serious'- when she interrupted me.

'Yes, it's always so!' she said. 'They are all surprised, these inconsiderate young people, fairly and full grown, to see any natural

feeling in a little thing like me! They make a plaything of me, use me for their amusement, throw me away when they are tired, and wonder that I feel more than a toy horse or a wooden soldier! Yes, yes, that's the way. The old way!

'It may be, with others,' I returned, 'but I do assure you it is not with me. Perhaps I ought not to be at all surprised to see you as you are now: I know so little of you. I said, without consideration, what I thought.'

'What can I do?' returned the little woman, standing up, and holding out her arms to show herself. 'See! What I am, my father was; and my sister is; and my brother is. I have worked for sister and brother these many years - hard, Mr Copperfield - all day. I must live. I do no harm. If there are people so unreflecting or so cruel, as to make a jest of me, what is left for me to do but to make a jest of myself, them, and everything? If I do so, for the time, whose fault is that? Mine?'

No. Not Miss Mowcher's, I perceived.

'If I had shown myself a sensitive dwarf to your false friend,' pursued the little woman, shaking her head at me, with reproachful earnestness, 'how much of his help or good will do you think I should ever have had? If little Mowcher (who had no hand, young gentleman, in the making of herself) addressed herself to him, or the like of him, because of her misfortunes, when do you suppose her small voice would have been heard? Little Mowcher would have as much need to live, if she was the bitterest and dullest of pigmies; but she couldn't do it. No. She might whistle for her bread and butter till she died of Air.'

Miss Mowcher sat down on the fender again, and took out her handkerchief, and wiped her eyes.

'Be thankful for me, if you have a kind heart, as I think you have,' she said, 'that while I know well what I am, I can be cheerful and endure it all. I am thankful for myself, at any rate, that I can find my tiny way through the world, without being beholden to anyone; and that in return for all that is thrown at me, in folly or vanity, as I go along, I can throw bubbles back. If I don't brood over all I want, it is the better for me, and not the worse for anyone. If I am a plaything for you giants, be gentle with me.'

Miss Mowcher replaced her handkerchief in her pocket, looking at me with very intent expression all the while, and pursued:

'I saw you in the street just now. You may suppose I am not able to walk as fast as you, with my short legs and short breath, and I couldn't overtake you; but I guessed where you came, and came after

you. I have been here before, today, but the good woman wasn't at home.'

'Do you know her?' I demanded.

'I know of her, and about her,' she replied, 'from Omer and Joram. I was there at seven o'clock this morning. Do you remember what Steerforth said to me about this unfortunate girl, that time when I saw you both at the inn?'

The great bonnet on Miss Mowcher's head, and the greater bonnet on the wall, began to go backwards and forwards again when she asked this question.

I remembered very well what she referred to, having had it in my thoughts many times that day. I told her so.

'May the Father of all Evil confound him,' said the little woman, holding up her forefinger between me and her sparkling eyes, 'and ten times more confound that wicked servant; but I believed it was YOU who had a boyish passion for her!'

'I?' I repeated.

'Child, child! In the name of blind ill-fortune,' cried Miss Mowcher, wringing her hands impatiently, as she went to and fro again upon the fender, 'why did you praise her so, and blush, and look disturbed?'

I could not conceal from myself that I had done this, though for a reason very different from her supposition.

'What did I know?' said Miss Mowcher, taking out her handkerchief again, and giving one little stamp on the ground whenever, at short intervals, she applied it to her eyes with both hands at once. 'He was crossing you and wheedling you, I saw; and you were soft wax in his hands, I saw. Had I left the room a minute, when his man told me that 'Young Innocence' (so he called you, and you may call him 'Old Guilt' all the days of your life) had set his heart upon her, and she was giddy and liked him, but his master was resolved that no harm should come of it - more for your sake than for hers - and that that was their business here? How could I BUT believe him? I saw Steerforth soothe and please you by his praise of her! You were the first to mention her name. You owned to an old admiration of her. You were hot and cold, and red and white, all at once when I spoke to you of her. What could I think - what DID I think - but that you were a young libertine in everything but experience, and had fallen into hands that had experience enough, and could manage you (having the fancy) for your own good? Oh! oh! oh! They were afraid of my finding out the truth,'

exclaimed Miss Mowcher, getting off the fender, and trotting up and down the kitchen with her two short arms distressfully lifted up, 'because I am a sharp little thing - I need be, to get through the world at all! - and they deceived me altogether, and I gave the poor unfortunate girl a letter, which I fully believe was the beginning of her ever speaking to Littimer, who was left behind on purpose!'

I stood amazed at the revelation of all this perfidy, looking at Miss Mowcher as she walked up and down the kitchen until she was out of breath: when she sat upon the fender again, and, drying her face with her handkerchief, shook her head for a long time, without otherwise moving, and without breaking silence.

'My country rounds,' she added at length, 'brought me to Norwich, Mr Copperfield, the night before last. What I happened to find there, about their secret way of coming and going, without you - which was strange - led to my suspecting something wrong. I got into the coach from London last night, as it came through Norwich, and was here this morning. Oh, oh, oh! too late!'

Poor little Mowcher turned so chilly after all her crying and fretting, that she turned round on the fender, putting her poor little wet feet in among the ashes to warm them, and sat looking at the fire, like a large doll. I sat in a chair on the other side of the hearth, lost in unhappy reflections, and looking at the fire too, and sometimes at her.

'I must go,' she said at last, rising as she spoke. 'It's late. You don't mistrust me?'

Meeting her sharp glance, which was as sharp as ever when she asked me, I could not on that short challenge answer no, quite frankly.

'Come!' said she, accepting the offer of my hand to help her over the fender, and looking wistfully up into my face, 'you know you wouldn't mistrust me, if I was a full-sized woman!'

I felt that there was much truth in this; and I felt rather ashamed of myself.

'You are a young man,' she said, nodding. 'Take a word of advice, even from three foot nothing. Try not to associate bodily defects with mental, my good friend, except for a solid reason.'

She had got over the fender now, and I had got over my suspicion. I told her that I believed she had given me a faithful account of herself, and that we had both been hapless instruments in designing hands. She thanked me, and said I was a good fellow.

'Now, mind!' she exclaimed, turning back on her way to the door, and looking shrewdly at me, with her forefinger up again.- 'I have some reason to suspect, from what I have heard - my ears are always open; I can't afford to spare what powers I have - that they are gone abroad. But if ever they return, if ever any one of them returns, while I am alive, I am more likely than another, going about as I do, to find it out soon. Whatever I know, you shall know. If ever I can do anything to serve the poor betrayed girl, I will do it faithfully, please Heaven! And Littimer had better have a bloodhound at his back, than little Mowcher!'

I placed implicit faith in this last statement, when I marked the look with which it was accompanied.

'Trust me no more, but trust me no less, than you would trust a full-sized woman,' said the little creature, touching me appealingly on the wrist. 'If ever you see me again, unlike what I am now, and like what I was when you first saw me, observe what company I am in. Call to mind that I am a very helpless and defenceless little thing. Think of me at home with my brother like myself and sister like myself, when my day's work is done. Perhaps you won't, then, be very hard upon me, or surprised if I can be distressed and serious. Good night!'

I gave Miss Mowcher my hand, with a very different opinion of her from that which I had hitherto entertained, and opened the door to let her out. It was not a trifling business to get the great umbrella up, and properly balanced in her grasp; but at last I successfully accomplished this, and saw it go bobbing down the street through the rain, without the least appearance of having anybody underneath it, except when a heavier fall than usual from some over-charged water-spout sent it toppling over, on one side, and discovered Miss Mowcher struggling violently to get it right. After making one or two sallies to her relief, which were rendered futile by the umbrella's hopping on again, like an immense bird, before I could reach it, I came in, went to bed, and slept till morning.

In the morning I was joined by Mr Peggotty and by my old nurse, and we went at an early hour to the coach office, where Mrs Gummidge and Ham were waiting to take leave of us.

'Mas'r Davy,' Ham whispered, drawing me aside, while Mr Peggotty was stowing his bag among the luggage, 'his life is quite broke up. He doesn't know wheer he's going; he doesn't know -what's afore him; he's bound upon a voyage that'll last, on and off, all the rest of his days, take my wured for 't, unless he finds what he's a seeking of. I am sure you'll be a friend to him, Mas'r Davy?'

'Trust me, I will indeed,' said I, shaking hands with Ham earnestly.

'Thankee. Thankee, very kind, sir. One thing funder. I'm in good employ, you know, Mas'r Davy, and I han't no way now of spending what I gets. Money's of no use to me no more, except to live. If you can lay it out for him, I shall do my work with a better art. Though as to that, sir,' and he spoke very steadily and mildly, 'you're not to think but I shall work at all times, like a man, and act the best that lays in my power!'

I told him I was well convinced of it; and I hinted that I hoped the time might even come, when he would cease to lead the lonely life he naturally contemplated now.

'No, sir,' he said, shaking his head, 'all that's past and over with me, sir. No one can never fill the place that's empty. But you'll bear in mind about the money, as theer's at all times some laying by for him?'

Reminding him of the fact, that Mr Peggotty derived a steady, though certainly a very moderate income from the bequest of his late brother-in-law, I promised to do so. We then took leave of each other. I cannot leave him even now, without remembering with a pang, at once his modest fortitude and his great sorrow.

As to Mrs Gummidge, if I were to endeavour to describe how she ran down the street by the side of the coach, seeing nothing but Mr Peggotty on the roof, through the tears she tried to repress, and dashing herself against the people who were coming in the opposite direction, I should enter on a task of some difficulty. Therefore I had better leave her sitting on a baker's door-step, out of breath, with no shape at all remaining in her bonnet, and one of her shoes off, lying on the pavement at a considerable distance.

When we got to our journey's end, our first pursuit was to look about for a little lodging for Peggotty, where her brother could have a bed. We were so fortunate as to find one, of a very clean and cheap description, over a chandler's shop, only two streets removed from me. When we had engaged this domicile, I bought some cold meat at an eating-house, and took my fellow-travellers home to tea; a proceeding, I regret to state, which did not meet with Mrs Crupp's approval, but quite the contrary. I ought to observe, however, in explanation of that lady's state of mind, that she was much offended by Peggotty's tucking up her widow's gown before she had been ten minutes in the place, and setting to work to dust my bedroom. This Mrs Crupp regarded in the light of a liberty, and a liberty, she said, was a thing she never allowed.

Mr Peggotty had made a communication to me on the way to London for which I was not unprepared. It was, that he purposed first seeing Mrs Steerforth. As I felt bound to assist him in this, and also to

mediate between them; with the view of sparing the mother's feelings as much as possible, I wrote to her that night. I told her as mildly as I could what his wrong was, and what my own share in his injury. I said he was a man in very common life, but of a most gentle and upright character; and that I ventured to express a hope that she would not refuse to see him in his heavy trouble. I mentioned two o'clock in the afternoon as the hour of our coming, and I sent the letter myself by the first coach in the morning.

At the appointed time, we stood at the door - the door of that house where I had been, a few days since, so happy: where my youthful confidence and warmth of heart had been yielded up so freely: which was closed against me henceforth: which was now a waste, a ruin.

No Littimer appeared. The pleasanter face which had replaced his, on the occasion of my last visit, answered to our summons, and went before us to the drawing-room. Mrs Steerforth was sitting there. Rosa Dartle glided, as we went in, from another part of the room and stood behind her chair.

I saw, directly, in his mother's face, that she knew from himself what he had done. It was very pale; and bore the traces of deeper emotion than my letter alone, weakened by the doubts her fondness would have raised upon it, would have been likely to create. I thought her more like him than ever I had thought her; and I felt, rather than saw, that the resemblance was not lost on my companion.

She sat upright in her arm-chair, with a stately, immovable, passionless air, that it seemed as if nothing could disturb. She looked very steadfastly at Mr Peggotty when he stood before her; and he looked quite as steadfastly at her. Rosa Dartle's keen glance comprehended all of us. For some moments not a word was spoken.

She motioned to Mr Peggotty to be seated. He said, in a low voice, 'I shouldn't feel it nat'ral, ma'am, to sit down in this house. I'd sooner stand.' And this was succeeded by another silence, which she broke thus:

'I know, with deep regret, what has brought you here. What do you want of me? What do you ask me to do?'

He put his hat under his arm, and feeling in his breast for Emily's letter, took it out, unfolded it, and gave it to her. 'Please to read that, ma'am. That's my niece's hand!'

She read it, in the same stately and impassive way, - untouched by its contents, as far as I could see, - and returned it to him.

'Unless he brings me back a lady," said Mr Peggotty, tracing out that part with his finger. 'I come to know, ma'am, whether he will keep his wured?'

'No,' she returned.

'Why not?' said Mr Peggotty.

'It is impossible. He would disgrace himself. You cannot fail to know that she is far below him.'

'Raise her up!' said Mr Peggotty.

'She is uneducated and ignorant.'

'Maybe she's not; maybe she is,' said Mr Peggotty. 'I think not, ma'am; but I'm no judge of them things. Teach her better!'

'Since you oblige me to speak more plainly, which I am very unwilling to do, her humble connexions would render such a thing impossible, if nothing else did.'

'Hark to this, ma'am,' he returned, slowly and quietly. 'You know what it is to love your child. So do I. If she was a hundred times my child, I couldn't love her more. You doesn't know what it is to lose your child. I do. All the heaps of riches in the wureld would be nowt to me (if they was mine) to buy her back! But, save her from this disgrace, and she shall never be disgraced by us. Not one of us that she's growed up among, not one of us that's lived along with her and had her for their all in all, these many year, will ever look upon her pritty face again. We'll be content to let her be; we'll be content to think of her, far off, as if she was underneath another sun and sky; we'll be content to trust her to her husband, - to her little children, p'raps, - and bide the time when all of us shall be alike in quality afore our God!'

The rugged eloquence with which he spoke, was not devoid of all effect. She still preserved her proud manner, but there was a touch of softness in her voice, as she answered:

'I justify nothing. I make no counter-accusations. But I am sorry to repeat, it is impossible. Such a marriage would irretrievably blight my son's career, and ruin his prospects. Nothing is more certain than that it never can take place, and never will. If there is any other compensation -'

'I am looking at the likeness of the face,' interrupted Mr Peggotty, with a steady but a kindling eye, 'that has looked at me, in my home, at my fireside, in my boat - wheer not? - smiling and friendly, when it was so

treacherous, that I go half wild when I think of it. If the likeness of that face don't turn to burning fire, at the thought of offering money to me for my child's blight and ruin, it's as bad. I don't know, being a lady's, but what it's worse.'

She changed now, in a moment. An angry flush overspread her features; and she said, in an intolerant manner, grasping the arm-chair tightly with her hands:

'What compensation can you make to ME for opening such a pit between me and my son? What is your love to mine? What is your separation to ours?'

Miss Dartle softly touched her, and bent down her head to whisper, but she would not hear a word.

'No, Rosa, not a word! Let the man listen to what I say! My son, who has been the object of my life, to whom its every thought has been devoted, whom I have gratified from a child in every wish, from whom I have had no separate existence since his birth, - to take up in a moment with a miserable girl, and avoid me! To repay my confidence with systematic deception, for her sake, and quit me for her! To set this wretched fancy, against his mother's claims upon his duty, love, respect, gratitude - claims that every day and hour of his life should have strengthened into ties that nothing could be proof against! Is this no injury?'

Again Rosa Dartle tried to soothe her; again ineffectually.

'I say, Rosa, not a word! If he can stake his all upon the lightest object, I can stake my all upon a greater purpose. Let him go where he will, with the means that my love has secured to him! Does he think to reduce me by long absence? He knows his mother very little if he does. Let him put away his whim now, and he is welcome back. Let him not put her away now, and he never shall come near me, living or dying, while I can raise my hand to make a sign against it, unless, being rid of her for ever, he comes humbly to me and begs for my forgiveness. This is my right. This is the acknowledgement I WILL HAVE. This is the separation that there is between us! And is this,' she added, looking at her visitor with the proud intolerant air with which she had begun, 'no injury?'

While I heard and saw the mother as she said these words, I seemed to hear and see the son, defying them. All that I had ever seen in him of an unyielding, wilful spirit, I saw in her. All the understanding that I had now of his misdirected energy, became an understanding of her character too, and a perception that it was, in its strongest springs, the same.

She now observed to me, aloud, resuming her former restraint, that it was useless to hear more, or to say more, and that she begged to put an end to the interview. She rose with an air of dignity to leave the room, when Mr Peggotty signified that it was needless.

'Doen't fear me being any hindrance to you, I have no more to say, ma'am,' he remarked, as he moved towards the door. 'I come beer with no hope, and I take away no hope. I have done what I thowt should be done, but I never looked fur any good to come of my stan'ning where I do. This has been too evil a house fur me and mine, fur me to be in my right senses and expect it.'

With this, we departed; leaving her standing by her elbow-chair, a picture of a noble presence and a handsome face.

We had, on our way out, to cross a paved hall, with glass sides and roof, over which a vine was trained. Its leaves and shoots were green then, and the day being sunny, a pair of glass doors leading to the garden were thrown open. Rosa Dartle, entering this way with a noiseless step, when we were close to them, addressed herself to me:

'You do well,' she said, 'indeed, to bring this fellow here!'

Such a concentration of rage and scorn as darkened her face, and flashed in her jet-black eyes, I could not have thought compressible even into that face. The scar made by the hammer was, as usual in this excited state of her features, strongly marked. When the throbbing I had seen before, came into it as I looked at her, she absolutely lifted up her hand, and struck it.

'This is a fellow,' she said, 'to champion and bring here, is he not? You are a true man!'

'Miss Dartle,' I returned, 'you are surely not so unjust as to condemn ME!'

'Why do you bring division between these two mad creatures?' she returned. 'Don't you know that they are both mad with their own self-will and pride?'

'Is it my doing?' I returned.

'Is it your doing!' she retorted. 'Why do you bring this man here?'

'He is a deeply-injured man, Miss Dartle,' I replied. 'You may not know it.'

'I know that James Steerforth,' she said, with her hand on her bosom, as if to prevent the storm that was raging there, from being loud, 'has a false, corrupt heart, and is a traitor. But what need I know or care about this fellow, and his common niece?'

'Miss Dartle,' I returned, 'you deepen the injury. It is sufficient already. I will only say, at parting, that you do him a great wrong.'

'I do him no wrong,' she returned. 'They are a depraved, worthless set. I would have her whipped!'

Mr Peggotty passed on, without a word, and went out at the door.

'Oh, shame, Miss Dartle! shame!' I said indignantly. 'How can you bear to trample on his undeserved affliction!'

'I would trample on them all,' she answered. 'I would have his house pulled down. I would have her branded on the face, dressed in rags, and cast out in the streets to starve. If I had the power to sit in judgement on her, I would see it done. See it done? I would do it! I detest her. If I ever could reproach her with her infamous condition, I would go anywhere to do so. If I could hunt her to her grave, I would. If there was any word of comfort that would be a solace to her in her dying hour, and only I possessed it, I wouldn't part with it for Life itself.'

The mere vehemence of her words can convey, I am sensible, but a weak impression of the passion by which she was possessed, and which made itself articulate in her whole figure, though her voice, instead of being raised, was lower than usual. No description I could give of her would do justice to my recollection of her, or to her entire deliverance of herself to her anger. I have seen passion in many forms, but I have never seen it in such a form as that.

When I joined Mr Peggotty, he was walking slowly and thoughtfully down the hill. He told me, as soon as I came up with him, that having now discharged his mind of what he had purposed doing in London, he meant 'to set out on his travels', that night. I asked him where he meant to go? He only answered, 'I'm a going, sir, to seek my niece.'

We went back to the little lodging over the chandler's shop, and there I found an opportunity of repeating to Peggotty what he had said to me. She informed me, in return, that he had said the same to her that morning. She knew no more than I did, where he was going, but she thought he had some project shaped out in his mind.

I did not like to leave him, under such circumstances, and we all three dined together off a beefsteak pie - which was one of the many good

things for which Peggotty was famous - and which was curiously flavoured on this occasion, I recollect well, by a miscellaneous taste of tea, coffee, butter, bacon, cheese, new loaves, firewood, candles, and walnut ketchup, continually ascending from the shop. After dinner we sat for an hour or so near the window, without talking much; and then Mr Peggotty got up, and brought his oilskin bag and his stout stick, and laid them on the table.

He accepted, from his sister's stock of ready money, a small sum on account of his legacy; barely enough, I should have thought, to keep him for a month. He promised to communicate with me, when anything befell him; and he slung his bag about him, took his hat and stick, and bade us both 'Good-bye!'

'All good attend you, dear old woman,' he said, embracing Peggotty, 'and you too, Mas'r Davy!' shaking hands with me. 'I'm a-going to seek her, fur and wide. If she should come home while I'm away - but ah, that ain't like to be! - or if I should bring her back, my meaning is, that she and me shall live and die where no one can't reproach her. If any hurt should come to me, remember that the last words I left for her was, 'My unchanged love is with my darling child, and I forgive her!''

He said this solemnly, bare-headed; then, putting on his hat, he went down the stairs, and away. We followed to the door. It was a warm, dusty evening, just the time when, in the great main thoroughfare out of which that by-way turned, there was a temporary lull in the eternal tread of feet upon the pavement, and a strong red sunshine. He turned, alone, at the corner of our shady street, into a glow of light, in which we lost him.

Rarely did that hour of the evening come, rarely did I wake at night, rarely did I look up at the moon, or stars, or watch the falling rain, or hear the wind, but I thought of his solitary figure toiling on, poor pilgrim, and recalled the words:

'I'm a going to seek her, fur and wide. If any hurt should come to me, remember that the last words I left for her was, 'My unchanged love is with my darling child, and I forgive her!''