

Chapter XL - The Wanderer

We had a very serious conversation in Buckingham Street that night, about the domestic occurrences I have detailed in the last chapter. My aunt was deeply interested in them, and walked up and down the room with her arms folded, for more than two hours afterwards. Whenever she was particularly discomposed, she always performed one of these pedestrian feats; and the amount of her discomposure might always be estimated by the duration of her walk. On this occasion she was so much disturbed in mind as to find it necessary to open the bedroom door, and make a course for herself, comprising the full extent of the bedrooms from wall to wall; and while Mr Dick and I sat quietly by the fire, she kept passing in and out, along this measured track, at an unchanging pace, with the regularity of a clock-pendulum.

When my aunt and I were left to ourselves by Mr Dick's going out to bed, I sat down to write my letter to the two old ladies. By that time she was tired of walking, and sat by the fire with her dress tucked up as usual. But instead of sitting in her usual manner, holding her glass upon her knee, she suffered it to stand neglected on the chimney-piece; and, resting her left elbow on her right arm, and her chin on her left hand, looked thoughtfully at me. As often as I raised my eyes from what I was about, I met hers. 'I am in the lovingest of tempers, my dear,' she would assure me with a nod, 'but I am fidgeted and sorry!'

I had been too busy to observe, until after she was gone to bed, that she had left her night-mixture, as she always called it, untasted on the chimney-piece. She came to her door, with even more than her usual affection of manner, when I knocked to acquaint her with this discovery; but only said, 'I have not the heart to take it, Trot, tonight,' and shook her head, and went in again.

She read my letter to the two old ladies, in the morning, and approved of it. I posted it, and had nothing to do then, but wait, as patiently as I could, for the reply. I was still in this state of expectation, and had been, for nearly a week; when I left the Doctor's one snowy night, to walk home.

It had been a bitter day, and a cutting north-east wind had blown for some time. The wind had gone down with the light, and so the snow had come on. It was a heavy, settled fall, I recollect, in great flakes; and it lay thick. The noise of wheels and tread of people were as hushed, as if the streets had been strewn that depth with feathers.

My shortest way home, - and I naturally took the shortest way on such a night - was through St. Martin's Lane. Now, the church which

gives its name to the lane, stood in a less free situation at that time; there being no open space before it, and the lane winding down to the Strand. As I passed the steps of the portico, I encountered, at the corner, a woman's face. It looked in mine, passed across the narrow lane, and disappeared. I knew it. I had seen it somewhere. But I could not remember where. I had some association with it, that struck upon my heart directly; but I was thinking of anything else when it came upon me, and was confused.

On the steps of the church, there was the stooping figure of a man, who had put down some burden on the smooth snow, to adjust it; my seeing the face, and my seeing him, were simultaneous. I don't think I had stopped in my surprise; but, in any case, as I went on, he rose, turned, and came down towards me. I stood face to face with Mr Peggotty!

Then I remembered the woman. It was Martha, to whom Emily had given the money that night in the kitchen. Martha Endell - side by side with whom, he would not have seen his dear niece, Ham had told me, for all the treasures wrecked in the sea.

We shook hands heartily. At first, neither of us could speak a word.

'Mas'r Davy!' he said, gripping me tight, 'it do my art good to see you, sir. Well met, well met!'

'Well met, my dear old friend!' said I.

'I had my thowts o' coming to make inquisition for you, sir, tonight,' he said, 'but knowing as your aunt was living along wi' you - fur I've been down yonder - Yarmouth way - I was afeerd it was too late. I should have come early in the morning, sir, afore going away.'

'Again?' said I.

'Yes, sir,' he replied, patiently shaking his head, 'I'm away tomorrow.'

'Where were you going now?' I asked.

'Well!' he replied, shaking the snow out of his long hair, 'I was a-going to turn in somewheers.'

In those days there was a side-entrance to the stable-yard of the Golden Cross, the inn so memorable to me in connexion with his misfortune, nearly opposite to where we stood. I pointed out the gateway, put my arm through his, and we went across. Two or three public-rooms opened out of the stable-yard; and looking into one of

them, and finding it empty, and a good fire burning, I took him in there.

When I saw him in the light, I observed, not only that his hair was long and ragged, but that his face was burnt dark by the sun. He was greyer, the lines in his face and forehead were deeper, and he had every appearance of having toiled and wandered through all varieties of weather; but he looked very strong, and like a man upheld by steadfastness of purpose, whom nothing could tire out. He shook the snow from his hat and clothes, and brushed it away from his face, while I was inwardly making these remarks. As he sat down opposite to me at a table, with his back to the door by which we had entered, he put out his rough hand again, and grasped mine warmly.

'I'll tell you, Mas'r Davy,' he said, - 'wheer all I've been, and what-all we've heerd. I've been fur, and we've heerd little; but I'll tell you!'

I rang the bell for something hot to drink. He would have nothing stronger than ale; and while it was being brought, and being warmed at the fire, he sat thinking. There was a fine, massive gravity in his face, I did not venture to disturb.

'When she was a child,' he said, lifting up his head soon after we were left alone, 'she used to talk to me a deal about the sea, and about them coasts where the sea got to be dark blue, and to lay a-shining and a-shining in the sun. I thowt, odd times, as her father being drownded made her think on it so much. I doen't know, you see, but maybe she believed - or hoped - he had drifted out to them parts, where the flowers is always a-blowing, and the country bright.'

'It is likely to have been a childish fancy,' I replied.

'When she was - lost,' said Mr Peggotty, 'I know'd in my mind, as he would take her to them countries. I know'd in my mind, as he'd have told her wonders of 'em, and how she was to be a lady theer, and how he got her to listen to him fust, along o' sech like. When we see his mother, I know'd quite well as I was right. I went across-channel to France, and landed theer, as if I'd fell down from the sky.'

I saw the door move, and the snow drift in. I saw it move a little more, and a hand softly interpose to keep it open.

'I found out an English gen'leman as was in authority,' said Mr Peggotty, 'and told him I was a-going to seek my niece. He got me them papers as I wanted fur to carry me through - I doen't rightly know how they're called - and he would have give me money, but that I was thankful to have no need on. I thank him kind, for all he done, I'm sure! I've wrote afore you,' he says to me, 'and I shall speak to

many as will come that way, and many will know you, fur distant from here, when you're a-travelling alone.' I told him, best as I was able, what my gratitooode was, and went away through France.'

'Alone, and on foot?' said I.

'Mostly a-foot,' he rejoined; 'sometimes in carts along with people going to market; sometimes in empty coaches. Many mile a day a-foot, and often with some poor soldier or another, travelling to see his friends. I couldn't talk to him,' said Mr Peggotty, 'nor he to me; but we was company for one another, too, along the dusty roads.'

I should have known that by his friendly tone.

'When I come to any town,' he pursued, 'I found the inn, and waited about the yard till someone turned up (someone mostly did) as know'd English. Then I told how that I was on my way to seek my niece, and they told me what manner of gentlefolks was in the house, and I waited to see any as seemed like her, going in or out. When it warn't Em'ly, I went on agen. By little and little, when I come to a new village or that, among the poor people, I found they know'd about me. They would set me down at their cottage doors, and give me what-not fur to eat and drink, and show me where to sleep; and many a woman, Mas'r Davy, as has had a daughter of about Em'ly's age, I've found a-waiting fur me, at Our Saviour's Cross outside the village, fur to do me sim'lar kindnesses. Some has had daughters as was dead. And God only knows how good them mothers was to me!'

It was Martha at the door. I saw her haggard, listening face distinctly. My dread was lest he should turn his head, and see her too.

'They would often put their children - particular their little girls,' said Mr Peggotty, 'upon my knee; and many a time you might have seen me sitting at their doors, when night was coming in, a'most as if they'd been my Darling's children. Oh, my Darling!'

Overpowered by sudden grief, he sobbed aloud. I laid my trembling hand upon the hand he put before his face. 'Thankee, sir,' he said, 'doen't take no notice.'

In a very little while he took his hand away and put it on his breast, and went on with his story. 'They often walked with me,' he said, 'in the morning, maybe a mile or two upon my road; and when we parted, and I said, 'I'm very thankful to you! God bless you!' they always seemed to understand, and answered pleasant. At last I come to the sea. It warn't hard, you may suppose, for a seafaring man like me to work his way over to Italy. When I got theer, I wandered on as I had done afore. The people was just as good to me, and I should have gone

from town to town, maybe the country through, but that I got news of her being seen among them Swiss mountains yonder. One as know'd his servant see 'em there, all three, and told me how they travelled, and where they was. I made fur them mountains, Mas'r Davy, day and night. Ever so fur as I went, ever so fur the mountains seemed to shift away from me. But I come up with 'em, and I crossed 'em. When I got nigh the place as I had been told of, I began to think within my own self, 'What shall I do when I see her?'

The listening face, insensible to the inclement night, still drooped at the door, and the hands begged me - prayed me - not to cast it forth.

'I never doubted her,' said Mr Peggotty. 'No! Not a bit! On'y let her see my face - on'y let her hear my voice - on'y let my stanning still afore her bring to her thoughts the home she had fled away from, and the child she had been - and if she had growed to be a royal lady, she'd have fell down at my feet! I know'd it well! Many a time in my sleep had I heerd her cry out, 'Uncle!' and seen her fall like death afore me. Many a time in my sleep had I raised her up, and whispered to her, 'Em'ly, my dear, I am come fur to bring forgiveness, and to take you home!'

He stopped and shook his head, and went on with a sigh.

'He was nowt to me now. Em'ly was all. I bought a country dress to put upon her; and I know'd that, once found, she would walk beside me over them stony roads, go where I would, and never, never, leave me more. To put that dress upon her, and to cast off what she wore - to take her on my arm again, and wander towards home - to stop sometimes upon the road, and heal her bruised feet and her worse-bruised heart - was all that I thowt of now. I doen't believe I should have done so much as look at him. But, Mas'r Davy, it warn't to be - not yet! I was too late, and they was gone. Wheer, I couldn't learn. Some said beer, some said theer. I travelled beer, and I travelled theer, but I found no Em'ly, and I travelled home.'

'How long ago?' I asked.

'A matter o' fower days,' said Mr Peggotty. 'I sighted the old boat arter dark, and the light a-shining in the winder. When I come nigh and looked in through the glass, I see the faithful creetur Missis Gummidge sittin' by the fire, as we had fixed upon, alone. I called out, 'Doen't be afeerd! It's Dan'!' and I went in. I never could have thowt the old boat would have been so strange!' From some pocket in his breast, he took out, with a very careful hand a small paper bundle containing two or three letters or little packets, which he laid upon the table.

'This fust one come,' he said, selecting it from the rest, 'afore I had been gone a week. A fifty pound Bank note, in a sheet of paper, directed to me, and put underneath the door in the night. She tried to hide her writing, but she couldn't hide it from Me!'

He folded up the note again, with great patience and care, in exactly the same form, and laid it on one side.

'This come to Missis Gummidge,' he said, opening another, 'two or three months ago.' After looking at it for some moments, he gave it to me, and added in a low voice, 'Be so good as read it, sir.'

I read as follows:

'Oh what will you feel when you see this writing, and know it comes from my wicked hand! But try, try - not for my sake, but for uncle's goodness, try to let your heart soften to me, only for a little little time! Try, pray do, to relent towards a miserable girl, and write down on a bit of paper whether he is well, and what he said about me before you left off ever naming me among yourselves - and whether, of a night, when it is my old time of coming home, you ever see him look as if he thought of one he used to love so dear. Oh, my heart is breaking when I think about it! I am kneeling down to you, begging and praying you not to be as hard with me as I deserve - as I well, well, know I deserve - but to be so gentle and so good, as to write down something of him, and to send it to me. You need not call me Little, you need not call me by the name I have disgraced; but oh, listen to my agony, and have mercy on me so far as to write me some word of uncle, never, never to be seen in this world by my eyes again!

'Dear, if your heart is hard towards me - justly hard, I know - but, listen, if it is hard, dear, ask him I have wronged the most - him whose wife I was to have been - before you quite decide against my poor poor prayer! If he should be so compassionate as to say that you might write something for me to read - I think he would, oh, I think he would, if you would only ask him, for he always was so brave and so forgiving - tell him then (but not else), that when I hear the wind blowing at night, I feel as if it was passing angrily from seeing him and uncle, and was going up to God against me. Tell him that if I was to die tomorrow (and oh, if I was fit, I would be so glad to die!) I would bless him and uncle with my last words, and pray for his happy home with my last breath!'

Some money was enclosed in this letter also. Five pounds. It was untouched like the previous sum, and he refolded it in the same way. Detailed instructions were added relative to the address of a reply, which, although they betrayed the intervention of several hands, and made it difficult to arrive at any very probable conclusion in reference

to her place of concealment, made it at least not unlikely that she had written from that spot where she was stated to have been seen.

'What answer was sent?' I inquired of Mr Peggotty.

'Missis Gummidge,' he returned, 'not being a good scholar, sir, Ham kindly drawed it out, and she made a copy on it. They told her I was gone to seek her, and what my parting words was.'

'Is that another letter in your hand?' said I.

'It's money, sir,' said Mr Peggotty, unfolding it a little way. 'Ten pound, you see. And wrote inside, 'From a true friend,' like the fust. But the fust was put underneath the door, and this come by the post, day afore yesterday. I'm a-going to seek her at the post-mark.'

He showed it to me. It was a town on the Upper Rhine. He had found out, at Yarmouth, some foreign dealers who knew that country, and they had drawn him a rude map on paper, which he could very well understand. He laid it between us on the table; and, with his chin resting on one hand, tracked his course upon it with the other.

I asked him how Ham was? He shook his head.

'He works,' he said, 'as bold as a man can. His name's as good, in all that part, as any man's is, anywheres in the wureld. Anyone's hand is ready to help him, you understand, and his is ready to help them. He's never been heerd fur to complain. But my sister's belief is ('twixt ourselves) as it has cut him deep.'

'Poor fellow, I can believe it!'

'He ain't no care, Mas'r Davy,' said Mr Peggotty in a solemn whisper - 'kinder no care no-how for his life. When a man's wanted for rough sarvice in rough weather, he's theer. When there's hard duty to be done with danger in it, he steps for'ard afore all his mates. And yet he's as gentle as any child. There ain't a child in Yarmouth that doesn't know him.'

He gathered up the letters thoughtfully, smoothing them with his hand; put them into their little bundle; and placed it tenderly in his breast again. The face was gone from the door. I still saw the snow drifting in; but nothing else was there.

'Well!' he said, looking to his bag, 'having seen you tonight, Mas'r Davy (and that doos me good!), I shall away betimes tomorrow morning. You have seen what I've got heer'; putting his hand on where the little packet lay; 'all that troubles me is, to think that any harm might come

to me, afore that money was give back. If I was to die, and it was lost, or stole, or elseways made away with, and it was never know'd by him but what I'd took it, I believe the t'other wureld wouldn't hold me! I believe I must come back!

He rose, and I rose too; we grasped each other by the hand again, before going out.

'I'd go ten thousand mile,' he said, 'I'd go till I dropped dead, to lay that money down afore him. If I do that, and find my Em'ly, I'm content. If I doen't find her, maybe she'll come to hear, sometime, as her loving uncle only ended his search for her when he ended his life; and if I know her, even that will turn her home at last!'

As he went out into the rigorous night, I saw the lonely figure flit away before us. I turned him hastily on some pretence, and held him in conversation until it was gone.

He spoke of a traveller's house on the Dover Road, where he knew he could find a clean, plain lodging for the night. I went with him over Westminster Bridge, and parted from him on the Surrey shore. Everything seemed, to my imagination, to be hushed in reverence for him, as he resumed his solitary journey through the snow.

I returned to the inn yard, and, impressed by my remembrance of the face, looked awfully around for it. It was not there. The snow had covered our late footprints; my new track was the only one to be seen; and even that began to die away (it snowed so fast) as I looked back over my shoulder.