

Chapter L - Mr Peggotty's Dream Comes True

By this time, some months had passed since our interview on the bank of the river with Martha. I had never seen her since, but she had communicated with Mr Peggotty on several occasions. Nothing had come of her zealous intervention; nor could I infer, from what he told me, that any clue had been obtained, for a moment, to Emily's fate. I confess that I began to despair of her recovery, and gradually to sink deeper and deeper into the belief that she was dead.

His conviction remained unchanged. So far as I know - and I believe his honest heart was transparent to me - he never wavered again, in his solemn certainty of finding her. His patience never tired. And, although I trembled for the agony it might one day be to him to have his strong assurance shivered at a blow, there was something so religious in it, so affectingly expressive of its anchor being in the purest depths of his fine nature, that the respect and honour in which I held him were exalted every day.

His was not a lazy trustfulness that hoped, and did no more. He had been a man of sturdy action all his life, and he knew that in all things wherein he wanted help he must do his own part faithfully, and help himself. I have known him set out in the night, on a misgiving that the light might not be, by some accident, in the window of the old boat, and walk to Yarmouth. I have known him, on reading something in the newspaper that might apply to her, take up his stick, and go forth on a journey of three- or four-score miles. He made his way by sea to Naples, and back, after hearing the narrative to which Miss Dartle had assisted me. All his journeys were ruggedly performed; for he was always steadfast in a purpose of saving money for Emily's sake, when she should be found. In all this long pursuit, I never heard him repine; I never heard him say he was fatigued, or out of heart.

Dora had often seen him since our marriage, and was quite fond of him. I fancy his figure before me now, standing near her sofa, with his rough cap in his hand, and the blue eyes of my child-wife raised, with a timid wonder, to his face. Sometimes of an evening, about twilight, when he came to talk with me, I would induce him to smoke his pipe in the garden, as we slowly paced to and fro together; and then, the picture of his deserted home, and the comfortable air it used to have in my childish eyes of an evening when the fire was burning, and the wind moaning round it, came most vividly into my mind.

One evening, at this hour, he told me that he had found Martha waiting near his lodging on the preceding night when he came out, and that she had asked him not to leave London on any account, until he should have seen her again.

'Did she tell you why?' I inquired.

'I asked her, Mas'r Davy,' he replied, 'but it is but few words as she ever says, and she on'y got my promise and so went away.'

'Did she say when you might expect to see her again?' I demanded.

'No, Mas'r Davy,' he returned, drawing his hand thoughtfully down his face. 'I asked that too; but it was more (she said) than she could tell.'

As I had long forborne to encourage him with hopes that hung on threads, I made no other comment on this information than that I supposed he would see her soon. Such speculations as it engendered within me I kept to myself, and those were faint enough.

I was walking alone in the garden, one evening, about a fortnight afterwards. I remember that evening well. It was the second in Mr Micawber's week of suspense. There had been rain all day, and there was a damp feeling in the air. The leaves were thick upon the trees, and heavy with wet; but the rain had ceased, though the sky was still dark; and the hopeful birds were singing cheerfully. As I walked to and fro in the garden, and the twilight began to close around me, their little voices were hushed; and that peculiar silence which belongs to such an evening in the country when the lightest trees are quite still, save for the occasional droppings from their boughs, prevailed.

There was a little green perspective of trellis-work and ivy at the side of our cottage, through which I could see, from the garden where I was walking, into the road before the house. I happened to turn my eyes towards this place, as I was thinking of many things; and I saw a figure beyond, dressed in a plain cloak. It was bending eagerly towards me, and beckoning.

'Martha!' said I, going to it.

'Can you come with me?' she inquired, in an agitated whisper. 'I have been to him, and he is not at home. I wrote down where he was to come, and left it on his table with my own hand. They said he would not be out long. I have tidings for him. Can you come directly?'

My answer was, to pass out at the gate immediately. She made a hasty gesture with her hand, as if to entreat my patience and my silence, and turned towards London, whence, as her dress betokened, she had come expeditiously on foot.

I asked her if that were not our destination? On her motioning Yes, with the same hasty gesture as before, I stopped an empty coach that was coming by, and we got into it. When I asked her where the

coachman was to drive, she answered, 'Anywhere near Golden Square! And quick!' - then shrunk into a corner, with one trembling hand before her face, and the other making the former gesture, as if she could not bear a voice.

Now much disturbed, and dazzled with conflicting gleams of hope and dread, I looked at her for some explanation. But seeing how strongly she desired to remain quiet, and feeling that it was my own natural inclination too, at such a time, I did not attempt to break the silence. We proceeded without a word being spoken. Sometimes she glanced out of the window, as though she thought we were going slowly, though indeed we were going fast; but otherwise remained exactly as at first.

We alighted at one of the entrances to the Square she had mentioned, where I directed the coach to wait, not knowing but that we might have some occasion for it. She laid her hand on my arm, and hurried me on to one of the sombre streets, of which there are several in that part, where the houses were once fair dwellings in the occupation of single families, but have, and had, long degenerated into poor lodgings let off in rooms. Entering at the open door of one of these, and releasing my arm, she beckoned me to follow her up the common staircase, which was like a tributary channel to the street.

The house swarmed with inmates. As we went up, doors of rooms were opened and people's heads put out; and we passed other people on the stairs, who were coming down. In glancing up from the outside, before we entered, I had seen women and children lolling at the windows over flower-pots; and we seemed to have attracted their curiosity, for these were principally the observers who looked out of their doors. It was a broad panelled staircase, with massive balustrades of some dark wood; cornices above the doors, ornamented with carved fruit and flowers; and broad seats in the windows. But all these tokens of past grandeur were miserably decayed and dirty; rot, damp, and age, had weakened the flooring, which in many places was unsound and even unsafe. Some attempts had been made, I noticed, to infuse new blood into this dwindling frame, by repairing the costly old wood-work here and there with common deal; but it was like the marriage of a reduced old noble to a plebeian pauper, and each party to the ill-assorted union shrunk away from the other. Several of the back windows on the staircase had been darkened or wholly blocked up. In those that remained, there was scarcely any glass; and, through the crumbling frames by which the bad air seemed always to come in, and never to go out, I saw, through other glassless windows, into other houses in a similar condition, and looked giddily down into a wretched yard, which was the common dust-heap of the mansion.

We proceeded to the top-storey of the house. Two or three times, by the way, I thought I observed in the indistinct light the skirts of a female figure going up before us. As we turned to ascend the last flight of stairs between us and the roof, we caught a full view of this figure pausing for a moment, at a door. Then it turned the handle, and went in.

'What's this!' said Martha, in a whisper. 'She has gone into my room. I don't know her!'

I knew her. I had recognized her with amazement, for Miss Dartle.

I said something to the effect that it was a lady whom I had seen before, in a few words, to my conductress; and had scarcely done so, when we heard her voice in the room, though not, from where we stood, what she was saying. Martha, with an astonished look, repeated her former action, and softly led me up the stairs; and then, by a little back-door which seemed to have no lock, and which she pushed open with a touch, into a small empty garret with a low sloping roof, little better than a cupboard. Between this, and the room she had called hers, there was a small door of communication, standing partly open. Here we stopped, breathless with our ascent, and she placed her hand lightly on my lips. I could only see, of the room beyond, that it was pretty large; that there was a bed in it; and that there were some common pictures of ships upon the walls. I could not see Miss Dartle, or the person whom we had heard her address. Certainly, my companion could not, for my position was the best. A dead silence prevailed for some moments. Martha kept one hand on my lips, and raised the other in a listening attitude.

'It matters little to me her not being at home,' said Rosa Dartle haughtily, 'I know nothing of her. It is you I come to see.'

'Me?' replied a soft voice.

At the sound of it, a thrill went through my frame. For it was Emily's!

'Yes,' returned Miss Dartle, 'I have come to look at you. What? You are not ashamed of the face that has done so much?'

The resolute and unrelenting hatred of her tone, its cold stern sharpness, and its mastered rage, presented her before me, as if I had seen her standing in the light. I saw the flashing black eyes, and the passion-wasted figure; and I saw the scar, with its white track cutting through her lips, quivering and throbbing as she spoke.

'I have come to see,' she said, 'James Steerforth's fancy; the girl who ran away with him, and is the town-talk of the commonest people of

her native place; the bold, flaunting, practised companion of persons like James Steerforth. I want to know what such a thing is like.'

There was a rustle, as if the unhappy girl, on whom she heaped these taunts, ran towards the door, and the speaker swiftly interposed herself before it. It was succeeded by a moment's pause.

When Miss Dartle spoke again, it was through her set teeth, and with a stamp upon the ground.

'Stay there!' she said, 'or I'll proclaim you to the house, and the whole street! If you try to evade me, I'll stop you, if it's by the hair, and raise the very stones against you!'

A frightened murmur was the only reply that reached my ears. A silence succeeded. I did not know what to do. Much as I desired to put an end to the interview, I felt that I had no right to present myself; that it was for Mr Peggotty alone to see her and recover her. Would he never come? I thought impatiently.

'So!' said Rosa Dartle, with a contemptuous laugh, 'I see her at last! Why, he was a poor creature to be taken by that delicate mock-modesty, and that hanging head!'

'Oh, for Heaven's sake, spare me!' exclaimed Emily. 'Whoever you are, you know my pitiable story, and for Heaven's sake spare me, if you would be spared yourself!'

'If I would be spared!' returned the other fiercely; 'what is there in common between us, do you think!'

'Nothing but our sex,' said Emily, with a burst of tears.

'And that,' said Rosa Dartle, 'is so strong a claim, preferred by one so infamous, that if I had any feeling in my breast but scorn and abhorrence of you, it would freeze it up. Our sex! You are an honour to our sex!'

'I have deserved this,' said Emily, 'but it's dreadful! Dear, dear lady, think what I have suffered, and how I am fallen! Oh, Martha, come back! Oh, home, home!'

Miss Dartle placed herself in a chair, within view of the door, and looked downward, as if Emily were crouching on the floor before her. Being now between me and the light, I could see her curled lip, and her cruel eyes intently fixed on one place, with a greedy triumph.

'Listen to what I say!' she said; 'and reserve your false arts for your dupes. Do you hope to move me by your tears? No more than you could charm me by your smiles, you purchased slave.'

'Oh, have some mercy on me!' cried Emily. 'Show me some compassion, or I shall die mad!'

'It would be no great penance,' said Rosa Dartle, 'for your crimes. Do you know what you have done? Do you ever think of the home you have laid waste?'

'Oh, is there ever night or day, when I don't think of it!' cried Emily; and now I could just see her, on her knees, with her head thrown back, her pale face looking upward, her hands wildly clasped and held out, and her hair streaming about her. 'Has there ever been a single minute, waking or sleeping, when it hasn't been before me, just as it used to be in the lost days when I turned my back upon it for ever and for ever! Oh, home, home! Oh dear, dear uncle, if you ever could have known the agony your love would cause me when I fell away from good, you never would have shown it to me so constant, much as you felt it; but would have been angry to me, at least once in my life, that I might have had some comfort! I have none, none, no comfort upon earth, for all of them were always fond of me!' She dropped on her face, before the imperious figure in the chair, with an imploring effort to clasp the skirt of her dress.

Rosa Dartle sat looking down upon her, as inflexible as a figure of brass. Her lips were tightly compressed, as if she knew that she must keep a strong constraint upon herself - I write what I sincerely believe - or she would be tempted to strike the beautiful form with her foot. I saw her, distinctly, and the whole power of her face and character seemed forced into that expression. - Would he never come?

'The miserable vanity of these earth-worms!' she said, when she had so far controlled the angry heavings of her breast, that she could trust herself to speak. 'YOUR home! Do you imagine that I bestow a thought on it, or suppose you could do any harm to that low place, which money would not pay for, and handsomely? YOUR home! You were a part of the trade of your home, and were bought and sold like any other vendible thing your people dealt in.'

'Oh, not that!' cried Emily. 'Say anything of me; but don't visit my disgrace and shame, more than I have done, on folks who are as honourable as you! Have some respect for them, as you are a lady, if you have no mercy for me.'

'I speak,' she said, not deigning to take any heed of this appeal, and drawing away her dress from the contamination of Emily's touch, 'I

speak of HIS home - where I live. Here,' she said, stretching out her hand with her contemptuous laugh, and looking down upon the prostrate girl, 'is a worthy cause of division between lady-mother and gentleman-son; of grief in a house where she wouldn't have been admitted as a kitchen-girl; of anger, and repining, and reproach. This piece of pollution, picked up from the water-side, to be made much of for an hour, and then tossed back to her original place!'

'No! no!' cried Emily, clasping her hands together. 'When he first came into my way - that the day had never dawned upon me, and he had met me being carried to my grave! - I had been brought up as virtuous as you or any lady, and was going to be the wife of as good a man as you or any lady in the world can ever marry. If you live in his home and know him, you know, perhaps, what his power with a weak, vain girl might be. I don't defend myself, but I know well, and he knows well, or he will know when he comes to die, and his mind is troubled with it, that he used all his power to deceive me, and that I believed him, trusted him, and loved him!'

Rosa Dartle sprang up from her seat; recoiled; and in recoiling struck at her, with a face of such malignity, so darkened and disfigured by passion, that I had almost thrown myself between them. The blow, which had no aim, fell upon the air. As she now stood panting, looking at her with the utmost detestation that she was capable of expressing, and trembling from head to foot with rage and scorn, I thought I had never seen such a sight, and never could see such another.

'YOU love him? You?' she cried, with her clenched hand, quivering as if it only wanted a weapon to stab the object of her wrath.

Emily had shrunk out of my view. There was no reply.

'And tell that to ME,' she added, 'with your shameful lips? Why don't they whip these creatures? If I could order it to be done, I would have this girl whipped to death.'

And so she would, I have no doubt. I would not have trusted her with the rack itself, while that furious look lasted. She slowly, very slowly, broke into a laugh, and pointed at Emily with her hand, as if she were a sight of shame for gods and men.

'SHE love!' she said. 'THAT carrion! And he ever cared for her, she'd tell me. Ha, ha! The liars that these traders are!'

Her mockery was worse than her undisguised rage. Of the two, I would have much preferred to be the object of the latter. But, when she suffered it to break loose, it was only for a moment. She had

chained it up again, and however it might tear her within, she subdued it to herself.

'I came here, you pure fountain of love,' she said, 'to see - as I began by telling you - what such a thing as you was like. I was curious. I am satisfied. Also to tell you, that you had best seek that home of yours, with all speed, and hide your head among those excellent people who are expecting you, and whom your money will console. When it's all gone, you can believe, and trust, and love again, you know! I thought you a broken toy that had lasted its time; a worthless spangle that was tarnished, and thrown away. But, finding you true gold, a very lady, and an ill-used innocent, with a fresh heart full of love and trustfulness - which you look like, and is quite consistent with your story! - I have something more to say. Attend to it; for what I say I'll do. Do you hear me, you fairy spirit? What I say, I mean to do!'

Her rage got the better of her again, for a moment; but it passed over her face like a spasm, and left her smiling.

'Hide yourself,' she pursued, 'if not at home, somewhere. Let it be somewhere beyond reach; in some obscure life - or, better still, in some obscure death. I wonder, if your loving heart will not break, you have found no way of helping it to be still! I have heard of such means sometimes. I believe they may be easily found.'

A low crying, on the part of Emily, interrupted her here. She stopped, and listened to it as if it were music.

'I am of a strange nature, perhaps,' Rosa Dartle went on; 'but I can't breathe freely in the air you breathe. I find it sickly. Therefore, I will have it cleared; I will have it purified of you. If you live here tomorrow, I'll have your story and your character proclaimed on the common stair. There are decent women in the house, I am told; and it is a pity such a light as you should be among them, and concealed. If, leaving here, you seek any refuge in this town in any character but your true one (which you are welcome to bear, without molestation from me), the same service shall be done you, if I hear of your retreat. Being assisted by a gentleman who not long ago aspired to the favour of your hand, I am sanguine as to that.'

Would he never, never come? How long was I to bear this? How long could I bear it? 'Oh me, oh me!' exclaimed the wretched Emily, in a tone that might have touched the hardest heart, I should have thought; but there was no relenting in Rosa Dartle's smile. 'What, what, shall I do!'

'Do?' returned the other. 'Live happy in your own reflections! Consecrate your existence to the recollection of James Steerforth's

tenderness - he would have made you his serving-man's wife, would he not? - or to feeling grateful to the upright and deserving creature who would have taken you as his gift. Or, if those proud remembrances, and the consciousness of your own virtues, and the honourable position to which they have raised you in the eyes of everything that wears the human shape, will not sustain you, marry that good man, and be happy in his condescension. If this will not do either, die! There are doorways and dust-heaps for such deaths, and such despair - find one, and take your flight to Heaven!

I heard a distant foot upon the stairs. I knew it, I was certain. It was his, thank God!

She moved slowly from before the door when she said this, and passed out of my sight.

'But mark!' she added, slowly and sternly, opening the other door to go away, 'I am resolved, for reasons that I have and hatreds that I entertain, to cast you out, unless you withdraw from my reach altogether, or drop your pretty mask. This is what I had to say; and what I say, I mean to do!'

The foot upon the stairs came nearer - nearer - passed her as she went down - rushed into the room!

'Uncle!'

A fearful cry followed the word. I paused a moment, and looking in, saw him supporting her insensible figure in his arms. He gazed for a few seconds in the face; then stooped to kiss it - oh, how tenderly! - and drew a handkerchief before it.

'Mas'r Davy,' he said, in a low tremulous voice, when it was covered, 'I thank my Heav'nly Father as my dream's come true! I thank Him hearty for having guided of me, in His own ways, to my darling!'

With those words he took her up in his arms; and, with the veiled face lying on his bosom, and addressed towards his own, carried her, motionless and unconscious, down the stairs.