

Chapter IV - In Which Some More First Appearances Are Made On The Stage Of These Adventures

Though the offices of Dombey and Son were within the liberties of the City of London, and within hearing of Bow Bells, when their clashing voices were not drowned by the uproar in the streets, yet were there hints of adventurous and romantic story to be observed in some of the adjacent objects. Gog and Magog held their state within ten minutes' walk; the Royal Exchange was close at hand; the Bank of England, with its vaults of gold and silver 'down among the dead men' underground, was their magnificent neighbour. Just round the corner stood the rich East India House, teeming with suggestions of precious stuffs and stones, tigers, elephants, howdahs, hookahs, umbrellas, palm trees, palanquins, and gorgeous princes of a brown complexion sitting on carpets, with their slippers very much turned up at the toes. Anywhere in the immediate vicinity there might be seen pictures of ships speeding away full sail to all parts of the world; outfitting warehouses ready to pack off anybody anywhere, fully equipped in half an hour; and little timber midshipmen in obsolete naval uniforms, eternally employed outside the shop doors of nautical Instrument-makers in taking observations of the hackney carriages.

Sole master and proprietor of one of these effigies - of that which might be called, familiarly, the woodenest - of that which thrust itself out above the pavement, right leg foremost, with a suavity the least endurable, and had the shoe buckles and flapped waistcoat the least reconcilable to human reason, and bore at its right eye the most offensively disproportionate piece of machinery - sole master and proprietor of that Midshipman, and proud of him too, an elderly gentleman in a Welsh wig had paid house-rent, taxes, rates, and dues, for more years than many a full-grown midshipman of flesh and blood has numbered in his life; and midshipmen who have attained a pretty green old age, have not been wanting in the English Navy.

The stock-in-trade of this old gentleman comprised chronometers, barometers, telescopes, compasses, charts, maps, sextants, quadrants, and specimens of every kind of instrument used in the working of a ship's course, or the keeping of a ship's reckoning, or the prosecuting of a ship's discoveries. Objects in brass and glass were in his drawers and on his shelves, which none but the initiated could have found the top of, or guessed the use of, or having once examined, could have ever got back again into their mahogany nests without assistance. Everything was jammed into the tightest cases, fitted into the narrowest corners, fenced up behind the most impertinent cushions, and screwed into the acutest angles, to prevent its philosophical composure from being disturbed by the rolling of the sea. Such extraordinary precautions were taken in every instance to save room, and keep the thing compact; and so much practical

navigation was fitted, and cushioned, and screwed into every box (whether the box was a mere slab, as some were, or something between a cocked hat and a star-fish, as others were, and those quite mild and modest boxes as compared with others); that the shop itself, partaking of the general infection, seemed almost to become a snug, sea-going, ship-shape concern, wanting only good sea-room, in the event of an unexpected launch, to work its way securely to any desert island in the world.

Many minor incidents in the household life of the Ships'

Instrument-maker who was proud of his little Midshipman, assisted and bore out this fancy. His acquaintance lying chiefly among ship-chandlers and so forth, he had always plenty of the veritable ships' biscuit on his table. It was familiar with dried meats and tongues, possessing an extraordinary flavour of rope yarn. Pickles were produced upon it, in great wholesale jars, with 'dealer in all kinds of Ships' Provisions' on the label; spirits were set forth in case bottles with no throats. Old prints of ships with alphabetical references to their various mysteries, hung in frames upon the walls; the Tartar Frigate under weigh, was on the plates; outlandish shells, seaweeds, and mosses, decorated the chimney-piece; the little wainscotted back parlour was lighted by a sky-light, like a cabin.

Here he lived too, in skipper-like state, all alone with his nephew Walter: a boy of fourteen who looked quite enough like a midshipman, to carry out the prevailing idea. But there it ended, for Solomon Gills himself (more generally called old Sol) was far from having a maritime appearance. To say nothing of his Welsh wig, which was as plain and stubborn a Welsh wig as ever was worn, and in which he looked like anything but a Rover, he was a slow, quiet-spoken, thoughtful old fellow, with eyes as red as if they had been small suns looking at you through a fog; and a newly-awakened manner, such as he might have acquired by having stared for three or four days successively through every optical instrument in his shop, and suddenly came back to the world again, to find it green. The only change ever known in his outward man, was from a complete suit of coffee-colour cut very square, and ornamented with glaring buttons, to the same suit of coffee-colour minus the inexpressibles, which were then of a pale nankeen. He wore a very precise shirt-frill, and carried a pair of first-rate spectacles on his forehead, and a tremendous chronometer in his fob, rather than doubt which precious possession, he would have believed in a conspiracy against it on part of all the clocks and watches in the City, and even of the very Sun itself. Such as he was, such he had been in the shop and parlour behind the little Midshipman, for years upon years; going regularly aloft to bed every night in a howling garret remote from the lodgers, where, when

gentlemen of England who lived below at ease had little or no idea of the state of the weather, it often blew great guns.

It is half-past five o'clock, and an autumn afternoon, when the reader and Solomon Gills become acquainted. Solomon Gills is in the act of seeing what time it is by the unimpeachable chronometer. The usual daily clearance has been making in the City for an hour or more; and the human tide is still rolling westward. 'The streets have thinned,' as Mr Gills says, 'very much.' It threatens to be wet to-night. All the weatherglasses in the shop are in low spirits, and the rain already shines upon the cocked hat of the wooden Midshipman.

'Where's Walter, I wonder!' said Solomon Gills, after he had carefully put up the chronometer again. 'Here's dinner been ready, half an hour, and no Walter!'

Turning round upon his stool behind the counter, Mr Gills looked out among the instruments in the window, to see if his nephew might be crossing the road. No. He was not among the bobbing umbrellas, and he certainly was not the newspaper boy in the oilskin cap who was slowly working his way along the piece of brass outside, writing his name over Mr Gills's name with his forefinger.

'If I didn't know he was too fond of me to make a run of it, and go and enter himself aboard ship against my wishes, I should begin to be fidgetty,' said Mr Gills, tapping two or three weather-glasses with his knuckles. 'I really should. All in the Downs, eh! Lots of moisture! Well! it's wanted.'

'I believe,' said Mr Gills, blowing the dust off the glass top of a compass-case, 'that you don't point more direct and due to the back parlour than the boy's inclination does after all. And the parlour couldn't bear straighter either. Due north. Not the twentieth part of a point either way.'

'Halloa, Uncle Sol!'

'Halloa, my boy!' cried the Instrument-maker, turning briskly round. 'What! you are here, are you?'

A cheerful looking, merry boy, fresh with running home in the rain; fair-faced, bright-eyed, and curly-haired.

'Well, Uncle, how have you got on without me all day? Is dinner ready? I'm so hungry.'

'As to getting on,' said Solomon good-naturedly, 'it would be odd if I couldn't get on without a young dog like you a great deal better than

with you. As to dinner being ready, it's been ready this half hour and waiting for you. As to being hungry, I am!

'Come along then, Uncle!' cried the boy. 'Hurrah for the admiral!'

'Confound the admiral!' returned Solomon Gills. 'You mean the Lord Mayor.'

'No I don't!' cried the boy. 'Hurrah for the admiral! Hurrah for the admiral! For-ward!'

At this word of command, the Welsh wig and its wearer were borne without resistance into the back parlour, as at the head of a boarding party of five hundred men; and Uncle Sol and his nephew were speedily engaged on a fried sole with a prospect of steak to follow.

'The Lord Mayor, Wally,' said Solomon, 'for ever! No more admirals. The Lord Mayor's your admiral.'

'Oh, is he though!' said the boy, shaking his head. 'Why, the Sword Bearer's better than him. He draws his sword sometimes.'

'And a pretty figure he cuts with it for his pains,' returned the Uncle. 'Listen to me, Wally, listen to me. Look on the mantelshelf.'

'Why who has cocked my silver mug up there, on a nail?' exclaimed the boy.

I have,' said his Uncle. 'No more mugs now. We must begin to drink out of glasses to-day, Walter. We are men of business. We belong to the City. We started in life this morning.'

'Well, Uncle,' said the boy, 'I'll drink out of anything you like, so long as I can drink to you. Here's to you, Uncle Sol, and Hurrah for the

'Lord Mayor,' interrupted the old man.

'For the Lord Mayor, Sheriffs, Common Council, and Livery,' said the boy. 'Long life to 'em!'

The uncle nodded his head with great satisfaction. 'And now,' he said, 'let's hear something about the Firm.'

'Oh! there's not much to be told about the Firm, Uncle,' said the boy, plying his knife and fork. 'It's a precious dark set of offices, and in the room where I sit, there's a high fender, and an iron safe, and some cards about ships that are going to sail, and an almanack, and some desks and stools, and an inkbottle, and some books, and some boxes,

and a lot of cobwebs, and in one of 'em, just over my head, a shrivelled-up blue-bottle that looks as if it had hung there ever so long.'

'Nothing else?' said the Uncle.

'No, nothing else, except an old birdcage (I wonder how that ever came there!) and a coal-scuttle.'

'No bankers' books, or cheque books, or bills, or such tokens of wealth rolling in from day to day?' said old Sol, looking wistfully at his nephew out of the fog that always seemed to hang about him, and laying an unctuous emphasis upon the words.

'Oh yes, plenty of that I suppose,' returned his nephew carelessly; 'but all that sort of thing's in Mr Carker's room, or Mr Morfin's, or MR Dombey's.'

'Has Mr Dombey been there to-day?' inquired the Uncle.

'Oh yes! In and out all day.'

'He didn't take any notice of you, I suppose?'

'Yes he did. He walked up to my seat, - I wish he wasn't so solemn and stiff, Uncle, - and said, 'Oh! you are the son of Mr Gills the Ships' Instrument-maker.' 'Nephew, Sir,' I said. 'I said nephew, boy,' said he. But I could take my oath he said son, Uncle.'

'You're mistaken I daresay. It's no matter.

'No, it's no matter, but he needn't have been so sharp, I thought. There was no harm in it though he did say son. Then he told me that you had spoken to him about me, and that he had found me employment in the House accordingly, and that I was expected to be attentive and punctual, and then he went away. I thought he didn't seem to like me much.'

'You mean, I suppose,' observed the Instrument-maker, 'that you didn't seem to like him much?'

'Well, Uncle,' returned the boy, laughing. 'Perhaps so; I never thought of that.'

Solomon looked a little graver as he finished his dinner, and glanced from time to time at the boy's bright face. When dinner was done, and the cloth was cleared away (the entertainment had been brought from a neighbouring eating-house), he lighted a candle, and went down

below into a little cellar, while his nephew, standing on the mouldy staircase, dutifully held the light. After a moment's groping here and there, he presently returned with a very ancient-looking bottle, covered with dust and dirt.

'Why, Uncle Sol!' said the boy, 'what are you about? that's the wonderful Madeira! - there's only one more bottle!'

Uncle Sol nodded his head, implying that he knew very well what he was about; and having drawn the cork in solemn silence, filled two glasses and set the bottle and a third clean glass on the table.

'You shall drink the other bottle, Wally,' he said, 'when you come to good fortune; when you are a thriving, respected, happy man; when the start in life you have made to-day shall have brought you, as I pray Heaven it may! - to a smooth part of the course you have to run, my child. My love to you!'

Some of the fog that hung about old Sol seemed to have got into his throat; for he spoke huskily. His hand shook too, as he clinked his glass against his nephew's. But having once got the wine to his lips, he tossed it off like a man, and smacked them afterwards.

'Dear Uncle,' said the boy, affecting to make light of it, while the tears stood in his eyes, 'for the honour you have done me, et cetera, et cetera. I shall now beg to propose Mr Solomon Gills with three times three and one cheer more. Hurrah! and you'll return thanks, Uncle, when we drink the last bottle together; won't you?'

They clinked their glasses again; and Walter, who was hoarding his wine, took a sip of it, and held the glass up to his eye with as critical an air as he could possibly assume.

His Uncle sat looking at him for some time in silence. When their eyes at last met, he began at once to pursue the theme that had occupied his thoughts, aloud, as if he had been speaking all the time.

'You see, Walter,' he said, 'in truth this business is merely a habit with me. I am so accustomed to the habit that I could hardly live if I relinquished it: but there's nothing doing, nothing doing. When that uniform was worn,' pointing out towards the little Midshipman, 'then indeed, fortunes were to be made, and were made. But competition, competition - new invention, new invention - alteration, alteration - the world's gone past me. I hardly know where I am myself, much less where my customers are.'

'Never mind 'em, Uncle!'

'Since you came home from weekly boarding-school at Peckham, for instance - and that's ten days,' said Solomon, 'I don't remember more than one person that has come into the shop.'

'Two, Uncle, don't you recollect? There was the man who came to ask for change for a sovereign - '

'That's the one,' said Solomon.

'Why Uncle! don't you call the woman anybody, who came to ask the way to Mile-End Turnpike?'

'Oh! it's true,' said Solomon, 'I forgot her. Two persons.'

'To be sure, they didn't buy anything,' cried the boy.

'No. They didn't buy anything,' said Solomon, quietly.

'Nor want anything,' cried the boy.

'No. If they had, they'd gone to another shop,' said Solomon, in the same tone.

'But there were two of 'em, Uncle,' cried the boy, as if that were a great triumph. 'You said only one.'

'Well, Wally,' resumed the old man, after a short pause: 'not being like the Savages who came on Robinson Crusoe's Island, we can't live on a man who asks for change for a sovereign, and a woman who inquires the way to Mile-End Turnpike. As I said just now, the world has gone past me. I don't blame it; but I no longer understand it. Tradesmen are not the same as they used to be, apprentices are not the same, business is not the same, business commodities are not the same. Seven-eighths of my stock is old-fashioned. I am an old-fashioned man in an old-fashioned shop, in a street that is not the same as I remember it. I have fallen behind the time, and am too old to catch it again. Even the noise it makes a long way ahead, confuses me.'

Walter was going to speak, but his Uncle held up his hand.

'Therefore, Wally - therefore it is that I am anxious you should be early in the busy world, and on the world's track. I am only the ghost of this business - its substance vanished long ago; and when I die, its ghost will be laid. As it is clearly no inheritance for you then, I have thought it best to use for your advantage, almost the only fragment of the old connexion that stands by me, through long habit. Some people suppose me to be wealthy. I wish for your sake they were right. But whatever I leave behind me, or whatever I can give you, you in such a

House as Dombey's are in the road to use well and make the most of. Be diligent, try to like it, my dear boy, work for a steady independence, and be happy!

'I'll do everything I can, Uncle, to deserve your affection. Indeed I will,' said the boy, earnestly

'I know it,' said Solomon. 'I am sure of it,' and he applied himself to a second glass of the old Madeira, with increased relish. 'As to the Sea,' he pursued, 'that's well enough in fiction, Wally, but it won't do in fact: it won't do at all. It's natural enough that you should think about it, associating it with all these familiar things; but it won't do, it won't do.'

Solomon Gills rubbed his hands with an air of stealthy enjoyment, as he talked of the sea, though; and looked on the seafaring objects about him with inexpressible complacency.

'Think of this wine for instance,' said old Sol, 'which has been to the East Indies and back, I'm not able to say how often, and has been once round the world. Think of the pitch-dark nights, the roaring winds, and rolling seas:'

'The thunder, lightning, rain, hail, storm of all kinds,' said the boy.

'To be sure,' said Solomon, - 'that this wine has passed through. Think what a straining and creaking of timbers and masts: what a whistling and howling of the gale through ropes and rigging:'

'What a clambering aloft of men, vying with each other who shall lie out first upon the yards to furl the icy sails, while the ship rolls and pitches, like mad!' cried his nephew.

'Exactly so,' said Solomon: 'has gone on, over the old cask that held this wine. Why, when the Charming Sally went down in the - '

'In the Baltic Sea, in the dead of night; five-and-twenty minutes past twelve when the captain's watch stopped in his pocket; he lying dead against the main-mast - on the fourteenth of February, seventeen forty-nine!' cried Walter, with great animation.

'Ay, to be sure!' cried old Sol, 'quite right! Then, there were five hundred casks of such wine aboard; and all hands (except the first mate, first lieutenant, two seamen, and a lady, in a leaky boat) going to work to stave the casks, got drunk and died drunk, singing 'Rule Britannia', when she settled and went down, and ending with one awful scream in chorus.'

'But when the George the Second drove ashore, Uncle, on the coast of Cornwall, in a dismal gale, two hours before daybreak, on the fourth of March, 'seventy-one, she had near two hundred horses aboard; and the horses breaking loose down below, early in the gale, and tearing to and fro, and trampling each other to death, made such noises, and set up such human cries, that the crew believing the ship to be full of devils, some of the best men, losing heart and head, went overboard in despair, and only two were left alive, at last, to tell the tale.'

'And when,' said old Sol, 'when the Polyphemus - '

'Private West India Trader, burden three hundred and fifty tons, Captain, John Brown of Deptford. Owners, Wiggs and Co.,' cried Walter.

'The same,' said Sol; 'when she took fire, four days' sail with a fair wind out of Jamaica Harbour, in the night - '

'There were two brothers on board,' interposed his nephew, speaking very fast and loud, 'and there not being room for both of them in the only boat that wasn't swamped, neither of them would consent to go, until the elder took the younger by the waist, and flung him in. And then the younger, rising in the boat, cried out, 'Dear Edward, think of your promised wife at home. I'm only a boy. No one waits at home for me. Leap down into my place!' and flung himself in the sea!'

The kindling eye and heightened colour of the boy, who had risen from his seat in the earnestness of what he said and felt, seemed to remind old Sol of something he had forgotten, or that his encircling mist had hitherto shut out. Instead of proceeding with any more anecdotes, as he had evidently intended but a moment before, he gave a short dry cough, and said, 'Well! suppose we change the subject.'

The truth was, that the simple-minded Uncle in his secret attraction towards the marvellous and adventurous - of which he was, in some sort, a distant relation, by his trade - had greatly encouraged the same attraction in the nephew; and that everything that had ever been put before the boy to deter him from a life of adventure, had had the usual unaccountable effect of sharpening his taste for it. This is invariable. It would seem as if there never was a book written, or a story told, expressly with the object of keeping boys on shore, which did not lure and charm them to the ocean, as a matter of course.

But an addition to the little party now made its appearance, in the shape of a gentleman in a wide suit of blue, with a hook instead of a hand attached to his right wrist; very bushy black eyebrows; and a thick stick in his left hand, covered all over (like his nose) with knobs. He wore a loose black silk handkerchief round his neck, and such a

very large coarse shirt collar, that it looked like a small sail. He was evidently the person for whom the spare wine-glass was intended, and evidently knew it; for having taken off his rough outer coat, and hung up, on a particular peg behind the door, such a hard glazed hat as a sympathetic person's head might ache at the sight of, and which left a red rim round his own forehead as if he had been wearing a tight basin, he brought a chair to where the clean glass was, and sat himself down behind it. He was usually addressed as Captain, this visitor; and had been a pilot, or a skipper, or a privateersman, or all three perhaps; and was a very salt-looking man indeed.

His face, remarkable for a brown solidity, brightened as he shook hands with Uncle and nephew; but he seemed to be of a laconic disposition, and merely said:

'How goes it?'

'All well,' said Mr Gills, pushing the bottle towards him.

He took it up, and having surveyed and smelt it, said with extraordinary expression:

'The?'

'The,' returned the Instrument-maker.

Upon that he whistled as he filled his glass, and seemed to think they were making holiday indeed.

'Wal'r!' he said, arranging his hair (which was thin) with his hook, and then pointing it at the Instrument-maker, 'Look at him! Love! Honour! And Obey! Overhaul your catechism till you find that passage, and when found turn the leaf down. Success, my boy!'

He was so perfectly satisfied both with his quotation and his reference to it, that he could not help repeating the words again in a low voice, and saying he had forgotten 'em these forty year.

'But I never wanted two or three words in my life that I didn't know where to lay my hand upon 'em, Gills,' he observed. 'It comes of not wasting language as some do.'

The reflection perhaps reminded him that he had better, like young Norval's father, 'ncrease his store.' At any rate he became silent, and remained so, until old Sol went out into the shop to light it up, when he turned to Walter, and said, without any introductory remark:

'I suppose he could make a clock if he tried?'

'I shouldn't wonder, Captain Cuttle,' returned the boy.

'And it would go!' said Captain Cuttle, making a species of serpent in the air with his hook. 'Lord, how that clock would go!'

For a moment or two he seemed quite lost in contemplating the pace of this ideal timepiece, and sat looking at the boy as if his face were the dial.

'But he's chockful of science,' he observed, waving his hook towards the stock-in-trade. 'Look'ye here! Here's a collection of 'em. Earth, air, or water. It's all one. Only say where you'll have it. Up in a balloon? There you are. Down in a bell? There you are. D'ye want to put the North Star in a pair of scales and weigh it? He'll do it for you.'

It may be gathered from these remarks that Captain Cuttle's reverence for the stock of instruments was profound, and that his philosophy knew little or no distinction between trading in it and inventing it.

'Ah!' he said, with a sigh, 'it's a fine thing to understand 'em. And yet it's a fine thing not to understand 'em. I hardly know which is best. It's so comfortable to sit here and feel that you might be weighed, measured, magnified, electrified, polarized, played the very devil with: and never know how.'

Nothing short of the wonderful Madeira, combined with the occasion (which rendered it desirable to improve and expand Walter's mind), could have ever loosened his tongue to the extent of giving utterance to this prodigious oration. He seemed quite amazed himself at the manner in which it opened up to view the sources of the taciturn delight he had had in eating Sunday dinners in that parlour for ten years. Becoming a sadder and a wiser man, he mused and held his peace.

'Come!' cried the subject of this admiration, returning. 'Before you have your glass of grog, Ned, we must finish the bottle.'

'Stand by!' said Ned, filling his glass. 'Give the boy some more.'

'No more, thank'e, Uncle!'

'Yes, yes,' said Sol, 'a little more. We'll finish the bottle, to the House, Ned - Walter's House. Why it may be his House one of these days, in part. Who knows? Sir Richard Whittington married his master's daughter.'

'Turn again Whittington, Lord Mayor of London, and when you are old you will never depart from it," interposed the Captain. 'Wal'r! Overhaul the book, my lad.'

'And although Mr Dombey hasn't a daughter,' Sol began.

'Yes, yes, he has, Uncle,' said the boy, reddening and laughing.

'Has he?' cried the old man. 'Indeed I think he has too.'

'Oh! I know he has,' said the boy. 'Some of 'em were talking about it in the office today. And they do say, Uncle and Captain Cuttle,' lowering his voice, 'that he's taken a dislike to her, and that she's left, unnoticed, among the servants, and that his mind's so set all the while upon having his son in the House, that although he's only a baby now, he is going to have balances struck oftener than formerly, and the books kept closer than they used to be, and has even been seen (when he thought he wasn't) walking in the Docks, looking at his ships and property and all that, as if he was exulting like, over what he and his son will possess together. That's what they say. Of course, I don't know.'

'He knows all about her already, you see,' said the instrument-maker.

'Nonsense, Uncle,' cried the boy, still reddening and laughing, boy-like. 'How can I help hearing what they tell me?'

'The Son's a little in our way at present, I'm afraid, Ned,' said the old man, humouring the joke.

'Very much,' said the Captain.

'Nevertheless, we'll drink him,' pursued Sol. 'So, here's to Dombey and Son.'

'Oh, very well, Uncle,' said the boy, merrily. 'Since you have introduced the mention of her, and have connected me with her and have said that I know all about her, I shall make bold to amend the toast. So here's to Dombey - and Son - and Daughter!'