

Chapter VII - A Bird's-Eye Glimpse Of Miss Tox's Dwelling-Place: Also Of The State Of Miss Tox's Affections

Miss Tox inhabited a dark little house that had been squeezed, at some remote period of English History, into a fashionable neighbourhood at the west end of the town, where it stood in the shade like a poor relation of the great street round the corner, coldly looked down upon by mighty mansions. It was not exactly in a court, and it was not exactly in a yard; but it was in the dullest of No-Thoroughfares, rendered anxious and haggard by distant double knocks. The name of this retirement, where grass grew between the chinks in the stone pavement, was Princess's Place; and in Princess's Place was Princess's Chapel, with a tinkling bell, where sometimes as many as five-and-twenty people attended service on a Sunday. The Princess's Arms was also there, and much resorted to by splendid footmen. A sedan chair was kept inside the railing before the Princess's Arms, but it had never come out within the memory of man; and on fine mornings, the top of every rail (there were eight-and-forty, as Miss Tox had often counted) was decorated with a pewter-pot.

There was another private house besides Miss Tox's in Princess's Place: not to mention an immense Pair of gates, with an immense pair of lion-headed knockers on them, which were never opened by any chance, and were supposed to constitute a disused entrance to somebody's stables. Indeed, there was a smack of stabling in the air of Princess's Place; and Miss Tox's bedroom (which was at the back) commanded a vista of Mews, where hostlers, at whatever sort of work engaged, were continually accompanying themselves with effervescent noises; and where the most domestic and confidential garments of coachmen and their wives and families, usually hung, like Macbeth's banners, on the outward walls.'

At this other private house in Princess's Place, tenanted by a retired butler who had married a housekeeper, apartments were let Furnished, to a single gentleman: to wit, a wooden-featured, blue-faced Major, with his eyes starting out of his head, in whom Miss Tox recognised, as she herself expressed it, 'something so truly military;' and between whom and herself, an occasional interchange of newspapers and pamphlets, and such Platonic dalliance, was effected through the medium of a dark servant of the Major's who Miss Tox was quite content to classify as a 'native,' without connecting him with any geographical idea whatever.

Perhaps there never was a smaller entry and staircase, than the entry and staircase of Miss Tox's house. Perhaps, taken altogether, from top to bottom, it was the most inconvenient little house in England, and the crookedest; but then, Miss Tox said, what a situation! There was very little daylight to be got there in the winter: no sun at the best of

times: air was out of the question, and traffic was walled out. Still Miss Tox said, think of the situation! So said the blue-faced Major, whose eyes were starting out of his head: who gloried in Princess's Place: and who delighted to turn the conversation at his club, whenever he could, to something connected with some of the great people in the great street round the corner, that he might have the satisfaction of saying they were his neighbours.

In short, with Miss Tox and the blue-faced Major, it was enough for Princess's Place - as with a very small fragment of society, it is enough for many a little hanger-on of another sort - to be well connected, and to have genteel blood in its veins. It might be poor, mean, shabby, stupid, dull. No matter. The great street round the corner trailed off into Princess's Place; and that which of High Holborn would have become a choleric word, spoken of Princess's Place became flat blasphemy.

The dingy tenement inhabited by Miss Tox was her own; having been devised and bequeathed to her by the deceased owner of the fishy eye in the locket, of whom a miniature portrait, with a powdered head and a pigtail, balanced the kettle-holder on opposite sides of the parlour fireplace. The greater part of the furniture was of the powdered-head and pig-tail period: comprising a plate-warmer, always languishing and sprawling its four attenuated bow legs in somebody's way; and an obsolete harpsichord, illuminated round the maker's name with a painted garland of sweet peas. In any part of the house, visitors were usually cognizant of a prevailing mustiness; and in warm weather Miss Tox had been seen apparently writing in sundry chinks and crevices of the wainscoat with the the wrong end of a pen dipped in spirits of turpentine.

Although Major Bagstock had arrived at what is called in polite literature, the grand meridian of life, and was proceeding on his journey downhill with hardly any throat, and a very rigid pair of jaw-bones, and long-flapped elephantine ears, and his eyes and complexion in the state of artificial excitement already mentioned, he was mightily proud of awakening an interest in Miss Tox, and tickled his vanity with the fiction that she was a splendid woman who had her eye on him. This he had several times hinted at the club: in connexion with little jocularities, of which old Joe Bagstock, old Joey Bagstock, old J. Bagstock, old Josh Bagstock, or so forth, was the perpetual theme: it being, as it were, the Major's stronghold and donjon-keep of light humour, to be on the most familiar terms with his own name.

'Joey B., Sir,' the Major would say, with a flourish of his walking-stick, 'is worth a dozen of you. If you had a few more of the Bagstock breed among you, Sir, you'd be none the worse for it. Old Joe, Sir, needn't

look far for a wile even now, if he was on the look-out; but he's hard-hearted, Sir, is Joe - he's tough, Sir, tough, and de-vilish sly!' After such a declaration, wheezing sounds would be heard; and the Major's blue would deepen into purple, while his eyes strained and started convulsively.

Notwithstanding his very liberal laudation of himself, however, the Major was selfish. It may be doubted whether there ever was a more entirely selfish person at heart; or at stomach is perhaps a better expression, seeing that he was more decidedly endowed with that latter organ than with the former. He had no idea of being overlooked or slighted by anybody; least of all, had he the remotest comprehension of being overlooked and slighted by Miss Tox.

And yet, Miss Tox, as it appeared, forgot him - gradually forgot him. She began to forget him soon after her discovery of the Toodle family. She continued to forget him up to the time of the christening. She went on forgetting him with compound interest after that. Something or somebody had superseded him as a source of interest.

'Good morning, Ma'am,' said the Major, meeting Miss Tox in Princess's Place, some weeks after the changes chronicled in the last chapter.

'Good morning, Sir,' said Miss Tox; very coldly.

'Joe Bagstock, Ma'am,' observed the Major, with his usual gallantry, 'has not had the happiness of bowing to you at your window, for a considerable period. Joe has been hardly used, Ma'am. His sun has been behind a cloud.'

Miss Tox inclined her head; but very coldly indeed.

'Joe's luminary has been out of town, Ma'am, perhaps,' inquired the Major.

'I? out of town? oh no, I have not been out of town,' said Miss Tox. 'I have been much engaged lately. My time is nearly all devoted to some very intimate friends. I am afraid I have none to spare, even now. Good morning, Sir!'

As Miss Tox, with her most fascinating step and carriage, disappeared from Princess's Place, the Major stood looking after her with a bluer face than ever: muttering and growling some not at all complimentary remarks.

'Why, damme, Sir,' said the Major, rolling his lobster eyes round and round Princess's Place, and apostrophizing its fragrant air, 'six

months ago, the woman loved the ground Josh Bagstock walked on. What's the meaning of it?'

The Major decided, after some consideration, that it meant mantraps; that it meant plotting and snaring; that Miss Tox was digging pitfalls. 'But you won't catch Joe, Ma'am,' said the Major. 'He's tough, Ma'am, tough, is J.B. Tough, and de-vilish sly!' over which reflection he chuckled for the rest of the day.

But still, when that day and many other days were gone and past, it seemed that Miss Tox took no heed whatever of the Major, and thought nothing at all about him. She had been wont, once upon a time, to look out at one of her little dark windows by accident, and blushing return the Major's greeting; but now, she never gave the Major a chance, and cared nothing at all whether he looked over the way or not. Other changes had come to pass too. The Major, standing in the shade of his own apartment, could make out that an air of greater smartness had recently come over Miss Tox's house; that a new cage with gilded wires had been provided for the ancient little canary bird; that divers ornaments, cut out of coloured card-boards and paper, seemed to decorate the chimney-piece and tables; that a plant or two had suddenly sprung up in the windows; that Miss Tox occasionally practised on the harpsichord, whose garland of sweet peas was always displayed ostentatiously, crowned with the Copenhagen and Bird Waltzes in a Music Book of Miss Tox's own copying.

Over and above all this, Miss Tox had long been dressed with uncommon care and elegance in slight mourning. But this helped the Major out of his difficulty; and he determined within himself that she had come into a small legacy, and grown proud.

It was on the very next day after he had eased his mind by arriving at this decision, that the Major, sitting at his breakfast, saw an apparition so tremendous and wonderful in Miss Tox's little drawing-room, that he remained for some time rooted to his chair; then, rushing into the next room, returned with a double-barrelled opera-glass, through which he surveyed it intently for some minutes.

'It's a Baby, Sir,' said the Major, shutting up the glass again, 'for fifty thousand pounds!'

The Major couldn't forget it. He could do nothing but whistle, and stare to that extent, that his eyes, compared with what they now became, had been in former times quite cavernous and sunken. Day after day, two, three, four times a week, this Baby reappeared. The Major continued to stare and whistle. To all other intents and purposes he was alone in Princess's Place. Miss Tox had ceased to

mind what he did. He might have been black as well as blue, and it would have been of no consequence to her.

The perseverance with which she walked out of Princess's Place to fetch this baby and its nurse, and walked back with them, and walked home with them again, and continually mounted guard over them; and the perseverance with which she nursed it herself, and fed it, and played with it, and froze its young blood with airs upon the harpsichord, was extraordinary. At about this same period too, she was seized with a passion for looking at a certain bracelet; also with a passion for looking at the moon, of which she would take long observations from her chamber window. But whatever she looked at; sun, moon, stars, or bracelet; she looked no more at the Major. And the Major whistled, and stared, and wondered, and dodged about his room, and could make nothing of it.

'You'll quite win my brother Paul's heart, and that's the truth, my dear,' said Mrs Chick, one day.

Miss Tox turned pale.

'He grows more like Paul every day,' said Mrs Chick.

Miss Tox returned no other reply than by taking the little Paul in her arms, and making his cockade perfectly flat and limp with her caresses.

'His mother, my dear,' said Miss Tox, 'whose acquaintance I was to have made through you, does he at all resemble her?'

'Not at all,' returned Louisa

'She was - she was pretty, I believe?' faltered Miss Tox.

'Why, poor dear Fanny was interesting,' said Mrs Chick, after some judicial consideration. 'Certainly interesting. She had not that air of commanding superiority which one would somehow expect, almost as a matter of course, to find in my brother's wife; nor had she that strength and vigour of mind which such a man requires.'

Miss Tox heaved a deep sigh.

'But she was pleasing:' said Mrs Chick: 'extremely so. And she meant! - oh, dear, how well poor Fanny meant!'

'You Angel!' cried Miss Tox to little Paul. 'You Picture of your own Papa!'

If the Major could have known how many hopes and ventures, what a multitude of plans and speculations, rested on that baby head; and could have seen them hovering, in all their heterogeneous confusion and disorder, round the puckered cap of the unconscious little Paul; he might have stared indeed. Then would he have recognised, among the crowd, some few ambitious motes and beams belonging to Miss Tox; then would he perhaps have understood the nature of that lady's faltering investment in the Dombey Firm.

If the child himself could have awakened in the night, and seen, gathered about his cradle-curtains, faint reflections of the dreams that other people had of him, they might have scared him, with good reason. But he slumbered on, alike unconscious of the kind intentions of Miss Tox, the wonder of the Major, the early sorrows of his sister, and the stern visions of his father; and innocent that any spot of earth contained a Dombey or a Son.