

Chapter XIX - Walter goes away

The wooden Midshipman at the Instrument-maker's door, like the hard-hearted little Midshipman he was, remained supremely indifferent to Walter's going away, even when the very last day of his sojourn in the back parlour was on the decline. With his quadrant at his round black knob of an eye, and his figure in its old attitude of indomitable alacrity, the Midshipman displayed his elfin small-clothes to the best advantage, and, absorbed in scientific pursuits, had no sympathy with worldly concerns. He was so far the creature of circumstances, that a dry day covered him with dust, and a misty day peppered him with little bits of soot, and a wet day brightened up his tarnished uniform for the moment, and a very hot day blistered him; but otherwise he was a callous, obdurate, conceited Midshipman, intent on his own discoveries, and caring as little for what went on about him, terrestrially, as Archimedes at the taking of Syracuse.

Such a Midshipman he seemed to be, at least, in the then position of domestic affairs. Walter eyed him kindly many a time in passing in and out; and poor old Sol, when Walter was not there, would come and lean against the doorpost, resting his weary wig as near the shoe-buckles of the guardian genius of his trade and shop as he could. But no fierce idol with a mouth from ear to ear, and a murderous visage made of parrot's feathers, was ever more indifferent to the appeals of its savage votaries, than was the Midshipman to these marks of attachment.

Walter's heart felt heavy as he looked round his old bedroom, up among the parapets and chimney-pots, and thought that one more night already darkening would close his acquaintance with it, perhaps for ever. Dismantled of his little stock of books and pictures, it looked coldly and reproachfully on him for his desertion, and had already a foreshadowing upon it of its coming strangeness. 'A few hours more,' thought Walter, 'and no dream I ever had here when I was a schoolboy will be so little mine as this old room. The dream may come back in my sleep, and I may return waking to this place, it may be: but the dream at least will serve no other master, and the room may have a score, and every one of them may change, neglect, misuse it.'

But his Uncle was not to be left alone in the little back parlour, where he was then sitting by himself; for Captain Cuttle, considerate in his roughness, stayed away against his will, purposely that they should have some talk together unobserved: so Walter, newly returned home from his last day's bustle, descended briskly, to bear him company.

'Uncle,' he said gaily, laying his hand upon the old man's shoulder, 'what shall I send you home from Barbados?'

'Hope, my dear Wally. Hope that we shall meet again, on this side of the grave. Send me as much of that as you can.'

'So I will, Uncle: I have enough and to spare, and I'll not be chary of it! And as to lively turtles, and limes for Captain Cuttle's punch, and preserves for you on Sundays, and all that sort of thing, why I'll send you ship-loads, Uncle: when I'm rich enough.'

Old Sol wiped his spectacles, and faintly smiled.

'That's right, Uncle!' cried Walter, merrily, and clapping him half a dozen times more upon the shoulder. 'You cheer up me! I'll cheer up you! We'll be as gay as larks to-morrow morning, Uncle, and we'll fly as high! As to my anticipations, they are singing out of sight now.'

'Wally, my dear boy,' returned the old man, 'I'll do my best, I'll do my best.'

'And your best, Uncle,' said Walter, with his pleasant laugh, 'is the best best that I know. You'll not forget what you're to send me, Uncle?'

'No, Wally, no,' replied the old man; 'everything I hear about Miss Dombey, now that she is left alone, poor lamb, I'll write. I fear it won't be much though, Wally.'

'Why, I'll tell you what, Uncle,' said Walter, after a moment's hesitation, 'I have just been up there.'

'Ay, ay, ay?' murmured the old man, raising his eyebrows, and his spectacles with them.

'Not to see her,' said Walter, 'though I could have seen her, I daresay, if I had asked, Mr Dombey being out of town: but to say a parting word to Susan. I thought I might venture to do that, you know, under the circumstances, and remembering when I saw Miss Dombey last.'

'Yes, my boy, yes,' replied his Uncle, rousing himself from a temporary abstraction.

'So I saw her,' pursued Walter, 'Susan, I mean: and I told her I was off and away to-morrow. And I said, Uncle, that you had always had an interest in Miss Dombey since that night when she was here, and always wished her well and happy, and always would be proud and glad to serve her in the least: I thought I might say that, you know, under the circumstances. Don't you think so?'

'Yes, my boy, yes,' replied his Uncle, in the tone as before.

'And I added,' pursued Walter, 'that if she - Susan, I mean - could ever let you know, either through herself, or Mrs Richards, or anybody else who might be coming this way, that Miss Dombey was well and happy, you would take it very kindly, and would write so much to me, and I should take it very kindly too. There! Upon my word, Uncle,' said Walter, 'I scarcely slept all last night through thinking of doing this; and could not make up my mind when I was out, whether to do it or not; and yet I am sure it is the true feeling of my heart, and I should have been quite miserable afterwards if I had not relieved it.'

His honest voice and manner corroborated what he said, and quite established its ingenuousness.

'So, if you ever see her, Uncle,' said Walter, 'I mean Miss Dombey now - and perhaps you may, who knows! - tell her how much I felt for her; how much I used to think of her when I was here; how I spoke of her, with the tears in my eyes, Uncle, on this last night before I went away. Tell her that I said I never could forget her gentle manner, or her beautiful face, or her sweet kind disposition that was better than all. And as I didn't take them from a woman's feet, or a young lady's: only a little innocent child's,' said Walter: 'tell her, if you don't mind, Uncle, that I kept those shoes - she'll remember how often they fell off, that night - and took them away with me as a remembrance!'

They were at that very moment going out at the door in one of Walter's trunks. A porter carrying off his baggage on a truck for shipment at the docks on board the *Son and Heir*, had got possession of them; and wheeled them away under the very eye of the insensible Midshipman before their owner had well finished speaking.

But that ancient mariner might have been excused his insensibility to the treasure as it rolled away. For, under his eye at the same moment, accurately within his range of observation, coming full into the sphere of his startled and intensely wide-awake look-out, were Florence and Susan Nipper: Florence looking up into his face half timidly, and receiving the whole shock of his wooden ogling!

More than this, they passed into the shop, and passed in at the parlour door before they were observed by anybody but the Midshipman. And Walter, having his back to the door, would have known nothing of their apparition even then, but for seeing his Uncle spring out of his own chair, and nearly tumble over another.

'Why, Uncle!' exclaimed Walter. 'What's the matter?'

Old Solomon replied, 'Miss Dombey!'

'Is it possible?' cried Walter, looking round and starting up in his turn. 'Here!'

Why, it was so possible and so actual, that, while the words were on his lips, Florence hurried past him; took Uncle Sol's snuff-coloured lapels, one in each hand; kissed him on the cheek; and turning, gave her hand to Walter with a simple truth and earnestness that was her own, and no one else's in the world!

'Going away, Walter!' said Florence.

'Yes, Miss Dombey,' he replied, but not so hopefully as he endeavoured: 'I have a voyage before me.'

'And your Uncle,' said Florence, looking back at Solomon. 'He is sorry you are going, I am sure. Ah! I see he is! Dear Walter, I am very sorry too.'

'Goodness knows,' exclaimed Miss Nipper, 'there's a many we could spare instead, if numbers is a object, Mrs Pipchin as a overseer would come cheap at her weight in gold, and if a knowledge of black slavery should be required, them Blimbers is the very people for the sitiuation.'

With that Miss Nipper untied her bonnet strings, and alter looking vacantly for some moments into a little black teapot that was set forth with the usual homely service on the table, shook her head and a tin canister, and began unasked to make the tea.

In the meantime Florence had turned again to the Instrument-maker, who was as full of admiration as surprise. 'So grown!' said old Sol. 'So improved! And yet not altered! Just the same!'

'Indeed!' said Florence.

'Ye - yes,' returned old Sol, rubbing his hands slowly, and considering the matter half aloud, as something pensive in the bright eyes looking at him arrested his attention. 'Yes, that expression was in the younger face, too!'

'You remember me,' said Florence with a smile, 'and what a little creature I was then?'

'My dear young lady,' returned the Instrument-maker, 'how could I forget you, often as I have thought of you and heard of you since! At the very moment, indeed, when you came in, Wally was talking about you to me, and leaving messages for you, and - '

'Was he?' said Florence. 'Thank you, Walter! Oh thank you, Walter! I was afraid you might be going away and hardly thinking of me;' and again she gave him her little hand so freely and so faithfully that Walter held it for some moments in his own, and could not bear to let it go.

Yet Walter did not hold it as he might have held it once, nor did its touch awaken those old day-dreams of his boyhood that had floated past him sometimes even lately, and confused him with their indistinct and broken shapes. The purity and innocence of her endearing manner, and its perfect trustfulness, and the undisguised regard for him that lay so deeply seated in her constant eyes, and glowed upon her fair face through the smile that shaded - for alas! it was a smile too sad to brighten - it, were not of their romantic race. They brought back to his thoughts the early death-bed he had seen her tending, and the love the child had borne her; and on the wings of such remembrances she seemed to rise up, far above his idle fancies, into clearer and serener air.

'I - I am afraid I must call you Walter's Uncle, Sir,' said Florence to the old man, 'if you'll let me.'

'My dear young lady,' cried old Sol. 'Let you! Good gracious!'

'We always knew you by that name, and talked of you,' said Florence, glancing round, and sighing gently. 'The nice old parlour! Just the same! How well I recollect it!'

Old Sol looked first at her, then at his nephew, and then rubbed his hands, and rubbed his spectacles, and said below his breath, 'Ah! time, time, time!'

There was a short silence; during which Susan Nipper skilfully impounded two extra cups and saucers from the cupboard, and awaited the drawing of the tea with a thoughtful air.

'I want to tell Walter's Uncle,' said Florence, laying her hand timidly upon the old man's as it rested on the table, to bespeak his attention, 'something that I am anxious about. He is going to be left alone, and if he will allow me - not to take Walter's place, for that I couldn't do, but to be his true friend and help him if I ever can while Walter is away, I shall be very much obliged to him indeed. Will you? May I, Walter's Uncle?'

The Instrument-maker, without speaking, put her hand to his lips, and Susan Nipper, leaning back with her arms crossed, in the chair of presidency into which she had voted herself, bit one end of her bonnet strings, and heaved a gentle sigh as she looked up at the skylight.

'You will let me come to see you,' said Florence, 'when I can; and you will tell me everything about yourself and Walter; and you will have no secrets from Susan when she comes and I do not, but will confide in us, and trust us, and rely upon us. And you'll try to let us be a comfort to you? Will you, Walter's Uncle?'

The sweet face looking into his, the gentle pleading eyes, the soft voice, and the light touch on his arm made the more winning by a child's respect and honour for his age, that gave to all an air of graceful doubt and modest hesitation - these, and her natural earnestness, so overcame the poor old Instrument-maker, that he only answered:

'Wally! say a word for me, my dear. I'm very grateful.'

'No, Walter,' returned Florence with her quiet smile. 'Say nothing for him, if you please. I understand him very well, and we must learn to talk together without you, dear Walter.'

The regretful tone in which she said these latter words, touched Walter more than all the rest.

'Miss Florence,' he replied, with an effort to recover the cheerful manner he had preserved while talking with his Uncle, 'I know no more than my Uncle, what to say in acknowledgment of such kindness, I am sure. But what could I say, after all, if I had the power of talking for an hour, except that it is like you?'

Susan Nipper began upon a new part of her bonnet string, and nodded at the skylight, in approval of the sentiment expressed.

'Oh! but, Walter,' said Florence, 'there is something that I wish to say to you before you go away, and you must call me Florence, if you please, and not speak like a stranger.'

'Like a stranger!' returned Walter, 'No. I couldn't speak so. I am sure, at least, I couldn't feel like one.'

'Ay, but that is not enough, and is not what I mean. For, Walter,' added Florence, bursting into tears, 'he liked you very much, and said before he died that he was fond of you, and said 'Remember Walter!' and if you'll be a brother to me, Walter, now that he is gone and I have none on earth, I'll be your sister all my life, and think of you like one wherever we may be! This is what I wished to say, dear Walter, but I cannot say it as I would, because my heart is full.'

And in its fulness and its sweet simplicity, she held out both her hands to him. Walter taking them, stooped down and touched the

tearful face that neither shrunk nor turned away, nor reddened as he did so, but looked up at him with confidence and truth. In that one moment, every shadow of doubt or agitation passed away from Walter's soul. It seemed to him that he responded to her innocent appeal, beside the dead child's bed: and, in the solemn presence he had seen there, pledged himself to cherish and protect her very image, in his banishment, with brotherly regard; to garner up her simple faith, inviolate; and hold himself degraded if he breathed upon it any thought that was not in her own breast when she gave it to him.

Susan Nipper, who had bitten both her bonnet strings at once, and imparted a great deal of private emotion to the skylight, during this transaction, now changed the subject by inquiring who took milk and who took sugar; and being enlightened on these points, poured out the tea. They all four gathered socially about the little table, and took tea under that young lady's active superintendence; and the presence of Florence in the back parlour, brightened the Tartar frigate on the wall.

Half an hour ago Walter, for his life, would have hardly called her by her name. But he could do so now when she entreated him. He could think of her being there, without a lurking misgiving that it would have been better if she had not come. He could calmly think how beautiful she was, how full of promise, what a home some happy man would find in such a heart one day. He could reflect upon his own place in that heart, with pride; and with a brave determination, if not to deserve it - he still thought that far above him - never to deserve it less

Some fairy influence must surely have hovered round the hands of Susan Nipper when she made the tea, engendering the tranquil air that reigned in the back parlour during its discussion. Some counter-influence must surely have hovered round the hands of Uncle Sol's chronometer, and moved them faster than the Tartar frigate ever went before the wind. Be this as it may, the visitors had a coach in waiting at a quiet corner not far off; and the chronometer, on being incidentally referred to, gave such a positive opinion that it had been waiting a long time, that it was impossible to doubt the fact, especially when stated on such unimpeachable authority. If Uncle Sol had been going to be hanged by his own time, he never would have allowed that the chronometer was too fast, by the least fraction of a second.

Florence at parting recapitulated to the old man all that she had said before, and bound him to the compact. Uncle Sol attended her lovingly to the legs of the wooden Midshipman, and there resigned her to Walter, who was ready to escort her and Susan Nipper to the coach.

'Walter,' said Florence by the way, 'I have been afraid to ask before your Uncle. Do you think you will be absent very long?'

'Indeed,' said Walter, 'I don't know. I fear so. Mr Dombey signified as much, I thought, when he appointed me.'

'Is it a favour, Walter?' inquired Florence, after a moment's hesitation, and looking anxiously in his face.

'The appointment?' returned Walter.

'Yes.'

Walter would have given anything to have answered in the affirmative, but his face answered before his lips could, and Florence was too attentive to it not to understand its reply.

'I am afraid you have scarcely been a favourite with Papa,' she said, timidly.

'There is no reason,' replied Walter, smiling, 'why I should be.'

'No reason, Walter!'

'There was no reason,' said Walter, understanding what she meant. 'There are many people employed in the House. Between Mr Dombey and a young man like me, there's a wide space of separation. If I do my duty, I do what I ought, and do no more than all the rest.'

Had Florence any misgiving of which she was hardly conscious: any misgiving that had sprung into an indistinct and undefined existence since that recent night when she had gone down to her father's room: that Walter's accidental interest in her, and early knowledge of her, might have involved him in that powerful displeasure and dislike? Had Walter any such idea, or any sudden thought that it was in her mind at that moment? Neither of them hinted at it. Neither of them spoke at all, for some short time. Susan, walking on the other side of Walter, eyed them both sharply; and certainly Miss Nipper's thoughts travelled in that direction, and very confidently too.

'You may come back very soon,' said Florence, 'perhaps, Walter.'

'I may come back,' said Walter, 'an old man, and find you an old lady. But I hope for better things.'

'Papa,' said Florence, after a moment, 'will - will recover from his grief, and - speak more freely to me one day, perhaps; and if he should, I

will tell him how much I wish to see you back again, and ask him to recall you for my sake.'

There was a touching modulation in these words about her father, that Walter understood too well.

The coach being close at hand, he would have left her without speaking, for now he felt what parting was; but Florence held his hand when she was seated, and then he found there was a little packet in her own.

'Walter,' she said, looking full upon him with her affectionate eyes, 'like you, I hope for better things. I will pray for them, and believe that they will arrive. I made this little gift for Paul. Pray take it with my love, and do not look at it until you are gone away. And now, God bless you, Walter! never forget me. You are my brother, dear!'

He was glad that Susan Nipper came between them, or he might have left her with a sorrowful remembrance of him. He was glad too that she did not look out of the coach again, but waved the little hand to him instead, as long as he could see it.

In spite of her request, he could not help opening the packet that night when he went to bed. It was a little purse: and there was was money in it.

Bright rose the sun next morning, from his absence in strange countries and up rose Walter with it to receive the Captain, who was already at the door: having turned out earlier than was necessary, in order to get under weigh while Mrs MacStinger was still slumbering. The Captain pretended to be in tip-top spirits, and brought a very smoky tongue in one of the pockets of the of the broad blue coat for breakfast.

'And, Wal'r,' said the Captain, when they took their seats at table, if your Uncle's the man I think him, he'll bring out the last bottle of the Madeira on the present occasion.'

'No, no, Ned,' returned the old man. 'No! That shall be opened when Walter comes home again.'

'Well said!' cried the Captain. 'Hear him!'

'There it lies,' said Sol Gills, 'down in the little cellar, covered with dirt and cobwebs. There may be dirt and cobwebs over you and me perhaps, Ned, before it sees the light.'

'Hear him!' cried the Captain. 'Good morality! Wal'r, my lad. Train up a fig-tree in the way it should go, and when you are old sit under the shade on it. Overhaul the - Well,' said the Captain on second thoughts, 'I ain't quite certain where that's to be found, but when found, make a note of. Sol Gills, heave ahead again!'

'But there or somewhere, it shall lie, Ned, until Wally comes back to claim it,' said the old man. 'That's all I meant to say.'

'And well said too,' returned the Captain; 'and if we three don't crack that bottle in company, I'll give you two leave to.'

Notwithstanding the Captain's excessive joviality, he made but a poor hand at the smoky tongue, though he tried very hard, when anybody looked at him, to appear as if he were eating with a vast appetite. He was terribly afraid, likewise, of being left alone with either Uncle or nephew; appearing to consider that his only chance of safety as to keeping up appearances, was in there being always three together. This terror on the part of the Captain, reduced him to such ingenious evasions as running to the door, when Solomon went to put his coat on, under pretence of having seen an extraordinary hackney-coach pass: and darting out into the road when Walter went upstairs to take leave of the lodgers, on a feint of smelling fire in a neighbouring chimney. These artifices Captain Cuttle deemed inscrutable by any uninspired observer.

Walter was coming down from his parting expedition upstairs, and was crossing the shop to go back to the little parlour, when he saw a faded face he knew, looking in at the door, and darted towards it.

'Mr Carker!' cried Walter, pressing the hand of John Carker the Junior. 'Pray come in! This is kind of you, to be here so early to say good-bye to me. You knew how glad it would make me to shake hands with you, once, before going away. I cannot say how glad I am to have this opportunity. Pray come in.'

'It is not likely that we may ever meet again, Walter,' returned the other, gently resisting his invitation, 'and I am glad of this opportunity too. I may venture to speak to you, and to take you by the hand, on the eve of separation. I shall not have to resist your frank approaches, Walter, any more.'

There was a melancholy in his smile as he said it, that showed he had found some company and friendship for his thoughts even in that.

'Ah, Mr Carker!' returned Walter. 'Why did you resist them? You could have done me nothing but good, I am very sure.'

He shook his head. 'If there were any good,' he said, 'I could do on this earth, I would do it, Walter, for you. The sight of you from day to day, has been at once happiness and remorse to me. But the pleasure has outweighed the pain. I know that, now, by knowing what I lose.'

'Come in, Mr Carker, and make acquaintance with my good old Uncle,' urged Walter. 'I have often talked to him about you, and he will be glad to tell you all he hears from me. I have not,' said Walter, noticing his hesitation, and speaking with embarrassment himself: 'I have not told him anything about our last conversation, Mr Carker; not even him, believe me.'

The grey Junior pressed his hand, and tears rose in his eyes.

'If I ever make acquaintance with him, Walter,' he returned, 'it will be that I may hear tidings of you. Rely on my not wronging your forbearance and consideration. It would be to wrong it, not to tell him all the truth, before I sought a word of confidence from him. But I have no friend or acquaintance except you: and even for your sake, am little likely to make any.'

'I wish,' said Walter, 'you had suffered me to be your friend indeed. I always wished it, Mr Carker, as you know; but never half so much as now, when we are going to part'

'It is enough replied the other, 'that you have been the friend of my own breast, and that when I have avoided you most, my heart inclined the most towards you, and was fullest of you. Walter, good-bye!'

'Good-bye, Mr Carker. Heaven be with you, Sir!' cried Walter with emotion.

'If,' said the other, retaining his hand while he spoke; 'if when you come back, you miss me from my old corner, and should hear from anyone where I am lying, come and look upon my grave. Think that I might have been as honest and as happy as you! And let me think, when I know time is coming on, that some one like my former self may stand there, for a moment, and remember me with pity and forgiveness! Walter, good-bye!'

His figure crept like a shadow down the bright, sun-lighted street, so cheerful yet so solemn in the early summer morning; and slowly passed away.

The relentless chronometer at last announced that Walter must turn his back upon the wooden Midshipman: and away they went, himself, his Uncle, and the Captain, in a hackney-coach to a wharf, where they were to take steam-boat for some Reach down the river, the name of

which, as the Captain gave it out, was a hopeless mystery to the ears of landsmen. Arrived at this Reach (whither the ship had repaired by last night's tide), they were boarded by various excited watermen, and among others by a dirty Cyclops of the Captain's acquaintance, who, with his one eye, had made the Captain out some mile and a half off, and had been exchanging unintelligible roars with him ever since. Becoming the lawful prize of this personage, who was frightfully hoarse and constitutionally in want of shaving, they were all three put aboard the Son and Heir. And the Son and Heir was in a pretty state of confusion, with sails lying all bedraggled on the wet decks, loose ropes tripping people up, men in red shirts running barefoot to and fro, casks blockading every foot of space, and, in the thickest of the fray, a black cook in a black caboose up to his eyes in vegetables and blinded with smoke.

The Captain immediately drew Walter into a corner, and with a great effort, that made his face very red, pulled up the silver watch, which was so big, and so tight in his pocket, that it came out like a bung.

'Wal'r,' said the Captain, handing it over, and shaking him heartily by the hand, 'a parting gift, my lad. Put it back half an hour every morning, and about another quarter towards the arternoon, and it's a watch that'll do you credit.'

'Captain Cuttle! I couldn't think of it!' cried Walter, detaining him, for he was running away. 'Pray take it back. I have one already.'

'Then, Wal'r,' said the Captain, suddenly diving into one of his pockets and bringing up the two teaspoons and the sugar-tongs, with which he had armed himself to meet such an objection, 'take this here trifle of plate, instead.'

'No, no, I couldn't indeed!' cried Walter, 'a thousand thanks! Don't throw them away, Captain Cuttle!' for the Captain was about to jerk them overboard. 'They'll be of much more use to you than me. Give me your stick. I have often thought I should like to have it. There! Good-bye, Captain Cuttle! Take care of my Uncle! Uncle Sol, God bless you!'

They were over the side in the confusion, before Walter caught another glimpse of either; and when he ran up to the stern, and looked after them, he saw his Uncle hanging down his head in the boat, and Captain Cuttle rapping him on the back with the great silver watch (it must have been very painful), and gesticulating hopefully with the teaspoons and sugar-tongs. Catching sight of Walter, Captain Cuttle dropped the property into the bottom of the boat with perfect unconcern, being evidently oblivious of its existence, and pulling off the glazed hat hailed him lustily. The glazed hat made quite a show in the sun with its glistening, and the Captain continued to wave it until

he could be seen no longer. Then the confusion on board, which had been rapidly increasing, reached its height; two or three other boats went away with a cheer; the sails shone bright and full above, as Walter watched them spread their surface to the favourable breeze; the water flew in sparkles from the prow; and off upon her voyage went the Son and Heir, as hopefully and trippingly as many another son and heir, gone down, had started on his way before her.

Day after day, old Sol and Captain Cuttle kept her reckoning in the little hack parlour and worked out her course, with the chart spread before them on the round table. At night, when old Sol climbed upstairs, so lonely, to the attic where it sometimes blew great guns, he looked up at the stars and listened to the wind, and kept a longer watch than would have fallen to his lot on board the ship. The last bottle of the old Madeira, which had had its cruising days, and known its dangers of the deep, lay silently beneath its dust and cobwebs, in the meanwhile, undisturbed.