Chapter XXIII - Florence Solitary, And The Midshipman Mysterious

Florence lived alone in the great dreary house, and day succeeded day, and still she lived alone; and the blank walls looked down upon her with a vacant stare, as if they had a Gorgon-like mind to stare her youth and beauty into stone.

No magic dwelling-place in magic story, shut up in the heart of a thick wood, was ever more solitary and deserted to the fancy, than was her father's mansion in its grim reality, as it stood lowering on the street: always by night, when lights were shining from neighbouring windows, a blot upon its scanty brightness; always by day, a frown upon its never-smiling face.

There were not two dragon sentries keeping ward before the gate of this above, as in magic legend are usually found on duty over the wronged innocence imprisoned; but besides a glowering visage, with its thin lips parted wickedly, that surveyed all comers from above the archway of the door, there was a monstrous fantasy of rusty iron, curling and twisting like a petrifaction of an arbour over threshold, budding in spikes and corkscrew points, and bearing, one on either side, two ominous extinguishers, that seemed to say, 'Who enter here, leave light behind!' There were no talismanic characters engraven on the portal, but the house was now so neglected in appearance, that boys chalked the railings and the pavement - particularly round the corner where the side wall was - and drew ghosts on the stable door; and being sometimes driven off by Mr Towlinson, made portraits of him, in return, with his ears growing out horizontally from under his hat. Noise ceased to be, within the shadow of the roof. The brass band that came into the street once a week, in the morning, never brayed a note in at those windows; but all such company, down to a poor little piping organ of weak intellect, with an imbecile party of automaton dancers, waltzing in and out at folding-doors, fell off from it with one accord, and shunned it as a hopeless place.

The spell upon it was more wasting than the spell that used to set enchanted houses sleeping once upon a time, but left their waking freshness unimpaired. The passive desolation of disuse was everywhere silently manifest about it. Within doors, curtains, drooping heavily, lost their old folds and shapes, and hung like cumbrous palls. Hecatombs of furniture, still piled and covered up, shrunk like imprisoned and forgotten men, and changed insensibly. Mirrors were dim as with the breath of years. Patterns of carpets faded and became perplexed and faint, like the memory of those years' trifling incidents. Boards, starting at unwonted footsteps, creaked and shook. Keys rusted in the locks of doors. Damp started on the walls, and as the stains came out, the pictures seemed to go in and secrete themselves.

Mildew and mould began to lurk in closets. Fungus trees grew in corners of the cellars. Dust accumulated, nobody knew whence nor how; spiders, moths, and grubs were heard of every day. An exploratory blackbeetle now and then was found immovable upon the stairs, or in an upper room, as wondering how he got there. Rats began to squeak and scuffle in the night time, through dark galleries they mined behind the panelling.

The dreary magnificence of the state rooms, seen imperfectly by the doubtful light admitted through closed shutters, would have answered well enough for an enchanted abode. Such as the tarnished paws of gilded lions, stealthily put out from beneath their wrappers; the marble lineaments of busts on pedestals, fearfully revealing themselves through veils; the clocks that never told the time, or, if wound up by any chance, told it wrong, and struck unearthly numbers, which are not upon the dial; the accidental tinklings among the pendant lustres, more startling than alarm-bells; the softened sounds and laggard air that made their way among these objects, and a phantom crowd of others, shrouded and hooded, and made spectral of shape. But, besides, there was the great staircase, where the lord of the place so rarely set his foot, and by which his little child had gone up to Heaven. There were other staircases and passages where no one went for weeks together; there were two closed rooms associated with dead members of the family, and with whispered recollections of them; and to all the house but Florence, there was a gentle figure moving through the solitude and gloom, that gave to every lifeless thing a touch of present human interest and wonder,

For Florence lived alone in the deserted house, and day succeeded day, and still she lived alone, and the cold walls looked down upon her with a vacant stare, as if they had a Gorgon-like mind to stare her youth and beauty into stone

The grass began to grow upon the roof, and in the crevices of the basement paving. A scaly crumbling vegetation sprouted round the window-sills. Fragments of mortar lost their hold upon the insides of the unused chimneys, and came dropping down. The two trees with the smoky trunks were blighted high up, and the withered branches domineered above the leaves, Through the whole building white had turned yellow, yellow nearly black; and since the time when the poor lady died, it had slowly become a dark gap in the long monotonous street.

But Florence bloomed there, like the king's fair daughter in the story. Her books, her music, and her daily teachers, were her only real companions, Susan Nipper and Diogenes excepted: of whom the former, in her attendance on the studies of her young mistress, began to grow quite learned herself, while the latter, softened possibly by the

same influences, would lay his head upon the window-ledge, and placidly open and shut his eyes upon the street, all through a summer morning; sometimes pricking up his head to look with great significance after some noisy dog in a cart, who was barking his way along, and sometimes, with an exasperated and unaccountable recollection of his supposed enemy in the neighbourhood, rushing to the door, whence, after a deafening disturbance, he would come jogging back with a ridiculous complacency that belonged to him, and lay his jaw upon the window-ledge again, with the air of a dog who had done a public service.

So Florence lived in her wilderness of a home, within the circle of her innocent pursuits and thoughts, and nothing harmed her. She could go down to her father's rooms now, and think of him, and suffer her loving heart humbly to approach him, without fear of repulse. She could look upon the objects that had surrounded him in his sorrow, and could nestle near his chair, and not dread the glance that she so well remembered. She could render him such little tokens of her duty and service' as putting everything in order for him with her own hands, binding little nosegays for table, changing them as one by one they withered and he did not come back, preparing something for him every' day, and leaving some timid mark of her presence near his usual seat. To-day, it was a little painted stand for his watch; tomorrow she would be afraid to leave it, and would substitute some other trifle of her making not so likely to attract his eye. Waking in the night, perhaps, she would tremble at the thought of his coming home and angrily rejecting it, and would hurry down with slippered feet and quickly beating heart, and bring it away. At another time, she would only lay her face upon his desk, and leave a kiss there, and a tear.

Still no one knew of this. Unless the household found it out when she was not there - and they all held Mr Dombey's rooms in awe - it was as deep a secret in her breast as what had gone before it. Florence stole into those rooms at twilight, early in the morning, and at times when meals were served downstairs. And although they were in every nook the better and the brighter for her care, she entered and passed out as quietly as any sunbeam, opting that she left her light behind.

Shadowy company attended Florence up and down the echoing house, and sat with her in the dismantled rooms. As if her life were an enchanted vision, there arose out of her solitude ministering thoughts, that made it fanciful and unreal. She imagined so often what her life would have been if her father could have loved her and she had been a favourite child, that sometimes, for the moment, she almost believed it was so, and, borne on by the current of that pensive fiction, seemed to remember how they had watched her brother in his grave together; how they had freely shared his heart between them; how they were united in the dear remembrance of him; how they often spoke about

him yet; and her kind father, looking at her gently, told her of their common hope and trust in God. At other times she pictured to herself her mother yet alive. And oh the happiness of falling on her neck, and clinging to her with the love and confidence of all her soul! And oh the desolation of the solitary house again, with evening coming on, and no one there!

But there was one thought, scarcely shaped out to herself, yet fervent and strong within her, that upheld Florence when she strove and filled her true young heart, so sorely tried, with constancy of purpose. Into her mind, as 'into all others contending with the great affliction of our mortal nature, there had stolen solemn wonderings and hopes, arising in the dim world beyond the present life, and murmuring, like faint music, of recognition in the far-off land between her brother and her mother: of some present consciousness in both of her: some love and commiseration for her: and some knowledge of her as she went her way upon the earth. It was a soothing consolation to Florence to give shelter to these thoughts, until one day - it was soon after she had last seen her father in his own room, late at night - the fancy came upon her, that, in weeping for his alienated heart, she might stir the spirits of the dead against him' Wild, weak, childish, as it may have been to think so, and to tremble at the half-formed thought, it was the impulse of her loving nature; and from that hour Florence strove against the cruel wound in her breast, and tried to think of him whose hand had made it, only with hope.

Her father did not know - she held to it from that time - how much she loved him. She was very young, and had no mother, and had never learned, by some fault or misfortune, how to express to him that she loved him. She would be patient, and would try to gain that art in time, and win him to a better knowledge of his only child.

This became the purpose of her life. The morning sun shone down upon the faded house, and found the resolution bright and fresh within the bosom of its solitary mistress, Through all the duties of the day, it animated her; for Florence hoped that the more she knew, and the more accomplished she became, the more glad he would be when he came to know and like her. Sometimes she wondered, with a swelling heart and rising tear, whether she was proficient enough in anything to surprise him when they should become companions. Sometimes she tried to think if there were any kind of knowledge that would bespeak his interest more readily than another. Always: at her books, her music, and her work: in her morning walks, and in her nightly prayers: she had her engrossing aim in view. Strange study for a child, to learn the road to a hard parent's heart!

There were many careless loungers through the street, as the summer evening deepened into night, who glanced across the road at the

sombre house, and saw the youthful figure at the window, such a contrast to it, looking upward at the stars as they began to shine, who would have slept the worse if they had known on what design she mused so steady. The reputation of the mansion as a haunted house, would not have been the gayer with some humble dwellers elsewhere, who were struck by its external gloom in passing and repassing on their daily avocations, and so named it, if they could have read its story in the darkening face. But Florence held her sacred purpose, unsuspected and unaided: and studied only how to bring her father to the understanding that she loved him, and made no appeal against him in any wandering thought.

Thus Florence lived alone in the deserted house, and day succeeded day, and still she lived alone, and the monotonous walls looked down upon her with a stare, as if they had a Gorgon-like intent to stare her youth and beauty into stone.

Susan Nipper stood opposite to her young mistress one morning, as she folded and sealed a note she had been writing: and showed in her looks an approving knowledge of its contents.

'Better late than never, dear Miss Floy,' said Susan, 'and I do say, that even a visit to them old Skettleses will be a Godsend.'

'It is very good of Sir Barnet and Lady Skettles, Susan,' returned Florence, with a mild correction of that young lady's familiar mention of the family in question, 'to repeat their invitation so kindly.'

Miss Nipper, who was perhaps the most thoroughgoing partisan on the face of the earth, and who carried her partisanship into all matters great or small, and perpetually waged war with it against society, screwed up her lips and shook her head, as a protest against any recognition of disinterestedness in the Skettleses, and a plea in bar that they would have valuable consideration for their kindness, in the company of Florence.

'They know what they're about, if ever people did,' murmured Miss Nipper, drawing in her breath 'oh! trust them Skettleses for that!'

'I am not very anxious to go to Fulham, Susan, I confess,' said Florence thoughtfully: 'but it will be right to go. I think it will be better.'

'Much better,' interposed Susan, with another emphatic shake of her head.

'And so,' said Florence, 'though I would prefer to have gone when there was no one there, instead of in this vacation time, when it seems

there are some young people staying in the house, I have thankfully said yes.'

'For which I say, Miss Floy, Oh be joyful!' returned Susan, 'Ah!

This last ejaculation, with which Miss Nipper frequently wound up a sentence, at about that epoch of time, was supposed below the level of the hall to have a general reference to Mr Dombey, and to be expressive of a yearning in Miss Nipper to favour that gentleman with a piece of her mind. But she never explained it; and it had, in consequence, the charm of mystery, in addition to the advantage of the sharpest expression.

'How long it is before we have any news of Walter, Susan!' observed Florence, after a moment's silence.

'Long indeed, Miss Floy!' replied her maid. 'And Perch said, when he came just now to see for letters - but what signifies what he says!' exclaimed Susan, reddening and breaking off. 'Much he knows about it!'

Florence raised her eyes quickly, and a flush overspread her face.

'If I hadn't,' said Susan Nipper, evidently struggling with some latent anxiety and alarm, and looking full at her young mistress, while endeavouring to work herself into a state of resentment with the unoffending Mr Perch's image, 'if I hadn't more manliness than that insipidest of his sex, I'd never take pride in my hair again, but turn it up behind my ears, and wear coarse caps, without a bit of border, until death released me from my insignificance. I may not be a Amazon, Miss Floy, and wouldn't so demean myself by such disfigurement, but anyways I'm not a giver up, I hope'

'Give up! What?' cried Florence, with a face of terror.

'Why, nothing, Miss,' said Susan. 'Good gracious, nothing! It's only that wet curl-paper of a man, Perch, that anyone might almost make away with, with a touch, and really it would be a blessed event for all parties if someone would take pity on him, and would have the goodness!'

'Does he give up the ship, Susan?' inquired Florence, very pale.

'No, Miss,' returned Susan, 'I should like to see' him make so bold as do it to my face! No, Miss, but he goes 'on about some bothering ginger that Mr Walter was to send to Mrs Perch, and shakes his dismal head, and says he hopes it may be coming; anyhow, he says, it can't come now in time for the intended occasion, but may do for next,

which really,' said Miss Nipper, with aggravated scorn, 'puts me out of patience with the man, for though I can bear a great deal, I am not a camel, neither am I,' added Susan, after a moment's consideration, 'if I know myself, a dromedary neither.'

'What else does he say, Susan?' inquired Florence, earnestly. 'Won't you tell me?'

'As if I wouldn't tell you anything, Miss Floy, and everything!' said Susan. 'Why, nothing Miss, he says that there begins to be a general talk about the ship, and that they have never had a ship on that voyage half so long unheard of, and that the Captain's wife was at the office yesterday, and seemed a little put out about it, but anyone could say that, we knew nearly that before.'

'I must visit Walter's uncle,' said Florence, hurriedly, 'before I leave home. I will go and see him this morning. Let us walk there, directly, Susan.

Miss Nipper having nothing to urge against the proposal, but being perfectly acquiescent, they were soon equipped, and in the streets, and on their way towards the little Midshipman.

The state of mind in which poor Walter had gone to Captain Cuttle's, on the day when Brogley the broker came into possession, and when there seemed to him to be an execution in the very steeples, was pretty much the same as that in which Florence now took her way to Uncle Sol's; with this difference, that Florence suffered the added pain of thinking that she had been, perhaps, the innocent occasion of involving Walter in peril, and all to whom he was dear, herself included, in an agony of suspense. For the rest, uncertainty and danger seemed written upon everything. The weathercocks on spires and housetops were mysterious with hints of stormy wind, and pointed, like so many ghostly fingers, out to dangerous seas, where fragments of great wrecks were drifting, perhaps, and helpless men were rocked upon them into a sleep as deep as the unfathomable waters. When Florence came into the City, and passed gentlemen who were talking together, she dreaded to hear them speaking of the ship, an'd saying it was lost. Pictures and prints of vessels fighting with the rolling waves filled her with alarm. The smoke and clouds, though moving gently, moved too fast for her apprehensions, and made her fear there was a tempest blowing at that moment on the ocean.

Susan Nipper may or may not have been affected similarly, but having her attention much engaged in struggles with boys, whenever there was any press of people - for, between that grade of human kind and herself, there was some natural animosity that invariably broke out,

whenever they came together - it would seem that she had not much leisure on the road for intellectual operations,

Arriving in good time abreast of the wooden Midshipman on the opposite side of the way, and waiting for an opportunity to cross the street, they were a little surprised at first to see, at the Instrument-maker's door, a round-headed lad, with his chubby face addressed towards the sky, who, as they looked at him, suddenly thrust into his capacious mouth two fingers of each hand, and with the assistance of that machinery whistled, with astonishing shrillness, to some pigeons at a considerable elevation in the air.

'Mrs Richards's eldest, Miss!' said Susan, 'and the worrit of Mrs Richards's life!'

As Polly had been to tell Florence of the resuscitated prospects of her son and heir, Florence was prepared for the meeting: so, a favourable moment presenting itself, they both hastened across, without any further contemplation of Mrs Richards's bane' That sporting character, unconscious of their approach, again whistled with his utmost might, and then yelled in a rapture of excitement, 'Strays! Whip! Strays!' which identification had such an effect upon the conscience-stricken pigeons, that instead of going direct to some town in the North of England, as appeared to have been their original intention, they began to wheel and falter; whereupon Mrs Richards's first born pierced them with another whistle, and again yelled, in a voice that rose above the turmoil of the street, 'Strays! Who~oop! Strays!'

From this transport, he was abruptly recalled to terrestrial objects, by a poke from Miss Nipper, which sent him into the shop,

'Is this the way you show your penitence, when Mrs Richards has been fretting for you months and months?' said Susan, following the poke. 'Where's Mr Gills?'

Rob, who smoothed his first rebellious glance at Miss Nipper when he saw Florence following, put his knuckles to his hair, in honour of the latter, and said to the former, that Mr Gills was out'

Fetch him home,' said Miss Nipper, with authority, 'and say that my young lady's here.'

'I don't know where he's gone,' said Rob.

'Is that your penitence?' cried Susan, with stinging sharpness.

'Why how can I go and fetch him when I don't know where to go?' whimpered the baited Rob. 'How can you be so unreasonable?'

'Did Mr Gills say when he should be home?' asked Florence.

'Yes, Miss,' replied Rob, with another application of his knuckles to his hair. 'He said he should be home early in the afternoon; in about a couple of hours from now, Miss.'

'Is he very anxious about his nephew?' inquired Susan.

'Yes, Miss,' returned Rob, preferring to address himself to Florence and slighting Nipper; 'I should say he was, very much so. He ain't indoors, Miss, not a quarter of an hour together. He can't settle in one place five minutes. He goes about, like a - just like a stray,' said Rob, stooping to get a glimpse of the pigeons through the window, and checking himself, with his fingers half-way to his mouth, on the verge of another whistle.

'Do you know a friend of Mr Gills, called Captain Cuttle?' inquired Florence, after a moment's reflection.

'Him with a hook, Miss?' rejoined Rob, with an illustrative twist of his left hand. Yes, Miss. He was here the day before yesterday.'

'Has he not been here since?' asked Susan.

'No, Miss,' returned Rob, still addressing his reply to Florence.

'Perhaps Walter's Uncle has gone there, Susan,' observed Florence, turning to her.

'To Captain Cuttle's, Miss?' interposed Rob; 'no, he's not gone there, Miss. Because he left particular word that if Captain Cuttle called, I should tell him how surprised he was, not to have seen him yesterday, and should make him stop till he came back' 'Do you know where Captain Cuttle lives?' asked Florence.

Rob replied in the affirmative, and turning to a greasy parchment book on the shop desk, read the address aloud.

Florence again turned to her maid and took counsel with her in a low voice, while Rob the round-eyed, mindful of his patron's secret charge, looked on and listened. Florence proposed that they kould go to Captain Cuttle's house; hear from his own lips, what he thought of the absence of any tidings ofthe Son and Heir; and bring him, if they could, to comfort Uncle Sol. Susan at first objected slightly, on the score of distance; but a hackney-coach being mentioned by her

mistress, withdrew that opposition, and gave in her assent. There were some minutes of discussion between them before they came to this conclusion, during which the staring Rob paid close attention to both speakers, and inclined his ear to each by turns, as if he were appointed arbitrator of the argument.

In time, Rob was despatched for a coach, the visitors keeping shop meanwhile; and when he brought it, they got into it, leaving word for Uncle Sol that they would be sure to call again, on their way back. Rob having stared after the coach until it was as invisible as the pigeons had now become, sat down behind the desk with a most assiduous demeanour; and in order that he might forget nothing of what had transpired, made notes of it on various small scraps of paper, with a vast expenditure of ink. There was no danger of these documents betraying anything, if accidentally lost; for long before a word was dry, it became as profound a mystery to Rob, as if he had had no part whatever in its production.

While he was yet busy with these labours, the hackney-coach, after encountering unheard-of difficulties from swivel-bridges, soft roads, impassable canals, caravans of casks, settlements of scarlet-beans and little wash-houses, and many such obstacles abounding in that country, stopped at the corner of Brig Place. Alighting here, Florence and Susan Nipper walked down the street, and sought out the abode of Captain Cuttle.

It happened by evil chance to be one of Mrs MacStinger's great cleaning days. On these occasions, Mrs MacStinger was knocked up by the policeman at a quarter before three in the morning, and rarely such before twelve o'clock next night. The chief object of this institution appeared to be, that Mrs MacStinger should move all the furniture into the back garden at early dawn, walk about the house in pattens all day, and move the furniture back again after dark. These ceremonies greatly fluttered those doves the young MacStingers, who were not only unable at such times to find any resting-place for the soles of their feet, but generally came in for a good deal of pecking from the maternal bird during the progress of the solemnities.

At the moment when Florence and Susan Nipper presented themselves at Mrs MacStinger's door, that worthy but redoubtable female was in the act of conveying Alexander MacStinger, aged two years and three months, along the passage, for forcible deposition in a sitting posture on the street pavement: Alexander being black in the face with holding his breath after punishment, and a cool paving-stone being usually found to act as a powerful restorative in such cases.

The feelings of Mrs MacStinger, as a woman and a mother, were outraged by the look of pity for Alexander which she observed on Florence's face. Therefore, Mrs MacStinger asserting those finest emotions of our nature, in preference to weakly gratifying her curiosity, shook and buffeted Alexander both before and during the application of the paving-stone, and took no further notice of the strangers.

'I beg your pardon, Ma'am,' said Florence, when the child had found his breath again, and was using it. 'Is this Captain Cuttle's house?'

'No,' said Mrs MacStinger.

'Not Number Nine?' asked Florence, hesitating.

'Who said it wasn't Number Nine?' said Mrs MacStinger.

Susan Nipper instantly struck in, and begged to inquire what Mrs MacStinger meant by that, and if she knew whom she was talking to.

Mrs MacStinger in retort, looked at her all over. 'What do you want with Captain Cuttle, I should wish to know?' said Mrs MacStinger.

'Should you? Then I'm sorry that you won't be satisfied,' returned Miss Nipper.

'Hush, Susan! If you please!' said Florence. 'Perhaps you can have the goodness to tell us where Captain Cutlle lives, Ma'am as he don't live here.'

'Who says he don't live here?' retorted the implacable MacStinger. 'I said it wasn't Cap'en Cuttle's house - and it ain't his house -and forbid it, that it ever should be his house - for Cap'en Cuttle don't know how to keep a house - and don't deserve to have a house - it's my house - and when I let the upper floor to Cap'en Cuttle, oh I do a thankless thing, and cast pearls before swine!'

Mrs MacStinger pitched her voice for the upper windows in offering these remarks, and cracked off each clause sharply by itself as if from a rifle possessing an infinity of barrels. After the last shot, the Captain's voice was heard to say, in feeble remonstrance from his own room, 'Steady below!'

'Since you want Cap'en Cuttle, there he is!' said Mrs MacStinger, with an angry motion of her hand. On Florence making bold to enter, without any more parley, and on Susan following, Mrs MacStinger recommenced her pedestrian exercise in pattens, and Alexander MacStinger (still on the paving-stone), who had stopped in his crying

to attend to the conversation, began to wail again, entertaining himself during that dismal performance, which was quite mechanical, with a general survey of the prospect, terminating in the hackney-coach.

The Captain in his own apartment was sitting with his hands in his pockets and his legs drawn up under his chair, on a very small desolate island, lying about midway in an ocean of soap and water. The Captain's windows had been cleaned, the walls had been cleaned, the stove had been cleaned, and everything the stove excepted, was wet, and shining with soft soap and sand: the smell of which dry-saltery impregnated the air. In the midst of the dreary scene, the Captain, cast away upon his island, looked round on the waste of waters with a rueful countenance, and seemed waiting for some friendly bark to come that way, and take him off.

But when the Captain, directing his forlorn visage towards the door, saw Florence appear with her maid, no words can describe his astonishment. Mrs MacStinger's eloquence having rendered all other sounds but imperfectly distinguishable, he had looked for no rarer visitor than the potboy or the milkman; wherefore, when Florence appeared, and coming to the confines of the island, put her hand in his, the Captain stood up, aghast, as if he supposed her, for the moment, to be some young member of the Flying Dutchman's family.'

Instantly recovering his self-possession, however, the Captain's first care was to place her on dry land, which he happily accomplished, with one motion of his arm. Issuing forth, then, upon the main, Captain Cuttle took Miss Nipper round the waist, and bore her to the island also. Captain Cuttle, then, with great respect and admiration, raised the hand of Florence to his lips, and standing off a little(for the island was not large enough for three), beamed on her from the soap and water like a new description of Triton.

'You are amazed to see us, I am sure,'said Florence, with a smile.

The inexpressibly gratified Captain kissed his hook in reply, and growled, as if a choice and delicate compliment were included in the words, 'Stand by! Stand by!'

'But I couldn't rest,' said Florence, 'without coming to ask you what you think about dear Walter - who is my brother now- and whether there is anything to fear, and whether you will not go and console his poor Uncle every day, until we have some intelligence of him?'

At these words Captain Cuttle, as by an involuntary gesture, clapped his hand to his head, on which the hard glazed hat was not, and looked discomfited.

'Have you any fears for Walter's safety?' inquired Florence, from whose face the Captain (so enraptured he was with it) could not take his eyes: while she, in her turn, looked earnestly at him, to be assured of the sincerity of his reply.

'No, Heart's-delight,' said Captain Cuttle, 'I am not afeard. Wal'r is a lad as'll go through a deal o' hard weather. Wal'r is a lad as'll bring as much success to that 'ere brig as a lad is capable on. Wal'r,' said the Captain, his eyes glistening with the praise of his young friend, and his hook raised to announce a beautiful quotation, 'is what you may call a out'ard and visible sign of an in'ard and spirited grasp, and when found make a note of.'

Florence, who did not quite understand this, though the Captain evidentllty thought it full of meaning, and highly satisfactory, mildly looked to him for something more.

'I am not afeard, my Heart's-delight,' resumed the Captain, 'There's been most uncommon bad weather in them latitudes, there's no denyin', and they have drove and drove and been beat off, may be t'other side the world. But the ship's a good ship, and the lad's a good lad; and it ain't easy, thank the Lord,' the Captain made a little bow, 'to break up hearts of oak, whether they're in brigs or buzzums. Here we have 'em both ways, which is bringing it up with a round turn, and so I ain't a bit afeard as yet.'

'As yet?' repeated Florence.

'Not a bit,' returned the Captain, kissing his iron hand; 'and afore I begin to be, my Hearts-delight, Wal'r will have wrote home from the island, or from some port or another, and made all taut and shipsahape'And with regard to old Sol Gills, here the Captain became solemn, 'who I'll stand by, and not desert until death do us part, and when the stormy winds do blow, do blow, do blow - overhaul the Catechism,' said the Captain parenthetically, 'and there you'll find them expressions - if it would console Sol Gills to have the opinion of a seafaring man as has got a mind equal to any undertaking that he puts it alongside of, and as was all but smashed in his'prenticeship, and of which the name is Bunsby, that 'ere man shall give him such an opinion in his own parlour as'll stun him. Ah!' said Captain Cuttle, vauntingly, 'as much as if he'd gone and knocked his head again a door!'

'Let us take this ~gentleman to see him, and let us hear what he says,' cried Florence. 'Will you go with us now? We have a coach here.'

Again the Captain clapped his hand to his head, on which the hard glazed hat was not, and looked discomfited. But at this instant a most

remarkable phenomenon occurred. The door opening, without any note of preparation, and apparently of itself, the hard glazed hat in question skimmed into the room like a bird, and alighted heavily at the Captain's feet. The door then shut as violently as it had opened, and nothIng ensued in explanation of the prodigy.

Captain Cuttle picked up his hat, and having turned it over with a look of interest and welcome, began to polish it on his sleeve' While doing so, the Captain eyed his visitors intently, and said in a low voice

'You see I should have bore down on Sol Gills yesterday, and this morning, but she - she took it away and kep it. That's the long and short ofthe subject.'

'Who did, for goodness sake?' asked Susan Nipper.

'The lady of the house, my dear,'returned the Captain, in a gruff whisper, and making signals of secrecy.'We had some words about the swabbing of these here planks, and she - In short,' said the Captain, eyeing the door, and relieving himself with a long breath, 'she stopped my liberty.'

'Oh! I wish she had me to deal with!' said Susan, reddening with the energy of the wish. 'I'd stop her!'

'Would you, do you, my dear?' rejoined the Captain, shaking his head doubtfully, but regarding the desperate courage of the fair aspirant with obvious admiration. 'I don't know. It's difficult navigation. She's very hard to carry on with, my dear. You never can tell how she'll head, you see. She's full one minute, and round upon you next. And when she in a tartar,' said the Captain, with the perspiration breaking out upon his forehead. There was nothing but a whistle emphatic enough for the conclusion of the sentence, so the Captain whistled tremulously. After which he again shook his head, and recurring to his admiration of Miss Nipper's devoted bravery, timidly repeated, 'Would you, do you think, my dear?'

Susan only replied with a bridling smile, but that was so very full of defiance, that there is no knowing how long Captain Cuttle might have stood entranced in its contemplation, if Florence in her anxiety had not again proposed their immediately resorting to the oracular Bunsby. Thus reminded of his duty, Captain Cuttle Put on the glazed hat firmly, took up another knobby stick, with which he had supplied the place of that one given to Walter, and offering his arm to Florence, prepared to cut his way through the enemy.

It turned out, however, that Mrs MacStinger had already changed her course, and that she headed, as the Captain had remarked she often

did, in quite a new direction. For when they got downstairs, they found that exemplary woman beating the mats on the doorsteps, with Alexander, still upon the paving-stone, dimly looming through a fog of dust; and so absorbed was Mrs MacStinger in her household occupation, that when Captain Cuttle and his visitors passed, she beat the harder, and neither by word nor gesture showed any consciousness of their vicinity. The Captain was so well pleased with this easy escape - although the effect of the door-mats on him was like a copious administration of snuff, and made him sneeze until the tears ran down his face - that he could hardly believe his good fortune; but more than once, between the door and the hackney-coach, looked over his shoulder, with an obvious apprehension of Mrs MacStinger's giving chase yet.

However, they got to the corner of Brig Place without any molestation from that terrible fire-ship; and the Captain mounting the coach-box - for his gallantry would not allow him to ride inside with the ladies, though besought to do so - piloted the driver on his course for Captain Bunsby's vessel, which was called the Cautious Clara, and was lying hard by Ratcliffe.

Arrived at the wharf off which this great commander's ship was jammed in among some five hundred companions, whose tangled rigging looked like monstrous cobwebs half swept down, Captain Cuttle appeared at the coach-window, and invited Florence and Miss Nipper to accompany him on board; observing that Bunsby was to the last degree soft-hearted in respect of ladies, and that nothing would so much tend to bring his expansive intellect into a state of harmony as their presentation to the Cautious Clara.

Florence readily consented; and the Captain, taking her little hand in his prodigious palm, led her, with a mixed expression of patronage, paternity, pride, and ceremony, that was pleasant to see, over several very dirty decks, until, coming to the Clara, they found that cautious craft (which lay outside the tier) with her gangway removed, and half-a-dozen feet of river interposed between herself and her nearest neighbour. It appeared, from Captain Cuttle's explanation, that the great Bunsby, like himself, was cruelly treated by his landlady, and that when her usage of him for the time being was so hard that he could bear it no longer, he set this gulf between them as a last resource.

'Clara a-hoy!' cried the Captain, putting a hand to each side of his mouth.

'A-hoy!' cried a boy, like the Captain's echo, tumbling up from below.

'Bunsby aboard?' cried the Captain, hailing the boy in a stentorian voice, as if he were half-a-mile off instead of two yards.

'Ay, ay!' cried the boy, in the same tone.

The boy then shoved out a plank to Captain Cuttle, who adjusted it carefully, and led Florence across: returning presently for Miss Nipper. So they stood upon the deck of the Cautious Clara, in whose standing rigging, divers fluttering articles of dress were curing, in company with a few tongues and some mackerel.

Immediately there appeared, coming slowly up above the bulk-head of the cabin, another bulk-head 'human, and very large - with one stationary eye in the mahogany face, and one revolving one, on the principle of some lighthouses. This head was decorated with shaggy hair, like oakum,' which had no governing inclination towards the north, east, west, or south, but inclined to all four quarters of the compass, and to every point upon it. The head was followed by a perfect desert of chin, and by a shirt-collar and neckerchief, and by a dreadnought pilot-coat, and by a pair of dreadnought pilot-trousers, whereof the waistband was so very broad and high, that it became a succedaneum for a waistcoat: being ornamented near the wearer's breastbone with some massive wooden buttons, like backgammon men. As the lower portions of these pantaloons became revealed, Bunsby stood confessed; his hands in their pockets, which were of vast size; and his gaze directed, not to Captain Cuttle or the ladies, but the mast-head.

The profound appearance of this philosopher, who was bulky and strong, and on whose extremely red face an expression of taciturnity sat enthroned, not inconsistent with his character, in which that quality was proudly conspicuous, almost daunted Captain Cuttle, though on familiar terms with him. Whispering to Florence that Bunsby had never in his life expressed surprise, and was considered not to know what it meant, the Captain watched him as he eyed his mast-head, and afterwards swept the horizon; and when the revolving eye seemed to be coming round in his direction, said:

'Bunsby, my lad, how fares it?'

A deep, gruff, husky utterance, which seemed to have no connexion with Bunsby, and certainly had not the least effect upon his face, replied, 'Ay, ay, shipmet, how goes it?' At the same time Bunsby's right hand and arm, emerging from a pocket, shook the Captain's, and went back again.

'Bunsby,' said the Captain, striking home at once, 'here you are; a man of mind, and a man as can give an opinion. Here's a young lady

as wants to take that opinion, in regard of my friend Wal'r; likewise my t'other friend, Sol Gills, which is a character for you to come within hail of, being a man of science, which is the mother of inwention, and knows no law. Bunsby, will you wear, to oblige me, and come along with us?'

The great commander, who seemed by expression of his visage to be always on the look-out for something in the extremest distance' and to have no ocular knowledge of any anng' within ten miles, made no reply whatever.

'Here is a man,' said the Captain, addressing himself to his fair auditors, and indicating the commander with his outstretched hook, 'that has fell down, more than any man alive; that has had more accidents happen to his own self than the Seamen's Hospital to all hands; that took as many spars and bars and bolts about the outside of his head when he was young, as you'd want a order for on Chatham-yard to build a pleasure yacht with; and yet that his opinions in that way, it's my belief, for there ain't nothing like 'em afloat or ashore.'

The stolid commander appeared by a very slight vibration in his elbows, to express some satisfitction in this encomium; but if his face had been as distant as his gaze was, it could hardIy have enlightened the beholders less in reference to anything that was passing in his thoughts.

'Shipmate,' said Bunsby, all of a sudden, and stooping down to look out under some interposing spar, 'what'll the ladies drink?'

Captain Cuttle, whose delicacy was shocked by such an inquiry in connection with Florence, drew the sage aside, and seeming to explain in his ear, accompanied him below; where, that he might not take offence, the Captain drank a dram himself' which Florence and Susan, glancing down the open skylight, saw the sage, with difficulty finding room for himself between his berth and a very little brass fireplace, serve out for self and friend. They soon reappeared on deck, and Captain Cuttle, triumphing in the success of his enterprise, conducted Florence back to the coach, while Bunsby followed, escorting Miss Nipper, whom he hugged upon the way (much to that young lady's indignation) with his pilot-coated arm, like a blue bear.

The Captain put his oracle inside, and gloried so much in having secured him, and having got that mind into a hackney-coach, that he could not refrain from often peeping in at Florence through the little window behind the driver, and testifiing his delight in smiles, and also in taps upon his forehead, to hint to her that the brain of Bunsby was hard at it' In the meantime, Bunsby, still hugging Miss Nipper (for his

friend, the Captain, had not exaggerated the softness of his heart), uniformily preserved his gravity of deportment, and showed no other consciousness of her or anything.

Uncle Sol, who had come home, received them at the door, and ushered them immediately into the little back parlour: strangely altered by the absence of Walter. On the table, and about the room, were the charts and maps on which the heavy-hearted Instrument-maker had again and again tracked the missing vessel across the sea, and on which, with a pair of compasses that he still had in his hand, he had been measuring, a minute before, how far she must have driven, to have driven here or there: and trying to demonstrate that a long time must elapse before hope was exhausted.

'Whether she can have run,' said Uncle Sol, looking wistfully over the chart; 'but no, that's almost impossible or whether she can have been forced by stress of weather, - but that's not reasonably likely. Or whether there is any hope she so far changed her course as - but even I can hardly hope that!' With such broken suggestions, poor old Uncle Sol roamed over the great sheet before him, and could not find a speck of hopeful probability in it large enough to set one small point of the compasses upon.

Florence saw immediately - it would have been difficult to help seeing - that there was a singular, indescribable change in the old man, and that while his manner was far more restless and unsettled than usual, there was yet a curious, contradictory decision in it, that perplexed her very much. She fancied once that he spoke wildly, and at random; for on her saying she regretted not to have seen him when she had been there before that morning, he at first replied that he had been to see her, and directly afterwards seemed to wish to recall that answer.

'You have been to see me?' said Florence. 'To-day?'

'Yes, my dear young lady,' returned Uncle Sol, looking at her and away from her in a confused manner. 'I wished to see you with my own eyes, and to hear you with my own ears, once more before - ' There he stopped.

'Before when? Before what?' said Florence, putting her hand upon his arm.

'Did I say "before?" replied old Sol. 'If I did, I must have meant before we should have news of my dear boy.'

'You are not well,' said Florence, tenderly. 'You have been so very anxious I am sure you are not well.'

'I am as well,' returned the old man, shutting up his right hand, and holding it out to show her: 'as well and firm as any man at my time of life can hope to be. See! It's steady. Is its master not as capable of resolution and fortitude as many a younger man? I think so. We shall see.'

There was that in his manner more than in his words, though they remained with her too, which impressed Florence so much, that she would have confided her uneasiness to Captain Cuttle at that moment, if the Captain had not seized that moment for expounding the state of circumstance, on which the opinion of the sagacious Bunsby was requested, and entreating that profound authority to deliver the same.

Bunsby, whose eye continued to be addressed to somewhere about the half-way house between London and Gravesend, two or three times put out his rough right arm, as seeking to wind it for inspiration round the fair form of Miss Nipper; but that young female having withdrawn herself, in displeasure, to the opposite side of the table, the soft heart of the Commander of the Cautious Clara met with no response to its impulses. After sundry failures in this wise, the Commander, addressing himself to nobody, thus spake; or rather the voice within him said of its own accord, and quite independent of himself, as if he were possessed by a gruff spirit:

'My name's Jack Bunsby!'

'He was christened John,' cried the delighted Captain Cuttle. 'Hear him!'

'And what I says,' pursued the voice, after some deliberation, 'I stands to.

The Captain, with Florence on his arm, nodded at the auditory, and seemed to say, 'Now he's coming out. This is what I meant when I brought him.'

'Whereby,' proceeded the voice, 'why not? If so, what odds? Can any man say otherwise? No. Awast then!'

When it had pursued its train of argument to this point, the voice stopped, and rested. It then proceeded very slowly, thus:

'Do I believe that this here Son and Heir's gone down, my lads? Mayhap. Do I say so? Which? If a skipper stands out by Sen' George's Channel, making for the Downs, what's right ahead of him? The Goodwins. He isn't foroed to run upon the Goodwins, but he may. The bearings of this observation lays in the application on it. That ain't no

part of my duty. Awast then, keep a bright look-out for'ard, and good luck to you!'

The voice here went out of the back parlour and into the street, taking the Commander of the Cautious Clara with it, and accompanying him on board again with all convenient expedition, where he immediately turned in, and refreshed his mind with a nap.

The students of the sage's precepts, left to their own application of his wisdom - upon a principle which was the main leg of the Bunsby tripod, as it is perchance of some other oracular stools - looked upon one another in a little uncertainty; while Rob the Grinder, who had taken the innocent freedom of peering in, and listening, through the skylight in the roof, came softly down from the leads, in a state of very dense confusion. Captain Cuttle, however, whose admiration of Bunsby was, if possible, enhanced by the splendid manner in which he had justified his reputation and come through this solemn reference, proceeded to explain that Bunsby meant nothing but confidence; that Bunsby had no misgivings; and that such an opinion as that man had given, coming from such a mind as his, was Hope's own anchor, with good roads to cast it in. Florence endeavoured to believe that the Captain was right; but the Nipper, with her arms tight folded, shook her head in resolute denial, and had no more trust m Bunsby than in Mr Perch himself.

The philosopher seemed to have left Uncle Sol pretty much where he had found him, for he still went roaming about the watery world, compasses in hand, and discovering no rest for them. It was in pursuance of a whisper in his ear from Florence, while the old man was absorbed in this pursuit, that Captain Cuttle laid his heavy hand upon his shoulder.

'What cheer, Sol Gills?' cried the Captain, heartily.

'But so-so, Ned,' returned the Instrument-maker. 'I have been remembering, all this afternoon, that on the very day when my boy entered Dombey's House, and came home late to dinner, sitting just there where you stand, we talked of storm and shipwreck, and I could hardly turn him from the subject'

But meeting the eyes of Florence, which were fixed with earnest scrutiny upon his face, the old man stopped and smiled.

'Stand by, old friend!' cried the Captain. 'Look alive! I tell you what, Sol Gills; arter I've convoyed Heart's-delight safe home,' here the Captain kissed his hook to Florence, 'I'll come back and take you in tow for the rest of this blessed day. You'll come and eat your dinner along with me, Sol, somewheres or another.'

'Not to-day, Ned!' said the old man quickly, and appearing to be unaccountably startled by the proposition. 'Not to-day. I couldn't do it!'

'Why not?' returned the Captain, gazing at him in astonishment.

'I - I have so much to do. I - I mean to think of, and arrange. I couldn't do it, Ned, indeed. I must go out again, and be alone, and turn my mind to many things to-day.'

The Captain looked at the Instrument-maker, and looked at Florence, and again at the Instrument-maker. 'To-morrow, then,' he suggested, at last.

'Yes, yes. To-morrow,' said the old man. 'Think of me to-morrow. Say to-morrow.'

'I shall come here early, mind, Sol Gills,' stipulated the Captain.

'Yes, yes. The first thing tomorrow morning,' said old Sol; 'and now good-bye, Ned Cuttle, and God bless you!'

Squeezing both the Captain's hands, with uncommon fervour, as he said it, the old man turned to Florence, folded hers in his own, and put them to his lips; then hurried her out to the coach with very singular precipitation. Altogether, he made such an effect on Captain Cuttle that the Captain lingered behind, and instructed Rob to be particularly gentle and attentive to his master until the morning: which injunction he strengthened with the payment of one shilling down, and the promise of another sixpence before noon next day. This kind office performed, Captain Cuttle, who considered himself the natural and lawful body-guard of Florence, mounted the box with a mighty sense of his trust, and escorted her home. At parting, he assured her that he would stand by Sol Gills, close and true; and once again inquired of Susan Nipper, unable to forget her gallant words in reference to Mrs MacStinger, 'Would you, do you think my dear, though?'

When the desolate house had closed upon the two, the Captain's thoughts reverted to the old Instrument-maker, and he felt uncomfortable. Therefore, instead of going home, he walked up and down the street several times, and, eking out his leisure until evening, dined late at a certain angular little tavern in the City, with a public parlour like a wedge, to which glazed hats much resorted. The Captain's principal intention was to pass Sol Gills's, after dark, and look in through the window: which he did, The parlour door stood open, and he could see his old friend writing busily and steadily at the table within, while the little Midshipman, already sheltered from the

night dews, watched him from the counter; under which Rob the Grinder made his own bed, preparatory to shutting the shop. Reassured by the tranquillity that reigned within the precincts of the wooden mariner, the Captain headed for Brig Place, resolving to weigh anchor betimes in the morning.