

Chapter XXV - Strange News of Uncle Sol

Captain Cuttle, though no sluggard, did not turn out so early on the morning after he had seen Sol Gills, through the shop-window, writing in the parlour, with the Midshipman upon the counter, and Rob the Grinder making up his bed below it, but that the clocks struck six as he raised himself on his elbow, and took a survey of his little chamber. The Captain's eyes must have done severe duty, if he usually opened them as wide on awaking as he did that morning; and were but roughly rewarded for their vigilance, if he generally rubbed them half as hard. But the occasion was no common one, for Rob the Grinder had certainly never stood in the doorway of Captain Cuttle's room before, and in it he stood then, panting at the Captain, with a flushed and touzled air of Bed about him, that greatly heightened both his colour and expression.

'Holloa!' roared the Captain. 'What's the matter?'

Before Rob could stammer a word in answer, Captain Cuttle turned out, all in a heap, and covered the boy's mouth with his hand.

'Steady, my lad,' said the Captain, 'don't ye speak a word to me as yet!'

The Captain, looking at his visitor in great consternation, gently shouldered him into the next room, after laying this injunction upon him; and disappearing for a few moments, forthwith returned in the blue suit. Holding up his hand in token of the injunction not yet being taken off, Captain Cuttle walked up to the cupboard, and poured himself out a dram; a counterpart of which he handed to the messenger. The Captain then stood himself up in a corner, against the wall, as if to forestall the possibility of being knocked backwards by the communication that was to be made to him; and having swallowed his liquor, with his eyes fixed on the messenger, and his face as pale as his face could be, requested him to 'heave ahead.'

'Do you mean, tell you, Captain?' asked Rob, who had been greatly impressed by these precautions

'Ay!' said the Captain.

'Well, Sir,' said Rob, 'I ain't got much to tell. But look here!'

Rob produced a bundle of keys. The Captain surveyed them, remained in his corner, and surveyed the messenger.

'And look here!' pursued Rob.

The boy produced a sealed packet, which Captain Cuttle stared at as he had stared at the keys.

'When I woke this morning, Captain,' said Rob, 'which was about a quarter after five, I found these on my pillow. The shop-door was unbolted and unlocked, and Mr Gills gone.'

'Gone!' roared the Captain.

'Flowed, Sir,' returned Rob.

The Captain's voice was so tremendous, and he came out of his corner with such way on him, that Rob retreated before him into another corner: holding out the keys and packet, to prevent himself from being run down.

'For Captain Cuttle,' Sir,' cried Rob, 'is on the keys, and on the packet too. Upon my word and honour, Captain Cuttle, I don't know anything more about it. I wish I may die if I do! Here's a situation for a lad that's just got a situation,' cried the unfortunate Grinder, screwing his cuff into his face: 'his master bolted with his place, and him blamed for it!'

These lamentations had reference to Captain Cuttle's gaze, or rather glare, which was full of vague suspicions, threatenings, and denunciations. Taking the proffered packet from his hand, the Captain opened it and read as follows:-

'My dear Ned Cuttle. Enclosed is my will!' The Captain turned it over, with a doubtful look - 'and Testament - Where's the Testament?' said the Captain, instantly impeaching the ill-fated Grinder. 'What have you done with that, my lad?'

'I never see it,' whimpered Rob. 'Don't keep on suspecting an innocent lad, Captain. I never touched the Testament.'

Captain Cuttle shook his head, implying that somebody must be made answerable for it; and gravely proceeded:

'Which don't break open for a year, or until you have decisive intelligence of my dear Walter, who is dear to you, Ned, too, I am sure.' The Captain paused and shook his head in some emotion; then, as a re-establishment of his dignity in this trying position, looked with exceeding sternness at the Grinder. 'If you should never hear of me, or see me more, Ned, remember an old friend as he will remember you to the last - kindly; and at least until the period I have mentioned has expired, keep a home in the old place for Walter. There are no debts, the loan from Dombey's House is paid off and all my keys I send with

this. Keep this quiet, and make no inquiry for me; it is useless. So no more, dear Ned, from your true friend, Solomon Gills.' The Captain took a long breath, and then read these words written below: 'The boy Rob, well recommended, as I told you, from Dombey's House. If all else should come to the hammer, take care, Ned, of the little Midshipman.'

To convey to posterity any idea of the manner in which the Captain, after turning this letter over and over, and reading it a score of times, sat down in his chair, and held a court-martial on the subject in his own mind, would require the united genius of all the great men, who, discarding their own untoward days, have determined to go down to posterity, and have never got there. At first the Captain was too much confounded and distressed to think of anything but the letter itself; and even when his thoughts began to glance upon the various attendant facts, they might, perhaps, as well have occupied themselves with their former theme, for any light they reflected on them. In this state of mind, Captain Cuttle having the Grinder before the court, and no one else, found it a great relief to decide, generally, that he was an object of suspicion: which the Captain so clearly expressed in his visage, that Rob remonstrated.

'Oh, don't, Captain!' cried the Grinder. 'I wonder how you can! what have I done to be looked at, like that?'

'My lad,' said Captain Cuttle, 'don't you sing out afore you're hurt. And don't you commit yourself, whatever you do.'

'I haven't been and committed nothing, Captain!' answered Rob.

'Keep her free, then,' said the Captain, impressively, 'and ride easy.'

With a deep sense of the responsibility imposed upon him' and the necessity of thoroughly fathoming this mysterious affair as became a man in his relations with the parties, Captain Cuttle resolved to go down and examine the premises, and to keep the Grinder with him. Considering that youth as under arrest at present, the Captain was in some doubt whether it might not be expedient to handcuff him, or tie his ankles together, or attach a weight to his legs; but not being clear as to the legality of such formalities, the Captain decided merely to hold him by the shoulder all the way, and knock him down if he made any objection.

However, he made none, and consequently got to the Instrument-maker's house without being placed under any more stringent restraint. As the shutters were not yet taken down, the Captain's first care was to have the shop opened; and when the daylight was freely admitted, he proceeded, with its aid, to further investigation.

The Captain's first care was to establish himself in a chair in the shop, as President of the solemn tribunal that was sitting within him; and to require Rob to lie down in his bed under the counter, show exactly where he discovered the keys and packet when he awoke, how he found the door when he went to try it, how he started off to Brig Place - cautiously preventing the latter imitation from being carried farther than the threshold - and so on to the end of the chapter. When all this had been done several times, the Captain shook his head and seemed to think the matter had a bad look.

Next, the Captain, with some indistinct idea of finding a body, instituted a strict search over the whole house; groping in the cellars with a lighted candle, thrusting his hook behind doors, bringing his head into violent contact with beams, and covering himself with cobwebs. Mounting up to the old man's bed-room, they found that he had not been in bed on the previous night, but had merely lain down on the coverlet, as was evident from the impression yet remaining there.

'And I think, Captain,' said Rob, looking round the room, 'that when Mr Gills was going in and out so often, these last few days, he was taking little things away, piecemeal, not to attract attention.'

'Ay!' said the Captain, mysteriously. 'Why so, my lad?'

'Why,' returned Rob, looking about, 'I don't see his shaving tackle. Nor his brushes, Captain. Nor no shirts. Nor yet his shoes.'

As each of these articles was mentioned, Captain Cuttle took particular notice of the corresponding department of the Grinder, lest he should appear to have been in recent use, or should prove to be in present possession thereof. But Rob had no occasion to shave, was not brushed, and wore the clothes he had on for a long time past, beyond all possibility of a mistake.

'And what should you say,' said the Captain - 'not committing yourself - about his time of sheering off? Hey?'

'Why, I think, Captain,' returned Rob, 'that he must have gone pretty soon after I began to snore.'

'What o'clock was that?' said the Captain, prepared to be very particular about the exact time.

'How can I tell, Captain!' answered Rob. 'I only know that I'm a heavy sleeper at first, and a light one towards morning; and if Mr Gills had come through the shop near daybreak, though ever so much on tiptoe, I'm pretty sure I should have heard him shut the door at all events.'

On mature consideration of this evidence, Captain Cuttle began to think that the Instrument-maker must have vanished of his own accord; to which logical conclusion he was assisted by the letter addressed to himself, which, as being undeniably in the old man's handwriting, would seem, with no great forcing, to bear the construction, that he arranged of his own will to go, and so went. The Captain had next to consider where and why? and as there was no way whatsoever that he saw to the solution of the first difficulty, he confined his meditations to the second.

Remembering the old man's curious manner, and the farewell he had taken of him; unaccountably fervent at the time, but quite intelligible now: a terrible apprehension strengthened on the Captain, that, overpowered by his anxieties and regrets for Walter, he had been driven to commit suicide. Unequal to the wear and tear of daily life, as he had often professed himself to be, and shaken as he no doubt was by the uncertainty and deferred hope he had undergone, it seemed no violently strained misgiving, but only too probable. Free from debt, and with no fear for his personal liberty, or the seizure of his goods, what else but such a state of madness could have hurried him away alone and secretly? As to his carrying some apparel with him, if he had really done so - and they were not even sure of that - he might have done so, the Captain argued, to prevent inquiry, to distract attention from his probable fate, or to ease the very mind that was now revolving all these possibilities. Such, reduced into plain language, and condensed within a small compass, was the final result and substance of Captain Cuttle's deliberations: which took a long time to arrive at this pass, and were, like some more public deliberations, very discursive and disorderly.

Dejected and despondent in the extreme, Captain Cuttle felt it just to release Rob from the arrest in which he had placed him, and to enlarge him, subject to a kind of honourable inspection which he still resolved to exercise; and having hired a man, from Brogley the Broker, to sit in the shop during their absence, the Captain, taking Rob with him, issued forth upon a dismal quest after the mortal remains of Solomon Gills.

Not a station-house, or bone-house, or work-house in the metropolis escaped a visitation from the hard glazed hat. Along the wharves, among the shipping on the bank-side, up the river, down the river, here, there, everywhere, it went gleaming where men were thickest, like the hero's helmet in an epic battle. For a whole week the Captain read of all the found and missing people in all the newspapers and handbills, and went forth on expeditions at all hours of the day to identify Solomon Gills, in poor little ship-boys who had fallen overboard, and in tall foreigners with dark beards who had taken poison - 'to make sure,' Captain Cuttle said, 'that it wam't him.' It is a

sure thing that it never was, and that the good Captain had no other satisfaction.

Captain Cuttle at last abandoned these attempts as hopeless, and set himself to consider what was to be done next. After several new perusals of his poor friend's letter, he considered that the maintenance of a home in the old place for Walter' was the primary duty imposed upon him. Therefore, the Captain's decision was, that he would keep house on the premises of Solomon Gills himself, and would go into the instrument-business, and see what came of it.

But as this step involved the relinquishment of his apartments at Mrs MacStinger's, and he knew that resolute woman would never hear of his deserting them, the Captain took the desperate determination of running away.

'Now, look ye here, my lad,' said the Captain to Rob, when he had matured this notable scheme, 'to-morrow, I shan't be found in this here roadstead till night - not till arter midnight p'rhaps. But you keep watch till you hear me knock, and the moment you do, turn-to, and open the door.'

'Very good, Captain,' said Rob.

'You'll continue to be rated on these here books,' pursued the Captain condescendingly, 'and I don't say but what you may get promotion, if you and me should pull together with a will. But the moment you hear me knock to-morrow night, whatever time it is, turn-to and show yourself smart with the door.'

'I'll be sure to do it, Captain,' replied Rob.

'Because you understand,' resumed the Captain, coming back again to enforce this charge upon his mind, 'there may be, for anything I can say, a chase; and I might be took while I was waiting, if you didn't show yourself smart with the door.'

Rob again assured the Captain that he would be prompt and wakeful; and the Captain having made this prudent arrangement, went home to Mrs MacStinger's for the last time.

The sense the Captain had of its being the last time, and of the awful purpose hidden beneath his blue waistcoat, inspired him with such a mortal dread of Mrs MacStinger, that the sound of that lady's foot downstairs at any time of the day, was sufficient to throw him into a fit of trembling. It fell out, too, that Mrs MacStinger was in a charming temper - mild and placid as a house- lamb; and Captain Cuttle's

conscience suffered terrible twinges, when she came up to inquire if she could cook him nothing for his dinner.

'A nice small kidney-pudding now, Cap'en Cuttle,' said his landlady: 'or a sheep's heart. Don't mind my trouble.'

'No thank'ee, Ma'am,' returned the Captain.

'Have a roast fowl,' said Mrs MacStinger, 'with a bit of weal stuffing and some egg sauce. Come, Cap'en Cuttle! Give yourself a little treat!'

'No thank'ee, Ma'am,' returned the Captain very humbly.

'I'm sure you're out of sorts, and want to be stimulated,' said Mrs MacStinger. 'Why not have, for once in a way, a bottle of sherry wine?'

'Well, Ma'am,' rejoined the Captain, 'if you'd be so good as take a glass or two, I think I would try that. Would you do me the favour, Ma'am,' said the Captain, torn to pieces by his conscience, 'to accept a quarter's rent ahead?'

'And why so, Cap'en Cuttle?' retorted Mrs MacStinger - sharply, as the Captain thought.

The Captain was frightened to death 'If you would Ma'am,' he said with submission, 'it would oblige me. I can't keep my money very well. It pays itself out. I should take it kind if you'd comply.'

'Well, Cap'en Cuttle,' said the unconscious MacStinger, rubbing her hands, 'you can do as you please. It's not for me, with my family, to refuse, no more than it is to ask'

'And would you, Ma'am,' said the Captain, taking down the tin canister in which he kept his cash' from the top shelf of the cupboard, 'be so good as offer eighteen-pence a-piece to the little family all round? If you could make it convenient, Ma'am, to pass the word presently for them children to come for'ard, in a body, I should be glad to see 'em'

These innocent MacStingers were so many daggers to the Captain's breast, when they appeared in a swarm, and tore at him with the confiding trustfulness he so little deserved. The eye of Alexander MacStinger, who had been his favourite, was insupportable to the Captain; the voice of Juliana MacStinger, who was the picture of her mother, made a coward of him.

Captain Cuttle kept up appearances, nevertheless, tolerably well, and for an hour or two was very hardly used and roughly handled by the

young MacStingers: who in their childish frolics, did a little damage also to the glazed hat, by sitting in it, two at a time, as in a nest, and drumming on the inside of the crown with their shoes. At length the Captain sorrowfully dismissed them: taking leave of these cherubs with the poignant remorse and grief of a man who was going to execution.

In the silence of night, the Captain packed up his heavier property in a chest, which he locked, intending to leave it there, in all probability for ever, but on the forlorn chance of one day finding a man sufficiently bold and desperate to come and ask for it. Of his lighter necessaries, the Captain made a bundle; and disposed his plate about his person, ready for flight. At the hour of midnight, when Brig Place was buried in slumber, and Mrs MacStinger was lulled in sweet oblivion, with her infants around her, the guilty Captain, stealing down on tiptoe, in the dark, opened the door, closed it softly after him, and took to his heels

Pursued by the image of Mrs MacStinger springing out of bed, and, regardless of costume, following and bringing him back; pursued also by a consciousness of his enormous crime; Captain Cuttle held on at a great pace, and allowed no grass to grow under his feet, between Brig Place and the Instrument-maker's door. It opened when he knocked - for Rob was on the watch - and when it was bolted and locked behind him, Captain Cuttle felt comparatively safe.

'Whew!' cried the Captain, looking round him. 'It's a breather!'

'Nothing the matter, is there, Captain?' cried the gaping Rob.

'No, no!' said Captain Cuttle, after changing colour, and listening to a passing footstep in the street. 'But mind ye, my lad; if any lady, except either of them two as you see t'other day, ever comes and asks for Cap'en Cuttle, be sure to report no person of that name known, nor never heard of here; observe them orders, will you?'

'I'll take care, Captain,' returned Rob.

'You might say - if you liked,' hesitated the Captain, 'that you'd read in the paper that a Cap'en of that name was gone to Australia, emigrating, along with a whole ship's complement of people as had all swore never to come back no more.

Rob nodded his understanding of these instructions; and Captain Cuttle promising to make a man of him, if he obeyed orders, dismissed him, yawning, to his bed under the counter, and went aloft to the chamber of Solomon Gills.

What the Captain suffered next day, whenever a bonnet passed, or how often he darted out of the shop to elude imaginary MacStingers, and sought safety in the attic, cannot be told. But to avoid the fatigues attendant on this means of self-preservation, the Captain curtained the glass door of communication between the shop and parlour, on the inside; fitted a key to it from the bunch that had been sent to him; and cut a small hole of espial in the wall. The advantage of this fortification is obvious. On a bonnet appearing, the Captain instantly slipped into his garrison, locked himself up, and took a secret observation of the enemy. Finding it a false alarm, the Captain instantly slipped out again. And the bonnets in the street were so very numerous, and alarms were so inseparable from their appearance, that the Captain was almost incessantly slipping in and out all day long.

Captain Cuttle found time, however, in the midst of this fatiguing service to inspect the stock; in connexion with which he had the general idea (very laborious to Rob) that too much friction could not be bestowed upon it, and that it could not be made too bright. He also ticketed a few attractive-looking articles at a venture, at prices ranging from ten shillings to fifty pounds, and exposed them in the window to the great astonishment of the public.

After effecting these improvements, Captain Cuttle, surrounded by the instruments, began to feel scientific: and looked up at the stars at night, through the skylight, when he was smoking his pipe in the little back parlour before going to bed, as if he had established a kind of property in them. As a tradesman in the City, too, he began to have an interest in the Lord Mayor, and the Sheriffs, and in Public Companies; and felt bound to read the quotations of the Funds every day, though he was unable to make out, on any principle of navigation, what the figures meant, and could have very well dispensed with the fractions. Florence, the Captain waited on, with his strange news of Uncle Sol, immediately after taking possession of the Midshipman; but she was away from home. So the Captain sat himself down in his altered station of life, with no company but Rob the Grinder; and losing count of time, as men do when great changes come upon them, thought musingly of Walter, and of Solomon Gills, and even of Mrs MacStinger herself, as among the things that had been.