

Chapter XXXVIII - Miss Tox Improves An Old Acquaintance

The forlorn Miss Tox, abandoned by her friend Louisa Chick, and bereft of Mr Dombey's countenance - for no delicate pair of wedding cards, united by a silver thread, graced the chimney-glass in Princess's Place, or the harpsichord, or any of those little posts of display which Lucretia reserved for holiday occupation - became depressed in her spirits, and suffered much from melancholy. For a time the Bird Waltz was unheard in Princess's Place, the plants were neglected, and dust collected on the miniature of Miss Tox's ancestor with the powdered head and pigtail.

Miss Tox, however, was not of an age or of a disposition long to abandon herself to unavailing regrets. Only two notes of the harpsichord were dumb from disuse when the Bird Waltz again warbled and trilled in the crooked drawing-room: only one slip of geranium fell a victim to imperfect nursing, before she was gardening at her green baskets again, regularly every morning; the powdered-headed ancestor had not been under a cloud for more than six weeks, when Miss Tox breathed on his benignant visage, and polished him up with a piece of wash-leather.

Still, Miss Tox was lonely, and at a loss. Her attachments, however ludicrously shown, were real and strong; and she was, as she expressed it, 'deeply hurt by the unmerited contumely she had met with from Louisa.' But there was no such thing as anger in Miss Tox's composition. If she had ambled on through life, in her soft spoken way, without any opinions, she had, at least, got so far without any harsh passions. The mere sight of Louisa Chick in the street one day, at a considerable distance, so overpowered her milky nature, that she was fain to seek immediate refuge in a pastrycook's, and there, in a musty little back room usually devoted to the consumption of soups, and pervaded by an ox-tail atmosphere, relieve her feelings by weeping plentifully.

Against Mr Dombey Miss Tox hardly felt that she had any reason of complaint. Her sense of that gentleman's magnificence was such, that once removed from him, she felt as if her distance always had been immeasurable, and as if he had greatly condescended in tolerating her at all. No wife could be too handsome or too stately for him, according to Miss Tox's sincere opinion. It was perfectly natural that in looking for one, he should look high. Miss Tox with tears laid down this proposition, and fully admitted it, twenty times a day. She never recalled the lofty manner in which Mr Dombey had made her subservient to his convenience and caprices, and had graciously permitted her to be one of the nurses of his little son. She only thought, in her own words, 'that she had passed a great many happy hours in that house, which she must ever remember with

gratification, and that she could never cease to regard Mr Dombey as one of the most impressive and dignified of men.'

Cut off, however, from the implacable Louisa, and being shy of the Major (whom she viewed with some distrust now), Miss Tox found it very irksome to know nothing of what was going on in Mr Dombey's establishment. And as she really had got into the habit of considering Dombey and Son as the pivot on which the world in general turned, she resolved, rather than be ignorant of intelligence which so strongly interested her, to cultivate her old acquaintance, Mrs Richards, who she knew, since her last memorable appearance before Mr Dombey, was in the habit of sometimes holding communication with his servants. Perhaps Miss Tox, in seeking out the Toodle family, had the tender motive hidden in her breast of having somebody to whom she could talk about Mr Dombey, no matter how humble that somebody might be.

At all events, towards the Toodle habitation Miss Tox directed her steps one evening, what time Mr Toodle, cindery and swart, was refreshing himself with tea, in the bosom of his family. Mr Toodle had only three stages of existence. He was either taking refreshment in the bosom just mentioned, or he was tearing through the country at from twenty-five to fifty miles an hour, or he was sleeping after his fatigues. He was always in a whirlwind or a calm, and a peaceable, contented, easy-going man Mr Toodle was in either state, who seemed to have made over all his own inheritance of fuming and fretting to the engines with which he was connected, which panted, and gasped, and chafed, and wore themselves out, in a most unsparing manner, while Mr Toodle led a mild and equable life.

'Polly, my gal,' said Mr Toodle, with a young Toodle on each knee, and two more making tea for him, and plenty more scattered about - Mr Toodle was never out of children, but always kept a good supply on hand - 'you ain't seen our Biler lately, have you?'

'No,' replied Polly, 'but he's almost certain to look in tonight. It's his right evening, and he's very regular.'

'I suppose,' said Mr Toodle, relishing his meal infinitely, 'as our Biler is a doin' now about as well as a boy can do, eh, Polly?'

'Oh! he's a doing beautiful!' responded Polly.

'He ain't got to be at all secret-like - has he, Polly?' inquired Mr Toodle.

'No!' said Mrs Toodle, plumply.

'I'm glad he ain't got to be at all secret-like, Polly,' observed Mr Toodle in his slow and measured way, and shovelling in his bread and butter with a clasp knife, as if he were stoking himself, 'because that don't look well; do it, Polly?'

'Why, of course it don't, father. How can you ask!'

'You see, my boys and gals,' said Mr Toodle, looking round upon his family, 'wotever you're up to in a honest way, it's my opinion as you can't do better than be open. If you find yourselves in cuttings or in tunnels, don't you play no secret games. Keep your whistles going, and let's know where you are.'

The rising Toodles set up a shrill murmur, expressive of their resolution to profit by the paternal advice.

'But what makes you say this along of Rob, father?' asked his wife, anxiously.

'Polly, old ooman,' said Mr Toodle, 'I don't know as I said it partickler along o' Rob, I'm sure. I starts light with Rob only; I comes to a branch; I takes on what I finds there; and a whole train of ideas gets coupled on to him, afore I knows where I am, or where they comes from. What a Junction a man's thoughts is,' said Mr Toodle, 'to-be-sure!'

This profound reflection Mr Toodle washed down with a pint mug of tea, and proceeded to solidify with a great weight of bread and butter; charging his young daughters meanwhile, to keep plenty of hot water in the pot, as he was uncommon dry, and should take the indefinite quantity of 'a sight of mugs,' before his thirst was appeased.

In satisfying himself, however, Mr Toodle was not regardless of the younger branches about him, who, although they had made their own evening repast, were on the look-out for irregular morsels, as possessing a relish. These he distributed now and then to the expectant circle, by holding out great wedges of bread and butter, to be bitten at by the family in lawful succession, and by serving out small doses of tea in like manner with a spoon; which snacks had such a relish in the mouths of these young Toodles, that, after partaking of the same, they performed private dances of ecstasy among themselves, and stood on one leg apiece, and hopped, and indulged in other saltatory tokens of gladness. These vents for their excitement found, they gradually closed about Mr Toodle again, and eyed him hard as he got through more bread and butter and tea; affecting, however, to have no further expectations of their own in reference to those viands, but to be conversing on foreign subjects, and whispering confidentially.

Mr Toodle, in the midst of this family group, and setting an awful example to his children in the way of appetite, was conveying the two young Toodles on his knees to Birmingham by special engine, and was contemplating the rest over a barrier of bread and butter, when Rob the Grinder, in his sou'wester hat and mourning slops, presented himself, and was received with a general rush of brothers and sisters.

'Well, mother!' said Rob, dutifully kissing her; 'how are you, mother?'

'There's my boy!' cried Polly, giving him a hug and a pat on the back. 'Secret! Bless you, father, not he!'

This was intended for Mr Toodle's private edification, but Rob the Grinder, whose withers were not unwrung, caught the words as they were spoken.

'What! father's been a saying something more again me, has he?' cried the injured innocent. 'Oh, what a hard thing it is that when a cove has once gone a little wrong, a cove's own father should be always a throwing it in his face behind his back! It's enough,' cried Rob, resorting to his coat-cuff in anguish of spirit, 'to make a cove go and do something, out of spite!'

'My poor boy!' cried Polly, 'father didn't mean anything.'

'If father didn't mean anything,' blubbered the injured Grinder, 'why did he go and say anything, mother? Nobody thinks half so bad of me as my own father does. What a unnatural thing! I wish somebody'd take and chop my head off. Father wouldn't mind doing it, I believe, and I'd much rather he did that than t'other.'

At these desperate words all the young Toodles shrieked; a pathetic effect, which the Grinder improved by ironically adjuring them not to cry for him, for they ought to hate him, they ought, if they was good boys and girls; and this so touched the youngest Toodle but one, who was easily moved, that it touched him not only in his spirit but in his wind too; making him so purple that Mr Toodle in consternation carried him out to the water-butt, and would have put him under the tap, but for his being recovered by the sight of that instrument.

Matters having reached this point, Mr Toodle explained, and the virtuous feelings of his son being thereby calmed, they shook hands, and harmony reigned again.

'Will you do as I do, Biler, my boy?' inquired his father, returning to his tea with new strength.

'No, thank'ee, father. Master and I had tea together.'

'And how is master, Rob?' said Polly.

'Well, I don't know, mother; not much to boast on. There ain't no bis'ness done, you see. He don't know anything about it - the Cap'en don't. There was a man come into the shop this very day, and says, 'I want a so-and-so,' he says - some hard name or another. 'A which?' says the Cap'en. 'A so-and-so,' says the man. 'Brother,' says the Cap'en, 'will you take a observation round the shop.' 'Well,' says the man, 'I've done' 'Do you see wot you want?' says the Cap'en 'No, I don't,' says the man. 'Do you know it wen you do see it?' says the Cap'en. 'No, I don't,' says the man. 'Why, then I tell you wot, my lad,' says the Cap'en, 'you'd better go back and ask wot it's like, outside, for no more don't I!'

'That ain't the way to make money, though, is it?' said Polly. 'Money, mother! He'll never make money. He has such ways as I never see. He ain't a bad master though, I'll say that for him. But that ain't much to me, for I don't think I shall stop with him long.'

'Not stop in your place, Rob!' cried his mother; while Mr Toodle opened his eyes.

'Not in that place, p'raps,' returned the Grinder, with a wink. 'I shouldn't wonder - friends at court you know - but never you mind, mother, just now; I'm all right, that's all.'

The indisputable proof afforded in these hints, and in the Grinder's mysterious manner, of his not being subject to that failing which Mr Toodle had, by implication, attributed to him, might have led to a renewal of his wrongs, and of the sensation in the family, but for the opportune arrival of another visitor, who, to Polly's great surprise, appeared at the door, smiling patronage and friendship on all there.

'How do you do, Mrs Richards?' said Miss Tox. 'I have come to see you. May I come in?'

The cheery face of Mrs Richards shone with a hospitable reply, and Miss Tox, accepting the proffered chair, and grab fully recognising Mr Toodle on her way to it, untied her bonnet strings, and said that in the first place she must beg the dear children, one and all, to come and kiss her.

The ill-starred youngest Toodle but one, who would appear, from the frequency of his domestic troubles, to have been born under an unlucky planet, was prevented from performing his part in this general salutation by having fixed the sou'wester hat (with which he had been previously trifling) deep on his head, hind side before, and being unable to get it off again; which accident presenting to his

terrified imagination a dismal picture of his passing the rest of his days in darkness, and in hopeless seclusion from his friends and family, caused him to struggle with great violence, and to utter suffocating cries. Being released, his face was discovered to be very hot, and red, and damp; and Miss Tox took him on her lap, much exhausted.

'You have almost forgotten me, Sir, I daresay,' said Miss Tox to Mr Toodle.

'No, Ma'am, no,' said Toodle. 'But we've all on us got a little older since then.'

'And how do you find yourself, Sir?' inquired Miss Tox, blandly.

'Hearty, Ma'am, thank'ee,' replied Toodle. 'How do you find yourself, Ma'am? Do the rheumatics keep off pretty well, Ma'am? We must all expect to grow into 'em, as we gets on.'

'Thank you,' said Miss Tox. 'I have not felt any inconvenience from that disorder yet.'

'You're wery fortunate, Ma'am,' returned Mr Toodle. 'Many people at your time of life, Ma'am, is martyrs to it. There was my mother - ' But catching his wife's eye here, Mr Toodle judiciously buried the rest in another mug of tea

'You never mean to say, Mrs Richards,' cried Miss Tox, looking at Rob, 'that that is your - '

'Eldest, Ma'am,' said Polly. 'Yes, indeed, it is. That's the little fellow, Ma'am, that was the innocent cause of so much.'

'This here, Ma'am,' said Toodle, 'is him with the short legs - and they was,' said Mr Toodle, with a touch of poetry in his tone, 'unusual short for leathers - as Mr Dombey made a Grinder on.'

The recollection almost overpowered Miss Tox. The subject of it had a peculiar interest for her directly. She asked him to shake hands, and congratulated his mother on his frank, ingenuous face. Rob, overhearing her, called up a look, to justify the eulogium, but it was hardly the right look.

'And now, Mrs Richards,' said Miss Tox, - 'and you too, Sir,' addressing Toodle - 'I'll tell you, plainly and truly, what I have come here for. You may be aware, Mrs Richards - and, possibly, you may be aware too, Sir - that a little distance has interposed itself between me

and some of my friends, and that where I used to visit a good deal, I do not visit now.'

Polly, who, with a woman's tact, understood this at once, expressed as much in a little look. Mr Toodle, who had not the faintest idea of what Miss Tox was talking about, expressed that also, in a stare.

'Of course,' said Miss Tox, 'how our little coolness has arisen is of no moment, and does not require to be discussed. It is sufficient for me to say, that I have the greatest possible respect for, and interest in, Mr Dombey;' Miss Tox's voice faltered; 'and everything that relates to him.'

Mr Toodle, enlightened, shook his head, and said he had heard it said, and, for his own part, he did think, as Mr Dombey was a difficult subject.

'Pray don't say so, Sir, if you please,' returned Miss Tox. 'Let me entreat you not to say so, Sir, either now, or at any future time. Such observations cannot but be very painful to me; and to a gentleman, whose mind is constituted as, I am quite sure, yours is, can afford no permanent satisfaction.'

Mr Toodle, who had not entertained the least doubt of offering a remark that would be received with acquiescence, was greatly confounded.

'All that I wish to say, Mrs Richards,' resumed Miss Tox, - 'and I address myself to you too, Sir, - is this. That any intelligence of the proceedings of the family, of the welfare of the family, of the health of the family, that reaches you, will be always most acceptable to me. That I shall be always very glad to chat with Mrs Richards about the family, and about old time And as Mrs Richards and I never had the least difference (though I could wish now that we had been better acquainted, but I have no one but myself to blame for that), I hope she will not object to our being very good friends now, and to my coming backwards and forwards here, when I like, without being a stranger. Now, I really hope, Mrs Richards,' said Miss Tox - earnestly, 'that you will take this, as I mean it, like a good-humoured creature, as you always were.'

Polly was gratified, and showed it. Mr Toodle didn't know whether he was gratified or not, and preserved a stolid calmness.

'You see, Mrs Richards,' said Miss Tox - 'and I hope you see too, Sir - there are many little ways in which I can be slightly useful to you, if you will make no stranger of me; and in which I shall be delighted to be so. For instance, I can teach your children something. I shall bring

a few little books, if you'll allow me, and some work, and of an evening now and then, they'll learn - dear me, they'll learn a great deal, I trust, and be a credit to their teacher.'

Mr Toodle, who had a great respect for learning, jerked his head approvingly at his wife, and moistened his hands with dawning satisfaction.

'Then, not being a stranger, I shall be in nobody's way,' said Miss Tox, 'and everything will go on just as if I were not here. Mrs Richards will do her mending, or her ironing, or her nursing, whatever it is, without minding me: and you'll smoke your pipe, too, if you're so disposed, Sir, won't you?'

'Thank'ee, Mum,' said Mr Toodle. 'Yes; I'll take my bit of backer.'

'Very good of you to say so, Sir,' rejoined Miss Tox, 'and I really do assure you now, unfeignedly, that it will be a great comfort to me, and that whatever good I may be fortunate enough to do the children, you will more than pay back to me, if you'll enter into this little bargain comfortably, and easily, and good-naturedly, without another word about it.'

The bargain was ratified on the spot; and Miss Tox found herself so much at home already, that without delay she instituted a preliminary examination of the children all round - which Mr Toodle much admired - and booked their ages, names, and acquirements, on a piece of paper. This ceremony, and a little attendant gossip, prolonged the time until after their usual hour of going to bed, and detained Miss Tox at the Toodle fireside until it was too late for her to walk home alone. The gallant Grinder, however, being still there, politely offered to attend her to her own door; and as it was something to Miss Tox to be seen home by a youth whom Mr Dombey had first inducted into those manly garments which are rarely mentioned by name,' she very readily accepted the proposal.

After shaking hands with Mr Toodle and Polly, and kissing all the children, Miss Tox left the house, therefore, with unlimited popularity, and carrying away with her so light a heart that it might have given Mrs Chick offence if that good lady could have weighed it.

Rob the Grinder, in his modesty, would have walked behind, but Miss Tox desired him to keep beside her, for conversational purposes; and, as she afterwards expressed it to his mother, 'drew him out,' upon the road.

He drew out so bright, and clear, and shining, that Miss Tox was charmed with him. The more Miss Tox drew him out, the finer he

came - like wire. There never was a better or more promising youth - a more affectionate, steady, prudent, sober, honest, meek, candid young man - than Rob drew out, that night.

'I am quite glad,' said Miss Tox, arrived at her own door, 'to know you. I hope you'll consider me your friend, and that you'll come and see me as often as you like. Do you keep a money-box?'

'Yes, Ma'am,' returned Rob; 'I'm saving up, against I've got enough to put in the Bank, Ma'am.

'Very laudable indeed,' said Miss Tox. 'I'm glad to hear it. Put this half-crown into it, if you please.'

'Oh thank you, Ma'am,' replied Rob, 'but really I couldn't think of depriving you.'

'I commend your independent spirit,' said Miss Tox, 'but it's no deprivation, I assure you. I shall be offended if you don't take it, as a mark of my good-will. Good-night, Robin.'

'Good-night, Ma'am,' said Rob, 'and thank you!'

Who ran sniggering off to get change, and tossed it away with a pieman. But they never taught honour at the Grinders' School, where the system that prevailed was particularly strong in the engendering of hypocrisy. Insomuch, that many of the friends and masters of past Grinders said, if this were what came of education for the common people, let us have none. Some more rational said, let us have a better one. But the governing powers of the Grinders' Company were always ready for them, by picking out a few boys who had turned out well in spite of the system, and roundly asserting that they could have only turned out well because of it. Which settled the business of those objectors out of hand, and established the glory of the Grinders' Institution.