Chapter XXXIX - Further Adventures Of Captain Edward Cuttle, Mariner

Time, sure of foot and strong of will, had so pressed onward, that the year enjoined by the old Instrument-maker, as the term during which his friend should refrain from opening the sealed packet accompanying the letter he had left for him, was now nearly expired, and Captain Cuttle began to look at it, of an evening, with feelings of mystery and uneasiness

The Captain, in his honour, would as soon have thought of opening the parcel one hour before the expiration of the term, as he would have thought of opening himself, to study his own anatomy. He merely brought it out, at a certain stage of his first evening pipe, laid it on the table, and sat gazing at the outside of it, through the smoke, in silent gravity, for two or three hours at a spell. Sometimes, when he had contemplated it thus for a pretty long while, the Captain would hitch his chair, by degrees, farther and farther off, as if to get beyond the range of its fascination; but if this were his design, he never succeeded: for even when he was brought up by the parlour wall, the packet still attracted him; or if his eyes, in thoughtful wandering, roved to the ceiling or the fire, its image immediately followed, and posted itself conspicuously among the coals, or took up an advantageous position on the whitewash.

In respect of Heart's Delight, the Captain's parental and admiration knew no change. But since his last interview with Mr Carker, Captain Cuttle had come to entertain doubts whether his former intervention in behalf of that young lady and his dear boy Wal'r, had proved altogether so favourable as he could have wished, and as he at the time believed. The Captain was troubled with a serious misgiving that he had done more harm than good, in short; and in his remorse and modesty he made the best atonement he could think of, by putting himself out of the way of doing any harm to anyone, and, as it were, throwing himself overboard for a dangerous person.

Self-buried, therefore, among the instruments, the Captain never went near Mr Dombey's house, or reported himself in any way to Florence or Miss Nipper. He even severed himself from Mr Perch, on the occasion of his next visit, by dryly informing that gentleman, that he thanked him for his company, but had cut himself adrift from all such acquaintance, as he didn't know what magazine he mightn't blow up, without meaning of it. In this self-imposed retirement, the Captain passed whole days and weeks without interchanging a word with anyone but Rob the Grinder, whom he esteemed as a pattern of disinterested attachment and fidelity. In this retirement, the Captain, gazing at the packet of an evening, would sit smoking, and thinking of Florence and poor Walter, until they both seemed to his homely fancy

to be dead, and to have passed away into eternal youth, the beautiful and innocent children of his first remembrance.

The Captain did not, however, in his musings, neglect his own improvement, or the mental culture of Rob the Grinder. That young man was generally required to read out of some book to the Captain, for one hour, every evening; and as the Captain implicitly believed that all books were true, he accumulated, by this means, many remarkable facts. On Sunday nights, the Captain always read for himself, before going to bed, a certain Divine Sermon once delivered on a Mount; and although he was accustomed to quote the text, without book, after his own manner, he appeared to read it with as reverent an understanding of its heavenly spirit, as if he had got it all by heart in Greek, and had been able to write any number of fierce theological disquisitions on its every phrase.

Rob the Grinder, whose reverence for the inspired writings, under the admirable system of the Grinders' School, had been developed by a perpetual bruising of his intellectual shins against all the proper names of all the tribes of Judah, and by the monotonous repetition of hard verses, especially by way of punishment, and by the parading of him at six years old in leather breeches, three times a Sunday, very high up, in a very hot church, with a great organ buzzing against his drowsy head, like an exceedingly busy bee - Rob the Grinder made a mighty show of being edified when the Captain ceased to read, and generally yawned and nodded while the reading was in progress. The latter fact being never so much as suspected by the good Captain.

Captain Cuttle, also, as a man of business; took to keeping books. In these he entered observations on the weather, and on the currents of the waggons and other vehicles: which he observed, in that quarter, to set westward in the morning and during the greater part of the day, and eastward towards the evening. Two or three stragglers appearing in one week, who 'spoke him' - so the Captain entered it- on the subject of spectacles, and who, without positively purchasing, said they would look in again, the Captain decided that the business was improving, and made an entry in the day-book to that effect: the wind then blowing (which he first recorded) pretty fresh, west and by north; having changed in the night.

One of the Captain's chief difficulties was Mr Toots, who called frequently, and who without saying much seemed to have an idea that the little back parlour was an eligible room to chuckle in, as he would sit and avail himself of its accommodations in that regard by the half-hour together, without at all advancing in intimacy with the Captain. The Captain, rendered cautious by his late experience, was unable quite to satisfy his mind whether Mr Toots was the mild subject he appeared to be, or was a profoundly artful and dissimulating

hypocrite. His frequent reference to Miss Dombey was suspicious; but the Captain had a secret kindness for Mr Toots's apparent reliance on him, and forbore to decide against him for the present; merely eyeing him, with a sagacity not to be described, whenever he approached the subject that was nearest to his heart.

'Captain Gills,' blurted out Mr Toots, one day all at once, as his manner was, 'do you think you could think favourably of that proposition of mine, and give me the pleasure of your acquaintance?'

'Why, I tell you what it is, my lad,' replied the Captain, who had at length concluded on a course of action; 'I've been turning that there, over.'

'Captain Gills, it's very kind of you,' retorted Mr Toots. 'I'm much obliged to you. Upon my word and honour, Captain Gills, it would be a charity to give me the pleasure of your acquaintance. It really would.'

'You see, brother,' argued the Captain slowly, 'I don't know you.

'But you never can know me, Captain Gills,' replied Mr Toots, steadfast to his point, 'if you don't give me the pleasure of your acquaintance.

The Captain seemed struck by the originality and power of this remark, and looked at Mr Toots as if he thought there was a great deal more in him than he had expected.

'Well said, my lad,' observed the Captain, nodding his head thoughtfully; 'and true. Now look'ee here: You've made some observations to me, which gives me to understand as you admire a certain sweet creetur. Hey?'

'Captain Gills,' said Mr Toots, gesticulating violently with the hand in which he held his hat, 'Admiration is not the word. Upon my honour, you have no conception what my feelings are. If I could be dyed black, and made Miss Dombey's slave, I should consider it a compliment. If, at the sacrifice of all my property, I could get transmigrated into Miss Dombey's dog - I - I really think I should never leave off wagging my tail. I should be so perfectly happy, Captain Gills!'

Mr Toots said it with watery eyes, and pressed his hat against his bosom with deep emotion.

'My lad,' returned the Captain, moved to compassion, 'if you're in arnest -

'Captain Gills,' cried Mr Toots, 'I'm in such a state of mind, and am so dreadfully in earnest, that if I could swear to it upon a hot piece of iron, or a live coal, or melted lead, or burning sealing-wax, Or anything of that sort, I should be glad to hurt myself, as a relief to my feelings.' And Mr Toots looked hurriedly about the room, as if for some sufficiently painful means of accomplishing his dread purpose.

The Captain pushed his glazed hat back upon his head, stroked his face down with his heavy hand - making his nose more mottled in the process - and planting himself before Mr Toots, and hooking him by the lapel of his coat, addressed him in these words, while Mr Toots looked up into his face, with much attention and some wonder.

'If you're in arnest, you see, my lad,' said the Captain, 'you're a object of clemency, and clemency is the brightest jewel in the crown of a Briton's head, for which you'll overhaul the constitution as laid down in Rule Britannia, and, when found, that is the charter as them garden angels was a singing of, so many times over. Stand by! This here proposal o' you'rn takes me a little aback. And why? Because I holds my own only, you understand, in these here waters, and haven't got no consort, and may be don't wish for none. Steady! You hailed me first, along of a certain young lady, as you was chartered by. Now if you and me is to keep one another's company at all, that there young creetur's name must never be named nor referred to. I don't know what harm mayn't have been done by naming of it too free, afore now, and thereby I brings up short. D'ye make me out pretty clear, brother?'

'Well, you'll excuse me, Captain Gills,' replied Mr Toots, 'if I don't quite follow you sometimes. But upon my word I - it's a hard thing, Captain Gills, not to be able to mention Miss Dombey. I really have got such a dreadful load here!' - Mr Toots pathetically touched his shirt-front with both hands - 'that I feel night and day, exactly as if somebody was sitting upon me.

'Them,' said the Captain, 'is the terms I offer. If they're hard upon you, brother, as mayhap they are, give 'em a wide berth, sheer off, and part company cheerily!'

'Captain Gills,' returned Mr Toots, 'I hardly know how it is, but after what you told me when I came here, for the first time, I - I feel that I'd rather think about Miss Dombey in your society than talk about her in almost anybody else's. Therefore, Captain Gills, if you'll give me the pleasure of your acquaintance, I shall be very happy to accept it on your own conditions. I wish to be honourable, Captain Gills,' said Mr Toots, holding back his extended hand for a moment, 'and therefore I am obliged to say that I can not help thinking about Miss Dombey. It's impossible for me to make a promise not to think about her.'

'My lad,' said the Captain, whose opinion of Mr Toots was much improved by this candid avowal, 'a man's thoughts is like the winds, and nobody can't answer for 'em for certain, any length of time together. Is it a treaty as to words?'

'As to words, Captain Gills,' returned Mr Toots, 'I think I can bind myself.'

Mr Toots gave Captain Cuttle his hand upon it, then and there; and the Captain with a pleasant and gracious show of condescension, bestowed his acquaintance upon him formally. Mr Toots seemed much relieved and gladdened by the acquisition, and chuckled rapturously during the remainder of his visit. The Captain, for his part, was not ill pleased to occupy that position of patronage, and was exceedingly well satisfied by his own prudence and foresight.

But rich as Captain Cuttle was in the latter quality, he received a surprise that same evening from a no less ingenuous and simple youth, than Rob the Grinder. That artless lad, drinking tea at the same table, and bending meekly over his cup and saucer, having taken sidelong observations of his master for some time, who was reading the newspaper with great difficulty, but much dignity, through his glasses, broke silence by saying -

'Oh! I beg your pardon, Captain, but you mayn't be in want of any pigeons, may you, Sir?'

'No, my lad,' replied the Captain.

'Because I was wishing to dispose of mine, Captain,' said Rob.

'Ay, ay?' cried the Captain, lifting up his bushy eyebrows a little.

'Yes; I'm going, Captain, if you please,' said Rob.

'Going? Where are you going?' asked the Captain, looking round at him over the glasses.

'What? didn't you know that I was going to leave you, Captain?' asked Rob, with a sneaking smile.

The Captain put down the paper, took off his spectacles, and brought his eyes to bear on the deserter.

'Oh yes, Captain, I am going to give you warning. I thought you'd have known that beforehand, perhaps,' said Rob, rubbing his hands, and getting up. 'If you could be so good as provide yourself soon, Captain,

it would be a great convenience to me. You couldn't provide yourself by to-morrow morning, I am afraid, Captain: could you, do you think?'

'And you're a going to desert your colours, are you, my lad?' said the Captain, after a long examination of his face.

'Oh, it's very hard upon a cove, Captain,' cried the tender Rob, injured and indignant in a moment, 'that he can't give lawful warning, without being frowned at in that way, and called a deserter. You haven't any right to call a poor cove names, Captain. It ain't because I'm a servant and you're a master, that you're to go and libel me. What wrong have I done? Come, Captain, let me know what my crime is, will you?'

The stricken Grinder wept, and put his coat-cuff in his eye.

'Come, Captain,' cried the injured youth, 'give my crime a name! What have I been and done? Have I stolen any of the property? have I set the house a-fire? If I have, why don't you give me in charge, and try it? But to take away the character of a lad that's been a good servant to you, because he can't afford to stand in his own light for your good, what a injury it is, and what a bad return for faithful service! This is the way young coves is spiled and drove wrong. I wonder at you, Captain, I do.'

All of which the Grinder howled forth in a lachrymose whine, and backing carefully towards the door.

'And so you've got another berth, have you, my lad?' said the Captain, eyeing him intently.

'Yes, Captain, since you put it in that shape, I have got another berth,' cried Rob, backing more and more; 'a better berth than I've got here, and one where I don't so much as want your good word, Captain, which is fort'nate for me, after all the dirt you've throw'd at me, because I'm poor, and can't afford to stand in my own light for your good. Yes, I have got another berth; and if it wasn't for leaving you unprovided, Captain, I'd go to it now, sooner than I'd take them names from you, because I'm poor, and can't afford to stand in my own light for your good. Why do you reproach me for being poor, and not standing in my own light for your good, Captain? How can you so demean yourself?'

'Look ye here, my boy,' replied the peaceful Captain. 'Don't you pay out no more of them words.'

'Well, then, don't you pay in no more of your words, Captain,' retorted the roused innocent, getting louder in his whine, and backing into the shop. 'I'd sooner you took my blood than my character.'

'Because,' pursued the Captain calmly, 'you have heerd, may be, of such a thing as a rope's end.'

'Oh, have I though, Captain?' cried the taunting Grinder. 'No I haven't. I never heerd of any such a article!'

'Well,' said the Captain, 'it's my belief as you'll know more about it pretty soon, if you don't keep a bright look-out. I can read your signals, my lad. You may go.'

'Oh! I may go at once, may I, Captain?' cried Rob, exulting in his success. 'But mind! I never asked to go at once, Captain. You are not to take away my character again, because you send me off of your own accord. And you're not to stop any of my wages, Captain!'

His employer settled the last point by producing the tin canister and telling the Grinder's money out in full upon the table. Rob, snivelling and sobbing, and grievously wounded in his feelings, took up the pieces one by one, with a sob and a snivel for each, and tied them up separately in knots in his pockethandkerchief; then he ascended to the roof of the house and filled his hat and pockets with pigeons; then, came down to his bed under the counter and made up his bundle, snivelling and sobbing louder, as if he were cut to the heart by old associations; then he whined, 'Good-night, Captain. I leave you without malice!' and then, going out upon the door-step, pulled the little Midshipman's nose as a parting indignity, and went away down the street grinning triumphantly.

The Captain, left to himself, resumed his perusal of the news as if nothing unusual or unexpected had taken place, and went reading on with the greatest assiduity. But never a word did Captain Cuttle understand, though he read a vast number, for Rob the Grinder was scampering up one column and down another all through the newspaper.

It is doubtful whether the worthy Captain had ever felt himself quite abandoned until now; but now, old Sol Gills, Walter, and Heart's Delight were lost to him indeed, and now Mr Carker deceived and jeered him cruelly. They were all represented in the false Rob, to whom he had held forth many a time on the recollections that were warm within him; he had believed in the false Rob, and had been glad to believe in him; he had made a companion of him as the last of the old ship's company; he had taken the command of the little Midshipman with him at his right hand; he had meant to do his duty by him, and had felt almost as kindly towards the boy as if they had been shipwrecked and cast upon a desert place together. And now, that the false Rob had brought distrust, treachery, and meanness into the very parlour, which was a kind of sacred place, Captain Cuttle felt

as if the parlour might have gone down next, and not surprised him much by its sinking, or given him any very great concern.

Therefore Captain Cuttle read the newspaper with profound attention and no comprehension, and therefore Captain Cuttle said nothing whatever about Rob to himself, or admitted to himself that he was thinking about him, or would recognise in the most distant manner that Rob had anything to do with his feeling as lonely as Robinson Crusoe.

In the same composed, business-like way, the Captain stepped over to Leadenhall Market in the dusk, and effected an arrangement with a private watchman on duty there, to come and put up and take down the shutters of the wooden Midshipman every night and morning. He then called in at the eating-house to diminish by one half the daily rations theretofore supplied to the Midshipman, and at the public-house to stop the traitor's beer. 'My young man,' said the Captain, in explanation to the young lady at the bar, 'my young man having bettered himself, Miss.' Lastly, the Captain resolved to take possession of the bed under the counter, and to turn in there o' nights instead of upstairs, as sole guardian of the property.

From this bed Captain Cuttle daily rose thenceforth, and clapped on his glazed hat at six o'clock in the morning, with the solitary air of Crusoe finishing his toilet with his goat-skin cap; and although his fears of a visitation from the savage tribe, MacStinger, were somewhat cooled, as similar apprehensions on the part of that lone mariner used to be by the lapse of a long interval without any symptoms of the cannibals, he still observed a regular routine of defensive operations, and never encountered a bonnet without previous survey from his castle of retreat. In the meantime (during which he received no call from Mr Toots, who wrote to say he was out of town) his own voice began to have a strange sound in his ears; and he acquired such habits of profound meditation from much polishing and stowing away of the stock, and from much sitting behind the counter reading, or looking out of window, that the red rim made on his forehead by the hard glazed hat, sometimes ached again with excess of reflection.

The year being now expired, Captain Cuttle deemed it expedient to open the packet; but as he had always designed doing this in the presence of Rob the Grinder, who had brought it to him, and as he had an idea that it would be regular and ship-shape to open it in the presence of somebody, he was sadly put to it for want of a witness. In this difficulty, he hailed one day with unusual delight the announcement in the Shipping Intelligence of the arrival of the Cautious Clara, Captain John Bunsby, from a coasting voyage; and to that philosopher immediately dispatched a letter by post, enjoining

inviolable secrecy as to his place of residence, and requesting to be favoured with an early visit, in the evening season.

Bunsby, who was one of those sages who act upon conviction, took some days to get the conviction thoroughly into his mind, that he had received a letter to this effect. But when he had grappled with the fact, and mastered it, he promptly sent his boy with the message, 'He's a coming to-night.' Who being instructed to deliver those words and disappear, fulfilled his mission like a tarry spirit, charged with a mysterious warning.

The Captain, well pleased to receive it, made preparation of pipes and rum and water, and awaited his visitor in the back parlour. At the hour of eight, a deep lowing, as of a nautical Bull, outside the shop-door, succeeded by the knocking of a stick on the panel, announced to the listening ear of Captain Cuttle, that Bunsby was alongside; whom he instantly admitted, shaggy and loose, and with his stolid mahogany visage, as usual, appearing to have no consciousness of anything before it, but to be attentively observing something that was taking place in quite another part of the world.

'Bunsby,' said the Captain, grasping him by the hand, 'what cheer, my lad, what cheer?'

'Shipmet,' replied the voice within Bunsby, unaccompanied by any sign on the part of the Commander himself, 'hearty, hearty.'

'Bunsby!' said the Captain, rendering irrepressible homage to his genius, 'here you are! a man as can give an opinion as is brighter than di'monds - and give me the lad with the tarry trousers as shines to me like di'monds bright, for which you'll overhaul the Stanfell's Budget, and when found make a note.' Here you are, a man as gave an opinion in this here very place, that has come true, every letter on it,' which the Captain sincerely believed.

'Ay, ay?' growled Bunsby.

'Every letter,' said the Captain.

'For why?' growled Bunsby, looking at his friend for the first time. 'Which way? If so, why not? Therefore.' With these oracular words - they seemed almost to make the Captain giddy; they launched him upon such a sea of speculation and conjecture - the sage submitted to be helped off with his pilot-coat, and accompanied his friend into the back parlour, where his hand presently alighted on the rum-bottle, from which he brewed a stiff glass of grog; and presently afterwards on a pipe, which he filled, lighted, and began to smoke.

Captain Cuttle, imitating his visitor in the matter of these particulars, though the rapt and imperturbable manner of the great Commander was far above his powers, sat in the opposite corner of the fireside, observing him respectfully, and as if he waited for some encouragement or expression of curiosity on Bunsby's part which should lead him to his own affairs. But as the mahogany philosopher gave no evidence of being sentient of anything but warmth and tobacco, except once, when taking his pipe from his lips to make room for his glass, he incidentally remarked with exceeding gruffness, that his name was Jack Bunsby - a declaration that presented but small opening for conversation - the Captain bespeaking his attention in a short complimentary exordium, narrated the whole history of Uncle Sol's departure, with the change it had produced in his own life and fortunes; and concluded by placing the packet on the table.

After a long pause, Mr Bunsby nodded his head.

'Open?' said the Captain.

Bunsby nodded again.

The Captain accordingly broke the seal, and disclosed to view two folded papers, of which he severally read the endorsements, thus: 'Last Will and Testament of Solomon Gills.' 'Letter for Ned Cuttle.'

Bunsby, with his eye on the coast of Greenland, seemed to listen for the contents. The Captain therefore hemmed to clear his throat, and read the letter aloud.

'‘My dear Ned Cuttle. When I left home for the West Indies’ - '

Here the Captain stopped, and looked hard at Bunsby, who looked fixedly at the coast of Greenland.

' - ‘in forlorn search of intelligence of my dear boy, I knew that if you were acquainted with my design, you would thwart it, or accompany me; and therefore I kept it secret. If you ever read this letter, Ned, I am likely to be dead. You will easily forgive an old friend's folly then, and will feel for the restlessness and uncertainty in which he wandered away on such a wild voyage. So no more of that. I have little hope that my poor boy will ever read these words, or gladden your eyes with the sight of his frank face any more.’ No, no; no more,' said Captain Cuttle, sorrowfully meditating; 'no more. There he lays, all his days - '

Mr Bunsby, who had a musical ear, suddenly bellowed, 'In the Bays of Biscay, O!' which so affected the good Captain, as an appropriate tribute to departed worth, that he shook him by the hand in acknowledgment, and was fain to wipe his eyes.

'Well, well!' said the Captain with a sigh, as the Lament of Bunsby ceased to ring and vibrate in the skylight. 'Affliction sore, long time he bore, and let us overhaul the wollume, and there find it.'

'Physicians,' observed Bunsby, 'was in vain.'

'Ay, ay, to be sure,' said the Captain, 'what's the good o' them in two or three hundred fathoms o' water!' Then, returning to the letter, he read on: - '"But if he should be by, when it is opened;" the Captain involuntarily looked round, and shook his head; '"or should know of it at any other time;" the Captain shook his head again; '"my blessing on him! In case the accompanying paper is not legally written, it matters very little, for there is no one interested but you and he, and my plain wish is, that if he is living he should have what little there may be, and if (as I fear) otherwise, that you should have it, Ned. You will respect my wish, I know. God bless you for it, and for all your friendliness besides, to Solomon Gills.' Bunsby!' said the Captain, appealing to him solemnly, 'what do you make of this? There you sit, a man as has had his head broke from infancy up'ards, and has got a new opinion into it at every seam as has been opened. Now, what do you make o' this?'

'If so be,' returned Bunsby, with unusual promptitude, 'as he's dead, my opinion is he won't come back no more. If so be as he's alive, my opinion is he will. Do I say he will? No. Why not? Because the bearings of this obserwation lays in the application on it.'

'Bunsby!' said Captain Cuttle, who would seem to have estimated the value of his distinguished friend's opinions in proportion to the immensity of the difficulty he experienced in making anything out of them; 'Bunsby,' said the Captain, quite confounded by admiration, 'you carry a weight of mind easy, as would swamp one of my tonnage soon. But in regard o' this here will, I don't mean to take no steps towards the property - Lord forbid! - except to keep it for a more rightful owner; and I hope yet as the rightful owner, Sol Gills, is living and'll come back, strange as it is that he ain't forwarded no dispatches. Now, what is your opinion, Bunsby, as to stowing of these here papers away again, and marking outside as they was opened, such a day, in the presence of John Bunsby and Ed'ard Cuttle?'

Bunsby, descrying no objection, on the coast of Greenland or elsewhere, to this proposal, it was carried into execution; and that great man, bringing his eye into the present for a moment, affixed his sign-manual to the cover, totally abstaining, with characteristic modesty, from the use of capital letters. Captain Cuttle, having attached his own left-handed signature, and locked up the packet in the iron safe, entreated his guest to mix another glass and smoke

another pipe; and doing the like himself, fell a musing over the fire on the possible fortunes of the poor old Instrument-maker.

And now a surprise occurred, so overwhelming and terrific that Captain Cuttle, unsupported by the presence of Bunsby, must have sunk beneath it, and been a lost man from that fatal hour.

How the Captain, even in the satisfaction of admitting such a guest, could have only shut the door, and not locked it, of which negligence he was undoubtedly guilty, is one of those questions that must for ever remain mere points of speculation, or vague charges against destiny. But by that unlocked door, at this quiet moment, did the fell MacStinger dash into the parlour, bringing Alexander MacStinger in her parental arms, and confusion and vengeance (not to mention Juliana MacStinger, and the sweet child's brother, Charles MacStinger, popularly known about the scenes of his youthful sports, as Chowley) in her train. She came so swiftly and so silently, like a rushing air from the neighbourhood of the East India Docks, that Captain Cuttle found himself in the very act of sitting looking at her, before the calm face with which he had been meditating, changed to one of horror and dismay.

But the moment Captain Cuttle understood the full extent of his misfortune, self-preservation dictated an attempt at flight. Darting at the little door which opened from the parlour on the steep little range of cellar-steps, the Captain made a rush, head-foremost, at the latter, like a man indifferent to bruises and contusions, who only sought to hide himself in the bowels of the earth. In this gallant effort he would probably have succeeded, but for the affectionate dispositions of Juliana and Chowley, who pinning him by the legs - one of those dear children holding on to each - claimed him as their friend, with lamentable cries. In the meantime, Mrs MacStinger, who never entered upon any action of importance without previously inverting Alexander MacStinger, to bring him within the range of a brisk battery of slaps, and then sitting him down to cool as the reader first beheld him, performed that solemn rite, as if on this occasion it were a sacrifice to the Furies; and having deposited the victim on the floor, made at the Captain with a strength of purpose that appeared to threaten scratches to the interposing Bunsby.

The cries of the two elder MacStingers, and the wailing of young Alexander, who may be said to have passed a piebald childhood, forasmuch as he was black in the face during one half of that fairy period of existence, combined to make this visitation the more awful. But when silence reigned again, and the Captain, in a violent perspiration, stood meekly looking at Mrs MacStinger, its terrors were at their height.

'Oh, Cap'en Cuttle, Cap'en Cuttle!' said Mrs MacStinger, making her chin rigid, and shaking it in unison with what, but for the weakness of her sex, might be described as her fist. 'Oh, Cap'en Cuttle, Cap'en Cuttle, do you dare to look me in the face, and not be struck down in the herth!'

The Captain, who looked anything but daring, feebly muttered 'Standby!'

'Oh I was a weak and trusting Fool when I took you under my roof, Cap'en Cuttle, I was!' cried Mrs MacStinger. 'To think of the benefits I've showered on that man, and the way in which I brought my children up to love and honour him as if he was a father to 'em, when there ain't a housekeeper, no nor a lodger in our street, don't know that I lost money by that man, and by his guzzlings and his muzzlings' - Mrs MacStinger used the last word for the joint sake of alliteration and aggravation, rather than for the expression of any idea - 'and when they cried out one and all, shame upon him for putting upon an industrious woman, up early and late for the good of her young family, and keeping her poor place so clean that a individual might have ate his dinner, yes, and his tea too, if he was so disposed, off any one of the floors or stairs, in spite of all his guzzlings and his muzzlings, such was the care and pains bestowed upon him!'

Mrs MacStinger stopped to fetch her breath; and her face flushed with triumph in this second happy introduction of Captain Cuttle's muzzlings.

'And he runs awa-a-a-y!'cried Mrs MacStinger, with a lengthening out of the last syllable that made the unfortunate Captain regard himself as the meanest of men; 'and keeps away a twelve-month! From a woman! Such is his conscience! He hasn't the courage to meet her hi-i-igh;' long syllable again; 'but steals away, like a felion. Why, if that baby of mine,' said Mrs MacStinger, with sudden rapidity, 'was to offer to go and steal away, I'd do my duty as a mother by him, till he was covered with wales!'

The young Alexander, interpreting this into a positive promise, to be shortly redeemed, tumbled over with fear and grief, and lay upon the floor, exhibiting the soles of his shoes and making such a deafening outcry, that Mrs MacStinger found it necessary to take him up in her arms, where she quieted him, ever and anon, as he broke out again, by a shake that seemed enough to loosen his teeth.

'A pretty sort of a man is Cap'en Cuttle,' said Mrs MacStinger, with a sharp stress on the first syllable of the Captain's name, 'to take on for - and to lose sleep for- and to faint along of- and to think dead forsooth - and to go up and down the blessed town like a madwoman,

asking questions after! Oh, a pretty sort of a man! Ha ha ha ha! He's worth all that trouble and distress of mind, and much more. That's nothing, bless you! Ha ha ha ha! Cap'en Cuttle,' said Mrs MacStinger, with severe reaction in her voice and manner, 'I wish to know if you're a-coming home.

The frightened Captain looked into his hat, as if he saw nothing for it but to put it on, and give himself up.

'Cap'en Cuttle,' repeated Mrs MacStinger, in the same determined manner, 'I wish to know if you're a-coming home, Sir.'

The Captain seemed quite ready to go, but faintly suggested something to the effect of 'not making so much noise about it.'

'Ay, ay, ay,' said Bunsby, in a soothing tone. 'Awast, my lass, awast!'

'And who may you be, if you please!' retorted Mrs MacStinger, with chaste loftiness. 'Did you ever lodge at Number Nine, Brig Place, Sir? My memory may be bad, but not with me, I think. There was a Mrs Jollson lived at Number Nine before me, and perhaps you're mistaking me for her. That is my only ways of accounting for your familiarity, Sir.'

'Come, come, my lass, awast, awast!' said Bunsby.

Captain Cuttle could hardly believe it, even of this great man, though he saw it done with his waking eyes; but Bunsby, advancing boldly, put his shaggy blue arm round Mrs MacStinger, and so softened her by his magic way of doing it, and by these few words - he said no more - that she melted into tears, after looking upon him for a few moments, and observed that a child might conquer her now, she was so low in her courage.

Speechless and utterly amazed, the Captain saw him gradually persuade this inexorable woman into the shop, return for rum and water and a candle, take them to her, and pacify her without appearing to utter one word. Presently he looked in with his pilot-coat on, and said, 'Cuttle, I'm a-going to act as convoy home;' and Captain Cuttle, more to his confusion than if he had been put in irons himself, for safe transport to Brig Place, saw the family pacifically filing off, with Mrs MacStinger at their head. He had scarcely time to take down his canister, and stealthily convey some money into the hands of Juliana MacStinger, his former favourite, and Chowley, who had the claim upon him that he was naturally of a maritime build, before the Midshipman was abandoned by them all; and Bunsby whispering that he'd carry on smart, and hail Ned Cuttle again before he went aboard, shut the door upon himself, as the last member of the party.

Some uneasy ideas that he must be walking in his sleep, or that he had been troubled with phantoms, and not a family of flesh and blood, beset the Captain at first, when he went back to the little parlour, and found himself alone. Illimitable faith in, and immeasurable admiration of, the Commander of the Cautious Clara, succeeded, and threw the Captain into a wondering trance.

Still, as time wore on, and Bunsby failed to reappear, the Captain began to entertain uncomfortable doubts of another kind. Whether Bunsby had been artfully decoyed to Brig Place, and was there detained in safe custody as hostage for his friend; in which case it would become the Captain, as a man of honour, to release him, by the sacrifice of his own liberty. Whether he had been attacked and defeated by Mrs MacStinger, and was ashamed to show himself after his discomfiture. Whether Mrs MacStinger, thinking better of it, in the uncertainty of her temper, had turned back to board the Midshipman again, and Bunsby, pretending to conduct her by a short cut, was endeavouring to lose the family amid the wilds and savage places of the City. Above all, what it would behove him, Captain Cuttle, to do, in case of his hearing no more, either of the MacStingers or of Bunsby, which, in these wonderful and unforeseen conjunctions of events, might possibly happen.

He debated all this until he was tired; and still no Bunsby. He made up his bed under the counter, all ready for turning in; and still no Bunsby. At length, when the Captain had given him up, for that night at least, and had begun to undress, the sound of approaching wheels was heard, and, stopping at the door, was succeeded by Bunsby's hail.

The Captain trembled to think that Mrs MacStinger was not to be got rid of, and had been brought back in a coach.

But no. Bunsby was accompanied by nothing but a large box, which he hauled into the shop with his own hands, and as soon as he had hauled in, sat upon. Captain Cuttle knew it for the chest he had left at Mrs MacStinger's house, and looking, candle in hand, at Bunsby more attentively, believed that he was three sheets in the wind, or, in plain words, drunk. It was difficult, however, to be sure of this; the Commander having no trace of expression in his face when sober.

'Cuttle,' said the Commander, getting off the chest, and opening the lid, 'are these here your traps?'

Captain Cuttle looked in and identified his property.

'Done pretty taut and trim, hey, shipmet?' said Bunsby.

The grateful and bewildered Captain grasped him by the hand, and was launching into a reply expressive of his astonished feelings, when Bunsby disengaged himself by a jerk of his wrist, and seemed to make an effort to wink with his revolving eye, the only effect of which attempt, in his condition, was nearly to over-balance him. He then abruptly opened the door, and shot away to rejoin the Cautious Clara with all speed - supposed to be his invariable custom, whenever he considered he had made a point.

As it was not his humour to be often sought, Captain Cuttle decided not to go or send to him next day, or until he should make his gracious pleasure known in such wise, or failing that, until some little time should have lapsed. The Captain, therefore, renewed his solitary life next morning, and thought profoundly, many mornings, noons, and nights, of old Sol Gills, and Bunsby's sentiments concerning him, and the hopes there were of his return. Much of such thinking strengthened Captain Cuttle's hopes; and he humoured them and himself by watching for the Instrument-maker at the door - as he ventured to do now, in his strange liberty - and setting his chair in its place, and arranging the little parlour as it used to be, in case he should come home unexpectedly. He likewise, in his thoughtfulness, took down a certain little miniature of Walter as a schoolboy, from its accustomed nail, lest it should shock the old man on his return. The Captain had his presentiments, too, sometimes, that he would come on such a day; and one particular Sunday, even ordered a double allowance of dinner, he was so sanguine. But come, old Solomon did not; and still the neighbours noticed how the seafaring man in the glazed hat, stood at the shop-door of an evening, looking up and down the street.