

## Chapter XLI - New Voices in the Waves

All is going on as it was wont. The waves are hoarse with repetition of their mystery; the dust lies piled upon the shore; the sea-birds soar and hover; the winds and clouds go forth upon their trackless flight; the white arms beckon, in the moonlight, to the invisible country far away.

With a tender melancholy pleasure, Florence finds herself again on the old ground so sadly trodden, yet so happily, and thinks of him in the quiet place, where he and she have many and many a time conversed together, with the water welling up about his couch. And now, as she sits pensive there, she hears in the wild low murmur of the sea, his little story told again, his very words repeated; and finds that all her life and hopes, and griefs, since - in the solitary house, and in the pageant it has changed to - have a portion in the burden of the marvellous song.

And gentle Mr Toots, who wanders at a distance, looking wistfully towards the figure that he dotes upon, and has followed there, but cannot in his delicacy disturb at such a time, likewise hears the requiem of little Dombey on the waters, rising and falling in the lulls of their eternal madrigal in praise of Florence. Yes! and he faintly understands, poor Mr Toots, that they are saying something of a time when he was sensible of being brighter and not addle-brained; and the tears rising in his eyes when he fears that he is dull and stupid now, and good for little but to be laughed at, diminish his satisfaction in their soothing reminder that he is relieved from present responsibility to the Chicken, by the absence of that game head of poultry in the country, training (at Toots's cost) for his great mill with the Larkey Boy.

But Mr Toots takes courage, when they whisper a kind thought to him; and by slow degrees and with many indecisive stoppages on the way, approaches Florence. Stammering and blushing, Mr Toots affects amazement when he comes near her, and says (having followed close on the carriage in which she travelled, every inch of the way from London, loving even to be choked by the dust of its wheels) that he never was so surprised in all his life.

'And you've brought Diogenes, too, Miss Dombey!' says Mr Toots, thrilled through and through by the touch of the small hand so pleasantly and frankly given him.

No doubt Diogenes is there, and no doubt Mr Toots has reason to observe him, for he comes straightway at Mr Toots's legs, and tumbles over himself in the desperation with which he makes at him, like a very dog of Montargis. But he is checked by his sweet mistress.

'Down, Di, down. Don't you remember who first made us friends, Di? For shame!'

Oh! Well may Di lay his loving cheek against her hand, and run off, and run back, and run round her, barking, and run headlong at anybody coming by, to show his devotion. Mr Toots would run headlong at anybody, too. A military gentleman goes past, and Mr Toots would like nothing better than to run at him, full tilt.

'Diogenes is quite in his native air, isn't he, Miss Dombey?' says Mr Toots.

Florence assents, with a grateful smile.

'Miss Dombey,' says Mr Toots, 'beg your pardon, but if you would like to walk to Blimber's, I - I'm going there.'

Florence puts her arm in that of Mr Toots without a word, and they walk away together, with Diogenes going on before. Mr Toots's legs shake under him; and though he is splendidly dressed, he feels misfits, and sees wrinkles, in the masterpieces of Burgess and Co., and wishes he had put on that brightest pair of boots.

Doctor Blimber's house, outside, has as scholastic and studious an air as ever; and up there is the window where she used to look for the pale face, and where the pale face brightened when it saw her, and the wasted little hand waved kisses as she passed. The door is opened by the same weak-eyed young man, whose imbecility of grin at sight of Mr Toots is febleness of character personified. They are shown into the Doctor's study, where blind Homer and Minerva give them audience as of yore, to the sober ticking of the great clock in the hall; and where the globes stand still in their accustomed places, as if the world were stationary too, and nothing in it ever perished in obedience to the universal law, that, while it keeps it on the roll, calls everything to earth.

And here is Doctor Blimber, with his learned legs; and here is Mrs Blimber, with her sky-blue cap; and here Cornelia, with her sandy little row of curls, and her bright spectacles, still working like a sexton in the graves of languages. Here is the table upon which he sat forlorn and strange, the 'new boy' of the school; and hither comes the distant cooing of the old boys, at their old lives in the old room on the old principle!

'Toots,' says Doctor Blimber, 'I am very glad to see you, Toots.'

Mr Toots chuckles in reply.

'Also to see you, Toots, in such good company,' says Doctor Blimber.

Mr Toots, with a scarlet visage, explains that he has met Miss Dombey by accident, and that Miss Dombey wishing, like himself, to see the old place, they have come together.

'You will like,' says Doctor Blimber, 'to step among our young friends, Miss Dombey, no doubt. All fellow-students of yours, Toots, once. I think we have no new disciples in our little portico, my dear,' says Doctor Blimber to Cornelia, 'since Mr Toots left us.'

'Except Bitherstone,' returns Cornelia.

'Ay, truly,' says the Doctor. 'Bitherstone is new to Mr Toots.'

New to Florence, too, almost; for, in the schoolroom, Bitherstone - no longer Master Bitherstone of Mrs Pipchin's - shows in collars and a neckcloth, and wears a watch. But Bitherstone, born beneath some Bengal star of ill-omen, is extremely inky; and his Lexicon has got so dropsical from constant reference, that it won't shut, and yawns as if it really could not bear to be so bothered. So does Bitherstone its master, forced at Doctor Blimber's highest pressure; but in the yawn of Bitherstone there is malice and snarl, and he has been heard to say that he wishes he could catch 'old Blimber' in India. He'd precious soon find himself carried up the country by a few of his (Bitherstone's) Coolies, and handed over to the Thugs; he can tell him that.

Briggs is still grinding in the mill of knowledge; and Tozer, too; and Johnson, too; and all the rest; the older pupils being principally engaged in forgetting, with prodigious labour, everything they knew when they were younger. All are as polite and as pale as ever; and among them, Mr Feeder, B.A., with his bony hand and bristly head, is still hard at it; with his Herodotus stop on just at present, and his other barrels on a shelf behind him.

A mighty sensation is created, even among these grave young gentlemen, by a visit from the emancipated Toots; who is regarded with a kind of awe, as one who has passed the Rubicon, and is pledged never to come back, and concerning the cut of whose clothes, and fashion of whose jewellery, whispers go about, behind hands; the bilious Bitherstone, who is not of Mr Toots's time, affecting to despise the latter to the smaller boys, and saying he knows better, and that he should like to see him coming that sort of thing in Bengal, where his mother had got an emerald belonging to him that was taken out of the footstool of a Rajah. Come now!

Bewildering emotions are awakened also by the sight of Florence, with whom every young gentleman immediately falls in love, again; except,

as aforesaid, the bilious Bitherstone, who declines to do so, out of contradiction. Black jealousies of Mr Toots arise, and Briggs is of opinion that he ain't so very old after all. But this disparaging insinuation is speedily made nought by Mr Toots saying aloud to Mr Feeder, B.A., 'How are you, Feeder?' and asking him to come and dine with him to-day at the Bedford; in right of which feats he might set up as Old Parr, if he chose, unquestioned.

There is much shaking of hands, and much bowing, and a great desire on the part of each young gentleman to take Toots down in Miss Dombey's good graces; and then, Mr Toots having bestowed a chuckle on his old desk, Florence and he withdraw with Mrs Blimber and Cornelia; and Doctor Blimber is heard to observe behind them as he comes out last, and shuts the door, 'Gentlemen, we will now resume our studies,' For that and little else is what the Doctor hears the sea say, or has heard it saying all his life.

Florence then steals away and goes upstairs to the old bedroom with Mrs Blimber and Cornelia; Mr Toots, who feels that neither he nor anybody else is wanted there, stands talking to the Doctor at the study-door, or rather hearing the Doctor talk to him, and wondering how he ever thought the study a great sanctuary, and the Doctor, with his round turned legs, like a clerical pianoforte, an awful man. Florence soon comes down and takes leave; Mr Toots takes leave; and Diogenes, who has been worrying the weak-eyed young man pitilessly all the time, shoots out at the door, and barks a glad defiance down the cliff; while Melia, and another of the Doctor's female domestics, looks out of an upper window, laughing 'at that there Toots,' and saying of Miss Dombey, 'But really though, now - ain't she like her brother, only prettier?'

Mr Toots, who saw when Florence came down that there were tears upon her face, is desperately anxious and uneasy, and at first fears that he did wrong in proposing the visit. But he is soon relieved by her saying she is very glad to have been there again, and by her talking quite cheerfully about it all, as they walked on by the sea. What with the voices there, and her sweet voice, when they come near Mr Dombey's house, and Mr Toots must leave her, he is so enslaved that he has not a scrap of free-will left; when she gives him her hand at parting, he cannot let it go.

'Miss Dombey, I beg your pardon,' says Mr Toots, in a sad fluster, 'but if you would allow me to - to -'

The smiling and unconscious look of Florence brings him to a dead stop.

'If you would allow me to - if you would not consider it a liberty, Miss Dombey, if I was to - without any encouragement at all, if I was to hope, you know,' says Mr Toots.

Florence looks at him inquiringly.

'Miss Dombey,' says Mr Toots, who feels that he is in for it now, 'I really am in that state of adoration of you that I don't know what to do with myself. I am the most deplorable wretch. If it wasn't at the corner of the Square at present, I should go down on my knees, and beg and entreat of you, without any encouragement at all, just to let me hope that I may - may think it possible that you -

'Oh, if you please, don't!' cries Florence, for the moment quite alarmed and distressed. 'Oh, pray don't, Mr Toots. Stop, if you please. Don't say any more. As a kindness and a favour to me, don't.'

Mr Toots is dreadfully abashed, and his mouth opens.

'You have been so good to me,' says Florence, 'I am so grateful to you, I have such reason to like you for being a kind friend to me, and I do like you so much;' and here the ingenuous face smiles upon him with the pleasantest look of honesty in the world; 'that I am sure you are only going to say good-bye!'

'Certainly, Miss Dombey,' says Mr Toots, 'I - I - that's exactly what I mean. It's of no consequence.'

'Good-bye!' cries Florence.

'Good-bye, Miss Dombey!' stammers Mr Toots. 'I hope you won't think anything about it. It's - it's of no consequence, thank you. It's not of the least consequence in the world.'

Poor Mr Toots goes home to his hotel in a state of desperation, locks himself into his bedroom, flings himself upon his bed, and lies there for a long time; as if it were of the greatest consequence, nevertheless. But Mr Feeder, B.A., is coming to dinner, which happens well for Mr Toots, or there is no knowing when he might get up again. Mr Toots is obliged to get up to receive him, and to give him hospitable entertainment.

And the generous influence of that social virtue, hospitality (to make no mention of wine and good cheer), opens Mr Toots's heart, and warms him to conversation. He does not tell Mr Feeder, B.A., what passed at the corner of the Square; but when Mr Feeder asks him 'When it is to come off?' Mr Toots replies, 'that there are certain subjects' - which brings Mr Feeder down a peg or two immediately. Mr

Toots adds, that he don't know what right Blimber had to notice his being in Miss Dombey's company, and that if he thought he meant impudence by it, he'd have him out, Doctor or no Doctor; but he supposes its only his ignorance. Mr Feeder says he has no doubt of it.

Mr Feeder, however, as an intimate friend, is not excluded from the subject. Mr Toots merely requires that it should be mentioned mysteriously, and with feeling. After a few glasses of wine, he gives Miss Dombey's health, observing, 'Feeder, you have no idea of the sentiments with which I propose that toast.' Mr Feeder replies, 'Oh, yes, I have, my dear Toots; and greatly they redound to your honour, old boy.' Mr Feeder is then agitated by friendship, and shakes hands; and says, if ever Toots wants a brother, he knows where to find him, either by post or parcel. Mr Feeder like-wise says, that if he may advise, he would recommend Mr Toots to learn the guitar, or, at least the flute; for women like music, when you are paying your addresses to 'em, and he has found the advantage of it himself.

This brings Mr Feeder, B.A., to the confession that he has his eye upon Cornelia Blimber. He informs Mr Toots that he don't object to spectacles, and that if the Doctor were to do the handsome thing and give up the business, why, there they are - provided for. He says it's his opinion that when a man has made a handsome sum by his business, he is bound to give it up; and that Cornelia would be an assistance in it which any man might be proud of. Mr Toots replies by launching wildly out into Miss Dombey's praises, and by insinuations that sometimes he thinks he should like to blow his brains out. Mr Feeder strongly urges that it would be a rash attempt, and shows him, as a reconciliation to existence, Cornelia's portrait, spectacles and all.

Thus these quiet spirits pass the evening; and when it has yielded place to night, Mr Toots walks home with Mr Feeder, and parts with him at Doctor Blimber's door. But Mr Feeder only goes up the steps, and when Mr Toots is gone, comes down again, to stroll upon the beach alone, and think about his prospects. Mr Feeder plainly hears the waves informing him, as he loiters along, that Doctor Blimber will give up the business; and he feels a soft romantic pleasure in looking at the outside of the house, and thinking that the Doctor will first paint it, and put it into thorough repair.

Mr Toots is likewise roaming up and down, outside the casket that contains his jewel; and in a deplorable condition of mind, and not unsuspected by the police, gazes at a window where he sees a light, and which he has no doubt is Florence's. But it is not, for that is Mrs Skewton's room; and while Florence, sleeping in another chamber, dreams lovingly, in the midst of the old scenes, and their old associations live again, the figure which in grim reality is substituted for the patient boy's on the same theatre, once more to connect it -

but how differently! - with decay and death, is stretched there, wakeful and complaining. Ugly and haggard it lies upon its bed of unrest; and by it, in the terror of her unimpassioned loveliness - for it has terror in the sufferer's failing eyes - sits Edith. What do the waves say, in the stillness of the night, to them?

'Edith, what is that stone arm raised to strike me? Don't you see it?'

There is nothing, mother, but your fancy.'

'But my fancy! Everything is my fancy. Look! Is it possible that you don't see it?'

'Indeed, mother, there is nothing. Should I sit unmoved, if there were any such thing there?'

'Unmoved?' looking wildly at her - 'it's gone now - and why are you so unmoved? That is not my fancy, Edith. It turns me cold to see you sitting at my side.'

'I am sorry, mother.'

'Sorry! You seem always sorry. But it is not for me!'

With that, she cries; and tossing her restless head from side to side upon her pillow, runs on about neglect, and the mother she has been, and the mother the good old creature was, whom they met, and the cold return the daughters of such mothers make. In the midst of her incoherence, she stops, looks at her daughter, cries out that her wits are going, and hides her face upon the bed.

Edith, in compassion, bends over her and speaks to her. The sick old woman clutches her round the neck, and says, with a look of horror,

'Edith! we are going home soon; going back. You mean that I shall go home again?'

'Yes, mother, yes.'

'And what he said - what's-his-name, I never could remember names - Major - that dreadful word, when we came away - it's not true? Edith!' with a shriek and a stare, 'it's not that that is the matter with me.'

Night after night, the lights burn in the window, and the figure lies upon the bed, and Edith sits beside it, and the restless waves are calling to them both the whole night long. Night after night, the waves are hoarse with repetition of their mystery; the dust lies piled upon the shore; the sea-birds soar and hover; the winds and clouds are on

their trackless flight; the white arms beckon, in the moonlight, to the invisible country far away.

And still the sick old woman looks into the corner, where the stone arm - part of a figure of some tomb, she says - is raised to strike her. At last it falls; and then a dumb old woman lies upon the the bed, and she is crooked and shrunk up, and half of her is dead.

Such is the figure, painted and patched for the sun to mock, that is drawn slowly through the crowd from day to day; looking, as it goes, for the good old creature who was such a mother, and making mouths as it peers among the crowd in vain. Such is the figure that is often wheeled down to the margin of the sea, and stationed there; but on which no wind can blow freshness, and for which the murmur of the ocean has no soothing word. She lies and listens to it by the hour; but its speech is dark and gloomy to her, and a dread is on her face, and when her eyes wander over the expanse, they see but a broad stretch of desolation between earth and heaven.

Florence she seldom sees, and when she does, is angry with and mows at. Edith is beside her always, and keeps Florence away; and Florence, in her bed at night, trembles at the thought of death in such a shape, and often wakes and listens, thinking it has come. No one attends on her but Edith. It is better that few eyes should see her; and her daughter watches alone by the bedside.

A shadow even on that shadowed face, a sharpening even of the sharpened features, and a thickening of the veil before the eyes into a pall that shuts out the dim world, is come. Her wandering hands upon the coverlet join feebly palm to palm, and move towards her daughter; and a voice not like hers, not like any voice that speaks our mortal language - says, 'For I nursed you!'

Edith, without a tear, kneels down to bring her voice closer to the sinking head, and answers:

'Mother, can you hear me?'

Staring wide, she tries to nod in answer.

'Can you recollect the night before I married?'

The head is motionless, but it expresses somehow that she does.

'I told you then that I forgave your part in it, and prayed God to forgive my own. I told you that time past was at an end between us. I say so now, again. Kiss me, mother.'

Edith touches the white lips, and for a moment all is still. A moment afterwards, her mother, with her girlish laugh, and the skeleton of the Cleopatra manner, rises in her bed.

Draw the rose-coloured curtains. There is something else upon its flight besides the wind and clouds. Draw the rose-coloured curtains close!

Intelligence of the event is sent to Mr Dombey in town, who waits upon Cousin Feenix (not yet able to make up his mind for Baden-Baden), who has just received it too. A good-natured creature like Cousin Feenix is the very man for a marriage or a funeral, and his position in the family renders it right that he should be consulted.

'Dombey,' said Cousin Feenix, 'upon my soul, I am very much shocked to see you on such a melancholy occasion. My poor aunt! She was a devilish lively woman.'

Mr Dombey replies, 'Very much so.'

'And made up,' says Cousin Feenix, 'really young, you know, considering. I am sure, on the day of your marriage, I thought she was good for another twenty years. In point of fact, I said so to a man at Brooks's - little Billy Joper - you know him, no doubt - man with a glass in his eye?'

Mr Dombey bows a negative. 'In reference to the obsequies,' he hints, 'whether there is any suggestion - '

'Well, upon my life,' says Cousin Feenix, stroking his chin, which he has just enough of hand below his wristbands to do; 'I really don't know. There's a Mausoleum down at my place, in the park, but I'm afraid it's in bad repair, and, in point of fact, in a devil of a state. But for being a little out at elbows, I should have had it put to rights; but I believe the people come and make pic-nic parties there inside the iron railings.'

Mr Dombey is clear that this won't do.

'There's an uncommon good church in the village,' says Cousin Feenix, thoughtfully; 'pure specimen of the Anglo-Norman style, and admirably well sketched too by Lady Jane Finchbury - woman with tight stays - but they've spoilt it with whitewash, I understand, and it's a long journey.'

'Perhaps Brighton itself,' Mr Dombey suggests.

'Upon my honour, Dombey, I don't think we could do better,' says Cousin Feenix. 'It's on the spot, you see, and a very cheerful place.'

'And when,' hints Mr Dombey, 'would it be convenient?'

'I shall make a point,' says Cousin Feenix, 'of pledging myself for any day you think best. I shall have great pleasure (melancholy pleasure, of course) in following my poor aunt to the confines of the - in point of fact, to the grave,' says Cousin Feenix, failing in the other turn of speech.

'Would Monday do for leaving town?' says Mr Dombey.

'Monday would suit me to perfection,' replies Cousin Feenix. Therefore Mr Dombey arranges to take Cousin Feenix down on that day, and presently takes his leave, attended to the stairs by Cousin Feenix, who says, at parting, 'I'm really excessively sorry, Dombey, that you should have so much trouble about it;' to which Mr Dombey answers, 'Not at all.'

At the appointed time, Cousin Feenix and Mr Dombey meet, and go down to Brighton, and representing, in their two selves, all the other mourners for the deceased lady's loss, attend her remains to their place of rest. Cousin Feenix, sitting in the mourning-coach, recognises innumerable acquaintances on the road, but takes no other notice of them, in decorum, than checking them off aloud, as they go by, for Mr Dombey's information, as 'Tom Johnson. Man with cork leg, from White's. What, are you here, Tommy? Foley on a blood mare. The Smalder girls' - and so forth. At the ceremony Cousin Feenix is depressed, observing, that these are the occasions to make a man think, in point of fact, that he is getting shaky; and his eyes are really moistened, when it is over. But he soon recovers; and so do the rest of Mrs Skewton's relatives and friends, of whom the Major continually tells the club that she never did wrap up enough; while the young lady with the back, who has so much trouble with her eyelids, says, with a little scream, that she must have been enormously old, and that she died of all kinds of horrors, and you mustn't mention it.

So Edith's mother lies unmentioned of her dear friends, who are deaf to the waves that are hoarse with repetition of their mystery, and blind to the dust that is piled upon the shore, and to the white arms that are beckoning, in the moonlight, to the invisible country far away. But all goes on, as it was wont, upon the margin of the unknown sea; and Edith standing there alone, and listening to its waves, has dank weed cast up at her feet, to strew her path in life withal.