

Chapter XLVIII - The Flight of Florence

In the wildness of her sorrow, shame, and terror, the forlorn girl hurried through the sunshine of a bright morning, as if it were the darkness of a winter night. Wringing her hands and weeping bitterly, insensible to everything but the deep wound in her breast, stunned by the loss of all she loved, left like the sole survivor on a lonely shore from the wreck of a great vessel, she fled without a thought, without a hope, without a purpose, but to fly somewhere anywhere.

The cheerful vista of the long street, burnished by the morning light, the sight of the blue sky and airy clouds, the vigorous freshness of the day, so flushed and rosy in its conquest of the night, awakened no responsive feelings in her so hurt bosom. Somewhere, anywhere, to hide her head! somewhere, anywhere, for refuge, never more to look upon the place from which she fled!

But there were people going to and fro; there were opening shops, and servants at the doors of houses; there was the rising clash and roar of the day's struggle. Florence saw surprise and curiosity in the faces flitting past her; saw long shadows coming back upon the pavement; and heard voices that were strange to her asking her where she went, and what the matter was; and though these frightened her the more at first, and made her hurry on the faster, they did her the good service of recalling her in some degree to herself, and reminding her of the necessity of greater composure.

Where to go? Still somewhere, anywhere! still going on; but where! She thought of the only other time she had been lost in the wild wilderness of London - though not lost as now - and went that way. To the home of Walter's Uncle.

Checking her sobs, and drying her swollen eyes, and endeavouring to calm the agitation of her manner, so as to avoid attracting notice, Florence, resolving to keep to the more quiet streets as long as she could, was going on more quietly herself, when a familiar little shadow darted past upon the sunny pavement, stopped short, wheeled about, came close to her, made off again, bounded round and round her, and Diogenes, panting for breath, and yet making the street ring with his glad bark, was at her feet.

'Oh, Di! oh, dear, true, faithful Di, how did you come here? How could I ever leave you, Di, who would never leave me?'

Florence bent down on the pavement, and laid his rough, old, loving, foolish head against her breast, and they got up together, and went on together; Di more off the ground than on it, endeavouring to kiss his mistress flying, tumbling over and getting up again without the least

concern, dashing at big dogs in a jocose defiance of his species, terrifying with touches of his nose young housemaids who were cleaning doorsteps, and continually stopping, in the midst of a thousand extravagances, to look back at Florence, and bark until all the dogs within hearing answered, and all the dogs who could come out, came out to stare at him.

With this last adherent, Florence hurried away in the advancing morning, and the strengthening sunshine, to the City. The roar soon grew more loud, the passengers more numerous, the shops more busy, until she was carried onward in a stream of life setting that way, and flowing, indifferently, past marts and mansions, prisons, churches, market-places, wealth, poverty, good, and evil, like the broad river side by side with it, awakened from its dreams of rushes, willows, and green moss, and rolling on, turbid and troubled, among the works and cares of men, to the deep sea.

At length the quarters of the little Midshipman arose in view. Nearer yet, and the little Midshipman himself was seen upon his post, intent as ever on his observations. Nearer yet, and the door stood open, inviting her to enter. Florence, who had again quickened her pace, as she approached the end of her journey, ran across the road (closely followed by Diogenes, whom the bustle had somewhat confused), ran in, and sank upon the threshold of the well-remembered little parlour.

The Captain, in his glazed hat, was standing over the fire, making his morning's cocoa, with that elegant trifle, his watch, upon the chimney-piece, for easy reference during the progress of the cookery. Hearing a footstep and the rustle of a dress, the Captain turned with a palpitating remembrance of the dreadful Mrs MacStinger, at the instant when Florence made a motion with her hand towards him, reeled, and fell upon the floor.

The Captain, pale as Florence, pale in the very knobs upon his face raised her like a baby, and laid her on the same old sofa upon which she had slumbered long ago.

'It's Heart's Delight!' said the Captain, looking intently in her face. 'It's the sweet creetur grow'd a woman!'

Captain Cuttle was so respectful of her, and had such a reverence for her, in this new character, that he would not have held her in his arms, while she was unconscious, for a thousand pounds.

'My Heart's Delight!' said the Captain, withdrawing to a little distance, with the greatest alarm and sympathy depicted on his countenance. 'If you can hail Ned Cuttle with a finger, do it!'

But Florence did not stir.

'My Heart's Delight!' said the trembling Captain. 'For the sake of Wal'r drowned in the briny deep, turn to, and histe up something or another, if able!'

Finding her insensible to this impressive adjuration also, Captain Cuttle snatched from his breakfast-table a basin of cold water, and sprinkled some upon her face. Yielding to the urgency of the case, the Captain then, using his immense hand with extraordinary gentleness, relieved her of her bonnet, moistened her lips and forehead, put back her hair, covered her feet with his own coat which he pulled off for the purpose, patted her hand - so small in his, that he was struck with wonder when he touched it - and seeing that her eyelids quivered, and that her lips began to move, continued these restorative applications with a better heart.

'Cheerily,' said the Captain. 'Cheerily! Stand by, my pretty one, stand by! There! You're better now. Steady's the word, and steady it is. Keep her so! Drink a little drop o' this here,' said the Captain. 'There you are! What cheer now, my pretty, what cheer now?'

At this stage of her recovery, Captain Cuttle, with an imperfect association of a Watch with a Physician's treatment of a patient, took his own down from the mantel-shelf, and holding it out on his hook, and taking Florence's hand in his, looked steadily from one to the other, as expecting the dial to do something.

'What cheer, my pretty?' said the Captain. 'What cheer now? You've done her some good, my lad, I believe,' said the Captain, under his breath, and throwing an approving glance upon his watch. 'Put you back half-an-hour every morning, and about another quarter towards the arternoon, and you're a watch as can be ekalled by few and excelled by none. What cheer, my lady lass!'

'Captain Cuttle! Is it you?' exclaimed Florence, raising herself a little.

'Yes, yes, my lady lass,' said the Captain, hastily deciding in his own mind upon the superior elegance of that form of address, as the most courtly he could think of.

'Is Walter's Uncle here?' asked Florence.

'Here, pretty?' returned the Captain. 'He ain't been here this many a long day. He ain't been heerd on, since he sheered off arter poor Wal'r. But,' said the Captain, as a quotation, 'Though lost to sight, to memory dear, and England, Home, and Beauty!'

'Do you live here?' asked Florence.

'Yes, my lady lass,' returned the Captain.

'Oh, Captain Cuttle!' cried Florence, putting her hands together, and speaking wildly. 'Save me! keep me here! Let no one know where I am! I'll tell you what has happened by-and-by, when I can. I have no one in the world to go to. Do not send me away!'

'Send you away, my lady lass!' exclaimed the Captain. 'You, my Heart's Delight! Stay a bit! We'll put up this here deadlight, and take a double turn on the key!'

With these words, the Captain, using his one hand and his hook with the greatest dexterity, got out the shutter of the door, put it up, made it all fast, and locked the door itself.

When he came back to the side of Florence, she took his hand, and kissed it. The helplessness of the action, the appeal it made to him, the confidence it expressed, the unspeakable sorrow in her face, the pain of mind she had too plainly suffered, and was suffering then, his knowledge of her past history, her present lonely, worn, and unprotected appearance, all so rushed upon the good Captain together, that he fairly overflowed with compassion and gentleness.

'My lady lass,' said the Captain, polishing the bridge of his nose with his arm until it shone like burnished copper, 'don't you say a word to Ed'ard Cuttle, until such times as you finds yourself a riding smooth and easy; which won't be to-day, nor yet to-morrow. And as to giving of you up, or reporting where you are, yes verily, and by God's help, so I won't, Church catechism, make a note on!'

This the Captain said, reference and all, in one breath, and with much solemnity; taking off his hat at 'yes verily,' and putting it on again, when he had quite concluded.

Florence could do but one thing more to thank him, and to show him how she trusted in him; and she did it' Clinging to this rough creature as the last asylum of her bleeding heart, she laid her head upon his honest shoulder, and clasped him round his neck, and would have kneeled down to bless him, but that he divined her purpose, and held her up like a true man.

'Steady!' said the Captain. 'Steady! You're too weak to stand, you see, my pretty, and must lie down here again. There, there!' To see the Captain lift her on the sofa, and cover her with his coat, would have been worth a hundred state sights. 'And now,' said the Captain, 'you must take some breakfast, lady lass, and the dog shall have some too.'

And arter that you shall go aloft to old Sol Gills's room, and fall asleep there, like a angel.'

Captain Cuttle patted Diogenes when he made allusion to him, and Diogenes met that overture graciously, half-way. During the administration of the restoratives he had clearly been in two minds whether to fly at the Captain or to offer him his friendship; and he had expressed that conflict of feeling by alternate waggings of his tail, and displays of his teeth, with now and then a growl or so. But by this time, his doubts were all removed. It was plain that he considered the Captain one of the most amiable of men, and a man whom it was an honour to a dog to know.

In evidence of these convictions, Diogenes attended on the Captain while he made some tea and toast, and showed a lively interest in his housekeeping. But it was in vain for the kind Captain to make such preparations for Florence, who sorely tried to do some honour to them, but could touch nothing, and could only weep and weep again.

'Well, well!' said the compassionate Captain, 'arter turning in, my Heart's Delight, you'll get more way upon you. Now, I'll serve out your allowance, my lad.' To Diogenes. 'And you shall keep guard on your mistress aloft.'

Diogenes, however, although he had been eyeing his intended breakfast with a watering mouth and glistening eyes, instead of falling to, ravenously, when it was put before him, pricked up his ears, darted to the shop-door, and barked there furiously: burrowing with his head at the bottom, as if he were bent on mining his way out.

'Can there be anybody there!' asked Florence, in alarm.

'No, my lady lass,' returned the Captain. 'Who'd stay there, without making any noise! Keep up a good heart, pretty. It's only people going by.'

But for all that, Diogenes barked and barked, and burrowed and burrowed, with pertinacious fury; and whenever he stopped to listen, appeared to receive some new conviction into his mind, for he set to, barking and burrowing again, a dozen times. Even when he was persuaded to return to his breakfast, he came jogging back to it, with a very doubtful air; and was off again, in another paroxysm, before touching a morsel.

'If there should be someone listening and watching,' whispered Florence. 'Someone who saw me come - who followed me, perhaps.'

'It ain't the young woman, lady lass, is it?' said the Captain, taken with a bright idea

'Susan?' said Florence, shaking her head. 'Ah no! Susan has been gone from me a long time.'

'Not deserted, I hope?' said the Captain. 'Don't say that that there young woman's run, my pretty!'

'Oh, no, no!' cried Florence. 'She is one of the truest hearts in the world!'

The Captain was greatly relieved by this reply, and expressed his satisfaction by taking off his hard glazed hat, and dabbing his head all over with his handkerchief, rolled up like a ball, observing several times, with infinite complacency, and with a beaming countenance, that he know'd it.

'So you're quiet now, are you, brother?' said the Captain to Diogenes. 'There warn't nobody there, my lady lass, bless you!'

Diogenes was not so sure of that. The door still had an attraction for him at intervals; and he went snuffing about it, and growling to himself, unable to forget the subject. This incident, coupled with the Captain's observation of Florence's fatigue and faintness, decided him to prepare Sol Gills's chamber as a place of retirement for her immediately. He therefore hastily betook himself to the top of the house, and made the best arrangement of it that his imagination and his means suggested.

It was very clean already; and the Captain being an orderly man, and accustomed to make things ship-shape, converted the bed into a couch, by covering it all over with a clean white drapery. By a similar contrivance, the Captain converted the little dressing-table into a species of altar, on which he set forth two silver teaspoons, a flower-pot, a telescope, his celebrated watch, a pocket-comb, and a song-book, as a small collection of rarities, that made a choice appearance. Having darkened the window, and straightened the pieces of carpet on the floor, the Captain surveyed these preparations with great delight, and descended to the little parlour again, to bring Florence to her bower.

Nothing would induce the Captain to believe that it was possible for Florence to walk upstairs. If he could have got the idea into his head, he would have considered it an outrageous breach of hospitality to allow her to do so. Florence was too weak to dispute the point, and the Captain carried her up out of hand, laid her down, and covered her with a great watch-coat.

'My lady lass!' said the Captain, 'you're as safe here as if you was at the top of St Paul's Cathedral, with the ladder cast off. Sleep is what you want, afore all other things, and may you be able to show yourself smart with that there balsam for the still small voice of a wounded mind! When there's anything you want, my Heart's Delight, as this here humble house or town can offer, pass the word to Ed'ard Cuttle, as'll stand off and on outside that door, and that there man will vibrate with joy.' The Captain concluded by kissing the hand that Florence stretched out to him, with the chivalry of any old knight-errant, and walking on tiptoe out of the room.

Descending to the little parlour, Captain Cuttle, after holding a hasty council with himself, decided to open the shop-door for a few minutes, and satisfy himself that now, at all events, there was no one loitering about it. Accordingly he set it open, and stood upon the threshold, keeping a bright look-out, and sweeping the whole street with his spectacles.

'How de do, Captain Gills?' said a voice beside him. The Captain, looking down, found that he had been boarded by Mr Toots while sweeping the horizon.

'How are, you, my lad?' replied the Captain.

'Well, I m pretty well, thank'ee, Captain Gills,' said Mr Toots. 'You know I'm never quite what I could wish to be, now. I don't expect that I ever shall be any more.'

Mr Toots never approached any nearer than this to the great theme of his life, when in conversation with Captain Cuttle, on account of the agreement between them.

'Captain Gills,' said Mr Toots, 'if I could have the pleasure of a word with you, it's - it's rather particular.'

'Why, you see, my lad,' replied the Captain, leading the way into the parlour, 'I ain't what you may call exactly free this morning; and therefore if you can clap on a bit, I should take it kindly.'

'Certainly, Captain Gills,' replied Mr Toots, who seldom had any notion of the Captain's meaning. 'To clap on, is exactly what I could wish to do. Naturally.'

'If so be, my lad,' returned the Captain. 'Do it!'

The Captain was so impressed by the possession of his tremendous secret - by the fact of Miss Dombey being at that moment under his roof, while the innocent and unconscious Toots sat opposite to him -

that a perspiration broke out on his forehead, and he found it impossible, while slowly drying the same, glazed hat in hand, to keep his eyes off Mr Toots's face. Mr Toots, who himself appeared to have some secret reasons for being in a nervous state, was so unspeakably disconcerted by the Captain's stare, that after looking at him vacantly for some time in silence, and shifting uneasily on his chair, he said:

'I beg your pardon, Captain Gills, but you don't happen to see anything particular in me, do you?'

'No, my lad,' returned the Captain. 'No.'

'Because you know,' said Mr Toots with a chuckle, 'I kNOW I'm wasting away. You needn't at all mind alluding to that. I - I should like it. Burgess and Co. have altered my measure, I'm in that state of thinness. It's a gratification to me. I - I'm glad of it. I - I'd a great deal rather go into a decline, if I could. I'm a mere brute you know, grazing upon the surface of the earth, Captain Gills.'

The more Mr Toots went on in this way, the more the Captain was weighed down by his secret, and stared at him. What with this cause of uneasiness, and his desire to get rid of Mr Toots, the Captain was in such a scared and strange condition, indeed, that if he had been in conversation with a ghost, he could hardly have evinced greater discomposure.

'But I was going to say, Captain Gills,' said Mr Toots. 'Happening to be this way early this morning - to tell you the truth, I was coming to breakfast with you. As to sleep, you know, I never sleep now. I might be a Watchman, except that I don't get any pay, and he's got nothing on his mind.'

'Carry on, my lad!' said the Captain, in an admonitory voice.

'Certainly, Captain Gills,' said Mr Toots. 'Perfectly true! Happening to be this way early this morning (an hour or so ago), and finding the door shut - '

'What! were you waiting there, brother?' demanded the Captain.

'Not at all, Captain Gills,' returned Mr Toots. 'I didn't stop a moment. I thought you were out. But the person said - by the bye, you don't keep a dog, you, Captain Gills?'

The Captain shook his head.

'To be sure,' said Mr Toots, 'that's exactly what I said. I knew you didn't. There is a dog, Captain Gills, connected with - but excuse me. That's forbidden ground.'

The Captain stared at Mr Toots until he seemed to swell to twice his natural size; and again the perspiration broke out on the Captain's forehead, when he thought of Diogenes taking it into his head to come down and make a third in the parlour.

'The person said,' continued Mr Toots, 'that he had heard a dog barking in the shop: which I knew couldn't be, and I told him so. But he was as positive as if he had seen the dog.'

'What person, my lad?' inquired the Captain.

'Why, you see there it is, Captain Gills,' said Mr Toots, with a perceptible increase in the nervousness of his manner. 'It's not for me to say what may have taken place, or what may not have taken place. Indeed, I don't know. I get mixed up with all sorts of things that I don't quite understand, and I think there's something rather weak in my - in my head, in short.'

The Captain nodded his own, as a mark of assent.

'But the person said, as we were walking away,' continued Mr Toots, 'that you knew what, under existing circumstances, might occur - he said 'might,' very strongly - and that if you were requested to prepare yourself, you would, no doubt, come prepared.'

'Person, my lad' the Captain repeated.

'I don't know what person, I'm sure, Captain Gills,' replied Mr Toots, 'I haven't the least idea. But coming to the door, I found him waiting there; and he said was I coming back again, and I said yes; and he said did I know you, and I said, yes, I had the pleasure of your acquaintance - you had given me the pleasure of your acquaintance, after some persuasion; and he said, if that was the case, would I say to you what I have said, about existing circumstances and coming prepared, and as soon as ever I saw you, would I ask you to step round the corner, if it was only for one minute, on most important business, to Mr Brogley's the Broker's. Now, I tell you what, Captain Gills - whatever it is, I am convinced it's very important; and if you like to step round, now, I'll wait here till you come back.'

The Captain, divided between his fear of compromising Florence in some way by not going, and his horror of leaving Mr Toots in possession of the house with a chance of finding out the secret, was a spectacle of mental disturbance that even Mr Toots could not be blind

to. But that young gentleman, considering his nautical friend as merely in a state of preparation for the interview he was going to have, was quite satisfied, and did not review his own discreet conduct without chuckle

At length the Captain decided, as the lesser of two evils, to run round to Brogley's the Broker's: previously locking the door that communicated with the upper part of the house, and putting the key in his pocket. 'If so be,' said the Captain to Mr Toots, with not a little shame and hesitation, 'as you'll excuse my doing of it, brother.'

'Captain Gills,' returned Mr Toots, 'whatever you do, is satisfactory to me.'

The Captain thanked him heartily, and promising to come back in less than five minutes, went out in quest of the person who had entrusted Mr Toots with this mysterious message. Poor Mr Toots, left to himself, lay down upon the sofa, little thinking who had reclined there last, and, gazing up at the skylight and resigning himself to visions of Miss Dombey, lost all heed of time and place.

It was as well that he did so; for although the Captain was not gone long, he was gone much longer than he had proposed. When he came back, he was very pale indeed, and greatly agitated, and even looked as if he had been shedding tears. He seemed to have lost the faculty of speech, until he had been to the cupboard and taken a dram of rum from the case-bottle, when he fetched a deep breath, and sat down in a chair with his hand before his face.

'Captain Gills,' said Toots, kindly, 'I hope and trust there's nothing wrong?'

'Thank'ee, my lad, not a bit,' said the Captain. 'Quite contrary.'

'You have the appearance of being overcome, Captain Gills,' observed Mr Toots.

'Why, my lad, I am took aback,' the Captain admitted. 'I am.'

'Is there anything I can do, Captain Gills?' inquired Mr Toots. 'If there is, make use of me.'

The Captain removed his hand from his face, looked at him with a remarkable expression of pity and tenderness, and took him by the hand, and shook it hard.

'No, thank'ee,' said the Captain. 'Nothing. Only I'll take it as a favour if you'll part company for the present. I believe, brother,' wringing his

hand again, 'that, after Wal'r, and on a different model, you're as good a lad as ever stepped.'

'Upon my word and honour, Captain Gills,' returned Mr Toots, giving the Captain's hand a preliminary slap before shaking it again, 'it's delightful to me to possess your good opinion. Thank'ee.

'And bear a hand and cheer up,' said the Captain, patting him on the back. 'What! There's more than one sweet creetur in the world!'

'Not to me, Captain Gills,' replied Mr Toots gravely. 'Not to me, I assure you. The state of my feelings towards Miss Dombey is of that unspeakable description, that my heart is a desert island, and she lives in it alone. I'm getting more used up every day, and I'm proud to be so. If you could see my legs when I take my boots off, you'd form some idea of what unrequited affection is. I have been prescribed bark, but I don't take it, for I don't wish to have any tone whatever given to my constitution. I'd rather not. This, however, is forbidden ground. Captain Gills, goodbye!'

Captain Cuttle cordially reciprocating the warmth of Mr Toots's farewell, locked the door behind him, and shaking his head with the same remarkable expression of pity and tenderness as he had regarded him with before, went up to see if Florence wanted him.

There was an entire change in the Captain's face as he went upstairs. He wiped his eyes with his handkerchief, and he polished the bridge of his nose with his sleeve as he had done already that morning, but his face was absolutely changed. Now, he might have been thought supremely happy; now, he might have been thought sad; but the kind of gravity that sat upon his features was quite new to them, and was as great an improvement to them as if they had undergone some sublimating process.

He knocked softly, with his hook, at Florence's door, twice or thrice; but, receiving no answer, ventured first to peep in, and then to enter: emboldened to take the latter step, perhaps, by the familiar recognition of Diogenes, who, stretched upon the ground by the side of her couch, wagged his tail, and winked his eyes at the Captain, without being at the trouble of getting up.

She was sleeping heavily, and moaning in her sleep; and Captain Cuttle, with a perfect awe of her youth, and beauty, and her sorrow, raised her head, and adjusted the coat that covered her, where it had fallen off, and darkened the window a little more that she might sleep on, and crept out again, and took his post of watch upon the stairs. All this, with a touch and tread as light as Florence's own.

Long may it remain in this mixed world a point not easy of decision, which is the more beautiful evidence of the Almighty's goodness - the delicate fingers that are formed for sensitiveness and sympathy of touch, and made to minister to pain and grief, or the rough hard Captain Cuttle hand, that the heart teaches, guides, and softens in a moment!

Florence slept upon her couch, forgetful of her homelessness and orphanage, and Captain Cuttle watched upon the stairs. A louder sob or moan than usual, brought him sometimes to her door; but by degrees she slept more peacefully, and the Captain's watch was undisturbed.