

Chapter LVII - Another Wedding

Mr Sownds the beadle, and Mrs Miff the pew-opener, are early at their posts in the fine church where Mr Dombey was married. A yellow-faced old gentleman from India, is going to take unto himself a young wife this morning, and six carriages full of company are expected, and Mrs Miff has been informed that the yellow-faced old gentleman could pave the road to church with diamonds and hardly miss them. The nuptial benediction is to be a superior one, proceeding from a very reverend, a dean, and the lady is to be given away, as an extraordinary present, by somebody who comes express from the Horse Guards

Mrs Miff is more intolerant of common people this morning, than she generally is; and she has always strong opinions on that subject, for it is associated with free sittings. Mrs Miff is not a student of political economy (she thinks the science is connected with dissenters; 'Baptists or Wesleyans, or some o' them,' she says), but she can never understand what business your common folks have to be married. 'Drat 'em,' says Mrs Miff 'you read the same things over 'em' and instead of sovereigns get sixpences!'

Mr Sownds the beadle is more liberal than Mrs Miff - but then he is not a pew-opener. 'It must be done, Ma'am,' he says. 'We must marry 'em. We must have our national schools to walk at the head of, and we must have our standing armies. We must marry 'em, Ma'am,' says Mr Sownds, 'and keep the country going.'

Mr Sownds is sitting on the steps and Mrs Miff is dusting in the church, when a young couple, plainly dressed, come in. The mortified bonnet of Mrs Miff is sharply turned towards them, for she espies in this early visit indications of a runaway match. But they don't want to be married - 'Only,' says the gentleman, 'to walk round the church.' And as he slips a genteel compliment into the palm of Mrs Miff, her vinegary face relaxes, and her mortified bonnet and her spare dry figure dip and crackle.

Mrs Miff resumes her dusting and plumps up her cushions - for the yellow-faced old gentleman is reported to have tender knees - but keeps her glazed, pew-opening eye on the young couple who are walking round the church. 'Ahem,' coughs Mrs Miff whose cough is drier than the hay in any hassock in her charge, 'you'll come to us one of these mornings, my dears, unless I'm much mistaken!'

They are looking at a tablet on the wall, erected to the memory of someone dead. They are a long way off from Mrs Miff, but Mrs Miff can see with half an eye how she is leaning on his arm, and how his head

is bent down over her. 'Well, well,' says Mrs Miff, 'you might do worse. For you're a tidy pair!'

There is nothing personal in Mrs Miff's remark. She merely speaks of stock-in-trade. She is hardly more curious in couples than in coffins. She is such a spare, straight, dry old lady - such a pew of a woman - that you should find as many individual sympathies in a chip. Mr Sownds, now, who is fleshy, and has scarlet in his coat, is of a different temperament. He says, as they stand upon the steps watching the young couple away, that she has a pretty figure, hasn't she, and as well as he could see (for she held her head down coming out), an uncommon pretty face. 'Altogether, Mrs Miff,' says Mr Sownds with a relish, 'she is what you may call a rose-bud.'

Mrs Miff assents with a spare nod of her mortified bonnet; but approves of this so little, that she inwardly resolves she wouldn't be the wife of Mr Sownds for any money he could give her, Beadle as he is.

And what are the young couple saying as they leave the church, and go out at the gate?

'Dear Walter, thank you! I can go away, now, happy.'

'And when we come back, Florence, we will come and see his grave again.'

Florence lifts her eyes, so bright with tears, to his kind face; and clasps her disengaged hand on that other modest little hand which clasps his arm.

'It is very early, Walter, and the streets are almost empty yet. Let us walk.'

'But you will be so tired, my love.'

'Oh no! I was very tired the first time that we ever walked together, but I shall not be so to-day.' And thus - not much changed - she, as innocent and earnest-hearted - he, as frank, as hopeful, and more proud of her - Florence and Walter, on their bridal morning, walk through the streets together.

Not even in that childish walk of long ago, were they so far removed from all the world about them as to-day. The childish feet of long ago, did not tread such enchanted ground as theirs do now. The confidence and love of children may be given many times, and will spring up in many places; but the woman's heart of Florence, with its

undivided treasure, can be yielded only once, and under slight or change, can only droop and die.

They take the streets that are the quietest, and do not go near that in which her old home stands. It is a fair, warm summer morning, and the sun shines on them, as they walk towards the darkening mist that overspreads the City. Riches are uncovering in shops; jewels, gold, and silver flash in the goldsmith's sunny windows; and great houses cast a stately shade upon them as they pass. But through the light, and through the shade, they go on lovingly together, lost to everything around; thinking of no other riches, and no prouder home, than they have now in one another.

Gradually they come into the darker, narrower streets, where the sun, now yellow, and now red, is seen through the mist, only at street corners, and in small open spaces where there is a tree, or one of the innumerable churches, or a paved way and a flight of steps, or a curious little patch of garden, or a burying-ground, where the few tombs and tombstones are almost black. Lovingly and trustfully, through all the narrow yards and alleys and the shady streets, Florence goes, clinging to his arm, to be his wife.

Her heart beats quicker now, for Walter tells her that their church is very near. They pass a few great stacks of warehouses, with waggons at the doors, and busy carmen stopping up the way - but Florence does not see or hear them - and then the air is quiet, and the day is darkened, and she is trembling in a church which has a strange smell like a cellar.

The shabby little old man, ringer of the disappointed bell, is standing in the porch, and has put his hat in the font - for he is quite at home there, being sexton. He ushers them into an old brown, panelled, dusty vestry, like a corner-cupboard with the shelves taken out; where the wormy registers diffuse a smell like faded snuff, which has set the tearful Nipper sneezing.

Youthful, and how beautiful, the young bride looks, in this old dusty place, with no kindred object near her but her husband. There is a dusty old clerk, who keeps a sort of evaporated news shop underneath an archway opposite, behind a perfect fortification of posts. There is a dusty old pew-opener who only keeps herself, and finds that quite enough to do. There is a dusty old beadle (these are Mr Toots's beadle and pew-opener of last Sunday), who has something to do with a Worshipful Company who have got a Hall in the next yard, with a stained-glass window in it that no mortal ever saw. There are dusty wooden ledges and cornices poked in and out over the altar, and over the screen and round the gallery, and over the inscription about what the Master and Wardens of the Worshipful Company did in one

thousand six hundred and ninety-four. There are dusty old sounding-boards over the pulpit and reading-desk, looking like lids to be let down on the officiating ministers in case of their giving offence. There is every possible provision for the accommodation of dust, except in the churchyard, where the facilities in that respect are very limited. The Captain, Uncle Sol, and Mr Toots are come; the clergyman is putting on his surplice in the vestry, while the clerk walks round him, blowing the dust off it; and the bride and bridegroom stand before the altar. There is no bridesmaid, unless Susan Nipper is one; and no better father than Captain Cuttle. A man with a wooden leg, chewing a faint apple and carrying a blue bag in his hand, looks in to see what is going on; but finding it nothing entertaining, stumps off again, and pegs his way among the echoes out of doors.

No gracious ray of light is seen to fall on Florence, kneeling at the altar with her timid head bowed down. The morning luminary is built out, and don't shine there. There is a meagre tree outside, where the sparrows are chirping a little; and there is a blackbird in an eyelet-hole of sun in a dyer's garret, over against the window, who whistles loudly whilst the service is performing; and there is the man with the wooden leg stumping away. The amens of the dusty clerk appear, like Macbeth's, to stick in his throat a little'; but Captain Cuttle helps him out, and does it with so much goodwill that he interpolates three entirely new responses of that word, never introduced into the service before.

They are married, and have signed their names in one of the old sneezy registers, and the clergyman's surplice is restored to the dust, and the clergyman is gone home. In a dark corner of the dark church, Florence has turned to Susan Nipper, and is weeping in her arms. Mr Toots's eyes are red. The Captain lubricates his nose. Uncle Sol has pulled down his spectacles from his forehead, and walked out to the door.

'God bless you, Susan; dearest Susan! If you ever can bear witness to the love I have for Walter, and the reason that I have to love him, do it for his sake. Good-bye! Good-bye!'

They have thought it better not to go back to the Midshipman, but to part so; a coach is waiting for them, near at hand. Miss Nipper cannot speak; she only sobs and chokes, and hugs her mistress. Mr Toots advances, urges her to cheer up, and takes charge of her. Florence gives him her hand - gives him, in the fulness of her heart, her lips - kisses Uncle Sol, and Captain Cuttle, and is borne away by her young husband.

But Susan cannot bear that Florence should go away with a mournful recollection of her. She had meant to be so different, that she

reproaches herself bitterly. Intent on making one last effort to redeem her character, she breaks from Mr Toots and runs away to find the coach, and show a parting smile. The Captain, divining her object, sets off after her; for he feels it his duty also to dismiss them with a cheer, if possible. Uncle Sol and Mr Toots are left behind together, outside the church, to wait for them.

The coach is gone, but the street is steep, and narrow, and blocked up, and Susan can see it at a stand-still in the distance, she is sure. Captain Cuttle follows her as she flies down the hill, and waves his glazed hat as a general signal, which may attract the right coach and which may not.

Susan outstrips the Captain, and comes up with it. She looks in at the window, sees Walter, with the gentle face beside him, and claps her hands and screams:

'Miss Floy, my darling! look at me! We are all so happy now, dear! One more good-bye, my precious, one more!'

How Susan does it, she don't know, but she reaches to the window, kisses her, and has her arms about her neck, in a moment.

'We are all so happy now, my dear Miss Floy!' says Susan, with a suspicious catching in her breath. 'You, you won't be angry with me now. Now will you?'

'Angry, Susan!'

'No, no; I am sure you won't. I say you won't, my pet, my dearest!' exclaims Susan; 'and here's the Captain too - your friend the Captain, you know - to say good-bye once more!'

'Hooroar, my Heart's Delight!' vociferates the Captain, with a countenance of strong emotion. 'Hooroar, Wal'r my lad. Hooroar! Hooroar!'

What with the young husband at one window, and the young wife at the other; the Captain hanging on at this door, and Susan Nipper holding fast by that; the coach obliged to go on whether it will or no, and all the other carts and coaches turbulent because it hesitates; there never was so much confusion on four wheels. But Susan Nipper gallantly maintains her point. She keeps a smiling face upon her mistress, smiling through her tears, until the last. Even when she is left behind, the Captain continues to appear and disappear at the door, crying 'Hooroar, my lad! Hooroar, my Heart's Delight!' with his shirt-collar in a violent state of agitation, until it is hopeless to attempt to keep up with the coach any longer. Finally, when the coach

is gone, Susan Nipper, being rejoined by the Captain, falls into a state of insensibility, and is taken into a baker's shop to recover.

Uncle Sol and Mr Toots wait patiently in the churchyard, sitting on the coping-stone of the railings, until Captain Cuttle and Susan come back, Neither being at all desirous to speak, or to be spoken to, they are excellent company, and quite satisfied. When they all arrive again at the little Midshipman, and sit down to breakfast, nobody can touch a morsel. Captain Cuttle makes a feint of being voracious about toast, but gives it up as a swindle. Mr Toots says, after breakfast, he will come back in the evening; and goes wandering about the town all day, with a vague sensation upon him as if he hadn't been to bed for a fortnight.

There is a strange charm in the house, and in the room, in which they have been used to be together, and out of which so much is gone. It aggravates, and yet it soothes, the sorrow of the separation. Mr Toots tells Susan Nipper when he comes at night, that he hasn't been so wretched all day long, and yet he likes it. He confides in Susan Nipper, being alone with her, and tells her what his feelings were when she gave him that candid opinion as to the probability of Miss Dombey's ever loving him. In the vein of confidence engendered by these common recollections, and their tears, Mr Toots proposes that they shall go out together, and buy something for supper. Miss Nipper assenting, they buy a good many little things; and, with the aid of Mrs Richards, set the supper out quite showily before the Captain and old Sol came home.

The Captain and old Sol have been on board the ship, and have established Di there, and have seen the chests put aboard. They have much to tell about the popularity of Walter, and the comforts he will have about him, and the quiet way in which it seems he has been working early and late, to make his cabin what the Captain calls 'a picter,' to surprise his little wife. 'A admiral's cabin, mind you,' says the Captain, 'ain't more trim.'

But one of the Captain's chief delights is, that he knows the big watch, and the sugar-tongs, and tea-spoons, are on board: and again and again he murmurs to himself, 'Ed'ard Cuttle, my lad, you never shaped a better course in your life than when you made that there little property over jintly. You see how the land bore, Ed'ard,' says the Captain, 'and it does you credit, my lad.'

The old Instrument-maker is more distraught and misty than he used to be, and takes the marriage and the parting very much to heart. But he is greatly comforted by having his old ally, Ned Cuttle, at his side; and he sits down to supper with a grateful and contented face.

'My boy has been preserved and thrives,' says old Sol Gills, rubbing his hands. 'What right have I to be otherwise than thankful and happy!'

The Captain, who has not yet taken his seat at the table, but who has been fidgeting about for some time, and now stands hesitating in his place, looks doubtfully at Mr Gills, and says:

'Sol! There's the last bottle of the old Madeira down below. Would you wish to have it up to-night, my boy, and drink to Wal'r and his wife?'

The Instrument-maker, looking wistfully at the Captain, puts his hand into the breast-pocket of his coffee-coloured coat, brings forth his pocket-book, and takes a letter out.

'To Mr Dombey,' says the old man. 'From Walter. To be sent in three weeks' time. I'll read it.'

'Sir. I am married to your daughter. She is gone with me upon a distant voyage. To be devoted to her is to have no claim on her or you, but God knows that I am.

'Why, loving her beyond all earthly things, I have yet, without remorse, united her to the uncertainties and dangers of my life, I will not say to you. You know why, and you are her father.

'Do not reproach her. She has never reproached you.

'I do not think or hope that you will ever forgive me. There is nothing I expect less. But if an hour should come when it will comfort you to believe that Florence has someone ever near her, the great charge of whose life is to cancel her remembrance of past sorrow, I solemnly assure you, you may, in that hour, rest in that belief.'

Solomon puts back the letter carefully in his pocket-book, and puts back his pocket-book in his coat.

'We won't drink the last bottle of the old Madeira yet, Ned,' says the old man thoughtfully. 'Not yet.

'Not yet,' assents the Captain. 'No. Not yet.'

Susan and Mr Toots are of the same opinion. After a silence they all sit down to supper, and drink to the young husband and wife in something else; and the last bottle of the old Madeira still remains among its dust and cobwebs, undisturbed.

A few days have elapsed, and a stately ship is out at sea, spreading its white wings to the favouring wind.

Upon the deck, image to the roughest man on board of something that is graceful, beautiful, and harmless - something that it is good and pleasant to have there, and that should make the voyage prosperous - is Florence. It is night, and she and Walter sit alone, watching the solemn path of light upon the sea between them and the moon.

At length she cannot see it plainly, for the tears that fill her eyes; and then she lays her head down on his breast, and puts her arms around his neck, saying, 'Oh Walter, dearest love, I am so happy!'

Her husband holds her to his heart, and they are very quiet, and the stately ship goes on serenely.

'As I hear the sea,' says Florence, 'and sit watching it, it brings so many days into my mind. It makes me think so much - '

'Of Paul, my love. I know it does.'

Of Paul and Walter. And the voices in the waves are always whispering to Florence, in their ceaseless murmuring, of love - of love, eternal and illimitable, not bounded by the confines of this world, or by the end of time, but ranging still, beyond the sea, beyond the sky, to the invisible country far away!