



Charles Dickens (英) 著

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大 卫 · 科 波 菲 尔

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CHAPTER 32

THE BEGINNING OF A LONG JOURNEY



What is natural in me, is natural in many other men, I infer, and so I am not afraid to write that I never had loved Steerforth better than when the ties that bound me to him were broken. In the keen distress of the discovery of his unworthiness, I thought more of all that was brilliant in him, I softened more towards all that was good in him, I did more justice to the qualities that might have made him a man of a noble nature and a great name, than ever I had done in the height of my devotion to him. Deeply as I felt my own unconscious part in his pollution of an honest home, I believed that if I had been brought face to face with him, I could not have uttered one reproach. I should have loved him so well still — though he fascinated me no longer — I should have held in so much tenderness the memory of my affection for him, that I think I should have been as weak as a spirit-wounded child, in all but the entertainment of a thought that we could ever be reunited. That thought I never had. I felt, as he had felt, that all was at an end between us. What his remembrances of me were, I have never known — they were light enough, perhaps, and easily dismissed — but mine of him were as the remembrances of a cherished friend, who was dead.

Yes, Steerforth, long removed from the scenes of this

poor history! My sorrow may bear involuntary witness against you at the Judgement Throne; but my angry thoughts or my reproaches never will, I know!

The news of what had happened soon spread through the town; insomuch that as I passed along the streets next morning, I overheard the people speaking of it at their doors. Many were hard upon her, some few were hard upon him, but towards her second father and her lover there was but one sentiment. Among all kinds of people a respect for them in their distress prevailed, which was full of gentleness and delicacy. The seafaring men kept apart, when those two were seen early, walking with slow steps on the beach; and stood in knots, talking compassionately among themselves.

It was on the beach, close down by the sea, that I found them. It would have been easy to perceive that they had not slept all last night, even if Peggotty had failed to tell me of their still sitting just as I left them, when it was broad day. They looked worn; and I thought Mr. Peggotty's head was bowed in one night more than in all the years I had known him. But they were both as grave and steady as the sea itself: then lying beneath a dark sky, waveless — yet with a heavy roll upon it, as if it breathed in its rest — and touched, on the horizon, with a strip of silvery light from the unseen sun.

‘We have had a mort of talk, sir,’ said Mr. Peggotty to me, when we had all three walked a little while in silence, ‘of what we ought and doesn't ought to do. But we see our course now.’

I happened to glance at Ham, then looking out to sea upon the distant light, and a frightful thought came into

my mind — not that his face was angry, for it was not; I recall nothing but an expression of stern determination in it — that if ever he encountered Steerforth, he would kill him.

‘My dooty here, sir,’ said Mr. Peggotty, ‘is done. I’m a going to seek my — ’ he stopped, and went on in a firmer voice: ‘I’m a going to seek her. That’s my dooty evermore.’

He shook his head when I asked him where he would seek her, and inquired if I were going to London to-morrow? I told him I had not gone to-day, fearing to lose the chance of being of any service to him; but that I was ready to go when he would.

‘I’ll go along with you, sir,’ he rejoined, ‘if you’re agreeable, to-morrow.’

We walked again, for a while, in silence.

‘Ham,’ he presently resumed, ‘he’ll hold to his present work, and go and live along with my sister. The old boat yonder — ’

‘Will you desert the old boat, Mr. Peggotty?’ I gently interposed.

‘My station, Mas’r Davy,’ he returned, ‘ain’t there no longer; and if ever a boat foundered, since there was darkness on the face of the deep, that one’s gone down. But no, sir, no; I doesn’t mean as it should be deserted. Fur from that.’

We walked again for a while, as before, until he explained —

‘My wishes is, sir, as it shall look, day and night, winter

and summer, as it has always looked, since she fust know'd it. If ever she should come a wandering back, I wouldn't have the old place seem to cast her off, you understand, but seem to tempt her to draw nigher to 't, and to peep in, maybe, like a ghost, out of the wind and rain, through the old winder, at the old seat by the fire. Then, maybe, Mas'r Davy, seein' none but Missis Gummidge there, she might take heart to creep in, trembling; and might come to be laid down in her old bed, and rest her weary head where it was once so gay.'

I could not speak to him in reply, though I tried.

'Every night,' said Mr. Peggotty, 'as reg'lar as the night comes, the candle must be stood in its old pane of glass, that if ever she should see it, it may seem to say "Come back, my child, come back!" If ever there's a knock, Ham (partic'ler a soft knock), arter dark, at your aunt's door, doesn't you go nigh it. Let it be her — not you — that sees my fallen child!'

He walked a little in front of us, and kept before us for some minutes. During this interval, I glanced at Ham again, and observing the same expression on his face, and his eye, still directed to the distant light, I touched his arm.

Twice I called him by his name, in the tone in which I might have tried to rouse a sleeper, before he heeded me. When I at last inquired on what his thoughts were so bent, he replied —

'On what's afore me, Mas'r Davy; and over yon.'

'On the life before you, do you mean?' He had pointed confusedly out to sea.

‘Ay, Mas’r Davy. I doesn’t rightly know how ’tis, but from over yon there seemed to me to come — the end of it like’; looking at me as if he were waking, but with the same determined face.

‘What end?’ I asked, possessed by my former fear.

‘I doesn’t know,’ he said, thoughtfully; ‘I was calling to mind that the beginning of it all did take place here — and then the end come. But it’s gone! Mas’r Davy,’ he added; answering, as I think, my look; ‘you han’t no call to be afeerd of me: but I’m kiender muddled; I don’t fare to feel no matters,’ — which was as much as to say that he was not himself, and quite confounded.

Mr. Peggotty stopping for us to join him: we did so, and said no more. The remembrance of this, in connection with my former thought, however, haunted me at intervals, even until the inexorable end came at its appointed time.

We insensibly approached the old boat, and entered. Mrs. Gummidge, no longer moping in her especial corner, was busy preparing breakfast. She took Mr. Peggotty’s hat, and placed his seat for him, and spoke so comfortably and softly, that I hardly knew her.

‘Dan’l, my good man,’ said she, ‘you must eat and drink, and keep up your strength, for without it you’ll do nowt. Try, that’s a dear soul! An if I disturb you with my clicketten,’ she meant her chattering, ‘tell me so, Dan’l, and I won’t.’

When she had served us all, she withdrew to the window, where she sedulously employed herself in repairing

some shirts and other clothes belonging to Mr. Peggotty, and neatly folding and packing them in an old oilskin bag, such as sailors carry. Meanwhile, she continued talking, in the same quiet manner —

‘All times and seasons, you know, Dan’l,’ said Mrs. Gummidge, ‘I shall be allus here, and everythink will look accordin’ to your wishes. I’m a poor scholar, but I shall write to you, odd times, when you’re away, and send my letters to Mas’r Davy. Maybe you’ll write to me too, Dan’l, odd times, and tell me how you fare to feel upon your lone lorn journies.’

‘You’ll be a solitary woman heer, I’m afeerd!’ said Mr. Peggotty.

‘No, no, Dan’l,’ she returned, ‘I shan’t be that. Doesn’t you mind me. I shall have enough to do to keep a Beein for you’ (Mrs. Gummidge meant a home), ‘again you come back — to keep a Beein here for any that may hap to come back, Dan’l. In the fine time, I shall set outside the door as I used to do. If any *should* come nigh, they shall see the old widder woman true to ’em, a long way off.’

What a change in Mrs. Gummidge in a little time! She was another woman. She was so devoted, she had such a quick perception of what it would be well to say, and what it would be well to leave unsaid; she was so forgetful of herself, and so regardful of the sorrow about her, that I held her in a sort of veneration. The work she did that day! There were many things to be brought up from the beach and stored in the outhouse — as oars, nets, sails, cordage, spars, lobster-pots, bags of ballast, and the like; and though there was abundance of assistance rendered, there being not a pair of working hands on all that shore

but would have laboured hard for Mr. Peggotty, and been well paid in being asked to do it, yet she persisted, all day long, in toiling under weights that she was quite unequal to, and fagging to and fro on all sorts of unnecessary errands. As to deploring her misfortunes, she appeared to have entirely lost the recollection of ever having had any. She preserved an equable cheerfulness in the midst of her sympathy, which was not the least astonishing part of the change that had come over her. Querulousness was out of the question. I did not even observe her voice to falter, or a tear to escape from her eyes, the whole day through, until twilight; when she and I and Mr. Peggotty being alone together, and he having fallen asleep in perfect exhaustion, she broke into a half-suppressed fit of sobbing and crying, and taking me to the door, said, 'Ever bless you, Mas'r Davy, be a friend to him, poor dear!' Then, she immediately ran out of the house to wash her face, in order that she might sit quietly beside him, and be found at work there, when he should awake. In short I left her, when I went away at night, the prop and staff of Mr. Peggotty's affliction; and I could not meditate enough upon the lesson that I read in Mrs. Gummidge, and the new experience she unfolded to me.

It was between nine and ten o'clock when, strolling in a melancholy manner through the town, I stopped at Mr. Omer's door. Mr. Omer had taken it so much to heart, his daughter told me, that he had been very low and poorly all day, and had gone to bed without his pipe.

'A deceitful, bad-hearted girl,' said Mrs. Joram. 'There was no good in her, ever!'

'Don't say so,' I returned. 'You don't think so.'

‘Yes, I do!’ cried Mrs. Joram, angrily.

‘No, no,’ said I.

Mrs. Joram tossed her head, endeavouring to be very stern and cross; but she could not command her softer self, and began to cry. I was young, to be sure; but I thought much the better of her for this sympathy, and fancied it became her, as a virtuous wife and mother, very well indeed.

‘What will she ever do!’ sobbed Minnie. ‘Where will she go! What will become of her! Oh, how could she be so cruel, to herself and him?’

I remembered the time when Minnie was a young and pretty girl; and I was glad she remembered it too, so feelingly.

‘My little Minnie,’ said Mrs. Joram, ‘has only just now been got to sleep. Even in her sleep she is sobbing for Em’ly. All day long, little Minnie has cried for her, and asked me, over and over again, whether Em’ly was wicked? What can I say to her, when Em’ly tied a ribbon off her own neck round little Minnie’s the last night she was here, and laid her head down on the pillow beside her till she was fast asleep? The ribbon’s round my little Minnie’s neck now. It ought not to be, perhaps, but what can I do? Em’ly is very bad, but they were fond of one another. And the child knows nothing!’

Mrs. Joram was so unhappy that her husband came out to take care of her. Leaving them together, I went home to Peggotty’s; more melancholy myself, if possible, than I had been yet.