

## CHAPTER 16.

### What the Waves were always saying

Paul had never risen from his little bed. He lay there, listening to the noises in the street, quite tranquilly; not caring much how the time went, but watching it and watching everything about him with observing eyes.

When the sunbeams struck into his room through the rustling blinds, and quivered on the opposite wall like golden water, he knew that evening was coming on, and that the sky was red and beautiful. As the reflection died away, and a gloom went creeping up the wall, he watched it deepen, deepen, deepen, into night. Then he thought how the long streets were dotted with lamps, and how the peaceful stars were shining overhead. His fancy had a strange tendency to wander to the river, which he knew was flowing through the great city; and now he thought how black it was, and how deep it would look, reflecting the hosts of stars — and more than all, how steadily it rolled away to meet the sea.

As it grew later in the night, and footsteps in the street became so rare that he could hear them coming, count them as they passed, and lose them in the hollow distance, he would lie and watch the many-coloured ring about the candle, and wait patiently for day. His only trouble was, the swift and rapid river. He felt forced, sometimes, to try to stop it — to stem it with his childish hands — or choke its way with sand — and when he saw it coming on, resistless, he cried out! But a word from Florence, who was always at his side, restored him to himself; and leaning his poor head upon her breast, he told Floy of his dream, and smiled.

When day began to dawn again, he watched for the sun; and when its cheerful light began to sparkle in the room, he pictured to himself — pictured! he saw — the high church towers rising up into the morning sky, the town reviving, waking, starting into life once more, the river glistening as it rolled (but rolling fast as ever), and the country bright with dew. Familiar sounds and cries came by degrees into the street below; the servants in the house were roused and busy; faces looked in at the door, and voices asked his attendants softly how he was. Paul always answered for himself, 'I am better. I am a great deal better, thank you! Tell Papa so!'

By little and little, he got tired of the bustle of the day, the noise of carriages and carts, and people passing and repassing; and would fall asleep, or be troubled with a restless and uneasy sense again — the child could hardly tell whether this were in his sleeping or his waking moments — of that rushing river. 'Why, will it never stop, Floy?' he would sometimes ask her. 'It is bearing me away, I think!'

But Floy could always soothe and reassure him; and it was his daily delight to make her lay her head down on his pillow, and take some rest.

'You are always watching me, Floy, let me watch you, now!' They would prop him up with cushions in a corner of his bed, and there he would recline the while she lay

beside him: bending forward oftentimes to kiss her, and whispering to those who were near that she was tired, and how she had sat up so many nights beside him.

Thus, the flush of the day, in its heat and light, would gradually decline; and again the golden water would be dancing on the wall.

He was visited by as many as three grave doctors — they used to assemble downstairs, and come up together — and the room was so quiet, and Paul was so observant of them (though he never asked of anybody what they said), that he even knew the difference in the sound of their watches. But his interest centred in Sir Parker Peps, who always took his seat on the side of the bed. For Paul had heard them say long ago, that that gentleman had been with his Mama when she clasped Florence in her arms, and died. And he could not forget it, now. He liked him for it. He was not afraid.

The people round him changed as unaccountably as on that first night at Doctor Blimber's — except Florence; Florence never changed — and what had been Sir Parker Peps, was now his father, sitting with his head upon his hand. Old Mrs Pipchin dozing in an easy chair, often changed to Miss Tox, or his aunt; and Paul was quite content to shut his eyes again, and see what happened next, without emotion. But this figure with its head upon its hand returned so often, and remained so long, and sat so still and solemn, never speaking, never being spoken to, and rarely lifting up its face, that Paul began to wonder languidly, if it were real; and in the night-time saw it sitting there, with fear.

'Floy!' he said. 'What is that?'

'Where, dearest?'

'There! at the bottom of the bed.'

'There's nothing there, except Papa!'

The figure lifted up its head, and rose, and coming to the bedside, said:

'My own boy! Don't you know me?'

Paul looked it in the face, and thought, was this his father? But the face so altered to his thinking, thrilled while he gazed, as if it were in pain; and before he could reach out both his hands to take it between them, and draw it towards him, the figure turned away quickly from the little bed, and went out at the door.

Paul looked at Florence with a fluttering heart, but he knew what she was going to say, and stopped her with his face against her lips. The next time he observed the figure sitting at the bottom of the bed, he called to it.

'Don't be sorry for me, dear Papa! Indeed I am quite happy!'

His father coming and bending down to him — which he did quickly, and without first pausing by the bedside — Paul held him round the neck, and repeated those words to him several times, and very earnestly; and Paul never saw him in his room again at any time, whether it were day or night, but he called out, ‘Don’t be sorry for me! Indeed I am quite happy!’ This was the beginning of his always saying in the morning that he was a great deal better, and that they were to tell his father so.

How many times the golden water danced upon the wall; how many nights the dark, dark river rolled towards the sea in spite of him; Paul never counted, never sought to know. If their kindness, or his sense of it, could have increased, they were more kind, and he more grateful every day; but whether they were many days or few, appeared of little moment now, to the gentle boy.

One night he had been thinking of his mother, and her picture in the drawing-room downstairs, and thought she must have loved sweet Florence better than his father did, to have held her in her arms when she felt that she was dying — for even he, her brother, who had such dear love for her, could have no greater wish than that. The train of thought suggested to him to inquire if he had ever seen his mother? for he could not remember whether they had told him, yes or no, the river running very fast, and confusing his mind.

‘Floy, did I ever see Mama?’

‘No, darling, why?’

‘Did I ever see any kind face, like Mama’s, looking at me when I was a baby, Floy?’

He asked, incredulously, as if he had some vision of a face before him.

‘Oh yes, dear!’

‘Whose, Floy?’

‘Your old nurse’s. Often.’

‘And where is my old nurse?’ said Paul. ‘Is she dead too? Floy, are we all dead, except you?’

There was a hurry in the room, for an instant — longer, perhaps; but it seemed no more — then all was still again; and Florence, with her face quite colourless, but smiling, held his head upon her arm. Her arm trembled very much.

‘Show me that old nurse, Floy, if you please!’

‘She is not here, darling. She shall come to-morrow.’

‘Thank you, Floy!’

Paul closed his eyes with those words, and fell asleep. When he awoke, the sun was high, and the broad day was clear and He lay a little, looking at the windows, which were open, and the curtains rustling in the air, and waving to and fro: then he said, 'Floy, is it tomorrow? Is she come?'

Someone seemed to go in quest of her. Perhaps it was Susan. Paul thought he heard her telling him when he had closed his eyes again, that she would soon be back; but he did not open them to see. She kept her word — perhaps she had never been away — but the next thing that happened was a noise of footsteps on the stairs, and then Paul woke — woke mind and body — and sat upright in his bed. He saw them now about him. There was no grey mist before them, as there had been sometimes in the night. He knew them every one, and called them by their names.

'And who is this? Is this my old nurse?' said the child, regarding with a radiant smile, a figure coming in.

Yes, yes. No other stranger would have shed those tears at sight of him, and called him her dear boy, her pretty boy, her own poor blighted child. No other woman would have stooped down by his bed, and taken up his wasted hand, and put it to her lips and breast, as one who had some right to fondle it. No other woman would have so forgotten everybody there but him and Floy, and been so full of tenderness and pity.

'Floy! this is a kind good face!' said Paul. 'I am glad to see it again. Don't go away, old nurse! Stay here.'

His senses were all quickened, and he heard a name he knew.

'Who was that, who said "Walter"?' he asked, looking round. 'Someone said Walter. Is he here? I should like to see him very much.'

Nobody replied directly; but his father soon said to Susan, 'Call him back, then: let him come up!' After a short pause of expectation, during which he looked with smiling interest and wonder, on his nurse, and saw that she had not forgotten Floy, Walter was brought into the room. His open face and manner, and his cheerful eyes, had always made him a favourite with Paul; and when Paul saw him' he stretched out his hand, and said 'Good-bye!'

'Good-bye, my child!' said Mrs Pipchin, hurrying to his bed's head. 'Not good-bye?'

For an instant, Paul looked at her with the wistful face with which he had so often gazed upon her in his corner by the fire. 'Yes,' he said placidly, 'good-bye! Walter dear, good-bye!' — turning his head to where he stood, and putting out his hand again. 'Where is Papa?'

He felt his father's breath upon his cheek, before the words had parted from his lips.

‘Remember Walter, dear Papa,’ he whispered, looking in his face. ‘Remember Walter. I was fond of Walter!’ The feeble hand waved in the air, as if it cried ‘good-bye!’ to Walter once again.

‘Now lay me down,’ he said, ‘and, Floy, come close to me, and let me see you!’

Sister and brother wound their arms around each other, and the golden light came streaming in, and fell upon them, locked together.

‘How fast the river runs, between its green banks and the rushes, ‘Floy! But it’s very near the sea. I hear the waves! They always said so!’

Presently he told her the motion of the boat upon the stream was lulling him to rest. How green the banks were now, how bright the flowers growing on them, and how tall the rushes! Now the boat was out at sea, but gliding smoothly on. And now there was a shore before him. Who stood on the bank! —

He put his hands together, as he had been used to do at his prayers. He did not remove his arms to do it; but they saw him fold them so, behind her neck.

‘Mama is like you, Floy. I know her by the face! But tell them that the print upon the stairs at school is not divine enough. The light about the head is shining on me as I go!’

The golden ripple on the wall came back again, and nothing else stirred in the room. The old, old fashion! The fashion that came in with our first garments, and will last unchanged until our race has run its course, and the wide firmament is rolled up like a scroll. The old, old fashion — Death!

Oh thank GOD, all who see it, for that older fashion yet, of Immortality! And look upon us, angels of young children, with regards not quite estranged, when the swift river bears us to the ocean!

‘Dear me, dear me! To think,’ said Miss Tox, bursting out afresh that night, as if her heart were broken, ‘that Dombey and Son should be a Daughter after all!’