

CHAPTER XLIV - The Letter and the Answer

My guardian called me into his room next morning, and then I told him what had been left untold on the previous night. There was nothing to be done, he said, but to keep the secret and to avoid another such encounter as that of yesterday. He understood my feeling and entirely shared it. He charged himself even with restraining Mr Skimpole from improving his opportunity. One person whom he need not name to me, it was not now possible for him to advise or help. He wished it were, but no such thing could be. If her mistrust of the lawyer whom she had mentioned were well- founded, which he scarcely doubted, he dreaded discovery. He knew something of him, both by sight and by reputation, and it was certain that he was a dangerous man. Whatever happened, he repeatedly impressed upon me with anxious affection and kindness, I was as innocent of as himself and as unable to influence.

‘Nor do I understand,’ said he, ‘that any doubts tend towards you, my dear. Much suspicion may exist without that connexion.’

‘With the lawyer,’ I returned. ‘But two other persons have come into my mind since I have been anxious.’ Then I told him all about Mr Guppy, who I feared might have had his vague surmises when I little understood his meaning, but in whose silence after our last interview I expressed perfect confidence.

‘Well,’ said my guardian. ‘Then we may dismiss him for the present. Who is the other?’

I called to his recollection the French maid and the eager offer of herself she had made to me.

‘Ha!’ he returned thoughtfully. ‘That is a more alarming person than the clerk. But after all, my dear, it was but seeking for a new service. She had seen you and Ada a little while before, and it was natural that you should come into her head. She merely proposed herself for your maid, you know. She did nothing more.’

‘Her manner was strange,’ said I.

‘Yes, and her manner was strange when she took her shoes off and showed that cool relish for a walk that might have ended in her death-bed,’ said my guardian. ‘It would be useless self-distress and torment to reckon up such chances and possibilities. There are very few harmless circumstances that would not seem full of perilous meaning, so considered. Be hopeful, little woman. You can be nothing better than yourself; be that, through this knowledge, as you were before you

had it. It is the best you can do for everybody's sake. I, sharing the secret with you--'

'And lightening it, guardian, so much,' said I.

'--will be attentive to what passes in that family, so far as I can observe it from my distance. And if the time should come when I can stretch out a hand to render the least service to one whom it is better not to name even here, I will not fail to do it for her dear daughter's sake.'

I thanked him with my whole heart. What could I ever do but thank him! I was going out at the door when he asked me to stay a moment. Quickly turning round, I saw that same expression on his face again; and all at once, I don't know how, it flashed upon me as a new and far-off possibility that I understood it.

'My dear Esther,' said my guardian, 'I have long had something in my thoughts that I have wished to say to you.'

'Indeed?'

'I have had some difficulty in approaching it, and I still have. I should wish it to be so deliberately said, and so deliberately considered. Would you object to my writing it?'

'Dear guardian, how could I object to your writing anything for ME to read?'

'Then see, my love,' said he with his cheery smile, 'am I at this moment quite as plain and easy--do I seem as open, as honest and old-fashioned--as I am at any time?'

I answered in all earnestness, 'Quite.' With the strictest truth, for his momentary hesitation was gone (it had not lasted a minute), and his fine, sensible, cordial, sterling manner was restored.

'Do I look as if I suppressed anything, meant anything but what I said, had any reservation at all, no matter what?' said he with his bright clear eyes on mine.

I answered, most assuredly he did not.

'Can you fully trust me, and thoroughly rely on what I profess, Esther?'

'Most thoroughly,' said I with my whole heart.

'My dear girl,' returned my guardian, 'give me your hand.'

He took it in his, holding me lightly with his arm, and looking down into my face with the same genuine freshness and faithfulness of manner--the old protecting manner which had made that house my home in a moment--said, 'You have wrought changes in me, little woman, since the winter day in the stage-coach. First and last you have done me a world of good since that time.'

'Ah, guardian, what have you done for me since that time!'

'But,' said he, 'that is not to be remembered now.'

'It never can be forgotten.'

'Yes, Esther,' said he with a gentle seriousness, 'it is to be forgotten now, to be forgotten for a while. You are only to remember now that nothing can change me as you know me. Can you feel quite assured of that, my dear?'

'I can, and I do,' I said.

'That's much,' he answered. 'That's everything. But I must not take that at a word. I will not write this something in my thoughts until you have quite resolved within yourself that nothing can change me as you know me. If you doubt that in the least degree, I will never write it. If you are sure of that, on good consideration, send Charley to me this night week--'for the letter.' But if you are not quite certain, never send. Mind, I trust to your truth, in this thing as in everything. If you are not quite certain on that one point, never send!'

'Guardian,' said I, 'I am already certain, I can no more be changed in that conviction than you can be changed towards me. I shall send Charley for the letter.'

He shook my hand and said no more. Nor was any more said in reference to this conversation, either by him or me, through the whole week. When the appointed night came, I said to Charley as soon as I was alone, 'Go and knock at Mr Jarndyce's door, Charley, and say you have come from me--'for the letter.' Charley went up the stairs, and down the stairs, and along the passages--the zig-zag way about the old-fashioned house seemed very long in my listening ears that night--and so came back, along the passages, and down the stairs, and up the stairs, and brought the letter. 'Lay it on the table, Charley,' said I. So Charley laid it on the table and went to bed, and I sat looking at it without taking it up, thinking of many things.

I began with my overshadowed childhood, and passed through those timid days to the heavy time when my aunt lay dead, with her resolute face so cold and set, and when I was more solitary with Mrs Rachael than if I had had no one in the world to speak to or to look at. I passed to the altered days when I was so blest as to find friends in all around me, and to be beloved. I came to the time when I first saw my dear girl and was received into that sisterly affection which was the grace and beauty of my life. I recalled the first bright gleam of welcome which had shone out of those very windows upon our expectant faces on that cold bright night, and which had never paled. I lived my happy life there over again, I went through my illness and recovery, I thought of myself so altered and of those around me so unchanged; and all this happiness shone like a light from one central figure, represented before me by the letter on the table.

I opened it and read it. It was so impressive in its love for me, and in the unselfish caution it gave me, and the consideration it showed for me in every word, that my eyes were too often blinded to read much at a time. But I read it through three times before I laid it down. I had thought beforehand that I knew its purport, and I did. It asked me, would I be the mistress of Bleak House.

It was not a love letter, though it expressed so much love, but was written just as he would at any time have spoken to me. I saw his face, and heard his voice, and felt the influence of his kind protecting manner in every line. It addressed me as if our places were reversed, as if all the good deeds had been mine and all the feelings they had awakened his. It dwelt on my being young, and he past the prime of life; on his having attained a ripe age, while I was a child; on his writing to me with a silvered head, and knowing all this so well as to set it in full before me for mature deliberation. It told me that I would gain nothing by such a marriage and lose nothing by rejecting it, for no new relation could enhance the tenderness in which he held me, and whatever my decision was, he was certain it would be right. But he had considered this step anew since our late confidence and had decided on taking it, if it only served to show me through one poor instance that the whole world would readily unite to falsify the stern prediction of my childhood. I was the last to know what happiness I could bestow upon him, but of that he said no more, for I was always to remember that I owed him nothing and that he was my debtor, and for very much. He had often thought of our future, and foreseeing that the time must come, and fearing that it might come soon, when Ada (now very nearly of age) would leave us, and when our present mode of life must be broken up, had become accustomed to reflect on this proposal. Thus he made it. If I felt that I could ever give him the best right he could have to be my protector, and if I felt that I could happily and justly become the dear companion of his remaining life, superior to all lighter chances and changes than death, even then he could not

have me bind myself irrevocably while this letter was yet so new to me, but even then I must have ample time for reconsideration. In that case, or in the opposite case, let him be unchanged in his old relation, in his old manner, in the old name by which I called him. And as to his bright Dame Durden and little housekeeper, she would ever be the same, he knew.

This was the substance of the letter, written throughout with a justice and a dignity as if he were indeed my responsible guardian impartially representing the proposal of a friend against whom in his integrity he stated the full case.

But he did not hint to me that when I had been better looking he had had this same proceeding in his thoughts and had refrained from it. That when my old face was gone from me, and I had no attractions, he could love me just as well as in my fairer days. That the discovery of my birth gave him no shock. That his generosity rose above my disfigurement and my inheritance of shame. That the more I stood in need of such fidelity, the more firmly I might trust in him to the last.

But I knew it, I knew it well now. It came upon me as the close of the benignant history I had been pursuing, and I felt that I had but one thing to do. To devote my life to his happiness was to thank him poorly, and what had I wished for the other night but some new means of thanking him?

Still I cried very much, not only in the fullness of my heart after reading the letter, not only in the strangeness of the prospect-- for it was strange though I had expected the contents--but as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost to me. I was very happy, very thankful, very hopeful; but I cried very much.

By and by I went to my old glass. My eyes were red and swollen, and I said, 'Oh, Esther, Esther, can that be you!' I am afraid the face in the glass was going to cry again at this reproach, but I held up my finger at it, and it stopped.

'That is more like the composed look you comforted me with, my dear, when you showed me such a change!' said I, beginning to let down my hair. 'When you are mistress of Bleak House, you are to be as cheerful as a bird. In fact, you are always to be cheerful; so let us begin for once and for all.'

I went on with my hair now, quite comfortably. I sobbed a little still, but that was because I had been crying, not because I was crying then.

'And so Esther, my dear, you are happy for life. Happy with your best friends, happy in your old home, happy in the power of doing a great deal of good, and happy in the undeserved love of the best of men.'

I thought, all at once, if my guardian had married some one else, how should I have felt, and what should I have done! That would have been a change indeed. It presented my life in such a new and blank form that I rang my housekeeping keys and gave them a kiss before I laid them down in their basket again.

Then I went on to think, as I dressed my hair before the glass, how often had I considered within myself that the deep traces of my illness and the circumstances of my birth were only new reasons why I should be busy, busy, busy--useful, amiable, serviceable, in all honest, unpretending ways. This was a good time, to be sure, to sit down morbidly and cry! As to its seeming at all strange to me at first (if that were any excuse for crying, which it was not) that I was one day to be the mistress of Bleak House, why should it seem strange? Other people had thought of such things, if I had not. 'Don't you remember, my plain dear,' I asked myself, looking at the glass, 'what Mrs Woodcourt said before those scars were there about your marrying--'

Perhaps the name brought them to my remembrance. The dried remains of the flowers. It would be better not to keep them now. They had only been preserved in memory of something wholly past and gone, but it would be better not to keep them now.

They were in a book, and it happened to be in the next room--our sitting-room, dividing Ada's chamber from mine. I took a candle and went softly in to fetch it from its shelf. After I had it in my hand, I saw my beautiful darling, through the open door, lying asleep, and I stole in to kiss her.

It was weak in me, I know, and I could have no reason for crying; but I dropped a tear upon her dear face, and another, and another. Weaker than that, I took the withered flowers out and put them for a moment to her lips. I thought about her love for Richard, though, indeed, the flowers had nothing to do with that. Then I took them into my own room and burned them at the candle, and they were dust in an instant.

On entering the breakfast-room next morning, I found my guardian just as usual, quite as frank, as open, and free. There being not the least constraint in his manner, there was none (or I think there was none) in mine. I was with him several times in the course of the morning, in and out, when there was no one there, and I thought it

not unlikely that he might speak to me about the letter, but he did not say a word.

So, on the next morning, and the next, and for at least a week, over which time Mr Skimpole prolonged his stay. I expected, every day, that my guardian might speak to me about the letter, but he never did.

I thought then, growing uneasy, that I ought to write an answer. I tried over and over again in my own room at night, but I could not write an answer that at all began like a good answer, so I thought each night I would wait one more day. And I waited seven more days, and he never said a word.

At last, Mr Skimpole having departed, we three were one afternoon going out for a ride; and I, being dressed before Ada and going down, came upon my guardian, with his back towards me, standing at the drawing-room window looking out.

He turned on my coming in and said, smiling, 'Aye, it's you, little woman, is it?' and looked out again.

I had made up my mind to speak to him now. In short, I had come down on purpose. 'Guardian,' I said, rather hesitating and trembling, 'when would you like to have the answer to the letter Charley came for?'

'When it's ready, my dear,' he replied.

'I think it is ready,' said I.

'Is Charley to bring it?' he asked pleasantly.

'No. I have brought it myself, guardian,' I returned.

I put my two arms round his neck and kissed him, and he said was this the mistress of Bleak House, and I said yes; and it made no difference presently, and we all went out together, and I said nothing to my precious pet about it.