CHAPTER L - Esther's Narrative

It happened that when I came home from Deal I found a note from Caddy Jellyby (as we always continued to call her), informing me that her health, which had been for some time very delicate, was worse and that she would be more glad than she could tell me if I would go to see her. It was a note of a few lines, written from the couch on which she lay and enclosed to me in another from her husband, in which he seconded her entreaty with much solicitude. Caddy was now the mother, and I the godmother, of such a poor little baby--such a tiny old-faced mite, with a countenance that seemed to be scarcely anything but cap-border, and a little lean, long-fingered hand, always clenched under its chin. It would lie in this attitude all day, with its bright specks of eyes open, wondering (as I used to imagine) how it came to be so small and weak. Whenever it was moved it cried, but at all other times it was so patient that the sole desire of its life appeared to be to lie quiet and think. It had curious little dark veins in its face and curious little dark marks under its eyes like faint remembrances of poor Caddy's inky days, and altogether, to those who were not used to it, it was quite a piteous little sight.

But it was enough for Caddy that SHE was used to it. The projects with which she beguiled her illness, for little Esther's education, and little Esther's marriage, and even for her own old age as the grandmother of little Esther's little Esthers, was so prettily expressive of devotion to this pride of her life that I should be tempted to recall some of them but for the timely remembrance that I am getting on irregularly as it is.

To return to the letter. Caddy had a superstition about me which had been strengthening in her mind ever since that night long ago when she had lain asleep with her head in my lap. She almost--I think I must say quite--believed that I did her good whenever I was near her. Now although this was such a fancy of the affectionate girl's that I am almost ashamed to mention it, still it might have all the force of a fact when she was really ill. Therefore I set off to Caddy, with my guardian's consent, post-haste; and she and Prince made so much of me that there never was anything like it.

Next day I went again to sit with her, and next day I went again. It was a very easy journey, for I had only to rise a little earlier in the morning, and keep my accounts, and attend to housekeeping matters before leaving home.

But when I had made these three visits, my guardian said to me, on my return at night, 'Now, little woman, little woman, this will never do. Constant dropping will wear away a stone, and constant coaching

will wear out a Dame Durden. We will go to London for a while and take possession of our old lodgings.'

'Not for me, dear guardian,' said I, 'for I never feel tired,' which was strictly true. I was only too happy to be in such request.

'For me then,' returned my guardian, 'or for Ada, or for both of us. It is somebody's birthday to-morrow, I think.'

'Truly I think it is,' said I, kissing my darling, who would be twenty-one to-morrow.

'Well,' observed my guardian, half pleasantly, half seriously, 'that's a great occasion and will give my fair cousin some necessary business to transact in assertion of her independence, and will make London a more convenient place for all of us. So to London we will go. That being settled, there is another thing--how have you left Caddy?'

'Very unwell, guardian. I fear it will be some time before she regains her health and strength.'

'What do you call some time, now?' asked my guardian thoughtfully.

'Some weeks, I am afraid.'

'Ah!' He began to walk about the room with his hands in his pockets, showing that he had been thinking as much. 'Now, what do you say about her doctor? Is he a good doctor, my love?'

I felt obliged to confess that I knew nothing to the contrary but that Prince and I had agreed only that evening that we would like his opinion to be confirmed by some one.

'Well, you know,' returned my guardian quickly, 'there's Woodcourt.'

I had not meant that, and was rather taken by surprise. For a moment all that I had had in my mind in connexion with Mr Woodcourt seemed to come back and confuse me.

'You don't object to him, little woman?'

'Object to him, guardian? Oh no!'

'And you don't think the patient would object to him?'

So far from that, I had no doubt of her being prepared to have a great reliance on him and to like him very much. I said that he was no

stranger to her personally, for she had seen him often in his kind attendance on Miss Flite.

'Very good,' said my guardian. 'He has been here to-day, my dear, and I will see him about it to-morrow.'

I felt in this short conversation--though I did not know how, for she was quiet, and we interchanged no look--that my dear girl well remembered how merrily she had clasped me round the waist when no other hands than Caddy's had brought me the little parting token. This caused me to feel that I ought to tell her, and Caddy too, that I was going to be the mistress of Bleak House and that if I avoided that disclosure any longer I might become less worthy in my own eyes of its master's love. Therefore, when we went upstairs and had waited listening until the clock struck twelve in order that only I might be the first to wish my darling all good wishes on her birthday and to take her to my heart, I set before her, just as I had set before myself, the goodness and honour of her cousin John and the happy life that was in store for for me. If ever my darling were fonder of me at one time than another in all our intercourse, she was surely fondest of me that night. And I was so rejoiced to know it and so comforted by the sense of having done right in casting this last idle reservation away that I was ten times happier than I had been before. I had scarcely thought it a reservation a few hours ago, but now that it was gone I felt as if I understood its nature better.

Next day we went to London. We found our old lodging vacant, and in half an hour were quietly established there, as if we had never gone away. Mr Woodcourt dined with us to celebrate my darling's birthday, and we were as pleasant as we could be with the great blank among us that Richard's absence naturally made on such an occasion. After that day I was for some weeks--eight or nine as I remember--very much with Caddy, and thus it fell out that I saw less of Ada at this time than any other since we had first come together, except the time of my own illness. She often came to Caddy's, but our function there was to amuse and cheer her, and we did not talk in our usual confidential manner. Whenever I went home at night we were together, but Caddy's rest was broken by pain, and I often remained to nurse her.

With her husband and her poor little mite of a baby to love and their home to strive for, what a good creature Caddy was! So self- denying, so uncomplaining, so anxious to get well on their account, so afraid of giving trouble, and so thoughtful of the unassisted labours of her husband and the comforts of old Mr Turveydrop; I had never known the best of her until now. And it seemed so curious that her pale face and helpless figure should be lying there day after day where dancing was the business of life, where the kit and the apprentices began early

every morning in the ball- room, and where the untidy little boy waltzed by himself in the kitchen all the afternoon.

At Caddy's request I took the supreme direction of her apartment, trimmed it up, and pushed her, couch and all, into a lighter and more airy and more cheerful corner than she had yet occupied; then, every day, when we were in our neatest array, I used to lay my small small namesake in her arms and sit down to chat or work or read to her. It was at one of the first of these quiet times that I told Caddy about Bleak House.

We had other visitors besides Ada. First of all we had Prince, who in his hurried intervals of teaching used to come softly in and sit softly down, with a face of loving anxiety for Caddy and the very little child. Whatever Caddy's condition really was, she never failed to declare to Prince that she was all but well--which I, heaven forgive me, never failed to confirm. This would put Prince in such good spirits that he would sometimes take the kit from his pocket and play a chord or two to astonish the baby, which I never knew it to do in the least degree, for my tiny namesake never noticed it at all.

Then there was Mrs Jellyby. She would come occasionally, with her usual distraught manner, and sit calmly looking miles beyond her grandchild as if her attention were absorbed by a young Borrioboolan on its native shores. As bright-eyed as ever, as serene, and as untidy, she would say, 'Well, Caddy, child, and how do you do to-day?' And then would sit amiably smiling and taking no notice of the reply or would sweetly glide off into a calculation of the number of letters she had lately received and answered or of the coffee-bearing power of Borrioboola-Gha. This she would always do with a serene contempt for our limited sphere of action, not to be disguised.

Then there was old Mr Turveydrop, who was from morning to night and from night to morning the subject of innumerable precautions. If the baby cried, it was nearly stifled lest the noise should make him uncomfortable. If the fire wanted stirring in the night, it was surreptitiously done lest his rest should be broken. If Caddy required any little comfort that the house contained, she first carefully discussed whether he was likely to require it too. In return for this consideration he would come into the room once a day, all but blessing it--showing a condescension, and a patronage, and a grace of manner in dispensing the light of his high- shouldered presence from which I might have supposed him (if I had not known better) to have been the benefactor of Caddy's life.

'My Caroline,' he would say, making the nearest approach that he could to bending over her. 'Tell me that you are better to-day.'

'Oh, much better, thank you, Mr Turveydrop,' Caddy would reply.

'Delighted! Enchanted! And our dear Miss Summerson. She is not quite prostrated by fatigue?' Here he would crease up his eyelids and kiss his fingers to me, though I am happy to say he had ceased to be particular in his attentions since I had been so altered.

'Not at all,' I would assure him.

'Charming! We must take care of our dear Caroline, Miss Summerson. We must spare nothing that will restore her. We must nourish her. My dear Caroline'--he would turn to his daughter-in-law with infinite generosity and protection--'want for nothing, my love. Frame a wish and gratify it, my daughter. Everything this house contains, everything my room contains, is at your service, my dear. Do not,' he would sometimes add in a burst of deportment, 'even allow my simple requirements to be considered if they should at any time interfere with your own, my Caroline. Your necessities are greater than mine.'

He had established such a long prescriptive right to this deportment (his son's inheritance from his mother) that I several times knew both Caddy and her husband to be melted to tears by these affectionate self-sacrifices.

'Nay, my dears,' he would remonstrate; and when I saw Caddy's thin arm about his fat neck as he said it, I would be melted too, though not by the same process. 'Nay, nay! I have promised never to leave ye. Be dutiful and affectionate towards me, and I ask no other return. Now, bless ye! I am going to the Park.'

He would take the air there presently and get an appetite for his hotel dinner. I hope I do old Mr Turveydrop no wrong, but I never saw any better traits in him than these I faithfully record, except that he certainly conceived a liking for Peepy and would take the child out walking with great pomp, always on those occasions sending him home before he went to dinner himself, and occasionally with a halfpenny in his pocket. But even this disinterestedness was attended with no inconsiderable cost, to my knowledge, for before Peepy was sufficiently decorated to walk hand in hand with the professor of deportment, he had to be newly dressed, at the expense of Caddy and her husband, from top to toe.

Last of our visitors, there was Mr Jellyby. Really when he used to come in of an evening, and ask Caddy in his meek voice how she was, and then sit down with his head against the wall, and make no attempt to say anything more, I liked him very much. If he found me bustling about doing any little thing, he sometimes half took his coat off, as if with an intention of helping by a great exertion; but he never

got any further. His sole occupation was to sit with his head against the wall, looking hard at the thoughtful baby; and I could not quite divest my mind of a fancy that they understood one another.

I have not counted Mr Woodcourt among our visitors because he was now Caddy's regular attendant. She soon began to improve under his care, but he was so gentle, so skilful, so unwearying in the pains he took that it is not to be wondered at, I am sure. I saw a good deal of Mr Woodcourt during this time, though not so much as might be supposed, for knowing Caddy to be safe in his hands, I often slipped home at about the hours when he was expected. We frequently met, notwithstanding. I was quite reconciled to myself now, but I still felt glad to think that he was sorry for me, and he still WAS sorry for me I believed. He helped Mr Badger in his professional engagements, which were numerous, and had as yet no settled projects for the future.

It was when Caddy began to recover that I began to notice a change in my dear girl. I cannot say how it first presented itself to me, because I observed it in many slight particulars which were nothing in themselves and only became something when they were pieced together. But I made it out, by putting them together, that Ada was not so frankly cheerful with me as she used to be. Her tenderness for me was as loving and true as ever; I did not for a moment doubt that; but there was a quiet sorrow about her which she did not confide to me, and in which I traced some hidden regret.

Now, I could not understand this, and I was so anxious for the happiness of my own pet that it caused me some uneasiness and set me thinking often. At length, feeling sure that Ada suppressed this something from me lest it should make me unhappy too, it came into my head that she was a little grieved--for me--by what I had told her about Bleak House.

How I persuaded myself that this was likely, I don't know. I had no idea that there was any selfish reference in my doing so. I was not grieved for myself: I was quite contented and quite happy. Still, that Ada might be thinking--for me, though I had abandoned all such thoughts--of what once was, but was now all changed, seemed so easy to believe that I believed it.

What could I do to reassure my darling (I considered then) and show her that I had no such feelings? Well! I could only be as brisk and busy as possible, and that I had tried to be all along. However, as Caddy's illness had certainly interfered, more or less, with my home duties--though I had always been there in the morning to make my guardian's breakfast, and he had a hundred times laughed and said there must be two little women, for his little woman was never missing--I resolved to be doubly diligent and gay. So I went about the

house humming all the tunes I knew, and I sat working and working in a desperate manner, and I talked and talked, morning, noon, and night.

And still there was the same shade between me and my darling.

'So, Dame Trot,' observed my guardian, shutting up his book one night when we were all three together, 'so Woodcourt has restored Caddy Jellyby to the full enjoyment of life again?'

'Yes,' I said; 'and to be repaid by such gratitude as hers is to be made rich, guardian.'

'I wish it was,' he returned, 'with all my heart.'

So did I too, for that matter. I said so.

'Aye! We would make him as rich as a Jew if we knew how. Would we not, little woman?'

I laughed as I worked and replied that I was not sure about that, for it might spoil him, and he might not be so useful, and there might be many who could ill spare him. As Miss Flite, and Caddy herself, and many others.

'True,' said my guardian. 'I had forgotten that. But we would agree to make him rich enough to live, I suppose? Rich enough to work with tolerable peace of mind? Rich enough to have his own happy home and his own household gods--and household goddess, too, perhaps?'

That was quite another thing, I said. We must all agree in that.

'To be sure,' said my guardian. 'All of us. I have a great regard for Woodcourt, a high esteem for him; and I have been sounding him delicately about his plans. It is difficult to offer aid to an independent man with that just kind of pride which he possesses. And yet I would be glad to do it if I might or if I knew how. He seems half inclined for another voyage. But that appears like casting such a man away.'

'It might open a new world to him,' said I.

'So it might, little woman,' my guardian assented. 'I doubt if he expects much of the old world. Do you know I have fancied that he sometimes feels some particular disappointment or misfortune encountered in it. You never heard of anything of that sort?'

I shook my head.

‘Humph,’ said my guardian. ‘I am mistaken, I dare say.’ As there was a little pause here, which I thought, for my dear girl's satisfaction, had better be filled up, I hummed an air as I worked which was a favourite with my guardian.

‘And do you think Mr Woodcourt will make another voyage?’ I asked him when I had hummed it quietly all through.

‘I don't quite know what to think, my dear, but I should say it was likely at present that he will give a long trip to another country.’

‘I am sure he will take the best wishes of all our hearts with him wherever he goes,’ said I; ‘and though they are not riches, he will never be the poorer for them, guardian, at least.’

‘Never, little woman,’ he replied.

I was sitting in my usual place, which was now beside my guardian's chair. That had not been my usual place before the letter, but it was now. I looked up to Ada, who was sitting opposite, and I saw, as she looked at me, that her eyes were filled with tears and that tears were falling down her face. I felt that I had only to be placid and merry once for all to undeceive my dear and set her loving heart at rest. I really was so, and I had nothing to do but to be myself.

So I made my sweet girl lean upon my shoulder--how little thinking what was heavy on her mind!--and I said she was not quite well, and put my arm about her, and took her upstairs. When we were in our own room, and when she might perhaps have told me what I was so unprepared to hear, I gave her no encouragement to confide in me; I never thought she stood in need of it.

‘Oh, my dear good Esther,’ said Ada, ‘if I could only make up my mind to speak to you and my cousin John when you are together!’

‘Why, my love!’ I remonstrated. ‘Ada, why should you not speak to us!’

Ada only dropped her head and pressed me closer to her heart.

‘You surely don't forget, my beauty,’ said I, smiling, ‘what quiet, old-fashioned people we are and how I have settled down to be the discreetest of dames? You don't forget how happily and peacefully my life is all marked out for me, and by whom? I am certain that you don't forget by what a noble character, Ada. That can never be.’

‘No, never, Esther.’

‘Why then, my dear,’ said I, ‘there can be nothing amiss--and why should you not speak to us?’

‘Nothing amiss, Esther?’ returned Ada. ‘Oh, when I think of all these years, and of his fatherly care and kindness, and of the old relations among us, and of you, what shall I do, what shall I do!’

I looked at my child in some wonder, but I thought it better not to answer otherwise than by cheering her, and so I turned off into many little recollections of our life together and prevented her from saying more. When she lay down to sleep, and not before, I returned to my guardian to say good night, and then I came back to Ada and sat near her for a little while.

She was asleep, and I thought as I looked at her that she was a little changed. I had thought so more than once lately. I could not decide, even looking at her while she was unconscious, how she was changed, but something in the familiar beauty of her face looked different to me. My guardian's old hopes of her and Richard arose sorrowfully in my mind, and I said to myself, ‘She has been anxious about him,’ and I wondered how that love would end.

When I had come home from Caddy's while she was ill, I had often found Ada at work, and she had always put her work away, and I had never known what it was. Some of it now lay in a drawer near her, which was not quite closed. I did not open the drawer, but I still rather wondered what the work could he, for it was evidently nothing for herself.

And I noticed as I kissed my dear that she lay with one hand under her pillow so that it was hidden.

How much less amiable I must have been than they thought me, how much less amiable than I thought myself, to be so preoccupied with my own cheerfulness and contentment as to think that it only rested with me to put my dear girl right and set her mind at peace!

But I lay down, self-deceived, in that belief. And I awoke in it next day to find that there was still the same shade between me and my darling.