

Chapter XXIX - I Visit Steerforth At His Home, Again

I mentioned to Mr Spenlow in the morning, that I wanted leave of absence for a short time; and as I was not in the receipt of any salary, and consequently was not obnoxious to the implacable Jorkins, there was no difficulty about it. I took that opportunity, with my voice sticking in my throat, and my sight failing as I uttered the words, to express my hope that Miss Spenlow was quite well; to which Mr Spenlow replied, with no more emotion than if he had been speaking of an ordinary human being, that he was much obliged to me, and she was very well.

We articulated clerks, as germs of the patrician order of proctors, were treated with so much consideration, that I was almost my own master at all times. As I did not care, however, to get to Highgate before one or two o'clock in the day, and as we had another little excommunication case in court that morning, which was called The office of the judge promoted by Tipkins against Bullock for his soul's correction, I passed an hour or two in attendance on it with Mr Spenlow very agreeably. It arose out of a scuffle between two churchwardens, one of whom was alleged to have pushed the other against a pump; the handle of which pump projecting into a school-house, which school-house was under a gable of the church-roof, made the push an ecclesiastical offence. It was an amusing case; and sent me up to Highgate, on the box of the stage-coach, thinking about the Commons, and what Mr Spenlow had said about touching the Commons and bringing down the country.

Mrs Steerforth was pleased to see me, and so was Rosa Dartle. I was agreeably surprised to find that Littimer was not there, and that we were attended by a modest little parlour-maid, with blue ribbons in her cap, whose eye it was much more pleasant, and much less disconcerting, to catch by accident, than the eye of that respectable man. But what I particularly observed, before I had been half-an-hour in the house, was the close and attentive watch Miss Dartle kept upon me; and the lurking manner in which she seemed to compare my face with Steerforth's, and Steerforth's with mine, and to lie in wait for something to come out between the two. So surely as I looked towards her, did I see that eager visage, with its gaunt black eyes and searching brow, intent on mine; or passing suddenly from mine to Steerforth's; or comprehending both of us at once. In this lynx-like scrutiny she was so far from faltering when she saw I observed it, that at such a time she only fixed her piercing look upon me with a more intent expression still. Blameless as I was, and knew that I was, in reference to any wrong she could possibly suspect me of, I shrunk before her strange eyes, quite unable to endure their hungry lustre.

All day, she seemed to pervade the whole house. If I talked to Steerforth in his room, I heard her dress rustle in the little gallery outside. When he and I engaged in some of our old exercises on the lawn behind the house, I saw her face pass from window to window, like a wandering light, until it fixed itself in one, and watched us. When we all four went out walking in the afternoon, she closed her thin hand on my arm like a spring, to keep me back, while Steerforth and his mother went on out of hearing: and then spoke to me.

'You have been a long time,' she said, 'without coming here. Is your profession really so engaging and interesting as to absorb your whole attention? I ask because I always want to be informed, when I am ignorant. Is it really, though?'

I replied that I liked it well enough, but that I certainly could not claim so much for it.

'Oh! I am glad to know that, because I always like to be put right when I am wrong,' said Rosa Dartle. 'You mean it is a little dry, perhaps?'

'Well,' I replied; 'perhaps it was a little dry.'

'Oh! and that's a reason why you want relief and change - excitement and all that?' said she. 'Ah! very true! But isn't it a little - Eh? - for him; I don't mean you?'

A quick glance of her eye towards the spot where Steerforth was walking, with his mother leaning on his arm, showed me whom she meant; but beyond that, I was quite lost. And I looked so, I have no doubt.

'Don't it - I don't say that it does, mind I want to know - don't it rather engross him? Don't it make him, perhaps, a little more remiss than usual in his visits to his blindly-doting - eh?' With another quick glance at them, and such a glance at me as seemed to look into my innermost thoughts.

'Miss Dartle,' I returned, 'pray do not think -'

'I don't!' she said. 'Oh dear me, don't suppose that I think anything! I am not suspicious. I only ask a question. I don't state any opinion. I want to found an opinion on what you tell me. Then, it's not so? Well! I am very glad to know it.'

'It certainly is not the fact,' said I, perplexed, 'that I am accountable for Steerforth's having been away from home longer than usual - if he has been: which I really don't know at this moment, unless I

understand it from you. I have not seen him this long while, until last night.'

'No?'

'Indeed, Miss Dartle, no!'

As she looked full at me, I saw her face grow sharper and paler, and the marks of the old wound lengthen out until it cut through the disfigured lip, and deep into the nether lip, and slanted down the face. There was something positively awful to me in this, and in the brightness of her eyes, as she said, looking fixedly at me:

'What is he doing?'

I repeated the words, more to myself than her, being so amazed.

'What is he doing?' she said, with an eagerness that seemed enough to consume her like a fire. 'In what is that man assisting him, who never looks at me without an inscrutable falsehood in his eyes? If you are honourable and faithful, I don't ask you to betray your friend. I ask you only to tell me, is it anger, is it hatred, is it pride, is it restlessness, is it some wild fancy, is it love, what is it, that is leading him?'

'Miss Dartle,' I returned, 'how shall I tell you, so that you will believe me, that I know of nothing in Steerforth different from what there was when I first came here? I can think of nothing. I firmly believe there is nothing. I hardly understand even what you mean.'

As she still stood looking fixedly at me, a twitching or throbbing, from which I could not dissociate the idea of pain, came into that cruel mark; and lifted up the corner of her lip as if with scorn, or with a pity that despised its object. She put her hand upon it hurriedly - a hand so thin and delicate, that when I had seen her hold it up before the fire to shade her face, I had compared it in my thoughts to fine porcelain - and saying, in a quick, fierce, passionate way, 'I swear you to secrecy about this!' said not a word more.

Mrs Steerforth was particularly happy in her son's society, and Steerforth was, on this occasion, particularly attentive and respectful to her. It was very interesting to me to see them together, not only on account of their mutual affection, but because of the strong personal resemblance between them, and the manner in which what was haughty or impetuous in him was softened by age and sex, in her, to a gracious dignity. I thought, more than once, that it was well no serious cause of division had ever come between them; or two such natures - I ought rather to express it, two such shades of the same

nature - might have been harder to reconcile than the two extremest opposites in creation. The idea did not originate in my own discernment, I am bound to confess, but in a speech of Rosa Dartle's.

She said at dinner:

'Oh, but do tell me, though, somebody, because I have been thinking about it all day, and I want to know.'

'You want to know what, Rosa?' returned Mrs Steerforth. 'Pray, pray, Rosa, do not be mysterious.'

'Mysterious!' she cried. 'Oh! really? Do you consider me so?'

'Do I constantly entreat you,' said Mrs Steerforth, 'to speak plainly, in your own natural manner?'

'Oh! then this is not my natural manner?' she rejoined. 'Now you must really bear with me, because I ask for information. We never know ourselves.'

'It has become a second nature,' said Mrs Steerforth, without any displeasure; 'but I remember, - and so must you, I think, - when your manner was different, Rosa; when it was not so guarded, and was more trustful.'

'I am sure you are right,' she returned; 'and so it is that bad habits grow upon one! Really? Less guarded and more trustful? How can I, imperceptibly, have changed, I wonder! Well, that's very odd! I must study to regain my former self.'

'I wish you would,' said Mrs Steerforth, with a smile.

'Oh! I really will, you know!' she answered. 'I will learn frankness from - let me see - from James.'

'You cannot learn frankness, Rosa,' said Mrs Steerforth quickly - for there was always some effect of sarcasm in what Rosa Dartle said, though it was said, as this was, in the most unconscious manner in the world - 'in a better school.'

'That I am sure of,' she answered, with uncommon fervour. 'If I am sure of anything, of course, you know, I am sure of that.'

Mrs Steerforth appeared to me to regret having been a little nettled; for she presently said, in a kind tone:

'Well, my dear Rosa, we have not heard what it is that you want to be satisfied about?'

'That I want to be satisfied about?' she replied, with provoking coldness. 'Oh! It was only whether people, who are like each other in their moral constitution - is that the phrase?'

'It's as good a phrase as another,' said Steerforth.

'Thank you: - whether people, who are like each other in their moral constitution, are in greater danger than people not so circumstanced, supposing any serious cause of variance to arise between them, of being divided angrily and deeply?'

'I should say yes,' said Steerforth.

'Should you?' she retorted. 'Dear me! Supposing then, for instance - any unlikely thing will do for a supposition - that you and your mother were to have a serious quarrel.'

'My dear Rosa,' interposed Mrs Steerforth, laughing good-naturedly, 'suggest some other supposition! James and I know our duty to each other better, I pray Heaven!'

'Oh!' said Miss Dartle, nodding her head thoughtfully. 'To be sure. That would prevent it? Why, of course it would. Exactly. Now, I am glad I have been so foolish as to put the case, for it is so very good to know that your duty to each other would prevent it! Thank you very much.'

One other little circumstance connected with Miss Dartle I must not omit; for I had reason to remember it thereafter, when all the irremediable past was rendered plain. During the whole of this day, but especially from this period of it, Steerforth exerted himself with his utmost skill, and that was with his utmost ease, to charm this singular creature into a pleasant and pleased companion. That he should succeed, was no matter of surprise to me. That she should struggle against the fascinating influence of his delightful art - delightful nature I thought it then - did not surprise me either; for I knew that she was sometimes jaundiced and perverse. I saw her features and her manner slowly change; I saw her look at him with growing admiration; I saw her try, more and more faintly, but always angrily, as if she condemned a weakness in herself, to resist the captivating power that he possessed; and finally, I saw her sharp glance soften, and her smile become quite gentle, and I ceased to be afraid of her as I had really been all day, and we all sat about the fire, talking and laughing together, with as little reserve as if we had been children.

Whether it was because we had sat there so long, or because Steerforth was resolved not to lose the advantage he had gained, I do not know; but we did not remain in the dining-room more than five minutes after her departure. 'She is playing her harp,' said Steerforth, softly, at the drawing-room door, 'and nobody but my mother has heard her do that, I believe, these three years.' He said it with a curious smile, which was gone directly; and we went into the room and found her alone.

'Don't get up,' said Steerforth (which she had already done) 'my dear Rosa, don't! Be kind for once, and sing us an Irish song.'

'What do you care for an Irish song?' she returned.

'Much!' said Steerforth. 'Much more than for any other. Here is Daisy, too, loves music from his soul. Sing us an Irish song, Rosa! and let me sit and listen as I used to do.'

He did not touch her, or the chair from which she had risen, but sat himself near the harp. She stood beside it for some little while, in a curious way, going through the motion of playing it with her right hand, but not sounding it. At length she sat down, and drew it to her with one sudden action, and played and sang.

I don't know what it was, in her touch or voice, that made that song the most unearthly I have ever heard in my life, or can imagine. There was something fearful in the reality of it. It was as if it had never been written, or set to music, but sprung out of passion within her; which found imperfect utterance in the low sounds of her voice, and crouched again when all was still. I was dumb when she leaned beside the harp again, playing it, but not sounding it, with her right hand.

A minute more, and this had roused me from my trance: - Steerforth had left his seat, and gone to her, and had put his arm laughingly about her, and had said, 'Come, Rosa, for the future we will love each other very much!' And she had struck him, and had thrown him off with the fury of a wild cat, and had burst out of the room.

'What is the matter with Rosa?' said Mrs Steerforth, coming in.

'She has been an angel, mother,' returned Steerforth, 'for a little while; and has run into the opposite extreme, since, by way of compensation.'

'You should be careful not to irritate her, James. Her temper has been soured, remember, and ought not to be tried.'

Rosa did not come back; and no other mention was made of her, until I went with Steerforth into his room to say Good night. Then he laughed about her, and asked me if I had ever seen such a fierce little piece of incomprehensibility.

I expressed as much of my astonishment as was then capable of expression, and asked if he could guess what it was that she had taken so much amiss, so suddenly.

'Oh, Heaven knows,' said Steerforth. 'Anything you like - or nothing! I told you she took everything, herself included, to a grindstone, and sharpened it. She is an edge-tool, and requires great care in dealing with. She is always dangerous. Good night!'

'Good night!' said I, 'my dear Steerforth! I shall be gone before you wake in the morning. Good night!'

He was unwilling to let me go; and stood, holding me out, with a hand on each of my shoulders, as he had done in my own room.

'Daisy,' he said, with a smile - 'for though that's not the name your godfathers and godmothers gave you, it's the name I like best to call you by - and I wish, I wish, I wish, you could give it to me!'

'Why so I can, if I choose,' said I.

'Daisy, if anything should ever separate us, you must think of me at my best, old boy. Come! Let us make that bargain. Think of me at my best, if circumstances should ever part us!'

'You have no best to me, Steerforth,' said I, 'and no worst. You are always equally loved, and cherished in my heart.'

So much compunction for having ever wronged him, even by a shapeless thought, did I feel within me, that the confession of having done so was rising to my lips. But for the reluctance I had to betray the confidence of Agnes, but for my uncertainty how to approach the subject with no risk of doing so, it would have reached them before he said, 'God bless you, Daisy, and good night!' In my doubt, it did NOT reach them; and we shook hands, and we parted.

I was up with the dull dawn, and, having dressed as quietly as I could, looked into his room. He was fast asleep; lying, easily, with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school.

The time came in its season, and that was very soon, when I almost wondered that nothing troubled his repose, as I looked at him. But he

slept - let me think of him so again - as I had often seen him sleep at school; and thus, in this silent hour, I left him.

- Never more, oh God forgive you, Steerforth! to touch that passive hand in love and friendship. Never, never more!