

Chapter LVI - The New Wound, And The Old

No need, O Steerforth, to have said, when we last spoke together, in that hour which I so little deemed to be our parting-hour - no need to have said, 'Think of me at my best!' I had done that ever; and could I change now, looking on this sight!

They brought a hand-bier, and laid him on it, and covered him with a flag, and took him up and bore him on towards the houses. All the men who carried him had known him, and gone sailing with him, and seen him merry and bold. They carried him through the wild roar, a hush in the midst of all the tumult; and took him to the cottage where Death was already.

But when they set the bier down on the threshold, they looked at one another, and at me, and whispered. I knew why. They felt as if it were not right to lay him down in the same quiet room.

We went into the town, and took our burden to the inn. So soon as I could at all collect my thoughts, I sent for Joram, and begged him to provide me a conveyance in which it could be got to London in the night. I knew that the care of it, and the hard duty of preparing his mother to receive it, could only rest with me; and I was anxious to discharge that duty as faithfully as I could.

I chose the night for the journey, that there might be less curiosity when I left the town. But, although it was nearly midnight when I came out of the yard in a chaise, followed by what I had in charge, there were many people waiting. At intervals, along the town, and even a little way out upon the road, I saw more: but at length only the bleak night and the open country were around me, and the ashes of my youthful friendship.

Upon a mellow autumn day, about noon, when the ground was perfumed by fallen leaves, and many more, in beautiful tints of yellow, red, and brown, yet hung upon the trees, through which the sun was shining, I arrived at Highgate. I walked the last mile, thinking as I went along of what I had to do; and left the carriage that had followed me all through the night, awaiting orders to advance.

The house, when I came up to it, looked just the same. Not a blind was raised; no sign of life was in the dull paved court, with its covered way leading to the disused door. The wind had quite gone down, and nothing moved.

I had not, at first, the courage to ring at the gate; and when I did ring, my errand seemed to me to be expressed in the very sound of the bell.

The little parlour-maid came out, with the key in her hand; and looking earnestly at me as she unlocked the gate, said:

'I beg your pardon, sir. Are you ill?'

'I have been much agitated, and am fatigued.'

'Is anything the matter, sir? - Mr James? -' 'Hush!' said I. 'Yes, something has happened, that I have to break to Mrs Steerforth. She is at home?'

The girl anxiously replied that her mistress was very seldom out now, even in a carriage; that she kept her room; that she saw no company, but would see me. Her mistress was up, she said, and Miss Dartle was with her. What message should she take upstairs?

Giving her a strict charge to be careful of her manner, and only to carry in my card and say I waited, I sat down in the drawing-room (which we had now reached) until she should come back. Its former pleasant air of occupation was gone, and the shutters were half closed. The harp had not been used for many and many a day. His picture, as a boy, was there. The cabinet in which his mother had kept his letters was there. I wondered if she ever read them now; if she would ever read them more!

The house was so still that I heard the girl's light step upstairs. On her return, she brought a message, to the effect that Mrs Steerforth was an invalid and could not come down; but that if I would excuse her being in her chamber, she would be glad to see me. In a few moments I stood before her.

She was in his room; not in her own. I felt, of course, that she had taken to occupy it, in remembrance of him; and that the many tokens of his old sports and accomplishments, by which she was surrounded, remained there, just as he had left them, for the same reason. She murmured, however, even in her reception of me, that she was out of her own chamber because its aspect was unsuited to her infirmity; and with her stately look repelled the least suspicion of the truth.

At her chair, as usual, was Rosa Dartle. From the first moment of her dark eyes resting on me, I saw she knew I was the bearer of evil tidings. The scar sprung into view that instant. She withdrew herself a step behind the chair, to keep her own face out of Mrs Steerforth's observation; and scrutinized me with a piercing gaze that never faltered, never shrunk.

'I am sorry to observe you are in mourning, sir,' said Mrs Steerforth.

'I am unhappily a widower,' said I.

'You are very young to know so great a loss,' she returned. 'I am grieved to hear it. I am grieved to hear it. I hope Time will be good to you.'

'I hope Time,' said I, looking at her, 'will be good to all of us. Dear Mrs Steerforth, we must all trust to that, in our heaviest misfortunes.'

The earnestness of my manner, and the tears in my eyes, alarmed her. The whole course of her thoughts appeared to stop, and change.

I tried to command my voice in gently saying his name, but it trembled. She repeated it to herself, two or three times, in a low tone. Then, addressing me, she said, with enforced calmness:

'My son is ill.'

'Very ill.'

'You have seen him?'

'I have.'

'Are you reconciled?'

I could not say Yes, I could not say No. She slightly turned her head towards the spot where Rosa Dartle had been standing at her elbow, and in that moment I said, by the motion of my lips, to Rosa, 'Dead!'

That Mrs Steerforth might not be induced to look behind her, and read, plainly written, what she was not yet prepared to know, I met her look quickly; but I had seen Rosa Dartle throw her hands up in the air with vehemence of despair and horror, and then clasp them on her face.

The handsome lady - so like, oh so like! - regarded me with a fixed look, and put her hand to her forehead. I besought her to be calm, and prepare herself to bear what I had to tell; but I should rather have entreated her to weep, for she sat like a stone figure.

'When I was last here,' I faltered, 'Miss Dartle told me he was sailing here and there. The night before last was a dreadful one at sea. If he were at sea that night, and near a dangerous coast, as it is said he was; and if the vessel that was seen should really be the ship which -'

'Rosa!' said Mrs Steerforth, 'come to me!'

She came, but with no sympathy or gentleness. Her eyes gleamed like fire as she confronted his mother, and broke into a frightful laugh.

'Now,' she said, 'is your pride appeased, you madwoman? Now has he made atonement to you - with his life! Do you hear? - His life!'

Mrs Steerforth, fallen back stiffly in her chair, and making no sound but a moan, cast her eyes upon her with a wide stare.

'Aye!' cried Rosa, smiting herself passionately on the breast, 'look at me! Moan, and groan, and look at me! Look here!' striking the scar, 'at your dead child's handiwork!'

The moan the mother uttered, from time to time, went to My heart. Always the same. Always inarticulate and stifled. Always accompanied with an incapable motion of the head, but with no change of face. Always proceeding from a rigid mouth and closed teeth, as if the jaw were locked and the face frozen up in pain.

'Do you remember when he did this?' she proceeded. 'Do you remember when, in his inheritance of your nature, and in your pampering of his pride and passion, he did this, and disfigured me for life? Look at me, marked until I die with his high displeasure; and moan and groan for what you made him!'

'Miss Dartle,' I entreated her. 'For Heaven's sake -'

'I WILL speak!' she said, turning on me with her lightning eyes. 'Be silent, you! Look at me, I say, proud mother of a proud, false son! Moan for your nurture of him, moan for your corruption of him, moan for your loss of him, moan for mine!'

She clenched her hand, and trembled through her spare, worn figure, as if her passion were killing her by inches.

'You, resent his self-will!' she exclaimed. 'You, injured by his haughty temper! You, who opposed to both, when your hair was grey, the qualities which made both when you gave him birth! YOU, who from his cradle reared him to be what he was, and stunted what he should have been! Are you rewarded, now, for your years of trouble?'

'Oh, Miss Dartle, shame! Oh cruel!'

'I tell you,' she returned, 'I WILL speak to her. No power on earth should stop me, while I was standing here! Have I been silent all these years, and shall I not speak now? I loved him better than you ever loved him!' turning on her fiercely. 'I could have loved him, and asked no return. If I had been his wife, I could have been the slave of his

caprices for a word of love a year. I should have been. Who knows it better than I? You were exacting, proud, punctilious, selfish. My love would have been devoted - would have trod your paltry whimpering under foot!

With flashing eyes, she stamped upon the ground as if she actually did it.

'Look here!' she said, striking the scar again, with a relentless hand. 'When he grew into the better understanding of what he had done, he saw it, and repented of it! I could sing to him, and talk to him, and show the ardour that I felt in all he did, and attain with labour to such knowledge as most interested him; and I attracted him. When he was freshest and truest, he loved me. Yes, he did! Many a time, when you were put off with a slight word, he has taken Me to his heart!'

She said it with a taunting pride in the midst of her frenzy - for it was little less - yet with an eager remembrance of it, in which the smouldering embers of a gentler feeling kindled for the moment.

'I descended - as I might have known I should, but that he fascinated me with his boyish courtship - into a doll, a trifle for the occupation of an idle hour, to be dropped, and taken up, and trifled with, as the inconstant humour took him. When he grew weary, I grew weary. As his fancy died out, I would no more have tried to strengthen any power I had, than I would have married him on his being forced to take me for his wife. We fell away from one another without a word. Perhaps you saw it, and were not sorry. Since then, I have been a mere disfigured piece of furniture between you both; having no eyes, no ears, no feelings, no remembrances. Moan? Moan for what you made him; not for your love. I tell you that the time was, when I loved him better than you ever did!'

She stood with her bright angry eyes confronting the wide stare, and the set face; and softened no more, when the moaning was repeated, than if the face had been a picture.

'Miss Dartle,' said I, 'if you can be so obdurate as not to feel for this afflicted mother -'

'Who feels for me?' she sharply retorted. 'She has sown this. Let her moan for the harvest that she reaps today!'

'And if his faults -' I began.

'Faults!' she cried, bursting into passionate tears. 'Who dares malign him? He had a soul worth millions of the friends to whom he stooped!'

'No one can have loved him better, no one can hold him in dearer remembrance than I,' I replied. 'I meant to say, if you have no compassion for his mother; or if his faults - you have been bitter on them -'

'It's false,' she cried, tearing her black hair; 'I loved him!'

'- if his faults cannot,' I went on, 'be banished from your remembrance, in such an hour; look at that figure, even as one you have never seen before, and render it some help!'

All this time, the figure was unchanged, and looked unchangeable. Motionless, rigid, staring; moaning in the same dumb way from time to time, with the same helpless motion of the head; but giving no other sign of life. Miss Dartle suddenly kneeled down before it, and began to loosen the dress.

'A curse upon you!' she said, looking round at me, with a mingled expression of rage and grief. 'It was in an evil hour that you ever came here! A curse upon you! Go!'

After passing out of the room, I hurried back to ring the bell, the sooner to alarm the servants. She had then taken the impassive figure in her arms, and, still upon her knees, was weeping over it, kissing it, calling to it, rocking it to and fro upon her bosom like a child, and trying every tender means to rouse the dormant senses. No longer afraid of leaving her, I noiselessly turned back again; and alarmed the house as I went out.

Later in the day, I returned, and we laid him in his mother's room. She was just the same, they told me; Miss Dartle never left her; doctors were in attendance, many things had been tried; but she lay like a statue, except for the low sound now and then.

I went through the dreary house, and darkened the windows. The windows of the chamber where he lay, I darkened last. I lifted up the leaden hand, and held it to my heart; and all the world seemed death and silence, broken only by his mother's moaning.