Chapter III - In which Mr Dombey, as a Man and a Father, is seen at the Head of the Home-Department

The funeral of the deceased lady having been 'performed to the entire satisfaction of the undertaker, as well as of the neighbourhood at large, which is generally disposed to be captious on such a point, and is prone to take offence at any omissions or short-comings in the ceremonies, the various members of Mr Dombey's household subsided into their several places in the domestic system. That small world, like the great one out of doors, had the capacity of easily forgetting its dead; and when the cook had said she was a quiet-tempered lady, and the house-keeper had said it was the common lot, and the butler had said who'd have thought it, and the housemaid had said she couldn't hardly believe it, and the footman had said it seemed exactly like a dream, they had quite worn the subject out, and began to think their mourning was wearing rusty too.

On Richards, who was established upstairs in a state of honourable captivity, the dawn of her new life seemed to break cold and grey. Mr Dombey's house was a large one, on the shady side of a tall, dark, dreadfully genteel street in the region between Portland Place and Bryanstone Square.' It was a corner house, with great wide areas containing cellars frowned upon by barred windows, and leered at by crooked-eyed doors leading to dustbins. It was a house of dismal state, with a circular back to it, containing a whole suite of drawing-rooms looking upon a gravelled yard, where two gaunt trees, with blackened trunks and branches, rattled rather than rustled, their leaves were so smoked-dried. The summer sun was never on the street, but in the morning about breakfast-time, when it came with the water-carts and the old clothes men, and the people with geraniums, and the umbrella-mender, and the man who trilled the little bell of the Dutch clock as he went along. It was soon gone again to return no more that day; and the bands of music and the straggling Punch's shows going after it, left it a prey to the most dismal of organs, and white mice; with now and then a porcupine, to vary the entertainments; until the butlers whose families were dining out, began to stand at the house-doors in the twilight, and the lamp-lighter made his nightly failure in attempting to brighten up the street with gas.

It was as blank a house inside as outside. When the funeral was over, Mr Dombey ordered the furniture to be covered up - perhaps to preserve it for the son with whom his plans were all associated - and the rooms to be ungarnished, saving such as he retained for himself on the ground floor. Accordingly, mysterious shapes were made of tables and chairs, heaped together in the middle of rooms, and covered over with great winding-sheets. Bell-handles, window-blinds, and looking-glasses, being papered up in journals, daily and weekly,

obtruded fragmentary accounts of deaths and dreadful murders. Every chandelier or lustre, muffled in holland, looked like a monstrous tear depending from the ceiling's eye. Odours, as from vaults and damp places, came out of the chimneys. The dead and buried lady was awful in a picture-frame of ghastly bandages. Every gust of wind that rose, brought eddying round the corner from the neighbouring mews, some fragments of the straw that had been strewn before the house when she was ill, mildewed remains of which were still cleaving to the neighbourhood: and these, being always drawn by some invisible attraction to the threshold of the dirty house to let immediately opposite, addressed a dismal eloquence to Mr Dombey's windows.

The apartments which Mr Dombey reserved for his own inhabiting, were attainable from the hall, and consisted of a sitting-room; a library, which was in fact a dressing-room, so that the smell of hot-pressed paper, vellum, morocco, and Russia leather, contended in it with the smell of divers pairs of boots; and a kind of conservatory or little glass breakfast-room beyond, commanding a prospect of the trees before mentioned, and, generally speaking, of a few prowling cats. These three rooms opened upon one another. In the morning, when Mr Dombey was at his breakfast in one or other of the two first-mentioned of them, as well as in the afternoon when he came home to dinner, a bell was rung for Richards to repair to this glass chamber, and there walk to and fro with her young charge. From the glimpses she caught of Mr Dombey at these times, sitting in the dark distance, looking out towards the infant from among the dark heavy furniture - the house had been inhabited for years by his father, and in many of its appointments was old-fashioned and grim - she began to entertain ideas of him in his solitary state, as if he were a lone prisoner in a cell, or a strange apparition that was not to be accosted or understood. Mr Dombey came to be, in the course of a few days, invested in his own person, to her simple thinking, with all the mystery and gloom of his house. As she walked up and down the glass room, or sat hushing the baby there - which she very often did for hours together, when the dusk was closing in, too - she would sometimes try to pierce the gloom beyond, and make out how he was looking and what he was doing. Sensible that she was plainly to be seen by him' however, she never dared to pry in that direction but very furtively and for a moment at a time. Consequently she made out nothing, and Mr Dombey in his den remained a very shade.

Little Paul Dombey's foster-mother had led this life herself, and had carried little Paul through it for some weeks; and had returned upstairs one day from a melancholy saunter through the dreary rooms of state (she never went out without Mrs Chick, who called on fine mornings, usually accompanied by Miss Tox, to take her and Baby for an airing - or in other words, to march them gravely up and down the

pavement, like a walking funeral); when, as she was sitting in her own room, the door was slowly and quietly opened, and a dark-eyed little girl looked in.

'It's Miss Florence come home from her aunt's, no doubt,' thought Richards, who had never seen the child before. 'Hope I see you well, Miss.'

'Is that my brother?' asked the child, pointing to the Baby.

'Yes, my pretty,' answered Richards. 'Come and kiss him.'

But the child, instead of advancing, looked her earnestly in the face, and said:

'What have you done with my Mama?'

'Lord bless the little creeter!' cried Richards, 'what a sad question! I done? Nothing, Miss.'

'What have they done with my Mama?' inquired the child, with exactly the same look and manner.

'I never saw such a melting thing in all my life!' said Richards, who naturally substituted 'for this child one of her own, inquiring for herself in like circumstances. 'Come nearer here, my dear Miss! Don't be afraid of me.'

'I am not afraid of you,' said the child, drawing nearer. 'But I want to know what they have done with my Mama.'

Her heart swelled so as she stood before the woman, looking into her eyes, that she was fain to press her little hand upon her breast and hold it there. Yet there was a purpose in the child that prevented both her slender figure and her searching gaze from faltering.

'My darling,' said Richards, 'you wear that pretty black frock in remembrance of your Mama.'

'I can remember my Mama,' returned the child, with tears springing to her eyes, 'in any frock.'

'But people put on black, to remember people when they're gone.'

'Where gone?' asked the child.

'Come and sit down by me,' said Richards, 'and I'll tell you a story.'

With a quick perception that it was intended to relate to what she had asked, little Florence laid aside the bonnet she had held in her hand until now, and sat down on a stool at the Nurse's feet, looking up into her face.

'Once upon a time,' said Richards, 'there was a lady - a very good lady, and her little daughter dearly loved her.'

'A very good lady and her little daughter dearly loved her,' repeated the child.

'Who, when God thought it right that it should be so, was taken ill and died.'

The child shuddered.

'Died, never to be seen again by anyone on earth, and was buried in the ground where the trees grow.

'The cold ground?' said the child, shuddering again. 'No! The warm ground,' returned Polly, seizing her advantage, 'where the ugly little seeds turn into beautiful flowers, and into grass, and corn, and I don't know what all besides. Where good people turn into bright angels, and fly away to Heaven!'

The child, who had dropped her head, raised it again, and sat looking at her intently.

'So; let me see,' said Polly, not a little flurried between this earnest scrutiny, her desire to comfort the child, her sudden success, and her very slight confidence in her own powers.' So, when this lady died, wherever they took her, or wherever they put her, she went to GOD! and she prayed to Him, this lady did,' said Polly, affecting herself beyond measure; being heartily in earnest, 'to teach her little daughter to be sure of that in her heart: and to know that she was happy there and loved her still: and to hope and try - Oh, all her life - to meet her there one day, never, never, never to part any more.'

'It was my Mama!' exclaimed the child, springing up, and clasping her round the neck.

'And the child's heart,' said Polly, drawing her to her breast: 'the little daughter's heart was so full of the truth of this, that even when she heard it from a strange nurse that couldn't tell it right, but was a poor mother herself and that was all, she found a comfort in it - didn't feel so lonely - sobbed and cried upon her bosom - took kindly to the baby lying in her lap - and - there, there, there!' said Polly, smoothing the child's curls and dropping tears upon them. 'There, poor dear!'

'Oh well, Miss Floy! And won't your Pa be angry neither!' cried a quick voice at the door, proceeding from a short, brown, womanly girl of fourteen, with a little snub nose, and black eyes like jet beads. 'When it was 'tickerlerly given out that you wasn't to go and worrit the wet nurse.

'She don't worry me,' was the surprised rejoinder of Polly. 'I am very fond of children.'

'Oh! but begging your pardon, Mrs Richards, that don't matter, you know,' returned the black-eyed girl, who was so desperately sharp and biting that she seemed to make one's eyes water. 'I may be very fond of pennywinkles, Mrs Richards, but it don't follow that I'm to have 'em for tea. 'Well, it don't matter,' said Polly. 'Oh, thank'ee, Mrs Richards, don't it!' returned the sharp girl. 'Remembering, however, if you'll be so good, that Miss Floy's under my charge, and Master Paul's under your'n.'

'But still we needn't quarrel,' said Polly.

'Oh no, Mrs Richards,' rejoined Spitfire. 'Not at all, I don't wish it, we needn't stand upon that footing, Miss Floy being a permanency, Master Paul a temporary.' Spitfire made use of none but comma pauses; shooting out whatever she had to say in one sentence, and in one breath, if possible.

'Miss Florence has just come home, hasn't she?' asked Polly.

'Yes, Mrs Richards, just come, and here, Miss Floy, before you've been in the house a quarter of an hour, you go a smearing your wet face against the expensive mourning that Mrs Richards is a wearing for your Ma!' With this remonstrance, young Spitfire, whose real name was Susan Nipper, detached the child from her new friend by a wrench - as if she were a tooth. But she seemed to do it, more in the excessively sharp exercise of her official functions, than with any deliberate unkindness.

'She'll be quite happy, now she has come home again,' said Polly, nodding to her with an encouraging smile upon her wholesome face, 'and will be so pleased to see her dear Papa to-night.'

'Lork, Mrs Richards!' cried Miss Nipper, taking up her words with a jerk. 'Don't. See her dear Papa indeed! I should like to see her do it!'

'Won't she then?' asked Polly.

'Lork, Mrs Richards, no, her Pa's a deal too wrapped up in somebody else, and before there was a somebody else to be wrapped up in she

never was a favourite, girls are thrown away in this house, Mrs Richards, I assure you.

The child looked quickly from one nurse to the other, as if she understood and felt what was said.

'You surprise me!' cried Folly. 'Hasn't Mr Dombey seen her since - '

'No,' interrupted Susan Nipper. 'Not once since, and he hadn't hardly set his eyes upon her before that for months and months, and I don't think he'd have known her for his own child if he had met her in the streets, or would know her for his own child if he was to meet her in the streets to-morrow, Mrs Richards, as to me,' said Spitfire, with a giggle, 'I doubt if he's aweer of my existence.'

'Pretty dear!' said Richards; meaning, not Miss Nipper, but the little Florence.

'Oh! there's a Tartar within a hundred miles of where we're now in conversation, I can tell you, Mrs Richards, present company always excepted too,' said Susan Nipper; 'wish you good morning, Mrs Richards, now Miss Floy, you come along with me, and don't go hanging back like a naughty wicked child that judgments is no example to, don't!'

In spite of being thus adjured, and in spite also of some hauling on the part of Susan Nipper, tending towards the dislocation of her right shoulder, little Florence broke away, and kissed her new friend, affectionately.

'Oh dear! after it was given out so 'tickerlerly, that Mrs Richards wasn't to be made free with!' exclaimed Susan. 'Very well, Miss Floy!'

'God bless the sweet thing!' said Richards, 'Good-bye, dear!'

'Good-bye!' returned the child. 'God bless you! I shall come to see you again soon, and you'll come to see me? Susan will let us. Won't you, Susan?'

Spitfire seemed to be in the main a good-natured little body, although a disciple of that school of trainers of the young idea which holds that childhood, like money, must be shaken and rattled and jostled about a good deal to keep it bright. For, being thus appealed to with some endearing gestures and caresses, she folded her small arms and shook her head, and conveyed a relenting expression into her very-wide-open black eyes.

'It ain't right of you to ask it, Miss Floy, for you know I can't refuse you, but Mrs Richards and me will see what can be done, if Mrs Richards likes, I may wish, you see, to take a voyage to Chaney, Mrs Richards, but I mayn't know how to leave the London Docks.'

Richards assented to the proposition.

'This house ain't so exactly ringing with merry-making,' said Miss Nipper, 'that one need be lonelier than one must be. Your Toxes and your Chickses may draw out my two front double teeth, Mrs Richards, but that's no reason why I need offer 'em the whole set.'

This proposition was also assented to by Richards, as an obvious one.

'So I'm able, I'm sure,'said Susan Nipper, 'to live friendly, Mrs Richards, while Master Paul continues a permanency, if the means can be planned out without going openly against orders, but goodness gracious Miss Floy, you haven't got your things off yet, you naughty child, you haven't, come along!'

With these words, Susan Nipper, in a transport of coercion, made a charge at her young ward, and swept her out of the room.

The child, in her grief and neglect, was so gentle, so quiet, and uncomplaining; was possessed of so much affection that no one seemed to care to have, and so much sorrowful intelligence that no one seemed to mind or think about the wounding of, that Polly's heart was sore when she was left alone again. In the simple passage that had taken place between herself and the motherless little girl, her own motherly heart had been touched no less than the child's; and she felt, as the child did, that there was something of confidence and interest between them from that moment.

Notwithstanding Mr Toodle's great reliance on Polly, she was perhaps in point of artificial accomplishments very little his superior. She had been good-humouredly working and drudging for her life all her life, and was a sober steady-going person, with matter-of-fact ideas about the butcher and baker, and the division of pence into farthings. But she was a good plain sample of a nature that is ever, in the mass, better, truer, higher, nobler, quicker to feel, and much more constant to retain, all tenderness and pity, self-denial and devotion, than the nature of men. And, perhaps, unlearned as she was, she could have brought a dawning knowledge home to Mr Dombey at that early day, which would not then have struck him in the end like lightning.

But this is from the purpose. Polly only thought, at that time, of improving on her successful propitiation of Miss Nipper, and devising

some means of having little Florence aide her, lawfully, and without rebellion. An opening happened to present itself that very night.

She had been rung down into the glass room as usual, and had walked about and about it a long time, with the baby in her arms, when, to her great surprise and dismay, Mr Dombey - whom she had seen at first leaning on his elbow at the table, and afterwards walking up and down the middle room, drawing, each time, a little nearer, she thought, to the open folding doors - came out, suddenly, and stopped before her.

'Good evening, Richards.'

Just the same austere, stiff gentleman, as he had appeared to her on that first day. Such a hard-looking gentleman, that she involuntarily dropped her eyes and her curtsey at the same time.

'How is Master Paul, Richards?'

'Quite thriving, Sir, and well.'

'He looks so,' said Mr Dombey, glancing with great interest at the tiny face she uncovered for his observation, and yet affecting to be half careless of it. 'They give you everything you want, I hope?'

'Oh yes, thank you, Sir.'

She suddenly appended such an obvious hesitation to this reply, however, that Mr Dombey, who had turned away; stopped, and turned round again, inquiringly.

'If you please, Sir, the child is very much disposed to take notice of things,' said Richards, with another curtsey, 'and - upstairs is a little dull for him, perhaps, Sir.'

'I begged them to take you out for airings, constantly,' said Mr Dombey. 'Very well! You shall go out oftener. You're quite right to mention it.'

'I beg your pardon, Sir,' faltered Polly, 'but we go out quite plenty Sir, thank you.'

'What would you have then?' asked Mr Dombey.

'Indeed Sir, I don't exactly know,' said Polly, 'unless - '

'Yes?'

'I believe nothing is so good for making children lively and cheerful, Sir, as seeing other children playing about 'em,' observed Polly, taking courage.

'I think I mentioned to you, Richards, when you came here,' said Mr Dombey, with a frown, 'that I wished you to see as little of your family as possible.'

'Oh dear yes, Sir, I wasn't so much as thinking of that.'

'I am glad of it,' said Mr Dombey hastily. 'You can continue your walk if you please.'

With that, he disappeared into his inner room; and Polly had the satisfaction of feeling that he had thoroughly misunderstood her object, and that she had fallen into disgrace without the least advancement of her purpose.

Next night, she found him walking about the conservatory when she came down. As she stopped at the door, checked by this unusual sight, and uncertain whether to advance or retreat, he called her in. His mind was too much set on Dombey and Son, it soon appeared, to admit of his having forgotten her suggestion.

'If you really think that sort of society is good for the child,' he said sharply, as if there had been no interval since she proposed it, 'where's Miss Florence?'

'Nothing could be better than Miss Florence, Sir,' said Polly eagerly, 'but I understood from her maid that they were not to - '

Mr Dombey rang the bell, and walked till it was answered.

'Tell them always to let Miss Florence be with Richards when she chooses, and go out with her, and so forth. Tell them to let the children be together, when Richards wishes it.'

The iron was now hot, and Richards striking on it boldly - it was a good cause and she bold in it, though instinctively afraid of Mr Dombey - requested that Miss Florence might be sent down then and there, to make friends with her little brother.

She feigned to be dandling the child as the servant retired on this errand, but she thought that she saw Mr Dombey's colour changed; that the expression of his face quite altered; that he turned, hurriedly, as if to gainsay what he had said, or she had said, or both, and was only deterred by very shame.

And she was right. The last time he had seen his slighted child, there had been that in the sad embrace between her and her dying mother, which was at once a revelation and a reproach to him. Let him be absorbed as he would in the Son on whom he built such high hopes, he could not forget that closing scene. He could not forget that he had had no part in it. That, at the bottom of its clear depths of tenderness and truth' lay those two figures clasped in each other's arms, while he stood on the bank above them, looking down a mere spectator - not a sharer with them - quite shut out.

Unable to exclude these things from his remembrance, or to keep his mind free from such imperfect shapes of the meaning with which they were fraught, as were able to make themselves visible to him through the mist of his pride, his previous feeling of indifference towards little Florence changed into an uneasiness of an extraordinary kind. Young as she was, and possessing in any eyes but his (and perhaps in his too) even more than the usual amount of childish simplicity and confidence, he almost felt as if she watched and distrusted him. As if she held the clue to something secret in his breast, of the nature of which he was hardly informed himself. As if she had an innate knowledge of one jarring and discordant string within him, and her very breath could sound it.

His feeling about the child had been negative from her birth. He had never conceived an aversion to her: it had not been worth his while or in his humour. She had never been a positively disagreeable object to him. But now he was ill at ease about her. She troubled his peace. He would have preferred to put her idea aside altogether, if he had known how. Perhaps - who shall decide on such mysteries! - he was afraid that he might come to hate her.

When little Florence timidly presented herself, Mr Dombey stopped in his pacing up and down and looked towards her. Had he looked with greater interest and with a father's eye, he might have read in her keen glance the impulses and fears that made her waver; the passionate desire to run clinging to him, crying, as she hid her face in his embrace, 'Oh father, try to love me! there's no one else!' the dread of a repulse; the fear of being too bold, and of offending him; the pitiable need in which she stood of some assurance and encouragement; and how her overcharged young heart was wandering to find some natural resting-place, for its sorrow and affection.

But he saw nothing of this. He saw her pause irresolutely at the door and look towards him; and he saw no more.

'Come in,' he said, 'come in: what is the child afraid of?'

She came in; and after glancing round her for a moment with an uncertain air, stood pressing her small hands hard together, close within the door.

'Come here, Florence,' said her father, coldly. 'Do you know who I am?'

'Yes, Papa.'

'Have you nothing to say to me?'

The tears that stood in her eyes as she raised them quickly to his face, were frozen by the expression it wore. She looked down again, and put out her trembling hand.

Mr Dombey took it loosely in his own, and stood looking down upon her for a moment, as if he knew as little as the child, what to say or do.

'There! Be a good girl,' he said, patting her on the head, and regarding her as it were by stealth with a disturbed and doubtful look. 'Go to Richards! Go!'

His little daughter hesitated for another instant as though she would have clung about him still, or had some lingering hope that he might raise her in his arms and kiss her. She looked up in his face once more. He thought how like her expression was then, to what it had been when she looked round at the Doctor - that night - and instinctively dropped her hand and turned away.

It was not difficult to perceive that Florence was at a great disadvantage in her father's presence. It was not only a constraint upon the child's mind, but even upon the natural grace and freedom of her actions. As she sported and played about her baby brother that night, her manner was seldom so winning and so pretty as it naturally was, and sometimes when in his pacing to and fro, he came near her (she had, perhaps, for the moment, forgotten him) it changed upon the instant and became forced and embarrassed.

Still, Polly persevered with all the better heart for seeing this; and, judging of Mr Dombey by herself, had great confidence in the mute appeal of poor little Florence's mourning dress.' It's hard indeed,' thought Polly, 'if he takes only to one little motherless child, when he has another, and that a girl, before his eyes.'

So, Polly kept her before his eyes, as long as she could, and managed so well with little Paul, as to make it very plain that he was all the livelier for his sister's company. When it was time to withdraw upstairs again, she would have sent Florence into the inner room to

say good-night to her father, but the child was timid and drew back; and when she urged her again, said, spreading her hands before her eyes, as if to shut out her own unworthiness, 'Oh no, no! He don't want me. He don't want me!'

The little altercation between them had attracted the notice of Mr Dombey, who inquired from the table where he was sitting at his wine, what the matter was.

'Miss Florence was afraid of interrupting, Sir, if she came in to say good-night,' said Richards.

'It doesn't matter,' returned Mr Dombey. 'You can let her come and go without regarding me.'

The child shrunk as she listened - and was gone, before her humble friend looked round again.

However, Polly triumphed not a little in the success of her well-intentioned scheme, and in the address with which she had brought it to bear: whereof she made a full disclosure to Spitfire when she was once more safely entrenched upstairs. Miss Nipper received that proof of her confidence, as well as the prospect of their free association for the future, rather coldly, and was anything but enthusiastic in her demonstrations of joy.

'I thought you would have been pleased,' said Polly.

'Oh yes, Mrs Richards, I'm very well pleased, thank you,' returned Susan, who had suddenly become so very upright that she seemed to have put an additional bone in her stays.

'You don't show it,' said Polly.

'Oh! Being only a permanency I couldn't be expected to show it like a temporary,' said Susan Nipper. 'Temporaries carries it all before 'em here, I find, but though there's a excellent party-wall between this house and the next, I mayn't exactly like to go to it, Mrs Richards, notwithstanding!'