Chapter XXI - New Faces

The MAJOR, more blue-faced and staring - more over-ripe, as it were, than ever - and giving vent, every now and then, to one of the horse's coughs, not so much of necessity as in a spontaneous explosion of importance, walked arm-in-arm with Mr Dombey up the sunny side of the way, with his cheeks swelling over his tight stock, his legs majestically wide apart, and his great head wagging from side to side, as if he were remonstrating within himself for being such a captivating object. They had not walked many yards, before the Major encountered somebody he knew, nor many yards farther before the Major encountered somebody else he knew, but he merely shook his fingers at them as he passed, and led Mr Dombey on: pointing out the localities as they went, and enlivening the walk with any current scandal suggested by them.

In this manner the Major and Mr Dombey were walking arm-in-arm, much to their own satisfaction, when they beheld advancing towards them, a wheeled chair, in which a lady was seated, indolently steering her carriage by a kind of rudder in front, while it was propelled by some unseen power in the rear. Although the lady was not young, she was very blooming in the face - quite rosy- and her dress and attitude were perfectly juvenile. Walking by the side of the chair, and carrying her gossamer parasol with a proud and weary air, as if so great an effort must be soon abandoned and the parasol dropped, sauntered a much younger lady, very handsome, very haughty, very wilful, who tossed her head and drooped her eyelids, as though, if there were anything in all the world worth looking into, save a mirror, it certainly was not the earth or sky.

'Why, what the devil have we here, Sir!' cried the Major, stopping as this little cavalcade drew near.

'My dearest Edith!' drawled the lady in the chair, 'Major Bagstock!'

The Major no sooner heard the voice, than he relinquished Mr Dombey's arm, darted forward, took the hand of the lady in the chair and pressed it to his lips. With no less gallantry, the Major folded both his gloves upon his heart, and bowed low to the other lady. And now, the chair having stopped, the motive power became visible in the shape of a flushed page pushing behind, who seemed to have in part outgrown and in part out-pushed his strength, for when he stood upright he was tall, and wan, and thin, and his plight appeared the more forlorn from his having injured the shape of his hat, by butting at the carriage with his head to urge it forward, as is sometimes done by elephants in Oriental countries.

'Joe Bagstock,' said the Major to both ladies, 'is a proud and happy man for the rest of his life.'

'You false creature! said the old lady in the chair, insipidly. 'Where do you come from? I can't bear you.'

'Then suffer old Joe to present a friend, Ma'am,' said the Major, promptly, 'as a reason for being tolerated. Mr Dombey, Mrs Skewton.' The lady in the chair was gracious. 'Mr Dombey, Mrs Granger.' The lady with the parasol was faintly conscious of Mr Dombey's taking off his hat, and bowing low. 'I am delighted, Sir,' said the Major, 'to have this opportunity.'

The Major seemed in earnest, for he looked at all the three, and leered in his ugliest manner.

'Mrs Skewton, Dombey,' said the Major, 'makes havoc in the heart of old Josh.'

Mr Dombey signified that he didn't wonder at it.

'You perfidious goblin,' said the lady in the chair, 'have done! How long have you been here, bad man?'

'One day,' replied the Major.

'And can you be a day, or even a minute,' returned the lady, slightly settling her false curls and false eyebrows with her fan, and showing her false teeth, set off by her false complexion, 'in the garden of what's-its-name

'Eden, I suppose, Mama,' interrupted the younger lady, scornfully.

'My dear Edith,' said the other, 'I cannot help it. I never can remember those frightful names - without having your whole Soul and Being inspired by the sight of Nature; by the perfume,' said Mrs Skewton, rustling a handkerchief that was faint and sickly with essences, 'of her artless breath, you creature!'

The discrepancy between Mrs Skewton's fresh enthusiasm of words, and forlornly faded manner, was hardly less observable than that between her age, which was about seventy, and her dress, which would have been youthful for twenty-seven. Her attitude in the wheeled chair (which she never varied) was one in which she had been taken in a barouche, some fifty years before, by a then fashionable artist who had appended to his published sketch the name of Cleopatra: in consequence of a discovery made by the critics of the time, that it bore an exact resemblance to that Princess as she

reclined on board her galley. Mrs Skewton was a beauty then, and bucks threw wine-glasses over their heads by dozens in her honour. The beauty and the barouche had both passed away, but she still preserved the attitude, and for this reason expressly, maintained the wheeled chair and the butting page: there being nothing whatever, except the attitude, to prevent her from walking.

'Mr Dombey is devoted to Nature, I trust?' said Mrs Skewton, settling her diamond brooch. And by the way, she chiefly lived upon the reputation of some diamonds, and her family connexions.

'My friend Dombey, Ma'am,' returned the Major, 'may be devoted to her in secret, but a man who is paramount in the greatest city in the universe -

'No one can be a stranger,' said Mrs Skewton, 'to Mr Dombey's immense influence.'

As Mr Dombey acknowledged the compliment with a bend of his head, the younger lady glancing at him, met his eyes.

'You reside here, Madam?' said Mr Dombey, addressing her.

'No, we have been to a great many places. To Harrogate and Scarborough, and into Devonshire. We have been visiting, and resting here and there. Mama likes change.'

'Edith of course does not,' said Mrs Skewton, with a ghastly archness.

'I have not found that there is any change in such places,' was the answer, delivered with supreme indifference.

'They libel me. There is only one change, Mr Dombey,' observed Mrs Skewton, with a mincing sigh, 'for which I really care, and that I fear I shall never be permitted to enjoy. People cannot spare one. But seclusion and contemplation are my what-his-name - '

'If you mean Paradise, Mama, you had better say so, to render yourself intelligible,' said the younger lady.

'My dearest Edith,' returned Mrs Skewton, 'you know that I am wholly dependent upon you for those odious names. I assure you, Mr Dombey, Nature intended me for an Arcadian. I am thrown away in society. Cows are my passion. What I have ever sighed for, has been to retreat to a Swiss farm, and live entirely surrounded by cows - and china.'

This curious association of objects, suggesting a remembrance of the celebrated bull who got by mistake into a crockery shop, was received with perfect gravity by Mr Dombey, who intimated his opinion that Nature was, no doubt, a very respectable institution.

'What I want,' drawled Mrs Skewton, pinching her shrivelled throat, 'is heart.' It was frightfully true in one sense, if not in that in which she used the phrase. 'What I want, is frankness, confidence, less conventionality, and freer play of soul. We are so dreadfully artificial.'

We were, indeed.

'In short,' said Mrs Skewton, 'I want Nature everywhere. It would be so extremely charming.'

'Nature is inviting us away now, Mama, if you are ready,' said the younger lady, curling her handsome lip. At this hint, the wan page, who had been surveying the party over the top of the chair, vanished behind it, as if the ground had swallowed him up.

'Stop a moment, Withers!' said Mrs Skewton, as the chair began to move; calling to the page with all the languid dignity with which she had called in days of yore to a coachman with a wig, cauliflower nosegay, and silk stockings. 'Where are you staying, abomination?' The Major was staying at the Royal Hotel, with his friend Dombey.

'You may come and see us any evening when you are good,' lisped Mrs Skewton. 'If Mr Dombey will honour us, we shall be happy. Withers, go on!'

The Major again pressed to his blue lips the tips of the fingers that were disposed on the ledge of the wheeled chair with careful carelessness, after the Cleopatra model: and Mr Dombey bowed. The elder lady honoured them both with a very gracious smile and a girlish wave of her hand; the younger lady with the very slightest inclination of her head that common courtesy allowed.

The last glimpse of the wrinkled face of the mother, with that patched colour on it which the sun made infinitely more haggard and dismal than any want of colour could have been, and of the proud beauty of the daughter with her graceful figure and erect deportment, engendered such an involuntary disposition on the part of both the Major and Mr Dombey to look after them, that they both turned at the same moment. The Page, nearly as much aslant as his own shadow, was toiling after the chair, uphill, like a slow battering-ram; the top of Cleopatra's bonnet was fluttering in exactly the same corner to the inch as before; and the Beauty, loitering by herself a little in advance,

expressed in all her elegant form, from head to foot, the same supreme disregard of everything and everybody.

'I tell you what, Sir,' said the Major, as they resumed their walk again. 'If Joe Bagstock were a younger man, there's not a woman in the world whom he'd prefer for Mrs Bagstock to that woman. By George, Sir!' said the Major, 'she's superb!'

'Do you mean the daughter?' inquired Mr Dombey.

'Is Joey B. a turnip, Dombey,' said the Major, 'that he should mean the mother?'

'You were complimentary to the mother,' returned Mr Dombey.

'An ancient flame, Sir,' chuckled Major Bagstock. 'Devilish ancient. I humour her.'

'She impresses me as being perfectly genteel,' said Mr Dombey.

'Genteel, Sir,' said the Major, stopping short, and staring in his companion's face. 'The Honourable Mrs Skewton, Sir, is sister to the late Lord Feenix, and aunt to the present Lord. The family are not wealthy - they're poor, indeed - and she lives upon a small jointure; but if you come to blood, Sir!' The Major gave a flourish with his stick and walked on again, in despair of being able to say what you came to, if you came to that.

'You addressed the daughter, I observed,' said Mr Dombey, after a short pause, 'as Mrs Granger.'

'Edith Skewton, Sir,' returned the Major, stopping short again, and punching a mark in the ground with his cane, to represent her, 'married (at eighteen) Granger of Ours;' whom the Major indicated by another punch. 'Granger, Sir,' said the Major, tapping the last ideal portrait, and rolling his head emphatically, 'was Colonel of Ours; a devilish handsome fellow, Sir, of forty-one. He died, Sir, in the second year of his marriage.' The Major ran the representative of the deceased Granger through and through the body with his walking-stick, and went on again, carrying his stick over his shoulder.

'How long is this ago?' asked Mr Dombey, making another halt.

'Edith Granger, Sir,' replied the Major, shutting one eye, putting his head on one side, passing his cane into his left hand, and smoothing his shirt-frill with his right, 'is, at this present time, not quite thirty. And damme, Sir,' said the Major, shouldering his stick once more, and walking on again, 'she's a peerless woman!'

'Was there any family?' asked Mr Dombey presently.

'Yes, Sir,' said the Major. 'There was a boy.'

Mr Dombey's eyes sought the ground, and a shade came over his face.

'Who was drowned, Sir,' pursued the Major. 'When a child of four or five years old.'

'Indeed?' said Mr Dombey, raising his head.

'By the upsetting of a boat in which his nurse had no business to have put him,' said the Major. 'That's his history. Edith Granger is Edith Granger still; but if tough old Joey B., Sir, were a little younger and a little richer, the name of that immortal paragon should be Bagstock.'

The Major heaved his shoulders, and his cheeks, and laughed more like an over-fed Mephistopheles than ever, as he said the words.

'Provided the lady made no objection, I suppose?' said Mr Dombey coldly.

'By Gad, Sir,' said the Major, 'the Bagstock breed are not accustomed to that sort of obstacle. Though it's true enough that Edith might have married twenty times, but for being proud, Sir, proud.'

Mr Dombey seemed, by his face, to think no worse of her for that.

'It's a great quality after all,' said the Major. 'By the Lord, it's a high quality! Dombey! You are proud yourself, and your friend, Old Joe, respects you for it, Sir.'

With this tribute to the character of his ally, which seemed to be wrung from him by the force of circumstances and the irresistible tendency of their conversation, the Major closed the subject, and glided into a general exposition of the extent to which he had been beloved and doted on by splendid women and brilliant creatures.

On the next day but one, Mr Dombey and the Major encountered the Honourable Mrs Skewton and her daughter in the Pump-room; on the day after, they met them again very near the place where they had met them first. After meeting them thus, three or four times in all, it became a point of mere civility to old acquaintances that the Major should go there one evening. Mr Dombey had not originally intended to pay visits, but on the Major announcing this intention, he said he would have the pleasure of accompanying him. So the Major told the Native to go round before dinner, and say, with his and Mr Dombey's compliments, that they would have the honour of visiting the ladies

that same evening, if the ladies were alone. In answer to which message, the Native brought back a very small note with a very large quantity of scent about it, indited by the Honourable Mrs Skewton to Major Bagstock, and briefly saying, 'You are a shocking bear and I have a great mind not to forgive you, but if you are very good indeed,' which was underlined, 'you may come. Compliments (in which Edith unites) to Mr Dombey.'

The Honourable Mrs Skewton and her daughter, Mrs Granger, resided, while at Leamington, in lodgings that were fashionable enough and dear enough, but rather limited in point of space and conveniences; so that the Honourable Mrs Skewton, being in bed, had her feet in the window and her head in the fireplace, while the Honourable Mrs Skewton's maid was quartered in a closet within the drawing-room, so extremely small, that, to avoid developing the whole of its accommodations, she was obliged to writhe in and out of the door like a beautiful serpent. Withers, the wan page, slept out of the house immediately under the tiles at a neighbouring milk-shop; and the wheeled chair, which was the stone of that young Sisyphus, passed the night in a shed belonging to the same dairy, where new-laid eggs were produced by the poultry connected with the establishment, who roosted on a broken donkey-cart, persuaded, to all appearance, that it grew there, and was a species of tree.

Mr Dombey and the Major found Mrs Skewton arranged, as Cleopatra, among the cushions of a sofa: very airily dressed; and certainly not resembling Shakespeare's Cleopatra, whom age could not wither. On their way upstairs they had heard the sound of a harp, but it had ceased on their being announced, and Edith now stood beside it handsomer and haughtier than ever. It was a remarkable characteristic of this lady's beauty that it appeared to vaunt and assert itself without her aid, and against her will. She knew that she was beautiful: it was impossible that it could be otherwise: but she seemed with her own pride to defy her very self.

Whether she held cheap attractions that could only call forth admiration that was worthless to her, or whether she designed to render them more precious to admirers by this usage of them, those to whom they were precious seldom paused to consider.

'I hope, Mrs Granger,' said Mr Dombey, advancing a step towards her, 'we are not the cause of your ceasing to play?'

'You! oh no!'

'Why do you not go on then, my dearest Edith?' said Cleopatra.

'I left off as I began - of my own fancy.'

The exquisite indifference of her manner in saying this: an indifference quite removed from dulness or insensibility, for it was pointed with proud purpose: was well set off by the carelessness with which she drew her hand across the strings, and came from that part of the room.

'Do you know, Mr Dombey,' said her languishing mother, playing with a hand-screen, 'that occasionally my dearest Edith and myself actually almost differ - '

'Not quite, sometimes, Mama?' said Edith.

'Oh never quite, my darling! Fie, fie, it would break my heart,' returned her mother, making a faint attempt to pat her with the screen, which Edith made no movement to meet, ' - about these old conventionalities of manner that are observed in little things? Why are we not more natural? Dear me! With all those yearnings, and gushings, and impulsive throbbings that we have implanted in our souls, and which are so very charming, why are we not more natural?'

Mr Dombey said it was very true, very true.

'We could be more natural I suppose if we tried?' said Mrs Skewton.

Mr Dombey thought it possible.

'Devil a bit, Ma'am,' said the Major. 'We couldn't afford it. Unless the world was peopled with J.B.'s - tough and blunt old Joes, Ma'am, plain red herrings with hard roes, Sir - we couldn't afford it. It wouldn't do.'

'You naughty Infidel,' said Mrs Skewton, 'be mute.'

'Cleopatra commands,' returned the Major, kissing his hand, 'and Antony Bagstock obeys.'

'The man has no sensitiveness,' said Mrs Skewton, cruelly holding up the hand-screen so as to shut the Major out. 'No sympathy. And what do we live for but sympathy! What else is so extremely charming! Without that gleam of sunshine on our cold cold earth,' said Mrs Skewton, arranging her lace tucker, and complacently observing the effect of her bare lean arm, looking upward from the wrist, 'how could we possibly bear it? In short, obdurate man!' glancing at the Major, round the screen, 'I would have my world all heart; and Faith is so excessively charming, that I won't allow you to disturb it, do you hear?'

The Major replied that it was hard in Cleopatra to require the world to be all heart, and yet to appropriate to herself the hearts of all the world; which obliged Cleopatra to remind him that flattery was insupportable to her, and that if he had the boldness to address her in that strain any more, she would positively send him home.

Withers the Wan, at this period, handing round the tea, Mr Dombey again addressed himself to Edith.

'There is not much company here, it would seem?' said Mr Dombey, in his own portentous gentlemanly way.

'I believe not. We see none.'

'Why really,' observed Mrs Skewton fom her couch, 'there are no people here just now with whom we care to associate.'

'They have not enough heart,' said Edith, with a smile. The very twilight of a smile: so singularly were its light and darkness blended.

'My dearest Edith rallies me, you see!' said her mother, shaking her head: which shook a little of itself sometimes, as if the palsy Bed now and then in opposition to the diamonds. 'Wicked one!' 'You have been here before, if I am not mistaken?' said Mr Dombey. Still to Edith.

'Oh, several times. I think we have been everywhere.'

'A beautiful country!'

'I suppose it is. Everybody says so.'

'Your cousin Feenix raves about it, Edith,' interposed her mother from her couch.

The daughter slightly turned her graceful head, and raising her eyebrows by a hair's-breadth, as if her cousin Feenix were of all the mortal world the least to be regarded, turned her eyes again towards Mr Dombey.

'I hope, for the credit of my good taste, that I am tired of the neighbourhood,' she said.

'You have almost reason to be, Madam,' he replied, glancing at a variety of landscape drawings, of which he had already recognised several as representing neighbouring points of view, and which were strewn abundantly about the room, 'if these beautiful productions are from your hand.'

She gave him no reply, but sat in a disdainful beauty, quite amazing.

'Have they that interest?' said Mr Dombey. 'Are they yours?'

'Yes.'

'And you play, I already know.'

'Yes.'

'And sing?'

'Yes.'

She answered all these questions with a strange reluctance; and with that remarkable air of opposition to herself, already noticed as belonging to her beauty. Yet she was not embarrassed, but wholly self-possessed. Neither did she seem to wish to avoid the conversation, for she addressed her face, and - so far as she could - her manner also, to him; and continued to do so, when he was silent.

'You have many resources against weariness at least,' said Mr Dombey.

'Whatever their efficiency may be,' she returned, 'you know them all now. I have no more.

'May I hope to prove them all?' said Mr Dombey, with solemn gallantry, laying down a drawing he had held, and motioning towards the harp.

'Oh certainly] If you desire it!'

She rose as she spoke, and crossing by her mother's couch, and directing a stately look towards her, which was instantaneous in its duration, but inclusive (if anyone had seen it) of a multitude of expressions, among which that of the twilight smile, without the smile itself, overshadowed all the rest, went out of the room.

The Major, who was quite forgiven by this time, had wheeled a little table up to Cleopatra, and was sitting down to play picquet with her. Mr Dombey, not knowing the game, sat down to watch them for his edification until Edith should return.

'We are going to have some music, Mr Dombey, I hope?' said Cleopatra.

'Mrs Granger has been kind enough to promise so,' said Mr Dombey.

'Ah! That's very nice. Do you propose, Major?'

'No, Ma'am,' said the Major. 'Couldn't do it.'

'You're a barbarous being,' replied the lady, 'and my hand's destroyed. You are fond of music, Mr Dombey?'

'Eminently so,' was Mr Dombey's answer.

'Yes. It's very nice,' said Cleopatra, looking at her cards. 'So much heart in it - undeveloped recollections of a previous state of existence' - and all that - which is so truly charming. Do you know,' simpered Cleopatra, reversing the knave of clubs, who had come into her game with his heels uppermost, 'that if anything could tempt me to put a period to my life, it would be curiosity to find out what it's all about, and what it means; there are so many provoking mysteries, really, that are hidden from us. Major, you to play.'

The Major played; and Mr Dombey, looking on for his instruction, would soon have been in a state of dire confusion, but that he gave no attention to the game whatever, and sat wondering instead when Edith would come back.

She came at last, and sat down to her harp, and Mr Dombey rose and stood beside her, listening. He had little taste for music, and no knowledge of the strain she played, but he saw her bending over it, and perhaps he heard among the sounding strings some distant music of his own, that tamed the monster of the iron road, and made it less inexorable.

Cleopatra had a sharp eye, verily, at picquet. It glistened like a bird's, and did not fix itself upon the game, but pierced the room from end to end, and gleamed on harp, performer, listener, everything.

When the haughty beauty had concluded, she arose, and receiving Mr Dombey's thanks and compliments in exactly the same manner as before, went with scarcely any pause to the piano, and began there.

Edith Granger, any song but that! Edith Granger, you are very handsome, and your touch upon the keys is brilliant, and your voice is deep and rich; but not the air that his neglected daughter sang to his dead son]

Alas, he knows it not; and if he did, what air of hers would stir him, rigid man! Sleep, lonely Florence, sleep! Peace in thy dreams, although the night has turned dark, and the clouds are gathering, and threaten to discharge themselves in hail!