

Chapter XXIV - The Study Of A Loving Heart

Sir Barnet and Lady Skettles, very good people, resided in a pretty villa at Fulham, on the banks of the Thames; which was one of the most desirable residences in the world when a rowing-match happened to be going past, but had its little inconveniences at other times, among which may be enumerated the occasional appearance of the river in the drawing-room, and the contemporaneous disappearance of the lawn and shrubbery.

Sir Barnet Skettles expressed his personal consequence chiefly through an antique gold snuffbox, and a ponderous silk pocketkerchief, which he had an imposing manner of drawing out of his pocket like a banner and using with both hands at once. Sir Barnet's object in life was constantly to extend the range of his acquaintance. Like a heavy body dropped into water - not to disparage so worthy a gentleman by the comparison - it was in the nature of things that Sir Barnet must spread an ever widening circle about him, until there was no room left. Or, like a sound in air, the vibration of which, according to the speculation of an ingenious modern philosopher, may go on travelling for ever through the interminable fields of space, nothing but coming to the end of his moral tether could stop Sir Barnet Skettles in his voyage of discovery through the social system.

Sir Barnet was proud of making people acquainted with people. He liked the thing for its own sake, and it advanced his favourite object too. For example, if Sir Barnet had the good fortune to get hold of a law recruit, or a country gentleman, and ensnared him to his hospitable villa, Sir Barnet would say to him, on the morning after his arrival, 'Now, my dear Sir, is there anybody you would like to know? Who is there you would wish to meet? Do you take any interest in writing people, or in painting or sculpturing people, or in acting people, or in anything of that sort?' Possibly the patient answered yes, and mentioned somebody, of whom Sir Barnet had no more personal knowledge than of Ptolemy the Great. Sir Barnet replied, that nothing on earth was easier, as he knew him very well: immediately called on the aforesaid somebody, left his card, wrote a short note, - 'My dear Sir - penalty of your eminent position - friend at my house naturally desirous - Lady Skettles and myself participate - trust that genius being superior to ceremonies, you will do us the distinguished favour of giving us the pleasure,' etc, etc. - and so killed a brace of birds with one stone, dead as door-nails.

With the snuff-box and banner in full force, Sir Barnet Skettles propounded his usual inquiry to Florence on the first morning of her visit. When Florence thanked him, and said there was no one in particular whom she desired to see, it was natural she should think with a pang, of poor lost Walter. When Sir Barnet Skettles, urging his

kind offer, said, 'My dear Miss Dombey, are you sure you can remember no one whom your good Papa - to whom I beg you present the best compliments of myself and Lady Skettles when you write - might wish you to know?' it was natural, perhaps, that her poor head should droop a little, and that her voice should tremble as it softly answered in the negative.

Skettles Junior, much stiffened as to his cravat, and sobered down as to his spirits' was at home for the holidays, and appeared to feel himself aggrieved by the solicitude of his excellent mother that he should be attentive to Florence. Another and a deeper injury under which the soul of young Barnet chafed, was the company of Dr and Mrs Blimber, who had been invited on a visit to the paternal roof-tree, and of whom the young gentleman often said he would have preferred their passing the vacation at Jericho.

'Is there anybody you can suggest now, Doctor Blimber?' said Sir Barnet Skettles, turning to that gentleman.

'You are very kind, Sir Barnet,' returned Doctor Blimber. 'Really I am not aware that there is, in particular. I like to know my fellow-men in general, Sir Barnet. What does Terence say? Anyone who is the parent of a son is interesting to me.'

'Has Mrs Blimber any wish to see any remarkable person?' asked Sir Barnet, courteously.

Mrs Blimber replied, with a sweet smile and a shake of her sky-blue cap, that if Sir Barnet could have made her known to Cicero, she would have troubled him; but such an introduction not being feasible, and she already enjoying the friendship of himself and his amiable lady, and possessing with the Doctor her husband their joint confidence in regard to their dear son - here young Barnet was observed to curl his nose - she asked no more.

Sir Barnet was fain, under these circumstances, to content himself for the time with the company assembled. Florence was glad of that; for she had a study to pursue among them, and it lay too near her heart, and was too precious and momentous, to yield to any other interest.

There were some children staying in the house. Children who were as frank and happy with fathers and with mothers as those rosy faces opposite home. Children who had no restraint upon their love, and freely showed it. Florence sought to learn their secret; sought to find out what it was she had missed; what simple art they knew, and she knew not; how she could be taught by them to show her father that she loved him, and to win his love again.

Many a day did Florence thoughtfully observe these children. On many a bright morning did she leave her bed when the glorious sun rose, and walking up and down upon the river's bank' before anyone in the house was stirring, look up at the windows of their rooms, and think of them, asleep, so gently tended and affectionately thought of. Florence would feel more lonely then, than in the great house all alone; and would think sometimes that she was better there than here, and that there was greater peace in hiding herself than in mingling with others of her age, and finding how unlike them all she was. But attentive to her study, though it touched her to the quick at every little leaf she turned in the hard book, Florence remained among them, and tried with patient hope, to gain the knowledge that she wearied for.

Ah! how to gain it! how to know the charm in its beginning! There were daughters here, who rose up in the morning, and lay down to rest at night, possessed of fathers' hearts already. They had no repulse to overcome, no coldness to dread, no frown to smooth away. As the morning advanced, and the windows opened one by one, and the dew began to dry upon the flowers and and youthful feet began to move upon the lawn, Florence, glancing round at the bright faces, thought what was there she could learn from these children? It was too late to learn from them; each could approach her father fearlessly, and put up her lips to meet the ready kiss, and wind her arm about the neck that bent down to caress her. She could not begin by being so bold. Oh! could it be that there was less and less hope as she studied more and more!

She remembered well, that even the old woman who had robbed her when a little child - whose image and whose house, and all she had said and done, were stamped upon her recollection, with the enduring sharpness of a fearful impression made at that early period of life - had spoken fondly of her daughter, and how terribly even she had cried out in the pain of hopeless separation from her child. But her own mother, she would think again, when she recalled this, had loved her well. Then, sometimes, when her thoughts reverted swiftly to the void between herself and her father, Florence would tremble, and the tears would start upon her face, as she pictured to herself her mother living on, and coming also to dislike her, because of her wanting the unknown grace that should conciliate that father naturally, and had never done so from her cradle. She knew that this imagination did wrong to her mother's memory, and had no truth in it, or base to rest upon; and yet she tried so hard to justify him, and to find the whole blame in herself, that she could not resist its passing, like a wild cloud, through the distance of her mind.

There came among the other visitors, soon after Florence, one beautiful girl, three or four years younger than she, who was an

orphan child, and who was accompanied by her aunt, a grey-haired lady, who spoke much to Florence, and who greatly liked (but that they all did) to hear her sing of an evening, and would always sit near her at that time, with motherly interest. They had only been two days in the house, when Florence, being in an arbour in the garden one warm morning, musingly observant of a youthful group upon the turf, through some intervening boughs, - and wreathing flowers for the head of one little creature among them who was the pet and plaything of the rest, heard this same lady and her niece, in pacing up and down a sheltered nook close by, speak of herself.

'Is Florence an orphan like me, aunt?' said the child.

'No, my love. She has no mother, but her father is living.'

'Is she in mourning for her poor Mama, now?' inquired the child quickly.

'No; for her only brother.'

'Has she no other brother?'

'None.'

'No sister?'

'None.'

'I am very, very sorry!' said the little girl.

As they stopped soon afterwards to watch some boats, and had been silent in the meantime, Florence, who had risen when she heard her name, and had gathered up her flowers to go and meet them, that they might know of her being within hearing, resumed her seat and work, expecting to hear no more; but the conversation recommenced next moment.

'Florence is a favourite with everyone here, and deserves to be, I am sure,' said the child, earnestly. 'Where is her Papa?'

The aunt replied, after a moment's pause, that she did not know. Her tone of voice arrested Florence, who had started from her seat again; and held her fastened to the spot, with her work hastily caught up to her bosom, and her two hands saving it from being scattered on the ground.

'He is in England, I hope, aunt?' said the child.

'I believe so. Yes; I know he is, indeed.'

'Has he ever been here?'

'I believe not. No.'

'Is he coming here to see her?'

'I believe not.'

'Is he lame, or blind, or ill, aunt?' asked the child.

The flowers that Florence held to her breast began to fall when she heard those words, so wonderingly spoke She held them closer; and her face hung down upon them'

'Kate,' said the lady, after another moment of silence, 'I will tell you the whole truth about Florence as I have heard it, and believe it to be. Tell no one else, my dear, because it may be little known here, and your doing so would give her pain.'

'I never will!' exclaimed the child.

'I know you never will,' returned the lady. 'I can trust you as myself. I fear then, Kate, that Florence's father cares little for her, very seldom sees her, never was kind to her in her life, and now quite shuns her and avoids her. She would love him dearly if he would suffer her, but he will not - though for no fault of hers; and she is greatly to be loved and pitied by all gentle hearts.'

More of the flowers that Florence held fell scattering on the ground; those that remained were wet, but not with dew; and her face dropped upon her laden hands.

'Poor Florence! Dear, good Florence!' cried the child.

'Do you know why I have told you this, Kate?' said the lady.

'That I may be very kind to her, and take great care to try to please her. Is that the reason, aunt?'

'Partly,' said the lady, 'but not all. Though we see her so cheerful; with a pleasant smile for everyone; ready to oblige us all, and bearing her part in every amusement here: she can hardly be quite happy, do you think she can, Kate?'

'I am afraid not,' said the little girl.

'And you can understand,' pursued the lady, 'why her observation of children who have parents who are fond of them, and proud of them - like many here, just now - should make her sorrowful in secret?'

'Yes, dear aunt,' said the child, 'I understand that very well. Poor Florence!'

More flowers strayed upon the ground, and those she yet held to her breast trembled as if a wintry wind were rustling them.

'My Kate,' said the lady, whose voice was serious, but very calm and sweet, and had so impressed Florence from the first moment of her hearing it, 'of all the youthful people here, you are her natural and harmless friend; you have not the innocent means, that happier children have - '

'There are none happier, aunt!' exclaimed the child, who seemed to cling about her.

'As other children have, dear Kate, of reminding her of her misfortune. Therefore I would have you, when you try to be her little friend, try all the more for that, and feel that the bereavement you sustained - thank Heaven! before you knew its weight- gives you claim and hold upon poor Florence.'

'But I am not without a parent's love, aunt, and I never have been,' said the child, 'with you.'

'However that may be, my dear,' returned the lady, 'your misfortune is a lighter one than Florence's; for not an orphan in the wide world can be so deserted as the child who is an outcast from a living parent's love.'

The flowers were scattered on the ground like dust; the empty hands were spread upon the face; and orphaned Florence, shrinking down upon the ground, wept long and bitterly.

But true of heart and resolute in her good purpose, Florence held to it as her dying mother held by her upon the day that gave Paul life. He did not know how much she loved him. However long the time in coming, and however slow the interval, she must try to bring that knowledge to her father's heart one day or other. Meantime she must be careful in no thoughtless word, or look, or burst of feeling awakened by any chance circumstance, to complain against him, or to give occasion for these whispers to his prejudice.

Even in the response she made the orphan child, to whom she was attracted strongly, and whom she had such occasion to remember,

Florence was mindful of him' If she singled her out too plainly (Florence thought) from among the rest, she would confirm - in one mind certainly: perhaps in more - the belief that he was cruel and unnatural. Her own delight was no set-off to this, 'What she had overheard was a reason, not for soothing herself, but for saving him; and Florence did it, in pursuance of the study of her heart.

She did so always. If a book were read aloud, and there were anything in the story that pointed at an unkind father, she was in pain for their application of it to him; not for herself. So with any trifle of an interlude that was acted, or picture that was shown, or game that was played, among them. The occasions for such tenderness towards him were so many, that her mind misgave her often, it would indeed be better to go back to the old house, and live again within the shadow of its dull walls, undisturbed. How few who saw sweet Florence, in her spring of womanhood, the modest little queen of those small revels, imagined what a load of sacred care lay heavy in her breast! How few of those who stiffened in her father's freezing atmosphere, suspected what a heap of fiery coals was piled upon his head!

Florence pursued her study patiently, and, failing to acquire the secret of the nameless grace she sought, among the youthful company who were assembled in the house, often walked out alone, in the early morning, among the children of the poor. But still she found them all too far advanced to learn from. They had won their household places long ago, and did not stand without, as she did, with a bar across the door.

There was one man whom she several times observed at work very early, and often with a girl of about her own age seated near him' He was a very poor man, who seemed to have no regular employment, but now went roaming about the banks of the river when the tide was low, looking out for bits and scraps in the mud; and now worked at the unpromising little patch of garden-ground before his cottage; and now tinkered up a miserable old boat that belonged to him; or did some job of that kind for a neighbour, as chance occurred. Whatever the man's labour, the girl was never employed; but sat, when she was with him, in a listless, moping state, and idle.

Florence had often wished to speak to this man; yet she had never taken courage to do so, as he made no movement towards her. But one morning when she happened to come upon him suddenly, from a by-path among some pollard willows which terminated in the little shelving piece of stony ground that lay between his dwelling and the water, where he was bending over a fire he had made to caulk the old boat which was lying bottom upwards, close by, he raised his head at the sound of her footstep, and gave her Good morning.

'Good morning,' said Florence, approaching nearer, 'you are at work early.'

'I'd be glad to be often at work earlier, Miss, if I had work to do.'

'Is it so hard to get?' asked Florence.

'I find it so,' replied the man.

Florence glanced to where the girl was sitting, drawn together, with her elbows on her knees, and her chin on her hands, and said:

'Is that your daughter?'

He raised his head quickly, and looking towards the girl with a brightened face, nodded to her, and said 'Yes,' Florence looked towards her too, and gave her a kind salutation; the girl muttered something in return, ungraciously and sullenly.

'Is she in want of employment also?' said Florence.

The man shook his head. 'No, Miss,' he said. 'I work for both,'

'Are there only you two, then?' inquired Florence.

'Only us two,' said the man. 'Her mother has been dead these ten years. Martha!' lifted up his head again, and whistled to her) 'won't you say a word to the pretty young lady?'

The girl made an impatient gesture with her cowering shoulders, and turned her head another way. Ugly, misshapen, peevish, ill-conditioned, ragged, dirty - but beloved! Oh yes! Florence had seen her father's look towards her, and she knew whose look it had no likeness to.

'I'm afraid she's worse this morning, my poor girl!' said the man, suspending his work, and contemplating his ill-favoured child, with a compassion that was the more tender for being rougher.

'She is ill, then!' said Florence,

The man drew a deep sigh 'I don't believe my Martha's had five short days' good health,' he answered, looking at her still, 'in as many long years'

'Ay! and more than that, John,' said a neighbour, who had come down to help him with the boat.

'More than that, you say, do you?' cried the other, pushing back his battered hat, and drawing his hand across his forehead. 'Very like. It seems a long, long time.'

'And the more the time,' pursued the neighbour, 'the more you've favoured and humoured her, John, till she's got to be a burden to herself, and everybody else'

'Not to me,' said her father, falling to his work. 'Not to me.'

Florence could feel - who better? - how truly he spoke. She drew a little closer to him, and would have been glad to touch his rugged hand, and thank him for his goodness to the miserable object that he looked upon with eyes so different from any other man's.

'Who would favour my poor girl - to call it favouring - if I didn't?' said the father.

'Ay, ay,' cried the neighbour. 'In reason, John. But you! You rob yourself to give to her. You bind yourself hand and foot on her account. You make your life miserable along of her. And what does she care! You don't believe she knows it?'

The father lifted up his head again, and whistled to her. Martha made the same impatient gesture with her crouching shoulders, in reply; and he was glad and happy.

'Only for that, Miss,' said the neighbour, with a smile, in which there was more of secret sympathy than he expressed; 'only to get that, he never lets her out of his sight!'

'Because the day'll come, and has been coming a long while,' observed the other, bending low over his work, 'when to get half as much from that unfort'nate child of mine - to get the trembling of a finger, or the waving of a hair - would be to raise the dead.'

Florence softly put some money near his hand on the old boat, and left him.

And now Florence began to think, if she were to fall ill, if she were to fade like her dear brother, would he then know that she had loved him; would she then grow dear to him; would he come to her bedside, when she was weak and dim of sight, and take her into his embrace, and cancel all the past? Would he so forgive her, in that changed condition, for not having been able to lay open her childish heart to him, as to make it easy to relate with what emotions she had gone out of his room that night; what she had meant to say if she had had the

courage; and how she had endeavoured, afterwards, to learn the way she never knew in infancy?

Yes, she thought if she were dying, he would relent. She thought, that if she lay, serene and not unwilling to depart, upon the bed that was curtained round with recollections of their darling boy, he would be touched home, and would say, 'Dear Florence, live for me, and we will love each other as we might have done, and be as happy as we might have been these many years!' She thought that if she heard such words from him, and had her arms clasped round him' she could answer with a smile, 'It is too late for anything but this; I never could be happier, dear father!' and so leave him, with a blessing on her lips.

The golden water she remembered on the wall, appeared to Florence, in the light of such reflections, only as a current flowing on to rest, and to a region where the dear ones, gone before, were waiting, hand in hand; and often when she looked upon the darker river rippling at her feet, she thought with awful wonder, but not terror, of that river which her brother had so often said was bearing him away.

The father and his sick daughter were yet fresh in Florence's mind, and, indeed, that incident was not a week old, when Sir Barnet and his lady going out walking in the lanes one afternoon, proposed to her to bear them company. Florence readily consenting, Lady Skettles ordered out young Barnet as a matter of course. For nothing delighted Lady Skettles so much, as beholding her eldest son with Florence on his arm.

Barnet, to say the truth, appeared to entertain an opposite sentiment on the subject, and on such occasions frequently expressed himself audibly, though indefinitely, in reference to 'a parcel of girls.' As it was not easy to ruffle her sweet temper, however, Florence generally reconciled the young gentleman to his fate after a few minutes, and they strolled on amicably: Lady Skettles and Sir Barnet following, in a state of perfect complacency and high gratification.

This was the order of procedure on the afternoon in question; and Florence had almost succeeded in overruling the present objections of Skettles Junior to his destiny, when a gentleman on horseback came riding by, looked at them earnestly as he passed, drew in his rein, wheeled round, and came riding back again, hat in hand.

The gentleman had looked particularly at Florence; and when the little party stopped, on his riding back, he bowed to her, before saluting Sir Barnet and his lady. Florence had no remembrance of having ever seen him, but she started involuntarily when he came near her, and drew back.

'My horse is perfectly quiet, I assure you,' said the gentleman.

It was not that, but something in the gentleman himself - Florence could not have said what - that made her recoil as if she had been stung.

'I have the honour to address Miss Dombey, I believe?' said the gentleman, with a most persuasive smile. On Florence inclining her head, he added, 'My name is Carker. I can hardly hope to be remembered by Miss Dombey, except by name. Carker.'

Florence, sensible of a strange inclination to shiver, though the day was hot, presented him to her host and hostess; by whom he was very graciously received.

'I beg pardon,' said Mr Carker, 'a thousand times! But I am going down tomorrow morning to Mr Dombey, at Leamington, and if Miss Dombey can entrust me with any commission, need I say how very happy I shall be?'

Sir Barnet immediately divining that Florence would desire to write a letter to her father, proposed to return, and besought Mr Carker to come home and dine in his riding gear. Mr Carker had the misfortune to be engaged to dinner, but if Miss Dombey wished to write, nothing would delight him more than to accompany them back, and to be her faithful slave in waiting as long as she pleased. As he said this with his widest smile, and bent down close to her to pat his horse's neck, Florence meeting his eyes, saw, rather than heard him say, 'There is no news of the ship!'

Confused, frightened, shrinking from him, and not even sure that he had said those words, for he seemed to have shown them to her in some extraordinary manner through his smile, instead of uttering them, Florence faintly said that she was obliged to him, but she would not write; she had nothing to say.

'Nothing to send, Miss Dombey?' said the man of teeth.

'Nothing,' said Florence, 'but my - but my dear love- if you please.'

Disturbed as Florence was, she raised her eyes to his face with an imploring and expressive look, that plainly besought him, if he knew - which he as plainly did - that any message between her and her father was an uncommon charge, but that one most of all, to spare her. Mr Carker smiled and bowed low, and being charged by Sir Barnet with the best compliments of himself and Lady Skettles, took his leave, and rode away: leaving a favourable impression on that worthy couple. Florence was seized with such a shudder as he went, that Sir Barnet,

adopting the popular superstition, supposed somebody was passing over her grave. Mr Carker turning a corner, on the instant, looked back, and bowed, and disappeared, as if he rode off to the churchyard straight, to do it.