Chapter XXVIII - Alterations

'So the day has come at length, Susan,' said Florence to the excellent Nipper, 'when we are going back to our quiet home!'

Susan drew in her breath with an amount of expression not easily described, further relieving her feelings with a smart cough, answered, 'Very quiet indeed, Miss Floy, no doubt. Excessive so.'

'When I was a child,' said Florence, thoughtfully, and after musing for some moments, 'did you ever see that gentleman who has taken the trouble to ride down here to speak to me, now three times - three times, I think, Susan?'

'Three times, Miss,' returned the Nipper. 'Once when you was out a walking with them Sket- '

Florence gently looked at her, and Miss Nipper checked herself.

'With Sir Barnet and his lady, I mean to say, Miss, and the young gentleman. And two evenings since then.' 'When I was a child, and when company used to come to visit Papa, did you ever see that gentleman at home, Susan?' asked Florence.

'Well, Miss,' returned her maid, after considering, 'I really couldn't say I ever did. When your poor dear Ma died, Miss Floy, I was very new in the family, you see, and my element:' the Nipper bridled, as opining that her merits had been always designedly extinguished by Mr Dombey: 'was the floor below the attics.'

'To be sure,' said Florence, still thoughtfully; 'you are not likely to have known who came to the house. I quite forgot.'

'Not, Miss, but what we talked about the family and visitors,' said Susan, 'and but what I heard much said, although the nurse before Mrs Richards make unpleasant remarks when I was in company, and hint at little Pitchers, but that could only be attributed, poor thing,' observed Susan, with composed forbearance, 'to habits of intoxication, for which she was required to leave, and did.'

Florence, who was seated at her chamber window, with her face resting on her hand, sat looking out, and hardly seemed to hear what Susan said, she was so lost in thought.

'At all events, Miss,' said Susan, 'I remember very well that this same gentleman, Mr Carker, was almost, if not quite, as great a gentleman with your Papa then, as he is now. It used to be said in the house then, Miss, that he was at the head of all your Pa's affairs in the City,

and managed the whole, and that your Pa minded him more than anybody, which, begging your pardon, Miss Floy, he might easy do, for he never minded anybody else. I knew that, Pitcher as I might have been.'

Susan Nipper, with an injured remembrance of the nurse before Mrs Richards, emphasised 'Pitcher' strongly.

'And that Mr Carker has not fallen off, Miss,' she pursued, 'but has stood his ground, and kept his credit with your Pa, I know from what is always said among our people by that Perch, whenever he comes to the house; and though he's the weakest weed in the world, Miss Floy, and no one can have a moment's patience with the man, he knows what goes on in the City tolerable well, and says that your Pa does nothing without Mr Carker, and leaves all to Mr Carker, and acts according to Mr Carker, and has Mr Carker always at his elbow, and I do believe that he believes (that washiest of Perches!) that after your Pa, the Emperor of India is the child unborn to Mr Carker.'

Not a word of this was lost on Florence, who, with an awakened interest in Susan's speech, no longer gazed abstractedly on the prospect without, but looked at her, and listened with attention.

'Yes, Susan,' she said, when that young lady had concluded. 'He is in Papa's confidence, and is his friend, I am sure.'

Florence's mind ran high on this theme, and had done for some days. Mr Carker, in the two visits with which he had followed up his first one, had assumed a confidence between himself and her - a right on his part to be mysterious and stealthy, in telling her that the ship was still unheard of - a kind of mildly restrained power and authority over her - that made her wonder, and caused her great uneasiness. She had no means of repelling it, or of freeing herself from the web he was gradually winding about her; for that would have required some art and knowledge of the world, opposed to such address as his; and Florence had none. True, he had said no more to her than that there was no news of the ship, and that he feared the worst; but how he came to know that she was interested in the ship, and why he had the right to signify his knowledge to her, so insidiously and darkly, troubled Florence very much.

This conduct on the part of Mr Carker, and her habit of often considering it with wonder and uneasiness, began to invest him with an uncomfortable fascination in Florence's thoughts. A more distinct remembrance of his features, voice, and manner: which she sometimes courted, as a means of reducing him to the level of a real personage, capable of exerting no greater charm over her than another: did not remove the vague impression. And yet he never

frowned, or looked upon her with an air of dislike or animosity, but was always smiling and serene.

Again, Florence, in pursuit of her strong purpose with reference to her father, and her steady resolution to believe that she was herself unwittingly to blame for their so cold and distant relations, would recall to mind that this gentleman was his confidential friend, and would think, with an anxious heart, could her struggling tendency to dislike and fear him be a part of that misfortune in her, which had turned her father's love adrift, and left her so alone? She dreaded that it might be; sometimes believed it was: then she resolved that she would try to conquer this wrong feeling; persuaded herself that she was honoured and encouraged by the notice of her father's friend; and hoped that patient observation of him and trust in him would lead her bleeding feet along that stony road which ended in her father's heart.

Thus, with no one to advise her - for she could advise with no one without seeming to complain against him - gentle Florence tossed on an uneasy sea of doubt and hope; and Mr Carker, like a scaly monster of the deep, swam down below, and kept his shining eye upon her. Florence had a new reason in all this for wishing to be at home again. Her lonely life was better suited to her course of timid hope and doubt; and she feared sometimes, that in her absence she might miss some hopeful chance of testifying her affection for her father. Heaven knows, she might have set her mind at rest, poor child! on this last point; but her slighted love was fluttering within her, and, even in her sleep, it flew away in dreams, and nestled, like a wandering bird come home, upon her father's neck.

Of Walter she thought often. Ah! how often, when the night was gloomy, and the wind was blowing round the house! But hope was strong in her breast. It is so difficult for the young and ardent, even with such experience as hers, to imagine youth and ardour quenched like a weak flame, and the bright day of life merging into night, at noon, that hope was strong yet. Her tears fell frequently for Walter's sufferings; but rarely for his supposed death, and never long.

She had written to the old Instrument-maker, but had received no answer to her note: which indeed required none. Thus matters stood with Florence on the morning when she was going home, gladly, to her old secluded life.

Doctor and Mrs Blimber, accompanied (much against his will) by their valued charge, Master Barnet, were already gone back to Brighton, where that young gentleman and his fellow-pilgrims to Parnassus were then, no doubt, in the continual resumption of their studies. The holiday time was past and over; most of the juvenile guests at the villa

had taken their departure; and Florence's long visit was come to an end.

There was one guest, however, albeit not resident within the house, who had been very constant in his attentions to the family, and who still remained devoted to them. This was Mr Toots, who after renewing, some weeks ago, the acquaintance he had had the happiness of forming with Skettles Junior, on the night when he burst the Blimberian bonds and soared into freedom with his ring on, called regularly every other day, and left a perfect pack of cards at the hall-door; so many indeed, that the ceremony was quite a deal on the part of Mr Toots, and a hand at whist on the part of the servant.

Mr Toots, likewise, with the bold and happy idea of preventing the family from forgetting him (but there is reason to suppose that this expedient originated in the teeming brain of the Chicken), had established a six-oared cutter, manned by aquatic friends of the Chicken's and steered by that illustrious character in person, who wore a bright red fireman's coat for the purpose, and concealed the perpetual black eye with which he was afflicted, beneath a green shade. Previous to the institution of this equipage, Mr Toots sounded the Chicken on a hypothetical case, as, supposing the Chicken to be enamoured of a young lady named Mary, and to have conceived the intention of starting a boat of his own, what would he call that boat? The Chicken replied, with divers strong asseverations, that he would either christen it Poll or The Chicken's Delight. Improving on this idea, Mr Toots, after deep study and the exercise of much invention, resolved to call his boat The Toots's Joy, as a delicate compliment to Florence, of which no man knowing the parties, could possibly miss the appreciation.

Stretched on a crimson cushion in his gallant bark, with his shoes in the air, Mr Toots, in the exercise of his project, had come up the river, day after day, and week after week, and had flitted to and fro, near Sir Barnet's garden, and had caused his crew to cut across and across the river at sharp angles, for his better exhibition to any lookers-out from Sir Barnet's windows, and had had such evolutions performed by the Toots's Joy as had filled all the neighbouring part of the water-side with astonishment. But whenever he saw anyone in Sir Barnet's garden on the brink of the river, Mr Toots always feigned to be passing there, by a combination of coincidences of the most singular and unlikely description.

'How are you, Toots?' Sir Barnet would say, waving his hand from the lawn, while the artful Chicken steered close in shore.

'How de do, Sir Barnet?' Mr Toots would answer, What a surprising thing that I should see you here!'

Mr Toots, in his sagacity, always said this, as if, instead of that being Sir Barnet's house, it were some deserted edifice on the banks of the Nile, or Ganges.

'I never was so surprised!' Mr Toots would exclaim. - 'Is Miss Dombey there?'

Whereupon Florence would appear, perhaps.

'Oh, Diogenes is quite well, Miss Dombey,' Toots would cry. 'I called to ask this morning.'

'Thank you very much!' the pleasant voice of Florence would reply.

'Won't you come ashore, Toots?' Sir Barnet would say then. 'Come! you're in no hurry. Come and see us.'

'Oh, it's of no consequence, thank you!' Mr Toots would blushingly rejoin. 'I thought Miss Dombey might like to know, that's all. Good-bye!' And poor Mr Toots, who was dying to accept the invitation, but hadn't the courage to do it, signed to the Chicken, with an aching heart, and away went the Joy, cleaving the water like an arrow.

The Joy was lying in a state of extraordinary splendour, at the garden steps, on the morning of Florence's departure. When she went downstairs to take leave, after her talk with Susan, she found Mr Toots awaiting her in the drawing-room.

'Oh, how de do, Miss Dombey?' said the stricken Toots, always dreadfully disconcerted when the desire of his heart was gained, and he was speaking to her; 'thank you, I'm very well indeed, I hope you're the same, so was Diogenes yesterday.'

'You are very kind,' said Florence.

'Thank you, it's of no consequence,' retorted Mr Toots. 'I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind, in this fine weather, coming home by water, Miss Dombey. There's plenty of room in the boat for your maid.'

'I am very much obliged to you,' said Florence, hesitating. 'I really am - but I would rather not.'

'Oh, it's of no consequence,' retorted Mr Toots. 'Good morning.'

'Won't you wait and see Lady Skettles?' asked Florence, kindly.

'Oh no, thank you,' returned Mr Toots, 'it's of no consequence at all.'

So shy was Mr Toots on such occasions, and so flurried! But Lady Skettles entering at the moment, Mr Toots was suddenly seized with a passion for asking her how she did, and hoping she was very well; nor could Mr Toots by any possibility leave off shaking hands with her, until Sir Barnet appeared: to whom he immediately clung with the tenacity of desperation.

'We are losing, today, Toots,' said Sir Barnet, turning towards Florence, 'the light of our house, I assure you'

'Oh, it's of no conseq - I mean yes, to be sure,' faltered the embarrassed Mr Toots. 'Good morning!'

Notwithstanding the emphatic nature of this farewell, Mr Toots, instead of going away, stood leering about him, vacantly. Florence, to relieve him, bade adieu, with many thanks, to Lady Skettles, and gave her arm to Sir Barnet.

'May I beg of you, my dear Miss Dombey,' said her host, as he conducted her to the carriage, 'to present my best compliments to your dear Papa?'

It was distressing to Florence to receive the commission, for she felt as if she were imposing on Sir Barnet by allowing him to believe that a kindness rendered to her, was rendered to her father. As she could not explain, however, she bowed her head and thanked him; and again she thought that the dull home, free from such embarrassments, and such reminders of her sorrow, was her natural and best retreat.

Such of her late friends and companions as were yet remaining at the villa, came running from within, and from the garden, to say good-bye. They were all attached to her, and very earnest in taking leave of her. Even the household were sorry for her going, and the servants came nodding and curtseying round the carriage door. As Florence looked round on the kind faces, and saw among them those of Sir Barnet and his lady, and of Mr Toots, who was chuckling and staring at her from a distance, she was reminded of the night when Paul and she had come from Doctor Blimber's: and when the carriage drove away, her face was wet with tears.

Sorrowful tears, but tears of consolation, too; for all the softer memories connected with the dull old house to which she was returning made it dear to her, as they rose up. How long it seemed since she had wandered through the silent rooms: since she had last crept, softly and afraid, into those her father occupied: since she had felt the solemn but yet soothing influence of the beloved dead in every action of her daily life! This new farewell reminded her, besides, of her

parting with poor Walter: of his looks and words that night: and of the gracious blending she had noticed in him, of tenderness for those he left behind, with courage and high spirit. His little history was associated with the old house too, and gave it a new claim and hold upon her heart. Even Susan Nipper softened towards the home of so many years, as they were on their way towards it. Gloomy as it was, and rigid justice as she rendered to its gloom, she forgave it a great deal. 'I shall be glad to see it again, I don't deny, Miss,' said the Nipper. 'There ain't much in it to boast of, but I wouldn't have it burnt or pulled down, neither!'

'You'll be glad to go through the old rooms, won't you, Susan?' said Florence, smiling.

'Well, Miss,' returned the Nipper, softening more and more towards the house, as they approached it nearer, 'I won't deny but what I shall, though I shall hate 'em again, to-morrow, very likely.'

Florence felt that, for her, there was greater peace within it than elsewhere. It was better and easier to keep her secret shut up there, among the tall dark walls, than to carry it abroad into the light, and try to hide it from a crowd of happy eyes. It was better to pursue the study of her loving heart, alone, and find no new discouragements in loving hearts about her. It was easier to hope, and pray, and love on, all uncared for, yet with constancy and patience, in the tranquil sanctuary of such remembrances: although it mouldered, rusted, and decayed about her: than in a new scene, let its gaiety be what it would. She welcomed back her old enchanted dream of life, and longed for the old dark door to close upon her, once again.

Full of such thoughts, they turned into the long and sombre street. Florence was not on that side of the carriage which was nearest to her home, and as the distance lessened between them and it, she looked out of her window for the children over the way.

She was thus engaged, when an exclamation from Susan caused her to turn quickly round.

'Why, Gracious me!' cried Susan, breathless, 'where's our house!'

'Our house!' said Florence. Susan, drawing in her head from the window, thrust it out again, drew it in again as the carriage stopped, and stared at her mistress in amazement.

There was a labyrinth of scaffolding raised all round the house, from the basement to the roof. Loads of bricks and stones, and heaps of mortar, and piles of wood, blocked up half the width and length of the broad street at the side. Ladders were raised against the walls;

labourers were climbing up and down; men were at work upon the steps of the scaffolding; painters and decorators were busy inside; great rolls of ornamental paper were being delivered from a cart at the door; an upholsterer's waggon also stopped the way; no furniture was to be seen through the gaping and broken windows in any of the rooms; nothing but workmen, and the implements of their several trades, swarming from the kitchens to the garrets. Inside and outside alike: bricklayers, painters, carpenters, masons: hammer, hod, brush, pickaxe, saw, and trowel: all at work together, in full chorus!

Florence descended from the coach, half doubting if it were, or could be the right house, until she recognised Towlinson, with a sun-burnt face, standing at the door to receive her.

'There is nothing the matter?' inquired Florence.

'Oh no, Miss.'

'There are great alterations going on.'

'Yes, Miss, great alterations,' said Towlinson.

Florence passed him as if she were in a dream, and hurried upstairs. The garish light was in the long-darkened drawing-room and there were steps and platforms, and men In paper caps, in the high places. Her mother's picture was gone with the rest of the moveables, and on the mark where it had been, was scrawled in chalk, 'this room in panel. Green and gold.' The staircase was a labyrinth of posts and planks like the outside of the house, and a whole Olympus of plumbers and glaziers was reclining in various attitudes, on the skylight. Her own room was not yet touched within, but there were beams and boards raised against it without, baulking the daylight. She went up swiftly to that other bedroom, where the little bed was; and a dark giant of a man with a pipe in his mouth, and his head tied up in a pocket-handkerchief, was staring in at the window.

It was here that Susan Nipper, who had been in quest of Florence, found her, and said, would she go downstairs to her Papa, who wished to speak to her.

'At home! and wishing to speak to me!' cried Florence, trembling.

Susan, who was infinitely more distraught than Florence herself, repeated her errand; and Florence, pale and agitated, hurried down again, without a moment's hesitation. She thought upon the way down, would she dare to kiss him? The longing of her heart resolved her, and she thought she would.

Her father might have heard that heart beat, when it came into his presence. One instant, and it would have beat against his breast.

But he was not alone. There were two ladies there; and Florence stopped. Striving so hard with her emotion, that if her brute friend Di had not burst in and overwhelmed her with his caresses as a welcome home - at which one of the ladies gave a little scream, and that diverted her attention from herself - she would have swooned upon the floor.

'Florence,' said her father, putting out his hand: so stiffly that it held her off: 'how do you do?'

Florence took the hand between her own, and putting it timidly to her lips, yielded to its withdrawal. It touched the door in shutting it, with quite as much endearment as it had touched her.

'What dog is that?' said Mr Dombey, displeased.

'It is a dog, Papa - from Brighton.'

'Well!' said Mr Dombey; and a cloud passed over his face, for he understood her.

'He is very good-tempered,' said Florence, addressing herself with her natural grace and sweetness to the two lady strangers. 'He is only glad to see me. Pray forgive him.'

She saw in the glance they interchanged, that the lady who had screamed, and who was seated, was old; and that the other lady, who stood near her Papa, was very beautiful, and of an elegant figure.

'Mrs Skewton,' said her father, turning to the first, and holding out his hand, 'this is my daughter Florence.'

'Charming, I am sure,' observed the lady, putting up her glass. 'So natural! My darling Florence, you must kiss me, if you please.'

Florence having done so, turned towards the other lady, by whom her father stood waiting.

'Edith,' said Mr Dombey, 'this is my daughter Florence. Florence, this lady will soon be your Mama.'

Florence started, and looked up at the beautiful face in a conflict of emotions, among which the tears that name awakened, struggled for a moment with surprise, interest, admiration, and an indefinable sort of fear. Then she cried out, 'Oh, Papa, may you be happy! may you be

very, very happy all your life!' and then fell weeping on the lady's bosom.

There was a short silence. The beautiful lady, who at first had seemed to hesitate whether or no she should advance to Florence, held her to her breast, and pressed the hand with which she clasped her, close about her waist, as if to reassure her and comfort her. Not one word passed the lady's lips. She bent her head down over Florence, and she kissed her on the cheek, but she said no word.

'Shall we go on through the rooms,' said Mr Dombey, 'and see how our workmen are doing? Pray allow me, my dear madam.'

He said this in offering his arm to Mrs Skewton, who had been looking at Florence through her glass, as though picturing to herself what she might be made, by the infusion - from her own copious storehouse, no doubt - of a little more Heart and Nature. Florence was still sobbing on the lady's breast, and holding to her, when Mr Dombey was heard to say from the Conservatory:

'Let us ask Edith. Dear me, where is she?'

'Edith, my dear!' cried Mrs Skewton, 'where are you? Looking for Mr Dombey somewhere, I know. We are here, my love.'

The beautiful lady released her hold of Florence, and pressing her lips once more upon her face, withdrew hurriedly, and joined them. Florence remained standing In the same place: happy, sorry, joyful, and in tears, she knew not how, or how long, but all at once: when her new Mama came back, and took her in her arms again.

'Florence,' said the lady, hurriedly, and looking into her face with great earnestness. 'You will not begin by hating me?'

'By hating you, Mama?' cried Florence, winding her arm round her neck, and returning the look.

'Hush! Begin by thinking well of me,' said the beautiful lady. 'Begin by believing that I will try to make you happy, and that I am prepared to love you, Florence. Good-bye. We shall meet again soon. Good-bye! Don't stay here, now.'

Again she pressed her to her breast she had spoken in a rapid manner, but firmly - and Florence saw her rejoin them in the other room. And now Florence began to hope that she would learn from her new and beautiful Mama, how to gaIn her father's love; and in her sleep that night, in her lost old home, her own Mama smiled radiantly upon the hope, and blessed it. Dreaming Florence!