

Chapter XXIX - The Opening Of The Eyes Of Mrs Chick

Miss Tox, all unconscious of any such rare appearances in connexion with Mr Dombey's house, as scaffoldings and ladders, and men with their heads tied up in pocket-handkerchiefs, glaring in at the windows like flying genii or strange birds, - having breakfasted one morning at about this eventful period of time, on her customary viands; to wit, one French roll rasped, one egg new laid (or warranted to be), and one little pot of tea, wherein was infused one little silver scoopful of that herb on behalf of Miss Tox, and one little silver scoopful on behalf of the teapot - a flight of fancy in which good housekeepers delight; went upstairs to set forth the bird waltz on the harpsichord, to water and arrange the plants, to dust the nick-nacks, and, according to her daily custom, to make her little drawing-room the garland of Princess's Place.

Miss Tox endued herself with a pair of ancient gloves, like dead leaves, in which she was accustomed to perform these avocations - hidden from human sight at other times in a table drawer - and went methodically to work; beginning with the bird waltz; passing, by a natural association of ideas, to her bird - a very high-shouldered canary, stricken in years, and much rumped, but a piercing singer, as Princess's Place well knew; taking, next in order, the little china ornaments, paper fly-cages, and so forth; and coming round, in good time, to the plants, which generally required to be snipped here and there with a pair of scissors, for some botanical reason that was very powerful with Miss Tox. Miss Tox was slow in coming to the plants, this morning. The weather was warm, the wind southerly; and there was a sigh of the summer-time in Princess's Place, that turned Miss Tox's thoughts upon the country. The pot-boy attached to the Princess's Arms had come out with a can and trickled water, in a flowering pattern, all over Princess's Place, and it gave the weedy ground a fresh scent - quite a growing scent, Miss Tox said. There was a tiny blink of sun peeping in from the great street round the corner, and the smoky sparrows hopped over it and back again, brightening as they passed: or bathed in it, like a stream, and became glorified sparrows, unconnected with chimneys. Legends in praise of Ginger-Beer, with pictorial representations of thirsty customers submerged in the effervescence, or stunned by the flying corks, were conspicuous in the window of the Princess's Arms. They were making late hay, somewhere out of town; and though the fragrance had a long way to come, and many counter fragrances to contend with among the dwellings of the poor (may God reward the worthy gentlemen who stickle for the Plague as part and parcel of the wisdom of our ancestors, and who do their little best to keep those dwellings miserable!), yet it was wafted faintly into Princess's Place, whispering of Nature and her wholesome air, as such things will, even unto prisoners and captives, and those who are desolate and oppressed, in

very spite of aldermen and knights to boot: at whose sage nod - and how they nod! - the rolling world stands still!

Miss Tox sat down upon the window-seat, and thought of her good Papa deceased - Mr Tox, of the Customs Department of the public service; and of her childhood, passed at a seaport, among a considerable quantity of cold tar, and some rusticity. She fell into a softened remembrance of meadows, in old time, gleaming with buttercups, like so many inverted firmaments of golden stars; and how she had made chains of dandelion-stalks for youthful vowers of eternal constancy, dressed chiefly in nankeen; and how soon those fetters had withered and broken.

Sitting on the window-seat, and looking out upon the sparrows and the blink of sun, Miss Tox thought likewise of her good Mama deceased - sister to the owner of the powdered head and pigtail - of her virtues and her rheumatism. And when a man with bulgy legs, and a rough voice, and a heavy basket on his head that crushed his hat into a mere black muffin, came crying flowers down Princess's Place, making his timid little roots of daisies shudder in the vibration of every yell he gave, as though he had been an ogre, hawking little children, summer recollections were so strong upon Miss Tox, that she shook her head, and murmured she would be comparatively old before she knew it - which seemed likely.

In her pensive mood, Miss Tox's thoughts went wandering on Mr Dombey's track; probably because the Major had returned home to his lodgings opposite, and had just bowed to her from his window. What other reason could Miss Tox have for connecting Mr Dombey with her summer days and dandelion fetters? Was he more cheerful? thought Miss Tox. Was he reconciled to the decrees of fate? Would he ever marry again? and if yes, whom? What sort of person now!

A flush - it was warm weather - overspread Miss Tox's face, as, while entertaining these meditations, she turned her head, and was surprised by the reflection of her thoughtful image In the chimney-glass. Another flush succeeded when she saw a little carriage drive into Princess's Place, and make straight for her own door. Miss Tox arose, took up her scissors hastily, and so coming, at last, to the plants, was very busy with them when Mrs Chick entered the room.

'How is my sweetest friend!' exclaimed Miss Tox, with open arms.

A little stateliness was mingled with Miss Tox's sweetest friend's demeanour, but she kissed Miss Tox, and said, 'Lucretia, thank you, I am pretty well. I hope you are the same. Hem!'

Mrs Chick was labouring under a peculiar little monosyllabic cough; a sort of primer, or easy introduction to the art of coughing.

'You call very early, and how kind that is, my dear!' pursued Miss Tox. 'Now, have you breakfasted?'

'Thank you, Lucretia,' said Mrs Chick, 'I have. I took an early breakfast' - the good lady seemed curious on the subject of Princess's Place, and looked all round it as she spoke - 'with my brother, who has come home.'

'He is better, I trust, my love,' faltered Miss Tox.

'He is greatly better, thank you. Hem!'

'My dear Louisa must be careful of that cough' remarked Miss Tox.

'It's nothing,' returned Mrs Chic 'It's merely change of weather. We must expect change.'

'Of weather?' asked Miss Tox, in her simplicity.

'Of everything' returned Mrs Chick 'Of course we must. It's a world of change. Anyone would surprise me very much, Lucretia, and would greatly alter my opinion of their understanding, if they attempted to contradict or evade what is so perfectly evident. Change!' exclaimed Mrs Chick, with severe philosophy. 'Why, my gracious me, what is there that does not change! even the silkworm, who I am sure might be supposed not to trouble itself about such subjects, changes into all sorts of unexpected things continually.'

'My Louisa,' said the mild Miss Tox, 'is ever happy in her illustrations.'

'You are so kind, Lucretia,' returned Mrs Chick, a little softened, 'as to say so, and to think so, I believe. I hope neither of us may ever have any cause to lessen our opinion of the other, Lucretia.'

'I am sure of it,' returned Miss Tox.

Mrs Chick coughed as before, and drew lines on the carpet with the ivory end of her parasol. Miss Tox, who had experience of her fair friend, and knew that under the pressure of any slight fatigue or vexation she was prone to a discursive kind of irritability, availed herself of the pause, to change the subject.

'Pardon me, my dear Louisa,' said Miss Tox, 'but have I caught sight of the manly form of Mr Chick in the carriage?'

'He is there,' said Mrs Chick, 'but pray leave him there. He has his newspaper, and would be quite contented for the next two hours. Go on with your flowers, Lucretia, and allow me to sit here and rest.'

'My Louisa knows,' observed Miss Tox, 'that between friends like ourselves, any approach to ceremony would be out of the question. Therefore - ' Therefore Miss Tox finished the sentence, not in words but action; and putting on her gloves again, which she had taken off, and arming herself once more with her scissors, began to snip and clip among the leaves with microscopic industry.

'Florence has returned home also,' said Mrs Chick, after sitting silent for some time, with her head on one side, and her parasol sketching on the floor; 'and really Florence is a great deal too old now, to continue to lead that solitary life to which she has been accustomed. Of course she is. There can be no doubt about it. I should have very little respect, indeed, for anybody who could advocate a different opinion. Whatever my wishes might be, I could not respect them. We cannot command our feelings to such an extent as that.'

Miss Tox assented, without being particular as to the intelligibility of the proposition.

'If she's a strange girl,' said Mrs Chick, 'and if my brother Paul cannot feel perfectly comfortable in her society, after all the sad things that have happened, and all the terrible disappointments that have been undergone, then, what is the reply? That he must make an effort. That he is bound to make an effort. We have always been a family remarkable for effort. Paul is at the head of the family; almost the only representative of it left - for what am I - I am of no consequence - '

'My dearest love,' remonstrated Miss Tox.

Mrs Chick dried her eyes, which were, for the moment, overflowing; and proceeded:

'And consequently he is more than ever bound to make an effort. And though his having done so, comes upon me with a sort of shock - for mine is a very weak and foolish nature; which is anything but a blessing I am sure; I often wish my heart was a marble slab, or a paving-stone -

'My sweet Louisa,' remonstrated Miss Tox again.

'Still, it is a triumph to me to know that he is so true to himself, and to his name of Dombey; although, of course, I always knew he would be. I only hope,' said Mrs Chick, after a pause, 'that she may be worthy of the name too.'

Miss Tox filled a little green watering-pot from a jug, and happening to look up when she had done so, was so surprised by the amount of expression Mrs Chick had conveyed into her face, and was bestowing upon her, that she put the little watering-pot on the table for the present, and sat down near it.

'My dear Louisa,' said Miss Tox, 'will it be the least satisfaction to you, if I venture to observe in reference to that remark, that I, as a humble individual, think your sweet niece in every way most promising?~' 'What do you mean, Lucretia?' returned Mrs Chick, with increased stateliness of manner. 'To what remark of mine, my dear, do you refer?'

'Her being worthy of her name, my love,' replied Miss Tox.

'If,' said Mrs Chick, with solemn patience, 'I have not expressed myself with clearness, Lucretia, the fault of course is mine. There is, perhaps, no reason why I should express myself at all, except the intimacy that has subsisted between us, and which I very much hope, Lucretia - confidently hope - nothing will occur to disturb. Because, why should I do anything else? There is no reason; it would be absurd. But I wish to express myself clearly, Lucretia; and therefore to go back to that remark, I must beg to say that it was not intended to relate to Florence, in any way.'

'Indeed!' returned Miss Tox.

'No,' said Mrs Chick shortly and decisively.

'Pardon me, my dear,' rejoined her meek friend; 'but I cannot have understood it. I fear I am dull.'

Mrs Chick looked round the room and over the way; at the plants, at the bird, at the watering-pot, at almost everything within view, except Miss Tox; and finally dropping her glance upon Miss Tox, for a moment, on its way to the ground, said, looking meanwhile with elevated eyebrows at the carpet:

'When I speak, Lucretia, of her being worthy of the name, I speak of my brother Paul's second wife. I believe I have already said, in effect, if not in the very words I now use, that it is his intention to marry a second wife.'

Miss Tox left her seat in a hurry, and returned to her plants; clipping among the stems and leaves, with as little favour as a barber working at so many pauper heads of hair.

'Whether she will be fully sensible of the distinction conferred upon her,' said Mrs Chick, in a lofty tone, 'is quite another question. I hope she may be. We are bound to think well of one another in this world, and I hope she may be. I have not been advised with myself If I had been advised with, I have no doubt my advice would have been cavalierly received, and therefore it is infinitely better as it is. I much prefer it as it is.'

Miss Tox, with head bent down, still clipped among the plants. Mrs Chick, with energetic shakings of her own head from time to time, continued to hold forth, as if in defiance of somebody. 'If my brother Paul had consulted with me, which he sometimes does - or rather, sometimes used to do; for he will naturally do that no more now, and this is a circumstance which I regard as a relief from responsibility,' said Mrs Chick, hysterically, 'for I thank Heaven I am not jealous - ' here Mrs Chick again shed tears: 'if my brother Paul had come to me, and had said, 'Louisa, what kind of qualities would you advise me to look out for, in a wife?' I should certainly have answered, 'Paul, you must have family, you must have beauty, you must have dignity, you must have connexion.' Those are the words I should have used. You might have led me to the block immediately afterwards,' said Mrs Chick, as if that consequence were highly probable, 'but I should have used them. I should have said, 'Paul! You to marry a second time without family! You to marry without beauty! You to marry without dignity! You to marry without connexion! There is nobody in the world, not mad, who could dream of daring to entertain such a preposterous idea!''

Miss Tox stopped clipping; and with her head among the plants, listened attentively. Perhaps Miss Tox thought there was hope in this exordium, and the warmth of Mrs Chick.

I should have adopted this course of argument,' pursued the discreet lady, 'because I trust I am not a fool. I make no claim to be considered a person of superior intellect - though I believe some people have been extraordinary enough to consider me so; one so little humoured as I am, would very soon be disabused of any such notion; but I trust I am not a downright fool. And to tell ME,' said Mrs Chick with ineffable disdain, 'that my brother Paul Dombey could ever contemplate the possibility of uniting himself to anybody - I don't care who' - she was more sharp and emphatic in that short clause than in any other part of her discourse - 'not possessing these requisites, would be to insult what understanding I have got, as much as if I was to be told that I was born and bred an elephant, which I may be told next,' said Mrs Chick, with resignation. 'It wouldn't surprise me at all. I expect it.'

In the moment's silence that ensued, Miss Tox's scissors gave a feeble clip or two; but Miss Tox's face was still invisible, and Miss Tox's

morning gown was agitated. Mrs Chick looked sideways at her, through the intervening plants, and went on to say, in a tone of bland conviction, and as one dwelling on a point of fact that hardly required to be stated:

'Therefore, of course my brother Paul has done what was to be expected of him, and what anybody might have foreseen he would do, if he entered the marriage state again. I confess it takes me rather by surprise, however gratifying; because when Paul went out of town I had no idea at all that he would form any attachment out of town, and he certainly had no attachment when he left here. However, it seems to be extremely desirable in every point of view. I have no doubt the mother is a most genteel and elegant creature, and I have no right whatever to dispute the policy of her living with them: which is Paul's affair, not mine - and as to Paul's choice, herself, I have only seen her picture yet, but that is beautiful indeed. Her name is beautiful too,' said Mrs Chick, shaking her head with energy, and arranging herself in her chair; 'Edith is at once uncommon, as it strikes me, and distinguished. Consequently, Lucretia, I have no doubt you will be happy to hear that the marriage is to take place immediately - of course, you will:' great emphasis again: 'and that you are delighted with this change in the condition of my brother, who has shown you a great deal of pleasant attention at various times.'

Miss Tox made no verbal answer, but took up the little watering-pot with a trembling hand, and looked vacantly round as if considering what article of furniture would be improved by the contents. The room door opening at this crisis of Miss Tox's feelings, she started, laughed aloud, and fell into the arms of the person entering; happily insensible alike of Mrs Chick's indignant countenance and of the Major at his window over the way, who had his double-barrelled eye-glass in full action, and whose face and figure were dilated with Mephistophelean joy.

Not so the expatriated Native, amazed supporter of Miss Tox's swooning form, who, coming straight upstairs, with a polite inquiry touching Miss Tox's health (in exact pursuance of the Major's malicious instructions), had accidentally arrived in the very nick of time to catch the delicate burden in his arms, and to receive the content' of the little watering-pot in his shoe; both of which circumstances, coupled with his consciousness of being closely watched by the wrathful Major, who had threatened the usual penalty in regard of every bone in his skin in case of any failure, combined to render him a moving spectacle of mental and bodily distress.

For some moments, this afflicted foreigner remained clasping Miss Tox to his heart, with an energy of action in remarkable opposition to his disconcerted face, while that poor lady trickled slowly down upon him

the very last sprinklings of the little watering-pot, as if he were a delicate exotic (which indeed he was), and might be almost expected to blow while the gentle rain descended. Mrs Chick, at length recovering sufficient presence of mind to interpose, commanded him to drop Miss Tox upon the sofa and withdraw; and the exile promptly obeying, she applied herself to promote Miss Tox's recovery.

But none of that gentle concern which usually characterises the daughters of Eve in their tending of each other; none of that freemasonry in fainting, by which they are generally bound together in a mysterious bond of sisterhood; was visible in Mrs Chick's demeanour. Rather like the executioner who restores the victim to sensation previous to proceeding with the torture (or was wont to do so, in the good old times for which all true men wear perpetual mourning), did Mrs Chick administer the smelling-bottle, the slapping on the hands, the dashing of cold water on the face, and the other proved remedies. And when, at length, Miss Tox opened her eyes, and gradually became restored to animation and consciousness, Mrs Chick drew off as from a criminal, and reversing the precedent of the murdered king of Denmark, regarded her more in anger than in sorrow.'

'Lucretia!' said Mrs Chick 'I will not attempt to disguise what I feel. My eyes are opened, all at once. I wouldn't have believed this, if a Saint had told it to me.

'I am foolish to give way to faintness,' Miss Tox faltered. 'I shall be better presently.'

'You will be better presently, Lucretia!' repeated Mrs Chick, with exceeding scorn. 'Do you suppose I am blind? Do you imagine I am in my second childhood? No, Lucretia! I am obliged to you!'

Miss Tox directed an imploring, helpless kind of look towards her friend, and put her handkerchief before her face.

'If anyone had told me this yesterday,' said Mrs Chick, with majesty, 'or even half-an-hour ago, I should have been tempted, I almost believe, to strike them to the earth. Lucretia Tox, my eyes are opened to you all at once. The scales:' here Mrs Chick cast down an imaginary pair, such as are commonly used in grocers' shops: 'have fallen from my sight. The blindness of my confidence is past, Lucretia. It has been abused and played, upon, and evasion is quite out of the question now, I assure you.

'Oh! to what do you allude so cruelly, my love?' asked Miss Tox, through her tears.

'Lucretia,' said Mrs Chick, 'ask your own heart. I must entreat you not to address me by any such familiar term as you have just used, if you please. I have some self-respect left, though you may think otherwise.'

'Oh, Louisa!' cried Miss Tox. 'How can you speak to me like that?'

'How can I speak to you like that?' retorted Mrs Chick, who, in default of having any particular argument to sustain herself upon, relied principally on such repetitions for her most withering effects. 'Like that! You may well say like that, indeed!'

Miss Tox sobbed pitifully.

'The idea!' said Mrs Chick, 'of your having basked at my brother's fireside, like a serpent, and wound yourself, through me, almost into his confidence, Lucretia, that you might, in secret, entertain designs upon him, and dare to aspire to contemplate the possibility of his uniting himself to you! Why, it is an idea,' said Mrs Chick, with sarcastic dignity, 'the absurdity of which almost relieves its treachery.'

'Pray, Louisa,' urged Miss Tox, 'do not say such dreadful things.'

'Dreadful things!' repeated Mrs Chick. 'Dreadful things! Is it not a fact, Lucretia, that you have just now been unable to command your feelings even before me, whose eyes you had so completely closed?'

'I have made no complaint,' sobbed Miss Tox. 'I have said nothing. If I have been a little overpowered by your news, Louisa, and have ever had any lingering thought that Mr Dombey was inclined to be particular towards me, surely you will not condemn me.'

'She is going to say,' said Mrs Chick, addressing herself to the whole of the furniture, in a comprehensive glance of resignation and appeal, 'She is going to say - I know it - that I have encouraged her!'

'I don't wish to exchange reproaches, dear Louisa,' sobbed Miss Tox 'Nor do I wish to complain. But, in my own defence - '

'Yes,' cried Mrs Chick, looking round the room with a prophetic smile, 'that's what she's going to say. I knew it. You had better say it. Say it openly! Be open, Lucretia Tox,' said Mrs Chick, with desperate sternness, 'whatever you are.'

'In my own defence,' faltered Miss Tox, 'and only In my own defence against your unkind words, my dear Louisa, I would merely ask you if you haven't often favoured such a fancy, and even said it might happen, for anything we could tell?'

'There is a point,' said Mrs Chick, rising, not as if she were going to stop at the floor, but as if she were about to soar up, high, into her native skies, 'beyond which endurance becomes ridiculous, if not culpable. I can bear much; but not too much. What spell was on me when I came into this house this day, I don't know; but I had a presentiment - a dark presentiment,' said Mrs Chick, with a shiver, 'that something was going to happen. Well may I have had that foreboding, Lucretia, when my confidence of many years is destroyed in an instant, when my eyes are opened all at once, and when I find you revealed in your true colours. Lucretia, I have been mistaken in you. It is better for us both that this subject should end here. I wish you well, and I shall ever wish you well. But, as an individual who desires to be true to herself in her own poor position, whatever that position may be, or may not be - and as the sister of my brother - and as the sister-in-law of my brother's wife - and as a connexion by marriage of my brother's wife's mother - may I be permitted to add, as a Dombey? - I can wish you nothing else but good morning.'

These words, delivered with cutting suavity, tempered and chastened by a lofty air of moral rectitude, carried the speaker to the door. There she inclined her head in a ghostly and statue-like manner, and so withdrew to her carriage, to seek comfort and consolation in the arms of Mr Chick, her lord.

Figuratively speaking, that is to say; for the arms of Mr Chick were full of his newspaper. Neither did that gentleman address his eyes towards his wife otherwise than by stealth. Neither did he offer any consolation whatever. In short, he sat reading, and humming fag ends of tunes, and sometimes glancing furtively at her without delivering himself of a word, good, bad, or indifferent.

In the meantime Mrs Chick sat swelling and bridling, and tossing her head, as if she were still repeating that solemn formula of farewell to Lucretia Tox. At length, she said aloud, 'Oh the extent to which her eyes had been opened that day!'

'To which your eyes have been opened, my dear!' repeated Mr Chick.

'Oh, don't talk to me!' said Mrs Chic 'if you can bear to see me in this state, and not ask me what the matter is, you had better hold your tongue for ever.'

'What is the matter, my dear?' asked Mr Chick

'To think,' said Mrs Chick, in a state of soliloquy, 'that she should ever have conceived the base idea of connecting herself with our family by a marriage with Paul! To think that when she was playing at horses with that dear child who is now in his grave - I never liked it at the

time - she should have been hiding such a double-faced design! I wonder she was never afraid that something would happen to her. She is fortunate if nothing does.'

'I really thought, my dear,' said Mr Chick slowly, after rubbing the bridge of his nose for some time with his newspaper, 'that you had gone on the same tack yourself, all along, until this morning; and had thought it would be a convenient thing enough, if it could have been brought about.'

Mrs Chick instantly burst into tears, and told Mr Chick that if he wished to trample upon her with his boots, he had better do it.

'But with Lucretia Tox I have done,' said Mrs Chick, after abandoning herself to her feelings for some minutes, to Mr Chick's great terror. 'I can bear to resign Paul's confidence in favour of one who, I hope and trust, may be deserving of it, and with whom he has a perfect right to replace poor Fanny if he chooses; I can bear to be informed, in Paul's cool manner, of such a change in his plans, and never to be consulted until all is settled and determined; but deceit I can not bear, and with Lucretia Tox I have done. It is better as it is,' said Mrs Chick, piously; 'much better. It would have been a long time before I could have accommodated myself comfortably with her, after this; and I really don't know, as Paul is going to be very grand, and these are people of condition, that she would have been quite presentable, and might not have compromised myself. There's a providence in everything; everything works for the best; I have been tried today but on the whole I do not regret it.'

In which Christian spirit, Mrs Chick dried her eyes and smoothed her lap, and sat as became a person calm under a great wrong. Mr Chick feeling his unworthiness no doubt, took an early opportunity of being set down at a street corner and walking away whistling, with his shoulders very much raised, and his hands in his pockets.

While poor excommunicated Miss Tox, who, if she were a fawner and toad-eater, was at least an honest and a constant one, and had ever borne a faithful friendship towards her impeacher and had been truly absorbed and swallowed up in devotion to the magnificence of Mr Dombey - while poor excommunicated Miss Tox watered her plants with her tears, and felt that it was winter in Princess's Place.