

Chapter XXX - The Interval Before The Marriage

Although the enchanted house was no more, and the working world had broken into it, and was hammering and crashing and tramping up and down stairs all day long keeping Diogenes in an incessant paroxysm of barking, from sunrise to sunset - evidently convinced that his enemy had got the better of him at last, and was then sacking the premises in triumphant defiance - there was, at first, no other great change in the method of Florence's life. At night, when the workpeople went away, the house was dreary and deserted again; and Florence, listening to their voices echoing through the hall and staircase as they departed, pictured to herself the cheerful homes to which they were returning, and the children who were waiting for them, and was glad to think that they were merry and well pleased to go.

She welcomed back the evening silence as an old friend, but it came now with an altered face, and looked more kindly on her. Fresh hope was in it. The beautiful lady who had soothed and carressed her, in the very room in which her heart had been so wrung, was a spirit of promise to her. Soft shadows of the bright life dawning, when her father's affection should be gradually won, and all, or much should be restored, of what she had lost on the dark day when a mother's love had faded with a mother's last breath on her cheek, moved about her in the twilight and were welcome company. Peeping at the rosy children her neighbours, it was a new and precious sensation to think that they might soon speak together and know each other; when she would not fear, as of old, to show herself before them, lest they should be grieved to see her in her black dress sitting there alone!

In her thoughts of her new mother, and in the love and trust overflowing her pure heart towards her, Florence loved her own dead mother more and more. She had no fear of setting up a rival in her breast. The new flower sprang from the deep-planted and long-cherished root, she knew. Every gentle word that had fallen from the lips of the beautiful lady, sounded to Florence like an echo of the voice long hushed and silent. How could she love that memory less for living tenderness, when it was her memory of all parental tenderness and love!

Florence was, one day, sitting reading in her room, and thinking of the lady and her promised visit soon - for her book turned on a kindred subject - when, raising her eyes, she saw her standing in the doorway.

'Mama!' cried Florence, joyfully meeting her. 'Come again!'

'Not Mama yet,' returned the lady, with a serious smile, as she encircled Florence's neck with her arm.

'But very soon to be,' cried Florence.

'Very soon now, Florence: very soon.'

Edith bent her head a little, so as to press the blooming cheek of Florence against her own, and for some few moments remained thus silent. There was something so very tender in her manner, that Florence was even more sensible of it than on the first occasion of their meeting.

She led Florence to a chair beside her, and sat down: Florence looking in her face, quite wondering at its beauty, and willingly leaving her hand in hers.

'Have you been alone, Florence, since I was here last?'

'Oh yes!' smiled Florence, hastily.

She hesitated and cast down her eyes; for her new Mama was very earnest in her look, and the look was intently and thoughtfully fixed upon her face.

'I - I - am used to be alone,' said Florence. 'I don't mind it at all. Di and I pass whole days together, sometimes.' Florence might have said, whole weeks and months.

'Is Di your maid, love?'

'My dog, Mama,' said Florence, laughing. 'Susan is my maid.'

'And these are your rooms,' said Edith, looking round. 'I was not shown these rooms the other day. We must have them improved, Florence. They shall be made the prettiest in the house.'

'If I might change them, Mama,' returned Florence; 'there is one upstairs I should like much better.'

'Is this not high enough, dear girl?' asked Edith, smiling.

'The other was my brother's room,' said Florence, 'and I am very fond of it. I would have spoken to Papa about it when I came home, and found the workmen here, and everything changing; but - '

Florence dropped her eyes, lest the same look should make her falter again.

'but I was afraid it might distress him; and as you said you would be here again soon, Mama, and are the mistress of everything, I determined to take courage and ask you.'

Edith sat looking at her, with her brilliant eyes intent upon her face, until Florence raising her own, she, in her turn, withdrew her gaze, and turned it on the ground. It was then that Florence thought how different this lady's beauty was, from what she had supposed. She had thought it of a proud and lofty kind; yet her manner was so subdued and gentle, that if she had been of Florence's own age and character, it scarcely could have invited confidence more.

Except when a constrained and singular reserve crept over her; and then she seemed (but Florence hardly understood this, though she could not choose but notice it, and think about it) as if she were humbled before Florence, and ill at ease. When she had said that she was not her Mama yet, and when Florence had called her the mistress of everything there, this change in her was quick and startling; and now, while the eyes of Florence rested on her face, she sat as though she would have shrunk and hidden from her, rather than as one about to love and cherish her, in right of such a near connexion.

She gave Florence her ready promise, about her new room, and said she would give directions about it herself. She then asked some questions concerning poor Paul; and when they had sat in conversation for some time, told Florence she had come to take her to her own home.

'We have come to London now, my mother and I,' said Edith, 'and you shall stay with us until I am married. I wish that we should know and trust each other, Florence.'

'You are very kind to me,' said Florence, 'dear Mama. How much I thank you!'

'Let me say now, for it may be the best opportunity,' continued Edith, looking round to see that they were quite alone, and speaking in a lower voice, 'that when I am married, and have gone away for some weeks, I shall be easier at heart if you will come home here. No matter who invites you to stay elsewhere. Come home here. It is better to be alone than - what I would say is,' she added, checking herself, 'that I know well you are best at home, dear Florence.'

'I will come home on the very day, Mama'

'Do so. I rely on that promise. Now, prepare to come with me, dear girl. You will find me downstairs when you are ready.'

Slowly and thoughtfully did Edith wander alone through the mansion of which she was so soon to be the lady: and little heed took she of all the elegance and splendour it began to display. The same indomitable haughtiness of soul, the same proud scorn expressed in eye and lip, the same fierce beauty, only tamed by a sense of its own little worth, and of the little worth of everything around it, went through the grand saloons and halls, that had got loose among the shady trees, and raged and rent themselves. The mimic roses on the walls and floors were set round with sharp thorns, that tore her breast; in every scrap of gold so dazzling to the eye, she saw some hateful atom of her purchase-money; the broad high mirrors showed her, at full length, a woman with a noble quality yet dwelling in her nature, who was too false to her better self, and too debased and lost, to save herself. She believed that all this was so plain, more or less, to all eyes, that she had no resource or power of self-assertion but in pride: and with this pride, which tortured her own heart night and day, she fought her fate out, braved it, and defied it.

Was this the woman whom Florence - an innocent girl, strong only in her earnestness and simple truth - could so impress and quell, that by her side she was another creature, with her tempest of passion hushed, and her very pride itself subdued? Was this the woman who now sat beside her in a carriage, with her arms entwined, and who, while she courted and entreated her to love and trust her, drew her fair head to nestle on her breast, and would have laid down life to shield it from wrong or harm?

Oh, Edith! it were well to die, indeed, at such a time! Better and happier far, perhaps, to die so, Edith, than to live on to the end!

The Honourable Mrs Skewton, who was thinking of anything rather than of such sentiments - for, like many genteel persons who have existed at various times, she set her face against death altogether, and objected to the mention of any such low and levelling upstart - had borrowed a house in Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, from a stately relative (one of the Feenix brood), who was out of town, and who did not object to lending it, in the handsomest manner, for nuptial purposes, as the loan implied his final release and acquittance from all further loans and gifts to Mrs Skewton and her daughter. It being necessary for the credit of the family to make a handsome appearance at such a time, Mrs Skewton, with the assistance of an accommodating tradesman resident in the parish of Mary-le-bone, who lent out all sorts of articles to the nobility and gentry, from a service of plate to an army of footmen, clapped into this house a silver-headed butler (who was charged extra on that account, as having the appearance of an ancient family retainer), two very tall young men in livery, and a select staff of kitchen-servants; so that a legend arose, downstairs, that Withers the page, released at once from

his numerous household duties, and from the propulsion of the wheeled-chair (inconsistent with the metropolis), had been several times observed to rub his eyes and pinch his limbs, as if he misdoubted his having overslept himself at the Leamington milkman's, and being still in a celestial dream. A variety of requisites in plate and china being also conveyed to the same establishment from the same convenient source, with several miscellaneous articles, including a neat chariot and a pair of bays, Mrs Skewton cushioned herself on the principal sofa, in the Cleopatra attitude, and held her court in fair state.

'And how,' said Mrs Skewton, on the entrance of her daughter and her charge, 'is my charming Florence? You must come and kiss me, Florence, if you please, my love.' Florence was timidly stooping to pick out a place in the white part of Mrs Skewton's face, when that lady presented her ear, and relieved her of her difficulty.

'Edith, my dear,' said Mrs Skewton, 'positively, I - stand a little more in the light, my sweetest Florence, for a moment.

Florence blushingly complied.

'You don't remember, dearest Edith,' said her mother, 'what you were when you were about the same age as our exceedingly precious Florence, or a few years younger?'

'I have long forgotten, mother.'

'For positively, my dear,' said Mrs Skewton, 'I do think that I see a decided resemblance to what you were then, in our extremely fascinating young friend. And it shows,' said Mrs Skewton, in a lower voice, which conveyed her opinion that Florence was in a very unfinished state, 'what cultivation will do.'

'It does, indeed,' was Edith's stern reply.

Her mother eyed her sharply for a moment, and feeling herself on unsafe ground, said, as a diversion:

'My charming Florence, you must come and kiss me once more, if you please, my love.'

Florence complied, of course, and again imprinted her lips on Mrs Skewton's ear.

'And you have heard, no doubt, my darling pet,' said Mrs Skewton, detaining her hand, 'that your Papa, whom we all perfectly adore and dote upon, is to be married to my dearest Edith this day week.'

'I knew it would be very soon,' returned Florence, 'but not exactly when.'

'My darling Edith,' urged her mother, gaily, 'is it possible you have not told Florence?'

'Why should I tell Florence?' she returned, so suddenly and harshly, that Florence could scarcely believe it was the same voice.

Mrs Skewton then told Florence, as another and safer diversion, that her father was coming to dinner, and that he would no doubt be charmingly surprised to see her; as he had spoken last night of dressing in the City, and had known nothing of Edith's design, the execution of which, according to Mrs Skewton's expectation, would throw him into a perfect ecstasy. Florence was troubled to hear this; and her distress became so keen, as the dinner-hour approached, that if she had known how to frame an entreaty to be suffered to return home, without involving her father in her explanation, she would have hurried back on foot, bareheaded, breathless, and alone, rather than incur the risk of meeting his displeasure.

As the time drew nearer, she could hardly breathe. She dared not approach a window, lest he should see her from the street. She dared not go upstairs to hide her emotion, lest, in passing out at the door, she should meet him unexpectedly; besides which dread, she felt as though she never could come back again if she were summoned to his presence. In this conflict of fears; she was sitting by Cleopatra's couch, endeavouring to understand and to reply to the bald discourse of that lady, when she heard his foot upon the stair.

'I hear him now!' cried Florence, starting. 'He is coming!'

Cleopatra, who in her juvenility was always playfully disposed, and who in her self-engrossment did not trouble herself about the nature of this agitation, pushed Florence behind her couch, and dropped a shawl over her, preparatory to giving Mr Dombey a rapture of surprise. It was so quickly done, that in a moment Florence heard his awful step in the room.

He saluted his intended mother-in-law, and his intended bride. The strange sound of his voice thrilled through the whole frame of his child.

'My dear Dombey,' said Cleopatra, 'come here and tell me how your pretty Florence is.'

'Florence is very well,' said Mr Dombey, advancing towards the couch.

'At home?'

'At home,' said Mr Dombey.

'My dear Dombey,' returned Cleopatra, with bewitching vivacity; 'now are you sure you are not deceiving me? I don't know what my dearest Edith will say to me when I make such a declaration, but upon my honour I am afraid you are the falsest of men, my dear Dombey.'

Though he had been; and had been detected on the spot, in the most enormous falsehood that was ever said or done; he could hardly have been more disconcerted than he was, when Mrs Skewton plucked the shawl away, and Florence, pale and trembling, rose before him like a ghost. He had not yet recovered his presence of mind, when Florence had run up to him, clasped her hands round his neck, kissed his face, and hurried out of the room. He looked round as if to refer the matter to somebody else, but Edith had gone after Florence, instantly.

'Now, confess, my dear Dombey,' said Mrs Skewton, giving him her hand, 'that you never were more surprised and pleased in your life.'

'I never was more surprised,' said Mr Dombey.

'Nor pleased, my dearest Dombey?' returned Mrs Skewton, holding up her fan.

'I - yes, I am exceedingly glad to meet Florence here,' said Mr Dombey. He appeared to consider gravely about it for a moment, and then said, more decidedly, 'Yes, I really am very glad indeed to meet Florence here.'

'You wonder how she comes here?' said Mrs Skewton, 'don't you?' 'Edith, perhaps - ' suggested Mr Dombey.

'Ah! wicked guesser!' replied Cleopatra, shaking her head. 'Ah! cunning, cunning man! One shouldn't tell these things; your sex, my dear Dombey, are so vain, and so apt to abuse our weakness; but you know my open soul - very well; immediately.'

This was addressed to one of the very tall young men who announced dinner.

'But Edith, my dear Dombey,' she continued in a whisper, when she cannot have you near her - and as I tell her, she cannot expect that always - will at least have near her something or somebody belonging to you. Well, how extremely natural that is! And in this spirit, nothing would keep her from riding off to-day to fetch our darling Florence. Well, how excessively charming that is!'

As she waited for an answer, Mr Dombey answered, 'Eminently so.'

'Bless you, my dear Dombey, for that proof of heart!' cried Cleopatra, squeezing his hand. 'But I am growing too serious! Take me downstairs, like an angel, and let us see what these people intend to give us for dinner. Bless you, dear Dombey!'

Cleopatra skipping off her couch with tolerable briskness, after the last benediction, Mr Dombey took her arm in his and led her ceremoniously downstairs; one of the very tall young men on hire, whose organ of veneration was imperfectly developed, thrusting his tongue into his cheek, for the entertainment of the other very tall young man on hire, as the couple turned into the dining-room.

Florence and Edith were already there, and sitting side by side. Florence would have risen when her father entered, to resign her chair to him; but Edith openly put her hand upon her arm, and Mr Dombey took an opposite place at the round table.

The conversation was almost entirely sustained by Mrs Skewton. Florence hardly dared to raise her eyes, lest they should reveal the traces of tears; far less dared to speak; and Edith never uttered one word, unless in answer to a question. Verily, Cleopatra worked hard, for the establishment that was so nearly clutched; and verily it should have been a rich one to reward her!

And so your preparations are nearly finished at last, my dear Dombey?' said Cleopatra, when the dessert was put upon the table, and the silver-headed butler had withdrawn. 'Even the lawyers' preparations!'

'Yes, madam,' replied Mr Dombey; 'the deed of settlement, the professional gentlemen inform me, is now ready, and as I was mentioning to you, Edith has only to do us the favour to suggest her own time for its execution.'

Edith sat like a handsome statue; as cold, as silent, and as still.

'My dearest love,' said Cleopatra, 'do you hear what Mr Dombey says? Ah, my dear Dombey!' aside to that gentleman, 'how her absence, as the time approaches, reminds me of the days, when that most agreeable of creatures, her Papa, was in your situation!'

'I have nothing to suggest. It shall be when you please,' said Edith, scarcely looking over the table at Mr Dombey.

'To-morrow?' suggested Mr Dombey.

'If you please.' 'Or would next day,' said Mr Dombey, 'suit your engagements better?'

'I have no engagements. I am always at your disposal. Let it be when you like.'

'No engagements, my dear Edith!' remonstrated her mother, 'when you are in a most terrible state of flurry all day long, and have a thousand and one appointments with all sorts of trades-people!'

'They are of your making,' returned Edith, turning on her with a slight contraction of her brow. 'You and Mr Dombey can arrange between you.'

'Very true indeed, my love, and most considerate of you!' said Cleopatra. 'My darling Florence, you must really come and kiss me once more, if you please, my dear!'

Singular coincidence, that these gushes of interest in Florence hurried Cleopatra away from almost every dialogue in which Edith had a share, however trifling! Florence had certainly never undergone so much embracing, and perhaps had never been, unconsciously, so useful in her life.

Mr Dombey was far from quarrelling, in his own breast, with the manner of his beautiful betrothed. He had that good reason for sympathy with haughtiness and coldness, which is found in a fellow-feeling. It flattered him to think how these deferred to him, in Edith's case, and seemed to have no will apart from his. It flattered him to picture to himself, this proud and stately woman doing the honours of his house, and chilling his guests after his own manner. The dignity of Dombey and Son would be heightened and maintained, indeed, in such hands.

So thought Mr Dombey, when he was left alone at the dining-table, and mused upon his past and future fortunes: finding no uncongeniality in an air of scant and gloomy state that pervaded the room, in colour a dark brown, with black hatchments of pictures blotching the walls, and twenty-four black chairs, with almost as many nails in them as so many coffins, waiting like mutes, upon the threshold of the Turkey carpet; and two exhausted negroes holding up two withered branches of candelabra on the sideboard, and a musty smell prevailing as if the ashes of ten thousand dinners were entombed in the sarcophagus below it. The owner of the house lived much abroad; the air of England seldom agreed long with a member of the Feenix family; and the room had gradually put itself into deeper and still deeper mourning for him, until it was become so funereal as to want nothing but a body in it to be quite complete.

No bad representation of the body, for the nonce, in his unbending form, if not in his attitude, Mr Dombey looked down into the cold depths of the dead sea of mahogany on which the fruit dishes and decanters lay at anchor: as if the subjects of his thoughts were rising towards the surface one by one, and plunging down again. Edith was there in all her majesty of brow and figure; and close to her came Florence, with her timid head turned to him, as it had been, for an instant, when she left the room; and Edith's eyes upon her, and Edith's hand put out protectingly. A little figure in a low arm-chair came springing next into the light, and looked upon him wonderingly, with its bright eyes and its old-young face, gleaming as in the flickering of an evening fire. Again came Florence close upon it, and absorbed his whole attention. Whether as a fore-doomed difficulty and disappointment to him; whether as a rival who had crossed him in his way, and might again; whether as his child, of whom, in his successful wooing, he could stoop to think as claiming, at such a time, to be no more estranged; or whether as a hint to him that the mere appearance of caring for his own blood should be maintained in his new relations; he best knew. Indifferently well, perhaps, at best; for marriage company and marriage altars, and ambitious scenes - still blotted here and there with Florence - always Florence - turned up so fast, and so confusedly, that he rose, and went upstairs to escape them.

It was quite late at night before candles were brought; for at present they made Mrs Skewton's head ache, she complained; and in the meantime Florence and Mrs Skewton talked together (Cleopatra being very anxious to keep her close to herself), or Florence touched the piano softly for Mrs Skewton's delight; to make no mention of a few occasions in the course of the evening, when that affectionate lady was impelled to solicit another kiss, and which always happened after Edith had said anything. They were not many, however, for Edith sat apart by an open window during the whole time (in spite of her mother's fears that she would take cold), and remained there until Mr Dombey took leave. He was serenely gracious to Florence when he did so; and Florence went to bed in a room within Edith's, so happy and hopeful, that she thought of her late self as if it were some other poor deserted girl who was to be pitied for her sorrow; and in her pity, sobbed herself to sleep.

The week fled fast. There were drives to milliners, dressmakers, jewellers, lawyers, florists, pastry-cooks; and Florence was always of the party. Florence was to go to the wedding. Florence was to cast off her mourning, and to wear a brilliant dress on the occasion. The milliner's intentions on the subject of this dress - the milliner was a Frenchwoman, and greatly resembled Mrs Skewton - were so chaste and elegant, that Mrs Skewton bespoke one like it for herself. The

milliner said it would become her to admiration, and that all the world would take her for the young lady's sister.

The week fled faster. Edith looked at nothing and cared for nothing. Her rich dresses came home, and were tried on, and were loudly commended by Mrs Skewton and the milliners, and were put away without a word from her. Mrs Skewton made their plans for every day, and executed them. Sometimes Edith sat in the carriage when they went to make purchases; sometimes, when it was absolutely necessary, she went into the shops. But Mrs Skewton conducted the whole business, whatever it happened to be; and Edith looked on as uninterested and with as much apparent indifference as if she had no concern in it. Florence might perhaps have thought she was haughty and listless, but that she was never so to her. So Florence quenched her wonder in her gratitude whenever it broke out, and soon subdued it.

The week fled faster. It had nearly winged its flight away. The last night of the week, the night before the marriage, was come. In the dark room - for Mrs Skewton's head was no better yet, though she expected to recover permanently to-morrow - were that lady, Edith, and Mr Dombey. Edith was at her open window looking out into the street; Mr Dombey and Cleopatra were talking softly on the sofa. It was growing late; and Florence, being fatigued, had gone to bed.

'My dear Dombey,' said Cleopatra, 'you will leave me Florence to-morrow, when you deprive me of my sweetest Edith.'

Mr Dombey said he would, with pleasure.

'To have her about me, here, while you are both at Paris, and to think at her age, I am assisting in the formation of her mind, my dear Dombey,' said Cleopatra, 'will be a perfect balm to me in the extremely shattered state to which I shall be reduced.'

Edith turned her head suddenly. Her listless manner was exchanged, in a moment, to one of burning interest, and, unseen in the darkness, she attended closely to their conversation.

Mr Dombey would be delighted to leave Florence in such admirable guardianship.

'My dear Dombey,' returned Cleopatra, 'a thousand thanks for your good opinion. I feared you were going, with malice aforethought' as the dreadful lawyers say - those horrid proses! - to condemn me to utter solitude;'

'Why do me so great an injustice, my dear madam?' said Mr Dombey.

'Because my charming Florence tells me so positively she must go home tomorrow, returned Cleopatra, that I began to be afraid, my dearest Dombey, you were quite a Bashaw.'

'I assure you, madam!' said Mr Dombey, 'I have laid no commands on Florence; and if I had, there are no commands like your wish.'

'My dear Dombey,' replied Cleopatra, what a courtier you are! Though I'll not say so, either; for courtiers have no heart, and yours pervades your farming life and character. And are you really going so early, my dear Dombey!'

Oh, indeed! it was late, and Mr Dombey feared he must.

'Is this a fact, or is it all a dream!' lisped Cleopatra. 'Can I believe, my dearest Dombey, that you are coming back tomorrow morning to deprive me of my sweet companion; my own Edith!'

Mr Dombey, who was accustomed to take things literally, reminded Mrs Skewton that they were to meet first at the church.

'The pang,' said Mrs Skewton, 'of consigning a child, even to you, my dear Dombey, is one of the most excruciating imaginable, and combined with a naturally delicate constitution, and the extreme stupidity of the pastry-cook who has undertaken the breakfast, is almost too much for my poor strength. But I shall rally, my dear Dombey, In the morning; do not fear for me, or be uneasy on my account. Heaven bless you! My dearest Edith!' she cried archly. 'Somebody is going, pet.'

Edith, who had turned her head again towards the window, and whose interest in their conversation had ceased, rose up in her place, but made no advance towards him, and said nothing. Mr Dombey, with a lofty gallantry adapted to his dignity and the occasion, betook his creaking boots towards her, put her hand to his lips, said, 'Tomorrow morning I shall have the happiness of claiming this hand as Mrs Dombey's,' and bowed himself solemnly out.

Mrs Skewton rang for candles as soon as the house-door had closed upon him. With the candles appeared her maid, with the juvenile dress that was to delude the world to-morrow. The dress had savage retribution in it, as such dresses ever have, and made her infinitely older and more hideous than her greasy flannel gown. But Mrs Skewton tried it on with mincing satisfaction; smirked at her cadaverous self in the glass, as she thought of its killing effect upon the Major; and suffering her maid to take it off again, and to prepare her for repose, tumbled into ruins like a house of painted cards.

All this time, Edith remained at the dark window looking out into the street. When she and her mother were at last left alone, she moved from it for the first time that evening, and came opposite to her. The yawning, shaking, peevish figure of the mother, with her eyes raised to confront the proud erect form of the daughter, whose glance of fire was bent downward upon her, had a conscious air upon it, that no levity or temper could conceal.

'I am tired to death,' said she. 'You can't be trusted for a moment. You are worse than a child. Child! No child would be half so obstinate and undutiful.'

'Listen to me, mother,' returned Edith, passing these words by with a scorn that would not descend to trifle with them. 'You must remain alone here until I return.'

'Must remain alone here, Edith, until you return!' repeated her mother.

'Or in that name upon which I shall call to-morrow to witness what I do, so falsely: and so shamefully, I swear I will refuse the hand of this man in the church. If I do not, may I fall dead upon the pavement!'

The mother answered with a look of quick alarm, in no degree diminished by the look she met.

'It is enough,' said Edith, steadily, 'that we are what we are. I will have no youth and truth dragged down to my level. I will have no guileless nature undermined, corrupted, and perverted, to amuse the leisure of a world of mothers. You know my meaning. Florence must go home.'

'You are an idiot, Edith,' cried her angry mother. 'Do you expect there can ever be peace for you in that house, till she is married, and away?'

'Ask me, or ask yourself, if I ever expect peace in that house,' said her daughter, 'and you know the answer.'

'And am I to be told to-night, after all my pains and labour, and when you are going, through me, to be rendered independent,' her mother almost shrieked in her passion, while her palsied head shook like a leaf, 'that there is corruption and contagion in me, and that I am not fit company for a girl! What are you, pray? What are you?'

'I have put the question to myself,' said Edith, ashy pale, and pointing to the window, 'more than once when I have been sitting there, and something in the faded likeness of my sex has wandered past outside; and God knows I have met with my reply. Oh mother, mother, if you

had but left me to my natural heart when I too was a girl - a younger girl than Florence - how different I might have been!

Sensible that any show of anger was useless here, her mother restrained herself, and fell a whimpering, and bewailed that she had lived too long, and that her only child had cast her off, and that duty towards parents was forgotten in these evil days, and that she had heard unnatural taunts, and cared for life no longer.

'If one is to go on living through continual scenes like this,' she whined, 'I am sure it would be much better for me to think of some means of putting an end to my existence. Oh! The idea of your being my daughter, Edith, and addressing me in such a strain!'

'Between us, mother,' returned Edith, mournfully, 'the time for mutual reproaches is past.

'Then why do you revive it?' whimpered her mother. 'You know that you are lacerating me in the cruellest manner. You know how sensitive I am to unkindness. At such a moment, too, when I have so much to think of, and am naturally anxious to appear to the best advantage! I wonder at you, Edith. To make your mother a fright upon your wedding-day!'

Edith bent the same fixed look upon her, as she sobbed and rubbed her eyes; and said in the same low steady voice, which had neither risen nor fallen since she first addressed her, 'I have said that Florence must go home.'

'Let her go!' cried the afflicted and affrighted parent, hastily. 'I am sure I am willing she should go. What is the girl to me?'

'She is so much to me, that rather than communicate, or suffer to be communicated to her, one grain of the evil that is in my breast, mother, I would renounce you, as I would (if you gave me cause) renounce him in the church to-morrow,' replied Edith. 'Leave her alone. She shall not, while I can interpose, be tampered with and tainted by the lessons I have learned. This is no hard condition on this bitter night.'

'If you had proposed it in a filial manner, Edith,' whined her mother, 'perhaps not; very likely not. But such extremely cutting words - '

'They are past and at an end between us now,' said Edith. 'Take your own way, mother; share as you please in what you have gained; spend, enjoy, make much of it; and be as happy as you will. The object of our lives is won. Henceforth let us wear it silently. My lips are

closed upon the past from this hour. I forgive you your part in tomorrow's wickedness. May God forgive my own!

Without a tremor in her voice, or frame, and passing onward with a foot that set itself upon the neck of every soft emotion, she bade her mother good-night, and repaired to her own room.

But not to rest; for there was no rest in the tumult of her agitation when alone to and fro, and to and fro, and to and fro again, five hundred times, among the splendid preparations for her adornment on the morrow; with her dark hair shaken down, her dark eyes flashing with a raging light, her broad white bosom red with the cruel grasp of the relentless hand with which she spurned it from her, pacing up and down with an averted head, as if she would avoid the sight of her own fair person, and divorce herself from its companionship. Thus, In the dead time of the night before her bridal, Edith Granger wrestled with her unquiet spirit, tearless, friendless, silent, proud, and uncomplaining.

At length it happened that she touched the open door which led into the room where Florence lay.

She started, stopped, and looked in.

A light was burning there, and showed her Florence in her bloom of innocence and beauty, fast asleep. Edith held her breath, and felt herself drawn on towards her.

Drawn nearer, nearer, nearer yet; at last, drawn so near, that stooping down, she pressed her lips to the gentle hand that lay outside the bed, and put it softly to her neck. Its touch was like the prophet's rod of old upon the rock. Her tears sprung forth beneath it, as she sunk upon her knees, and laid her aching head and streaming hair upon the pillow by its side.

Thus Edith Granger passed the night before her bridal. Thus the sun found her on her bridal morning.