Chapter XXXIII - Contrasts

Turn we our eyes upon two homes; not lying side by side, but wide apart, though both within easy range and reach of the great city of London.

The first is situated in the green and wooded country near Norwood. It is not a mansion; it is of no pretensions as to size; but it is beautifully arranged, and tastefully kept. The lawn, the soft, smooth slope, the flower-garden, the clumps of trees where graceful forms of ash and willow are not wanting, the conservatory, the rustic verandah with sweet-smelling creeping plants entwined about the pillars, the simple exterior of the house, the well-ordered offices, though all upon the diminutive scale proper to a mere cottage, bespeak an amount of elegant comfort within, that might serve for a palace. This indication is not without warrant; for, within, it is a house of refinement and luxury. Rich colours, excellently blended, meet the eye at every turn; in the furniture - its proportions admirably devised to suit the shapes and sizes of the small rooms; on the walls; upon the floors; tingeing and subduing the light that comes in through the odd glass doors and windows here and there. There are a few choice prints and pictures too; in quaint nooks and recesses there is no want of books; and there are games of skill and chance set forth on tables - fantastic chessmen, dice, backgammon, cards, and billiards.

And yet amidst this opulence of comfort, there is something in the general air that is not well. Is it that the carpets and the cushions are too soft and noiseless, so that those who move or repose among them seem to act by stealth? Is it that the prints and pictures do not commemorate great thoughts or deeds, or render nature in the Poetry of landscape, hall, or hut, but are of one voluptuous cast - mere shows of form and colour - and no more? Is it that the books have all their gold outside, and that the titles of the greater part qualify them to be companions of the prints and pictures? Is it that the completeness and the beauty of the place are here and there belied by an affectation of humility, in some unimportant and inexpensive regard, which is as false as the face of the too truly painted portrait hanging yonder, or its original at breakfast in his easy chair below it? Or is it that, with the daily breath of that original and master of all here, there issues forth some subtle portion of himself, which gives a vague expression of himself to everything about him?

It is Mr Carker the Manager who sits in the easy chair. A gaudy parrot in a burnished cage upon the table tears at the wires with her beak, and goes walking, upside down, in its dome-top, shaking her house and screeching; but Mr Carker is indifferent to the bird, and looks with a musing smile at a picture on the opposite wall.

'A most extraordinary accidental likeness, certainly,' says he.

Perhaps it is a Juno; perhaps a Potiphar's Wife'; perhaps some scornful Nymph - according as the Picture Dealers found the market, when they christened it. It is the figure of a woman, supremely handsome, who, turning away, but with her face addressed to the spectator, flashes her proud glance upon him.

It is like Edith.

With a passing gesture of his hand at the picture - what! a menace? No; yet something like it. A wave as of triumph? No; yet more like that. An insolent salute wafted from his lips? No; yet like that too - he resumes his breakfast, and calls to the chafing and imprisoned bird, who coming down into a pendant gilded hoop within the cage, like a great wedding-ring, swings in it, for his delight.

The second home is on the other side of London, near to where the busy great north road of bygone days is silent and almost deserted, except by wayfarers who toil along on foot. It is a poor small house, barely and sparely furnished, but very clean; and there is even an attempt to decorate it, shown in the homely flowers trained about the porch and in the narrow garden. The neighbourhood in which it stands has as little of the country to recommend'it, as it has of the town. It is neither of the town nor country. The former, like the giant in his travelling boots, has made a stride and passed it, and has set his brick-and-mortar heel a long way in advance; but the intermediate space between the giant's feet, as yet, is only blighted country, and not town; and, here, among a few tall chimneys belching smoke all day and night, and among the brick-fields and the lanes where turf is cut, and where the fences tumble down, and where the dusty nettles grow, and where a scrap or two of hedge may yet be seen, and where the bird-catcher still comes occasionally, though he swears every time to come no more - this second home is to be found.'

She who inhabits it, is she who left the first in her devotion to an outcast brother. She withdrew from that home its redeeming spirit, and from its master's breast his solitary angel: but though his liking for her is gone, after this ungrateful slight as he considers it; and though he abandons her altogether in return, an old idea of her is not quite forgotten even by him. Let her flower-garden, in which he never sets his foot, but which is yet maintained, among all his costly alterations, as if she had quitted it but yesterday, bear witness!

Harriet Carker has changed since then, and on her beauty there has fallen a heavier shade than Time of his unassisted self can cast, all-potent as he is - the shadow of anxiety and sorrow, and the daily struggle of a poor existence. But it is beauty still; and still a gentle,

quiet, and retiring beauty that must be sought out, for it cannot vaunt itself; if it could, it would be what it is, no more.

Yes. This slight, small, patient figure, neatly dressed in homely stuffs, and indicating nothing but the dull, household virtues, that have so little in common with the received idea of heroism and greatness, unless, indeed, any ray of them should shine through the lives of the great ones of the earth, when it becomes a constellation and is tracked in Heaven straightway - this slight, small, patient figure, leaning on the man still young but worn and grey, is she, his sister, who, of all the world, went over to him in his shame and put her hand in his, and with a sweet composure and determination, led him hopefully upon his barren way.

'It is early, John,' she said. 'Why do you go so early?'

'Not many minutes earlier than usual, Harriet. If I have the time to spare, I should like, I think - it's a fancy - to walk once by the house where I took leave of him.'

'I wish I had ever seen or known him, John.'

'It is better as it is, my dear, remembering his fate.'

'But I could not regret it more, though I had known him. Is not your sorrow mine? And if I had, perhaps you would feel that I was a better companion to you in speaking about him, than I may seem now.

'My dearest sister! Is there anything within the range of rejoicing or regret, in which I am not sure of your companionship?'

'I hope you think not, John, for surely there is nothing!'

'How could you be better to me, or nearer to me then, than you are in this, or anything?' said her brother. 'I feel that you did know him, Harriet, and that you shared my feelings towards him.'

She drew the hand which had been resting on his shoulder, round his neck, and answered, with some hesitation:

'No, not quite.'

'True, true!' he said; 'you think I might have done him no harm if I had allowed myself to know him better?'

'Think! I know it.'

'Designedly, Heaven knows I would not,' he replied, shaking his head mournfully; 'but his reputation was too precious to be perilled by such association. Whether you share that knowledge, or do not, my dear - '

'I do not,' she said quietly.

'It is still the truth, Harriet, and my mind is lighter when I think of him for that which made it so much heavier then.' He checked himself in his tone of melancholy, and smiled upon her as he said 'Good-bye!'

'Good-bye, dear John! In the evening, at the old time and place, I shall meet you as usual on your way home. Good-bye.'

The cordial face she lifted up to his to kiss him, was his home, his life, his universe, and yet it was a portion of his punishment and grief; for in the cloud he saw upon it - though serene and calm as any radiant cloud at sunset - and in the constancy and devotion of her life, and in the sacrifice she had made of ease, enjoyment, and hope, he saw the bitter fruits of his old crime, for ever ripe and fresh.

She stood at the door looking after him, with her hands loosely clasped in each other, as he made his way over the frowzy and uneven patch of ground which lay before their house, which had once (and not long ago) been a pleasant meadow, and was now a very waste, with a disorderly crop of beginnings of mean houses, rising out of the rubbish, as if they had been unskilfully sown there. Whenever he looked back - as once or twice he did - her cordial face shone like a light upon his heart; but when he plodded on his way, and saw her not, the tears were in her eyes as she stood watching him.

Her pensive form was not long idle at the door. There was daily duty to discharge, and daily work to do - for such commonplace spirits that are not heroic, often work hard with their hands - and Harriet was soon busy with her household tasks. These discharged, and the poor house made quite neat and orderly, she counted her little stock of money, with an anxious face, and went out thoughtfully to buy some necessaries for their table, planning and conniving, as she went, how to save. So sordid are the lives of such lo natures, who are not only not heroic to their valets and waiting-women, but have neither valets nor waiting-women to be heroic to withal!

While she was absent, and there was no one in the house, there approached it by a different way from that the brother had taken, a gentleman, a very little past his prime of life perhaps, but of a healthy florid hue, an upright presence, and a bright clear aspect, that was gracious and good-humoured. His eyebrows were still black, and so was much of his hair; the sprinkling of grey observable among the

latter, graced the former very much, and showed his broad frank brow and honest eyes to great advantage.

After knocking once at the door, and obtaining no response, this gentleman sat down on a bench in the little porch to wait. A certain skilful action of his fingers as he hummed some bars, and beat time on the seat beside him, seemed to denote the musician; and the extraordinary satisfaction he derived from humming something very slow and long, which had no recognisable tune, seemed to denote that he was a scientific one.

The gentleman was still twirlIng a theme, which seemed to go round and round and round, and in and in and in, and to involve itself like a corkscrew twirled upon a table, without getting any nearer to anything, when Harriet appeared returning. He rose up as she advanced, and stood with his head uncovered.

'You are come again, Sir!' she said, faltering.

'I take that liberty,' he answered. 'May I ask for five minutes of your leisure?'

After a moment's hesitation, she opened the door, and gave him admission to the little parlour. The gentleman sat down there, drew his chair to the table over against her, and said, in a voice that perfectly corresponded to his appearance, and with a simplicity that was very engaging:

'Miss Harriet, you cannot be proud. You signified to me, when I called t'other morning, that you were. Pardon me if I say that I looked into your face while you spoke, and that it contradicted you. I look into it again,' he added, laying his hand gently on her arm, for an instant, 'and it contradicts you more and more.'

She was somewhat confused and agitated, and could make no ready answer.

'It is the mirror of truth,' said her visitor, 'and gentleness. Excuse my trusting to it, and returning.'

His manner of saying these words, divested them entirely of the character of compliments. It was so plain, grave, unaffected, and sincere, that she bent her head, as if at once to thank him, and acknowledge his sincerity.

'The disparity between our ages,' said the gentleman, 'and the plainness of my purpose, empower me, I am glad to think, to speak my mind. That is my mind; and so you see me for the second time.'

'There is a kind of pride, Sir,' she returned, after a moment's silence, 'or what may be supposed to be pride, which is mere duty. I hope I cherish no other.'

'For yourself,' he said.

'For myself.'

'But - pardon me - ' suggested the gentleman. 'For your brother John?'

'Proud of his love, I am,' said Harriet, looking full upon her visitor, and changing her manner on the instant - not that it was less composed and quiet, but that there was a deep impassioned earnestness in it that made the very tremble in her voice a part of her firmness, 'and proud of him. Sir, you who strangely know the story of his life, and repeated it to me when you were here last - '

'Merely to make my way into your confidence,' interposed the gentleman. 'For heaven's sake, don't suppose - '

'I am sure,' she said, 'you revived it, in my hearing, with a kind and good purpose. I am quite sure of it.'

'I thank you,' returned her visitor, pressing her hand hastily. 'I am much obliged to you. You do me justice, I assure you. You were going to say, that I, who know the story of John Carker's life - '

'May think it pride in me,' she continued, 'when I say that I am proud of him! I am. You know the time was, when I was not - when I could not be - but that is past. The humility of many years, the uncomplaining expiation, the true repentance, the terrible regret, the pain I know he has even in my affection, which he thinks has cost me dear, though Heaven knows I am happy, but for his sorrow I - oh, Sir, after what I have seen, let me conjure you, if you are in any place of power, and are ever wronged, never, for any wrong, inflict a punishment that cannot be recalled; while there is a GOD above us to work changes in the hearts He made.'

'Your brother is an altered man,' returned the gentleman, compassionately. 'I assure you I don't doubt it.'

'He was an altered man when he did wrong,' said Harriet. 'He is an altered man again, and is his true self now, believe me, Sir.'

'But we go on, said her visitor, rubbing his forehead, in an absent manner, with his hand, and then drumming thoughtfully on the table, 'we go on in our clockwork routine, from day to day, and can't make out, or follow, these changes. They - they're a metaphysical sort of

thing. We - we haven't leisure for it. We - we haven't courage. They're not taught at schools or colleges, and we don't know how to set about it. In short, we are so d - - - -d business-like,' said the gentleman, walking to the window, and back, and sitting down again, in a state of extreme dissatisfaction and vexation.

'I am sure,' said the gentleman, rubbing his forehead again; and drumming on the table as before, 'I have good reason to believe that a jog-trot life, the same from day to day, would reconcile one to anything. One don't see anything, one don't hear anything, one don't know anything; that's the fact. We go on taking everything for granted, and so we go on, until whatever we do, good, bad, or indifferent, we do from habit. Habit is all I shall have to report, when I am called upon to plead to my conscience, on my death-bed. "Habit,' says I; "I was deaf, dumb, blind, and paralytic, to a million things, from habit.' "Very business-like indeed, Mr What's-your-name,' says Conscience, "but it won't do here!"

The gentleman got up and walked to the window again and back: seriously uneasy, though giving his uneasiness this peculiar expression.

'Miss Harriet,' he said, resuming his chair, 'I wish you would let me serve you. Look at me; I ought to look honest, for I know I am so, at present. Do I?'

'Yes,' she answered with a smile.

'I believe every word you have said,' he returned. 'I am full of self-reproach that I might have known this and seen this, and known you and seen you, any time these dozen years, and that I never have. I hardly know how I ever got here - creature that I am, not only of my own habit, but of other people'sl But having done so, let me do something. I ask it in all honour and respect. You inspire me with both, in the highest degree. Let me do something.'

'We are contented, Sir.'

'No, no, not quite,' returned the gentleman. 'I think not quite. There are some little comforts that might smooth your life, and his. And his!' he repeated, fancying that had made some impression on her. 'I have been in the habit of thinking that there was nothing wanting to be done for him; that it was all settled and over; in short, of not thinking at all about it. I am different now. Let me do something for him. You too,' said the visitor, with careful delicacy, 'have need to watch your health closely, for his sake, and I fear it fails.'

'Whoever you may be, Sir,' answered Harriet, raising her eyes to his face, 'I am deeply grateful to you. I feel certain that in all you say, you have no object in the world but kindness to us. But years have passed since we began this life; and to take from my brother any part of what has so endeared him to me, and so proved his better resolution - any fragment of the merit of his unassisted, obscure, and forgotten reparation - would be to diminish the comfort it will be to him and me, when that time comes to each of us, of which you spoke just now. I thank you better with these tears than any words. Believe it, pray.

The gentleman was moved, and put the hand she held out, to his lips, much as a tender father might kiss the hand of a dutiful child. But more reverently.

'If the day should ever come, said Harriet, 'when he is restored, in part, to the position he lost - '

'Restored!' cried the gentleman, quickly. 'How can that be hoped for? In whose hands does the power of any restoration lie? It is no mistake of mine, surely, to suppose that his having gained the priceless blessing of his life, is one cause of the animosity shown to him by his brother.'

'You touch upon a subject that is never breathed between us; not even between us,' said Harriet.

'I beg your forgiveness,' said the visitor. 'I should have known it. I entreat you to forget that I have done so, inadvertently. And now, as I dare urge no more - as I am not sure that I have a right to do so - though Heaven knows, even that doubt may be habit,' said the gentleman, rubbing his head, as despondently as before, 'let me; though a stranger, yet no stranger; ask two favours.'

'What are they?' she inquired.

'The first, that if you should see cause to change your resolution, you will suffer me to be as your right hand. My name shall then be at your service; it is useless now, and always insignificant.'

'Our choice of friends,' she answered, smiling faintly, 'is not so great, that I need any time for consideration. I can promise that.'

'The second, that you will allow me sometimes, say every Monday morning, at nine o'clock - habit again - I must be businesslike,' said the gentleman, with a whimsical inclination to quarrel with himself on that head, 'in walking past, to see you at the door or window. I don't ask to come in, as your brother will be gone out at that hour. I don't ask to speak to you. I merely ask to see, for the satisfaction of my own

mind, that you are well, and without intrusion to remind you, by the sight of me, that you have a friend - an elderly friend, grey-haired already, and fast growing greyer - whom you may ever command.'

The cordial face looked up in his; confided in it; and promised.

'I understand, as before,' said the gentleman, rising, 'that you purpose not to mention my visit to John Carker, lest he should be at all distressed by my acquaintance with his history. I am glad of it, for it is out of the ordinary course of things, and - habit again!' said the gentleman, checking himself impatiently, 'as if there were no better course than the ordinary course!'

With that he turned to go, and walking, bareheaded, to the outside of the little porch, took leave of her with such a happy mixture of unconstrained respect and unaffected interest, as no breeding could have taught, no truth mistrusted, and nothing but a pure and single heart expressed.

Many half-forgotten emotions were awakened in the sister's mind by this visit. It was so very long since any other visitor had crossed their threshold; it was so very long since any voice of apathy had made sad music in her ears; that the stranger's figure remained present to her, hours afterwards, when she sat at the window, plying her needle; and his words seemed newly spoken, again and again. He had touched the spring that opened her whole life; and if she lost him for a short space, it was only among the many shapes of the one great recollection of which that life was made.

Musing and working by turns; now constraining herself to be steady at her needle for a long time together, and now letting her work fall, unregarded, on her lap, and straying wheresoever her busier thoughts led, Harriet Carker found the hours glide by her, and the day steal on. The morning, which had been bright and clear, gradually became overcast; a sharp wind set in; the rain fell heavily; and a dark mist drooping over the distant town, hid it from the view.

She often looked with compassion, at such a time, upon the stragglers who came wandering into London, by the great highway hard by, and who, footsore and weary, and gazing fearfully at the huge town before them, as if foreboding that their misery there would be but as a drop of water in the sea, or as a grain of sea-sand on the shore, went shrinking on, cowering before the angry weather, and looking as if the very elements rejected them. Day after day, such travellers crept past, but always, as she thought, In one direction - always towards the town. Swallowed up in one phase or other of its immensity, towards which they seemed impelled by a desperate fascination, they never returned. Food for the hospitals, the churchyards, the prisons, the

river, fever, madness, vice, and death, - they passed on to the monster, roaring in the distance, and were lost.

The chill wind was howling, and the rain was falling, and the day was darkening moodily, when Harriet, raising her eyes from the work on which she had long since been engaged with unremitting constancy, saw one of these travellers approaching.

A woman. A solitary woman of some thirty years of age; tall; well-formed; handsome; miserably dressed; the soil of many country roads in varied weather - dust, chalk, clay, gravel - clotted on her grey cloak by the streaming wet; no bonnet on her head, nothing to defend her rich black hair from the rain, but a torn handkerchief; with the fluttering ends of which, and with her hair, the wind blinded her so that she often stopped to push them back, and look upon the way she was going.

She was in the act of doing so, when Harriet observed her. As her hands, parting on her sunburnt forehead, swept across her face, and threw aside the hindrances that encroached upon it, there was a reckless and regardless beauty in it: a dauntless and depraved indifference to more than weather: a carelessness of what was cast upon her bare head from Heaven or earth: that, coupled with her misery and loneliness, touched the heart of her fellow-woman. She thought of all that was perverted and debased within her, no less than without: of modest graces of the mind, hardened and steeled, like these attractions of the person; of the many gifts of the Creator flung to the winds like the wild hair; of all the beautiful ruin upon which the storm was beating and the night was coming.

Thinking of this, she did not turn away with a delicate indignation - too many of her own compassionate and tender sex too often do - but pitied her.

Her fallen sister came on, looking far before her, trying with her eager eyes to pierce the mist in which the city was enshrouded, and glancing, now and then, from side to side, with the bewildered - and uncertain aspect of a stranger. Though her tread was bold and courageous, she was fatigued, and after a moment of irresolution, - sat down upon a heap of stones; seeking no shelter from the rain, but letting it rain on her as it would.

She was now opposite the house; raising her head after resting it for a moment on both hands, her eyes met those of Harriet.

In a moment, Harriet was at the door; and the other, rising from her seat at her beck, came slowly, and with no conciliatory look, towards her.

'Why do you rest in the rain?' said Harriet, gently.

'Because I have no other resting-place,' was the reply.

'But there are many places of shelter near here. This,' referring to the little porch, 'is better than where you were. You are very welcome to rest here.'

The wanderer looked at her, in doubt and surprise, but without any expression of thankfulness; and sitting down, and taking off one of her worn shoes to beat out the fragments of stone and dust that were inside, showed that her foot was cut and bleeding.

Harriet uttering an expression of pity, the traveller looked up with a contemptuous and incredulous smile.

'Why, what's a torn foot to such as me?' she said. 'And what's a torn foot in such as me, to such as you?'

'Come in and wash it,' answered Harriet, mildly, 'and let me give you something to bind it up.'

The woman caught her arm, and drawing it before her own eyes, hid them against it, and wept. Not like a woman, but like a stern man surprised into that weakness; with a violent heaving of her breast, and struggle for recovery, that showed how unusual the emotion was with her.

She submitted to be led into the house, and, evidently more in gratitude than in any care for herself, washed and bound the injured place. Harriet then put before her fragments of her own frugal dinner, and when she had eaten of them, though sparingly, besought her, before resuming her road (which she showed her anxiety to do), to dry her clothes before the fire. Again, more in gratitude than with any evidence of concern in her own behalf, she sat down in front of it, and unbinding the handkerchief about her head, and letting her thick wet hair fall down below her waist, sat drying it with the palms of her hands, and looking at the blaze.

'I daresay you are thinking,' she said, lifting her head suddenly, 'that I used to be handsome, once. I believe I was - I know I was - Look here!' She held up her hair roughly with both hands; seizing it as if she would have torn it out; then, threw it down again, and flung it back as though it were a heap of serpents.

'Are you a stranger in this place?' asked Harriet.

'A stranger!' she returned, stopping between each short reply, and looking at the fire. 'Yes. Ten or a dozen years a stranger. I have had no almanack where I have been. Ten or a dozen years. I don't know this part. It's much altered since I went away.'

'Have you been far?'

'Very far. Months upon months over the sea, and far away even then. I have been where convicts go,' she added, looking full upon her entertainer. 'I have been one myself.'

'Heaven help you and forgive you!' was the gentle answer.

'Ah! Heaven help me and forgive me!' she returned, nodding her head at the fire. 'If man would help some of us a little more, God would forgive us all the sooner perhaps.'

But she was softened by the earnest manner, and the cordial face so full of mildness and so free from judgment, of her, and said, less hardily:

'We may be about the same age, you and me. If I am older, it is not above a year or two. Oh think of that!'

She opened her arms, as though the exhibition of her outward form would show the moral wretch she was; and letting them drop at her sides, hung down her head.

'There is nothing we may not hope to repair; it is never too late to amend,' said Harriet. 'You are penitent

'No,' she answered. 'I am not! I can't be. I am no such thing. Why should I be penitent, and all the world go free? They talk to me of my penitence. Who's penitent for the wrongs that have been done to me?'

She rose up, bound her handkerchief about her head, and turned to move away.

'Where are you going?' said Harriet.

'Yonder,' she answered, pointing with her hand. 'To London.'

'Have you any home to go to?'

'I think I have a mother. She's as much a mother, as her dwelling is a home,' she answered with a bitter laugh.

'Take this,' cried Harriet, putting money in her hand. 'Try to do well. It is very little, but for one day it may keep you from harm.'

'Are you married?' said the other, faintly, as she took it.

'No. I live here with my brother. We have not much to spare, or I would give you more.'

'Will you let me kiss you?'

Seeing no scorn or repugnance in her face, the object of her charity bent over her as she asked the question, and pressed her lips against her cheek. Once more she caught her arm, and covered her eyes with it; and then was gone.

Gone into the deepening night, and howling wind, and pelting rain; urging her way on towards the mist-enshrouded city where the blurred lights gleamed; and with her black hair, and disordered head-gear, fluttering round her reckless face.