

Chapter XXXIV - Another Mother And Daughter

In an ugly and dark room, an old woman, ugly and dark too, sat listening to the wind and rain, and crouching over a meagre fire. More constant to the last-named occupation than the first, she never changed her attitude, unless, when any stray drops of rain fell hissing on the smouldering embers, to raise her head with an awakened attention to the whistling and pattering outside, and gradually to let it fall again lower and lower and lower as she sunk into a brooding state of thought, in which the noises of the night were as indistinctly regarded as is the monotonous rolling of a sea by one who sits in contemplation on its shore.

There was no light in the room save that which the fire afforded. Glaring sullenly from time to time like the eye of a fierce beast half asleep, it revealed no objects that needed to be jealous of a better display. A heap of rags, a heap of bones, a wretched bed, two or three mutilated chairs or stools, the black walls and blacker ceiling, were all its winking brightness shone upon. As the old woman, with a gigantic and distorted image of herself thrown half upon the wall behind her, half upon the roof above, sat bending over the few loose bricks within which it was pent, on the damp hearth of the chimney - for there was no stove - she looked as if she were watching at some witch's altar for a favourable token; and but that the movement of her chattering jaws and trembling chin was too frequent and too fast for the slow flickering of the fire, it would have seemed an illusion wrought by the light, as it came and went, upon a face as motionless as the form to which it belonged.

If Florence could have stood within the room and looked upon the original of the shadow thrown upon the wall and roof as it cowered thus over the fire, a glance might have sufficed to recall the figure of Good Mrs Brown; notwithstanding that her childish recollection of that terrible old woman was as grotesque and exaggerated a presentment of the truth, perhaps, as the shadow on the wall. But Florence was not there to look on; and Good Mrs Brown remained unrecognised, and sat staring at her fire, unobserved.

Attracted by a louder sputtering than usual, as the rain came hissing down the chimney in a little stream, the old woman raised her head, impatiently, to listen afresh. And this time she did not drop it again; for there was a hand upon the door, and a footstep in the room.

'Who's that?' she said, looking over her shoulder.

'One who brings you news, was the answer, in a woman's voice.

'News? Where from?'

'From abroad.'

'From beyond seas?' cried the old woman, starting up.

'Ay, from beyond seas.'

The old woman raked the fire together, hurriedly, and going close to her visitor who had entered, and shut the door, and who now stood in the middle of the room, put her hand upon the drenched cloak, and turned the unresisting figure, so as to have it in the full light of the fire. She did not find what she had expected, whatever that might be; for she let the cloak go again, and uttered a querulous cry of disappointment and misery.

'What is the matter?' asked her visitor.

'Oho! Oho!' cried the old woman, turning her face upward, with a terrible howl.

'What is the matter?' asked the visitor again.

'It's not my gal!' cried the old woman, tossing up her arms, and clasping her hands above her head. 'Where's my Alice? Where's my handsome daughter? They've been the death of her!'

'They've not been the death of her yet, if your name's Marwood,' said the visitor.

'Have you seen my gal, then?' cried the old woman. 'Has she wrote to me?'

'She said you couldn't read,' returned the other.

'No more I can!' exclaimed the old woman, wringing her hands.

'Have you no light here?' said the other, looking round the room.

The old woman, mumbling and shaking her head, and muttering to herself about her handsome daughter, brought a candle from a cupboard in the corner, and thrusting it into the fire with a trembling hand, lighted it with some difficulty and set it on the table. Its dirty wick burnt dimly at first, being choked in its own grease; and when the bleared eyes and failing sight of the old woman could distinguish anything by its light, her visitor was sitting with her arms folded, her eyes turned downwards, and a handkerchief she had worn upon her head lying on the table by her side.

'She sent to me by word of mouth then, my gal, Alice?' mumbled the old woman, after waiting for some moments. 'What did she say?'

'Look,' returned the visitor.

The old woman repeated the word in a scared uncertain way; and, shading her eyes, looked at the speaker, round the room, and at the speaker once again.

'Alice said look again, mother;' and the speaker fixed her eyes upon her.

Again the old woman looked round the room, and at her visitor, and round the room once more. Hastily seizing the candle, and rising from her seat, she held it to the visitor's face, uttered a loud cry, set down the light, and fell upon her neck!

'It's my gal! It's my Alice! It's my handsome daughter, living and come back!' screamed the old woman, rocking herself to and fro upon the breast that coldly suffered her embrace. 'It's my gal! It's my Alice! It's my handsome daughter, living and come back!' she screamed again, dropping on the floor before her, clasping her knees, laying her head against them, and still rocking herself to and fro with every frantic demonstration of which her vitality was capable.

'Yes, mother,' returned Alice, stooping forward for a moment and kissing her, but endeavouring, even in the act, to disengage herself from her embrace. 'I am here, at last. Let go, mother; let go. Get up, and sit in your chair. What good does this do?'

'She's come back harder than she went!' cried the mother, looking up in her face, and still holding to her knees. 'She don't care for me! after all these years, and all the wretched life I've led!'

'Why> mother!' said Alice, shaking her ragged skirts to detach the old woman from them: 'there are two sides to that. There have been years for me as well as you, and there has been wretchedness for me as well as you. Get up, get up!'

Her mother rose, and cried, and wrung her hands, and stood at a little distance gazing on her. Then she took the candle again, and going round her, surveyed her from head to foot, making a low moaning all the time. Then she put the candle down, resumed her chair, and beating her hands together to a kind of weary tune, and rolling herself from side to side, continued moaning and wailing to herself.

Alice got up, took off her wet cloak, and laid it aside. That done, she sat down as before, and with her arms folded, and her eyes gazing at

the fire, remained silently listening with a contemptuous face to her old mother's inarticulate complainings.

'Did you expect to see me return as youthful as I went away, mother?' she said at length, turning her eyes upon the old woman. 'Did you think a foreign life, like mine, was good for good looks? One would believe so, to hear you!'

'It ain't that!' cried the mother. 'She knows it!'

'What is it then?' returned the daughter. 'It had best be something that don't last, mother, or my way out is easier than my way in.'

'Hear that!' exclaimed the mother. 'After all these years she threatens to desert me in the moment of her coming back again!'

'I tell you, mother, for the second time, there have been years for me as well as you,' said Alice. 'Come back harder? Of course I have come back harder. What else did you expect?'

'Harder to me! To her own dear mother!' cried the old woman

'I don't know who began to harden me, if my own dear mother didn't,' she returned, sitting with her folded arms, and knitted brows, and compressed lips as if she were bent on excluding, by force, every softer feeling from her breast. 'Listen, mother, to a word or two. If we understand each other now, we shall not fall out any more, perhaps. I went away a girl, and have come back a woman. I went away undutiful enough, and have come back no better, you may swear. But have you been very dutiful to me?'

'I!' cried the old woman. 'To my gal! A mother dutiful to her own child!'

'It sounds unnatural, don't it?' returned the daughter, looking coldly on her with her stern, regardless, hardy, beautiful face; 'but I have thought of it sometimes, in the course of my lone years, till I have got used to it. I have heard some talk about duty first and last; but it has always been of my duty to other people. I have wondered now and then - to pass away the time - whether no one ever owed any duty to me.'

Her mother sat mowing, and mumbling, and shaking her head, but whether angrily or remorsefully, or in denial, or only in her physical infirmity, did not appear.

'There was a child called Alice Marwood,' said the daughter, with a laugh, and looking down at herself in terrible derision of herself, 'born,

among poverty and neglect, and nursed in it. Nobody taught her, nobody stepped forward to help her, nobody cared for her.'

'Nobody!' echoed the mother, pointing to herself, and striking her breast.

'The only care she knew,' returned the daughter, 'was to be beaten, and stinted, and abused sometimes; and she might have done better without that. She lived in homes like this, and in the streets, with a crowd of little wretches like herself; and yet she brought good looks out of this childhood. So much the worse for her. She had better have been hunted and worried to death for ugliness.'

'Go on! go on!' exclaimed the mother.

'I am going on,' returned the daughter. 'There was a girl called Alice Marwood. She was handsome. She was taught too late, and taught all wrong. She was too well cared for, too well trained, too well helped on, too much looked after. You were very fond of her - you were better off then. What came to that girl comes to thousands every year. It was only ruin, and she was born to it.'

'After all these years!' whined the old woman. 'My gal begins with this.'

'She'll soon have ended,' said the daughter. 'There was a criminal called Alice Marwood - a girl still, but deserted and an outcast. And she was tried, and she was sentenced. And lord, how the gentlemen in the Court talked about it! and how grave the judge was on her duty, and on her having perverted the gifts of nature - as if he didn't know better than anybody there, that they had been made curses to her! - and how he preached about the strong arm of the Law - so very strong to save her, when she was an innocent and helpless little wretch! - and how solemn and religious it all was! I have thought of that, many times since, to be sure!'

She folded her arms tightly on her breast, and laughed in a tone that made the howl of the old woman musical.

'So Alice Marwood was transported, mother,' she pursued, 'and was sent to learn her duty, where there was twenty times less duty, and more wickedness, and wrong, and infamy, than here. And Alice Marwood is come back a woman. Such a woman as she ought to be, after all this. In good time, there will be more solemnity, and more fine talk, and more strong arm, most likely, and there will be an end of her; but the gentlemen needn't be afraid of being thrown out of work. There's crowds of little wretches, boy and girl, growing up in any of the streets they live in, that'll keep them to it till they've made their fortunes.'

The old woman leaned her elbows on the table, and resting her face upon her two hands, made a show of being in great distress - or really was, perhaps.

'There! I have done, mother,' said the daughter, with a motion of her head, as if in dismissal of the subject. 'I have said enough. Don't let you and I talk of being dutiful, whatever we do. Your childhood was like mine, I suppose. So much the worse for both of us. I don't want to blame you, or to defend myself; why should I? That's all over long ago. But I am a woman - not a girl, now - and you and I needn't make a show of our history, like the gentlemen in the Court. We know all about it, well enough.'

Lost and degraded as she was, there was a beauty in her, both of face and form, which, even in its worst expression, could not but be recognised as such by anyone regarding her with the least attention. As she subsided into silence, and her face which had been harshly agitated, quieted down; while her dark eyes, fixed upon the fire, exchanged the reckless light that had animated them, for one that was softened by something like sorrow; there shone through all her wayworn misery and fatigue, a ray of the departed radiance of the fallen angel.'

Her mother, after watching her for some time without speaking, ventured to steal her withered hand a little nearer to her across the table; and finding that she permitted this, to touch her face, and smooth her hair. With the feeling, as it seemed, that the old woman was at least sincere in this show of interest, Alice made no movement to check her; so, advancing by degrees, she bound up her daughter's hair afresh, took off her wet shoes, if they deserved the name, spread something dry upon her shoulders, and hovered humbly about her, muttering to herself, as she recognised her old features and expression more and more.

'You are very poor, mother, I see,' said Alice, looking round, when she had sat thus for some time.

'Bitter poor, my deary,' replied the old woman.

She admired her daughter, and was afraid of her. Perhaps her admiration, such as it was, had originated long ago, when she first found anything that was beautiful appearing in the midst of the squalid fight of her existence. Perhaps her fear was referable, in some sort, to the retrospect she had so lately heard. Be this as it might, she stood, submissively and deferentially, before her child, and inclined her head, as if in a pitiful entreaty to be spared any further reproach.

'How have you lived?'

'By begging, my deary.

'And pilfering, mother?'

'Sometimes, Ally - in a very small way. I am old and timid. I have taken trifles from children now and then, my deary, but not often. I have tramped about the country, pet, and I know what I know. I have watched.'

'Watched?' returned the daughter, looking at her.

'I have hung about a family, my deary,' said the mother, even more humbly and submissively than before.

'What family?'

'Hush, darling. Don't be angry with me. I did it for the love of you. In memory of my poor gal beyond seas.' She put out her hand deprecatingly, and drawing it back again, laid it on her lips.

'Years ago, my deary,' she pursued, glancing timidly at the attentive and stem face opposed to her, 'I came across his little child, by chance.'

'Whose child?'

'Not his, Alice deary; don't look at me like that; not his. How could it be his? You know he has none.'

'Whose then?' returned the daughter. 'You said his.'

'Hush, Ally; you frighten me, deary. Mr Dombey's - only Mr Dombey's. Since then, darling, I have seen them often. I have seen him.'

In uttering this last word, the old woman shrunk and recoiled, as if with sudden fear that her daughter would strike her. But though the daughter's face was fixed upon her, and expressed the most vehement passion, she remained still: except that she clenched her arms tighter and tighter within each other, on her bosom, as if to restrain them by that means from doing an injury to herself, or someone else, in the blind fury of the wrath that suddenly possessed her.

'Little he thought who I was!' said the old woman, shaking her clenched hand.

'And little he cared!' muttered her daughter, between her teeth.

'But there we were, said the old woman, 'face to face. I spoke to him, and he spoke to me. I sat and watched him as he went away down a long grove of trees: and at every step he took, I cursed him soul and body.'

'He will thrive in spite of that,' returned the daughter disdainfully.

'Ay, he is thriving,' said the mother.

She held her peace; for the face and form before her were unshaped by rage. It seemed as if the bosom would burst with the emotions that strove within it. The effort that constrained and held it pent up, was no less formidable than the rage itself: no less bespeaking the violent and dangerous character of the woman who made it. But it succeeded, and she asked, after a silence:

'Is he married?'

'No, deary,' said the mother.

'Going to be?'

'Not that I know of, deary. But his master and friend is married. Oh, we may give him joy! We may give 'em all joy!' cried the old woman, hugging herself with her lean arms in her exultation. 'Nothing but joy to us will come of that marriage. Mind met'

The daughter looked at her for an explanation.

'But you are wet and tired; hungry and thirsty,' said the old woman, hobbling to the cupboard; 'and there's little here, and little' - diving down into her pocket, and jingling a few half-pence on the table - 'little here. Have you any money, Alice, deary?'

The covetous, sharp, eager face, with which she 'asked the question and looked on, as her daughter took out of her bosom the little gift she had so lately received, told almost as much of the history of this parent and child as the child herself had told in words.

'Is that all?' said the mother.

'I have no more. I should not have this, but for charity.'

'But for charity, eh, deary?' said the old woman, bending greedily over the table to look at the money, which she appeared distrustful of her daughter's still retaining in her hand, and gazing on. 'Humph! six and six is twelve, and six eighteen - so - we must make the most of it. I'll go buy something to eat and drink.'

With greater alacrity than might have been expected in one of her appearance - for age and misery seemed to have made her as decrepit as ugly - she began to occupy her trembling hands in tying an old bonnet on her head, and folding a torn shawl about herself: still eyeing the money in her daughter's hand, with the same sharp desire.

'What joy is to come to us of this marriage, mother?' asked the daughter. 'You have not told me that.'

'The joy,' she replied, attiring herself, with fumbling fingers, 'of no love at all, and much pride and hate, my deary. The joy of confusion and strife among 'em, proud as they are, and of danger - danger, Alice!'

'What danger?'

'I have seen what I have seen. I know what I know!' chuckled the mother. 'Let some look to it. Let some be upon their guard. My gal may keep good company yet!'

Then, seeing that in the wondering earnestness with which her daughter regarded her, her hand involuntarily closed upon the money, the old woman made more speed to secure it, and hurriedly added, 'but I'll go buy something; I'll go buy something.'

As she stood with her hand stretched out before her daughter, her daughter, glancing again at the money, put it to her lips before parting with it.

'What, Ally! Do you kiss it?' chuckled the old woman. 'That's like me - I often do. Oh, it's so good to us!' squeezing her own tarnished halfpence up to her bag of a throat, 'so good to us in everything but not coming in heaps!'

'I kiss it, mother,' said the daughter, 'or I did then - I don't know that I ever did before - for the giver's sake.'

'The giver, eh, deary?' retorted the old woman, whose dimmed eyes glistened as she took it. 'Ay! I'll kiss it for the giver's sake, too, when the giver can make it go farther. But I'll go spend it, deary. I'll be back directly.'

'You seem to say you know a great deal, mother,' said the daughter, following her to the door with her eyes. 'You have grown very wise since we parted.'

'Know!' croaked the old woman, coming back a step or two, 'I know more than you think I know more than he thinks, deary, as I'll tell you by and bye. I know all'

The daughter smiled incredulously.

'I know of his brother, Alice,' said the old woman, stretching out her neck with a leer of malice absolutely frightful, 'who might have been where you have been - for stealing money - and who lives with his sister, over yonder, by the north road out of London.'

'Where?' 'By the north road out of London, deary. You shall see the house if you like. It ain't much to boast of, genteel as his own is. No, no, no,' cried the old woman, shaking her head and laughing; for her daughter had started up, 'not now; it's too far off; it's by the milestone, where the stones are heaped; - to-morrow, deary, if it's fine, and you are in the humour. But I'll go spend - '

'Stop!' and the daughter flung herself upon her, with her former passion raging like a fire. 'The sister is a fair-faced Devil, with brown hair?'

The old woman, amazed and terrified, nodded her head.

'I see the shadow of him in her face! It's a red house standing by itself. Before the door there is a small green porch.'

Again the old woman nodded.

'In which I sat to-day! Give me back the money.'

'Alice! Deary!'

'Give me back the money, or you'll be hurt.'

She forced it from the old woman's hand as she spoke, and utterly indifferent to her complainings and entreaties, threw on the garments she had taken off, and hurried out, with headlong speed.

The mother followed, limping after her as she could, and expostulating with no more effect upon her than upon the wind and rain and darkness that encompassed them. Obdurate and fierce in her own purpose, and indifferent to all besides, the daughter defied the weather and the distance, as if she had known no travel or fatigue, and made for the house where she had been relieved. After some quarter of an hour's walking, the old woman, spent and out of breath, ventured to hold by her skirts; but she ventured no more, and they travelled on in silence through the wet and gloom. If the mother now and then uttered a word of complaint, she stifled it lest her daughter should break away from her and leave her behind; and the daughter was dumb.

It was within an hour or so of midnight, when they left the regular streets behind them, and entered on the deeper gloom of that neutral ground where the house was situated. The town lay in the distance, lurid and lowering; the bleak wind howled over the open space; all around was black, wild, desolate.

'This is a fit place for me!' said the daughter, stopping to look back. 'I thought so, when I was here before, to-day.'

'Alice, my deary,' cried the mother, pulling her gently by the skirt. 'Alice!'

'What now, mother?'

'Don't give the money back, my darling; please don't. We can't afford it. We want supper, deary. Money is money, whoever gives it. Say what you will, but keep the money.'

'See there!' was all the daughter's answer. 'That is the house I mean. Is that it?'

The old woman nodded in the affirmative; and a few more paces brought them to the threshold. There was the light of fire and candle in the room where Alice had sat to dry her clothes; and on her knocking at the door, John Carker appeared from that room.

He was surprised to see such visitors at such an hour, and asked Alice what she wanted.

'I want your sister,' she said. 'The woman who gave me money to-day.'

At the sound of her raised voice, Harriet came out.

'Oh!' said Alice. 'You are here! Do you remember me?'

'Yes,' she answered, wondering.

The face that had humbled itself before her, looked on her now with such invincible hatred and defiance; and the hand that had gently touched her arm, was clenched with such a show of evil purpose, as if it would gladly strangle her; that she drew close to her brother for protection.

'That I could speak with you, and not know you! That I could come near you, and not feel what blood was running in your veins, by the tingling of my own!' said Alice, with a menacing gesture.

'What do you mean? What have I done?'

'Done!' returned the other. 'You have sat me by your fire; you have given me food and money; you have bestowed your compassion on me! You! whose name I spit upon!'

The old woman, with a malevolence that made her ugliness quite awful, shook her withered hand at the brother and sister in confirmation of her daughter, but plucked her by the skirts again, nevertheless, imploring her to keep the money.

'If I dropped a tear upon your hand, may it wither it up! If I spoke a gentle word in your hearing, may it deafen you! If I touched you with my lips, may the touch be poison to you! A curse upon this roof that gave me shelter! Sorrow and shame upon your head! Ruin upon all belonging to you!'

As she said the words, she threw the money down upon the ground, and spurned it with her foot.

'I tread it in the dust: I wouldn't take it if it paved my way to Heaven! I would the bleeding foot that brought me here to-day, had rotted off, before it led me to your house!'

Harriet, pale and trembling, restrained her brother, and suffered her to go on uninterrupted.

'It was well that I should be pitied and forgiven by you, or anyone of your name, in the first hour of my return! It was well that you should act the kind good lady to me! I'll thank you when I die; I'll pray for you, and all your race, you may be sure!'

With a fierce action of her hand, as if she sprinkled hatred on the ground, and with it devoted those who were standing there to destruction, she looked up once at the black sky, and strode out into the wild night.

The mother, who had plucked at her skirts again and again in vain, and had eyed the money lying on the threshold with an absorbing greed that seemed to concentrate her faculties upon it, would have prowled about, until the house was dark, and then groped in the mire on the chance of repossessing herself of it. But the daughter drew her away, and they set forth, straight, on their return to their dwelling; the old woman whimpering and bemoaning their loss upon the road, and fretfully bewailing, as openly as she dared, the undutiful conduct of her handsome girl in depriving her of a supper, on the very first night of their reunion.

Supperless to bed she went, saving for a few coarse fragments; and those she sat mumbling and munching over a scrap of fire, long after her undutiful daughter lay asleep.

Were this miserable mother, and this miserable daughter, only the reduction to their lowest grade, of certain social vices sometimes prevailing higher up? In this round world of many circles within circles, do we make a weary journey from the high grade to the low, to find at last that they lie close together, that the two extremes touch, and that our journey's end is but our starting-place? Allowing for great difference of stuff and texture, was the pattern of this woof repeated among gentle blood at all?

Say, Edith Dombey! And Cleopatra, best of mothers, let us have your testimony!