

## Chapter XXXV - The Happy Pair

The dark blot on the street is gone. Mr Dombey's mansion, if it be a gap among the other houses any longer, is only so because it is not to be vied with in its brightness, and haughtily casts them off. The saying is, that home is home, be it never so homely. If it hold good in the opposite contingency, and home is home be it never so stately, what an altar to the Household Gods is raised up here!

Lights are sparkling in the windows this evening, and the ruddy glow of fires is warm and bright upon the hangings and soft carpets, and the dinner waits to be served, and the dinner-table is handsomely set forth, though only for four persons, and the side board is cumbrous with plate. It is the first time that the house has been arranged for occupation since its late changes, and the happy pair are looked for every minute.

Only second to the wedding morning, in the interest and expectation it engenders among the household, is this evening of the coming home. Mrs Perch is in the kitchen taking tea; and has made the tour of the establishment, and priced the silks and damasks by the yard, and exhausted every interjection in the dictionary and out of it expressive of admiration and wonder. The upholsterer's foreman, who has left his hat, with a pocket-handkerchief in it, both smelling strongly of varnish, under a chair in the hall, lurks about the house, gazing upwards at the cornices, and downward at the carpets, and occasionally, in a silent transport of enjoyment, taking a rule out of his pocket, and skirmishingly measuring expensive objects, with unutterable feelings. Cook is in high spirits, and says give her a place where there's plenty of company (as she'll bet you sixpence there will be now), for she is of a lively disposition, and she always was from a child, and she don't mind who knows it; which sentiment elicits from the breast of Mrs Perch a responsive murmur of support and approbation. All the housemaid hopes is, happiness for 'em - but marriage is a lottery, and the more she thinks about it, the more she feels the independence and the safety of a single life. Mr Towlinson is saturnine and grim' and says that's his opinion too, and give him War besides, and down with the French - for this young man has a general impression that every foreigner is a Frenchman, and must be by the laws of nature.

At each new sound of wheels, they all stop > whatever they are saying, and listen; and more than once there is a general starting up and a cry of 'Here they are!' But here they are not yet; and Cook begins to mourn over the dinner, which has been put back twice, and the upholsterer's foreman still goes lurking about the rooms, undisturbed in his blissful reverie!

Florence is ready to receive her father and her new Mama. Whether the emotions that are throbbing in her breast originate in pleasure or in pain, she hardly knows. But the fluttering heart sends added colour to her cheeks, and brightness to her eyes; and they say downstairs, drawing their heads together - for they always speak softly when they speak of her - how beautiful Miss Florence looks to-night, and what a sweet young lady she has grown, poor dear! A pause succeeds; and then Cook, feeling, as president, that her sentiments are waited for, wonders whether - and there stops. The housemaid wonders too, and so does Mrs Perch, who has the happy social faculty of always wondering when other people wonder, without being at all particular what she wonders at. Mr Towlinson, who now descends an opportunity of bringing down the spirits of the ladies to his own level, says wait and see; he wishes some people were well out of this. Cook leads a sigh then, and a murmur of 'Ah, it's a strange world, it is indeed!' and when it has gone round the table, adds persuasively, 'but Miss Florence can't well be the worse for any change, Tom.' Mr Towlinson's rejoinder, pregnant with frightful meaning, is 'Oh, can't she though!' and sensible that a mere man can scarcely be more prophetic, or improve upon that, he holds his peace.

Mrs Skewton, prepared to greet her darling daughter and dear son-in-law with open arms, is appropriately attired for that purpose in a very youthful costume, with short sleeves. At present, however, her ripe charms are blooming in the shade of her own apartments, whence she had not emerged since she took possession of them a few hours ago, and where she is fast growing fretful, on account of the postponement of dinner. The maid who ought to be a skeleton, but is in truth a buxom damsel, is, on the other hand, in a most amiable state: considering her quarterly stipend much safer than heretofore, and foreseeing a great improvement in her board and lodging.

Where are the happy pair, for whom this brave home is waiting? Do steam, tide, wind, and horses, all abate their speed, to linger on such happiness? Does the swarm of loves and graces hovering about them retard their progress by its numbers? Are there so many flowers in their happy path, that they can scarcely move along, without entanglement in thornless roses, and sweetest briar?

They are here at last! The noise of wheels is heard, grows louder, and a carriage drives up to the door! A thundering knock from the obnoxious foreigner anticipates the rush of Mr Towlinson and party to open it; and Mr Dombey and his bride alight, and walk in arm in arm.

'My sweetest Edith!' cries an agitated voice upon the stairs. 'My dearest Dombey!' and the short sleeves wreath themselves about the happy couple in turn, and embrace them.

Florence had come down to the hall too, but did not advance: reserving her timid welcome until these nearer and dearer transports should subside. But the eyes of Edith sought her out, upon the threshold; and dismissing her sensitive parent with a slight kiss on the cheek, she hurried on to Florence and embraced her.

'How do you do, Florence?' said Mr Dombey, putting out his hand.

As Florence, trembling, raised it to her lips, she met his glance. The look was cold and distant enough, but it stirred her heart to think that she observed in it something more of interest than he had ever shown before. It even expressed a kind of faint surprise, and not a disagreeable surprise, at sight of her. She dared not raise her eyes to his any more; but she felt that he looked at her once again, and not less favourably. Oh what a thrill of joy shot through her, awakened by even this intangible and baseless confirmation of her hope that she would learn to win him, through her new and beautiful Mama!

'You will not be long dressing, Mrs Dombey, I presume?' said Mr Dombey.

'I shall be ready immediately.'

'Let them send up dinner in a quarter of an hour.'

With that Mr Dombey stalked away to his own dressing-room, and Mrs Dombey went upstairs to hers. Mrs Skewton and Florence repaired to the drawing-room, where that excellent mother considered it incumbent on her to shed a few irrepressible tears, supposed to be forced from her by her daughter's felicity; and which she was still drying, very gingerly, with a laced corner of her pocket-handkerchief, when her son-in-law appeared.

'And how, my dearest Dombey, did you find that delightfulest of cities, Paris?' she asked, subduing her emotion.

'It was cold,' returned Mr Dombey.

'Gay as ever,' said Mrs Skewton, 'of course.'

'Not particularly. I thought it dull,' said Mr Dombey.

'Fie, my dearest Dombey!' archly; 'dull!'

'It made that impression upon me, Madam,' said Mr Dombey, with grave politeness. 'I believe Mrs Dombey found it dull too. She mentioned once or twice that she thought it so.'

'Why, you naughty girl!' cried Mrs Skewton, rallying her dear child, who now entered, 'what dreadfully heretical things have you been saying about Paris?'

Edith raised her eyebrows with an air of weariness; and passing the folding-doors which were thrown open to display the suite of rooms in their new and handsome garniture, and barely glancing at them as she passed, sat down by Florence.

'My dear Dombey,' said Mrs Skewton, 'how charmingly these people have carried out every idea that we hinted. They have made a perfect palace of the house, positively.'

'It is handsome,' said Mr Dombey, looking round. 'I directed that no expense should be spared; and all that money could do, has been done, I believe.'

'And what can it not do, dear Dombey?' observed Cleopatra.

'It is powerful, Madam,' said Mr Dombey.

He looked in his solemn way towards his wife, but not a word said she.

'I hope, Mrs Dombey,' addressing her after a moment's silence, with especial distinctness; 'that these alterations meet with your approval?'

'They are as handsome as they can be,' she returned, with haughty carelessness. 'They should be so, of course. And I suppose they are.'

An expression of scorn was habitual to the proud face, and seemed inseparable from it; but the contempt with which it received any appeal to admiration, respect, or consideration on the ground of his riches, no matter how slight or ordinary in itself, was a new and different expression, unequalled in intensity by any other of which it was capable. Whether Mr Dombey, wrapped in his own greatness, was at all aware of this, or no, there had not been wanting opportunities already for his complete enlightenment; and at that moment it might have been effected by the one glance of the dark eye that lighted on him, after it had rapidly and scornfully surveyed the theme of his self-glorification. He might have read in that one glance that nothing that his wealth could do, though it were increased ten thousand fold, could win him for its own sake, one look of softened recognition from the defiant woman, linked to him, but arrayed with her whole soul against him. He might have read in that one glance that even for its sordid and mercenary influence upon herself, she spurned it, while she claimed its utmost power as her right, her bargain - as the base and worthless recompense for which she had become his wife. He might

have read in it that, ever baring her own head for the lightning of her own contempt and pride to strike, the most innocent allusion to the power of his riches degraded her anew, sunk her deeper in her own respect, and made the blight and waste within her more complete.

But dinner was announced, and Mr Dombey led down Cleopatra; Edith and his daughter following. Sweeping past the gold and silver demonstration on the sideboard as if it were heaped-up dirt, and deigning to bestow no look upon the elegancies around her, she took her place at his board for the first time, and sat, like a statue, at the feast.

Mr Dombey, being a good deal in the statue way himself, was well enough pleased to see his handsome wife immovable and proud and cold. Her deportment being always elegant and graceful, this as a general behaviour was agreeable and congenial to him. Presiding, therefore, with his accustomed dignity, and not at all reflecting on his wife by any warmth or hilarity of his own, he performed his share of the honours of the table with a cool satisfaction; and the installation dinner, though not regarded downstairs as a great success, or very promising beginning, passed off, above, in a sufficiently polite, genteel, and frosty manner.

Soon after tea' Mrs Skewton, who affected to be quite overcome and worn Out by her emotions of happiness, arising in the contemplation of her dear child united to the man of her heart, but who, there is reason to suppose, found this family party somewhat dull, as she yawned for one hour continually behind her fan, retired to bed. Edith, also, silently withdrew and came back' no more. Thus, it happened that Florence, who had been upstairs to have some conversation with Diogenes, returning to the drawing-room with her little work-basket, found no one there but her father, who was walking to and fro, in dreary magnificence.

'I beg your pardon. Shall I go away, Papa?' said Florence faintly, hesitating at the door.

'No,' returned Mr Dombey, looking round over his shoulder; you can come and go here, Florence, as you please. This is not my private room.

Florence entered, and sat down at a distant little table with her work: finding herself for the first time in her life - for the very first time within her memory from her infancy to that hour - alone with her father, as his companion. She, his natural companion, his only child, who in her lonely life and grief had known the suffering of a breaking heart; who, in her rejected love, had never breathed his name to God at night, but with a tearful blessing, heavier on him than a curse; who

had prayed to die young, so she might only die in his arms; who had, all through, repaid the agony of slight and coldness, and dislike, with patient unexacting love, excusing him, and pleading for him, like his better angel!

She trembled, and her eyes were dim. His figure seemed to grow in height and bulk before her as he paced the room: now it was all blurred and indistinct; now clear again, and plain; and now she seemed to think that this had happened, just the same, a multitude of years ago. She yearned towards him, and yet shrunk from his approach. Unnatural emotion in a child, innocent of wrong! Unnatural the hand that had directed the sharp plough, which furrowed up her gentle nature for the sowing of its seeds!

Bent upon not distressing or offending him by her distress, Florence controlled herself, and sat quietly at her work. After a few more turns across and across the room, he left off pacing it; and withdrawing into a shadowy corner at some distance, where there was an easy chair, covered his head with a handkerchief, and composed himself to sleep.

It was enough for Florence to sit there watching him; turning her eyes towards his chair from time to time; watching him with her thoughts, when her face was intent upon her work; and sorrowfully glad to think that he could sleep, while she was there, and that he was not made restless by her strange and long-forbidden presence.

What would have been her thoughts if she had known that he was steadily regarding her; that the veil upon his face, by accident or by design, was so adjusted that his sight was free, and that it never wandered from her face an instant? That when she looked towards him' In the obscure dark corner, her speaking eyes, more earnest and pathetic in their voiceless speech than all the orators of all the world, and impeaching him more nearly in their mute address, met his, and did not know it! That when she bent her head again over her work, he drew his breath more easily, but with the same attention looked upon her still - upon her white brow and her falling hair, and busy hands; and once attracted, seemed to have no power to turn his eyes away!

And what were his thoughts meanwhile? With what emotions did he prolong the attentive gaze covertly directed on his unknown daughter? Was there reproach to him in the quiet figure and the mild eyes? Had he begun to her disregarded claims and did they touch him home at last, and waken him to some sense of his cruel injustice?

There are yielding moments in the lives of the sternest and harshest men, though such men often keep their secret well. The sight of her in her beauty, almost changed into a woman without his knowledge, may have struck out some such moments even in his life of pride. Some

passing thought that he had had a happy home within his reach-had had a household spirit bending at his feet - had overlooked it in his stiffnecked sullen arrogance, and wandered away and lost himself, may have engendered them. Some simple eloquence distinctly heard, though only uttered in her eyes, unconscious that he read them' as 'By the death-beds I have tended, by the childhood I have suffered, by our meeting in this dreary house at midnight, by the cry wrung from me in the anguish of my heart, oh, father, turn to me and seek a refuge in my love before it is too late!' may have arrested them. Meaner and lower thoughts, as that his dead boy was now superseded by new ties, and he could forgive the having been supplanted in his affection, may have occasioned them. The mere association of her as an ornament, with all the ornament and pomp about him, may have been sufficient. But as he looked, he softened to her, more and more. As he looked, she became blended with the child he had loved, and he could hardly separate the two. As he looked, he saw her for an instant by a clearer and a brighter light, not bending over that child's pillow as his rival - monstrous thought - but as the spirit of his home, and in the action tending himself no less, as he sat once more with his bowed-down head upon his hand at the foot of the little bed. He felt inclined to speak to her, and call her to him. The words 'Florence, come here!' were rising to his lips - but slowly and with difficulty, they were so very strange - when they were checked and stifled by a footstep on the stair.

It was his wife's. She had exchanged her dinner dress for a loose robe, and unbound her hair, which fell freely about her neck. But this was not the change in her that startled him.

'Florence, dear,' she said, 'I have been looking for you everywhere.' As she sat down by the side of Florence, she stooped and kissed her hand. He hardly knew his wife. She was so changed. It was not merely that her smile was new to him - though that he had never seen; but her manner, the tone of her voice, the light of her eyes, the interest, and confidence, and winning wish to please, expressed in all-this was not Edith.

'Softly, dear Mama. Papa is asleep.'

It was Edith now. She looked towards the corner where he was, and he knew that face and manner very well.

'I scarcely thought you could be here, Florence.'

Again, how altered and how softened, in an instant!

'I left here early,' pursued Edith, 'purposely to sit upstairs and talk with you. But, going to your room, I found my bird was flown, and I have been waiting there ever since, expecting its return.'

If it had been a bird, indeed, she could not have taken it more tenderly and gently to her breast, than she did Florence.

'Come, dear!'

'Papa will not expect to find me, I suppose, when he wakes,' hesitated Florence.

'Do you think he will, Florence?' said Edith, looking full upon her.

Florence drooped her head, and rose, and put up her work-basket. Edith drew her hand through her arm, and they went out of the room like sisters. Her very step was different and new to him' Mr Dombey thought, as his eyes followed her to the door.

He sat in his shadowy corner so long, that the church clocks struck the hour three times before he moved that night. All that while his face was still intent upon the spot where Florence had been seated. The room grew darker, as the candles waned and went out; but a darkness gathered on his face, exceeding any that the night could cast, and rested there.

Florence and Edith, seated before the fire in the remote room where little Paul had died, talked together for a long time. Diogenes, who was of the party, had at first objected to the admission of Edith, and, even in deference to his mistress's wish, had only permitted it under growling protest. But, emerging by little and little from the ante-room, whither he had retired in dudgeon, he soon appeared to comprehend, that with the most amiable intentions he had made one of those mistakes which will occasionally arise in the best-regulated dogs' minds; as a friendly apology for which he stuck himself up on end between the two, in a very hot place in front of the fire, and sat panting at it, with his tongue out, and a most imbecile expression of countenance, listening to the conversation.

It turned, at first, on Florence's books and favourite pursuits, and on the manner in which she had beguiled the interval since the marriage. The last theme opened up to her a subject which lay very near her heart, and she said, with the tears starting to her eyes:

'Oh, Mama! I have had a great sorrow since that day.'

'You a great sorrow, Florence!'

'Yes. Poor Walter is drowned.'

Florence spread her hands before her face, and wept with all her heart. Many as were the secret tears which Walter's fate had cost her, they flowed yet, when she thought or spoke of him.

'But tell me, dear,' said Edith, soothing her. 'Who was Walter? What was he to you?'

'He was my brother, Mama. After dear Paul died, we said we would be brother and sister. I had known him a long time - from a little child. He knew Paul, who liked him very much; Paul said, almost at the last, 'Take care of Walter, dear Papa! I was fond of him!' Walter had been brought in to see him, and was there then - in this room.

'And did he take care of Walter?' inquired Edith, sternly.

'Papa? He appointed him to go abroad. He was drowned in shipwreck on his voyage,' said Florence, sobbing.

'Does he know that he is dead?' asked Edith.

'I cannot tell, Mama. I have no means of knowing. Dear Mama!' cried Florence, clinging to her as for help, and hiding her face upon her bosom, 'I know that you have seen - '

'Stay! Stop, Florence.' Edith turned so pale, and spoke so earnestly, that Florence did not need her restraining hand upon her lips. 'Tell me all about Walter first; let me understand this history all through.'

Florence related it, and everything belonging to it, even down to the friendship of Mr Toots, of whom she could hardly speak in her distress without a tearful smile, although she was deeply grateful to him. When she had concluded her account, to the whole of which Edith, holding her hand, listened with close attention, and when a silence had succeeded, Edith said:

'What is it that you know I have seen, Florence?'

'That I am not,' said Florence, with the same mute appeal, and the same quick concealment of her face as before, 'that I am not a favourite child, Mama. I never have been. I have never known how to be. I have missed the way, and had no one to show it to me. Oh, let me learn from you how to become dearer to Papa Teach me! you, who can so well!' and clinging closer to her, with some broken fervent words of gratitude and endearment, Florence, relieved of her sad secret, wept long, but not as painfully as of yore, within the encircling arms of her new mother.

Pale even to her lips, and with a face that strove for composure until its proud beauty was as fixed as death, Edith looked down upon the weeping girl, and once kissed her. Then gradually disengaging herself, and putting Florence away, she said, stately, and quiet as a marble image, and in a voice that deepened as she spoke, but had no other token of emotion in it:

'Florence, you do not know me! Heaven forbid that you should learn from me!'

'Not learn from you?' repeated Florence, in surprise.

'That I should teach you how to love, or be loved, Heaven forbid!' said Edith. 'If you could teach me, that were better; but it is too late. You are dear to me, Florence. I did not think that anything could ever be so dear to me, as you are in this little time.'

She saw that Florence would have spoken here, so checked her with her hand, and went on.

'I will be your true friend always. I will cherish you, as much, if not as well as anyone in this world could. You may trust in me - I know it and I say it, dear, - with the whole confidence even of your pure heart. There are hosts of women whom he might have married, better and truer in all other respects than I am, Florence; but there is not one who could come here, his wife, whose heart could beat with greater truth to you than mine does.'

'I know it, dear Mama!' cried Florence. 'From that first most happy day I have known it.'

'Most happy day!' Edith seemed to repeat the words involuntarily, and went on. 'Though the merit is not mine, for I thought little of you until I saw you, let the undeserved reward be mine in your trust and love. And in this - in this, Florence; on the first night of my taking up my abode here; I am led on as it is best I should be, to say it for the first and last time.'

Florence, without knowing why, felt almost afraid to hear her proceed, but kept her eyes riveted on the beautiful face so fixed upon her own.

'Never seek to find in me,' said Edith, laying her hand upon her breast, 'what is not here. Never if you can help it, Florence, fall off from me because it is not here. Little by little you will know me better, and the time will come when you will know me, as I know myself. Then, be as lenient to me as you can, and do not turn to bitterness the only sweet remembrance I shall have.'

The tears that were visible in her eyes as she kept them fixed on Florence, showed that the composed face was but as a handsome mask; but she preserved it, and continued:

'I have seen what you say, and know how true it is. But believe me - you will soon, if you cannot now - there is no one on this earth less qualified to set it right or help you, Florence, than I. Never ask me why, or speak to me about it or of my husband, more. There should be, so far, a division, and a silence between us two, like the grave itself.'

She sat for some time silent; Florence scarcely venturing to breathe meanwhile, as dim and imperfect shadows of the truth, and all its daily consequences, chased each other through her terrified, yet incredulous imagination. Almost as soon as she had ceased to speak, Edith's face began to subside from its set composure to that quieter and more relenting aspect, which it usually wore when she and Florence were alone together. She shaded it, after this change, with her hands; and when she arose, and with an affectionate embrace bade Florence good-night, went quickly, and without looking round.

But when Florence was in bed, and the room was dark except for the glow of the fire, Edith returned, and saying that she could not sleep, and that her dressing-room was lonely, drew a chair upon the hearth, and watched the embers as they died away. Florence watched them too from her bed, until they, and the noble figure before them, crowned with its flowing hair, and in its thoughtful eyes reflecting back their light, became confused and indistinct, and finally were lost in slumber.

In her sleep, however, Florence could not lose an undefined impression of what had so recently passed. It formed the subject of her dreams, and haunted her; now in one shape, now in another; but always oppressively; and with a sense of fear. She dreamed of seeking her father in wildernesses, of following his track up fearful heights, and down into deep mines and caverns; of being charged with something that would release him from extraordinary suffering - she knew not what, or why - yet never being able to attain the goal and set him free. Then she saw him dead, upon that very bed, and in that very room, and knew that he had never loved her to the last, and fell upon his cold breast, passionately weeping. Then a prospect opened, and a river flowed, and a plaintive voice she knew, cried, 'It is running on, Floy! It has never stopped! You are moving with it!' And she saw him at a distance stretching out his arms towards her, while a figure such as Walter's used to be, stood near him, awfully serene and still. In every vision, Edith came and went, sometimes to her joy, sometimes to her sorrow, until they were alone upon the brink of a dark grave,

and Edith pointing down, she looked and saw - what! - another Edith lying at the bottom.

In the terror of this dream, she cried out and awoke, she thought. A soft voice seemed to whisper in her ear, 'Florence, dear Florence, it is nothing but a dream!' and stretching out her arms, she returned the caress of her new Mama, who then went out at the door in the light of the grey morning. In a moment, Florence sat up wondering whether this had really taken place or not; but she was only certain that it was grey morning indeed, and that the blackened ashes of the fire were on the hearth, and that she was alone.

So passed the night on which the happy pair came home.