

Chapter XXXVI - Housewarming

Many succeeding days passed in like manner; except that there were numerous visits received and paid, and that Mrs Skewton held little levees in her own apartments, at which Major Bagstock was a frequent attendant, and that Florence encountered no second look from her father, although she saw him every day. Nor had she much communication in words with her new Mama, who was imperious and proud to all the house but her - Florence could not but observe that - and who, although she always sent for her or went to her when she came home from visiting, and would always go into her room at night, before retiring to rest, however late the hour, and never lost an opportunity of being with her, was often her silent and thoughtful companion for a long time together.

Florence, who had hoped for so much from this marriage, could not help sometimes comparing the bright house with the faded dreary place out of which it had arisen, and wondering when, in any shape, it would begin to be a home; for that it was no home then, for anyone, though everything went on luxuriously and regularly, she had always a secret misgiving. Many an hour of sorrowful reflection by day and night, and many a tear of blighted hope, Florence bestowed upon the assurance her new Mama had given her so strongly, that there was no one on the earth more powerless than herself to teach her how to win her father's heart. And soon Florence began to think - resolved to think would be the truer phrase - that as no one knew so well, how hopeless of being subdued or changed her father's coldness to her was, so she had given her this warning, and forbidden the subject in very compassion. Unselfish here, as in her every act and fancy, Florence preferred to bear the pain of this new wound, rather than encourage any faint foreshadowings of the truth as it concerned her father; tender of him, even in her wandering thoughts. As for his home, she hoped it would become a better one, when its state of novelty and transition should be over; and for herself, thought little and lamented less.

If none of the new family were particularly at home in private, it was resolved that Mrs Dombey at least should be at home in public, without delay. A series of entertainments in celebration of the late nuptials, and in cultivation of society, were arranged, chiefly by Mr Dombey and Mrs Skewton; and it was settled that the festive proceedings should commence by Mrs Dombey's being at home upon a certain evening, and by Mr and Mrs Dombey's requesting the honour of the company of a great many incongruous people to dinner on the same day.

Accordingly, Mr Dombey produced a list of sundry eastern magnates who were to be bidden to this feast on his behalf; to which Mrs

Skewton, acting for her dearest child, who was haughtily careless on the subject, subjoined a western list, comprising Cousin Feenix, not yet returned to Baden-Baden, greatly to the detriment of his personal estate; and a variety of moths of various degrees and ages, who had, at various times, fluttered round the light of her fair daughter, or herself, without any lasting injury to their wings. Florence was enrolled as a member of the dinner-party, by Edith's command - elicited by a moment's doubt and hesitation on the part of Mrs Skewton; and Florence, with a wondering heart, and with a quick instinctive sense of everything that grated on her father in the least, took her silent share in the proceedings of the day.

The proceedings commenced by Mr Dombey, in a cravat of extraordinary height and stiffness, walking restlessly about the drawing-room until the hour appointed for dinner; punctual to which, an East India Director,' of immense wealth, in a waistcoat apparently constructed in serviceable deal by some plain carpenter, but really engendered in the tailor's art, and composed of the material called nankeen, arrived and was received by Mr Dombey alone. The next stage of the proceedings was Mr Dombey's sending his compliments to Mrs Dombey, with a correct statement of the time; and the next, the East India Director's falling prostrate, in a conversational point of view, and as Mr Dombey was not the man to pick him up, staring at the fire until rescue appeared in the shape of Mrs Skewton; whom the director, as a pleasant start in life for the evening, mistook for Mrs Dombey, and greeted with enthusiasm.

The next arrival was a Bank Director, reputed to be able to buy up anything - human Nature generally, if he should take it in his head to influence the money market in that direction - but who was a wonderfully modest-spoken man, almost boastfully so, and mentioned his 'little place' at Kingston-upon-Thames, and its just being barely equal to giving Dombey a bed and a chop, if he would come and visit it. Ladies, he said, it was not for a man who lived in his quiet way to take upon himself to invite - but if Mrs Skewton and her daughter, Mrs Dombey, should ever find themselves in that direction, and would do him the honour to look at a little bit of a shrubbery they would find there, and a poor little flower-bed or so, and a humble apology for a pinery, and two or three little attempts of that sort without any pretension, they would distinguish him very much. Carrying out his character, this gentleman was very plainly dressed, in a wisp of cambric for a neckcloth, big shoes, a coat that was too loose for him, and a pair of trousers that were too spare; and mention being made of the Opera by Mrs Skewton, he said he very seldom went there, for he couldn't afford it. It seemed greatly to delight and exhilarate him to say so: and he beamed on his audience afterwards, with his hands in his pockets, and excessive satisfaction twinkling in his eyes.

Now Mrs Dombey appeared, beautiful and proud, and as disdainful and defiant of them all as if the bridal wreath upon her head had been a garland of steel spikes put on to force concession from her which she would die sooner than yield. With her was Florence. When they entered together, the shadow of the night of the return again darkened Mr Dombey's face. But unobserved; for Florence did not venture to raise her eyes to his, and Edith's indifference was too supreme to take the least heed of him.

The arrivals quickly became numerous. More directors, chairmen of public companies, elderly ladies carrying burdens on their heads for full dress, Cousin Feenix, Major Bagstock, friends of Mrs Skewton, with the same bright bloom on their complexion, and very precious necklaces on very withered necks. Among these, a young lady of sixty-five, remarkably coolly dressed as to her back and shoulders, who spoke with an engaging lisp, and whose eyelids wouldn't keep up well, without a great deal of trouble on her part, and whose manners had that indefinable charm which so frequently attaches to the giddiness of youth. As the greater part of Mr Dombey's list were disposed to be taciturn, and the greater part of Mrs Dombey's list were disposed to be talkative, and there was no sympathy between them, Mrs Dombey's list, by magnetic agreement, entered into a bond of union against Mr Dombey's list, who, wandering about the rooms in a desolate manner, or seeking refuge in corners, entangled themselves with company coming in, and became barricaded behind sofas, and had doors opened smartly from without against their heads, and underwent every sort of discomfiture.

When dinner was announced, Mr Dombey took down an old lady like a crimson velvet pincushion stuffed with bank notes, who might have been the identical old lady of Threadneedle Street, she was so rich, and looked so unaccommodating; Cousin Feenix took down Mrs Dombey; Major Bagstock took down Mrs Skewton; the young thing with the shoulders was bestowed, as an extinguisher, upon the East India Director; and the remaining ladies were left on view in the drawing-room by the remaining gentlemen, until a forlorn hope volunteered to conduct them downstairs, and those brave spirits with their captives blocked up the dining-room door, shutting out seven mild men in the stony-hearted hall. When all the rest were got in and were seated, one of these mild men still appeared, in smiling confusion, totally destitute and unprovided for, and, escorted by the butler, made the complete circuit of the table twice before his chair could be found, which it finally was, on Mrs Dombey's left hand; after which the mild man never held up his head again.

Now, the spacious dining-room, with the company seated round the glittering table, busy with their glittering spoons, and knives and forks, and plates, might have been taken for a grown-up exposition of

Tom Tiddler's ground, where children pick up gold and silver.' Mr Dombey, as Tiddler, looked his character to admiration; and the long plateau of precious metal frosted, separating him from Mrs Dombey, whereon frosted Cupids offered scentless flowers to each of them, was allegorical to see.

Cousin Feenix was in great force, and looked astonishingly young. But he was sometimes thoughtless in his good humour - his memory occasionally wandering like his legs - and on this occasion caused the company to shudder. It happened thus. The young lady with the back, who regarded Cousin Feenix with sentiments of tenderness, had entrapped the East India Director into leading her to the chair next him; in return for which good office, she immediately abandoned the Director, who, being shaded on the other side by a gloomy black velvet hat surmounting a bony and speechless female with a fan, yielded to a depression of spirits and withdrew into himself. Cousin Feenix and the young lady were very lively and humorous, and the young lady laughed so much at something Cousin Feenix related to her, that Major Bagstock begged leave to inquire on behalf of Mrs Skewton (they were sitting opposite, a little lower down), whether that might not be considered public property.

'Why, upon my life,' said Cousin Feenix, 'there's nothing in it; it really is not worth repeating: in point of fact, it's merely an anecdote of Jack Adams. I dare say my friend Dombey;' for the general attention was concentrated on Cousin Feenix; 'may remember Jack Adams, Jack Adams, not Joe; that was his brother. Jack - little Jack - man with a cast in his eye, and slight impediment in his speech - man who sat for somebody's borough. We used to call him in my parliamentary time W. P. Adams, in consequence of his being Warming Pan for a young fellow who was in his minority. Perhaps my friend Dombey may have known the man?'

Mr Dombey, who was as likely to have known Guy Fawkes, replied in the negative. But one of the seven mild men unexpectedly leaped into distinction, by saying he had known him, and adding - 'always wore Hessian boots!'

'Exactly,' said Cousin Feenix, bending forward to see the mild man, and smile encouragement at him down the table. 'That was Jack. Joe wore - '

'Tops!' cried the mild man, rising in public estimation every Instant.

'Of course,' said Cousin Feenix, 'you were intimate with em?'

'I knew them both,' said the mild man. With whom Mr Dombey immediately took wine.

'Devilish good fellow, Jack!' said Cousin Feenix, again bending forward, and smiling.

'Excellent,' returned the mild man, becoming bold on his success. 'One of the best fellows I ever knew.'

'No doubt you have heard the story?' said Cousin Feenix.

'I shall know,' replied the bold mild man, 'when I have heard your Ludship tell it.' With that, he leaned back in his chair and smiled at the ceiling, as knowing it by heart, and being already tickled.

'In point of fact, it's nothing of a story in itself,' said Cousin Feenix, addressing the table with a smile, and a gay shake of his head, 'and not worth a word of preface. But it's illustrative of the neatness of Jack's humour. The fact is, that Jack was invited down to a marriage - which I think took place in Berkshire?'

'Shropshire,' said the bold mild man, finding himself appealed to.

'Was it? Well! In point of fact it might have been in any shire,' said Cousin Feenix. 'So my friend being invited down to this marriage in Anyshire,' with a pleasant sense of the readiness of this joke, 'goes. Just as some of us, having had the honour of being invited to the marriage of my lovely and accomplished relative with my friend Dombey, didn't require to be asked twice, and were devilish glad to be present on so interesting an occasion. - Goes - Jack goes. Now, this marriage was, in point of fact, the marriage of an uncommonly fine girl with a man for whom she didn't care a button, but whom she accepted on account of his property, which was immense. When Jack returned to town, after the nuptials, a man he knew, meeting him in the lobby of the House of Commons, says, 'Well, Jack, how are the ill-matched couple?' 'Ill-matched,' says Jack 'Not at all. It's a perfectly and equal transaction. She is regularly bought, and you may take your oath he is as regularly sold!'

In his full enjoyment of this culminating point of his story, the shudder, which had gone all round the table like an electric spark, struck Cousin Feenix, and he stopped. Not a smile occasioned by the only general topic of conversation broached that day, appeared on any face. A profound silence ensued; and the wretched mild man, who had been as innocent of any real foreknowledge of the story as the child unborn, had the exquisite misery of reading in every eye that he was regarded as the prime mover of the mischief.

Mr Dombey's face was not a changeful one, and being cast in its mould of state that day, showed little other apprehension of the story, if any, than that which he expressed when he said solemnly, amidst

the silence, that it was 'Very good.' There was a rapid glance from Edith towards Florence, but otherwise she remained, externally, impassive and unconscious.

Through the various stages of rich meats and wines, continual gold and silver, dainties of earth, air, fire, and water, heaped-up fruits, and that unnecessary article in Mr Dombey's banquets - ice- the dinner slowly made its way: the later stages being achieved to the sonorous music of incessant double knocks, announcing the arrival of visitors, whose portion of the feast was limited to the smell thereof. When Mrs Dombey rose, it was a sight to see her lord, with stiff throat and erect head, hold the door open for the withdrawal of the ladies; and to see how she swept past him with his daughter on her arm.

Mr Dombey was a grave sight, behind the decanters, in a state of dignity; and the East India Director was a forlorn sight near the unoccupied end of the table, in a state of solitude; and the Major was a military sight, relating stories of the Duke of York to six of the seven mild men (the ambitious one was utterly quenched); and the Bank Director was a lowly sight, making a plan of his little attempt at a pinery, with dessert-knives, for a group of admirers; and Cousin Feenix was a thoughtful sight, as he smoothed his long wristbands and stealthily adjusted his wig. But all these sights were of short duration, being speedily broken up by coffee, and the desertion of the room.

There was a throng in the state-rooms upstairs, increasing every minute; but still Mr Dombey's list of visitors appeared to have some native impossibility of amalgamation with Mrs Dombey's list, and no one could have doubted which was which. The single exception to this rule perhaps was Mr Carker, who now smiled among the company, and who, as he stood in the circle that was gathered about Mrs Dombey - watchful of her, of them, his chief, Cleopatra and the Major, Florence, and everything around - appeared at ease with both divisions of guests, and not marked as exclusively belonging to either.

Florence had a dread of him, which made his presence in the room a nightmare to her. She could not avoid the recollection of it, for her eyes were drawn towards him every now and then, by an attraction of dislike and distrust that she could not resist. Yet her thoughts were busy with other things; for as she sat apart - not unadmired or unsought, but in the gentleness of her quiet spirit - she felt how little part her father had in what was going on, and saw, with pain, how ill at ease he seemed to be, and how little regarded he was as he lingered about near the door, for those visitors whom he wished to distinguish with particular attention, and took them up to introduce them to his wife, who received them with proud coldness, but showed no interest or wish to please, and never, after the bare ceremony of reception, in

consultation of his wishes, or in welcome of his friends, opened her lips. It was not the less perplexing or painful to Florence, that she who acted thus, treated her so kindly and with such loving consideration, that it almost seemed an ungrateful return on her part even to know of what was passing before her eyes.

Happy Florence would have been, might she have ventured to bear her father company, by so much as a look; and happy Florence was, in little suspecting the main cause of his uneasiness. But afraid of seeming to know that he was placed at any did advantage, lest he should be resentful of that knowledge; and divided between her impulse towards him, and her grateful affection for Edith; she scarcely dared to raise her eyes towards either. Anxious and unhappy for them both, the thought stole on her through the crowd, that it might have been better for them if this noise of tongues and tread of feet had never come there, - if the old dulness and decay had never been replaced by novelty and splendour, - if the neglected child had found no friend in Edith, but had lived her solitary life, unpitied and forgotten.

Mrs Chick had some such thoughts too, but they were not so quietly developed in her mind. This good matron had been outraged in the first instance by not receiving an invitation to dinner. That blow partially recovered, she had gone to a vast expense to make such a figure before Mrs Dombey at home, as should dazzle the senses of that lady, and heap mortification, mountains high, on the head of Mrs Skewton.

'But I am made,' said Mrs Chick to Mr Chick, 'of no more account than Florence! Who takes the smallest notice of me? No one!'

'No one, my dear,' assented Mr Chick, who was seated by the side of Mrs Chick against the wall, and could console himself, even there, by softly whistling.

'Does it at all appear as if I was wanted here?' exclaimed Mrs Chick, with flashing eyes.

'No, my dear, I don't think it does,' said Mr Chic

'Paul's mad!' said Mrs Chic

Mr Chick whistled.

'Unless you are a monster, which I sometimes think you are,' said Mrs Chick with candour, 'don't sit there humming tunes. How anyone with the most distant feelings of a man, can see that mother-in-law of Paul's, dressed as she is, going on like that, with Major Bagstock, for

whom, among other precious things, we are indebted to your Lucretia Tox

'My Lucretia Tox, my dear!' said Mr Chick, astounded.

'Yes,' retorted Mrs Chick, with great severity, 'your Lucretia Tox - I say how anybody can see that mother-in-law of Paul's, and that haughty wife of Paul's, and these indecent old frights with their backs and shoulders, and in short this at home generally, and hum - ' on which word Mrs Chick laid a scornful emphasis that made Mr Chick start, 'is, I thank Heaven, a mystery to me!

Mr Chick screwed his mouth into a form irreconcilable with humming or whistling, and looked very contemplative.

'But I hope I know what is due to myself,' said Mrs Chick, swelling with indignation, 'though Paul has forgotten what is due to me. I am not going to sit here, a member of this family, to be taken no notice of. I am not the dirt under Mrs Dombey's feet, yet - not quite yet,' said Mrs Chick, as if she expected to become so, about the day after tomorrow. 'And I shall go. I will not say (whatever I may think) that this affair has been got up solely to degrade and insult me. I shall merely go. I shall not be missed!'

Mrs Chick rose erect with these words, and took the arm of Mr Chick, who escorted her from the room, after half an hour's shady sojourn there. And it is due to her penetration to observe that she certainly was not missed at all.

But she was not the only indignant guest; for Mr Dombey's list (still constantly in difficulties) were, as a body, indignant with Mrs Dombey's list, for looking at them through eyeglasses, and audibly wondering who all those people were; while Mrs Dombey's list complained of weariness, and the young thing with the shoulders, deprived of the attentions of that gay youth Cousin Feenix (who went away from the dinner-table), confidentially alleged to thirty or forty friends that she was bored to death. All the old ladies with the burdens on their heads, had greater or less cause of complaint against Mr Dombey; and the Directors and Chairmen coincided in thinking that if Dombey must marry, he had better have married somebody nearer his own age, not quite so handsome, and a little better off. The general opinion among this class of gentlemen was, that it was a weak thing in Dombey, and he'd live to repent it. Hardly anybody there, except the mild men, stayed, or went away, without considering himself or herself neglected and aggrieved by Mr Dombey or Mrs Dombey; and the speechless female in the black velvet hat was found to have been stricken mute, because the lady in the crimson velvet had been handed down before her. The nature even of the mild men

got corrupted, either from their curdling it with too much lemonade, or from the general inoculation that prevailed; and they made sarcastic jokes to one another, and whispered disparagement on stairs and in bye-places. The general dissatisfaction and discomfort so diffused itself, that the assembled footmen in the hall were as well acquainted with it as the company above. Nay, the very linkmen outside got hold of it, and compared the party to a funeral out of mourning, with none of the company remembered in the will. At last, the guests were all gone, and the linkmen too; and the street, crowded so long with carriages, was clear; and the dying lights showed no one in the rooms, but Mr Dombey and Mr Carker, who were talking together apart, and Mrs Dombey and her mother: the former seated on an ottoman; the latter reclining in the Cleopatra attitude, awaiting the arrival of her maid. Mr Dombey having finished his communication to Carker, the latter advanced obsequiously to take leave.

'I trust,' he said, 'that the fatigues of this delightful evening will not inconvenience Mrs Dombey to-morrow.'

'Mrs Dombey,' said Mr Dombey, advancing, 'has sufficiently spared herself fatigue, to relieve you from any anxiety of that kind. I regret to say, Mrs Dombey, that I could have wished you had fatigued yourself a little more on this occasion.'

She looked at him with a supercilious glance, that it seemed not worth her while to protract, and turned away her eyes without speaking.

'I am sorry, Madam,' said Mr Dombey, 'that you should not have thought it your duty -

She looked at him again.

'Your duty, Madam,' pursued Mr Dombey, 'to have received my friends with a little more deference. Some of those whom you have been pleased to slight to-night in a very marked manner, Mrs Dombey, confer a distinction upon you, I must tell you, in any visit they pay you.'

'Do you know that there is someone here?' she returned, now looking at him steadily.

'No! Carker! I beg that you do not. I insist that you do not,' cried Mr Dombey, stopping that noiseless gentleman in his withdrawal. 'Mr Carker, Madam, as you know, possesses my confidence. He is as well acquainted as myself with the subject on which I speak. I beg to tell you, for your information, Mrs Dombey, that I consider these wealthy and important persons confer a distinction upon me:' and Mr Dombey

drew himself up, as having now rendered them of the highest possible importance.

'I ask you,' she repeated, bending her disdainful, steady gaze upon him, 'do you know that there is someone here, Sir?'

'I must entreat,' said Mr Carker, stepping forward, 'I must beg, I must demand, to be released. Slight and unimportant as this difference is - '

Mrs Skewton, who had been intent upon her daughter's face, took him up here.

'My sweetest Edith,' she said, 'and my dearest Dombey; our excellent friend Mr Carker, for so I am sure I ought to mention him - '

Mr Carker murmured, 'Too much honour.'

' - has used the very words that were in my mind, and that I have been dying, these ages, for an opportunity of introducing. Slight and unimportant! My sweetest Edith, and my dearest Dombey, do we not know that any difference between you two - No, Flowers; not now.

Flowers was the maid, who, finding gentlemen present, retreated with precipitation.

'That any difference between you two,' resumed Mrs Skewton, 'with the Heart you possess in common, and the excessively charming bond of feeling that there is between you, must be slight and unimportant? What words could better define the fact? None. Therefore I am glad to take this slight occasion - this trifling occasion, that is so replete with Nature, and your individual characters, and all that - so truly calculated to bring the tears into a parent's eyes - to say that I attach no importance to them in the least, except as developing these minor elements of Soul; and that, unlike most Mamas-in-law (that odious phrase, dear Dombey!) as they have been represented to me to exist in this I fear too artificial world, I never shall attempt to interpose between you, at such a time, and never can much regret, after all, such little flashes of the torch of What's-his-name - not Cupid, but the other delightful creature.

There was a sharpness in the good mother's glance at both her children as she spoke, that may have been expressive of a direct and well-considered purpose hidden between these rambling words. That purpose, providently to detach herself in the beginning from all the clankings of their chain that were to come, and to shelter herself with the fiction of her innocent belief in their mutual affection, and their adaptation to each other.

'I have pointed out to Mrs Dombey,' said Mr Dombey, in his most stately manner, 'that in her conduct thus early in our married life, to which I object, and which, I request, may be corrected. Carker,' with a nod of dismissal, 'good-night to you!'

Mr Carker bowed to the imperious form of the Bride, whose sparkling eye was fixed upon her husband; and stopping at Cleopatra's couch on his way out, raised to his lips the hand she graciously extended to him, in lowly and admiring homage.

If his handsome wife had reproached him, or even changed countenance, or broken the silence in which she remained, by one word, now that they were alone (for Cleopatra made off with all speed), Mr Dombey would have been equal to some assertion of his case against her. But the intense, unutterable, withering scorn, with which, after looking upon him, she dropped her eyes, as if he were too worthless and indifferent to her to be challenged with a syllable - the ineffable disdain and haughtiness in which she sat before him - the cold inflexible resolve with which her every feature seemed to bear him down, and put him by - these, he had no resource against; and he left her, with her whole overbearing beauty concentrated on despising him.

Was he coward enough to watch her, an hour afterwards, on the old well staircase, where he had once seen Florence in the moonlight, toiling up with Paul? Or was he in the dark by accident, when, looking up, he saw her coming, with a light, from the room where Florence lay, and marked again the face so changed, which he could not subdue?

But it could never alter as his own did. It never, in its uttermost pride and passion, knew the shadow that had fallen on his, in the dark corner, on the night of the return; and often since; and which deepened on it now, as he looked up.