

Chapter XXXVII - More Warnings Than One

Florence, Edith, and Mrs Skewton were together next day, and the carriage was waiting at the door to take them out. For Cleopatra had her galley again now, and Withers, no longer the-wan, stood upright in a pigeon-breasted jacket and military trousers, behind her wheel-less chair at dinner-time and butted no more. The hair of Withers was radiant with pomatum, in these days of down, and he wore kid gloves and smelt of the water of Cologne.

They were assembled in Cleopatra's room The Serpent of old Nile (not to mention her disrespectfully) was reposing on her sofa, sipping her morning chocolate at three o'clock in the afternoon, and Flowers the Maid was fastening on her youthful cuffs and frills, and performing a kind of private coronation ceremony on her, with a peach-coloured velvet bonnet; the artificial roses in which nodded to uncommon advantage, as the palsy trifled with them, like a breeze.

'I think I am a little nervous this morning, Flowers,' said Mrs Skewton. 'My hand quite shakes.'

'You were the life of the party last night, Ma'am, you know,' returned Flowers, 'and you suffer for it, to-day, you see.'

Edith, who had beckoned Florence to the window, and was looking out, with her back turned on the toilet of her esteemed mother, suddenly withdrew from it, as if it had lightened.

'My darling child,' cried Cleopatra, languidly, 'you are not nervous? Don't tell me, my dear Edith, that you, so enviably self-possessed, are beginning to be a martyr too, like your unfortunately constituted mother! Withers, someone at the door.'

'Card, Ma'am,' said Withers, taking it towards Mrs Dombey.

'I am going out,' she said without looking at it.

'My dear love,' drawled Mrs Skewton, 'how very odd to send that message without seeing the name! Bring it here, Withers. Dear me, my love; Mr Carker, too! That very sensible person!'

'I am going out,' repeated Edith, in so imperious a tone that Withers, going to the door, imperiously informed the servant who was waiting, 'Mrs Dombey is going out. Get along with you,' and shut it on him.'

But the servant came back after a short absence, and whispered to Withers again, who once more, and not very willingly, presented himself before Mrs Dombey.

'If you please, Ma'am, Mr Carker sends his respectful compliments, and begs you would spare him one minute, if you could - for business, Ma'am, if you please.'

'Really, my love,' said Mrs Skewton in her mildest manner; for her daughter's face was threatening; 'if you would allow me to offer a word, I should recommend - '

'Show him this way,' said Edith. As Withers disappeared to execute the command, she added, frowning on her mother, 'As he comes at your recommendation, let him come to your room.'

'May I - shall I go away?' asked Florence, hurriedly.

Edith nodded yes, but on her way to the door Florence met the visitor coming in. With the same disagreeable mixture of familiarity and forbearance, with which he had first addressed her, he addressed her now in his softest manner - hoped she was quite well - needed not to ask, with such looks to anticipate the answer - had scarcely had the honour to know her, last night, she was so greatly changed - and held the door open for her to pass out; with a secret sense of power in her shrinking from him, that all the deference and politeness of his manner could not quite conceal.

He then bowed himself for a moment over Mrs Skewton's condescending hand, and lastly bowed to Edith. Coldly returning his salute without looking at him, and neither seating herself nor inviting him to be seated, she waited for him to speak.

Entrenched in her pride and power, and with all the obduracy of her spirit summoned about her, still her old conviction that she and her mother had been known by this man in their worst colours, from their first acquaintance; that every degradation she had suffered in her own eyes was as plain to him as to herself; that he read her life as though it were a vile book, and fluttered the leaves before her in slight looks and tones of voice which no one else could detect; weakened and undermined her. Proudly as she opposed herself to him, with her commanding face exacting his humility, her disdainful lip repulsing him, her bosom angry at his intrusion, and the dark lashes of her eyes sullenly veiling their light, that no ray of it might shine upon him - and submissively as he stood before her, with an entreating injured manner, but with complete submission to her will - she knew, in her own soul, that the cases were reversed, and that the triumph and superiority were his, and that he knew it full well.

'I have presumed,' said Mr Carker, 'to solicit an interview, and I have ventured to describe it as being one of business, because - '

'Perhaps you are charged by Mr Dombey with some message of reproof,' said Edith 'You possess Mr Dombey's confidence in such an unusual degree, Sir, that you would scarcely surprise me if that were your business.'

'I have no message to the lady who sheds a lustre upon his name,' said Mr Carker. 'But I entreat that lady, on my own behalf to be just to a very humble claimant for justice at her hands - a mere dependant of Mr Dombey's - which is a position of humility; and to reflect upon my perfect helplessness last night, and the impossibility of my avoiding the share that was forced upon me in a very painful occasion.'

'My dearest Edith,' hinted Cleopatra in a low voice, as she held her eye-glass aside, 'really very charming of Mr What's-his-name. And full of heart!'

'For I do,' said Mr Carker, appealing to Mrs Skewton with a look of grateful deference, - 'I do venture to call it a painful occasion, though merely because it was so to me, who had the misfortune to be present. So slight a difference, as between the principals - between those who love each other with disinterested devotion, and would make any sacrifice of self in such a cause - is nothing. As Mrs Skewton herself expressed, with so much truth and feeling last night, it is nothing.'

Edith could not look at him, but she said after a few moments,

'And your business, Sir - '

'Edith, my pet,' said Mrs Skewton, 'all this time Mr Carker is standing! My dear Mr Carker, take a seat, I beg.'

He offered no reply to the mother, but fixed his eyes on the proud daughter, as though he would only be bidden by her, and was resolved to be bidden by her. Edith, in spite of herself sat down, and slightly motioned with her hand to him to be seated too. No action could be colder, haughtier, more insolent in its air of supremacy and disrespect, but she had struggled against even that concession ineffectually, and it was wrested from her. That was enough! Mr Carker sat down.

'May I be allowed, Madam,' said Carker, turning his white teeth on Mrs Skewton like a light - 'a lady of your excellent sense and quick feeling will give me credit, for good reason, I am sure - to address what I have to say, to Mrs Dombey, and to leave her to impart it to you who are her best and dearest friend - next to Mr Dombey?'

Mrs Skewton would have retired, but Edith stopped her. Edith would have stopped him too, and indignantly ordered him to speak openly or not at all, but that he said, in a low Voice - 'Miss Florence - the young lady who has just left the room - '

Edith suffered him to proceed. She looked at him now. As he bent forward, to be nearer, with the utmost show of delicacy and respect, and with his teeth persuasively arrayed, in a self-depreciating smile, she felt as if she could have struck him dead.

'Miss Florence's position,' he began, 'has been an unfortunate one. I have a difficulty in alluding to it to you, whose attachment to her father is naturally watchful and jealous of every word that applies to him.' Always distinct and soft in speech, no language could describe the extent of his distinctness and softness, when he said these words, or came to any others of a similar import. 'But, as one who is devoted to Mr Dombey in his different way, and whose life is passed in admiration of Mr Dombey's character, may I say, without offence to your tenderness as a wife, that Miss Florence has unhappily been neglected - by her father. May I say by her father?'

Edith replied, 'I know it.'

'You know it!' said Mr Carker, with a great appearance of relief. 'It removes a mountain from my breast. May I hope you know how the neglect originated; in what an amiable phase of Mr Dombey's pride - character I mean?'

'You may pass that by, Sir,' she returned, 'and come the sooner to the end of what you have to say.'

'Indeed, I am sensible, Madam,' replied Carker, - 'trust me, I am deeply sensible, that Mr Dombey can require no justification in anything to you. But, kindly judge of my breast by your own, and you will forgive my interest in him, if in its excess, it goes at all astray.'

What a stab to her proud heart, to sit there, face to face with him, and have him tendering her false oath at the altar again and again for her acceptance, and pressing it upon her like the dregs of a sickening cup she could not own her loathing of or turn away from'. How shame, remorse, and passion raged within her, when, upright and majestic in her beauty before him, she knew that in her spirit she was down at his feet!

'Miss Florence,' said Carker, 'left to the care - if one may call it care - of servants and mercenary people, in every way her inferiors, necessarily wanted some guide and compass in her younger days, and, naturally, for want of them, has been indiscreet, and has in some

degree forgotten her station. There was some folly about one Walter, a common lad, who is fortunately dead now: and some very undesirable association, I regret to say, with certain coasting sailors, of anything but good repute, and a runaway old bankrupt.'

'I have heard the circumstances, Sir,' said Edith, flashing her disdainful glance upon him, 'and I know that you pervert them. You may not know it. I hope so.'

'Pardon me,' said Mr Carker, 'I believe that nobody knows them so well as I. Your generous and ardent nature, Madam - the same nature which is so nobly imperative in vindication of your beloved and honoured husband, and which has blessed him as even his merits deserve - I must respect, defer to, bow before. But, as regards the circumstances, which is indeed the business I presumed to solicit your attention to, I can have no doubt, since, in the execution of my trust as Mr Dombey's confidential - I presume to say - friend, I have fully ascertained them. In my execution of that trust; in my deep concern, which you can so well understand, for everything relating to him, intensified, if you will (for I fear I labour under your displeasure), by the lower motive of desire to prove my diligence, and make myself the more acceptable; I have long pursued these circumstances by myself and trustworthy instruments, and have innumerable and most minute proofs.'

She raised her eyes no higher than his mouth, but she saw the means of mischief vaunted in every tooth it contained.

'Pardon me, Madam,' he continued, 'if in my perplexity, I presume to take counsel with you, and to consult your pleasure. I think I have observed that you are greatly interested in Miss Florence?'

What was there in her he had not observed, and did not know? Humbled and yet maddened by the thought, in every new presentment of it, however faint, she pressed her teeth upon her quivering lip to force composure on it, and distantly inclined her head in reply.

'This interest, Madam - so touching an evidence of everything associated with Mr Dombey being dear to you - induces me to pause before I make him acquainted with these circumstances, which, as yet, he does not know. It so shakes me, if I may make the confession, in my allegiance, that on the intimation of the least desire to that effect from you, I would suppress them.'

Edith raised her head quickly, and starting back, bent her dark glance upon him. He met it with his blandest and most deferential smile, and went on.

'You say that as I describe them, they are perverted. I fear not - I fear not: but let us assume that they are. The uneasiness I have for some time felt on the subject, arises in this: that the mere circumstance of such association often repeated, on the part of Miss Florence, however innocently and confidingly, would be conclusive with Mr Dombey, already predisposed against her, and would lead him to take some step (I know he has occasionally contemplated it) of separation and alienation of her from his home. Madam, bear with me, and remember my intercourse with Mr Dombey, and my knowledge of him, and my reverence for him, almost from childhood, when I say that if he has a fault, it is a lofty stubbornness, rooted in that noble pride and sense of power which belong to him, and which we must all defer to; which is not assailable like the obstinacy of other characters; and which grows upon itself from day to day, and year to year.

She bent her glance upon him still; but, look as steadfast as she would, her haughty nostrils dilated, and her breath came somewhat deeper, and her lip would slightly curl, as he described that in his patron to which they must all bow down. He saw it; and though his expression did not change, she knew he saw it.

'Even so slight an incident as last night's,' he said, 'if I might refer to it once more, would serve to illustrate my meaning, better than a greater one. Dombey and Son know neither time, nor place, nor season, but bear them all down. But I rejoice in its occurrence, for it has opened the way for me to approach Mrs Dombey with this subject to-day, even if it has entailed upon me the penalty of her temporary displeasure. Madam, in the midst of my uneasiness and apprehension on this subject, I was summoned by Mr Dombey to Leamington. There I saw you. There I could not help knowing what relation you would shortly occupy towards him - to his enduring happiness and yours. There I resolved to await the time of your establishment at home here, and to do as I have now done. I have, at heart, no fear that I shall be wanting in my duty to Mr Dombey, if I bury what I know in your breast; for where there is but one heart and mind between two persons - as in such a marriage - one almost represents the other. I can acquit my conscience therefore, almost equally, by confidence, on such a theme, in you or him. For the reasons I have mentioned I would select you. May I aspire to the distinction of believing that my confidence is accepted, and that I am relieved from my responsibility?'

He long remembered the look she gave him - who could see it, and forget it? - and the struggle that ensued within her. At last she said:

'I accept it, Sir You will please to consider this matter at an end, and that it goes no farther.'

He bowed low, and rose. She rose too, and he took leave with all humility. But Withers, meeting him on the stairs, stood amazed at the beauty of his teeth, and at his brilliant smile; and as he rode away upon his white-legged horse, the people took him for a dentist, such was the dazzling show he made. The people took her, when she rode out in her carriage presently, for a great lady, as happy as she was rich and fine. But they had not seen her, just before, in her own room with no one by; and they had not heard her utterance of the three words, 'Oh Florence, Florence!'

Mrs Skewton, reposing on her sofa, and sipping her chocolate, had heard nothing but the low word business, for which she had a mortal aversion, insomuch that she had long banished it from her vocabulary, and had gone nigh, in a charming manner and with an immense amount of heart, to say nothing of soul, to ruin divers milliners and others in consequence. Therefore Mrs Skewton asked no questions, and showed no curiosity. Indeed, the peach-velvet bonnet gave her sufficient occupation out of doors; for being perched on the back of her head, and the day being rather windy, it was frantic to escape from Mrs Skewton's company, and would be coaxed into no sort of compromise. When the carriage was closed, and the wind shut out, the palsy played among the artificial roses again like an almshouse-full of superannuated zephyrs; and altogether Mrs Skewton had enough to do, and got on but indifferently.

She got on no better towards night; for when Mrs Dombey, in her dressing-room, had been dressed and waiting for her half an hour, and Mr Dombey, in the drawing-room, had paraded himself into a state of solemn fretfulness (they were all three going out to dinner), Flowers the Maid appeared with a pale face to Mrs Dombey, saying:

'If you please, Ma'am, I beg your pardon, but I can't do nothing with Missis!'

'What do you mean?' asked Edith.

'Well, Ma'am,' replied the frightened maid, 'I hardly know. She's making faces!'

Edith hurried with her to her mother's room. Cleopatra was arrayed in full dress, with the diamonds, short sleeves, rouge, curls, teeth, and other juvenility all complete; but Paralysis was not to be deceived, had known her for the object of its errand, and had struck her at her glass, where she lay like a horrible doll that had tumbled down.

They took her to pieces in very shame, and put the little of her that was real on a bed. Doctors were sent for, and soon came. Powerful remedies were resorted to; opinions given that she would rally from

this shock, but would not survive another; and there she lay speechless, and staring at the ceiling, for days; sometimes making inarticulate sounds in answer to such questions as did she know who were present, and the like: sometimes giving no reply either by sign or gesture, or in her unwinking eyes.

At length she began to recover consciousness, and in some degree the power of motion, though not yet of speech. One day the use of her right hand returned; and showing it to her maid who was in attendance on her, and appearing very uneasy in her mind, she made signs for a pencil and some paper. This the maid immediately provided, thinking she was going to make a will, or write some last request; and Mrs Dombey being from home, the maid awaited the result with solemn feelings.

After much painful scrawling and erasing, and putting in of wrong characters, which seemed to tumble out of the pencil of their own accord, the old woman produced this document:

'Rose-coloured curtains.'

The maid being perfectly transfixed, and with tolerable reason, Cleopatra amended the manuscript by adding two words more, when it stood thus:

'Rose-coloured curtains for doctors.'

The maid now perceived remotely that she wished these articles to be provided for the better presentation of her complexion to the faculty; and as those in the house who knew her best, had no doubt of the correctness of this opinion, which she was soon able to establish for herself the rose-coloured curtains were added to her bed, and she mended with increased rapidity from that hour. She was soon able to sit up, in curls and a laced cap and nightgown, and to have a little artificial bloom dropped into the hollow caverns of her cheeks.

It was a tremendous sight to see this old woman in her finery leering and mincing at Death, and playing off her youthful tricks upon him as if he had been the Major; but an alteration in her mind that ensued on the paralytic stroke was fraught with as much matter for reflection, and was quite as ghastly.

Whether the weakening of her intellect made her more cunning and false than before, or whether it confused her between what she had assumed to be and what she really had been, or whether it had awakened any glimmering of remorse, which could neither struggle into light nor get back into total darkness, or whether, in the jumble of her faculties, a combination of these effects had been shaken up,

which is perhaps the more likely supposition, the result was this: - That she became hugely exacting in respect of Edith's affection and gratitude and attention to her; highly laudatory of herself as a most inestimable parent; and very jealous of having any rival in Edith's regard. Further, in place of remembering that compact made between them for an avoidance of the subject, she constantly alluded to her daughter's marriage as a proof of her being an incomparable mother; and all this, with the weakness and peevishness of such a state, always serving for a sarcastic commentary on her levity and youthfulness.

'Where is Mrs Dombey? she would say to her maid.

'Gone out, Ma'am.'

'Gone out! Does she go out to shun her Mama, Flowers?'

'La bless you, no, Ma'am. Mrs Dombey has only gone out for a ride with Miss Florence.'

'Miss Florence. Who's Miss Florence? Don't tell me about Miss Florence. What's Miss Florence to her, compared to me?'

The apposite display of the diamonds, or the peach-velvet bonnet (she sat in the bonnet to receive visitors, weeks before she could stir out of doors), or the dressing of her up in some gaud or other, usually stopped the tears that began to flow hereabouts; and she would remain in a complacent state until Edith came to see her; when, at a glance of the proud face, she would relapse again.

'Well, I am sure, Edith!' she would cry, shaking her head.

'What is the matter, mother?'

'Matter! I really don't know what is the matter. The world is coming to such an artificial and ungrateful state, that I begin to think there's no Heart - or anything of that sort - left in it, positively. Withers is more a child to me than you are. He attends to me much more than my own daughter. I almost wish I didn't look so young - and all that kind of thing - and then perhaps I should be more considered.'

'What would you have, mother?'

'Oh, a great deal, Edith,' impatiently.

'Is there anything you want that you have not? It is your own fault if there be.'

'My own fault!' beginning to whimper. 'The parent I have been to you, Edith: making you a companion from your cradle! And when you neglect me, and have no more natural affection for me than if I was a stranger - not a twentieth part of the affection that you have for Florence - but I am only your mother, and should corrupt her in a day! - you reproach me with its being my own fault.'

'Mother, mother, I reproach you with nothing. Why will you always dwell on this?'

'Isn't it natural that I should dwell on this, when I am all affection and sensitiveness, and am wounded in the cruellest way, whenever you look at me?'

'I do not mean to wound you, mother. Have you no remembrance of what has been said between us? Let the Past rest.'

'Yes, rest! And let gratitude to me rest; and let affection for me rest; and let me rest in my out-of-the-way room, with no society and no attention, while you find new relations to make much of, who have no earthly claim upon you! Good gracious, Edith, do you know what an elegant establishment you are at the head of?'

'Yes. Hush!'

'And that gentlemanly creature, Dombey? Do you know that you are married to him, Edith, and that you have a settlement and a position, and a carriage, and I don't know what?'

'Indeed, I know it, mother; well.'

'As you would have had with that delightful good soul - what did they call him? - Granger - if he hadn't died. And who have you to thank for all this, Edith?'

'You, mother; you.'

'Then put your arms round my neck, and kiss me; and show me, Edith, that you know there never was a better Mama than I have been to you. And don't let me become a perfect fright with teasing and wearing myself at your ingratitude, or when I'm out again in society no soul will know me, not even that hateful animal, the Major.'

But, sometimes, when Edith went nearer to her, and bending down her stately head, Put her cold cheek to hers, the mother would draw back as if she were afraid of her, and would fall into a fit of trembling, and cry out that there was a wandering in her wits. And sometimes she would entreat her, with humility, to sit down on the chair beside

her bed, and would look at her (as she sat there brooding) with a face that even the rose-coloured curtains could not make otherwise than scared and wild.

The rose-coloured curtains blushed, in course of time, on Cleopatra's bodily recovery, and on her dress - more juvenile than ever, to repair the ravages of illness - and on the rouge, and on the teeth, and on the curls, and on the diamonds, and the short sleeves, and the whole wardrobe of the doll that had tumbled down before the mirror. They blushed, too, now and then, upon an indistinctness in her speech which she turned off with a girlish giggle, and on an occasional failing in her memory, that had no rule in it, but came and went fantastically, as if in mockery of her fantastic self.

But they never blushed upon a change in the new manner of her thought and speech towards her daughter. And though that daughter often came within their influence, they never blushed upon her loveliness irradiated by a smile, or softened by the light of filial love, in its stem beauty.