

## Chapter XLIII - The Watches Of The Night

Florence, long since awakened from her dream, mournfully observed the estrangement between her father and Edith, and saw it widen more and more, and knew that there was greater bitterness between them every day. Each day's added knowledge deepened the shade upon her love and hope, roused up the old sorrow that had slumbered for a little time, and made it even heavier to bear than it had been before.

It had been hard - how hard may none but Florence ever know! - to have the natural affection of a true and earnest nature turned to agony; and slight, or stern repulse, substituted for the tenderest protection and the dearest care. It had been hard to feel in her deep heart what she had felt, and never know the happiness of one touch of response. But it was much more hard to be compelled to doubt either her father or Edith, so affectionate and dear to her, and to think of her love for each of them, by turns, with fear, distrust, and wonder.

Yet Florence now began to do so; and the doing of it was a task imposed upon her by the very purity of her soul, as one she could not fly from. She saw her father cold and obdurate to Edith, as to her; hard, inflexible, unyielding. Could it be, she asked herself with starting tears, that her own dear mother had been made unhappy by such treatment, and had pined away and died? Then she would think how proud and stately Edith was to everyone but her, with what disdain she treated him, how distantly she kept apart from him, and what she had said on the night when they came home; and quickly it would come on Florence, almost as a crime, that she loved one who was set in opposition to her father, and that her father knowing of it, must think of her in his solitary room as the unnatural child who added this wrong to the old fault, so much wept for, of never having won his fatherly affection from her birth. The next kind word from Edith, the next kind glance, would shake these thoughts again, and make them seem like black ingratitude; for who but she had cheered the drooping heart of Florence, so lonely and so hurt, and been its best of comforters! Thus, with her gentle nature yearning to them both, feeling for the misery of both, and whispering doubts of her own duty to both, Florence in her wider and expanded love, and by the side of Edith, endured more than when she had hoarded up her undivided secret in the mournful house, and her beautiful Mama had never dawned upon it.

One exquisite unhappiness that would have far outweighed this, Florence was spared. She never had the least suspicion that Edith by her tenderness for her widened the separation from her father, or gave him new cause of dislike. If Florence had conceived the possibility of such an effect being wrought by such a cause, what grief she would

have felt, what sacrifice she would have tried to make, poor loving girl, how fast and sure her quiet passage might have been beneath it to the presence of that higher Father who does not reject his children's love, or spurn their tried and broken hearts, Heaven knows! But it was otherwise, and that was well.

No word was ever spoken between Florence and Edith now, on these subjects. Edith had said there ought to be between them, in that wise, a division and a silence like the grave itself: and Florence felt she was right'

In this state of affairs her father was brought home, suffering and disabled; and gloomily retired to his own rooms, where he was tended by servants, not approached by Edith, and had no friend or companion but Mr Carker, who withdrew near midnight.

'And nice company he is, Miss Floy,' said Susan Nipper. 'Oh, he's a precious piece of goods! If ever he wants a character don't let him come to me whatever he does, that's all I tell him.'

'Dear Susan,' urged Florence, 'don't!'

'Oh, it's very well to say 'don't' Miss Floy,' returned the Nipper, much exasperated; 'but raly begging your pardon we're coming to such passes that it turns all the blood in a person's body into pins and needles, with their pints all ways. Don't mistake me, Miss Floy, I don't mean nothing again your ma-in-law who has always treated me as a lady should though she is rather high I must say not that I have any right to object to that particular, but when we come to Mrs Pipchinses and having them put over us and keeping guard at your Pa's door like crocodiles (only make us thankful that they lay no eggs!) we are a growing too outrageous!'

'Papa thinks well of Mrs Pipchin, Susan,' returned Florence, 'and has a right to choose his housekeeper, you know. Pray don't!'

'Well Miss Floy,' returned the Nipper, 'when you say don't, I never do I hope but Mrs Pipchin acts like early gooseberries upon me Miss, and nothing less.'

Susan was unusually emphatic and destitute of punctuation in her discourse on this night, which was the night of Mr Dombey's being brought home, because, having been sent downstairs by Florence to inquire after him, she had been obliged to deliver her message to her mortal enemy Mrs Pipchin; who, without carrying it in to Mr Dombey, had taken upon herself to return what Miss Nipper called a huffish answer, on her own responsibility. This, Susan Nipper construed into presumption on the part of that exemplary sufferer by the Peruvian

mines, and a deed of disparagement upon her young lady, that was not to be forgiven; and so far her emphatic state was special. But she had been in a condition of greatly increased suspicion and distrust, ever since the marriage; for, like most persons of her quality of mind, who form a strong and sincere attachment to one in the different station which Florence occupied, Susan was very jealous, and her jealousy naturally attached to Edith, who divided her old empire, and came between them. Proud and glad as Susan Nipper truly was, that her young mistress should be advanced towards her proper place in the scene of her old neglect, and that she should have her father's handsome wife for her companion and protectress, she could not relinquish any part of her own dominion to the handsome wife, without a grudge and a vague feeling of ill-will, for which she did not fail to find a disinterested justification in her sharp perception of the pride and passion of the lady's character. From the background to which she had necessarily retired somewhat, since the marriage, Miss Nipper looked on, therefore, at domestic affairs in general, with a resolute conviction that no good would come of Mrs Dombey: always being very careful to publish on all possible occasions, that she had nothing to say against her.

'Susan,' said Florence, who was sitting thoughtfully at her table, 'it is very late. I shall want nothing more to-night.'

'Ah, Miss Floy!' returned the Nipper, 'I'm sure I often wish for them old times when I sat up with you hours later than this and fell asleep through being tired out when you was as broad awake as spectacles, but you've ma's-in-law to come and sit with you now Miss Floy and I'm thankful for it I'm sure. I've not a word to say against 'em.'

'I shall not forget who was my old companion when I had none, Susan,' returned Florence, gently, 'never!' And looking up, she put her arm round the neck of her humble friend, drew her face down to hers, and bidding her good-night, kissed it; which so mollified Miss Nipper, that she fell a sobbing.

'Now my dear Miss Floy, said Susan, 'let me go downstairs again and see how your Pa is, I know you're wretched about him, do let me go downstairs again and knock at his door my own self.'

'No,' said Florence, 'go to bed. We shall hear more in the morning. I will inquire myself in the morning. Mama has been down, I daresay;' Florence blushed, for she had no such hope; 'or is there now, perhaps. Good-night!'

Susan was too much softened to express her private opinion on the probability of Mrs Dombey's being in attendance on her husband, and silently withdrew. Florence left alone, soon hid her head upon her

hands as she had often done in other days, and did not restrain the tears from coursing down her face. The misery of this domestic discord and unhappiness; the withered hope she cherished now, if hope it could be called, of ever being taken to her father's heart; her doubts and fears between the two; the yearning of her innocent breast to both; the heavy disappointment and regret of such an end as this, to what had been a vision of bright hope and promise to her; all crowded on her mind and made her tears flow fast. Her mother and her brother dead, her father unmoved towards her, Edith opposed to him and casting him away, but loving her, and loved by her, it seemed as if her affection could never prosper, rest where it would. That weak thought was soon hushed, but the thoughts in which it had arisen were too true and strong to be dismissed with it; and they made the night desolate.

Among such reflections there rose up, as there had risen up all day, the image of her father, wounded and in pain, alone in his own room, untended by those who should be nearest to him, and passing the tardy hours in lonely suffering. A frightened thought which made her start and clasp her hands - though it was not a new one in her mind - that he might die, and never see her or pronounce her name, thrilled her whole frame. In her agitation she thought, and trembled while she thought, of once more stealing downstairs, and venturing to his door.

She listened at her own. The house was quiet, and all the lights were out. It was a long, long time, she thought, since she used to make her nightly pilgrimages to his door! It was a long, long time, she tried to think, since she had entered his room at midnight, and he had led her back to the stair-foot!

With the same child's heart within her, as of old: even with the child's sweet timid eyes and clustering hair: Florence, as strange to her father in her early maiden bloom, as in her nursery time, crept down the staircase listening as she went, and drew near to his room. No one was stirring in the house. The door was partly open to admit air; and all was so still within, that she could hear the burning of the fire, and count the ticking of the clock that stood upon the chimney-piece.

She looked in. In that room, the housekeeper wrapped in a blanket was fast asleep in an easy chair before the fire. The doors between it and the next were partly closed, and a screen was drawn before them; but there was a light there, and it shone upon the cornice of his bed. All was so very still that she could hear from his breathing that he was asleep. This gave her courage to pass round the screen, and look into his chamber.

It was as great a start to come upon his sleeping face as if she had not expected to see it. Florence stood arrested on the spot, and if he had awakened then, must have remained there.

There was a cut upon his forehead, and they had been wetting his hair, which lay bedabbled and entangled on the pillow. One of his arms, resting outside the bed, was bandaged up, and he was very white. But it was not this, that after the first quick glance, and first assurance of his sleeping quietly, held Florence rooted to the ground. It was something very different from this, and more than this, that made him look so solemn in her eye

She had never seen his face in all her life, but there had been upon it - or she fancied so - some disturbing consciousness of her. She had never seen his face in all her life, but hope had sunk within her, and her timid glance had dropped before its stern, unloving, and repelling harshness. As she looked upon it now, she saw it, for the first time, free from the cloud that had darkened her childhood. Calm, tranquil night was reigning in its stead. He might have gone to sleep, for anything she saw there, blessing her.

Awake, unkind father! Awake, now, sullen man! The time is flitting by; the hour is coming with an angry tread. Awake!

There was no change upon his face; and as she watched it, awfully, its motionless repose recalled the faces that were gone. So they looked, so would he; so she, his weeping child, who should say when! so all the world of love and hatred and indifference around them! When that time should come, it would not be the heavier to him, for this that she was going to do; and it might fall something lighter upon her.

She stole close to the bed, and drawing in her breath, bent down, and softly kissed him on the face, and laid her own for one brief moment by its side, and put the arm, with which she dared not touch him, round about him on the pillow.

Awake, doomed man, while she is near! The time is flitting by; the hour is coming with an angry tread; its foot is in the house. Awake!

In her mind, she prayed to God to bless her father, and to soften him towards her, if it might be so; and if not, to forgive him if he was wrong, and pardon her the prayer which almost seemed impiety. And doing so, and looking back at him with blinded eyes, and stealing timidly away, passed out of his room, and crossed the other, and was gone.

He may sleep on now. He may sleep on while he may. But let him look for that slight figure when he wakes, and find it near him when the hour is come!

Sad and grieving was the heart of Florence, as she crept upstairs. The quiet house had grown more dismal since she came down. The sleep she had been looking on, in the dead of night, had the solemnity to her of death and life in one. The secrecy and silence of her own proceeding made the night secret, silent, and oppressive. She felt unwilling, almost unable, to go on to her own chamber; and turning into the drawing-rooms, where the clouded moon was shining through the blinds, looked out into the empty streets.

The wind was blowing drearily. The lamps looked pale, and shook as if they were cold. There was a distant glimmer of something that was not quite darkness, rather than of light, in the sky; and foreboding night was shivering and restless, as the dying are who make a troubled end. Florence remembered how, as a watcher, by a sick-bed, she had noted this bleak time, and felt its influence, as if in some hidden natural antipathy to it; and now it was very, very gloomy.

Her Mama had not come to her room that night, which was one cause of her having sat late out of her bed. In her general uneasiness, no less than in her ardent longing to have somebody to speak to, and to break the spell of gloom and silence, Florence directed her steps towards the chamber where she slept.

The door was not fastened within, and yielded smoothly to her hesitating hand. She was surprised to find a bright light burning; still more surprised, on looking in, to see that her Mama, but partially undressed, was sitting near the ashes of the fire, which had crumbled and dropped away. Her eyes were intently bent upon the air; and in their light, and in her face, and in her form, and in the grasp with which she held the elbows of her chair as if about to start up, Florence saw such fierce emotion that it terrified her.

'Mama!' she cried, 'what is the matter?'

Edith started; looking at her with such a strange dread in her face, that Florence was more frightened than before.

'Mama!' said Florence, hurriedly advancing. 'Dear Mama! what is the matter?'

'I have not been well,' said Edith, shaking, and still looking at her in the same strange way. 'I have had had dreams, my love.'

'And not yet been to bed, Mama?'

'No,' she returned. 'Half-waking dreams.'

Her features gradually softened; and suffering Florence to come closer to her, within her embrace, she said in a tender manner, 'But what does my bird do here? What does my bird do here?'

'I have been uneasy, Mama, in not seeing you to-night, and in not knowing how Papa was; and I - '

Florence stopped there, and said no more.

'Is it late?' asked Edith, fondly putting back the curls that mingled with her own dark hair, and strayed upon her face.

'Very late. Near day.'

'Near day!' she repeated in surprise.

'Dear Mama, what have you done to your hand?' said Florence.

Edith drew it suddenly away, and, for a moment, looked at her with the same strange dread (there was a sort of wild avoidance in it) as before; but she presently said, 'Nothing, nothing. A blow.' And then she said, 'My Florence!' and then her bosom heaved, and she was weeping passionately.

'Mama!' said Florence. 'Oh Mama, what can I do, what should I do, to make us happier? Is there anything?'

'Nothing,' she replied.

'Are you sure of that? Can it never be? If I speak now of what is in my thoughts, in spite of what we have agreed,' said Florence, 'you will not blame me, will you?'

'It is useless,' she replied, 'useless. I have told you, dear, that I have had bad dreams. Nothing can change them, or prevent them coming back.'

'I do not understand,' said Florence, gazing on her agitated face which seemed to darken as she looked.

'I have dreamed,' said Edith in a low voice, 'of a pride that is all powerless for good, all powerful for evil; of a pride that has been galled and goaded, through many shameful years, and has never recoiled except upon itself; a pride that has debased its owner with the consciousness of deep humiliation, and never helped its owner boldly to resent it or avoid it, or to say, 'This shall not be!' a pride that,

rightly guided, might have led perhaps to better things, but which, misdirected and perverted, like all else belonging to the same possessor, has been self-contempt, mere hardihood and ruin.'

She neither looked nor spoke to Florence now, but went on as if she were alone.

'I have dreamed,' she said, 'of such indifference and callousness, arising from this self-contempt; this wretched, inefficient, miserable pride; that it has gone on with listless steps even to the altar, yielding to the old, familiar, beckoning finger, - oh mother, oh mother! - while it spurned it; and willing to be hateful to itself for once and for all, rather than to be stung daily in some new form. Mean, poor thing!'

And now with gathering and darkening emotion, she looked as she had looked when Florence entered.

'And I have dreamed,' she said, 'that in a first late effort to achieve a purpose, it has been trodden on, and trodden down by a base foot, but turns and looks upon him. I have dreamed that it is wounded, hunted, set upon by dogs, but that it stands at bay, and will not yield; no, that it cannot if it would; but that it is urged on to hate

Her clenched hand tightened on the trembling arm she had in hers, and as she looked down on the alarmed and wondering face, frown subsided. 'Oh Florence!' she said, 'I think I have been nearly mad to-night!' and humbled her proud head upon her neck and wept again.

'Don't leave me! be near me! I have no hope but in you! These words she said a score of times.

Soon she grew calmer, and was full of pity for the tears of Florence, and for her waking at such untimely hours. And the day now dawning, with folded her in her arms and laid her down upon her bed, and, not lying down herself, sat by her, and bade her try to sleep.

'For you are weary, dearest, and unhappy, and should rest.'

'I am indeed unhappy, dear Mama, tonight,' said Florence. 'But you are weary and unhappy, too.'

'Not when you lie asleep so near me, sweet.'

They kissed each other, and Florence, worn out, gradually fell into a gentle slumber; but as her eyes closed on the face beside her, it was so sad to think upon the face downstairs, that her hand drew closer to Edith for some comfort; yet, even in the act, it faltered, lest it should be deserting him. So, in her sleep, she tried to reconcile the two



together, and to show them that she loved them both, but could not do it, and her waking grief was part of her dreams.

Edith, sitting by, looked down at the dark eyelashes lying wet on the flushed cheeks, and looked with gentleness and pity, for she knew the truth. But no sleep hung upon her own eyes. As the day came on she still sat watching and waking, with the placid hand in hers, and sometimes whispered, as she looked at the hushed face, 'Be near me, Florence. I have no hope but in you!'