

Chapter XLV - The Trusty Agent

Edith went out alone that day, and returned home early. It was but a few minutes after ten o'clock, when her carriage rolled along the street in which she lived.

There was the same enforced composure on her face, that there had been when she was dressing; and the wreath upon her head encircled the same cold and steady brow. But it would have been better to have seen its leaves and flowers reft into fragments by her passionate hand, or rendered shapeless by the fitful searches of a throbbing and bewildered brain for any resting-place, than adorning such tranquillity. So obdurate, so unapproachable, so unrelenting, one would have thought that nothing could soften such a woman's nature, and that everything in life had hardened it.

Arrived at her own door, she was alighting, when some one coming quietly from the hall, and standing bareheaded, offered her his arm. The servant being thrust aside, she had no choice but to touch it; and she then knew whose arm it was.

'How is your patient, Sir?' she asked, with a curled lip.

'He is better,' returned Carker. 'He is doing very well. I have left him for the night.'

She bent her head, and was passing up the staircase, when he followed and said, speaking at the bottom:

'Madam! May I beg the favour of a minute's audience?'

She stopped and turned her eyes back 'It is an unseasonable time, Sir, and I am fatigued. Is your business urgent?'

'It is very urgent, returned Carker. 'As I am so fortunate as to have met you, let me press my petition.'

She looked down for a moment at his glistening mouth; and he looked up at her, standing above him in her stately dress, and thought, again, how beautiful she was.

'Where is Miss Dombey?' she asked the servant, aloud.

'In the morning room, Ma'am.'

'Show the way there!' Turning her eyes again on the attentive gentleman at the bottom of the stairs, and informing him with a slight motion of her head, that he was at liberty to follow, she passed on.

'I beg your pardon! Madam! Mrs Dombey!' cried the soft and nimble Carker, at her side in a moment. 'May I be permitted to entreat that Miss Dombey is not present?'

She confronted him, with a quick look, but with the same self-possession and steadiness.

'I would spare Miss Dombey,' said Carker, in a low voice, 'the knowledge of what I have to say. At least, Madam, I would leave it to you to decide whether she shall know of it or not. I owe that to you. It is my bounden duty to you. After our former interview, it would be monstrous in me if I did otherwise.'

She slowly withdrew her eyes from his face, and turning to the servant, said, 'Some other room.' He led the way to a drawing-room, which he speedily lighted up and then left them. While he remained, not a word was spoken. Edith enthroned herself upon a couch by the fire; and Mr Carker, with his hat in his hand and his eyes bent upon the carpet, stood before her, at some little distance.

'Before I hear you, Sir,' said Edith, when the door was closed, 'I wish you to hear me.'

'To be addressed by Mrs Dombey,' he returned, 'even in accents of unmerited reproach, is an honour I so greatly esteem, that although I were not her servant in all things, I should defer to such a wish, most readily.'

'If you are charged by the man whom you have just now left, Sir;' Mr Carker raised his eyes, as if he were going to counterfeit surprise, but she met them, and stopped him, if such were his intention; 'with any message to me, do not attempt to deliver it, for I will not receive it. I need scarcely ask you if you are come on such an errand. I have expected you some time.'

'It is my misfortune,' he replied, 'to be here, wholly against my will, for such a purpose. Allow me to say that I am here for two purposes. That is one.'

'That one, Sir,' she returned, 'is ended. Or, if you return to it - '

'Can Mrs Dombey believe,' said Carker, coming nearer, 'that I would return to it in the face of her prohibition? Is it possible that Mrs Dombey, having no regard to my unfortunate position, is so determined to consider me inseparable from my instructor as to do me great and wilful injustice?'

'Sir,' returned Edith, bending her dark gaze full upon him, and speaking with a rising passion that inflated her proud nostril and her swelling neck, and stirred the delicate white down upon a robe she wore, thrown loosely over shoulders that could hear its snowy neighbourhood. 'Why do you present yourself to me, as you have done, and speak to me of love and duty to my husband, and pretend to think that I am happily married, and that I honour him? How dare you venture so to affront me, when you know - I do not know better, Sir: I have seen it in your every glance, and heard it in your every word - that in place of affection between us there is aversion and contempt, and that I despise him hardly less than I despise myself for being his! Injustice! If I had done justice to the torment you have made me feel, and to my sense of the insult you have put upon me, I should have slain you!'

She had asked him why he did this. Had she not been blinded by her pride and wrath, and self-humiliation, - which she was, fiercely as she bent her gaze upon him, - she would have seen the answer in his face. To bring her to this declaration.

She saw it not, and cared not whether it was there or no. She saw only the indignities and struggles she had undergone and had to undergo, and was writhing under them. As she sat looking fixedly at them, rather than at him, she plucked the feathers from a pinion of some rare and beautiful bird, which hung from her wrist by a golden thread, to serve her as a fan, and rained them on the ground.

He did not shrink beneath her gaze, but stood, until such outward signs of her anger as had escaped her control subsided, with the air of a man who had his sufficient reply in reserve and would presently deliver it. And he then spoke, looking straight into her kindling eyes.

'Madam,' he said, 'I know, and knew before to-day, that I have found no favour with you; and I knew why. Yes. I knew why. You have spoken so openly to me; I am so relieved by the possession of your confidence - '

'Confidence!' she repeated, with disdain.

He passed it over.

' - that I will make no pretence of concealment. I did see from the first, that there was no affection on your part for Mr Dombey - how could it possibly exist between such different subjects? And I have seen, since, that stronger feelings than indifference have been engendered in your breast - how could that possibly be otherwise, either, circumstanced as you have been? But was it for me to presume to avow this knowledge to you in so many words?'

'Was it for you, Sir,' she replied, 'to feign that other belief, and audaciously to thrust it on me day by day?'

'Madam, it was,' he eagerly retorted. 'If I had done less, if I had done anything but that, I should not be speaking to you thus; and I foresaw - who could better foresee, for who has had greater experience of Mr Dombey than myself? - that unless your character should prove to be as yielding and obedient as that of his first submissive lady, which I did not believe - '

A haughty smile gave him reason to observe that he might repeat this.

'I say, which I did not believe, - the time was likely to come, when such an understanding as we have now arrived at, would be serviceable.'

'Serviceable to whom, Sir?' she demanded scornfully.

'To you. I will not add to myself, as warning me to refrain even from that limited commendation of Mr Dombey, in which I can honestly indulge, in order that I may not have the misfortune of saying anything distasteful to one whose aversion and contempt,' with great expression, 'are so keen.'

'Is it honest in you, Sir,' said Edith, 'to confess to your 'limited commendation,' and to speak in that tone of disparagement, even of him: being his chief counsellor and flatterer!'

'Counsellor, - yes,' said Carker. 'Flatterer, - no. A little reservation I fear I must confess to. But our interest and convenience commonly oblige many of us to make professions that we cannot feel. We have partnerships of interest and convenience, friendships of interest and convenience, dealings of interest and convenience, marriages of interest and convenience, every day.'

She bit her blood-red lip; but without wavering in the dark, stern watch she kept upon him.

'Madam,' said Mr Carker, sitting down in a chair that was near her, with an air of the most profound and most considerate respect, 'why should I hesitate now, being altogether devoted to your service, to speak plainly? It was natural that a lady, endowed as you are, should think it feasible to change her husband's character in some respects, and mould him to a better form.'

'It was not natural to me, Sir,' she rejoined. 'I had never any expectation or intention of that kind.'

The proud undaunted face showed him it was resolute to wear no mask he offered, but was set upon a reckless disclosure of itself, indifferent to any aspect in which it might present itself to such as he.

'At least it was natural,' he resumed, 'that you should deem it quite possible to live with Mr Dombey as his wife, at once without submitting to him, and without coming into such violent collision with him. But, Madam, you did not know Mr Dombey (as you have since ascertained), when you thought that. You did not know how exacting and how proud he is, or how he is, if I may say so, the slave of his own greatness, and goes yoked to his own triumphal car like a beast of burden, with no idea on earth but that it is behind him and is to be drawn on, over everything and through everything.'

His teeth gleamed through his malicious relish of this conceit, as he went on talking:

'Mr Dombey is really capable of no more true consideration for you, Madam, than for me. The comparison is an extreme one; I intend it to be so; but quite just. Mr Dombey, in the plenitude of his power, asked me - I had it from his own lips yesterday morning - to be his go-between to you, because he knows I am not agreeable to you, and because he intends that I shall be a punishment for your contumacy; and besides that, because he really does consider, that I, his paid servant, am an ambassador whom it is derogatory to the dignity - not of the lady to whom I have the happiness of speaking; she has no existence in his mind - but of his wife, a part of himself, to receive. You may imagine how regardless of me, how obtuse to the possibility of my having any individual sentiment or opinion he is, when he tells me, openly, that I am so employed. You know how perfectly indifferent to your feelings he is, when he threatens you with such a messenger. As you, of course, have not forgotten that he did.'

She watched him still attentively. But he watched her too; and he saw that this indication of a knowledge on his part, of something that had passed between herself and her husband, rankled and smarted in her haughty breast, like a poisoned arrow.

'I do not recall all this to widen the breach between yourself and Mr Dombey, Madam - Heaven forbid! what would it profit me? - but as an example of the hopelessness of impressing Mr Dombey with a sense that anybody is to be considered when he is in question. We who are about him, have, in our various positions, done our part, I daresay, to confirm him in his way of thinking; but if we had not done so, others would - or they would not have been about him; and it has always been, from the beginning, the very staple of his life. Mr Dombey has had to deal, in short, with none but submissive and dependent persons, who have bowed the knee, and bent the neck, before him. He

has never known what it is to have angry pride and strong resentment opposed to him.'

'But he will know it now!' she seemed to say; though her lips did not part, nor her eyes falter. He saw the soft down tremble once again, and he saw her lay the plumage of the beautiful bird against her bosom for a moment; and he unfolded one more ring of the coil into which he had gathered himself.

'Mr Dombey, though a most honourable gentleman,' he said, 'is so prone to pervert even facts to his own view, when he is at all opposed, in consequence of the warp in his mind, that he - can I give a better instance than this! - he sincerely believes (you will excuse the folly of what I am about to say; it not being mine) that his severe expression of opinion to his present wife, on a certain special occasion she may remember, before the lamented death of Mrs Skewton, produced a withering effect, and for the moment quite subdued her!'

Edith laughed. How harshly and unmusically need not be described. It is enough that he was glad to hear her.

'Madam,' he resumed, 'I have done with this. Your own opinions are so strong, and, I am persuaded, so unalterable,' he repeated those words slowly and with great emphasis, 'that I am almost afraid to incur your displeasure anew, when I say that in spite of these defects and my full knowledge of them, I have become habituated to Mr Dombey, and esteem him. But when I say so, it is not, believe me, for the mere sake of vaunting a feeling that is so utterly at variance with your own, and for which you can have no sympathy' - oh how distinct and plain and emphasized this was! - 'but to give you an assurance of the zeal with which, in this unhappy matter, I am yours, and the indignation with which I regard the part I am to fill!'

She sat as if she were afraid to take her eyes from his face.

And now to unwind the last ring of the coil!

'It is growing late,' said Carker, after a pause, 'and you are, as you said, fatigued. But the second object of this interview, I must not forget. I must recommend you, I must entreat you in the most earnest manner, for sufficient reasons that I have, to be cautious in your demonstrations of regard for Miss Dombey.'

'Cautious! What do you mean?'

'To be careful how you exhibit too much affection for that young lady.'

'Too much affection, Sir!' said Edith, knitting her broad brow and rising. 'Who judges my affection, or measures it out? You?'

'It is not I who do so.' He was, or feigned to be, perplexed.

'Who then?'

'Can you not guess who then?'

'I do not choose to guess,' she answered.

'Madam,' he said after a little hesitation; meantime they had been, and still were, regarding each other as before; 'I am in a difficulty here. You have told me you will receive no message, and you have forbidden me to return to that subject; but the two subjects are so closely entwined, I find, that unless you will accept this vague caution from one who has now the honour to possess your confidence, though the way to it has been through your displeasure, I must violate the injunction you have laid upon me.'

'You know that you are free to do so, Sir,' said Edith. 'Do it.'

So pale, so trembling, so impassioned! He had not miscalculated the effect then!

'His instructions were,' he said, in a low voice, 'that I should inform you that your demeanour towards Miss Dombey is not agreeable to him. That it suggests comparisons to him which are not favourable to himself. That he desires it may be wholly changed; and that if you are in earnest, he is confident it will be; for your continued show of affection will not benefit its object.'

'That is a threat,' she said.

'That is a threat,' he answered, in his voiceless manner of assent: adding aloud, 'but not directed against you.'

Proud, erect, and dignified, as she stood confronting him; and looking through him as she did, with her full bright flashing eye; and smiling, as she was, with scorn and bitterness; she sunk as if the ground had dropped beneath her, and in an instant would have fallen on the floor, but that he caught her in his arms. As instantaneously she threw him off, the moment that he touched her, and, drawing back, confronted him again, immovable, with her hand stretched out.

'Please to leave me. Say no more to-night.'

'I feel the urgency of this,' said Mr Carker, 'because it is impossible to say what unforeseen consequences might arise, or how soon, from your being unacquainted with his state of mind. I understand Miss Dombey is concerned, now, at the dismissal of her old servant, which is likely to have been a minor consequence in itself. You don't blame me for requesting that Miss Dombey might not be present. May I hope so?'

'I do not. Please to leave me, Sir.'

'I knew that your regard for the young lady, which is very sincere and strong, I am well persuaded, would render it a great unhappiness to you, ever to be a prey to the reflection that you had injured her position and ruined her future hopes,' said Carker hurriedly, but eagerly.

'No more to-night. Leave me, if you please.'

'I shall be here constantly in my attendance upon him, and in the transaction of business matters. You will allow me to see you again, and to consult what should be done, and learn your wishes?'

She motioned him towards the door.

'I cannot even decide whether to tell him I have spoken to you yet; or to lead him to suppose that I have deferred doing so, for want of opportunity, or for any other reason. It will be necessary that you should enable me to consult with you very soon.'

'At any time but now,' she answered.

'You will understand, when I wish to see you, that Miss Dombey is not to be present; and that I seek an interview as one who has the happiness to possess your confidence, and who comes to render you every assistance in his power, and, perhaps, on many occasions, to ward off evil from her?'

Looking at him still with the same apparent dread of releasing him for a moment from the influence of her steady gaze, whatever that might be, she answered, 'Yes!' and once more bade him go.

He bowed, as if in compliance; but turning back, when he had nearly reached the door, said:

'I am forgiven, and have explained my fault. May I - for Miss Dombey's sake, and for my own - take your hand before I go?'

She gave him the gloved hand she had maimed last night. He took it in one of his, and kissed it, and withdrew. And when he had closed the door, he waved the hand with which he had taken hers, and thrust it in his breast.

Edith saw no one that night, but locked her door, and kept herself alone.

She did not weep; she showed no greater agitation, outwardly, than when she was riding home. She laid as proud a head upon her pillow as she had borne in her carriage; and her prayer ran thus:

'May this man be a liar! For if he has spoken truth, she is lost to me, and I have no hope left!'

This man, meanwhile, went home musing to bed, thinking, with a dainty pleasure, how imperious her passion was, how she had sat before him in her beauty, with the dark eyes that had never turned away but once; how the white down had fluttered; how the bird's feathers had been strewn upon the ground.