

Chapter LXI - Relenting

Florence had need of help. Her father's need of it was sore, and made the aid of her old friend invaluable. Death stood at his pillow. A shade, already, of what he had been, shattered in mind, and perilously sick in body, he laid his weary head down on the bed his daughter's hands prepared for him, and had never raised it since.

She was always with him. He knew her, generally; though, in the wandering of his brain, he often confused the circumstances under which he spoke to her. Thus he would address her, sometimes, as if his boy were newly dead; and would tell her, that although he had said nothing of her ministering at the little bedside, yet he had seen it - he had seen it; and then would hide his face and sob, and put out his worn hand. Sometimes he would ask her for herself. 'Where is Florence?' 'I am here, Papa, I am here.' 'I don't know her!' he would cry. 'We have been parted so long, that I don't know her!' and then a staring dread would be upon him, until she could soothe his perturbation; and recall the tears she tried so hard, at other times, to dry.

He rambled through the scenes of his old pursuits - through many where Florence lost him as she listened - sometimes for hours. He would repeat that childish question, 'What is money?' and ponder on it, and think about it, and reason with himself, more or less connectedly, for a good answer; as if it had never been proposed to him until that moment. He would go on with a musing repetition of the title of his old firm twenty thousand times, and at every one of them, would turn his head upon his pillow. He would count his children - one - two - stop, and go back, and begin again in the same way.

But this was when his mind was in its most distracted state. In all the other phases of its illness, and in those to which it was most constant, it always turned on Florence. What he would oftenest do was this: he would recall that night he had so recently remembered, the night on which she came down to his room, and would imagine that his heart smote him, and that he went out after her, and up the stairs to seek her. Then, confounding that time with the later days of the many footsteps, he would be amazed at their number, and begin to count them as he followed her. Here, of a sudden, was a bloody footstep going on among the others; and after it there began to be, at intervals, doors standing open, through which certain terrible pictures were seen, in mirrors, of haggard men, concealing something in their breasts. Still, among the many footsteps and the bloody footsteps here and there, was the step of Florence. Still she was going on before. Still the restless mind went, following and counting, ever farther, ever higher, as to the summit of a mighty tower that it took years to climb.

One day he inquired if that were not Susan who had spoken a long while ago.

Florence said 'Yes, dear Papa;' and asked him would he like to see her?

He said 'very much.' And Susan, with no little trepidation, showed herself at his bedside.

It seemed a great relief to him. He begged her not to go; to understand that he forgave her what she had said; and that she was to stay. Florence and he were very different now, he said, and very happy. Let her look at this! He meant his drawing the gentle head down to his pillow, and laying it beside him.

He remained like this for days and weeks. At length, lying, the faint feeble semblance of a man, upon his bed, and speaking in a voice so low that they could only hear him by listening very near to his lips, he became quiet. It was dimly pleasant to him now, to lie there, with the window open, looking out at the summer sky and the trees: and, in the evening, at the sunset. To watch the shadows of the clouds and leaves, and seem to feel a sympathy with shadows. It was natural that he should. To him, life and the world were nothing else.

He began to show now that he thought of Florence's fatigue: and often taxed his weakness to whisper to her, 'Go and walk, my dearest, in the sweet air. Go to your good husband!' One time when Walter was in his room, he beckoned him to come near, and to stoop down; and pressing his hand, whispered an assurance to him that he knew he could trust him with his child when he was dead.

It chanced one evening, towards sunset, when Florence and Walter were sitting in his room together, as he liked to see them, that Florence, having her baby in her arms, began in a low voice to sing to the little fellow, and sang the old tune she had so often sung to the dead child: He could not bear it at the time; he held up his trembling hand, imploring her to stop; but next day he asked her to repeat it, and to do so often of an evening: which she did. He listening, with his face turned away.

Florence was sitting on a certain time by his window, with her work-basket between her and her old attendant, who was still her faithful companion. He had fallen into a doze. It was a beautiful evening, with two hours of light to come yet; and the tranquillity and quiet made Florence very thoughtful. She was lost to everything for the moment, but the occasion when the so altered figure on the bed had first presented her to her beautiful Mama; when a touch from Walter leaning on the back of her chair, made her start.

'My dear,' said Walter, 'there is someone downstairs who wishes to speak to you.'

She fancied Walter looked grave, and asked him if anything had happened.

'No, no, my love!' said Walter. 'I have seen the gentleman myself, and spoken with him. Nothing has happened. Will you come?'

Florence put her arm through his; and confiding her father to the black-eyed Mrs Toots, who sat as brisk and smart at her work as black-eyed woman could, accompanied her husband downstairs. In the pleasant little parlour opening on the garden, sat a gentleman, who rose to advance towards her when she came in, but turned off, by reason of some peculiarity in his legs, and was only stopped by the table.

Florence then remembered Cousin Feenix, whom she had not at first recognised in the shade of the leaves. Cousin Feenix took her hand, and congratulated her upon her marriage.

'I could have wished, I am sure,' said Cousin Feenix, sitting down as Florence sat, to have had an earlier opportunity of offering my congratulations; but, in point of fact, so many painful occurrences have happened, treading, as a man may say, on one another's heels, that I have been in a devil of a state myself, and perfectly unfit for every description of society. The only description of society I have kept, has been my own; and it certainly is anything but flattering to a man's good opinion of his own sources, to know that, in point of fact, he has the capacity of boring himself to a perfectly unlimited extent.'

Florence divined, from some indefinable constraint and anxiety in this gentleman's manner - which was always a gentleman's, in spite of the harmless little eccentricities that attached to it - and from Walter's manner no less, that something more immediately tending to some object was to follow this.

'I have been mentioning to my friend Mr Gay, if I may be allowed to have the honour of calling him so,' said Cousin Feenix, 'that I am rejoiced to hear that my friend Dombey is very decidedly mending. I trust my friend Dombey will not allow his mind to be too much preyed upon, by any mere loss of fortune. I cannot say that I have ever experienced any very great loss of fortune myself: never having had, in point of fact, any great amount of fortune to lose. But as much as I could lose, I have lost; and I don't find that I particularly care about it. I know my friend Dombey to be a devilish honourable man; and it's calculated to console my friend Dombey very much, to know, that this is the universal sentiment. Even Tommy Screwzer, - a man of an

extremely bilious habit, with whom my friend Gay is probably acquainted - cannot say a syllable in disputation of the fact.'

Florence felt, more than ever, that there was something to come; and looked earnestly for it. So earnestly, that Cousin Feenix answered, as if she had spoken.

'The fact is,' said Cousin Feenix, 'that my friend Gay and myself have been discussing the propriety of entreating a favour at your hands; and that I have the consent of my friend Gay - who has met me in an exceedingly kind and open manner, for which I am very much indebted to him - to solicit it. I am sensible that so amiable a lady as the lovely and accomplished daughter of my friend Dombey will not require much urging; but I am happy to know, that I am supported by my friend Gay's influence and approval. As in my parliamentary time, when a man had a motion to make of any sort - which happened seldom in those days, for we were kept very tight in hand, the leaders on both sides being regular Martinets, which was a devilish good thing for the rank and file, like myself, and prevented our exposing ourselves continually, as a great many of us had a feverish anxiety to do - as' in my parliamentary time, I was about to say, when a man had leave to let off any little private popgun, it was always considered a great point for him to say that he had the happiness of believing that his sentiments were not without an echo in the breast of Mr Pitt; the pilot, in point of fact, who had weathered the storm. Upon which, a devilish large number of fellows immediately cheered, and put him in spirits. Though the fact is, that these fellows, being under orders to cheer most excessively whenever Mr Pitt's name was mentioned, became so proficient that it always woke 'em. And they were so entirely innocent of what was going on, otherwise, that it used to be commonly said by Conversation Brown - four-bottle man at the Treasury Board, with whom the father of my friend Gay was probably acquainted, for it was before my friend Gay's time - that if a man had risen in his place, and said that he regretted to inform the house that there was an Honourable Member in the last stage of convulsions in the Lobby, and that the Honourable Member's name was Pitt, the approbation would have been vociferous.'

This postponement of the point, put Florence in a flutter; and she looked from Cousin Feenix to Walter, in increasing agitation.

'My love,' said Walter, 'there is nothing the matter.'

'There is nothing the matter, upon my honour,' said Cousin Feenix; 'and I am deeply distressed at being the means of causing you a moment's uneasiness. I beg to assure you that there is nothing the matter. The favour that I have to ask is, simply - but it really does seem so exceedingly singular, that I should be in the last degree

obliged to my friend Gay if he would have the goodness to break the - in point of fact, the ice,' said Cousin Feenix.

Walter thus appealed to, and appealed to no less in the look that Florence turned towards him, said:

'My dearest, it is no more than this. That you will ride to London with this gentleman, whom you know.

'And my friend Gay, also - I beg your pardon!' interrupted Cousin Feenix.

And with me - and make a visit somewhere.'

'To whom?' asked Florence, looking from one to the other.

'If I might entreat,' said Cousin Feenix, 'that you would not press for an answer to that question, I would venture to take the liberty of making the request.'

'Do you know, Walter?'

'Yes.'

'And think it right?'

'Yes. Only because I am sure that you would too. Though there may be reasons I very well understand, which make it better that nothing more should be said beforehand.'

'If Papa is still asleep, or can spare me if he is awake, I will go immediately,' said Florence. And rising quietly, and glancing at them with a look that was a little alarmed but perfectly confiding, left the room.

When she came back, ready to bear them company, they were talking together, gravely, at the window; and Florence could not but wonder what the topic was, that had made them so well acquainted in so short a time. She did not wonder at the look of pride and love with which her husband broke off as she entered; for she never saw him, but that rested on her.

'I will leave,' said Cousin Feenix, 'a card for my friend Dombey, sincerely trusting that he will pick up health and strength with every returning hour. And I hope my friend Dombey will do me the favour to consider me a man who has a devilish warm admiration of his character, as, in point of fact, a British merchant and a devilish upright gentleman. My place in the country is in a most confounded

state of dilapidation, but if my friend Dombey should require a change of air, and would take up his quarters there, he would find it a remarkably healthy spot - as it need be, for it's amazingly dull. If my friend Dombey suffers from bodily weakness, and would allow me to recommend what has frequently done myself good, as a man who has been extremely queer at times, and who lived pretty freely in the days when men lived very freely, I should say, let it be in point of fact the yolk of an egg, beat up with sugar and nutmeg, in a glass of sherry, and taken in the morning with a slice of dry toast. Jackson, who kept the boxing-rooms in Bond Street - man of very superior qualifications, with whose reputation my friend Gay is no doubt acquainted - used to mention that in training for the ring they substituted rum for sherry. I should recommend sherry in this case, on account of my friend Dombey being in an invalided condition; which might occasion rum to fly - in point of fact to his head - and throw him into a devil of a state.'

Of all this, Cousin Feenix delivered himself with an obviously nervous and discomposed air. Then, giving his arm to Florence, and putting the strongest possible constraint upon his wilful legs, which seemed determined to go out into the garden, he led her to the door, and handed her into a carriage that was ready for her reception.

Walter entered after him, and they drove away.

Their ride was six or eight miles long. When they drove through certain dull and stately streets, lying westward in London, it was growing dusk. Florence had, by this time, put her hand in Walter's; and was looking very earnestly, and with increasing agitation, into every new street into which they turned.

When the carriage stopped, at last, before that house in Brook Street, where her father's unhappy marriage had been celebrated, Florence said, 'Walter, what is this? Who is here?' Walter cheering her, and not replying, she glanced up at the house-front, and saw that all the windows were shut, as if it were uninhabited. Cousin Feenix had by this time alighted, and was offering his hand.

'Are you not coming, Walter?'

'No, I will remain here. Don't tremble there is nothing to fear, dearest Florence.' 'I know that, Walter, with you so near. I am sure of that, but -'

The door was softly opened, without any knock, and Cousin Feenix led her out of the summer evening air into the close dull house. More sombre and brown than ever, it seemed to have been shut up from the wedding-day, and to have hoarded darkness and sadness ever since.

Florence ascended the dusky staircase, trembling; and stopped, with her conductor, at the drawing-room door. He opened it, without speaking, and signed an entreaty to her to advance into the inner room, while he remained there. Florence, after hesitating an instant, complied.

Sitting by the window at a table, where she seemed to have been writing or drawing, was a lady, whose head, turned away towards the dying light, was resting on her hand. Florence advancing, doubtfully, all at once stood still, as if she had lost the power of motion. The lady turned her head.

'Great Heaven!' she said, 'what is this?'

'No, no!' cried Florence, shrinking back as she rose up and putting out her hands to keep her off. 'Mama!'

They stood looking at each other. Passion and pride had worn it, but it was the face of Edith, and beautiful and stately yet. It was the face of Florence, and through all the terrified avoidance it expressed, there was pity in it, sorrow, a grateful tender memory. On each face, wonder and fear were painted vividly; each so still and silent, looking at the other over the black gulf of the irrevocable past.

Florence was the first to change. Bursting into tears, she said from her full heart, 'Oh, Mama, Mama! why do we meet like this? Why were you ever kind to me when there was no one else, that we should meet like this?'

Edith stood before her, dumb and motionless. Her eyes were fixed upon her face.

'I dare not think of that,' said Florence, 'I am come from Papa's sick bed. We are never asunder now; we never shall be' any more. If you would have me ask his pardon, I will do it, Mama. I am almost sure he will grant it now, if I ask him. May Heaven grant it to you, too, and comfort you!'

She answered not a word.

'Walter - I am married to him, and we have a son,' said Florence, timidly - 'is at the door, and has brought me here. I will tell him that you are repentant; that you are changed,' said Florence, looking mournfully upon her; 'and he will speak to Papa with me, I know. Is there anything but this that I can do?'

Edith, breaking her silence, without moving eye or limb, answered slowly:

'The stain upon your name, upon your husband's, on your child's. Will that ever be forgiven, Florence?'

'Will it ever be, Mama? It is! Freely, freely, both by Walter and by me. If that is any consolation to you, there is nothing that you may believe more certainly. You do not - you do not,' faltered Florence, 'speak of Papa; but I am sure you wish that I should ask him for his forgiveness. I am sure you do.'

She answered not a word.

'I will!' said Florence. 'I will bring it you, if you will let me; and then, perhaps, we may take leave of each other, more like what we used to be to one another. I have not,' said Florence very gently, and drawing nearer to her, 'I have not shrunk back from you, Mama, because I fear you, or because I dread to be disgraced by you. I only wish to do my duty to Papa. I am very dear to him, and he is very dear to me. But I never can forget that you were very good to me. Oh, pray to Heaven,' cried Florence, falling on her bosom, 'pray to Heaven, Mama, to forgive you all this sin and shame, and to forgive me if I cannot help doing this (if it is wrong), when I remember what you used to be!'

Edith, as if she fell beneath her touch, sunk down on her knees, and caught her round the neck.

'Florence!' she cried. 'My better angel! Before I am mad again, before my stubbornness comes back and strikes me dumb, believe me, upon my soul I am innocent!'

'Mama!'

'Guilty of much! Guilty of that which sets a waste between us evermore. Guilty of what must separate me, through the whole remainder of my life, from purity and innocence - from you, of all the earth. Guilty of a blind and passionate resentment, of which I do not, cannot, will not, even now, repent; but not guilty with that dead man. Before God!'

Upon her knees upon the ground, she held up both her hands, and swore it.

'Florence!' she said, 'purest and best of natures, - whom I love - who might have changed me long ago, and did for a time work some change even in the woman that I am, - believe me, I am innocent of that; and once more, on my desolate heart, let me lay this dear head, for the last time!'

She was moved and weeping. Had she been oftener thus in older days, she had been happier now.

'There is nothing else in all the world,' she said, 'that would have wrung denial from me. No love, no hatred, no hope, no threat. I said that I would die, and make no sign. I could have done so, and I would, if we had never met, Florence.

'I trust,' said Cousin Feenix, ambling in at the door, and speaking, half in the room, and half out of it, 'that my lovely and accomplished relative will excuse my having, by a little stratagem, effected this meeting. I cannot say that I was, at first, wholly incredulous as to the possibility of my lovely and accomplished relative having, very unfortunately, committed herself with the deceased person with white teeth; because in point of fact, one does see, in this world - which is remarkable for devilish strange arrangements, and for being decidedly the most unintelligible thing within a man's experience - very odd conjunctions of that sort. But as I mentioned to my friend Dombey, I could not admit the criminality of my lovely and accomplished relative until it was perfectly established. And feeling, when the deceased person was, in point of fact, destroyed in a devilish horrible manner, that her position was a very painful one - and feeling besides that our family had been a little to blame in not paying more attention to her, and that we are a careless family - and also that my aunt, though a devilish lively woman, had perhaps not been the very best of mothers - I took the liberty of seeking her in France, and offering her such protection as a man very much out at elbows could offer. Upon which occasion, my lovely and accomplished relative did me the honour to express that she believed I was, in my way, a devilish good sort of fellow; and that therefore she put herself under my protection. Which in point of fact I understood to be a kind thing on the part of my lovely and accomplished relative, as I am getting extremely shaky, and have derived great comfort from her solicitude.'

Edith, who had taken Florence to a sofa, made a gesture with her hand as if she would have begged him to say no more.

'My lovely and accomplished relative,' resumed Cousin Feenix, still ambling about at the door, 'will excuse me, if, for her satisfaction, and my own, and that of my friend Dombey, whose lovely and accomplished daughter we so much admire, I complete the thread of my observations. She will remember that, from the first, she and I never alluded to the subject of her elopement. My impression, certainly, has always been, that there was a mystery in the affair which she could explain if so inclined. But my lovely and accomplished relative being a devilish resolute woman, I knew that she was not, in point of fact, to be trifled with, and therefore did not involve myself in any discussions. But, observing lately, that her

accessible point did appear to be a very strong description of tenderness for the daughter of my friend Dombey, it occurred to me that if I could bring about a meeting, unexpected on both sides, it might lead to beneficial results. Therefore, we being in London, in the present private way, before going to the South of Italy, there to establish ourselves, in point of fact, until we go to our long homes, which is a devilish disagreeable reflection for a man, I applied myself to the discovery of the residence of my friend Gay - handsome man of an uncommonly frank disposition, who is probably known to my lovely and accomplished relative - and had the happiness of bringing his amiable wife to the present place. And now,' said Cousin Feenix, with a real and genuine earnestness shining through the levity of his manner and his slipshod speech, 'I do conjure my relative, not to stop half way, but to set right, as far as she can, whatever she has done wrong - not for the honour of her family, not for her own fame, not for any of those considerations which unfortunate circumstances have induced her to regard as hollow, and in point of fact, as approaching to humbug - but because it is wrong, and not right.'

Cousin Feenix's legs consented to take him away after this; and leaving them alone together, he shut the door.

Edith remained silent for some minutes, with Florence sitting close beside her. Then she took from her bosom a sealed paper.

'I debated with myself a long time,' she said in a low voice, 'whether to write this at all, in case of dying suddenly or by accident, and feeling the want of it upon me. I have deliberated, ever since, when and how to destroy it. Take it, Florence. The truth is written in it.'

'Is it for Papa?' asked Florence.

'It is for whom you will,' she answered. 'It is given to you, and is obtained by you. He never could have had it otherwise.'

Again they sat silent, in the deepening darkness.

'Mama,' said Florence, 'he has lost his fortune; he has been at the point of death; he may not recover, even now. Is there any word that I shall say to him from you?'

'Did you tell me,' asked Edith, 'that you were very dear to him?'

'Yes!' said Florence, in a thrilling voice.

'Tell him I am sorry that we ever met.'

'No more?' said Florence after a pause.

'Tell him, if he asks, that I do not repent of what I have done - not yet - for if it were to do again to-morrow, I should do it. But if he is a changed man - '

She stopped. There was something in the silent touch of Florence's hand that stopped her.

'But that being a changed man, he knows, now, it would never be. Tell him I wish it never had been.'

'May I say,' said Florence, 'that you grieved to hear of the afflictions he has suffered?'

'Not,' she replied, 'if they have taught him that his daughter is very dear to him. He will not grieve for them himself, one day, if they have brought that lesson, Florence.'

'You wish well to him, and would have him happy. I am sure you would!' said Florence. 'Oh! let me be able, if I have the occasion at some future time, to say so?'

Edith sat with her dark eyes gazing steadfastly before her, and did not reply until Florence had repeated her entreaty; when she drew her hand within her arm, and said, with the same thoughtful gaze upon the night outside:

'Tell him that if, in his own present, he can find any reason to compassionate my past, I sent word that I asked him to do so. Tell him that if, in his own present, he can find a reason to think less bitterly of me, I asked him to do so. Tell him, that, dead as we are to one another, never more to meet on this side of eternity, he knows there is one feeling in common between us now, that there never was before.'

Her sternness seemed to yield, and there were tears in her dark eyes.

'I trust myself to that,' she said, 'for his better thoughts of me, and mine of him. When he loves his Florence most, he will hate me least. When he is most proud and happy in her and her children, he will be most repentant of his own part in the dark vision of our married life. At that time, I will be repentant too - let him know it then - and think that when I thought so much of all the causes that had made me what I was, I needed to have allowed more for the causes that had made him what he was. I will try, then, to forgive him his share of blame. Let him try to forgive me mine!'

'Oh Mama!' said Florence. 'How it lightens my heart, even in such a strange meeting and parting, to hear this!'

'Strange words in my own ears,' said Edith, 'and foreign to the sound of my own voice! But even if I had been the wretched creature I have given him occasion to believe me, I think I could have said them still, hearing that you and he were very dear to one another. Let him, when you are dearest, ever feel that he is most forbearing in his thoughts of me - that I am most forbearing in my thoughts of him! Those are the last words I send him! Now, goodbye, my life!'

She clasped her in her arms, and seemed to pour out all her woman's soul of love and tenderness at once.

'This kiss for your child! These kisses for a blessing on your head! My own dear Florence, my sweet girl, farewell!'

'To meet again!' cried Florence.

'Never again! Never again! When you leave me in this dark room, think that you have left me in the grave. Remember only that I was once, and that I loved you!'

And Florence left her, seeing her face no more, but accompanied by her embraces and caresses to the last.

Cousin Feenix met her at the door, and took her down to Walter in the dingy dining room, upon whose shoulder she laid her head weeping.

'I am devilish sorry,' said Cousin Feenix, lifting his wristbands to his eyes in the simplest manner possible, and without the least concealment, 'that the lovely and accomplished daughter of my friend Dombey and amiable wife of my friend Gay, should have had her sensitive nature so very much distressed and cut up by the interview which is just concluded. But I hope and trust I have acted for the best, and that my honourable friend Dombey will find his mind relieved by the disclosures which have taken place. I exceedingly lament that my friend Dombey should have got himself, in point of fact, into the devil's own state of conglomeration by an alliance with our family; but am strongly of opinion that if it hadn't been for the infernal scoundrel Barker - man with white teeth - everything would have gone on pretty smoothly. In regard to my relative who does me the honour to have formed an uncommonly good opinion of myself, I can assure the amiable wife of my friend Gay, that she may rely on my being, in point of fact, a father to her. And in regard to the changes of human life, and the extraordinary manner in which we are perpetually conducting ourselves, all I can say is, with my friend Shakespeare - man who wasn't for an age but for all time, and with whom my friend Gay is no doubt acquainted - that its like the shadow of a dream.'