

LETTER XVI

MISS CLARISSA HARLOWE, TO MISS HOWE [HER PRECEDING NOT AT THAT TIME RECEIVED.] FRIDAY, MARCH 3.

(..)I had but just got into my own apartment, and began to think of sending Hannah to beg an audience of my mother (the more encouraged by her condescending goodness at breakfast) when Shorey, her woman, brought me her commands to attend me in her closet.

My father, Hannah told me, was just gone out of it with a positive angry countenance. Then I as much dreaded the audience as I had wished for it before.

I went down however; but, apprehending the subject she intended to talk to me upon, approached her trembling, and my heart in visible palpitations.

She saw my concern. Holding out her kind arms, as she sat, Come kiss me, my dear, said she, with a smile like a sun-beam breaking through the cloud that overshadowed her naturally benign aspect—Why flutters my jewel so?

This preparative sweetness, with her goodness just before, confirmed my apprehensions. My mother saw the bitter pill wanted gilding.

O my Mamma! was all I could say; and I clasped my arms round her neck, and my face sunk into her bosom.

My child! my child! restrain, said she, your powers of moving! I dare not else trust myself with you.—And my tears trickled down her bosom, as hers bedewed my neck.

O the words of kindness, all to be expressed in vain, that flowed from her lips!

Lift up your sweet face, my best child, my own Clarissa Harlowe!—O my daughter, best beloved of my heart, lift up a face so ever amiable to me!—Why these sobs?—Is an apprehended duty so affecting a thing, that before I can speak—But I am glad, my love, you can guess at what I have to say to you. I am spared the pains of breaking to you what was a task upon me reluctantly enough undertaken to break to you. Then rising, she drew a chair near her own, and made me sit down by her, overwhelmed as I was with tears of apprehension of what she had to say, and of gratitude for her truly maternal goodness to me—sobs still my only language.

And drawing her chair still nearer to mine, she put her arms round my neck, and my glowing cheek wet with my tears, close to her own: Let me talk to you, my child. Since silence is your choice, hearken to me, and be silent.

You know, my dear, what I every day forego, and undergo, for the sake of peace. Your papa is a very good man, and means well; but he will not be controuled; nor yet persuaded. You have sometimes seemed to pity me, that I am obliged to give up every point. Poor man! his reputation the less for it; mine the greater: yet would I not have this credit, if I could help it, at so dear a rate to him and to myself. You are a dutiful, a prudent, and a wise child, she was pleased to say, in hope, no doubt, to make me so: you would not add, I am sure, to my trouble: you would not wilfully break that peace which costs your mother so much to preserve. Obedience is better than sacrifice. O my Clary Harlowe, rejoice my heart, by telling me that I have apprehended too much!—I see your concern! I see your perplexity! I see your conflict! [loosing her arm, and rising, not willing I should see how much she herself was affected]. I will leave you a moment.—Answer me not—[for I was essaying to speak, and had, as soon as she took her dear cheek from mine, dropt down on my knees, my hands clasped, and lifted up in a supplicating manner]—I am not prepared for your irresistible expostulation, she was pleased to say. I will leave you to recollection: and I charge you, on my blessing, that all this my truly maternal tenderness be not thrown away upon you.

And then she withdrew into the next apartment; wiping her eyes as she went from me; as mine overflowed; my heart taking in the whole compass of her meaning.

She soon returned, having recovered more steadiness.

Still on my knees, I had thrown my face across the chair she had sat in.

Look up to me, my Clary Harlowe—No sullenness, I hope!

No, indeed, my ever-to-be-revered Mamma.—And I arose. I bent my knee.

She raised me. No kneeling to me, but with knees of duty and compliance. Your heart, not your knees, must bend. It is absolutely determined. Prepare yourself therefore to receive your father, when he visits you by-and-by, as he would wish to receive you. But on this one quarter of an hour depends the peace of my future life, the satisfaction of all the family, and your own security from a man of violence: and I charge you besides, on my blessing, that you think of being Mrs. Solmes.

There went the dagger to my heart, and down I sunk: and when I recovered, found myself in the arms of my Hannah, my sister's Betty holding open my reluctantly-opened palm, my laces cut, my linen scented with hartshorn; and my mother gone (...)