Chapter IV - Mr Yorke (Continued)

A Yorkshire gentleman he was, par excellence, in every point; about fifty- five years old, but looking at first sight still older, for his hair was silver white. His forehead was broad, not high; his face fresh and hale; the harshness of the north was seen in his features, as it was heard in his voice; every trait was thoroughly English - not a Norman line anywhere; it was an inelegant, unclassic, unaristoctatic mould of visage. Fine people would perhaps have called it vulgar; sensible people would have termed it characteristic; shrewd people would have delighted in it for the pith, sagacity, intelligence, the rude yet real originality marked in every lineament, latent in every furrow. But it was an indocile, a scornful, and a sarcastic face - the face of a man difficult to lead, and impossible to drive. His stature was rather tall, and he was well made and wiry, and had a stately integrity of port; there was not a suspicion of the clown about him anywhere.

I did not find it easy to sketch Mr Yorke's person, but it is more difficult to indicate his mind. If you expect to be treated to a Perfection, reader, or even to a benevolent, philanthropic old gentleman in him, you are mistaken. He has spoken with some sense and with some good feeling to Mr Moore, but you are not thence to conclude that he always spoke and thought justly and kindly.

Mr Yorke, in the first place, was without the organ of veneration - a great want, and which throws a man wrong on every point where veneration is required. Secondly, he was without the organ of Comparison - a deficiency which strips a man of sympathy; and thirdly, he had too little of the organs of Benevolence and Ideality, which took the glory and softness from his nature, and for him diminished those divine qualities throughout the universe.

The want of veneration made him intolerant to those above him - kings and nobles and priests, dynasties and parliaments and establishments, with all their doings, most of their enactments, their forms, their rights, their claims, were to him an abomination, all rubbish; he found no use or pleasure in them, and believed it would be clear gain, and no damage to the world, if its high places were razed, and their occupants crushed in the fall. The want of veneration, too, made him dead at heart to the electric delight of admiring what is admirable; it dried up a thousand pure sources of enjoyment; it withered a thousand vivid pleasures. He was not irreligious, though a member of no sect; but his religion could not be that of one who knows how to venerate. He believed in God and heaven; but his God and heaven were those of a man in whom awe, imagination, and tenderness lack.

The weakness of his powers of comparison made him inconsistent; while he professed some excellent general doctrines of mutual toleration and forbearance, he cherished towards certain classes a bigoted antipathy. He spoke of 'parsons' and all who belonged to parsons, of 'lords' and the appendages of lords, with a harshness, sometimes an insolence, as unjust as it was insufferable. He could not place himself in the position of those he vituperated; he could not compare their errors with their temptations, their defects with their disadvantages; he could not realise the effect of such and such circumstances on himself similarly situated, and he would often express the most ferocious and tyrannical wishes regarding those who had acted, as he thought, ferociously and tyrannically. To judge by his threats, he would have employed arbitrary, even cruel, means to advance the cause of freedom and equality. Equality! yes, Mr Yorke talked about equality, but at heart he was a proud man: very friendly to his workpeople, very good to all who were beneath him, and submitted quietly to be beneath him, but haughty as Beelzebub to whomsoever the world deemed (for he deemed no man) his superior. Revolt was in his blood: he could not bear control; his father, his grandfather before him, could not bear it, and his children after him never could.

The want of general benevolence made him very impatient of imbecility, and of all faults which grated on his strong, shrewd nature; it left no check to his cutting sarcasm. As he was not merciful, he would sometimes wound and wound again, without noticing how much he hurt, or caring how deep he thrust.

As to the paucity of ideality in his mind, that can scarcely be called a fault: a fine ear for music, a correct eye for colour and form, left him the quality of taste; and who cares for imagination? Who does not think it a rather dangerous, senseless attribute, akin to weakness, perhaps partaking of frenzy - a disease rather than a gift of the mind?

Probably all think it so but those who possess, or fancy they possess it. To hear them speak, you would believe that their hearts would be cold if that elixir did not flow about them, that their eyes would be dim if that flame did not refine their vision, that they would be lonely if this strange companion abandoned them. You would suppose that it imparted some glad hope to spring, some fine charm to summer, some tranquil joy to autumn, some consolation to winter, which you do not feel. All illusion, of course; but the fanatics cling to their dream, and would not give it for gold.

As Mr Yorke did not possess poetic imagination himself, he considered it a most superfluous quality in others. Painters and musicians he could tolerate, and even encourage, because he could relish the results of their art; he could see the charm of a fine picture, and feel

the pleasure of good music; but a quiet poet - whatever force struggled, whatever fire glowed in his breast - if he could not have played the man in the counting-house, or the tradesman in the Piece Hall, might have lived despised, and died scorned, under the eyes of Hiram Yorke.

And as there are' many Hiram Yorkes in the world, it is well that the true poet, quiet externally though he may be, has often a truculent spirit under his placidity, and is full of shrewdness in his meekness, and can measure the whole stature of those who look down on him, and correctly ascertain the weight and value of the pursuits they disdain him for not having followed. It is happy that he can have his own bliss, his own society with his great friend and goddess Nature, quite independent of those who find little pleasure in him, and in whom he finds no pleasure at all. It is just that while the world and circumstances often turn a dark, cold side to him - and properly, too, because he first turns a dark, cold, careless side to them - he should be able to maintain a festal brightness and cherishing glow in his bosom, which makes all bright and genial for him; while strangers, perhaps, deem his existence a Polar winter never gladdened by a sun. The true poet is not one whit to be pitied, and he is apt to laugh in his sleeve when any misguided sympathiser whines over his wrongs. Even when utilitarians sit in judgment on him, and pronounce him and his art useless, he hears the sentence with such a hard derision, such a broad, deep, comprehensive, and merciless contempt of the unhappy Pharisees who pronounce it, that he is rather to be chidden than condoled with. These, however, are not Mr Yorke's reflections, and it is with Mr Yorke we have at present to do.

I have told you some of his faults, reader: as to his good points, he was one of the most honourable and capable men in Yorkshire; even those who disliked him were forced to respect him. He was much beloved by the poor, because he was thoroughly kind and very fatherly to them. To his workmen he was considerate and cordial: when he dismissed them from an occupation, he would try to set them on to something else, or, if that was impossible, help them to remove with their families to a district where work might possibly be had. It must also be remarked that if, as sometimes chanced, any individual amongst his 'hands' showed signs of insubordination, Yorke - who, like many who abhor being controlled, knew how to control with vigour - had the secret of crushing rebellion in the germ, of eradicating it like a bad weed, so that it never spread or developed within the sphere of his authority. Such being the happy state of his own affairs, he felt himself at liberty to speak with the utmost severity of those who were differently situated, to ascribe whatever was unpleasant in their position entirely to their own fault, to sever himself from the masters, and advocate freely the cause of the operatives.

Mr Yorke's family was the first and oldest in the district; and he, though not the wealthiest, was one of the most influential men. His education had been good. In his youth, before the French Revolution, he had travelled on the Continent He was an adept in the French and Italian languages. During a two years' sojourn in Italy he had collected many good paintings and tasteful rarities, with which his residence was now adorned. His manners, when he liked, were those of a finished gentleman of the old school; his conversation, when he was disposed to please, was singularly interesting and original; and if he usually expressed himself in the Yorkshire dialect; it was because he chose to do so, preferring his native Doric to a more refined vocabulary. 'A Yorkshire burr,' he affirmed, 'was as much better than a cockney's lisp as a bull's bellow than a ratton's squeak.'

Mr Yorke knew every one, and was known by every one, for miles round; yet his intimate acquaintances were very few. Himself thoroughly original, he had no taste for what was ordinary: a racy, rough character, high or low, ever found acceptance with him; a refined, insipid personage, however exalted in station, was his aversion. He would spend an hour any time in talking freely with a shrewd workman of his own, or with some queer, sagacious old woman amongst his cottagers, when he would have grudged a moment to a commonplace fine gentleman or to the most fashionable and elegant, if frivolous, lady. His preferences on these points he carried to an extreme, forgetting that there may be amiable and even admirable characters amongst those who cannot be original. Yet he made exceptions to his own rule. There was a certain order of mind, plain, ingenuous, neglecting refinement, almost devoid of intellectuality, and quite incapable of appreciating what was intellectual in him, but which, at the same time, never felt disgust at his rudeness, was not easily wounded by his sarcasm, did not closely analyse his sayings, doings, or opinions, with which he was peculiarly at ease, and, consequently, which he peculiarly preferred. He was lord amongst such characters. They, while submitting implicitly to his influence, never acknowledged, because they never reflected on, his superiority; they were quite tractable therefore without running the smallest danger of being servile; and their unthinking, easy, artless insensibility was as acceptable, because as convenient, to Mr Yorke as that of the chair he sat on, or of the floor he trod.

It will have been observed that he was not quite uncordial with Mr Moore. He had two or three reasons for entertaining a faint partiality to that gentleman. It may sound odd, but the first of these was that Moore spoke English with a foreign, and French with a perfectly pure, accent and that his dark, thin face, with its fine though rather wasted lines, had a most anti-British and anti- Yorkshire look These points seem frivolous, unlikely to influence a character like Yorke's; but the fact is they recalled old, perhaps pleasurable associations they

brought back his travelling, his youthful days. He had seen, amidst Italian cities and scenes, faces like Moore's; he had heard, in Parisian cafes and theatres, voices like his. He was young then, and when he looked at and listened to the alien, he seemed young again.

Secondly, he had known Moore's father, and had had dealings with him. That was a more substantial, though by no means a more agreeable tie; for as his firm had been connected with Moore's in business, it had also, in some measure, been implicated in its losses. Thirdly, he had found Robert himself a sharp man of business. He saw reason to anticipate that he would, in the end, by one means or another, make money; and he respected both his resolution and acuteness - perhaps also, his hardness. A fourth circumstance which drew them together was that of Mr Yorke being one of the guardians of the minor on whose estate Hollow's Mill was situated; consequently Moore, in the course of his alterations and improvements, had frequent occasion to consult him.

As to the other guest now present in Mr Yorke's parlour, Mr Helstone, between him and his host there existed a double antipathy - the antipathy of nature and that of circumstances. The free-thinker hated the formalist, the lover of liberty detested the disciplinarian. Besides, it was said that in former years they had been rival suitors of the same lady.

Mr Yorke, as a general rule, was, when young, noted for his preference of sprightly and dashing women: a showy shape and air, a lively wit, a ready tongue, chiefly seemed to attract him. He never, however, proposed to any of these brilliant belles whose society he sought; and all at once he seriously fell in love with and eagerly wooed a girl who presented a complete contrast to those he had hitherto noticed - a girl with the face of a Madonna; a girl of living marble - stillness personified. No matter that, when he spoke to her, she only answered him in monosyllables; no matter that his sighs seemed unheard, that his glances were unreturned, that she never responded to his opinions, rarely smiled at his jests, paid him no respect and no attention; no matter that she seemed the opposite of everything feminine he had ever in his whole life been known to admire. For him Mary Cave was perfect, because somehow, for some reason - no doubt he had a reason - he loved her.

Mr Helstone, at that time curate of Briarfield, loved Mary too or, at any rate, he fancied her. Several others admired her, for she was beautiful as a monumental angel; but the clergyman was preferred for his office's sake - that office probably investing him with some of the illusion necessary to allure to the commission of matrimony, and which Miss Cave did not find in any of the young wool-staplers, her other adorers. Mr Helstone neither had, nor professed to have, Mr

Yorke's absorbing passion for her. He had none of the humble reverence which seemed to subdue most of her suitors; he saw her more as she really was than the rest did. He was, consequently, more master of her and himself. She accepted him at the first offer, and they were married.

Nature never intended Mr Helstone to make a very good husband, especially to a quiet wife. He thought so long as a woman was silent nothing ailed her, and she wanted nothing. If she did not complain of solitude, solitude, however continued, could not be irksome to her. If she did not talk and put herself forward, express a partiality for this, an aversion to that, she had no partialities or aversions, and it was useless to consult her tastes. He made no pretence of comprehending women, or comparing them with men. They were a different, probably a very inferior, order of existence. A wife could not be her husband's companion, much less his confidante, much less his stay. His wife, after a year or two, was of no great importance to him in any shape; and when she one day, as he thought, suddenly - for he had scarcely noticed her decline - but, as others thought, gradually, took her leave of him and of life, and there was only a still; beautiful-featured mould of clay left, cold and white, in the conjugal couch, he felt his bereavement - who shall say how little? Yet, perhaps, more than he seemed to feel it; for he was not a man from whom grief easily wrung tears.

His dry-eyed and sober mourning scandalised an old housekeeper, and likewise a female attendant, who had waited upon Mrs Helstone in her sickness, and who, perhaps, had had opportunities of learning more of the deceased lady's nature, of her capacity for feeling and loving, than her husband knew. They gossiped together over the corpse, related anecdotes, with embellishments of her lingering decline, and its real or supposed cause. In short, they worked each other up to some indignation against the austere little man, who sat examining papers in an adjoining room, unconscious of what opprobrium he was the object.

Mrs Helstone was hardly under the sod, when rumours began to be rife in the neighbourhood that she had died of a broken heart. These magnified quickly into reports of hard usage, and, finally, details of harsh treatment on the part of her husband - reports grossly untrue, but not the less eagerly received on that account. Mr Yorke heard them, partly believed them. Already, of course, he had no friendly feeling to his successful rival. Though himself a married man now, and united to a woman who seemed a complete contrast to Mary Gave in all respects, he could not forget the great disappointment of his life; and when he heard that what would have been so precious to him had been neglected, perhaps abused, by another, he conceived for that other a rooted and bitter animosity. Of the nature and strength of this

animosity Mr Helstone was but half aware. He neither knew how much Yorke had loved Mary Gave, what he had felt on losing her, nor was he conscious of the calumnies concerning his treatment of her, familiar to every ear in the neighbourhood but his own. He believed political and religious differences alone separated him and Mr Yorke. Had he known how the case really stood, he would hardly have been induced by any persuasion to cross his former rival's threshold.

Mr Yorke did not resume his lecture of Robert Moore. The conversation ere long recommenced in a more general form, though still in a somewhat disputative tone. The unquiet state of the country, the various depredations lately committed on mill-property in the district, supplied abundant matter for disagreement, especially as each of the three gentlemen present differed more or less in his views on these subjects. Mr Helstone thought the masters aggrieved, the workpeople unreasonable; he condemned sweepingly the widespread spirit of disaffection against constituted authorities, the growing indisposition to bear with patience evils he regarded as inevitable. The cures he prescribed were vigorous government interference, strict magisterial vigilance; when necessary, prompt military coercion.

Mr Yorke wished to know whether this interference, vigilance, and coercion would feed those who were hungry, give work to those who wanted work, and whom no man would hire. He scouted the idea of inevitable evils. He said public patience was a camel, on whose back the last atom that could be borne had already been laid, and that resistance was now a duty; the widespread spirit of disaffection against constituted authorities he regarded as the most promising sign of the times; the masters, he allowed, were truly aggrieved, but their main grievance had been heaped upon them by a 'corrupt, base and bloody' government (these were Mr Yorke's epithets). Madmen like Pitt, demons like Castlereagh, mischievous idiots like Perceval, were the tyrants, the curses of the country, the destroyers of her trade. It was their infatuated perseverance in an unjustifiable, a hopeless, a ruinous war, which had brought the nation to its present pass. It was their monstrously oppressive taxation, it was the infamous 'Orders in Council' - the originators of which deserved impeachment and the scaffold, if ever public men did - that hung a millstone about England's neck.

'But where was the use of talking?' he demanded. 'what chance was there of reason being heard in a land that was king-ridden, priest-ridden, peer-ridden; where a lunatic was the nominal monarch, an unprincipled debauchee the real ruler; where such an insult to common sense as hereditary legislators was tolerated; where such a humbug as a bench of bishops, such an arrogant abuse as a pampered, persecuting established church was endured and

venerated; where a standing army was maintained, and a host of lazy parsons, and the pauper families were kept on the fat of the land?'

Mr Helstone, rising up and putting on his shovel-hat, observed in reply, 'that in the course of his life he had met with two or three instances where sentiments of this sort had been very bravely maintained so long as health, strength, and worldly prosperity had been the allies of him who professed them; but there came a time,' he said, 'to all men, 'when the keepers of the house should tremble; when they should be afraid of that which is high, and fear should be in the way,' and that time was the test of the advocate of anarchy and rebellion, the enemy of religion and order. Ere now,' he affirmed, 'he had been called upon to read those prayers our church has provided for the sick by the miserable dying-bed of one of her most rancorous foes; he had seen such a one stricken with remorse, solicitous to discover a place for repentance, and unable to find any, though he sought it carefully with tears. He must forewarn Mr Yorke that blasphemy against God and the king was a deadly sin, and that there was such a thing as 'judgment to come."

Mr Yorke 'believed fully that there was such a thing as judgment to come. If it were otherwise, it would be difficult to imagine how all the scoundrels who seemed triumphant in this world, who broke innocent hearts with impunity, abused unmerited privileges, were a scandal to honourable callings, took the bread out of the mouths of the poor, browbeat the humble, and truckled meanly to the rich and proud, were to be properly paid off, in such coin as they had earned. But,' he added, 'whenever he got low-spirited about such-like goings-on, and their seeming success in this mucky lump of a planet, he just reached down t' owd book' (pointing to a great Bible in the bookcase), 'opened it like at a chance, and he was sure to light of a verse blazing wi' a blue brimstone low that set all straight. He knew,' he said, 'where some folk war bound for, just as weel as if an angel wi' great white wings had come in ower t' door-stone and told him.'

'Sir,' said Mr Helstone, collecting all his dignity - 'sir, the great knowledge of man is to know himself, and the bourne whither his own steps tend.'

'Ay, ay. You'll recollect, Mr Helstone, that Ignorance was carried away from the very gates of heaven, borne through the air, and thrust in at a door in the side of the hill which led down to hell.'

'Nor have I forgotten, Mr Yorke, that Vain-Confidence, not seeing the way before him, fell into a deep pit, which was on purpose there made by the prince of the grounds, to catch vain-glorious fools withal, and was dashed to pieces with his fall.'

'Now,' interposed Mr Moore, who had hitherto sat a silent but amused spectator of this wordy combat, and whose indifference to the party politics of the day, as well as to the gossip of the neighbourhood, made him an impartial, if apathetic, judge of the merits of such an encounter, 'you have both sufficiently black-balled each other, and proved how cordially you detest each other, and how wicked you think each other. For my part my hate is still running in such a strong current against the fellows who have broken my frames that I have none to spare for my private acquaintance, and still less for such a vague thing as a sect or a government. But really, gentlemen, you both seem very bad by your own showing - worse than ever I suspected you to be - I dare not stay all night with a rebel and blasphemer like you, Yorke; and I hardly dare ride home with a cruel and tyrannical ecclesiastic like Mr Helstone.'

'I am going, however, Mr Moore,' said the rector sternly. 'Come with me or not, as you please.'

'Nay, he shall not have the choice, he shall go with you,' responded Yorke. 'It's midnight, and past; and I'll have nob'dy staying up i' my house any longer. Ye mun all go.'

He rang the bell.

'Deb,' said he to the servant who answered it, 'clear them folk out o' t' kitchen, and lock t' doors, and be off to bed. Here is your way, gentlemen,' he continued to his guests; and, lighting them through the passage, he fairly put them out at his front-door.

They met their party hurrying out pell-mell by the back way. Their horses stood at the gate; they mounted and rode off, Moore laughing at their abrupt dismissal, Helstone deeply indignant thereat.