Chapter XXXIII - Martin's Tactics

It was necessary to the arrangement of Martin's plan, that he should stay at home that day. Accordingly, he found no appetite for breakfast; and, just about school-time, took a severe pain about his heart, which rendered it advisable that, instead of setting out to the grammar-school with Mark, he should succeed to his father's arm-chair by the fireside, and also to his morning-paper. This point being satisfactorily settled, and Mark being gone to Mr Summer's class, and Matthew and Mr Yorke withdrawn to the counting-house, three other exploits, nay four, remained to be achieved.

The first of these was to realise the breakfast he had not yet tasted, and with which his appetite of fifteen could ill afford to dispense; the second, third, fourth, to get his mother, Miss Moore and Mrs Horsfall successively, out of the way before four o'clock that afternoon.

The first was, for the present, the most pressing, since the work before him demanded an amount of energy which the present empty condition of his youthful stomach did not seem likely to supply.

Martin knew the way to the larder; and knowing this way, he took it. The servants were in the kitchen, breakfasting solemnly with closed doors; his mother and Miss Moore were airing themselves on the lawn, and discussing the closed doors aforesaid: Martin, safe in the larder, made fastidious selection from its stores. His breakfast had been delayed - he was determined it should be recherché: it appeared to him that a variety on his usual somewhat insipid fare of bread and milk was both desirable and advisable: the savoury and the salutary he thought might be combined. There was store of rosy apples laid in straw upon a shelf; he picked out three. There was pastry upon a dish; he selected an apricot-puff and a damson tart. On the plain household bread his eye did not dwell; but he surveyed with favour some currant tea-cakes, and condescended to make choice of one. Thanks to his clasp-knife, he was able to appropriate a wing of fowl and a slice of ham; a cantlet of cold custard-pudding he thought would harmonise with these articles; and having made this final addition to his booty, he at length sallied forth into the hall.

He was already half-way across - three steps more would have anchored him in the harbour of the back-parlour - when the front door opened, and there stood Matthew. Better far had it been the Old Gentleman, in full equipage of horns, hoofs, and tail.

Matthew, sceptic and scoffer, had already failed to subscribe a prompt belief in that pain about the heart: he had muttered some words, amongst which the phrase 'shamming Abraham' had been very distinctly audible; and the succession to the arm-chair and newspaper

had appeared to affect him with mental spasms: the spectacle now before him, the apples, the tarts, the tea-cake, the fowl, ham, and pudding, offered evidence but too well calculated to inflate his opinion of his own sagacity.

Martin paused 'interdit' one minute, one instant; the next he knew his ground, and pronounced all well. With the true perspicacity 'des êmes élites,' he at once saw how this - at first sight untoward event - might be turned to excellent account: he saw how it might be so handled as to secure the accomplishment of his second task, viz., the disposal of his mother. He knew that a collision between him and Matthew always suggested to Mrs Yorke the propriety of a fit of hysterics; he further knew that, on the 'principle of calm succeeding to storm, after a morning of hysterics his mother was sure to indulge in an afternoon of bed. This would accommodate him perfectly.

The collision duly took place in the hall. A dry laugh, an insulting sneer, a contemptuous taunt, met by a nonchalant but most cutting reply, were, the signals. They rushed at it. Martin, who usually made little noise on these occasions, made a great deal now. In flew the servants, Mrs Yorke, Miss Moore: no female hand could separate them. Mr Yorke was. summoned.

'Sons,' said he, 'one of you must leave my roof if this occurs again: I will have no Cain and Abel strife here.'

Martin now allowed himself to be taken off: he had been hurt; he was the youngest and slightest: he was quite cool, in no passion: he even smiled, content that the most difficult part of the labour he had set himself was over.

Once he seemed to flag in the course of the morning.

'It is not worth while to bother myself for that Caroline,' he remarked. But, a quarter of an hour afterwards, he was again in the dining-room, looking at the head with dishevelled tresses, and eyes turbid with despair.

'Yes,' he said, 'I made her sob, shudder, almost faint: I'll see her smile before I've done with her: besides, I want to outwit all these womenites.'

Directly after dinner, Mrs Yorke fulfilled her son's calculation, by withdrawing to her chamber. Now for Hortense.

That lady was just comfortably settled to stocking-mending in the back parlour, when Martin - laying down a book which, stretched on the sofa (he was still indisposed, according to his own account), he

had been perusing in all the voluptuous ease of a yet callow pacha - lazily introduced some discourse about Sarah, the maid at the Hollow. In the course of much verbal meandering, he insinuated information that this damsel was said to have three suitors, Frederic Murgatroyd, Jeremiah Pighills, and John-of-Mally's-of-Hannah's-of-Deb's; and that Miss Mann had affirmed she knew for a fact, that, now the girl was left in sole charge of the cottage, she often had her swains to meals, and entertained them with the best the house afforded.

It needed no more. Hortense could not have lived another hour without betaking herself to the scene of these nefarious transactions, and inspecting the state of matters in person. Mrs Horsfall remained.

Martin, master of the field now, extracted from his mother's work-basket a bunch of keys; with these he opened the sideboard cupboard, produced thence a black bottle and a small glass, placed them on the table, nimbly mounted the stairs, made for Mr Moore's door, tapped, the nurse opened.

'If you please, ma'am, you are invited to step into the back-parlour, and take some refreshment: you will not be disturbed: the family are out.'

He watched her down; he watched her in; himself shut the door: he knew she was safe.

The hard work was done; now for the pleasure. He snatched his cap, and away for the wood.

It was yet but half-past three; it had been a fine morning, but the sky looked dark now: it was beginning to snow; the wind blew cold; the wood looked dismal; the old tree grim. Yet Martin approved the shadow on his path: he found a charm in the spectral aspect of the doddered oak.

He had to wait; to and fro he walked, while the flakes fell faster; and the wind, which at first had but moaned, pitifully howled.

'She is long in coming,' he muttered, as he glanced along the narrow track. 'I wonder,' he subjoined, 'what I wish to see her so much for? She is not coming for me. But I have power over her, and I want her to come that I may use that power.'

He continued his walk.

'Now,' he resumed, when a further period had elapsed, 'if she fails to come, I shall hate and scorn her.'

It struck four: he heard the church-clock far away. A step so quick, so light, that, but for the rustling of leaves, it would scarcely have sounded on the wood-walk, checked his impatience. The wind blew fiercely now, and the thickened white storm waxed bewildering: but on she came, and not dismayed.

'Well, Martin,' she said eagerly, 'how is he?'

'It is queer how she thinks of him,' reflected Martin: 'the blinding snow and bitter cold are nothing to her, I believe: yet she is but a 'chitty-faced creature,' as my mother would say. I could find in my heart to wish I had a cloak to wrap her in.'

Thus meditating to himself, he neglected to answer Miss Helstone.

'You have seen him?'

'No.'

'Oh! You promised you would.'

'I mean to do better by you than that. Didn't I say I don't care to see him?'

'But now it will be so long before I get to know anything certain about him, and I am sick of waiting. Martin, do see him, and give him Caroline Helstone's regards, and say she wished to know how he was, and if anything could be done for his comfort.'

'I won't.'

'You are changed: you were so friendly last night.'

'Come: we must not stand in this wood; it is too cold.'

'But, before I go, promise me to come again to-morrow with news.'

'No such thing; I am much too delicate to make and keep such appointments in the winter season if you knew what a pain I had in my chest this morning, and how I went without breakfast, and was knocked down besides, you'd feel the impropriety of bringing me here in the snow, Come, I say.'

'Are you really delicate, Martin?'

'Don't I look so?'

'You have rosy cheeks.'

'That's hectic. Will you come - or you won't?'

'Where?'

'With me. I was a fool not to bring a cloak: I would have made you cosy.'

'You are going home! my nearest road lies in the opposite direction.'

'Put your arm through mine. I'll take care of you.'

'But, the wall - the hedge - it. is such hard work climbing, and you are too slender and young to help me without hurting yourself.'

'You shall go through the gate.'

'But - - '

'But! - but! Will you trust me or not?'

She looked into his face.

'I think I will. Anything rather than return as anxious as I came.'

'I can't answer for that. This, however, I promise you; be ruled by me, and you shall see Moore yourself.'

'See him myself?'

'Yourself.'

'But, dear Martin, does he know?'

'Ah! I'm dear now. No: he doesn't know.'

'And your mother and the others?'

'All is right.'

Caroline fell into a long silent fit of musing, but still she walked on with her guide: they came in sight of Briarmains.

'Have you made up your mind?' he asked.

She was silent.

'Decide. We are just on the spot. I won't see him - that I tell you - except to announce your arrival.'

'Martin, you are a strange boy, and this is a strange step; but all I feel is and has been, for a long time, strange. I will see him.'

'Having said that, you will neither hesitate nor retract?'

'No.'

'Here we are, then. Do not be afraid of passing the parlour-window: no one will see you. My father and Matthew are at the mill; Mark is at school; the servants are in the back-kitchen; Miss Moore is at the cottage; my mother in her bed; and Mrs Horsfall in Paradise. Observe - I need not ring: I open the door; the hall is empty; the staircase quiet; so is the gallery: the whole house and all its inhabitants are under a spell, which I will not break till you are gone.'

'Martin, I trust you.'

'You never said a better word. Let me take your shawl: I will shake off the snow and dry it for you. You are cold and wet: never mind; there is a fire upstairs. Are you ready?'

'Yes.'

'Follow me.'

He left his shoes on the mat; mounted the stair unshod; Caroline stole after, with noiseless step: there was a gallery, and there was a passage; at the end of that passage Martin paused before a door and tapped: he had to tap twice - thrice: a voice, known to one listener, at last said - 'Come in.'

The boy entered briskly.

'Mr Moore, a lady called to inquire after you: none of the women were about: it is washing day, and the maids are over the crown of the head in soap-suds in the back-kitchen; so I asked her to step up.'

'Up here, sir?'

'Up here; sir: but if you object, she shall go down again.'

'Is this a place, or am I a person to bring a lady to, you absurd lad?'

'No: so I'll take her off.'

'Martin, you will stay here. Who is she?'

'Your grandmother from that château on the Scheldt Miss Moore talks about.'

'Martin,' said the softest whisper at the door, 'don't be foolish.'

'Is she there?' inquired Moore hastily. He had caught an imperfect sound.

'She is there, fit to faint: she is standing on the mat, shocked at your want of filial affection.'

'Martin, you are an evil cross between an imp and a page. What is she like?'

'More like me than you; for she is young and beautiful.'

'You are to show her forward. Do you hear?'

'Come, Miss Caroline.'

'Miss Caroline!' repeated Moore.

And when Miss Caroline entered, she was encountered in the middle of the chamber by a tall, thin, wasted figure, who took both her hands.

'I give you a quarter of an hour,' said Martin as he withdrew: 'no more. Say what you have to say in that time: till it is past, I will wait in the gallery: nothing shall approach: I'll see you safe away. Should you persist in staying longer, I leave you to your fate.'

He shut the door. In the gallery he was as elate as a king: he had never been engaged in an adventure he liked so well; for no adventure had ever invested him with so much importance or inspired him with so much interest.

'You are come at last,' said the meagre man, gazing on his visitress with hollow eyes.

'Did you expect me before?'

'For a month - near two months, we have been very near; and I have been in sad pain, and danger, and misery, Cary.'

'I could not come.'

'Couldn't you? But the Rectory and Briarmains are very near: not two miles apart.'

There was pain - there was pleasure in the girl's face as she listened to these implied reproaches: it was sweet - it was bitter to defend herself.

'When I say I could not come, I mean I could not see you; for I came with mamma the very day we heard what had happened. Mr MacTurk then told us it was impossible to admit any stranger.'

'But afterwards - every fine afternoon these many weeks past I have waited and listened. Something here, Cary' (laying his hand on his breast), 'told me it was impossible but that you should think of me. Not that I merit thought; but we are old acquaintance; we are cousins.'

'I came again, Robert: mamma and I came again.'

'Did you? Come, that is worth hearing: since you came again, we will sit down and talk about it.'

They sat down. Caroline drew her chair up to his. The air was now dark with snow: an Iceland blast was driving it wildly. This pair neither heard the long 'wuthering' rush, nor saw the white burden it drifted: each seemed conscious but of one thing - the presence of the other.

'And so mamma and you came again?'

'And Mrs Yorke did treat us strangely. We asked to see you. 'No,' said she; 'not in my house. I am at present responsible for his life: it shall not be forfeited for half-an hour's idle gossip.' But I must not tell you all she said: it was very disagreeable. However, we came yet again - mamma, Miss Keeldar, and I. This time we thought we should conquer, as we were three against one, and Shirley was on our side. But Mrs Yorke opened such a battery.'

Moore smiled. 'What did she say?'

'Things that astonished us. Shirley laughed at last; I cried; mamma was seriously annoyed we were all three driven from the field. Since that time I have only walked once a day past the house, just for the satisfaction of looking up at your window, which I could distinguish by the drawn curtains. I really dared not come in.'

'I have wished for you, Caroline.'

'I did not know that. I never dreamt one instant that you thought of me. If I had but most distantly imagined such a possibility - - '

'Mrs Yorke would still have beaten you.'

'She would not. Stratagem should have been tried, if persuasion failed. I would have come to the kitchen-door; the servant should have let me in; and I would have walked straight upstairs. In fact, it was far more the fear of intrusion - the fear of yourself, that baffled me, than the fear of Mrs Yorke.'

'Only last night, I despaired of ever seeing you again. Weakness has wrought terrible depression in me - terrible depression.'

'And you sit alone?'

'Worse than alone.'

'But you must be getting better, since you can leave your bed?'

'I doubt whether I shall live: I see nothing for it, after such exhaustion, but decline.'

'You - you shall go home to the Hollow.'

'Dreariness would accompany - nothing cheerful come near me.'

'I will alter this: this shall be altered, were there ten Mrs Yorkes to do battle with.'

'Cary, you make me smile.'

'Do smile: smile again. Shall I tell you what I should like?'

'Tell me anything - only keep talking. I am Saul: but for music I should perish.'

'I should like you to be brought to the Rectory, and given to me and mamma.'

'A precious gift! I have not laughed since they shot me till now.'

'Do you suffer pain, Robert?'

'Not so much pain now; but I am hopelessly weak, and the state of my mind is inexpressible - dark, barren, impotent. Do you not read it all in my face? I look a mere ghost.'

'Altered, yet I should have known you anywhere: but I understand your feelings: I experienced something like it Since we met, I too have been very ill.'

'Very ill?'

'I thought I should die. The tale of my life seemed told. Every night, just at midnight, I used to wake from awful dreams - and the book lay open before me at the last page, where was written 'Finis.' I had strange feelings.'

'You speak my experience.'

'I believed I should never see you again; and I grew so thin - as thin as you are now: I could do nothing for myself - neither rise nor lie down; and I could not eat - yet, you see I am better.'

'Comforter! sad as sweet: I am too feeble to say what I feel; but, while you speak, I do feel.'

'Here, I am at your side, where I thought never more to be; here I speak to you - I see you listen to me willingly - look at me kindly. Did I count on that? I despaired.'

Moore sighed - a sigh so deep, it was nearly a groan: he covered his eyes with his hand.

'May I be spared to make some atonement.'

Such was his prayer.

'And for what?

'We will not touch on it now, Cary; unmanned as I am, I have not the power to cope with such a topic. Was Mrs Pryor with you during your illness?'

'Yes' (Caroline smiled brightly) - 'you know she is mamma?'

'I have heard: Hortense told me; but that tale, too, I will receive from yourself. Does she add to your happiness?'

'What! mamma? She is dear to me; how dear I cannot say. I was altogether weary, and she held me up.'

'I deserve to hear that in a moment when I can scarce lift my hand to my head. I deserve it.'

'It is no reproach against you.'

'It is a coal of fire heaped on my head; and so is every word you address to me, and every look that lights your sweet face. Come still nearer, Lina; and give me your hand - if my thin fingers do not scare you.'

She took those thin fingers between her two little hands - she bent her head 'et les effleura de ses lèvres' (I put that in French, because the word 'effleurer' is an exquisite word). Moore was much moved: a large tear or two coursed down his hollow cheek.

'I'll keep these things in my heart, Cary; that kiss I will put by, and you shall hear of it again some day.'

'Come out!' cried Martin, opening the door. 'Come away - you have had twenty minutes instead of a quarter of an hour.'

'She will not stir yet - you hempseed.'

'I dare not stay longer, Robert.'

'Can you promise to return?'

'No, she can't,' responded Martin. 'The thing mustn't become customary: I can't be troubled. It's very well for once: I'll not have it repeated.'

'You'll not have it repeated.'

'Hush! don't vex him - we could not have met to-day but for him: but I will come again, if it is your wish that I should come.'

'It is my wish - my one wish - almost the only wish I can feel.'

'Come this minute: my mother has coughed, got up, set her feet on the floor. Let her only catch you on the stairs, Miss Caroline: you're not to bid him good- bye' (stepping between her and Moore), - 'you are to march.'

'My shawl, Martin.'

'I have it. I'll put it on for you when you are in the hall.'

He made them part: he would suffer no farewell but what could be expressed in looks: he half carried Caroline down the stairs. In the hall he wrapped her shawl round her, and - but that his mother's tread then creaked in the gallery, and but that a sentiment of diffidence - the proper, natural, therefore the noble impulse of his boy's heart, held him back, he would have claimed his reward - he would have said, 'Now, Miss Caroline, for all this give me one kiss.' But ere the words had passed his lips, she was across the snowy road, rather skimming than wading the drifts.

'She is my debtor, and I will be paid.'

He flattered himself that it was opportunity, not audacity, which had failed him: he misjudged the quality of his own nature, and held it for something lower than it was.