

Chapter II

A FINE October morning succeeded to the foggy evening that had witnessed my first introduction to Crimsworth Hall. I was early up and walking in the large park-like meadow surrounding the house. The autumn sun, rising over the - - shire hills, disclosed a pleasant country; woods brown and mellow varied the fields from which the harvest had been lately carried; a river, gliding between the woods, caught on its surface the somewhat cold gleam of the October sun and sky; at frequent intervals along the banks of the river, tall, cylindrical chimneys, almost like slender round towers, indicated the factories which the trees half concealed; here and there mansions, similar to Crimsworth Hall, occupied agreeable sites on the hill-side; the country wore, on the whole, a cheerful, active, fertile look. Steam, trade, machinery had long banished from it all romance and seclusion. At a distance of five miles, a valley, opening between the low hills, held in its cups the great town of X - - . A dense, permanent vapour brooded over this locality - there lay Edward's 'Concern.'

I forced my eye to scrutinize this prospect, I forced my mind to dwell on it for a time, and when I found that it communicated no pleasurable emotion to my heart - that it stirred in me none of the hopes a man ought to feel, when he sees laid before him the scene of his life's career - I said to myself, 'William, you are a rebel against circumstances; you are a fool, and know not what you want; you have chosen trade and you shall be a tradesman. Look!' I continued mentally - 'Look at the sooty smoke in that hollow, and know that there is your post! There you cannot dream, you cannot speculate and theorize - there you shall out and work!'

Thus self-schooled, I returned to the house. My brother was in the breakfast-room. I met him collectedly - I could not meet him cheerfully; he was standing on the rug, his back to the fire - how much did I read in the expression of his eye as my glance encountered his, when I advanced to bid him good morning; how much that was contradictory to my nature! He said 'Good morning' abruptly and nodded, and then he snatched, rather than took, a newspaper from the table, and began to read it with the air of a master who seizes a pretext to escape the bore of conversing with an underling. It was well I had taken a resolution to endure for a time, or his manner would have gone far to render insupportable the disgust I had just been endeavouring to subdue. I looked at him: I measured his robust frame and powerful proportions; I saw my own reflection in the mirror over the mantel-piece; I amused myself with comparing the two pictures. In face I resembled him, though I was not so handsome; my features were less regular; I had a darker eye, and a broader brow - in form I was greatly inferior - thinner, slighter, not so tall. As an animal, Edward excelled me far; should he prove as paramount in mind as in

person I must be a slave - for I must expect from him no lion-like generosity to one weaker than himself; his cold, avaricious eye, his stern, forbidding manner told me he would not spare. Had I then force of mind to cope with him? I did not know; I had never been tried.

Mrs Crimsworth's entrance diverted my thoughts for a moment. She looked well, dressed in white, her face and her attire shining in morning and bridal freshness. I addressed her with the degree of ease her last night's careless gaiety seemed to warrant, but she replied with coolness and restraint: her husband had tutored her; she was not to be too familiar with his clerk.

As soon as breakfast was over Mr Crimsworth intimated to me that they were bringing the gig round to the door, and that in five minutes he should expect me to be ready to go down with him to X - - . I did not keep him waiting; we were soon dashing at a rapid rate along the road. The horse he drove was the same vicious animal about which Mrs Crimsworth had expressed her fears the night before. Once or twice Jack seemed disposed to turn restive, but a vigorous and determined application of the whip from the ruthless hand of his master soon compelled him to submission, and Edward's dilated nostril expressed his triumph in the result of the contest; he scarcely spoke to me during the whole of the brief drive, only opening his lips at intervals to damn his horse.

X - - was all stir and bustle when we entered it; we left the clean streets where there were dwelling-houses and shops, churches, and public buildings; we left all these, and turned down to a region of mills and warehouses; thence we passed through two massive gates into a great paved yard, and we were in Bigben Close, and the mill was before us, vomiting soot from its long chimney, and quivering through its thick brick walls with the commotion of its iron bowels. Workpeople were passing to and fro; a waggon was being laden with pieces. Mr Crimsworth looked from side to side, and seemed at one glance to comprehend all that was going on; he alighted, and leaving his horse and gig to the care of a man who hastened to take the reins from his hand, he bid me follow him to the counting-house. We entered it; a very different place from the parlours of Crimsworth Hall - a place for business, with a bare, planked floor, a safe, two high desks and stools, and some chairs. A person was seated at one of the desks, who took off his square cap when Mr Crimsworth entered, and in an instant was again absorbed in his occupation of writing or calculating - I know not which.

Mr Crimsworth, having removed his mackintosh, sat down by the fire. I remained standing near the hearth; he said presently -

‘Steighton, you may leave the room; I have some business to transact with this gentleman. Come back when you hear the bell.’

The individual at the desk rose and departed, closing the door as he went out. Mr Crimsworth stirred the fire, then folded his arms, and sat a moment thinking, his lips compressed, his brow knit. I had nothing to do but to watch him - how well his features were cut! what a handsome man he was! Whence, then, came that air of contraction - that narrow and hard aspect on his forehead, in all his lineaments?

Turning to me he began abruptly:

‘You are come down to - - shire to learn to be a tradesman?’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘Have you made up your mind on the point? Let me know that at once.’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, I am not bound to help you, but I have a place here vacant, if you are qualified for it. I will take you on trial. What can you do? Do you know anything besides that useless trash of college learning - Greek, Latin, and so forth?’

‘I have studied mathematics.’

‘Stuff! I dare say you have.’

‘I can read and write French and German.’

‘Hum!’ He reflected a moment, then opening a drawer in a desk near him took out a letter, and gave it to me.

‘Can you read that?’ he asked.

It was a German commercial letter; I translated it; I could not tell whether he was gratified or not - his countenance remained fixed.

‘It is well;’ he-said, after a pause, ‘that you are acquainted with something useful, something that may enable you to earn your board and lodging: since you know French and German, I will take you as second clerk to manage the foreign correspondence of the house. I shall give you a good salary - 90l. a year - and now,’ he continued, raising his voice, ‘hear once for all what I have to say about our relationship, and all that sort of humbug! I must have no nonsense on that point; it would never suit me. I shall excuse you nothing on the

plea of being my brother; if I find you stupid, negligent, dissipated, idle, or possessed of any faults detrimental to the interests of the house, I shall dismiss you as I would any other clerk. Ninety pounds a year are good wages, and I expect to have the full value of my money out of you; remember, too, that things are on a practical footing in my establishment - business-like habits, feelings, and ideas, suit me best. Do you understand?’

‘Partly,’ I replied. ‘I suppose you mean that I am to do my work for my wages; not to expect favour from you, and not to depend on you for any help but what I earn; that suits me exactly, and on these terms I will consent to be your clerk.’

I turned on my heel, and walked to the window; this time I did not consult his face to learn his opinion: what it was I do not know, nor did I then care. After a silence of some minutes he recommenced: -

‘You perhaps expect to be accommodated with apartments at Crimsworth Hall, and to go and come with me in the gig. I wish you, however, to be aware that such an arrangement would be quite inconvenient to me. I like to have the seat in my gig at liberty for any gentleman whom for business reasons I may wish to take down to the hall for a night or so. You will seek out lodgings in X - - .’

Quitting the window, I walked back to the hearth.

‘Of course I shall seek out lodgings in X - - ,’ I answered. ‘It would not suit me either to lodge at Crimsworth Hall.’

My tone was quiet. I always speak quietly. Yet Mr Crimsworth's blue eye became incensed; he took his revenge rather oddly. Turning to me he said bluntly -

‘You are poor enough, I suppose; how do you expect to live till your quarter's salary becomes due?’

‘I shall get on,’ said I.

‘How do you expect to live?’ he repeated in a louder voice.

‘As I can, Mr Crimsworth.’

‘Get into debt at your peril! that's all,’ he answered. ‘For aught I know you may have extravagant aristocratic habits: if you have, drop them; I tolerate nothing of the sort here, and I will never give you a shilling extra, whatever liabilities you may incur - mind that.’

‘Yes, Mr Crimsworth, you will find I have a good memory.’

I said no more. I did not think the time was come for much parley. I had an instinctive feeling that it would be folly to let one's temper effervesce often with such a man as Edward. I said to myself, 'I will place my cup under this continual dropping; it shall stand there still and steady; when full, it will run over of itself - meantime patience. Two things are certain. I am capable of performing the work Mr Crimsworth has set me; I can earn my wages conscientiously, and those wages are sufficient to enable me to live. As to the fact of my brother assuming towards me the bearing of a proud, harsh master, the fault is his, not mine; and shall his injustice, his bad feeling, turn me at once aside from the path I have chosen? No; at least, ere I deviate, I will advance far enough to see whither my career tends. As yet I am only pressing in at the entrance - a strait gate enough; it ought to have a good terminus.' While I thus reasoned, Mr Crimsworth rang a bell; his first clerk, the individual dismissed previously to our conference, re-entered.

'Mr Steighton,' said he, 'show Mr William the letters from Voss, Brothers, and give him English copies of the answers; he will translate them.'

Mr Steighton, a man of about thirty-five, with a face at once sly and heavy, hastened to execute this order; he laid the letters on the desk, and I was soon seated at it, and engaged in rendering the English answers into German. A sentiment of keen pleasure accompanied this first effort to earn my own living - a sentiment neither poisoned nor weakened by the presence of the taskmaster, who stood and watched me for some time as I wrote. I thought he was trying to read my character, but I felt as secure against his scrutiny as if I had had on a casque with the visor down-or rather I showed him my countenance with the confidence that one would show an unlearned man a letter written in Greek; he might see lines, and trace characters, but he could make nothing of them; my nature was not his nature, and its signs were to him like the words of an unknown tongue. Ere long he turned away abruptly, as if baffled, and left the counting-house; he returned to it but twice in the course of that day; each time he mixed and swallowed a glass of brandy-and-water, the materials for making which he extracted from a cupboard on one side of the fireplace; having glanced at my translations - he could read both French and German - he went out again in silence.