

Chapter III

I SERVED Edward as his second clerk faithfully, punctually, diligently. What was given me to do I had the power and the determination to do well. Mr Crimsworth watched sharply for defects, but found none; he set Timothy Steighton, his favourite and head man, to watch also. Tim was baffled; I was as exact as himself, and quicker. Mr Crimsworth made inquiries as to how I lived, whether I got into debt - no, my accounts with my landlady were always straight. I had hired small lodgings, which I contrived to pay for out of a slender fund - the accumulated savings of my Eton pocket-money; for as it had ever been abhorrent to my nature to ask pecuniary assistance, I had early acquired habits of self-denying economy; husbanding my monthly allowance with anxious care, in order to obviate the danger of being forced, in some moment of future exigency, to beg additional aid. I remember many called me miser at the time, and I used to couple the reproach with this consolation - better to be misunderstood now than repulsed hereafter. At this day I had my reward; I had had it before, when on parting with my irritated uncles one of them threw down on the table before me a 5l. note, which I was able to leave there, saying that my travelling expenses were already provided for. Mr Crimsworth employed Tim to find out whether my landlady had any complaint to make on the score of my morals; she answered that she believed I was a very religious man, and asked Tim, in her turn, if he thought I had any intention of going into the Church some day; for, she said, she had had young curates to lodge in her house who were nothing equal to me for steadiness and quietness. Tim was 'a religious man' himself; indeed, he was 'a joined Methodist,' which did not (be it understood) prevent him from being at the same time an engrained rascal, and he came away much posed at hearing this account of my piety. Having imparted it to Mr Crimsworth, that gentleman, who himself frequented no place of worship, and owned no God but Mammon, turned the information into a weapon of attack against the equability of my temper. He commenced a series of covert sneers, of which I did not at first perceive the drift, till my landlady happened to relate the conversation she had had with Mr Steighton; this enlightened me; afterwards I came to the counting-house prepared, and managed to receive the millowner's blasphemous sarcasms, when next levelled at me, on a buckler of impenetrable indifference. Ere long he tired of wasting his ammunition on a statue, but he did not throw away the shafts - he only kept them quiet in his quiver.

Once during my clerkship I had an invitation to Crimsworth Hall; it was on the occasion of a large party given in honour of the master's birthday; he had always been accustomed to invite his clerks on similar anniversaries, and could not well pass me over; I was, however, kept strictly in the background. Mrs Crimsworth, elegantly

dressed in satin and lace, blooming in youth and health, vouchsafed me no more notice than was expressed by a distant move; Crimsworth, of course, never spoke to me; I was introduced to none of the band of young ladies, who, enveloped in silvery clouds of white gauze and muslin, sat in array against me on the opposite side of a long and large room; in fact, I was fairly isolated, and could but contemplate the shining ones from afar, and when weary of such a dazzling scene, turn for a change to the consideration of the carpet pattern. Mr Crimsworth, standing on the rug, his elbow supported by the marble mantelpiece, and about him a group of very pretty girls, with whom he conversed gaily - Mr Crimsworth, thus placed, glanced at me; I looked weary, solitary, kept down like some desolate tutor or governess; he was satisfied. Dancing began; I should have liked well enough to be introduced to some pleasing and intelligent girl, and to have freedom and opportunity to show that I could both feel and communicate the pleasure of social intercourse - that I was not, in short, a block, or a piece of furniture, but an acting, thinking, sentient man. Many smiling faces and graceful figures glided past me, but the smiles were lavished on other eyes, the figures sustained by other hands than mine. I turned away tantalized, left the dancers, and wandered into the oak-panelled dining-room. No fibre of sympathy united me to any living thing in this house; I looked for and found my mother's picture. I took a wax taper from a stand, and held it up. I gazed long, earnestly; my heart grew to the image. My mother, I perceived, had bequeathed to me much of her features and countenance - her forehead, her eyes, her complexion. No regular beauty pleases egotistical human beings so much as a softened and refined likeness of themselves; for this reason, fathers regard with complacency the lineaments of their daughters' faces, where frequently their own similitude is found flatteringly associated with softness of hue and delicacy of outline. I was just wondering how that picture, to me so interesting, would strike an impartial spectator, when a voice close behind me pronounced the words -

'Humph! there's some sense in that face.'

I turned; at my elbow stood a tall man, young, though probably five or six years older than I - in other respects of an appearance the opposite to common place; though just now, as I am not disposed to paint his portrait in detail, the reader must be content with the silhouette I have just thrown off; it was all I myself saw of him for the moment: I did not investigate the colour of his eyebrows, nor of his eyes either; I saw his stature, and the outline of his shape; I saw, too, his fastidious-looking RETROUSSE nose; these observations, few in number, and general in character (the last excepted), sufficed, for they enabled me to recognize him.

'Good evening, Mr Hunsden,' muttered I with a bow, and then, like a shy noodle as I was, I began moving away - and why? Simply because Mr Hunsden was a manufacturer and a millowner, and I was only a clerk, and my instinct propelled me from my superior. I had frequently seen Hunsden in Bigben Close, where he came almost weekly to transact business with Mr Crimsworth, but I had never spoken to him, nor he to me, and I owed him a sort of involuntary grudge, because he had more than once been the tacit witness of insults offered by Edward to me. I had the conviction that he could only regard me as a poor-spirited slave, wherefore I now went about to shun his presence and eschew his conversation.

'Where are you going?' asked he, as I edged off sideways. I had already noticed that Mr Hunsden indulged in abrupt forms of speech, and I perversely said to myself -

'He thinks he may speak as he likes to a poor clerk; but my mood is not, perhaps, so supple as he deems it, and his rough freedom pleases me not at all.'

I made some slight reply, rather indifferent than courteous, and continued to move away. He coolly planted himself in my path.

'Stay here awhile,' said he: 'it is so hot in the dancing-room; besides, you don't dance; you have not had a partner to-night.'

He was right, and as he spoke neither his look, tone, nor manner displeased me; my AMOUR-PROPRE was propitiated; he had not addressed me out of condescension, but because, having repaired to the cool dining-room for refreshment, he now wanted some one to talk to, by way of temporary amusement. I hate to be condescended to, but I like well enough to oblige; I stayed.

'That is a good picture,' he continued, recurring to the portrait.

'Do you consider the face pretty?' I asked.

'Pretty! no - how can it be pretty, with sunk eyes and hollow cheeks? but it is peculiar; it seems to think. You could have a talk with that woman, if she were alive, on other subjects than dress, visiting, and compliments.'

I agreed with him, but did not say so. He went on.

'Not that I admire a head of that sort; it wants character and force; there's too much of the sen-si-tive (so he articulated it, curling his lip at the same time) in that mouth; besides, there is Aristocrat written on the brow and defined in the figure; I hate your aristocrats.'

'You think, then, Mr Hunsden, that patrician descent may be read in a distinctive cast of form and features?' 'Patrician descent be hanged! Who doubts that your lordlings may have their 'distinctive cast of form and features' as much as we - - shire tradesmen have ours? But which is the best? Not theirs assuredly. As to their women, it is a little different: they cultivate beauty from childhood upwards, and may by care and training attain to a certain degree of excellence in that point, just like the oriental odalisques. Yet even this superiority is doubtful. Compare the figure in that frame with Mrs Edward Crimsworth - which is the finer animal?'

I replied quietly: 'Compare yourself and Mr Edward Crimsworth, Mr Hunsden.'

'Oh, Crimsworth is better filled up than I am, I know besides he has a straight nose, arched eyebrows, and all that; but these advantages - if they are advantages - he did not inherit from his mother, the patrician, but from his father, old Crimsworth, who, MY father says, was as veritable a - - shire blue-dyer as ever put indigo in a vat yet withal the handsomest man in the three Ridings. It is you, William, who are the aristocrat of your family, and you are not as fine a fellow as your plebeian brother by long chalk.'

There was something in Mr Hunsden's point-blank mode of speech which rather pleased me than otherwise because it set me at my ease. I continued the conversation with a degree of interest.

'How do you happen to know that I am Mr Crimsworth's brother? I thought you and everybody else looked upon me only in the light of a poor clerk.'

'Well, and so we do; and what are you but a poor clerk? You do Crimsworth's work, and he gives you wages - shabby wages they are, too.'

I was silent. Hunsden's language now bordered on the impertinent, still his manner did not offend me in the least - it only piqued my curiosity; I wanted him to go on, which he did in a little while.

'This world is an absurd one,' said he.

'Why so, Mr Hunsden?'

'I wonder you should ask: you are yourself a strong proof of the absurdity I allude to.'

I was determined he should explain himself of his own accord, without my pressing him so to do - so I resumed my silence.

'Is it your intention to become a tradesman?' he inquired presently.

'It was my serious intention three months ago.'

'Humph! the more fool you - you look like a tradesman! What a practical business-like face you have!'

'My face is as the Lord made it, Mr Hunsden.'

'The Lord never made either your face or head for X - - What good can your bumps of ideality, comparison, self-esteem, conscientiousness, do you here? But if you like Bigben Close, stay there; it's your own affair, not mine.'

'Perhaps I have no choice.'

'Well, I care nought about it - it will make little difference to me what you do or where you go; but I'm cool now - I want to dance again; and I see such a fine girl sitting in the corner of the sofa there by her mamma; see if I don't get her for a partner in a jiffy! There's Waddy - Sam Waddy making up to her; won't I cut him out?'

And Mr Hunsden strode away. I watched him through the open folding-doors; he outstripped Waddy, applied for the hand of the fine girl, and led her off triumphant. She was a tall, well-made, full-formed, dashing-dressed young woman, much in the style of Mrs E. Crimsworth; Hunsden whirled her through the waltz with spirit; he kept at her side during the remainder of the evening, and I read in her animated and gratified countenance that he succeeded in making himself perfectly agreeable. The mamma too (a stout person in a turban - Mrs Lupton by name) looked well pleased; prophetic visions probably flattered her inward eye. The Hunsdens were of an old stem; and scornful as Yorke (such was my late interlocutor's name) professed to be of the advantages of birth, in his secret heart he well knew and fully appreciated the distinction his ancient, if not high lineage conferred on him in a mushroom-place like X - - , concerning whose inhabitants it was proverbially said, that not one in a thousand knew his own grandfather. Moreover the Hunsdens, once rich, were still independent; and report affirmed that Yorke bade fair, by his success in business, to restore to pristine prosperity the partially decayed fortunes of his house. These circumstances considered, Mrs Lupton's broad face might well wear a smile of complacency as she contemplated the heir of Hunsden Wood occupied in paying assiduous court to her darling Sarah Martha. I, however, whose observations being less anxious, were likely to be more accurate, soon saw that the grounds for maternal self-congratulation were slight indeed; the gentleman appeared to me much more desirous of making, than susceptible of receiving an impression. I know not what it was in Mr

Hunsden that, as I watched him (I had nothing better to do), suggested to me, every now and then, the idea of a foreigner. In form and features he might be pronounced English, though even there one caught a dash of something Gallic; but he had no English shyness: he had learnt somewhere, somehow, the art of setting himself quite at his ease, and of allowing no insular timidity to intervene as a barrier between him and his convenience or pleasure. Refinement he did not affect, yet vulgar he could not be called; he was not odd - no quiz - yet he resembled no one else I had ever seen before; his general bearing intimated complete, sovereign satisfaction with himself; yet, at times, an indescribable shade passed like an eclipse over his countenance, and seemed to me like the sign of a sudden and strong inward doubt of himself, his words and actions-an energetic discontent at his life or his social position, his future prospects or his mental attainments - I know not which; perhaps after all it might only be a bilious caprice.