

## Chapter 8

'Rumour doth double like the voice and echo.' - SHAKESPEARE.

The mind of a man is as a country which was once open to squatters, who have bred and multiplied and become masters of the land. But then happeneth a time when new and hungry comers dispute the land; and there is trial of strength, and the stronger wins. Nevertheless the first squatters be they who have prepared the ground, and the crops to the end will be sequent (though chiefly on the nature of the soil, as of light sand, mixed loam, or heavy clay, yet) somewhat on the primal labour and sowing. THAT talkative maiden, Rumour, though in the interest of art she is figured as a youthful winged beauty with flowing garments, soaring above the heads of men, and breathing world-thrilling news through a gracefully-curved trumpet, is in fact a very old maid, who puckers her silly face by the fireside, and really does no more than chirp a wrong guess or a lame story into the ear of a fellow-gossip; all the rest of the work attributed to her is done by the ordinary working of those passions against which men pray in the Litany, with the help of a plentiful stupidity against which we have never yet had any authorised form of prayer.

When Mr Scales's strong need to make an impressive figure in conversation, together with his very slight need of any other premise than his own sense of his wide general knowledge and probable infallibility, led him to specify five hundred thousand as the lowest admissible amount of Harold Transome's commercially-acquired fortune, it was not fair to put this down to poor old Miss Rumour, who had only told Scales that the fortune was considerable. And again, when the curt Mr Sircome found occasion at Treby to mention the five hundred thousand as a fact that folks seemed pretty sure about, this expansion of the butler into 'folks' was entirely due to Mr Sircome's habitual preference for words which could not be laid hold of or give people a handle over him. It was in this simple way that the report of Harold Transome's fortune spread and was magnified, adding much lustre to his opinions in the eyes of Liberals, and compelling even men of the opposite party to admit that it increased his eligibility as a member for North Loamshire. It was observed by a sound thinker in these parts that property was ballast; and when once the aptness of that metaphor had been perceived, it followed that a man was not fit to navigate the sea of politics without a great deal of such ballast; and that, rightly understood, whatever increased the expense of election, inasmuch as it virtually raised the property qualification, was an unspeakable boon to the country.

Meanwhile the fortune that was getting larger in the imagination of constituents was shrinking a little in the imagination of its owner. It was hardly more than a hundred and fifty thousand; and there were

not only the heavy mortgages to be paid off, but also a large amount of capital was needed in order to repair the farm-buildings all over the estate, to carry out extensive draining, and make allowances to incoming tenants, which might remove the difficulty of newly letting the farms in a time of agricultural depression. The farms actually tenanted were held by men who had begged hard to succeed their fathers in getting a little poorer every year, on land which was also getting poorer, where the highest rate of increase was in the arrears of rent, and where the master, in crushed hat and corduroys, looked pitifully lean and care-worn by the side of pauper labourers, who showed that superior assimilating power often observed to attend nourishment by the public money. Mr Goffe, of Rabbit's End, had never had it explained to him that, according to the true theory of rent, land must inevitably be given up when it would not yield a profit equal to the ordinary rate of interest; so that from want of knowing what was inevitable, and not from a Titanic spirit of opposition, he kept on his land. He often said of himself, with a melancholy wipe of his sleeve across his brow, that he 'didn't know which-a-way to turn'; and he would have been still more at a loss on the subject if he had quitted Rabbit's End with a waggonful of furniture and utensils, a file of receipts, a wife with five children, and a shepherd-dog in low spirits.

It took no long time for Harold Transome to discover this state of things, and to see, moreover, that, except on the demesne immediately around the house, the timber had been mismanaged. The woods had been recklessly thinned, and there had been insufficient planting. He had not yet thoroughly investigated the various accounts kept by his mother, by Jermyn, and by Banks the bailiff; but what had been done with the large sums which had been received for timber was a suspicious mystery to him. He observed that the farm held by Jermyn was in first-rate order, that a good deal had been spent on the buildings, and that the rent had stood unpaid. Mrs Transome had taken an opportunity of saying that Jermyn had had some of the mortgage-deeds transferred to him, and that his rent was set against so much interest. Harold had only said, in his careless yet decisive way, 'O, Jermyn be hanged! It seems to me if Durfey hadn't died and made room for me, Jermyn would have ended by coming to live here, and you would have had to keep the lodge and open the gate for his carriage. But I shall pay him off - mortgages and all - by-and-by. I'll owe him nothing - not even a curse.' Mrs Transome said no more. Harold did not care to enter fully into the subject with his mother. The fact that she had been active in the management of the estate - had ridden about it continually, had busied herself with accounts, had been head-bailiff of the vacant farms, and had yet allowed things to go wrong - was set down by him simply to the general futility of women's attempts to transact men's business. He did not want to say anything to annoy her: he was only determined to let her understand, as quietly as possible, that she had better cease all interference.

Mrs Transome did understand this; and it was very little that she dared to say on business, though there was a fierce struggle of her anger and pride with a dread which was nevertheless supreme. As to the old tenants, she only observed, on hearing Harold burst forth about their wretched condition 'that with the estate so burthened, the yearly loss by arrears could better be borne than the outlay and sacrifice necessary in order to let the farms anew'.

'I was really capable of calculating, Harold,' she ended, with a touch of bitterness. 'It seems easy to deal with farmers and their affairs when you only see them in print, I daresay; but it's not quite so easy when you live among them. You have only to look at Sir Maximus's estate: you will see plenty of the same thing. The times have been dreadful, and old families like to keep their old tenants. But I daresay that is Toryism.'

'It's a hash of odds and ends, if that is Toryism, my dear mother. However, I wish you had kept three more old tenants; for then I should have had three more fifty-pound voters. And, in a hard run, one may be beaten by a head. But,' Harold added, smiling and handing her a ball of worsted, which had fallen, 'a woman ought to be a Tory, and graceful, and handsome, like you. I should hate a woman who took up my opinions, and talked for me. I'm an Oriental, you know. I say, mother, shall we have this room furnished with rose-colour? I notice that it suits your bright grey hair.'

Harold thought it was only natural that his mother should have been in a sort of subjection to Jermyn throughout the awkward circumstances of the family. It was the way of women, and all weak minds, to think that what they had been used to was inalterable, and any quarrel with a man who managed private affairs was necessarily a formidable thing. He himself was proceeding very cautiously, and preferred not even to know too much just at present, lest a certain personal antipathy he was conscious of toward Jermyn, and an occasional liability to exasperation, should get the better of a calm and clear-sighted resolve not to quarrel with the man while he could be of use. Harold would have been disgusted with himself if he had helped to frustrate his own purpose. And his strongest purpose now was to get returned for parliament, to make a figure there as a Liberal member, and to become on all grounds a personage of weight in North Loamshire.

How Harold Transome came to be a Liberal in opposition to all the traditions of his family, was a more subtle inquiry than he had ever cared to follow out. The newspapers undertook to explain it. The North Loamshire Herald witnessed with a grief and disgust certain to be shared by all persons who were actuated by wholesome British feeling, an example of defection in the inheritor of a family name which in

times past had been associated with attachment to right principle, and with the maintenance of our constitution in Church and State; and pointed to it as an additional proof that men who had passed any large portion of their lives beyond the limits of our favoured country, usually contracted not only a laxity of feeling towards Protestantism, nay, towards religion itself - a latitudinarian spirit hardly distinguishable from atheism - but also a levity of disposition, inducing them to tamper with those institutions by which alone Great Britain had risen to her pre-eminence among the nations. Such men, infected with outlandish habits, intoxicated with vanity, grasping at momentary power by flattery of the multitude, fearless because godless, liberal because un-English, were ready to pull one stone from under another in the national edifice, till the great structure tottered to its fall. On the other hand, the Duffield Watchman saw in this signal instance of self-liberation from the trammels of prejudice, a decisive guarantee of intellectual pre-eminence, united with a generous sensibility to the claims of man as man, which had burst asunder, and cast off, by a spontaneous exertion of energy, the cramping out-worn shell of hereditary bias and class interest.

But these large-minded guides of public opinion argued from wider data than could be furnished by any knowledge of the particular case concerned. Harold Transome was neither the dissolute cosmopolitan so vigorously sketched by the Tory Herald, nor the intellectual giant and moral lobster suggested by the liberal imagination of the Watchman. Twenty years ago he had been a bright, active, good-tempered lad, with sharp eyes and a good aim; he delighted in success and in predominance; but he did not long for an impossible predominance, and become sour and sulky because it was impossible. He played at the games he was clever in, and usually won; all other games he let alone, and thought them of little worth. At home and at Eton he had been side by side with his stupid elder brother Durfey, whom he despised; and he very early began to reflect that since this Caliban in miniature was older than himself, he must carve out his own fortune. That was a nuisance; and on the whole the world seemed rather ill-arranged, at Eton especially, where there were many reasons why Harold made no great figure. He was not sorry the money was wanting to send him to Oxford; he did not see the good of Oxford; he had been surrounded by many things during his short life, of which he had distinctly said to himself that he did not see the good, and he was not disposed to venerate on the strength of any good that others saw. He turned his back on home very cheerfully, though he was rather fond of his mother, and very fond of Transome Court, and the river where he had been used to fish; but he said to himself as he passed the lodge-gates, 'I'll get rich somehow, and have an estate of my own, and do what I like with it.' This determined aiming at something not easy but clearly possible, marked the direction in which Harold's nature was strong; he had the energetic will and

muscle, the self-confidence, the quick perception, and the narrow imagination which make what is admiringly called the practical mind.

Since then his character had been ripened by a various experience, and also by much knowledge which he had set himself deliberately to gain. But the man was no more than the boy writ large, with an extensive commentary. The years had nourished an inclination to as much opposition as would enable him to assert his own independence and power without throwing himself into that tabooed condition which robs power of its triumph. And this inclination had helped his shrewdness in forming judgments which were at once innovating and moderate. He was addicted at once to rebellion and to conformity, and only an intimate personal knowledge could enable any one to predict where his conformity would begin. The limit was not defined by theory, but was drawn in an irregular zigzag by early disposition and association; and his resolution, of which he had never lost hold, to be a thorough Englishman again some day, had kept up the habit of considering all his conclusions with reference to English politics and English social conditions. He meant to stand up for every change that the economical condition of the country required, and he had an angry contempt for men with coronets on their coaches, but too small a share of brains to see when they had better make a virtue of necessity. His respect was rather for men who had no coronets, but who achieved a just influence by furthering all measures which the common sense of the country, and the increasing self-assertion of the majority, peremptorily demanded. He could be such a man himself.

In fact Harold Transome was a clever, frank, good-natured egoist; not stringently consistent, but without any disposition to falsity; proud, but with a pride that was moulded in an individual rather than an hereditary form; unspeculative, unsentimental, unsympathetic; fond of sensual pleasures, but disinclined to all vice, and attached as a healthy, clear-sighted person, to all conventional morality, construed with a certain freedom, like doctrinal articles to which the public order may require subscription. A character is apt to look but indifferently, written out in this way. Reduced to a map, our premises seem insignificant, but they make, nevertheless, a very pretty freehold to live in and walk over; and so, if Harold Transome had been among your acquaintances, and you had observed his qualities through the medium of his agreeable person, bright smile, and a certain easy charm which accompanies sensuousness when unsullied by coarseness - through the medium also of the many opportunities in which he would have made himself useful or pleasant to you - you would have thought him a good fellow, highly acceptable as a guest, a colleague, or a brother-in-law. Whether all mothers would have liked him as a son, is another question.

It is a fact perhaps kept a little too much in the back-ground, that mothers have a self larger than their maternity, and that when their sons have become taller than themselves, and are gone from them to college or into the world, there are wide spaces of their time which are not filled with praying for their boys, reading old letters, and envying yet blessing those who are attending to their shirt-buttons. Mrs Transome was certainly not one of those bland, adoring, and gently tearful women. After sharing the common dream that when a beautiful man-child was born to her, her cup of happiness would be full, she had travelled through long years apart from that child to find herself at last in the presence of a son of whom she was afraid, who was utterly unmanageable by her, and to whose sentiments in any given case she possessed no key. Yet Harold was a kind son: he kissed his mother's brow, offered her his arm, let her choose what she liked for the house and garden, asked her whether she would have bays or greys for her new carriage, and was bent on seeing her make as good a figure in the neighbourhood as any other woman of her rank. She trembled under this kindness: it was not enough to satisfy her; still, if it should ever cease and give place to something else - she was too uncertain about Harold's feelings to imagine clearly what that something would be. The finest threads, such as no eye sees, if bound cunningly about the sensitive flesh, so that the movement to break them would bring torture, may make a worse bondage than any fetters. Mrs Transome felt the fatal threads about her, and the bitterness of this helpless bondage mingled itself with the new elegancies of the dining and drawing rooms, and all the household changes which Harold had ordered to be brought about with magical quickness. Nothing was as she had once expected it would be. If Harold had shown the least care to have her stay in the room with him - if he had really cared for her opinion - if he had been what she had dreamed he would be in the eyes of those people who had made her world - if all the past could be dissolved, and leave no solid trace of itself - mighty ifs that were all impossible - she would have tasted some joy; but now she began to look back with regret to the days when she sat in loneliness among the old drapery, and still longed for something that might happen. Yet, save in a bitter little speech, or in a deep sigh heard by no one besides Denner, she kept all these things hidden in her heart, and went out in the autumn sunshine to overlook the alterations in the pleasure-grounds very much as a happy woman might have done. One day, however, when she was occupied in this way, an occasion came on which she chose to express indirectly a part of her inward care.

She was standing on the broad gravel in the afternoon; the long shadows lay on the grass; the light seemed the more glorious because of the reddened and golden trees. The gardeners were busy at their pleasant work; the newly-turned soil gave out an agreeable fragrance; and little Harry was playing with Nimrod round old Mr Transome, who

sat placidly on a low garden-chair. The scene would have made a charming picture of English domestic life, and the handsome, majestic, grey-haired woman (obviously grandmamma) would have been especially admired. But the artist would have felt it requisite to turn her face towards her husband and little grandson, and to have given her an elderly amiability of expression which would have divided remark with his exquisite rendering of her Indian shawl. Mrs Transome's face was turned the other way, and for this reason she only heard an approaching step, and did not see whose it was; yet it startled her: it was not quick enough to be her son's step, and besides, Harold was away at Duffield. It was Mr Jermyn's.