Chapter 9

'A woman, naturally born to fears.' - King John. 'Methinks Some unborn sorrow, ripe in fortune's womb, Is coming towards me; and my inward soul With nothing trembles.' - King Richard II.

MATTHEW JERMYN approached Mrs Transome taking off his hat and smiling. She did not smile, but said - 'You knew Harold was not at home?'

'Yes; I came to see you, to know if you had any wishes that I could further, since I have not had an opportunity of consulting you since he came home.'

'Let us walk towards the Rookery, then.'

They turned together, Mr Jermyn still keeping his hat off and holding it behind him; the air was so soft and agreeable that Mrs Transome herself had nothing but a large veil over her head.

They walked for a little while in silence till they were out of sight, under tall trees, and treading noiselessly on fallen leaves. What Jermyn was really most anxious about, was to learn from Mrs Transome whether anything had transpired that was significant of Harold's disposition towards him, which he suspected to be very far from friendly. Jermyn was not naturally flinty-hearted: at five-and-twenty he had written verses, and had got himself wet through in order not to disappoint a dark-eyed woman whom he was proud to believe in love with him; but a family man with grown-up sons and daughters, a man with a professional position and complicated affairs that make it hard to ascertain the exact relation between property and liabilities, necessarily thinks of himself and what may be impending.

'Harold is remarkably acute and clever,' he began at last, since Mrs Transome did not speak. 'If he gets into parliament, I have no doubt he will distinguish himself. He has a quick eye for business of all kinds.'

'That is no comfort to me,' said Mrs Transome. To-day she was more conscious than usual of that bitterness which was always in her mind in Jermyn's presence, but which was carefully suppressed: - suppressed because she could not endure that the degradation she inwardly felt should ever become visible or audible in acts or words of her own - should ever be reflected in any word or look of his. For years there had been a deep silence about the past between them: on her side, because she remembered; on his, because he more and more forgot.

'I trust he is not unkind to you in any way. I know his opinions pain you; but I trust you find him in everything else disposed to be a good son.'

'O, to be sure - good as men are disposed to be to women, giving them cushions and carriages, and recommending them to enjoy themselves, and then expecting them to be contented under contempt and neglect. I have no power over him - remember that - none.'

Jermyn turned to look in Mrs Transome's face: it was long since he had heard her speak to him as if she were losing her self-command.

'Has he shown any unpleasant feeling about your management of the affairs?'

'My management of the affairs?' Mrs Transome said, with concentrated rage, flashing a fierce look at Jermyn. She checked herself: she felt as if she were lighting a torch to flare on her own past folly and misery. It was a resolve which had become a habit, that she would never quarrel with this man - never tell him what she saw him to be. She had kept her woman's pride and sensibility intact: through all her life there had vibrated the maiden need to have her hand kissed and be the object of chivalry. And so she sank into silence again, trembling.

Jermyn felt annoyed - nothing more. There was nothing in his mind corresponding to the intricate meshes of sensitiveness in Mrs Transome's. He was anything but stupid; yet he always blundered when he wanted to be delicate or magnanimous; he constantly sought to soothe others by praising himself. Moral vulgarity cleaved to him like an hereditary odour. He blundered now.

'My dear Mrs Transome,' he said in a tone of bland kindness, 'you are agitated - you appear angry with me. Yet I think, if you consider, you will see that you have nothing to complain of in me, unless you will complain of the inevitable course of man's life. I have always met your wishes both in happy circumstances and in unhappy ones. I should be ready to do so now, if it were possible.'

Every sentence was as pleasant to her as if it had been cut in her bared arm. Some men's kindness and love-making are more exasperating, more humiliating than others' derision; but the pitiable woman who has once made herself secretly dependent on a man who is beneath her in feeling, must bear that humiliation for fear of worse. Coarse kindness is at least better than coarse anger; and in all private quarrels the duller nature is triumphant by reason of its dulness. Mrs Transome knew in her inmost soul that those relations which had sealed her lips on Jermyn's conduct in business matters, had been

with him a ground for presuming that he should have impunity in any lax dealing into which circumstances had led him. She knew that she herself had endured all the more privation because of his dishonest selfishness. And now, Harold's long-deferred heirship, and his return with startlingly unexpected penetration, activity, and assertion of mastery, had placed them both in the full presence of a difficulty which had been prepared by the years of vague uncertainty as to issues. In this position, with a great dread hanging over her, which Jermyn knew, and ought to have felt that he had caused her, she was inclined to lash him with indignation, to scorch him with the words that were just the fit names for his doings - inclined all the more when he spoke with an insolent blandness, ignoring all that was truly in her heart. But no sooner did the words 'You have brought it on me' rise within her than she heard within also the retort, 'You brought it on yourself.' Not for all the world beside could she bear to hear that retort uttered from without. What did she do? With strange sequence to all that rapid tumult, after a few moments' silence she said, in a gentle and almost tremulous voice - 'Let me take your arm.'

He gave it immediately, putting on his hat and wondering. For more than twenty years Mrs Transome had never chosen to take his arm.

'I have but one thing to ask. Make me a promise.'

'What is it?'

'That you will never quarrel with Harold.'

'You must know that it is my wish not to quarrel with him.'

'But make a vow - fix it in your mind as a thing not to be done. Bear anything from him rather than quarrel with him.

'A man can't make a vow not to quarrel,' said Jermyn, who was already a little irritated by the implication that Harold might be disposed to use him roughly. 'A man's temper may get the better of him at any moment. I am not prepared to bear anything.'

'Good God!' said Mrs Transome, taking her hand from his arm,' is it possible you don't feel how horrible it would be?'

As she took away her hand, Jermyn let his arm fall, put both his hands in his pockets, and shrugging his shoulders said, 'I shall use him as he uses me.'

Jermyn had turned round his savage side, and the blandness was out of sight. It was this that had always frightened Mrs Transome: there was a possibility of fierce insolence in this man who was to pass with

those nearest to her as her indebted servant, but whose brand she secretly bore. She was as powerless with him as she was with her son.

This woman, who loved rule, dared not speak another word of attempted persuasion. They were both silent, taking the nearest way into the sunshine again. There was a half-formed wish in both their minds - even in the mother's - that Harold Transome had never been born.

'We are working hard for the election,' said Jermyn, recovering himself, as they turned into the sunshine again. 'I think we shall get him returned, and in that case he will be in high good-humour. Everything will be more propitious than you are apt to think. You must persuade yourself,' he added, smiling at her, 'that it is better for a man of his position to be in parliament on the wrong side than not be in at all.'

'Never,' said Mrs Transome. 'I am too old to learn to call bitter sweet and sweet bitter. But what I may think or feel is of no consequence now. I am as unnecessary as a chimney ornament.'

And in this way they parted on the gravel, in that pretty scene where they had met. Mrs Transome shivered as she stood alone: all around her, where there had once been brightness and warmth, there were white ashes, and the sunshine looked dreary as it fell on them.

Mr Jermyn's heaviest reflections in riding homeward turned on the possibility of incidents between himself and Harold Transome which would have disagreeable results, requiring him to raise money, and perhaps causing scandal, which in its way might also help to create a monetary deficit. A man of sixty, with a wife whose Duffield connections were of the highest respectability, with a family of tall daughters, an expensive establishment, and a large professional business, owed a great deal more to himself as the mainstay of all those solidities, than to feelings and ideas which were quite unsubstantial. There were many unfortunate coincidences which placed Mr Jermyn in an uncomfortable position just now; he had not been much to blame, he considered; if it had not been for a sudden turn of affairs no one would have complained. He defied any man to say that he had intended to wrong people; he was able to refund, to make reprisals, if they could be fairly demanded. Only he would certainly have preferred that they should not be demanded.

A German poet was intrusted with a particularly fine sausage, which he was to convey to the donor's friend at Paris. In the course of the long journey he smelt the sausage; he got hungry, and desired to taste it; he pared a morsel off, then another, and another, in successive moments of temptation, till at last the sausage was, humanly

speaking, at an end. The offence had not been premeditated. The poet had never loved meanness, but he loved sausage; and the result was undeniably awkward.

So it was with Matthew Jermyn. He was far from liking that ugly abstraction rascality, but he had liked other things which had suggested nibbling. He had had to do many things in law and in daily life which, in the abstract, he would have condemned; and indeed he had never been tempted by them in the abstract. Here, in fact, was the inconvenience; he had sinned for the sake of particular concrete things, and particular concrete consequences were likely to follow.

But he was a man of resolution, who, having made out what was the best course to take under a difficulty, went straight to his work. The election must be won: that would put Harold in good-humour, give him something to do, and leave himself more time to prepare for any crisis.

He was in anything but low spirits that evening. It was his eldest daughter's birthday, and the young people had a dance. Papa was delightful - stood up for a quadrille and a country-dance, told stories at supper, and made humorous quotations from his early readings: if these were Latin, he apologised, and translated to the ladies; so that a deaf lady-visitor from Duffield kept her trumpet up continually, lest she should lose any of Mr Jermyn's conversation, and wished that her niece Maria had been present, who was young and had a good memory.

Still the party was smaller than usual, for some families in Treby refused to visit Jermyn, now that he was concerned for a Radical candidate.