

Chapter 12

'Oh, sir, 'twas that mixture of spite and over-fed merriment which passes for humour with the vulgar. In their fun they have much resemblance to a turkey-cock. It has a cruel beak, and a silly iteration of ugly sounds; it spreads its tail in self-glorification, but shows you the wrong side of that ornament - liking admiration, but knowing not what is admirable.'

THIS Sunday evening, which promised to be so memorable in the experience of the Sproxton miners, had its drama also for those unsatisfactory objects to Mr Johnson's moral sense, the Debarrys. Certain incidents occurring at Treby Manor caused an excitement there which spread from the dining-room to the stables; but no one underwent such agitating transitions of feeling as Mr Scales. At six o'clock that superior butler was chuckling in triumph at having played a fine and original practical joke on his rival Mr Christian. Some two hours after that time, he was frightened, sorry, and even meek; he was on the brink of a humiliating confession; his cheeks were almost livid; his hair was flattened for want of due attention from his fingers; and the fine roll of his whiskers, which was too firm to give way, seemed only a sad reminiscence of past splendour and felicity. His sorrow came about in this wise.

After service on that Sunday morning, Mr Philip Debarry had left the rest of the family to go home in the carriage, and had remained at the Rectory to lunch with his uncle Augustus, that he might consult him touching some letters of importance. He had returned the letters to his pocket-book but had not returned the book to his pocket, and he finally walked away leaving the enclosure of private papers and bank-notes on his uncle's escritoire. After his arrival at home he was reminded of his omission, and immediately despatched Christian with a note begging his uncle to seal up the pocket-book and send it by the bearer. This commission, which was given between three and four o'clock, happened to be very unwelcome to the courier. The fact was that Mr Christian, who had been remarkable through life for that power of adapting himself to circumstances which enables a man to fall safely on all-fours in the most hurried expulsions and escapes, was not exempt from bodily suffering - a circumstance to which there is no known way of adapting one's self so as to be perfectly comfortable under it, or to push it off on to other people's shoulders. He did what he could: he took doses of opium when he had an access of nervous pains, and he consoled himself as to future possibilities by thinking that if the pains ever became intolerably frequent a considerable increase in the dose might put an end to them altogether. He was neither Cato nor Hamlet, and though he had learned their soliloquies at his first boarding-school, he would probably have increased his dose without reciting those masterpieces.

Next to the pain itself he disliked that any one should know of it: defective health diminished a man's market value; he did not like to be the object of the sort of pity he himself gave to a poor devil who was forced to make a wry face or 'give in' altogether.

He had felt it expedient to take a slight dose this afternoon, and still he was not altogether relieved at the time he set off to the rectory. On returning with the valuable case safely deposited in his hind pocket he felt increasing bodily uneasiness, and took another dose. Thinking it likely that he looked rather pitiable, he chose not to proceed to the house by the carriage-road. The servants often walked in the park on a Sunday, and he wished to avoid any meeting. He would make a circuit, get into the house privately, and after delivering his packet to Mr Debarry, shut himself up till the ringing of the half-hour bell. But when he reached an elbowed seat under some sycamores, he felt so ill at ease that he yielded to the temptation of throwing himself on it to rest a little. He looked at his watch: it was but five; he had done his errand quickly hitherto, and Mr Debarry had not urged haste. But in less than ten minutes he was in a sound sleep. Certain conditions of his system had determined a stronger effect than usual from the opium.

As he had expected, there were servants strolling in the park, but they did not all choose the most frequented part. Mr Scales, in pursuit of a slight flirtation with the younger lady's-maid, had preferred a more sequestered walk in the company of that agreeable nymph. And it happened to be this pair, of all others, who alighted on the sleeping Christian - a sight which at the very first moment caused Mr Scales a vague pleasure as at an incident that must lead to something clever on his part. To play a trick, and make some one or other look foolish, was held the most pointed form of wit throughout the back regions of the Manor, and served as a constant substitute for theatrical entertainment: what the farce wanted in costume or 'make up' it gained in the reality of the mortification which excited the general laughter. And lo ! here was the offensive, the exasperatingly cool and superior, Christian caught comparatively helpless, with his head hanging on his shoulder, and one coat-tail hanging out heavily below the elbow of the rustic seat. It was this coat-tail which served as a suggestion to Mr Scales's genius. Putting his finger up in warning to Mrs Cherry, and saying, 'Hush - be quiet - I see a fine bit of fun' - he took a knife from his pocket, stepped behind the unconscious Christian, and quickly cut off the pendent coat-tail. Scales knew nothing of the errand to the rectory; and as he noticed that there was something in the pocket, thought it was probably a large cigar-case. So much the better - he had no time to pause. He threw the coat-tail as far as he could, and noticed that it fell among the elms under which they had been walking. Then, beckoning to Mrs Cherry, he hurried away with her towards the more open part of the park, not

daring to explode in laughter until it was safe from the chance of waking the sleeper. And then the vision of the graceful well-appointed Mr Christian, who sneered at Scales about his 'get-up', having to walk back to the house with only one tail to his coat, was a source of so much enjoyment to the butler, that the fair Cherry began to be quite jealous of the joke. Still she admitted that it really was funny, tittered intermittently, and pledged herself to secrecy. Mr Scales explained to her that Christian would try to creep in unobserved, but that this must be made impossible; and he requested her to imagine the figure this interloping fellow would cut when everybody was asking what had happened. 'Hallo, Christian! where's your coat-tail?' would become a proverb at the Manor, where jokes kept remarkably well without the aid of salt; and Mr Christian's comb would be cut so effectually that it would take a long time to grow again. Exit Scales, laughing, and presenting a fine example of dramatic irony to any one in the secret of Fate.

When Christian awoke, he was shocked to find himself in the twilight. He started up, shook himself, missed something, and soon became aware what it was he missed. He did not doubt that he had been robbed, and he at once foresaw that the consequence would be highly unpleasant. In no way could the cause of the accident be so represented to Mr Philip Debarry as to prevent him from viewing his hitherto unimpeachable factotum in a new and unfavourable light. And though Mr Christian did not regard his present position as brilliant, he did not see his way to anything better. A man nearly fifty who is not always quite well is seldom ardently hopeful: he is aware that this is a world in which merit is often overlooked. With the idea of robbery in full possession of his mind, to peer about and search in the dimness, even if it had occurred to him, would have seemed a preposterous waste of time and energy. He knew it was likely that Mr Debarry's pocket-book had important and valuable contents, and that he should deepen his offence by deferring his announcement of the unfortunate fact. He hastened back to the house, relieved by the obscurity from that mortification of his vanity on which the butler had counted. Indeed, to Scales himself the affair had already begun to appear less thoroughly jocose than he had anticipated. For he observed that Christian's non-appearance before dinner had caused Mr Debarry some consternation; and he gathered that the courier had been sent on a commission to the rectory. 'My uncle must have detained him for some reason or other,' he heard Mr Philip say; 'but it is odd. If he were less trusty about commissions, or had ever seemed to drink too much, I should be uneasy.' Altogether the affair was not taking the turn Mr Scales had intended. At last, when dinner had been removed and the butler's chief duties were at an end, it was understood that Christian had entered without his coat-tail, looking serious and even agitated; that he had asked leave at once to speak to Mr Debarry; and that he was even then in parley with the gentlemen

in the dining-room. Scales was in alarm; it must have been some property of Mr Debarry's that had weighted the pocket. He took a lantern, got a groom to accompany him with another lantern, and with the utmost practicable speed reached the fatal spot in the park. He searched under the elms - he was certain that the pocket had fallen there - and he found the pocket; but he found it empty, and, in spite of further search, did not find the contents, though he had at first consoled himself with thinking that they had fallen out, and would be lying not far off. He returned with the lanterns and the coat-tail and a most uncomfortable consciousness in that great seat of a butler's emotion, the stomach. He had no sooner re-entered than he was met by Mrs Cherry, pale and anxious, who drew him aside to say that if he didn't tell everything, she would; that the constables were to be sent for; that there had been no end of bank-notes and letters and things in Mr Debarry's pocket-book, which Christian was carrying in that very pocket Scales had cut off; that the rector was sent for, the constable was coming, and they should all be hanged. Mr Scales's own intellect was anything but clear as to the possible issues. Crest-fallen, and with the coal-tail in his hands as an attestation that he was innocent of anything more than a joke, he went and made his confession. His story relieved Christian a little, but did not relieve Mr Debarry, who was more annoyed at the loss of the letters, and the chance of their getting into hands that might make use of them, than at the loss of the bank-notes. Nothing could be done for the present, but that the rector, who was a magistrate, should instruct the constables, and that the spot in the park indicated by Scales should again be carefully searched. This was done, but in vain; and many of the family at the manor had disturbed sleep that night.