

Chapter 13

'Give sorrow leave awhile, to tutor me

To this submission.' - Richard II.

MEANWHILE Felix Holt had been making his way back from Sproxton to Treby in some irritation and bitterness of spirit. For a little while he walked slowly along the direct road, hoping that Mr Johnson would overtake him, in which case he would have the pleasure of quarrelling with him, and telling him what he thought of his intentions in coming to cant at the Sugar Loaf. But he presently checked himself in this folly and turned off again towards the canal, that he might avoid the temptation of getting into a passion to no purpose.

'Where's the good,' he thought, 'of pulling at such a tangled skein as this electioneering trickery? As long as three-fourths of the men in this country see nothing in an election but self-interest, and nothing in self-interest but some form of greed, one might as well try to purify the proceedings of the fishes and say to a hungry cod-fish - 'My good friend, abstain; don't goggle your eyes so, or show such a stupid gluttonous mouth, or think the little fishes are worth nothing except in relation to your own inside.' He'd be open to no argument short of crimping him. I should get into a rage with this fellow, and perhaps end by thrashing him. There's some reason in me as long as I keep my temper, but my rash humour is drunkenness without wine. I shouldn't wonder if he upsets all my plans with these colliers. Of course he's going to treat them for the sake of getting up a posse at the nomination and speechifyings. They'll drink double, and never come near me on a Saturday evening. I don't know what sort of man Transome really is. It's no use my speaking to anybody else, but if I could get at him, he might put a veto on this thing. Though, when once the men have been promised and set agoing, the mischief is likely to be past mending. Hang the Liberal cod-fish! I shouldn't have minded so much if he'd been a Tory!'

Felix went along in the twilight struggling in this way with the intricacies of life, which would certainly be greatly simplified if corrupt practices were the invariable mark of wrong opinions. When he had crossed the common and had entered the park, the overshadowing trees deepened the grey gloom of the evening; it was useless to try and keep the blind path, and he could only be careful that his steps should be bent in the direction of the park-gate. He was striding along rapidly now, whistling 'Bannockburn' in a subdued way as an accompaniment to his inward discussion, when something smooth and soft on which his foot alighted arrested him with an unpleasant startling sensation, and made him stoop to examine the object he was treading on. He found it to be a large leather pocket-book swelled by

its contents, and fastened with a sealed ribbon as well as a clasp. In stooping he saw about a yard off something whitish and square lying on the dark grass. This was an ornamental note-book of pale leather stamped with gold. Apparently it had burst open in falling, and out of the pocket, formed by the cover, there protruded a small gold chain about four inches long, with various seals and other trifles attached to it by a ring at the end. Felix thrust the chain back, and finding that the clasp of the note-book was broken, he closed it and thrust it into his side-pocket, walking along under some annoyance that fortune had made him the finder of articles belonging most probably to one of the family at Treby Manor. He was much too proud a man to like any contact with the aristocracy, and he could still less endure coming within speech of their servants. Some plan must be devised by which he could avoid carrying these things up to the Manor himself: he thought at first of leaving them at the lodge, but he had a scruple against placing property, of which the ownership was after all uncertain, in the hands of persons unknown to him. It was possible that the large pocket-book contained papers of high importance, and that it did not belong to any of the Debarry family. He resolved at last to carry his findings to Mr Lyon, who would perhaps be good-natured enough to save him from the necessary transactions with the people at the Manor by undertaking those transactions himself. With this determination he walked straight to Malthouse Yard, and waited outside the chapel until the congregation was dispersing, when he passed along the aisle to the vestry in order to speak to the minister in private.

But Mr Lyon was not alone when Felix entered. Mr Nuttwood, the grocer, who was one of the deacons, was complaining to him about the obstinate demeanour of the singers, who had declined to change the tunes in accordance with a change in the selection of hymns, and had stretched short metre into long out of pure wilfulness and defiance, irreverently adapting the most sacred monosyllables to a multitude of wandering quavers, arranged, it was to be feared, by some musician who was inspired by conceit rather than by the true spirit of psalmody.

'Come in, my friend,' said Mr Lyon, smiling at Felix, and then continuing in a faint voice, while he wiped the perspiration from his brow and bald crown, 'Brother Nuttwood, we must be content to carry a thorn in our sides while the necessities of our imperfect state demand that there should be a body set apart and called a choir, whose special office it is to lead the singing, not because they are more disposed to the devout uplifting of praise, but because they are endowed with better vocal organs, and have attained more of the musician's art. For all office, unless it be accompanied by peculiar grace, becomes, as it were, a diseased organ, seeking to make itself too much of a centre. Singers, specially so called, are, it must be

confessed, an anomaly among us who seek to reduce the church to its primitive simplicity, and to cast away all that may obstruct the direct communion of spirit with spirit.'

'They are so headstrong,' said Mr Nuttwood, in a tone of sad perplexity, 'that if we dealt not warily with them, they might end in dividing the church, even now that we have had the chapel enlarged. Brother Kemp would side with them, and draw the half part of the members after him. I cannot but think it a snare when a professing Christian has a bass voice like Brother Kemp's. It makes him desire to be heard of men; but the weaker song of the humble may have more power in the ear of God.'

'Do you think it any better vanity to flatter yourself that God likes to hear you, though men don't?' said Felix, with unwarrantable bluntness.

The civil grocer was prepared to be scandalised by anything that came from Felix. In common with many hearers in Malthouse Yard, he already felt an objection to a young man who was notorious for having interfered in a question of wholesale and retail, which should have been left to Providence. Old Mr Holt, being a church member, had probably had 'leadings' which were more to be relied on than his son's boasted knowledge. In any case, a little visceral disturbance and inward chastisement to the consumers of questionable medicines would tend less to obscure the divine glory than a show of punctilious morality in one who was not a 'professor'. Besides, how was it to be known that the medicines would not be blessed, if taken with due trust in a higher influence? A Christian must consider not the medicines alone in their relation to our frail bodies (which are dust), but the medicines with Omnipotence behind them. Hence a pious vendor will look for 'leadings', and he is likely to find them in the cessation of demand and the disproportion of expenses and returns. The grocer was thus on his guard against the presumptuous disputant.

'Mr Lyon may understand you, sir,' he replied. 'He seems to be fond of your conversation. But you have too much of the pride of human learning for me. I follow no new lights.'

'Then follow an old one,' said Felix, mischievously disposed towards a sleek tradesman. 'Follow the light of the old-fashioned Presbyterians that I've heard sing at Glasgow. The preacher gives out the psalm, and then everybody sings a different tune, as it happens to turn up in their throats. It's a domineering thing to set a tune and expect everybody else to follow it. It's a denial of private judgement.'

'Hush, hush, my young friend,' said Mr Lyon, hurt by this levity, which glanced at himself as well as at the deacon. 'Play not with paradoxes. That caustic which you handle in order to scorch others may happen to sear your own fingers and make them dead to the quality of things. 'Tis difficult enough to see our way and keep our torch steady in this dim labyrinth: to whirl the torch and dazzle the eyes of our fellow-seekers is a poor daring, and may end in total darkness. You yourself are a lover of freedom, and a bold rebel against usurping authority. But the right to rebellion is the right to seek a higher rule, and not to wander in mere lawlessness. Wherefore, I beseech you, seem not to say that liberty is licence. And I apprehend - though I am not endowed with an ear to seize those earthly harmonies, which to some devout souls have seemed, as it were, the broken echoes of the heavenly choir - I apprehend that there is a law in music, disobedience whereunto would bring us in our singing to the level of shrieking maniacs or howling beasts: so that herein we are well instructed how true liberty can be nought but the transfer of obedience from the will of one or of a few men to that will which is the norm or rule for all men. And though the transfer may sometimes be but an erroneous direction of search, yet is the search good and necessary to the ultimate finding. And even as in music, where all obey and concur to one end, so that each has the joy of contributing to a whole whereby he is ravished and lifted up into the courts of heaven so will it be in that crowning time of the millennial reign, when our daily prayer will be fulfilled, and one law shall be written on all hearts, and be the very structure of all thought, and be the principle of all action.

Tired, even exhausted, as the minister had been when Felix Holt entered, the gathering excitement of speech gave more and more energy to his voice and manner; he walked away from the vestry table, he paused, and came back to it; he walked away again, then came back, and ended with his deepest-toned largo, keeping his hands clasped behind him, while his brown eyes were bright with the lasting youthfulness of enthusiastic thought and love. But to any one who had no share in the energies that were thrilling his little body, he would have looked queer enough. No sooner had he finished his eager speech, than he held out his hand to the deacon, and said, in his former faint tone of fatigue -

'God be with you, brother. We shall meet to-morrow, and we will see what can be done to subdue these refractory spirits.'

When the deacon was gone, Felix said, 'Forgive me, Mr Lyon; I was wrong, and you are right.'

'Yes, yes, my friend; you have that mark of grace within you, that you are ready to acknowledge the justice of a rebuke. Sit down; you have something to say - some packet there.'

They sat down at a corner of the small table, and Felix drew the note-book from his pocket to lay it down with the pocket-book, saying -

'I've had the ill-luck to be the finder of these things in the Debarrys' Park. Most likely they belong to one of the family at the Manor, or to some grandee who is staying there. I hate having anything to do with such people. They'll think me a poor rascal, and offer me money. You are a known man, and I thought you would be kind enough to relieve me by taking charge of these things, and writing to Debarry, not mentioning me, and asking him to send some one for them. I found them on the grass in the park this evening about half-past seven, in the corner we cross going to Sproxton.'

'Stay,' said Mr Lyon, 'this little book is open; we may venture to look in it for some sign of ownership. There be others who possess property, and might be crossing that end of the park, beside the Debarrys.'

As he lifted the note-book close to his eyes, the chain again slipped out. He arrested it and held it in his hand, while he examined some writing, which appeared to be a name on the inner leather. He looked long, as if he were trying to decipher something that was partly rubbed out; and his hands began to tremble noticeably. He made a movement in an agitated manner, as if he were going to examine the chain and seals, which he held in his hand. But he checked himself, closed his hand again, and rested it on the table, while with the other hand he pressed sides of the note-book together.

Felix observed his agitation, and was much surprised; but with a delicacy of which he was capable under all his abruptness, he said, 'You are overcome with fatigue, sir. I was thoughtless to tease you with these matters at the end of Sunday, when you have been preaching three sermons.'

Mr Lyon did not speak for a few moments, but at last he said -

'It is true. I am overcome. It was a name I saw - a name that called up a past sorrow. Fear not; I will do what is needful with these things. You may trust them to me.'

With trembling fingers he replaced the chain, and tied both the large pocket-book and the note-book in his handkerchief. He was evidently making a great effort over himself. But when he had gathered the knot of the handkerchief in his hand, he said -

'Give me your arm to the door, my friend. I feel ill. Doubtless I am over-wearied.'

The door was already open, and Lyddy was watching for her master's return. Felix therefore said 'Good-night' and passed on, sure that this was what Mr Lyon would prefer. The minister's supper of warm porridge was ready by the kitchen-fire, where he always took it on a Sunday evening, and afterwards smoked his weekly pipe up the broad chimney - the one great relaxation he allowed himself. Smoking, he considered, was a recreation of the travailed spirit, which, if indulged in, might endear this world to us by the ignoble bonds of mere sensuous ease. Daily smoking might be lawful, but it was not expedient. And in this Esther concurred with a doctrinal eagerness that was unusual in her. It was her habit to go to her own room, professedly to bed, very early on Sundays - immediately on her return from chapel - that she might avoid her father's pipe. But this evening she had remained at home, under a true plea of not feeling well; and when she heard him enter, she ran out of the parlour to meet him.

'Father, you are ill,' she said, as he tottered to the wicker-bottomed arm-chair, while Lyddy stood by, shaking her head.

'No, my dear,' he answered feebly, as she took off his hat and looked in his face inquiringly; 'I am weary.'

'Let me lay these things down for you,' said Esther, touching the bundle in the handkerchief.

'No; they are matters which I have to examine,' he said, laying them on the table, and putting his arm across them. 'Go you to bed, Lyddy.'

'Not me, sir. If ever a man looked as if he was struck with death, it's you, this very night as here is.'

'Nonsense, Lyddy,' said Esther angrily. 'Go to bed when my father desires it. I will stay with him.'

Lyddy was electrified by surprise at this new behaviour of Miss Esther's. She took her candle silently and went.

'Go you too, my dear,' said Mr Lyon, tenderly, giving his hand to Esther, when Lyddy was gone. 'It is your wont to go early. Why are you up?'

'Let me lift your porridge from before the fire, and stay with you, father. You think I'm so naughty that I don't like doing anything for you,' said Esther, smiling rather sadly at him.

'Child, what has happened? you have become the image of your mother to-night,' said the minister, in a loud whisper. The tears came and relieved him, while Esther, who had stooped to lift the porridge from the fender, paused on one knee and looked up at him. 'She was very good to you?' asked Esther, softly.

'Yes, dear. She did not reject my affection. She thought not scorn of my love. She would have forgiven me, if I had erred against her, from very tenderness. Could you forgive me, child?'

'Father, I have not been good to you; but I will be, I will be,' said Esther, laying her head on his knee.

He kissed her head. 'Go to bed, my dear; I would be alone.'

When Esther was lying down that night, she felt as if the little incidents between herself and her father on this Sunday had made it an epoch. Very slight words and deeds may have a sacramental efficacy, if we can cast our self-love behind us, in order to say or do them. And it has been well believed through many ages that the beginning of compunction is the beginning of a new life; that the mind which sees itself blameless may be called dead in trespasses - in trespasses on the love of others, in trespasses on their weakness, in trespasses on all those great claims which are the image of our own need.

But Esther persisted in assuring herself that she was not bending to any criticism from Felix. She was full of resentment against his rudeness, and yet more against his too harsh conception of her character. She was determined to keep as much at a distance from him as possible.