

Chapter 14

This man's metallic; at a sudden blow

His soul rings hard. I cannot lay my palm,

Trembling with life, upon that jointed brass.

I shudder at the cold unanswering touch;

But if it press me in response, I'm bruised.

THE next morning, when the Debarrys, including the rector, who had ridden over to the Manor early, were still seated at breakfast, Christian came in with a letter, saying that it had been brought by a man employed at the chapel in Malthouse Yard, who had been ordered by the minister to use all speed and care in the delivery. The letter was addressed to Sir Maximus.

'Stay, Christian, it may possibly refer to the lost pocket-book,' said Philip Debarry, who was beginning to feel rather sorry for his factotum, as a reaction from previous suspicions and indignation.

Sir Maximus opened the letter and felt for his glasses, but then said, 'Here, you read it, Phil: the man writes a hand like small print.'

Philip cast his eyes over it, and then read aloud in a tone of satisfaction: -

Sir, - I send this letter to apprise you that I have now in my possession certain articles, which, last evening, at about half-past seven o'clock, were found lying on the grass at the western extremity of your park. The articles are - 1^o, a well-filled pocket-book, of brown leather, fastened with a black ribbon and with a seal of red wax; 2^o, a small note-book, covered with gilded vellum, whereof the clasp was burst, and from out whereof had partly escaped a small gold chain, with seals and a locket attached, the locket bearing on the back a device, and round the face a female name.

Wherefore I request that you will further my effort to place these articles in the right hands, by ascertaining whether any person within your walls claims them as his property, and by sending that person to me (if such be found); for I will on no account let them pass from my care save into that of one who, declaring himself to be the owner, can state to me what is the impression on the seal, and what the device and name upon the locket. - I am, Sir, yours to command in all right dealing,

RUFUS LYON. Malthouse Yard, Oct. 3, 1832.

'Well done, old Lyon,' said the rector; 'I didn't think that any composition of his would ever give me so much pleasure.'

'What an old fox it is!' said Sir Maximus. 'Why couldn't he send the things to me at once along with the letter?'

'No, no, Max; he uses a justifiable caution,' said the rector, a refined and rather severe likeness of his brother, with a ring of fearlessness and decision in his voice which startled all flaccid men and unruly boys. 'What are you going to do, Phil?' seeing his nephew rise.

'To write, of course. Those other matters are yours, I suppose?' said Mr Debarry, looking at Christian.

'Yes, sir.'

'I shall send you with a letter to the preacher. You can describe your own property. And the seal, uncle - was it your coat-of-arms?'

'No, it was this head of Achilles. Here, I can take it off the ring, and you can carry it, Christian. But don't lose that, for I've had it ever since eighteen hundred. I should like to send my compliments with it,' the rector went on, looking at his brother, 'and beg that since he has so much wise caution at command, he would exercise a little in more public matters, instead of making himself a firebrand in my parish, and teaching hucksters and tape-weavers that it's their business to dictate to statesmen.'

'How did Dissenters, and Methodists, and Quakers, and people of that sort first come up, uncle?' said Miss Selina, a radiant girl of twenty, who had given much time to the harp.

'Dear me, Selina,' said her elder sister, Harriet, whose forte was general knowledge, 'don't you remember Woodstock? They were in Cromwell's time.'

'O! Holdenough, and those people? Yes; but they preached in the churches; they had no chapels. Tell me, uncle Gus; I like to be wise,' said Selina, looking up at the face which was smiling down on her with a sort of severe benignity. 'Phil says I'm an ignorant puss.'

'The seeds of Nonconformity were sown at the Reformation, my dear, when some obstinate men made scruples about surplices and the place of the communion-table, and other trifles of that sort. But the Quakers came up about Cromwell's time, and the Methodists only in

the last century. The first Methodists were regular clergymen, the more's the pity.'

'But all those wrong things - why didn't government put them down?'

'Ah, to be sure,' fell in Sir Maximus, in a cordial tone of corroboration.

'Because error is often strong, and government is often weak, my dear. Well, Phil, have you finished your letter?'

'Yes, I will read it to you,' said Philip, turning and leaning over the back of his chair with the letter in his hand.

There is a portrait of Mr Philip Debarry still to be seen at Treby Manor, and a very fine bust of him at Rome, where he died fifteen years later, a convert to Catholicism. His face would have been plain but for the exquisite setting of his hazel eyes, which fascinated even the dogs of the household. The other features, though slight and irregular, were redeemed from triviality by the stamp of gravity and intellectual preoccupation in his face and bearing. As he read aloud, his voice was what his uncle's might have been if it had been modulated by delicate health and a visitation of self-doubt.

Sir, - In reply to the letter with which you have favoured me this morning, I beg to state that the articles you describe were lost from the pocket of my servant, who is the bearer of this letter to you, and is the claimant of the vellum note-book and the gold chain. The large leathern pocket-book is my own property, and the impression on the wax, a helmeted head of Achilles, was made by my uncle, the Rev. Augustus Debarry, who allows me to forward his seal to you in proof that I am not making a mistaken claim.

I feel myself under deep obligation to you, sir, for the care and trouble you have taken in order to restore to its right owner a piece of property which happens to be of particular importance to me. And I shall consider myself doubly fortunate if at any time you can point out to me some method by which I may procure you as lively a satisfaction as I am now feeling, in that full and speedy relief from anxiety which I owe to your considerate conduct.

I remain, sir, your obliged and faithful servant, PHILIP DEBARRY.

'You know best, Phil, of course,' said Sir Maximus, pushing his plate from him, by way of interjection. 'But it seems to me you exaggerate preposterously every little service a man happens to do for you. Why should you make a general offer of that sort? How do you know what he will be asking you to do? Stuff and nonsense! Tell Willis to send him a few head of game. You should think twice before you give a

blank cheque of that sort to one of these quibbling, meddle-some Radicals.'

'You are afraid of my committing myself to 'the bottomless perjury of an et cetera',' said Philip, smiling, as he turned to fold his letter. 'But I think I am not doing any mischief; at all events I could not be content to say less. And I have a notion that he would regard a present of game just now as an insult. I should, in his place.'

'Yes, yes, you; but you don't make yourself a measure of dissenting preachers, I hope,' said Sir Maximus, rather wrathfully. 'What do you say, Gus?'

'Phil is right,' said the rector, in an absolute tone. 'I would not deal with a Dissenter, or put profits into the pocket of a Radical which I might put into the pocket of a good churchman and a quiet subject. But if the greatest scoundrel in the world made way for me, or picked my hat up, I would thank him. So would you, Max.'

'Pooh! I didn't mean that one shouldn't behave like a gentleman,' said Sir Maximus, in some vexation. He had great pride in his son's superiority even to himself; but he did not enjoy having his own opinion argued down as it always was, and did not quite trust the dim vision opened by Phil's new words and new notions. He could only submit in silence while the letter was delivered to Christian, with the order to start for Malthouse Yard immediately.

Meanwhile, in that somewhat dim locality the possible claimant of the note-book and the chain was thought of and expected with palpitating agitation. Mr Lyon was seated in his study, looking haggard and already aged from a sleepless night. He was so afraid lest his emotion should deprive him of the presence of mind necessary to the due attention to particulars in the coming interview, that he continued to occupy his sight and touch with the objects which had stirred the depths, not only of memory, but of dread. Once again he unlocked a small box which stood beside his desk, and took from it a little oval locket, and compared this with one which hung with the seals on the stray gold chain. There was the same device in enamel on the back of both: clasped hands surrounded with blue flowers. Both had round the face a name in gold italics on a blue ground: the name on the locket taken from the drawer was Maurice; the name on the locket which hung with the seals was Annette, and within the circle of this name there was a lover's knot of light-brown hair, which matched a curl that lay in the box. The hair in the locket which bore the name of Maurice was of a very dark brown, and before returning it to the drawer Mr Lyon noted the colour and quality of this hair more carefully than ever. Then he recurred to the note-book: undoubtedly there had been something, probably a third name, beyond the names

Maurice Christian, which had themselves been rubbed and slightly smeared as if by accident; and from the very first examination in the vestry, Mr Lyon could not prevent himself from transferring the mental image of the third name in faint lines to the rubbed leather. The leaves of the note-book seemed to have been recently inserted; they were of fresh white paper, and only bore some abbreviations in pencil with a notation of small sums. Nothing could be gathered from the comparison of the writing in the book with that of the yellow letters which lay in the box: the smeared name had been carefully printed, and so bore no resemblance to the signature of those letters; and the pencil abbreviations and figures had been made too hurriedly to bear any decisive witness. 'I will ask him to write - to write a description of the locket,' had been one of Mr Lyon's thoughts; but he faltered in that intention. His power of fulfilling it must depend on what he saw in this visitor, of whose coming he had a horrible dread, at the very time he was writing to demand it. In that demand he was obeying the voice of his rigid conscience, which had never left him perfectly at rest under his one act of deception - the concealment from Esther that he was not her natural father, the assertion of a false claim upon her. 'Let my path be henceforth simple,' he had said to himself in the anguish of that night; 'let me seek to know what is, and if possible to declare it.' If he was really going to find himself face to face with the man who had been Annette's husband, and who was Esther's father - if that wandering of his from the light had brought the punishment of a blind sacrilege as the issue of a conscious transgression, - he prayed that he might be able to accept all consequences of pain to himself. But he saw other possibilities concerning the claimant of the book and chain. His ignorance and suspicions as to the history and character of Annette's husband made it credible that he had laid a plan for convincing her of his death as a means of freeing himself from a burthensome tie; but it seemed equally probable that he was really dead, and that these articles of property had been a bequest, or a payment, or even a sale, to their present owner. Indeed, in all these years there was no knowing into how many hands such pretty trifles might have passed. And the claimant might, after all, have no connection with the Debarrys; he might not come on this day or the next. There might be more time left for reflection and prayer.

All these possibilities, which would remove the pressing need for difficult action, Mr Lyon represented to himself, but he had no effective belief in them; his belief went with his strongest feeling, and in these moments his strongest feeling was dread. He trembled under the weight that seemed already added to his own sin; he felt himself already confronted by Annette's husband and Esther's father. Perhaps the father was a gentleman on a visit to the Debarrys. There was no hindering the pang with which the old man said to himself -

'The child will not be sorry to leave this poor home, and I shall be guilty in her sight.'

He was walking about among the rows of books when there came a loud rap at the outer door. The rap shook him so that he sank into his chair, feeling almost powerless. Lyddy presented herself.

'Here's ever such a fine man from the Manor wants to see you, sir. Dear heart, dear heart I shall I tell him you're too bad to see him?'

'Show him up,' said Mr Lyon, making an effort to rally. When Christian appeared, the minister half rose, leaning on an arm of his chair, and said, 'Be seated, sir,' seeing nothing but that a tall man was entering.

'I've brought you a letter from Mr Debarry,' said Christian, in an off-hand manner. This rusty little man, in his dismal chamber, seemed to the Ulysses of the steward's room a pitiable sort of human curiosity, to whom a man of the world would speak rather loudly, in accommodation to an eccentricity which was likely to be accompanied with deafness. One cannot be eminent in everything; and if Mr Christian had dispersed his faculties in study that would have enabled him to share unconventional points of view, he might have worn a mistaken kind of boot, and been less competent to win at ecarte, or at betting, or in any other contest suitable to a person of figure.

As he seated himself, Mr Lyon opened the letter, and held it close to his eyes, so that his face was hidden. But at the word 'servant' he could not avoid starting, and looking off the letter towards the bearer. Christian, knowing what was in the letter, conjectured that the old man was amazed to learn that so distinguished-looking a personage was a servant; he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, balanced his cane on his fingers, and began a whispering whistle. The minister checked himself, finished the reading of the letter, and then slowly and nervously put on his spectacles to survey this man, between whose fate and his own there might be a terrible collision. The word 'servant' had been a fresh caution to him. He must do nothing rashly. Esther's lot was deeply concerned. 'Here is the seal mentioned in the letter,' said Christian.

Mr Lyon drew the pocket-book from his desk, and, after comparing the seal with the impression, said, 'It is right, sir: I deliver the pocket-book to you.'

He held it out with the seal, and Christian rose to take them, saying, carelessly, 'The other things - the chain and the little book - are mine.' 'Your name then is -'

'Maurice Christian.'

A spasm shot through Mr Lyon. It had seemed possible that he might hear another name, and be freed from the worse half of his anxiety. His next words were not wisely chosen, but escaped him impulsively.

'And you have no other name?'

'What do you mean?' said Christian, sharply.

'Be so good as to reseat yourself.'

Christian did not comply. 'I'm rather in a hurry, sir,' he said, recovering his coolness. 'If it suits you to restore to me those small articles of mine, I shall be glad; but I would rather leave them behind than be detained.' He had reflected that the minister was simply a punctilious old bore. The question meant nothing else. But Mr Lyon had wrought himself up to the task of finding out, then and there, if possible, whether or not this were Annette's husband. How could he lay himself and his sin before God if he wilfully declined to learn the truth?

'Nay, sir, I will not detain you unreasonably,' he said, in a firmer tone than before. 'How long have these articles been your property?'

'Oh, for more than twenty years,' said Christian, carelessly. He was not altogether easy under the minister's persistence, but for that very reason he showed no more impatience.

'You have been in France and in Germany?'

'I have been in most countries on the continent.'

'Be so good as to write me your name,' said Mr Lyon, dipping a pen in the ink, and holding it out with a piece of paper.

Christian was much surprised, but not now greatly alarmed. In his rapid conjectures as to the explanation of the minister's curiosity, he had alighted on one which might carry advantage rather than inconvenience. But he was not going to commit himself.

'Before I oblige you there, sir,' he said, laying down the pen, and looking straight at Mr Lyon, 'I must know exactly the reasons you have for putting these questions to me. You are a stranger to me - an excellent person, I daresay - but I have no concern about you farther than to get from you those small articles. Do you still doubt that they are mine? You wished, I think, that I should tell you what the locket is like. It has a pair of hands and blue flowers on one side, and the name

Annette round the hair on the other side. That is all I have to say. If you wish for anything more from me, you will be good enough to tell me why you wish it. Now then, sir, what is your concern with me?'

The cool stare, the hard challenging voice, with which these words were uttered, made them fall like the beating, cutting chill of heavy hail on Mr Lyon. He sank back in his chair in utter irresolution and helplessness. How was it possible to lay bare the sad and sacred past in answer to such a call as this? The dread with which he had thought of this man's coming, the strongly-confirmed suspicion that he was really Annette's husband, intensified the antipathy created by his gestures and glances. The sensitive little minister knew instinctively that words which would cost him efforts as painful as the obedient footsteps of a wounded bleeding hound that wills a foreseen throe, would fall on this man as the pressure of tender fingers falls on a brazen glove. And Esther - if this man was her father - every additional word might help to bring down irrevocable, perhaps cruel, consequences on her. A thick mist seemed to have fallen where Mr Lyon was looking for the track of duty: the difficult question, how far he was to care for consequences in seeking and avowing the truth, seemed anew obscured. All these things, like the vision of a coming calamity, were compressed into a moment of consciousness. Nothing could be done to-day; everything must be deferred. He answered Christian in a low apologetic tone.

'It is true, sir; you have told me all I can demand. I have no sufficient reason for detaining your property further.'

He handed the note-book and chain to Christian, who had been observing him narrowly, and now said, in a tone of indifference, as he pocketed the articles -

'Very good, sir. I wish you a good-morning.'

'Good-morning,' said Mr Lyon, feeling, while the door closed behind his guest, that mixture of uneasiness and relief which all procrastination of difficulty produces in minds capable of strong forecast. The work was still to be done. He had still before him the task of learning everything that could be learned about this man's relation to himself and Esther.

Christian, as he made his way back along Malthouse Lane, was thinking, 'This old fellow has got some secret in his head. It's not likely he can know anything about me; it must be about Bycliffe. But Bycliffe was a gentleman: how should he ever have had anything to do with such a seedy old ranter as that?'