

Chapter 15

And doubt shall be as lead upon the feet

Of thy most anxious will.

MR LYON was careful to look in at Felix as soon as possible after Christian's departure, to tell him that his trust was discharged. During the rest of the day he was somewhat relieved from agitating reflections by the necessity of attending to his ministerial duties, the rebuke of rebellious singers being one of them; and on his return from the Monday evening prayer-meeting he was so overcome with weariness that he went to bed without taking note of any objects in his study. But when he rose the next morning, his mind, once more eagerly active, was arrested by Philip Debarry's letter, which still lay open on his desk, and was arrested by precisely that portion which had been unheeded the day before: '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.'

To understand how these words could carry the suggestion they actually had for the minister in a crisis of peculiar personal anxiety and struggle, we must bear in mind that for many years he had walked through life with the sense of having for a space been unfaithful to what he esteemed the highest trust ever committed to man - the ministerial vocation. In a mind of any nobleness, a lapse into transgression against an object still regarded as supreme, issues in a new and purer devotedness, chastised by humility and watched over by a passionate regret. So it was with that ardent spirit which animated the little body of Rufus Lyon. Once in his life he had been blinded, deafened, hurried along by rebellious impulse; he had gone astray after his own desires, and had let the fire die out on the altar; and as the true penitent, hating his self-besotted error, asks from all coming life duty instead of joy, and service instead of ease, so Rufus was perpetually on the watch lest he should ever again postpone to some private affection a great public opportunity which to him was equivalent to a command.

Now here was an opportunity brought by a combination of that unexpected incalculable kind which might be regarded as the divine emphasis invoking especial attention to trivial events - an opportunity of securing what Rufus Lyon had often wished for as a means of honouring truth, and exhibiting error in the character of a stammering, halting, short-breathed usurper of office and dignity. What was more exasperating to a zealous preacher, with whom copious speech was not a difficulty but a relief - who never lacked

argument, but only combatants and listeners - than to reflect that there were thousands on thousands of pulpits in this kingdom, supplied with handsome sounding-boards, and occupying an advantageous position in buildings far larger than the chapel in Malthouse Yard - buildings sure to be places of resort, even as the markets were, if only from habit and interest; and that these pulpits were filled, or rather made vacuous, by men whose privileged education in the ancient centres of instruction issued in twenty minutes' formal reading of tepid exhortation or probably infirm deductions from premises based on rotten scaffolding? And it is in the nature of exasperation gradually to concentrate itself. The sincere antipathy of a dog towards cats in general, necessarily takes the form of indignant barking at the neighbour's black cat which makes daily trespass; the bark at imagined cats, though a frequent exercise of the canine mind, is yet comparatively feeble. Mr Lyon's sarcasm was not without an edge when he dilated in general on an elaborate education for teachers which issued in the minimum of teaching, but it found a whetstone in the particular example of that bad system known as the rector of Treby Magna. There was nothing positive to be said against the Rev. Augustus Debarry; his life could not be pronounced blameworthy except for its negatives. And the good Rufus was too pure-minded not to be glad of that. He had no delight in vice as discrediting wicked opponents; he shrank from dwelling on the images of cruelty or of grossness, and his indignation was habitually inspired only by those moral and intellectual mistakes which darken the soul but do not injure or degrade the temple of the body. If the rector had been a less respectable man, Rufus would have more reluctantly made him an object of antagonism; but as an incarnation of soul-destroying error, dissociated from those baser sins which have no good repute even with the worldly, it would be an argumentative luxury to get into close quarters with him, and fight with a dialectic short-sword in the eyes of the Treby world (sending also a written account thereof to the chief organs of dissenting opinion). Vice was essentially stupid - a deaf and eyeless monster, insusceptible to demonstration: the Spirit might work on it by unseen ways, and the unstudied sallies of sermons were often as the arrows which pierced and awakened the bmtified conscience; but illuminated thought, finely-dividing speech, were the choicer weapons of the divine armoury, which whoso could wield must be careful not to leave idle.

Here, then, was the longed-for opportunity. Here was an engagement - an expression of a strong wish - on the part of Philip Debarry, if it were in his power, to procure a satisfaction to Rufus Lyon. How had that man of God and exemplary Independent minister, Mr Ainsworth, of persecuted sanctity, conducted himself when a similar occasion had befallen him at Amsterdam? ' He had thought of nothing but the glory of the highest cause, and had converted the offer of recompense into a public debate with a Jew on the chief mysteries of the faith. Here was

a model: the case was nothing short of a heavenly indication, and he, Rufus Lyon, would seize the occasion to demand a public debate with the rector on the constitution of the true church.

What if he were inwardly torn by doubt and anxiety concerning his own private relations and the facts of his past life? That danger of absorption within the narrow bounds of self only urged him the more towards action which had a wider bearing, and might tell on the welfare of England at large. It was decided. Before the minister went down to his breakfast that morning he had written the following letter to Mr Philip Debarry:

Sir, - Referring to your letter of yesterday, I find the following words: '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 am not unaware, sir, that, in the usage of the world, there are words of courtesy (so called) which are understood, by those amongst whom they are current, to have no precise meaning, and to constitute no bond or obligation. I will not now insist that this is an abuse of language, wherein our fallible nature requires the strictest safeguards against laxity and misapplication, for I do not apprehend that in writing the words I have above quoted, you were open to the reproach of using phrases which, while seeming to carry a specific meaning, were really no more than what is called a polite form. I believe, sir, that you used these words advisedly, sincerely, and with an honourable intention of acting on them as a pledge, should such action be demanded. No other supposition on my part would correspond to the character you bear as a young man who aspires (albeit mistakenly) to engraft the finest fruits of public virtue on a creed and institutions, whereof the sap is composed rather of human self-seeking than of everlasting truth.

Wherefore I act on this my belief in the integrity of your written word; and I beg you to procure for me (as it is doubtless in your power) that I may be allowed a public discussion with your near relative, the rector of this parish, the Reverend Augustus Debarry, to be held in the large room of the Free School, or in the Assembly Room of the Marquis of Granby, these being the largest covered spaces at our command. For I presume he would neither allow me to speak within his church, nor would consent himself to speak within my chapel; and the probable inclemency of the approaching season forbids an assured expectation that we could discourse in the open air. The subjects I desire to discuss are, - first, the constitution of the true church; and, secondly, the bearing thereupon of the English Reformation. Confidently expecting that you will comply with this request, which is

the sequence of your expressed desire, I remain, sir, yours, with the respect offered to a sincere with-stander,

Malthouse Yard. RUFUS LYON.

After writing this letter, the good Rufus felt that serenity and elevation of mind which is infallibly brought by a preoccupation with the wider relations of things. Already he was beginning to sketch the course his argument might most judiciously take in the coming debate; his thoughts were running into sentences, and marking off careful exceptions in parentheses; and he had come down and seated himself at the breakfast-table quite automatically, without expectation of toast or coffee, when Esther's voice and touch recalled him to an inward debate of another kind, in which he felt himself much weaker. Again there arose before him the image of that cool, hard-eyed, worldly man, who might be this dear child's father, and one against whose rights he had himself grievously offended. Always as the image recurred to him Mr Lyon's heart sent forth a prayer for guidance, but no definite guidance had yet made itself visible for him. It could not be guidance - it was a temptation - that said, 'Let the matter rest: seek to know no more; know only what is thrust upon you.' The remembrance that in his time of wandering he had wilfully remained in ignorance of facts which he might have inquired after, deepened the impression that it was now an imperative duty to seek the fullest attainable knowledge. And the inquiry might possibly issue in a blessed repose, by putting a negative on all his suspicions. But the more vividly all the circumstances became present to him, the more unfit he felt himself to set about any investigation concerning this man who called himself Maurice Christian. He could seek no confidant or helper among 'the brethren'; he was obliged to admit to himself that the members of his church, with whom he hoped to go to heaven, were not easy to converse with on earth touching the deeper secrets of his experience, and were still less able to advise him as to the wisest procedure, in a case of high delicacy, with a worldling who had a carefully-trimmed whisker and a fashionable costume. For the first time in his life it occurred to the minister that he should be glad of an adviser who had more worldly than spiritual experience, and that it might not be inconsistent with his principles to seek some light from one who had studied human law. But it was a thought to be paused upon, and not followed out rashly; some other guidance might intervene.

Esther noticed that her father was in a fit of abstraction, that he seemed to swallow his coffee and toast quite unconsciously, and that he vented from time to time a low guttural interjection, which was habitual with him when he was absorbed by an inward discussion. She did not disturb him by remarks, and only wondered whether anything unusual, had occurred on Sunday evening. But at last she

thought it needful to say, 'You recollect what I told you yesterday, father?'

'Nay, child; what?' said Mr Lyon, rousing himself

'That Mr Jermyn asked me if you would probably be at home this morning before one o'clock.'

Esther was surprised to see her father start and change colour as if he had been shaken by some sudden collision before he answered -

'Assuredly; I do not intend to move from my study after I have once been out to give this letter to Zachary.'

'Shall I tell Lyddy to take him up at once to your study if he comes? If not, I shall have to stay in my own room, because I shall be at home all this morning, and it is rather cold now to sit without a fire.'

'Yes, my dear, let him come up to me; unless, indeed, he should bring a second person, which might happen, seeing that in all likelihood he is coming, as hitherto, on electioneering business. And I could not well accommodate two visitors up-stairs.'

While Mr Lyon went out to Zachary, the pew-opener, to give him a second time the commission of carrying a letter to Treby Manor, Esther gave her injunction to Lyddy that if one gentleman came he was to be shown up-stairs - if two, they were to be shown into the parlour. But she had to resolve various questions before Lyddy clearly saw what was expected of her, - as that, 'if it was the gentleman as came on Thursday in the pepper-and-salt coat, was he to be shown up-stairs? And the gentleman from the Manor yesterday as went out whistling - had Miss Esther heard about him? There seemed no end of these great folks coming to Malthouse Yard since there was talk of the election; but they might be poor lost creatures the most of 'em.' Whereupon Lyddy shook her head and groaned, under an edifying despair as to the future lot of gentlemen callers.

Esther always avoided asking questions of Lyddy, who found an answer as she found a key, by pouring out a pocketful of miscellanies. But she had remarked so many indications that something had happened to cause her father unusual excitement and mental preoccupation, that she could not help connecting with them the fact of this visit from the Manor, which he had not mentioned to her.

She sat down in the dull parlour and took up her netting; for since Sunday she had felt unable to read when she was alone, being obliged, in spite of herself, to think of Felix Holt - to imagine what he would like her to be, and what sort of views he took of life so as to

make it seem valuable in the absence of all elegance, luxury, gaiety, or romance. Had he yet reflected that he had behaved very rudely to her on Sunday? Perhaps not. Perhaps he had dismissed her from his mind with contempt. And at that thought Esther's eyes smarted unpleasantly. She was fond of netting, because it showed to advantage both her hand and her foot; and across this image of Felix Holt's indifference and contempt there passed the vaguer image of a possible somebody who would admire her hands and feet, and delight in looking at their beauty, and long, yet not dare, to kiss them. Life would be much easier in the presence of such a love. But it was precisely this longing after her own satisfaction that Felix had reproached her with. Did he want her to be heroic? That seemed impossible without some great occasion. Her life was a heap of fragments, and so were her thoughts: some great energy was needed to bind them together. Esther was beginning to lose her complacency at her own wit and criticism; to lose the sense of superiority in an awakening need for reliance on one whose vision was wider, whose nature was purer and stronger than her own. But then, she said to herself, that 'one' must be tender to her, not rude and predominating in his manners. A man with any chivalry in him could never adopt a scolding tone towards a woman - that is, towards a charming woman. But Felix had no chivalry in him. He loved lecturing and opinion too well ever to love any woman.

In this way Esther strove to see that Felix was thoroughly in the wrong - at least, if he did not come again expressly to show that he was sorry.