

## Chapter 17

It is a good and soothfast saw;  
Half-roasted never will be raw;  
No dough is dried once more to meal  
No crock new-shapen by the wheel;  
You can't turn curds to milk again,  
Nor Now, by wishing, back to Then;  
And having tasted stolen honey,  
You can't buy innocence for money.

JERMYN was not particularly pleased that some chance had apparently hindered Harold Transome from making other canvassing visits immediately after leaving Mr Lyon, and so had sent him back to the office earlier than he had been expected to come. The inconvenient chance he guessed at once to be represented by Felix Holt, whom he knew very well by Trebian report to be a young man with so little of the ordinary Christian motives as to making an appearance and getting on in the world, that he presented no handle to any judicious and respectable person who might be willing to make use of him.

Harold Transome, on his side, was a good deal annoyed at being worried by Felix into an inquiry about electioneering details. The real dignity and honesty there was in him made him shrink from this necessity of satisfying a man with a troublesome tongue; it was as if he were to show indignation at the discovery of one barrel with a false bottom, when he had invested his money in a manufactory where a larger or smaller number of such barrels had always been made. A practical man must seek a good end by the only possible means; that is to say, if he is to get into parliament he must not be too particular. It was not disgraceful to be neither a Quixote nor a theorist, aiming to correct the moral rules of the world; but whatever actually was, or might prove to be, disgraceful, Harold held in detestation. In this mood he pushed on unceremoniously to the inner office without waiting to ask questions; and when he perceived that Jermyn was not alone, he said, with haughty quickness -

'A question about the electioneering at Sproxton. Can you give your attention to it at once? Here is Mr Holt, who has come to me about the business.'

'A - yes - a - certainly,' said Jermyn, who, as usual, was the more cool and deliberate because he was vexed. He was standing, and, as he turned round, his broad figure concealed the person who was seated writing at the bureau. 'Mr Holt - a - will doubtless - a - make a point of saving a busy man's time. You can speak at once. This gentleman' - here Jermyn made a slight backward movement of his head - 'is one of ourselves; he is a true-blue.'

'I have simply to complain,' said Felix, 'that one of your agents has been sent on a bribing expedition to Sproxton - with what purpose you, sir, may know better than I do. Mr Transome, it appears, was ignorant of the affair, and does not approve it.'

Jermyn, looking gravely and steadily at Felix while he was speaking, at the same time drew forth a small sheaf of papers from his side-pocket, and then, as he turned his eyes slowly on Harold, felt in his waistcoat-pocket for his pencil-case.

'I don't approve it at all,' said Harold, who hated Jermyn's calculated slowness and conceit in his own impenetrability. 'Be good enough to put a stop to it, will you?'

'Mr Holt, I know, is an excellent Liberal,' said Jermyn, just inclining his head to Harold, and then alternately looking at Felix and docketing his bills; 'but he is perhaps too inexperienced to be aware that no canvass - a - can be conducted without the action of able men, who must - a - be trusted, and not interfered with. And as to any possibility of promising to put a stop - a - to any procedure - a - that depends. If he had ever held the coachman's ribbons in his hands, as I have in my younger days - a - he would know that stopping is not always easy.'

'I know very little about holding ribbons,' said Felix; 'but I saw clearly enough at once that more mischief had been done than could be well mended. Though I believe, if it were heartily tried, the treating might be reduced, and something might be done to hinder the men from turning out in a body to make a noise, which might end in worse.'

'They might be hindered from making a noise on our side,' said Jermyn, smiling. 'That is perfectly true. But if they made a noise on the other - would your purpose be answered better, sir?'

Harold was moving about in an irritated manner while Felix and Jermyn were speaking. He preferred leaving the talk to the attorney, of whose talk he himself liked to keep as clear as possible.

'I can only say,' answered Felix, 'that if you make use of those heavy fellows when the drink is in them, I shouldn't like your responsibility.'

You might as well drive bulls to roar on our side as bribe a set of colliers and navvies to shout and groan.'

'A lawyer may well envy your command of language, Mr Holt,' said Jermyn, pocketing his bills again, and shutting up his pencil; 'but he would not be satisfied with the accuracy - a - of your terms. You must permit me to check your use of the word 'bribery'. The essence of bribery is, that it should be legally proved; there is not such a thing - a - in rerum natura - a - as unproved bribery. There has been no such thing as bribery at Sproxton, I'll answer for it. The presence of a body of stalwart fellows on - a - the Liberal side will tend to preserve order; for we know that the benefit clubs from the Pitchley district will show for Debarry. Indeed, the gentleman who has conducted the canvass at Sproxton is experienced in parliamentary affairs, and would not exceed - a - the necessary measures that a rational judgment would dictate!'

'What! you mean the man who calls himself Johnson?' said Felix, in a tone of disgust.

Before Jermyn chose to answer, Harold broke in, saying, quickly and peremptorily, 'The long and short of it is this, Mr Holt: I shall desire and insist that whatever can be done by way of remedy shall be done. Will that satisfy you? You see now some of a candidate's difficulties?' said Harold, breaking into his most agreeable smile. 'I hope you will have some pity for me.'

'I suppose I must be content,' said Felix, not thoroughly propitiated. 'I bid you good-morning, gentlemen.'

When he was gone out, and had closed the door behind him, Harold, turning round and flashing, in spite of himself, an angry look at Jermyn, said -

'And who is Johnson? an alias, I suppose. It seems you are fond of the name.'

Jermyn turned perceptibly paler, but disagreeables of this sort between himself and Harold had been too much in his anticipations of late for him to be taken by surprise. He turned quietly round and just touched the shoulder of the person seated at the bureau, who now rose.

'On the contrary,' Jermyn answered, 'the Johnson in question is this gentleman, whom I have the pleasure of introducing to you as one of my most active helpmates in electioneering business - Mr Johnson, of Bedford Row, London. I am comparatively a novice - a - in these matters. But he was engaged with James Putty in two hardly-

contested elections, and there could scarcely be a better initiation. Putty is one of the first men of the country as an agent - a - on the Liberal side - a - eh, Johnson? I think Makepiece is - a - not altogether a match for him, not quite of the same calibre - a - haud consimili ingenio - a - in tactics - a - and in experience?'

'Makepiece is a wonderful man, and so is Putty,' said the glib Johnson, too vain not to be pleased with an opportunity of speaking, even when the situation was rather awkward. 'Makepiece for scheming, but Putty for management. Putty knows men, sir,' he went on, turning to Harold; 'it's a thousand pities that you have not had his talents employed in your service. He's beyond any man for saving a candidate's money - does half the work with his tongue. He'll talk of anything, from the Areopagus, and that sort of thing, down to the joke about 'Where are you going, Paddy?' - you know what I mean, sir! 'Back again, says Paddy' - an excellent electioneering joke. Putty understands these things. He has said to me, 'Johnson, bear in mind there are two ways of speaking an audience will always like: one is, to tell them what they don't understand; and the other is, to tell them what they're used to.' I shall never be the man to deny that I owe a great deal to Putty. I always say it was a most providential thing in the Mugham election last year that Putty was not on the Tory side. He managed the women; and if you'll believe me, sir, one fourth of the men would never have voted if their wives hadn't driven them to it for the good of their families. And as for speaking - it's currently reported in our London circles that Putty writes regularly for the Times. He has that kind of language; and I needn't tell you, Mr Transome, that it's the apex, which, I take it, means the tiptop - and nobody can get higher than that, I think. I've belonged to a political debating society myself; I've heard a little language in my time; but when Mr Jermyn first spoke to me about having the honour to assist in your canvass of North Loamshire' - here Johnson played with his watch-seals and balanced himself a moment on his toes - 'the very first thing I said was, 'And there's Garstin has got Putty! No Whig could stand against a Whig,' I said, 'who had Putty on his side: I hope Mr Transome goes in for something of a deeper colour.' I don't say that, as a general rule, opinions go for much in a return, Mr Transome; it depends on who are in the field before you, and on the skill of your agents. But as a Radical, and a moneyed Radical, you are in a fine position, sir; and with care and judgment - with care and judgment -'

It had been impossible to interrupt Johnson before, without the most impolite rudeness. Jermyn was not sorry that he should talk, even if he made a fool of himself; for in that solid shape, exhibiting the average amount of human foibles, he seemed less of the alias which Harold had insinuated him to be, and had all the additional plausibility of a lie with a circumstance.

Harold had thrown himself with contemptuous resignation into a chair, had drawn off one of his buff gloves, and was looking at his hand. But when Johnson gave his iteration with a slightly slackened pace, Harold looked up at him and broke in -

'Well, then, Mr Johnson, I shall be glad if you will use your care and judgment in putting an end as well as you can to this Sproxton affair; else it may turn out an ugly business.'

'Excuse me, sir, I must beg you to look at the matter a little more closely. You will see that it is impossible to take a single step backward at Sproxton. It was a matter of necessity to get the Sproxton men; else I know to a certainty the other side would have laid hold of them first, and now I've undermined Garstin's people. They'll use their authority, and give a little shabby treating, but I've taken all the wind out of their sails. But if, by your orders, I or Mr Jermyn here were to break promise with the honest fellows, and offend Chubb the publican, what would come of it? Chubb would leave no stone unturned against you, sir; he would egg on his customers against you; the colliers and navvies would be at the nomination and at the election all the same, or rather not all the same, for they would be there against us; and instead of hustling people good-humouredly by way of a joke, and counterbalancing Debarry's cheers, they'd help to kick the cheering and the voting out of our men, and instead of being, let us say, half-a-dozen ahead of Garstin, you'd be half-a-dozen behind him, that's all. I speak plain English to you, Mr Transome, though I've the highest respect for you as a gentleman of first-rate talents and position. But, sir, to judge of these things a man must know the English voter and the English publican; and it would be a poor tale indeed' - here Mr Johnson's mouth took an expression at once bitter and pathetic - 'that a gentleman like you, to say nothing of the good of the country, should have gone to the expense and trouble of a canvass for nothing but to find himself out of parliament at the end of it. I've seen it again and again; it looks bad in the cleverest man to have to sing small.'

Mr Johnson's argument was not the less stringent because his idioms were vulgar. It requires a conviction and resolution amounting to heroism not to wince at phrases that class our foreshadowed endurance among those common and ignominious troubles which the world is more likely to sneer at than to pity. Harold remained a few moments in angry silence looking at the floor, with one hand on his knee, and the other on his hat, as if he were preparing to start up.

'As to undoing anything that's been done down there,' said Johnson, throwing in this observation as something into the bargain, 'I must wash my hands of it, sir. I couldn't work knowingly against your interest. And that young man who is just gone out, - you don't believe

that he need be listened to, I hope? Chubb, the publican, hates him. Chubb would guess he was at the bottom of your having the treating stopped, and he'd set half-a-dozen of the colliers to duck him in the canal, or break his head by mistake. I'm an experienced man, sir. I hope I've put it clear enough.'

'Certainly, the exposition befits the subject,' said Harold, scornfully, his dislike of the man Johnson's personality being stimulated by causes which Jermyn more than conjectured. 'It's a damned, unpleasant, ravelled business that you and Mr Jermyn have knit up between you. I've no more to say.'

'Then, sir, if you've no more commands, I don't wish to intrude. I shall wish you good-morning, sir,' said Johnson, passing out quickly.

Harold knew that he was indulging his temper, and he would probably have restrained it as a foolish move if he had thought there was great danger in it. But he was beginning to drop much of his caution and self-mastery where Jermyn was concerned, under the growing conviction that the attorney had very strong reasons for being afraid of him; reasons which would only be reinforced by any action hostile to the Transome interest. As for a sneak like this Johnson, a gendeman had to pay him, not to please him. Harold had smiles at command in the right place, but he was not going to smile when it was neither necessary nor agreeable. He was one of those good-humoured, yet energetic men, who have the gift of anger, hatred, and scom upon occasion, though they are too healthy and selfcontented for such feelings to get generated in them without external occasion. And in relation to Jermyn the gift was coming into fine exercise.

'A - pardon me, Mr Harold,' said Jermyn, speaking as soon as Johnson went out, 'but I am sorry - a - you should behave disobligingly to a man who has it in his power to do much service - who, in fact, holds many threads in his hands. I admit that - a - nemo mortalium omnibus horis sapit, as we say - a -'

'Speak for yourself,' said Harold. 'I don't talk in tags of Latin, which might be learned by a schoolmaster's footboy. I find the King's English express my meaning better.'

'In the King's English, then,' said Jermyn who could be idiomatic enough when he was stung, 'a candidate should keep his kicks till he's a member.'

'O, I suppose Johnson will bear a kick if you bid him. You're his principal, I believe.'

'Certainly, thus far - a - he is my London agent. But he is a man of substance, and -'

'I shall know what he is if it's necessary, I daresay. But I must jump into the carriage again. I've no time to lose; I must go to Hawkins at the factory. Will you go?'

When Harold was gone, Jermyn's handsome face gathered blackness. He hardly ever wore his worst expression in the presence of others, and but seldom when he was alone, for he was not given to believe that any game would ultimately go against him. His luck had been good. New conditions might always turn up to give him new chances; and if affairs threatened to come to an extremity between Harold and himself, he trusted to finding some sure resource.

'He means to see to the bottom of everything if he can, that's quite plain,' said Jermyn to himself. 'I believe he has been getting another opinion; he has some new light about those annuities on the estate that are held in Johnson's name. He has inherited a deuced faculty for business - there's no denying that. But I shall beg leave to tell him that I've propped up the family. I don't know where they would have been without me; and if it comes to balancing, I know into which scale the gratitude ought to go. Not that he's likely to feel any - but he can feel something else; and if he makes signs of setting the dogs on me, I shall make him feel it. The people named Transome owe me a good deal more than I owe them.'

In this way Mr Jermyn inwardly appealed against an unjust construction which he foresaw that his old acquaintance the Law might put on certain items in his history.

I have known persons who have been suspected of undervaluing gratitude, and excluding it from the list of virtues; but on closer observation it has been seen that, if they have never felt grateful, it has been for want of an opportunity; and that, far from despising gratitude, they regard it as the virtue most of all incumbent - on others towards them.