

Chapter 18

'The little, nameless, unremembered acts

Of kindness and of love.'

WORDSWORTH: Tintern Abbey.

JERMYN did not forget to pay his visit to the minister in Malthouse Yard that evening. The mingled irritation, dread, and defiance which he was feeling towards Harold Transome in the middle of the day, depended on too many and far-stretching causes to be dissipated by eight o'clock; but when he left Mr Lyon's house he was in a state of comparative triumph in the belief that he, and he alone, was now in possession of facts which, once grouped together, made a secret that gave him new power over Harold.

Mr Lyon, in his need for help from one who had that wisdom of the serpent which, he argued, is not forbidden, but is only of hard acquirement to dove-like innocence, had been gradually led to pour out to the attorney all the reasons which made him desire to know the truth about the man who called himself Maurice Christian: he had shown all the precious relics, the locket, the letters, and the marriage certificate. And Jermyn had comforted him by confidently promising to ascertain, without scandal or premature betrayals, whether this man were really Annette's husband, Maurice Christian Bycliffe.

Jermyn was not rash in making this promise, since he had excellent reasons for believing that he had already come to a true conclusion on the subject. But he wished both to know a little more of this man himself, and to keep Mr Lyon in ignorance - not a difficult precaution - in an affair which it cost the minister so much pain to speak of. An easy opportunity of getting an interview with Christian was sure to offer itself before long - might even offer itself to-morrow. Jermyn had seen him more than once, though hitherto without any reason for observing him with interest; he had heard that Philip Debarry's courier was often busy in the town, and it seemed especially likely that he would be seen there when the market was to be agitated by politics, and the new candidate was to show his paces.

The world of which Treby Magna was the centre was naturally curious to see the young Transome, who had come from the East, was as rich as a Jew, and called himself a Radical; characteristics all equally vague in the minds of various excellent ratepayers, who drove to market in their taxed carts, or in their hereditary gigs. Places at convenient windows had been secured beforehand for a few best bonnets; but, in general, a Radical candidate excited no ardent feminine partisanship, even among the Dissenters in Treby, if they

were of the prosperous and longresident class. Some chapel-going ladies were fond of remembering that 'their family had been Church'; others objected to politics altogether as having spoiled old neighbourliness, and sundered friends who had kindred views as to cowslip wine and Michaelmas cleaning; others, of the melancholy sort, said it would be well if people would think less of reforming parliament and more of pleasing God. Irreproachable Dissenting matrons, like Mrs Muscat, whose youth had been passed in a short-waisted bodice and tight skirt, had never been animated by the struggle for liberty, and had a timid suspicion that religion was desecrated by being applied to the things of this world. Since Mr Lyon had been in Malthouse Yard there had been far too much mixing up of politics with religion; but, at any rate, these ladies had never yet been to hear speechifying in the market-place, and they were not going to begin that practice.

Esther, however, had heard some of her feminine acquaintances say that they intended to sit at the druggist's upper window, and she was inclined to ask her father if he could think of a suitable place where she also might see and hear. Two inconsistent motives urged her. She knew that Felix cared earnestly for all public questions, and she supposed that he held it one of her deficiencies not to care about them: well, she would try to learn the secret of this ardour, which was so strong in him that it animated what she thought the dullest form of life. She was not too stupid to find it out. But this self-correcting motive was presently displaced by a motive of a different sort. It had been a pleasant variety in her monotonous days to see a man like Harold Transome, with a distinguished appearance and polished manners, and she would like to see him again: he suggested to her that brighter and more luxurious life on which her imagination dwelt without the painful effort it required to conceive the mental condition which would place her in complete sympathy with Felix Holt. It was this less unaccustomed prompting of which she was chiefly conscious when she awaited her father's coming down to breakfast. Why, indeed, should she trouble herself so much about Felix?

Mr Lyon, more serene now that he had unbosomed his anxieties and obtained a promise of help, was already swimming so happily in the deep water of polemics in expectation of Philip Debarry's answer to his challenge, that, in the occupation of making a few notes lest certain felicitous inspirations should be wasted, he had forgotten to come down to breakfast. Esther, suspecting his abstraction, went up to his study, and found him at his desk looking up with wonder at her interruption.

'Come, father, you have forgotten your breakfast.'

'It is true, child; I will come,' he said, lingering to make some final strokes.

'O you naughty father!' said Esther, as he got up from his chair, 'your coat-collar is twisted, your waistcoat is buttoned all wrong, and you have not brushed your hair. Sit down and let me brush it again as I did yesterday.'

He sat down obediently, while Esther took a towel, which she threw over his shoulders, and then brushed the thick long fringe of soft auburn hair. This very trifling act, which she had brought herself to for the first time yesterday, meant a great deal in Esther's little history. It had been her habit to leave the mending of her father's clothes to Lyddy; she had not liked even to touch his cloth garments; still less had it seemed a thing she would willingly undertake to correct his toilette, and use a brush for him. But having once done this, under her new sense of faulty omission, the affectionateness that was in her flowed so pleasantly, as she saw how much her father was moved by what he thought a great act of tenderness, that she quite longed to repeat it. This morning, as he sat under her hands, his face had such a calm delight in it that she could not help kissing the top of his bald head; and afterwards, when they were seated at breakfast, she said, merrily -

'Father, I shall make a petit maitre of you by-and-by; your hair looks so pretty and silken when it is well brushed.'

'Nay, child, I trust that while I would willingly depart from my evil habit of a somewhat slovenly forgetfulness in my attire, I shall never arrive at the opposite extreme. For though there is that in apparel which pleases the eye, and I deny not that your neat gown and the colour thereof - which is that of certain little flowers that spread themselves in the hedgerows, and make a blueness there as of the sky when it is deepened in the water, - I deny not, I say, that these minor strivings after a perfection which is, as it were, an irrecoverable yet haunting memory, are a good in their proportion. Nevertheless, the brevity of our life, and the hurry and crush of the great battle with error and sin, often oblige us to an advised neglect of what is less momentous. This, I conceive, is the principle on which my friend Felix Holt acts; and I cannot but think the light comes from the true fount, though it shines through obstructions.'

'You have not seen Mr Holt since Sunday, have you, father?'

'Yes; he was here yesterday. He sought Mr Transome, having a matter of some importance to speak upon with him. And I saw him afterwards in the street, when he agreed that I should call for him this morning before I go into the market-place. He will have it,' Mr Lyon

went on, smiling, 'that I must not walk about in the crowd without him to act as my special constable.'

Esther felt vexed with herself that her heart was suddenly beating with unusual quickness, and that her last resolution not to trouble herself about what Felix thought, had transformed itself with magic swiftness into mortification that he evidently avoided coming to the house when she was there, though he used to come on the slightest occasion. He knew that she was always at home until the afternoon on market days; that was the reason why he would not call for her father. Of course, it was because he attributed such littleness to her that he supposed she would retain nothing else than a feeling of offence towards him for what he had said to her. Such distrust of any good in others, such arrogance of immeasurable superiority, was extremely ungenerous. But presently she said -

'I should have liked to hear Mr Transome speak, but I suppose it is too late to get a place now.'

'I am not sure; I would fain have you go if you desire it, my dear,' said Mr Lyon, who could not bear to deny Esther any lawful wish. 'Walk with me to Mistress Holt's, and we will learn from Felix, who will doubtless already have been out, whether he could lead you in safety to Friend Lambert's.'

Esther was glad of the proposal, because, if it answered no other purpose, it would be an easy way of obliging Felix to see her, and of showing him that it was not she who cherished offence. But when, later in the morning, she was walking towards Mrs Holt's with her father, they met Mr Jermyn, who stopped them to ask, in his most affable manner, whether Miss Lyon intended to hear the candidate, and whether she had secured a suitable place. And he ended by insisting that his daughters, who were presently coming in an open carriage, should call for her, if she would permit them. It was impossible to refuse this civility, and Esther turned back to await the carriage, pleased with the certainty of hearing and seeing, yet sorry to miss Felix. There was another day for her to think of him with unsatisfied resentment, mixed with some longings for a better understanding; and in our spring-time every day has its hidden growths in the mind, as it has in the earth when the little folded blades are getting ready to pierce the ground.