

Chapter 21

'Tis grievous, that with all amplification of travel both by sea and land, a man can never separate himself from his past history.

MR JERMYN'S handsome house stood a little way out of the town, surrounded by garden and lawn and plantations of hopeful trees. As Christian approached it he was in a perfectly easy state of mind: the business he was going on was none of his, otherwise than as he was well satisfied with any opportunity of making himself valuable to Mr Philip Debarry. As he looked at Jermyn's length of wall and iron railing, he said to himself, 'These lawyers are the fellows for getting on in the world with the least expense of civility. With this cursed conjuring secret of theirs called Law, they think everybody's frightened at them. My Lord Jermyn seems to have his insolence as ready as his soft sawder. He's as sleek as a rat, and has as vicious a tooth. I know the sort of vermin well enough. I've helped to fatten one or two.'

In this mood of conscious, contemptuous penetration, Christian was shown by the footman into Jermyn's private room, where the attorney sat surrounded with massive oaken bookcases, and other furniture to correspond, from the thickest-legged library-table to the calendar frame and card-rack. It was the sort of room a man prepares for himself when he feels sure of a long and respectable future. He was leaning back in his leather chair, against the broad window opening on the lawn, and had just taken off his spectacles and let the newspaper fall on his knees, in despair of reading by the fading light.

When the footman opened the door and said, 'Mr Christian,' Jermyn said, 'Good evening, Mr Christian. Be seated,' pointing to a chair opposite himself and the window. 'Light the candles on the shelf, John, but leave the blinds alone.'

He did not speak again till the man was gone out, but appeared to be referring to a document which lay on the bureau before him. When the door was closed he drew himself up again, began to rub his hands, and turned towards his visitor, who seemed perfectly indifferent to the fact that the attorney was in shadow, and that the light fell on himself. 'A - your name - a - is Henry Scaddon.'

There was a start through Christian's frame which he was quick enough, almost simultaneously, to try and disguise as a change of position. He uncrossed his legs and unbuttoned his coat. But before he had time to say anything, Jermyn went on with slow emphasis.

'You were born on the 16th of December 1782, at Blackheath Your father was a cloth-merchant in London: he died when you were barely of age, leaving an extensive business; before you were five-and-twenty

you had run through the greater part of the property, and had compromised your safety by an attempt to defraud your creditors. Subsequently you forged a cheque on your father's elder brother, who had intended to make you his heir.'

Here Jermyn paused a moment and referred to the document. Christian was silent.

'In 1808 you found it expedient to leave this country in a military disguise, and were taken prisoner by the French. On the occasion of an exchange of prisoners you had the opportunity of returning to your own country, and to the bosom of your own family. You were generous enough to sacrifice that prospect in favour of a fellow-prisoner, of about your own age and figure, who had more pressing reasons than yourself for wishing to be on this side of the water. You exchanged dress, luggage, and names with him, and he passed to England instead of you as Henry Scaddon. Almost immediately afterwards you escaped from your imprisonment, after feigning an illness which prevented your exchange of names from being discovered; and it was reported that you - that is, you under the name of your fellow-prisoner - were drowned in an open boat, trying to reach a Neapolitan vessel bound for Malta. Nevertheless I have to congratulate you on the falsehood of that report, and on the certainty that you are now, after the lapse of more than twenty years, seated here in perfect safety.'

Jermyn paused so long that he was evidently awaiting some answer. At last Christian replied, in a dogged tone -

'Well, sir, I've heard much longer stories than that told quite as solemnly, when there was not a word of truth in them. Suppose I deny the very peg you hang your statement on. Suppose I say I am not Henry Scaddon.'

'A - in that case - a,' said Jermyn, with a wooden indifference, 'you would lose the advantage which - a - may attach to your possession of Henry Scaddon's knowledge. And at the same time, if it were in the least - a - inconvenient to you that you should be recognised as Henry Scaddon, your denial would not prevent me from holding the knowledge and evidence which I possess on that point; it would only prevent us from pursuing the present conversation.'

'Well, sir, suppose we admit, for the sake of the conversation, that your account of the matter is the true one: what advantage have you to offer the man named Henry Scaddon ?'

'The advantage - a - is problematical; but it may be considerable. It might, in fact, release you from the necessity of acting as courier, or - a - valet, or whatever other office you may occupy which prevents you

from being your own master. On the other hand, my acquaintance with your secret is not necessarily a disadvantage to you. To put the matter in a nutshell, I am not inclined - a - gratuitously - to do you any harm, and I may be able to do you a considerable service.'

'Which you want me to earn somehow?' said Christian. 'You offer me a turn in a lottery?'

'Precisely. The matter in question is of no earthly interest to you, except - a - as it may yield you a prize. We lawyers have to do with complicated questions, and - a - legal subtleties, which are never - a - fully known even to the parties immediately interested, still less to the witnesses. Shall we agree, then, that you continue to retain two-thirds of the name which you gained by exchange, and that you oblige me by answering certain questions as to the experience of Henry Scaddon?' 'Very good. Go on.'

'What articles of property, once belonging to your fellow-prisoner, Maurice Christian Bycliffe, do you still retain?'

'This ring,' said Christian, twirling round the fine seal-ring on his finger, 'his watch, and the little matters that hung with it, and a case of papers. I got rid of a gold snuff-box once when I was hard-up. The clothes are all gone, of course. We exchanged everything; it was all done in a hurry. Bycliffe thought we should meet again in England before long, and he was mad to get there. But that was impossible - I mean that we should meet soon after. I don't know what's become of him, else I would give him up his papers and the watch, and so on - though, you know, it was I who did him the service, and he felt that.'

'You were at Vesoul together before being moved to Verdun?'

'Yes.'

'What else do you know about Bycliffe?'

'O, nothing very particular,' said Christian, pausing, and rapping his boot with his cane. 'He'd been in the Hanoverian army - a high-spirited fellow, took nothing easily; not overstrong in health. He made a fool of himself with marrying at Vesoul; and there was the devil to pay with the girl's relations; and then, when the prisoners were ordered off, they had to part. Whether they ever got together again I don't know.'

'Was the marriage all right, then?'

'O, all on the square - civil marriage, church - everything. Bycliffe was a fool - a good-natured, proud, head-strong fellow.'

'How long did the marriage take place before you left Vesoul?' 'About three months. I was a witness to the marriage.' 'And you know no more about the wife?'

'Not afterwards. I knew her very well before - pretty Annette - Annette Ledru was her name. She was of a good family, and they had made up a fine match for her. But she was one of your meek little diablasses, who have a will of their own once in their lives - the will to choose their own master.'

'Bycliffe was not open to you about his other affairs?'

'O no - a fellow you wouldn't dare to ask a question of. People told him everything, but he told nothing in return. If Madame Annette ever found him again, she found her lord and master with a vengeance; but she was a regular lapdog. However, her family shut her up - made a prisoner of her - to prevent her running away.'

'Ah - good. Much of what you have been so obliging as to say is irrelevant to any possible purpose of mine, which, in fact, has to do only with a mouldy law-case that might be aired some day. You will doubtless, on your own account, maintain perfect silence on what has passed between us, and with that condition duly preserved - a - it is possible that - a - the lottery you have put into - as you observe - may turn up a prize.'

'This, then, is all the business you have with me?' said Christian, rising.

'All. You will, of course, preserve carefully all the papers and other articles which have so many - a - recollections - a - attached to them?'

'O yes. If there's any chance of Bycliffe turning up again, I shall be sorry to have parted with the snuff-box; but I was hard-up at Naples. In fact, as you see, I was obliged at last to turn courier.'

'An exceedingly agreeable life for a man of some - a - accomplishments and - a - no income,' said Jermyn, rising, and reaching a candle, which he placed against his desk.

Christian knew this was a sign that he was expected to go, but he lingered standing, with one hand on the back of his chair. At last he said, rather sulkily -

'I think you're too clever, Mr Jermyn, not to perceive that I'm not a man to be made a fool of.'

'Well - a - it may perhaps be a still better guarantee for you,' said Jermyn, smiling, 'that I see no use in attempting that - a - metamorphosis.'

The old gentleman, who ought never to have felt himself injured, is dead now, and I'm not afraid of creditors after more than twenty years.'

'Certainly not; - a - there may indeed be claims which can't assert themselves - a - legally, which yet are molesting to a man of some reputation. But you may perhaps be happily free from such fears.'

Jermyn drew round his chair towards the bureau, and Christian, too acute to persevere uselessly, said, 'Good-day,' and left the room.

After leaning back in his chair to reflect a few minutes, Jermyn wrote the following letter:

Dear Johnson, - I learn from your letter, received this morning, that you intend returning to town on Saturday.

While you are there, be so good as to see Medwin, who used to be with Batt & Cowley, and ascertain from him indirectly, and in the course of conversation on other topics, whether in that old business in 1810-11, Scaddon alias Bycliffe, or Bycliffe alias Scaddon, before his imprisonment, gave Batt & Cowley any reason to believe that he was married and expected to have a child. The question, as you know, is of no practical importance; but I wish to draw up an abstract of the Bycliffe case, and the exact position in which it stood before the suit was closed by the death of the plaintiff, in order that, if Mr Harold Transome desires it, he may see how the failure of the last claim has secured the Durfey-Transome title, and whether there is a hair's-breadth of a chance that another claim should be set up.

Of course there is not a shadow of such a chance. For even if Batt & Cowley were to suppose that they had alighted on a surviving representative of the Bycliffes, it would not enter into their heads to set up a new claim, since they brought evidence that the last life which suspended the Bycliffe remainder was extinct before the case was closed, a good twenty years ago.

Still, I want to show the present heir of the Durfey-Transomes the exact condition of the family title to the estates. So get me an answer from Medwin on the above-mentioned point.

I shall meet you at Duffield next week. We must get Transome returned. Never mind his having been a little rough the other day, but go on doing what you know is necessary for his interest. His interest is

mine, which I need not say is John Johnson's. - Yours faithfully,
MATTIEW JERMYN.

When the attorney had sealed this letter and leaned back in his chair again, he was inwardly saying -

'Now, Mr Harold, I shall shut up this affair in a private drawer till you choose to take any extreme measures which will force me to bring it out. I have the matter entirely in my own power. No one but old Lyon knows about the girl's birth. No one but Scaddon can clinch the evidence about Bycliffe, and I've got Scaddon under my thumb. No soul except myself and Johnson, who is a limb of myself, knows that there is one half-dead life which may presently leave the girl a new claim to the Bycliffe heirship. I shall learn through Methurst whether Batt & Cowley knew, through Bycliffe, of this woman having come to England. I shall hold all the threads between my thumb and finger. I can use the evidence or I can nullify it.

'And so, if Mr Harold pushes me to extremity, and threatens me with Chancery and ruin, I have an opposing threat, which will either save me or turn into a punishment for him.'

He rose, put out his candles, and stood with his back to the fire, looking out on the dim lawn, with its black twilight fringe of shrubs, still meditating. Quick thought was gleaming over five-and-thirty years filled with devices more or less clever, more or less desirable to be avowed. Those which might be avowed with impunity were not always to be distinguished as innocent by comparison with those which it was advisable to conceal. In a profession where much that is noxious may be done without disgrace, is a conscience likely to be without balm when circumstances have urged a man to overstep the line where his good technical information makes him aware that (with discovery) disgrace is likely to begin?

With regard to the Transome affairs, the family had been in pressing need of money, and it had lain with him to get it for them: was it to be expected that he would not consider his own advantage where he had rendered services such as are never fully paid? If it came to a question of right and wrong instead of law, the least justifiable things he had ever done had been done on behalf of the Transomes. It had been a deucedly unpleasant thing for him to get Bycliffe arrested and thrown into prison as Henry Scaddon - perhaps hastening the man's death in that way. But if it had not been done by dint of his (Jermyn's) exertions and tact, he would like to know where the Durfey-Transomes might have been by this time. As for right or wrong, if the truth were known, the very possession of the estate by the Durfey-Transomes was owing to law-tricks that took place nearly a century ago, when the original old Durfey got his base fee.

But inward argument of this sort now, as always, was merged in anger, in exasperation, that Harold, precisely Harold Transome should have turned out to be the probable instrument of a visitation which would be bad luck, not justice; for is there any justice where ninety-nine out of a hundred escape? He felt himself beginning to hate Harold as he had never -

Just then Jermyn's third daughter, a tall slim girl wrapped in a white woollen shawl, which she had hung over her blanketwise, skipped across the lawn towards the greenhouse to get a flower. Jermyn was startled, and did not identify the figure, or rather he identified it falsely with another tall white-wrapped figure which had sometimes set his heart beating quickly more than thirty years before. For a moment he was fully back in those distant years when he and another bright-eyed person had seen no reason why they should not indulge their passion and their vanity, and determine for themselves how their lives should be made delightful in spite of unalterable external conditions. The reasons had been unfolding themselves gradually ever since through all the years which had converted the handsome, soft-eyed, slim young Jermyn (with a touch of sentiment) into a portly lawyer of sixty, for whom life had resolved itself into the means of keeping up his head among his professional brethren and maintaining an establishment - into a grey-haired husband and father, whose third affectionate and expensive daughter now rapped at the window and called to him, 'Papa, papa, get ready for dinner; don't you remember the Lukyns are coming?'