

Chapter 23

'I will not excuse you; you shall not be excused; excuses shall not be admitted; there's no excuse shall serve; you shall not be excused.' - Henry IV.

WHEN Philip Debarry had come home that morning and read the letters which had not been forwarded to him, he laughed so heartily at Mr Lyon's that he congratulated himself on being in his private room. Otherwise his laughter would have awakened the curiosity of Sir Maximus, and Philip did not wish to tell any one the contents of the letter until he had shown them to his uncle. He determined to ride over to the rectory to lunch; for as Lady Mary was away, he and his uncle might be tete-a-tete.

The rectory was on the other side of the river, close to the church of which it was the fitting companion: a fine old brick-and-stone house, with a great bow-window opening from the library on to the deep-turfed lawn, one fat dog sleeping on the door-stone, another fat dog waddling on the gravel, the autumn leaves duly swept away, the lingering chrysanthemums cherished, tall trees stooping or soaring in the most picturesque variety, and a Virginian creeper turning a little rustic hut into a scarlet pavilion. It was one of those rectories which are among the bulwarks of our venerable institutions - which arrest disintegrating doubt, serve as a double embankment against Popery and Dissent, and rally feminine instinct and affection to reinforce the decisions of masculine thought.

'What makes you look so merry, Phil?' said the rector, as his nephew entered the pleasant library.

'Something that concerns you,' said Philip, taking out the letter. 'A clerical challenge. Here's an opportunity for you to emulate the divines of the sixteenth century and have a theological duel. Read this letter.'

'What answer have you sent the crazy little fellow?' said the rector, keeping the letter in his hand and running over it again and again, with brow knit, but eyes gleaming without any malignity. 'O, I sent no answer. I awaited yours.'

'Mine!' said the rector, throwing down the letter on the table. 'You don't suppose I'm going to hold a public debate with a schismatic of that sort? I should have an infidel shoe-maker next expecting me to answer blasphemies delivered in bad grammar.'

'But you see how he puts it,' said Philip. With all his gravity of nature he could not resist a slightly mischievous prompting, though he had a

serious feeling that he should not like to be regarded as failing to fulfil his pledge. 'I think if you refuse, I shall be obliged to offer myself.'

'Nonsense! Tell him he is himself acting a dishonourable part in interpreting your words as a pledge to do any preposterous thing that suits his fancy. Suppose he had asked you to give him land to build a chapel on; doubtless that would have given him a 'lively satisfaction.' A man who puts a non-natural strained sense on a promise is no better than a robber.'

'But he has not asked for land. I daresay he thinks you won't object to his proposal. I confess there's a simplicity and quaintness about the letter that rather pleases me.'

'Let me tell you, Phil, he's a crazy little firefly, that does a great deal of harm in my parish. He inflames the Dissenters' minds on politics. There's no end to the mischief done by these busy prating men. They make the ignorant multitude the judges of the largest questions, both political and religious, till we shall soon have no institution left that is not on a level with the comprehension of a huckster or a drayman. There can be nothing more retrograde - losing all the results of civilisation, all the lessons of Providence - letting the windlass run down after men have been turning at it painfully for generations. If the instructed are not to judge for the uninstructed, why, let us set Dick Stubbs to make our almanacs, and have a President of the Royal Society elected by universal suffrage.'

The rector had risen, placed himself with his back to the fire, and thrust his hands in his pockets, ready to insist further on this wide argument. Philip sat nursing one leg, listening respectfully, as he always did, though often listening to the sonorous echo of his own statements, which suited his uncle's needs so exactly that he did not distinguish them from his old impressions.

'True,' said Philip, 'but in special cases we have to do with special conditions. You know I defend the casuists. And it may happen that, for the honour of the church in Treby and a little also for my honour, circumstances may demand a concession even to some notions of a dissenting preacher.'

'Not at all. I should be making a figure which my brother clergy might well take as an affront to themselves. The character of the establishment has suffered enough already through the Evangelicals, with their extempore incoherence and their pipe-smoking piety. Look at Wimple, the man who is vicar of Shuttleton - without his gown and bands, anybody would take him for a grocer in mourning.'

'Well, I shall cut a still worse figure, and so will you, in the dissenting magazines and newspapers. It will go the round of the kingdom. There will be a paragraph headed, 'Tory Falsehood and Clerical Cowardice,' or else 'The Meanness of the Aristocracy and the Incompetence of the Beneficed Clergy.'

'There would be a worse paragraph if I were to consent to the debate. Of course it would be said that I was beaten hollow, and that now the question had been cleared up at Treby Magna, the church had not a sound leg to stand on. Besides,' the rector went on, frowning and smiling, 'it's all very well for you to talk, Phil, but this debating is not so easy when a man's close upon sixty. What one writes or says must be something good and scholarly; and after all had been done, this little Lyon would buzz about one like a wasp, and cross-question and rejoin. Let me tell you, a plain truth may be so worried and mauled by fallacies as to get the worst of it. There's no such thing as tiring a talking machine like Lyon.' 'Then you absolutely refuse?' 'Yes, I do.'

'You remember that when I wrote my letter of thanks to Lyon you approved my offer to serve him if possible.'

'Certainly I remember it. But suppose he had asked you to vote for civil marriage, or to go and hear him preach every Sunday?'

'But he has not asked that.'

'Something as unreasonable, though.'

'Well,' said Philip, taking up Mr Lyon's letter and looking graver - looking even vexed, 'it is rather an unpleasant business for me. I really felt obliged to him. I think there's a sort of worth in the man beyond his class. Whatever may be the reason of the case, I shall disappoint him instead of doing him the service I offered.'

'Well, that's a misfortune; we can't help it.'

'The worst of it is, I should be insulting him to say, 'I will do anything else, but not just this that you want.' He evidently feels himself in company with Luther and Zwingli and Calvin and considers our letters part of the history of Protestantism.'

'Yes, yes. I know it's rather an unpleasant thing, Phil. You are aware that I would have done anything in reason to prevent you from becoming unpopular here. I consider your character a possession to all of us.'

'I think I must call on him forthwith, and explain and apologise.'

'No, sit still; I've thought of something,' said the rector, with a sudden revival of spirits. 'I've just seen Sherlock coming in. He is to lunch with me to-day. It would do no harm for him to hold the debate - a curate and a young man - he'll gain by it; and it would release you from any awkwardness, Phil. Sherlock is not going to stay here long, you know; he'll soon have his title. I'll put the thing to him. He won't object if I wish it. It's a capital idea. It will do Sherlock good. He's a clever fellow, but he wants confidence.'

Philip had not time to object before Mr Sherlock appeared - a young divine of good birth and figure, of sallow complexion and bashful address.

'Sherlock, you have come in most opportunely,' said the rector. 'A case has turned up in the parish in which you can be of eminent use. I know that is what you have desired ever since you have been with me. But I'm about so much myself that there really has not been sphere enough for you. You are a studious man, I know; I daresay you have all the necessary matter prepared - at your finger-ends, if not on paper.'

Mr Sherlock smiled with rather a trembling lip, willing to distinguish himself, but hoping that the rector only alluded to a dialogue on baptism by aspersion, or some other pamphlet suited to the purposes of the Christian Knowledge Society. But as the rector proceeded to unfold the circumstances under which his eminent service was to be rendered, he grew more and more nervous.

'You'll oblige me very much, Sherlock,' the rector ended, 'by going into this thing zealously. Can you guess what time you will require? because it will rest with us to fix the day.'

'I should be rejoiced to oblige you, Mr Debarry, but I really think I am not competent to -'

'That's your modesty, Sherlock. Don't let me hear any more of that. I know Filmore of Corpus said you might be a first-rate man if your diffidence didn't do you injustice. And you can refer anything to me, you know. Come, you will set about the thing at once. But, Phil, you must tell the preacher to send a scheme of the debate - all the different heads - and he must agree to keep rigidly within the scheme. There, sit down at my desk and write the letter now; Thomas shall carry it.'

Philip sat down to write, and the rector, with his firm ringing voice, went on at his ease, giving 'indications' to his agitated curate.

'But you can begin at once preparing a good, cogent, clear statement, and considering the probable points of assault. You can look into Jewel, Hall, Hooker, Whitgift, and the rest: you'll find them all here. My library wants nothing in English divinity. Sketch the lower ground taken by Usher and those men, but bring all your force to bear on marking out the true High-Church doctrine. Expose the wretched cavils of the Nonconformists, and the noisy futility that belongs to schismatics generally. I will give you a telling passage from Burke on the Dissenters, and some good quotations which I brought together in two sermons of my own on the Position of the English Church in Christendom. How long do you think it will take you to bring your thoughts together? You can throw them afterwards into the form of an essay; we'll have the thing printed; it will do you good with the bishop.'

With all Mr Sherlock's timidity, there was fascination for him in this distinction. He reflected that he could take coffee and sit up late, and perhaps produce something rather fine. It might be a first step towards that eminence which it was no more than his duty to aspire to. Even a polemical fame like that of a Philpotts must have had a beginning. Mr Sherlock was not insensible to the pleasure of turning sentences successfully, and it was a pleasure not always unconnected with preferment. A diffident man likes the idea of doing something remarkable, which will create belief in him without any immediate display of brilliancy. Celebrity may blush and be silent, and win a grace the more. Thus Mr Sherlock was constrained, trembling all the while, and much wishing that his essay were already in print.

'I think I could hardly be ready under a fortnight.'

'Very good. Just write that, Phil, and tell him to fix the precise day and place. And then we'll go to lunch.'

The rector was quite satisfied. He had talked himself into thinking that he should like to give Sherlock a few useful hints, look up his own earlier sermons, and benefit the curate by his criticism, when the argument had been got into shape. He was a healthy-natured man, but that was not at all a reason why he should not have those sensibilities to the odour of authorship which belong to almost everybody who is not expected to be a writer - and especially to that form of authorship which is called suggestion, and consists in telling another man that he might do a great deal with a given subject, by bringing a sufficient amount of knowledge, reasoning, and wit to bear upon it.

Philip would have had some twinges of conscience about the curate, if he had not guessed that the honour thrust upon him was not altogether disagreeable. The church might perhaps have had a

stronger supporter; but for himself, he had done what he was bound to do: he had done his best towards fulfilling Mr Lyon's desire.