

Chapter 24

'If he come not, the play is marred.' - *Midsummer Night's Dream*

RUFUS LYON was very happy on that mild November morning appointed for the great conference in the larger room at the Free School, between himself and the Rev. Theodore Sherlock, B.A. The disappointment of not contending with the rector in person, which had at first been bitter, had been gradually lost sight of in the positive enjoyment of an opportunity for debating on any terms. Mr Lyon had two grand elements of pleasure on such occasions: confidence in the strength of his case, and confidence in his own power of advocacy. Not - to use his own phrase - not that he 'glorified himself herein'; for speech and exposition were so easy to him, that if he argued forcibly, he believed it to be simply because the truth was forcible. He was not proud of moving easily in his native medium. A panting man thinks of himself as a clever swimmer; but a fish swims much better, and takes his performance as a matter of course.

Whether Mr Sherlock were that panting, self-gratulating man, remained a secret. Philip Debarry, much occupied with his electioneering affairs, had only once had an opportunity of asking his uncle how Sherlock got on, and the rector had said, curtly, 'I think he'll do. I've supplied him well with references. I advise him to read only, and decline everything else as out of order. Lyon will speak to a point, and then Sherlock will read: it will be all the more telling. It will give variety.' But on this particular morning peremptory business connected with the magistracy called the rector away.

Due notice had been given, and the feminine world of Treby Magna was much more agitated by the prospect than by that of any candidate's speech. Mrs Pendrell at the Bank, Mrs Tiliot, and the church ladies generally, felt bound to hear the curate, who was known, apparently by an intuition concerning the nature of curates, to be a very clever young man; and he would show them what learning had to say on the right side. One or two Dissenting ladies were not without emotion at the thought that, seated on the front benches, they should be brought near to old Church friends, and have a longer greeting than had taken place since the Catholic Emancipation. Mrs Muscat, who had been a beauty, and was as nice in her millinery as any Trebian lady belonging to the establishment, reflected that she should put on her best large embroidered collar, and that she should ask Mrs Tiliot where it was in Duffield that she once got her bedhangings dyed so beautifully. When Mrs Tiliot was Mary Salt, the two ladies had been bosom friends; but Mr Tiliot had looked higher and higher since his gin had become so famous; and in the year '29 he had, in Mr Muscat's hearing, spoken of Dissenters as sneaks, - a personality which could not be overlooked.

The debate was to begin at eleven, for the rector would not allow the evening to be chosen, when low men and boys might want to be admitted out of mere mischief. This was one reason why the female part of the audience outnumbered the males. But some chief Trebians were there, even men whose means made them as independent of theory as Mr Pendrell and Mr Wace; encouraged by reflecting that they were not in a place of worship, and would not be obliged to stay longer than they chose. There was a muster of all Dissenters who could spare the morning time, and on the back benches were all the aged churchwomen who shared the remnants of the sacrament wine, and who were humbly anxious to neglect nothing ecclesiastical or connected with 'going to a better place'.

At eleven the arrival of listeners seemed to have ceased. Mr Lyon was seated on the school tribune or dais at his particular round table; another round table, with a chair, awaited the curate, with whose superior position it was quite in keeping that he should not be first on the ground. A couple of extra chairs were placed further back, and more than one important personage had been requested to act as chairman; but no churchman would place himself in a position so equivocal as to dignity of aspect, and so unequivocal as to the obligation of sitting out the discussion; and the rector had beforehand put a veto on any Dissenting chairman.

Mr Lyon sat patiently absorbed in his thoughts, with his notes in minute handwriting lying before him, seeming to look at the audience, but not seeing them. Every one else was contented that there should be an interval in which there could be a little neighbourly talk.

Esther was particularly happy, seated on a side-bench near her father's side of the tribune, with Felix close behind her, so that she could turn her head and talk to him. He had been very kind ever since that morning when she had called at his home, more disposed to listen indulgently to what she had to say, and less blind to her looks and movements. If he had never railed at her or ignored her, she would have been less sensitive to the attention he gave her; but as it was, the prospect of seeing him seemed to light up her life, and to disperse the old dulness. She looked unusually charming to-day, from the very fact that she was not vividly conscious of anything but of having a mind near her that asked her to be something better than she actually was. The consciousness of her own superiority amongst the people around her was superseded, and even a few brief weeks had given a softened expression to her eyes, a more feminine beseechingness and self-doubt to her manners. Perhaps, however, a little new defiance was rising in place of the old contempt - defiance of the Trebian views concerning Felix Holt.

'What a very nice-looking young woman your minister's daughter is ! ' said Mrs Tiliot in an undertone to Mrs Muscat, who, as she had hoped, had found a seat next to her quondam friend - 'quite the lady'.

'Rather too much so, considering,' said Mrs Muscat. 'She's thought proud, and that's not pretty in a girl, even if there was anything to back it up. But now she seems to be encouraging that young Holt, who scoffs at everything, as you may judge by his appearance. She has despised his betters before now; but I leave you to judge whether a young man who has taken to low ways of getting his living can pay for fine cambric handkerchiefs and light kid gloves.'

Mrs Muscat lowered her blond eyelashes and swayed her neat head just perceptibly from side to side, with a sincere desire to be moderate in her expressions, not withstanding any shock that facts might have given her.

'Dear, dear,' said Mrs Tiliot. 'What! that is young Holt leaning forward now without a cravat? I've never seen him before to notice him, but I've heard Tiliot talking about him. They say he's a dangerous character, and goes stirring up the working men at Sproxton. And - well, to be sure, such great eyes and such a great head of hair - it is enough to frighten one. What can she see in him? Quite below her.'

'Yes, and brought up a governess,' said Mrs Muscat; 'you'd have thought she'd know better how to choose. But the minister has let her get the upper hand sadly too much. It's a pity in a man of God - I don't deny he's that.'

'Well, I am sorry,' said Mrs Tiliot, 'for I meant her to give my girls lessons when they came from school.'

Mr Wace and Pendrell meanwhile were standing up and looking round at the audience, nodding to their fellow-townpeople with the affability due from men in their position.

'It's time he came now,' said Mr Wace, looking at his watch and comparing it with the schoolroom clock. 'This debating is a newfangled sort of thing; but the rector would never have given in to it if there hadn't been good reasons. Nolan said he wouldn't come. He says this debating is an atheistical sort of thing; the Atheists are very fond of it. Theirs is a bad book to take a leaf out of. However, we shall hear nothing but what's good from Mr Sherlock. He preaches a capital sermon - for such a young man.'

'Well, it was our duty to support him - not to leave him alone among the Dissenters,' said Mr Pendrell. 'You see, everybody hasn't felt that.'

Labron might have shown himself, if not Lukyn. I could have alleged business myself if I had thought proper.'

'Here he comes, I think,' said Mr Wace, turning round on hearing a movement near the small door on a level with the platform. 'By George! it's Mr Debarry. Come now, this is handsome.'

Mr Wace and Mr Pendrell clapped their hands, and the example was followed even by most of the Dissenters. Philip was aware that he was doing a popular thing, of a kind that Treby was not used to from the elder Debarrys; but his appearance had not been long premeditated. He was driving through the town towards an engagement at some distance, but on calling at Labron's office he had found that the affair which demanded his presence had been deferred, and so had driven round to the Free School. Christian came in behind him.

Mr Lyon was now roused from his abstraction, and, stepping from his slight elevation, begged Mr Debarry to act as moderator or president on the occasion.

'With all my heart,' said Philip. 'But Mr Sherlock has not arrived, apparently?'

'He tarries somewhat unduly,' said Mr Lyon. 'Nevertheless there may be a reason of which we know not. Shall I collect the thoughts of the assembly by a brief introductory address in the interval?'

'No, no, no,' said Mr Wace, who saw a limit to his powers of endurance. 'Mr Sherlock is sure to be here in a minute or two.'

'Christian,' said Philip Debarry, who felt a slight misgiving, 'just be so good - but stay, I'll go myself. Excuse me, gentlemen; I'll drive round to Mr Sherlock's lodgings. He may be under a little mistake as to the time. Studious men are sometimes rather absent. You needn't come with me, Christian.'

As Mr Debarry went out, Rufus Lyon stepped on to the tribune again in rather an uneasy state of mind. A few ideas had occurred to him, eminently fitted to engage the audience profitably, and so to wrest some edification out of an unforeseen delay. But his native delicacy made him feel that in this assembly the church people might fairly decline any 'deliverance' on his part which exceeded the programme, and Mr Wace's negative had been energetic. But the little man suffered from imprisoned ideas, and was as restless as a racer held in. He could not sit down again, but walked backwards and forwards, stroking his chin, emitting his low guttural interjection under the pressure of clauses and sentences which he longed to utter aloud, as he would have done in his own study. There was a low buzz in the

room which helped to deepen the minister's sense that the thoughts within him were as divine messengers unheeded or rejected by a trivial generation. Many of the audience were standing; all, except the old churchwomen on the back seats, and a few devout Dissenters who kept their eyes shut and gave their bodies a gentle oscillating motion, were interested in chat. 'Your father is uneasy,' said Felix to Esther.

'Yes; and now, I think, he is feeling for his spectacles. I hope he has not left them at home: he will not be able to see anything two yards before him without them; - and it makes him so unconscious of what people expect or want.'

'I'll go and ask him whether he has them,' said Felix, striding over the form in front of him, and approaching Mr Lyon, whose face showed a gleam of pleasure at this relief from his abstracted isolation.

'Miss Lyon is afraid that you are at a loss for your spectacles, sir,' said Felix.

'My dear young friend,' said Mr Lyon, laying his hand on Felix Holt's fore-arm, which was about on a level with the minister's shoulder, 'it is a very glorious truth, albeit made somewhat painful to me by the circumstances of the present moment, that as a counterpoise to the brevity of our mortal life (wherein, as I apprehend, our powers are being trained not only for the transmission of an improved heritage, as I have heard you insist, but also for our own entrance into a higher initiation in the divine scheme) - it is, I say, a very glorious truth, that even in what are called the waste minutes of our time, like those of expectation, the soul may soar and range, as in some of our dreams which are brief as a broken rainbow in duration, yet seem to comprise a long history of terror or of joy. And again, each moment may be a beginning of a new spiritual energy; and our pulse would doubtless be a coarse and clumsy notation of the passage from that which was not to that which is, even in the finer processes of the material world - and how much more -'

Esther was watching her father and Felix, and though she was not within hearing of what was being said, she guessed the actual state of the case - that the inquiry about the spectacles had been unheeded, and that her father was losing himself and embarrassing Felix in the intricacies of a dissertation. There was not the stillness around her that would have made a movement on her part seem conspicuous, and she was impelled by her anxiety to step on the tribune and walk up to her father, who paused, a little startled.

'Pray see whether you have forgotten your spectacles, father. If so, I will go home at once and look for them.'

Mr Lyon was automatically obedient to Esther, and he began immediately to feel in his pockets.

'How is it that Miss Jermyn is so friendly with the Dissenting parson?' said Christian to Quorlen, the Tory printer, who was an intimate of his. 'Those grand Jermyns are not Dissenters surely?'

'What Miss Jermyn?'

'Why - don't you see? - that fine girl who is talking to him.'

'Miss Jermyn! Why, that's the little parson's daughter.'

'His daughter!' Christian gave a low brief whistle, which seemed a natural expression of surprise that 'the rusty old ranter' should have a daughter of such distinguished appearance.

Meanwhile the search for the spectacles had proved vain.

'Tis a grievous fault in me, my dear,' said the little man, humbly; 'I become thereby sadly burthensome to you.'

'I will go at once,' said Esther, refusing to let Felix go instead of her. But she had scarcely stepped off the tribune when Mr Debarry re-entered, and there was a commotion which made her wait. After a low-toned conversation with Mr Pendrell and Mr Wace, Philip Debarry stepped on to the tribune with his hat in his hand, and said, with an air of much concern and annoyance -

'I am sorry to have to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that - doubtless owing to some accidental cause which I trust will soon be explained as nothing serious - Mr Sherlock is absent from his residence, and is not to be found. He went out early, his landlady informs me, to refresh himself by a walk on this agreeable morning, as is his habit, she tells me, when he has been kept up late by study; and he has not returned. Do not let us be too anxious. I shall cause inquiry to be made in the direction of his walk. It is easy to imagine many accidents, not of a grave character, by which he might nevertheless be absolutely detained against his will. Under these circumstances, Mr Lyon,' continued Philip, turning to the minister, 'I presume that the debate must be adjourned.'

'The debate, doubtless,' began Mr Lyon; but his further speech was drowned by a general rising of the church people from their seats, many of them feeling that even if the cause were lamentable, the adjournment was not altogether disagreeable.

'Good gracious me!' said Mrs Tiliot, as she took her husband's arm, 'I hope the poor young man hasn't fallen into the river or broken his leg.'

But some of the more acrid Dissenters, whose temper was not controlled by the habits of retail business, had begun to hiss, implying that in their interpretation the curate's absence had not depended on any injury to life or limb.

'He's turned tail, sure enough,' said Mr Muscat to the neighbour behind him, lifting his eyebrows and shoulders, and laughing in a way that showed that, deacon as he was, he looked at the affair in an entirely secular light.

But Mrs Muscat thought it would be nothing but right to have all the waters dragged, agreeing in this with the majority of the church ladies.

'I regret sincerely, Mr Lyon,' said Philip Debarry, addressing the minister with politeness, 'that I must say goodmorning to you, with the sense that I have not been able at present to contribute to your satisfaction as I had wished.'

'Speak not of it in the way of apology, sir,' said Mr Lyon, in a tone of depression. 'I doubt not that you yourself have acted in good faith. Nor will I open any door of egress to constructions such as anger often deems ingenious, but which the disclosure of the simple truth may expose as erroneous and uncharitable fabrications. I wish you goodmorning, sir.'

When the room was deared of the church people, Mr Lyon wished to soothe his own spirit and that of his flock by a few reflections introductory to a parting prayer. But there was a general resistance to this effect. The men mustered round the minister, and declared their opinion that the whole thing was disgraceful to the church. Some said the curate's absence had been contrived from the first. Others more than hinted that it had been a folly in Mr Lyon to set on foot any procedure in common with Tories and clergymen, who, if they ever aped civility to Dissenters, would never do anything but laugh at them in their sleeves. Brother Remp urged in his heavy bass that Mr Lyon should lose no time in sending an account of the affair to the Patriot; and Brother Hawkins, in his high tenor, observed that it was an occasion on which some stinging things might be said with all the extra effect of an apro pos.

The position of receiving a many-voiced lecture from the members of his church was familiar to Mr Lyon, but now he felt weary, frustrated, and doubtful of his own temper. Felix, who stood by and saw that this man of sensitive fibre was suffering from talkers whose noisy

superficiality cost them nothing, got exasperated. 'It seems to me, sirs,' he burst in, with his predominant voice, 'that Mr Lyon has hitherto had the hard part of the business, while you of his congregation have had the easy one. Punish the church clergy, if you like - they can take care of themselves. But don't punish your own minister. It's no business of mine, perhaps, except so far as fair-play is everybody's business; but it seems to me the time to ask Mr Lyon to take a little rest, instead of setting on him like so many wasps.'

By this speech Felix raised a displeasure which fell on the minister as well as on himself; but he gained his immediate end. The talkers dropped off after a slight show of persistence, and Mr Lyon quitted the field of no combat with a small group of his less imperious friends, to whom he confided his intention of committing his argument fully to paper, and forwarding it to a discriminating editor.

'But regarding personalities,' he added, 'I have not the same clear showing. For, say that this young man was pusillanimous - I were but ill provided with arguments if I took my stand even for a moment on so poor an irrelevancy as that because one curate is ill furnished therefore episcopacy is false. If I held up any one to just obloquy, it would be the well-designated incumbent of this parish, who, calling himself one of the church militant, sends a young and weak-kneed substitute to take his place in the fight.'

Mr Philip Debarry did not neglect to make industrious inquiry concerning the accidents which had detained the Rev. Theodore Sherlock on his morning walk. That well-intentioned young divine was seen no more in Treby Magna. But the river was not dragged, for by the evening coach the rector received an explanatory letter. The Rev. Theodore's agitation had increased so much during his walk, that the passing coach had been a means of deliverance not to be resisted, and, literally at the eleventh hour, he had hailed and mounted the cheerful Tally-ho! and carried away his portion of the debate in his pocket.

But the rector had subsequently the satisfaction of receiving Mr Sherlock's painstaking production in print, with a dedication to the Rev. Augustus Debarry, a motto from St Chrysostum, and other additions, the fruit of ripening leisure. He was 'sorry for poor Sherlock, who wanted confidence'; but he was convinced that for his own part he had taken the course which under the circumstances was the least compromising to the church. Sir Maximus, however, observed to his son and brother that he had been right and they had been wrong as to the danger of vague, enormous expressions of gratitude to a Dissenting preacher, and on any differences of opinion seldom failed to remind them of that precedent.