

Chapter 25

Your fellow-man? - Divide the epithet:

Say rather, you're the fellow, he the man.

WHEN Christian quitted the Free School with the discovery that the young lady whose appearance had first startled him with an indefinable impression in the market-place was the daughter of the old Dissenting preacher who had shown so much agitated curiosity about his name, he felt very much like an uninitiated chess-player who sees that the pieces are in a peculiar position on the board, and might open the way for him to give checkmate, if he only knew how. Ever since his interview with Jermyn, his mind had been occupied with the charade it offered to his ingenuity. What was the real meaning of the lawyer's interest in him, and in his relations with Maurice Christian Bycliffe? Here was a secret; and secrets were often a source of profit, of that agreeable kind which involved little labour. Jermyn had hinted at profit which might possibly come through him; but Christian said inwardly, with well-satisfied self-esteem, that he was not so pitiable a nincompoop as to trust Jermyn. On the contrary, the only problem before him was to find out by what combination of independent knowledge he could outwit Jermyn, elude any purchase the attorney had on him through his past history, and get a handsome bonus, by which a somewhat shattered man of pleasure might live well without a master. Christian, having early exhausted the more impulsive delights of life, had become a sober calculator; and he had made up his mind that, for a man who had long ago run through his own money, servitude in a great family was the best kind of retirement after that of a pensioner; but if a better chance offered, a person of talent must not let it slip through his fingers. He held various ends of threads, but there was danger in pulling at them too impatiently. He had not forgotten the surprise which had made him drop the punch-ladle, when Mr Crowder, talking in the steward's room, had said that a scamp named Henry Scaddon had been concerned in a lawsuit about the Transome estate. Again, Jermyn was the family lawyer of the Transomes; he knew about the exchange of names between Scaddon and Bycliffe; he clearly wanted to know as much as he could about Bycliffe's history. The conclusion was not remote that Bycliffe had had some claim on the Transome property, and that a difficulty had arisen from his being confounded with Henry Scaddon. But hitherto the other incident which had been apparently connected with the interchange of names - Mr Lyon's demand that he should write down the name Maurice Christian, accompanied with the question whether that were his whole name - had had no visible link with the inferences arrived at through Crowder and Jermyn.

The discovery made this morning at the Free School that Esther was the daughter of the Dissenting preacher at last suggested a possible link. Until then, Christian had not known why Esther's face had impressed him so peculiarly; but the minister's chief association for him was with Bycliffe, and that association served as a flash to show him that Esther's features and expression, and still more her bearing, now she stood and walked, revived Bycliffe's image. Daughter? There were various ways of being a daughter. Suppose this were a case of adoption: suppose Bycliffe were known to be dead, or thought to be dead. 'Begad, if the old parson had fancied the original father was come to life again, it was enough to frighten him a little. Slow and steady,' Christian said to himself; 'I'll get some talk with the old man again. He's safe enough: one can handle him without cutting one's self. I'll tell him I knew Bycliffe, and was his fellow-prisoner. I'll worm out the truth about this daughter. Could pretty Annette have married again, and married this little scarecrow? There's no knowing what a woman will not do.'

Christian could see no distinct result for himself from his industry; but if there were to be any such result, it must be reached by following out every clue; and to the non-legal mind there are dim possibilities in law and heirship which prevent any issue from seeming too miraculous.

The consequence of these meditations was, that Christian hung about Treby more than usual in his leisure time, and that on the first opportunity he accosted Mr Lyon in the street with suitable civility, stating that since the occasion which had brought them together some weeks before he had often wished to renew their conversation, and, with Mr Lyon's permission, would now ask to do so. After being assured, as he had been by Jermyn, that this courier, who had happened by some accident to possess the memorable locket and pocket-book, was certainly not Annette's husband, and was ignorant whether Maurice Christian Bycliffe were living or dead, the minister's mind had become easy again; his habitual lack of interest in personal details rendering him gradually oblivious of Jermyn's precautionary statement that he was pursuing inquiries, and that if anything of interest turned up, Mr Lyon should be made acquainted with it. Hence, when Christian addressed him, the minister, taken by surprise and shaken by the recollections of former anxieties, said, helplessly -

'If it is business, sir, you would perhaps do better to address yourself to Mr Jermyn.'

He could not have said anything that was a more valuable hint to Christian. He inferred that the minister had made a confidant of Jermyn, and it was needful to be wary

'On the contrary, sir,' he answered, 'it may be of the utmost importance to you that what passes between us should not be known to Mr Jermyn.'

Mr Lyon was perplexed, and felt at once that he was no more in clear daylight concerning Jermyn than concerning Christian. He dared not neglect the possible duty of hearing what this man had to say, and he invited him to proceed to Malthouse Yard, where they could converse in private.

Once in Mr Lyon's study, Christian opened the dialogue by saying that since he was in this room before it had occurred to him that the anxiety he had observed in Mr Lyon might be owing to some acquaintance with Maurice Christian Bycliffe - a fellow-prisoner in France whom he, Christian, had assisted in getting freed from his imprisonment, and who, in fact, had been the owner of the trifles which Mr Lyon had recently had in his possession and had restored. Christian hastened to say that he knew nothing of Bycliffe's history since they had parted in France, but that he knew of his marriage with Annette Ledru, and had been acquainted with Annette herself. He would be very glad to know what became of Bycliffe, if he could, for he liked him uncommonly.

Here Christian paused; but Mr Lyon only sat changing colour and trembling. This man's bearing and tone of mind were made repulsive to him by being brought in contact with keenly-felt memories, and he could not readily summon the courage to give answers or ask questions.

'May I ask if you knew my friend Bycliffe?' said Christian, trying a more direct method.

'No, sir; I never saw him.'

'Ah I well - you have seen a very striking likeness of him. It's wonderful - unaccountable; but when I saw Miss Lyon at the Free School the other day, I could have sworn she was Bycliffe's daughter.'

'Sir!' said Mr Lyon, in his deepest tone, half rising, and holding by the arms of his chair, 'these subjects touch me with too sharp a point for you to be justified in thrusting them on me out of mere levity. Is there any good you seek or any injury you fear in relation to them?'

'Precisely, sir. We shall come now to an understanding. Suppose I believed that the young lady who goes by the name of Miss Lyon was the daughter of Bycliffe?'

Mr Lyon moved his lips silently.

'And suppose I had reason to suspect that there would be some great advantage for her if the law knew who was her father?'

'Sir!' said Mr Lyon, shaken out of all reticence, 'I would not conceal it. She believes herself to be my daughter. But I will bear all things rather than deprive her of a right. Nevertheless I will appeal to the pity of any fellow-man, not to thrust himself between her and me, but to let me disclose the truth to her myself.'

'All in good time,' said Christian. 'We must do nothing rash. Then Miss Lyon is Annette's child?'

The minister shivered as if the edge of a knife had been drawn across his hand. But the tone of the question, by the very fact that it intensified his antipathy to Christian, enabled him to collect himself for what must be simply the endurance of a painful operation. After a moment or two he said more coolly, 'It is true, sir. Her mother became my wife. Proceed with any statement which may concern my duty.'

'I have no more to say than this: If there's a prize that the law might hand over to Bycliffe's daughter, I am much mistaken if there isn't a lawyer who'll take precious good care to keep the law hoodwinked. And that lawyer is Mat Jermyn. Why, my good sir, if you've been taking Jermyn into your confidence, you've been setting the fox to keep off the weasel. It strikes me that when you were made a little anxious about those articles of poor Bycliffe's, you put Jermyn on making inquiries of me. Eh? I think I am right?'

'I do not deny it.'

'Ah! - it was very well you did, for by that means I've found out that he's got hold of some secrets about Bycliffe which he means to stifle. Now, sir, if you desire any justice for your daughter, step-daughter, I should say - don't so much as wink to yourself before Jermyn; and if you've got any papers or things of that sort that may come in evidence, as these confounded rescals the lawyers call it, clutch them tight, for if they get into Jermyn's hands they may soon fly up the chimney. Have I said enough?'

'I had not purposed any further communication with Mr Jermyn, sir; indeed, I have nothing further to communicate. Except that one fact concerning my daughter's birth, which I have erred in concealing from her, I neither seek disclosures nor do I tremble before them.'

'Then I have your word that you will be silent about this conversation between us? It is for your daughter's interest, mind.'

'Sir, I shall be silent,' said Mr Lyon, with cold gravity. 'Unless,' he added, with an acumen as to possibilities rather disturbing to Christian's confident contempt for the old man - 'unless I were called upon by some tribunal to declare the whole truth in this relation; in which case I should submit myself to that authority of investigation which is a requisite of social order.'

Christian departed, feeling satisfied that he had got the utmost to be obtained at present out of the Dissenting preacher, whom he had not dared to question more closely. He must look out for chance lights, and perhaps, too, he might catch a stray hint by stirring the sediment of Mr Crowder's memory. But he must not venture on inquiries that might be noticed. He was in awe of Jermyn.

When Mr Lyon was alone he paced up and down among his books, and thought aloud, in order to relieve himself after the constraint of this interview. 'I will not wait for the urgency of necessity,' he said, more than once. 'I will tell the child, without compulsion. And then I shall fear nothing. And an unwonted spirit of tenderness has filled her of late. She will forgive me.'