

Chapter 28

'Titus. But what says Jupiter, I ask thee?

CLOWN. Alas, sir, I know not Jupiter:

I never drank with him in all my life.'

Titus Andronicus.

THE multiplication of uncomplimentary placards noticed by Mr Lyon and Felix Holt was one of several signs that the days of nomination and election were approaching. The presence of the revising barrister in Treby was not only an opportunity for all persons not otherwise busy to show their zeal for the purification of the voting-lists, but also to reconcile private ease and public duty by standing about the streets and lounging at doors.

It was no light business for Trebians to form an opinion; the mere fact of a public functionary with an unfamiliar title was enough to give them pause, as a premiss that was not to be quickly started from. To Mr Pink the saddler, for example, until some distinct injury or benefit had accrued to him, the existence of the revising barrister was like the existence of the young giraffe which Wombwell had lately brought into those parts - it was to be contemplated, and not criticised. Mr Pink professed a deep-dyed Toryism; but he regarded all fault-finding as Radical and somewhat impious, as disturbing to trade, and likely to offend the gentry or the servants through whom their harness was ordered: there was a Nemesis in things which made objection unsafe, and even the Reform Bill was a sort of electric eel which a thriving tradesman had better leave alone. It was only the 'Papists' who lived far enough off to be spoken of uncivilly.

But Mr Pink was fond of news, which he collected and retailed with perfect impartiality, noting facts and rejecting comments. Hence he was well pleased to have his shop so constant a place of resort for loungers, that to many Trebians there was a strong association between the pleasures of gossip and the smell of leather. He had the satisfaction of chalking and cutting, and of keeping his journeymen close at work, at the very time that he learned from his visitors who were those whose votes had been called in question before His Honour, how Lawyer Jermyn had been too much for Lawyer Labron about Todd's cottages, and how, in the opinion of some townsmen, this looking into the value of people's property, and swearing it down below a certain sum, was a nasty, inquisitorial kind of thing; while others observed that being nice to a few pounds was all nonsense - they should put the figure high enough, and then never mind if a voter's qualification was thereabouts. But, said Mr Sims the

auctioneer, everything was done for the sake of the lawyers. Mr Pink suggested impartially that lawyers must live; but Mr Sims, having a ready auctioneering wit, did not see that so many of them need live, or that babies were born lawyers. Mr Pink felt that this speculation was complicated by the ordering of side-saddles for lawyers' daughters, and, returning to the firm ground of fact, stated that it was getting dusk.

The dusk seemed deepened the next moment by a tall figure obstructing the doorway, at sight of whom Mr Pink rubbed his hands and smiled and bowed more than once, with evident solicitude to show honour where honour was due, while he said -

'Mr Christian, sir, how do you do, sir?'

Christian answered with the condescending familiarity of a superior. 'Very badly, I can tell you, with these confounded braces that you were to make such a fine job of. See, old fellow, they've burst out again.'

'Very sorry, sir. Can you leave them with me?'

'O yes, I'll leave them. What's the news, eh?' said Christian, half seating himself on a high stool, and beating his boot with a hand-whip.

'Well, sir, we look to you to tell us that,' said Mr Pink, with a knowing smile. 'You're at headquarters - eh, sir? That was what I said to Mr Scales the other day. He came for some straps, Mr Scales did, and he asked that question in pretty near the same terms that you've done, sir, and I answered him, as I may say, ditto. Not meaning any disrespect to you, sir, but a way of speaking.'

'Come, that's gammon, Pink,' said Christian. 'You know everything. You can tell me, if you will, who is the fellow employed to paste up Transome's handbills?'

'What do you say, Mr Sims?' said Pink, looking at the auctioneer.

'Why, you know and I know well enough. It's Tommy Trounsem - an old, crippling, half-mad fellow. Most people know Tommy. I've employed him myself for charity.'

'Where shall I find him?' said Christian.

'At the Cross-Keys, in Pollard's End, most likely,' said Mr Sims. 'I don't know where he puts himself when he isn't at the public.'

'He was a stoutish fellow fifteen year ago, when he carried pots,' said Mr Pink.

'Ay, and has snared many a hare in his time,' said Mr Sims. 'But he was always a little cracked. Lord bless you! he used to swear he'd a right to the Transome estate.'

'Why, what put that notion into his head?' said Christian, who had learned more than he expected.

'The lawing, sir - nothing but the lawing about the estate. There was a deal of it twenty year ago,' said Mr Pink. 'Tommy happened to turn up hereabout at that time; a big, lungeous fellow, who would speak disrespectfully of hanybody.'

'O, he meant no harm,' said Mr Simms. 'He was fond of a drop to drink, and not quite right in the upper story, and he could hear no difference between Trounsem and Transome. It's an odd way of speaking they have in that part where he was born - a little north'ard. You'll hear it in his tongue now, if you talk to him.'

'At the Cross-Keys I shall find him, eh?' said Christian, getting off his stool. 'Good-day, Pink, good-day.'

Christian went straight from the saddler's to Quorlen's, the Tory printer's, with whom he had contrived a political spree. Quorlen was a new man in Treby, who had so reduced the trade of Dow, the old hereditary printer, that Dow had lapsed to Whiggery and Radicalism and opinions in general, so far as they were contented to express themselves in a small stock of types. Quorlen had brought his Duffield wit with him, and insisted that religion and joking were the handmaids of politics; on which principle he and Christian undertook the joking, and left the religion to the rector. The joke at present in question was a practical one. Christian, turning into the shop, merely said, 'I've found him out - give me the placards'; and, tucking a thickish flat bundle, wrapped in a black glazed cotton bag, under his arm, walked out into the dusk again.

'Suppose now,' he said to himself, as he strode along - 'suppose there should be some secret to be got out of this old scamp, or some notion that's as good as a secret to those who know how to use it? That would be virtue rewarded. But I'm afraid the old tosspot is not likely to be good for much. There's truth in wine, and there may be some in gin and muddy beer; but whether it's truth worth my knowing, is another question. I've got plenty of truth in my time out of men who were half-seas-over, but never any that was worth a sixpence to me.'

The Cross-Keys was a very old-fashioned 'public': its bar was a big rambling kitchen, with an undulating brick floor; the small-paned windows threw an interesting obscurity over the far-off dresser, garnished with pewter and tin, and with large dishes that seemed to speak of better times; the two settles were half pushed under the wide-mouthed chimney; and the grate, with its brick hobs, massive iron crane, and various pothooks, suggested a generous plenty possibly existent in all moods and tenses except the indicative present. One way of getting an idea of our fellow-countrymen's miseries is to go and look at their pleasures. The Cross-Keys had a fungous-featured landlord and a yellow sickly landlady, with a napkin bound round her head like a resuscitated

Lazarus; it had doctored ale, an odour of bad tobacco, and remarkably strong cheese. It was not what Astraea, when come back, might be expected to approve as the scene of ecstatic enjoyment for the beings whose special prerogative it is to lift their sublime faces towards heaven. Still, there was ample space on the hearth - accommodation for narrative bagmen or boxmen - room for a man to stretch his legs; his brain was not pressed upon by a white wall within a yard of him, and the light did not stare in mercilessly on bare ugliness, turning the fire to ashes. Compared with some beerhouses of this more advanced period, the Cross-Keys of that day presented a high standard of pleasure.

But though this venerable 'public' had not failed to share in the recent political excitement of drinking, the pleasures it offered were not at this early hour of the evening sought by a numerous company. There were only three or four pipes being smoked by the firelight, but it was enough for Christian when he found that one of these was being smoked by the bill-sticker, whose large flat basket stuffed with placards, leaned near him against the settle. So splendid an apparition as Christian was not a little startling at the Cross-Keys, and was gazed at in expectant silence; but he was a stranger in Pollard's End, and was taken for the highest style of traveller when he declared that he was deucedly thirsty, ordered six-pennyworth of gin and a large jug of water, and, putting a few drops of the spirit into his own glass, invited Tommy Trounsem, who sat next him, to help himself. Tommy was not slower than a shaking hand obliged him to be in accepting this invitation. He was a tall broad-shouldered old fellow, who had once been good-looking; but his cheeks and chest were both hollow now, and his limbs were shrunken.

'You've got some bills there, master, eh?' said Christian, pointing to the basket. 'Is there an auction coming on?'

'Auction? no,' said Tommy, with a gruff hoarseness, which was the remnant of a jovial bass, and with an accent which differed from the

Trebian fitfully, as an early habit is wont to reassert itself 'I've nought to do wi' auctions; I'm a pol'tical charicter. It's me am getting Trounsem into parliament.'

'Trounsem, says he,' the landlord observed, taking out his pipe with a low laugh. 'It's Transome, sir. Maybe you don't belong to this part. It's the candidate 'ull do most for the working men, and's proved it too, in the way o' being openhanded and wishing 'em to enjoy themselves. If I'd twenty votes, I'd give one for Transome, and I don't care who hears me.'

The landlord peeped out from his fungous cluster of features with a beery confidence that the high figure of twenty had somehow raised the hypothetic value of his vote.

'Spilkins, now,' said Tommy, waving his hand to the landlord, 'you let one genelman speak to another, will you? This genelman wants to know about my bills. Does he, or doesn't he?'

'What then? I spoke according,' said the landlord, mildly holding his own.

'You're all very well, Spilkins,' returned Tommy, 'but y'aren't me. I know what the bills are. It's public business. I'm none o' your common bill-stickers, master; I've left off sticking up ten guineas reward for a sheep-stealer, or low stuff like that. These are Trounsem's bills; and I'm the rightful family, and so I give him a lift. A Trounsem I am, and a Trounsem I'll be buried; and if Old Nick tries to lay hold on me for poaching, I'll say, 'You be hanged for a lawyer, Old Nick; every hare and pheasant on the Trounsem's land is mine'; and what rises the family, rises old Tommy; and we're going to get into parl'ment - that's the long and the short on't, master. And I'm the head o' the family, and I stick the bills. There's Johnsons, and Thomsons, and Jacksons, and Billsons; but I'm a Trounsem, I am. What do you say to that, master?'

This appeal, accompanied by a blow on the table, while the landlord winked at the company, was addressed to Christian, who answered, with severe gravity - 'I say there isn't any work more honourable than bill-sticking.'

'No, no,' said Tommy, wagging his head from side to side. 'I thought you'd come in to that. I thought you'd know better than say contrary. But I'll shake hands wi' you; I don't want to knock any man's head off. I'm a good chap - a sound crock - an old family kep' out o' my rights. I shall go to heaven, for all Old Nick.'

As these celestial prospects might imply that a little extra gin was beginning to tell on the bill-sticker, Christian wanted to lose no time in arresting his attention. He laid his hand on Tommy's arm and spoke emphatically.

'But I'll tell you what you bill-stickers are not up to. You should be on the look-out when Debarry's side have stuck up fresh bills, and go and paste yours over them. I know where there's a lot of Debarry's bills now. Come along with me, and I'll show you. We'll paste them over, and then we'll come back and treat the company.'

'Hooray ! ' said Tommy. 'Let's be off then.'

He was one of the thoroughly inured, originally hale drunkards, and did not easily lose his head or legs or the ordinary amount of method in his talk. Strangers often supposed that Tommy was tipsy when he had only taken what he called 'one blessed pint', chiefly from that glorious contentment with himself and his adverse fortunes which is not usually characteristic of the sober Briton. He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, seized his paste-vessel and his basket, and prepared to start, with a satisfactory promise that he could know what he was about.

The landlord and some others had confidently concluded that they understood all about Christian now. He was a Transome's man, come to see after the bill-sticking in Transome's interest. The landlord, telling his yellow wife snappishly to open the door for the gentleman, hoped soon to see him again.

'This is a Transome's house, sir,' he observed, 'in respect of entertaining customers of that colour. I do my duty as a publican, which, if I know it, is to turn back no genelman's money. I say, give every genelman a chanch, and the more the merrier, in parl'ment and out of it. And if anybody says they want but two parl'ment men, I say it 'ud be better for trade if there was six of 'em, and voters according.'

'Ay, ay,' said Christian; 'you're a sensible man, landlord. You don't mean to vote for Debarry then, eh?'

'Not nohow,' said the landlord, thinking that where negatives were good the more you heard of them the better.

As soon as the door had closed behind Christian and his new companion, Tommy said -

'Now, master, if you're to be my lantern, don't you be a Jacky Lantern, which I take to mean one as leads you the wrong way. For I'll tell you

what - if you've had the luck to fall in wi' Tommy Trounsem, don't you let him drop.'

'No, no - to be sure not,' said Christian. 'Come along here. We'll go to the Back Brewery wall first.'

'No, no; don't you let me drop. Give me a shilling any day you like, and I'll tell you more nor you'll hear from Spilkins in a week. There isna many men like me. I carried pots for fifteen years off and on - what do you think o' that now, for a man as might ha' lived up there at Trounsem Park, and snared his own game? Which I'd ha' done,' said Tommy, wagging his head at Christian in the dimness undisturbed by gas. 'None o' your shooting for me - it's two to one you'll miss. Snaring's more fishing-like. You bait your hook, and if it isna the fishes' goodwill to come, that's nothing again' the sporting genelman. And that's what I say by snaring.'

'But if you'd a right to the Transome estate, how was it you were kept out of it, old boy? It was some foul shame or other, eh?'

'It's the law - that's what it is. You're a good sort o' chap; I don't mind telling you. There's folks born to property, and there's folks catch hold on it; and the law's made for them as catch hold. I'm pretty deep; I see a good deal further than Spilkins. There was Ned Patch, the pedlar, used to say to me 'You canna read, Tommy,' says he. 'No; thank you,' says I; 'I'm not going to crack my headpiece to make myself as big a fool as you.' I was fond o' Ned. Many's the pot we've had together.'

'I see well enough you're deep, Tommy. How came you to know you were born to property?'

'It was the regester - the parish regester,' said Tommy, with his knowing wag of the head, 'that shows as you was born. I allays felt it inside me as I was somebody, and I could see other chaps thought it on me too; and so one day at Littleshaw, where I kept ferrets and a little bit of a public, there comes a fine man looking after me, and walking me up and down wi' questions. And I made out from the clerk as he'd been at the regester; and I gave the clerk a pot or two, and he got it of our parson as the name o' Trounsem was a great name hereabout. And I waits a bit for my fine man to come again. Thinks I, if there's property wants a right owner, I shall be called for; for I didn't know the law then. And I waited and waited, till I see'd no fun i' waiting. So I parted wi' my public and my ferrets - for she was dead a'ready, my wife was, and I hadn't no cumbrance. And off I started a pretty long walk to this countryside, for I could walk for a wager in them days.'

'Ah! well, here we are at the Back Brewery wall. Put down your paste and your basket now, old boy, and I'll help you. You paste, and I'll give you the bills, and then you can go on talking.'

Tommy obeyed automatically, for he was now carried away by the rare opportunity of talking to a new listener, and was only eager to go on with his story. As soon as his back was turned, and he was stooping over his paste-pot, Christian, with quick adroitness, exchanged the placards in his own bag for those in Tommys basket. Christian's placards had not been printed at Treby, but were a new lot which had been sent from Duffield that very day - 'highly spiced', Quorlen had said, 'coming from a pen that was up to that sort of thing'. Christian had read the first of the sheaf, and supposed they were all alike. He proceeded to hand one to Tommy, and said -

'Here, old boy, paste this over the other. And so, when you got into this country-side, what did you do?'

'Do? Why, I put up at a good public and ordered the best, for I'd a bit o' money in my pocket; and I axed about, and they said to me, if it's Trounsem business you're after, you go to Lawyer Jermyn. And I went; and says I, going along, he's maybe the fine man as walked me up and down. But no such thing. I'll tell you what Lawyer Jermyn was. He stands you there, and holds you away from him wi' a pole three yards long. He stares at you, and says nothing, till you feel like a Tomfool; and then he threats you to set the justice on you; and then he's sorry for you, and hands you money, and preaches you a sarmint, and tells you you're a poor man, and he'll give you a bit of advice - and you'd better not be meddling wi' things belonging to the law, else you'll be caught up in a big wheel and fly to bits. And I went of a cold sweat, and I wished I might never come i' sight o' Lawyer Jermyn again. But he says, if you keep i' this neighbourhood, behave yourself well, and I'll pect you. I were deep enough, but it's no use being deep, 'cause you can never know the law. And there's times when the deepest fellow's worst frightened.'

'Yes, yes. There! Now for another placard. And so that was all?'

'All?' said Tommy, turning round and holding the pastebrush in suspense. 'Don't you be running too quick. Thinks I, 'I'll meddle no more. I've got a bit o' money - I'll buy a basket, and be a potman. It's a pleasant life. I shall live at publics and see the world, and pick up 'quaintance, and get a chanch penny.' But when I'd turned into the Red Lion, and got myself warm again wi' a drop o' hot, something jumps into my head. Thinks I, Tommy, you've done finely for yourself: you're a rat as has broke up your house to take a journey, and show yourself to a ferret. And then it jumps into my head: I'd once two ferrets as turned on one another, and the little un killed the big un.'

Says I to the landlady, 'Missis, could you tell me of a lawyer,' says I, 'not very big or fine, but a second size - a pig-potato, like?' 'That I can,' says she; 'there's one now in the bar-parlour.' 'Be so kind as bring us together,' says I. And she cries out - I think I hear her now - 'Mr Johnson ! ' And what do you think?'

At this crisis in Tommy's story the grey clouds, which had been gradually thinning, opened sufficiently to let down the sudden moonlight, and show his poor battered old figure and face in the attitude and with the expression of a narrator sure of the coming effect on his auditor; his body and neck stretched a little on one side, and his paste-brush held out with an alarming intention of tapping Christian's coat-sleeve at the right moment. Christian started to a safe distance, and said -

'It's wonderful. I can't tell what to think.'

'Then never do you deny Old Nick,' said Tommy, with solemnity. 'I've believed in him more ever since. Who was Johnson? Why, Johnson was the fine man as had walked me up and down with questions. And I out with it to him then and there. And he speaks me civil, and says, 'Come away wi' me, my good fellow.' And he told me a deal o' law. And he says, whether you're a Tommy Trounsem or no, it's no good to you, but only to them as have got hold o' the property. If you was a Tommy Trounsem twenty times over, it 'ud be no good, for the law's bought you out; and your life's no good, only to them as have caught hold o' the property. The more you live, the more they'll stick in. Not as they want you now, says he - you're no good to anybody, and you might howl like a dog for iver, and the law 'ud take no notice on you. Says Johnson. I'm doing a kind thing by you, to tell you. For that's the law. And if you want to know the law, master, you ask Johnson. I heard 'em say after, as he was an understrapper at Jermyn's. I've never forgot it from that day to this. But I saw clear enough, as if the law hadn't been again' me, the Trounsem estate 'ud ha' been mine. But folks are fools hereabouts, and I've left off talking. The more you tell 'em the truth, the more they'll niver believe you. And I went and bought my basket and the pots, and -'

'Come, then, fire away,' said Christian. 'Here's another placard.'

'I'm getting a bit dry, master.'

'Well, then, make haste, and you'll have something to drink all the sooner.'

Tommy turned to his work again, and Christian, continuing his help, said, 'And how long has Mr Jermyn been employing you?'

'Oh, no particular time - off and on; but a week or two ago he sees me upo' the road, and speaks to me uncommon civil, and tells me to go up to his office, and he'll give me employ. And I was noways unwilling to stick the bills to get the family into parl'ment. For there's no man can help the law. And the family's the family, whether you carry pots or no. Master, I'm uncommon dry - my head's a turning round - it's talking so long on end.'

The unwonted excitement of poor Tommy's memory was producing a reaction.

'Well, Tommy,' said Christian, who had just made a discovery among the placards which altered the bent of his thoughts, 'you may go back to the Cross-Keys now, if you like; here's a half-crown for you to spend handsomely. I can't go back there myself just yet; but you may give my respects to Spilkins, and mind you paste the rest of the bills early to-morrow morning.'

'Ay, ay. But don't you believe too much i' Spilkins,' said Tommy, pocketing the half-crown, and showing his gratitude by giving this advice - 'he's no harm much - but weak. He thinks he's at the bottom o' things because he scores you up. But I bear him no ill-will. Tommy Trounsem's a good chap; and any day you like to give me half-a-crown, I'll tell you the same story over again. Not now; I'm dry. Come, help me up wi' these things; you're a younger chap than me. Well, I'll tell Spilkins you'll come again another day.'

The moonlight, which had lit up poor Tommy's oratorical attitude, had served to light up for Christian the print of the placards. He had expected the copies to be various, and had turned them half over at different depths of the sheaf before drawing out those he offered to the bill-sticker. Suddenly the clear light had shown him on one of them a name which was just then especially interesting to him, and all the more when occurring in a placard intended to dissuade the electors of North Loamshire from voting for the heir of the Transomes. He hastily turned over the lists that preceded and succeeded, that he might draw out and carry away all of this pattern; for it might turn out to be wiser for him not to contribute to the publicity of handbills which contained allusions to Bycliffe versus Transome. There were about a dozen of them; he pressed them together and thrust them into his pocket, returning all the rest to Tommy's basket. To take away this dozen might not be to prevent similar bills from being posted up elsewhere, but he had reason to believe that these were all of the same kind which had been sent to Treby from Duffield.

Christian's interest in his practical joke had died out like a morning rushlight. Apart from this discovery in the placards, old Tommy's story had some indications in it that were worth pondering over.

Where was that well-informed Johnson now? Was he still an understrapper of Jermyn's?

With this matter in his thoughts, Christian only turned in hastily at Quorlen's, threw down the black bag which contained the captured Radical handbills, said he had done the job, and hurried back to the Manor that he might study his problem.