

Chapter 30

'His nature is too noble for the world:

He would not flatter Neptune for his trident,

Or Jove for his power to thunder. His heart's his mouth:

What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent;

And, being angry, doth forget that ever

He heard the name of death.' - Coriolanus.

CHRISTIAN and Johnson did meet, however, by means that were quite incalculable. The incident which brought them into communication was due to Felix Holt, who of all men in the world had the least affinity either for the indusiuious or the idle parasite.

Mr Lyon had urged Felix to go to Duffield on the 15th of December, to witness the nomination of the candidates for North Loamshire. The minister wished to hear what took place; and the pleasure of gratifying him helped to outweigh some opposing reasons.

'I shall get into a rage at something or other,' Felix had said. 'I've told you one of my weak points. Where I have any particular business, I must incur the risks my nature brings. But I've no particular business at Duffield. However, I'll make a holiday and go. By dint of seeing folly, I shall get lessons in patience.'

The weak point to which Felix referred was his liability to be carried completely out of his own mastery by indignant anger. His strong health, his renunciation of selfish claims, his habitual preoccupation with large thoughts and with purposes independent of everyday casualties, secured him a fine and even temper, free from moodiness or irritability. He was full of long-suffering towards his unwise mother, who 'pressed him daily with her words and urged him, so that his soul was vexed'; he had chosen to fill his days in a way that required the utmost exertion of patience, that required those little rill-like outflowings of goodness which in minds of great energy must be fed from deep sources of thought and passionate devotedness. In this way his energies served to make him gentle; and now, in this twenty-sixth year of his life, they had ceased to make him angry, except in the presence of something that roused his deep indignation. When once exasperated, the passionateness of his nature threw off the yoke of a long-trained consciousness in which thought and emotion had been more and more completely mingled and concentrated itself in a rage as ungovernable as that of boyhood. He was thoroughly aware of the

liability, and knew that in such circumstances he could not answer for himself. Sensitive people with feeble frames have often the same sort of fury within them; but they are themselves shattered, and shatter nothing. Felix had a terrible arm: he knew that he was dangerous; and he avoided the conditions that might cause him exasperation, as he would have avoided intoxicating drinks if he had been in danger of intemperance.

The nomination-day was a great epoch of successful trickery, or, to speak in a more parliamentary manner, of war-stratagem, on the part of skilful agents. And Mr Johnson had his share of inward chuckling and self-approval, as one who might justly expect increasing renown, and be some day in as general request as the great Putty himself. To have the pleasure and the praise of electioneering ingenuity, and also to get paid for it, without too much anxiety whether the ingenuity will achieve its ultimate end, perhaps gives to some select persons a sort of satisfaction in their superiority to their more agitated fellow-men that is worthy to be classed with those generous enjoyments of having the truth chiefly to yourself, and of seeing others in danger of drowning while you are high and dry, which seem to have been regarded as unmixed privileges by Lucretius and Lord Bacon.

One of Mr Johnson's great successes was this. Spratt, the hated manager of the Sproxton Colliery, in careless confidence that the colliers and other labourers under him would follow his orders, had provided carts to carry some loads of voteless enthusiasm to Duffield on behalf of Garstin; enthusiasm which, being already paid for by the recognised benefit of Garstin's existence as a capitalist with a share in the Sproxton mines, was not to cost much in the form of treating. A capitalist was held worthy of pious honour as the cause why working men existed. But Mr Spratt did not sufficiently consider that a cause which has to be proved by argument or testimony is not an object of passionate devotion to colliers: a visible cause of beer acts on them much more strongly. And even if there had been any love of the far-off Garstin, hatred of the too-immediate Spratt would have been the stronger motive. Hence Johnson's calculations, made long ago with Chubb, the remarkable publican, had been well founded, and there had been diligent care to supply treating at Duffield in the name of Transome. After the election was over, it was not improbable that there would be much friendly joking between Putty and Johnson as to the success of this trick against Putty's employer, and Johnson would be conscious of rising in the opinion of his celebrated senior.

For the show of hands and the cheering, the hustling and the pelting, the roaring and the hissing, the hard hits with small missiles, and the soft hits with small jokes, were strong enough on the side of Transome to balance the similar 'demonstrations' for Garstin, even with the Debarry interest in his favour. And the inconvenient presence of

Spratt was early got rid of by a dexterously managed accident, which sent him bruised and limping from the scene of action. Mr Chubb had never before felt so thoroughly that the occasion was up to a level with his talents, while the clear daylight in which his virtue would appear when at the election he voted, as his duty to himself bound him, for Garstin only, gave him thorough repose of conscience.

Felix Holt was the only person looking on at the senseless exhibitions of this nomination-day, who knew from the beginning the history of the trick with the Sproxtton men. He had been aware all along that the treating at Chubb's had been continued, and that so far Harold Transome's promise had produced no good fruits; and what he was observing to-day, as he watched the uproarious crowd, convinced him that the whole scheme would be carried out just as if he had never spoken about it. He could be fair enough to Transome to allow that he might have wished, and yet have been unable, with his notions of success, to keep his promise; and his bitterness towards the candidate only took the form of contemptuous pity; for Felix was not sparing in his contempt for men who put their inward honour in pawn by seeking the prizes of the world. His scorn fell too readily on the fortunate. But when he saw Johnson passing to and fro, and speaking to Jermyn on the hustings, he felt himself getting angry, and jumped off the wheel of the stationary cart on which he was mounted that he might no longer be in sight of this man, whose vitiating cant had made his blood hot and his fingers tingle on the first day of encountering him at Sproxtton. It was a little too exasperating to look at this pink-faced rotund specimen of prosperity, to witness the power for evil that lay in his vulgar cant, backed by another man's money, and to know that such stupid iniquity flourished the flags of Reform, and Liberalism, and justice to the needy. While the roaring and the scuffling were still going on, Felix, with his thick stick in his hand, made his way through the crowd, and walked on through the Duffield streets till he came out on a grassy suburb, where the houses surrounded a small common: Here he walked about in the breezy air, and ate his bread and apples, telling himself that this angry haste of his about evils that could only be remedied slowly, could be nothing else than obstructive, and might some day - he saw it so clearly that the thought seemed like a presentiment - be obstructive of his own work.

'Not to waste energy, to apply force where it would tell, to do small work close at hand, not waiting for speculative chances of heroism, but preparing for them' - these were the rules he had been constantly urging on himself. But what could be a greater waste than to beat a scoundrel who had law and opodeldoc at command? After this meditation, Felix felt cool and wise enough to return into the town, not, however, intending to deny himself the satisfaction of a few pungent words wherever there was place for them. Blows are

sarcasms turned stupid: wit is a form of force that leaves the limbs at rest.

Anything that could be called a crowd was no longer to be seen. The show of hands having been pronounced to be in favour of Debarry and Transome, and a poll having been demanded for Garstin, the business of the day might be considered at an end. But in the street where the hustings were erected, and where the great hotels stood, there were many groups, as well as strollers and steady walkers to and fro. Men in superior greatcoats and well-brushed hats were awaiting with more or less impatience an important dinner, either at the Crown, which was Debarry's house, or at the Three Cranes, which was Garstin's, or at the Fox and Hounds, which was Transome's. Knots of sober retailers, who had already dined, were to be seen at some shop-doors; men in very shabby coats and miscellaneous head-coverings, inhabitants of Duffield and not county voters, were lounging about in dull silence, or listening, some to a grimy man in a flannel shirt, hatless and with turbid red hair, who was insisting on political points with much more ease than had seemed to belong to the gentlemen speakers on the hustings, and others to a Scotch vendor of articles useful to sell, whose unfamiliar accent seemed to have a guarantee of truth in it wanting as an association with everyday English. Some rough-looking pipe-smokers, or distinguished cigar-smokers, chose to walk up and down in isolation and silence. But the majority of those who had shown a burning interest in the nomination had disappeared, and cockades no longer studded a close-packed crowd, like, and also very unlike, meadow flowers among the grass. The street pavement was strangely painted with fragments of perishable missiles ground flat under heavy feet: but the workers were resting from their toil, and the buzz and tread and the fitfully discernible voices seemed like stillness to Felix after the roar with which the wide space had been filled when he left it.

The group round the speaker in the flannel shirt stood at the corner of a side-street, and the speaker himself was elevated by the head and shoulders above his hearers, not because he was tall, but because he stood on a projecting stone. At the opposite corner of the turning was the great inn of the Fox and Hounds, and this was the ultra-Liberal quarter of the High Street. Felix was at once attracted by this group; he liked the look of the speaker, whose bare arms were powerfully muscular, though he had the pallid complexion of a man who lives chiefly amidst the heat of furnaces. He was leaning against the dark stone building behind him with folded arms, the grimy paleness of his shirt and skin standing out in high relief against the dark stone building behind him. He lifted up one fore-finger, and marked his emphasis with it as he spoke. His voice was high and not strong, but Felix recognised the fluency and the method of a habitual preacher or lecturer.

'It's the fallacy of all monopolists,' he was saying. 'We know what monopolists are: men who want to keep a trade all to themselves, under the pretence that they'll furnish the public with a better article. We know what that comes to: in some countries a poor man can't afford to buy a spoonful of salt, and yet there's salt enough in the world to pickle every living thing in it. That's the sort of benefit monopolists do to mankind. And these are the men who tell us we're to let politics alone; they'll govern us better without our knowing anything about it. We must mind our business; we are ignorant; we've no time to study great questions. But I tell them this: the greatest question in the world is, how to give every man a man's share in what goes on in life -'

'Hear, hear!' said Felix, in his sonorous voice, which seemed to give a new impressiveness to what the speaker had said. Every one looked at him: the well-washed face and its educated expression, along with a dress more careless than that of most well-to-do workmen on a holiday, made his appearance strangely arresting.

'Not a pig's share,' the speaker went on, 'not a horse's share, not the share of a machine fed with oil only to make it work and nothing else. It isn't a man's share just to mind your pin-making, or your glass-blowing, and higgler about your own wages, and bring up your family to be ignorant sons of ignorant fathers, and no better prospect; that's a slave's share; we want a freeman's share, and that is to think and speak and act about what concerns us all, and see whether these fine gentlemen who undertake to govern us are doing the best they can for us. They've got the knowledge, say they. Very well, we've got the wants. There's many a one who would be idle if hunger didn't pinch him; but the stomach sets us to work. There's a fable told where the nobles are the belly and the people the members. But I make another sort of fable. I say, we are the belly that feels the pinches, and we'll set these aristocrats, these great people who call themselves our brains, to work at some way of satisfying us a bit better. The aristocrats are pretty sure to try and govern for their own benefit; but how are we to be sure they'll try and govern for ours? They must be looked after, I think, like other workmen. We must have what we call inspectors, to see whether the work's well done for us. We want to send our inspectors to parliament. Well, they say - you've got the Reform Bill; what more can you want? Send your inspectors. But I say, the Reform Bill is a trick - it's nothing but swearing-in special constables to keep the aristocrats safe in their monopoly; it's bribing some of the people with votes to make them hold their tongues about giving votes to the rest. I say, if a man doesn't beg or steal, but works for his bread, the poorer and the more miserable he is, the more he'd need have a vote to send an inspector to parliament - else the man who is worst off is likely to be forgotten; and I say, he's the man who ought to be first remembered. Else what does their religion mean? Why do they build

churches and endow them that their sons may get well paid for preaching a Saviour, and making themselves as little like Him as can be? If I want to believe in Jesus Christ, I must shut my eyes for fear I should see a parson. And what's a bishop? A bishop's a parson dressed up, who sits in the House of Lords to help and throw out Reform Bills. And because it's hard to get anything in the shape of a man to dress himself up like that, and do such work, they gave him a palace for it, and plenty of thousands a-year. And then they cry out - 'The church is in danger,' - 'the poor man's church'. And why is it the poor man's church? Because he can have a seat for nothing. I think it is for nothing; for it would be hard to tell what he gets by it. If the poor man had a vote in the matter, I think he'd choose a different sort of a church to what that is. But do you think the aristocrats will ever alter it, if the belly doesn't pinch them? Not they. It's part of their monopoly. They'll supply us with our religion like everything else, and get a profit on it. They'll give us plenty of heaven. We may have land there. That's the sort of religion they like - a religion that gives us working men heaven, and nothing else. But we'll offer to change with 'em. Well give them back some of their heaven, and take it out in something for us and our children in this world. They don't seem to care so much about heaven themselves till they feel the gout very bad - but you won't get them to give up anything else, if you don't pinch 'em for it. And to pinch them enough, we must get the suffrage, we must get votes, that we may send the men to parliament who will do our work for us; and we must have parliament dissolved every year, that we may change our man if he doesn't do what we want him to do; and we must have the country divided so that the little kings of the counties can't do as they like, but must be shaken up in one bag with us. I say, if we working men are ever to get a man's share, we must have universal suffrage, and annual parliaments, and the vote by ballot, and electoral districts.'

'No! - something else before all that,' said Felix, again startling the audience into looking at him. But the speaker glanced coldly at him and went on.

'That's what Sir Francis Burdett went in for fifteen years ago; and it's the right thing for us, if it was Tomfool who went in for it. You must lay hold of such handles as you can. I don't believe much in Liberal aristocrats; but if there's any fine carved gold-headed stick of an aristocrat will make a broom-stick of himself, I'll lose no time but I'll sweep with him. And that's what I think about Transome. And if any of you have acquaintance among county voters, give 'em a hint that you wish 'em to vote for Transome.'

At the last word, the speaker stepped down from his slight eminence, and walked away rapidly, like a man whose leisure was exhausted, and who must go about his business. But he had left an appetite in

his audience for further oratory, and one of them seemed to express a general sentiment as he turned immediately to Felix, and said, 'Come, sir, what do you say?'

Felix did at once what he would very likely have done without being asked - he stepped on to the stone, and took off his cap by an instinctive prompting that always led him to speak uncovered. The effect of his figure in relief against the stone background was unlike that of the previous speaker. He was considerably taller, his head and neck were more massive, and the expression of his mouth and eyes was something very different from the mere acuteness and rather hard-lipped antagonism of the trades-union man. Felix Holt's face had the look of the habitual meditative abstraction from objects of mere personal vanity or desire, which is the peculiar stamp of culture, and makes a very roughly-cut face worthy to be called 'the human face divine'. Even lions and dogs know a distinction between men's glances; and doubtless those Duffield men, in the expectation with which they looked up at Felix, were unconsciously influenced by the grandeur of his full yet firm mouth, and the calm clearness of his grey eyes, which were somehow unlike what they were accustomed to see along with an old brown velveteen coat, and an absence of chin-propping. When he began to speak, the contrast of voice was still stronger than that of appearance. The man in the flannel shirt had not been heard - had probably not cared to be heard - beyond the immediate group of listeners. But Felix at once drew the attention of persons comparatively at a distance.

'In my opinion,' he said, almost the moment after he was addressed, 'that was a true word spoken by our friend when he said the great question was how to give every man a man's share in life. But I think he expects voting to do more towards it than I do. I want the working men to have power. I'm a working man myself, and I don't want to be anything else. But there are two sorts of power. There's a power to do mischief - to undo what has been done with great expense and labour, to waste and destroy, to be cruel to the weak, to lie and quarrel, and to talk poisonous nonsense. That's the sort of power that ignorant numbers have. It never made a joint stool or planted a potato. Do you think it's likely to do much towards governing a great country, and making wise laws, and giving shelter, food, and clothes to millions of men? Ignorant power comes in the end to the same thing as wicked power; it makes misery. It's another sort of power that I want us working men to have, and I can see plainly enough that our all having votes will do little towards it at present. I hope we, or the children that come after us, will get plenty of political power some time. I tell everybody plainly, I hope there will be great changes, and that some time, whether we live to see it or not, men will have come to be ashamed of things they're proud of now. But I should like to convince you that votes would never give you political power worth having while

things are as they are now, and that if you go the right way to work you may get power sooner without votes. Perhaps all you who hear me are sober men, who try to learn as much of the nature of things as you can, and to be as little like fools as possible. A fool or idiot is one who expects things to happen that never can happen; he pours milk into a can without a bottom, and expects the milk to stay there. The more of such vain expectations a man has, the more he is of a fool or idiot. And if any working man expects a vote to do for him what it never can do, he's foolish to that amount, if no more. I think that's clear enough, eh?'

'Hear, hear,' said several voices, but they were not those of the original group; they belonged to some strollers who had been attracted by Felix Holt's vibrating voice, and were Tories from the Crown. Among them was Christian, who was smoking a cigar with a pleasure he always felt in being among people who did not know him, and doubtless took him to be something higher than he really was. Hearers from the Fox and Hounds also were slowly adding themselves to the nucleus. Felix, accessible to the pleasure of being listened to, went on with more and more animation -

'The way to get rid of folly is to get rid of vain expectations, and of thoughts that don't agree with the nature of things. The men who have had true thoughts about water, and what it will do when it is turned into steam and under all sorts of circumstances, have made themselves a great power in the world: they are turning the wheels of engines that will help to change most things. But no engines would have done, if there had been false notions about the way water would act. Now, all the schemes about voting, and districts, and annual parliaments, and the rest, are engines, and the water or steam - the force that is to work them - must come out of human nature - out of men's passions, feelings, desires. Whether the engines will do good work or bad depends on these feelings; and if we have false expectations about men's characters, we are very much like the idiot who thinks he'll carry milk in a can without a bottom. In my opinion, the notions about what mere voting will do are very much of that sort.'

'That's very fine,' said a man in dirty fustian, with a scornful laugh. 'But how are we to get the power without votes?'

'I'll tell you what's the greatest power under heaven,' said Felix, 'and that is public opinion - the ruling belief in society about what is right and what is wrong, what is honourable and what is shameful. That's the steam that is to work the engines. How can political freedom make us better any more than a religion we don't believe in, if people laugh and wink when they see men abuse and defile it? And while public opinion is what it is - while men have no better beliefs about public duty - while corruption is not felt to be a damning disgrace - while

men are not ashamed in parliament and out of it to make public questions which concern the welfare of millions a mere screen for their own petty private ends, - I say, no fresh scheme of voting will much mend our condition. For, take us working men of all sorts. Suppose out of every hundred who had a vote there were thirty who had some soberness, some sense to choose with, some good feeling to make them wish the right thing for all. And suppose there were seventy out of the hundred who were, half of them, not sober, who had no sense to choose one thing in politics more than another, and who had so little good feeling in them that they wasted on their own drinking the money that should have helped to feed and clothe their wives and children; and another half of them who, if they didn't drink, were too ignorant or mean or stupid to see any good for themselves better than pocketing a five-shilling piece when it was offered them. Where would be the political power of the thirty sober men? The power would lie with the seventy drunken and stupid votes; and I'll tell you what sort of men would get the power - what sort of men would end by returning whom they pleased to parliament.'

Felix had seen every face around him, and had particularly noticed a recent addition to his audience; but now he looked before him without appearing to fix his glance on any one. In spite of his cooling meditations an hour ago, his pulse was getting quickened by indignation, and the desire to crush what he hated was likely to vent itself in articulation. His tone became more biting.

'They would be men who would undertake to do the business for a candidate, and return him: men who have no real opinions, but who pilfer the words of every opinion, and turn them into a cant which will serve their purpose at the moment; men who look out for dirty work to make their fortunes by, because dirty work wants little talent and no conscience; men who know all the ins and outs of bribery, because there is not a cranny in their own souls where a bribe can't enter. Such men as these will be the masters wherever there's a majority of voters who care more for money, more for drink, more for some mean little end which is their own and nobody else's, than for anything that has ever been called Right in the world. For suppose there's a poor voter named Jack, who has seven children, and twelve or fifteen shillings a-week wages, perhaps less. Jack can't read - I don't say whose fault that is - he never had the chance to learn; he knows so little that he perhaps thinks God made the poor-laws, and if anybody said the pattern of the workhouse was laid down in the Testament, he wouldn't be able to contradict them. What is poor Jack likely to do when he sees a smart stranger coming to him, who happens to be just one of those men that I say will be the masters till public opinion gets too hot for them? He's a middle-sized man, we'll say; stout, with coat upon coat of fine broadcloth, open enough to show a fine gold chain: none of your dark, scowling men, but one with an innocent pink-and-

white skin and very smooth light hair - a most respectable man, who calls himself by a good, sound, well-known English name - as Green, or Baker, or Wilson, or, let us say, Johnson -'

Felix was interrupted by an explosion of laughter from a majority of the bystanders. Some eyes had been turned on Johnson, who stood on the right hand of Felix, at the very beginning of the description, and these were gradually followed by others, till at last every hearer's attention was fixed on him, and the first burst of laughter from the two or three who knew the attorney's name, let every one sufficiently into the secret to make the amusement common. Johnson, who had kept his ground till his name was mentioned, now turned away, looking unusually white after being unusually red, and feeling by an attorney's instinct for his pocket-book, as if he felt it was a case for taking down the names of witnesses.

All the well-dressed hearers turned away too, thinking they had had the cream of the speech in the joke against Johnson, which, as a thing worth telling, helped to recall them to the scene of dinner.

'Who is this Johnson?' said Christian to a young man who had been standing near him, and had been one of the first to laugh. Christian's curiosity had naturally been awakened by what might prove a golden opportunity.

'O - a London attorney. He acts for Transome. That tremendous fellow at the comer there is some red-hot Radical demagogue, and Johnson has offended him, I suppose; else he wouldn't have turned in that way on a man of their own party.'

'I had heard there was a Johnson who was an understrapper of Jermyn's,' said Christian.

'Well, so this man may have been for what I know. But he's a London man now - a very busy fellow - on his own legs in Bedford Row. Ha ha! It's capital, though, when these Liberals get a slap in the face from the working men they're so very fond of.'

Another turn along the street enabled Christian to come to a resolution. Having seen Jermyn drive away an hour before, he was in no fear: he walked at once to the Fox and Hounds and asked to speak to Mr Johnson. A brief interview, in which Christian ascertained that he had before him the Johnson mentioned by the bill-sticker, issued in the appointment of a longer one at a later hour; and before they left Duffield they had come not exactly to a mutual understanding, but to an exchange of information mutually welcome.

Christian had been very cautious in the commencement, only intimating that he knew something important which some chance hints had induced him to think might be interesting to Mr Johnson, but that this entirely depended on how far he had a common interest with Mr Jermyn. Johnson replied that he had much business in which that gentleman was not concerned, but that to a certain extent they had a common interest. Probably then, Christian observed, the affairs of the Transome estate were part of the business in which Mr Jermyn and Mr Johnson might be understood to represent each other - in which case he need not detain Mr Johnson? At this hint Johnson could not conceal that he was becoming eager. He had no idea what Christian's information was, but there were many grounds on which Johnson desired to know as much as he could about the Transome affairs independently of Jermyn. By little and little an understanding was arrived at. Christian told of his interview with Tommy Trounsem, and stated that if Johnson could show him whether the knowledge could have any legal value, he could bring evidence that a legitimate child of Bycliffe's existed: he felt certain of this fact, and of his proof. Johnson explained, that in this case the death of the old bill-sticker would give the child the first valid claim to the Bycliffe heirship; that for his own part he should be glad to further a true claim, but that caution must be observed. How did Christian know that Jermyn was informed on this subject? Christian, more and more convinced that Johnson would be glad to counteract Jermyn, at length became explicit about Esther, but still withheld his own real name, and the nature of his relations with Bycliffe. He said he would bring the rest of his information when Mr Johnson took the case up seriously, and placed it in the hands of Bycliffe's old lawyers - of course he would do that? Johnson replied that he would certainly do that; but that there were legal niceties which Mr Christian was probably not acquainted with; that Esther's claim had not yet accrued; and that hurry was useless.

The two men parted, each in distrust of the other, but each well pleased to have learned something. Johnson was not at all sure how he should act, but thought it likely that events would soon guide him. Christian was beginning to meditate a way of securing his own ends without depending in the least on Johnson's procedure. It was enough for him that he was now assured of Esther's legal claim on the Transome estates.