

Chapter 34

The fields are hoary with December's frost.

I too am hoary with the chills of age.

But through the fields and through the untrodden woods

Is rest and stillness - only in my heart

The pall of winter shrouds a throbbing life.

A WEEK after that Treby Riot, Harold Transome was at Transome Court. He had returned from a hasty visit to town, to keep his Christmas at this delightful country home, not in the best Christmas spirits. He had lost the election; but if that had been his only annoyance, he had good humour and good sense enough to have borne it as well as most men, and to have paid the eight or nine thousand, which had been the price of ascertaining that he was not to sit in the next parliament, without useless grumbling. But the disappointments of life can never, any more than its pleasures, be estimated singly; and the healthiest and most agreeable of men is exposed to that coincidence of various vexations, each heightening the effect of the other, which may produce in him something corresponding to the spontaneous and externally unaccountable moodiness of the morbid and disagreeable.

Harold might not have grieved much at a small riot in Treby, even if it had caused some expenses to fall on the county; but the turn which the riot had actually taken, was a bitter morsel for rumination, on more grounds than one. However the disturbances had arisen and been aggravated - and probably no one knew the whole truth on these points - the conspicuous, gravest incidents had all tended to throw the blame on the Radical party, that is to say, on Transome and on Transome's agents; and so far the candidateship and its results had done Harold dishonour in the county: precisely the opposite effect to that which was a dear object of his ambition. More than this, Harold's conscience was active enough to be very unpleasantly affected by what had befallen Felix Holt. His memory, always good, was particularly vivid in its retention of Felix Holt's complaint to him about the treating of the Sproxtton men, and of the subsequent irritating scene in Jermyn's office when the personage with the inauspicious name of Johnson had expounded to him the impossibility of revising an electioneering scheme once begun, and of turning your vehicle back when it had already begun to roll downhill. Remembering Felix Holt's words of indignant warning about hiring men with drink in them to make a noise, Harold could not resist the urgent impression that the offences for which Felix was committed were fatalities, not brought

about by any willing co-operation of his with the rioters, but arising probably from some ill-judged efforts to counteract their violence. And this impression, which insisted on growing into a conviction, became in one of its phases an uneasy sense that he held evidence which would at once tend to exonerate Felix, and to place himself and his agents in anything but a desirable light. It was likely that some one else could give equivalent evidence in favour of Felix - the little talkative Dissenting preacher, for example; but, anyhow, the affair with the Sproxtton men would be ripped open and made the worst of by the opposite parties. The man who has failed in the use of some indirectness, is helped very little by the fact that his rivals are men to whom that indirectness is a something human, very far from being alien. There remains this grand distinction, that he has failed, and that the jet of light is thrown entirely on his misdoings.

In this matter Harold felt himself a victim. Could he hinder the tricks of his agents? In this particular case he had tried to hinder them, and had tried in vain. He had not loved the two agents in question, to begin with; and now at this later stage of events he was more innocent than ever of bearing them anything but the most sincere ill-will. He was more utterly exasperated with them than he would probably have been if his one great passion had been for public virtue. Jermyn, with his John Johnson, had added this

ugly dirty business of the Treby election to all the long-accumulating list of offences, which Harold was resolved to visit on him to the utmost. He had seen some handbills carrying the insinuation that there was a discreditable indebtedness to Jermyn on the part of the Transomes. If any such notions existed apart from electioneering slander, there was all the more reason for letting the world see Jermyn severely punished for abusing his power over the family affairs, and tampering with the family property. And the world certainly should see this with as little delay as possible. The cool confident assuming fellow should be bled to the last drop in compensation, and all connection with him be finally got rid of. Now that the election was done with, Harold meant to devote himself to private affairs, till everything lay in complete order under his own supervision.

This morning he was seated as usual in his private room, which had now been handsomely fitted up for him. It was but the third morning after the first Christmas he had spent in his English home for fifteen years, and the home looked like an eminently desirable one. The white frost lay on the broad lawn, on the many-formed leaves of the evergreens, and on the giant trees at a distance. Logs of dry oak blazed on the hearth; the carpet was like warm moss under his feet; he had breakfasted just according to his taste, and he had the interesting occupations of a large proprietor to fill the morning. All through the house now, steps were noiseless on carpets or on fine

matting; there was warmth in hall and corridors; there were servants enough to do everything, and to do it at the right time. Skilful Dominic was always at hand to meet his master's demands, and his bland presence diffused itself like a smile over the household, infecting the gloomy English mind with the belief that life was easy, and making his real predominance seem as soft and light as a down quilt. Old Mr Transome had gathered new courage and strength since little Harry and Dominic had come and since Harold had insisted on his taking drives. Mrs Transome herself was seen on a fresh background with a gown of rich new stuff. And if, in spite of this, she did not seem happy, Harold either did not observe it, or kindly ignored it as the necessary frailty of elderly women whose lives have had too much of dulness and privation. Our minds get tricks and attitudes as our bodies do, thought Harold, and age stiffens them into unalterableness. 'Poor mother! I confess I should not like to be an elderly woman myself. One requires a good deal of the purring cat for that, or else of the loving grandame. I wish she would take more to little Harry. I suppose she has her suspicions about the lad's mother, and is as rigid in those matters as in her Toryism. However, I do what I can; it would be difficult to say what there is wanting to her in the way of indulgence and luxury to make up for the old niggardly life.'

And certainly Transome Court was now such a home as many women would covet. Yet even Harold's own satisfaction in the midst of its elegant comfort needed at present to be sustained by the expectation of gratified resentment. He was obviously less bright and enjoying than usual, and his mother, who watched him closely without daring to ask questions, had gathered hints and drawn inferences enough to make her feel sure that there was some storm gathering between him and Jermyn. She did not dare to ask questions, and yet she had not resisted the temptation to say something bitter about Harold's failure to get returned as a Radical, helping, with feminine self-defeat, to exclude herself more completely from any consultation by him. In this way poor women, whose power lies solely in their influence, make themselves like music out of tune, and only move men to run away.

This morning Harold had ordered his letters to be brought to him at the breakfast-table, which was not his usual practice. His mother could see that there were London business letters about which he was eager, and she found out that the letter brought by a clerk the day before was to make an appointment with Harold for Jermyn to come to Transome Court at eleven this morning. She observed Harold swallow his coffee and push away his plate with an early abstraction from the business of breakfast which was not at all after his usual manner. She herself ate nothing; her sips of tea seemed to excite her; her cheeks flushed, and her hands were cold. She was still young and ardent in her terrors; the passions of the past were living in her dread.

When Harold left the table she went into the long drawing-room, where she might relieve her restlessness by walking up and down, and catch the sound of Jermyn's entrance into Harold's room, which was close by. Here she moved to and fro amongst the rose-coloured satin of chairs and curtains - the great story of this world reduced for her to the little tale of her own existence - dull obscurity everywhere, except where the keen light fell on the narrow track of her own lot, wide only for a woman's anguish. At last she heard the expected ring and footstep, and the opening and closing door. Unable to walk about any longer, she sank into a large cushioned chair, helpless and prayerless. She was not thinking of God's anger or mercy, but of her son's. She was thinking of what might be brought, not by death, but by life.