

Chapter 35

M. Check to your queen!

N. Nay, your own king is bare,

And moving so, you give yourself checkmate.

WHEN Jermyn entered the room, Harold, who was seated at his library table examining papers, with his back towards the light and his face towards the door, moved his head coldly. Jermyn said an ungracious 'Good-morning' - as little as possible like a salutation to one who might regard himself as a patron. On the attorney's handsome face there was a black cloud of defiant determination, slightly startling to Harold, who had expected to feel that the overpowering weight of temper in the interview was on his own side. Nobody was ever prepared beforehand for this expression of Jermyn's face, which seemed as strongly contrasted with the cold impenetrableness which he preserved under the ordinary annoyances of business as with the bland radiance of his lighter moments.

Harold himself did not look amiable just then, but his anger was of the sort that seeks a vent without waiting to give a fatal blow; it was that of a nature more subtly mixed than Jermyn's - less animally forcible, less unwavering in selfishness, and with more of high-bred pride. He looked at Jermyn with increased disgust and secret wonder.

'Sit down,' he said, curtly.

Jermyn seated himself in silence, opened his greatcoat, and took some papers from a side-pocket.

'I have written to Makepeace,' said Harold, 'to tell him to take the entire management of the election expenses. So you will transmit your accounts to him.'

'Very well. I am come this morning on other business.'

'If it's about the riot and the prisoners, I have only to say that I shall enter into no plans. If I am called on, I shall say what I know about that young fellow Felix Holt. People may prove what they can about Johnson's damnable tricks, or yours either.'

'I am not come to speak about the riot. I agree with you in thinking that quite a subordinate subject.' (When Jermyn had the black cloud over his face, he never hesitated or drawled, and made no Latin quotations.)

'Be so good, then, as to open your business at once,' said Harold, in a tone of imperious indifference.

'That is precisely what I wish to do. I have here information from a London correspondent that you are about to file a bill against me in Chancery.' Jermyn, as he spoke, laid his hand on the papers before him, and looked straight at Harold.

'In that case the question for you is, how far your conduct as the family solicitor will bear investigation. But it is a question which you will consider quite apart from me.'

'Doubtless. But prior to that there is a question which we must consider together.'

The tone in which Jermyn said this gave an unpleasant shock to Harold's sense of mastery. Was it possible that he should have the weapon wrenched out of his hand?

'I shall know what to think of that,' he replied, as haughtily as ever, 'when you have stated what the question is.'

'Simply, whether you will choose to retain the family estates, or lay yourself open to be forthwith legally deprived of them.'

'I presume you refer to some underhand scheme of your own, on a par with the annuities you have drained us by in the name of Johnson,' said Harold, feeling a new movement of anger. 'If so, you had better state your scheme to my lawyers, Dymock and Halliwell.'

'No. I think you will approve of my stating in your own ear first of all, that it depends on my will whether you remain an important landed proprietor in North Loamshire, or whether you retire from the county with the remainder of the fortune you have acquired in trade.'

Jermyn paused, as if to leave time for this morsel to be tasted.

'What do you mean?' said Harold, sharply

'Not any scheme of mine; but a state of the facts, resulting from the settlement of the estate made in 1729: a state of the facts which renders your father's title and your own title to the family estates utterly worthless as soon as the true claimant is made aware of his right.'

'And you intend to inform him?'

'That depends. I am the only person who has the requisite knowledge. It rests with you to decide whether I shall use that knowledge against you; or whether I shall use it in your favour - by putting an end to the evidence that would serve to oust you in spite of your 'robust title of occupancy'.'

Jermyn paused again. He had been speaking slowly, but without the least hesitation, and with a bitter definiteness of enunciation. There was a moment or two before Harold answered, and then he said abruptly -

'I don't believe you.'

'I thought you were more shrewd,' said Jermyn, with a touch of scorn. 'I thought you understood that I had had too much experience to waste my time in telling fables to persuade a man who has put himself into the attitude of my deadly enemy.'

'Well, then, say at once what your proofs are,' said Harold, shaking in spite of himself, and getting nervous.

'I have no inclination to be lengthy. It is not more than a few weeks since I ascertained that there is in existence an heir of the Bycliffes, the old adversaries of your family. More curiously, it is only a few days ago - in fact, only since the day of the riot - that the Bycliffe claim has become valid, and that the right of remainder accrues to the heir in question.'

'And how pray?' said Harold, rising from his chair, and making a turn in the room, with his hands thrust in his pockets. Jermyn rose too, and stood near the hearth facing Harold, as he moved to and fro.

'By the death of an old fellow who got drunk, and was trampled to death in the riot. He was the last of that Thomas Transome's line, by the purchase of whose interest your family got its title to the estate. Your title died with him. It was supposed that the line had become extinct before - and on that supposition the old Bycliffes founded their claim. But I hunted up this man just about the time the last suit was closed. His death would have been of no consequence to you if there had not been a Bycliffe in existence; but I happen to know that there is, and that the fact can be legally proved.'

For a minute or two Harold did not speak, but continued to pace the room, while Jermyn kept his position, holding his hands behind him. At last Harold said, from the other end of the room, speaking in a scornful tone -

'That sounds alarming. But it is not to be proved simply by your statement.'

'Clearly. I have here a document, with a copy, which will back my statement. It is the opinion given on the case more than twenty years ago, and it bears the signature of the Attorney-General and the first conveyancer of the day.'

Jermyn took up the papers he had laid on the table, opening them slowly and coolly as he went on speaking, and as Harold advanced towards him.

'You may suppose that we spared no pains to ascertain the state of the title in the last suit against Maurice Christian Bycliffe, which threatened to be a hard run. This document is the result of a consultation; it gives an opinion which must be taken as a final authority. You may cast your eyes over that, if you please; I will wait your time. Or you may read the summing-up here,' Jermyn ended, holding out one of the papers to Harold, and pointing to a final passage.

Harold took the paper, with a slight gesture of impatience. He did not choose to obey Jermyn's indication, and confine himself to the summing-up. He ran through the document. But in truth he was too much excited really to follow the details, and was rather acting than reading, till at length he threw himself into his chair and consented to bend his attention on the passage to which Jermyn had pointed. The attorney watched him as he read and twice re-read:

To sum up ... we are of opinion that the title of the present possessors of the Transome estates can be strictly proved to rest solely upon a base fee created under the original settlement of 1729, and to be good so long only as issue exists of the tenant in tail by whom that base fee was created. We feel satisfied by the evidence that such issue exists in the person of Thomas Transome, otherwise Trounsem, of Littleshaw. But upon his decease without issue we are of opinion that the right in remainder of the Bycliffe family will arise, which right would not be barred by any statute of limitation.

When Harold's eyes were on the signatures to this document for the third time, Jermyn said -

'As it turned out, the case being closed by the death of the claimant, we had no occasion for producing Thomas Transome, who was the old fellow I tell you of. The inquiries about him set him agog, and after they were dropped he came into this neighbourhood, thinking there was something fine in store for him. Here, if you like to take it, is a memorandum about him. I repeat, that he died in the riot. The proof

is ready. And I repeat, that, to my knowledge, and mine only, there is a Bycliffe in existence; and that I know how the proof can be made out.'

Harold rose from his chair again, and again paced the room. He was not prepared with any defiance.

'And where is he - this Bycliffe?' he said at last, stopping in his walk, and facing round towards Jermyn.

'I decline to say more till you promise to suspend proceedings against me.'

Harold turned again, and looked out of the window without speaking for a moment or two. It was impossible

that there should not be a conflict within him, and at present it was a very confused one. At last he said - 'This person is in ignorance of his claim?' 'Yes.' 'Has been brought up in an inferior station?'

'Yes,' said Jermyn, keen enough to guess part of what was going on in Harold's mind. 'There is no harm in leaving him in ignorance. The question is a purely legal one. And, as I said before, the complete knowledge of the case, as one of evidence, lies exclusively with me. I can nullify the evidence, or I can make it tell with certainty against you. The choice lies with you.'

'I must have time to think of this,' said Harold, conscious of a terrible pressure.

'I can give you no time unless you promise me to suspend proceedings.'

'And then, when I ask you, you will lay the details before me?'

'Not without a thorough understanding beforehand. If I engage not to use my knowledge against you, you must engage in writing that on being satisfied by the details, you will cancel all hostile proceedings against me, and will not institute fresh ones on the strength of any occurrences now past.'

'Well, I must have time,' said Harold, more than ever inclined to thrash the attorney, but feeling bound hand and foot with knots that he was not sure he could ever unfasten.

'That is to say,' said Jermyn, with his black-browed persistence, 'you will write to suspend proceedings.'

Again Harold paused. He was more than ever exasperated, but he was threatened, mortified, and confounded by the necessity for an immediate decision between alternatives almost equally hateful to him. It was with difficulty that he could prevail on himself to speak any conclusive words. He walked as far as he could from Jermyn - to the other end of the room - then walked back to his chair and threw himself into it. At last he said, without looking at Jermyn, 'I agree - I must have time.' 'Very well. It is a bargain.'

'No further than this,' said Harold, hastily, flashing a look at Jermyn - 'no further than this, that I require time, and therefore I give it to you.'

'Of course. You require time to consider whether the pleasure of trying to ruin me - me to whom you are really indebted - is worth the loss of the Transome estates. I shall wish you good-morning.'

Harold did not speak to him or look at him again, and Jermyn walked out of the room. As he appeared outside the door and closed it behind him, Mrs Transome showed her white face at another door which opened on a level with Harold's in such a way that it was just possible for Jermyn not to see her. He availed himself of that possibility, and walked straight across the hall, where there was no servant in attendance to let him out, as if he believed that no one was looking at him who could expect recognition. He did not want to speak to Mrs Transome at present; he had nothing to ask from her, and one disagreeable interview had been enough for him this morning.

She was convinced that he had avoided her, and she was too proud to arrest him. She was as insignificant now in his eyes as in her son's. 'Men have no memories in their hearts,' she said to herself, bitterly. Turning into her sitting-room she heard the voices of Mr Transome and little Harry at play together. She would have given a great deal at this moment if her feeble husband had not always lived in dread of her temper and her tyranny, so that he might have been fond of her now. She felt herself loveless - if she was important to any one, it was only to her old waiting-woman Denner.