

Chapter 36

'Are these things then necessities?

Then let us meet them like necessities.'

SHAKESPEARE: Henry IV.

See now the virtue living in a word I

Hobson will think of swearing it was noon

When he saw Dobson at the May-day fair,

To prove poor Dobson did not rob the mail.

'Tis neighbourly to save a neighbour's neck:

What harm is lying when you mean no harm?

But say 'tis perjury, then Hobson quakes -

He'll none of perjury.

Thus words embalm

The conscience of mankind; and Roman laws

Bring still a conscience to poor Hobson's aid.

FEW men would have felt otherwise than Harold Transome felt, if, having a reversion tantamount to possession of a fine estate, carrying an association with an old name and considerable social importance, they were suddenly informed that there was a person who had a legal right to deprive them of these advantages; that person's right having never been contemplated by any one as more than a chance, and being quite unknown to himself. In ordinary cases a shorter possession than Harold's family had enjoyed was allowed by the law to constitute an indefeasible right; and if in rare and peculiar instances the law left the possessor of a long inheritance exposed to deprivation as a consequence of old obscure transactions, the moral reasons for giving legal validity to the title of long occupancy were not the less strong. Nobody would have said that Harold was bound to hunt out this alleged remainder-man and urge his rights upon him; on the contrary, all the world would have laughed at such conduct, and he would have been thought an interesting patient for a mad-doctor. The unconscious remainder-man was probably much better off left in his original station: Harold would not have been called upon to consider

his existence, if it had not been presented to him in the shape of a threat from one who had power to execute the threat.

In fact, what he would have done had the circumstances been different was much clearer than what he should choose to do or feel himself compelled to do in the actual crisis. He would not have been disgraced if, on a valid claim being urged, he had got his lawyers to fight it out for him on the chance of eluding the claim by some adroit technical management. Nobody off the stage could be sentimental about these things, or pretend to shed tears of joy because an estate was handed over from a gentleman to a mendicant sailor with a wooden leg. And this chance remainder-man was perhaps some such specimen of inheritance as the drunken fellow killed in the riot. All the world would think the actual Transomes in the right to contest any adverse claim to the utmost. But then - it was not certain that they would win in the contest; and not winning, they would incur other loss besides that of the estate. There had been a little too much of such loss already.

But why, if it were not wrong to contest the claim, should he feel the most uncomfortable scruples about robbing the claim of its sting by getting rid of its evidence? It was a mortal disappointment - it was a sacrifice of indemnification - to abstain from punishing Jermyn. But even if he brought his mind to contemplate that as the wiser course, he still shrank from what looked like complicity with Jermyn; he still shrank from the secret nullification of a just legal claim. If he had only known the details, if he had known who this alleged heir was, he might have seen his way to some course that would not have grated on his sense of honour and dignity. But Jermyn had been too acute to let Harold know this: he had even carefully kept to the masculine pronoun. And he believed that there was no one besides himself who would or could make Harold any wiser. He went home persuaded that between this interview and the next which they would have together, Harold would be left to an inward debate, founded entirely on the information he himself had given. And he had not much doubt that the result would be what he desired. Harold was no fool: there were many good things he liked better in life than an irrational vindictiveness.

And it did happen that, after writing to London in fulfilment of his pledge, Harold spent many hours over that inward debate, which was not very different from what Jermyn imagined. He took it everywhere with him, on foot and on horseback, and it was his companion through a great deal of the night. His nature was not of a kind given to internal conflict, and he had never before been long undecided and puzzled. This unaccustomed state of mind was so painfully irksome to him - he rebelled so impatiently against the oppression of circumstances in which his quick temperament and habitual decision

could not help him - that it added tenfold to his hatred of Jermyn, who was the cause of it. And thus, as the temptation to avoid all risk of losing the estate grew and grew till scruples looked minute by the side of it, the difficulty of bringing himself to make a compact with Jermyn seemed more and more insurmountable.

But we have seen that the attorney was much too confident in his calculations. And while Harold was being galled by his subjection to Jermyn's knowledge, independent information was on its way to him. The messenger was Christian, who, after as complete a survey of probabilities as he was capable of, had come to the conclusion that the most profitable investment he could make of his peculiar experience and testimony in relation to Bycliffe and Bycliffe's daughter, was to place them at the disposal of Harold Transome. He was afraid of Jermyn; he utterly distrusted Johnson; but he thought he was secure in relying on Harold Transome's care for his own interest; and he preferred above all issues the prospect of forthwith leaving the country with a sum that at least for a good while would put him at his ease.

When, only three mornings after the interview with Jermyn, Dominic opened the door of Harold's sitting-room, and said that 'Meester Chreestian', Mr Philip Debarry's courier and an acquaintance of his own at Naples, requested to be admitted on business of importance, Harold's immediate thought was that the business referred to the so-called political affairs which were just now his chief association with the name of Debarry, though it seemed an oddness requiring explanation that a servant should be personally an intermediary. He assented, expecting something rather disagreeable than otherwise.

Christian wore this morning those perfect manners of a subordinate who is not servile, which he always adopted towards his unquestionable superiors. Mr Debarry, who preferred having some one about him with as little resemblance as possible to a regular servant, had a singular liking for the adroit, quiet-mannered Christian, and would have been amazed to see the insolent assumption he was capable of in the presence of people like Lyon, who were of no account in society. Christian had that sort of cleverness which is said to 'know the world' - that is to say, he knew the price-current of most things.

Aware that he was looked at as a messenger while he remained standing near the door with his hat in his hand, he said, with respectful ease -

'You will probably be surprised, sir, at my coming to speak to you on my own account; and, in fact, I could not have thought of doing so if

my business did not happen to be something of more importance to you than to any one else.'

'You don't come from Mr Debarry, then?' said Harold, with some surprise.

'No, sir. My business is a secret; and, if you please, must remain so.'

'Is it a pledge you are demanding from me?' said Harold, rather suspiciously, having no ground for confidence in a man of Christian's position.

'Yes, sir; I am obliged to ask no less than that you will pledge yourself not to take Mr Jermyn into confidence concerning what passes between us.'

'With all my heart,' said Harold, something like a gleam passing over his face. His circulation had become more rapid. 'But what have you had to do with Jermyn?'

'He has not mentioned me to you then - has he, sir?'

'No; certainly not - never.'

Christian thought, 'Aha, Mr Jermyn! you are keeping the secret well are you?' He said, aloud -

'Then Mr Jermyn has never mentioned to you, sir, what I believe he is aware of - that there is danger of a new suit being raised against you on the part of a Bycliffe, to get the estate?'

'Aha !' said Harold, starting up, and placing himself with his back against the mantelpiece. He was electrified by surprise at the quarter from which this information was coming. Any fresh alarm was counteracted by the flashing thought that he might be enabled to act independently of Jermyn; and in the rush of feelings he could utter no more than an interjection. Christian concluded that Harold had had no previous hint.

'It is this fact, sir, that I came to tell you of '

'From some other motive than kindness to me, I presume,' said Harold, with a slight approach to a smile.

'Certainly,' said Christian, as quietly as if he had been stating yesterday's weather. 'I should not have the folly to use any affectation with you, Mr Transome. I lost considerable property early in life, and am now in the receipt of a salary simply. In the affair I have just

mentioned to you I can give evidence which will turn the scale against you. I have no wish to do so, if you will make it worth my while to leave the country.'

Harold listened as if he had been a legendary hero, selected for peculiar solicitation by the Evil One. Here was temptation in a more alluring form than before, because it was sweetened by the prospect of eluding Jermyn. But the desire to gain time served all the purposes of caution and resistance, and his indifference to the speaker in this case helped him to preserve perfect self-command.

'You are aware,' he said, coolly, 'that silence is not a commodity worth purchasing unless it is loaded. There are many persons, I dare say, who would like me to pay their travelling expenses for them. But they might hardly be able to show me that it was worth my while.'

'You wish me to state what I know?'

'Well, that is a necessary preliminary to any further conversation.'

'I think you will see, Mr Transome, that, as a matter of justice, the knowledge I can give is worth something, quite apart from my future appearance or non-appearance as a witness. I must take care of my own interest, and if anything should hinder you from choosing to satisfy me for taking an essential witness out of the way, I must at least be paid for bringing you the information.'

'Can you tell me who and where this Bycliffe is?'

'I can.'

'- And give me a notion of the whole affair?'

'Yes: I have talked to a lawyer - not Jermyn - who is at the bottom of the law in the affair.'

'You must not count on any wish of mine to suppress evidence or remove a witness. But name your price for the information.'

'In that case I must be paid the higher for my information. Say, two thousand pounds.'

'Two thousand devils!' burst out Harold, throwing himself into his chair again, and turning his shoulder towards Christian. New thoughts crowded upon him. 'This fellow may want to decamp for some reason or other,' he said to himself. 'More people besides Jermyn know about his evidence, it seems. The whole thing may look black for

me if it comes out. I shall be believed to have bribed him to run away, whether or not.' Thus the outside conscience came in aid of the inner.

'I will not give you one sixpence for your information,' he said, resolutely, 'until time has made it clear that you do not intend to decamp, but will be forthcoming when you are called for. On those terms I have no objection to give you a note, specifying that after the fulfilment of that condition - that is, after the occurrence of a suit, or the understanding that no suit is to occur - I will pay you a certain sum in consideration of the information you now give me!'

Christian felt himself caught in a vice. In the first instance he had counted confidently on Harold's ready seizure of his offer to disappear, and after some words had seemed to cast a doubt on this presupposition, he had inwardly determined to go away, whether Harold wished it or not, if he could get a sufficient sum. He did not reply immediately, and Harold waited in silence, inwardly anxious to know what Christian could tell, but with a vision at present so far cleared that he was determined not to risk incurring the imputation of having anything to do with scoundrelism. We are very much indebted to such a linking of events as makes a doubtful action look wrong.

Christian was reflecting that if he stayed, and faced some possible inconveniences of being known publicly as Henry Scaddon for the sake of what he might get from Esther, it would at least be wise to be certain of some money from Harold Transome, since he turned out to be of so peculiar a disposition as to insist on a punctilious honesty to his own disadvantage. Did he think of making a bargain with the other side? If so, he might be content to wait for the knowledge till it came in some other way. Christian was beginning to be afraid lest he should get nothing by this clever move of coming to Transome Court. At last he said -

'I think, sir, two thousand would not be an unreasonable sum, on those conditions.'

'I will not give two thousand.'

'Allow me to say, sir, you must consider that there is no one whose interest it is to tell you as much as I shall, even if they could; since Mr Jermyn, who knows it, has not thought fit to tell you. There may be use you don't think of in getting the information at once.' 'Well?'

'I think a gentleman should act liberally under such circumstances.'

'So I will.'

I could not take less than a thousand pounds. It really would not be worth my while. If Mr Jermyn knew I gave you the information, he would endeavour to injure me.'

'I will give you a thousand,' said Harold, immediately, for Christian had unconsciously touched a sure spring. 'At least, I'll give you a note to the effect I spoke of.'

He wrote as he had promised, and gave the paper to Christian.

'Now, don't be circuitous,' said Harold. 'You seem to have a business-like gift of speech Who and where is this Bycliffe?'

'You will be surprised to hear, sir, that she is supposed to be the daughter of the old preacher, Lyon, in Malthouse.'

'Good God! How can that be?' said Harold. At once, the first occasion on which he had seen Esther rose in his memory - the little dark parlour - the graceful girl in blue, with the surprisingly distinguished manners and appearance.

'In this way. Old Lyon, by some strange means or other, married Bycliffe's widow when this girl was a baby. And the preacher didn't want the girl to know that he was not her real father: he told me that himself. But she is the image of Bycliffe, whom I knew well - an uncommonly fine woman - steps like a queen.'

I have seen her,' said Harold, more than ever glad to have purchased this knowledge. 'But now, go on.'

Christian proceeded to tell all he knew, including his conversation with Jermyn, except so far as it had an unpleasant relation to himself.

'Then,' said Harold, as the details seemed to have come to a close, 'you believe that Miss Lyon and her supposed father are at present unaware of the claims that might be urged for her on the strength of her birth?'

'I believe so. But I need not tell you that where the lawyers are on the scent you can never be sure of anything long together. I must remind you, sir, that you have promised to protect me from Mr Jermyn by keeping my confidence.'

'Never fear. Depend upon it, I shall betray nothing to Mr Jermyn.'

Christian was dismissed with a 'good-morning'; and while he cultivated some friendly reminiscences with Dominic, Harold sat

chewing the cud of his new knowledge, and finding it not altogether so bitter as he had expected.

From the first, after his interview with Jermyn, the recoil of Harold's mind from the idea of strangling a legal right threw him on the alternative of attempting a compromise. Some middle course might be possible, which would be a less evil than a costly lawsuit, or than the total renunciation of the estates. And now he had learned that the new claimant was a woman - a young woman, brought up under circumstances that would make the fourth of the Transome property seem to her an immense fortune. Both the sex and the social condition were of the sort that lies open to many softening influences. And having seen Esther, it was inevitable that, amongst the various issues, agreeable and disagreeable, depicted by Harold's imagination, there should present itself a possibility that would unite the two claims - his own, which he felt to be the rational, and Esther's, which apparently was the legal claim.

Harold, as he had constantly said to his mother, was 'not a marrying man;' he did not contemplate bringing a wife to Transome Court for many years to come, if at all. Having little Harry as an heir, he preferred freedom. Western women were not to his taste: they showed a transition from the feebly animal to the thinking being, which was simply troublesome. Harold preferred a slow-witted large-eyed woman, silent and affectionate, with a load of black hair weighing much more heavily than her brains. He had seen no such woman in England, except one whom he had brought with him from the East.

Therefore Harold did not care to be married until or unless some surprising chance presented itself; and now that such a chance had occurred to suggest marriage to him, he would not admit to himself that he contemplated marrying Esther as a plan; he was only obliged to see that such an issue was not inconceivable. He was not going to take any step expressly directed towards that end: what he had made up his mind to, as the comse most satisfactory to his nature under present urgencies, was to behave to Esther with a frank gentlemanliness, which must win her good-will, and incline her to save his family interest as much as possible. He was helped to this determination by the pleasure of frustrating Jermyn's contrivance to shield himself from punishment; and his most distinct and cheering prospect was, that within a very short space of time he should not only have effected a satisfactory compromise with Esther, but should have made Jermyn aware, by a very disagreeable form of announcement, that Harold Transome was no longer afraid of him. Jermyn should bite the dust.

At the end of these meditations he felt satisfied with himself and light-hearted. He had rejected two dishonest propositions, and he was going

to do something that seemed eminently graceful. But he needed his mother's assistance, and it was necessary that he should both confide in her and persuade her.

Within two hours after Christian left him, Harold begged his mother to come into his private room, and there he told her the strange and startling story, omitting, however, any particulars which would involve the identification of Christian as his informant. Harold felt that his engagement demanded this reticence; and he told his mother that he was bound to conceal the source of that knowledge which he had got independently of Jermyn.

Mrs Transome said little in the course of the story: she made no exclamations, but she listened with close attention, and asked a few questions so much to the point as to surprise Harold. When he showed her the copy of the legal opinion which Jermyn had left with him, she said she knew it very well; she had a copy herself. The particulars of that last lawsuit were too well engraven on her mind: it happened at a time when there was no one to supersede her, and she was the virtual head of the family affairs. She was prepared to understand how the estate might be in danger; but nothing had prepared her for the strange details - for the way in which the new claimant had been reared and brought within the range of converging motives that had led to this revelation, least of all for the part Jermyn had come to play in the revelation. Mrs Transome saw these things through the medium of certain dominant emotions that made them seem like a long-ripening retribution. Harold perceived that she was painfully agitated, that she trembled, and that her white lips would not readily lend themselves to speech. And this was hardly more than he expected. He had not liked the revelation himself when it had first come to him.

But he did not guess what it was in his narrative which had most pierced his mother. It was something that made the threat about the estate only a secondary alarm. Now, for the first time, she heard of the intended proceedings against Jermyn. Harold had not chosen to speak of them before; but having at last called his mother into consultation, there was nothing in his mind to hinder him from speaking without reserve of his determination to visit on the attorney his shameful maladministration of the family affairs.

Harold went through the whole narrative - of what he called Jermyn's scheme to catch him in a vice, and his power of triumphantly frustrating that scheme - in his usual rapid way, speaking with a final decisiveness of tone: and his mother felt that if she urged any counter-consideration at all, she could only do so when he had no more to say.

'Now, what I want you to do, mother, if you can see this matter as I see it,' Harold said in conclusion, 'is to go with me to call on this girl in Malthouse Yard. I will open the affair to her; it appears she is not likely to have been informed yet; and you will invite her to visit you here at once, that all scandal, all hatching of law-mischief, may be avoided, and the thing may be brought to an amicable conclusion.'

'It seems almost incredible - extraordinary - a girl in her position,' said Mrs Transome, with difficulty. It would have seemed the bitterest humiliating penance if another sort of suffering had left any room in her heart.

'I assure you she is a lady; I saw her when I was canvassing, and was amazed at the time. You will be quite struck with her. It is no indignity for you to invite her.'

'Oh,' said Mrs Transome, with low-toned bitterness, 'I must put up with all things as they are determined for me. When shall we go?'

'Well,' said Harold, looking at his watch, 'it is hardly two yet. We could really go to-day, when you have lunched. It is better to lose no time. I'll order the carriage.'

'Stay,' said Mrs Transome, making a desperate effort. 'There is plenty of time. I shall not lunch. I have a word to say.'

Harold withdrew his hand from the bell, and leaned against the mantelpiece to listen.

'You see I comply with your wish at once, Harold?'

'Yes, mother, I'm much obliged to you for making no difficulties.'

'You ought to listen to me in return.'

'Pray go on,' said Harold, expecting to be annoyed.

'What is the good of having these Chancery proceedings against Jermyn?'

'Good? This good; that fellow has burdened the estate with annuities and mortgages to the extent of three thousand a-year; and the bulk of them, I am certain, he holds himself under the name of another man. And the advances this yearly interest represents, have not been much more than twenty thousand. Of course he has hoodwinked you, and my father never gave attention to these things. He has been up to all sorts of devil's work with the deeds; he didn't count on my coming back from Smyrna to fill poor Durfey's place. He shall feel the

difference. And the good will be, that I shall save almost all the annuities for the rest of my father's life, which may be ten years or more, and I shall get back some of the money, and I shall punish a scoundrel. That is the good.' 'He will be ruined.' 'That's what I intend,' said Harold, sharply.

'He exerted himself a great deal for us in the old suits: every one said he had wonderful zeal and ability,' said Mrs Transome, getting courage and warmth as she went on. Her temper was rising.

'What he did, he did for his own sake, you may depend on that,' said Harold, with a scornful laugh.

'There were very painful things in that last suit. You seem anxious, about this young woman, to avoid all further scandal and contests in the family. Why don't you wish to do it in this case? Jermyn might be willing to arrange things amicably - to make restitution as far as he can - if he has done anything wrong.'

'I will arrange nothing amicably with him,' said Harold, decisively. 'If he has ever done anything scandalous as our agent, let him bear the infamy. And the right way to throw the infamy on him is to show the world that he has robbed us, and that I mean to punish him. Why do you wish to shield such a fellow, mother? It has been chiefly through him that you have had to lead such a thrifty miserable life - you who used to make as brilliant a figure as a woman need wish.'

Mrs Transome's rising temper was turned into a horrible sensation, as painful as a sudden concussion from something hard and immovable when we have struck out with our fist, intending to hit something warm, soft, and breathing, like ourselves. Poor Mrs Transome's strokes were sent jarring back on her by a hard unalterable past. She did not speak in answer to Harold, but rose from the chair as if she gave up the debate.

'Women are frightened at everything, I know,' said Harold, kindly, feeling that he had been a little harsh after his mother's compliance. 'And you have been used for so many years to think Jermyn a law of nature. Come, mother,' he went on, looking at her gently, and resting his hands on her shoulders, 'look cheerful. We shall get through all these difficulties. And this girl - I daresay she will be quite an interesting visitor for you. You have not had any young girl about you for a long while. Who knows? she may fall deeply in love with me, and I may be obliged to marry her.'

He spoke laughingly, only thinking how he could make his mother smile. But she looked at him seriously and said, 'Do you mean that, Harold?'

'Am I not capable of making a conquest? Not too fat yet - a handsome, well-rounded youth of thirty-four?'

She was forced to look straight at the beaming face with its rich dark colour, just bent a little over her. Why could she not be happy in this son whose future she had once dreamed of, and who had been as fortunate as she had ever hoped? The tears came, not plenteously, but making her dark eyes as large and bright as youth had once made them without tears.

'There, there!' said Harold, coaxingly. 'Don't be afraid. You shall not have a daughter-in-law unless she is a pearl. Now we will get ready to go.'

In half an hour from that time Mrs Transome came down, looking majestic in sables and velvet, ready to call on 'the girl in Malthouse Yard'. She had composed herself to go through this task. She saw there was nothing better to be done. After the resolutions Harold had taken, some sort of compromise with this oddly-placed heiress was the result most to be hoped for; if the compromise turned out to be a marriage - well, she had no reason to care much: she was already powerless. It remained to be seen what this girl was.

The carriage was to be driven round the back way, to avoid too much observation. But the late election affairs might account for Mr Lyon's receiving a visit from the unsuccessful Radical candidate.