

Chapter 37

'I also could speak as ye do; if your soul were in my soul's stead, I could heap up words against you, and shake mine head at you.' - Book of Job.

IN the interval since Esther parted with Felix Holt on the day of the riot, she had gone through so much emotion, and had already had so strong a shock of surprise, that she was prepared to receive any new incident of an unwonted kind with comparative equanimity.

When Mr Lyon had got home again from his preaching excursion, Felix was already on his way to Loamford Jail. The little minister was terribly shaken by the news. He saw no clear explanation of Felix Holt's conduct; for the statements Esther had heard were so conflicting that she had not been able to gather distinctly what had come out in the examination by the magistrates. But Mr Lyon felt confident that Felix was innocent of any wish to abet a riot or the infliction of injuries; what he chiefly feared was that in the fatal encounter with Tucker he had been moved by a rash temper, not sufficiently guarded against by a prayerful and humble spirit.

'My poor young friend is being taught with mysterious severity the evil of a too confident self-reliance,' he said to Esther, as they sat opposite to each other, listening and speaking sadly.

'You will go and see him, father?'

'Verily will I. But I must straightway go and see that poor afflicted woman, whose soul is doubtless whirled about in this trouble like a shapeless and unstable thing driven by divided winds.' Mr Lyon rose and took his hat hastily, ready to walk out, with his greatcoat flying open and exposing his small person to the keen air.

'Stay, father, pray, till you have had some food,' said Esther, putting her hand on his arm. 'You look quite weary and shattered.'

'Child, I cannot stay. I can neither eat bread nor drink water till I have learned more about this young man's deeds, what can be proved and what cannot be proved against him. I fear he has none to stand by him in this town, for even by the friends of our church I have been oft times rebuked because he seemed dear to me. But, Esther, my beloved child -'

Here Mr Lyon grasped her arm, and seemed in the need of speech to forget his previous haste. 'I bear in mind this: the Lord knoweth them that are His; but we - we are left to judge by uncertain signs, that so we may learn to exercise hope and faith towards one another; and in

this uncertainty I cling with awful hope to those whom the world loves not because their conscience, albeit mistakenly, is at war with the habits of the world. Our great faith, my Esther, is the faith of martyrs: I will not lightly turn away from any man who endures harshness because he will not lie; nay, though I would not wantonly grasp at ease of mind through an arbitrary choice of doctrine, I cannot but believe that the merits of the divine sacrifice are wider than our utmost charity. I once believed otherwise - but not now, not now.'

The minister paused, and seemed to be abstractedly gazing at some memory: he was always liable to be snatched away by thoughts from the pursuit of a purpose which had seemed pressing. Esther seized the opportunity and prevailed on him to fortify himself with some of Lyddy's porridge before he went out on his tiring task of seeking definite trustworthy knowledge from the lips of various witnesses, beginning with that feminine darkener of counsel, poor Mrs Holt.

She, regarding all her trouble about Felix in the light of a fulfilment of her own prophecies, treated the sad history with a preference for edification above accuracy, and for mystery above relevance, worthy of a commentator on the Apocalypse. She insisted chiefly, not on the important facts that Felix had sat at his work till after eleven, like a deaf man, had rushed out in surprise and alarm, had come back to report with satisfaction that things were quiet, and had asked her to set by his dinner for him - facts which would tell as evidence that Felix was disconnected with any project of disturbances, and was averse to them. These things came out incidentally in her long plaint to the minister - but what Mrs Holt felt it essential to state was, that long before Michaelmas was turned, sitting in her chair, she had said to Felix that there would be a judgment on him for being so certain sure about the pills and the elixir.

'And now, Mr Lyon,' said the poor woman, who had dressed herself in a gown previously cast off, a front all out of curl, and a cap with no starch in it, while she held little coughing Job on her knee, - 'and now you see - my words have come true sooner than I thought they would. Felix may contradict me if he will; but there he is in prison, and here am I, with nothing in the world to bless myself with but half-a-crown a-week as I've saved by my own scraping and this house I've got to pay rent for. It's not me has done wrong. Mr Lyon; there's nobody can say it of me - not the orphin child on my knee is more innocent o' riot and murder and anything else as is bad. But when you've got a son so masterful and stopping medicines as providence has sent, and his betters have been taking up and down the country since before he was a baby, it's o' no use being good here below. But he was a baby, Mr Lyon, and I gave him the breast,' - here poor Mrs Holt's motherly love overcame her expository eagerness, and she fell more and more to crying as she spoke - 'And to think there's folks saying now as he'll be

transported, and his hair shaved off, and the treadmill, and everything. O dear!

As Mrs Holt broke off into sobbing, little Job also, who had got a confused yet profound sense of sorrow, and of Felix being hurt and gone away, set up a little wail of wondering misery.

'Nay, Mistress Holt,' said the minister soothingly, 'enlarge not your grief by more than warrantable grounds. I have good hope that my young friend your son will be delivered from any severe consequences beyond the death of the man Tucker, which I fear will ever be a sore burthen on his memory. I feel confident that a jury of his countrymen will discern between misfortune or it may be misjudgment, and an evil will, and that he will be acquitted of any grave offence.'

'He never stole anything in his life, Mr Lyon,' said Mrs Holt, reviving. 'Nobody can throw it in my face as my son ran away with money like the young man at the bank - though he looked most respectable, and far different on a Sunday to what Felix ever did. And I know it's very hard fighting with constables; but they say Tucker's wife'll be a deal better off than she was before, for the great folks'll pension her, and she'll be put on all the charities, and her children at the Free School, and everything. Your trouble's easy borne when everybody gives it a lift for you; and if judge and jury wants to do right by Felix, they'll think of his poor mother, with the bread took out of her mouth, all but half-a-crown a-week and furniture - which, to be sure, is most excellent, and of my own buying - and got to keep this orphin child as Felix himself brought on me. And I might send him back to his old grandfather on parish pay, but I'm not that woman, Mr Lyon; I've a tender heart. And here's his little feet and toes, like marbil; do but look' - here Mrs Holt drew off Job's sock and shoe, and showed a well-washed little foot - 'and you'll perhaps say I might take a lodger; but it's easy talking; it isn't everybody at a loose-end wants a parlour and a bedroom; and if anything bad happens to Felix, I may as well go and sit in the parish pound, and nobody to buy me out; for it's beyond everything how the church members find fault with my son. But I think they might leave his mother to find fault; for queer and masterful he might be, and flying in the face of the very Scripture about the physic, but he was most clever beyond anything - that I will say - and was his own father's lawful child, and me his mother, that was Mary Wall thirty years before ever I married his father.' Here Mrs Holt's feelings again became too much for her, but she struggled on to say, sobbingly, 'And if they're to transport him, I should like to go to the prison and take the orphin child; for he was most fond of having him on his lap, and said he'd never marry; and there was One above overheard him, for he's been took at his word.'

Mr Lyon listened with low groans, and then tried to comfort her by saying that he would himself go to Loamford as soon as possible, and would give his soul no rest till he had done all he could do for Felix.

On one point Mrs Holt's plaint tallied with his own forebodings, and he found them verified: the state of feeling in Treby among the Liberal dissenting flock was unfavourable to Felix. None who had observed his conduct from the windows saw anything tending to excuse him, and his own account of his motives, given on his examination, was spoken of with head-shaking; if it had not been for his habit of always thinking himself wiser than other people, he would never have entertained such a wild scheme. He had set himself up for something extraordinary, and had spoken ill of respectable tradespeople. He had put a stop to the making of saleable drugs, contrary to the nature of buying and selling, and to a due reliance on what providence might effect in the human inside through the instrumentality of remedies unsuitable to the stomach, looked at in a merely secular light; and the result was what might have been expected. He had brought his mother to poverty, and himself into trouble. And what for? He had done no good to 'the cause'; if he had fought about churchrates, or had been worsted in some struggle in which he was distinctly the champion of Dissent and Liberalism, his case would have been one for gold, silver, and copper subscriptions, in order to procure the best defence; sermons might have been preached on him, and his name might have floated on flags from Newcastle to Dorchester. But there seemed to be no edification in what had befallen Felix. The riot at Treby, 'turn it which way you would,' as Mr Muscat observed, was no great credit to Liberalism; and what Mr Lyon had to testify as to Felix Holt's conduct in the matter of the Sproxton men, only made it clear that the defence of Felix was the accusation of his party. The whole affair, Mr Nuttwood said, was dark and inscrutable, and seemed not to be one in which the interference of God's servants would tend to give the glory where the glory was due. That a candidate for whom the richer church members had all voted should have his name associated with the encouragement of drunkenness, riot, and plunder, was an occasion for the enemy to blaspheme; and it was not clear how the enemy's mouth would be stopped by exertions in favour of a rash young man, whose interference had made things worse instead of better. Mr Lyon was warned lest his human partialities should blind him to the interests of truth; it was God's cause that was endangered in this matter.

The little minister's soul was bruised; he himself was keenly alive to the complication of public and private regards in this affair, and suffered a good deal at the thought of Tory triumph in the demonstration that, excepting the attack on the Seven Stars, which called itself a Whig house, all damage to property had been borne by Tories. He cared intensely for his opinions, and would have liked

events to speak for them in a sort of picture-writing that everybody could understand. The enthusiasms of the world are not to be stimulated by a commentary in small and subtle characters which alone can tell the whole truth; and the picture-writing in Felix Holt's troubles was of an entirely puzzling kind: if he were a martyr, neither side wanted to claim him. Yet the minister, as we have seen, found in his Christian faith a reason for clinging the more to one who had not a large party to back him. That little man's heart was heroic: he was not one of those Liberals who make their anxiety for 'the cause' of Liberalism a plea for cowardly desertion.

Besides himself, he believed there was no one who could bear testimony to the remonstrances of Felix concerning the treating of the Sproxton men, except Jermyn, Johnson, and Harold Transome. Though he had the vaguest idea of what could be done in the case, he fixed his mind on the probability that Mr Transome would be moved to the utmost exertion, if only as an atonement; but he dared not take any step until he had consulted Felix, who he foresaw was likely to have a very strong determination as to the help he would accept or not accept.

This last expectation was fulfilled. Mr Lyon returned to Esther, after his days journey to Loamford and back, with less of trouble and perplexity in his mind: he had at least got a definite course marked out, to which he must resign himself. Felix had declared that he would receive no aid from Harold Transome, except the aid he might give as an honest witness. There was nothing to be done for him but what was perfectly simple and direct. Even if the pleading of counsel had been permitted (and at that time it was not) on behalf of a prisoner on trial for felony, Felix would have declined it: he would in any case have spoken in his own defence. He had a perfectly simple account to give, and needed not to avail himself of any legal adroitness. He consented to accept the services of a respectable solicitor in Loamford, who offered to conduct his case without any fees. The work was plain and easy, Felix said. The only witnesses who had to be hunted up at all were some who could testify that he had tried to take the crowd down Hobb's Lane, and that they had gone to the Manor in spite of him.

'Then he is not so much cast down as you feared, father?' said Esther.

'No, child; albeit he is pale and much shaken for one so stalwart. He hath no grief, he says, save for the poor man Tucker, and for his mother; otherwise his heart is without a burthen. We discoursed greatly on the sad effect of all this for his mother, and on the perplexed condition of human things, whereby even right action seems to bring evil consequences, if we have respect only to our own brief

lives, and not to that larger rule whereby we are stewards of the eternal dealings, and not contrivers of our own success.'

'Did he say nothing about me, father?' said Esther, trembling a little, but unable to repress her egoism.

'Yea; he asked if you were well, and sent his affectionate regards. Nay, he bade me say something which appears to refer to your discourse together when I was not present. 'Tell her,' he said, 'whatever they sentence me to, she knows they can't rob me of my vocation. With poverty for my bride, and preaching and pedagogy for my business, I am sure of a handsome establishment.' He laughed - doubtless bearing in mind some playfulness of thine.'

Mr Lyon seemed to be looking at Esther as he smiled, but she was not near enough for him to discern the expression of her face. Just then it seemed made for melancholy rather than for playfulness. Hers was not a childish beauty; and when the sparkle of mischief, wit, and vanity was out of her eyes, and the large look of abstracted sorrow was there, you would have been surprised by a certain grandeur which the smiles had hidden. That changing face was the perfect symbol of her mixed susceptible nature, in which battle was inevitable, and the side of victory uncertain.

She began to look on all that had passed between herself and Felix as something not buried, but embalmed and kept as a relic in a private sanctuary. The very entireness of her preoccupation about him, the perpetual repetition in her memory of all that had passed between them, tended to produce this effect. She lived with him in the past; in the future she seemed shut out from him. He was an influence above her life, rather than a part of it; some time or other, perhaps, he would be to her as if he belonged to the solemn admonishing skies, checking her self-satisfied pettiness with the suggestion of a wider life.

But not yet - not while her trouble was so fresh. For it was still her trouble, and not Felix Holt's. Perhaps it was a subtraction from his power over her, that she could never think of him with pity, because he always seemed to her too great and strong to be pitied: he wanted nothing. He evaded calamity by choosing privation. The best part of a woman's love is worship; but it is hard to her to be sent away with her precious spikenard rejected, and her long tresses too, that were let fall ready to soothe the wearied feet.

While Esther was carrying these things in her heart, the January days were beginning to pass by with their wonted wintry monotony, except that there was rather more of good cheer than usual remaining from the feast of Twelfth Night among the triumphant Tories, and rather more scandal than usual excited among the mortified Dissenters by

the wilfulness of their minister. He had actually mentioned Felix Holt by name in his evening sermon, and offered up a petition for him in the evening prayer, also by name - not as 'a young Ishmaelite, whom we would fain see brought back from the lawless life of the desert, and seated in the same fold even with the sons of Judah and of Benjamin', a suitable periphrasis which Brother Kemp threw off without any effort, and with all the felicity of a suggestive critic. Poor Mrs Holt, indeed, even in the midst of her grief, experienced a proud satisfaction, that though not a church member she was now an object of congregational remark and ministerial allusion. Feeling herself a spotless character standing out in relief on a dark background of affliction, and a practical contradiction to that extreme doctrine of human depravity which she had never 'given in to', she was naturally gratified and soothed by a notice which must be a recognition. But more influential hearers were of opinion, that in a man who had so many long sentences at command as Mr Lyon, so many parentheses and modifying clauses, this naked use of a non-scriptural Treby name in an address to the Almighty was all the more offensive. In a low unlettered local preacher of the Wesleyan persuasion such things might pass; but a certain style in prayer was demanded from Independents,

the most educated body in the ranks of orthodox Dissent. To Mr Lyon such notions seemed painfully perverse, and the next morning he was declaring to Esther his resolution stoutly to withstand them, and to count nothing common or unclean on which a blessing could be asked, when the tenor of his thoughts was completely changed by a great shock of surprise which made both himself and Esther sit looking at each other in speechless amazement.

The cause was a letter brought by a special messenger from Duffield; a heavy letter addressed to Esther in a business-like manner, quite unexampled in her correspondence. And the contents of the letter were more startling than its exterior. It began:

Madam, - Herewith we send you a brief abstract of evidence which has come within our knowledge, that the right of remainder whereby the lineal issue of Edward Bycliffe can claim possession of the estates of which the entail was settled by John Justus Transome in 1729, now first accrues to you as the sole and lawful issue of Maurice Christian Bycliffe. We are confident of success in the prosecution of this claim, which will result to you in the possession of estates to the value, at the lowest, of from five to six thousand per annum -

It was at this point that Esther, who was reading aloud, let her hand fall with the letter on her lap, and with a pal pitating heart looked at her father, who looked again, in silence that lasted for two or three

minutes. A certain terror was upon them both, though the thoughts that laid that weight on the tongue of each were different.

It was Mr Lyon who spoke first.

'This, then, is what the man named Christian referred to. I distrusted him, yet it seems he spoke truly.'

'But,' said Esther, whose imagination ran necessarily to those conditions of wealth which she could best appreciate, 'do they mean that the Transomes would be turned out of Transome Court, and that I should go and live there? It seems quite an impossible thing.'

'Nay, child, I know not. I am ignorant in these things, and the thought of worldly grandeur for you hath more of terror than of gladness for me. Nevertheless we must duly weigh all things, not considering aught that befalls us as a bare event, but rather as an occasion for faithful stewardship. Let us go to my study and consider this writing further.'

How this announcement, which to Esther seemed as unprepared as if it had fallen from the skies, came to be made to her by solicitors other than Batt & Cowley, the old lawyers of the Bycliffes, was by a sequence as natural, that is to say, as legally-natural, as any in the world. The secret worker of the apparent wonder was Mr Johnson, who, on the very day when he wrote to give his patron, Mr Jermyn, the serious warning that a bill was likely to be filed in Chancery against him, had carried forward with added zeal the business already commenced, of arranging with another firm his share in the profits likely to result from the prosecution of Esther Bycliffe's claim.

Jermyn's star was certainly going down, and Johnson did not feel an unmitigated grief. Beyond some troublesome declarations as to his actual share in transactions in which his name had been used, Johnson saw nothing formidable in prospect for himself. He was not going to be ruined, though Jermyn probably was: he was not a highflyer, but a mere climbing-bird, who could hold on and get his livelihood just as well if his wings were clipped a little. And, in the meantime, here was something to be gained in this Bycliffe business, which, it was not unpleasant to think, was a nut that Jermyn had intended to keep for his own particular cracking, and which would be rather a severe astonishment to Mr Harold Transome, whose manners towards respectable agents were such as leave a smart in a man of spirit.

Under the stimulus of small many-mixed motives like these, a great deal of business has been done in the world by well-clad and, in 1833, clean-shaven men, whose names are on charity-lists, and who do not

know that they are base. Mr Johnson's character was not much more exceptional than his double chin.

No system, religious or political, I believe, has laid it down as a principle that all men are alike virtuous, or even that all the people rated for œ80 houses are an honour to their species.