

Chapter 42

'Thou sayst it, and not I; for thou hast done

The ugly deed that made these ugly words.'

SOPHOCLES: Electra.

'Yea, it becomes a man

To cherish memory, where he had delight.

For kindness is the natural birth of kindness.

Whose soul records not the great debt of joy,

Is stamped for ever an ignoble man.'

SOPHOCLES: Ajax.

IT SO happened that, on the morning of the day when Esther went to see her father, Jermyn had not yet heard of her presence at Transome Court. One fact conducing to keep him in this ignorance was, that some days after his critical interview with Harold - days during which he had been wondering how long it would be before Harold made up his mind to sacrifice the luxury of satisfied anger for the solid advantage of securing fortune and position - he was peremptorily called away by business to the south of England, and was obliged to inform Harold by letter of his absence. He took care also to notify his return; but Harold made no sign in reply. The days passed without bringing him any gossip concerning Esther's visit, for such gossip was almost confined to Mr Lyon's congregation, her Church pupils, Miss Louisa Jermyn among them, having been satisfied by her father's written statement that she was gone on a visit of uncertain duration. But on this day of Esther's call in Malthouse Yard, the Miss Jermyns in their walk saw her getting into the Transome's carriage, which they had previously observed to be waiting, and which they now saw bowled along on the road towards Little Treby. It followed that only a few hours later the news reached the astonished ears of Matthew Jermyn.

Entirely ignorant of those converging indications and small links of incident which had raised Christian's conjectures, and had gradually contributed to put him in possession of the facts; ignorant too of some busy motives in the mind of his obliged servant Johnson; Jermyn was not likely to see at once how the momentous information that Esther was the surviving Bycliffe could possibly have reached Harold. His daughters naturally leaped, as others had done, to the conclusion that

the Transomes, seeking a governess for little Harry, had had their choice directed to Esther, and observed that they must have attracted her by a high salary to induce her to take charge of such a small pupil; though of course it was important that his English and French should be carefully attended to from the first. Jermyn, hearing this suggestion, was not without a momentary hope that it might be true, and that Harold was still safely unconscious of having under the same roof with him the legal claimant of the family estate.

But a mind in the grasp of a terrible anxiety is not credulous of easy solutions. The one stay that bears up our hopes is sure to appear frail, and if looked at long will seem to totter. Too much depended on that unconsciousness of Harold's; and although Jermyn did not see the course of things that could have disclosed and combined the various items of knowledge which he had imagined to be his own secret, and therefore his safeguard, he saw quite clearly what was likely to be the result of the disclosure. Not only would Harold Transome be no longer afraid of him, but also, by marrying Esther (and Jermyn at once felt sure of this issue), he would be triumphantly freed from my unpleasant consequences, and could pursue much at his ease the gratification of ruining Matthew Jermyn. The prevision of an enemy's triumphant case is in any case sufficiently irritating to hatred, and there were reasons why it was peculiarly exasperating here; but Jermyn had not the leisure now for mere fruitless emotion; he had to think of a possible device which might save him from imminent ruin - not an indefinite adversity, but a ruin in detail, which his thoughts painted out with the sharpest, ugliest intensity. A man of sixty, with an unsuspecting wife and daughters capable of shrieking and fainting at a sudden revelation, and of looking at him reproachfully in their daily misery under a shabby lot to which he had reduced them - with a mind and with habits dried hard by the years - with no glimpse of an endurable standing-ground except where he could domineer and be prosperous according to the ambitions of pushing middle-class gentility, - such a man is likely to find the prospect of worldly ruin ghastly enough to drive him to the most uninviting means of escape. He will probably prefer any private scorn that will save him from public infamy or that will leave him money in his pocket, to the humiliation and hardship of new servitude in old age, a shabby hat, and a melancholy hearth, where the firing must be used and the women look sad. But though a man may be willing to escape through a sewer, a sewer with an outlet into the dry air is not always at hand. Running away, especially when spoken of as absconding, seems at a distance to offer a good modern substitute for the right of sanctuary; but seen closely, it is often found inconvenient and scarcely possible.

Jermyn, on thoroughly considering his position, saw that he had no very agreeable resources at command. But he soon made up his mind what he would do next. He wrote to Mrs Transome requesting her to

appoint an hour in which he could see her privately: he knew she would understand that it was to be an hour when Harold was not at home. As he sealed the letter, he indulged a faint hope that in this interview he might be assured of Esther's birth being unknown at Transome Court; but in the worst case, perhaps some help might be found in Mrs Transome. To such uses may tender relations come when they have ceased to be tender! The Hazael's of our world who are pushed on quickly against their preconceived confidence in themselves to do doglike actions by the sudden suggestion of a wicked ambition, are much fewer than those who are led on through the years by the gradual demands of a selfishness which has spread its fibres far and wide through the intricate vanities and sordid cares of an everyday existence.

In consequence of that letter to Mrs Transome, Jennyn was two days afterwards ushered into the smaller drawing room at Transome Court. It was a charming little room in its refurbished condition: it had two pretty inlaid cabinets, great china vases with contents that sent forth odours of paradise, groups of flowers in oval frames on the walls, and Mrs Transome's own portrait in the evening costume of 1800, with a garden in the background. That brilliant young woman looked smilingly down on Mr Jermyn as he passed in front of the fire; and at present hers was the only gaze in the room. He could not help meeting the gaze as he waited, holding his hat behind him - could not help seeing many memories lit up by it; but the strong bent of his mind was to go on arguing each memory into a claim, and to see in the regard others had for him a merit of his own. There had been plenty of roads open to him when he was a young man; perhaps if he had not allowed himself to be determined (chiefly, of course, by the feelings of others, for of what effect would his own feelings have been without them?) into the road he actually took, he might have done better for himself. At any rate, he was likely at last to get the worst of it, and it was he who had most reason to complain. The fortunate Jason, as we know from Euripides, piously thanked the goddess, and saw clearly that he was not at all obliged to Medea: Jermyn was perhaps not aware of the precedent, but thought out his own freedom from obligation and the indebtedness of others towards him with a native faculty not inferior to Jason's. Before three minutes had passed, however, as if by some sorcery, the brilliant smiling young woman above the mantel-piece seemed to be appearing at the doorway withered and frosted by many winters, and with lips and eyes from which the smile had departed. Jermyn advanced, and they shook hands, but neither of them said anything by way of greeting. Mrs Transome seated herself, and pointed to a chair opposite and near her.

'Harold has gone to Loamford,' she said, in a subdued tone. 'You had something particular to say to me?'

'Yes,' said Jermyn, with his soft and deferential air. 'The last time I was here I could not take the opportunity of speaking to you. But I am anxious to know whether you are aware of what has passed between me and Harold?'

'Yes, he has told me everything.'

'About his proceedings against me? and the reason he stopped them?'

'Yes: have you had notice that he has begun them again?'

'No,' said Jermyn, with a very unpleasant sensation.

'Of course he will now,' said Mrs Transome. 'There is no reason in his mind why he should not.'

'Has he resolved to risk the estate then?'

'He feels in no danger on that score. And if there were, the danger doesn't depend on you. The most likely thing is, that he will marry this girl.'

'He knows everything then?' said Jermyn, the expression of his face getting clouded.

'Everything. It's of no use for you to think of mastering him: you can't do it. I used to wish Harold to be fortunate - and he is fortunate,' said Mrs Transome, with intense bitterness. 'It's not my star that he inherits.'

'Do you know how he came by the information about this girl?'

'No; but she knew it all before we spoke to her. It's no secret.'

Jermyn was confounded by this hopeless frustration to which he had no key. Though he thought of Christian, the thought shed no light; but the more fatal point was clear: he held no secret that could help him.

'You are aware that these Chancery proceedings may ruin me?'

'He told me they would. But if you are imagining that I can do anything, dismiss the notion. I have told him as plainly as I dare that I wish him to drop all public quarrel with you, and that you could make an arrangement without scandal. I can do no more. He will not listen to me; he doesn't mind about my feelings. He cares more for Mr Transome than he does for me. He will not listen to me any more than if I were an old ballad-singer.'

'It's very hard on me, I know,' said Jermyn, in the tone with which a man flings out a reproach

'I besought you three months ago to bear anything rather than quarrel with him.'

'I have not quarrelled with him. It is he who has been always seeking a quarrel with me. I have borne a good deal - more than any one else would. He set his teeth against me from the first.'

'He saw things that annoyed him - and men are not like women,' said Mrs Transome. There was a bitter innuendo in that truism.

'It's very hard on me - I know that,' said Jermyn, with an intensification of his previous tone, rising and walking a step or two, then turning and laying his hand on the back of the chair. 'Of course the law in this case can't in the least represent the justice of the matter. I made a good many sacrifices in times past. I gave up a great deal of fine business for the sake of attending to the family affairs, and in that lawsuit they would have gone to rack and ruin if it hadn't been for me.'

He moved away again, laid down his hat, which he had been previously holding, and thrust his hands into his pockets as he returned. Mrs Transome sat motionless as marble, and almost as pale. Her hands lay crossed on her knees. This man, young, slim, and graceful, with a selfishness which then took the form of homage to her, had at one time kneeled to her and kissed those hands fervently; and she had thought there was a poetry in such passion beyond any to be found in everyday domesticity.

'I stretched my conscience a good deal in that affair of Bycliffe, as you know perfectly well. I told you everything at the time. I told you I was very uneasy about those witnesses, and about getting him thrown into prison. I know it's the blackest thing anybody could charge me with, if they knew my life from beginning to end; and I should never have done it, if I had not been under an infatuation such as makes a man do anything. What did it signify to me about the loss of the lawsuit? I was a young bachelor - I had the world before me.'

'Yes,' said Mrs Transome, in a low tone. 'It was a pity you didn't make another choice.'

'What would have become of you?' said Jermyn, carried along a climax, like other self-justifiers. 'I had to think of you. You would not have liked me to make another choice then.'

'Clearly,' said Mrs Transome, with concentrated bitterness, but still quietly; 'the greater mistake was mine.'

Egoism is usually stupid in a dialogue; but Jermyn's did not make him so stupid that he did not feel the edge of Mrs Transome's words. They increased his irritation.

'I hardly see that,' he replied, with a slight laugh of scorn. 'You had an estate and a position to save, to go no further. I remember very well what you said to me - 'A clever lawyer can do anything if he has the will; if it's impossible, he will make it possible. And the property is sure to be Harold's some day.' He was a baby then.'

'I remember most things a little too well: you had better say at once what is your object in recalling them.'

'An object that is nothing more than justice. With the relation I stood in, it was not likely I should think myself bound by all the forms that are made to bind strangers. I had often immense trouble to raise the money necessary to pay off debts and carry on the affairs; and, as I said before, I had given up other lines of advancement which would have been open to me if I had not stayed in this neighbourhood at a critical time when I was fresh to the world. Anybody who knew the whole circumstances would say that my being hunted and run down on the score of my past transactions with regard to the family affairs, is an abominably unjust and unnatural thing.'

Jermyn paused a moment, and then added, 'At my time of life ... and with a family about me - and after what has passed ... I should have thought there was nothing you would care more to prevent.'

'I do care. It makes me miserable. That is the extent of my power - to feel miserable.'

'No, it is not the extent of your power. You could save me if you would. It is not to be supposed that Harold would go on against me ... if he knew the whole truth.'

Jermyn had sat down before he uttered the last words. He had lowered his voice slightly. He had the air of one who thought that he had prepared the way for an understanding. That a man with so much sharpness, with so much suavity at command - a man who piqued himself on his persuasiveness towards women, - should behave just as Jermyn did on this occasion, would be surprising, but for the constant experience that temper and selfish insensibility will defeat excellent gifts - will make a sensible person shout when shouting is out of place, and will make a polished man rude when his polish might be of eminent use to him.

As Jermyn, sitting down and leaning forward with an elbow on his knee, uttered his last words - 'if he knew the whole truth' - a slight shock seemed to pass through Mrs Transome's hitherto motionless body, followed by a sudden light in her eyes, as in an animal's about to spring.

'And you expect me to tell him?' she said, not loudly, but yet with a clear metallic ring in her voice.

'Would it not be right for him to know?' said Jermyn, in a more bland and persuasive tone than he had yet used.

Perhaps some of the most terrible irony of the human lot is this of a deep truth coming to be uttered by lips that have no right to it.

'I will never tell him!' said Mrs Transome, starting up, her whole frame thrilled with a passion that seemed almost to make her young again. Her hands hung beside her clenched tightly, her eyes and lips lost the helpless repressed bitterness of discontent, and seemed suddenly fed with energy. 'You reckon up your sacrifices for me: you have kept a good account of them, and it is needful; they are some of them what no one else could guess or find out. But you made your sacrifices when they seemed pleasant to you; when you told me they were your happiness; when you told me that it was I who stooped, and I who bestowed favours.'

Jermyn rose too, and laid his hand on the back of the chair. He had grown visibly paler, but seemed about to speak.

'Don't speak!' Mrs Transome said peremptorily. 'Don't open your lips again. You have said enough; I will speak now. I have made sacrifices too, but it was when I knew that they were not my happiness. It was after I saw that I had stooped - after I saw that your tenderness had turned into calculation - after I saw that you cared for yourself only, and not for me. I heard your explanations - of your duty in life - of our mutual reputation - of a virtuous young lady attached to you. I bore it; I let everything go; I shut my eyes; I might almost have let myself starve, rather than have scenes of quarrel with the man I had loved, in which I must accuse him of turning my love into a good bargain.' There was a slight tremor in Mrs Transome's voice in the last words, and for a moment she paused; but when she spoke again it seemed as if the tremor had frozen into a cutting icicle. 'I suppose if a lover picked one's pocket, there's no woman would like to own it. I don't say I was not afraid of you: I was afraid of you, and I know now I was right.'

'Mrs Transome,' said Jermyn, white to the lips, 'it is needless to say more. I withdraw any words that have offended you.' 'You can't

withdraw them. Can a man apologise for being a dastard? ... And I have caused you to strain your conscience, have I? - it is I who have sullied your purity? I should think the demons have more honour - they are not so impudent to one another. I would not lose the misery of being a woman, now I see what can be the baseness of a man. One must be a man - first to tell a woman that her love has made her your debtor, and then ask her to pay you by breaking the last poor threads between her and her son.'

'I do not ask it,' said Jermyn, with a certain asperity. He was beginning to find this intolerable. The mere brute strength of a masculine creature rebelled. He felt almost inclined to throttle the voice out of this woman.

'You do ask it: it is what you would like. I have had a terror on me lest evil should happen to you. From the first, after Harold came home, I had a horrible dread. It seemed as if murder might come between you - I didn't know what. I felt the horror of his not knowing the truth. I might have been dragged at last, by my own feeling - by my own memory - to tell him all, and make him as well as myself miserable, to save you.'

Again there was a slight tremor, as if at the remembrance of womanly tenderness and pity. But immediately she launched forth again.

'But now you have asked me, I will never tell him! Be ruined - no - do something more dastardly to save yourself. If I sinned, my judgment went beforehand - that I should sin for a man like you.'

Swiftly upon those last words Mrs Transome passed out of the room. The softly-padded door closed behind her making no noise, and Jermyn found himself alone.

For a brief space he stood still. Human beings in moments of passionate reproach and denunciation, especially when their anger is on their own account, are never so wholly in the right that the person who has to wince cannot possibly protest against some unreasonableness or unfairness in their outburst. And if Jermyn had been capable of feeling that he had thoroughly merited this infliction, he would not have uttered the words that drew it down on him. Men do not become penitent and learn to abhor themselves by having their backs cut open with the lash; rather, they learn to abhor the lash. What Jermyn felt about Mrs Transome when she disappeared was, that she was a furious woman - who would not do what he wanted her to do. And he was supported as to his justifiableness by the inward repetition of what he had already said to her: it was right that Harold should know the truth. He did not take into account (how should he?) the exasperation and loathing excited by his daring to urge the plea of

right. A man who had stolen the pyx, and got frightened when justice was at his heels, might feel the sort of penitence which would induce him to run back in the dark and lay the pyx where the sexton might find it; but if in doing so he whispered to the Blessed Virgin that he was moved by considering the sacredness of all property, and the peculiar sacredness of the pyx, it is not to be believed that she would like him the better for it. Indeed, one often seems to see why the saints should prefer candles to words, especially from penitents whose skin is in danger. Some salt of generosity would have made Jermyn conscious that he had lost the citizenship which authorised him to plead the right; still more, that his self-vindication to Mrs Transome would be like the exhibition of a brand-mark, and only show that he was shame-proof. There is heroism even in the circles of hell for fellow-sinners who cling to each other in the fiery whirlwind and never recriminate. But these things, which are easy to discern when they are painted for us on the large canvas of poetic story, become confused and obscure even for well-read gentlemen when their affection for themselves is alarmed by pressing details of actual experience. If their comparison of instances is active at such times, it is chiefly in showing them that their own case has subtle distinctions from all other cases, which should free them from unmitigated condemnation.

And it was in this way with Matthew Jermyn. So many things were more distinctly visible to him, and touched him more acutely, than the effect of his acts or words on Mrs Transome's feelings! In fact - he asked, with a touch of something that makes us all akin - was it not preposterous, this excess of feeling on points which he himself did not find powerfully moving? She had treated him most unreasonably. It would have been right for her to do what he had - not asked, but only hinted at in a mild and interrogatory manner. But the clearest and most unpleasant result of the interview was, that this right thing which he desired so much would certainly not be done for him by Mrs Transome.

As he was moving his arm from the chair-back, and turning to take his hat, there was a boisterous noise in the entrance-hall; the door of the small drawing-room, which had closed without latching, was pushed open, and old Mr Transome appeared with a face of feeble delight, playing horse to little Harry, who roared and flogged behind him, while Moro yapped in a puppy voice at their heels. But when Mr Transome saw Jermyn in the room he stood still in the doorway, as if he did not know whether entrance were permissible. The majority of his thoughts were but ravelled threads of the past. The attorney came forward to shake hands with due politeness, but the old man said, with a bewildered look, and in a hesitating way -

'Mr Jermyn? - why - why - where is Mrs Transome?'

Jermyn smiled his way out past the unexpected group; and little Harry, thinking he had an eligible opportunity, turned round to give a parting stroke on the stranger's coattails.