

Chapter 47

The devil tempts us not - 'tis we tempt him.

Beckoning his skill with opportunity.

THE more permanent effect of Esther's action in the trial was visible in a meeting which took place the next day in the principal room of the White Hart at Loamford. To the magistrates and other county gentlemen who were drawn together about noon, some of the necessary impulse might have been lacking but for that stirring of heart in certain just-spirited men and good fathers among them, which had been raised to a high pitch of emotion by Esther's maidenly fervour. Among these one of the foremost was Sir Maximus Debarry, who had come to the assizes with a mind, as usual, slightly rebellious under an influence which he never ultimately resisted - the influence of his son. Philip Debarry himself was detained in London, but in his correspondence with his father he had urged him, as well as his uncle Augustus, to keep eyes and interest awake on the subject of Felix Holt, whom, from all the knowledge of the case he had been able to obtain, he was inclined to believe peculiarly unfortunate rather than guilty. Philip had said he was the more anxious that his family should intervene benevolently in this affair, if it were possible, because he understood that Mr Lyon took the young man's case particularly to heart, and he should always regard himself as obliged to the old preacher. At this superfineness of consideration Sir Maximus had vented a few 'pshaws!' and, in relation to the whole affair, had grumbled that Phil was always setting him to do he didn't know what - always seeming to turn nothing into something by dint of words which hadn't so much substance as a mote behind them. Nevertheless he was coerced; and in reality he was willing to do anything fair or good-natured which had a handle that his understanding could lay hold of. His brother, the rector, desired to be rigorously just; but he had come to Loamford with a severe opinion concerning Felix, thinking that some sharp punishment might be a wholesome check on the career of a young man disposed to rely too much on his own crude devices.

Before the trial commenced, Sir Maximus had naturally been one of those who had observed Esther with curiosity, owing to the report of her inheritance, and her probable marriage to his once welcome but now exasperating neighbour, Harold Transome; and he had made the emphatic comment - 'A fine girl! something thoroughbred in the look of her. Too good for a Radical; that's all I have to say.' But during the trial Sir Maximus was wrought into a state of sympathetic ardour that needed no fanning. As soon as he could take his brother by the buttonhole, he said -

'I tell you what, Gus! we must exert ourselves to get a pardon for this young fellow. Confound it! what's the use of mewing him up for four years? Example? Nonsense. Will there be a man knocked down the less for it? That girl made me cry. Depend upon it, whether she's going to marry Transome or not, she's been fond of Holt - in her poverty, you know. She's a modest, brave, beautiful woman. I'd ride a steeplechase, old as I am, to gratify her feelings. Hang it ! the fellow's a good fellow if she thinks so. And he threw out a fine sneer, I thought, at the Radical candidate. Depend upon it, he's a good fellow at bottom.'

The rector had not exactly the same kind of ardour, nor was he open to precisely that process of proof which appeared to have convinced Sir Maximus; but he had been so far influenced as to be inclined to unite in an effort on the side of mercy, observing, also, that he 'knew Phil would be on that side'. And by the co-operation of similar movements in the minds of other men whose names were of weight, a meeting had been determined on to consult about getting up a memorial to the Home Secretary on behalf of Felix Holt. His case had never had the sort of significance that could rouse political partisanship; and such interest as was now felt in him was still more unmixed with that inducement. The gentlemen who gathered in the room at the White Hart were - not as the large imagination of the North Loamshire Herald suggested, 'of all shades of political opinion,' but - of as many shades as were to be found among the gentlemen of that county.

Harold Transome has been energetically active in bringing about this meeting. Over and above the stings of conscience and a determination to act up to the level of all recognised honourableness, he had the powerful motive of desiring to do what would satisfy Esther. His gradually heightened perception that she had a strong feeling towards Felix Holt had not made him uneasy. Harold had a conviction that might have seemed like fatuity if it had not been that he saw the effect he produced on Esther by the light of his opinions about women in general. The conviction was, that Felix Holt could not be his rival in any formidable sense: Esther's admiration for this eccentric young man was, he thought, a moral enthusiasm, a romantic fervour, which was one among those many attractions quite novel in his own experience; her distress about the trouble of one who had been a familiar object in her former home, was no more than naturally followed from a tender woman's compassion. The place young Holt had held in her regard had necessarily changed its relations now that her lot was so widely changed. It is undeniable, that what most conduced to the quieting nature of Harold's conclusions was the influence on his imagination of the more or less detailed reasons that Felix Holt was a watchmaker, that his home and dress were of a certain quality, that his person and manners - that, in short (for

Harold, like the rest of us, had many impressions which saved him the trouble of distinct ideas), Felix Holt was not the sort of man a woman would be likely to be in love with when she was wooed by Harold Transome.

Thus, he was sufficiently at rest on this point not to be exercising any painful self-conquest in acting as the zealous advocate of Felix Holt's cause with all persons worth influencing; but it was by no direct intercourse between him and Sir Maximus that they found themselves in co-operation, for the old baronet would not recognise Harold by more than the faintest bow, and Harold was not a man to expose himself to a rebuff. Whatever he in his inmost soul regarded as nothing more than a narrow prejudice, he could defy, not with airs of importance, but with easy indifference. He could bear most things good-humouredly where he felt that he had the superiority. The object of the meeting was discussed, and the memorial agreed upon without any clashing. Mr Lingon was gone home, but it was expected that his concurrence and signature would be given, as well as those of other gentlemen who were absent. The business gradually reached that stage at which the concentration of interest ceases - when the attention of all but a few who are more practically concerned drops off and disperses itself in private chat, and there is no longer any particular reason why everybody stays except that everybody is there. The room was rather a long one, and invited to a little movement: one gentleman drew another aside to speak in an under-tone about Scotch bullocks, another had something to say about the North Loamshire Hunt to a friend who was the reverse of good-looking, but who, nevertheless, while listening, showed his strength of mind by giving a severe attention also to his full-length reflection in the handsome tall mirror that filled the space between two windows. And in this way the groups were continually shifting

But in the meantime there were moving towards this room at the White Hart the footsteps of a person whose presence had not been invited, and who, very far from being drawn thither by the belief that he would be welcome, knew well that his entrance would, to one person at least, be bitterly disagreeable. They were the footsteps of Mr Jermyn, whose appearance that morning was not less comely and less carefully tended than usual, but who was suffering the torment of a compressed rage, which, if not impotent to inflict pain on another, was impotent to avert evil from himself. After his interview with Mrs Transome there had been for some reasons a delay of positive procedures against him by Harold, of which delay Jermyn had twice availed himself; first, to seek an interview with Harold and then to send him a letter. The interview had been refused; and the letter had been returned, with the statement that no communication could take place except through Harold's lawyers. And yesterday Johnson had brought Jermyn the information that he would quickly hear of the

proceedings in Chancery being resumed: the watch Johnson kept in town had given him secure knowledge on this head. A doomed animal, with every issue earthed up except that where its enemy stands, must, if it has teeth and fierceness, try its one chance without delay. And a man may reach a point in his life in which his impulses are not distinguished from those of a hunted brute by any capability of scruples. Our selfishness is so robust and many-clutching, that, well encouraged, it easily devours all sustenance away from our poor little scmples.

Since Harold would not give Jermyn access to him, that vigorous attorney was resolved to take it. He knew all about the meeting at the White Hart, and he was going thither with the determination of accosting Harold. He thought he knew what he should say, and the tone in which he should say it. It would be a vague intimation, carrying the effect of a threat, which should compel Harold to give him a private interview. To any counter-consideration that presented itself in his mind - to anything that an imagined voice might say - that imagined answer arose, 'That's all very fine, but I'm not going to be ruined if I can help it - least of all, mined in that way.' Shall we call it degeneration or gradual development - this effect of thirty additional winters on the soft-glancing, versifying young Jermyn?

When Jermyn entered the room at the White Hart he did not immediately see Harold. The door was at the extremity of the room, and the view was obstructed by groups of gentlemen with figures broadened by overcoats. His entrance excited no peculiar observation: several persons had come in late. Only one or two, who knew Jermyn well, were not too much pre-occupied to have a glancing remembrance of what had been chatted about freely the day before - Harold's irritated reply about his agent, from the witness-box. Receiving and giving a slight nod here and there, Jermyn pushed his way, looking round keenly, until he saw Harold standing near the other end of the room. The solicitor who had acted for Felix was just then speaking to him. but having put a paper into his hand turned away; and Harold, standing isolated, though at no great distance from others, bent his eyes on the paper. He looked brilliant that morning; his blood was flowing prosperously. He had come in after a ride, and was additionally brightened by rapid talk and the excitement of seeking to impress himself favourably, or at least powerfully, on the minds of neighbours nearer or more remote. He had just that amount of flush which indicates that life is more enjoyable than usual; and as he stood with his left hand caressing his whisker, and his right holding the paper and his riding-whip, his dark eyes running rapidly along the written lines, and his lips reposing in a curve of good-humour which had more happiness in it than a smile, all beholders might have seen that his mind was at ease.

Jermyn walked quickly and quietly close up to him. The two men were of the same height, and before Harold looked round Jermyn's voice was saying, close to his ear, not in a whisper, but in a hard, incisive, disrespectful and yet not loud tone -

'Mr Transome, I must speak to you in private.'

The sound jarred through Harold with a sensation all the more insufferable because of the revulsion from the satisfied, almost elated, state in which it had seized him. He started and looked round into Jermyn's eyes. For an instant, which seemed long, there was no sound between them, but only angry hatred gathering in the two faces. Harold felt himself going to crush this insolence: Jermyn felt that he had words within him that were fangs to clutch this obstinate strength, and wring forth the blood and compel submission. And Jermyn's impulse was the more urgent. He said, in a tone that was rather lower, but yet harder and more biting - 'You will repent else - for your mother's sake.'

At that sound, quick as a leaping flame, Harold had struck Jermyn across the face with his whip. The brim of the hat had been a defence. Jermyn, a powerful man, had instantly thrust out his hand and clutched Harold hard by the clothes just below the throat, pushing him slightly so as to make him stagger.

By this time everybody's attention had been called to this end of the room, but both Jermyn and Harold were beyond being arrested by any consciousness of spectators.

'Let me go, you scoundrel!' said Harold, fiercely, 'or I'll be the death of you.'

'Do,' said Jermyn, in a grating voice; 'I am your father.'

In the thrust by which Harold had been made to stagger backward a little, the two men had got very near the long mirror. They were both white - both had anger and hatred in their faces; the hands of both were upraised. As Harold heard the last terrible words he started at a leaping throb that went through him, and in the start turned his eyes away from Jermyn's face. He turned them on the same face in the glass with his own beside it, and saw the hated fatherhood reasserted.

The young strong man reeled with a sick faintness. But in the same moment Jermyn released his hold, and Harold felt himself supported by the arm. It was Sir Maximus Debarry who had taken hold of him.

'Leave the room, sir!' the baronet said to Jermyn, in a voice of imperious scorn. 'This is a meeting of gentlemen.'

'Come, Harold,' he said, in the old friendly voice, 'come away with me.'