

CHAPTER XIII

Go, my reader, if the day is dull, and you feel inclined to moralize-- for whatever may be said to the contrary, there are less useful occupations--and look at your village churchyard. What do you see before you? A plot of enclosed ground backed by a grey old church, a number of tombstones more or less decrepit, and a great quantity of little oblong mounds covered with rank grass. If you have any imagination, any power of thought, you will see more than that. First, with the instinctive selfishness of human nature, you will recognize your own future habitation; perhaps your eye will mark the identical spot where the body you love must lie through all seasons and weathers, through the slow centuries that will flit so fast for you, till the crash of doom. It is good that you should think of that, although it makes you shudder. The English churchyard takes the place of the Egyptian mummy at the feast, or the slave in the Roman conqueror's car--it mocks your vigour, and whispers of the end of beauty and strength.

Probably you need some such reminder. But if, giving to the inevitable the sigh that is its due, you pursue the vein of thought, it may further occur to you that the plot before you is in a sense a summary of the aspirations of humanity. It marks the realization of human hopes, it is the crown of human ambitions, the grave of human failures. Here, too, is the end of the man, and here the birthplace of the angel or the demon. It is his sure inheritance, one that he never

solicits and never squanders; and, last, it is the only certain resting-place of sleepless, tired mortality.

Here it was that they brought Hilda, and the old squire, and laid them side by side against the coffin of yeoman Caresfoot, whose fancy it had been to be buried in stone, and then, piling primroses and blackthorn blooms upon their graves, left them to their chilly sleep. Farewell to them, they have passed to where as yet we may not follow. Violent old man and proud and lovely woman, rest in peace, if peace be the portion of you both!

To return to the living. The news of the sudden decease of old Mr. Caresfoot; of the discovery of Philip's secret marriage and the death of his wife; of the terms of the old man's will, under which, Hilda being dead, and having only left a daughter behind her, George inherited all the unentailed portion of the property, with the curious provision that he was never to leave it back to Philip or his children; of the sudden departure of Miss Lee, and of many other things, that were some of them true and some of them false, following as they did upon the heels of the great dinner-party, and the announcement made thereat, threw the country-side into a state of indescribable ferment. When this settled down, it left a strong and permanent residuum of public indignation and contempt directed against Philip, the more cordially, perhaps, because he was no longer a rich man. People very rarely express contempt or indignation against a rich man who happens to be their neighbour in the country, whatever he may

have done. They keep their virtue for those who are impoverished, or for their unfortunate relations. But for Philip it was felt that there was no excuse and no forgiveness; he had lost both his character and his money, and must therefore be cut, and from that day forward he was cut accordingly.

As for Philip himself, he was fortunately, as yet, ignorant of the kind intentions of his friends and neighbours, who had been so fond of him a week ago. He had enough upon his shoulders without that--for he had spoken no lie when he told Maria Lee that he was crushed by the dreadful and repeated blows that had fallen upon him, blows that had robbed him of everything that made life worth living, and given him in return nothing but an infant who could not inherit, and who was therefore only an incumbrance.

Who is it that says, "After all, let a bad man take what pains he may to push it down, a human soul is an awful, ghostly, unique possession for a bad man to have?" During the time that had elapsed between the death and burial of his father and wife, Philip had become thoroughly acquainted with the truth of this remark.

Do what he would, he could never for a single hour shake himself free from the recollection of his father's death; whenever he shut his eyes, his uneasy mind continually conjured up the whole scene with uncanny distinctness; the gloomy room, the contorted face of the dying man, the red flicker of the firelight on the wall--all these things

were burnt deep into the tablets of his memory. More and more did he recognize the fact that, even should he live long enough to bury the events of that hour beneath the debris of many years, the lapse of time would be insufficient to bring forgetfulness, and the recognition brought with it moral helplessness. He had, too, sufficient religious feeling to make him uneasy as to his future fate, and possessed a certain amount of imagination, which was at this time all directed towards that awful day when he and his dead father must settle their final accounts. Already, in the quiet nights, he would wake with a start, thinking that the inevitable time had come. Superstitious fears also would seize him with their clammy fingers, and he would shake and tremble at the fancied step of ghostly feet, and his blood would curdle in his veins as his mind hearkened to voices that were for ever still.

And, worst of all, what had been done, and could never be undone, had been done in vain. These deadly torments must be endured, whilst the object for which they had been incurred had utterly escaped him. He had sold himself to the powers of evil for a price, and that price had not been paid. But the bond was good for all that.

And so he would brood, hour after hour, till he felt himself drawing near to madness. Sometimes by a strong effort he would succeed in tearing his mind away from the subject, but then its place was instantly filled by a proud form with reproachful eyes, and he would feel that there, too, death had put it out of his power to make

atonement. Of those whom he had wronged Maria Lee alone survived, and she had left him in sorrow, more bitter than any anger. Truly, Philip Caresfoot was in melancholy case. Somewhere he had read that the wages of sin is death, but surely what he felt surpassed the bitterness of death. His evil-doing had not prospered with him. The snare he had set for his father had fallen back upon himself, and he was a crushed and ruined man.

It affords a curious insight into his character to reflect that all these piled-up calamities, all this wreck and sudden death, did not bring him penitent on his knees before the Maker he had outraged. The crimes he had committed, especially if unsuccessful, or the sorrows that had fallen upon him, would have sufficed to reduce nine-tenths of ordinary men to a condition of humble supplication. For, generally speaking, irreligion, or rather forgetfulness of God, is a plant of no deep growth in the human heart, since its roots are turned by the rock of that innate knowledge of a higher Power that forms the foundation of every soul, and on which we are glad enough to set our feet when the storms of trouble and emergency threaten to destroy us. But with Philip this was not so. He never thought of repentance. His was not the nature to fall down and say, "Lord, I have sinned, take Thou my burden from me." Indeed, he was not so much sorry for the past as fearful for the future. It was not grief for wrong-doing that wrung his heart and broke his spirit, but rather his natural sorrow at losing the only creature he had ever deeply loved, chagrin at the shame of his position and the failure of his hopes, and the icy

fingers of superstitious fears.

The crisis had come and passed: he had sinned against his Father in heaven and his father on earth, and he did not sorrow for his sin; his wife had left him, murmuring with her dying lips exhortations to repentance, and he did not soften; shame and loss had fallen upon him, and he did not turn to God. But his pride was broken, all that remained to him of strength was his wickedness; the flood that had swept over him had purged away not the evil but the good, from the evil it only took its courage. Henceforth, if he sins at all, his will be no bold and hazardous villany which, whilst it excites horror, can almost compel respect, but rather the low and sordid crime, the safe and treacherous iniquity.

Ajax no longer defies the lightning--he mutters curses on it beneath his breath.

On the evening of the double funeral--which Philip did not feel equal to attending, and at which George, in a most egregious hatband and with many sobs and tears, officiated as chief mourner--Mr. Fraser thought it would be a kind act on his part to go and offer such consolation to the bereaved man as lay within his power, if indeed he would accept it. Somewhat contrary to his expectation, he was, on arrival at the Abbey House, asked in without delay.

"I am glad to see a human face," said Philip to the clergyman, as he

entered the room; "this loneliness is intolerable. I am as much alone as though I lay stark in the churchyard like my poor wife."

Mr. Fraser did not answer him immediately, so taken up was he in noticing the wonderful changes a week had wrought in his appearance. Not only did his countenance bear traces of the illness and exhaustion that might not unnaturally be expected in such a case of bereavement, but it faithfully reflected the change that had taken place in his mental attitude. His eyes had lost the frank boldness that had made them very pleasing to some people, they looked scared; the mouth too was rendered conspicuous by the absence of the firm lines that once gave it character; indeed the man's whole appearance was pitiful and almost abject.

"I am afraid," he said at length, in a tone of gentle compassion, "that you must have suffered a great deal, Caresfoot."

"Suffered! I have suffered the tortures of the damned! I still suffer them, I shall always suffer them."

"I do not wish," said the clergyman, with a little hesitation, "to appear officious or to make a mockery of your grief by telling you that it is for your good; but I should fail in my duty if I did not point out to you that He who strikes the blow has the power to heal the wound, and that very often such things are for our ultimate benefit, either in this world or the next. Carry your troubles to Him,

my dear fellow, acknowledge His hand, and, if you know in your heart of any way in which you have sinned, offer Him your hearty repentance; do this, and you will not be deserted. Your life, that now seems to you nothing but ashes, may yet be both a happy and a useful one."

Philip smiled bitterly as he answered--

"You talk to me of repentance--how can I repent when Providence has treated me so cruelly, robbing me at a single blow of my wife and my fortune? I know that I did wrong in concealing my marriage, but I was driven to it by fear of my father. Ah! if you had seen him as I saw him, you would have known that they were right to call him 'Devil Caresfoot.'" He checked himself, and then went on--"He forced me into the engagement with Miss Lee, and announced it without my consent. Now I am ruined--everything is taken from me."

"You have your little daughter, and all the entailed estate--at least, so I am told."

"My little daughter!--I never want to see her face; she killed her mother. If it had been a boy, it would have been different, for then, at any rate, that accursed George would not have got my birthright. My little daughter, indeed! don't enumerate her among my earthly blessings."

"It is rather sad to hear you talk like that of your child; but, at

any rate, you are not left in want. You have one of the finest old places in the county, and a thousand a year, which to most men would be riches."

"And which to me," answered Philip, "is beggary. I should have had six, and I have got one. But look you here, Fraser, I swear before God----"

"Hush! I cannot listen to such talk."

"Well, then, before anything you like, that, while I live, I will never rest one single moment until I get my own back again. It may seem impossible, but I will find a way. For instance," he added, as a thought struck him, "strangely enough, the will does not forbid me to buy the lands back. If I can get them no other way, I will buy them--do you hear?--I will buy them. I must have them again before I die."

"How will you get the money?"

"The money--I will save it, make it, steal it, get it somehow. Oh! do not be afraid; I will get the money. It will take a few years, but I will get it somehow. It is not the want of a few thousands that will stop a determined man."

"And suppose your cousin won't sell?"

"I will find a way to make him sell--some bribe, something. There, there," and his enthusiasm and eagerness vanished in a moment, and the broken look came back upon his face. "It's all nonsense; I am talking impossibilities--a little weak in my mind, I suppose. Forget it, there's a good fellow; say nothing about it. And so you buried them? Ah, me! ah, me! And George did chief mourner. I suppose he blubbered freely; he always could blubber freely when he liked. I remember how he used to take folks in as a lad, and then laugh at them; that's why they called him 'Crocodile' at school. Well, he's my master now, and I'm his very humble servant; perhaps one day it will be the other way up again. What, must you go? If you knew how fearfully lonely I am, you would not go. My nerves have quite gone, and I fancy all sorts of things. I can think of nothing but those two graves out there in the dark. Have they sodded them over? Tell them to sod them over. It was kind of you to come and see me. You mustn't pay any attention to my talk; I am not quite myself. Good night."

Mr. Fraser was an extremely unsuspecting man, but somehow, as he picked his way to the vicarage to eat his solitary chop, he felt a doubt rising in his mind as to whether, his disclaimer notwithstanding, Philip had not sincerely meant all he said.

"He is shockingly changed," he mused, "and I am not sure that it is a change for the better. Poor fellow, he has a great deal to bear, and should be kindly judged. It is all so painful that I must try to divert my mind. Mrs. Brown, will you bring me a little chocolate-

coloured book, that you will see on the table in my study, when you come back with the potatoes? It has Plato--P-l-a-t-o--printed on the back."