Harriet Martineau

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CHAPTER I. PIOUS ORGIES.

The winter day closed in early on a certain Saturday in February, 1685, when the weather was dreary all round our shores. On the Dorsetshire coast the winds blew shrill; and the mists that they drove inland brought on an earlier night than the almanack told of. In Squire Battiscombe’s mansion, which looked down upon the fishing town of Lyme Regis, as little account was made of the weather as in any house in England, for the family could seldom have gone

out of doors at all if they had been afraid of the gales on the bare downs; or the chilling blasts which drove up the ravines from the beach below; or the sea-foam, which, on stormy days, wetted everything within a quarter of a mile of the margin of the tide.

In Battiscombe House, therefore, the children made no remark on the darkness of the evening except when their attention was drawn to it.

“You take too much of the fire for such a little one, Joanna,” observed the mother, to a child who was poring over her book by the blaze from the log in the chimney. “How this cheek of yours is scorched, while some of us are chill!”

“I only wanted the light,” Joanna observed with a sigh, as she at once retired into the twilight behind her mother’s chair. She was called to that chair, and kept warm with an arm round her waist, and soft kisses on the crown of the head. Still she held the book, with a finger between the pages, where she had been stopped.

“That child is always reading!” the Squire remarked, and nobody gainsayed the observation.

“These little ones get their own will out of us in a way for which we shall be answerable,” the Squire proceeded. “Arabella and Judith are thinking at this moment how strictly they were

cut off from vain learning when they were that child’s age.”

Arabella and Judith looked up with a smile which showed how truly their father had read their thoughts. They were not likely to forget the wrenchings of the heart they had endured, many a time, when some beloved volume was snatched from their hands at the cruellest moment.

“I have gone to their bedsides,” said their father, “and taken from under their pillows the idol of the moment,—not always a romance or a narrative of a voyage, but some treatise of philosophy, or perhaps the grammar of some foreign tongue. See their smiles now! They not only forgive me, they understand me.”

The girls looked up cheerfully.

“My daughters are my friends, and their mother’s friends,” the proud father observed. “They have had other and better teaching than books; and I, for my part, doubt whether the most learned damsels that my grandfather used to extol, could have been safer and truer friends to their fathers than my daughters are to me. I would have this last little daughter please me as well.”

Joanna here thrust her book behind her mother’s skirt, and the mother did not show that she was aware of the act.

“But we have not grown up entirely ignorant, sir,” said Judith.

“You can read the Holy Word,” he replied, “and that is enough.”

“Except the foreign tongues, in which men read the Holy Word in sympathy,” observed the family tutor, from his seat in the window. “The ladies have no small knowledge of the French and Dutch languages—”

“I reckon those things as included in their study of the Word,” the Squire replied. He did not wish to discuss a family arrangement by which opulent gentry, under cover of a plan for educating their children, kept up communication with continental Protestants of their own way of thinking.

At this moment a shout was heard outside, and the tramp of horses’ feet on the shell walk in front of the house. In those days, every unusual sound was supposed (by Nonconformists, at least) to mean misfortune of some kind. The father of the family stood upright; the mother’s lips moved in prayer; and the looks of the daughters waited upon both. Their suspense was short, for Anthony, and David, and little Will, came up to the windows crying out “Christopher! Christopher! Christopher is come!”

In another minute, Christopher, the heir and the pride of the household, was in the midst of his family, and the tutor had withdrawn.

Christopher had never looked so comely; but he was thoughtful. There was no mystery about his appearance. He had come down, with a party of comrades from the Inns of Court, to attend the sessions at Dorchester: and he found he could ride over to Lyme to spend the Lord’s day in his old home. He was aware that the morrow was to be a remarkable Sabbath to his family and friends at Lyme, and he had used great efforts to arrive in time. At one part of the journey he scarcely hoped to accomplish it. The waters were out, so that his brother barristers and himself, and their guides and servants—twenty-three in all—had been compelled to go many miles round; and at dusk yesterday it had seemed an inevitable thing that men and horses would spend the night with no better shelter than a leafless wood. By means of Christopher’s new groom, however, who seemed to know the country better than the guides themselves, the party had been brought round into the Dorchester road, and enabled to divide themselves between two inns before the lights and fires were out: and they had ridden into Dorchester to breakfast.

“Who is this new groom of yours?” the Squire asked.

“Reuben? Oh! he is one of the Coads that there are so many of among the fishermen below. I believe his father is the horse-dealer,

and that may be the way that Reuben knows the county roads and bridle-paths so well.”

“I suppose he was trustily recommended to you?” observed the careful mother.

“As a horse-keeper, he was. As for the rest, I liked his coming straight to a Dorsetshire man, and offering his services on the ground of neighbourhood and our good old country non-conformity. Oh, yes! he is one of us. He would walk twenty miles to hear John Hickes.”

“You will allow him a good rest this night?” observed Mrs. Battiscombe. “None but trusty old acquaintances should be of our company on this occasion.”

“As it pleases you, mother. I fear Reuben will be hurt when he learns how near he has been to Hickes’s pulpit without knowing it; but I will observe your pleasure.”

When Christopher left the room, and the young people followed him all over the beloved old mansion, the Squire observed to his lady that Kit’s arrival was, to his mind, rather perplexing. Had she supposed he would come?

“I had hardly liked to wish it, or not to wish it,” she replied. “It will be a blessing to us to have all our elder children with us this night; yet, if his suit had been favoured, he would scarcely have left his lady-love at the first moment to hear John Hickes.”

“I have little fear for his suit,” the Squire observed. “He has had no disappointment. You may see that in his face.”

“He has secured that strength by which the keenest disappointment—”

“Yes, yes, my dear. No doubt of that. But his countenance is bright with success. Elizabeth Bankshope is to be our daughter, I have a full persuasion.”

“If so, how strong must be his faithfulness, that he leaves her to share the services and dangers of his family this night!”

When the supper was over, and prayers had been read, and the younger children were gone to bed, and the tutor, M. Florien, had withdrawn, Christopher explained that he had brought news which he had thought it best not to commit to paper. He should have ridden over on this account, if there had been no question of other matters. It was understood that this news was of public concern; for Christopher had not been four hours in the house without obtaining his parents’ blessing on his betrothal to Elizabeth Bankshope, —the toast of the county, and the sister of the high-sheriff.

“It is certainly true,” Christopher declared, when he was satisfied that he could not be heard beyond the fireside, “it is certainly true that the King died a Catholic. They smuggled in a monk, who administered the sacrament. I had particular

information of this three days ago: and I doubt not the news is creeping from house to house in London by this time."

"Florien ought to hear this," the Squire observed. And Christopher went to bring him in.

Then a long discussion followed of the prospects of the Church and of Nonconformity. There had been a hope, since King Charles died, that the new sovereign would be gentle with the Nonconformists, in order that they and the Catholics might co-operate to keep the tyranny of the Church in check; but if Protestantism itself was in strong peril, there was no corresponding chance of an alliance between the Church and the Dissenters. Some great change must be at hand. The question was,—what it would be.

No one of the party put the thing into plain words: but Arabella and Judith agreed, when they had reached their chamber, that what father, brother, and tutor expected was a new king—a Protestant king, who should send King James to the Continent, to make himself happy in some Catholic State.

At an hour past midnight, a part of the family assembled in silence in the hall of the mansion. A dim lantern gave the only light. The Squire carried this lantern, and he held it up to the face of each of the muffled figures before the back door was opened.

“My daughters!” whispered their mother, when she saw that Arabella and Judith were there. “This winter night and these perils are not for young creatures like you!”

“Let us go, mother!” said the one. The other put her arm round her father’s neck. “Father, you will not forbid us! You said, this very evening, that we were your friends. Where you go, we will go.”

“Yes, yes!” he replied. “Wife, we must be just to our children. How was it with you when your father chose to abide in the midst of the Plague?”

Mrs. Battiscombe was always silenced by a reference to her conduct in the Plague-year; and she now took one daughter under her own wing, and committed the other to the Squire. Nurse had oiled the locks and bolts, so that the party left the house without wakening the sleepers up-stairs. Once in the yard, they dispersed to a certain extent. One or two went round first to the road, to see whether anybody was about; and then two took that way down into the town. Two more passed into the garden, and down a footpath which led to the beach. Others waited a few minutes, till the first should be half-way to their destination. As far as any of them could see, they were not dodged or seen; but the night was very dark. There were no lights in any windows, and, till they came near the rendezvous, the young people saw nobody

moving. Then, they passed or followed people muffled like themselves: but where they went in the darkness, no group could tell of any other.

They in fact passed up various alleys, and through several private houses, in order to meet in a large room, well hidden from the street. This room, once used for the storing of wool, had been offered for a chapel by a staunch Presbyterian citizen, who had used his influence among the men in his employ to get the proper fittings introduced and put up, as if they were improvements of his place of business. The few windows were so thoroughly closed that no ray of light escaped: there was a double entrance,—the one to be closed while the other was opened; and the pulpit was so placed that the hearers could gather round it, and save the preacher from speaking louder than the size of his congregation rendered necessary.

The place was nearly filled when the Battiscombes dropped in; but the pulpit was still empty. Presently, as a man in a fisherman’s dress passed under one of the dim lights, a whisper went round that that was John Hickes. In a few moments more he had put off his disguise, and appeared in cap and bands, inviting the congregation to pray.

It required less power and skill than John Hickes was noted for to interest by his discourse that night: but he moved his hearers deeply. He

made them proud instead of ashamed by contrasting the opening of this House of the Lord with all the consecrations in religious story, from the gathering of the Jews into the Temple of Solomon, to the late thronging of the people of London into the new St. Paul’s. He made his hearers bold instead of alarmed when he set before them the danger they incurred by being there, listening to him who, under the Five Mile Act, was under condemnation for being about this night’s business in the town where he had formerly ministered in the face of day. Some of them had perhaps considered that they had done a brave thing in having service in their homes in the presence of guests who brought up their numbers above the four prescribed by law as the largest company of Dissenters that might worship together. Some really had run great risks in taking adjoining houses, and making an opening in the wall, covered by a picture or the like, in order that two households and a few visitors might join in their services. But the risks run this night far exceeded those. None but such as were fast anchored on the Lord had need be there; for they were encompassed with dangers which no care or faithfulness could avert. Suspicion was always awake: bribes lay ready for the vile to clutch: spies were everywhere:—perhaps there were some now present. And then the preacher launched an anathema against any

traitor who might be present which innocent hearers at least never forgot. He described the miseries to which faithful confessors were subjected in their imprisonments,—the bad company, the bad air,—both that which was breathed by the body and that which stifled the soul; the filth, the loathsome food and foul water; the rheumatism or the spotted fever; the ridicule of the vile, the oppression of the magistrates, the horror of the pillory and the scourge, and the lifelong trial of beggary, when repeated fines had drained the fortunes of men and women delicately reared:—he described these things as in full prospect for any and everybody there; and then declared that the most painful of them were joys and blessings in comparison with the retribution which should await the spy who now heard him,—if such an one there were. His description of the anguish to be endured sooner or later by any one who should bring the righteous into trouble,—of the pangs, intolerable and eternal, which he should not escape, made the most innocent tremble; and it seemed an act of mercy when the preacher, after a pause, leaned over the desk, and said, in deep, low voice, which, however, was heard by the remotest listener, that a way of escape should be opened for any wicked who would forsake their wickedness. A path should be made to the door, from which the keeper should withdraw for the

time: the lights should be extinguished for five minutes; and any spies who might be present could steal away unseen. Departing in such a manner, it might be hoped that they would for ever hold their peace on what they had this night witnessed and heard. Entertaining this trust, and regarding them as penitents, he sent his prayers and blessings with them.

As soon as the lights were out, some of the congregation made a shuffling of their feet on the sanded floor, lest the silence should daunt any one who wished to withdraw. The lapse of three minutes was announced by a voice below the pulpit; and then of four; and then of the fifth; and when the few candles were re-lighted, it was observed that all heads were turned towards the door.

The preacher remarked that it was not perhaps yielding too much to natural solicitude to ask whether, to the knowledge of any who heard him, any person had passed out. Two or three answered,—one being sure that at least one, and he believed two, had stolen forth; while others were quite certain that the door had never been opened. The preacher invited to prayer before disclosing his further counsel; and he was wise in doing so; for, while he was “wrestling” with more vehemence than he had hitherto been betrayed into, for strength to the sufferers for the testimony, and pardon to the weak and

treacherous, and while all heads were bent in prayer, some person certainly did leave the place.

The assemblage was now sifted, the preacher said: and he could open counsel further. He related the news—for news it was to nearly all present,—of the administration of Romish rites to the late King on his death-bed. This event, he announced, was a date posted up in fiery characters in the history of religion. It was true, no persecution from Catholic James could well be worse than what the people of God were still suffering from the government of Protestant Charles,—so-called: but, as Charles turned out to be no Protestant, it was clear that the time had become ripe for the royal enterprise of overthrowing the Reformation altogether; and if the attempt could not be baffled, the doom of the world was sealed. The most monstrous of worldlings, Louis of France, was sitting quiet, watching for the lapse of Britain to Rome; and now, that monster no doubt thought his game secure, as England, under two successive Romish kings, could be no true ally to Holland; and Holland, with England against her, could no longer defy France.

The question was,—what was to be done? The Lord’s chosen would stand fast. A seed would be left in England,—and also in Scotland,—from which a harvest might arise to the Lord at some

future day: but was England going to allow her kings to hand her over to Rome, as a tenant hands over his Michaelmas gift to his landlord? Was such a lapse as this a fitting result of the conflict the last generation had waged, and of the death the father of these two kings had died?

Some murmurings of emotion had been heard at former points of the discourse: and now several voices exclaimed that a Protestant king must be had. It had become difficult to say so, one manly voice declared, because, since the Ryehouse plot, every one who desired a Protestant king was supposed to favour the assassination of the Catholic princes on or near the throne: but the time had come for men who were no zealots, and who abhorred bloodshed, to insist on a Protestant king for a reformed kingdom. Could any brother within the sound of his voice give information of any dealings by which the coming in of a Protestant king could be hoped for?

The preacher repeated the question, which was made more weighty by his authority.

“That can I,” replied some one in a foreign accent. “I have some knowledge. But to disclose it is to put my liberty on a random cast: and I have sacrificed much—my country and my kindred, and my patrimony,—for my liberty.”

The preacher leaned forward, and said, in a solemn voice:

“And what man of God’s elect has, in these evil days, obtained liberty but by sacrifices? And what man is worthy of liberty who would not put it to hazard to secure to Christ’s own the liberty with which he has made them free? It vexes me to speak of myself in such a case: but which of you does not know that I stand here as on the threshold of a prison, or on the ladder of the gallows? If I thus trust the brethren here assembled, another man surely may. If John Hickes is safe in the honour of Christians, so is Emmanuel Florien. I know you, Florien, and the stoutness of your heart. If I adjure you to speak, you will utter what concerns the cause.—I adjure you to speak.”

“I obey,” replied Florien: and of the whole assemblage, none were so amazed by his disclosures as the Battiscombes.

“I have information,” he said, “no matter how, for I will not involve others, and it is for those who hear me to test the truth of my words—I have information that a Protestant king for England has long been in view; and that since the late king’s death, the movement has quickened greatly. The exiles in Holland .....”

“He would be a madman who should trust the exiles in Holland,” observed a grey-headed man who sat under the pulpit. “How many of them have betrayed members of the late plot whom they had first incited to conspiracy, keeping from

them the aim against the lives of the Popish princes?”

“Hear me!” Florien continued: “and remember that those exiles are of various quality. John Locke is one of them.”

“Is he one of the movers you tell of?”

“I know not: but I know that he is as malcontent as any. When he learned that, by the King’s order, his name was blotted out of the books of his college, he said that this was equal to a command to take up the work from which Lord Shaftesbury had been released by death; and that he was an Englishman no more till an Englishman’s birthright of liberty was restored. It was not of him, however, that I rose to speak; but of others of whose transactions I will say no further word, if inquiry is made, directly or indirectly, about their names.”

“Speak on,” said the preacher; and his words were echoed by many.

“Certain of those Protestant patriots are now on the shores of the Lake of Geneva, waiting on Edmund Ludlow, to ask him to be their leader in cleansing the throne of England from Popery.”

A murmur of enthusiasm ran through the congregation. A voice here and there said that the Lord’s people would see the face of the Lord Protector’s old friend again before they died; while others feared that Ludlow would not be again brought forth from his retreat.