

## JEREMY

BY HUGH WALPOLE

*(Continued)*

## CHAPTER VIII

## Religion

## § 1

Always in after years Jeremy remembered that party of Miss Maddison's—not because it was there that he had won his first fight, but for the deeper reason that from that day his life received a new color woven into the texture of it; even now when he thinks of those hours that followed Miss Maddison's party, he catches his breath and glances around him to see whether everything is safe. The children, on arriving home that evening, found that their father and mother had already returned from Drymouth. Jeremy, sleepy though he was, rushed to his mother, held her hand, explained his black eye, and then suddenly, in a way that he had, fell asleep there where he was and had to be carried up to bed.

When he awoke next morning his first thought was of his mother. He did not know why: she was so definitely part of the background of his daily life that he felt too sure of her continual and unvarying presence to need deliberate thought of her. But this morning he wanted to get up quickly and find her. Perhaps her absence had made him feel more insecure, but there had also been something that night—something in her face, something in the touch of her hand. . . .

And the other thing that he realized was that summer had truly come. He knew at once that hot smell that

pressed even through the closed window-panes of his room; the bars and squares of light on the floor when he jumped out of bed and stood upon them seemed to burn the soles of his feet, and the rays of light on the ceiling quivered as only summer sunlight can quiver. The two windows of his bedroom looked back behind Polchester, over fields and hedges, to a dim purple line of wood. A tiny stream ran through the first two fields, and this little river was shining now with a white, hot light that had yet the breeze of the morning ruffling it.

He ran to his window and opened it. Beyond the wall that boarded their house was a little brown path; even as he watched, a company of cows were slowly wandering along. Already they were flapping their ears lazily in anticipation of the flies, and the boy who was driving them was whistling as one only whistles on a summer morning. He could see the buttercups, too, in the nearest field; they seemed to have sprung to life in the space of a night. Someone was pulling the rope of a well somewhere, and someone else was pouring water out upon some stone court. Even as he watched, a bee came blundering up to his window, hesitated for a moment and then went whirring off again; and through all the sun and glitter and the sparkle of the little river there was a scent of pinks and mignonette and hay and even, although it could not really

be so, of the gorse. The sky was a pale white-blue, so pale that it was scarcely any color at all, and a few puffs of clouds, dead white like the purest smoke, hovered in dancing procession above the purple wood. The sun burned upon his bare feet and his head and his hands.

This coming of summer meant so much more to him than merely the immediate joy of it: it meant Rafiel and Cow Farm and the cave, and green pools with crabs in them, and shrimping and paddling and riding home in the evening on hay-carts, and drinking milk out of tin cans, and cows, and small pigs. It meant peeling sticks and apples, and collecting shells and fishermen's nets, and sandwiches and saffron buns mixed with sand and hot ginger beer; one's ears peeling with the sun, and church on Sunday with the Rafiel sheep cropping the grass just outside the church door; and Dick Marriott the fisherman, and slipping along over the green water in his boat, trailing one's fingers in the water, and fishy smells by the sea-wall, and red masses of dogfish on the pier, and the still, cool feel of the farmhouse sheets just after getting into bed—all these things and a thousand more the coming of summer meant to Jeremy.

But this morning he did not feel his customary joy. Closing his window and dressing slowly, he wondered what was the matter. What could it be? It was not his eye—certainly it was a funny color this morning and it hurt when you touched it, but he was proud of that. No, it was not his eye. And it was not the dog, who came into his room, after scratching on the door, and made his usual morning pretense of having come for any other purpose than to see his friend and master—first looking under the bed, then going up to the window pretending to gaze

out of it (which he could not do), barking, then rolling on a square of sunlit carpet and, after that, lying on his back, his legs out stiff, his ridiculous "imperial" pointed and ironical; then suddenly turning, with a twist of his legs, rushing at last up to Jeremy, barking at him, laughing at him, licking him and even biting his stockings—last of all seizing a bedroom slipper and rushing, wildly, into the schoolroom with it.

No, there was nothing the matter with Hamlet. Nor was there anything the matter with Miss Jones, free, happily, from her customary neuralgia and delighted with the new number of "The Church Times". Nor was it the breakfast, which today included bacon and strawberry jam. Nor finally was it Mary or Helen who, pleased with the summer weather (and Mary additionally pleased with the virtues of Lance as minutely recorded in the second volume of "The Pillars of the House"), were both in the most amiable of tempers. No, it must be something inside Jeremy himself. . . .

He waited until the end of breakfast to ask his question: "Can I go and see mother, Miss Jones?"

Mary and Helen looked across at him inquisitively.

"What do you want to see your mother for now, Jeremy? You always see her at twelve o'clock." Miss Jones pushed her spectacles lower upon her nose and continued her reading.

"I want to."

"Well, you can't now."

"Why not?"

"Because I say not; that's enough."

But Jeremy was gentle today. He got off his chair, went round to Miss Jones's chair, and looking up at her out of his bruised eye,

said in his most touching voice:

"But, please, Miss Jones, I want to. I really do."

Then she said what he had known all the time was coming:

"I'm afraid you won't see your mother today, dear. She's not well. She's in bed."

"What? Is she ill?"

"She's tired after her journey yesterday, I expect."

He said no more.

He tried during the whole of that day not to think of his mother and he found that, for the first time in his life, he could do nothing else but think of her. During the morning he sat very silently over his lessons, did all that he was told, did not once kick Mary under the table, nor ask Miss Jones to sharpen his pencil, nor make faces at Hamlet. Once or twice, in a way that he had, he leaned his head on his hand as though he were an ancient professor with a whole library of great works behind him, and when Miss Jones asked him whether he had a headache he said, "No, thank you", instead of seizing on the wonderful opportunity for release that such a question offered him.

When they all went for a walk in the afternoon he sprang, for a moment, into something of his natural vivacity; they came upon a thin, ill-shaven tramp, dressed as a sailor, with a patch over one eye, producing terrible discordance from a fiddle. This individual held in one hand a black tin cup, and at his side crouched a mongrel terrier whose beaten and disheveled appearance created at once hopes in the breast of the flamboyant Hamlet. This couple were posted just outside Mr. Poole's second-hand bookshop, close to the second box and, for a moment, Jeremy was enthralled. He wanted to give the hero his week's

penny, and upon finding that his week's penny was not—owing to sweet purchases on the previous day, he began elaborate bargainings with Miss Jones as to the forestalling of future pennies. Meanwhile Hamlet leaped, with every sign of joyful expectation, upon the pauper dog, the blind sailor began to hit wildly about with his stick, Mr. Poole's second box was upset, and the sailor's black patch fell off, revealing him as the possessor of two beautiful eyes just like any other gentleman, and a fine vigorous stock of the best Glebeshire profanities. Mr. Poole, himself, an irascible old man, came out, a policeman approached, two old ladies from the close, well known to Jeremy, were shocked by the tramp, and the cathedral bell, as though it had just woke up to its real responsibilities, suddenly began to ring.

All this was, of course, delightful to Jeremy, and offered so many possible veins of interest that he could have stayed there for hours. He wanted very badly to ask the sailor why he covered up a perfectly wholesome eye with a black patch and he would have liked to see what Hamlet could do in the direction of eating up the scattered remnants of Mr. Poole's second box. But he was dragged away by the agitated hand of Miss Jones, having to console himself finally with a wink from the august policeman who, known throughout Polchester as Tom Noddy, was a kindly soul and liked gentlemanly little boys but persecuted the street sort.

For a moment this exciting adventure carried him away and he even listened for a minute or two to Mary who, seizing her opportunity, began hurriedly: "Once upon a time there lived a sailor, very thin, and he never washed and he had a dog and a violin—", but soon he remembered and

sighed and said, "Oh, bother, Mary!" and then walked on by himself. And still all through that hot afternoon, when even the Rope Walk did not offer any shade and when the Pol was of so clear a color that you could see trout and emerald stones and golden sand as under glass, and when Hamlet was compelled to run ahead and find a piece of shade and lie there stretched, panting, with his tongue out until they came up to him—even all these signs of a true and marvelous summer did not relieve Jeremy of his burden. Something horrible was going to happen. He knew it with such certainty that he wondered how Mary and Helen could be so gaily light-hearted and despised them for their carelessness. This was connected in some way with the hot weather; he felt as though, were a cold breeze suddenly to come and rain to fall, he would be happy again.

There had once been a boy, older than he, called Johnny Bain, a fat boy who had lived next door to the Coles. Whenever he had had the opportunity he had bullied Jeremy, pinching his arms, putting pins into his legs, and shouting suddenly into his ears. Jeremy, who had feared Johnny Bain, had always "felt" the stout youth's arrival before he appeared. The sky had seemed to darken, the air to thicken, the birds to gather in the "rooky" wood. He had trembled and shaken, his teeth had chattered, and his throat grown dry for no reason at all.

As he had once felt about Johnny Bain so now he felt about life in general. Something horrible was going to happen. . . . Something to do with Mother. . . . As he came up the road to their house his heart beat so that he could not hear his own steps.

## § 2

They entered the house and at once even Mary, preoccupied as she was with her story about the sailor, noticed that something was wrong.

"Rose! Rose!" she called out loudly.

"Hush!" said Miss Jones. "You must be quiet, dear."

"Why?" said Mary. "I want Rose to——"

"Your mother isn't at all well, dear—I——"

And she was interrupted by Rose who, coming suddenly downstairs with a face very different from her usual cheerful one, said something to Miss Jones in a low voice.

Miss Jones gave a little cry: "So soon? . . . A girl . . ." and then added, "How is she?"

Then Rose said something more which the children could not catch and vanished.

They all went upstairs. Then in the schoolroom Miss Jones said an amazing thing:

"I must tell you all, children, that you've got a new little sister."

"A new sister!" screamed Mary.

Helen said: "Oh, Miss Jones!"

Jeremy said: "What did she come for just now when mother is ill?"

"God wanted her to come, dear", said Miss Jones. "You must all be very kind to her and do all you can——"

She was interrupted by a torrent of questions from the two girls. What was she like? What was her name? Could she walk? Where did she come from? Did father and mother find her in Drymouth?—and so on. Jeremy was silent. At last he said: "We don't want any more girls here".

"Better than having another boy", said Helen.

But he would not take up the challenge. He sat on his favorite seat on

the window-ledge, dragged up a reluctant Hamlet to sit with him, and gazed out down into the garden that was misty now in the evening golden light, the trees and the soil black beneath the gold, the rooks circling slowly across the sky above the farther side of the road. Hamlet wriggled. He always detested that he should be cuddled and he would press first with one leg, then with another against Jeremy's coat; then he would lie dead for a moment, suddenly springing with his head up in the hope that the surprise would free him; then he would turn into a snake, twisting his body under Jeremy's arm and dropping with a flop on to the floor. All these manoeuvres today availed him nothing; Jeremy held his neck in a vise and dug his fingers well into the skin. Hamlet whined, then lay still and, in the midst of indignant reflections against the imbecile tyrannies of man, fell to his own surprise asleep.

Jeremy sat there while the dusk fell and all the beautiful lights were drawn from the sky and the rooks went to bed. Rose came to draw the curtains and then he left his window-seat, dragged out his toy farm and pretended to play with it. He looked at his sisters. They seemed quite tranquil. Helen was sewing and Mary deep in "The Pillars of the House". The clock ticked. Hamlet, lost in sleep, snored and sputtered; the whole world pursued its ordinary way. Only in himself something was changed: he was unhappy and he could not account for his unhappiness. It should have been because his mother was ill, and yet she had been ill before and he had been only disturbed for a moment. After all, grown-up people always got well. There had been Aunt Amy who had measles and the wife of the dean who had something, and even the

bishop once. . . . But now he was frightened. There was some perception, coming to him now for the first time in his life, that this world was not absolutely stable, that people left it, people came into it, that there was change and danger and something stronger. . . . Gradually this perception was approaching him as though it had been some dark figure who had entered the house and now with muffled step and veiled face was slowly climbing the stairs toward him. He only knew that his mother could not go, she could not go. She was part of his life, and she would always be so. Why, now when he thought of it, he could do nothing without his mother; every day he must tell her what he had done and what he was going to do, must show her what he had acquired, and must explain to her what he had lost, must go to her when he was hurt, and when he was frightened and when he was glad—and all these things he had never even thought until now.

As he sat there the house seemed to grow even quieter and quieter about him. He felt as though he would have liked to go to the schoolroom door and listen. It was terrible imagining the house behind the door—quite silent—so that the clocks had stopped and no one walked upon the stairs and no one laughed down in the pantry. He wished that they would make more noise in the schoolroom. He upset the church and the apple farm and Mrs. Noah.

But the silence after the noise was worse than ever.

Soon Miss Jones took the two girls away to her room to fit on some clothes, an operation which Helen adored and Mary hated. Jeremy was left alone and he was, at once, terribly frightened. He knew that it was of

no use to be frightened and he tried to go on with his game, putting the church with the apple-trees around it and the Noah family all sleeping under the trees; but at every moment something compelled him to raise his head and see that no one was there, and he felt so small and so lonely that he would have liked to hide under something.

Then when he thought of his mother all alone and the house so quiet around her and no one able to go to her, he felt so miserable that he turned round from his village and stared desolately into the fireplace. The thought of his new sister came to him, but was dismissed impatiently. He did not want a new sister—Mary and Helen were trouble enough as it was—and he felt, with an old weary air, that it was time, indeed, that he was off to school. Nothing was the same. Always new people. Never any peace. . . .

Jeremy, left alone, had a desperate impulse to scream that someone must come, that he was frightened, that something horrible was in the house. He stood up, staring at the closed door, his face white, his eyes large and full of fear. Then he flung himself down by Hamlet and taking him by the neck, whispered:

"I'm frightened! I'm frightened! Bark or something. . . . There's someone here!"

### § 3

Next morning Mrs. Cole was still alive. There had been no change during the night; today, the doctor said, would be the critical day. Today was Sunday and Mr. Cole took his morning service at his church as usual. He had been up all night—he looked haggard and pale, wearing the expression as of a man lost in a world that he had always trusted. But he would not

fail in his duty. "When two or three are gathered together in my name . . ." Perhaps God would hear him. . . .

It was a day of tremendous heat. No one had ever remembered so hot a day at so early a time of year. The windows of the church were open, but no breeze blew through the aisles. The relentless, blazing blue of the sky penetrated into the cool shadows of the church and it was as though the congregation sat there under shimmering glass. The waves of light shifted, rose and fell above the bonnets and hats and bare heads, and all the little choir-boys fell asleep during the sermon.

The Cole family did not fall asleep. They sat with pale faces and stiff backs staring at their father and thinking about their mother. Mary and Helen were frightened; the house was so strange, everyone spoke in whispers and, on the way into church, many ladies asked them how their mother was.

They felt important as well as sad. But Jeremy did not feel important. He had not heard the ladies and their questions—he would not have cared if he had. People had always called him "a queer little boy" simply because he was independent and thought more than he spoke. Nevertheless, he had always in reality been normal enough until now. Today he was really "queer", was conscious for the first time of the existence of a world whose adjacency to the real world was, in after days, to trouble him so often and to complicate life for him so grievously. The terror that had come down upon him on the previous day seemed today utterly to soak through into the very heart of him. His mother was going to die unless something or somebody saved her. What was dying?

Going away, he had always been told, with a golden harp, to sing hymns in a foreign country. But today the picture would not form so easily. There was silence and darkness and confusion about this death. His mother was going, against her will, and no one could tell him whither she was going. If he could only stop her dying, force God to leave her alone, to leave her with them all as she had been before. . . .

He fixed his eyes upon his father, who climbed into his pulpit and gave out the text of his sermons. Today he would talk about the sacrifice of Isaac. "Abraham, as his hearers would remember . . ." and so on.

Jeremy listened and gradually there grew before his eyes the figure of a strange and terrible God. This was no new figure. He had never thought directly about God, but for a very long time now he had had Him in the background of his life, as Polchester Town Hall was in the background. But now he definitely and actively figured to himself this God, this God who was taking his mother away, and was intending apparently to put her into some dark place where she would know nobody. It must be some horrible place, because his father looked so frightened—which he would not look if his mother were simply going, with a golden harp, to sing hymns. Jeremy had always heard that this God was loving and kind and tender, but the figure whom his father was now drawing for the benefit of the congregation was none of these things.

Mr. Cole spoke of a God just and terrible, but a God who apparently for the merest fancy put His faithful servant to terrible anguish and distress and then, for another fancy as light as the first, spared him his sorrow. Mr. Cole emphasized the neces-

sity for obedience, the need for a willing surrender of anything that may be dear to us, "because the love of God must be greater than anything that holds us here on earth". But Jeremy did not listen to these remarks; his mind was filled with this picture of a vast, shadowy figure, seated in the sky, his white beard flowing beneath eyes that frowned from dark, rocky eyebrows out upon people like Jeremy who, although doing their best, were nevertheless at the mercy of any whim that He might have. This terrible figure was the author of the hot day, author of the silent house and the shimmering darkened church, author of the decision to take his mother away from all that she loved and put her somewhere where she would be alone and cold and silent—"simply because he wishes . . ."

"From this beautiful passage", concluded Mr. Cole, "we learn that God is just and merciful but that He demands our obedience. We must be ready at any instant to give up what we love best . . ."

Afterward they all trooped out into the splendid sunshine.

#### § 4

There was a horrible Sunday dinner when the silence, and the roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, and the dining-room quivering with heat, emphasized every minute of the solemn ticking clock—Mary suddenly burst into tears, choked over a glass of water, and was led from the room. Jeremy ate his beef and rice pudding in silence except that once or twice in a low hoarse voice he whispered: "Pass the mustard, please" or "Pass the salt, please". Miss Jones, watching his white face and the tremble of his upper lip, longed to say something

to comfort him but wisely held her peace.

After dinner Jeremy collected Hamlet and went to the conservatory. This, like so many other English conservatories, was a desolate and desperate little place where boxes of sand, dry corded-looking bulbs, and an unhappy plant or two languished, forgotten and forlorn. For Jeremy the place had had always an indescribable fascination. When he was very young there had been absolute trust that things would grow, that every kind of wonder might spring before one's eyes at any moment of the day. Then when no wonder came, there had been the thrill of the empty boxes of earth, the probing with one's fingers to see what the funny-looking bulbs would be, and the watching of the fronds on the pale vine. Afterward there was another fascination—the fascination of some strange and sinister atmosphere that he was much too young to define. The place, he knew, was different from the rest of the house. It projected, conventionally enough, from the drawing-room, but the heavy door with thick windows of red glass shut it off from the whole world. Its rather dirty and obscure windows looked over the same country that Jeremy's bedroom window commanded. It also caught all the sun, so that in the summer it was terribly hot. But he loved the heat.

Another thing that Jeremy felt there was that he was in a glass cage swinging over the whole world. If one shut one's eyes, one could easily fancy that one was swinging out, swinging, swinging . . . and that suddenly, perhaps, the cage would be detached from the house and go sailing, like a magic carpet, to Arabia and Persia and anywhere you please

to command . . . easily and quickly.

Today the glass burnt like fire and the green fields came floating up like running water. The house was utterly still; the red glass door shut off the world. Jeremy sat, his arms tightly round Hamlet's neck, on the dirty floor; he was a strange mixture of misery, weariness, fright, and anger. There was already in him a strain of impatience, so that he could not bear simply to sit down and bewail something as, for instance, both his sisters were doing at this moment. He must act. They could not be happy without their mother; he himself wanted her so badly that even now, there in the flaming conservatory, if he had allowed himself to do such a thing, he would have sat and cried and cried and cried. But he was not going to cry. Mary and Helen could cry; they were girls; he was going to do something.

As he sat there, getting hotter and hotter, there grew, larger and larger before his eyes, the figure of Terrible God. That image of Someone of a vast size sitting in the red-hot sky, his white beard flowing, his eyes frowning, grew ever more and more awful. Jeremy stared up into the glass, his eyes blinking, the sweat beginning to pour down his nose, and yet his body shivering with terror. But he had strung himself up to meet Him. Somehow he was going to save his mother and hinder her departure. At an instant, inside him, he was crying: "I want my mother! I want my mother!" like a little boy who had been left in the street, and at the other, "You shan't have her! You shan't have her!" as though someone were trying to steal his toy village or Hamlet away from him. His sleepy, bemused, heated brain wandered, in dazed fashion, back to his

father's sermon of that morning. Abraham and Isaac! Abraham and Isaac!

Abraham and Isaac! Suddenly, as though through the flaming glass something had been flung to him, an idea came. Perhaps God, that huge, ugly God, was teasing the Coles just as once He had teased Abraham. Perhaps He wished to see whether they were truly obedient as the Jampot had sometimes wished in the old days. He was only, it might be, pretending. Perhaps he was demanding that one of them should give up something, something of great value. Even Jeremy, himself. . . .

If he had to sacrifice something to save his mother what would be hardest to sacrifice? Would it be his toy village or Mary or Helen or his soldiers or his paint-box or his goldfish that he had in a bowl or . . . No, of course he had known from the first what would be hardest . . . it would, of course, be Hamlet.

At this stage in his thinking he removed his arms from Hamlet's neck and looked at the animal. At the same moment the light that had filled the glass-house with a fiery radiance that burnt in the very heart of the place, was clouded. Above in the sky, black smoky clouds, rolling in fold after fold as though some demon were flinging them out across the sky as one flings a carpet, piled up and up, each one darker than the last. The light vanished; the conservatory was filled with a thick murky glow, and far across the fields from the heart of the black wood came the low rumble of thunder. But Jeremy did not hear that; he was busy with his thoughts. He stared at the dog who was lying stretched out on the dirty floor, his nose between his toes. It cannot truthfully be said that the resolve

that was forming in Jeremy's head had its birth in any fine, noble idealisms. It was as though some bully, seizing his best marbles, had said: "I'll give you these back, if you hand over this week's pocket-money!" His attitude to the bully could not truthfully be described as one of homage or reverence; rather was it one of anger and impotent rebellion.

He loved Hamlet and he loved his mother more than Hamlet, but he was not moved by sentiment. Grimly, his legs apart, his eyes shut tight as they were when he said his prayers, he made his challenge.

"I'll give you Hamlet, if you won't take mother——" A pause. "Only I can't cut Hamlet's throat. But I could lose him if that would do. . . . Only you must take him now—I couldn't do it tomorrow." His voice began to tremble. He was frightened. He could feel behind his closed eyes that the darkness had gathered. The place seemed to be filled with rolling smoke and the house was so terribly still!

He said again: "You can take Hamlet. He's my best thing. You can . . . You can . . ."

There followed then with the promptitude of a most admirably managed theatrical climax a peal of thunder that seemed to strike the house with the iron hand of a giant. Two more came and then, for a second, a silence, more deadly than all the earlier havoc.

Jeremy felt that God had leapt upon him. He opened his eyes, turned as though to run and then saw, with a freezing check upon the very beat of his heart, that Hamlet was gone. . . .

##### §5

There was no Hamlet!

In that second of frantic, unreasoning terror he received a conviction of

God that no rationalistic training in later years was able to remove.

There was no Hamlet—only the dusky, dirty place with a black torrent-driven world beyond it. With a rush as of a thousand whips slashing the air, the rain came down upon the glass. Jeremy turned crying, "Mother! Mother! I want Mother!" and flung himself at the red glass doors; fumbling in his terror for the handle, he felt as though the end of the world had come; such a panic had seized him as only belongs to the most desperate of nightmares. God had answered him. Hamlet was gone and in a moment Jeremy himself might be seized. . . .

He felt frantically for the door; he beat upon the glass. He cried "Mother! Mother! Mother!"

He had found the door but just as he turned the handle he was aware of a new sound, heard distantly, through the rain. Looking back he saw, from behind a rampart of dusty flower-pots, first a head, then a rough, tumbled body, then a tail that might be

recognized among all the tails of Christendom.

Hamlet (who had trained himself to meet with a fine natural show of bravery every possible violence save only thunder) crept ashamed, dirty, and smiling toward his master.

God had only played His trick—Abraham and Isaac after all.

Then with a fine sense of victory and defiance Jeremy turned back, looked up at the slashing rain, and gazed out upon the black country. At last he seized Hamlet and dragging him out by his hind-legs, knelt there in the dust, and suffered himself to be licked until his face was as though a snail had crossed over it.

The thunder passed. Blue pushed up into the grey. A cool air blew through the world.

Nevertheless, deep in his heart, the terror remained. In that moment he had met God, face to face; he had delivered his first challenge. . . .

It was on the evening of that Sunday that Mrs. Cole turned the corner toward recovery.

*(To be continued)*

