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Howells' Minister in a Maze: "A Difficult Case"

by JOHN W. CROWLEY

PERHAPS BECAUSE W. D. Howells' literary reputation rests upon his accomplishments as a novelist, his short fiction, except for the widely anthologized "Editha," has gone practically unnoticed. As a result, anthologists and critics alike have so far overlooked one of his best stories, "A Difficult Case."¹ The germ of "A Difficult Case" was an entry in Howells' *Indian Summer* notebook on a story to be called "Transfusion": "Old fellow who goes to a young friend for cheer when he is gloomy, and impoverishes his spirit. Friend expostulates with him; he stops coming; or on the way commits suicide. Perhaps young man's wife interferes."² When Howells took up the idea in 1899 or 1900, he wrote a story which resembles Hawthorne's tales both in its psychological and moral complexity and in its concern with the "magnetic chain of humanity."

The strikingly Hawthornian quality of "A Difficult Case" is not accidental. Howells once wrote of Hawthorne that "more truly than any other American author he has been a passion with me."³ "A Difficult Case" might well have been entitled "The Minister in a Maze," since it was undoubtedly inspired by that chapter in *The Scarlet Letter*, a book which Howells greatly admired. The Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, encountering "the eldest female member of his church," barely conquers a satanic urge to whisper in her ear "a brief, pithy, and, as it then appeared to him, unanswerable argument against the immortality of the human soul." The result, Hawthorne suggests, would have been to cause "this aged sister to drop down dead, at once, as by the effect of an intensely poisonous infusion."⁴ Clarence Ewbart, Howells' minister in a maze, is not so

1. "A Difficult Case" first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1900. The merits of the story were not lost on Howells' two closest literary friends. Henry James told Howells that he found it "beautiful and admirable, ever so true and ever so done" (*The Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock [New York: Scribner's, 1920], I, 375). Samuel Clemens, presumably identifying himself with old Hilbrook's skepticism, reported: "I read the Difficult Situation night before last, & got a world of evil joy out of it" (*Mark Twain—Howells Letters*, ed. Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960], II, 719).

2. Quoted in Edwin H. Cady, *The Realist At War* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 137–38. Cady gives glancing critical attention to "A Difficult Case," calling it a "striking tale" (p. 138) and one of Howells' "most moving short stories" (p. 201).

3. *My Literary Passions and Criticism and Fiction*, Library Ed. (New York: Harper, 1911), p. 139.

4. *The Scarlet Letter*, ed. Edwin H. Cady (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1969), pp. 218–19. On Howells' admiration for Hawthorne, see Louis J. Budd, "W. D. Howells' Defence of the Romance," *PMLA*, LXVII (March 1952), 36–38.

fortunate as Dimmesdale. Pressed beyond the limits of his Christian love by an elderly skeptic, Ewbert in his action rather than his words *does* make a seemingly “unanswerable argument against the immortality of the human soul”; and the consequences are fatal.

At the beginning of “A Difficult Case,” Clarence and Emily Ewbert have recently arrived in the small New England town of Hilbrook. Formerly known as West Mallow, Hilbrook owes its name as well as its university, library, town hall, soldiers’ monument, and even public drinking fountain to the bequest of Josiah Hilbrook, a native who left town to make his fortune in New York. A member of an obscure Christian sect, known as the Rixonites, Hilbrook also bequeathed money to support a church; and it is the ministry of the Rixonite Church that has brought Ewbert and his wife to the village. As conceived by its founder, the religious life of Rixonitism consisted of “a patient waiting upon the divine will, with a constant reference of this world’s mysteries and problems to the world to come. . . .”⁵ But in Ewbert’s preaching the Rixonite doctrine of patience has degenerated into “a species of acquiescence which was foreign to the thoughts of the founder”:

So far from wishing his hearers to be constantly taking stock, as it were, of their spiritual condition, and interrogating Providence as to its will concerning them, he besought them to rest in confidence of the divine mindfulness, secure that while they fulfilled all their plain, simple duties toward one another, God would inspire them to act according to his purposes in the more psychological crises and emergencies, if these should ever be part of their experience. (pp. 149–50)

In Ewbert’s own psychological crisis, he learns painfully that the will of Providence is more inscrutable than he has believed.

The agent of this crisis is old Ransom Hilbrook, Josiah Hilbrook’s brother, who has lived as a recluse in the old family house since his business failure. Like his brother, Ransom was raised in the Rixonite faith; and he dutifully attends all of Ewbert’s services. But Hilbrook’s faith in immortality was shattered by his combat experiences in the Civil War. Convinced that he has exhausted his capacity to enjoy life, Hilbrook wants to die. He is troubled, however, by a lingering fear that he might live again after all, and be compelled to “wake up in my old identity, with the potentiality of new experiences in new conditions” (p. 176). Since belief in immortality is the core of Rixonitism, Hilbrook’s doubt challenges Ewbert’s pastoral skill. He must persuade Hilbrook not only that there is an afterlife, but that it will be sufficiently different from earthly existence to be worthwhile.

The two men engage in a series of exhausting philosophical discussions through which Ewbert progresses from patronizing Hilbrook to hoping desperately for his conversion. His repeated arguments for immortality

5. “A Difficult Case” in *A Pair of Patient Lovers* (New York: Harper, 1901), p. 149. Other quotations are cited in the text.

finally begin to tell, but to his horror Ewbert finds that his own faith has diminished proportionately as Hilbrook's has grown. "The conviction of a life hereafter was not something which he was *sharing* with Hilbrook; he was *giving* it absolutely, and with such entire unreserve that he was impoverishing his own soul of its most precious possession" (p. 195). As his health, both physical and spiritual, deteriorates, Ewbert comes to perceive Hilbrook as his monster, "as if he had spiritually constituted him, in the charnel of unbelief, out of the spoil of death, like some new and fearful figment of Frankenstein's" (p. 185). Like Dimmesdale, after his forest encounter with Hester Prynne, Ewbert must resist perverse temptations:

The more monstrous the thing appeared to his mind and conscience, the more fascinating it became. Once the mere horror of such a conception as catching a comely parishoner [sic] about the waist and kissing her, when she had come to him with a case of conscience, had so confused him in her presence as to make him answer her wildly, not because he was really tempted to the wickedness, but because he realized so vividly the hideousness of the impossible temptation. In some such sort he now trembled before old Hilbrook, thinking how dreadful it would be if he were suddenly to begin undoing the work of faith in him, and putting back in its place the doubts which he had uprooted before. (pp. 196-97)

At the moment of success with Hilbrook, Ewbert teeters on the brink of nervous collapse. At this juncture, as Howells interjects, "the time had come when the minister must seek refuge and counsel with his wife" (p. 199).

Mrs. Ewbert, unlike her husband, was not brought up as a Rixonite; she "accepted its doctrines because she loved her husband rather than because she had been convinced of its truth" (p. 147). From the beginning of the story, Mrs. Ewbert shows herself to be more cognizant of the social than of the moral dimensions of her husband's ministry. Her goal is to ingratiate the respectable people at Hilbrook University, whose sense of debt to Josiah Hilbrook does not extend to their attending the Rixonite Church, except on ceremonial occasions. Mrs. Ewbert complains that Ewbert's sermons are wasted on the dull faithful of his congregation; and she resents his attentions to Hilbrook, whose unbelief she regards as an insult to her husband. At first, Ewbert gently chastizes her, reminding her that his Christian duty requires him to serve even the most offensive members of his flock. But as Hilbrook saps more and more of his vigor, Ewbert feels increasingly torn between his marital and pastoral responsibilities.

As he nears a breakdown, he has a climactic argument with his wife. Calling Hilbrook a "terrible old man" and a "vampire," she insists that Ewbert escape for a recuperative vacation (p. 200). To his plea that he has a duty to give his life to others, she retorts: "But *my* life isn't for you to give to others, and *your* life *is* mine, and I think I have some right to say what shall be done with it, and I don't choose to have it used up on old Hilbrook" (p. 200). Although Ewbert muses that his wife's "thoroughly

terrestrial attitude" might be "a potent argument for sacerdotal celibacy," he submits to her will.

Mrs. Ewbert's concern for her husband seems reasonable initially, but Howells carefully undercuts her character. When Ewbert agrees to let her send Hilbrook away temporarily, she promises, "I shall take care of his feelings, but I shall have my own opinions, all the same, Clarence." Howells adds: "Whether a woman with opinions so strong as Mrs. Ewbert's, and so indistinguishable from her prejudices, could be trusted to keep them to herself, in dealing with the matter at hand, was a question which her husband felt must largely be left to her goodness of heart for its right solution" (p. 201). Ewbert should know what Howells implies, that Mrs. Ewbert is motivated as much by selfishness and social ambition as by any "goodness of heart." So in the crucial scene where she refuses Hilbrook admittance to her husband, Mrs. Ewbert ostensibly tries to dismiss him without letting him feel "anything personal in her hints"; but her words betray her deeper intent:

Mr. Ewbert merely needed toning up, she said; but to correct the impression she might be giving that his breakdown was a trifling matter, she added that she felt very anxious about it, and wanted to get him away as soon as possible. She said with a confidential effect, as of something in which Hilbrook could sympathize with her: "You know it isn't merely his church work proper; it's his giving himself spiritually to all sorts of people so indiscriminately. He can't deny himself to any one; and sometimes he's perfectly exhausted by it." (p. 202)

Sure that her husband will never succeed with the university people so long as he devotes himself to pariahs like Hilbrook, Mrs. Ewbert means to insult the old man. But as Hilbrook leaves the house despondently, a fear comes upon her that makes it "impossible for her to recount all the facts of her interview to her husband." Rather, she feels compelled "to conceal what was painful to herself in it, and she merely told him that Mr. Hilbrook had taken it all in the right way . . ." (p. 203).

Unaware that Hilbrook has been deeply hurt by his wife's rebuff, Ewbert takes his vacation. The absence of Hilbrook permits the minister finally to indulge the dread of the man which he has previously repressed; and upon his return, Ewbert secretly wishes that Hilbrook will leave him alone. Hilbrook, meanwhile, lapses into despair and dies miserably, despite Ewbert's frantic, belated ministrations. Having lost the will to live, Hilbrook, in effect, commits suicide; but he is also the apparent victim of the Ewberts' indifference.

Tortured by guilt for having neglected Hilbrook, Ewbert accepts the dubious consolation of his wife: "And what use would there have been in your killing yourself, anyway? It wasn't as if he were a young man with a career of usefulness before him, that might have been marred by his not believing this or that. He had been a complete failure every way, and the end of the world had come for him. What did it matter whether such a man believed that there was another world or not?" (p. 217). Twitting him

for being "more conscientious than the worst kind of Congregationalist," she urges him to consider "your duty to yourself—and to me—and to people who can know how to profit by your teaching and your example, not to give way as you're doing, simply because a worn-out old agnostic couldn't keep his hold on the truth" (p. 218).

In the final chapter, Ewbert delivers a funeral sermon for Hilbrook which greatly impresses the university people, who "to testify their respect for their founder, had come in a body to the obsequies of his kinsman"; and Mrs. Ewbert "augured the best things for her husband's future usefulness from their presence" (p. 220). In this mordant last sentence, as throughout the story, Howells' ironic undercutting of Mrs. Ewbert is unmistakable. By deceiving her husband, by masking her selfishness and hypocrisy in the guise of wifely concern, she is more monstrous than she accuses Hilbrook of being.

Unlike his wife, Ewbert knows he has failed morally in neglecting Hilbrook. Though he recognizes some reason and justice in his wife's hatred of Hilbrook—who was, after all, threatening to consume his very life—Ewbert takes his Christian principles seriously enough to feel guilt for betraying them. As his wife says, "I do believe that if you could bring old Hilbrook back into a world that he was sick and tired of, you'd give your own life to do it" (p. 218). But Ewbert refuses to abandon himself to "a useless remorse." Rather, he sets himself "to study the lesson of old Hilbrook's life" (p. 219).

This lesson is the efficacy of love. Hilbrook, on his deathbed, makes it clear that what briefly had reanimated his life was not Ewbert's philosophical arguments—" 'twa'n't nothing but a metaphysical toy, anyway" (p. 212)—but Ewbert's human concern, his willingness to give his life for a brother. What had made belief in immortality possible for Hilbrook was the personification in Ewbert of that perfect love that the minister speculated would exist in afterlife: "Can't we imagine love in which there is no greed,—for greed, and not hate, is the true antithesis of love which is all giving, while greed is all getting,—a love that is absolutely pure?" (p. 187).

"A Difficult Case" is Howells' confrontation of this question; and, as the title suggests, he offers no easy answer. Yes, Howells seems to say, we can *imagine* a "love that is absolutely pure," but we are not likely to discover it in this life. As Mrs. Ewbert's love for her husband is compromised by her greed for social status, so Ewbert's love for Hilbrook is limited by his psychological and physical need to survive. Of course, Howells judges Ewbert's failure of love to be less morally culpable than that of his wife; but it is a failure nonetheless. The inextricable bondage of love to greed, the irreducible ambiguity of human motivation, the individual's reluctance literally to lay down his life for another, all make pure love impossible to sustain for long. Failing to find pure love on earth, Hilbrook cannot believe in its existing hereafter. Although Howells

understands the reasons for Hilbrook's despair, he refuses to countenance it. To deny the possibility of pure love is, like Hilbrook, to die to this life *and* to the hope of an afterlife. The alternative view, what Howells seems to affirm in the story, is a willed belief in the ideal of love and a commitment to life itself, whatever its mysteries and imperfections. Like Ewbert, in his sermon, Howells urges "upon his hearers the necessity of keeping themselves alive through some relation to the undying frame of things, which they could do only by cherishing earthly ties; and when these were snapped in the removal of their objects, by attaching the broken threads through an effort of the will to yet other objects: the world could furnish these inexhaustibly" (p. 219).

Not surprisingly, Mrs. Ewbert finds this sermon "rather abstruse in certain passages." Neither she nor the university people seem capable of grasping Ewbert's point or the lesson of old Hilbrook's life. Howells does not, then, conclude the story with any ringing affirmation; he juxtaposes Ewbert's insight to Mrs. Ewbert's blindness. This ironic balance, the literary expression of Howells' persistent agnosticism, leaves us with the calculated irresolution so characteristic of Howells' work. "A Difficult Case" evinces Howells' conviction, as he said in an essay in 1903, that "what really endures is mystery, which is the prime condition of existence, and will doubtless be its ultimate condition." To face such mystery, Howells found agnosticism "not an unpromising or unhopeful frame of mind." It might be, as he said, "only one remove, as it is only one syllable, from a Gnosticism wiser and not less trusting than the old. . . ."⁶

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6. "Editor's Easy Chair," *Harper's*, CVII (June 1903), 146, 149.