

Chapter 10

'He made love neither with roses, nor with apples, nor with locks of hair.' - THEOCRITUS.

ONE Sunday afternoon Felix Holt rapped at the door of Mr Lyon's house, although he could hear the voice of the minister preaching in the chapel. He stood with a book under his arm, apparently confident that there was some one in the house to open the door for him. In fact, Esther never went to chapel in the afternoon: that 'exercise' made her head ache.

In these September weeks Felix had got rather intimate with Mr Lyon. They shared the same political sympathies; and though, to Liberals who had neither freehold nor copyhold nor leasehold, the share in a county election consisted chiefly of that prescriptive amusement of the majority known as 'looking on,' there was still something to be said on the occasion, if not to be done. Perhaps the most delightful friendships are those in which there is much agreement, much disputation, and yet more personal liking; and the advent of the public-spirited, contradictory, yet affectionate Felix, into Treby life, had made a welcome epoch to the minister. To talk with this young man, who, though hopeful, had a singularity which some might at once have pronounced heresy, but which Mr Lyon persisted in regarding as orthodoxy 'in the making,' was like a good bite to strong teeth after a too plentiful allowance of spoon meat. To cultivate his society with a view to checking his erratic tendencies was a laudable purpose; but perhaps if Felix had been rapidly subdued and reduced to conformity, little Mr Lyon would have found the conversation much flatter.

Esther had not seen so much of their new acquaintance as her father had. But she had begun to find him amusing, and also rather irritating to her woman's love of conquest. He always opposed and criticised her; and besides that, he

looked at her as if he never saw a single detail about her person - quite as if she were a middle-aged woman in a cap. She did not believe that he had ever admired her hands, or her long neck, or her graceful movements, which had made all the girls at school call her Calypso (doubtless from their familiarity with Telemaque). Felix ought properly to have been a little in love with her - never mentioning it, of course, because that would have been disagreeable, and his being a regular lover was out of the question. But it was quite clear that, instead of feeling any disadvantage on his own side, he held himself to be immeasurably her superior: and, what was worse, Esther had a secret consciousness that he was her superior. She was all the more vexed at the suspicion that he thought slightly of her; and wished in her

vexation that she could have found more fault with him - that she had not been obliged to admire more and more the varying expressions of his open face and his deliciously good-humoured laugh, always loud at a joke against himself. Besides, she could not help having her curiosity roused by the unusual combinations both in his mind and in his outward position, and she had surprised herself as well as her father one day by suddenly starting up and proposing to walk with him when he was going to pay an afternoon visit to Mrs Holt, to try and soothe her concerning Felix. 'What a mother he has!' she said to herself when they came away again; 'but, rude and queer as he is, I cannot say there is anything vulgar about him. Yet - I don't know - if I saw him by the side of a finished gentleman.' Esther wished that finished gentleman were among her acquaintances: he would certainly admire her, and make her aware of Felix's inferiority.

On this particular Sunday afternoon, when she heard the knock at the door, she was seated in the kitchen corner between the fire and the window reading Rene. Certainly, in her well-fitting light-blue dress - she almost always wore some shade of blue - with her delicate sandalled slipper stretched towards the fire, her little gold watch, which had cost her nearly a quarter's earnings, visible at her side, her slender fingers playing with a shower of brown curls, and a coronet of shining plaits at the summit of her head, she was a remarkable Cinderella. When the rap came, she coloured, and was going to shut her book and put it out of the way on the window-ledge behind her; but she desisted with a little toss, laid it open on the table beside her, and walked to the outer door, which opened into the kitchen. There was rather a mischievous gleam in her face: the rap was not a small one; it came probably from a large personage with a vigorous arm.

'Good afternoon, Miss Lyon,' said Felix, taking off his cloth cap: he resolutely declined the expensive ugliness of a hat, and in a poked cap and without a cravat, made a figure at which his mother cried every Sunday, and thought of with a slow shake of the head at several passages in the minister's prayer.

'Dear me, it is you, Mr Holt! fear you will have to wait some time before you can see my father. The sermon is not ended yet, and there will be the hymn and the prayer, and perhaps other things to detain him.'

'Well, will you let me sit down in the kitchen? I don't want to be a bore.'

'O no,' said Esther, with her pretty light laugh, 'I always give you credit for not meaning it. Pray come in, if you don't mind waiting. I was sitting in the kitchen: the kettle is singing quite prettily. It is much nicer than the parlour - not half so ugly.'

'There I agree with you.'

'How very extraordinary! But if you prefer the kitchen, and don't want to sit with me, I can go into the parlour.'

'I came on purpose to sit with you,' said Felix, in his blunt way, 'but I thought it likely you might be vexed at seeing me. I wanted to talk to you, but I've got nothing pleasant to say. As your father would have it, I'm not given to prophesy smooth things - to prophesy deceit.'

'I understand,' said Esther, sitting down. 'Pray be seated. You thought I had no afternoon sermon, so you came to give me one.'

'Yes,' said Felix, seating himself sideways in a chair not far off her, and leaning over the back to look at her with his large clear grey eyes, 'and my text is something you said the other day. You said you didn't mind about people having right opinions so that they had good taste. Now I want you to see what shallow stuff that is.'

'Oh, I don't doubt it if you say so. I know you are a person of right opinions.'

'But by opinions you mean men's thoughts about great subjects, and by taste you mean their thoughts about small ones; dress, behaviour, amusements, ornaments.'

'Well - yes - or rather, their sensibilities about those things.'

'It comes to the same thing; thoughts, opinions, knowledge, are only a sensibility to facts and ideas. If I understand a geometrical problem, it is because I have a sensibility to the way in which lines and figures are related to each other; and I want you to see that the creature who has the sensibilities that you call taste, and not the sensibilities that you call opinions, is simply a lower, pettier sort of being - an insect that notices the shaking of the table, but never notices the thunder.'

'Very well, I am an insect; yet I notice that you are thundering at me.'

'No, you are not an insect. That is what exasperates me at your making a boast of littleness. You have enough understanding to make it wicked that you should add one more to the women who hinder men's lives from having any nobleness in them.'

Esther coloured deeply: she resented this speech, yet she disliked it less than many Felix had addressed to her.

'What is my horrible guilt?' she said, rising and standing, as she was wont, with one foot on the fender, and looking at the fire. If it had

been any one but Felix who was near her, it might have occurred to her that this attitude showed her to advantage; but she had only a mortified sense that he was quite indifferent to what others praised her for.

'Why do you read this mawkish stuff on a Sunday, for example?' he said, snatching up Rene, and running his eye over the pages.

'Why don't you always go to chapel, Mr Holt, and read Howe's Living Temple, and join the church?'

'There's just the difference between us - I know why I don't do those things. I distinctly see that I can do something better. I have other principles, and should sink myself by doing what I don't recognise as the best.'

'I understand,' said Esther, as lightly as she could, to conceal her bitterness. 'I am a lower kind of being, and could not so easily sink myself.'

'Not by entering into your father's ideas. If a woman really believes herself to be a lower kind of being, she should place herself in subjection: she should be ruled by the thoughts of her father or husband. If not, let her show her power of choosing something better. You must know that your father's principles are greater and worthier than what guides your life. You have no reason but idle fancy and selfish inclination for shirking his teaching and giving your soul up to trifles.'

'You are kind enough to say so. But I am not aware that I have ever confided my reasons to you.'

'Why, what worth calling a reason could make any mortal hang over this trash? - idiotic immorality dressed up to look fine, with a little bit of doctrine tacked to it, like a hare's foot on a dish, to make believe the mess is not cat's flesh. Look here ! 'Est-ce ma faute, si je trouve partout les bornes, si ce qui est fini n'a pour moi aucune valeur?' Yes, sir, distinctly your fault, because you're an ass. Your dunce who can't do his sums always has a taste for the infinite. Sir, do you know what a rhomboid is? Oh no, I don't value these things with limits. 'Cependant, j'aime la monotonie des sentimens de la vie, et si j'avais encore la folie de croire au bonheur -'

'O pray, Mr Holt, don't go on reading with that dreadful accent; it sets one's teeth on edge.' Esther, smarting helplessly under the previous lashes, was relieved by this diversion of criticism.

'There it is!' said Felix, throwing the book on the table, and getting up to walk about. 'You are only happy when you can spy a tag or a tassel loose to turn the talk, and get rid of any judgment that must carry grave action after it.'

'I think I have borne a great deal of talk without turning it.'

'Not enough, Miss Lyon - not all that I came to say. I want you to change. Of course I am a brute to say so. I ought to say you are perfect. Another man would, perhaps. But I say, I want you to change.'

'How am I to oblige you? By joining the church?'

'No; but by asking yourself whether life is not as solemn a thing as your father takes it to be - in which you may be either a blessing or a curse to many. You know you have never done that. You don't care to be better than a bird trimming its feathers, and pecking about after what pleases it. You are discontented with the world because you can't get just the small things that suit your pleasure, not because it's a world where myriads of men and women are ground by wrong and misery, and tainted with pollution.'

Esther felt her heart swelling with mingled indignation at this liberty, wounded pride at this depreciation, and acute consciousness that she could not contradict what Felix said. He was outrageously ill-bred; but she felt that she should be lowering herself by telling him so, and manifesting her anger: in that way she would be confirming his accusation of a littleness that shrank from severe truth; and, besides, through all her mortification there pierced a sense that this exasperation of Felix against her was more complimentary than anything in his previous behaviour. She had self-command enough to speak with her usual silvery voice.

'Pray go on, Mr Holt. Relieve yourself of these burning truths. I am sure they must be troublesome to carry unuttered.'

'Yes, they are,' said Felix, pausing, and standing not far off her. 'I can't bear to see you going the way of the foolish women who spoil men's lives. Men can't help loving them, and so they make themselves slaves to the petty desires of petty creatures. That's the way those who might do better spend their lives for nought - get checked in every great effort - toil with brain and limb for things that have no more to do with a manly life than tarts and confectionery. That's what makes women a curse; all life is stunted to suit their littleness. That's why I'll never love, if I can help it; and if I love, I'll bear it, and never marry.'

The tumult of feeling in Esther's mind - mortification, anger, the sense of a terrible power over her that Felix seemed to have as his angry words vibrated through her - was getting almost too much for her self-control. She felt her lips quivering; but her pride, which feared nothing so much as the betrayal of her emotion, helped her to a desperate effort. She pinched her own hand to overcome her tremor, and said, in a tone of scorn -

'I ought to be very much obliged to you for giving me your confidence so freely.'

'Ah! now you are offended with me, and disgusted with me. I expected it would be so. A woman doesn't like a man who tells her the truth.'

'I think you boast a little too much of your truth-telling, Mr Holt,' said Esther, flashing out at last. 'That virtue is apt to be easy to people when they only wound others and not themselves. Telling the truth often means no more than taking a liberty.'

'Yes, I suppose I should have been taking a liberty if I had tried to drag you back by the skirt when I saw you running into a pit.'

'You should really found a sect. Preaching is your vocation. It is a pity you should ever have an audience of only one.'

'I see; I have made a fool of myself. I thought you had a more generous mind - that you might be kindled to a better ambition. But I've set your vanity aflame - nothing else. I'm going. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' said Esther, not looking at him. He did not open the door immediately. He seemed to be adjusting his cap and pulling it down. Esther longed to be able to throw a lasso round him and compel him to stay, that she might say what she chose to him; her very anger made this departure irritating, especially as he had the last word, and that a very bitter one. But soon the latch was lifted and the door closed behind him. She ran up to her bedroom and burst into tears. Poor maiden! There was a strange contradiction of impulses in her mind in those first moments. She could not bear that Felix should not respect her, yet she could not bear that he should see her bend before his denunciation. She revolted against his assumption of superiority, yet she felt herself in a new kind of subjection to him. He was ill-bred, he was rude, he had taken an unwarrantable liberty; yet his indignant words were a tribute to her: he thought she was worth more pains than the women of whom he took no notice. It was excessively impertinent in him to tell her of his resolving not to love - not to marry - as if she cared about that; as if he thought himself likely to inspire an affection that would incline any woman to marry him after such eccentric steps as he had taken. Had he ever for a moment imagined

that she had thought of him in the light of a man who would make love to her? . . . But did he love her one little bit, and was that the reason why he wanted her to change? Esther felt less angry at that form of freedom; though she was quite sure that she did not love him, and that she could never love any one who was so much of a pedagogue and a master, to say nothing of his oddities. But he wanted her to change. For the first time in her life Esther felt herself seriously shaken in her self-contentment. She knew there was a mind to which she appeared trivial, narrow, selfish. Every word Felix had said to her seemed to have burnt itself into her memory. She felt as if she should for evermore be haunted by self-criticism, and never do anything to satisfy those fancies on which she had simply piqued herself before without being dogged by inward questions. Her father's desire for her conversion had never moved her; she saw that he adored her all the while, and he never checked her unregenerate acts as if they degraded her on earth, but only mourned over them as unfitting her for heaven. Unfitness for heaven (spoken of as 'Jerusalem' and 'glory'), the prayers of a good little father, whose thoughts and motives seemed to her like the Life of Dr Doddridge, which she was content to leave unread, did not attack her self-respect and self-satisfaction. But now she had been stung - stung even into a new consciousness concerning her father. Was it true that his life was so much worthier than her own? She could not change for anything Felix said, but she told herself he was mistaken if he supposed her incapable of generous thoughts.

She heard her father coming into the house. She dried her tears, tried to recover herself hurriedly, and went down to him.

'You want your tea, father; how your forehead burns!' she said gently, kissing his brow, and then putting her cool hand on it.

Mr Lyon felt a little surprise; such spontaneous tenderness was not quite common with her; it reminded him of her mother.

'My sweet child,' he said gratefully, thinking with wonder of the treasures still left in our fallen nature.