

Chapter 22

Her gentle looks shot arrows, piercing him

As gods are pierced, with poison of sweet pity.

THE evening of the market-day had passed, and Felix had not looked in at Malthouse Yard to talk over the public events with Mr Lyon. When Esther was dressing the next morning, she had reached a point of irritated anxiety to see Felix, at which she found herself devising little schemes for attaining that end in some way that would be so elaborate as to seem perfectly natural. Her watch had a long-standing ailment of losing; possibly it wanted cleaning; Felix would tell her if it merely wanted regulating, whereas Mr Prowd might detain it unnecessarily, and cause her useless inconvenience. Or could she not get a valuable hint from Mrs Holt about the home-made bread, which was something as 'sad' as Lyddy herself? Or, if she came home that way at twelve o'clock, Felix might be going out, she might meet him, and not be obliged to call. Or - but it would be very much beneath her to take any steps of this sort. Her watch had been losing for the last two months - why should it not go on losing a little longer? She could think of no devices that were not so transparent as to be undignified. All the more undignified because Felix chose to live in a way that would prevent any one from classing him according to his education and mental refinement - 'which certainly are very high', said Esther inwardly, colouring, as if in answer to some contrary allegation, 'else I should not think his opinion of any consequence'. But she came to the conclusion that she could not possibly call at Mrs Holt's.

It followed that up to a few minutes past twelve, when she reached the turning towards Mrs Holt's, she believed that she should go home the other way; but at the last moment there is always a reason not existing before - namely, the impossibility of further vacillation. Esther turned the corner without any visible pause, and in another minute was knocking at Mrs Holt's door, not without an inward flutter, which she was bent on disguising.

'It's never you, Miss Lyon! who'd have thought of seeing you at this time? Is the minister ill? I thought he looked creechy. If you want help, I'll put my bonnet on.'

'Don't keep Miss Lyon at the door, mother; ask her to come in,' said the ringing voice of Felix, surmounting various small shufflings and babbling voices within.

'It's my wish for her to come in, I'm sure,' said Mrs Holt, making way; 'but what is there for her to come in to? a floor worse than any public. But step in, pray, if you're so inclined. When I've been forced to take

my bit of carpet up, and have benches, I don't see why I need mind nothing no more.'

'I only came to ask Mr Holt if he would look at my watch for me,' said Esther, entering, and blushing a general rose-colour.

'He'll do that fast enough,' said Mrs Holt, with emphasis; 'that's one of the things he will do.'

'Excuse my rising, Miss Lyon,' said Felix; 'I'm binding up Job's finger.'

Job was a small fellow about five, with a germinal nose, large round blue eyes, and red hair that curled close to his head like the wool on the back of an infantine lamb. He had evidently been crying, and the corners of his mouth were still dolorous. Felix held him on his knee as he bound and tied up very cleverly a tiny forefinger. There was a table in front of Felix and against the window, covered with his watchmaking implements and some open books. Two benches stood at right angles on the sanded floor, and six or seven boys of various ages up to twelve were getting their caps and preparing to go home. They huddled themselves together and stood still when Esther entered. Felix could not look up till he had finished his surgery, but he went on speaking.

'This is a hero, Miss Lyon. This is Job Tudge, a bold Briton whose finger hurts him, but who doesn't mean to cry. Good morning, boys. Don't lose your time. Get out into the air.'

Esther seated herself on the end of the bench near Felix, much relieved that Job was the immediate object of attention; and the other boys rushed out behind her with a brief chant of 'Good morning!'

'Did you ever see,' said Mrs Holt, standing to look on, 'how wonderful Felix is at that small work with his large fingers? And that's because he learnt doctoring. It isn't for want of cleverness he looks like a poor man, Miss Lyon. I've left off speaking, else I should say it's a sin and a shame.'

'Mother,' said Felix, who often amused himself and kept good-humoured by giving his mother answers that were unintelligible to her, 'you have an astonishing readiness in the Ciceronian antiphrasis, considering you have never studied oratory. There, Job - thou patient man - sit still if thou wilt; and now we can look at Miss Lyon.'

Esther had taken off her watch and was holding it in her hand. But he looked at her face, or rather at her eyes, as he said, 'You want me to doctor your watch?'

Esther's expression was appealing and timid, as it had never been before in Felix's presence; but when she saw the perfect calmness, which to her seemed coldness, of his clear grey eyes, as if he saw no reason for attaching any emphasis to this first meeting, a pang swift as an electric shock darted through her. She had been very foolish to think so much of it. It seemed to her as if her inferiority to Felix made a great gulf between them. She could not at once rally her pride and self-command, but let her glance fall on her watch, and said, rather tremulously, 'It loses. It is very troublesome. It has been losing a long while.'

Felix took the watch from her hand; then, looking round and seeing that his mother was gone out of the room, he said, very gently -

'You look distressed, Miss Lyon. I hope there is no trouble at home' (Felix was thinking of the minister's agitation on the previous Sunday). 'But I ought perhaps to beg your pardon for saying so much.'

Poor Esther was quite helpless. The mortification which had come like a bruise to all the sensibilities that had been in keen activity, insisted on some relief. Her eyes filled instantly, and a great tear rolled down while she said in a loud sort of whisper, as involuntary as her tears -

'I wanted to tell you that I was not offended - that I am not ungenerous - I thought you might think - but you have not thought of it.'

Was there ever more awkward speaking? - or any behaviour less like that of the graceful, self-possessed Miss Lyon, whose phrases were usually so well turned, and whose repartees were so ready?

For a moment there was silence. Esther had her two little delicately-gloved hands clasped on the table. The next moment she felt one hand of Felix covering them both and pressing them firmly; but he did not speak. The tears were both on her cheeks now, and she could look up at him. His eyes had an expression of sadness in them, quite new to her. Suddenly little Job, who had his mental exercises on the occasion, called out, impatiently -

'She's tut her finger!'

Felix and Esther laughed, and drew their hands away; and as Esther took her handkerchief to wipe the tears from her cheeks, she said -

'You see, Job, I am a naughty coward I can't help crying when I've hurt myself.'

'Zoo soodn't kuy,' said Job, energetically, being much impressed with a moral doctrine which had come to him after a sufficient transgression of it.

'Job is like me,' said Felix, 'fonder of preaching than of practice. But let us look at this same watch,' he went on, opening and examining it. 'These little Geneva toys are cleverly constructed to go always a little wrong. But if you wind them up and set them regularly every night, you may know at least that it's not noon when the hand points there.'

Felix chatted, that Esther might recover herself; but now Mrs Holt came back and apologised.

'You'll excuse my going away, I know, Miss Lyon. But there were the dumplings to see to, and what little I've got left on my hands now, I like to do well. Not but what I've more cleaning to do than ever I had in my life before, as you may tell soon enough if you look at this floor. But when you've been used to doing things, and they've been taken away from you, it's as if your hands had been cut off, and you felt the fingers as are of no use to you.'

'That's a great image, mother,' said Felix, as he snapped the watch together, and handed it to Esther: 'I never heard you use such an image before.'

'Yes, I know you've always some fault to find with what your mother says. But if ever there was a woman could talk with the open Bible before her, and not be afraid, it's me. I never did tell stories, and I never will - though I know it's done, Miss Lyon, and by church members too, when they have candles to sell, as I could bring you the proof. But I never was one of 'em, let Felix say what he will about the printing on the tickets. His father believed it was gospel truth, and it's presumptuous to say it wasn't. For as for curing, how can anybody know? There's no physic'll cure without a blessing, and with a blessing I know I've seen a mustard plaister work when there was no more smell nor strength in the mustard than so much flour. And reason good - for the mustard had laid in paper nobody knows how long - so I'll leave you to guess.'

Mrs Holt looked hard out of the window and gave a slight inarticulate sound of scorn.

Felix had leaned back in his chair with a resigned smile, and was pinching Job's ears.

Esther said, 'I think I had better go now,' not knowing what else to say, yet not wishing to go immediately, lest she should seem to be running away from Mrs Holt. She felt keenly how much endurance

there must be for Felix. And she had often been discontented with her father, and called him tiresome!

'Where does Job Tudge live?' she said, still sitting, and looking at the droll little figure, set off by a ragged jacket with a tail about two inches deep sticking out above the funniest of corduroys.

'Job has two mansions,' said Felix. 'He lives here chiefly; but he has another home, where his grandfather, Mr Tudge the stone-breaker, lives. My mother is very good to Job, Miss Lyon. She has made him a little bed in a cupboard, and she gives him sweetened porridge.'

The exquisite goodness implied in these words of Felix impressed Esther the more, because in her hearing his talk had usually been pungent and denunciatory. Looking at Mrs Holt, she saw that her eyes had lost their bleak north-easterly expression, and were shining with some mildness on little Job, who had turned round towards her, propping his head against Felix.

'Well, why shouldn't I be motherly to the child, Miss Lyon?' said Mrs Holt, whose strong powers of argument required the file of an imagined contradiction, if there were no real one at hand. 'I never was hard-hearted, and I never will be. It was Felix picked the child up and took to him, you may be sure, for there's nobody else master where he is; but I wasn't going to beat the orphin child and abuse him because of that, and him as straight as an arrow when he's stript, and me so fond of children, and only had one of my own to live. I'd three babies, Miss Lyon, but the blessed Lord only spared Felix, and him the masterfullest and the brownest of 'em all. But I did my duty by him, and I said, he'll have more schooling than his father, and he'll grow up a doctor, and marry a woman with money to furnish - as I was myself, spoons and everything - and I shall have the grandchildren to look up to me, and be drove out in the gig sometimes, like old Mrs Lukyn. And you see what it's all come to, Miss Lyon: here's Felix made a common man of himself, and says he'll never be married - which is the most unreasonable thing, and him never easy but when he's got the child on his lap, or when -'

'Stop, stop, mother,' Felix burst in; 'pray don't use that limping argument again - that a man should marry because he's fond of children. That's a reason for not marrying. A bachelor's children are always young: they're immortal children - always lisping, waddling, helpless, and with a chance of turning out good.'

'The Lord above may know what you mean! And haven't other folk's children a chance of turning out good?'

'O, they grow out of it very fast. Here's Job Tudge now,' said Felix, turning the little one round on his knee, and holding his head by the back - 'Job's limbs will get lanky; this little fist, that looks like a puff-ball, and can hide nothing bigger than a gooseberry, will get large and bony, and perhaps want to clutch more than its share; these wide blue eyes that tell me more truth than Job knows, will narrow and narrow and try to hide truth that Job would be better without knowing; this little negative nose will become long and self-asserting; and this little tongue - put out thy tongue, Job' - Job, awe-struck under this ceremony, put out a little red tongue very timidly - 'this tongue, hardly bigger than a rose-leaf, will get large and thick, wag out of season, do mischief, brag and cant for gain or vanity, and cut as cruelly, for all its clumsiness as if it were a sharp-edge blade. Big Job will perhaps be naughty -' As Felix, speaking with the loud emphatic distinctness habitual to him, brought out this terribly familiar word, Job's sense of mystification became too painful: he hung his lip, and began to cry.

'See there,' said Mrs Holt, 'you're frightening the innocent child with such talk - and it's enough to frighten them that think themselves the safest.'

'Look here, Job, my man,' said Felix, setting the boy down and turning him towards Esther; 'go to Miss Lyon, ask her to smile at you, and that will dry up your tears like the sunshine.'

Job put his two brown fists on Esther's lap, and she stooped to kiss him. Then holding his face between her hands, she said, 'Tell Mr Holt we don't mean to be naughty, Job. He should believe in us more. But now I must really go home.'

Esther rose and held out her hand to Mrs Holt who kept it while she said, a little to Esther's confusion -

'I'm very glad it's took your fancy to come here sometimes, Miss Lyon. I know you're thought to hold your head high, but I speak of people as I find 'em. And I'm sure anybody had need be humble that comes where there's a floor like this - for I've put by my best tea-trays, they're so out of all character - I must look Above for comfort now; but I don't say I'm not worthy to be called on for all that.'

Felix had risen and moved towards the door that he might open it and shield Esther from more last words on his mother's part.

'Good-bye, Mr Holt.'

'Will Mr Lyon like me to sit with him an hour this evening, do you think?'

'Why not? He always likes to see you.'

'Then I will come. Good-bye.'

'She's a very straight figure,' said Mrs Holt. 'How she carries herself! But I doubt there's some truth in what our people say. If she won't look at young Muscat, it's the better for him. He'd need have a big fortune that marries her.'

'That's true, mother,' said Felix, sitting down, snatching up little Job, and finding a vent for some unspeakable feeling in the pretence of worrying him.

Esther was rather melancholy as she went home, yet happier withal than she had been for many days before. She thought, 'I need not mind having shown so much anxiety about his opinion. He is too clear-sighted to mistake our mutual position; he is quite above putting a false interpretation on what I have done. Besides, he had not thought of me at all - I saw that plainly enough. Yet he was very kind. There is something greater and better in him than I had imagined. His behaviour to-day - to his mother and me too - I should call it the highest gentlemanliness, only it seems in him to be something deeper. But he has chosen an intolerable life; though I suppose, if I had a mind equal to his, and if he loved me very dearly, I should choose the same life.'

Esther felt that she had prefixed an impossible 'if' to that result. But now she had known Felix, her conception of what a happy love must be had become like a dissolving view, in which the once-clear images were gradually melting into new forms and new colours. The favourite Byronic heroes were beginning to look something like last night's decorations seen in the sober dawn. So fast does a little leaven spread within us - so incalculable is the effect of one personality on another. Behind all Esther's thoughts, like an unacknowledged yet constraining presence, there was the sense, that if Felix Holt were to love her, her life would be exalted into something quite new - into a sort of difficult blessedness, such as one may imagine in beings who are conscious of painfully growing into the possession of higher powers.

It was quite true that Felix had not thought the more of Esther because of that Sunday afternoon's interview which had shaken her mind to the very roots. He had avoided intruding on Mr Lyon without special reason, because he believed the minister to be preoccupied with some private care. He had thought a great deal of Esther with a mixture of strong disapproval and strong liking, which both together made a feeling the reverse of indifference; but he was not going to let her have any influence on his life. Even if his determination had not

been fixed, he would have believed that she would utterly scorn him in any other light than that of an acquaintance, and the emotion she had shown to-day did not change that belief. But he was deeply touched by this manifestation of her better qualities, and felt that there was a new tie of friendship between them. That was the brief history Felix would have given of his relation to Esther. And he was accustomed to observe himself. But very close and diligent looking at living creatures, even through the best microscope, will leave room for new and contradictory discoveries.

Felix found Mr Lyon particularly glad to talk to him. The minister had never yet disburthened himself about his letter to Mr Philip Debarry concerning the public conference; and as by this time he had all the heads of his discussion thoroughly in his mind, it was agreeable to recite them, as well as to express his regret that time had been lost by Mr Debarry's absence from the Manor, which had prevented the immediate fulfilment of his pledge.

'I don't see how he can fulfil it if the rector refuses,' said Felix, thinking it well to moderate the little man's confidence.

'The rector is of a spirit that will not incur earthly impeachment, and he cannot refuse what is necessary to his nephew's honourable discharge of an obligation,' said Mr Lyon. 'My young friend, it is a case wherein the prearranged conditions tend by such a beautiful fitness to the issue I have sought, that I should have for ever held myself a traitor to my charge had I neglected the indication.'