Chapter 27

'To hear with eyes is part of love's rare wit.'

- SHAKESPEARE: Sonnets.

'Custom calls me to't :-

What custom wills, in all things should we do't?

The dust on antique time would lie unswept,

And mountainous error be too highly heaped

For truth to over-peer.' - Coriolanus.

IN the afternoon Mr Lyon went out to see the sick amongst his flock, and Esther, who had been passing the morning in dwelling on the memories and the few remaining relics of her parents, was left alone in the parlour amidst the lingering odours of the early dinner, not easily got rid of in that small house. Rich people, who know nothing of these vulgar details, can hardly imagine their significance in the history of multitudes of human lives in which the sensibilities are never adjusted to the external conditions. Esther always felt so much discomfort from those odours that she usually seized any possibility of escaping from them, and to-day they oppressed her the more because she was weary with long-continued agitation. Why did she not put on her bonnet as usual and get out into the open air? It was one of those pleasant November afternoons - pleasant in the wide country - when the sunshine is on the clinging brown leaves of the young oaks, and the last yellow leaves of the elms flutter down in the fresh but not eager breeze. But Esther sat still on the sofa - pale and with reddened eyelids, her curls all pushed back carelessly, and her elbow resting on the ridgy black horse-hair, which usually almost set her teeth on edge if she pressed it even through her sleeve - while her eyes rested blankly on the dull street. Lyddy had said, 'Miss, you look sadly; if you can't take a walk, go and lie down.' She had never seen the curls in such disorder, and she reflected that there had been a death from typhus recently. But the obstinate miss only shook her head.

Esther was waiting for the sake of - not a probability, but - a mere possibility, which made the brothy odours endurable. Apparently, in less than half an hour, the possibility came to pass, for she changed her attitude, almost started from her seat, sat down again, and listened eagerly. If Lyddy should send him away, could she herself rush out and call him back? Why not? Such things were permissible where it was understood, from the necessity of the case, that there was only friendship. But Lyddy opened the door and said, 'Here's Mr

Holt, miss, wants to know if you'll give him leave to come in. I told him you was sadly.'

'O yes, Lyddy, beg him to come in.'

'I should not have persevered,' said Felix, as they shook hands, 'only I know Lyddy's dismal way. But you do look ill,' he went on, as he seated himself at the other end of the sofa. 'Or rather - for that's a false way of putting it - you look as if you had been very much distressed. Do you mind about my taking notice of it?'

He spoke very kindly, and looked at her more persistently than he had ever done before, when her hair was perfect.

'You are quite right. I am not at all ill. But I have been very much agitated this morning. My father has been telling me things I never heard before about my mother, and giving me things that belonged to her. She died when I was a very little creature.'

'Then it is no new pain or trouble for you and Mr Lyon? I could not help being anxious to know that.'

Esther passed her hand over her brow before she answered. 'I hardly know whether it is pain, or something better than pleasure. It has made me see things I was blind to before - depths in my father's nature.'

As she said this, she looked at Felix, and their eyes met very gravely.

'It is such a beautiful day,' he said, 'it would do you good to go into the air. Let me take you along the river towards Little Treby, will you?'

'I will put my bonnet on,' said Esther, unhesitatingly, though they had never walked out together before.

It is true that to get into the fields they had to pass through the street; and when Esther saw some acquaintances, she reflected that her walking alone with Felix might be a subject of remark - all the more because of his cap, patched boots, no cravat, and thick stick. Esther was a little amazed herself at what she had come to. So our lives glide on: the river ends we don't know where, and the sea begins, and then there is no more jumping ashore.

When they were in the streets Esther hardly spoke. Felix talked with his usual readiness, as easily as if he were not doing it solely to divert her thoughts, first about Job Tudge's delicate chest, and the probability that the little white-faced monkey would not live long; and then about a miserable beginning of a night-school, which was all he

could get together at Sproxton; and the dismalness of that hamlet, which was a sort of lip to the coalpit on one side and the 'public' on the other - and yet a paradise compared with the wynds of Glasgow, where there was little more than a chink of daylight to show the hatred in women's faces.

But soon they got into the fields, where there was a right of way towards Little Treby, now following the course of the river, now crossing towards a lane, and now turning into a cart-track through a plantation.

'Here we are!' said Felix, when they had crossed the wooden bridge, and were treading on the slanting shadows made by the elm trunks. 'I think this is delicious. I never feel less unhappy than in these late autumn afternoons when they are sunny.'

'Less unhappy! There now!' said Esther, smiling at him with some of her habitual sauciness, 'I have caught you in self-contradiction. I have heard you quite furious against puling, melancholy people. If I had said what you have just said, you would have given me a long lecture, and told me to go home and interest myself in the reason of the rule of three.'

'Very likely,' said Felix, beating the weeds, according to the foible of our common humanity when it has a stick in its hand. 'But I don't think myself a fine fellow because I'm melancholy. I don't measure my force by the negations in me, and think my soul must be a mighty one because it is more given to idle suffering than to beneficent activity. That's what your favourite gentlemen do, of the Byronic bilious style.' 'I don't admit that those are my favourite gentlemen.'

'I've heard you defend them - gentlemen like your Renes, who have no particular talent for the finite, but a general sense that the infinite is the right thing for them. They might as well boast of nausea as a proof of a strong inside.'

'Stop, stop! You run on in that way to get out of my reach. I convicted you of confessing that you are melancholy.'

'Yes!' said Felix, thrusting his left hand into his pocket, with a shrug; 'as I could confess to a great many other things I'm not proud of. The fact is, there are not many easy lots to be drawn in the world at present; and such as they are I am not envious of them. I don't say life is not worth having: it is worth having to a man who has some sparks of sense and feeling and bravery in him. And the finest fellow of all would be the one who could be glad to have lived because the world was chiefly miserable, and his life had come to help some one who needed it. He would be the man who had the most powers and the

fewest selfish wants. But I'm not up to the level of what I see to be best. I'm often a hungry discontented fellow.'

'Why have you made life so hard then?' said Esther, rather frightened as she asked the question. 'It seems to me you have tried to find just the most difficult task.'

'Not at all,' said Felix, with curt decision. 'My course was a very simple one. It was pointed out to me by conditions that I saw as clearly as I see the bars of this stile. It's a difficult stile too,' added Felix, striding over. 'Shall I help you, or will you be left to yourself?'

'I can do without help, thank you.'

'It was all simple enough,' continued Felix, as they walked on. 'If I meant to put a stop to the sale of those drugs, I must keep my mother, and of course at her age she would not leave the place she had been used to. And I had made up my mind against what they call genteel businesses.'

'But suppose every one did as you do? Please to forgive me for saying so; but I cannot see why you could not have lived as honourably with some employment that presupposes education and refinement.'

'Because you can't see my history or my nature,' said Felix, bluntly. 'I have to determine for myself, and not for other men. I don't blame them, or think I am better than they; their circumstances are different. I would never choose to withdraw myself from the labour and common burthen of the world; but I do choose to withdraw myself from the push and the scramble for money and position. Any man is at liberty to call me a fool, and say that mankind are benefited by the push and the scramble in the long-run. But I care for the people who live now and will not be living when the long-run comes. As it is, I prefer going shares with the unlucky.'

Esther did not speak, and there was silence between them for a minute or two, till they passed through a gate into a plantation where there was no large timber, but only thin-stemmed trees and underwood, so that the sunlight fell on the mossy spaces which lay open here and there.

'See how beautiful those stooping birch-stems are with the light on them!' said Felix. 'Here is an old felled trunk they have not thought worth carrying away. Shall we sit down a little while?'

'Yes, the mossy ground with the dry leaves sprinkled over it is delightful to one's feet.' Esther sat down and took off her bonnet, that

the light breeze might fall on her head. Felix, too, threw down his cap and stick, lying on the ground with his back against the felled trunk.

'I wish I felt more as you do,' she said, looking at the point of her foot, which was playing with a tuft of moss. 'I can't help caring very much what happens to me. And you seem to care so little about yourself.'

'You are thoroughly mistaken,' said Felix. 'It is just because I'm a very ambitious fellow, with very hungry passions, wanting a great deal to satisfy me, that I have chosen to give up what people call worldly good. At least that has been one determining reason. It all depends on what a man gets into his consciousness - what life thrusts into his mind, so that it becomes present to him as remorse is present to the guilty, or a mechanical problem to an inventive genius. There are two things I've got present in that way: one of them is the picture of what I should hate to be. I'm determined never to go about making my face simpering or solemn, and telling professional lies for profit; or to get tangled in affairs where I must wink at dishonesty and pocket the proceeds, and justify that knavery as part of a system that I can't alter. If I once went into that sort of struggle for success, I should want to win - I should defend the wrong that I had once identified myself with. I should become everything that I see now beforehand to be detestable. And what's more, I should do this, as men are doing it every day, for a ridiculously small prize - perhaps for none at all - perhaps for the sake of two parlours, a rank eligible for the church-wardenship, a discontented wife and several unhopeful children.'

Esther felt a terrible pressure on her heart - the certainty of her remoteness from Felix - the sense that she was utterly trivial to him.

'The other thing that's got into my mind like a splinter,' said Felix, after a pause, 'is the life of the miserable - the spawning life of vice and hunger. I'll never be one of the sleek dogs. The old Catholics are right, with their higher rule and their lower. Some are called to subject themselves to a harder discipline, and renounce things voluntarily which are lawful for others. It is the old word - ‘necessity is laid upon me’.'

'It seems to me you are stricter than my father is.'

'No! I quarrel with no delight that is not base or cruel, but one must sometimes accommodate one's self to a small share. That is the lot of the majority. I would wish the minority joy, only they don't want my wishes.'

Again there was silence. Esther's cheeks were hot in spite of the breeze that sent her hair floating backward. She felt an inward strain, a demand on her to see things in a light that was not easy or soothing.

When Felix had asked her to walk, he had seemed so kind, so alive to what might be her feelings, that she had thought herself nearer to him than she had ever been before; but since they had come out, he had appeared to forget all that. And yet she was conscious that this impatience of hers was very petty. Battling in this way with her own little impulses, and looking at the birch-stems opposite till her gaze was too wide for her to see anything distinctly, she was unaware how long they had remained without speaking. She did not know that Felix had changed his attitude a little, and was resting his elbow on the tree-trunk, while he supported his head, which was turned towards her. Suddenly he said, in a lower tone than was habitual to him -

'You are very beautiful.'

She started and looked round at him, to see whether his face would give some help to the interpretation of this novel speech. He was looking up at her quite calmly, very much as a reverential Protestant might look at a picture of the Virgin, with a devoutness suggested by the type rather than by the image. Esther's vanity was not in the least gratified: she felt that, somehow or other, Felix was going to reproach her.

'I wonder,' he went on, still looking at her, 'whether the subtle measuring of forces will ever come to measuring the force there would be in one beautiful woman whose mind was as noble as her face was beautiful - who made a man's passion for her rush in one current with all the great aims of his life.'

Esther's eyes got hot and smarting. It was no use trying to be dignified. She had turned away her head, and now said, rather bitterly, 'It is difficult for a woman ever to try to be anything good when she is not believed in - when it is always supposed that she must be contemptible.'

'No, dear Esther' - it was the first time Felix had been prompted to call her by her Christian name, and as he did so he laid his large hand on her two little hands, which were clasped on her knees. 'You don't believe that I think you contemptible. When I first saw you -'

'I know, I know,' said Esther, interrupting him impetuously, but still looking away. 'You mean you did think me contemptible then. But it was very narrow of you to judge me in that way, when my life had been so different from yours. I have great faults. I know I am selfish, and think too much of my own small tastes and too little of what affects others. But I am not stupid. I am not unfeeling. I can see what is better.'

'But I have not done you injustice since I knew more of you,' said Felix, gently.

'Yes, you have,' said Esther, turning and smiling at him through her tears. 'You talk to me like an angry pedagogue. Were you always wise? Remember the time when you were foolish or naughty.'

'That is not far off,' said Felix, curtly, taking away his hand and clasping it with the other at the back of his head. The talk, which seemed to be introducing a mutual understanding, such as had not existed before, seemed to have undergone some check.

'Shall we get up and walk back now?' said Esther, after a few moments.

'No,' said Felix, entreatingly. 'Don't move yet. I daresay we shall never walk together or sit here again.'

'Why not?'

'Because I am a man who am warned by visions. Those old stories of visions and dreams guiding men have their truth: we are saved by making the future present to ourselves.'

'I wish I could get visions, then,' said Esther, smiling at him, with an effort at playfulness, in resistance to something vaguely mournful within her.

'That is what I want,' said Felix, looking at her very earnestly. 'Don't turn your head. Do look at me, and then I shall know if I may go on speaking. I do believe in you; but I want you to have such a vision of the future that you may never lose your best self. Some charm or other may be flung about you - some of your atta-of-rose fascinations - and nothing but a good strong terrible vision will save you. And if it did save you, you might be that woman I was thinking of a little while ago when I looked at your face: the woman whose beauty makes a great task easier to men instead of turning them away from it. I am not likely to see such fine issues; but they may come where a woman's spirit is finely touched. I should like to be sure they would come to you.'

'Why are you not likely to know what becomes of me?' said Esther, turning away her eyes in spite of his command. 'Why should you not always be my father's friend and mine?'

'O, I shall go away as soon as I can to some large town,' said Felix, in his more usual tone, - 'some ugly, wicked, miserable place. I want to be a demagogue of a new sort; an honest one, if possible, who will tell

the people they are blind and foolish, and neither flatter them nor fatten on them. I have my heritage - an order I belong to. I have the blood of a line of handicraftsmen in my veins, and I want to stand up for the lot of the handicraftsmen as a good lot, in which a man may be better trained to all the best functions of his nature than if he belonged to the grimacing set who have visiting-cards, and are proud to be thought richer than their neighbours.'

'Would nothing ever make it seem right to you to change your mind?' said Esther (she had rapidly woven some possibilities out of the new uncertainties in her own lot, though she would not for the world have had Felix know of her weaving). 'Suppose, by some means or other, a fortune might come to you honourably - by marriage, or in any other unexpected way - would you see no change in your course?'

'No,' said Felix, peremptorily: 'I will never be rich. I don't count that as any peculiar virtue. Some men do well to accept riches, but that is not my inward vocation: I have no fellow-feeling with the rich as a class; the habits of their lives are odious to me. Thousands of men have wedded poverty because they expect to go to heaven for it; I don't expect to go to heaven for it, but I wed it because it enables me to do what I most want to do on earth. Whatever the hopes for the world may be - whether great or small - I am a man of this generation; I will try to make life less bitter for a few within my reach. It is held reasonable enough to toil for the fortunes of a family, though it may turn to imbecility in the third generation. I choose a family with more chances in it.'

Esther looked before her dreamily till she said, 'That seems a hard lot; yet it is a great one.' She rose to walk back.

'Then you don't think I'm a fool,' said Felix, loudly, starting to his feet, and then stooping to gather up his cap and stick.

'Of course you suspected me of that stupidity.'

'Well - women, unless they are Saint Theresas or Elizabeth Frys, generally think this sort of thing madness, unless when they read of it in the Bible.'

'A woman can hardly ever choose in that way; she is dependent on what happens to her. She must take meaner things, because only meaner things are within her reach.'

'Why, can you imagine yourself choosing hardship as the better lot?' said Felix, looking at her with a sudden question in his eyes.

'Yes, I can,' she said, flushing over neck and brow.

Their words were charged with a meaning dependent entirely on the secret consciousness of each. Nothing had been said which was necessarily personal. They walked a few yards along the road by which they had come, without further speech, till Felix said gently, 'Take my arm.' She took it, and they walked home so, entirely without conversation. Felix was struggling as a firm man struggles with a temptation, seeing beyond it and disbelieving its lying promise. Esther was struggling as a woman struggles with the yearning for some expression of love, and with vexation under that subjection to a yearning which is not likely to be satisfied. Each was conscious of a silence which each was unable to break, till they entered Malthouse Lane, and were within a few yards of the minister's door.

'It is getting dusk,' Felix then said; 'will Mr Lyon be anxious about you?'

'No, I think not. Lyddy would tell him that I went out with you, and that you carried a large stick,' said Esther, with her light laugh.

Felix went in with Esther to take tea, but the conversation was entirely between him and Mr Lyon about the tricks of canvassing, and foolish personality of the placards, and the probabilities of Transome's return, as to which Felix declared himself to have become indifferent. This scepticism made the minister uneasy: he had great belief in the old political watchwords, had preached that universal suffrage and no ballot were agreeable to the will of God, and liked to believe that a visible 'instrument' was forthcoming in the Radical candidate who had pronounced emphatically against Whig finality. Felix, being in a perverse mood, contended that universal suffrage would be equally agreeable to the devil; that he would change his politics a little, having a larger traffic, and see himself more fully represented in parliament.

'Nay, my friend,' said the minister, 'you are again sporting with paradox; for you will not deny that you glory in the name of Radical, or Root-and-branch man, as they said in the great times when Nonconformity was in its giant youth.'

'A Radical - yes; but I want to go to some roots a good deal lower down than the franchise.'

'Truly there is a work within which cannot be dispensed with; but it is our preliminary work to free men from the stifled life of political nullity, and bring them into what Milton calls ‘the liberal air’, wherein alone can be wrought the final triumphs of the Spirit.'

'With all my heart. But while Caliban is Caliban, though you multiply him by a million, he'll worship every Trinculo that carries a bottle. I forget, though - you don't read Shakspeare, Mr Lyon.'

'I am bound to confess that I have so far looked into a volume of Esther's as to conceive your meaning; but the fantasies therein were so little to be reconciled with a steady contemplation of that divine economy which is hidden from sense and revealed to faith, that I forbore the reading, as likely to perturb my ministrations.'

Esther sat by in unusual silence. The conviction that Felix willed her exclusion from his life was making it plain that something more than friendship between them was not so thoroughly out of the question as she had always inwardly asserted. In her pain that his choice lay aloof from her, she was compelled frankly to admit to herself the longing that it had been otherwise, and that he had entreated her to share his difficult life. He was like no one else to her: he had seemed to bring at once a law, and the love that gave strength to obey the law. Yet the next moment, stung by his independence of her, she denied that she loved him; she had only longed for a moral support under the negations of her life. If she were not to have that support, all effort seemed useless.

Esther had been so long used to hear the formulas of her father's belief without feeling or understanding them, that they had lost all power to touch her. The first religious experience of her life - the first self-questioning, the first voluntary subjection, the first longing to acquire the strength of greater motives and obey the more strenuous rule - had come to her through Felix Holt. No wonder that she felt as if the loss of him were inevitable backsliding.

But was it certain that she should lose him? She did not believe that he was really indifferent to her.