

Chapter 32

'Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand
Henceforward in thy shadow. Never more
Alone upon the threshold of my door
Of individual life, I shall command
The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand
Serenely in the sunshine as before
Without the sense of that which I forbore -
Thy touch upon the palm. The widest land
Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine
With pulses that beat double. What I do
And what I dream include thee, as the wine
Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue
God for myself, He hears that name of thine,
And sees within my eyes the tears of two.'

MRS BROWNING.

FELIX HOLT, seated at his work without his pupils, who had asked for a holiday with a notion that the wooden booths promised some sort of show, noticed about eleven o'clock that the noises which reached him from the main street were getting more and more tumultuous. He had long seen bad auguries for this election, but, like all people who dread the prophetic wisdom that ends in desiring the fulfilment of its own evil forebodings, he had checked himself with remembering that, though many conditions were possible which might bring on violence, there were just as many which might avert it. There would, perhaps, be no other mischief than what he was already certain of. With these thoughts he had sat down quietly to his work, meaning not to vex his soul by going to look on at things he would fain have made different if he could. But he was of a fibre that vibrated too strongly to the life around him to shut himself away in quiet, even from suffering and irremediable wrong. As the noises grew louder, and wrought more and more strongly on his imagination, he was obliged to lay down his

delicate wheel-work. His mother came from her turnip-paring in the kitchen, where little Job was her companion, to observe that they must be killing everybody in the High Street, and that the election, which had never been before at Treby, must have come for a judgment; that there were mercies where you didn't look for them, and that she thanked God in His wisdom for making her live up a back street.

Felix snatched his cap and rushed out. But when he got to the turning into the market-place the magistrates were already on horseback there, the constables were moving about, and Felix observed that there was no strong spirit of resistance to them. He stayed long enough to see the partial dispersion of the crowd and the restoration of tolerable quiet, and then went back to Mrs Holt to tell her that there was nothing to fear now: he was going out again, and she must not be in any anxiety at his absence. She might set by his dinner for him.

Felix had been thinking of Esther and her probable alarm at the noises that must have reached her more distinctly than they had reached him, for Malthouse Yard was removed but a little way from the main street. Mr Lyon was away from home, having been called to preach charity sermons and attend meetings in a distant town; and Esther, with the plaintive Lyddy for her sole companion, was not cheerfully circumstanced. Felix had not been to see her yet since her father's departure, but to-day he gave way to new reasons.

'Miss Esther was in the garret,' Lyddy said, trying to see what was going on. But before she was fetched she came running down the stairs, drawn by the knock at the door, which had shaken the small dwelling.

'I am so thankful to see you,' she said eagerly. 'Pray come in.'

When she had shut the parlour door behind him, Felix said, 'I suspected that you might have been made anxious by the noises. I came to tell you that things are quiet now. Though, indeed, you can hear that they are.'

'I was frightened,' said Esther. 'The shouting and roaring of rude men is so hideous. It is a relief to me that my father is not at home - that he is out of the reach of any danger he might have fallen into if he had been here. But I gave you credit for being in the midst of the danger,' she added, smiling, with a determination not to show much feeling. 'Sit down and tell me what has happened.'

They sat down at the extremities of the old black sofa, and Felix said -

'To tell you the truth, I had shut myself up, and tried to be as indifferent to the election as if I'd been one of the fishes in the Lapp, till the noises got too strong for me. But I only saw the tail end of the disturbance. The poor noisy simpletons seemed to give way before the magistrates and the constables. I hope nobody has been much hurt. The fear is that they may turn out again by-and-by; their giving way so soon may not be altogether a good sign. There's a great number of heavy fellows in the town. If they go and drink more, the last end may be worse than the first. However -'

Felix broke off, as if this talk were futile, clasped his hands behind his head, and, leaning backward, looked at Esther, who was looking at him.

'May I stay here a little while?' he said, after a moment, which seemed long.

'Pray do,' said Esther, colouring. To relieve herself she took some work and bowed her head over her stitching. It was in reality a little heaven to her that Felix was there, but she saw beyond it - saw that by-and-by he would be gone, and that they should be farther on their way, not towards meeting, but parting. His will was impregnable. He was a rock, and she was no more to him than the white clinging mist-cloud.

'I wish I could be sure that you see things just as I do,' he said, abruptly, after a minute's silence.

'I am sure you see them much more wisely than I do,' said Esther, almost bitterly, without looking up.

'There are some people one must wish to judge one truly. Not to wish it would be mere hardness. I know you think I am a man without feeling - at least, without strong affections. You think I love nothing but my own resolutions.'

'Suppose I reply in the same sort of strain?' said Esther, with a little toss of the head.

'How?'

'Why, that you think me a shallow woman, incapable of believing what is best in you, setting down everything that is too high for me as a deficiency.'

'Don't parry what I say. Answer me.' There was an expression of painful beseeching in the tone with which Felix said this. Esther let her work fall on her lap and looked at him, but she was unable to speak.

'I want you to tell me - once - that you know it would be easier to me to give myself up to loving and being loved, as other men do, when they can, than to -'

This breaking-off in speech was something quite new in Felix. For the first time he had lost his self-possession, and turned his eyes away. He was at variance with himself. He had begun what he felt that he ought not to finish

Esther, like a woman as she was - a woman waiting for love, never able to ask for it - had her joy in these signs of her power; but they made her generous, not chary, as they might have done if she had had a pettier disposition. She said, with deep yet timid earnestness -

'What you have chosen to do has only convinced me that your love would be the better worth having.'

All the finest part of Esther's nature trembled in those words. To be right in great memorable moments, is perhaps the thing we need most desire for ourselves.

Felix as quick as lightning turned his look upon her again, and, leaning forward, took her sweet hand and held it to his lips some moments before he let it fall again and raised his head.

'We shall always be the better for thinking of each other,' he said, leaning his elbow on the back of the sofa, and supporting his head as he looked at her with calm sadness. 'This thing can never come to me twice over. It is my knight-hood. That was always a business of great cost.'

He smiled at her, but she sat biting her inner lip, and pressing her hands together. She desired to be worthy of what she revered in Felix, but the inevitable renunciation was too difficult. She saw herself wandering through the future weak and forsaken. The charming sauciness was all gone from her face, but the memory of it made this child-like dependent sorrow all the more touching.

'Tell me what you would -' Felix burst out, leaning nearer to her; but the next instant he started up, went to the table, took his cap in his hand, and came in front of her.

'Good-bye,' he said, very gently, not daring to put out his hand. But Esther put up hers instead of speaking. He just pressed it and then went away.

She heard the doors close behind him, and felt free to be miserable. She cried bitterly. If she might have married Felix Holt, she could have

been a good woman. She felt no trust that she could ever be good without him.

Felix reproached himself. He would have done better not to speak in that way. But the prompting to which he had chiefly listened had been the desire to prove to Esther that he set a high value on her feelings. He could not help seeing that he was very important to her; and he was too simple and sincere a man to ape a sort of humility which would not have made him any the better if he had possessed it. Such pretences turn our lives into sorry dramas. And Felix wished Esther to know that her love was dear to him as the beloved dead are dear. He felt that they must not marry - that they would ruin each other's lives. But he had longed for her to know fully that his will to be always apart from her was renunciation, not an easy preference. In this he was thoroughly generous; and yet, now some subtle, mysterious conjuncture of impressions and circumstances had made him speak, he questioned the wisdom of what he had done. Express confessions give definiteness to memories that might more easily melt away without them; and Felix felt for Esther's pain as the strong soldier, who can march on hungering without fear that he shall faint, feels for the young brother - the maiden-cheeked conscript whose load is too heavy for him.