

Chapter 38

The down we rest on in our aery dreams

Has not been plucked from birds that live and smart:

'Tis but warm snow, that melts not.

THE story and the prospect revealed to Esther by the lawyers' letter, which she and her father studied together, had made an impression on her very different from what she had been used to figure to herself in her many daydreams as to the effect of a sudden elevation in rank and fortune. In her day-dreams she had not traced out the means by which such a change could be brought about; in fact, the change had seemed impossible to her, except in her little private Utopia, which, like other Utopias, was filled with delightful results, independent of processes. But her mind had fixed itself habitually on the signs and luxuries of ladyhood, for which she had the keenest perception. She had seen the very mat in her carriage, had scented the dried rose-leaves in her corridors, had felt the soft carpets under her pretty feet, and seen herself, as she rose from her sofa cushions, in the crystal panel that reflected a long drawing-room, where the conservatory flowers and the pictures of fair women left her still with the supremacy of charm. She had trodden the marble-firm gravel of her garden-walks and the soft deep turf of her lawn; she had had her servants about her filled with adoring respect, because of her kindness as well as her grace and beauty; and she had had several accomplished cavaliers all at once suing for her hand - one of whom, uniting very high birth with long dark eyelashes and the most distinguished talents, she secretly preferred, though his pride and hers hindered an avowal, and supplied the inestimable interest of retardation. The glimpses she had had in her brief life as a family governess, supplied her ready faculty with details enough of delightful still life to furnish her day-dreams; and no one who has not, like Esther, a strong natural prompting and susceptibility towards such things, and has at the same time suffered from the presence of opposite conditions, can understand how powerfully those minor accidents of rank which please the fastidious sense can preoccupy the imagination.

It seemed that almost everything in her day-dreams - cavaliers apart - must be found at Transome Court. But now that fancy was becoming real, and the impossible appeared possible, Esther found the balance of her attention reversed: now that her ladyhood was not simply in Utopia, she found herself arrested and painfully grasped by the means through which the ladyhood was to be obtained. To her inexperience this strange story of an alienated inheritance, of such a last representative of pure-blooded lineage as old Thomas Transome the

bill-sticker, above all of the dispossession hanging over those who actually held, and had expected always to hold, the wealth and position which were suddenly announced to be rightfully hers - all these things made a picture, not for her own tastes and fancies to float in with Elysian indulgence, but in which she was compelled to gaze on the degrading hard experience of other human beings, and on a humiliating loss which was the obverse of her own proud gain. Even in her times of most untroubled egoism Esther shrank from anything ungenerous; and the fact that she had a very lively image of Harold Transome and his gipsy-eyed boy in her mind, gave additional distinctness to the thought that if she entered they must depart. Of the elder Transomes she had a dimmer vision, and they were necessarily in the background to her sympathy.

She and her father sat with their hands locked, as they might have done if they had been listening to a solemn oracle in the days of old revealing unknown kinship and rightful heirdom. It was not that Esther had any thought of renouncing her fortune; she was incapable, in these moments, of condensing her vague ideas and feelings into any distinct plan of action, nor indeed did it seem that she was called upon to act with any promptitude. It was only that she was conscious of being strangely awed by something that was called good fortune; and the awe shut out any scheme of rejection as much as any triumphant joy in acceptance. Her first father, she learned, had died disappointed and in wrongful imprisonment, and an undefined sense of Nemesis seemed half to sanctify her inheritance, and counteract its apparent arbitrariness.

Felix Holt was present in her mind throughout: what he would say was an imaginary commentary that she was constantly framing, and the words that she most frequently gave him - for she dramatised under the inspiration of a sadness slightly bitter - were of this kind: 'That is clearly your destiny - to be aristocratic, to be rich. I always saw that our lots lay widely apart. You are not fit for poverty, or any work of difficulty. But remember what I once said to you about a vision of consequences; take care where your fortune leads you.'

Her father had not spoken since they had ended their study and discussion of the story and the evidence as it was presented to them. Into this he had entered with his usual penetrating activity; but he was so accustomed to the impersonal study of narrative, that even in these exceptional moments the habit of half a century asserted itself, and he seemed sometimes not to distinguish the case of Esther's inheritance from a story in ancient history, until some detail recalled him to the profound feeling that a great, great change might be coming over the life of this child who was so close to him. At last he relapsed into total silence, and for some time Esther was not moved to interrupt it. He had sunk back in his chair, with his hand locked in

hers, and was pursuing a sort of prayerful meditation: he lifted up no formal petition, but it was as if his soul travelled again over the facts he had been considering in the company of a guide ready to inspire and correct him. He was striving to purify his feeling in this matter from selfish or worldly dross - a striving which is that prayer without ceasing, sure to wrest an answer by its sublime importunity.

There is no knowing how long they might have sat in this way, if it had not been for the inevitable Lyddy reminding them dismally of dinner.

'Yes, Lyddy, we come,' said Esther; and then, before moving -

'Is there any advice you have in your mind for me, father?' The sense of awe was growing in Esther. Her intensest life was no longer in her dreams, where she made things to her own mind; she was moving in a world charged with forces.

'Not yet, my dear - save this: that you will seek special illumination in this juncture, and, above all, be watchful that your soul be not lifted up within you by what, rightly considered, is rather an increase of charge, and a call upon you to walk along a path which is indeed easy to the flesh, but dangerous to the spirit.'

'You would always live with me, father?' Esther spoke under a strong impulse - partly affection, partly the need to grasp at some moral help. But she had no sooner uttered the words than they raised a vision, showing, as by a flash of lightning, the incongruity of that past which had created the sanctities and affections of her life with that future which was coming to her.... The little rusty old minister, with the one luxury of his Sunday evening pipe, smoked up the kitchen chimney, coming to live in the midst of grandeur ... but not her father, with the grandeur of his past sorrow and his long struggling labours, forsaking his vocation, and vulgarly accepting an existence unsuited to him.... Esther's face flushed with the excitement of this vision and its reversed interpretation, which five months ago she would have been incapable of seeing. Her question to her father seemed like a mockery; she was ashamed. He answered slowly -

'Touch not that chord yet, child. I must learn to think of thy lot according to the demands of Providence. We will rest a while from the subject; and I will seek calmness in my ordinary duties.'

The next morning nothing more was said. Mr Lyon was absorbed in his sermon-making, for it was near the end of the week, and Esther was obliged to attend to her pupils. Mrs Holt came by invitation with little Job to share their dinner of roast-meat; and, after much of what the minister called unprofitable discourse, she was quitting the house

when she hastened back with an astonished face, to tell Mr Lyon and Esther, who were already in wonder at crashing, thundering sounds on the pavement, that there was a carriage stopping and stamping at the entry into Malthouse Yard, with 'all sorts of fine liveries', and a lady and gentleman inside. Mr Lyon and Esther looked at each other, both having the same name in their minds.

'If it's Mr Transome or somebody else as is great, Mr Lyon,' urged Mrs Holt, 'you'll remember my son, and say he's got a mother with a character they may inquire into as much as they like. And never mind what Felix says, for he's so masterful he'd stay in prison and be transported whether or no, only to have his own way. For it's not to be thought but what the great people could get him off if they would; and it's very hard with a king in the country and all the texts in Proverbs about the king's countenance, and Solomon and the live baby -'

Mr Lyon lifted up his hand deprecatingly, and Mrs Holt retreated from the parlour-door to a corner of the kitchen, the outer doorway being occupied by Dominic, who was inquiring if Mr and Miss Lyon were at home, and could receive Mrs Transome and Mr Harold Transome. While Dominic went back to the carriage Mrs Holt escaped with her tiny companion to Zachary's, the pew-opener, observing to Lyddy that she knew herself, and was not that woman to stay where she might not be wanted; whereupon Lyddy, differing fundamentally, admonished her parting ear that it was well if she knew herself to be dust and ashes - silently extending the application of this remark to Mrs Transome as she saw the tall lady sweep in arrayed in her rich black and fur, with that fine gentleman behind her whose thick topknot of wavy hair, sparkling ring, dark complexion, and general air of worldly exaltation unconnected with chapel were painfully suggestive to Lyddy of Herod, Pontius Pilate or the much-quoted Gallio.

Harold Transome, greeting Esther gracefully, presented his mother, whose eagle-like glance, fixed on her from the first moment of entering, seemed to Esther to pierce her through. Mrs Transome hardly noticed Mr Lyon, not from studied haughtiness, but from sheer mental inability to consider him - as a person ignorant of natural history is unable to consider a fresh-water polype otherwise than as a sort of animated weed, certainly not fit for table. But Harold saw that his mother was agreeably struck by Esther, who indeed showed to much advantage. She was not at all taken by surprise, and maintained a dignified quietude; but her previous knowledge and reflection about the possible dispossession of these Transomes gave her a softened feeling towards them which tinged her manners very agreeably.

Harold was carefully polite to the minister, throwing out a word to make him understand that he had an important part in the important business which had brought this unannounced visit; and the four made a group seated not far off each other near the window, Mrs Transome and Esther being on the sofa.

'You must be astonished at a visit from me, Miss Lyon,' Mrs Transome began; 'I seldom come to Treby Magna. Now I see you, the visit is an unexpected pleasure; but the cause of my coming is business of a serious nature, which my son will communicate to you.'

'I ought to begin by saying that what I have to announce to you is the reverse of disagreeable, Miss Lyon,' said Harold, with lively ease. 'I don't suppose the world would consider it very good news for me; but a rejected candidate, Mr Lyon,' Harold went on, turning graciously to the minister, 'begins to be inured to loss and misfortune.'

'Truly, sir,' said Mr Lyon, with a rather sad solemnity, 'your allusion hath a grievous bearing for me, but I will not retard your present purpose by further remark.'

'You will never guess what I have to disclose,' said Harold, again looking at Esther, 'unless, indeed, you have had some previous intimation of it.'

'Does it refer to law and inheritance?' said Esther, with a smile. She was already brightened by Harold's manner. The news seemed to be losing its chillness, and to be something really belonging to warm, comfortable, interesting life.

'Then you have already heard of it?' said Harold, inwardly vexed, but sufficiently prepared not to seem so.

'Only yesterday,' said Esther, quite simply. 'I received a letter from some lawyers with a statement of many surprising things, showing that I was an heiress' - here she turned very prettily to address Mrs Transome - 'which, as you may imagine, is one of the last things I could have supposed myself to be.'

'My dear,' said Mrs Transome with elderly grace, just laying her hand for an instant on Esther's, 'it is a lot that would become you admirably.'

Esther blushed, and said playfully -

'O, I know what to buy with fifty pounds a-year, but I know the price of nothing beyond that.'

Her father sat looking at her through his spectacles, stroking his chin. It was amazing to herself that she was taking so lightly now what had caused her such deep emotion yesterday.

'I daresay, then,' said Harold, 'you are more fully possessed of particulars than I am. So that my mother and I need only tell you what no one else can tell you - that is, what are her and my feelings and wishes under these new and unexpected circumstances.'

'I am most anxious,' said Esther, with a grave beautiful look of respect to Mrs Transome - 'most anxious on that point. Indeed, being of course in uncertainty about it, I have not yet known whether I could rejoice.' Mrs Transome's glance had softened. She liked Esther to look at her.

'Our chief anxiety,' she said, knowing what Harold wished her to say, 'is, that there may be no contest, no useless expenditure of money. Of course we will surrender what can be rightfully claimed.'

'My mother expresses our feeling precisely, Miss Lyon,' said Harold. 'And I'm sure, Mr Lyon, you will understand our desire.'

'Assuredly, sir. My daughter would in any case have had my advice to seek a conclusion which would involve no strife. We endeavour, sir, in our body, to hold to the apostolic rule that one Christian brother should not go to law with another; and I, for my part, would extend this rule to all my fellow-men, apprehending that the practice of our courts is little consistent with the simplicity that is in Christ.'

'If it is to depend on my will,' said Esther, 'there is nothing that would be more repugnant to me than any struggle on such a subject. But can't the lawyers go on doing what they will in spite of me? It seems that this is what they mean?'

'Not exactly,' said Harold, smiling. 'Of course they live by such struggles as you dislike. But we can thwart them by determining not to quarrel. It is desirable that we should consider the affair together, and put it into the hands of honourable solicitors. I assure you we Transomes will not contend for what is not our own.'

'And this is what I have come to beg of you,' said Mrs Transome. 'It is that you will come to Transome Court - and let us take full time to arrange matters. Do oblige me: you shall not be teased more than you like by an old woman: you shall do just as you please, and become acquainted with your future home, since it is to be yours. I can tell you a world of things that you will want to know; and the business can proceed properly.'

'Do consent,' said Harold, with winning brevity.

Esther was flushed, and her eyes were bright. It was impossible for her not to feel that the proposal was a more tempting step towards her change of condition than she could have thought of beforehand. She had forgotten that she was in any trouble. But she looked towards her father, who was again stroking his chin, as was his habit when he was doubting and deliberating.

'I hope you do not disapprove of Miss Lyon's granting us this favour?' said Harold to the minister.

'I have nothing to oppose to it, sir, if my daughter's own mind is clear as to her course.'

'You will come - now - with us,' said Mrs Transome, persuasively. 'You will go back with us in the carriage.'

Harold was highly gratified with the perfection of his mother's manner on this occasion, which he had looked forward to as difficult. Since he had come home again, he had never seen her so much at her ease, or with so much benignancy in her face. The secret lay in the charm of Esther's sweet young deference, a sort of charm that had not before entered into Mrs Transome's elderly life. Esther's pretty behaviour, it must be confessed, was not fed entirely from lofty moral sources: over and above her really generous feeling, she enjoyed Mrs Transome's accent, the high-bred quietness of her speech, the delicate odour of her drapery. She had always thought that life must be particularly easy if one could pass it among refined people; and so it seemed at this moment. She wished, unmixedly, to go to Transome Court.

'Since my father has no objection,' she said, 'and you urge me so kindly. But I must beg for time to pack up a few clothes.'

'By all means,' said Mrs Transome. 'We are not at all pressed.'

When Esther had left the room, Harold said, 'Apart from our immediate reason for coming, Mr Lyon, I could have wished to see you about these unhappy consequences of the election contest. But you will understand that I have been much preoccupied with private affairs.'

'You have well said that the consequences are unhappy, sir. And but for a reliance on something more than human calculation, I know not which I should most bewail - the scandal which wrong-dealing has brought on right principles, or the snares which it laid for the feet of a young man who is dear to me. 'One soweth, and another reapeth,' is a verity that applies to evil as well as good.'

'You are referring to Felix Holt. I have not neglected steps to secure the best legal help for the prisoners; but I am given to understand that Holt refuses any aid from me. I hope he will not go rashly to work in speaking in his own defence without any legal instruction. It is an opprobrium of our law that no counsel is allowed to plead for the prisoner in cases of felony. A ready tongue may do a man as much harm as good in a court of justice. He piques himself on making a display, and displays a little too much.'

'Sir, you know him not,' said the little minister, in his deeper tone. 'He would not accept, even if it were accorded, a defence wherein the truth was screened or avoided - not from a vainglorious spirit of self-exhibition, for he hath a singular directness and simplicity of speech; but from an averseness to a profession wherein a man may without shame seek to justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him.'

'It's a pity a fine young fellow should do himself harm by fanatical notions of that sort. I could at least have procured the advantage of first-rate consultation. He didn't look to me like a dreamy personage.'

'Nor is he dreamy; rather, his excess lies in being too practical.'

'Well, I hope you will not encourage him in such irrationality: the question is not one of misrepresentation, but of adjusting fact, so as to raise it to the power of evidence. Don't you see that?'

'I do, I do. But I distrust not Felix Holt's discernment in regard to his own case. He builds not on doubtful things, and hath no illusory hopes; on the contrary, he is of a too-scornful incredulity where I would fain see a more childlike faith. But we will hold no belief without action corresponding thereto; and the occasion of his return to this his native place at a time which has proved fatal, was no other than his resolve to hinder the sale of some drugs, which had chiefly supported his mother, but which his better knowledge showed him to be pernicious to the human frame. He undertook to support her by his own labour: but, sir, I pray you to mark - and old as I am, I will not deny that this young man instructs me herein - I pray you to mark the poisonous confusion of good and evil which is the wide-spreading effect of vicious practices. Through the use of undue electioneering means - concerning which, however, I do not accuse you farther than of having acted the part of him who washes his hands when he delivers up to others the exercise of an iniquitous power - Felix Holt is, I will not scruple to say, the innocent victim of a riot; and that deed of strict honesty, whereby he took on himself the charge of his aged mother, seems now to have deprived her of sufficient bread, and is even an occasion of reproach to him from the weaker brethren.'

'I shall be proud to supply her as amply as you think desirable,' said Harold, not enjoying this lecture.

'I will pray you to speak of this question with my daughter, who, it appears, may herself have large means at command, and would desire to minister to Mistress Holt's needs with all friendship and delicacy. For the present, I can take care that she lacks nothing essential.'

As Mr Lyon was speaking, Esther re-entered, equipped for her drive. She laid her hand on her father's arm, and said, 'You will let my pupils know at once, will you, father?'

'Doubtless, my dear,' said the old man, trembling a little under the feeling that this departure of Esther's was a crisis. Nothing again would be as it had been in their mutual life. But he feared that he was being mastered by a too-tender self-regard, and struggled to keep himself calm.

Mrs Transome and Harold had both risen.

'If you are quite ready, Miss Lyon,' said Harold, divining that the father and daughter would like to have an unobserved moment, 'I will take my mother to the carriage, and come back for you.'

When they were alone, Esther put her hands on her father's shoulders, and kissed him.

'This will not be a grief to you, I hope, father? You think it is better that I should go?'

'Nay, child, I am weak. But I would fain be capable of a joy quite apart from the accidents of my aged earthly existence, which, indeed, is a petty and almost dried-up fountain - whereas to the receptive soul the river of life pauseth not, nor is diminished.'

'Perhaps you will see Felix Holt again, and tell him everything?'

'Shall I say aught to him for you?'

'O no; only that Job Tudge has a little flannel shirt and a box of lozenges,' said Esther, smiling. 'Ah, I hear Mr Transome coming back. I must say good-bye to Lyddy, else she will cry over my hard heart.'

In spite of all the grave thoughts that had been, Esther felt it a very pleasant as well as new experience to be led to the carriage by Harold Transome, to be seated on soft cushions, and bowled along, looked at admiringly and deferentially by a person opposite, whom it was agreeable to look at in return, and talked to with suavity and

liveliness. Towards what prospect was that easy carriage really leading her? She could not be always asking herself Mentor-like questions. Her young bright nature was rather weary of the sadness that had grown heavier in these last weeks, like a chill white mist hopelessly veiling the day. Her fortune was beginning to appear worthy of being called good fortune. She had come to a new stage in her journey; a new day had arisen on new scenes, and her young untired spirit was full of curiosity.