

Chapter 39

No man believes that many-textured knowledge and skill - as a just idea of the solar system, or the power of painting flesh, or of reading written harmonies - can come late and of a sudden; yet many will not stick at believing that happiness can come at any day and hour solely by a new disposition of events; though there is nought less capable of a magical production than a mortal's happiness, which is mainly a complex of habitual relations and dispositions not to be wrought by news from foreign parts, or any whirling of fortune's wheel for one on whose brow Time has written legibly.

SOME days after Esther's arrival at Transome Court, Denner, coming to dress Mrs Transome before dinner - a labour of love for which she had ample leisure now - found her mistress seated with more than ever of that marble aspect of self-absorbed suffering, which to the waiting-woman's keen observation had been gradually intensifying itself during the past week. She had tapped at the door without having been summoned, and she had ventured to enter though she had heard no voice saying 'Come in.'

Mrs Transome had on a dark warm dressing-gown, hanging in thick folds about her, and she was seated before a mirror which filled a panel from the floor to the ceiling. The room was bright with the light of the fire and of wax candles. For some reason, contrary to her usual practice, Mrs Transome had herself unfastened her abundant grey hair, which rolled backward in a pale sunless stream over her dark dress. She was seated before the mirror apparently looking at herself, her brow knit in one deep furrow, and her jewelled hands laid one above the other on her knee. Probably she had ceased to see the reflection in the mirror, for her eyes had the fixed wide-open look that belongs not to examination, but to reverie. Motionless in that way, her clear-cut features keeping distinct record of past beauty, she looked like an image faded, dried, and bleached by uncounted suns, rather than a breathing woman who had numbered the years as they passed, and had a consciousness within her which was the slow deposit of those ceaseless rolling years.'

Denner, with all her ingrained and systematic reserve, could not help showing signs that she was startled, when, peering from between her half-closed eyelids, she saw the motionless image in the mirror opposite to her as she entered. Her gentle opening of the door had not roused her mistress, to whom the sensations produced by Denner's presence were as little disturbing as those of a favourite cat. But the slight cry, and the start reflected in the glass, were unusual enough to break the reverie: Mrs Transome moved, leaned back in her chair, and said -

'So you're come at last, Denner?'

'Yes, madam; it is not late. I'm sorry you should have undone your hair yourself.'

'I undid it to see what an old hag I am. These fine clothes you put on me, Denner, are only a smart shroud.'

'Pray don't talk so, madam. If there's anybody doesn't think it pleasant to look at you, so much the worse for them. For my part, I've seen no young ones fit to hold up your train. Look at your likeness down below; and though you're older now, what signifies? I wouldn't be Letty in the scullery because she's got red cheeks. She mayn't know she's a poor creature, but I know it, and that's enough for me: I know what sort of a dowdy draggletail she'll be in ten years' time. I would change with nobody, madam. And if troubles were put up to market, I'd sooner buy old than new. It's something to have seen the worst.'

'A woman never has seen the worst till she is old, Denner,' said Mrs Transome, bitterly.

The keen little waiting-woman was not clear as to the cause of her mistress's added bitterness; but she rarely brought herself to ask questions, when Mrs Transome did not authorise them by beginning to give her information. Banks the bailiff and the head-servant had nodded and winked a good deal over the certainty that Mr Harold was 'none so fond' of Jermyn, but this was a subject on which Mrs Transome had never made up her mind to speak, and Denner knew nothing definite. Again, she felt quite sure that there was some important secret connected with Esther's presence in the house; she suspected that the close Dominic knew the secret, and was more trusted than she was, in spite of her forty years' service; but any resentment on this ground would have been an entertained reproach against her mistress, inconsistent with Denner's creed and character. She inclined to the belief that Esther was the immediate cause of the new discontent.

'If there's anything worse coming to you, I should like to know what it is, madam,' she said, after a moment's silence, speaking always in the same low quick way, and keeping up her quiet labours. 'When I awake at cock-crow, I'd sooner have one real grief on my mind than twenty false. It's better to know you're robbed than to think one's going to be murdered.'

'I believe you are the creature in the world that loves me best, Denner; yet you will never understand what I suffered. It's of no use telling you. There's no folly in you and no heartache. You are made of iron. You have never had any trouble.'

'I've had some of your trouble, madam.'

'Yes, you good thing. But as a sick-nurse, that never caught the fever. You never even had a child.'

'I can feel for things I never went through. I used to be sorry for the poor French queen when I was young: I'd have lain cold for her to lie warm. I know people have feelings according to their birth and station. And you always took things to heart, madam, beyond anybody else. But I hope there's nothing new, to make you talk of the worst.'

'Yes, Denner, there is - there is,' said Mrs Transome, speaking in a low tone of misery, while she bent for her headdress to be pinned on.

'Is it this young lady?'

'Why, what do you think about her, Denner?' said Mrs Transome, in a tone of more spirit, rather curious to hear what the old woman would say.

'I don't deny she's graceful, and she has a pretty smile and very good manners: it's quite unaccountable by what Banks says about her father. I know nothing of those Treby townfolk myself, but for my part I'm puzzled. I'm fond of Mr Harold. I always shall be, madam. I was at his bringing into the world, and nothing but his doing wrong by you would turn me against him. But the servants all say he's in love with Miss Lyon.'

'I wish it were true, Denner,' said Mrs Transome, energetically. 'I wish he were in love with her, so that she could master him, and make him do what she pleased.'

'Then it is not true - what they say?'

'Not true that she will ever master him. No woman ever will. He will make her fond of him, and afraid of him. That's one of the things you have never gone through, Denner. A woman's love is always freezing into fear. She wants everything, she is secure of nothing. This girl has a fine spirit - plenty of fire and pride and wit. Men like such captives, as they like horses that champ the bit and paw the ground: they feel more triumph in their mastery. What is the use of a woman's will? - if she tries, she doesn't get it, and she ceases to be loved. God was cruel when he made women.'

Denner was used to such outbursts as this. Her mistress's rhetoric and temper belonged to her superior rank, her grand person, and her piercing black eyes. Mrs Transome had a sense of impiety in her words which made them all the more tempting to her impotent anger.

The waiting-woman had none of that awe which could be turned into defiance: the Sacred Grove was a common thicket to her.

'It mayn't be good-luck to be a woman,' she said. 'But one begins with it from a baby: one gets used to it. And I shouldn't like to be a man - to cough so loud, and stand straddling about on a wet day, and be so wasteful with meat and drink. They're a coarse lot, I think. Then I needn't make a trouble of this young lady, madam,' she added, after a moment's pause.

'No, Denner. I like her. If that were all - I should like Harold to marry her. It would be the best thing. If the truth were known - and it will be known soon - the estate is hers by law - such law as it is. It's a strange story: she's a Bycliffe really.'

Denner did not look amazed, but went on fastening her mistress's dress, as she said -

'Well, madam, I was sure there was something wonderful at the bottom of it. And turning the old lawsuits and everything else over in my mind, I thought the law might have something to do with it. Then she is a born lady?'

'Yes; she has good blood in her veins.'

'We talked that over in the housekeeper's room - what a hand and an instep she has, and how her head is set on her shoulders - almost like your own, madam. But her lightish complexion spoils her, to my thinking. And Dominic said Mr Harold never admired that sort of woman before. There's nothing that smooth fellow couldn't tell you if he would: he knows the answers to riddles before they're made. However, he knows how to hold his tongue; I'll say that for him. And so do I, madam.'

'Yes, yes; you will not talk of it till other people are talking of it.'

'And so, if Mr Harold married her, it would save all fuss and mischief?'

'Yes - about the estate.'

'And he seems inclined; and she'll not refuse him, I'll answer for it. And you like her, madam. There's everything to set your mind at rest.'

Denner was putting the finishing-touch to Mrs Transome's dress by throwing an Indian scarf over her shoulders, and so completing the contrast between the majestic lady in costume and the dishevelled Hecuba-like woman whom she had found half an hour before.

'I am not at rest!' Mrs Transome said, with slow distinctness, moving from the mirror to the window, where the blind was not drawn down, and she could see the chill white landscape and the far-off unheeding stars.

Denner, more distressed by her mistress's suffering than she could have been by anything else, took up with the instinct of affection a gold vinaigrette which Mrs Transome often liked to carry with her, and going up to her put it into her hand gently. Mrs Transome grasped the little woman's hand hard, and held it so.

'Denner,' she said, in a low tone, 'if I could choose at this moment, I would choose that Harold should never have been born.'

'Nay, my dear' (Denner had only once before in her life said 'my dear' to her mistress), 'it was a happiness to you then.'

'I don't believe I felt the happiness then as I feel the misery now. It is foolish to say people can't feel much when they are getting old. Not pleasure, perhaps - little comes. But they can feel they are forsaken - why, every fibre in me seems to be a memory that makes a pang. They can feel that all the love in their lives is turned to hatred or contempt.'

'Not mine, madam, not mine. Let what would be, I should want to live for your sake, for fear you should have nobody to do for you as I would.'

'Ah, then, you are a happy woman, Denner; you have loved somebody for forty years who is old and weak now, and can't do without you.'

The sound of the dinner-gong resounded below, and Mrs Transome let the faithful hand fall again.