Chapter 40

'She's beautiful; and therefore to be wooed:

She is a woman; therefore to be won.' - Henry VI.

IF Denner had had a suspicion that Esther's presence at Transome Court was not agreeable to her mistress, it was impossible to entertain such a suspicion with regard to the other members of the family. Between her and little Harry there was an extraordinary fascination. This creature, with the soft broad brown cheeks, low forehead, great black eyes, tiny well-defined nose, fierce biting tricks towards every person and thing he disliked, and insistence on entirely occupying those he liked, was a human specimen such as Esther had never seen before, and she seemed to be equally original in Harry's experience. At first sight her light complexion and her blue gown, probably also her sunny smile and her hands stretched out towards him, seemed to make a show for him as of a new sort of bird: he threw himself backward against his 'Gappa', as he called old Mr Transome, and stared at this new-comer with the gravity of a wild animal. But she had no sooner sat down on the sofa in the library than he climbed up to her, and began to treat her as an attractive object in natural history, snatched up her curls with his brown fist, and, discovering that there was a little ear under them, pinched it and blew into it, pulled at her coronet of plaits, and seemed to discover with satisfaction that it did not grow at the summit of her head, but could be dragged down and altogether undone. Then finding that she laughed, tossed him back, kissed, and pretended to bite him - in fact, was an animal that understood fun - he rushed off and made Dominic bring a small menagerie of white-mice, squirrels, and birds, with Moro, the black spaniel, to make her acquaintance. Whomsoever Harry liked, it followed that Mr Transome must like: 'Gappa', along with Nimrod the retriever, was part of the menagerie, and perhaps endured more than all the other live creatures in the way of being tumbled about. Seeing that Esther bore having her hair pulled down quite merrily, and that she was willing to be harnessed and beaten, the old man began to confide in her, in his feeble, smiling, and rather jerking fashion, Harry's remarkable feats: how he had one day, when Gappa was asleep, unpinned a whole drawerful of beetles, to see if they would fly away; then, disgusted with their stupidity, was about to throw them all on the ground and stamp on them, when Dominic came in and rescued these valuable specimens; also, how he had subtly watched Mrs Transome at the cabinet where she kept her medicines, and, when she had left it for a little while without locking it, had gone to the drawers and scattered half the contents on the floor. But what old Mr Transome thought the most wonderful proof of an almost preter-natural cleverness was, that Harry would hardly ever

talk, but preferred making inarticulate noises, or combining syllables after a method of his own.

'He can talk well enough if he likes,' said Gappa, evidently thinking that Harry, like the monkeys, had deep reasons for his reticence.

'You mind him,' he added, nodding at Esther, and shaking with low-toned laughter. 'You'll hear: he knows the right names of things well enough, but he likes to make his own. He'll give you one all to yourself before long.'

And when Harry seemed to have made up his mind distinctly that Esther's name was 'Boo', Mr Transome nodded at her with triumphant satisfaction, and then told her in a low whisper, looking round cautiously beforehand, that Harry would never call Mrs Transome 'Gamma,' but always 'Bite.'

'It's wonderful ! ' said he, laughing slyly.

The old man seemed so happy now in the new world created for him by Dominic and Harry, that he would perhaps have made a holocaust of his flies and beetles if it had been necessary in order to keep this living, lively kindness about him. He no longer confined himself to the library, but shuffled along from room to room, staying and looking on at what was going forward wherever he did not find Mrs Transome alone.

To Esther the sight of this feeble-minded, timid, paralytic man, who had long abdicated all mastery over the things that were his, was something piteous. Certainly this had never been part of the furniture she had imagined for the delightful aristocratic dwelling in her Utopia; and the sad irony of such a lot impressed her the more because in her father she was accustomed to age accompanied with mental acumen and activity. Her thoughts went back in conjecture over the past life of Mr and Mrs Transome, a couple so strangely different from each other. She found it impossible to arrange their existence in the seclusion of this fine park and in this lofty large-roomed house, where it seemed quite ridiculous to be anything so small as a human being, without finding it rather dull. Mr Transome had always had his beetles, but Mrs Transome - ? It was not easy to conceive that the husband and wife had ever been very fond of each other.

Esther felt at her ease with Mrs Transome: she was gratified by the consciousness - for on this point Esther was very quick - that Mrs Transome admired her, and looked at her with satisfied eyes. But when they were together in the early days of her stay, the conversation turned chiefly on what happened in Mrs Transome's youth - what she wore when she was presented at Court - who were the most

distinguished and beautiful women at that time - the terrible excitement of the French Revolution - the emigrants she had known, and the history of various titled members of the Lingon family. And Esther, from native delicacy, did not lead to more recent topics of a personal kind. She was copiously instructed that the Lingon family was better than that even of the elder Transomes, and was privileged with an explanation of the various quarterings, which proved that the Lingon blood had been continually enriched. Poor Mrs Transome, with her secret bitterness and dread, still found a flavour in this sort of pride; none the less because certain deeds of her own life had been in fatal inconsistency with it. Besides, genealogies entered into her stock of ideas, and her talk on such subjects was as necessary as the notes of the linnet or the blackbird. She had no ultimate analysis of things that went beyond blood and family - the Herons of Fenshore or the Badgers of Hillbury. She had never seen behind the canvas with which her life was hung. In the dim background there was the burning mount and the tables of the law; in the foreground there was Lady Debarry privately gossiping about her, and Lady Wyvern finally deciding not to send her invitations to dinner. Unlike that Semiramis who made laws to suit her practical licence, she lived, poor soul, in the midst of desecrated sanctities, and of honours that looked tarnished in the light of monotonous and weary suns. Glimpses of the Lingon heraldry in their freshness were interesting to Esther; but it occurred to her that when she had known about them a good while they would cease to be succulent themes of converse or meditation, and Mrs Transome, having known them all along, might have felt a vacuum in spite of them.

Nevertheless it was entertaining at present to be seated on soft cushions with her netting before her, while Mrs Transome went on with her embroidery, and told in that easy phrase, and with that refined high-bred tone and accent which she possessed in perfection, family stories that to Esther were like so many novelettes: what diamonds were in the earl's family, own cousins to Mrs Transome; how poor Lady Sara's husband went off into jealous madness only a month after their marriage, and dragged that sweet blue-eyed thing by the hair; and how the brilliant Fanny, having married a country parson, became so niggardly that she had gone about almost begging for fresh eggs from the farmers' wives, though she had done very well with her six sons, as there was a bishop and no end of interest in the family, and two of them got appointments in India.

At present Mrs Transome did not touch at all on her own time of privation, or her troubles with her eldest son, or on anything that lay very close to her heart. She conversed with Esther, and acted the part of hostess as she performed her toilette and went on with her embroidery: these things were to be done whether one were happy or miserable. Even the patriarch Job, if he had been a gentleman of the

modern West, would have avoided picturesque disorder and poetical laments; and the friends who called on him, though not less disposed than Bildad the Shuhite to hint that their unfortunate friend was in the wrong, would have sat on chairs and held their hats in their hands. The harder problems of our life have changed less than our manners; we wrestle with the old sorrows, but more decorously. Esther's inexperience prevented her from divining much about this fine grey-haired woman, whom she could not help perceiving to stand apart from the family group, as if there were some cause of isolation for her both within and without. To her young heart there was a peculiar interest in Mrs Transome. An elderly woman, whose beauty, position, and graceful kindness towards herself, made deference to her spontaneous, was a new figure in Esther's experience. Her quick light movement was always ready to anticipate what Mrs Transome wanted; her bright apprehension and silvery speech were always ready to cap Mrs Transome's narratives or instructions even about doses and liniments, with some lively commentary. She must have behaved charmingly; for one day when she had tripped across the room to put the screen just in the right place, Mrs Transome said, taking her hand, 'My dear, you make me wish I had a daughter!'

That was pleasant; and so it was to be decked by Mrs Transome's own hands in a set of turquoise ornaments, which became her wonderfully, worn with a white Cashmere dress, which was also insisted on. Esther never reflected that there was a double intention in these pretty ways towards her; with young generosity, she was rather preoccupied by the desire to prove that she herself entertained no low triumph in the fact that she had rights prejudicial to this family whose life she was learning. And besides, through all Mrs Transome's perfect manners there pierced some indefinable indications of a hidden anxiety much deeper than anything she could feel about this affair of the estate - to which she often alluded slightly as a reason for informing Esther of something. It was impossible to mistake her for a happy woman; and young speculation is always stirred by discontent for which there is no obvious cause. When we are older, we take the uneasy eyes and the bitter lips more as a matter of course.

But Harold Transome was more communicative about recent years than his mother was. He thought it well that Esther should know how the fortune of his family had been drained by law expenses, owing to suits mistakenly urged by her family; he spoke of his mother's lonely life and pinched circumstances, of her lack of comfort in her elder son, and of the habit she had consequently acquired of looking at the gloomy side of things. He hinted that she had been accustomed to dictate, and that, as he had left her when he was a boy, she had perhaps indulged the dream that he would come back a boy. She was still sore on the point of his politics. These things could not be helped,

but, so far as he could, he wished to make the rest of her life as cheerful as possible.

Esther listened eagerly, and took these things to heart. The claim to an inheritance, the sudden discovery of a right to a fortune held by others, was acquiring a very distinct and unexpected meaning for her. Every day she was getting more clearly into her imagination what it would be to abandon her own past, and what she would enter into in exchange for it; what it would be to disturb a long possession, and how difficult it was to fix a point at which the disturbance might begin, so as to be contemplated without pain.

Harold Transome's thoughts turned on the same subject, but accompanied by a different state of feeling and with more definite resolutions. He saw a mode of reconciling all difficulties which looked pleasanter to him the longer he looked at Esther. When she had been hardly a week in the house, he had made up his mind to marry her; and it had never entered into that mind that the decision did not rest entirely with his inclination. It was not that he thought slightly of Esther's demands; he saw that she would require considerable attractions to please her, and that there were difficulties to be overcome. She was clearly a girl who must be wooed; but Harold did not despair of presenting the requisite attractions, and the difficulties gave more interest to the wooing than he could have believed. When he had said that he would not marry an Englishwoman, he had always made a mental reservation in favour of peculiar circumstances; and now the peculiar circumstances were come. To be deeply in love was a catastrophe not likely to happen to him; but he was readily amorous. No woman could make him miserable, but he was sensitive to the presence of women, and was kind to them; not with grimaces, like a man of mere gallantry, but beamingly, easily, like a man of genuine good-nature. And each day that he was near Esther, the solution of all difficulties by marriage became a more pleasing prospect; though he had to confess to himself that the difficulties did not diminish on a nearer view, in spite of the flattering sense that she brightened at his approach.

Harold was not one to fail in a purpose for want of assiduity. After an hour or two devoted to business in the morning, he went to look for Esther, and if he did not find her at play with Harry and old Mr Transome, or chatting with his mother, he went into the drawing-room, where she was usually either seated with a book on her knee and 'making a bed for her cheek' with one little hand, while she looked out of the window, or else standing in front of one of the full-length family portraits with an air of rumination. Esther found it impossible to read in these days; her life was a book which she seemed herself to be constructing - trying to make character clear before her, and looking into the ways of destiny.

The active Harold had almost always something definite to propose by way of filling the time: if it were fine, she must walk out with him and see the grounds; and when the snow melted and it was no longer slippery, she must get on horseback and learn to ride. If they stayed indoors, she must learn to play at billiards, or she must go over the house and see the pictures he had hung anew, or the costumes he had brought from the East, or come into his study and look at the map of the estate, and hear what - if it had remained in his family - he had intended to do in every corner of it in order to make the most of its capabilities.

About a certain time in the morning Esther had learned to expect him. Let every woocr make himself strongly expected; he may succeed by dint of being absent, but hardly in the first instance. One morning Harold found her in the drawing-room, leaning against a consol table, and looking at the full-length portrait of a certain Lady Betty Transome, who had lived a century and a half before, and had the usual charm of ladies in Sir Peter Lely's style.

'Don't move, pray,' he said on entering; 'you look as if you were standing for your own portrait.'

'I take that as an insinuation,' said Esther, laughing, and moving towards her seat on an ottoman near the fire, 'for I notice almost all the portraits are in a conscious, affected attitude. That fair Lady Betty looks as if she had been drilled into that posture, and had not will enough of her own ever to move again unless she had a little push given to her.'

'She brightens up that panel well with her long satin skirt,' said Harold, as he followed Esther, 'but alive I daresay she would have been less cheerful company.'

'One would certainly think that she had just been unpacked from silver paper. Ah, how chivalrous you are!' said Esther, as Harold, kneeling on one knee, held her silken netting-stirrup for hcr to put her foot through. She had often fancied pleasant scenes in which such homage was rendered to her, and the homage was not disagreeable now it was really come; but, strangely enough, a little darting sensation at that moment was accompanied by the vivid remembrance of some one who had never paid the least attention to her foot. There had been a slight blush, such as often came and went rapidly, and she was silent a moment. Harold naturally believed that it was he himself who was filling the field of vision He would have liked to place himself on the ottoman near Esther, and behave very much more like a lover; but he took a chair opposite to her at a circumspect distance. He dared not do otherwise. Along with Esther's playful charm she conveyed an impression of personal pride and high spirit which

warned Harold's acuteness that in the delicacy of their present position he might easily make a false move and offend her. A woman was likely to be credulous about adoration, and to find no difficulty in referring it to her intrinsic attractions; but Esther was too dangerously quick and critical not to discern the least awkwardness that looked like offering her marriage as a convenient compromise for himself. Beforehand, he might have said that such characteristics as hers were not lovable in a woman; but, as it was, he found that the hope of pleasing her had a piquancy quite new to him.

'I wonder,' said Esther, breaking her silence in her usual light silvery tones - 'I wonder whether the woman who looked in that way ever felt any troubles. I see there are two old ones upstairs in the billiard-room who have only got fat; the expression of their faces is just of the same sort.'

'A woman ought never to have any trouble. There should always be a man to guard her from it.' (Harold Transome was masculine and fallible; he had incautiously sat down this morning to pay his addresses by talk about nothing in particular; and, clever experienced man as he was, he fell into nonsense.)

'But suppose the man himself got into trouble - you would wish her to mind about that. Or suppose,' added Esther, suddenly looking up merrily at Harold, 'the man himself was troublesome?'

'O you must not strain probabilities in that way. The generality of men are perfect. Take me, for example.'

'You are a perfect judge of sauces,' said Esther, who had her triumphs in letting Harold know that she was capable of taking notes.

'That is perfection number one. Pray go on.'

'O, the catalogue is too long - I should be tired before I got to your magnificent ruby ring and your gloves always of the right colour.'

'If you would let me tell you your perfections, I should not be tired.'

'That is not complimentary; it means that the list is short.'

'No; it means that the list is pleasant to dwell upon.'

'Pray don't begin,' said Esther, with her pretty toss of the head; 'it would be dangerous to our good understanding. The person I liked best in the world was one who did nothing but scold me and tell me of my faults.'

When Esther began to speak, she meant to do no more than make a remote unintelligible allusion, feeling, it must be owned, a naughty will to flirt and be saucy, and thwart Harold's attempts to be felicitous in compliment. But she had no sooner uttered the words than they seemed to her like a confession. A deep flush spread itself over her face and neck, and the sense that she was blushing went on deepening her colour. Harold felt himself unpleasantly illuminated as to a possibility that had never yet occurred to him. His surprise made an uncomfortable pause, in which Esther had time to feel much vexation.

'You speak in the past tense,' said Harold, at last; 'yet I am rather envious of that person. I shall never be able to win your regard in the same way. Is it any one at Treby? Because in that case I can inquire about your faults.'

'O you know I have always lived among grave people,' said Esther, more able to recover herself now she was spoken to. 'Before I came home to be with my father I was nothing but a school-girl first, and then a teacher in different stages of growth. People in those circumstances are not usually flattered. But there are varieties in fault-finding. At our Paris school the master I liked best was an old man who stormed at me terribly when I read Racine, but yet showed that he was proud of me.'

Esther was getting quite cool again. But Harold was not entirely satisfied; if there was any obstacle in his way, he wished to know exactly what it was.

'That must have been a wretched life for you at Treby,' he said, - 'a person of your accomplishments.'

'I used to be dreadfully discontented,' said Esther, much occupied with mistakes she had made in her netting. 'But I was becoming less so. I have had time to get rather wise, you know; I am two-and-twenty.'

'Yes,' said Harold, rising and walking a few paces backwards and forwards, 'you are past your majority; you are empress of your own fortunes - and more besides.'

'Dear me,' said Esther, letting her work fall, and leaning back against the cushions; 'I don't think I know very well what to do with my empire.'

'Well,' said Harold, pausing in front of her, leaning one arm on the mantelpiece, and speaking very gravely, 'I hope that in any case, since you appear to have no near relative who understands affairs, you will

confide in me, and trust me with all your intentions as if I had no other personal concern in the matter than a regard for you. I hope you believe me capable of acting as the guardian of your interest, even where it turns out to be inevitably opposed to my own.'

'I am sure you have given me reason to believe it,' said Esther, with seriousness, putting out her hand to Harold. She had not been left in ignorance that he had had opportunities twice offered of stifling her claims.

Harold raised the hand to his lips, but dared not retain it more than an instant. Still the sweet reliance in Esther's manner made an irresistible temptation to him. After standing still a moment or two, while she bent over her work, he glided to the ottoman and seated himself close by her, looking at her busy hands.

'I see you have made mistakes in your work,' he said, bending still nearer, for he saw that she was conscious yet not angry.

'Nonsense I you know nothing about it,' said Esther, laughing, and crushing up the soft silk under her palms. 'Those blunders have a design in them.'

She looked round, and saw a handsome face very near her. Harold was looking, as he felt, thoroughly enamoured of this bright woman, who was not at all to his preconceived taste. Perhaps a touch of hypothetic jealousy now helped to heighten the effect. But he mastered all indiscretion, and only looked at her as he said -

'I am wondering whether you have any deep wishes and secrets that I can't guess.'

'Pray don't speak of my wishes,' said Esther, quite overmastered by this new and apparently involuntary manifestation in Harold; 'I could not possibly tell you one at this moment - I think I shall never find them out again. O yes she said, abruptly, struggling to relieve herself from the oppression of unintelligible feelings - 'I do know one wish distinctly. I want to go and see my father. He writes me word that all is well with him, but still I want to see him.' 'You shall be driven there when you like.'

'May I go now - I mean as soon as it is convenient?' said Esther, rising.

'I will give the order immediately, if you wish it,' said Harold, understanding that the audience was broken up.