

## Chapter 41

He rates me as a merchant does the wares

He will not purchase - 'quality not high I -

'Twill lose its colour opened to the sun,

Has no aroma, and, in fine, is naught -

I barter not for such commodities -

There is no ratio betwixt sand and gems.'

'Tis wicked judgment ! for the soul can grov,

As embryos, that live and move but blindly,

Burst from the dark, emerge regenerate,

And lead a life of vision and of choice.

ESTHER did not take the carriage into Malthouse Lane, but left it to wait for her outside the town; and when she entered the house she put her finger on her lip to Lyddy and ran lightly upstairs. She wished to surprise her father by this visit, and she succeeded. The little minister was just then almost surrounded by a wall of books, with merely his head peeping above them, being much embarrassed to find a substitute for tables and desks on which to arrange the volumes he kept open for reference. He was absorbed in mastering all those painstaking interpretations of the Book of Daniel, which are by this time well gone to the limbo of mistaken criticism; and Esther, as she opened the door softly, heard him rehearsing aloud a passage in which he declared, with some parenthetic provisoes, that he conceived not how a perverse ingenuity could blunt the edge of prophetic explicitness, or how an open mind could fail to see in the chronology of 'the little horn' the resplendent lamp of an inspired symbol searching out the germinal growth of an antichristian power.

'You will not like me to interrupt you, father?' said Esther slyly.

'Ah, my beloved child!' he exclaimed, upsetting a pile of books, and thus unintentionally making a convenient breach in his wall, through which Esther could get up to him and kiss him. 'Thy appearing is as a joy despaired of. I had thought of thee as the blinded think of the daylight - which indeed is a thing to rejoice in, like all other good, though we see it not nigh.'

'Are you sure you have been as well and comfortable as you said you were in your letters?' said Esther, seating herself close in front of her father, and laying her hand on his shoulder.

'I wrote truly, my dear, according to my knowledge at the time. But to an old memory like mine the present days are but as a little water poured on the deep. It seems now that all has been as usual, except my studies, which have gone somewhat curiously into prophetic history. But I fear you will rebuke me for my negligent apparel,' said the little man, feeling in front of Esther's brightness like a bat overtaken by the morning.

'That is Lyddy's fault, who sits crying over her want of Christian assurance instead of brushing your clothes and putting out your clean cravat. She is always saying her righteousness is filthy rags, and really I don't think that is a very strong expression for it. I'm sure it is dusty clothes and furniture.'

'Nay, my dear, your playfulness glances too severely on our faithful Lyddy. Doubtless I am myself deficient, in that I do not aid her infirm memory by admonition. But now tell me aught that you have left untold about yourself Your heart has gone out somewhat towards this family - the old man and the child, whom I had not reckoned of?'

'Yes, father. It is more and more difficult to me to see how I can make up my mind to disturb these people at all.'

'Something should doubtless be devised to lighten the loss and the change to the aged father and mother. I would have you in any case seek to temper a vicissitude, which is nevertheless a providential arrangement not to be wholly set aside.'

'Do you think, father - do you feel assured that a case of inheritance like this of mine is a sort of providential arrangement that makes a command?'

'I have so held it,' said Mr Lyon, solemnly; 'in all my meditations I have so held it. For you have to consider, my dear, that you have been led by a peculiar path, and into experience which is not ordinarily the lot of those who are seated in high places; and what I have hinted to you already in my letters on this head, I shall wish on a future opportunity to enter into more at large.'

Esther was uneasily silent. On this great question of her lot she saw doubts and difficulties, in which it seemed as if her father could not help her. There was no illumination for her in this theory of providential arrangement. She said suddenly (what she had not thought of at all suddenly) -

'Have you been again to see Felix Holt, father? You have not mentioned him in your letters.'

'I have been since I last wrote, my dear, and I took his mother with me, who, I fear, made the time heavy to him with her complaints. But afterwards I carried her away to the house of a brother minister of Loamford, and returned to Felix, and then we had much discourse.'

'Did you tell him of everything that has happened - I mean about me - about the Transomes?'

'Assuredly I told him, and he listened as one astonished. For he had much to hear, knowing nought of your birth, and that you had any other father than Rufus Lyon. 'Tis a narrative I trust I shall not be called on to give to others; but I was not without satisfaction in unfolding the truth to this young man, who hath wrought himself into my affection strangely - I would fain hope for ends that will be a visible good in his less way-worn life, when mine shall be no longer.'

'And you told him how the Transomes had come, and that I was staying at Transome Court?'

'Yes, I told these things with some particularity, as is my wont concerning what hath imprinted itself on my mind.' 'What did Felix say?'

'Truly, my dear, nothing desirable to recite,' said Mr Lyon, rubbing his hand over his brow.

'Dear father, he did say something, and you always remember what people say. Pray tell me; I want to know.'

'It was a hasty remark, and rather escaped him than was consciously framed. He said, 'Then she will marry Transome; that is what Transome means.''

'That was all?' said Esther, turning rather pale, and biting her lip with the determination that the tears should not start.

'Yes, we did not go further into that branch of the subject. I apprehend there is no warrant for his seeming prognostic, and I should not be without disquiet if I thought otherwise. For I confess that in your accession to this great position and property, I contemplate with hopeful satisfaction your remaining attached to that body of congregational Dissent, which, as I hold, hath retained most of pure and primitive discipline. Your education and peculiar history would thus be seen to have coincided with a long train of events in making this family property a means of honouring and illustrating a

purser form of Christianity than that which hath unhappily obtained the pre-eminence in this land. I speak, my child, as you know, always in the hope that you will fully join our communion; and this dear wish of my heart - nay, this urgent prayer - would seem to be frustrated by your marriage with a man, of whom there is at least no visible indication that he would unite himself to our body.'

If Esther had been less agitated, she would hardly have helped smiling at the picture her father's words suggested of Harold Transome 'joining the church' in Malthouse Yard. But she was too seriously preoccupied with what Felix had said, which hurt her in a two-edged fashion that was highly significant. First, she was angry with him for daring to say positively whom she would marry; secondly, she was angry at the implication that there was from the

first a cool deliberate design in Harold Transome to marry her. Esther said to herself that she was quite capable of discerning Harold Transome's disposition. and judging of his conduct. She felt sure he was generous and open. It did not lower him in her opinion that since circumstances had brought them together he evidently admired her - was in love with her - in short, desired to marry her; and she thought that she discerned the delicacy which hindered him from being more explicit. There is no point on which young women are more easily piqued than this of their sufficiency to judge the men who make love to them. And Esther's generous nature delighted to believe in generosity. All these thoughts were making a tumult in her mind while her father was suggesting the radiance her lot might cast on the cause of congregational Dissent. She heard what he said, and remembered it afterwards, but she made no reply at present, and chose rather to start up in search of a brush - an action which would seem to her father quite a usual sequence with her. It served the purpose of diverting him from a lengthy subject.

'Have you yet spoken with Mr Transome concerning Mistress Holt, my dear?' he said, as Esther was moving about the room. 'I hinted to him that you would best decide how assistance should be tendered to her.'

'No, father, we have not approached the subject. Mr Transome may have forgotten it, and, for several reasons, I would rather not talk of this - of money matters to him at present. There is money due to me from the Lukyns and the Pendrells.'

'They have paid it,' said Mr Lyon, opening his desk. 'I have it here ready to deliver to you.'

'Keep it, father, and pay Mrs Holt's rent with it, and do anything else that is wanted for her. We must consider everything temporary now,' said Esther, enveloping her father in a towel, and beginning to brush

his auburn fringe of hair, while he shut his eyes in preparation for this pleasant passivity. 'Everything is uncertain - what may become of Felix - what may become of us all. O dear!' she went on, changing suddenly to laughing merriment, 'I am beginning to talk like Lyddy, I think.'

'Truly,' said Mr Lyon, smiling, 'the uncertainty of things is a text rather too wide and obvious for fruitful application; and to discourse of it is, as one might say, to bottle up the air, and make a present of it to those who are already standing out of doors.'

'Do you think,' said Esther, in the course of their chat, 'that the Treby people know at all about the reasons of my being at Transome Court?'

'I have had no sign thereof; and indeed there is no one, as it appears, who could make the story public. The man Christian is away in London with Mr Debarry, parliament now beginning; and Mr Jermyn would doubtless respect the confidence of the Transomes. I have not seen him lately. I know nothing of his movements. And so far as my own speech is concerned, and my strict command to Lyddy, I have withheld the means of information even as to your having returned to Transome Court in the carriage, not wishing to give any occasion to solicitous questioning till time hath somewhat inured me. But it hath got abroad that you are there, and is the subject of conjectures, whereof, I imagine, the chief is, that you are gone as companion to Mistress Transome; for some of our friends have already hinted a rebuke to me that I should permit your taking a position so little likely to further your spiritual welfare.'

'Now, father, I think I shall be obliged to run away from you, not to keep the carriage too long,' said Esther, as she finished her reforms in the minister's toilette. 'You look beautiful now, and I must give Lyddy a little lecture before I go.'

'Yes, my dear; I would not detain you, seeing that my duties demand me. But take with you this Treatise, which I have purposely selected. It concerns all the main questions between ourselves and the establishment - government, discipline, state-support. It is seasonable that you should give a nearer attention to these polemics, lest you be drawn aside by the fallacious association of a state church with elevated rank.'

Esther chose to take the volume submissively, rather than to adopt the ungraceful sincerity of saying that she was unable at present to give her mind to the original functions of a bishop, or the comparative merit of endowments and voluntaryism. But she did not run her eyes over the pages during her solitary drive to get a foretaste of the

argument, for she was entirely occupied with Felix Holt's prophecy that she would marry Harold Transome.