

Chapter 43

'Whichever way my days decline,
I felt and feel, though left alone,
His being working in mine own,
The footsteps of his life in mine.
Dear friend, far off, my lost desire,
So far, so near, in woe and weal;
O, loved the most when most I feel
There is a lower and a higher!'

TENNYSON: In Memoriam.

AFTER that morning on which Esther found herself reddened and confused by the sense of having made a distant allusion to Felix Holt, she felt it impossible that she should even, as she had sometimes intended, speak of him explicitly to Harold, in order to discuss the probabilities as to the issue of his trial. She was certain she could not do it without betraying emotion, and there were very complex reasons in Esther's mind why she could not bear that Harold should detect her sensibility on this subject. It was not only all the fibres of maidenly pride and reserve, of a bashfulness undefinably peculiar towards this man, who, while much older than herself, and bearing the stamp of an experience quite hidden from her imagination, was taking strongly the aspect of a lover - it was not only this exquisite kind of shame which was at work within her: there was another sort of susceptibility in Esther, which her present circumstances tended to encourage, though she had come to regard it as not at all lofty, but rather as something which condemned her to littleness in comparison with a mind she had learned to venerate. She knew quite well that, to Harold Transome, Felix Holt was one of the common people who could come into question in no other than a public light. She had a native capability for discerning that the sense of ranks and degrees has its repulsions corresponding to the repulsions dependent on difference of race and colour; and she remembered her own impressions too well not to foresee that it would come on Harold Transome as a shock, if he suspected there had been any love-passages between her and this young man, who to him was of course no more than any other intelligent member of the working class. 'To him,' said Esther to herself, with a reaction of her newer, better pride, 'who has not had the sort of intercourse in which Felix Holt's cultured nature would

have asserted its superiority.' And in her fluctuations on this matter, she found herself mentally protesting that, whatever Harold might think, there was a light in which he was vulgar compared with Felix. Felix had ideas and motives which she did not believe that Harold could understand. More than all, there was this test: she herself had no sense of inferiority and just subjection when she was with Harold Transome; there were even points in him for which she felt a touch, not of angry, but of playful scorn; whereas with Felix she had always a sense of dependence and possible illumination. In those large, grave, candid grey eyes of his, love seemed something that belonged to the high enthusiasm of life, such as might now be for ever shut out from her.

All the same, her vanity winced at the idea that Harold should discern what, from his point of view, would seem like a degradation of her taste and refinement. She could not help being gratified by all the manifestations from those around her that she was thought thoroughly fitted for a high position - could not help enjoying, with more or less keenness, a rehearsal of that demeanour amongst luxuries and dignities which had often been a part of her daydreams, and the rehearsal included the reception of more and more emphatic attentions from Harold, and of an effusiveness in his manners, which, in proportion as it would have been offensive if it had appeared earlier, became flattering as the effect of a growing acquaintance and daily contact. It comes in so many forms in this life of ours - the knowledge that there is something sweetest and noblest of which we despair, and the sense of something present that solicits us with an immediate and easy indulgence. And there is a pernicious falsity in the pretence that a woman's love lies above the range of such temptations.

Day after day Esther had an arm offered her, had very beaming looks upon her, had opportunities for a great deal of light, airy talk, in which she knew herself to be charming, and had the attractive interest of noticing Harold's practical cleverness - the masculine ease with which he governed everybody and administered everything about him, without the least harshness, and with a facile good-nature which yet was not weak. In the background, too, there was the ever-present consideration, that if Harold Transome wished to marry her, and she accepted him, the problem of her lot would be more easily solved than in any other way. It was difficult by any theory of providence, or consideration of results, to see a course which she could call duty: if something would come and urge itself strongly as pleasure, and save her from the effort to find a clue of principle amid the labyrinthine confusions of right and possession, the promise could not but seem alluring. And yet, this life at Transome Court was not the life of her daydreams: there was dulness already in its ease, and in the absence of high demand; and there was the vague consciousness that the love of this not un fascinating man who hovered about her gave an air of

moral mediocrity to all her prospects. She would not have been able perhaps to define this impression; but somehow or other by this elevation of fortune it seemed that the higher ambition which had begun to spring in her was for ever nullified. All life seemed cheapened; as it might seem to a young student who, having believed that to gain a certain degree he must write a thesis in which he would bring his powers to bear with memorable effect, suddenly ascertained that no thesis was expected, but the sum (in English money) of twenty-seven pounds ten shillings and sixpence.

After all, she was a woman, and could not make her own lot. As she had once said to Felix, 'A woman must choose meaner things, because only meaner things are offered to her.' Her lot is made for her by the love she accepts. And Esther began to think that her lot was being made for her by the love that was surrounding her with the influence of a garden on a summer morning.

Harold, on his side, was conscious that the interest of his wooing was not standing still. He was beginning to think it a conquest, in which it would be disappointing to fail, even if this fair nymph had no claim to the estate. He would have liked - and yet he would not have liked - that just a slight shadow of doubt as to his success should be removed. There was something about Esther that he did not altogether understand. She was clearly a woman that could be governed; she was too charming for him to fear that she would ever be obstinate or interfering. Yet there was a lightning that shot out of her now and then, which seemed the sign of a dangerous judgment; as if she inwardly saw something more admirable than Harold Transome. Now, to be perfectly charming, a woman should not see this.

One fine February day, when already the golden and purple crocuses were out on the terrace - one of those flattering days which sometimes precede the north-east winds of March, and make believe that the coming spring will be enjoyable - a very striking group, of whom Esther and Harold made a part, came out at mid-day to walk upon the gravel at Transome Court. They did not, as usual, go towards the pleasure-grounds on the eastern side, because Mr Lingon, who was one of them, was going home, and his road lay through the stone gateway into the park.

Uncle Lingon, who disliked painful confidences, and preferred knowing 'no mischief of anybody', had not objected to being let into the important secret about Esther, and was sure at once that the whole affair, instead of being a misfortune, was a piece of excellent luck. For himself, he did not profess to be a judge of women, but she seemed to have all the 'points', and carry herself as well as Arabella did, which was saying a good deal. Honest Jack Lingon's first impressions quickly became traditions, which no subsequent evidence

could disturb. He was fond of his sister, and seemed never to be conscious of any change for the worse in her since their early time. He considered that man a beast who said anything unpleasant about the persons to whom he was attached. It was not that he winked; his wide-open eyes saw nothing but what his easy disposition inclined him to see. Harold was a good fellow; a clever chap; and Esther's peculiar fitness for him, under all the circumstances, was extraordinary: it reminded him of something in the classics, though he couldn't think exactly what - in fact, a memory was a nasty uneasy thing. Esther was always glad when the old rector came. With an odd contrariety to her former niceties she liked his rough attire and careless frank speech; they were something not point device that seemed to connect the life of Transome Court with that rougher, commoner world where her home had been.

She and Harold were walking a little in advance of the rest of the party, who were retarded by various causes. Old Mr Transome, wrapped in a cloth cloak trimmed with sable, and with a soft warm cap also trimmed with fur on his head, had a shuffling uncertain walk. Little Harry was dragging a toy-vehicle, on the seat of which he had insisted on tying Moro, with a piece of scarlet drapery round him, making him look like a barbaric prince in a chariot. Moro, having little imagination, objected to this, and barked with feeble snappishness as the tyrannous lad ran forward, then whirled the chariot round, and ran back to 'Gappa', then came to a dead stop, which upset the chariot, that he might watch Uncle Lingon's water-spaniel run for the hurled stick and bring it in his mouth. Nimrod kept close to his old master's legs, glancing with much indifference at this youthful ardour about sticks - he had 'gone through all that'; and Dominic walked by, looking on blandly, and taking care both of young and old. Mrs Transome was not there.

Looking back and seeing that they were a good deal in advance of the rest, Esther and Harold paused.

'What do you think about thinning the trees over there?' said Harold, pointing with his stick. 'I have a bit of a notion that if they were divided into clumps so as to show the oaks beyond, it would be a great improvement. It would give an idea of extent that is lost now. And there might be some very pretty clumps got out of those mixed trees. What do you think?'

'I should think it would be an improvement. One likes a 'beyond' everywhere. But I never heard you express yourself so dubiously,' said Esther, looking at him rather archly: 'you generally see things so clearly, and are so convinced, that I shall begin to feel quite tottering if I find you in uncertainty. Pray don't begin to be doubtful; it is so infectious.'

'You think me a great deal too sure - too confident?' said Harold.

'Not at all. It is an immense advantage to know your own will, when you always mean to have it.'

'But suppose I couldn't get it, in spite of meaning?' said Harold, with a beaming inquiry in his eyes.

'O then,' said Esther, turning her head aside, carelessly, as if she were considering the distant birch-stems, 'you` would bear it quite easily, as you did your not getting into parliament. You would know you could get it another time - or get something else as good.'

'The fact is,' said Harold, moving on a little, as if he did not want to be quite overtaken by the others, 'you consider me a fat, fatuous, self-satisfied fellow.'

'O there are degrees,' said Esther, with a silvery laugh; 'you have just as much of those qualities as is becoming. There are different styles. You are perfect in your own.'

'But you prefer another style, I suspect. A more submissive, tearful, devout worshipper, who would offer his incense with more trembling.'

'You are quite mistaken,' said Esther, still lightly. 'I find I am very wayward. When anything is offered to me, it seems that I prize it less, and don't want to have it.'

Here was a very baulking answer, but in spite of it Harold could not help believing that Esther was very far from objecting to the sort of incense he had been offering just then.

'I have often read that that is in human nature,' she went on, 'yet it takes me by surprise in myself. I suppose,' she added, smiling, 'I didn't think of myself as human nature.'

'I don't confess to the same waywardness,' said Harold. 'I am very fond of things that I can get. And I never longed much for anything out of my reach. Whatever I feel sure of getting I like all the better. I think half those priggish maxims about human nature in the lump are no more to be relied on than universal remedies. There are different sorts of human nature. Some are given to discontent and longing, others to securing and enjoying. And let me tell you, the discontented longing style is unpleasant to live with.'

Harold nodded with a meaning smile at Esther.

'O, I assure you I have abjured all admiration for it,' she said, smiling up at him in return.

She was remembering the schooling Felix had given her about her Byronic heroes, and was inwardly adding a third sort of human nature to those varieties which Harold had mentioned. He naturally supposed that he might take the abjuration to be entirely in his own favour. And his face did look very pleasant; she could not help liking him, although he was certainly too particular about sauces, gravies, and wines, and had a way of virtually measuring the value of everything by the contribution it made to his own pleasure. His very good-nature was unsympathetic: it never came from any thorough understanding or deep respect for what was in the mind of the person he obliged or indulged; it was like his kindness to his mother - an arrangement of his for the happiness of others, which, if they were sensible, ought to succeed. And an inevitable comparison which haunted her, showed her the same quality in his political views: the utmost enjoyment of his own advantages was the solvent that blended pride in his family and position, with the adhesion to changes that were to obliterate tradition and melt down enchased gold heirlooms into plating for the egg-spoons of 'the people.' It is terrible - the keen bright eye of a woman when it has once been turned with admiration on what is severely true; but then, the severely true rarely comes within its range of vision. Esther had had an unusual illumination; Harold did not know how, but he discerned enough of the effect to make him more cautious than he had ever been in his life before. That caution would have prevented him just then from following up the question as to the style of person Esther would think pleasant to live with, even if Uncle Lingon had not joined them, as he did, to talk about southing tiles; saying presently that he should turn across the grass and get on to the Home Farm, to have a look at the improvements that Harold was making with such racing speed.

'But you know, lad,' said the rector, as they paused at the expected parting, 'you can't do everything in a hurry. The wheat must have time to grow, even when you've reformed all us old Tories off the face of the ground. Dash it! now the election's over: I'm an old Tory again. You see, Harold, a Radical won't do for the county. At another election, you must be on the look-out for a borough where they want a bit of blood. I should have liked you uncommonly to stand for the county; and a Radical of good family squares well enough with a new-fashioned Tory like young Debarry; but you see, these riots - it's been a nasty business. I shall have my hair combed at the sessions for a year to come. But hey-day ! What dame is this, with a small boy? - not one of my parishioners?'

Harold and Esther turned, and saw an elderly woman advancing with a tiny red-haired boy, scantily attired as to his jacket, which merged

into a small sparrow-tail a little higher than his waist, but muffled as to his throat with a blue woollen comforter. Esther recognised the pair too well, and felt very uncomfortable. We are so pitifully in subjection to all sorts of vanity - even the very vanities we are practically renouncing! And in spite of the almost solemn memories connected with Mrs Holt, Esther's first shudder was raised by the idea of what things this woman would say, and by the mortification of having Felix in any way represented by his mother.

As Mrs Holt advanced into closer observation, it became more evident that she was attired with a view not to charm the eye, but rather to afflict it with all that expression of woe which belongs to very rusty bombazine and the limpest state of false hair. Still, she was not a woman to lose the sense of her own value, or become abject in her manners under any circumstances of depression; and she had a peculiar sense on the present occasion that she was justly relying on the force of her own character and judgment, in independence of anything that Mr Lyon or the masterful Felix would have said, if she had thought them worthy to know of her undertaking. She curtsied once, as if to the entire group, now including even the dogs, who showed various degrees of curiosity, especially as to what kind of game the smaller animal Job might prove to be after due investigation; and then she proceeded at once towards Esther, who, in spite of her annoyance, took her arm from Harold's, said, 'How do you do, Mrs Holt?' very kindly, and stooped to pat little Job.

'Yes - you know him, Miss Lyon,' said Mrs Holt, in that tone which implies that the conversation is intended for the edification of the company generally; 'you know the orphin child, as Felix brought home for me that am his mother to take care of. And it's what I've done - nobody more so - though it's trouble is my reward.'

Esther had raised herself again, to stand in helpless endurance of whatever might be coming. But by this time young Harry, struck even more than the dogs by the appearance of Job Tudge, had come round dragging his chariot, and placed himself close to the pale child, whom he exceeded in height and breadth, as well as in depth of colouring. He looked into Job's eyes, peeped round at the tail of his jacket and pulled it a little, and then, taking off the tiny cloth-cap, observed with much interest the tight red curls which had been hidden underneath it. Job looked at his inspector with the round blue eyes of astonishment, until Harry, purely by way of experiment, took a bon-bon from a fantastic wallet which hung over his shoulder, and applied the test to Job's lips. The result was satisfactory to both. Every one had been watching this small comedy, and when Job crunched the bon-bon while Harry looked down at him inquiringly and patted his back, there was general laughter except on the part of Mrs Holt, who was shaking her head slowly, and slapping the back of her left hand

with the painful patience of a tragedian whose part is in abeyance to an ill-timed introduction of the humorous.

'I hope Job's cough has been better lately,' said Esther, in mere uncertainty as to what it would be desirable to say or do.

'I daresay you hope so, Miss Lyon,' said Mrs Holt, looking at the distant landscape. 'I've no reason to disbelieve but what you wish well to the child, and to Felix, and to me. I'm sure nobody has any occasion to wish me otherways. My character will bear inquiry, and what you, as are young, don't know, others can tell you. That was what I said to myself when I made up my mind to come here and see you, and ask you to get me the freedom to speak to Mr Transome. I said, whatever Miss Lyon may be now, in the way of being lifted up among great people, she's our minister's daughter, and was not above coming to my house and walking with my son Felix - though I'll not deny he made that figure on the Lord's Day, that'll perhaps go against him with the judge, if anybody thinks well to tell him.'

Here Mrs Holt paused a moment, as with a mind arrested by the painful image it had called up.

Esther's face was glowing, when Harold glanced at her; and seeing this, he was considerate enough to address Mrs Holt instead of her.

'You are then the mother of the unfortunate young man who is in prison?'

'Indeed, I am, sir,' said Mrs Holt, feeling that she was now in deep water. 'It's not likely I should claim him if he wasn't my own; though it's not by my will, nor my advice, sir, that he ever walked; for I gave him none but good. But if everybody's son was guided by their mothers, the world 'ud be different; my son is not worse than many another woman's son, and that in Treby, whatever they may say as haven't got their sons in prison. And as to his giving up the doctoring, and then stopping his father's medicines, I know it's bad - that I know - but it's me as has had to suffer, and it's me a king and parliament 'ud consider, if they meant to do the right thing, and had anybody to make it known to 'em. And as for the rioting and killing the constable - my son said most plain to me he never meant it, and there was his bit of potato-pie for his dinner getting dry by the fire, the whole blessed time as I sat and never knew what was coming on me. And it's my opinion as if great people make elections to get themselves into parliament, and there's riot and murder to do it, they ought to see as the widow and the widow's son doesn't suffer for it. I well know my duty: and I read my Bible; and I know in Jude where it's been stained with the dried tulip-leaves this many a year, as you're told not to rail at your betters if they was the devil himself; nor will I; but this I do

say, if it's three Mr Transomes instead of one as is listening to me, as there's them ought to go to the king and get him to let off my son Felix.'

This speech, in its chief points, had been deliberately prepared. Mrs Holt had set her face like a flint, to make the gentry know their duty as she knew hers: her defiant, defensive tone was due to the consciousness, not only that she was braving a powerful audience, but that she was daring to stand on the strong basis of her own judgment in opposition to her son's. Her proposals had been waived off by Mr Lyon and Felix; but she had long had the feminine conviction that if she could 'get to speak' in the right quarter, things might be different. The daring bit of impromptu about the three Mr Transomes was immediately suggested by a movement of old Mr Transome to the foreground in a line with Mr Lingon and Harold; his furred and unusual costume appearing to indicate a mysterious dignity which she must hasten to include in her appeal.

And there were reasons that none could have foreseen, which made Mrs Holt's remonstrance immediately effective. While old Mr Transome stared, very much like a waxen image in which the expression is a failure, and the rector, accustomed to female parishioners and complainants, looked on with a smile in his eyes, Harold said at once, with cordial kindness -

'I think you are quite right, Mrs Holt. And for my part, I am determined to do my best for your son, both in the witness-box and elsewhere. Take comfort; if it is necessary, the king shall be appealed to. And rely upon it, I shall bear you in mind, as Felix Holt's mother.'

Rapid thoughts had convinced Harold that in this way he was best commending himself to Esther.

'Well, sir,' said Mrs Holt, who was not going to pour forth disproportionate thanks, 'I'm glad to hear you speak so becoming; and if you had been the king himself, I should have made free to tell you my opinion. For the Bible says, the king's favour is towards a wise servant; and it's reasonable to think he'd make all the more account of them as have never been in service, or took wage, which I never did, and never thought of my son doing; and his father left money, meaning otherways, so as he might have been a doctor on horseback at this very minute, instead of being in prison.'

'What! was he regularly apprenticed to a doctor?' said Mr Lingon, who had not understood this before.

'Sir, he was, and most clever, like his father before him, only he turned contrary. But as for harming anybody, Felix never meant to

harm anybody but himself and his mother, which he certainly did in respect of his clothes, and taking to be a low working man, and stopping my living respectable, more particular by the pills, which had a sale, as you may be sure they suited people's insides. And what folks can never have boxes enough of to swallow, I should think you have a right to sell. And there's many and many a text for it, as I've opened on without ever thinking; for if it's true, 'Ask, and you shall have,' I should think it's truer when you're willing to pay for what you have.'

This was a little too much for Mr Lingon's gravity; he exploded, and Harold could not help following him. Mrs Holt fixed her eyes on the distance, and slapped the back of her left hand again: it might be that this kind of mirth was the peculiar effect produced by forcible truth on high and worldly people who were neither in the Independent nor the General Baptist connection.

'I'm sure you must be tired with your long walk, and little Job too,' said Esther, by way of breaking this awkward scene. 'Aren't you, Job?' she added, stooping to caress the child, who was timidly shrinking from Harry's invitation to him to pull the little chariot - Harry's view being that Job would make a good horse for him to beat, and would run faster than Gappa.

'It's well you can feel for the orphin child, Miss Lyon,' said Mrs Holt, choosing an indirect answer rather than to humble herself by confessing fatigue before gentlemen who seemed to be taking her too lightly. 'I didn't believe but what you'd behave pretty, as you always did to me, though everybody used to say you held yourself high. But I'm sure you never did to Felix, for you let him sit by you at the Free School before all the town, and him with never a bit of stock round his neck. And it shows you saw that in him worth taking notice of; - and it is but right, if you know my words are true, as you should speak for him to the gentleman.'

'I assure you, Mrs Holt,' said Harold, coming to the rescue - 'I assure you that enough has been said to make me use my best efforts for your son. And now, pray, go on to the house with the little boy and take some rest. Dominic show Mrs Holt the way, and ask Mrs Hickee to make her comfortable, and see that somebody takes her back to Treby in the buggy.'

'I will go back with Mrs Holt,' said Esther, making an effort against herself.

'No, pray,' said Harold, with that kind of entreaty which is really a decision. 'Let Mrs Holt have time to rest. We shall have returned, and

you can see her before she goes. We will say good-bye for the present, Mrs Holt.'

The poor woman was not sorry to have the prospect of rest and food, especially for 'the orphin child', of whom she was tenderly careful. Like many women who appear to others to have a masculine decisiveness of tone, and to themselves to have a masculine force of mind, and who come into severe collision with sons arrived at the masterful stage, she had the maternal cord vibrating strongly within her towards all tiny children. And when she saw Dominic pick up Job and hoist him on his arm for a little while, by way of making acquaintance, she regarded him with an approval which she had not thought it possible to extend to a foreigner. Since Dominic was going, Harry and old Mr Transome chose to follow. Uncle Lingon shook hands and turned off across the grass, and thus Esther was left alone with Harold.

But there was a new consciousness between them. Harold's quick perception was least likely to be slow in seizing indications of anything that might affect his position with regard to Esther. Some time before, his jealousy had been awakened to the possibility that before she had known him she had been deeply interested in some one else. Jealousy of all sorts - whether for our fortune or our love - is ready at combinations, and likely even to outstrip the fact. And Esther's renewed confusion, united with her silence about Felix, which now first seemed noteworthy, and with Mrs Holt's graphic details as to her walking with him and letting him sit by her before all the town, were grounds not merely for a suspicion, but for a conclusion in Harold's mind. The effect of this, which he at once regarded as a discovery, was rather different from what Esther had anticipated. It seemed to him that Felix was the least formidable person that he could have found out as an object of interest antecedent to himself. A young workman who had got himself thrown into prison, whatever recommendations he might have had for a girl at a romantic age in the dreariness of Dissenting society at Treby, could hardly be considered by Harold in the light of a rival. Esther was too clever and tasteful a woman to make a ballad heroine of herself, by bestowing her beauty and her lands on this lowly lover. Besides, Harold cherished the belief that, at the present time, Esther was more wisely disposed to bestow these things on another lover in every way eligible. But in two directions this discovery had a determining effect on him; his curiosity was stirred to know exactly what the relation with Felix had been, and he was solicitous that his behaviour with regard to this young man should be such as to enhance his own merit in Esther's eyes. At the same time he was not inclined to any euphemisms that would seem by any possibility to bring Felix into the lists with himself.

Naturally, when they were left alone, it was Harold who spoke first. 'I should think there's a good deal of worth in this young fellow - this Holt, notwithstanding the mistakes he has made. A little queer and conceited, perhaps; but that is usually the case with men of his class when they are at all superior to their fellows.'

'Felix Holt is a highly cultivated man; he is not at all conceited,' said Esther. The different kinds of pride within her were coalescing now. She was aware that there had been a betrayal.

'Ah?' said Harold, not quite liking the tone of this answer. 'This eccentricity is a sort of fanaticism, then? - this giving up being a doctor on horseback, as the old woman calls it, and taking to - let me see - watchmaking, isn't it?'

'If it is eccentricity to be very much better than other men, he is certainly eccentric; and fanatical too, if it is fanatical to renounce all small selfish motives for the sake of a great and unselfish one. I never knew what nobleness of character really was before I knew Felix Holt!'

It seemed to Esther as if, in the excitement of this moment, her own words were bringing her a clearer revelation.

'God bless me!' said Harold, in a tone of surprised yet thorough belief, and looking in Esther's face. 'I wish you had talked to me about this before.'

Esther at that moment looked perfectly beautiful, with an expression which Harold had never hitherto seen. All the confusion which had depended on personal feeling had given way before the sense that she had to speak the truth about the man whom she felt to be admirable.

'I think I didn't see the meaning of anything fine - I didn't even see the value of my father's character, until I had been taught a little by hearing what Felix Holt said, and seeing that his life was like his words.'

Harold looked and listened, and felt his slight jealousy allayed rather than heightened. 'This is not like love,' he said to himself, with some satisfaction. With all due regard to Harold Transome, he was one of those men who are liable to make the greater mistakes about a particular woman's feelings, because they pique themselves on a power of interpretation derived from much experience. Experience is enlightening, but with a difference. Experiments on live animals may go on for a long period, and yet the fauna on which they are made may be limited. There may be a passion in the mind of a woman which precipitates her, not along the path of easy beguilement, but into a great leap away from it. Harold's experience had not taught him this;

and Esther's enthusiasm about Felix Holt did not seem to him to be dangerous.

'He's quite an apostolic sort of fellow, then,' was the self-quieting answer he gave to her last words. 'He didn't look like that; but I had only a short interview with him, and I was given to understand that he refused to see me in prison. I believe he's not very well inclined towards me. But you saw a great deal of him, I suppose; and your testimony to any one is enough for me,' said Harold, lowering his voice rather tenderly. 'Now I know what your opinion is, I shall spare no effort on behalf of such a young man. In fact, I had come to the same resolution before, but your wish would make difficult things easy'

After that energetic speech of Esther's, as often happens the tears had just suffused her eyes. It was nothing more than might have been expected in a tender-hearted woman considering Felix Holt's circumstances, and the tears only made more lovely the look with which she met Harold's when he spoke so kindly. She felt pleased with him - she was open to the fallacious delight of being assured that she had power over him to make him do what she liked, and quite forgot the many impressions which had convinced her that Harold had a padded yoke ready for the neck of every man, woman, and child that depended on him.

After a short silence, they were getting near the stone gateway, and Harold said, with an air of intimate consultation -

'What could we do for this young man, supposing he were let off? I shall send a letter with fifty pounds to the old woman to-morrow. I ought to have done it before, but it really slipped my memory, amongst the many things that have occupied me lately. But this young man - what do you think would be the best thing we could do for him, if he gets at large again? He should be put in a position where his qualities could be more telling.'

Esther was recovering her liveliness a little, and was disposed to encourage it for the sake of veiling other feelings, about which she felt renewed reticence, now that the overpowering influence of her enthusiasm was past. She was rather wickedly amused and scornful at Harold's misconceptions and ill-placed intentions of patronage.

'You are hopelessly in the dark,' she said, with a light laugh and toss of her head. 'What would you offer Felix Holt? a place in the Excise? You might as well think of offering it to John the Baptist. Felix has chosen his lot. He means always to be a poor man.'

'Means? Yes,' said Harold, slightly piqued, 'but what a man means usually depends on what happens. I mean to be a commoner; but a peerage might present itself under acceptable circumstances.'

'O there is no sum in proportion to be done there,' said Esther, again gaily. 'As you are to a peerage, so is not Felix Holt to any offer an advantage that you could imagine for him.'

'You must think him fit for any position - the first in the county.'

'No, I don't,' said Esther shaking her head mischievously. 'I think him too high for it.'

'I see you can be ardent in your admiration.'

'Yes, it is my champagne; you know I don't like the other kind.'

'That would be satisfactory if one were sure of getting your admiration,' said Harold, leading her up to the terrace, and amongst the crocuses, from whence they had a fine view of the park and river. They stood still near the east parapet, and saw the dash of light on the water, and the pencilled shadows of the trees on the grassy lawn.

'Would it do as well to admire you, instead of being worthy to be admired?' said Harold, turning his eyes from that landscape to Esther's face.

'It would be a thing to be put up with,' said Esther, smiling at him rather roguishly. 'But you are not in that state of self-despair.'

'Well, I am conscious of not having those severe virtues that you have been praising.'

'That is true. You are quite in another genre.'

'A woman would not find me a tragic hero.'

'O, no! She must dress for genteel comedy - such as your mother once described to me - where the most thrilling event is the drawing of a handsome cheque.'

'You are a naughty fairy,' said Harold, daring to press Esther's hand a little more closely to him, and drawing her down the eastern steps into the pleasure-ground, as if he were unwilling to give up the conversation. 'Confess that you are disgusted with my want of romance.'

'I shall not confess to being disgusted. I shall ask you to confess that you are not a romantic figure.'

'I am a little too stout.'

'For romance - yes. At least you must find security for not getting stouter.'

'And I don't look languishing enough?'

'O yes - rather too much so - at a fine cigar.'

'And I am not in danger of committing suicide?'

'No; you are a widower.'

Harold did not reply immediately to this last thrust of Esther's. She had uttered it with innocent thoughtlessness from the playful suggestions of the moment; but it was a fact that Harold's previous married life had entered strongly into her impressions about him. The presence of Harry made it inevitable. Harold took the allusion of Esther's as an indication that his quality of widower was a point that made against him; and after a brief silence he said, in an altered, more serious tone -

'You don't suppose, I hope, that any other woman has ever held the place that you could hold in my life?'

Esther began to tremble a little, as she always did when the love-talk between them seemed getting serious. She only gave the rather stumbling answer, 'How so?' 'Harry's mother had been a slave - was bought, in fact.'

It was impossible for Harold to preconceive the effect this had on Esther. His natural disqualification for judging of a girl's feelings was heightened by the blinding effect of an exclusive object - which was to assure her that her own place was peculiar and supreme. Hitherto Esther's acquaintance with Oriental love was derived chiefly from Byronic poems, and this had not sufficed to adjust her mind to a new story, where the Giaour concerned was giving her his arm. She was unable to speak; and Harold went on -

'Though I am close on thirty-five, I never met with a woman at all like you before. There are new eras in one's life that are equivalent to youth - are something better than youth. I was never an aspirant till I knew you.'

Esther was still silent.

'Not that I dare to call myself that. I am not so confident a personage as you imagine. I am necessarily in a painful position for a man who has any feeling.'

Here at last Harold had stirred the right fibre. Esther's generosity seized at once the whole meaning implied in that last sentence. She had a fine sensibility to the line at which flirtation must cease; and she was now pale, and shaken with feelings she had not yet defined for herself.

'Do not let us speak of difficult things any more now,' she said, with gentle seriousness. 'I am come into a new world of late, and have to learn life all over again. Let us go in. I must see poor Mrs Holt again, and my little friend Job.'

She paused at the glass door that opened on the terrace, and entered there, while Harold went round to the stables.

When Esther had been upstairs and descended again into the large entrance-hall, she found its stony spaciousness made lively by human figures extremely unlike the statues. Since Harry insisted on playing with Job again, Mrs Holt and her orphan, after dining, had just been brought to this delightful scene for a game at hide-and-seek, and for exhibiting the climbing powers of the two pet squirrels. Mrs Holt sat on a stool, in singular relief against the pedestal of the Apollo, while Dominic and Denner (otherwise Mrs Hickers) bore her company; Harry, in his bright red and purple, flitted about like a great tropic bird after the sparrow-tailed Job, who hid himself with much intelligence behind the scagliola pillars and the pedestals; while one of the squirrels perched itself on the head of the tallest statue, and the other was already peeping down from among the heavy stuccoed angels on the ceiling, near the summit of a pillar.

Mrs Holt held on her lap a basket filled with good things for Job, and seemed much soothed by pleasant company and excellent treatment. As Esther, descending softly and unobserved, leaned over the stone bannisters and looked at the scene for a minute or two, she saw that Mrs Holt's attention, having been directed to the squirrel which had scampered on to the head of the Silenus carrying the infant Bacchus, had been drawn downward to the tiny babe looked at with so much affection by the rather ugly and hairy gentleman, of whom she nevertheless spoke with reserve as of one who possibly belonged to the Transome family.

'It's most pretty to see its little limbs, and the gentleman holding it. I should think he was amiable by his look; but it was odd he should have his likeness took without any clothes. Was he Transome by

name?' (Mrs Holt suspected that there might be a mild madness in the family.)

Denner, peering and smiling quietly, was about to reply, when she was prevented by the appearance of old Mr Transome, who since his walk had been having 'forty winks' on the sofa in the library, and now came out to look for Harry. He had doffed his furred cap and cloak, but in lying down to sleep he had thrown over his shoulders a soft Oriental scarf which Harold had given him, and this still hung over his scanty white hair and down to his knees, held fast by his wooden-looking arms and laxly clasped hands, which fell in front of him.

This singular appearance of an undoubted Transome fitted exactly into Mrs Holt's thought at the moment. It lay in the probabilities of things that gentry's intellects should be peculiar: since they had not to get their own living, the good Lord might have economised in their case that common sense which others were so much more in need of; and in the shuffling figure before her she saw a descendant of the gentleman who had chosen to be represented without his clothes - all the more eccentric where there were the means of buying the best. But these oddities 'said nothing' in great folks, who were powerful in high quarters all the same. And Mrs Holt rose and curtsied with a proud respect, precisely as she would have done if Mr Transome had looked as wise as Lord Burleigh.

'I hope I'm in no ways taking a liberty, sir,' she began, while the old gentleman looked at her with bland feebleness; 'I'm not that woman to sit anywhere out of my own home without inviting, and pressing too. But I was brought here to wait, because the little gentleman wanted to play with the orphin child.'

'Very glad, my good woman - sit down - sit down,' said Mr Transome, nodding and smiling between his clauses. 'Nice little boy. Your grandchild?'

'Indeed, sir, no,' said Mrs Holt, continuing to stand. Quite apart from any awe of Mr Transome - sitting down, she felt, would be a too great familiarity with her own pathetic importance on this extra and unlooked-for occasion. 'It's not me has any grandchild, nor ever shall have, though most fit. But with my only son saying he'll never be married, and in prison besides, and some saying he'll be transported, you may see yourself - though a gentleman - as there isn't much chance of my having grandchildren of my own. And this is old Master Tudge's grandchild, as my own Felix took to for pity because he was sickly and clemm'd, and I was noways against it, being of a tender heart. For I'm a widow myself, and my son Felix, though big, is fatherless, and I know my duty in consequence. And it's to be wished, sir, as others should know it as are more in power and live in great

houses, and can ride in a carriage where they will. And if you're the gentleman as is the head of everything - and it's not to be thought you'd give up to your son as a poor widow's been forced to do - it behoves you to take the part of them as are deserving; for the Bible says, grey hairs should speak.'

'Yes, yes - poor woman - what shall I say?' said old Mr Transome, feeling himself scolded, and as usual desirous of mollifying displeasure.

'Sir, I can tell you what to say fast enough; for it's what I should say myself if I could get to speak to the king. For I've asked them that know, and they say it's the truth both out of the Bible and in, as the king can pardon anything and anybody. And judging by his countenance on the new signs, and the talk there was a while ago about his being the people's friend, as the minister once said it from the very pulpit - if there's any meaning in words, he'll do the right thing by me and my son, if he's asked proper.'

'Yes - a very good man - he'll do anything right,' said Mr Transome, whose own ideas about the king just then were somewhat misty, consisting chiefly in broken reminiscences of George the Third. 'I'll ask him anything you like,' he added, with a pressing desire to satisfy Mrs Holt, who alarmed him slightly.

'Then, sir, if you'll go in your carriage and say, This young man, Felix Holt by name, as his father was known the country round, and his mother most respectable - he never meant harm to anybody, and so far from bloody murder and fighting, would part with his victual to them that needed it more - and if you'd get other gentlemen to say the same, and if they're not satisfied to inquire - I'll not believe but what the king 'ud let my son out of prison. Or if it's true he must stand his trial, the king 'ud take care no mischief happened to him. I've got my senses, and I'll never believe as in a country where there's a God above and a king below, the right thing can't be done if great people was willing to do it.'

Mrs Holt, like all orators, had waxed louder and more energetic, ceasing to propel her arguments, and being propelled by them. Poor old Mr Transome, getting more and more frightened at this severe-spoken woman, who had the horrible possibility to his mind of being a novelty that was to become permanent, seemed to be fascinated by fear, and stood helplessly forgetful that if he liked he might turn round and walk away.

Little Harry, alive to anything that had relation to 'Gappa', had paused in his game, and, discerning what he thought a hostile aspect in this naughty black old woman, rushed towards her and proceeded first to

beat her with his mimic jockey's whip, and then, suspecting that her bombazine was not sensitive, to set his teeth in her arm. While Dominic rebuked him and pulled him off, Nimrod began to bark anxiously, and the scene was become alarming even to the squirrels, which scrambled as far off as possible.

Esther, who had been waiting for an opportunity of intervention, now came up to Mrs Holt to speak some soothing words; and old Mr Transome, seeing a sufficient screen between himself and his formidable suppliant, at last gathered courage to turn round and shuffle away with unusual swiftness into the library.

'Dear Mrs Holt,' said Esther, 'do rest comforted. I assure you, you have done the utmost that can be done by your words. Your visit has not been thrown away. See how the children have enjoyed it I I saw little Job actually laughing. I think I never saw him do more than smile before.' Then, turning round to Dominic, she said, 'Will the buggy come round to this door?'

This hint was sufficient. Dominic went to see if the vehicle was ready, and Denner, remarking that Mrs Holt would like to mount it in the inner court, invited her to go back into the housekeeper's room. But there was a fresh resistance raised in Harry by the threatened departure of Job, who had seemed an invaluable addition to the menagerie of tamed creatures; and it was barely in time that Esther had the relief of seeing the entrance-hall cleared so as to prevent any further encounter of Mrs Holt with Harold, who was now coming up the flight of steps at the entrance.