

## Chapter 44

I'm sick at heart. The eye of day,  
The insistent summer noon, seems pitiless,  
Shining in all the barren crevices  
Of weary life, leaving no shade, no dark,  
Where I may dream that hidden waters lie.

SHORTLY after Mrs Holt's striking presentation of herself at Transome Court, Esther went on a second visit to her father. The Loamford Assizes were approaching; it was expected that in about ten days Felix Holt's trial would come on, and some hints in her father's letters had given Esther the impression that he was taking a melancholy view of the result. Harold Transome had once or twice mentioned the subject with a facile hopefulness as to 'the young fellow's coming off easily', which, in her anxious mind, was not a counterpoise to disquieting suggestions, and she had not chosen to introduce another conversation about Felix Holt, by questioning Harold concerning the probabilities he relied on. Since those moments on the terrace, Harold had daily become more of the solicitous and indirectly beseeching lover; and Esther, from the very fact that she was weighed on by thoughts that were painfully bewildering to her - by thoughts which, in their newness to her young mind, seemed to shake her belief that life could be anything else than a compromise with things repugnant to the moral taste - had become more passive to his attentions at the very time that she had begun to feel more profoundly that in accepting Harold Transome she left the high mountain air, the passionate serenity of perfect love for ever behind her, and must adjust her wishes to a life of middling delights, overhung with the languorous haziness of motiveless ease, where poetry was only literature, and the fine ideas had to be taken down from the shelves of the library when her husband's back was turned. But it seemed as if all outward conditions concurred, along with her generous sympathy for the Transomes, and with those native tendencies against which she had once begun to struggle, to make this middling lot the best she could attain to. She was in this half-sad half-satisfied resignation to something like what is called worldly wisdom, when she went to see her father, and learn what she could from him about Felix.

The little minister was much depressed, unable to resign himself to the dread which had begun to haunt him, that Felix might have to endure the odious penalty of transportation for the manslaughter, which was the offence that no evidence in his favour could disprove.

'I had been encouraged by the assurances of men instructed in this regard,' said Mr Lyon, while Esther sat on the stool near him, and listened anxiously, 'that though he were pronounced guilty in regard to this deed whereinto he hath calamitously fallen, yet that a judge mildly disposed, and with a due sense of that invisible activity of the soul whereby the deeds which are the same in the outward appearance and effect, yet differ as the knife-stroke of the surgeon, even though it kill, differs from the knife-stroke of a wanton mutilator, might use his discretion in tempering the punishment, so that it would not be very evil to bear. But now it is said that the judge who cometh is a severe man, and one nourishing a prejudice against the bolder spirits who stand not in the old paths.'

'I am going to be present at the trial, father,' said Esther, who was preparing the way to express a wish, which she was timid about even with her father. 'I mentioned to Mrs Transome that I should like to do so, and she said that she used in old days always to attend the assizes, and that she would take me. You will be there, father?'

'Assuredly I shall be there, having been summoned to bear witness to Felix's character, and to his having uttered remonstrances and warnings long beforehand whereby he proved himself an enemy to riot. In our ears, who knew him, it sounds strangely that aught else should be credible; but he hath few to speak for him, though I trust that Mr Harold Transome's testimony will go far, if, as you say, he is disposed to set aside all minor regards, and not to speak the truth grudgingly and reluctantly. For the very truth hath a colour from the disposition of the utterer.' 'He is kind; he is capable of being generous,' said Esther.

'It is well. For I verily believe that evil-minded men have been at work against Felix. The Duffield Watchman hath written continually in allusion to him as one of those mischievous men who seek to elevate themselves through the dishonour of their party; and as one of those who go not heart and soul with the needs of the people, but seek only to get a hearing for themselves by raising their voices in crotchety discord. It is those things that cause me heaviness of spirit: the dark secret of this young man's lot is a cross I carry daily.'

'Father,' said Esther, timidly, while the eyes of both were filling with tears, 'I should like to see him again, before his trial. Might I? Will you ask him? Will you take me?'

The minister raised his suffused eyes to hers, and did not speak for a moment or two. A new thought had visited him. But his delicate tenderness shrank even from an inward inquiry that was too curious - that seemed like an effort to peep at sacred secrets.

'I see nought against it, my dear child, if you arrived early enough, and would take the elderly lady into your confidence, so that you might descend from the carriage at some suitable place - the house of the Independent minister, for example - where I could meet and accompany you. I would forewarn Felix, who would doubtless delight to see your face again; seeing that he may go away, and be, as it were, buried from you, even though it may be only in prison, and not -

This was too much for Esther. She threw her arms round her father's neck and sobbed like a child. It was an unspeakable relief to her after all the pent-up stifling experience, all the inward incommunicable debate of the last few weeks. The old man was deeply moved too, and held his arm close round the dear child, praying silently.

No word was spoken for some minutes, till Esther raised herself, dried her eyes, and with an action that seemed playful, though there was no smile on her face, pressed her handkerchief against her father's cheeks. Then, when she had put her hand in his, he said, solemnly -

'Tis a great and mysterious gift, this clinging of the heart, my Esther, whereby, it hath often seemed to me that even in the very moment of suffering our souls have the keenest foretaste of heaven. I speak not lightly, but as one who hath endured. And 'tis a strange truth that only in the agony of parting we look into the depths of love.'

So the interview ended, without any question from Mr Lyon concerning what Esther contemplated as the ultimate arrangement between herself and the Transomes.

After this conversation, which showed him that what happened to Felix touched Esther more closely than he had supposed, the minister felt no impulse to raise the images of a future so unlike anything that Felix would share. And Esther would have been unable to answer any such questions. The successive weeks, instead of bringing her nearer to clearness and decision, had only brought that state of disenchantment belonging to the actual presence of things which have long dwelt in the imagination with all the factitious charms of arbitrary arrangement. Her imaginary mansion had not been inhabited just as Transome Court was; her imaginary fortune had not been attended with circumstances which she was unable to sweep away. She herself, in her Utopia, had never been what she was now - a woman whose heart was divided and oppressed. The first spontaneous offering of her woman's devotion, the first great inspiration of her life, was a sort of vanished ecstasy which had left its wounds. It seemed to her a cruel misfortune of her young life that her best feeling, her most precious dependence, had been called forth just where the conditions were hardest, and that all the easy invitations of circumstance were towards something which that previous

consecration of her longing had made a moral descent for her. It was characteristic of her that she scarcely at all entertained the alternative of such a compromise, as would have given her the larger portion of the fortune to which she had a legal claim, and yet have satisfied her sympathy by leaving the Transomes in possession of their old home. Her domestication with his family had brought them into the foreground of her imagination; the gradual wooing of Harold had acted on her with a constant immediate influence that predominated over all indefinite prospects; and a solitary elevation to wealth, which out of Utopia she had no notion how she should manage, looked as chill and dreary as the offer of dignities in an unknown country.

In the ages since Adam's marriage, it has been good for some men to be alone, and for some women also. But Esther was not one of these women: she was intensely of the feminine type, verging neither towards the saint nor the angel. She was 'a fair divided excellence, whose fulness of perfection' must be in marriage. And, like all youthful creatures, she felt as if the present conditions of choice were final. It belonged to the freshness of her heart that, having had her emotions strongly stirred by real objects, she never speculated on possible relations yet to come. It seemed to her that she stood at the first and last parting of the ways. And, in one sense, she was under no illusion. It is only in that freshness of our time that the choice is possible which gives unity to life, and makes the memory a temple where all relics and all votive offerings, all worship and all grateful joy, are an unbroken history sanctified by one religion.