

Chapter 45

We may not make this world a paradise

By walking it together with clasped hands

And eyes that meeting feed a double strength.

We must be only joined by pains divine,

Of spirits blent in mutual memories.

IT was a consequence of that interview with her father, that when Esther stepped early on a grey March morning into the carriage with Mrs Transome, to go to the Loamford Assizes, she was full of an expectation that held her lips in trembling silence, and gave her eyes that sightless beauty which tells that the vision is all within.

Mrs Transome did not disturb her with unnecessary speech. Of late, Esther's anxious observation had been drawn to a change in Mrs Transome, shown in many small ways which only women notice. It was not only that when they sat together the talk seemed more of an effort to her: that might have come from the gradual draining away of matter for discourse pertaining to most sorts of companionship, in which repetition is not felt to be as desirable as novelty. But while Mrs Transome was dressed just as usual, took her seat as usual, trifled with her drugs and had her embroidery before her as usual, and still made her morning greetings with that finished easy politeness and consideration of tone which to rougher people seems like affection, Esther noticed a strange fitfulness in her movements. Sometimes the stitches of her embroidery went on with silent unbroken swiftness for a quarter of an hour as if she had to work out her deliverance from bondage by finishing a scroll-patterned border; then her hands dropt suddenly and her gaze fell blankly on the table before her, and she would sit in that way motionless as a seated statue, apparently unconscious of Esther's presence, till some thought darting within her seemed to have the effect of an external shock and rouse her with a start, when she looked round hastily like a person ashamed of having slept. Esther, touched with wondering pity at signs of unhappiness that were new in her experience, took the most delicate care to appear inobservant, and only tried to increase the gentle attention that might help to soothe or gratify this uneasy woman. But, one morning, Mrs Transome had said, breaking rather a long silence -

'My dear, I shall make this house dull for you. You sit with me like an embodied patience. I am unendurable; I am getting into a melancholy dotage. A fidgety old woman like me is as unpleasant to see as a rook with its wing broken. Don't mind me, my dear. Run away from me

without ceremony. Every one else does, you see. I am part of the old furniture with new drapery.'

'Dear Mrs Transome,' said Esther, gliding to the low ottoman close by the basket of embroidery, 'do you dislike my sitting with you?'

'Only for your sake, my fairy,' said Mrs Transome, smiling faintly, and putting her hand under Esther's chin. 'Doesn't it make you shudder to look at me?'

'Why will you say such naughty things?' said Esther, affectionately. 'If you had had a daughter, she would have desired to be with you most when you most wanted cheering. And surely every young woman has something of a daughter's feeling towards an older one who has been kind to her.'

'I should like you to be really my daughter,' said Mrs Transome, rousing herself to look a little brighter. 'That is something still for an old woman to hope for.'

Esther blushed: she had not foreseen this application of words that came from pitying tenderness. To divert the train of thought as quickly as possible, she at once asked what she had previously had in her mind to ask. Before her blush had disappeared she said -

'O, you are so good; I shall ask you to indulge me very much. It is to let us set out very early to Loamford on Wednesday, and put me down at a particular house, that I may keep an engagement with my father. It is a private matter, that I wish no one to know about, if possible. And he will bring me back to you wherever you appoint.'

In that way Esther won her end without needing to betray it; and as Harold was already away at Loamford, she was the more secure.

The Independent minister's house at which she was set down, and where she was received by her father, was in a quiet street not far from the jail. Esther had thrown a dark cloak over the handsomer coverings which Denner had assured her was absolutely required of ladies who sat anywhere near the judge at a great trial; and as the bonnet of that day did not throw the face into high relief, but rather into perspective, a veil drawn down gave her a sufficiently inconspicuous appearance.

'I have arranged all things, my dear,' said Mr Lyon, 'and Felix expects us. We will lose no time.'

They walked away at once, Esther not asking a question. She had no consciousness of the road along which they passed; she could never

remember anything but a dim sense of entering within high walls and going along passages, till they were ushered into a larger space than she expected, and her father said -

'It is here that we are permitted to see Felix, my Esther. He will presently appear.'

Esther automatically took off her gloves and bonnet, as if she had entered the house after a walk. She had lost the complete consciousness of everything except that she was going to see Felix. She trembled. It seemed to her as if he too would look altered after her new life - as if even the past would change for her and be no longer a steadfast remembrance, but something she had been mistaken about, as she had been about the new life. Perhaps she was growing out of that childhood to which common things have rareness, and all objects look larger. Perhaps from henceforth the whole world was to be meaner for her. The dread concentrated in those moments seemed worse than anything she had known before. It was what the dread of a pilgrim might be who has it whispered to him that the holy places are a delusion, or that he will see them with a soul unstirred and unbelieving. Every minute that passes may be charged with some such crisis in the little inner world of man or woman.

But soon the door opened slightly; some one looked in; then it opened wide, and Felix Holt entered.

'Miss Lyon - Esther!' and her hand was in his grasp.

He was just the same - no, something inexpressibly better, because of the distance and separation, and the half-weary novelties, which made him like the return of morning.

'Take no heed of me, children,' said Mr Lyon. 'I have some notes to make, and my time is precious. We may remain here only a quarter of an hour.' And the old man sat down at a window with his back to them, writing with his head bent close to the paper.

'You are very pale; you look ill, compared with your old self,' said Esther. She had taken her hand away, but they stood still near each other, she looking up at him.

'The fact is, I'm not fond of prison,' said Felix, smiling; 'but I suppose the best I can hope for is to have a good deal more of it.'

'It is thought that in the worst case a pardon may be obtained,' said Esther, avoiding Harold Transome's name.

'I don't rely on that,' said Felix, shaking his head. 'My wisest course is to make up my mind to the very ugliest penalty they can condemn me to. If I can face that, anything less will seem easy. But you know,' he went on, smiling at her brightly, 'I never went in for fine company and cushions. I can't be very heavily disappointed in that way.'

'Do you see things just as you used to do?' said Esther, turning pale as she said it - 'I mean - about poverty, and the people you will live among. Has all the misunderstanding and sadness left you just as obstinate?' She tried to smile, but could not succeed.

'What - about the sort of life I should lead if I were free again?' said Felix.

'Yes. I can't help being discouraged for you by all these things that have happened. See how you may fail!' Esther spoke timidly. She saw a peculiar smile, which she knew well, gathering in his eyes. 'Ah, I daresay I am silly,' she said, deprecatingly.

'No, you are dreadfully inspired,' said Felix. 'When the wicked tempter is tired of snarling that word failure in a man's cell, he sends a voice like a thrush to say it for him. See now what a messenger of darkness you are!' He smiled, and took her two hands between his, pressed together as children hold them up in prayer. Both of them felt too solemnly to be bashful. They looked straight into each other's eyes, as angels do when they tell some truth. And they stood in that way while he went on speaking.

'But I'm proof against that word failure. I've seen behind it. The only failure a man ought to fear is failure in cleaving to the purpose he sees to be best. As to just the amount of result he may see from his particular work - that's a tremendous uncertainty: the universe has not been arranged for the gratification of his feelings. As long as a man sees and believes in some great good, he'll prefer working towards that in the way he's best fit for, come what may. I put effects at their minimum, but I'd rather have the minimum of effect, if it's of the sort I care for, than the maximum of effect I don't care for - a lot of fine things that are not to my taste - and if they were, the conditions of holding them while the world is what it is, are such as would jar on me like grating metal.'

'Yes,' said Esther, in a low tone, 'I think I understand that now, better than I used to do.' The words of Felix at last seemed strangely to fit her own experience. But she said no more, though he seemed to wait for it a moment or two, looking at her. But then he went on -

'I don't mean to be illustrious, you know, and make a new era, else it would be kind of you to get a raven and teach it to croak 'failure' in

my ears. Where great things can't happen, I care for very small things, such as will never be known beyond a few garrets and workshops. And then, as to one thing I believe in, I don't think I can altogether fail. If there's anything our people want convincing of, it is, that there's some dignity and happiness for a man other than changing his station. That's one of the beliefs I choose to consecrate my life to. If anybody could demonstrate to me that I was a flat for it, I shouldn't think it would follow that I must borrow money to set up genteelly and order new clothes. That's not a rigorous consequence to my understanding.'

They smiled at each other, with the old sense of amusement they had so often had together.

'You are just the same,' said Esther.

'And you?' said Felix. 'My affairs have been settled long ago. But yours - a great change has come in them - magic at work.'

'Yes,' said Esther, rather falteringly.

'Well,' said Felix, looking at her gravely again, 'it's a case of fitness that seems to give a chance sanction to that musty law. The first time I saw you, your birth was an immense puzzle to me. However, the appropriate conditions are come at last.'

These words seemed cruel to Esther. But Felix could not know all the reasons for their seeming so. She could not speak; she was turning cold and feeling her heart beat painfully.

'All your tastes are gratified now,' he went on innocently. 'But you'll remember the old pedagogue and his lectures?'

One thought in the mind of Felix was, that Esther was sure to marry Harold Transome. Men readily believe these things of the women who love them. But he could not allude to the marriage more directly. He was afraid of this destiny for her, without having any very distinct knowledge by which to justify his fear to the mind of another. It did not satisfy him that Esther should marry Harold Transome.

'My children,' said Mr Lyon at this moment, not looking round, but only looking close at his watch, 'we have just two minutes more.' Then he went on writing.

Esther did not speak, but Felix could not help observing now that her hands had turned to a deathly coldness, and that she was trembling. He believed, he knew, that whatever prospects she had, this feeling

was for his sake. An overpowering impulse from mingled love, gratitude, and anxiety, urged him to say -

'I had a horrible struggle, Esther. But you see I was right. There was a fitting lot in reserve for you. But remember you have cost a great price - don't throw what is precious away. I shall want the news that you have a happiness worthy of you.'

Esther felt too miserable for tears to come. She looked helplessly at Felix for a moment, then took her hands from his, and, turning away mutely, walked dreamily towards her father, and said, 'Father, I am ready - there is no more to say.'

She turned back again, towards the chair where her bonnet lay, with a face quite corpse-like above her dark garment.

'Esther!'

She heard Felix say the word, with an entreating cry, and went towards him with the swift movement of a frightened child towards its protector. He clasped her, and they kissed each other.

She never could recall anything else that happened, till she was in the carriage again with Mrs Transome.