

## Chapter 48

'Tis law as stedfast as the throne of Zeus -

Our days are heritors of days gone by.'

AESCHYLUS: Agamemnon.

A LITTLE after five o'clock that day, Harold arrived at Transome Court. As he was winding along the broad road of the park, some parting gleams of the March sun pierced the trees here and there, and threw on the grass a long shadow of himself and the groom riding, and illuminated a window or two of the home he was approaching. But the bitterness in his mind made these sunny gleams almost as odious as an artificial smile. He wished he had never come back to this pale English sunshine.

In the course of his eighteen miles' drive, he had made up his mind what he would do. He understood now, as he had never understood before, the neglected solitariness of his mother's life, the allusions and innuendoes which had come out during the election. But with a proud insurrection against the hardship of an ignominy which was not of his own making, he inwardly said, that if the circumstances of his birth were such as to warrant any man in regarding his character of gentleman with ready suspicion, that character should be the more strongly asserted in his conduct. No one should be able to allege with any show of proof that he had inherited meanness.

As he stepped from the carriage and entered the hall, there were the voice and the trotting feet of little Harry as usual, and the rush to clasp his father's leg and make his joyful puppy-like noises. Harold just touched the boy's head, and then said to Dominic in a weary voice -

'Take the child away. Ask where my mother is.'

Mrs Transome, Dominic said, was upstairs. He had seen her go up after coming in from her walk with Miss Lyon, and she had not come down again.

Harold, throwing off his hat and greatcoat, went straight to his mother's dressing-room. There was still hope in his mind. He might be suffering simply from a lie. There is much misery created in the world by mere mistake or slander, and he might have been stunned by a lie suggested by such slander. He rapped at his mother's door.

Her voice said immediately, 'Come in.'

Mrs Transome was resting in her easy-chair, as she often did between an afternoon walk and dinner. She had taken off her walking-dress and wrapped herself in a soft dressinggown. She was neither more nor less empty of joy than usual. But when she saw Harold, a dreadful certainty took possession of her. It was as if a long-expected letter, with a black seal, had come at last.

Harold's face told her what to fear the more decisively, because she had never before seen it express a man's deep agitation. Since the time of its pouting childhood and careless youth she had seen only the confident strength and good-humoured imperiousness of maturity. The last five hours had made a change as great as illness makes. Harold looked as if he had been wrestling, and had had some terrible blow. His eyes had that sunken look which, because it is unusual, seems to intensify expression.

He looked at his mother as he entered, and her eyes followed him as he moved, till he came and stood in front of her, she looking up at him, with white lips.

'Mother,' he said, speaking with a distant slowness, in strange contrast with his habitual manner, 'tell me the truth, that I may know how to act.'

He paused a moment, and then said, 'Who is my father?'

She was mute: her lips only trembled. Harold stood silent for a few moments, as if waiting. Then he spoke again.

'He has said - said it before others - that he is my father.'

He looked still at his mother. She seemed as if age was striking her with a sudden wand - as if her trembling face were getting haggard before him. She was mute. But her eyes had not fallen; they looked up in helpless misery at her son.

Her son turned away his eyes from her, and left her. In that moment Harold felt hard: he could show no pity. All the pride of his nature rebelled against his sonship.