

Chapter 49

Nay, falter not - 'tis an assured good

To seek the noblest - 'tis your only good

Now you have seen it; for that higher vision

Poisons all meaner choice for evermore.

THAT day Esther dined with old Mr Transome only. Harold sent word that he was engaged and had already dined, and Mrs Transome that she was feeling ill. Esther was much disappointed that any tidings Harold might have brought relating to Felix were deferred in this way; and, her anxiety making her fearful, she was haunted by the thought that if there had been anything cheering to tell, he would have found time to tell it without delay. Old Mr Transome went as usual to his sofa in the library to sleep after dinner, and Esther had to seat herself in the small drawing-room, in a well-lit solitude that was unusually dispiriting to her. Pretty as this room was, she did not like it. Mrs Transome's full-length portrait, being the only picture there, urged itself too strongly on her attention: the youthful brilliancy it represented saddened Esther by its inevitable association with what she daily saw had come instead of it - a joyless, embittered age. The sense that Mrs Transome was unhappy, affected Esther more and more deeply as the growing familiarity which relaxed the efforts of the hostess revealed more and more the thread-bare tissue of this majestic lady's life. Even the flowers and the pure sunshine and the sweet waters of Paradise would have been spoiled for a young heart, if the bowered walks had been haunted by an Eve gone grey with bitter memories of an Adam who had complained, 'The woman ... she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.' And many of us know how, even in our childhood, some blank discontented face on the background of our home has marred our summer mornings. Why was it, when the birds were singing, when the fields were a garden, and when we were clasping another little hand just larger than our own, there was somebody who found it hard to smile? Esther had got far beyond that childhood to a time and circumstances when this daily presence of elderly dissatisfaction amidst such outward things as she had always thought must greatly help to satisfy, awaked, not merely vague questioning emotion, but strong determining thought. And now, in these hours since her return from Loamford, her mind was in that state of highly-wrought activity, that large discourse, in which we seem to stand aloof from our own life - weighing impartially our own temptations and the weak desires that most habitually solicit us. 'I think I am getting that power Felix wished me to have: I shall soon see strong visions,' she said to herself, with a melancholy smile flitting across her face, as she put out the wax lights that she might get rid of

the oppressive urgency of walls and upholstery and that portrait smiling with deluded brightness, unwitting of the future.

Just then Dominic came to say that Mr Harold sent his compliments, and begged that she would grant him an interview in his study. He disliked the small drawing-room: if she would oblige him by going to the study at once, he would join her very soon. Esther went, in some wonder and anxiety. What she most feared or hoped in these moments related to Felix Holt, and it did not occur to her that Harold could have anything special to say to her that evening on other subjects.

Certainly the study was pleasanter than the small drawing-room. A quiet light shone on nothing but greenness and dark wood, and Dominic had placed a delightful chair for her opposite to his master's, which was still empty. All the little objects of luxury around indicated Harold's habitual occupancy; and as Esther sat opposite all these things along with the empty chair which suggested the coming presence, the expectation of his beseeching homage brought with it an impatience and repugnance which she had never felt before. While these feelings were strongly upon her, the door opened and Harold appeared.

He had recovered his self-possession since his interview with his mother: he had dressed, and was perfectly calm. He had been occupied with resolute thoughts, determining to do what he knew that perfect honour demanded, let it cost him what it would. It is true he had a tacit hope behind, that it might not cost him what he prized most highly: it is true he had a glimpse even of reward; but it was not less true that he would have acted as he did without that hope or glimpse. It was the most serious moment in Harold Transome's life: for the first time the iron had entered into his soul, and he felt the hard pressure of our common lot, the yoke of that mighty resistless destiny laid upon us by the acts of other men as well as our own.

When Esther looked at him she relented, and felt ashamed of her gratuitous impatience. She saw that his mind was in some way burdened. But then immediately sprang the dread that he had to say something hopeless about Felix.

They shook hands in silence, Esther looking at him with anxious surprise. He released her hand, but it did not occur to her to sit down, and they both continued standing on the hearth.

'Don't let me alarm you,' said Harold, seeing that her face gathered solemnity from his. 'I suppose I carry the marks of a past agitation. It relates entirely to troubles of my own - of my own family. No one beyond is involved in them.'

Esther wondered still more, and felt still more relenting.

'But,' said Harold, after a slight pause, and in a voice that was weighted with new feeling, 'it involves a difference in my position with regard to you; and it is on this point that I wished to speak to you at once. When a man sees what ought to be done, he had better do it forthwith. He can't answer for himself to-morrow.'

While Esther continued to look at him, with eyes widened by anxious expectation, Harold turned a little, leaned on the mantelpiece, and ceased to look at her as he spoke.

'My feelings drag me another way. I need not tell you that your regard has become very important to me - that if our mutual position had been different - that, in short, you must have seen - if it had not seemed to be a matter of worldly interest, I should have told you plainly already that I loved you, and that my happiness could be complete only if you would consent to marry me.'

Esther felt her heart beginning to beat painfully. Harold's voice and words moved her so much that her own task seemed more difficult than she had before imagined. It seemed as if the silence, unbroken by anything but the clicking of the fire, had been long, before Harold turned round towards her again and said -

'But to-day I have heard something that affects my own position. I cannot tell you what it is. There is no need. It is not any culpability of my own. But I have not just the same unsullied name and fame in the eyes of the world around us, as I believed that I had when I allowed myself to entertain that wish about you. You are very young, entering on a fresh life with bright prospects - you are worthy of everything that is best. I may be too vain in thinking it was at all necessary; but I take this precaution against myself. I shut myself out from the chance of trying, after to-day, to induce you to accept anything which others may regard as specked and stained by any obloquy, however slight.'

Esther was keenly touched. With a paradoxical longing, such as often happens to us, she wished at that moment that she could have loved this man with her whole heart. The tears came into her eyes; she did not speak, but, with an angel's tenderness in her face, she laid her hand on his sleeve. Harold commanded himself strongly, and said -

'What is to be done now is, that we should proceed at once to the necessary legal measures for putting you in possession of your own, and arranging mutual claims. After that I shall probably leave England.'

Esther was oppressed by an overpowering difficulty. Her sympathy with Harold at this moment was so strong, that it spread itself like a mist over all previous thought and resolve. It was impossible now to wound him afresh. With her hand still resting on his arm, she said timidly -

'Should you be urged - obliged to go - in any case?'

'Not in every case, perhaps,' Harold said, with an evident movement of the blood towards his face; 'at least not for long, not for always.'

Esther was conscious of the gleam in his eyes. With terror at herself, she said, in difficult haste, 'I can't speak. I can't say anything to-night. A great decision has to be made: I must wait - till to-morrow.'

She was moving her hand from his arm, when Harold took it reverentially and raised it to his lips. She turned towards her chair, and as he released her hand she sank down on the seat with a sense that she needed that support. She did not want to go away from Harold yet. All the while there was something she needed to know, and yet she could not bring herself to ask it. She must resign herself to depend entirely on his recollection of anything beyond his own immediate trial. She sat helpless under contending sympathies, while Harold stood at some distance from her, feeling more harassed by weariness and uncertainty, now that he had fulfilled his resolve, and was no longer under the excitement of actually fulfilling it.

Esther's last words had forbidden his revival of the subject that was necessarily supreme with him. But still she sat there, and his mind, busy as to the probabilities of her feeling, glanced over all she had done and said in the later days of their intercourse. It was this retrospect that led him to say at last -

'You will be glad to hear that we shall get a very powerfully signed memorial to the Home Secretary about young Holt. I think your speaking for him helped a great deal. You made all the men wish what you wished.'

This was what Esther had been yearning to hear and dared not ask, as well from respect for Harold's absorption in his own sorrow, as from the shrinking that belongs to our dearest need. The intense relief of hearing what she longed to hear, affected her whole frame: her colour, her expression, changed as if she had been suddenly freed from some torturing constraint. But we interpret signs of emotion as we interpret other signs - often quite erroneously, unless we have the right key to what they signify. Harold did not gather that this was what Esther had waited for, or that the change in her indicated more

than he had expected her to feel at this allusion to an unusual act which she had done under a strong impulse.

Besides, the introduction of a new subject after very momentous words have passed, and are still dwelling on the mind, is necessarily a sort of concussion, shaking us into a new adjustment of ourselves.

It seemed natural that soon afterward Esther put out her hand and said, 'Good-night.'

Harold went to his bedroom on the same level with this study, thinking of the morning with an uncertainty that dipped on the side of hope. This sweet woman, for whom he felt a passion newer than any he had expected to feel, might possibly make some hard things more bearable - if she loved him. If not - well, he had acted so that he could defy any one to say he was not a gentleman.

Esther went up-stairs to her bedroom, thinking that she should not sleep that night. She set her light on a high stand, and did not touch her dress. What she desired to see with undisturbed clearness were things not present: the rest she needed was the rest of a final choice. It was difficult. On each side there was renunciation.

She drew up her blinds, liking to see the grey sky, where there were some veiled glimmerings of moonlight, and the lines of the for-ever running river, and the bending movement of the black trees. She wanted the largeness of the world to help her thought. This young creature, who trod lightly backward and forward, and leaned against the window-frame, and shook back her brown curls as she looked at something not visible, had lived hardly more than six months since she saw Felix Holt for the first time. But life is measured by the rapidity of change, the succession of influences that modify the being; and Esther had undergone something little short of an inward revolution. The revolutionary struggle, however, was not quite at an end.

There was something which she now felt profoundly to be the best thing that life could give her. But - if it was to be had at all - it was not to be had without paying a heavy price for it, such as we must pay for all that is greatly good. A supreme love, a motive that gives a sublime rhythm to a woman's life, and exalts habit into partnership with the soul's highest needs, is not to be had where and how she wills: to know that high initiation, she must often tread where it is hard to tread, and feel the chill air, and watch through darkness. It is not true that love makes all things easy: it makes us choose what is difficult. Esther's previous life had brought her into close acquaintance with many negations, and with many positive ills too, not of the acutely painful, but of the distasteful sort. What if she chose the hardship,

and had to bear it alone, with no strength to lean upon - no other better self to make a place for trust and joy? Her past experience saved her from illusions. She knew the dim life of the back street, the contact with sordid vulgarity, the lack of refinement for the senses, the summons to a daily task; and the gain that was to make that life of privation something on which she dreaded to turn her back, as if it were heaven - the presence and the love of Felix Holt - was only a quivering hope, not a certainty. It was not in her woman's nature that the hope should not spring within her and make a strong impulse. She knew that he loved her: had he not said how a woman might help a man if she were worthy? and if she proved herself worthy? But still there was the dread that after all she might find herself on the stony road alone, and faint and be weary. Even with the fulfilment of her hope, she knew that she pledged herself to meet high demands.

And on the other side there was a lot where everything seemed easy - but for the fatal absence of those feelings which, now she had once known them, it seemed nothing less than a fall and a degradation to do without. With a terrible prescience which a multitude of impressions during her stay at Transome Court had contributed to form, she saw herself in a silken bondage that arrested all motive, and was nothing better than a well-cushioned despair. To be restless amidst ease, to be languid among all appliances for pleasure, was a possibility that seemed to haunt the rooms of this house, and wander with her under the oaks and elms of the park. And Harold Transome's love, no longer a hovering fancy with which she played, but become a serious fact, seemed to threaten her with a stifling oppression. The homage of a man may be delightful until he asks straight for love, by which a woman renders homage. Since she and Felix had kissed each other in the prison, she felt as if she had vowed herself away, as if memory lay on her lips like a seal of possession. Yet what had happened that very evening had strengthened her liking for Harold, and her care for all that regarded him: it had increased her repugnance to turning him out of anything he had expected to be his, or to snatching anything from him on the ground of an arbitrary claim. It had even made her dread, as a coming pain, the task of saying anything to him that was not a promise of the utmost comfort under this newly-disclosed trouble of his.

It was already near midnight, but with these thoughts succeeding and returning in her mind like scenes through which she was living, Esther had a more intense wakefulness than any she had known by day. All had been stillness hitherto, except the fitful wind outside. But her ears now caught a sound within - slight, but sudden. She moved near her door, and heard the sweep of something on the matting outside. It came closer, and paused. Then it began again, and seemed to sweep away from her. Then it approached, and paused as it had done before. Esther listened, wondering. The same thing happened

again and again, till she could bear it no longer. She opened her door, and in the dim light of the corridor, where the glass above seemed to make a glimmering sky, she saw Mrs Transome's tall figure pacing slowly, with her cheek upon her hand.