

## Chapter 50

'The great question in life is the suffering we cause; and the utmost ingenuity of metaphysics cannot justify the man who has pierced the heart that loved him.' - BENJAMIN CONSTANT.

WHEN Denner had gone up to her mistress's room to dress her for dinner, she had found her seated just as Harold had found her, only with eyelids drooping and trembling over slowly-rolling tears - nay, with a face in which every sensitive feature, every muscle, seemed to be quivering with a silent endurance of some agony.

Denner went and stood by the chair a minute without speaking, only laying her hand gently on Mrs Transome's. At last she said, beseechingly, 'Pray speak, madam. What has happened?'

'The worst, Denner - the worst.'

'You are ill. Let me undress you, and put you to bed.'

'No, I am not ill, I am not going to die! I shall live - I shall live!'

'What may I do?'

'Go and say I shall not dine. Then you may come back, if you will.'

The patient waiting-woman came back and sat by her mistress in motionless silence. Mrs Transome would not let her dress be touched, and waved away all proffers with a slight movement of her hand. Denner dared not even light a candle without being told. At last, when the evening was far gone, Mrs Transome said -

'Go down, Denner, and find out where Harold is, and come back and tell me.'

'Shall I ask him to come to you, madam?'

'No; don't dare to do it, if you love me. Come back.'

Denner brought word that Mr Harold was in his study, and that Miss Lyon was with him. He had not dined, but had sent later to ask Miss Lyon to go into his study. 'Light the candles and leave me.' 'Mayn't I come again?' 'No. It may be that my son will come to me.' 'Mayn't I sleep on the little bed in your bedroom?' 'No, good Denner; I am not ill. You can't help me.' 'That's the hardest word of all, madam.' 'The time will come - but not now. Kiss me. Now go.'

The small quiet old woman obeyed, as she had always done. She shrank from seeming to claim an equal's share in her mistress's sorrow.

For two hours Mrs Transome's mind hung on what was hardly a hope - hardly more than the listening for a bare possibility. She began to create the sounds that her anguish craved to hear - began to imagine a footfall, and a hand upon the door. Then, checked by continual disappointment, she tried to rouse a truer consciousness by rising from her seat and walking to her window, where she saw streaks of light moving and disappearing on the grass, and the sound of bolts and closing doors. She hurried away and threw herself into her seat again, and buried her head in the deafening down of the cushions. There was no sound of comfort for her.

Then her heart cried out within her against the cruelty of this son. When he turned from her in the first moment, he had not had time to feel anything but the blow that had fallen on himself. But afterwards - was it possible that he should not be touched with a son's pity - was it possible that he should not have been visited by some thought of the long years through which she had suffered? The memory of those years came back to her now with a protest against the cruelty that had all fallen on her. She started up with a new restlessness from this spirit of resistance. She was not penitent. She had borne too hard a punishment. Always the edge of calamity had fallen on her. Who had felt for her? She was desolate. God had no pity, else her son would not have been so hard. What dreary future was there after this dreary past? She, too, looked out into the dim night; but the black boundary of trees and the long line of the river seemed only part of the loneliness and monotony of her life.

Suddenly she saw a light on the stone balustrades of the balcony that projected in front of Esther's window, and the flash of a moving candle falling on a shrub below. Esther was still awake and up. What had Harold told her - what had passed between them? Harold was fond of this young creature, who had been always sweet and reverential to her. There was mercy in her young heart; she might be a daughter who had no impulse to punish and to strike her whom fate had stricken. On the dim loneliness before her she seemed to see Esther's gentle look; it was possible still that the misery of this night might be broken by some comfort. The proud woman yearned for the caressing pity that must dwell in that young bosom. She opened her door gently, but when she had reached Esther's she hesitated. She had never yet in her life asked for compassion - had never thrown herself in faith on an unproffered love. And she might have gone on pacing the corridor like an uneasy spirit without a goal, if Esther's thought, leaping towards her, had not saved her from the need to ask admission.

Mrs Transome was walking towards the door when it opened. As Esther saw that image of restless misery, it blent itself by a rapid flash with all that Harold had said in the evening. She divined that the son's new trouble must be one with the mother's long sadness. But there was no waiting. In an instant Mrs Transome felt Esther's arm round her neck, and a voice saying softly -

'O why didn't you call me before?'

They turned hand in hand into the room, and sat down together on a sofa at the foot of the bed. The disordered grey hair - the haggard face - the reddened eyelids under which the tears seemed to be coming again with pain, pierced Esther to the heart. A passionate desire to soothe this suffering woman came over her. She clung round her again, and kissed her poor quivering lips and eyelids, and laid her young cheek against the pale and haggard one. Words could not be quick or strong enough to utter her yearning. As Mrs Transome felt that soft clinging, she said - 'God has some pity on me.'

'Rest on my bed,' said Esther. 'You are so tired. I will cover you up warmly, and then you will sleep.'

'No - tell me, dear - tell me what Harold said.'

'That he has had some new trouble.'

'He said nothing hard about me?'

'No - nothing. He did not mention you.'

'I have been an unhappy woman, dear.'

'I feared it,' said Esther, pressing her gently.

'Men are selfish. They are selfish and cruel. What they care for is their own pleasure and their own pride.'

'Not all,' said Esther, on whom these words fell with a painful jar.

'All I have ever loved,' said Mrs Transome. She paused a moment or two, and then said, 'For more than twenty years I have not had an hour's happiness. Harold knows it, and yet he is hard to me.'

'He will not be. To-morrow he will not be. I am sure he will be good,' said Esther, pleadingly. 'Remember - he said to me his trouble was new - he has not had time.'

'It is too hard to bear, dear,' Mrs Transome said, a new sob rising as she clung fast to Esther in return. 'I am old, and expect so little now - a very little thing would seem great. Why should I be punished any more?'

Esther found it difficult to speak. The dimly-suggested tragedy of this woman's life, the dreary waste of years empty of sweet trust and affection, afflicted her even to horror. It seemed to have come as a last vision to urge her towards the life where the draughts of joy sprang from the unchanging fountains of reverence and devout love.

But all the more she longed to still the pain of this heart that beat against hers.

'Do let me go to your own room with you, and let me undress you, and let me tend upon you,' she said, with a woman's gentle instinct. 'It will be a very great thing to me. I shall seem to have a mother again. Do let me.'

Mrs Transome yielded at last, and let Esther soothe her with a daughter's tendance. She was undressed and went to bed; and at last dozed fitfully, with frequent starts. But Esther watched by her till the chills of morning came, and then she only wrapped more warmth around her, and slept fast in the chair till Denner's movement in the room roused her. She started out of a dream in which she was telling Felix what had happened to her that night.

Mrs Transome was now in the sounder morning sleep which sometimes comes after a long night of misery. Esther beckoned Denner into the dressing-room, and said -

'It is late, Mrs Hickes. Do you think Mr Harold is out of his room?'

'Yes, a long while; he was out earlier than usual.'

'Will you ask him to come up here? Say I begged you.'

When Harold entered, Esther was leaning against the back of the empty chair where yesterday he had seen his mother sitting. He was in a state of wonder and suspense, and when Esther approached him and gave him her hand, he said, in a startled way -

'Good God! how ill you look! Have you been sitting up with my mother?'

'Yes. She is asleep now,' said Esther. They had merely pressed hands by way of greeting, and now stood apart looking at each other solemnly.

'Has she told you anything?' said Harold.

'No - only that she is wretched. O, I think I would bear a great deal of unhappiness to save her from having any more.'

A painful thrill passed through Harold, and showed itself in his face with that pale rapid flash which can never be painted. Esther pressed her hands together, and said, timidly, though it was from an urgent prompting -

'There is nothing in all this place - nothing since ever I came here - I could care for so much as that you should sit down by her now, and that she should see you when she wakes.'

Then with delicate instinct, she added, just laying her hand on his sleeve, 'I know you would have come. I know you meant it. But she is asleep now. Go gently before she wakes.'

Harold just laid his right hand for an instant on the back of Esther's as it rested on his sleeve, and then stepped softly to his mother's bedside.

An hour afterwards, when Harold had laid his mother's pillow afresh, and sat down again by her, she said -

'If that dear thing will marry you, Harold, it will make up to you for a great deal.'

But before the day closed Harold knew that this was not to be. That young presence, which had flitted like a white new-winged dove over all the saddening relics and new finery of Transome Court, could not find its home there. Harold heard from Esther's lips that she loved some one else, and that she resigned all claim to the Transome estates.

She wished to go back to her father.