

## Chapter 51

The maiden said, I wis the londe

Is very fair to see,

But my true-love that is in bonde

Is fairer still to me.

ONE April day, when the sun shone on the lingering raindrops, Lyddy was gone out, and Esther chose to sit in the kitchen, in the wicker chair against the white table, between the fire and the window. The kettle was singing, and the clock was ticking steadily towards four o'clock.

She was not reading, but stitching; and as her fingers moved nimbly, something played about her parted lips like a ray. Suddenly she laid down her work, pressed her hands together on her knees, and bent forward a little. The next moment there came a loud rap at the door. She started up and opened it, but kept herself hidden behind it.

'Mr Lyon at home?' said Felix, in his firm tones.

'No, sir,' said Esther from behind her screen; 'but Miss Lyon is, if you'll please to walk in.'

'Esther!' exclaimed Felix, amazed.

They held each other by both hands, and looked into each other's faces with delight.

'You are out of prison?'

'Yes, till I do something bad again. But you? - how is it all?'

'Oh, it is,' said Esther, smiling brightly as she moved towards the wicker chair, and seated herself again, 'that everything is as usual: my father is gone to see the sick; Lyddy is gone in deep despondency to buy the groccry; and I am sitting here, with some vanity in me, needing to be scolded.'

Felix had seated himself on a chair that happened to be near her, at the corner of the table. He looked at her still with questioning eyes - he grave, she mischievously smiling. 'Are you come back to live here then?' 'Yes.'

'You are not going to be married to Harold Transome, or to be rich?'

'No.' Something made Esther take up her work again, and begin to stitch. The smiles were dying into a tremor.

'Why?' said Felix, in rather a low tone, leaning his elbow on the table, and resting his head on his hand while he looked at her.

'I did not wish to marry him, or to be rich.'

'You have given it all up?' said Felix, leaning forward a little, and speaking in a still lower tone.

Esther did not speak. They heard the kettle singing and the clock loudly ticking. There was no knowing how it was: Esther's work fell, their eyes met; and the next instant their arms were round each other's necks, and once more they kissed each other.

When their hands fell again, their eyes were bright with tears. Felix laid his hand on her shoulder.

'Could you share the life of a poor man, then, Esther?'

'If I thought well enough of him,' she said, the smile coming again, with the pretty saucy movement of her head.

'Have you considered well what it would be? - that it will be a very bare and simple life?'

'Yes - without attas of roses.'

Felix suddenly removed his hand from her shoulder, rose from his chair, and walked a step or two; then he turned round and said, with deep gravity -

'And the people I shall live among, Esther? They have not just the same follies and vices as the rich, but they have their own forms of folly and vice; and they have not what are called the refinements of the rich to make their faults more bearable. I don't say more bearable to me - I'm not fond of those refinements; but you are.'

Felix paused an instant, and then added -

'It is very serious, Esther.'

'I know it is serious,' said Esther, looking up at him. 'Since I have been at Transome Court I have seen many things very seriously. If I had not, I should not have left what I did leave. I made a deliberate choice.'

Felix stood a moment or two, dwelling on her with a face where the gravity gathered tenderness.

'And these curls?' he said, with a sort of relenting, seating himself again, and putting his hand on them.

'They cost nothing - they are natural.'

'You are such a delicate creature.'

'I am very healthy. Poor women, I think, are healthier than the rich. Besides,' Esther went on, with a mischievous meaning, 'I think of having some wealth.'

'How?' said Felix, with an anxious start. 'What do you mean?'

'I think even of two pounds a-week: one needn't live up to the splendour of all that, you know; we must live as simply as you liked: there would be money to spare, and you could do wonders, and be obliged to work too, only not if sickness came. And then I think of a little income for your mother, enough for her to live as she has been used to live; and a little income for my father, to save him from being dependent when he is no longer able to preach.'

Esther said all this in a playful tone, but she ended, with a grave look of appealing submission -

'I mean - if you approve. I wish to do what you think it will be right to do.'

Felix put his hand on her shoulder again and reflected a little while, looking on the hearth: then he said, lifting up his eyes, with a smile at her -

'Why, I shall be able to set up a great library, and lend the books to be dog's-eared and marked with breadcrumbs.'

Esther said, laughing, 'You think you are to do everything. You don't know how clever I am. I mean to go on teaching a great many things.'

'Teaching me?'

'Oh yes,' she said, with a little toss; 'I shall improve your French accent.'

'You won't want me to wear a stock?' said Felix, with a defiant shake of the head.

'No; and you will not attribute stupid thoughts to me before I've uttered them.'

They laughed merrily, each holding the other's arms, like girl and boy. There was the ineffable sense of youth in common.

Then Felix leaned forward, that their lips might meet again, and after that his eyes roved tenderly over her face and curls.

'I'm a rough, severe fellow, Esther. Shall you never repent? - never be inwardly reproaching me that I was not a man who could have shared your wealth? Are you quite sure?'

'Quite sure!' said Esther, shaking her head; 'for then I should have honoured you less. I am weak - my husband must be greater and nobler than I am.'

'O, I tell you what, though!' said Felix, starting up, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and creasing his brow playfully, 'if you take me in that way I shall be forced to be a much better fellow than I ever thought of being.'

'I call that retribution,' said Esther, with a laugh as sweet as the morning thrush.

### **Epilogue**

Our finest hope is finest memory;

And those who love in age think youth is happy,

Because it has a life to fill with love.

THE very next May, Felix and Esther were married. Every one in those days was married at the parish church, but Mr Lyon was not satisfied without an additional private solemnity, 'wherein there was no bondage to questionable forms, so that he might have a more enlarged utterance of joy and supplication.'

It was a very simple wedding; but no wedding, even the gayest, ever raised so much interest and debate in Treby Magna. Even very great people, like Sir Maximus and his family, went to the church to look at this bride, who had renounced wealth and chosen to be the wife of a man who said he would always be poor.

Some few shook their heads; could not quite believe it; and thought there was 'more behind'. But the majority of honest Trebians were affected somewhat in the same way as happy-looking Mr Wace was,

who observed to his wife, as they walked from under the churchyard chestnuts, 'It's wonderful how things go through you - you don't know how. I feel somehow as if I believed more in everything that's good.'

Mrs Holt that day, said she felt herself to be receiving 'some reward', implying that justice certainly had much more in reserve. Little Job Tudge had an entirely new suit, of which he fingered every separate brass button in a way that threatened an arithmetical mania; and Mrs Holt had out her best tea-trays and put down her carpet again, with the satisfaction of thinking that there would no more be boys coming in all weathers with dirty shoes.

For Felix and Esther did not take up their abode in Treby Magna; and after a while Mr Lyon left the town too, and joined them where they dwelt. On his resignation the church in Malthouse Yard chose a successor to him whose doctrine was rather higher.

There were other departures from Treby. Mr Jermyn's establishment was broken up, and he was understood to have gone to reside at a great distance: some said 'abroad' that large home of ruined reputations. Mr Johnson continued blond and sufficiently prosperous till he got grey and rather more prosperous. Some persons, who did not think highly of him, held that his prosperity was a fact to be kept in the background, as being dangerous to the morals of the young; judging that it was not altogether creditable to the Divine Providence that anything but virtue should be rewarded by a front and back drawing-room in Bedford Row.

As for Mr Christian, he had no more profitable secrets at his disposal. But he got his thousand pounds from Harold Transome.

The Transome family were absent for some time from Transome Court. The place was kept up and shown to visitors, but not by Denner, who was away with her mistress. After a while the family came back, and Mrs Transome died there. Sir Maximus was at her funeral, and throughout that neighbourhood there was silence about the past.

Uncle Lingon continued to watch over the shooting on the Manor and the covers until that event occurred which he had predicted as a part of Church reform sure to come. Little Treby had a new rector, but others were sorry besides the old pointers.

As to all that wide parish of Treby Magna, it had since prospered as the rest of England has prospered. Doubtless there is more enlightenment now. Whether the farmers are all public-spirited, the shopkeepers nobly independent, the Sproxton men entirely sober and judicious, the Dissenters quite without narrowness or asperity in religion and politics, and the publicans all fit, like Gaius, to be the

friends of an apostle - these things I have not heard, not having correspondence in those parts. Whether any presumption may be drawn from the fact that North Loamshire does not yet return a Radical candidate, I leave to the all-wise - I mean the newspapers.

As to the town in which Felix Holt now resides, I will keep that a secret, lest he should be troubled by any visitor having the insufferable motive of curiosity.

I will only say that Esther has never repented. Felix, however, grumbles a little that she has made his life too easy, and that, if it were not for much walking, he should be a sleek dog.

There is a young Felix, who has a great deal more science than his father, but not much more money.

**The End**