Chapter XXV - The West Wind Blows

Not always do those who dare such divine conflict prevail. Night after night the sweat of agony may burst dark on the forehead; the supplicant may cry for mercy with that soundless voice the soul utters when its appeal is to the Invisible. 'Spare my beloved,' it may implore. 'Heal my life's life. Rend not from me what long affection entwines with my whole nature. God of heaven - bend - hear - be clement!' And after this cry and strife, the sun may rise and see him worsted. That opening morn, which used to salute him with the whisper of zephyrs, the carol of skylarks, may breathe, as its first accents, from the dear lips which colour and heat have quitted - 'Oh! I have had a suffering night. This morning I am worse. I have tried to rise. I cannot. Dreams I am unused to have troubled me.'

Then the watcher approaches the patient's pillow, and sees a new and strange moulding of the familiar features, feels at once that the insufferable moment draws nigh, knows that it is God's will his idol shall be broken, and bends his head, and subdues his soul to the sentence he cannot avert, and scarce can bear.

Happy Mrs Pryor! She was still praying, unconscious that the summer sun hung above the hills, when her child softly woke in her arms. No piteous, unconscious moaning - sound which so wastes our strength that, even if we have sworn to be firm, a rush of unconquerable tears sweeps away the oath - preceded her waking. No space of deaf apathy followed. The first words spoken were not those of one becoming estranged from this world, and already permitted to stray at times into realms foreign to the living. Caroline evidently remembered with clearness what had happened.

'Mamma, I have slept so well, I only dreamed and woke twice.'

Mrs Pryor rose with a start, that her daughter might not see the joyful tears called into her eyes by that affectionate word 'mamma,' and the welcome assurance that followed it.

For many days the mother dared rejoice only with trembling. That first revival seemed like the flicker of a dying lamp: if the flame streamed up bright one moment, the next it sank dim in the socket. Exhaustion followed close on excitement.

There was always a touching endeavour to appear better, but too often ability refused to second will; too often the attempt to bear up failed: the effort to eat, to talk, to look cheerful, was unsuccessful. Many an hour passed, during which Mrs Pryor feared that the chords of life could never more be strengthened, though the time of their breaking might be deferred.

During this space the mother and daughter seemed left almost alone in the neighbourhood. It was the close of August: the weather was fine - that is to say, it was very dry and very dusty, for an arid wind had been blowing from the east this month past: very cloudless, too, though a pale haze, stationary in the atmosphere, seemed to rob of all depth of tone the blue of heaven, of all freshness the verdure of earth, and of all glow the light of day. Almost every family in Briarfield was absent on an excursion. Miss Keeldar and her friends were at the seaside; so were Mrs Yorke's household. Mr Hall and Louis Moore, between whom a spontaneous intimacy seemed to have arisen, the result, probably, of harmony of views and temperament, were gone 'up north' on a pedestrian excursion to the Lakes. Even Hortense, who would fain have stayed at home and aided Mrs Pryor in nursing Caroline, had been so earnestly entreated by Miss Mann to accompany her once more to Wormwood Wells, in the hope of alleviating sufferings greatly aggravated by the insalubrious weather, that she felt obliged to comply; indeed, it was not in her nature to refuse a request that at once appealed to her goodness of heart, - and - by a confession of dependency - flattered her amour-propre. As for Robert, from Birmingham he had gone on to London, where he still sojourned.

So long as the breath of Asiatic deserts parched Caroline's lips and fevered her veins, her physical convalescence could not keep pace with her returning mental tranquillity: but there came a day when the wind ceased to sob at the eastern gable of the Rectory, and at the oriel window of the church. A little cloud like a man's hand arose in the west: gusts from the same quarter drove it on and spread it wide; wet and tempest prevailed a while. When that was over the sun broke out genially, heaven regained its azure, and earth its green; the livid cholera-tint had vanished from the face of nature: the hills rose clear round the horizon, absolved from that pale malaria-haze.

Caroline's youth could now be of some avail to her, and so could her mother's nurture: both - crowned by God's blessing, sent in the pure west wind blowing soft as fresh through the ever-open chamber lattice - rekindled her long- languishing energies. At last Mrs Pryor saw that it was permitted to hope - a genuine, material convalescence had commenced. It was not merely Caroline's smile which was brighter, or her spirits which were cheered, but a certain look had passed from her face and eye - a look dread and indescribable, but which will easily be recalled by those who have watched the couch of dangerous disease. Long before the emaciated outlines of her aspect began to fill, or its departed colour to return, a more subtle change took place: all grew softer and warmer. Instead of a marble mask and glassy eye, Mrs Pryor saw laid on the pillow a face pale and wasted enough, perhaps more haggard than the other appearance, but less awful; for it was a sick, living girl - not a mere white mould, or rigid piece of statuary.

Now, too, she was not always petitioning to drink. The words 'I am so thirsty' ceased to be her plaint. Sometimes, when she had swallowed a morsel, she would say it had revived her: all descriptions of food were no longer equally distasteful; she could be induced, sometimes, to indicate a preference. With what trembling pleasure and anxious care did not her nurse prepare what was selected! How she watched her as she partook of it!

Nourishment brought strength. She could sit up. Then she longed to breathe the fresh air, to revisit her flowers, to see how the fruit had ripened. Her uncle, always liberal, had bought a garden-chair for her express use: he carried her down in his own arms, and placed her in it himself, and William Farren was there to wheel her round the walks, to show her what he had done amongst her plants, to take her directions for further work.

William and she found plenty to talk about: they had a dozen topics in common; interesting to them, unimportant to the rest of the world. They took a similar interest in animals, birds, insects, and plants: they held similar doctrines about humanity to the lower creation; and had a similar turn for minute observation on points of natural history. The nest and proceedings of some ground-bees, which had burrowed in the turf under an old cherry-tree, was one subject of interest: the haunts of certain hedge-sparrows, and the welfare of certain pearly eggs and callow fledglings, another.

Had Chambers's Journal existed in those days, it would certainly have formed Miss Helstone's and Farren's favourite periodical. She would have subscribed for it; and to him each number would duly have been lent: both would have put implicit faith, and found great savour in its marvellous anecdotes of animal sagacity.

This is a digression; but it suffices to explain why Caroline would have no other hand than William's to guide her chair, and why his society and conversation sufficed to give interest to her garden-airings.

Mrs Pryor, walking near, wondered how her daughter could be so much at ease with a 'man of the people.' She found it impossible to speak to him otherwise than stiffly. She felt as if a great gulf lay between her caste and his; and that to cross it, or meet him half-way, would be to degrade herself. She gently asked Caroline - 'Are you not afraid, my dear, to converse with that person so unreservedly? He may presume, and become troublesomely garrulous.'

'William presume, mamma? You don't know him. He never presumes: he is altogether too proud and sensitive to do so. William has very fine feelings.'

And Mrs Pryor smiled sceptically at the naïve notion of that rough-handed, rough-headed, fustian-clad clown having 'fine feelings.'

Farren, for his part, showed Mrs Pryor only a very sulky brow. He knew when he was misjudged, and was apt to turn unmanageable with such as failed to give him his due.

The evening restored Caroline entirely to her mother, and Mrs Pryor liked the evening; for then, alone with her daughter, no human shadow came between her and what she loved. During the day, she would have her stiff demeanour and cool moments, as was her wont. Between her and Mr Helstone a very respectful but most rigidly ceremonious intercourse was kept up: anything like familiarity would have bred contempt at once in one or both these personages: but by dint of strict civility and well-maintained distance, they got on very smoothly.

Towards the servants, Mrs Pryor's bearing was not uncourteous, but shy, freezing, ungenial. Perhaps it was diffidence rather than pride which made her appear so haughty; but, as was to be expected, Fanny and Eliza failed to make the distinction, and she was unpopular with them accordingly. She felt the effect produced: it tendered her at times dissatisfied with herself for faults she could not help; and with all else, dejected, chill, and taciturn.

This mood changed to Caroline's influence, and to that influence alone. The dependent fondness of her nursling, the natural affection of her child, came over her suavely: her frost fell away; her rigidity unbent: she grew smiling and pliant. Not that Caroline made any wordy profession of love - that would ill have suited Mrs Pryor: she would have read therein the proof of insincerity; but she hung on her with easy dependence; she confided in her with fearless reliance: these things contented the mother's heart.

She liked to hear her daughter say 'Mamma, do this.' 'Please, mamma, fetch me that.' 'Mamma, read to me.' 'Sing a little, mamma.'

Nobody else - not one living thing - had ever so claimed her services, so looked for help at her hand. Other people were always more or less reserved and stiff with her, as she was reserved and stiff with them; other people betrayed consciousness of and annoyance at her weak points: Caroline no more showed 'such wounding sagacity or reproachful sensitiveness now, than she had done when a suckling of three months old.

Yet Caroline could find fault. Blind to the constitutional defects that were incurable, she had her eyes wide open to the acquired habits that were susceptible of remedy. On certain points she would quite

artlessly lecture her parent; and that parent, instead of being hurt, felt a sensation of pleasure in discovering that the girl dared lecture her; that she was so much at home with her.

'Mamma, I am determined you shall not wear that old gown any more; its fashion is not becoming: it is too strait in the skirt. You shall put on your black silk every afternoon; in that you look nice: it suits you; and you shall have a black satin dress for Sundays - a real satin - not a satinet or any of the shams. And, mamma, when you get the new one, mind you must wear it.'

'My dear, I thought of the black silk serving me as a best dress for many years yet, and I wished to buy you several things.'

'Nonsense, mamma: my uncle gives me cash to get what I want: you know he is generous enough; and I have set my heart on seeing you in a black satin. Get it soon, and let it be made by a dressmaker of my recommending: let me choose the pattern. You always want to disguise yourself like a grandmother: you would persuade one that you are old and ugly, - not at all! On the contrary, when well dressed and cheerful, you are very comely indeed. Your smile is so pleasant, your teeth are so white, your hair is still such a pretty light colour. And then you speak like a young lady, with such a clear, fine tone, and you sing better than any young lady I ever heard. Why do you wear such dresses and bonnets, mamma, such as nobody else ever wears?'

'Does it annoy you, Caroline?'

'Very much: it vexes me even. People say you are miserly; and yet you are not, for you give liberally to the poor and to religious societies: though your gifts are conveyed so secretly and quietly, that they are known to few except the receivers. But I will be your maid myself: when I get a little stronger I will set to work, and you must be good, mamma, and do as I bid you.'

And Caroline, sitting near her mother, re-arranged her muslin handkerchief, and re-smoothed her hair.

'My own mamma,' then she went on, as if pleasing herself with the thought of their relationship, 'who belongs to me, and to whom I belong! I am a rich girl now: I have something I can love well, and not be afraid of loving. Mamma, who gave you this little brooch? Let me unpin it and look at it.'

Mrs Pryor, who usually shrank from meddling fingers and near approach, allowed the license complacently.

'Did papa give you this, mamma?'

'My sister gave it me - my only sister, Cary. Would that your aunt Caroline had lived to see her niece!'

'Have you nothing of papa's? - no trinket, no gift of his?'

'I have one thing.'

'That you prize?'

'That I prize.'

'Valuable and pretty?'

'Invaluable and sweet to me.'

'Show it, mamma. Is it here or at Fieldhead?'

'It is talking to me now, leaning on me: its arms are round me.'

'Ah! mamma! you mean your teasing daughter, who will never let you alone; who, when you go into your room, cannot help running to seek for you; who follows you upstairs and down, like a dog.'

'Whose features still give me such a strange thrill sometimes. I half fear your fair looks yet, child.'

'You don't; you can't. Mamma, I'm sorry papa was not good: I do so wish he had been. Wickedness spoils and poisons all pleasant things: it kills love. If you and I thought each other wicked, we could not love each other, could we?'

'And if we could not trust each other, Cary?'

'How miserable we should be! Mother, before I knew you, I had an apprehension that you were not good, that I could not esteem you: that dread damped my wish to see you; and now my heart is elate because I find you perfect, - almost; kind, clever, nice. Your sole fault is that you are old-fashioned, and of that I shall cure you. Mamma, put your work down: read to me. I like your southern accent: it is so pure, so soft. It has no rugged burr, no nasal twang, such as almost every one's voice here in the north has. My uncle and Mr Hall say that you are a fine reader, mamma. Mr Hall said he never heard any lady read with such propriety of expression, or purity of accent.'

'I wish I could reciprocate the compliment, Cary; but really the first time I heard your truly excellent friend read and preach, I could not understand his broad, northern tongue.'

'Could you understand me, mamma? Did I seem to speak roughly?'

'No: I almost wished you had, as I wished you had looked unpolished. Your father, Caroline, naturally spoke well; quite otherwise than your worthy uncle: correctly, gently, smoothly. You inherit the gift.'

'Poor papal When he was so agreeable, why was he not good?'

'Why he was as he was - and, happily, of that you, child, can form no conception - I cannot tell: it is a deep mystery. The key is in the hands of his Maker: there I leave it.'

'Mamma, you will keep stitching, stitching away: put down the sewing; I am an enemy to it. It cumbers your lap, and I want it for my head: it engages your eyes, and I want them for a book. Here is your favourite - Cowper.'

These importunities were the mother's pleasure. If ever she delayed compliance, it was only to hear them repeated, and to enjoy her child's soft, half-playful, half-petulant urgency. And then, when she yielded, Caroline would say archly - 'You will spoil me, mamma. I always thought I should like to be spoiled, and I find it very sweet.'

So did Mrs Pryor.