## Chapter XII

'He had more tow on his distaffe Than Gerveis knew.' - CHAUCER.

The ride to Stone Court, which Fred and Rosamond took the next morning, lay through a pretty bit of midland landscape, almost all meadows and pastures, with hedgerows still allowed to grow in bushy beauty and to spread out coral fruit for the birds. Little details gave each field a particular physiognomy, dear to the eyes that have looked on them from childhood: the pool in the corner where the grasses were dank and trees leaned whisperingly; the great oak shadowing a bare place in mid-pasture; the high bank where the ash-trees grew; the sudden slope of the old marl-pit making a red background for the burdock; the huddled roofs and ricks of the homestead without a traceable way of approach; the gray gate and fences against the depths of the bordering wood; and the stray hovel, its old, old thatch full of mossy hills and valleys with wondrous modulations of light and shadow such as we travel far to see in later life, and see larger, but not more beautiful. These are the things that make the gamut of joy in landscape to midland-bred souls - the things they toddled among, or perhaps learned by heart standing between their father's knees while he drove leisurely.

But the road, even the byroad, was excellent; for Lowick, as we have seen, was not a parish of muddy lanes and poor tenants; and it was into Lowick parish that Fred and Rosamond entered after a couple of miles' riding. Another mile would bring them to Stone Court, and at the end of the first half, the house was already visible, looking as if it had been arrested in its growth toward a stone mansion by an unexpected budding of farm-buildings on its left flank, which had hindered it from becoming anything more than the substantial dwelling of a gentleman farmer. It was not the less agreeable an object in the distance for the cluster of pinnacled corn-ricks which balanced the fine row of walnuts on the right.

Presently it was possible to discern something that might be a gig on the circular drive before the front door.

'Dear me,' said Rosamond, 'I hope none of my uncle's horrible relations are there.'

'They are, though. That is Mrs Waule's gig - the last yellow gig left, I should think. When I see Mrs Waule in it, I understand how yellow can have been worn for mourning. That gig seems to me more funereal than a hearse. But then Mrs Waule always has black crape on. How does she manage it, Rosy? Her friends can't always be dying.'

‘I don't know at all. And she is not in the least evangelical,’ said Rosamond, reflectively, as if that religious point of view would have fully accounted for perpetual crape. ‘And, not poor,’ she added, after a moment's pause.

‘No, by George! They are as rich as Jews, those Waules and Featherstones; I mean, for people like them, who don't want to spend anything. And yet they hang about my uncle like vultures, and are afraid of a farthing going away from their side of the family. But I believe he hates them all.’

The Mrs Waule who was so far from being admirable in the eyes of these distant connections, had happened to say this very morning (not at all with a defiant air, but in a low, muffled, neutral tone, as of a voice heard through cotton wool) that she did not wish ‘to enjoy their good opinion.’ She was seated, as she observed, on her own brother's hearth, and had been Jane Featherstone five-and-twenty years before she had been Jane Waule, which entitled her to speak when her own brother's name had been made free with by those who had no right to it.

‘What are you driving at there?’ said Mr Featherstone, holding his stick between his knees and settling his wig, while he gave her a momentary sharp glance, which seemed to react on him like a draught of cold air and set him coughing.

Mrs Waule had to defer her answer till he was quiet again, till Mary Garth had supplied him with fresh syrup, and he had begun to rub the gold knob of his stick, looking bitterly at the fire. It was a bright fire, but it made no difference to the chill-looking purplish tint of Mrs Waule's face, which was as neutral as her voice; having mere chinks for eyes, and lips that hardly moved in speaking.

‘The doctors can't master that cough, brother. It's just like what I have; for I'm your own sister, constitution and everything. But, as I was saying, it's a pity Mrs Vincy's family can't be better conducted.’

‘Tchah! you said nothing o' the sort. You said somebody had made free with my name.’

‘And no more than can be proved, if what everybody says is true. My brother Solomon tells me it's the talk up and down in Middlemarch how unsteady young Vincy is, and has been forever gambling at billiards since home he came.’

‘Nonsense! What's a game at billiards? It's a good gentlemanly game; and young Vincy is not a clodhopper. If your son John took to billiards, now, he'd make a fool of himself.’

'Your nephew John never took to billiards or any other game, brother, and is far from losing hundreds of pounds, which, if what everybody says is true, must be found somewhere else than out of Mr Vincy the father's pocket. For they say he's been losing money for years, though nobody would think so, to see him go coursing and keeping open house as they do. And I've heard say Mr Bulstrode condemns Mrs Vincy beyond anything for her flightiness, and spoiling her children so.'!

'What's Bulstrode to me? I don't bank with him.'

'Well, Mrs Bulstrode is Mr Vincy's own sister, and they do say that Mr Vincy mostly trades on the Bank money; and you may see yourself, brother, when a woman past forty has pink strings always flying, and that light way of laughing at everything, it's very unbecoming. But indulging your children is one thing, and finding money to pay their debts is another. And it's openly said that young Vincy has raised money on his expectations. I don't say what expectations. Miss Garth hears me, and is welcome to tell again. I know young people hang together.'

'No, thank you, Mrs Waule,' said Mary Garth. 'I dislike hearing scandal too much to wish to repeat it.'

Mr Featherstone rubbed the knob of his stick and made a brief convulsive show of laughter, which had much the same genuineness as an old whist-player's chuckle over a bad hand. Still looking at the fire, he said -

'And who pretends to say Fred Vincy hasn't got expectations? Such a fine, spirited fellow is like enough to have 'em.'

There was a slight pause before Mrs Waule replied, and when she did so, her voice seemed to be slightly moistened with tears, though her face was still dry.

'Whether or no, brother, it is naturally painful to me and my brother Solomon to hear your name made free with, and your complaint being such as may carry you off sudden, and people who are no more Featherstones than the Merry-Andrew at the fair, openly reckoning on your property coming to *them*. And me your own sister, and Solomon your own brother! And if that's to be it, what has it pleased the Almighty to make families for?' Here Mrs Waule's tears fell, but with moderation.

'Come, out with it, Jane!' said Mr Featherstone, looking at her. 'You mean to say, Fred Vincy has been getting somebody to advance him money on what he says he knows about my will, eh?'

‘I never said so, brother’ (Mrs Waule's voice had again become dry and unshaken). ‘It was told me by my brother Solomon last night when he called coming from market to give me advice about the old wheat, me being a widow, and my son John only three-and-twenty, though steady beyond anything. And he had it from most undeniable authority, and not one, but many.’

‘Stuff and nonsense! I don't believe a word of it. It's all a got-up story. Go to the window, missy; I thought I heard a horse. See if the doctor's coming.’

‘Not got up by me, brother, nor yet by Solomon, who, whatever else he may be - and I don't deny he has oddities - has made his will and parted his property equal between such kin as he's friends with; though, for my part, I think there are times when some should be considered more than others. But Solomon makes it no secret what he means to do.’

‘The more fool he!’ said Mr Featherstone, with some difficulty; breaking into a severe fit of coughing that required Mary Garth to stand near him, so that she did not find out whose horses they were which presently paused stamping on the gravel before the door.

Before Mr Featherstone's cough was quiet, Rosamond entered, bearing up her riding-habit with much grace. She bowed ceremoniously to Mrs Waule, who said stiffly, ‘How do you do, miss?’ smiled and nodded silently to Mary, and remained standing till the coughing should cease, and allow her uncle to notice her.

‘Heyday, miss!’ he said at last, ‘you have a fine color. Where's Fred?’

‘Seeing about the horses. He will be in presently.’

‘Sit down, sit down. Mrs Waule, you'd better go.’

Even those neighbors who had called Peter Featherstone an old fox, had never accused him of being insincerely polite, and his sister was quite used to the peculiar absence of ceremony with which he marked his sense of blood-relationship. Indeed, she herself was accustomed to think that entire freedom from the necessity of behaving agreeably was included in the Almighty's intentions about families. She rose slowly without any sign of resentment, and said in her usual muffled monotone, ‘Brother, I hope the new doctor will be able to do something for you. Solomon says there's great talk of his cleverness. I'm sure it's my wish you should be spared. And there's none more ready to nurse you than your own sister and your own nieces, if you'd only say the word. There's Rebecca, and Joanna, and Elizabeth, you know.’

‘Ay, ay, I remember - you'll see I've remembered 'em all - all dark and ugly. They'd need have some money, eh? There never was any beauty in the women of our family; but the Featherstones have always had some money, and the Waules too. Waule had money too. A warm man was Waule. Ay, ay; money's a good egg; and if you 've got money to leave behind you, lay it in a warm nest. Good-by, Mrs Waule.’ Here Mr Featherstone pulled at both sides of his wig as if he wanted to deafen himself, and his sister went away ruminating on this oracular speech of his. Notwithstanding her jealousy of the Vincys and of Mary Garth, there remained as the nethermost sediment in her mental shallows a persuasion that her brother Peter Featherstone could never leave his chief property away from his blood-relations: - else, why had the Almighty carried off his two wives both childless, after he had gained so much by manganese and things, turning up when nobody expected it? - and why was there a Lowick parish church, and the Waules and Powderells all sit ting in the same pew for generations, and the Featherstone pew next to them, if, the Sunday after her brother Peter's death, everybody was to know that the property was gone out of the family? The human mind has at no period accepted a moral chaos; and so preposterous a result was not strictly conceivable. But we are frightened at much that is not strictly conceivable.

When Fred came in the old man eyed him with a peculiar twinkle, which the younger had often had reason to interpret as pride in the satisfactory details of his appearance.

‘You two misses go away,’ said Mr Featherstone. ‘I want to speak to Fred.’

‘Come into my room, Rosamond, you will not mind the cold for a little while,’ said Mary. The two girls had not only known each other in childhood, but had been at the same provincial school together (Mary as an articled pupil), so that they had many memories in common, and liked very well to talk in private. Indeed, this tete-a-tete was one of Rosamond's objects in coming to Stone Court.

Old Featherstone would not begin the dialogue till the door had been closed. He continued to look at Fred with the same twinkle and with one of his habitual grimaces, alternately screwing and widening his mouth; and when he spoke, it was in a low tone, which might be taken for that of an informer ready to be bought off, rather than for the tone of an offended senior. He was not a man to feel any strong moral indignation even on account of trespasses against himself. It was natural that others should want to get an advantage over him, but then, he was a little too cunning for them.

‘So, sir, you've been paying ten per cent for money which you've promised to pay off by mortgaging my land when I'm dead and gone, eh? You put my life at a twelvemonth, say. But I can alter my will yet.’

Fred blushed. He had not borrowed money in that way, for excellent reasons. But he was conscious of having spoken with some confidence (perhaps with more than he exactly remembered) about his prospect of getting Featherstone's land as a future means of paying present debts. ‘I don't know what you refer to, sir. I have certainly never borrowed any money on such an insecurity. Please to explain.’

‘No, sir, it's you must explain. I can alter my will yet, let me tell you. I'm of sound mind - can reckon compound interest in my head, and remember every fool's name as well as I could twenty years ago. What the deuce? I'm under eighty. I say, you must contradict this story.’

‘I have contradicted it, sir,’ Fred answered, with a touch of impatience, not remembering that his uncle did not verbally discriminate contradicting from disproving, though no one was further from confounding the two ideas than old Featherstone, who often wondered that so many fools took his own assertions for proofs. ‘But I contradict it again. The story is a silly lie.’

‘Nonsense! you must bring dockiments. It comes from authority.’

‘Name the authority, and make him name the man of whom I borrowed the money, and then I can disprove the story.’

‘It's pretty good authority, I think - a man who knows most of what goes on in Middlemarch. It's that fine, religious, charitable uncle o' yours. Come now!’ Here Mr Featherstone had his peculiar inward shake which signified merriment.

‘Mr Bulstrode?’

‘Who else, eh?’

‘Then the story has grown into this lie out of some sermonizing words he may have let fall about me. Do they pretend that he named the man who lent me the money?’

‘If there is such a man, depend upon it Bulstrode knows him. But, supposing you only tried to get the money lent, and didn't get it - Bulstrode 'ud know that too. You bring me a writing from Bulstrode to say he doesn't believe you've ever promised to pay your debts out o' my land. Come now!’

Mr Featherstone's face required its whole scale of grimaces as a muscular outlet to his silent triumph in the soundness of his faculties.

Fred felt himself to be in a disgusting dilemma.

'You must be joking, sir. Mr Bulstrode, like other men, believes scores of things that are not true, and he has a prejudice against me. I could easily get him to write that he knew no facts in proof of the report you speak of, though it might lead to unpleasantness. But I could hardly ask him to write down what he believes or does not believe about me.' Fred paused an instant, and then added, in politic appeal to his uncle's vanity, 'That is hardly a thing for a gentleman to ask.' But he was disappointed in the result.

'Ay, I know what you mean. You'd sooner offend me than Bulstrode. And what's he? - he's got no land hereabout that ever I heard tell of. A speckilating fellow! He may come down any day, when the devil leaves off backing him. And that's what his religion means: he wants God A'mighty to come in. That's nonsense! There's one thing I made out pretty clear when I used to go to church - and it's this: God A'mighty sticks to the land. He promises land, and He gives land, and He makes chaps rich with corn and cattle. But you take the other side. You like Bulstrode and speckilation better than Featherstone and land.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said Fred, rising, standing with his back to the fire and beating his boot with his whip. 'I like neither Bulstrode nor speculation.' He spoke rather sulkily, feeling himself stalemated.

'Well, well, you can do without me, that's pretty clear,' said old Featherstone, secretly disliking the possibility that Fred would show himself at all independent. 'You neither want a bit of land to make a squire of you instead of a starving parson, nor a lift of a hundred pound by the way. It's all one to me. I can make five codicils if I like, and I shall keep my bank-notes for a nest-egg. It's all one to me.'

Fred colored again. Featherstone had rarely given him presents of money, and at this moment it seemed almost harder to part with the immediate prospect of bank-notes than with the more distant prospect of the land.

'I am not ungrateful, sir. I never meant to show disregard for any kind intentions you might have towards me. On the contrary.'

'Very good. Then prove it. You bring me a letter from Bulstrode saying he doesn't believe you've been cracking and promising to pay your debts out o' my land, and then, if there's any scrape you've got into,

we'll see if I can't back you a bit. Come now! That's a bargain. Here, give me your arm. I'll try and walk round the room.'

Fred, in spite of his irritation, had kindness enough in him to be a little sorry for the unloved, unvenerated old man, who with his dropsical legs looked more than usually pitiable in walking. While giving his arm, he thought that he should not himself like to be an old fellow with his constitution breaking up; and he waited good-temperedly, first before the window to hear the wonted remarks about the guinea-fowls and the weather-cock, and then before the scanty book-shelves, of which the chief glories in dark calf were Josephus, Culpepper, Klopstock's 'Messiah,' and several volumes of the 'Gentleman's Magazine.'

'Read me the names o' the books. Come now! you're a college man.'

Fred gave him the titles.

'What did missy want with more books? What must you be bringing her more books for?'

'They amuse her, sir. She is very fond of reading.'

'A little too fond,' said Mr Featherstone, captiously. 'She was for reading when she sat with me. But I put a stop to that. She's got the newspaper to read out loud. That's enough for one day, I should think. I can't abide to see her reading to herself. You mind and not bring her any more books, do you hear?'

'Yes, sir, I hear.' Fred had received this order before, and had secretly disobeyed it. He intended to disobey it again.

'Ring the bell,' said Mr Featherstone; 'I want missy to come down.'

Rosamond and Mary had been talking faster than their male friends. They did not think of sitting down, but stood at the toilet-table near the window while Rosamond took off her hat, adjusted her veil, and applied little touches of her finger-tips to her hair - hair of infantine fairness, neither flaxen nor yellow. Mary Garth seemed all the plainer standing at an angle between the two nymphs - the one in the glass, and the one out of it, who looked at each other with eyes of heavenly blue, deep enough to hold the most exquisite meanings an ingenious beholder could put into them, and deep enough to hide the meanings of the owner if these should happen to be less exquisite. Only a few children in Middlemarch looked blond by the side of Rosamond, and the slim figure displayed by her riding-habit had delicate undulations. In fact, most men in Middlemarch, except her brothers, held that Miss Vincy was the best girl in the world, and some called her an angel.

Mary Garth, on the contrary, had the aspect of an ordinary sinner: she was brown; her curly dark hair was rough and stubborn; her stature was low; and it would not be true to declare, in satisfactory antithesis, that she had all the virtues. Plainness has its peculiar temptations and vices quite as much as beauty; it is apt either to feign amiability, or, not feigning it, to show all the repulsiveness of discontent: at any rate, to be called an ugly thing in contrast with that lovely creature your companion, is apt to produce some effect beyond a sense of fine veracity and fitness in the phrase. At the age of two-and-twenty Mary had certainly not attained that perfect good sense and good principle which are usually recommended to the less fortunate girl, as if they were to be obtained in quantities ready mixed, with a flavor of resignation as required. Her shrewdness had a streak of satiric bitterness continually renewed and never carried utterly out of sight, except by a strong current of gratitude towards those who, instead of telling her that she ought to be contented, did something to make her so. Advancing womanhood had tempered her plainness, which was of a good human sort, such as the mothers of our race have very commonly worn in all latitudes under a more or less becoming headgear. Rembrandt would have painted her with pleasure, and would have made her broad features look out of the canvas with intelligent honesty. For honesty, truth-telling fairness, was Mary's reigning virtue: she neither tried to create illusions, nor indulged in them for her own behoof, and when she was in a good mood she had humor enough in her to laugh at herself. When she and Rosamond happened both to be reflected in the glass, she said, laughingly -

'What a brown patch I am by the side of you, Rosy! You are the most unbecoming companion.'

'Oh no! No one thinks of your appearance, you are so sensible and useful, Mary. Beauty is of very little consequence in reality,' said Rosamond, turning her head towards Mary, but with eyes swerving towards the new view of her neck in the glass.

'You mean my beauty,' said Mary, rather sardonically.

Rosamond thought, 'Poor Mary, she takes the kindest things ill.' Aloud she said, 'What have you been doing lately?'

'I? Oh, minding the house - pouring out syrup - pretending to be amiable and contented - learning to have a bad opinion of everybody.'

'It is a wretched life for you.'

'No,' said Mary, curtly, with a little toss of her head. 'I think my life is pleasanter than your Miss Morgan's.'

‘Yes; but Miss Morgan is so uninteresting, and not young.’

‘She is interesting to herself, I suppose; and I am not at all sure that everything gets easier as one gets older.’

‘No,’ said Rosamond, reflectively; ‘one wonders what such people do, without any prospect. To be sure, there is religion as a support. But,’ she added, dimpling, ‘it is very different with you,'Mary. You may have an offer.’

‘Has any one told you he means to make me one?’

‘Of course not. I mean, there is a gentleman who may fall in love with you, seeing you almost every day.’

A certain change in Mary's face was chiefly determined by the resolve not to show any change.

‘Does that always make people fall in love?’ she answered, carelessly; ‘it seems to me quite as often a reason for detesting each other.’

‘Not when they are interesting and agreeable. I hear that Mr Lydgate is both.’

‘Oh, Mr Lydgate!’ said Mary, with an unmistakable lapse into indifference. ‘You want to know something about him,’ she added, not choosing to indulge Rosamond's indirectness.

‘Merely, how you like him.’

‘There is no question of liking at present. My liking always wants some little kindness to kindle it. I am not magnanimous enough to like people who speak to me without seeming to see me.’

‘Is he so haughty?’ said Rosamond, with heightened satisfaction. ‘You know that he is of good family?’

‘No; he did not give that as a reason.’

‘Mary! you are the oddest girl. But what sort of looking man is he? Describe him to me.’

‘How can one describe a man? I can give you an inventory: heavy eyebrows, dark eyes, a straight nose, thick dark hair, large solid white hands - and - let me see - oh, an exquisite cambric pocket-handkerchief. But you will see him. You know this is about the time of his visits.’

Rosamond blushed a little, but said, meditatively, 'I rather like a haughty manner. I cannot endure a rattling young man.'

'I did not tell you that Mr Lydgate was haughty; but il y en a pour tous les gouts, as little Mamselle used to say, and if any girl can choose the particular sort of conceit she would like, I should think it is you, Rosy.'

'Haughtiness is not conceit; I call Fred conceited.'

'I wish no one said any worse of him. He should be more careful. Mrs Waule has been telling uncle that Fred is very unsteady.' Mary spoke from a girlish impulse which got the better of her judgment. There was a vague uneasiness associated with the word 'unsteady' which she hoped Rosamond might say something to dissipate. But she purposely abstained from mentioning Mrs Waule's more special insinuation.

'Oh, Fred is horrid!' said Rosamond. She would not have allowed herself so unsuitable a word to any one but Mary.

'What do you mean by horrid?'

'He is so idle, and makes papa so angry, and says he will not take orders.'

'I think Fred is quite right.'

'How can you say he is quite right, Mary? I thought you had more sense of religion.'

'He is not fit to be a clergyman.'

'But he ought to be fit.' - 'Well, then, he is not what he ought to be. I know some other people who are in the same case.'

'But no one approves of them. I should not like to marry a clergyman; but there must be clergymen.'

'It does not follow that Fred must be one.'

'But when papa has been at the expense of educating him for it! And only suppose, if he should have no fortune left him?'

'I can suppose that very well,' said Mary, dryly.

'Then I wonder you can defend Fred,' said Rosamond, inclined to push this point. 'I don't defend him,' said Mary, laughing; 'I would defend any parish from having him for a clergyman.'

‘But of course if he were a clergyman, he must be different.’

‘Yes, he would be a great hypocrite; and he is not that yet.’

‘It is of no use saying anything to you, Mary. You always take Fred's part.’

‘Why should I not take his part?’ said Mary, lighting up. ‘He would take mine. He is the only person who takes the least trouble to oblige me.’

‘You make me feel very uncomfortable, Mary,’ said Rosamond, with her gravest mildness; ‘I would not tell mamma for the world.’

‘What would you not tell her?’ said Mary, angrily.

‘Pray do not go into a rage, Mary,’ said Rosamond, mildly as ever.

‘If your mamma is afraid that Fred will make me an offer, tell her that I would not marry him if he asked me. But he is not going to do so, that I am aware. He certainly never has asked me.’

‘Mary, you are always so violent.’

‘And you are always so exasperating.’

‘I? What can you blame me for?’

‘Oh, blameless people are always the most exasperating. There is the bell - I think we must go down.’

‘I did not mean to quarrel,’ said Rosamond, putting on her hat.

‘Quarrel? Nonsense; we have not quarrelled. If one is not to get into a rage sometimes, what is the good of being friends?’

‘Am I to repeat what you have said?’ ‘Just as you please. I never say what I am afraid of having repeated. But let us go down.’

Mr Lydgate was rather late this morning, but the visitors stayed long enough to see him; for Mr Featherstone asked Rosamond to sing to him, and she herself was so kind as to propose a second favorite song of his - ‘Flow on, thou shining river’ - after she had sung ‘Home, sweet home’ (which she detested). This hard-headed old Overreach approved of the sentimental song, as the suitable garnish for girls, and also as fundamentally fine, sentiment being the right thing for a song.

Mr Featherstone was still applauding the last performance, and assuring missy that her voice was as clear as a blackbird's, when Mr Lydgate's horse passed the window.

His dull expectation of the usual disagreeable routine with an aged patient - who can hardly believe that medicine would not 'set him up' if the doctor were only clever enough - added to his general disbelief in Middlemarch charms, made a doubly effective background to this vision of Rosamond, whom old Featherstone made haste ostentatiously to introduce as his niece, though he had never thought it worth while to speak of Mary Garth in that light. Nothing escaped Lydgate in Rosamond's graceful behavior: how delicately she waived the notice which the old man's want of taste had thrust upon her by a quiet gravity, not showing her dimples on the wrong occasion, but showing them afterwards in speaking to Mary, to whom she addressed herself with so much good-natured interest, that Lydgate, after quickly examining Mary more fully than he had done before, saw an adorable kindness in Rosamond's eyes. But Mary from some cause looked rather out of temper.

'Miss Rosy has been singing me a song - you've nothing to say against that, eh, doctor?' said Mr Featherstone. 'I like it better than your physic.'

'That has made me forget how the time was going,' said Rosamond, rising to reach her hat, which she had laid aside before singing, so that her flower-like head on its white stem was seen in perfection above-her riding-habit. 'Fred, we must really go.'

'Very good,' said Fred, who had his own reasons for not being in the best spirits, and wanted to get away.

'Miss Vincy is a musician?' said Lydgate, following her with his eyes. (Every nerve and muscle in Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at. She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her physique: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own.)

'The best in Middlemarch, I'll be bound,' said Mr Featherstone, 'let the next be who she will. Eh, Fred? Speak up for your sister.'

'I'm afraid I'm out of court, sir. My evidence would be good for nothing.'

'Middlemarch has not a very high standard, uncle,' said Rosamond, with a pretty lightness, going towards her whip, which lay at a distance.

Lydgate was quick in anticipating her. He reached the whip before she did, and turned to present it to her. She bowed and looked at him: he of course was looking at her, and their eyes met with that peculiar meeting which is never arrived at by effort, but seems like a sudden divine clearance of haze. I think Lydgate turned a little paler than usual, but Rosamond blushed deeply and felt a certain astonishment. After that, she was really anxious to go, and did not know what sort of stupidity her uncle was talking of when she went to shake hands with him.

Yet this result, which she took to be a mutual impression, called falling in love, was just what Rosamond had contemplated beforehand. Ever since that important new arrival in Middlemarch she had woven a little future, of which something like this scene was the necessary beginning. Strangers, whether wrecked and clinging to a raft, or duly escorted and accompanied by portmanteaus, have always had a circumstantial fascination for the virgin mind, against which native merit has urged itself in vain. And a stranger was absolutely necessary to Rosamond's social romance, which had always turned on a lover and bridegroom who was not a Middlemarcher, and who had no connections at all like her own: of late, indeed, the construction seemed to demand that he should somehow be related to a baronet. Now that she and the stranger had met, reality proved much more moving than anticipation, and Rosamond could not doubt that this was the great epoch of her life. She judged of her own symptoms as those of awakening love, and she held it still more natural that Mr Lydgate should have fallen in love at first sight of her. These things happened so often at balls, and why not by the morning light, when the complexion showed all the better for it? Rosamond, though no older than Mary, was rather used to being fallen in love with; but she, for her part, had remained indifferent and fastidiously critical towards both fresh sprig and faded bachelor. And here was Mr Lydgate suddenly corresponding to her ideal, being altogether foreign to Middlemarch, carrying a certain air of distinction congruous with good family, and possessing connections which offered vistas of that middle-class heaven, rank; a man of talent, also, whom it would be especially delightful to enslave: in fact, a man who had touched her nature quite newly, and brought a vivid interest into her life which was better than any fancied ‘might-be’ such as she was in the habit of opposing to the actual.

Thus, in riding home, both the brother and the sister were preoccupied and inclined to be silent. Rosamond, whose basis for her structure had the usual airy slightness, was of remarkably detailed and realistic imagination when the foundation had been once presupposed; and before they had ridden a mile she was far on in the costume and introductions of her wedded life, having determined on her house in Middle-march, and foreseen the visits she would pay to

her husband's high-bred relatives at a distance, whose finished manners she could appropriate as thoroughly as she had done her school accomplishments, preparing herself thus for vaguer elevations which might ultimately come. There was nothing financial, still less sordid, in her previsions: she cared about what were considered refinements, and not about the money that was to pay for them.

Fred's mind, on the other hand, was busy with an anxiety which even his ready hopefulness could not immediately quell. He saw no way of eluding Featherstone's stupid demand without incurring consequences which he liked less even than the task of fulfilling it. His father was already out of humor with him, and would be still more so if he were the occasion of any additional coolness between his own family and the Bulstrodes. Then, he himself hated having to go and speak to his uncle Bulstrode, and perhaps after drinking wine he had said many foolish things about Featherstone's property, and these had been magnified by report. Fred felt that he made a wretched figure as a fellow who bragged about expectations from a queer old miser like Featherstone, and went to beg for certificates at his bidding. But - those expectations! He really had them, and he saw no agreeable alternative if he gave them up; besides, he had lately made a debt which galled him extremely, and old Featherstone had almost bargained to pay it off. The whole affair was miserably small: his debts were small, even his expectations were not anything so very magnificent. Fred had known men to whom he would have been ashamed of confessing the smallness of his scrapes. Such ruminations naturally produced a streak of misanthropic bitterness. To be born the son of a Middlemarch manufacturer, and inevitable heir to nothing in particular, while such men as Mainwaring and Vyan - certainly life was a poor business, when a spirited young fellow, with a good appetite for the best of everything, had so poor an outlook.

It had not occurred to Fred that the introduction of Bulstrode's name in the matter was a fiction of old Featherstone's; nor could this have made any difference to his position. He saw plainly enough that the old man wanted to exercise his power by tormenting him a little, and also probably to get some satisfaction out of seeing him on unpleasant terms with Bulstrode. Fred fancied that he saw to the bottom of his uncle Featherstone's soul, though in reality half what he saw there was no more than the reflex of his own inclinations. The difficult task of knowing another soul is not for young gentlemen whose consciousness is chiefly made up of their own wishes.

Fred's main point of debate with himself was, whether he should tell his father, or try to get through the affair without his father's knowledge. It was probably Mrs Waule who had been talking about him; and if Mary Garth had repeated Mrs Waule's report to Rosamond, it would be sure to reach his father, who would as surely

question him about it. He said to Rosamond, as they slackened their pace -

'Rosy, did Mary tell you that Mrs Waule had said anything about me?'

'Yes, indeed, she did.'

'What?'

'That you were very unsteady.'

'Was that all?'

'I should think that was enough, Fred.'

'You are sure she said no more?'

'Mary mentioned nothing else. But really, Fred, I think you ought to be ashamed.'

'Oh, fudge! Don't lecture me. What did Mary say about it?'

'I am not obliged to tell you. You care so very much what Mary says, and you are too rude to allow me to speak.'

'Of course I care what Mary says. She is the best girl I know.'

'I should never have thought she was a girl to fall in love with.'

'How do you know what men would fall in love with? Girls never know.'

'At least, Fred, let me advise *you* not to fall in love with her, for she says she would not marry you if you asked her.'

'She might have waited till I did ask her.'

'I knew it would nettle you, Fred.'

'Not at all. She would not have said so if you had not provoked her.' Before reaching home, Fred concluded that he would tell the whole affair as simply as possible to his father, who might perhaps take on himself the unpleasant business of speaking to Bulstrode.

**BOOK II. OLD AND YOUNG**