Chapter XIII

1st Gent. How class your man? - as better than the most, Or, seeming better, worse beneath that cloak? As saint or knave, pilgrim or hypocrite? 2d Gent. Nay, tell me how you class your wealth of books The drifted relics of all time. As well sort them at once by size and livery: Vellum, tall copies, and the common calf Will hardly cover more diversity Than all your labels cunningly devised To class your unread authors.

In consequence of what he had heard from Fred, Mr Vincy determined to speak with Mr Bulstrode in his private room at the Bank at half-past one, when he was usually free from other callers. But a visitor had come in at one o'clock, and Mr Bulstrode had so much to say to him, that there was little chance of the interview being over in half an hour. The banker's speech was fluent, but it was also copious, and he used up an appreciable amount of time in brief meditative pauses. Do not imagine his sickly aspect to have been of the yellow, black-haired sort: he had a pale blond skin, thin gray-besprinkled brown hair, light-gray eyes, and a large forehead. Loud men called his subdued tone an undertone, and sometimes implied that it was inconsistent with openness; though there seems to be no reason why a loud man should not be given to concealment of anything except his own voice, unless it can be shown that Holy Writ has placed the seat of candor in the lungs. Mr Bulstrode had also a deferential bending attitude in listening, and an apparently fixed attentiveness in his eyes which made those persons who thought themselves worth hearing infer that he was seeking the utmost improvement from their discourse. Others, who expected to make no great figure, disliked this kind of moral lantern turned on them. If you are not proud of your cellar, there is no thrill of satisfaction in seeing your guest hold up his wine-glass to the light and look judicial. Such joys are reserved for conscious merit. Hence Mr Bulstrode's close attention was not agreeable to the publicans and sinners in Middlemarch; it was attributed by some to his being a Pharisee, and by others to his being Evangelical. Less superficial reasoners among them wished to know who his father and grandfather were, observing that five-and-twenty years ago nobody had ever heard of a Bulstrode in Middlemarch. To his present visitor, Lydgate, the scrutinizing look was a matter of indifference: he simply formed an unfavorable opinion of the banker's constitution, and concluded that he had an eager inward life with little enjoyment of tangible things.

'I shall be exceedingly obliged if you will look in on me here occasionally, Mr Lydgate,' the banker observed, after a brief pause. 'If, as I dare to hope, I have the privilege of finding you a valuable coadjutor in the interesting matter of hospital management, there will

be many questions which we shall need to discuss in private. As to the new hospital, which is nearly finished, I shall consider what you have said about the advantages of the special destination for fevers. The decision will rest with me, for though Lord Medlicote has given the land and timber for the building, he is not disposed to give his personal attention to the object.'

'There are few things better worth the pains in a provincial town like this,' said Lydgate. 'A fine fever hospital in addition to the old infirmary might be the nucleus of a medical school here, when once we get our medical reforms; and what would do more for medical education than the spread of such schools over the country? A born provincial man who has a grain of public spirit as well as a few ideas, should do what he can to resist the rush of everything that is a little better than common towards London. Any valid professional aims may often find a freer, if not a richer field, in the provinces.'

One of Lydgate's gifts was a voice habitually deep and sonorous, yet capable of becoming very low and gentle at the right moment. About his ordinary bearing there was a certain fling, a fearless expectation of success, a confidence in his own powers and integrity much fortified by contempt for petty obstacles or seductions of which he had had no experience. But this proud openness was made lovable by an expression of unaffected good-will. Mr Bulstrode perhaps liked him the better for the difference between them in pitch and manners; he certainly liked him the better, as Rosamond did, for being a stranger in Middlemarch. One can begin so many things with a new person! - even begin to be a better man.

'I shall rejoice to furnish your zeal with fuller opportunities,' Mr Bulstrode answered; 'I mean, by confiding to you the superintendence of my new hospital, should a maturer knowledge favor that issue, for I am determined that so great an object shall not be shackled by our two physicians. Indeed, I am encouraged to consider your advent to this town as a gracious indication that a more manifest blessing is now to be awarded to my efforts, which have hitherto been much with stood. With regard to the old infirmary, we have gained the initial point - I mean your election. And now I hope you will not shrink from incurring a certain amount of jealousy and dislike from your professional brethren by presenting yourself as a reformer.'

'I will not profess bravery,' said Lydgate, smiling, 'but I acknowledge a good deal of pleasure in fighting, and I should not care for my profession, if I did not believe that better methods were to be found and enforced there as well as everywhere else.'

'The standard of that profession is low in Middlemarch, my dear sir,' said the banker. 'I mean in knowledge and skill; not in social status,

for our medical men are most of them connected with respectable townspeople here. My own imperfect health has induced me to give some attention to those palliative resources which the divine mercy has placed within our reach. I have consulted eminent men in the metropolis, and I am painfully aware of the backwardness under which medical treatment labors in our provincial districts.'

'Yes; - with our present medical rules and education, one must be satisfied now and then to meet with a fair practitioner. As to all the higher questions which determine the starting-point of a diagnosis - as to the philosophy of medial evidence - any glimmering of these can only come from a scientific culture of which country practitioners have usually no more notion than the man in the moon.'

Mr Bulstrode, bending and looking intently, found the form which Lydgate had given to his agreement not quite suited to his comprehension. Under such circumstances a judicious man changes the topic and enters on ground where his own gifts may be more useful.

'I am aware,' he said, 'that the peculiar bias of medical ability is towards material means. Nevertheless, Mr Lydgate, I hope we shall not vary in sentiment as to a measure in which you are not likely to be actively concerned, but in which your sympathetic concurrence may be an aid to me. You recognize, I hope; the existence of spiritual interests in your patients?'

'Certainly I do. But those words are apt to cover different meanings to different minds.'

'Precisely. And on such subjects wrong teaching is as fatal as no teaching. Now a point which I have much at heart to secure is a new regulation as to clerical attendance at the old infirmary. The building stands in Mr Farebrother's parish. You know Mr Farebrother?'

'I have seen him. He gave me his vote. I must call to thank him. He seems a very bright pleasant little fellow. And I understand he is a naturalist.' 'Mr Farebrother, my dear sir, is a man deeply painful to contemplate. I suppose there is not a clergyman in this country who has greater talents.' Mr Bulstrode paused and looked meditative.

'I have not yet been pained by finding any excessive talent in Middlemarch,' said Lydgate, bluntly.

'What I desire,' Mr Bulstrode continued, looking still more serious, 'is that Mr Farebrother's attendance at the hospital should be superseded by the appointment of a chaplain - of Mr Tyke, in fact - and that no other spiritual aid should be called in.'

‘As a medial man I could have no opinion on such a point unless I knew Mr Tyke, and even then I should require to know the cases in which he was applied.’ Lydgate smiled, but he was bent on being circumspect.

‘Of course you cannot enter fully into the merits of this measure at present. But’ - here Mr Bulstrode began to speak with a more chiselled emphasis - ‘the subject is likely to be referred to the medical board of the infirmary, and what I trust I may ask of you is, that in virtue of the cooperation between us which I now look forward to, you will not, so far as you are concerned, be influenced by my opponents in this matter.’

‘I hope I shall have nothing to do with clerical disputes,’ said Lydgate. ‘The path I have chosen is to work well in my own profession.’

‘My responsibility, Mr Lydgate, is of a broader kind. With me, indeed, this question is one of sacred accountableness; whereas with my opponents, I have good reason to say that it is an occasion for gratifying a spirit of worldly opposition. But I shall not therefore drop one iota of my convictions, or cease to identify myself with that truth which an evil generation hates. I have devoted myself to this object of hospital-improvement, but I will boldly confess to you, Mr Lydgate, that I should have no interest in hospitals if I believed that nothing more was concerned therein than the cure of mortal diseases. I have another ground of action, and in the face of persecution I will not conceal it.’

Mr Bulstrode's voice had become a loud and agitated whisper as he said the last words.

‘There we certainly differ,’ said Lydgate. But he was not sorry that the door was now opened, and Mr Vincy was announced. That florid sociable personage was become more interesting to him since he had seen Rosamond. Not that, like her, he had been weaving any future in which their lots were united; but a man naturally remembers a charming girl with pleasure, and is willing to dine where he may see her again. Before he took leave, Mr Vincy had given that invitation which he had been ‘in no hurry about,’ for Rosamond at breakfast had mentioned that she thought her uncle Featherstone had taken the new doctor into great favor.

Mr Bulstrode, alone with his brother-in-law, poured himself out a glass of water, and opened a sandwich-box.

‘I cannot persuade you to adopt my regimen, Vincy?’

'No, no; I've no opinion of that system. Life wants padding,' said Mr Vincy, unable to omit his portable theory. 'However,' he went on, accenting the word, as if to dismiss all irrelevance, 'what I came here to talk about was a little affair of my young scapegrace, Fred's.'

'That is a subject on which you and I are likely to take quite as different views as on diet, Vincy.'

'I hope not this time.' (Mr Vincy was resolved to be good-humored.) 'The fact is, it's about a whim of old Featherstone's. Somebody has been cooking up a story out of spite, and telling it to the old man, to try to set him against Fred. He's very fond of Fred, and is likely to do something handsome for him; indeed he has as good as told Fred that he means to leave him his land, and that makes other people jealous.'

'Vincy, I must repeat, that you will not get any concurrence from me as to the course you have pursued with your eldest son. It was entirely from worldly vanity that you destined him for the Church: with a family of three sons and four daughters, you were not warranted in devoting money to an expensive education which has succeeded in nothing but in giving him extravagant idle habits. You are now reaping the consequences.'

To point out other people's errors was a duty that Mr Bulstrode rarely shrank from, but Mr Vincy was not equally prepared to be patient. When a man has the immediate prospect of being mayor, and is ready, in the interests of commerce, to take up a firm attitude on politics generally, he has naturally a sense of his importance to the framework of things which seems to throw questions of private conduct into the background. And this particular reproof irritated him more than any other. It was eminently superfluous to him to be told that he was reaping the consequences. But he felt his neck under Bulstrode's yoke; and though he usually enjoyed kicking, he was anxious to refrain from that relief.

'As to that, Bulstrode, it's no use going back. I'm not one of your pattern men, and I don't pretend to be. I couldn't foresee everything in the trade; there wasn't a finer business in Middlemarch than ours, and the lad was clever. My poor brother was in the Church, and would have done well - had got preferment already, but that stomach fever took him off: else he might have been a dean by this time. I think I was justified in what I tried to do for Fred. If you come to religion, it seems to me a man shouldn't want to carve out his meat to an ounce beforehand: - one must trust a little to Providence and be generous. It's a good British feeling to try and raise your family a little: in my opinion, it's a father's duty to give his sons a fine chance.'

'I don't wish to act otherwise than as your best friend, Vincy, when I say that what you have been uttering just now is one mass of worldliness and inconsistent folly.'

'Very well,' said Mr Vincy, kicking in spite of resolutions, 'I never professed to be anything but worldly; and, what's more, I don't see anybody else who is not worldly. I suppose you don't conduct business on what you call unworldly principles. The only difference I see is that one worldliness is a little bit honester than another.'

'This kind of discussion is unfruitful, Vincy,' said Mr Bulstrode, who, finishing his sandwich, had thrown himself back in his chair, and shaded his eyes as if weary. 'You had some more particular business.'

'Yes, yes. The long and short of it is, somebody has told old Featherstone, giving you as the authority, that Fred has been borrowing or trying to borrow money on the prospect of his land. Of course you never said any such nonsense. But the old fellow will insist on it that Fred should bring him a denial in your handwriting; that is, just a bit of a note saying you don't believe a word of such stuff, either of his having borrowed or tried to borrow in such a fool's way. I suppose you can have no objection to do that.'

'Pardon me. I have an objection. I am by no means sure that your son, in his recklessness and ignorance - I will use no severer word - has not tried to raise money by holding out his future prospects, or even that some one may not have been foolish enough to supply him on so vague a presumption: there is plenty of such lax money-lending as of other folly in the world.'

'But Fred gives me his honor that he has never borrowed money on the pretence of any understanding about his uncle's land. He is not a liar. I don't want to make him better than he is. I have blown him up well - nobody can say I wink at what he does. But he is not a liar. And I should have thought - but I may be wrong - that there was no religion to hinder a man from believing the best of a young fellow, when you don't know worse. It seems to me it would be a poor sort of religion to put a spoke in his wheel by refusing to say you don't believe such harm of him as you've got no good reason to believe.'

'I am not at all sure that I should be befriending your son by smoothing his way to the future possession of Featherstone's property. I cannot regard wealth as a blessing to those who use it simply as a harvest for this world. You do not like to hear these things, Vincy, but on this occasion I feel called upon to tell you that I have no motive for furthering such a disposition of property as that which you refer to. I do not shrink from saying that it will not tend to your son's eternal welfare or to the glory of God. Why then should you

expect me to pen this kind of affidavit, which has no object but to keep up a foolish partiality and secure a foolish bequest?'

'If you mean to hinder everybody from having money but saints and evangelists, you must give up some profitable partnerships, that's all I can say,' Mr Vincy burst out very bluntly. 'It may be for the glory of God, but it is not for the glory of the Middlemarch trade, that Plymdale's house uses those blue and green dyes it gets from the Brassing manufactory; they rot the silk, that's all I know about it. Perhaps if other people knew so much of the profit went to the glory of God, they might like it better. But I don't mind so much about that - I could get up a pretty row, if I chose.'

Mr Bulstrode paused a little before he answered. 'You pain me very much by speaking in this way, Vincy. I do not expect you to understand my grounds of action - it is not an easy thing even to thread a path for principles in the intricacies of the world - still less to make the thread clear for the careless and the scoffing. You must remember, if you please, that I stretch my tolerance towards you as my wife's brother, and that it little becomes you to complain of me as withholding material help towards the worldly position of your family. I must remind you that it is not your own prudence or judgment that has enabled you to keep your place in the trade.'

'Very likely not; but you have been no loser by my trade yet,' said Mr Vincy, thoroughly nettled (a result which was seldom much retarded by previous resolutions). 'And when you married Harriet, I don't see how you could expect that our families should not hang by the same nail. If you've changed your mind, and want my family to come down in the world, you'd better say so. I've never changed; I'm a plain Churchman now, just as I used to be before doctrines came up. I take the world as I find it, in trade and everything else. I'm contented to be no worse than my neighbors. But if you want us to come down in the world, say so. I shall know better what to do then.'

'You talk unreasonably. Shall you come down in the world for want of this letter about your son?'

'Well, whether or not, I consider it very unhandsome of you to refuse it. Such doings may be lined with religion, but outside they have a nasty, dog-in-the-manger look. You might as well slander Fred: it comes pretty near to it when you refuse to say you didn't set a slander going. It's this sort of thing - -this tyrannical spirit, wanting to play bishop and banker everywhere - it's this sort of thing makes a man's name stink.'

'Vincy, if you insist on quarrelling with me, it will be exceedingly painful to Harriet as well as myself,' said Mr Bulstrode, with a trifle more eagerness and paleness than usual.

'I don't want to quarrel. It's for my interest - and perhaps for yours too - that we should be friends. I bear you no grudge; I think no worse of you than I do of other people. A man who half starves himself, and goes the length in family prayers, and so on, that you do, believes in his religion whatever it may be: you could turn over your capital just as fast with cursing and swearing: - plenty of fellows do. You like to be master, there's no denying that; you must be first chop in heaven, else you won't like it much. But you're my sister's husband, and we ought to stick together; and if I know Harriet, she'll consider it your fault if we quarrel because you strain at a gnat in this way, and refuse to do Fred a good turn. And I don't mean to say I shall bear it well. I consider it unhandsome.'

Mr Vincy rose, began to button his great-coat, and looked steadily at his brother-in-law, meaning to imply a demand for a decisive answer.

This was not the first time that Mr Bulstrode had begun by admonishing Mr Vincy, and had ended by seeing a very unsatisfactory reflection of himself in the coarse unflattering mirror which that manufacturer's mind presented to the subtler lights and shadows of his fellow-men; and perhaps his experience ought to have warned him how the scene would end. But a full-fed fountain will be generous with its waters even in the rain, when they are worse than useless; and a fine fount of admonition is apt to be equally irrepressible.

It was not in Mr Bulstrode's nature to comply directly in consequence of uncomfortable suggestions. Before changing his course, he always needed to shape his motives and bring them into accordance with his habitual standard. He said, at last -

'I will reflect a little, Vincy. I will mention the subject to Harriet. I shall probably send you a letter.'

'Very well. As soon as you can, please. I hope it will all be settled before I see you to-morrow.'