

Chapter XIV

'Follows here the strict receipt For that sauce to dainty meat, Named Idleness, which many eat By preference, and call it sweet: First watch for morsels, like a hound Mix well with buffets, stir them round With good thick oil of flatteries, And froth with mean self-lauding lies. Serve warm: the vessels you must choose To keep it in are dead men's shoes.'

Mr Bulstrode's consultation of Harriet seemed to have had the effect desired by Mr Vincy, for early the next morning a letter came which Fred could carry to Mr Featherstone as the required testimony.

The old gentleman was staying in bed on account of the cold weather, and as Mary Garth was not to be seen in the sitting-room, Fred went up-stairs immediately and presented the letter to his uncle, who, propped up comfortably on a bed-rest, was not less able than usual to enjoy his consciousness of wisdom in distrusting and frustrating mankind. He put on his spectacles to read the letter, pursing up his lips and drawing down their corners.

'Under the circumstances I will not decline to state my conviction - tchah! what fine words the fellow puts! He's as fine as an auctioneer - that your son Frederic has not obtained any advance of money on bequests promised by Mr Featherstone - promised? who said I had ever promised? I promise nothing - I shall make codicils as long as I like - and that considering the nature of such a proceeding, it is unreasonable to presume that a young man of sense and character would attempt it - ah, but the gentleman doesn't say you are a young man of sense and character, mark you that, sir! - As to my own concern with any report of such a nature, I distinctly affirm that I never made any statement to the effect that your son had borrowed money on any property that might accrue to him on Mr Featherstone's demise - bless my heart! 'property' - accrue - demise! Lawyer Standish is nothing to him. He couldn't speak finer if he wanted to borrow. Well,' Mr Featherstone here looked over his spectacles at Fred, while he handed back the letter to him with a contemptuous gesture, 'you don't suppose I believe a thing because Bulstrode writes it out fine, eh?'

Fred colored. 'You wished to have the letter, sir. I should think it very likely that Mr Bulstrode's denial is as good as the authority which told you what he denies.'

'Every bit. I never said I believed either one or the other. And now what d' you expect?' said Mr Featherstone, curtly, keeping on his spectacles, but withdrawing his hands under his wraps.

'I expect nothing, sir.' Fred with difficulty restrained himself from venting his irritation. 'I came to bring you the letter. If you like I will bid you good morning.'

'Not yet, not yet. Ring the bell; I want missy to come.'

It was a servant who came in answer to the bell.

'Tell missy to come!' said Mr Featherstone, impatiently. 'What business had she to go away?' He spoke in the same tone when Mary came.

'Why couldn't you sit still here till I told you to go? want my waistcoat now. I told you always to put it on the bed.'

Mary's eyes looked rather red, as if she had been crying. It was clear that Mr Featherstone was in one of his most snappish humors this morning, and though Fred had now the prospect of receiving the much-needed present of money, he would have preferred being free to turn round on the old tyrant and tell him that Mary Garth was too good to be at his beck. Though Fred had risen as she entered the room, she had barely noticed him, and looked as if her nerves were quivering with the expectation that something would be thrown at her. But she never had anything worse than words to dread. When she went to reach the waistcoat from a peg, Fred went up to her and said, 'Allow me.'

'Let it alone! You bring it, missy, and lay it down here,' said Mr Featherstone. 'Now you go away again till I call you,' he added, when the waistcoat was laid down by him. It was usual with him to season his pleasure in showing favor to one person by being especially disagreeable to another, and Mary was always at hand to furnish the condiment. When his own relatives came she was treated better. Slowly he took out a bunch of keys from the waistcoat pocket, and slowly he drew forth a tin box which was under the bed-clothes.

'You expect I am going to give you a little fortune, eh?' he said, looking above his spectacles and pausing in the act of opening the lid.

'Not at all, sir. You were good enough to speak of making me a present the other day, else, of course, I should not have thought of the matter.' But Fred was of a hopeful disposition, and a vision had presented itself of a sum just large enough to deliver him from a certain anxiety. When Fred got into debt, it always seemed to him highly probable that something or other - he did not necessarily conceive what - would come to pass enabling him to pay in due time. And now that the providential occurrence was apparently close at hand, it would have been sheer absurdity to think that the supply would be short of the

need: as absurd as a faith that believed in half a miracle for want of strength to believe in a whole one.

The deep-veined hands fingered many bank-notes-one after the other, laying them down flat again, while Fred leaned back in his chair, scorning to look eager. He held himself to be a gentleman at heart, and did not like courting an old fellow for his money. At last, Mr Featherstone eyed him again over his spectacles and presented him with a little sheaf of notes: Fred could see distinctly that there were but five, as the less significant edges gaped towards him. But then, each might mean fifty pounds. He took them, saying -

'I am very much obliged to you, sir,' and was going to roll them up without seeming to think of their value. But this did not suit Mr Featherstone, who was eying him intently.

'Come, don't you think it worth your while to count 'em? You take money like a lord; I suppose you lose it like one.'

'I thought I was not to look a gift-horse in the mouth, sir. But I shall be very happy to count them.'

Fred was not so happy, however, after he had counted them. For they actually presented the absurdity of being less than his hopefulness had decided that they must be. What can the fitness of things mean, if not their fitness to a man's expectations? Failing this, absurdity and atheism gape behind him. The collapse for Fred was severe when he found that he held no more than five twenties, and his share in the higher education of this country did not seem to help him. Nevertheless he said, with rapid changes in his fair complexion -

'It is very handsome of you, sir.'

'I should think it is,' said Mr Featherstone, locking his box and replacing it, then taking off his spectacles deliberately, and at length, as if his inward meditation had more deeply convinced him, repeating, 'I should think it handsome.'

'I assure you, sir, I am very grateful,' said Fred, who had had time to recover his cheerful air.

'So you ought to be. You want to cut a figure in the world, and I reckon Peter Featherstone is the only one you've got to trust to.' Here the old man's eyes gleamed with a curiously mingled satisfaction in the consciousness that this smart young fellow relied upon him, and that the smart young fellow was rather a fool for doing so.

'Yes, indeed: I was not born to very splendid chances. Few men have been more cramped than I have been,' said Fred, with some sense of surprise at his own virtue, considering how hardly he was dealt with. 'It really seems a little too bad to have to ride a broken-winded hunter, and see men, who, are not half such good judges as yourself, able to throw away any amount of money on buying bad bargains.'

'Well, you can buy yourself a fine hunter now. Eighty pound is enough for that, I reckon - and you'll have twenty pound over to get yourself out of any little scrape,' said Mr Featherstone, chuckling slightly.

'You are very good, sir,' said Fred, with a fine sense of contrast between the words and his feeling.

'Ay, rather a better uncle than your fine uncle Bulstrode. You won't get much out of his spekulations, I think. He's got a pretty strong string round your father's leg, by what I hear, eh?'

'My father never tells me anything about his affairs, sir.'

'Well, he shows some sense there. But other people find 'em out without his telling. *He'll* never have much to leave you: he'll most-like die without a will - he's the sort of man to do it - let 'em make him mayor of Middlemarch as much as they like. But you won't get much by his dying without a will, though you *are* the eldest son.'

Fred thought that Mr Featherstone had never been so disagreeable before. True, he had never before given him quite so much money at once.

'Shall I destroy this letter of Mr Bulstrode's, sir?' said Fred, rising with the letter as if he would put it in the fire.

'Ay, ay, I don't want it. It's worth no money to me.'

Fred carried the letter to the fire, and thrust the poker through it with much zest. He longed to get out of the room, but he was a little ashamed before his inner self, as well as before his uncle, to run away immediately after pocketing the money. Presently, the farm-bailiff came up to give his master a report, and Fred, to his unspeakable relief, was dismissed with the injunction to come again soon.

He had longed not only to be set free from his uncle, but also to find Mary Garth. She was now in her usual place by the fire, with sewing in her hands and a book open on the little table by her side. Her eyelids had lost some of their redness now, and she had her usual air of self-command.

'Am I wanted up-stairs?' she said, half rising as Fred entered.

'No; I am only dismissed, because Simmons is gone up.'

Mary sat down again, and resumed her work. She was certainly treating him with more indifference than usual: she did not know how affectionately indignant he had felt on her behalf up-stairs.

'May I stay here a little, Mary, or shall I bore you?'

'Pray sit down,' said Mary; 'you will not be so heavy a bore as Mr John Waule, who was here yesterday, and he sat down without asking my leave.'

'Poor fellow! I think he is in love with you.'

'I am not aware of it. And to me it is one of the most odious things in a girl's life, that there must always be some supposition of falling in love coming between her and any man who is kind to her, and to whom she is grateful. I should have thought that I, at least, might have been safe from all that. I have no ground for the nonsensical vanity of fancying everybody who comes near me is in love with me.'

Mary did not mean to betray any feeling, but in spite of herself she ended in a tremulous tone of vexation.

'Confound John Waule! I did not mean to make you angry. I didn't know you had any reason for being grateful to me. I forgot what a great service you think it if any one snuffs a candle for you. Fred also had his pride, and was not going to show that he knew what had called forth this outburst of Mary's.

'Oh, I am not angry, except with the ways of the world. I do like to be spoken to as if I had common-sense. I really often feel as if I could understand a little more than I ever hear even from young gentlemen who have been to college.' Mary had recovered, and she spoke with a suppressed rippling under-current of laughter pleasant to hear.

'I don't care how merry you are at my expense this morning,' said Fred, 'I thought you looked so sad when you came up-stairs. It is a shame you should stay here to be bullied in that way.'

'Oh, I have an easy life - by comparison. I have tried being a teacher, and I am not fit for that: my mind is too fond of wandering on its own way. I think any hardship is better than pretending to do what one is paid for, and never really doing it. Everything here I can do as well as any one else could; perhaps better than some - Rosy, for example.

Though she is just the sort of beautiful creature that is imprisoned with ogres in fairy tales.'

'Rosy!' cried Fred, in a tone of profound brotherly scepticism.

'Come, Fred!' said Mary, emphatically; 'you have no right to be so critical.'

'Do you mean anything particular - just now?'

'No, I mean something general - always.'

'Oh, that I am idle and extravagant. Well, I am not fit to be a poor man. I should not have made a bad fellow if I had been rich.'

'You would have done your duty in that state of life to which it has not pleased God to call you,' said Mary, laughing.

'Well, I couldn't do my duty as a clergyman, any more than you could do yours as a governess. You ought to have a little fellow-feeling there, Mary.'

'I never said you ought to be a clergyman. There are other sorts of work. It seems to me very miserable not to resolve on some course and act accordingly.'

'So I could, if - ' Fred broke off, and stood up, leaning against the mantel-piece.

'If you were sure you should not have a fortune?'

'I did not say that. You want to quarrel with me. It is too bad of you to be guided by what other people say about me.'

'How can I want to quarrel with you? I should be quarrelling with all my new books,' said Mary, lifting the volume on the table. 'However naughty you may be to other people, you are good to me.'

'Because I like you better than any one else. But I know you despise me.'

'Yes, I do - a little,' said Mary, nodding, with a smile.

'You would admire a stupendous fellow, who would have wise opinions about everything.'

'Yes, I should.' Mary was sewing swiftly, and seemed provokingly mistress of the situation. When a conversation has taken a wrong

turn for us, we only get farther and farther into the swamp of awkwardness. This was what Fred Vincy felt.

'I suppose a woman is never in love with any one she has always known - ever since she can remember; as a man often is. It is always some new fellow who strikes a girl.'

'Let me see,' said Mary, the corners of her mouth curling archly; 'I must go back on my experience. There is Juliet - she seems an example of what you say. But then Ophelia had probably known Hamlet a long while; and Brenda Troil - she had known Mordaunt Merton ever since they were children; but then he seems to have been an estimable young man; and Minna was still more deeply in love with Cleveland, who was a stranger. Waverley was new to Flora MacIvor; but then she did not fall in love with him. And there are Olivia and Sophia Primrose, and Corinne - they may be said to have fallen in love with new men. Altogether, my experience is rather mixed.'

Mary looked up with some roguishness at Fred, and that look of hers was very dear to him, though the eyes were nothing more than clear windows where observation sat laughingly. He was certainly an affectionate fellow, and as he had grown from boy to man, he had grown in love with his old playmate, notwithstanding that share in the higher education of the country which had exalted his views of rank and income.

'When a man is not loved, it is no use for him to say that he could be a better fellow - could do anything - I mean, if he were sure of being loved in return.'

'Not of the least use in the world for him to say he *could* be better. Might, could, would - they are contemptible auxiliaries.'

'I don't see how a man is to be good for much unless he has some one woman to love him dearly.'

'I think the goodness should come before he expects that.'

'You know better, Mary. Women don't love men for their goodness.'

'Perhaps not. But if they love them, they never think them bad.'

'It is hardly fair to say I am bad.'

'I said nothing at all about you.'

'I never shall be good for anything, Mary, if you will not say that you love me - if you will not promise to marry me - I mean, when I am able to marry.'

'If I did love you, I would not marry you: I would certainly not promise ever to marry you.'

'I think that is quite wicked, Mary. If you love me, you ought to promise to marry me.'

'On the contrary, I think it would be wicked in me to marry you even if I did love you.'

'You mean, just as I am, without any means of maintaining a wife. Of course: I am but three-and-twenty.'

'In that last point you will alter. But I am not so sure of any other alteration. My father says an idle man ought not to exist, much less, be married.'

'Then I am to blow my brains out?'

'No; on the whole I should think you would do better to pass your examination. I have heard Mr Farebrother say it is disgracefully easy.'

'That is all very fine. Anything is easy to him. Not that cleverness has anything to do with it. I am ten times cleverer than many men who pass.'

'Dear me!' said Mary, unable to repress her sarcasm; 'that accounts for the curates like Mr Crowse. Divide your cleverness by ten, and the quotient - dear me! - is able to take a degree. But that only shows you are ten times more idle than the others.'

'Well, if I did pass, you would not want me to go into the Church?'

'That is not the question - what I want you to do. You have a conscience of your own, I suppose. There! there is Mr Lydgate. I must go and tell my uncle.'

'Mary,' said Fred, seizing her hand as she rose; 'if you will not give me some encouragement, I shall get worse instead of better.'

'I will not give you any encouragement,' said Mary, reddening. 'Your friends would dislike it, and so would mine. My father would think it a disgrace to me if I accepted a man who got into debt, and would not work!'

Fred was stung, and released her hand. She walked to the door, but there she turned and said: 'Fred, you have always been so good, so generous to me. I am not ungrateful. But never speak to me in that way again.'

'Very well,' said Fred, sulkily, taking up his hat and whip. His complexion showed patches of pale pink and dead white. Like many a plucked idle young gentleman, he was thoroughly in love, and with a plain girl, who had no money! But having Mr Featherstone's land in the background, and a persuasion that, let Mary say what she would, she really did care for him, Fred was not utterly in despair.

When he got home, he gave four of the twenties to his mother, asking her to keep them for him. 'I don't want to spend that money, mother. I want it to pay a debt with. So keep it safe away from my fingers.'

'Bless you, my dear,' said Mrs Vincy. She doted on her eldest son and her youngest girl (a child of six), whom others thought her two naughtiest children. The mother's eyes are not always deceived in their partiality: she at least can best judge who is the tender, filial-hearted child. And Fred was certainly very fond of his mother. Perhaps it was his fondness for another person also that made him particularly anxious to take some security against his own liability to spend the hundred pounds. For the creditor to whom he owed a hundred and sixty held a firmer security in the shape of a bill signed by Mary's father.