

Chapter XVII

'The clerkly person smiled and said Promise was a pretty maid, But being poor she died unwed.'

The Rev. Camden Farebrother, whom Lydgate went to see the next evening, lived in an old parsonage, built of stone, venerable enough to match the church which it looked out upon. All the furniture too in the house was old, but with another grade of age - that of Mr Farebrother's father and grandfather. There were painted white chairs, with gilding and wreaths on them, and some lingering red silk damask with slits in it. There were engraved portraits of Lord Chancellors and other celebrated lawyers of the last century; and there were old pier-glasses to reflect them, as well as the little satin-wood tables and the sofas resembling a prolongation of uneasy chairs, all standing in relief against the dark wainscot. This was the physiognomy of the drawing-room into which Lydgate was shown; and there were three ladies to receive him, who were also old-fashioned, and of a faded but genuine respectability: Mrs Farebrother, the Vicar's white-haired mother, befrilled and kerchiefed with dainty cleanliness, up right, quick-eyed, and still under seventy; Miss Noble, her sister, a tiny old lady of meeker aspect, with frills and kerchief decidedly more worn and mended; and Miss Winifred Farebrother, the Vicar's elder sister, well-looking like himself, but nipped and subdued as single women are apt to be who spend their lives in uninterrupted subjection to their elders. Lydgate had not expected to see so quaint a group: knowing simply that Mr Farebrother was a bachelor, he had thought of being ushered into a snuggerly where the chief furniture would probably be books and collections of natural objects. The Vicar himself seemed to wear rather a changed aspect, as most men do when acquaintances made elsewhere see them for the first time in their own homes; some indeed showing like an actor of genial parts disadvantageously cast for the curmudgeon in a new piece. This was not the case with Mr Farebrother: he seemed a trifle milder and more silent, the chief talker being his mother, while he only put in a good-humored moderating remark here and there. The old lady was evidently accustomed to tell her company what they ought to think, and to regard no subject as quite safe without her steering. She was afforded leisure for this function by having all her little wants attended to by Miss Winifred. Meanwhile tiny Miss Noble carried on her arm a small basket, into which she diverted a bit of sugar, which she had first dropped in her saucer as if by mistake; looking round furtively afterwards, and reverting to her teacup with a small innocent noise as of a tiny timid quadruped. Pray think no ill of Miss Noble. That basket held small savings from her more portable food, destined for the children of her poor friends among whom she trotted on fine mornings; fostering and petting all needy creatures being so spontaneous a delight to her, that she regarded it much as if it had been a pleasant vice that she was

addicted to. Perhaps she was conscious of being tempted to steal from those who had much that she might give to those who had nothing, and carried in her conscience the guilt of that repressed desire. One must be poor to know the luxury of giving!

Mrs Farebrother welcomed the guest with a lively formality and precision. She presently informed him that they were not often in want of medical aid in that house. She had brought up her children to wear flannel and not to over-eat themselves, which last habit she considered the chief reason why people needed doctors. Lydgate pleaded for those whose fathers and mothers had over-eaten themselves, but Mrs Farebrother held that view of things dangerous: Nature was more just than that; it would be easy for any felon to say that his ancestors ought to have been hanged instead of him. If those he had bad fathers and mothers were bad themselves, they were hanged for that. There was no need to go back on what you couldn't see.

'My mother is like old George the Third,' said the Vicar, 'she objects to metaphysics.'

'I object to what is wrong, Camden. I say, keep hold of a few plain truths, and make everything square with them. When I was young, Mr Lydgate, there never was any question about right and wrong. We knew our catechism, and that was enough; we learned our creed and our duty. Every respectable Church person had the same opinions. But now, if you speak out of the Prayer-book itself, you are liable to be contradicted.'

'That makes rather a pleasant time of it for those who like to maintain their own point,' said Lydgate.

'But my mother always gives way,' said the Vicar, slyly.

'No, no, Camden, you must not lead Mr Lydgate into a mistake about *me*. I shall never show that disrespect to my parents, to give up what they taught me. Any one may see what comes of turning. If you change once, why not twenty times?'

'A man might see good arguments for changing once, and not see them for changing again,' said Lydgate, amused with the decisive old lady.

'Excuse me there. If you go upon arguments, they are never wanting, when a man has no constancy of mind. My father never changed, and he preached plain moral sermons without arguments, and was a good man - few better. When you get me a good man made out of arguments, I will get you a good dinner with reading you the cookery-

book. That's my opinion, and I think anybody's stomach will bear me out.'

'About the dinner certainly, mother,' said Mr Farebrother.

'It is the same thing, the dinner or the man. I am nearly seventy, Mr Lydgate, and I go upon experience. I am not likely to follow new lights, though there are plenty of them here as elsewhere. I say, they came in with the mixed stuffs that will neither wash nor wear. It was not so in my youth: a Churchman was a Churchman, and a clergyman, you might be pretty sure, was a gentleman, if nothing else. But now he may be no better than a Dissenter, and want to push aside my son on pretence of doctrine. But whoever may wish to push him aside, I am proud to say, Mr Lydgate, that he will compare with any preacher in this kingdom, not to speak of this town, which is but a low standard to go by; at least, to my thinking, for I was born and bred at Exeter.'

'A mother is never partial,' said Mr Farebrother, smiling. 'What do you think Tyke's mother says about him?'

'Ah, poor creature! what indeed?' said Mrs Farebrother, her sharpness blunted for the moment by her confidence in maternal judgments. 'She says the truth to herself, depend upon it.'

'And what is the truth?' said Lydgate. 'I am curious to know.'

'Oh, nothing bad at all,' said Mr Farebrother. 'He is a zealous fellow: not very learned, and not very wise, I think - because I don't agree with him.'

'Why, Camden!' said Miss Winifred, 'Griffin and his wife told me only to-day, that Mr Tyke said they should have no more coals if they came to hear you preach.'

Mrs Farebrother laid down her knitting, which she had resumed after her small allowance of tea and toast, and looked at her son as if to say 'You hear that?' Miss Noble said, 'Oh poor things! poor things!' in reference, probably, to the double loss of preaching and coal. But the Vicar answered quietly -

'That is because they are not my parishioners. And I don't think my sermons are worth a load of coals to them.'

'Mr Lydgate,' said Mrs Farebrother, who could not let this pass, 'you don't know my son: he always undervalues himself. I tell him he is undervaluing the God who made him, and made him a most excellent preacher.'

'That must be a hint for me to take Mr Lydgate away to my study, mother,' said the Vicar, laughing. 'I promised to show you my collection,' he added, turning to Lydgate; 'shall we go?'

All three ladies remonstrated. Mr Lydgate ought not to be hurried away without being allowed to accept another cup of tea: Miss Winifred had abundance of good tea in the pot. Why was Camden in such haste to take a visitor to his den? There was nothing but pickled vermin, and drawers full of blue-bottles and moths, with no carpet on the floor. Mr Lydgate must excuse it. A game at cribbage would be far better. In short, it was plain that a vicar might be adored by his womankind as the king of men and preachers, and yet be held by them to stand in much need of their direction. Lydgate, with the usual shallowness of a young bachelor, wondered that Mr Farebrother had not taught them better.

'My mother is not used to my having visitors who can take any interest in my hobbies,' said the Vicar, as he opened the door of his study, which was indeed as bare of luxuries for the body as the ladies had implied, unless a short porcelain pipe and a tobacco-box were to be excepted.

'Men of your profession don't generally smoke,' he said. Lydgate smiled and shook his head. 'Nor of mine either, properly, I suppose. You will hear that pipe alleged against me by Bulstrode and Company. They don't know how pleased the devil would be if I gave it up.'

'I understand. You are of an excitable temper and want a sedative. I am heavier, and should get idle with it. I should rush into idleness, and stagnate there with all my might.'

'And you mean to give it all to your work. I am some ten or twelve years older than you, and have come to a compromise. I feed a weakness or two lest they should get clamorous. See,' continued the Vicar, opening several small drawers, 'I fancy I have made an exhaustive study of the entomology of this district. I am going on both with the fauna and flora; but I have at least done my insects well. We are singularly rich in orthoptera: I don't know whether - Ah! you have got hold of that glass jar - you are looking into that instead of my drawers. You don't really care about these things?'

'Not by the side of this lovely anencephalous monster. I have never had time to give myself much to natural history. I was early bitten with an interest in structure, and it is what lies most directly in my profession. I have no hobby besides. I have the sea to swim in there.'

'Ah! you are a happy fellow,' said Mr Farebrother, turning on his heel and beginning to fill his pipe. 'You don't know what it is to want

spiritual tobacco - bad emendations of old texts, or small items about a variety of *Aphis Brassicae*, with the well-known signature of Philomicron, for the 'Twaddler's Magazine;' or a learned treatise on the entomology of the Pentateuch, including all the insects not mentioned, but probably met with by the Israelites in their passage through the desert; with a monograph on the Ant, as treated by Solomon, showing the harmony of the Book of Proverbs with the results of modern research. You don't mind my fumigating you?'

Lydgate was more surprised at the openness of this talk than at its implied meaning - that the Vicar felt himself not altogether in the right vocation. The neat fitting-up of drawers and shelves, and the bookcase filled with expensive illustrated books on Natural History, made him think again of the winnings at cards and their destination. But he was beginning to wish that the very best construction of everything that Mr Farebrother did should be the true one. The Vicar's frankness seemed not of the repulsive sort that comes from an uneasy consciousness seeking to forestall the judgment of others, but simply the relief of a desire to do with as little pretence as possible. Apparently he was not without a sense that his freedom of speech might seem premature, for he presently said -

'I have not yet told you that I have the advantage of you, Mr Lydgate, and know you better than you know me. You remember Trawley who shared your apartment at Paris for some time? I was a correspondent of his, and he told me a good deal about you. I was not quite sure when you first came that you were the same man. I was very glad when I found that you were. Only I don't forget that you have not had the like prologue about me.'

Lydgate divined some delicacy of feeling here, but did not half understand it. 'By the way,' he said, 'what has become of Trawley? I have quite lost sight of him. He was hot on the French social systems, and talked of going to the Backwoods to found a sort of Pythagorean community. Is he gone?'

'Not at all. He is practising at a German bath, and has married a rich patient.'

'Then my notions wear the best, so far,' said Lydgate, with a short scornful laugh. 'He would have it, the medical profession was an inevitable system of humbug. I said, the fault was in the men - men who truckle to lies and folly. Instead of preaching against humbug outside the walls, it might be better to set up a disinfecting apparatus within. In short - I am reporting my own conversation - you may be sure I had all the good sense on my side.'

'Your scheme is a good deal more difficult to carry out than the Pythagorean community, though. You have not only got the old Adam in yourself against you, but you have got all those descendants of the original Adam who form the society around you. You see, I have paid twelve or thirteen years more than you for my knowledge of difficulties. But' - Mr Farebrother broke off a moment, and then added, 'you are eying that glass vase again. Do you want to make an exchange? You shall not have it without a fair barter.'

'I have some sea-mice - fine specimens - in spirits. And I will throw in Robert Brown's new thing - 'Microscopic Observations on the Pollen of Plants' - if you don't happen to have it already.'

'Why, seeing how you long for the monster, I might ask a higher price. Suppose I ask you to look through my drawers and agree with me about all my new species?' The Vicar, while he talked in this way, alternately moved about with his pipe in his mouth, and returned to hang rather fondly over his drawers. 'That would be good discipline, you know, for a young doctor who has to please his patients in Middlemarch. You must learn to be bored, remember. However, you shall have the monster on your own terms.'

'Don't you think men overrate the necessity for humoring everybody's nonsense, till they get despised by the very fools they humor?' said Lydgate, moving to Mr Farebrother's side, and looking rather absently at the insects ranged in fine gradation, with names subscribed in exquisite writing. 'The shortest way is to make your value felt, so that people must put up with you whether you flatter them or not.'

'With all my heart. But then you must be sure of having the value, and you must keep yourself independent. Very few men can do that. Either you slip out of service altogether, and become good for nothing, or you wear the harness and draw a good deal where your yoke-fellows pull you. But do look at these delicate orthoptera!'

Lydgate had after all to give some scrutiny to each drawer, the Vicar laughing at himself, and yet persisting in the exhibition.

'Apropos of what you said about wearing harness,' Lydgate began, after they had sat down, 'I made up my mind some time ago to do with as little of it as possible. That was why I determined not to try anything in London, for a good many years at least. I didn't like what I saw when I was studying there - so much empty bigwiggism, and obstructive trickery. In the country, people have less pretension to knowledge, and are less of companions, but for that reason they affect one's amour-propre less: one makes less bad blood, and can follow one's own course more quietly.'

'Yes - well - you have got a good start; you are in the right profession, the work you feel yourself most fit for. Some people miss that, and repent too late. But you must not be too sure of keeping your independence.'

'You mean of family ties?' said Lydgate, conceiving that these might press rather tightly on Mr Farebrother.

'Not altogether. Of course they make many things more difficult. But a good wife - a good unworldly woman - may really help a man, and keep him more independent. There's a parishioner of mine - a fine fellow, but who would hardly have pulled through as he has done without his wife. Do you know the Garths? I think they were not Peacock's patients.'

'No; but there is a Miss Garth at old Featherstone's, at Lowick.'

'Their daughter: an excellent girl.'

'She is very quiet - I have hardly noticed her.'

'She has taken notice of you, though, depend upon it.'

'I don't understand,' said Lydgate; he could hardly say 'Of course.'

'Oh, she gauges everybody. I prepared her for confirmation - she is a favorite of mine.'

Mr Farebrother puffed a few moments in silence, Lydgate not caring to know more about the Garths. At last the Vicar laid down his pipe, stretched out his legs, and turned his bright eyes with a smile towards Lydgate, saying -

'But we Middlemarchers are not so tame as you take us to be. We have our intrigues and our parties. I am a party man, for example, and Bulstrode is another. If you vote for me you will offend Bulstrode.'

'What is there against Bulstrode?' said Lydgate, emphatically.

'I did not say there was anything against him except that. If you vote against him you will make him your enemy.'

'I don't know that I need mind about that,' said Lydgate, rather proudly; 'but he seems to have good ideas about hospitals, and he spends large sums on useful public objects. He might help me a good deal in carrying out my ideas. As to his religious notions - why, as Voltaire said, incantations will destroy a flock of sheep if administered

with a certain quantity of arsenic. I look for the man who will bring the arsenic, and don't mind about his incantations.'

'Very good. But then you must not offend your arsenic-man. You will not offend me, you know,' said Mr Farebrother, quite unaffectedly. 'I don't translate my own convenience into other people's duties. I am opposed to Bulstrode in many ways. I don't like the set he belongs to: they are a narrow ignorant set, and do more to make their neighbors uncomfortable than to make them better. Their system is a sort of worldly-spiritual cliquism: they really look on the rest of mankind as a doomed carcass which is to nourish them for heaven. But,' he added, smilingly, 'I don't say that Bulstrode's new hospital is a bad thing; and as to his wanting to oust me from the old one - why, if he thinks me a mischievous fellow, he is only returning a compliment. And I am not a model clergyman - only a decent makeshift.'

Lydgate was not at all sure that the Vicar maligned himself. A model clergyman, like a model doctor, ought to think his own profession the finest in the world, and take all knowledge as mere nourishment to his moral pathology and therapeutics. He only said, 'What reason does Bulstrode give for superseding you?'

'That I don't teach his opinions - which he calls spiritual religion; and that I have no time to spare. Both statements are true. But then I could make time, and I should be glad of the forty pounds. That is the plain fact of the case. But let us dismiss it. I only wanted to tell you that if you vote for your arsenic-man, you are not to cut me in consequence. I can't spare you. You are a sort of circumnavigator come to settle among us, and will keep up my belief in the antipodes. Now tell me all about them in Paris.'