Chapter XXI

'Hire facounde eke full womanly and plain, No contrefeted termes had she To semen wise.' - CHAUCER.

It was in that way Dorothea came to be sobbing as soon as she was securely alone. But she was presently roused by a knock at the door, which made her hastily dry her eyes before saying, 'Come in.' Tantripp had brought a card, and said that there was a gentleman waiting in the lobby. The courier had told him that only Mrs Casaubon was at home, but he said he was a relation of Mr Casaubon's: would she see him?

'Yes,' said Dorothea, without pause; 'show him into the salon.' Her chief impressions about young Ladislaw were that when she had seen him at Lowick she had been made aware of Mr Casaubon's generosity towards him, and also that she had been interested in his own hesitation about his career. She was alive to anything that gave her an opportunity for active sympathy, and at this moment it seemed as if the visit had come to shake her out of her self-absorbed discontent - to remind her of her husband's goodness, and make her feel that she had now the right to be his helpmate in all kind deeds. She waited a minute or two, but when she passed into the next room there were just signs enough that she had been crying to make her open face look more youthful and appealing than usual. She met Ladislaw with that exquisite smile of good-will which is unmixed with vanity, and held out her hand to him. He was the elder by several years, but at that moment he looked much the younger, for his transparent complexion flushed suddenly, and he spoke with a shyness extremely unlike the ready indifference of his manner with his male companion, while Dorothea became all the calmer with a wondering desire to put him at ease.

'I was not aware that you and Mr Casaubon were in Rome, until this morning, when I saw you in the Vatican Museum,' he said. 'I knew you at once - but - I mean, that I concluded Mr Casaubon's address would be found at the Poste Restante, and I was anxious to pay my respects to him and you as early as possible.'

'Pray sit down. He is not here now, but he will be glad to hear of you, I am sure,' said Dorothea, seating herself unthinkingly between the fire and the light of the tall window, and pointing to a chair opposite, with the quietude of a benignant matron. The signs of girlish sorrow in her face were only the more striking. 'Mr Casaubon is much engaged; but you will leave your address - will you not? - and he will write to you.'

'You are very good,' said Ladislaw, beginning to lose his diffidence in the interest with which he was observing the signs of weeping which

had altered her face. ‘My address is on my card. But if you will allow me I will call again to-morrow at an hour when Mr Casaubon is likely to be at home.’

‘He goes to read in the Library of the Vatican every day, and you can hardly see him except by an appointment. Especially now. We are about to leave Rome, and he is very busy. He is usually away almost from breakfast till dinner. But I am sure he will wish you to dine with us.’

Will Ladislaw was struck mute for a few moments. He had never been fond of Mr Casaubon, and if it had not been for the sense of obligation, would have laughed at him as a Bat of erudition. But the idea of this dried-up pedant, this elaborator of small explanations about as important as the surplus stock of false antiquities kept in a vendor's back chamber, having first got this adorable young creature to marry him, and then passing his honeymoon away from her, groping after his mouldy futilities (Will was given to hyperbole) - this sudden picture stirred him with a sort of comic disgust: he was divided between the impulse to laugh aloud and the equally unseasonable impulse to burst into scornful invective.

For an instant he felt that the struggle, was causing a queer contortion of his mobile features, but with a good effort he resolved it into nothing more offensive than a merry smile.

Dorothea wondered; but the smile was irresistible, and shone back from her face too. Will Ladislaw's smile was delightful, unless you were angry with him beforehand: it was a gush of inward light illuminating the transparent skin as well as the eyes, and playing about every curve and line as if some Ariel were touching them with a new charm, and banishing forever the traces of moodiness. The reflection of that smile could not but have a little merriment in it too, even under dark eyelashes still moist, as Dorothea said inquiringly, ‘Something amuses you?’

‘Yes,’ said Will, quick in finding resources. ‘I am thinking of the sort of figure I cut the first time I saw you, when you annihilated my poor sketch with your criticism.’

‘My criticism?’ said Dorothea, wondering still more. ‘Surely not. I always feel particularly ignorant about painting.’

‘I suspected you of knowing so much, that you knew how to say just what was most cutting. You said - I dare say you don't remember it as I do - that the relation of my sketch to nature was quite hidden from you. At least, you implied that.’ Will could laugh now as well as smile.

‘That was really my ignorance,’ said Dorothea, admiring

Will's good-humor. ‘I must have said so only because I never could see any beauty in the pictures which my uncle told me all judges thought very fine. And I have gone about with just the same ignorance in Rome. There are comparatively few paintings that I can really enjoy. At first when I enter a room where the walls are covered with frescos, or with rare pictures, I feel a kind of awe - like a child present at great ceremonies where there are grand robes and processions; I feel myself in the presence of some higher life than my own. But when I begin to examine the pictures one by on the life goes out of them, or else is something violent and strange to me. It must be my own dulness. I am seeing so much all at once, and not understanding half of it. That always makes one feel stupid. It is painful to be told that anything is very fine and not be able to feel that it is fine - something like being blind, while people talk of the sky.’

‘Oh, there is a great deal in the feeling for art which must be acquired,’ said Will. (It was impossible now to doubt the directness of Dorothea's confession.) ‘Art is an old language with a great many artificial affected styles, and sometimes the chief pleasure one gets out of knowing them is the mere sense of knowing. I enjoy the art of all sorts here immensely; but I suppose if I could pick my enjoyment to pieces I should find it made up of many different threads. There is something in daubing a little one's self, and having an idea of the process.’

‘You mean perhaps to be a painter?’ said Dorothea, with a new direction of interest. ‘You mean to make painting your profession? Mr Casaubon will like to hear that you have chosen a profession.’

‘No, oh no,’ said Will, with some coldness. ‘I have quite made up my mind against it. It is too one-sided a life. I have been seeing a great deal of the German artists here: I travelled from Frankfort with one of them. Some are fine, even brilliant fellows - but I should not like to get into their way of looking at the world entirely from the studio point of view.’

‘That I can understand,’ said Dorothea, cordially. ‘And in Rome it seems as if there were so many things which are more wanted in the world than pictures. But if you have a genius for painting, would it not be right to take that as a guide? Perhaps you might do better things than these - or different, so that there might not be so many pictures almost all alike in the same place.’

There was no mistaking this simplicity, and Will was won by it into frankness. ‘A man must have a very rare genius to make changes of that sort. I am afraid mine would not carry me even to the pitch of

doing well what has been done already, at least not so well as to make it worth while. And I should never succeed in anything by dint of drudgery. If things don't come easily to me I never get them.'

'I have heard Mr Casaubon say that he regrets your want of patience,' said Dorothea, gently. She was rather shocked at this mode of taking all life as a holiday.

'Yes, I know Mr Casaubon's opinion. He and I differ.'

The slight streak of contempt in this hasty reply offended Dorothea. She was all the more susceptible about Mr Casaubon because of her morning's trouble.

'Certainly you differ,' she said, rather proudly. 'I did not think of comparing you: such power of persevering devoted labor as Mr Casaubon's is not common.'

Will saw that she was offended, but this only gave an additional impulse to the new irritation of his latent dislike towards Mr Casaubon. It was too intolerable that Dorothea should be worshipping this husband: such weakness in a woman is pleasant to no man but the husband in question. Mortals are easily tempted to pinch the life out of their neighbor's buzzing glory, and think that such killing is no murder.

'No, indeed,' he answered, promptly. 'And therefore it is a pity that it should be thrown away, as so much English scholarship is, for want of knowing what is being done by the rest of the world. If Mr Casaubon read German he would save himself a great deal of trouble.'

'I do not understand you,' said Dorothea, startled and anxious.

'I merely mean,' said Will, in an offhand way, 'that the Germans have taken the lead in historical inquiries, and they laugh at results which are got by groping about in woods with a pocket-compass while they have made good roads. When I was with Mr Casaubon I saw that he deafened himself in that direction: it was almost against his will that he read a Latin treatise written by a German. I was very sorry.'

Will only thought of giving a good pinch that would annihilate that vaunted laboriousness, and was unable to imagine the mode in which Dorothea would be wounded. Young Mr Ladislaw was not at all deep himself in German writers; but very little achievement is required in order to pity another man's shortcomings.

Poor Dorothea felt a pang at the thought that the labor of her husband's life might be void, which left her no energy to spare for the

question whether this young relative who was so much obliged to him ought not to have repressed his observation. She did not even speak, but sat looking at her hands, absorbed in the piteousness of that thought.

Will, however, having given that annihilating pinch, was rather ashamed, imagining from Dorothea's silence that he had offended her still more; and having also a conscience about plucking the tail-feathers from a benefactor.

'I regretted it especially,' he resumed, taking the usual course from detraction to insincere eulogy, 'because of my gratitude and respect towards my cousin. It would not signify so much in a man whose talents and character were less distinguished.'

Dorothea raised her eyes, brighter than usual with excited feeling, and said in her saddest recitative, 'How I wish I had learned German when I was at Lausanne! There were plenty of German teachers. But now I can be of no use.'

There was a new light, but still a mysterious light, for Will in Dorothea's last words. The question how she had come to accept Mr Casaubon - which he had dismissed when he first saw her by saying that she must be disagreeable in spite of appearances - was not now to be answered on any such short and easy method. Whatever else she might be, she was not disagreeable. She was not coldly clever and indirectly satirical, but adorably simple and full of feeling. She was an angel beguiled. It would be a unique delight to wait and watch for the melodious fragments in which her heart and soul came forth so directly and ingenuously. The AEolian harp again came into his mind.

She must have made some original romance for herself in this marriage. And if Mr Casaubon had been a dragon who had carried her off to his lair with his talons simply and without legal forms, it would have been an unavoidable feat of heroism to release her and fall at her feet. But he was something more unmanageable than a dragon: he was a benefactor with collective society at his back, and he was at that moment entering the room in all the unimpeachable correctness of his demeanor, while Dorothea was looking animated with a newly roused alarm and regret, and Will was looking animated with his admiring speculation about her feelings.

Mr Casaubon felt a surprise which was quite unmixed with pleasure, but he did not swerve from his usual politeness of greeting, when Will rose and explained his presence. Mr Casaubon was less happy than usual, and this perhaps made him look all the dimmer and more faded; else, the effect might easily have been produced by the contrast of his young cousin's appearance. The first impression on seeing Will

was one of sunny brightness, which added to the uncertainty of his changing expression. Surely, his very features changed their form, his jaw looked sometimes large and sometimes small; and the little ripple in his nose was a preparation for metamorphosis. When he turned his head quickly his hair seemed to shake out light, and some persons thought they saw decided genius in this coruscation. Mr Casaubon, on the contrary, stood rayless.

As Dorothea's eyes were turned anxiously on her husband she was perhaps not insensible to the contrast, but it was only mingled with other causes in making her more conscious of that new alarm on his behalf which was the first stirring of a pitying tenderness fed by the realities of his lot and not by her own dreams. Yet it was a source of greater freedom to her that Will was there; his young equality was agreeable, and also perhaps his openness to conviction. She felt an immense need of some one to speak to, and she had never before seen any one who seemed so quick and pliable, so likely to understand everything.

Mr Casaubon gravely hoped that Will was passing his time profitably as well as pleasantly in Rome - had thought his intention was to remain in South Germany - but begged him to come and dine to-morrow, when he could converse more at large: at present he was somewhat weary. Ladislaw understood, and accepting the invitation immediately took his leave.

Dorothea's eyes followed her husband anxiously, while he sank down wearily at the end of a sofa, and resting his elbow supported his head and looked on the floor. A little flushed, and with bright eyes, she seated herself beside him, and said -

'Forgive me for speaking so hastily to you this morning. I was wrong. I fear I hurt you and made the day more burdensome.'

'I am glad that you feel that, my dear,' said Mr Casaubon. He spoke quietly and bowed his head a little, but there was still an uneasy feeling in his eyes as he looked at her.

'But you do forgive me?' said Dorothea, with a quick sob. In her need for some manifestation of feeling she was ready to exaggerate her own fault. Would not love see returning penitence afar off, and fall on its neck and kiss it?

'My dear Dorothea - `who with repentance is not satisfied, is not of heaven nor earth:' - you do not think me worthy to be banished by that severe sentence,' said Mr Casaubon, exerting himself to make a strong statement, and also to smile faintly.

Dorothea was silent, but a tear which had come up with the sob would insist on falling.

'You are excited, my dear.. And I also am feeling some unpleasant consequences of too much mental disturbance,' said Mr Casaubon. In fact, he had it in his thought to tell her that she ought not to have received young Ladislaw in his absence: but he abstained, partly from the sense that it would be ungracious to bring a new complaint in the moment of her penitent acknowledgment, partly because he wanted to avoid further agitation of himself by speech, and partly because he was too proud to betray that jealousy of disposition which was not so exhausted on his scholarly compeers that there was none to spare in other directions. There is a sort of jealousy which needs very little fire: it is hardly a passion, but a blight bred in the cloudy, damp despondency of uneasy egoism.

'I think it is time for us to dress,' he added, looking at his watch. They both rose, and there was never any further allusion between them to what had passed on this day.

But Dorothea remembered it to the last with the vividness with which we all remember epochs in our experience when some dear expectation dies, or some new motive is born. Today she had begun to see that she had been under a wild illusion in expecting a response to her feeling from Mr Casaubon, and she had felt the waking of a presentiment that there might be a sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as on her own.

We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling - an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects - that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.