Chapter XXIV

'The offender's sorrow brings but small relief To him who wears the strong offence's cross.' - SHAKESPEARE: Sonnets.

I am sorry to say that only the third day after the propitious events at Houndsley Fred Vincy had fallen into worse spirits than he had known in his life before. Not that he had been disappointed as to the possible market for his horse, but that before the bargain could be concluded with Lord Medlicote's man, this Diamond, in which hope to the amount of eighty pounds had been invested, had without the slightest warning exhibited in the stable a most vicious energy in kicking, had just missed killing the groom, and had ended in laming himself severely by catching his leg in a rope that overhung the stable-board. There was no more redress for this than for the discovery of bad temper after marriage - which of course old companions were aware of before the ceremony. For some reason or other, Fred had none of his usual elasticity under this stroke of ill-fortune: he was simply aware that he had only fifty pounds, that there was no chance of his getting any more at present, and that the bill for a hundred and sixty would be presented in five days. Even if he had applied to his father on the plea that Mr Garth should be saved from loss, Fred felt smartingly that his father would angrily refuse to rescue Mr Garth from the consequence of what he would call encouraging extravagance and deceit. He was so utterly downcast that he could frame no other project than to go straight to Mr Garth and tell him the sad truth, carrying with him the fifty pounds, and getting that sum at least safely out of his own hands. His father, being at the warehouse, did not yet know of the accident: when he did, he would storm about the vicious brute being brought into his stable; and before meeting that lesser annoyance Fred wanted to get away with all his courage to face the greater. He took his father's nag, for he had made up his mind that when he had told Mr Garth, he would ride to Stone Court and confess all to Mary. In fact, it is probable that but for Mary's existence and Fred's love for her, his conscience would have been much less active both in previously urging the debt on his thought and impelling him not to spare himself after his usual fashion by deferring an unpleasant task, but to act as directly and simply as he could. Even much stronger mortals than Fred Vincy hold half their rectitude in the mind of the being they love best. 'The theatre of all my actions is fallen,' said an antique personage when his chief friend was dead; and they are fortunate who get a theatre where the audience demands their best. Certainly it would have made a considerable difference to Fred at that time if Mary Garth had had no decided notions as to what was admirable in character.

Mr Garth was not at the office, and Fred rode on to his house, which was a little way outside the town - a homely place with an orchard in

front of it, a rambling, old-fashioned, half-timbered building, which before the town had spread had been a farm-house, but was now surrounded with the private gardens of the townsmen. We get the fonder of our houses if they have a physiognomy of their own, as our friends have. The Garth family, which was rather a large one, for Mary had four brothers and one sister, were very fond of their old house, from which all the best furniture had long been sold. Fred liked it too, knowing it by heart even to the attic which smelt deliciously of apples and quinces, and until to-day he had never come to it without pleasant expectations; but his heart beat uneasily now with the sense that he should probably have to make his confession before Mrs Garth, of whom he was rather more in awe than of her husband. Not that she was inclined to sarcasm and to impulsive sallies, as Mary was. In her present matronly age at least, Mrs Garth never committed herself by over-hasty speech; having, as she said, borne the yoke in her youth, and learned self-control. She had that rare sense which discerns what is unalterable, and submits to it without murmuring. Adoring her husband's virtues, she had very early made up her mind to his incapacity of minding his own interests, and had met the consequences cheerfully. She had been magnanimous enough to renounce all pride in teapots or children's frilling, and had never poured any pathetic confidences into the ears of her feminine neighbors concerning Mr Garth's want of prudence and the sums he might have had if he had been like other men. Hence these fair neighbors thought her either proud or eccentric, and sometimes spoke of her to their husbands as 'your fine Mrs Garth.' She was not without her criticism of them in return, being more accurately instructed than most matrons in Middlemarch, and - where is the blameless woman? - apt to be a little severe towards her own sex, which in her opinion was framed to be entirely subordinate. On the other hand, she was disproportionately indulgent towards the failings of men, and was often heard to say that these were natural. Also, it must be admitted that Mrs Garth was a trifle too emphatic in her resistance to what she held to be follies: the passage from governess into housewife had wrought itself a little too strongly into her consciousness, and she rarely forgot that while her grammar and accent were above the town standard, she wore a plain cap, cooked the family dinner, and darned all the stockings. She had sometimes taken pupils in a peripatetic fashion, making them follow her about in the kitchen with their book or slate. She thought it good for them to see that she could make an excellent lather while she corrected their blunders 'without looking,' - that a woman with her sleeves tucked up above her elbows might know all about the Subjunctive Mood or the Torrid Zone - that, in short, she might possess 'education' and other good things ending in 'tion,' and worthy to be pronounced emphatically, without being a useless doll. When she made remarks to this edifying effect, she had a firm little frown on her brow, which yet did not hinder her face from looking benevolent, and her words which came forth like a procession

were uttered in a fervid agreeable contralto. Certainly, the exemplary Mrs Garth had her droll aspects, but her character sustained her oddities, as a very fine wine sustains a flavor of skin.

Towards Fred Vincy she had a motherly feeling, and had always been disposed to excuse his errors, though she would probably not have excused Mary for engaging herself to him, her daughter being included in that more rigorous judgment which she applied to her own sex. But this very fact of her exceptional indulgence towards him made it the harder to Fred that he must now inevitably sink in her opinion. And the circumstances of his visit turned out to be still more unpleasant than he had expected; for Caleb Garth had gone out early to look at some repairs not far off. Mrs Garth at certain hours was always in the kitchen, and this morning she was carrying on several occupations at once there - making her pies at the well-scoured deal table on one side of that airy room, observing Sally's movements at the oven and dough-tub through an open door, and giving lessons to her youngest boy and girl, who were standing opposite to her at the table with their books and slates before them. A tub and a clothes-horse at the other end of the kitchen indicated an intermittent wash of small things also going on.

Mrs Garth, with her sleeves turned above her elbows, deftly handling her pastry - applying her rolling-pin and giving ornamental pinches, while she expounded with grammatical fervor what were the right views about the concord of verbs and pronouns with ‘nouns of multitude or signifying many,’ was a sight agreeably amusing. She was of the same curly-haired, square-faced type as Mary, but handsomer, with more delicacy of feature, a pale skin, a solid matronly figure, and a remarkable firmness of glance. In her snowy-frilled cap she reminded one of that delightful Frenchwoman whom we have all seen marketing, basket on arm. Looking at the mother, you might hope that the daughter would become like her, which is a prospective advantage equal to a dowry - the mother too often standing behind the daughter like a malignant prophecy - ‘Such as I am, she will shortly be.’

‘Now let us go through that once more,’ said Mrs Garth, pinching an apple-puff which seemed to distract Ben, an energetic young male with a heavy brow, from due attention to the lesson. ‘`Not without regard to the import of the word as conveying unity or plurality of idea' - tell me again what that means, Ben.’

(Mrs Garth, like more celebrated educators, had her favorite ancient paths, and in a general wreck of society would have tried to hold her ‘Lindley Murray’ above the waves.)

‘Oh - it means - you must think what you mean,’ said Ben, rather peevishly. ‘I hate grammar. What's the use of it?’

‘To teach you to speak and write correctly, so that you can be understood,’ said Mrs Garth, with severe precision. ‘Should you like to speak as old Job does?’

‘Yes,’ said Ben, stoutly; ‘it's funnier. He says, `Yo goo' - that's just as good as `You go.''

‘But he says, `A ship's in the garden,' instead of `a sheep,'‘ said Letty, with an air of superiority. ‘You might think he meant a ship off the sea.’

‘No, you mightn't, if you weren't silly,’ said Ben. ‘How could a ship off the sea come there?’

‘These things belong only to pronunciation, which is the least part of grammar,’ said Mrs Garth. ‘That apple-peel is to be eaten by the pigs, Ben; if you eat it, I must give them your piece of pasty. Job has only to speak about very plain things. How do you think you would write or speak about anything more difficult, if you knew no more of grammar than he does? You would use wrong words, and put words in the wrong places, and instead of making people understand you, they would turn away from you as a tiresome person. What would you do then?’

‘I shouldn't care, I should leave off,’ said Ben, with a sense that this was an agreeable issue where grammar was concerned.

‘I see you are getting tired and stupid, Ben,’ said Mrs Garth, accustomed to these obstructive arguments from her male offspring. Having finished her pies, she moved towards the clothes-horse, and said, ‘Come here and tell me the story I told you on Wednesday, about Cincinnatus.’

‘I know! he was a farmer,’ said Ben.

‘Now, Ben, he was a Roman - let *me* tell,’ said Letty, using her elbow contentiously.

‘You silly thing, he was a Roman farmer, and he was ploughing.’

‘Yes, but before that - that didn't come first - people wanted him,’ said Letty.

‘Well, but you must say what sort of a man he was first,’ insisted Ben. ‘He was a wise man, like my father, and that made the people want

his advice. And he was a brave man, and could fight. And so could my father - couldn't he, mother?'

'Now, Ben, let me tell the story straight on, as mother told it us,' said Letty, frowning. 'Please, mother, tell Ben not to speak.'

'Letty, I am ashamed of you,' said her mother, wringing out the caps from the tub. 'When your brother began, you ought to have waited to see if he could not tell the story. How rude you look, pushing and frowning, as if you wanted to conquer with your elbows! Cincinnatus, I am sure, would have been sorry to see his daughter behave so.' (Mrs Garth delivered this awful sentence with much majesty of enunciation, and Letty felt that between repressed volubility and general disesteem, that of the Romans inclusive, life was already a painful affair.) 'Now, Ben.'

'Well - oh - well - why, there was a great deal of fighting, and they were all blockheads, and - I can't tell it just how you told it - but they wanted a man to be captain and king and everything - '

'Dictator, now,' said Letty, with injured looks, and not without a wish to make her mother repent.

'Very well, dictator!' said Ben, contemptuously. 'But that isn't a good word: he didn't tell them to write on slates.'

'Come, come, Ben, you are not so ignorant as that,' said Mrs Garth, carefully serious. 'Hark, there is a knock at the door! Run, Letty, and open it.'

The knock was Fred's; and when Letty said that her father was not in yet, but that her mother was in the kitchen, Fred had no alternative. He could not depart from his usual practice of going to see Mrs Garth in the kitchen if she happened to be at work there. He put his arm round Letty's neck silently, and led her into the kitchen without his usual jokes and caresses.

Mrs Garth was surprised to see Fred at this hour, but surprise was not a feeling that she was given to express, and she only said, quietly continuing her work -

'You, Fred, so early in the day? You look quite pale. Has anything happened?'

'I want to speak to Mr Garth,' said Fred, not yet ready to say more - 'and to you also,' he added, after a little pause, for he had no doubt that Mrs Garth knew everything about the bill, and he must in the end speak of it before her, if not to her solely.

‘Caleb will be in again in a few minutes,’ said Mrs Garth, who imagined some trouble between Fred and his father. ‘He is sure not to be long, because he has some work at his desk that must be done this morning. Do you mind staying with me, while I finish my matters here?’

‘But we needn't go on about Cincinnatus, need we?’ said Ben, who had taken Fred's whip out of his hand, and was trying its efficiency on the cat.

‘No, go out now. But put that whip down. How very mean of you to whip poor old Tortoise! Pray take the whip from him, Fred.’

‘Come, old boy, give it me,’ said Fred, putting out his hand.

‘Will you let me ride on your horse to-day?’ said Ben, rendering up the whip, with an air of not being obliged to do it.

‘Not to-day - another time. I am not riding my own horse.’

‘Shall you see Mary to-day?’

‘Yes, I think so,’ said Fred, with an unpleasant twinge.

‘Tell her to come home soon, and play at forfeits, and make fun.’

‘Enough, enough, Ben! run away,’ said Mrs Garth, seeing that Fred was teased. . .

‘Are Letty and Ben your only pupils now, Mrs Garth?’ said Fred, when the children were gone and it was needful to say something that would pass the time. He was not yet sure whether he should wait for Mr Garth, or use any good opportunity in conversation to confess to Mrs Garth herself, give her the money and ride away.

‘One - only one. Fanny Hackbutt comes at half past eleven. I am not getting a great income now,’ said Mrs Garth, smiling. ‘I am at a low ebb with pupils. But I have saved my little purse for Alfred's premium: I have ninety-two pounds. He can go to Mr Hanmer's now; he is just at the right age.’

This did not lead well towards the news that Mr Garth was on the brink of losing ninety-two pounds and more. Fred was silent. ‘Young gentlemen who go to college are rather more costly than that,’ Mrs Garth innocently continued, pulling out the edging on a cap-border. ‘And Caleb thinks that Alfred will turn out a distinguished engineer: he wants to give the boy a good chance. There he is! I hear him coming in. We will go to him in the parlor, shall we?’

When they entered the parlor Caleb had thrown down his hat and was seated at his desk.

'What! Fred, my boy!' he said, in a tone of mild surprise, holding his pen still undipped; 'you are here betimes.' But missing the usual expression of cheerful greeting in Fred's face, he immediately added, 'Is there anything up at home? - anything the matter?'

'Yes, Mr Garth, I am come to tell something that I am afraid will give you a bad opinion of me. I am come to tell you and Mrs Garth that I can't keep my word. I can't find the money to meet the bill after all. I have been unfortunate; I have only got these fifty pounds towards the hundred and sixty.'

While Fred was speaking, he had taken out the notes and laid them on the desk before Mr Garth. He had burst forth at once with the plain fact, feeling boyishly miserable and without verbal resources. Mrs Garth was mutely astonished, and looked at her husband for an explanation. Caleb blushed, and after a little pause said -

'Oh, I didn't tell you, Susan: I put my name to a bill for Fred; it was for a hundred and sixty pounds. He made sure he could meet it himself.'

There was an evident change in Mrs Garth's face, but it was like a change below the surface of water which remains smooth. She fixed her eyes on Fred, saying -

'I suppose you have asked your father for the rest of the money and he has refused you.'

'No,' said Fred, biting his lip, and speaking with more difficulty; 'but I know it will be of no use to ask him; and unless it were of use, I should not like to mention Mr Garth's name in the matter.'

'It has come at an unfortunate time,' said Caleb, in his hesitating way, looking down at the notes and nervously fingering the paper, 'Christmas upon us - I'm rather hard up just now. You see, I have to cut out everything like a tailor with short measure. What can we do, Susan? I shall want every farthing we have in the bank. It's a hundred and ten pounds, the deuce take it!'

'I must give you the ninety-two pounds that I have put by for Alfred's premium,' said Mrs Garth, gravely and decisively, though a nice ear might have discerned a slight tremor in some of the words. 'And I have no doubt that Mary has twenty pounds saved from her salary by this time. She will advance it.'

Mrs Garth had not again looked at Fred, and was not in the least calculating what words she should use to cut him the most effectively. Like the eccentric woman she was, she was at present absorbed in considering what was to be done, and did not fancy that the end could be better achieved by bitter remarks or explosions. But she had made Fred feel for the first time something like the tooth of remorse. Curiously enough, his pain in the affair beforehand had consisted almost entirely in the sense that he must seem dishonorable, and sink in the opinion of the Garths: he had not occupied himself with the inconvenience and possible injury that his breach might occasion them, for this exercise of the imagination on other people's needs is not common with hopeful young gentlemen. Indeed we are most of us brought up in the notion that the highest motive for not doing a wrong is something irrespective of the beings who would suffer the wrong. But at this moment he suddenly saw himself as a pitiful rascal who was robbing two women of their savings.

'I shall certainly pay it all, Mrs Garth - ultimately,' he stammered out.

'Yes, ultimately,' said Mrs Garth, who having a special dislike to fine words on ugly occasions, could not now repress an epigram. 'But boys cannot well be apprenticed ultimately: they should be apprenticed at fifteen.' She had never been so little inclined to make excuses for Fred.

'I was the most in the wrong, Susan,' said Caleb. 'Fred made sure of finding the money. But I'd no business to be fingering bills. I suppose you have looked all round and tried all honest means?' he added, fixing his merciful gray eyes on Fred. Caleb was too delicate, to specify Mr Featherstone.

'Yes, I have tried everything - I really have. I should have had a hundred and thirty pounds ready but for a misfortune with a horse which I was about to sell. My uncle had given me eighty pounds, and I paid away thirty with my old horse in order to get another which I was going to sell for eighty or more - I meant to go without a horse - but now it has turned out vicious and lamed itself. I wish I and the horses too had been at the devil, before I had brought this on you. There's no one else I care so much for: you and Mrs Garth have always been so kind to me. However, it's no use saying that. You will always think me a rascal now.'

Fred turned round and hurried out of the room, conscious that he was getting rather womanish, and feeling confusedly that his being sorry was not of much use to the Garths. They could see him mount, and quickly pass through the gate.

'I am disappointed in Fred Vincy,' said Mrs Garth. 'I would not have believed beforehand that he would have drawn you into his debts. I

knew he was extravagant, but I did not think that he would be so mean as to hang his risks on his oldest friend, who could the least afford to lose.'

'I was a fool, Susan:'

'That you were,' said the wife, nodding and smiling. 'But I should not have gone to publish it in the market-place. Why should you keep such things from me? It is just so with your buttons: you let them burst off without telling me, and go out with your wristband hanging. If I had only known I might have been ready with some better plan.'

'You are sadly cut up, I know, Susan,' said Caleb, looking feelingly at her. 'I can't abide your losing the money you've scraped together for Alfred.'

'It is very well that I *had* scraped it together; and it is you who will have to suffer, for you must teach the boy yourself. You must give up your bad habits. Some men take to drinking, and you have taken to working without pay. You must indulge yourself a little less in that. And you must ride over to Mary, and ask the child what money she has.'

Caleb had pushed his chair back, and was leaning forward, shaking his head slowly, and fitting his finger-tips together with much nicety.

'Poor Mary!' he said. 'Susan,' he went on in a lowered tone, 'I'm afraid she may be fond of Fred.'

'Oh no! She always laughs at him; and he is not likely to think of her in any other than a brotherly way.'

Caleb made no rejoinder, but presently lowered his spectacles, drew up his chair to the desk, and said, 'Deuce take the bill - I wish it was at Hanover! These things are a sad interruption to business!'

The first part of this speech comprised his whole store of maledictory expression, and was uttered with a slight snarl easy to imagine. But it would be difficult to convey to those who never heard him utter the word 'business,' the peculiar tone of fervid veneration, of religious regard, in which he wrapped it, as a consecrated symbol is wrapped in its gold-fringed linen.

Caleb Garth often shook his head in meditation on the value, the indispensable might of that myriad-headed, myriad-handed labor by which the social body is fed, clothed, and housed. It had laid hold of his imagination in boyhood. The echoes of the great hammer where roof or keel were a-making, the signal-shouts of the workmen, the roar

of the furnace, the thunder and plash of the engine, were a sublime music to him; the felling and lading of timber, and the huge trunk vibrating star-like in the distance along the highway, the crane at work on the wharf, the piled-up produce in warehouses, the precision and variety of muscular effort wherever exact work had to be turned out, - all these sights of his youth had acted on him as poetry without the aid of the poets. had made a philosophy for him without the aid of philosophers, a religion without the aid of theology. His early ambition had been to have as effective a share as possible in this sublime labor, which was peculiarly dignified by him with the name of 'business;' and though he had only been a short time under a surveyor, and had been chiefly his own teacher, he knew more of land, building, and mining than most of the special men in the county.

His classification of human employments was rather crude, and, like the categories of more celebrated men, would not be acceptable in these advanced times. He divided them into 'business, politics, preaching, learning, and amusement.' He had nothing to say against the last four; but he regarded them as a reverential pagan regarded other gods than his own. In the same way, he thought very well of all ranks, but he would not himself have liked to be of any rank in which he had not such close contact with 'business' as to get often honorably decorated with marks of dust and mortar, the damp of the engine, or the sweet soil of the woods and fields. Though he had never regarded himself as other than an orthodox Christian, and would argue on prevenient grace if the subject were proposed to him, I think his virtual divinities were good practical schemes, accurate work, and the faithful completion of undertakings: his prince of darkness was a slack workman. But there was no spirit of denial in Caleb, and the world seemed so wondrous to him that he was ready to accept any number of systems, like any number of firmaments, if they did not obviously interfere with the best land-drainage, solid building, correct measuring, and judicious boring (for coal). In fact, he had a reverential soul with a strong practical intelligence. But he could not manage finance: he knew values well, but he had no keenness of imagination for monetary results in the shape of profit and loss: and having ascertained this to his cost, he determined to give up all forms of his beloved 'business' which required that talent. He gave himself up entirely to the many kinds of work which he could do without handling capital, and was one of those precious men within his own district whom everybody would choose to work for them, because he did his work well, charged very little, and often declined to charge at all. It is no wonder, then, that the Garths were poor, and 'lived in a small way.' However, they did not mind it.