Chapter XXV

'Love seeketh not itself to please, Nor for itself hath any care But for another gives its ease And builds a heaven in hell's despair. . . . . . . Love seeketh only self to please, To bind another to its delight, Joys in another's loss of ease, And builds a hell in heaven's despite.' - W. BLAKE: Songs of Experience

Fred Vincy wanted to arrive at Stone Court when Mary could not expect him, and when his uncle was not down-stairs in that case she might be sitting alone in the wainscoted parlor. He left his horse in the yard to avoid making a noise on the gravel in front, and entered the parlor without other notice than the noise of the door-handle. Mary was in her usual corner, laughing over Mrs Piozzi's recollections of Johnson, and looked up with the fun still in her face. It gradually faded as she saw Fred approach her without speaking, and stand before her with his elbow on the mantel-piece, looking ill. She too was silent, only raising her eyes to him inquiringly.

'Mary,' he began, 'I am a good-for-nothing blackguard.'

'I should think one of those epithets would do at a time,' said Mary, trying to smile, but feeling alarmed.

'I know you will never think well of me any more. You will think me a liar. You will think me dishonest. You will think I didn't care for you, or your father and mother. You always do make the worst of me, I know.'

'I cannot deny that I shall think all that of you, Fred, if you give me good reasons. But please to tell me at once what you have done. I would rather know the painful truth than imagine it.'

'I owed money - a hundred and sixty pounds. I asked your father to put his name to a bill. I thought it would not signify to him. I made sure of paying the money myself, and I have tried as hard as I could. And now, I have been so unlucky - a horse has turned out badly - I can only pay fifty pounds. And I can't ask my father for the money: he would not give me a farthing. And my uncle gave me a hundred a little while ago. So what can I do? And now your father has no ready money to spare, and your mother will have to pay away her ninety-two pounds that she has saved, and she says your savings must go too. You see what a - '

'Oh, poor mother, poor father!' said Mary, her eyes filling with tears, and a little sob rising which she tried to repress. She looked straight before her and took no notice of Fred, all the consequences at home becoming present to her. He too remained silent for some moments,

feeling more miserable than ever. 'I wouldn't have hurt you for the world, Mary,' he said at last. 'You can never forgive me.'

'What does it matter whether I forgive you?' said Mary, passionately. 'Would that make it any better for my mother to lose the money she has been earning by lessons for four years, that she might send Alfred to Mr Hanmer's? Should you think all that pleasant enough if I forgave you?'

'Say what you like, Mary. I deserve it all.'

'I don't want to say anything,' said Mary, more quietly, 'and my anger is of no use.' She dried her eyes, threw aside her book, rose and fetched her sewing.

Fred followed her with his eyes, hoping that they would meet hers, and in that way find access for his imploring penitence. But no! Mary could easily avoid looking upward.

'I do care about your mother's money going,' he said, when she was seated again and sewing quickly. 'I wanted to ask you, Mary - don't you think that Mr Featherstone - if you were to tell him - tell him, I mean, about apprenticing Alfred - would advance the money?'

'My family is not fond of begging, Fred. We would rather work for our money. Besides, you say that Mr Featherstone has lately given you a hundred pounds. He rarely makes presents; he has never made presents to us. I am sure my father will not ask him for anything; and even if I chose to beg of him, it would be of no use.'

'I am so miserable, Mary - if you knew how miserable I am, you would be sorry for me.'

'There are other things to be more sorry for than that. But selfish people always think their own discomfort of more importance than anything else in the world. I see enough of that every day.'

'It is hardly fair to call me selfish. If you knew what things other young men do, you would think me a good way off the worst.'

'I know that people who spend a great deal of money on themselves without knowing how they shall pay, must be selfish. They are always thinking of what they can get for themselves, and not of what other people may lose.'

'Any man may be unfortunate, Mary, and find himself unable to pay when he meant it. There is not a better man in the world than your father, and yet he got into trouble.'

‘How dare you make any comparison between my father and you, Fred?’ said Mary, in a deep tone of indignation. ‘He never got into trouble by thinking of his own idle pleasures, but because he was always thinking of the work he was doing for other people. And he has fared hard, and worked hard to make good everybody's loss.’

‘And you think that I shall never try to make good anything, Mary. It is not generous to believe the worst of a man. When you have got any power over him, I think you might try and use it to make him better; but that is what you never do. However, I'm going,’ Fred ended, languidly. ‘I shall never speak to you about anything again. I'm very sorry for all the trouble I've caused - that's all.’

Mary had dropped her work out of her hand and looked up. There is often something maternal even in a girlish love, and Mary's hard experience had wrought her nature to an impressibility very different from that hard slight thing which we call girlishness. At Fred's last words she felt an instantaneous pang, something like what a mother feels at the imagined sobs or cries of her naughty truant child, which may lose itself and get harm. And when, looking up, her eyes met his dull despairing glance, her pity for him surmounted her anger and all her other anxieties.

‘Oh, Fred, how ill you look! Sit down a moment. Don't go yet. Let me tell uncle that you are here. He has been wondering that he has not seen you for a whole week.’ Mary spoke hurriedly, saying the words that came first without knowing very well what they were, but saying them in a half-soothing half-beseeching tone, and rising as if to go away to Mr Featherstone. Of course Fred felt as if the clouds had parted and a gleam had come: he moved and stood in her way.

‘Say one word, Mary, and I will do anything. Say you will not think the worst of me - will not give me up altogether.’

‘As if it were any pleasure to me to think ill of you,’ said Mary, in a mournful tone. ‘As if it were not very painful to me to see you an idle frivolous creature. How can you bear to be so contemptible, when others are working and striving, and there are so many things to be done - how can you bear to be fit for nothing in the world that is useful? And with so much good in your disposition, Fred, - you might be worth a great deal.’

‘I will try to be anything you like, Mary, if you will say that you love me.’

‘I should be ashamed to say that I loved a man who must always be hanging on others, and reckoning on what they would do for him. What will you be when you are forty? Like Mr Bowyer, I suppose -

just as idle, living in Mrs Beck's front parlor - fat and shabby, hoping somebody will invite you to dinner - spending your morning in learning a comic song - oh no! learning a tune on the flute.'

Mary's lips had begun to curl with a smile as soon as she had asked that question about Fred's future (young souls are mobile), and before she ended, her face had its full illumination of fun. To him it was like the cessation of an ache that Mary could laugh at him, and with a passive sort of smile he tried to reach her hand; but she slipped away quickly towards the door and said, 'I shall tell uncle. You *must* see him for a moment or two.'

Fred secretly felt that his future was guaranteed against the fulfilment of Mary's sarcastic prophecies, apart from that 'anything' which he was ready to do if she would define it He never dared in Mary's presence to approach the subject of his expectations from Mr Featherstone, and she always ignored them, as if everything depended on himself. But if ever he actually came into the property, she must recognize the change in his position. All this passed through his mind somewhat languidly, before he went up to see his uncle. He stayed but a little while, excusing himself on the ground that he had a cold; and Mary did not reappear before he left the house. But as he rode home, he began to be more conscious of being ill, than of being melancholy.

When Caleb Garth arrived at Stone Court soon after dusk, Mary was not surprised, although he seldom had leisure for paying her a visit, and was not at all fond of having to talk with Mr Featherstone. The old man, on the other hand, felt himself ill at ease with a brother-in-law whom he could not annoy, who did not mind about being considered poor, had nothing to ask of him, and understood all kinds of farming and mining business better than he did. But Mary had felt sure that her parents would want to see her, and if her father had not come, she would have obtained leave to go home for an hour or two the next day. After discussing prices during tea with Mr Featherstone Caleb rose to bid him good-by, and said, 'I want to speak to you, Mary.'

She took a candle into another large parlor, where there was no fire, and setting down the feeble light on the dark mahogany table, turned round to her father, and putting her arms round his neck kissed him with childish kisses which he delighted in, - the expression of his large brows softening as the expression of a great beautiful dog softens when it is caressed. Mary was his favorite child, and whatever Susan might say, and right as she was on all other subjects, Caleb thought it natural that Fred or any one else should think Mary more lovable than other girls.

'I've got something to tell you, my dear,' said Caleb in his hesitating way. 'No very good news; but then it might be worse.'

‘About money, father? I think I know what it is.’

‘Ay? how can that be? You see, I've been a bit of a fool again, and put my name to a bill, and now it comes to paying; and your mother has got to part with her savings, that's the worst of it, and even they won't quite make things even. We wanted a hundred and ten pounds: your mother has ninety-two, and I have none to spare in the bank; and she thinks that you have some savings.’

‘Oh yes; I have more than four-and-twenty pounds. I thought you would come, father, so I put it in my bag. See! beautiful white notes and gold.’

Mary took out the folded money from her reticule and put it into her father's hand.

‘Well, but how - we only want eighteen - here, put the rest back, child, - but how did you know about it?’ said Caleb, who, in his unconquerable indifference to money, was beginning to be chiefly concerned about the relation the affair might have to Mary's affections.

‘Fred told me this morning.’

‘Ah! Did he come on purpose?’

‘Yes, I think so. He was a good deal distressed.’

‘I'm afraid Fred is not to be trusted, Mary,’ said the father, with hesitating tenderness. ‘He means better than he acts, perhaps. But I should think it a pity for any body's happiness to be wrapped up in him, and so would your mother.’ ‘And so should I, father,’ said Mary, not looking up, but putting the back of her father's hand against her cheek.

‘I don't want to pry, my dear. But I was afraid there might be something between you and Fred, and I wanted to caution you. You see, Mary’ - here Caleb's voice became more tender; he had been pushing his hat about on the table and looking at it, but finally he turned his eyes on his daughter - ‘a woman, let her be as good as she may, has got to put up with the life her husband makes for her. Your mother has had to put up with a good deal because of me.’

Mary turned the back of her father's hand to her lips and smiled at him.

‘Well, well, nobody's perfect, but’ - here Mr Garth shook his head to help out the inadequacy of words - ‘what I am thinking of is - what it

must be for a wife when she's never sure of her husband, when he hasn't got a principle in him to make him more afraid of doing the wrong thing by others than of getting his own toes pinched. That's the long and the short of it, Mary. Young folks may get fond of each other before they know what life is, and they may think it all holiday if they can only get together; but it soon turns into working day, my dear. However, you have more sense than most, and you haven't been kept in cotton-wool: there may be no occasion for me to say this, but a father trembles for his daughter, and you are all by yourself here.'

'Don't fear for me, father,' said Mary, gravely meeting her father's eyes; 'Fred has always been very good to me; he is kind-hearted and affectionate, and not false, I think, with all his self-indulgence. But I will never engage myself to one who has no manly independence, and who goes on loitering away his time on the chance that others will provide for him. You and my mother have taught me too much pride for that.'

'That's right - that's right. Then I am easy,' said Mr Garth, taking up his hat. But it's hard to run away with your earnings, eh child.'

'Father!' said Mary, in her deepest tone of remonstrance. 'Take pocketfuls of love besides to them all at home,' was her last word before he closed the outer door on himself.

'I suppose your father wanted your earnings,' said old Mr Featherstone, with his usual power of unpleasant surmise, when Mary returned to him. 'He makes but a tight fit, I reckon. You're of age now; you ought to be saving for yourself.'

'I consider my father and mother the best part of myself, sir,' said Mary, coldly.

Mr Featherstone grunted: he could not deny that an ordinary sort of girl like her might be expected to be useful, so he thought of another rejoinder, disagreeable enough to be always apropos. 'If Fred Vincy comes to-morrow, now, don't you keep him chattering: let him come up to me.'