

Chapter XXVI

‘He beats me and I rail at him: O worthy satisfaction! would it were otherwise - that I could beat him while he railed at me. - ‘ - Troilus and Cressida.

But Fred did not go to Stone Court the next day, for reasons that were quite peremptory. From those visits to unsanitary Houndsley streets in search of Diamond, he had brought back not only a bad bargain in horse-flesh, but the further misfortune of some ailment which for a day or two had deemed mere depression and headache, but which got so much worse when he returned from his visit to Stone Court that, going into the dining-room, he threw himself on the sofa, and in answer to his mother's anxious question, said, ‘I feel very ill: I think you must send for Wrench.’

Wrench came, but did not apprehend anything serious, spoke of a ‘slight derangement,’ and did not speak of coming again on the morrow. He had a due value for the Vincys' house, but the wariest men are apt to be dulled by routine, and on worried mornings will sometimes go through their business with the zest of the daily bell-ringer. Mr Wrench was a small, neat, bilious man, with a well-dressed wig: he had a laborious practice, an irascible temper, a lymphatic wife and seven children; and he was already rather late before setting out on a four-miles drive to meet Dr. Minchin on the other side of Tipton, the decease of Hicks, a rural practitioner, having increased Middlemarch practice in that direction. Great statesmen err, and why not small medical men? Mr Wrench did not neglect sending the usual white parcels, which this time had black and drastic contents. Their effect was not alleviating to poor Fred, who, however, unwilling as he said to believe that he was ‘in for an illness,’ rose at his usual easy hour the next morning and went down-stairs meaning to breakfast, but succeeded in nothing but in sitting and shivering by the fire. Mr Wrench was again sent for, but was gone on his rounds, and Mrs Vincy seeing her darling's changed looks and general misery, began to cry and said she would send for Dr. Sprague.

‘Oh, nonsense, mother! It's nothing,’ said Fred, putting out his hot dry hand to her, ‘I shall soon be all right. I must have taken cold in that nasty damp ride.’

‘Mamma!’ said Rosamond, who was seated near the window (the dining-room windows looked on that highly respectable street called Lowick Gate), ‘there is Mr Lydgate, stopping to speak to some one. If I were you I would call him in. He has cured Ellen Bulstrode. They say he cures every one.’

Mrs Vincy sprang to the window and opened it in an instant, thinking only of Fred and not of medical etiquette. Lydgate was only two yards off on the other side of some iron palisading, and turned round at the sudden sound of the sash, before she called to him. In two minutes he was in the room, and Rosamond went out, after waiting just long enough to show a pretty anxiety conflicting with her sense of what was becoming.

Lydgate had to hear a narrative in which Mrs Vincy's mind insisted with remarkable instinct on every point of minor importance, especially on what Mr Wrench had said and had not said about coming again. That there might be an awkward affair with Wrench, Lydgate saw at once; but the ease was serious enough to make him dismiss that consideration: he was convinced that Fred was in the pink-skinned stage of typhoid fever, and that he had taken just the wrong medicines. He must go to bed immediately, must have a regular nurse, and various appliances and precautions must be used, about which Lydgate was particular. Poor Mrs Vincy's terror at these indications of danger found vent in such words as came most easily. She thought it 'very ill usage on the part of Mr Wrench, who had attended their house so many years in preference to Mr Peacock, though Mr Peacock was equally a friend. Why Mr Wrench should neglect her children more than others, she could not for the life of her understand. He had not neglected Mrs Larcher's when they had the measles, nor indeed would Mrs Vincy have wished that he should. And if anything should happen - '

Here poor Mrs Vincy's spirit quite broke down, and her Niobe throat and good-humored face were sadly convulsed. This was in the hall out of Fred's hearing, but Rosamond had opened the drawing-room door, and now came forward anxiously. Lydgate apologized for Mr Wrench, said that the symptoms yesterday might have been disguising, and that this form of fever was very equivocal in its beginnings: he would go immediately to the druggist's and have a prescription made up in order to lose no time, but he would write to Mr Wrench and tell him what had been done.

'But you must come again - you must go on attending Fred. I can't have my boy left to anybody who may come or not. I bear nobody ill-will, thank God, and Mr Wrench saved me in the pleurisy, but he'd better have let me die - if - if - '

'I will meet Mr Wrench here, then, shall I?' said Lydgate, really believing that Wrench was not well prepared to deal wisely with a case of this kind.

'Pray make that arrangement, Mr Lydgate,' said Rosamond, coming to her mother's aid, and supporting her arm to lead her away.

When Mr Vincy came home he was very angry with Wrench, and did not care if he never came into his house again. Lydgate should go on now, whether Wrench liked it or not. It was no joke to have fever in the house. Everybody must be sent to now, not to come to dinner on Thursday. And Pritchard needn't get up any wine: brandy was the best thing against infection. 'I shall drink brandy,' added Mr Vincy, emphatically - as much as to say, this was not an occasion for firing with blank-cartridges. 'He's an uncommonly unfortunate lad, is Fred. He'd need have - some luck by-and-by to make up for all this - else I don't know who'd have an eldest son.'

'Don't say so, Vincy,' said the mother, with a quivering lip, 'if you don't want him to be taken from me.'

'It will worret you to death, Lucy; *that* I can see,' said Mr Vincy, more mildly. 'However, Wrench shall know what I think of the matter.' (What Mr Vincy thought confusedly was, that the fever might somehow have been hindered if Wrench had shown the proper solicitude about his - the Mayor's - family.) 'I'm the last man to give in to the cry about new doctors, or new parsons either - whether they're Bulstrode's men or not. But Wrench shall know what I think, take it as he will.'

Wrench did not take it at all well. Lydgate was as polite as he could be in his offhand way, but politeness in a man who has placed you at a disadvantage is only an additional exasperation, especially if he happens to have been an object of dislike beforehand. Country practitioners used to be an irritable species, susceptible on the point of honor; and Mr Wrench was one of the most irritable among them. He did not refuse to meet Lydgate in the evening, but his temper was somewhat tried on the occasion. He had to hear Mrs Vincy say -

'Oh, Mr Wrench, what have I ever done that you should use me so? - To go away, and never to come again! And my boy might have been stretched a corpse!'

Mr Vincy, who had been keeping up a sharp fire on the enemy Infection, and was a good deal heated in consequence, started up when he heard Wrench come in, and went into the hall to let him know what he thought.

'I'll tell you what, Wrench, this is beyond a joke,' said the Mayor, who of late had had to rebuke offenders with an official air, and how broadened himself by putting his thumbs in his armpits. - 'To let fever get unawares into a house like this. There are some things that ought to be actionable, and are not so - that's my opinion.'

But irrational reproaches were easier to bear than the sense of being instructed, or rather the sense that a younger man, like Lydgate, inwardly considered him in need of instruction, for 'in point of fact,' Mr Wrench afterwards said, Lydgate paraded flighty, foreign notions, which would not wear. He swallowed his ire for the moment, but he afterwards wrote to decline further attendance in the case. The house might be a good one, but Mr Wrench was not going to truckle to anybody on a professional matter. He reflected, with much probability on his side, that Lydgate would by-and-by be caught tripping too, and that his ungentlemanly attempts to discredit the sale of drugs by his professional brethren, would by-and-by recoil on himself. He threw out biting remarks on Lydgate's tricks, worthy only of a quack, to get himself a factitious reputation with credulous people. That cant about cures was never got up by sound practitioners.

This was a point on which Lydgate smarted as much as Wrench could desire. To be puffed by ignorance was not only humiliating, but perilous, and not more enviable than the reputation of the weather-prophet. He was impatient of the foolish expectations amidst which all work must be carried on, and likely enough to damage himself as much as Mr Wrench could wish, by an unprofessional openness.

However, Lydgate was installed as medical attendant on the Vincys, and the event was a subject of general conversation in Middlemarch. Some said, that the Vincys had behaved scandalously, that Mr Vincy had threatened Wrench, and that Mrs Vincy had accused him of poisoning her son. Others were of opinion that Mr Lydgate's passing by was providential, that he was wonderfully clever in fevers, and that Bulstrode was in the right to bring him forward. Many people believed that Lydgate's coming to the town at all was really due to Bulstrode; and Mrs Taft, who was always counting stitches and gathered her information in misleading fragments caught between the rows of her knitting, had got it into her head that Mr Lydgate was a natural son of Bulstrode's, a fact which seemed to justify her suspicions of evangelical laymen.

She one day communicated this piece of knowledge to Mrs Farebrother, who did not fail to tell her son of it, observing -

'I should not be surprised at anything in Bulstrode, but I should be sorry to think it of Mr Lydgate.'

'Why, mother,' said Mr Farebrother, after an explosive laugh, 'you know very well that Lydgate is of a good family in the North. He never heard of Bulstrode before he came here.'

'That is satisfactory so far as Mr Lydgate is concerned, Camden,' said the old lady, with an air of precision. - 'But as to Bulstrode - the report may be true of some other son.'