Chapter XXXI

How will you know the pitch of that great bell Too large for you to stir? Let but a flute Play 'neath the fine-mixed metal listen close Till the right note flows forth, a silvery rill. Then shall the huge bell tremble - then the mass With myriad waves concurrent shall respond In low soft unison.

Lydgate that evening spoke to Miss Vincy of Mrs Casaubon, and laid some emphasis on the strong feeling she appeared to have for that formal studious man thirty years older than herself.

'Of course she is devoted to her husband,' said Rosamond, implying a notion of necessary sequence which the scientific man regarded as the prettiest possible for a woman; but she was thinking at the same time that it was not so very melancholy to be mistress of Lowick Manor with a husband likely to die soon. 'Do you think her very handsome?'

'She certainly is handsome, but I have not thought about it,' said Lydgate.

'I suppose it would be unprofessional,' said Rosamond, dimpling. 'But how your practice is spreading! You were called in before to the Chettams, I think; and now, the Casaubons.'

'Yes,' said Lydgate, in a tone of compulsory admission. 'But I don't really like attending such people so well as the poor. The cases are more monotonous, and one has to go through more fuss and listen more deferentially to nonsense.'

'Not more than in Middlemarch,' said Rosamond. 'And at least you go through wide corridors and have the scent of rose-leaves everywhere.'

'That is true, Mademoiselle de Montmorenci,' said Lydgate, just bending his head to the table and lifting with his fourth finger her delicate handkerchief which lay at the mouth of her reticule, as if to enjoy its scent, while he looked at her with a smile.

But this agreeable holiday freedom with which Lydgate hovered about the flower of Middlemarch, could not continue indefinitely. It was not more possible to find social isolation in that town than elsewhere, and two people persistently flirting could by no means escape from 'the various entanglements, weights, blows, clashings, motions, by which things severally go on.' Whatever Miss Vincy did must be remarked, and she was perhaps the more conspicuous to admirers and critics because just now Mrs Vincy, after some struggle, had gone with Fred to stay a little while at Stone Court, there being no other way of at once gratifying old Featherstone and keeping watch against Mary

Garth, who appeared a less tolerable daughter-in-law in proportion as Fred's illness disappeared.

Aunt Bulstrode, for example, came a little oftener into Lowick Gate to see Rosamond, now she was alone. For Mrs Bulstrode had a true sisterly feeling for her brother; always thinking that he might have married better, but wishing well to the children. Now Mrs Bulstrode had a long-standing intimacy with Mrs Plymdale. They had nearly the same preferences in silks, patterns for underclothing, china-ware, and clergymen; they confided their little troubles of health and household management to each other, and various little points of superiority on Mrs Bulstrode's side, namely, more decided seriousness, more admiration for mind, and a house outside the town, sometimes served to give color to their conversation without dividing them - well-meaning women both, knowing very little of their own motives.

Mrs Bulstrode, paying a morning visit to Mrs Plymdale, happened to say that she could not stay longer, because she was going to see poor Rosamond.

'Why do you say `poor Rosamond'?' said Mrs Plymdale, a round-eyed sharp little woman, like a tamed falcon.

'She is so pretty, and has been brought up in such thoughtlessness. The mother, you know, had always that levity about her, which makes me anxious for the children.'

'Well, Harriet, if I am to speak my mind,' said Mrs Plymdale, with emphasis, 'I must say, anybody would suppose you and Mr Bulstrode would be delighted with what has happened, for you have done everything to put Mr Lydgate forward.'

'Selina, what do you mean?' said Mrs Bulstrode, in genuine surprise.

'Not but what I am truly thankful for Ned's sake,' said Mrs Plymdale. 'He could certainly better afford to keep such a wife than some people can; but I should wish him to look elsewhere. Still a mother has anxieties, and some young men would take to a bad life in consequence. Besides, if I was obliged to speak, I should say I was not fond of strangers coming into a town.'

'I don't know, Selina,' said Mrs Bulstrode, with a little emphasis in her turn. 'Mr Bulstrode was a stranger here at one time. Abraham and Moses were strangers in the land, and we are told to entertain strangers. And especially,' she added, after a slight pause, 'when they are unexceptionable.'

'I was not speaking in a religious sense, Harriet. I spoke as a mother.'

‘Selina, I am sure you have never heard me say anything against a niece of mine marrying your son.’

‘Oh, it is pride in Miss Vincy - I am sure it is nothing else,’ said Mrs Plymdale, who had never before given all her confidence to ‘Harriet’ on this subject. ‘No young man in Middlemarch was good enough for her: I have heard her mother say as much. That is not a Christian spirit, I think. But now, from all I hear, she has found a man as proud as herself.’

‘You don't mean that there is anything between Rosamond and Mr Lydgate?’ said Mrs Bulstrode, rather mortified at finding out her own ignorance.

‘Is it possible you don't know, Harriet?’

‘Oh, I go about so little; and I am not fond of gossip; I really never hear any. You see so many people that I don't see. Your circle is rather different from ours.’

‘Well, but your own niece and Mr Bulstrode's great favorite - and yours too, I am sure, Harriet! I thought, at one time, you meant him for Kate, when she is a little older.’

‘I don't believe there can be anything serious at present,’ said Mrs Bulstrode. ‘My brother would certainly have told me.’

‘Well, people have different ways, but I understand that nobody can see Miss Vincy and Mr Lydgate together without taking them to be engaged. However, it is not my business. Shall I put up the pattern of mittens?’

After this Mrs Bulstrode drove to her niece with a mind newly weighted. She was herself handsomely dressed, but she noticed with a little more regret than usual that Rosamond, who was just come in and met her in walking-dress, was almost as expensively equipped. Mrs Bulstrode was a feminine smaller edition of her brother, and had none of her husband's low-toned pallor. She had a good honest glance and used no circumlocution.

‘You are alone, I see, my dear,’ she said, as they entered the drawing-room together, looking round gravely. Rosamond felt sure that her aunt had something particular to say, and they sat down near each other. Nevertheless, the quilling inside Rosamond's bonnet was so charming that it was impossible not to desire the same kind of thing for Kate, and Mrs Bulstrode's eyes, which were rather fine, rolled round that ample quilled circuit, while she spoke.

‘I have just heard something about you that has surprised me very much, Rosamond.’

‘What is that, aunt?’ Rosamond's eyes also were roaming over her aunt's large embroidered collar.

‘I can hardly believe it - that you should be engaged without my knowing it - without your father's telling me.’ Here Mrs Bulstrode's eyes finally rested on Rosamond's, who blushed deeply, and said -

‘I am not engaged, aunt.’

‘How is it that every one says so, then - that it is the town's talk?’

‘The town's talk is of very little consequence, I think,’ said Rosamond, inwardly gratified.

‘Oh, my dear, be more thoughtful; don't despise your neighbors so. Remember you are turned twenty-two now, and you will have no fortune: your father, I am sure, will not be able to spare you anything. Mr Lydgate is very intellectual and clever; I know there is an attraction in that. I like talking to such men myself; and your uncle finds him very useful. But the profession is a poor one here. To be sure, this life is not everything; but it is seldom a medical man has true religious views - there is too much pride of intellect. And you are not fit to marry a poor man.

‘Mr Lydgate is not a poor man, aunt. He has very high connections.’

‘He told me himself he was poor.’

‘That is because he is used to people who have a high style

‘My dear Rosamond, *you* must not think of living in high style.’

Rosamond looked down and played with her reticule. She was not a fiery young lady and had no sharp answers, but she meant to live as she pleased.

‘Then it is really true?’ said Mrs Bulstrode, looking very earnestly at her niece. ‘You are thinking of Mr Lydgate - there is some understanding between you, though your father doesn't know. Be open, my dear Rosamond: Mr Lydgate has really made you an offer?’

Poor Rosamond's feelings were very unpleasant. She had been quite easy as to Lydgate's feeling and intention, but now when her aunt put this question she did not like being unable to say Yes. Her pride was hurt, but her habitual control of manner helped her.

'Pray excuse me, aunt. I would rather not speak on the subject.'

'You would not give your heart to a man without a decided prospect, I trust, my dear. And think of the two excellent offers I know of that you have refused! - and one still within your reach, if you will not throw it away. I knew a very great beauty who married badly at last, by doing so. Mr Ned Plymdale is a nice young man - some might think good-looking; and an only son; and a large business of that kind is better than a profession. Not that marrying is everything. I would have you seek first the kingdom of God. But a girl should keep her heart within her own power.'

'I should never give it to Mr Ned Plymdale, if it were. I have already refused him. If I loved, I should love at once and without change,' said Rosamond, with a great sense of being a romantic heroine, and playing the part prettily.

'I see how it is, my dear,' said Mrs Bulstrode, in a melancholy voice, rising to go. 'You have allowed your affections to be engaged without return.'

'No, indeed, aunt,' said Rosamond, with emphasis.

'Then you are quite confident that Mr Lydgate has a serious attachment to you?'

Rosamond's cheeks by this time were persistently burning, and she felt much mortification. She chose to be silent, and her aunt went away all the more convinced.

Mr Bulstrode in things worldly and indifferent was disposed to do what his wife bade him, and she now, without telling her reasons, desired him on the next opportunity to find out in conversation with Mr Lydgate whether he had any intention of marrying soon. The result was a decided negative. Mr Bulstrode, on being cross-questioned, showed that Lydgate had spoken as no man would who had any attachment that could issue in matrimony. Mrs Bulstrode now felt that she had a serious duty before her, and she soon managed to arrange a tete-a-tete with Lydgate, in which she passed from inquiries about Fred Vincy's health, and expressions of her sincere anxiety for her brother's large family, to general remarks on the dangers which lay before young people with regard to their settlement in life. Young men were often wild and disappointing, making little return for the money spent on them, and a girl was exposed to many circumstances which might interfere with her prospects.

'Especially when she has great attractions, and her parents see much company,' said Mrs Bulstrode 'Gentlemen pay her attention, and

engross her all to themselves, for the mere pleasure of the moment, and that drives off others. I think it is a heavy responsibility, Mr Lydgate, to interfere with the prospects of any girl.' Here Mrs Bulstrode fixed her eyes on him, with an unmistakable purpose of warning, if not of rebuke.

'Clearly,' said Lydgate, looking at her - perhaps even staring a little in return. 'On the other hand, a man must be a great coxcomb to go about with a notion that he must not pay attention to a young lady lest she should fall in love with him, or lest others should think she must.'

'Oh, Mr Lydgate, you know well what your advantages are. You know that our young men here cannot cope with you. Where you frequent a house it may militate very much against a girl's making a desirable settlement in life, and prevent her from accepting offers even if they are made.'

Lydgate was less flattered by his advantage over the Middlemarch Orlandos than he was annoyed by the perception of Mrs Bulstrode's meaning. She felt that she had spoken as impressively as it was necessary to do, and that in using the superior word 'militate' she had thrown a noble drapery over a mass of particulars which were still evident enough.

Lydgate was fuming a little, pushed his hair back with one hand, felt curiously in his waistcoat-pocket with the other, and then stooped to beckon the tiny black spaniel, which had the insight to decline his hollow caresses. It would not have been decent to go away, because he had been dining with other guests, and had just taken tea. But Mrs Bulstrode, having no doubt that she had been understood, turned the conversation.

Solomon's Proverbs, I think, have omitted to say, that as the sore palate findeth grit, so an uneasy consciousness heareth innuendoes. The next day Mr Farebrother, parting from Lydgate in the street, supposed that they should meet at Vincy's in the evening. Lydgate answered curtly, no - he had work to do - he must give up going out in the evening.

'What! you are going to get lashed to the mast, eh, and are stopping your ears?' said the Vicar. 'Well, if you don't mean to be won by the sirens, you are right to take precautions in time.'

A few days before, Lydgate would have taken no notice of these words as anything more than the Vicar's usual way of putting things. They seemed now to convey an innuendo which confirmed the impression that he had been making a fool of himself and behaving so as to be

misunderstood: not, he believed, by Rosamond herself; she, he felt sure, took everything as lightly as he intended it. She had an exquisite tact and insight in relation to all points of manners; but the people she lived among were blunderers and busybodies. However, the mistake should go no farther. He resolved - and kept his resolution - that he would not go to Mr Vincy's except on business.

Rosamond became very unhappy. The uneasiness first stirred by her aunt's questions grew and grew till at the end of ten days that she had not seen Lydgate, it grew into terror at the blank that might possibly come - into foreboding of that ready, fatal sponge which so cheaply wipes out the hopes of mortals. The world would have a new dreariness for her, as a wilderness that a magician's spells had turned for a little while into a garden. She felt that she was beginning to know the pang of disappointed love, and that no other man could be the occasion of such delightful aerial building as she had been enjoying for the last six months. Poor Rosamond lost her appetite and felt as forlorn as Ariadne - as a charming stage Ariadne left behind with all her boxes full of costumes and no hope of a coach.

There are many wonderful mixtures in the world which are all alike called love, and claim the privileges of a sublime rage which is an apology for everything (in literature and the drama). Happily Rosamond did not think of committing any desperate act: she plaited her fair hair as beautifully as usual, and kept herself proudly calm. Her most cheerful supposition was that her aunt Bulstrode had interfered in some way to hinder Lydgate's visits: everything was better than a spontaneous indifference in him. Any one who imagines ten days too short a time - not for falling into leanness, lightness, or other measurable effects of passion, but - for the whole spiritual circuit of alarmed conjecture and disappointment, is ignorant of what can go on in the elegant leisure of a young lady's mind.

On the eleventh day, however, Lydgate when leaving Stone Court was requested by Mrs Vincy to let her husband know that there was a marked change in Mr Featherstone's health, and that she wished him to come to Stone Court on that day. Now Lydgate might have called at the warehouse, or might have written a message on a leaf of his pocket-book and left it at the door. Yet these simple devices apparently did not occur to him, from which we may conclude that he had no strong objection to calling at the house at an hour when Mr Vincy was not at home, and leaving the message with Miss Vincy. A man may, from various motives, decline to give his company, but perhaps not even a sage would be gratified that nobody missed him. It would be a graceful, easy way of piecing on the new habits to the old, to have a few playful words with Rosamond about his resistance to dissipation, and his firm resolve to take long fasts even from sweet sounds. It must be confessed, also, that momentary speculations as to

all the possible grounds for Mrs Bulstrode's hints had managed to get woven like slight clinging hairs into the more substantial web of his thoughts.

Miss Vincy was alone, and blushed so deeply when Lydgate came in that he felt a corresponding embarrassment, and instead of any playfulness, he began at once to speak of his reason for calling, and to beg her, almost formally, to deliver the message to her father. Rosamond, who at the first moment felt as if her happiness were returning, was keenly hurt by Lydgate's manner; her blush had departed, and she assented coldly, without adding an unnecessary word, some trivial chain-work which she had in her hands enabling her to avoid looking at Lydgate higher than his chin. In all failures, the beginning is certainly the half of the whole. After sitting two long moments while he moved his whip and could say nothing, Lydgate rose to go, and Rosamond, made nervous by her struggle between mortification and the wish not to betray it, dropped her chain as if startled, and rose too, mechanically. Lydgate instantaneously stooped to pick up the chain. When he rose he was very near to a lovely little face set on a fair long neck which he had been used to see turning about under the most perfect management of self-contented grace. But as he raised his eyes now he saw a certain helpless quivering which touched him quite newly, and made him look at Rosamond with a questioning flash. At this moment she was as natural as she had ever been when she was five years old: she felt that her tears had risen, and it was no use to try to do anything else than let them stay like water on a blue flower or let them fall over her cheeks, even as they would.

That moment of naturalness was the crystallizing feather-touch: it shook flirtation into love. Remember that the ambitious man who was looking at those Forget-me-nots under the water was very warm-hearted and rash. He did not know where the chain went; an idea had thrilled through the recesses within him which had a miraculous effect in raising the power of passionate love lying buried there in no sealed sepulchre, but under the lightest, easily pierced mould. His words were quite abrupt and awkward; but the tone made them sound like an ardent, appealing avowal.

'What is the matter? you are distressed. Tell me, pray.'

Rosamond had never been spoken to in such tones before. I am not sure that she knew what the words were: but she looked at Lydgate and the tears fell over her cheeks. There could have been no more complete answer than that silence, and Lydgate, forgetting everything else, completely mastered by the outrush of tenderness at the sudden belief that this sweet young creature depended on him for her joy, actually put his arms round her, folding her gently and protectingly -

he was used to being gentle with the weak and suffering - and kissed each of the two large tears. This was a strange way of arriving at an understanding, but it was a short way. Rosamond was not angry, but she moved backward a little in timid happiness, and Lydgate could now sit near her and speak less incompletely. Rosamond had to make her little confession, and he poured out words of gratitude and tenderness with impulsive lavishment. In half an hour he left the house an engaged man, whose soul was not his own, but the woman's to whom he had bound himself.

He came again in the evening to speak with Mr Vincy, who, just returned from Stone Court, was feeling sure that it would not be long before he heard of Mr Featherstone's demise. The felicitous word ‘demise,’ which had seasonably occurred to him, had raised his spirits even above their usual evening pitch. The right word is always a power, and communicates its definiteness to our action. Considered as a demise, old Featherstone's death assumed a merely legal aspect, so that Mr Vincy could tap his snuff-box over it and be jovial, without even an intermittent affectation of solemnity; and Mr Vincy hated both solemnity and affectation. Who was ever awe struck about a testator, or sang a hymn on the title to real property? Mr Vincy was inclined to take a jovial view of all things that evening: he even observed to Lydgate that Fred had got the family constitution after all, and would soon be as fine a fellow as ever again; and when his approbation of Rosamond's engagement was asked for, he gave it with astonishing facility, passing at once to general remarks on the desirableness of matrimony for young men and maidens, and apparently deducing from the whole the appropriateness of a little more punch.