

## Chapter XXXIII

'Close up his eyes and draw the curtain close; And let us all to meditation.' - 2 Henry VI.

That night after twelve o'clock Mary Garth relieved the watch in Mr Featherstone's room, and sat there alone through the small hours. She often chose this task, in which she found some pleasure, notwithstanding the old man's testiness whenever he demanded her attentions. There were intervals in which she could sit perfectly still, enjoying the outer stillness and the subdued light. The red fire with its gently audible movement seemed like a solemn existence calmly independent of the petty passions, the imbecile desires, the straining after worthless uncertainties, which were daily moving her contempt. Mary was fond of her own thoughts, and could amuse herself well sitting in twilight with her hands in her lap; for, having early had strong reason to believe that things were not likely to be arranged for her peculiar satisfaction, she wasted no time in astonishment and annoyance at that fact. And she had already come to take life very much as a comedy in which she had a proud, nay, a generous resolution not to act the mean or treacherous part. Mary might have become cynical if she had not had parents whom she honored, and a well of affectionate gratitude within her, which was all the fuller because she had learned to make no unreasonable claims.

She sat to-night revolving, as she was wont, the scenes of the day, her lips often curling with amusement at the oddities to which her fancy added fresh drollery: people were so ridiculous with their illusions, carrying their fool's caps unawares, thinking their own lies opaque while everybody else's were transparent, making themselves exceptions to everything, as if when all the world looked yellow under a lamp they alone were rosy. Yet there were some illusions under Mary's eyes which were not quite comic to her. She was secretly convinced, though she had no other grounds than her close observation of old Featherstone's nature, that in spite of his fondness for having the Vincys about him, they were as likely to be disappointed as any of the relations whom he kept at a distance. She had a good deal of disdain for Mrs Vincy's evident alarm lest she and Fred should be alone together, but it did not hinder her from thinking anxiously of the way in which Fred would be affected, if it should turn out that his uncle had left him as poor as ever. She could make a butt of Fred when he was present, but she did not enjoy his follies when he was absent.

Yet she liked her thoughts: a vigorous young mind not overbalanced by passion, finds a good in making acquaintance with life, and watches its own powers with interest. Mary had plenty of merriment within.

Her thought was not veined by any solemnity or pathos about the old man on the bed: such sentiments are easier to affect than to feel about an aged creature whose life is not visibly anything but a remnant of vices. She had always seen the most disagreeable side of Mr Featherstone: he was not proud of her, and she was only useful to him. To be anxious about a soul that is always snapping at you must be left to the saints of the earth; and Mary was not one of them. She had never returned him a harsh word, and had waited on him faithfully: that was her utmost. Old Featherstone himself was not in the least anxious about his soul, and had declined to see Mr Tucker on the subject.

To-night he had not snapped, and for the first hour or two he lay remarkably still, until at last Mary heard him rattling his bunch of keys against the tin box which he always kept in the bed beside him. About three o'clock he said, with remarkable distinctness, 'Missy, come here!'

Mary obeyed, and found that he had already drawn the tin box from under the clothes, though he usually asked to have this done for him; and he had selected the key. He now unlocked the box, and, drawing from it another key, looked straight at her with eyes that seemed to have recovered all their sharpness and said, 'How many of 'em are in the house?'

'You mean of your own relations, sir,' said Mary, well used to the old man's way of speech. He nodded slightly and she went on.

'Mr Jonah Featherstone and young Cranch are sleeping here.'

'Oh ay, they stick, do they? and the rest - they come every day, I'll warrant - Solomon and Jane, and all the young uns? They come peeping, and counting and casting up?'

'Not all of them every day. Mr Solomon and Mrs Waule are here every day, and the others come often.'

The old man listened with a grimace while she spoke, and then said, relaxing his face, 'The more fools they. You hearken, missy. It's three o'clock in the morning, and I've got all my faculties as well as ever I had in my life. I know all my property, and where the money's put out, and everything. And I've made everything ready to change my mind, and do as I like at the last. Do you hear, missy? I've got my faculties.'

'Well, sir?' said Mary, quietly.

He now lowered his tone with an air of deeper cunning. 'I've made two wills, and I'm going to burn one. Now you do as I tell you. This is the

key of my iron chest, in the closet there. You push well at the side of the brass plate at the top, till it goes like a bolt: then you can put the key in the front lock and turn it. See and do that; and take out the topmost paper - Last Will and Testament - big printed.'

'No, sir,' said Mary, in a firm voice, 'I cannot do that.'

'Not do it? I tell you, you must,' said the old man, his voice beginning to shake under the shock of this resistance.

'I cannot touch your iron chest or your will. I must refuse to do anything that might lay me open to suspicion.'

'I tell you, I'm in my right mind. Shan't I do as I like at the last? I made two wills on purpose. Take the key, I say.'

'No, sir, I will not,' said Mary, more resolutely still. Her repulsion was getting stronger.

'I tell you, there's no time to lose.'

'I cannot help that, sir. I will not let the close of your life soil the beginning of mine. I will not touch your iron chest or your will.' She moved to a little distance from the bedside.

The old man paused with a blank stare for a little while, holding the one key erect on the ring; then with an agitated jerk he began to work with his bony left hand at emptying the tin box before him.

'Missy,' he began to say, hurriedly, 'look here! take the money - the notes and gold - look here - take it - you shall have it all - do as I tell you.'

He made an effort to stretch out the key towards her as far as possible, and Mary again retreated.

'I will not touch your key or your money, sir. Pray don't ask me to do it again. If you do, I must go and call your brother.'

He let his hand fall, and for the first time in her life Mary saw old Peter Featherstone begin to cry childishly. She said, in as gentle a tone as she could command, 'Pray put up your money, sir;' and then went away to her seat by the fire, hoping this would help to convince him that it was useless to say more. Presently he rallied and said eagerly -

'Look here, then. Call the young chap. Call Fred Vincy.'

Mary's heart began to beat more quickly. Various ideas rushed through her mind as to what the burning of a second will might imply. She had to make a difficult decision in a hurry.

'I will call him, if you will let me call Mr Jonah and others with him.'

'Nobody else, I say. The young chap. I shall do as I like.'

'Wait till broad daylight, sir, when every one is stirring. Or let me call Simmons now, to go and fetch the lawyer? He can be here in less than two hours.'

'Lawyer? What do I want with the lawyer? Nobody shall know - I say, nobody shall know. I shall do as I like.'

'Let me call some one else, sir,' said Mary, persuasively. She did not like her position - alone with the old man, who seemed to show a strange flaring of nervous energy which enabled him to speak again and again without falling into his usual cough; yet she desired not to push unnecessarily the contradiction which agitated him. 'Let me, pray, call some one else.'

'You let me alone, I say. Look here, missy. Take the money. You'll never have the chance again. It's pretty nigh two hundred - there's more in the box, and nobody knows how much there was. Take it and do as I tell you.'

Mary, standing by the fire, saw its red light falling on the old man, propped up on his pillows and bed-rest, with his bony hand holding out the key, and the money lying on the quilt before him. She never forgot that vision of a man wanting to do as he liked at the last. But the way in which he had put the offer of the money urged her to speak with harder resolution than ever.

'It is of no use, sir. I will not do it. Put up your money. I will not touch your money. I will do anything else I can to comfort you; but I will not touch your keys or your money.'

'Anything else anything else!' said old Featherstone, with hoarse rage, which, as if in a nightmare, tried to be loud, and yet was only just audible. 'I want nothing else. You come here - you come here.'

Mary approached him cautiously, knowing him too well. She saw him dropping his keys and trying to grasp his stick, while he looked at her like an aged hyena, the muscles of his face getting distorted with the effort of his hand. She paused at a safe distance.

'Let me give you some cordial,' she said, quietly, 'and try to compose yourself. You will perhaps go to sleep. And to-morrow by daylight you can do as you like.'

He lifted the stick, in spite of her being beyond his reach, and threw it with a hard effort which was but impotence. It fell, slipping over the foot of the bed. Mary let it lie, and retreated to her chair by the fire. By-and-by she would go to him with the cordial. Fatigue would make him passive. It was getting towards the chilliest moment of the morning, the fire had got low, and she could see through the chink between the moreen window-curtains the light whitened by the blind. Having put some wood on the fire and thrown a shawl over her, she sat down, hoping that Mr Featherstone might now fall asleep. If she went near him the irritation might be kept up. He had said nothing after throwing the stick, but she had seen him taking his keys again and laying his right hand on the money. He did not put it up, however, and she thought that he was dropping off to sleep.

But Mary herself began to be more agitated by the remembrance of what she had gone through, than she had been by the reality - questioning those acts of hers which had come imperatively and excluded all question in the critical moment.

Presently the dry wood sent out a flame which illuminated every crevice, and Mary saw that the old man was lying quietly with his head turned a little on one side. She went towards him with inaudible steps, and thought that his face looked strangely motionless; but the next moment the movement of the flame communicating itself to all objects made her uncertain. The violent beating of her heart rendered her perceptions so doubtful that even when she touched him and listened for his breathing, she could not trust her conclusions. She went to the window and gently propped aside the curtain and blind, so that the still light of the sky fell on the bed.

The next moment she ran to the bell and rang it energetically. In a very little while there was no longer any doubt that Peter Featherstone was dead, with his right hand clasping the keys, and his left hand lying on the heap of notes and gold.