BOOK IV. THREE LOVE PROBLEMS

Chapter XXXIV

1st Gent. Such men as this are feathers, chips, and straws. Carry no weight, no force. 2d Gent. But levity Is causal too, and makes the sum of weight. For power finds its place in lack of power; Advance is cession, and the driven ship May run aground because the helmsman's thought Lacked force to balance opposites.'

It was on a morning of May that Peter Featherstone was buried. In the prosaic neighborhood of Middlemarch, May was not always warm and sunny, and on this particular morning a chill wind was blowing the blossoms from the surrounding gardens on to the green mounds of Lowick churchyard. Swiftly moving clouds only now and then allowed a gleam to light up any object, whether ugly or beautiful, that happened to stand within its golden shower. In the churchyard the objects were remarkably various, for there was a little country crowd waiting to see the funeral. The news had spread that it was to be a 'big burying;' the old gentleman had left written directions about everything and meant to have a funeral 'beyond his betters.' This was true; for old Featherstone had not been a Harpagon whose passions had all been devoured by the ever-lean and ever-hungry passion of saving, and who would drive a bargain with his undertaker beforehand. He loved money, but he also loved to spend it in gratifying his peculiar tastes, and perhaps he loved it best of all as a means of making others feel his power more or less uncomfortably. If any one will here contend that there must have been traits of goodness in old Featherstone, I will not presume to deny this; but I must observe that goodness is of a modest nature, easily discouraged, and when much privacy, elbowed in early life by unabashed vices, is apt to retire into extreme privacy, so that it is more easily believed in by those who construct a selfish old gentleman theoretically, than by those who form the narrower judgments based on his personal acquaintance. In any case, he had been bent on having a handsome funeral, and on having persons 'bid' to it who would rather have stayed at home. He had even desired that female relatives should follow him to the grave, and poor sister Martha had taken a difficult journey for this purpose from the Chalky Flats. She and Jane would have been altogether cheered (in a tearful manner) by this sign that a brother who disliked seeing them while he was living had been prospectively fond of their presence when he should have become a testator, if the sign had not been made equivocal by being extended to Mrs Vincy, whose expense in handsome crape seemed to imply the most presumptuous hopes, aggravated by a bloom of complexion which told pretty plainly that she was not a blood-relation, but of that generally objectionable class called wife's kin.

We are all of us imaginative in some form or other, for images are the brood of desire; and poor old Featherstone, who laughed much at the way in which others cajoled themselves, did not escape the fellowship of illusion. In writing the programme for his burial he certainly did not make clear to himself that his pleasure in the little drama of which it formed a part was confined to anticipation. In chuckling over the vexations he could inflict by the rigid clutch of his dead hand, he inevitably mingled his consciousness with that livid stagnant presence, and so far as he was preoccupied with a future life, it was with one of gratification inside his coffin. Thus old Featherstone was imaginative, after his fashion.

However, the three mourning-coaches were filled according to the written orders of the deceased. There were pall-bearers on horseback, with the richest scarfs and hatbands, and even the under-bearers had trappings of woe which were of a good well-priced quality. The black procession, when dismounted, looked the larger for the smallness of the churchyard; the heavy human faces and the black draperies shivering in the wind seemed to tell of a world strangely incongruous with the lightly dropping blossoms and the gleams of sunshine on the daisies. The clergyman who met the procession was Mr Cadwallader - also according to the request of Peter Featherstone, prompted as usual by peculiar reasons. Having a contempt for curates, whom he always called understrappers, he was resolved to be buried by a beneficed clergyman. Mr Casaubon was out of the question, not merely because he declined duty of this sort, but because Featherstone had an especial dislike to him as the rector of his own parish, who had a lien on the land in the shape of tithe, also as the deliverer of morning sermons, which the old man, being in his pew and not at all sleepy, had been obliged to sit through with an inward snarl. He had an objection to a parson stuck up above his head preaching to him. But his relations with Mr Cadwallader had been of a different kind: the trout-stream which ran through Mr Casaubon's land took its course through Featherstone's also, so that Mr Cadwallader was a parson who had had to ask a favor instead of preaching. Moreover, he was one of the high gentry living four miles away from Lowick, and was thus exalted to an equal sky with the sheriff of the county and other dignities vaguely regarded as necessary to the system of things. There would be a satisfaction in being buried by Mr Cadwallader, whose very name offered a fine opportunity for pronouncing wrongly if you liked.

This distinction conferred on the Rector of Tipton and Freshitt was the reason why Mrs Cadwallader made one of the group that watched old Featherstone's funeral from an upper window of the manor. She was not fond of visiting that house, but she liked, as she said, to see collections of strange animals such as there would be at this funeral; and she had persuaded Sir James and the young Lady Chettam to

drive the Rector and herself to Lowick in order that the visit might be altogether pleasant.

'I will go anywhere with you, Mrs Cadwallader,' Celia had said; 'but I don't like funerals.'

'Oh, my dear, when you have a clergyman in your family you must accommodate your tastes: I did that very early. When I married Humphrey I made up my mind to like sermons, and I set out by liking the end very much. That soon spread to the middle and the beginning, because I couldn't have the end without them.'

'No, to be sure not,' said the Dowager Lady Chettam, with stately emphasis.

The upper window from which the funeral could be well seen was in the room occupied by Mr Casaubon when he had been forbidden to work; but he had resumed nearly his habitual style of life now in spite of warnings and prescriptions, and after politely welcoming Mrs Cadwallader had slipped again into the library to chew a cud of erudite mistake about Cush and Mizraim.

But for her visitors Dorothea too might have been shut up in the library, and would not have witnessed this scene of old Featherstone's funeral, which, aloof as it seemed to be from the tenor of her life, always afterwards came back to her at the touch of certain sensitive points in memory, just as the vision of St. Peter's at Rome was inwoven with moods of despondency. Scenes which make vital changes in our neighbors' lot are but the background of our own, yet, like a particular aspect of the fields and trees, they become associated for us with the epochs of our own history, and make a part of that unity which lies in the selection of our keenest consciousness.

The dream-like association of something alien and ill-understood with the deepest secrets of her experience seemed to mirror that sense of loneliness which was due to the very ardor of Dorothea's nature. The country gentry of old time lived in a rarefied social air: dotted apart on their stations up the mountain they looked down with imperfect discrimination on the belts of thicker life below. And Dorothea was not at ease in the perspective and chilliness of that height.

'I shall not look any more,' said Celia, after the train had entered the church, placing herself a little behind her husband's elbow so that she could slyly touch his coat with her cheek. 'I dare say Dodo likes it: she is fond of melancholy things and ugly people.'

'I am fond of knowing something about the people I live among,' said Dorothea, who had been watching everything with the interest of a

monk on his holiday tour. 'It seems to me we know nothing of our neighbors, unless they are cottagers. One is constantly wondering what sort of lives other people lead, and how they take things. I am quite obliged to Mrs Cadwallader for coming and calling me out of the library.'

'Quite right to feel obliged to me,' said Mrs Cadwallader. 'Your rich Lowick farmers are as curious as any buffaloes or bisons, and I dare say you don't half see them at church. They are quite different from your uncle's tenants or Sir James's - monsters - farmers without landlords - one can't tell how to class them.'

'Most of these followers are not Lowick people,' said Sir James; 'I suppose they are legatees from a distance, or from Middlemarch. Lovegood tells me the old fellow has left a good deal of money as well as land.'

'Think of that now! when so many younger sons can't dine at their own expense,' said Mrs Cadwallader. 'Ah,' turning round at the sound of the opening door, 'here is Mr Brooke. I felt that we were incomplete before, and here is the explanation. You are come to see this odd funeral, of course?'

'No, I came to look after Casaubon - to see how he goes on, you know. And to bring a little news - a little news, my dear,' said Mr Brooke, nodding at Dorothea as she came towards him. 'I looked into the library, and I saw Casaubon over his books. I told him it wouldn't do: I said, `This will never do, you know: think of your wife, Casaubon.' And he promised me to come up. I didn't tell him my news: I said, he must come up.'

'Ah, now they are coming out of church,' Mrs Cadwallader exclaimed. 'Dear me, what a wonderfully mixed set! Mr Lydgate as doctor, I suppose. But that is really a good looking woman, and the fair young man must be her son. Who are they, Sir James, do you know?'

'I see Vincy, the Mayor of Middlemarch; they are probably his wife and son,' said Sir James, looking interrogatively at Mr Brooke, who nodded and said -

'Yes, a very decent family - a very good fellow is Vincy; a credit to the manufacturing interest. You have seen him at my house, you know.'

'Ah, yes: one of your secret committee,' said Mrs Cadwallader, provokingly.

'A coursing fellow, though,' said Sir James, with a fox-hunter's disgust.

‘And one of those who suck the life out of the wretched handloom weavers in Tipton and Freshitt. That is how his family look so fair and sleek,’ said Mrs Cadwallader. ‘Those dark, purple-faced people are an excellent foil. Dear me, they are like a set of jugs! Do look at Humphrey: one might fancy him an ugly archangel towering above them in his white surplice.’

‘It's a solemn thing, though, a funeral,’ said Mr Brooke, ‘if you take it in that light, you know.’

‘But I am not taking it in that light. I can't wear my solemnity too often, else it will go to rags. It was time the old man died, and none of these people are sorry.’

‘How piteous!’ said Dorothea. ‘This funeral seems to me the most dismal thing I ever saw. It is a blot on the morning I cannot bear to think that any one should die and leave no love behind.’

She was going to say more, but she saw her husband enter and seat himself a little in the background. The difference his presence made to her was not always a happy one: she felt that he often inwardly objected to her speech.

‘Positively,’ exclaimed Mrs Cadwallader, ‘there is a new face come out from behind that broad man queerer than any of them: a little round head with bulging eyes - a sort of frog-face - do look. He must be of another blood, I think.’

‘Let me see!’ said Celia, with awakened curiosity, standing behind Mrs Cadwallader and leaning forward over her head. ‘Oh, what an odd face!’ Then with a quick change to another sort of surprised expression, she added, ‘Why, Dodo, you never told me that Mr Ladislaw was come again!’

Dorothea felt a shock of alarm: every one noticed her sudden paleness as she looked up immediately at her uncle, while Mr Casaubon looked at her.

‘He came with me, you know; he is my guest - puts up with me at the Grange,’ said Mr Brooke, in his easiest tone, nodding at Dorothea, as if the announcement were just what she might have expected. ‘And we have brought the picture at the top of the carriage. I knew you would be pleased with the surprise, Casaubon. There you are to the very life - as Aquinas, you know. Quite the right sort of thing. And you will hear young Ladislaw talk about it. He talks uncommonly well - points out this, that, and the other - knows art and everything of that kind - companionable, you know - is up with you in any track - what I've been wanting a long while.’

Mr Casaubon bowed with cold politeness, mastering his irritation, but only so far as to be silent. He remembered Will's letter quite as well as Dorothea did; he had noticed that it was not among the letters which had been reserved for him on his recovery, and secretly concluding that Dorothea had sent word to Will not to come to Lowick, he had shrunk with proud sensitiveness from ever recurring to the subject. He now inferred that she had asked her uncle to invite Will to the Grange; and she felt it impossible at that moment to enter into any explanation.

Mrs Cadwallader's eyes, diverted from the churchyard, saw a good deal of dumb show which was not so intelligible to her as she could have desired, and could not repress the question, 'Who is Mr Ladislaw?'

'A young relative of Mr Casaubon's,' said Sir James, promptly. His good-nature often made him quick and clear-seeing in personal matters, and he had divined from Dorothea's glance at her husband that there was some alarm in her mind.

'A very nice young fellow - Casaubon has done everything for him,' explained Mr Brooke. 'He repays your expense in him, Casaubon,' he went on, nodding encouragingly. 'I hope he will stay with me a long while and we shall make something of my documents. I have plenty of ideas and facts, you know, and I can see he is just the man to put them into shape - remembers what the right quotations are, omne tulit punctum, and that sort of thing - gives subjects a kind of turn. I invited him some time ago when you were ill, Casaubon; Dorothea said you couldn't have anybody in the house, you know, and she asked me to write.'

Poor Dorothea felt that every word of her uncle's was about as pleasant as a grain of sand in the eye to Mr Casaubon. It would be altogether unfitting now to explain that she had not wished her uncle to invite Will Ladislaw. She could not in the least make clear to herself the reasons for her husband's dislike to his presence - a dislike painfully impressed on her by the scene in the library; but she felt the unbecomingness of saying anything that might convey a notion of it to others. Mr Casaubon, indeed, had not thoroughly represented those mixed reasons to himself; irritated feeling with him, as with all of us, seeking rather for justification than for self-knowledge. But he wished to repress outward signs, and only Dorothea could discern the changes in her husband's face before he observed with more of dignified bending and sing-song than usual -

'You are exceedingly hospitable, my dear sir; and I owe you acknowledgments for exercising your hospitality towards a relative of mine.'

The funeral was ended now, and the churchyard was being cleared.

‘Now you can see him, Mrs Cadwallader,’ said Celia. ‘He is just like a miniature of Mr Casaubon's aunt that hangs in Dorothea's boudoir - quite nice-looking.’

‘A very pretty sprig,’ said Mrs Cadwallader, dryly. ‘What is your nephew to be, Mr Casaubon?’

‘Pardon me, he is not my nephew. He is my cousin.’

‘Well, you know,’ interposed Mr Brooke, ‘he is trying his wings. He is just the sort of young fellow to rise. I should be glad to give him an opportunity. He would make a good secretary, now, like Hobbes, Milton, Swift - that sort of man.’

‘I understand,’ said Mrs Cadwallader. ‘One who can write speeches.’

‘I'll fetch him in now, eh, Casaubon?’ said Mr Brooke. ‘He wouldn't come in till I had announced him, you know. And we'll go down and look at the picture. There you are to the life: a deep subtle sort of thinker with his fore-finger on the page, while Saint Bonaventure or somebody else, rather fat and florid, is looking up at the Trinity. Everything is symbolical, you know - the higher style of art: I like that up to a certain point, but not too far - it's rather straining to keep up with, you know. But you are at home in that, Casaubon. And your painter's flesh is good - solidity, transparency, everything of that sort. I went into that a great deal at one time. However, I'll go and fetch Ladislaw.’