

## Chapter XXXV

'Non, je ne comprends pas de plus charmant plaisir Que de voir d'heritiers une troupe affligee Le maintien interdit, et la mine allongee, Lire un long testament ou pales, etonnes On leur laisse un bonsoir avec un pied de nez. Pour voir au naturel leur tristesse profonde Je reviendrais, je crois, expres de l'autre monde.' - REGNARD: Le Legataire Universel.

When the animals entered the Ark in pairs, one may imagine that allied species made much private remark on each other, and were tempted to think that so many forms feeding on the same store of fodder were eminently superfluous, as tending to diminish the rations. (I fear the part played by the vultures on that occasion would be too painful for art to represent, those birds being disadvantageously naked about the gullet, and apparently without rites and ceremonies.)

The same sort of temptation befell the Christian Carnivora who formed Peter Featherstone's funeral procession; most of them having their minds bent on a limited store which each would have liked to get the most of. The long-recognized blood-relations and connections by marriage made already a goodly number, which, multiplied by possibilities, presented a fine range for jealous conjecture and pathetic hopefulness. Jealousy of the Vincys had created a fellowship in hostility among all persons of the Featherstone blood, so that in the absence of any decided indication that one of themselves was to have more than the rest, the dread lest that long-legged Fred Vincy should have the land was necessarily dominant, though it left abundant feeling and leisure for vaguer jealousies, such as were entertained towards Mary Garth. Solomon found time to reflect that Jonah was undeserving, and Jonah to abuse Solomon as greedy; Jane, the elder sister, held that Martha's children ought not to expect so much as the young Waules; and Martha, more lax on the subject of primogeniture, was sorry to think that Jane was so 'having.' These nearest of kin were naturally impressed with the unreasonableness of expectations in cousins and second cousins, and used their arithmetic in reckoning the large sums that small legacies might mount to, if there were too many of them. Two cousins were present to hear the will, and a second cousin besides Mr Trumbull. This second cousin was a Middlemarch mercer of polite manners and superfluous aspirates. The two cousins were elderly men from Brassing, one of them conscious of claims on the score of inconvenient expense sustained by him in presents of oysters and other eatables to his rich cousin Peter; the other entirely saturnine, leaning his hands and chin on a stick, and conscious of claims based on no narrow performance but on merit generally: both blameless citizens of Brassing, who wished that Jonah Featherstone did not live there. The wit of a family is usually best received among strangers.

'Why, Trumbull himself is pretty sure of five hundred - *that* you may depend, - I shouldn't wonder if my brother promised him,' said Solomon, musing aloud with his sisters, the evening before the funeral.

'Dear, dear!' said poor sister Martha, whose imagination of hundreds had been habitually narrowed to the amount of her unpaid rent.

But in the morning all the ordinary currents of conjecture were disturbed by the presence of a strange mourner who had plashed among them as if from the moon. This was the stranger described by Mrs Cadwallader as frog-faced: a man perhaps about two or three and thirty, whose prominent eyes, thin-lipped, downward-curved mouth, and hair sleekly brushed away from a forehead that sank suddenly above the ridge of the eyebrows, certainly gave his face a batrachian unchangeableness of expression. Here, clearly, was a new legatee; else why was he bidden as a mourner? Here were new possibilities, raising a new uncertainty, which almost checked remark in the mourning-coaches. We are all humiliated by the sudden discovery of a fact which has existed very comfortably and perhaps been staring at us in private while we have been making up our world entirely without it. No one had seen this questionable stranger before except Mary Garth, and she knew nothing more of him than that he had twice been to Stone Court when Mr Featherstone was down-stairs, and had sat alone with him for several hours. She had found an opportunity of mentioning this to her father, and perhaps Caleb's were the only eyes, except the lawyer's, which examined the stranger with more of inquiry than of disgust or suspicion. Caleb Garth, having little expectation and less cupidity, was interested in the verification of his own guesses, and the calmness with which he half smilingly rubbed his chin and shot intelligent glances much as if he were valuing a tree, made a fine contrast with the alarm or scorn visible in other faces when the unknown mourner, whose name was understood to be Rigg, entered the wainscoted parlor and took his seat near the door to make part of the audience when the will should be read. Just then Mr Solomon and Mr Jonah were gone up-stairs with the lawyer to search for the will; and Mrs Waule, seeing two vacant seats between herself and Mr Borthrop Trumbull, had the spirit to move next to that great authority, who was handling his watch-seals and trimming his outlines with a determination not to show anything so compromising to a man of ability as wonder or surprise.

'I suppose you know everything about what my poor brother's done, Mr Trumbull,' said Mrs Waule, in the lowest of her woolly tones, while she turned her crape-shadowed bonnet towards Mr Trumbull's ear.

'My good lady, whatever was told me was told in confidence,' said the auctioneer, putting his hand up to screen that secret.

'Them who've made sure of their good-luck may be disappointed yet,' Mrs Waule continued, finding some relief in this communication.

'Hopes are often delusive,' said Mr Trumbull, still in confidence.

'Ah!' said Mrs Waule, looking across at the Vincys, and then moving back to the side of her sister Martha.

'It's wonderful how close poor Peter was,' she said, in the same undertones. 'We none of us know what he might have had on his mind. I only hope and trust he wasn't a worse liver than we think of, Martha.'

Poor Mrs Cranch was bulky, and, breathing asthmatically, had the additional motive for making her remarks unexceptionable and giving them a general bearing, that even her whispers were loud and liable to sudden bursts like those of a deranged barrel-organ.

'I never *was* covetous, Jane,' she replied; 'but I have six children and have buried three, and I didn't marry into money. The eldest, that sits there, is but nineteen - so I leave you to guess. And stock always short, and land most awkward. But if ever I've begged and prayed; it's been to God above; though where there's one brother a bachelor and the other childless after twice marrying - anybody might think!'

Meanwhile, Mr Vincy had glanced at the passive face of Mr Rigg, and had taken out his snuff-box and tapped it, but had put it again unopened as an indulgence which, however clarifying to the judgment, was unsuited to the occasion. 'I shouldn't wonder if Featherstone had better feelings than any of us gave him credit for,' he observed, in the ear of his wife. 'This funeral shows a thought about everybody: it looks well when a man wants to be followed by his friends, and if they are humble, not to be ashamed of them. I should be all the better pleased if he'd left lots of small legacies. They may be uncommonly useful to fellows in a small way.'

'Everything is as handsome as could be, crape and silk and everything,' said Mrs Vincy, contentedly.

But I am sorry to say that Fred was under some difficulty in repressing a laugh, which would have been more unsuitable than his father's snuff-box. Fred had overheard Mr Jonah suggesting something about a 'love-child,' and with this thought in his mind, the stranger's face, which happened to be opposite him, affected him too ludicrously. Mary Garth, discerning his distress in the twitchings of his mouth, and his recourse to a cough, came cleverly to his rescue by asking him to change seats with her, so that he got into a shadowy corner. Fred was feeling as good-naturedly as possible towards

everybody, including Rigg; and having some relenting towards all these people who were less lucky than he was aware of being himself, he would not for the world have behaved amiss; still, it was particularly easy to laugh.

But the entrance of the lawyer and the two brothers drew every one's attention. The lawyer was Mr Standish, and he had come to Stone Court this morning believing that he knew thoroughly well who would be pleased and who disappointed before the day was over. The will he expected to read was the last of three which he had drawn up for Mr Featherstone. Mr Standish was not a man who varied his manners: he behaved with the same deep-voiced, off-hand civility to everybody, as if he saw no difference in them, and talked chiefly of the hay-crop, which would be 'very fine, by God!' of the last bulletins concerning the King, and of the Duke of Clarence, who was a sailor every inch of him, and just the man to rule over an island like Britain.

Old Featherstone had often reflected as he sat looking at the fire that Standish would be surprised some day: it is true that if he had done as he liked at the last, and burnt the will drawn up by another lawyer, he would not have secured that minor end; still he had had his pleasure in ruminating on it. And certainly Mr Standish was surprised, but not at all sorry; on the contrary, he rather enjoyed the zest of a little curiosity in his own mind, which the discovery of a second will added to the prospective amazement on the part of the Featherstone family.

As to the sentiments of Solomon and Jonah, they were held in utter suspense: it seemed to them that the old will would have a certain validity, and that there might be such an interlacement of poor Peter's former and latter intentions as to create endless 'lawing' before anybody came by their own - an inconvenience which would have at least the advantage of going all round. Hence the brothers showed a thoroughly neutral gravity as they re-entered with Mr Standish; but Solomon took out his white handkerchief again with a sense that in any case there would be affecting passages, and crying at funerals, however dry, was customarily served up in lawn.

Perhaps the person who felt the most throbbing excitement at this moment was Mary Garth, in the consciousness that it was she who had virtually determined the production of this second will, which might have momentous effects on the lot of some persons present. No soul except herself knew what had passed on that final night.

'The will I hold in my hand,' said Mr Standish, who, seated at the table in the middle of the room, took his time about everything, including the coughs with which he showed a disposition to clear his voice, 'was drawn up by myself and executed by our deceased friend

on the 9th of August, 1825. But I find that there is a subsequent instrument hitherto unknown to me, bearing date the 20th of July, 1826, hardly a year later than the previous one. And there is farther, I see' - Mr Standish was cautiously travelling over the document with his spectacles - 'a codicil to this latter will, bearing date March 1, 1828.'

'Dear, dear!' said sister Martha, not meaning to be audible, but driven to some articulation under this pressure of dates.

'I shall begin by reading the earlier will,' continued Mr Standish, 'since such, as appears by his not having destroyed the document, was the intention of deceased.'

The preamble was felt to be rather long, and several besides Solomon shook their heads pathetically, looking on the ground: all eyes avoided meeting other eyes, and were chiefly fixed either on the spots in the table-cloth or on Mr Standish's bald head; excepting Mary Garth's. When all the rest were trying to look nowhere in particular, it was safe for her to look at them. And at the sound of the first 'give and bequeath' she could see all complexions changing subtly, as if some faint vibration were passing through them, save that of Mr Rigg. He sat in unaltered calm, and, in fact, the company, preoccupied with more important problems, and with the complication of listening to bequests which might or might not be revoked, had ceased to think of him. Fred blushed, and Mr Vincy found it impossible to do without his snuff-box in his hand, though he kept it closed.

The small bequests came first, and even the recollection that there was another will and that poor Peter might have thought better of it, could not quell the rising disgust and indignation. One likes to be done well by in every tense, past, present, and future. And here was Peter capable five years ago of leaving only two hundred apiece to his own brothers and sisters, and only a hundred apiece to his own nephews and nieces: the Garths were not mentioned, but Mrs Vincy and Rosamond were each to have a hundred. Mr Trumbull was to have the gold-headed cane and fifty pounds; the other second cousins and the cousins present were each to have the like handsome sum, which, as the saturnine cousin observed, was a sort of legacy that left a man nowhere; and there was much more of such offensive dribbling in favor of persons not present - problematical, and, it was to be feared, low connections. Altogether, reckoning hastily, here were about three thousand disposed of. Where then had Peter meant the rest of the money to go - and where the land? and what was revoked and what not revoked - and was the revocation for better or for worse? All emotion must be conditional, and might turn out to be the wrong thing. The men were strong enough to bear up and keep quiet under this confused suspense; some letting their lower lip fall, others

pursing it up, according to the habit of their muscles. But Jane and Martha sank under the rush of questions, and began to cry; poor Mrs Cranch being half moved with the consolation of getting any hundreds at all without working for them, and half aware that her share was scanty; whereas Mrs Waule's mind was entirely flooded with the sense of being an own sister and getting little, while somebody else was to have much. The general expectation now was that the 'much' would fall to Fred Vincy, but the Vincys themselves were surprised when ten thousand pounds in specified investments were declared to be bequeathed to him: - was the land coming too? Fred bit his lips: it was difficult to help smiling, and Mrs Vincy felt herself the happiest of women - possible revocation shrinking out of sight in this dazzling vision.

There was still a residue of personal property as well as the land, but the whole was left to one person, and that person was - O possibilities! O expectations founded on the favor of 'close' old gentlemen! O endless vocatives that would still leave expression slipping helpless from the measurement of mortal folly! - that residuary legatee was Joshua Rigg, who was also sole executor, and who was to take thenceforth the name of Featherstone.

There was a rustling which seemed like a shudder running round the room. Every one stared afresh at Mr Rigg, who apparently experienced no surprise.

'A most singular testamentary disposition!' exclaimed Mr Trumbull, preferring for once that he should be considered ignorant in the past. 'But there is a second will - there is a further document. We have not yet heard the final wishes of the deceased.'

Mary Garth was feeling that what they had yet to hear were not the final wishes. The second will revoked everything except the legacies to the low persons before mentioned (some alterations in these being the occasion of the codicil), and the bequest of all the land lying in Lowick parish with all the stock and household furniture, to Joshua Rigg. The residue of the property was to be devoted to the erection and endowment of almshouses for old men, to be called Featherstone's Alms-Houses, and to be built on a piece of land near Middlemarch already bought for the purpose by the testator, he wishing - so the document declared - to please God Almighty. Nobody present had a farthing; but Mr Trumbull had the gold-headed cane. It took some time for the company to recover the power of expression. Mary dared not look at Fred.

Mr Vincy was the first to speak - after using his snuff-box energetically - and he spoke with loud indignation. 'The most unaccountable will I ever heard! I should say he was not in his right

mind when he made it. I should say this last will was void,' added Mr Vincy, feeling that this expression put the thing in the true light. 'Eh Standish?'

'Our deceased friend always knew what he was about, I think,' said Mr Standish. 'Everything is quite regular. Here is a letter from Clemmens of Brassing tied with the will. He drew it up. A very respectable solicitor.'

'I never noticed any alienation of mind - any aberration of intellect in the late Mr Featherstone,' said Borthrop Trumbull, 'but I call this will eccentric. I was always willingly of service to the old soul; and he intimated pretty plainly a sense of obligation which would show itself in his will. The gold-headed cane is farcical considered as an acknowledgment to me; but happily I am above mercenary considerations.'

'There's nothing very surprising in the matter that I can see,' said Caleb Garth. 'Anybody might have had more reason for wondering if the will had been what you might expect from an open-minded straightforward man. For my part, I wish there was no such thing as a will.'

'That's a strange sentiment to come from a Christian man, by God!' said the lawyer. 'I should like to know how you will back that up, Garth!'

'Oh,' said Caleb, leaning forward, adjusting his finger-tips with nicety and looking meditatively on the ground. It always seemed to him that words were the hardest part of 'business.'

But here Mr Jonah Featherstone made himself heard. 'Well, he always was a fine hypocrite, was my brother Peter. But this will cuts out everything. If I'd known, a wagon and six horses shouldn't have drawn me from Brassing. I'll put a white hat and drab coat on to-morrow.'

'Dear, dear,' wept Mrs Cranch, 'and we've been at the expense of travelling, and that poor lad sitting idle here so long! It's the first time I ever heard my brother Peter was so wishful to please God Almighty; but if I was to be struck helpless I must say it's hard - I can think no other.'

'It'll do him no good where he's gone, that's my belief,' said Solomon, with a bitterness which was remarkably genuine, though his tone could not help being sly. 'Peter was a bad liver, and almshouses won't cover it, when he's had the impudence to show it at the last.'

'And all the while had got his own lawful family - brothers and sisters and nephews and nieces - and has sat in church with 'em whenever he thought well to come,' said Mrs Waule. 'And might have left his property so respectable, to them that's never been used to extravagance or unsteadiness in no manner of way - and not so poor but what they could have saved every penny and made more of it. And me - the trouble I've been at, times and times, to come here and be sisterly - and him with things on his mind all the while that might make anybody's flesh creep. But if the Almighty's allowed it, he means to punish him for it. Brother Solomon, I shall be going, if you'll drive me.'

'I've no desire to put my foot on the premises again,' said Solomon. 'I've got land of my own and property of my own to will away.'

'It's a poor tale how luck goes in the world,' said Jonah. 'It never answers to have a bit of spirit in you. You'd better be a dog in the manger. But those above ground might learn a lesson. One fool's will is enough in a family.'

'There's more ways than one of being a fool,' said Solomon. 'I shan't leave my money to be poured down the sink, and I shan't leave it to foundlings from Africay. I like Feather, stones that were brewed such, and not turned Featherstones with sticking the name on 'em.'

Solomon addressed these remarks in a loud aside to Mrs Waule as he rose to accompany her. Brother Jonah felt himself capable of much more stinging wit than this, but he reflected that there was no use in offending the new proprietor of Stone Court, until you were certain that he was quite without intentions of hospitality towards witty men whose name he was about to bear.

Mr Joshua Rigg, in fact, appeared to trouble himself little about any innuendoes, but showed a notable change of manner, walking coolly up to Mr Standish and putting business questions with much coolness. He had a high chirping voice and a vile accent. Fred, whom he no longer moved to laughter, thought him the lowest monster he had ever seen. But Fred was feeling rather sick. The Middlemarch mercer waited for an opportunity of engaging Mr Rigg in conversation: there was no knowing how many pairs of legs the new proprietor might require hose for, and profits were more to be relied on than legacies. Also, the mercer, as a second cousin, was dispassionate enough to feel curiosity.

Mr Vincy, after his one outburst, had remained proudly silent, though too much preoccupied with unpleasant feelings to think of moving, till he observed that his wife had gone to Fred's side and was crying silently while she held her darling's hand. He rose immediately, and



turning his back on the company while he said to her in an undertone, - 'Don't give way, Lucy; don't make a fool of yourself, my dear, before these people,' he added in his usual loud voice - 'Go and order the phaeton, Fred; I have no time to waste.'

Mary Garth had before this been getting ready to go home with her father. She met Fred in the hall, and now for the first time had the courage to look at him. He had that withered sort of paleness which will sometimes come on young faces, and his hand was very cold when she shook it. Mary too was agitated; she was conscious that fatally, without will of her own, she had perhaps made a great difference to Fred's lot.

'Good-by,' she said, with affectionate sadness. 'Be brave, Fred. I do believe you are better without the money. What was the good of it to Mr Featherstone?'

'That's all very fine,' said Fred, pettishly. 'What is a fellow to do? I must go into the Church now.' (He knew that this would vex Mary: very well; then she must tell him what else he could do.) 'And I thought I should be able to pay your father at once and make everything right. And you have not even a hundred pounds left you. What shall you do now, Mary?'

'Take another situation, of course, as soon as I can get one. My father has enough to do to keep the rest, without me. Good-by.'

In a very short time Stone Court was cleared of well-brewed Featherstones and other long-accustomed visitors. Another stranger had been brought to settle in the neighborhood of Middlemarch, but in the case of Mr Rigg Featherstone there was more discontent with immediate visible consequences than speculation as to the effect which his presence might have in the future. No soul was prophetic enough to have any foreboding as to what might appear on the trial of Joshua Rigg.

And here I am naturally led to reflect on the means of elevating a low subject. Historical parallels are remarkably efficient in this way. The chief objection to them is, that the diligent narrator may lack space, or (what is often the same thing) may not be able to think of them with any degree of particularity, though he may have a philosophical confidence that if known they would be illustrative. It seems an easier and shorter way to dignity, to observe that - since there never was a true story which could not be told in parables, where you might put a monkey for a margrave, and vice versa - whatever has been or is to be narrated by me about low people, may be ennobled by being considered a parable; so that if any bad habits and ugly consequences are brought into view, the reader may have the relief of regarding them

as not more than figuratively ungentle, and may feel himself virtually in company with persons of some style. Thus while I tell the truth about loobies, my reader's imagination need not be entirely excluded from an occupation with lords; and the petty sums which any bankrupt of high standing would be sorry to retire upon, may be lifted to the level of high commercial transactions by the inexpensive addition of proportional ciphers.

As to any provincial history in which the agents are all of high moral rank, that must be of a date long posterior to the first Reform Bill, and Peter Featherstone, you perceive, was dead and buried some months before Lord Grey came into office.