

Chapter XL

Wise in his daily work was he: To fruits of diligence, And not to faiths or polity, He plied his utmost sense. These perfect in their little parts, Whose work is all their prize - Without them how could laws, or arts, Or towered cities rise?

In watching effects, if only of an electric battery, it is often necessary to change our place and examine a particular mixture or group at some distance from the point where the movement we are interested in was set up. The group I am moving towards is at Caleb Garth's breakfast-table in the large parlor where the maps and desk were: father, mother, and five of the children. Mary was just now at home waiting for a situation, while Christy, the boy next to her, was getting cheap learning and cheap fare in Scotland, having to his father's disappointment taken to books instead of that sacred calling 'business.'

The letters had come - nine costly letters, for which the postman had been paid three and twopence, and Mr Garth was forgetting his tea and toast while he read his letters and laid them open one above the other, sometimes swaying his head slowly, sometimes screwing up his mouth in inward debate, but not forgetting to cut off a large red seal unbroken, which Letty snatched up like an eager terrier.

The talk among the rest went on unrestrainedly, for nothing disturbed Caleb's absorption except shaking the table when he was writing.

Two letters of the nine had been for Mary. After reading them, she had passed them to her mother, and sat playing with her tea-spoon absently, till with a sudden recollection she returned to her sewing, which she had kept on her lap during breakfast.

'Oh, don't sew, Mary!' said Ben, pulling her arm down. 'Make me a peacock with this bread-crumbs.' He had been kneading a small mass for the purpose.

'No, no, Mischief!' said Mary, good-humoredly, while she pricked his hand lightly with her needle. 'Try and mould it yourself: you have seen me do it often enough. I must get this sewing done. It is for Rosamond Vincy: she is to be married next week, and she can't be married without this handkerchief.' Mary ended merrily, amused with the last notion.

'Why can't she, Mary?' said Letty, seriously interested in this mystery, and pushing her head so close to her sister that Mary now turned the threatening needle towards Letty's nose.

'Because this is one of a dozen, and without it there would only be eleven,' said Mary, with a grave air of explanation, so that Letty sank back with a sense of knowledge.

'Have you made up your mind, my dear?' said Mrs Garth, laying the letters down.

'I shall go to the school at York,' said Mary. 'I am less unfit to teach in a school than in a family. I like to teach classes best. And, you see, I must teach: there is nothing else to be done.'

'Teaching seems to me the most delightful work in the world,' said Mrs Garth, with a touch of rebuke in her tone. 'I could understand your objection to it if you had not knowledge enough, Mary, or if you disliked children.'

'I suppose we never quite understand why another dislikes what we like, mother,' said Mary, rather curtly. 'I am not fond of a schoolroom: I like the outside world better. It is a very inconvenient fault of mine.'

'It must be very stupid to be always in a girls' school,' said Alfred. 'Such a set of nincompoops, like Mrs Ballard's pupils walking two and two.'

'And they have no games worth playing at,' said Jim. 'They can neither throw nor leap. I don't wonder at Mary's not liking it.'

'What is that Mary doesn't like, eh?' said the father, looking over his spectacles and pausing before he opened his next letter.

'Being among a lot of nincompoop girls,' said Alfred.

'Is it the situation you had heard of, Mary?' said Caleb, gently, looking at his daughter.

'Yes, father: the school at York. I have determined to take it. It is quite the best. Thirty-five pounds a-year, and extra pay for teaching the smallest strummers at the piano.'

'Poor child! I wish she could stay at home with us, Susan,' said Caleb, looking plaintively at his wife.

'Mary would not be happy without doing her duty,' said Mrs Garth, magisterially, conscious of having done her own.

'It wouldn't make me happy to do such a nasty duty as that,' said Alfred - at which Mary and her father laughed silently, but Mrs Garth said, gravely -

'Do find a fitter word than nasty, my dear Alfred, for everything that you think disagreeable. And suppose that Mary could help you to go to Mr Hanmer's with the money she gets?'

'That seems to me a great shame. But she's an old brick,' said Alfred, rising from his chair, and pulling Mary's head backward to kiss her.

Mary colored and laughed, but could not conceal that the tears were coming. Caleb, looking on over his spectacles, with the angles of his eyebrows falling, had an expression of mingled delight and sorrow as he returned to the opening of his letter; and even Mrs Garth, her lips curling with a calm contentment, allowed that inappropriate language to pass without correction, although Ben immediately took it up, and sang, 'She's an old brick, old brick, old brick!' to a cantering measure, which he beat out with his fist on Mary's arm.

But Mrs Garth's eyes were now drawn towards her husband, who was already deep in the letter he was reading. His face had an expression of grave surprise, which alarmed her a little, but he did not like to be questioned while he was reading, and she remained anxiously watching till she saw him suddenly shaken by a little joyous laugh as he turned back to the beginning of the letter, and looking at her above his spectacles, said, in a low tone, 'What do you think, Susan?'

She went and stood behind him, putting her hand on his shoulder, while they read the letter together. It was from Sir James Chettam, offering to Mr Garth the management of the family estates at Freshitt and elsewhere, and adding that Sir James had been requested by Mr Brooke of Tipton to ascertain whether Mr Garth would be disposed at the same time to resume the agency of the Tipton property. The Baronet added in very obliging words that he himself was particularly desirous of seeing the Freshitt and Tipton estates under the same management, and he hoped to be able to show that the double agency might be held on terms agreeable to Mr Garth, whom he would be glad to see at the Hall at twelve o'clock on the following day.

'He writes handsomely, doesn't he, Susan?' said Caleb, turning his eyes upward to his wife, who raised her hand from his shoulder to his ear, while she rested her chin on his head. 'Brooke didn't like to ask me himself, I can see,' he continued, laughing silently.

'Here is an honor to your father, children,' said Mrs Garth, looking round at the five pair of eyes, all fixed on the parents. 'He is asked to take a post again by those who dismissed him long ago. That shows that he did his work well, so that they feel the want of him.'

'Like Cincinnatus - hooray!' said Ben, riding on his chair, with a pleasant confidence that discipline was relaxed.

'Will they come to fetch him, mother?' said Letty, thinking of the Mayor and Corporation in their robes.

Mrs Garth patted Letty's head and smiled, but seeing that her husband was gathering up his letters and likely soon to be out of reach in that sanctuary 'business,' she pressed his shoulder and said emphatically -

'Now, mind you ask fair pay, Caleb.'

'Oh yes,' said Caleb, in a deep voice of assent, as if it would be unreasonable to suppose anything else of him. 'It'll come to between four and five hundred, the two together.' Then with a little start of remembrance he said, 'Mary, write and give up that school. Stay and help your mother. I'm as pleased as Punch, now I've thought of that.'

No manner could have been less like that of Punch triumphant than Caleb's, but his talents did not lie in finding phrases, though he was very particular about his letter-writing, and regarded his wife as a treasury of correct language.

There was almost an uproar among the children now, and Mary held up the cambric embroidery towards her mother entreatingly, that it might be put out of reach while the boys dragged her into a dance. Mrs Garth, in placid joy, began to put the cups and plates together, while Caleb pushing his chair from the table, as if he were going to move to the desk, still sat holding his letters in his hand and looking on the ground meditatively, stretching out the fingers of his left hand, according to a mute language of his own. At last he said -

'It's a thousand pities Christy didn't take to business, Susan. I shall want help by-and-by. And Alfred must go off to the engineering - I've made up my mind to that.' He fell into meditation and finger-rhetoric again for a little while, and then continued: 'I shall make Brooke have new agreements with the tenants, and I shall draw up a rotation of crops. And I'll lay a wager we can get fine bricks out of the clay at Bott's corner. I must look into that: it would cheapen the repairs. It's a fine bit of work, Susan! A man without a family would be glad to do it for nothing.'

'Mind you don't, though,' said his wife, lifting up her finger.

'No, no; but it's a fine thing to come to a man when he's seen into the nature of business: to have the chance of getting a bit of the country into good fettle, as they say, and putting men into the right way with their farming, and getting a bit of good contriving and solid building done - that those who are living and those who come after will be the better for. I'd sooner have it than a fortune. I hold it the most

honorable work that is.' Here Caleb laid down his letters, thrust his fingers between the buttons of his waistcoat, and sat upright, but presently proceeded with some awe in his voice and moving his head slowly aside - 'It's a great gift of God, Susan.' 'That it is, Caleb,' said his wife, with answering fervor. 'And it will be a blessing to your children to have had a father who did such work: a father whose good work remains though his name may be forgotten.' She could not say any more to him than about the pay.

In the evening, when Caleb, rather tired with his day's work, was seated in silence with his pocket-book open on his knee, while Mrs Garth and Mary were at their sewing, and Letty in a corner was whispering a dialogue with her doll, Mr Farebrother came up the orchard walk, dividing the bright August lights and shadows with the tufted grass and the apple-tree boughs. We know that he was fond of his parishioners the Garths, and had thought Mary worth mentioning to Lydgate. He used to the full the clergyman's privilege of disregarding the Middlemarch discrimination of ranks, and always told his mother that Mrs Garth was more of a lady than any matron in the town. Still, you see, he spent his evenings at the Vincys', where the matron, though less of a lady, presided over a well-lit drawing-room and whist. In those days human intercourse was not determined solely by respect. But the Vicar did heartily respect the Garths, and a visit from him was no surprise to that family. Nevertheless he accounted for it even while he was shaking hands, by saying, 'I come as an envoy, Mrs Garth: I have something to say to you and Garth on behalf of Fred Vincy. The fact is, poor fellow,' he continued, as he seated himself and looked round with his bright glance at the three who were listening to him, 'he has taken me into his confidence.'

Mary's heart beat rather quickly: she wondered how far Fred's confidence had gone.

'We haven't seen the lad for months,' said Caleb. 'I couldn't think what was become of him.'

'He has been away on a visit,' said the Vicar, 'because home was a little too hot for him, and Lydgate told his mother that the poor fellow must not begin to study yet. But yesterday he came and poured himself out to me. I am very glad he did, because I have seen him grow up from a youngster of fourteen, and I am so much at home in the house that the children are like nephews and nieces to me. But it is a difficult case to advise upon. However, he has asked me to come and tell you that he is going away, and that he is so miserable about his debt to you, and his inability to pay, that he can't bear to come himself even to bid you good by.'

'Tell him it doesn't signify a farthing,' said Caleb, waving his hand. 'We've had the pinch and have got over it. And now I'm going to be as rich as a Jew.'

'Which means,' said Mrs Garth, smiling at the Vicar, 'that we are going to have enough to bring up the boys well and to keep Mary at home.'

'What is the treasure-trove?' said Mr Farebrother.

'I'm going to be agent for two estates, Freshitt and Tipton; and perhaps for a pretty little bit of land in Lowick besides: it's all the same family connection, and employment spreads like water if it's once set going. It makes me very happy, Mr Farebrother' - here Caleb threw back his head a little, and spread his arms on the elbows of his chair - 'that I've got an opportunity again with the letting of the land, and carrying out a notion or two with improvements. It's a most uncommonly cramping thing, as I've often told Susan, to sit on horseback and look over the hedges at the wrong thing, and not be able to put your hand to it to make it right. What people do who go into politics I can't think: it drives me almost mad to see mismanagement over only a few hundred acres.'

It was seldom that Caleb volunteered so long a speech, but his happiness had the effect of mountain air: his eyes were bright, and the words came without effort.

'I congratulate you heartily, Garth,' said the Vicar. 'This is the best sort of news I could have had to carry to Fred Vincy, for he dwelt a good deal on the injury he had done you in causing you to part with money - robbing you of it, he said - which you wanted for other purposes. I wish Fred were not such an idle dog; he has some very good points, and his father is a little hard upon him.'

'Where is he going?' said Mrs Garth, rather coldly.

'He means to try again for his degree, and he is going up to study before term. I have advised him to do that. I don't urge him to enter the Church - on the contrary. But if he will go and work so as to pass, that will be some guarantee that he has energy and a will; and he is quite at sea; he doesn't know what else to do. So far he will please his father, and I have promised in the mean time to try and reconcile Vincy to his son's adopting some other line of life. Fred says frankly he is not fit for a clergyman, and I would do anything I could to hinder a man from the fatal step of choosing the wrong profession. He quoted to me what you said, Miss Garth - do you remember it?' (Mr Farebrother used to say 'Mary' instead of 'Miss Garth,' but it was part of his delicacy to treat her with the more deference because, according to Mrs Vincy's phrase, she worked for her bread.)

Mary felt uncomfortable, but, determined to take the matter lightly, answered at once, 'I have said so many impertinent things to Fred - we are such old playfellows.'

'You said, according to him, that he would be one of those ridiculous clergymen who help to make the whole clergy ridiculous. Really, that was so cutting that I felt a little cut myself.'

Caleb laughed. 'She gets her tongue from you, Susan,' he said, with some enjoyment.

'Not its flippancy, father,' said Mary, quickly, fearing that her mother would be displeased. 'It is rather too bad of Fred to repeat my flippant speeches to Mr Farebrother.'

'It was certainly a hasty speech, my dear,' said Mrs Garth, with whom speaking evil of dignities was a high misdemeanor. 'We should not value our Vicar the less because there was a ridiculous curate in the next parish.'

'There's something in what she says, though,' said Caleb, not disposed to have Mary's sharpness undervalued. 'A bad workman of any sort makes his fellows mistrusted. Things hang together,' he added, looking on the floor and moving his feet uneasily with a sense that words were scantier than thoughts.

'Clearly,' said the Vicar, amused. 'By being contemptible we set men's minds, to the tune of contempt. I certainly agree with Miss Garth's view of the matter, whether I am condemned by it or not. But as to Fred Vincy, it is only fair he should be excused a little: old Featherstone's delusive behavior did help to spoil him. There was something quite diabolical in not leaving him a farthing after all. But Fred has the good taste not to dwell on that. And what he cares most about is having offended you, Mrs Garth; he supposes you will never think well of him again.'

'I have been disappointed in Fred,' said Mrs Garth, with decision. 'But I shall be ready to think well of him again when he gives me good reason to do so.'

At this point Mary went out of the room, taking Letty with her.

'Oh, we must forgive young people when they're sorry,' said Caleb, watching Mary close the door. 'And as you say, Mr Farebrother, there was the very devil in that old man.'

Now Mary's gone out, I must tell you a thing - it's only known to Susan and me, and you'll not tell it again. The old scoundrel wanted

Mary to burn one of the wills the very night he died, when she was sitting up with him by herself, and he offered her a sum of money that he had in the box by him if she would do it. But Mary, you understand, could do no such thing - would not be handling his iron chest, and so on. Now, you see, the will he wanted burnt was this last, so that if Mary had done what he wanted, Fred Vincy would have had ten thousand pounds. The old man did turn to him at the last. That touches poor Mary close; she couldn't help it - she was in the right to do what she did, but she feels, as she says, much as if she had knocked down somebody's property and broken it against her will, when she was rightfully defending herself. I feel with her, somehow, and if I could make any amends to the poor lad, instead of bearing him a grudge for the harm he did us, I should be glad to do it. Now, what is your opinion, sir? Susan doesn't agree with me. She says - tell what you say, Susan.'

'Mary could not have acted otherwise, even if she had known what would be the effect on Fred,' said Mrs Garth, pausing from her work, and looking at Mr Farebrother.

'And she was quite ignorant of it. It seems to me, a loss which falls on another because we have done right is not to lie upon our conscience.'

The Vicar did not answer immediately, and Caleb said, 'It's the feeling. The child feels in that way, and I feel with her. You don't mean your horse to tread on a dog when you're backing out of the way; but it goes through you, when it's done.'

'I am sure Mrs Garth would agree with you there,' said Mr Farebrother, who for some reason seemed more inclined to ruminate than to speak. 'One could hardly say that the feeling you mention about Fred is wrong - or rather, mistaken - though no man ought to make a claim on such feeling.'

'Well, well,' said Caleb, 'it's a secret. You will not tell Fred.'

'Certainly not. But I shall carry the other good news - that you can afford the loss he caused you.'

Mr Farebrother left the house soon after, and seeing Mary in the orchard with Letty, went to say good-by to her. They made a pretty picture in the western light which brought out the brightness of the apples on the old scant-leaved boughs - Mary in her lavender gingham and black ribbons holding a basket, while Letty in her well-worn nankin picked up the fallen apples. If you want to know more particularly how Mary looked, ten to one you will see a face like hers in the crowded street to-morrow, if you are there on the watch: she will not be among those daughters of Zion who are haughty, and walk

with stretched-out necks and wanton eyes, mincing as they go: let all those pass, and fix your eyes on some small plump brownish person of firm but quiet carriage, who looks about her, but does not suppose that anybody is looking at her. If she has a broad face and square brow, well-marked eyebrows and curly dark hair, a certain expression of amusement in her glance which her mouth keeps the secret of, and for the rest features entirely insignificant - take that ordinary but not disagreeable person for a portrait of Mary Garth. If you made her smile, she would show you perfect little teeth; if you made her angry, she would not raise her voice, but would probably say one of the bitterest things you have ever tasted the flavor of; if you did her a kindness, she would never forget it. Mary admired the keen-faced handsome little Vicar in his well-brushed threadbare clothes more than any man she had had the opportunity of knowing. She had never heard him say a foolish thing, though she knew that he did unwise ones; and perhaps foolish sayings were more objectionable to her than any of Mr Farebrother's unwise doings. At least, it was remarkable that the actual imperfections of the Vicar's clerical character never seemed to call forth the same scorn and dislike which she showed beforehand for the predicted imperfections of the clerical character sustained by Fred Vincy. These irregularities of judgment, I imagine, are found even in riper minds than Mary Garth's: our impartiality is kept for abstract merit and demerit, which none of us ever saw. Will any one guess towards which of those widely different men Mary had the peculiar woman's tenderness? - the one she was most inclined to be severe on, or the contrary?

'Have you any message for your old playfellow, Miss Garth?' said the Vicar, as he took a fragrant apple from the basket which she held towards him, and put it in his pocket. 'Something to soften down that harsh judgment? I am going straight to see him.'

'No,' said Mary, shaking her head, and smiling. 'If I were to say that he would not be ridiculous as a clergyman, I must say that he would be something worse than ridiculous. But I am very glad to hear that he is going away to work.'

'On the other hand, I am very glad to hear that *you* are not going away to work. My mother, I am sure, will be all the happier if you will come to see her at the vicarage: you know she is fond of having young people to talk to, and she has a great deal to tell about old times. You will really be doing a kindness.'

'I should like it very much, if I may,' said Mary. 'Everything seems too happy for me all at once. I thought it would always be part of my life to long for home, and losing that grievance makes me feel rather empty: I suppose it served instead of sense to fill up my mind?'

'May I go with you, Mary?' whispered Letty - a most inconvenient child, who listened to everything. But she was made exultant by having her chin pinched and her cheek kissed by Mr Farebrother - an incident which she narrated to her mother and father.

As the Vicar walked to Lowick, any one watching him closely might have seen him twice shrug his shoulders. I think that the rare Englishmen who have this gesture are never of the heavy type - for fear of any lumbering instance to the contrary, I will say, hardly ever; they have usually a fine temperament and much tolerance towards the smaller errors of men (themselves inclusive). The Vicar was holding an inward dialogue in which he told himself that there was probably something more between Fred and Mary Garth than the regard of old playfellows, and replied with a question whether that bit of womanhood were not a great deal too choice for that crude young gentleman. The rejoinder to this was the first shrug. Then he laughed at himself for being likely to have felt jealous, as if he had been a man able to marry, which, added he, it is as clear as any balance-sheet that I am not. Whereupon followed the second shrug.

What could two men, so different from each other, see in this 'brown patch,' as Mary called herself? It was certainly not her plainness that attracted them (and let all plain young ladies be warned against the dangerous encouragement given them by Society to confide in their want of beauty). A human being in this aged nation of ours is a very wonderful whole, the slow creation of long interchanging influences: and charm is a result of two such wholes, the one loving and the one loved.

When Mr and Mrs Garth were sitting alone, Caleb said, 'Susan, guess what I'm thinking of.'

'The rotation of crops,' said Mrs Garth, smiling at him, above her knitting, 'or else the back-doors of the Tipton cottages.'

'No,' said Caleb, gravely; 'I am thinking that I could do a great turn for Fred Vincy. Christy's gone, Alfred will be gone soon, and it will be five years before Jim is ready to take to business. I shall want help, and Fred might come in and learn the nature of things and act under me, and it might be the making of him into a useful man, if he gives up being a parson. What do you think?'

'I think, there is hardly anything honest that his family would object to more,' said Mrs Garth, decidedly.

'What care I about their objecting?' said Caleb, with a sturdiness which he was apt to show when he had an opinion. 'The lad is of age and must get his bread. He has sense enough and quickness enough;

he likes being on the land, and it's my belief that he could learn business well if he gave his mind to it.'

'But would he? His father and mother wanted him to be a fine gentleman, and I think he has the same sort of feeling himself. They all think us beneath them. And if the proposal came from you, I am sure Mrs Vincy would say that we wanted Fred for Mary.'

'Life is a poor tale, if it is to be settled by nonsense of that sort,' said Caleb, with disgust.

'Yes, but there is a certain pride which is proper, Caleb.'

'I call it improper pride to let fools' notions hinder you from doing a good action. There's no sort of work,' said Caleb, with fervor, putting out his hand and moving it up and down to mark his emphasis, 'that could ever be done well, if you minded what fools say. You must have it inside you that your plan is right, and that plan you must follow.'

'I will not oppose any plan you have set your mind on, Caleb,' said Mrs Garth, who was a firm woman, but knew that there were some points on which her mild husband was yet firmer. 'Still, it seems to be fixed that Fred is to go back to college: will it not be better to wait and see what he will choose to do after that? It is not easy to keep people against their will. And you are not yet quite sure enough of your own position, or what you will want.'

'Well, it may be better to wait a bit. But as to my getting plenty of work for two, I'm pretty sure of that. I've always had my hands full with scattered things, and there's always something fresh turning up. Why, only yesterday - bless me, I don't think I told you! - it was rather odd that two men should have been at me on different sides to do the same bit of valuing. And who do you think they were?' said Caleb, taking a pinch of snuff and holding it up between his fingers, as if it were a part of his exposition. He was fond of a pinch when it occurred to him, but he usually forgot that this indulgence was at his command.

His wife held down her knitting and looked attentive.

'Why, that Rigg, or Rigg Featherstone, was one. But Bulstrode was before him, so I'm going to do it for Bulstrode. Whether it's mortgage or purchase they're going for, I can't tell yet.'

'Can that man be going to sell the land just left him - which he has taken the name for?' said Mrs Garth.

'Deuce knows,' said Caleb, who never referred the knowledge of discreditable doings to any higher power than the deuce. 'But Bulstrode has long been wanting to get a handsome bit of land under his fingers - that I know. And it's a difficult matter to get, in this part of the country.'

Caleb scattered his snuff carefully instead of taking it, and then added, 'The ins and outs of things are curious. Here is the land they've been all along expecting for Fred, which it seems the old man never meant to leave him a foot of, but left it to this side-slip of a son that he kept in the dark, and thought of his sticking there and vexing everybody as well as he could have vexed 'em himself if he could have kept alive. I say, it would be curious if it got into Bulstrode's hands after all. The old man hated him, and never would bank with him.'

'What reason could the miserable creature have for hating a man whom he had nothing to do with?' said Mrs Garth.

'Pooh! where's the use of asking for such fellows' reasons? The soul of man,' said Caleb, with the deep tone and grave shake of the head which always came when he used this phrase - 'The soul of man, when it gets fairly rotten, will bear you all sorts of poisonous toadstools, and no eye can see whence came the seed thereof.'

It was one of Caleb's quaintnesses, that in his difficulty of finding speech for his thought, he caught, as it were, snatches of diction which he associated with various points of view or states of mind; and whenever he had a feeling of awe, he was haunted by a sense of Biblical phraseology, though he could hardly have given a strict quotation.