BOOK V. THE DEAD HAND

Chapter XLIII

This figure hath high price: 'twas wrought with love Ages ago in finest ivory; Nought modish in it, pure and noble lines Of generous womanhood that fits all time That too is costly ware; majolica Of deft design, to please a lordly eye: The smile, you see, is perfect - wonderful As mere Faience! a table ornament To suit the richest mounting.'

Dorothea seldom left home without her husband, but she did occasionally drive into Middlemarch alone, on little errands of shopping or charity such as occur to every lady of any wealth when she lives within three miles of a town. Two days after that scene in the Yew-tree Walk, she determined to use such an opportunity in order if possible to see Lydgate, and learn from him whether her husband had really felt any depressing change of symptoms which he was concealing from her, and whether he had insisted on knowing the utmost about himself. She felt almost guilty in asking for knowledge about him from another, but the dread of being without it - the dread of that ignorance which would make her unjust or hard - overcame every scruple. That there had been some crisis in her husband's mind she was certain: he had the very next day begun a new method of arranging his notes, and had associated her quite newly in carrying out his plan. Poor Dorothea needed to lay up stores of patience.

It was about four o'clock when she drove to Lydgate's house in Lowick Gate, wishing, in her immediate doubt of finding him at home, that she had written beforehand. And he was not at home.

'Is Mrs Lydgate at home?' said Dorothea, who had never, that she knew of, seen Rosamond, but now remembered the fact of the marriage. Yes, Mrs Lydgate was at home.

'I will go in and speak to her, if she will allow me. Will you ask her if she can see me - see Mrs Casaubon, for a few minutes?'

When the servant had gone to deliver that message, Dorothea could hear sounds of music through an open window - a few notes from a man's voice and then a piano bursting into roulades. But the roulades broke off suddenly, and then the servant came back saying that Mrs Lydgate would be happy to see Mrs Casaubon.

When the drawing-room door opened and Dorothea entered, there was a sort of contrast not infrequent in country life when the habits of the different ranks were less blent than now. Let those who know, tell us exactly what stuff it was that Dorothea wore in those days of mild

autumn - that thin white woollen stuff soft to the touch and soft to the eye. It always seemed to have been lately washed, and to smell of the sweet hedges - was always in the shape of a pelisse with sleeves hanging all out of the fashion. Yet if she had entered before a still audience as Imogene or Cato's daughter, the dress might have seemed right enough: the grace and dignity were in her limbs and neck; and about her simply parted hair and candid eyes the large round poke which was then in the fate of women, seemed no more odd as a head-dress than the gold trencher we call a halo. By the present audience of two persons, no dramatic heroine could have been expected with more interest than Mrs Casaubon. To Rosamond she was one of those county divinities not mixing with Middlemarch mortality, whose slightest marks of manner or appearance were worthy of her study; moreover, Rosamond was not without satisfaction that Mrs Casaubon should have an opportunity of studying *her*. What is the use of being exquisite if you are not seen by the best judges? and since Rosamond had received the highest compliments at Sir Godwin Lydgate's, she felt quite confident of the impression she must make on people of good birth. Dorothea put out her hand with her usual simple kindness, and looked admiringly at Lydgate's lovely bride - aware that there was a gentleman standing at a distance, but seeing him merely as a coated figure at a wide angle. The gentleman was too much occupied with the presence of the one woman to reflect on the contrast between the two - a contrast that would certainly have been striking to a calm observer. They were both tall, and their eyes were on a level; but imagine Rosamond's infantine blondness and wondrous crown of hair-plaits, with her pale-blue dress of a fit and fashion so perfect that no dressmaker could look at it without emotion, a large embroidered collar which it was to be hoped all beholders would know the price of, her small hands duly set off with rings, and that controlled self-consciousness of manner which is the expensive substitute for simplicity.

'Thank you very much for allowing me to interrupt you,' said Dorothea, immediately. 'I am anxious to see Mr Lydgate, if possible, before I go home, and I hoped that you might possibly tell me where I could find him, or even allow me to wait for him, if you expect him soon.'

'He is at the New Hospital,' said Rosamond; 'I am not sure how soon he will come home. But I can send for him,'

'Will you let me go and fetch him?' said Will Ladislaw, coming forward. He had already taken up his hat before Dorothea entered. She colored with surprise, but put out her hand with a smile of unmistakable pleasure, saying -

'I did not know it was you: I had no thought of seeing you here.'

‘May I go to the Hospital and tell Mr Lydgate that you wish to see him?’ said Will.

‘It would be quicker to send the carriage for him,’ said Dorothea, ‘if you will be kind enough to give the message to the coachman.’

Will was moving to the door when Dorothea, whose mind had flashed in an instant over many connected memories, turned quickly and said, ‘I will go myself, thank you. I wish to lose no time before getting home again. I will drive to the Hospital and see Mr Lydgate there. Pray excuse me, Mrs Lydgate. I am very much obliged to you.’

Her mind was evidently arrested by some sudden thought, and she left the room hardly conscious of what was immediately around her - hardly conscious that Will opened the door for her and offered her his arm to lead her to the carriage. She took the arm but said nothing. Will was feeling rather vexed and miserable, and found nothing to say on his side. He handed her into the carriage in silence, they said good-by, and Dorothea drove away.

In the five minutes' drive to the Hospital she had time for some reflections that were quite new to her. Her decision to go, and her preoccupation in leaving the room, had come from the sudden sense that there would be a sort of deception in her voluntarily allowing any further intercourse between herself and Will which she was unable to mention to her husband, and already her errand in seeking Lydgate was a matter of concealment. That was all that had been explicitly in her mind; but she had been urged also by a vague discomfort. Now that she was alone in her drive, she heard the notes of the man's voice and the accompanying piano, which she had not noted much at the time, returning on her inward sense; and she found herself thinking with some wonder that Will Ladislaw was passing his time with Mrs Lydgate in her husband's absence. And then she could not help remembering that he had passed some time with her under like circumstances, so why should there be any unfitness in the fact? But Will was Mr Casaubon's relative, and one towards whom she was bound to show kindness. Still there had been signs which perhaps she ought to have understood as implying that Mr Casaubon did not like his cousin's visits during his own absence. ‘Perhaps I have been mistaken in many things,’ said poor Dorothea to herself, while the tears came rolling and she had to dry them quickly. She felt confusedly unhappy, and the image of Will which had been so clear to her before was mysteriously spoiled. But the carriage stopped at the gate of the Hospital. She was soon walking round the grass plots with Lydgate, and her feelings recovered the strong bent which had made her seek for this interview.

Will Ladislaw, meanwhile, was mortified, and knew the reason of it clearly enough. His chances of meeting Dorothea were rare; and here for the first time there had come a chance which had set him at a disadvantage. It was not only, as it had been hitherto, that she was not supremely occupied with him, but that she had seen him under circumstances in which he might appear not to be supremely occupied with her. He felt thrust to a new distance from her, amongst the circles of Middlemarchers who made no part of her life. But that was not his fault: of course, since he had taken his lodgings in the town, he had been making as many acquaintances as he could, his position requiring that he should know everybody and everything. Lydgate was really better worth knowing than any one else in the neighborhood, and he happened to have a wife who was musical and altogether worth calling upon. Here was the whole history of the situation in which Diana had descended too unexpectedly on her worshipper. It was mortifying. Will was conscious that he should not have been at Middlemarch but for Dorothea; and yet his position there was threatening to divide him from her with those barriers of habitual sentiment which are more fatal to the persistence of mutual interest than all the distance between Rome and Britain. Prejudices about rank and status were easy enough to defy in the form of a tyrannical letter from Mr Casaubon; but prejudices, like odorous bodies, have a double existence both solid and subtle - solid as the pyramids, subtle as the twentieth echo of an echo, or as the memory of hyacinths which once scented the darkness. And Will was of a temperament to feel keenly the presence of subtleties: a man of clumsier perceptions would not have felt, as he did, that for the first time some sense of unfitness in perfect freedom with him had sprung up in Dorothea's mind, and that their silence, as he conducted her to the carriage, had had a chill in it. Perhaps Casaubon, in his hatred and jealousy, had been insisting to Dorothea that Will had slid below her socially. Confound Casaubon!

Will re-entered the drawing-room, took up his hat, and looking irritated as he advanced towards Mrs Lydgate, who had seated herself at her work-table, said -

'It is always fatal to have music or poetry interrupted. May I come another day and just finish about the rendering of `Lungi dal caro bene'?'

'I shall be happy to be taught,' said Rosamond. 'But I am sure you admit that the interruption was a very beautiful one. I quite envy your acquaintance with Mrs Casaubon. Is she very clever? She looks as if she were.'

'Really, I never thought about it,' said Will, sulkily.

'That is just the answer Tertius gave me, when I first asked him if she were handsome. What is it that you gentlemen are thinking of when you are with Mrs Casaubon?'

'Herself,' said Will, not indisposed to provoke the charming Mrs Lydgate. 'When one sees a perfect woman, one never thinks of her attributes - one is conscious of her presence.'

'I shall be jealous when Tertius goes to Lowick,' said Rosamond, dimpling, and speaking with aery lightness. 'He will come back and think nothing of me.'

'That does not seem to have been the effect on Lydgate hitherto. Mrs Casaubon is too unlike other women for them to be compared with her.'

'You are a devout worshipper, I perceive. You often see her, I suppose.'

'No,' said Will, almost pettishly. 'Worship is usually a matter of theory rather than of practice. But I am practising it to excess just at this moment - I must really tear myself away.

'Pray come again some evening: Mr Lydgate will like to hear the music, and I cannot enjoy it so well without him.'

When her husband was at home again, Rosamond said, standing in front of him and holding his coat-collar with both her hands, 'Mr Ladislaw was here singing with me when Mrs Casaubon came in. He seemed vexed. Do you think he disliked her seeing him at our house? Surely your position is more than equal to his - whatever may be his relation to the Casaubons.'

'No, no; it must be something else if he were really vexed, Ladislaw is a sort of gypsy; he thinks nothing of leather and prunella.'

'Music apart, he is not always very agreeable. Do you like him?'

'Yes: I think he is a good fellow: rather miscellaneous and bric-a-brac, but likable.'

'Do you know, I think he adores Mrs Casaubon.'

'Poor devil!' said Lydgate, smiling and pinching his wife's ears.

Rosamond felt herself beginning to know a great deal of the world, especially in discovering what when she was in her unmarried girlhood had been inconceivable to her except as a dim tragedy in by-gone costumes - that women, even after marriage, might make

conquests and enslave men. At that time young ladies in the country, even when educated at Mrs Lemon's, read little French literature later than Racine, and public prints had not cast their present magnificent illumination over the scandals of life. Still, vanity, with a woman's whole mind and day to work in, can construct abundantly on slight hints, especially on such a hint as the possibility of indefinite conquests. How delightful to make captives from the throne of marriage with a husband as crown-prince by your side - himself in fact a subject - while the captives look up forever hopeless, losing their rest probably, and if their appetite too, so much the better! But Rosamond's romance turned at present chiefly on her crown-prince, and it was enough to enjoy his assured subjection. When he said, 'Poor devil!' she asked, with playful curiosity -

'Why so?'

'Why, what can a man do when he takes to adoring one of you mermaids? He only neglects his work and runs up bills.'

'I am sure you do not neglect your work. You are always at the Hospital, or seeing poor patients, or thinking about some doctor's quarrel; and then at home you always want to pore over your microscope and phials. Confess you like those things better than me.'

'Haven't you ambition enough to wish that your husband should be something better than a Middlemarch doctor?' said Lydgate, letting his hands fall on to his wife's shoulders, and looking at her with affectionate gravity. 'I shall make you learn my favorite bit from an old poet -

`Why should our pride make such a stir to be And be forgot? What good is like to this, To do worthy the writing, and to write Worthy the reading and the worlds delight?'

What I want, Rosy, is to do worthy the writing, - and to write out myself what I have done. A man must work, to do that, my pet.'

'Of course, I wish you to make discoveries: no one could more wish you to attain a high position in some better place than Middlemarch. You cannot say that I have ever tried to hinder you from working. But we cannot live like hermits. You are not discontented with me, Tertius?'

'No, dear, no. I am too entirely contented.'

'But what did Mrs Casaubon want to say to you?'

‘Merely to ask about her husband's health. But I think she is going to be splendid to our New Hospital: I think she will give us two hundred a-year.’