Chapter XLVI

Pues no podemos haber aquello que queremos, queramos aquello que podremos.

Since we cannot get what we like, let us like what we can get. - Spanish Proverb.

While Lydgate, safely married and with the Hospital under his command, felt himself struggling for Medical Reform against Middlemarch, Middlemarch was becoming more and more conscious of the national struggle for another kind of Reform.

By the time that Lord John Russell's measure was being debated in the House of Commons, there was a new political animation in Middlemarch, and a new definition of parties which might show a decided change of balance if a new election came. And there were some who already predicted this event, declaring that a Reform Bill would never be carried by the actual Parliament. This was what Will Ladislaw dwelt on to Mr Brooke as a reason for congratulation that he had not yet tried his strength at the hustings.

'Things will grow and ripen as if it were a comet year,' said Will. 'The public temper will soon get to a cometary heat, now the question of Reform has set in. There is likely to be another election before long, and by that time Middlemarch will have got more ideas into its head. What we have to work at now is the `Pioneer' and political meetings.'

'Quite right, Ladislaw; we shall make a new thing of opinion here,' said Mr Brooke. 'Only I want to keep myself independent about Reform, you know; I don't want to go too far. I want to take up. Wilberforce's and Romilly's line, you know, and work at Negro Emancipation, Criminal Law - that kind of thing. But of course I should support Grey.'

'If you go in for the principle of Reform, you must be prepared to take what the situation offers,' said Will. 'If everybody pulled for his own bit against everybody else, the whole question would go to tatters.'

'Yes, yes, I agree with you - I quite take that point of view. I should put it in that light. I should support Grey, you know. But I don't want to change the balance of the constitution, and I don't think Grey would.'

'But that is what the country wants,'-said Will. 'Else there would be no meaning in political unions or any other movement that knows what it's about. It wants to have a House of Commons which is not weighted with nominees of the landed class, but with representatives of the other interests. And as to contending for a reform short of that,

it is like asking for a bit of an avalanche which has already begun to thunder.'

'That is fine, Ladislaw: that is the way to put it. Write that down, now. We must begin to get documents about the feeling of the country, as well as the machine-breaking and general distress.'

'As to documents,' said Will, 'a two-inch card will hold plenty. A few rows of figures are enough to deduce misery from, and a few more will show the rate at which the political determination of the people is growing.'

'Good: draw that out a little more at length, Ladislaw. That is an idea, now: write it out in the `Pioneer.' Put the figures and deduce the misery, you know; and put the other figures and deduce - and so on. You have a way of putting things. Burke, now: - when I think of Burke, I can't help wishing somebody had a pocket-borough to give you, Ladislaw. You'd never get elected, you know. And we shall always want talent in the House: reform as we will, we shall always want talent. That avalanche and the thunder, now, was really a little like Burke. I want that sort of thing - not ideas, you know, but a way of putting them.'

'Pocket-boroughs would be a fine thing,' said Ladislaw, 'if they were always in the right pocket, and there were always a Burke at hand.'

Will was not displeased with that complimentary comparison, even from Mr Brooke; for it is a little too trying to human flesh to be conscious of expressing one's self better than others and never to have it noticed, and in the general dearth of admiration for the right thing, even a chance bray of applause falling exactly in time is rather fortifying. Will felt that his literary refinements were usually beyond the limits of Middlemarch perception; nevertheless, he was beginning thoroughly to like the work of which when he began he had said to himself rather languidly, 'Why not?' - and he studied the political situation with as ardent an interest as he had ever given to poetic metres or mediaevalism. It is undeniable that but for the desire to be where Dorothea was, and perhaps the want of knowing what else to do, Will would not at this time have been meditating on the needs of the English people or criticising English statesmanship: he would probably have been rambling in Italy sketching plans for several dramas, trying prose and finding it too jejune, trying verse and finding it too artificial, beginning to copy 'bits' from old pictures, leaving off because they were 'no good,' and observing that, after all, self-culture was the principal point; while in politics he would have been sympathizing warmly with liberty and progress in general. Our sense of duty must often wait for some work which shall take the place of

dilettanteism and make us feel that the quality of our action is not a matter of indifference.

Ladislaw had now accepted his bit of work, though it was not that indeterminate loftiest thing which he had once dreamed of as alone worthy of continuous effort. His nature warmed easily in the presence of subjects which were visibly mixed with life and action, and the easily stirred rebellion in him helped the glow of public spirit. In spite of Mr Casaubon and the banishment from Lowick, he was rather happy; getting a great deal of fresh knowledge in a vivid way and for practical purposes, and making the 'Pioneer' celebrated as far as Brassing (never mind the smallness of the area; the writing was not worse than much that reaches the four corners of the earth).

Mr Brooke was occasionally irritating; but Will's impatience was relieved by the division of his time between visits to the Grange and retreats to his Middlemarch lodgings, which gave variety to his life.

'Shift the pegs a little,' he said to himself, 'and Mr Brooke might be in the Cabinet, while I was Under-Secretary. That is the common order of things: the little waves make the large ones and are of the same pattern. I am better here than in the sort of life Mr Casaubon would have trained me for, where the doing would be all laid down by a precedent too rigid for me to react upon. I don't care for prestige or high pay.'

As Lydgate had said of him, he was a sort of gypsy, rather enjoying the sense of belonging to no class; he had a feeling of romance in his position, and a pleasant consciousness of creating a little surprise wherever he went. That sort of enjoyment had been disturbed when he had felt some new distance between himself and Dorothea in their accidental meeting at Lydgate's, and his irritation had gone out towards Mr Casaubon, who had declared beforehand that Will would lose caste. 'I never had any caste,' he would have said, if that prophecy had been uttered to him, and the quick blood would have come and gone like breath in his transparent skin. But it is one thing to like defiance, and another thing to like its consequences.

Meanwhile, the town opinion about the new editor of the 'Pioneer' was tending to confirm Mr Casaubon's view. Will's relationship in that distinguished quarter did not, like Lydgate's high connections, serve as an advantageous introduction: if it was rumored that young Ladislaw was Mr Casaubon's nephew or cousin, it was also rumored that 'Mr Casaubon would have nothing to do with him.'

'Brooke has taken him up,' said Mr Hawley, 'because that is what no man in his senses could have expected. Casaubon has devilish good reasons, you may be sure, for turning the cold shoulder on a young

fellow whose bringing-up he paid for. Just like Brooke - one of those fellows who would praise a cat to sell a horse.'

And some oddities of Will's, more or less poetical, appeared to support Mr Keck, the editor of the 'Trumpet,' in asserting that Ladislaw, if the truth were known, was not only a Polish emissary but crack-brained, which accounted for the preternatural quickness and glibness of his speech when he got on to a platform - as he did whenever he had an opportunity, speaking with a facility which cast reflections on solid Englishmen generally. It was disgusting to Keck to see a strip of a fellow, with light curls round his head, get up and speechify by the hour against institutions 'which had existed when he was in his cradle.' And in a leading article of the 'Trumpet,' Keck characterized Ladislaw's speech at a Reform meeting as 'the violence of an energumen - a miserable effort to shroud in the brilliancy of fireworks the daring of irresponsible statements and the poverty of a knowledge which was of the cheapest and most recent description.'

'That was a rattling article yesterday, Keck,' said Dr. Sprague, with sarcastic intentions. 'But what is an energumen?'

'Oh, a term that came up in the French Revolution,' said Keck.

This dangerous aspect of Ladislaw was strangely contrasted with other habits which became matter of remark. He had a fondness, half artistic, half affectionate, for little children - the smaller they were on tolerably active legs, and the funnier their clothing, the better Will liked to surprise and please them. We know that in Rome he was given to ramble about among the poor people, and the taste did not quit him in Middlemarch.

He had somehow picked up a troop of droll children, little hatless boys with their galligaskins much worn and scant shirting to hang out, little girls who tossed their hair out of their eyes to look at him, and guardian brothers at the mature age of seven. This troop he had led out on gypsy excursions to Halsell Wood at nutting-time, and since the cold weather had set in he had taken them on a clear day to gather sticks for a bonfire in the hollow of a hillside, where he drew out a small feast of gingerbread for them, and improvised a Punch-and-Judy drama with some private home-made puppets. Here was one oddity. Another was, that in houses where he got friendly, he was given to stretch himself at full length on the rug while he talked, and was apt to be discovered in this attitude by occasional callers for whom such an irregularity was likely to confirm the notions of his dangerously mixed blood and general laxity.

But Will's articles and speeches naturally recommended him in families which the new strictness of party division had marked off on

the side of Reform. He was invited to Mr Bulstrode's; but here he could not lie down on the rug, and Mrs Bulstrode felt that his mode of talking about Catholic countries, as if there were any truce with Antichrist, illustrated the usual tendency to unsoundness in intellectual men.

At Mr Farebrother's, however, whom the irony of events had brought on the same side with Bulstrode in the national movement, Will became a favorite with the ladies; especially with little Miss Noble, whom it was one of his oddities to escort when he met her in the street with her little basket, giving her his arm in the eyes of the town, and insisting on going with her to pay some call where she distributed her small filchings from her own share of sweet things.

But the house where he visited oftenest and lay most on the rug was Lydgate's. The two men were not at all alike, but they agreed none the worse. Lydgate was abrupt but not irritable, taking little notice of megrims in healthy people; and Ladislaw did not usually throw away his susceptibilities on those who took no notice of them. With Rosamond, on the other hand, he pouted and was wayward - nay, often uncomplimentary, much to her inward surprise; nevertheless he was gradually becoming necessary to her entertainment by his companionship in her music, his varied talk, and his freedom from the grave preoccupation which, with all her husband's tenderness and indulgence, often made his manners unsatisfactory to her, and confirmed her dislike of the medical profession.

Lydgate, inclined to be sarcastic on the superstitious faith of the people in the efficacy of 'the bill,' while nobody cared about the low state of pathology, sometimes assailed Will with troublesome questions. One evening in March, Rosamond in her cherry-colored dress with swansdown trimming about the throat sat at the tea-table; Lydgate, lately come in tired from his outdoor work, was seated sideways on an easy-chair by the fire with one leg over the elbow, his brow looking a little troubled as his eyes rambled over the columns of the 'Pioneer,' while Rosamond, having noticed that he was perturbed, avoided looking at him, and inwardly thanked heaven that she herself had not a moody disposition. Will Ladislaw was stretched on the rug contemplating the curtain-pole abstractedly, and humming very low the notes of 'When first I saw thy face;' while the house spaniel, also stretched out with small choice of room, looked from between his paws at the usurper of the rug with silent but strong objection.

Rosamond bringing Lydgate his cup of tea, he threw down the paper, and said to Will, who had started up and gone to the table -

'It's no use your puffing Brooke as a reforming landlord, Ladislaw: they only pick the more holes in his coat in the `Trumpet.'‘

‘No matter; those who read the `Pioneer' don't read the `Trumpet,'‘ said Will, swallowing his tea and walking about. ‘Do you suppose the public reads with a view to its own conversion? We should have a witches' brewing with a vengeance then - `Mingle, mingle, mingle, mingle, You that mingle may' - and nobody would know which side he was going to take.’

‘Farebrother says, he doesn't believe Brooke would get elected if the opportunity came: the very men who profess to be for him would bring another member out of the bag at the right moment.’

‘There's no harm in trying. It's good to have resident members.’

‘Why?’ said Lydgate, who was much given to use that inconvenient word in a curt tone.

‘They represent the local stupidity better,’ said Will, laughing, and shaking his curls; ‘and they are kept on their best behavior in the neighborhood. Brooke is not a bad fellow, but he has done some good things on his estate that he never would have done but for this Parliamentary bite.’

‘He's not fitted to be a public man,’ said Lydgate, with contemptuous decision. ‘He would disappoint everybody who counted on him: I can see that at the Hospital. Only, there Bulstrode holds the reins and drives him.’

‘That depends on how you fix your standard of public men,’ said Will. ‘He's good enough for the occasion: when the people have made up their mind as they are making it up now, they don't want a man - they only want a vote.’

‘That is the way with you political writers, Ladislaw - crying up a measure as if it were a universal cure, and crying up men who are a part of the very disease that wants curing.’

‘Why not? Men may help to cure themselves off the face of the land without knowing it,’ said Will, who could find reasons impromptu, when he had not thought of a question beforehand.

‘That is no excuse for encouraging the superstitious exaggeration of hopes about this particular measure, helping the cry to swallow it whole and to send up voting popinjays who are good for nothing but to carry it. You go against rottenness, and there is nothing more thoroughly rotten than making people believe that society can be cured by a political hocus-pocus.’

'That's very fine, my dear fellow. But your cure must begin somewhere, and put it that a thousand things which debase a population can never be reformed without this particular reform to begin with. Look what Stanley said the other day - that the House had been tinkering long enough at small questions of bribery, inquiring whether this or that voter has had a guinea when everybody knows that the seats have been sold wholesale. Wait for wisdom and conscience in public agents - fiddlestick! The only conscience we can trust to is the massive sense of wrong in a class, and the best wisdom that will work is the wisdom of balancing claims. That's my text - which side is injured? I support the man who supports their claims; not the virtuous upholder of the wrong.'

'That general talk about a particular case is mere question begging, Ladislaw. When I say, I go in for the dose that cures, it doesn't follow that I go in for opium in a given case of gout.'

'I am not begging the question we are upon - whether we are to try for nothing till we find immaculate men to work with. Should you go on that plan? If there were one man who would carry you a medical reform and another who would oppose it, should you inquire which had the better motives or even the better brains?'

'Oh, of course,' said Lydgate, seeing himself checkmated by a move which he had often used himself, 'if one did not work with such men as are at hand, things must come to a dead-lock. Suppose the worst opinion in the town about Bulstrode were a true one, that would not make it less true that he has the sense and the resolution to do what I think ought to be done in the matters I know and care most about; but that is the only ground on which I go with him,' Lydgate added rather proudly, bearing in mind Mr Farebrother's remarks. 'He is nothing to me otherwise; I would not cry him up on any personal ground - I would keep clear of that.'

'Do you mean that I cry up Brooke on any personal ground?' said Will Ladislaw, nettled, and turning sharp round. For the first time he felt offended with Lydgate; not the less so, perhaps, because he would have declined any close inquiry into the growth of his relation to Mr Brooke.

'Not at all,' said Lydgate, 'I was simply explaining my own action. I meant that a man may work for a special end with others whose motives and general course are equivocal, if he is quite sure of his personal independence, and that he is not working for his private interest - either place or money.'

'Then, why don't you extend your liberality to others?' said Will, still nettled. 'My personal independence is as important to me as yours is

to you. You have no more reason to imagine that I have personal expectations from Brooke, than I have to imagine that you have personal expectations from Bulstrode. Motives are points of honor, I suppose - nobody can prove them. But as to money and place in the world.' Will ended, tossing back his head, 'I think it is pretty clear that I am not determined by considerations of that sort.'

'You quite mistake me, Ladislaw,' said Lydgate, surprised. He had been preoccupied with his own vindication, and had been blind to what Ladislaw might infer on his own account. 'I beg your pardon for unintentionally annoying you. In fact, I should rather attribute to you a romantic disregard of your own worldly interests. On the political question, I referred simply to intellectual bias.'

'How very unpleasant you both are this evening!' said Rosamond. 'I cannot conceive why money should have been referred to. Polities and Medicine are sufficiently disagreeable to quarrel upon. You can both of you go on quarrelling with all the world and with each other on those two topics.'

Rosamond looked mildly neutral as she said this, rising to ring the bell, and then crossing to her work-table.

'Poor Rosy!' said Lydgate, putting out his hand to her as she was passing him. 'Disputation is not amusing to cherubs. Have some music. Ask Ladislaw to sing with you.'

When Will was gone Rosamond said to her husband, 'What put you out of temper this evening, Tertius?'

'Me? It was Ladislaw who was out of temper. He is like a bit of tinder.'

'But I mean, before that. Something had vexed you before you came in, you looked cross. And that made you begin to dispute with Mr Ladislaw. You hurt me very much when you look so, Tertius.'

'Do I? Then I am a brute,' said Lydgate, caressing her penitently.

'What vexed you?'

'Oh, outdoor things - business.' It was really a letter insisting on the payment of a bill for furniture. But Rosamond was expecting to have a baby, and Lydgate wished to save her from any perturbation.