

Chapter LII

'His heart The lowliest duties on itself did lay.' - WORDSWORTH.

On that June evening when Mr Farebrother knew that he was to have the Lowick living, there was joy in the old fashioned parlor, and even the portraits of the great lawyers seemed to look on with satisfaction. His mother left her tea and toast untouched, but sat with her usual pretty primness, only showing her emotion by that flush in the cheeks and brightness in the eyes which give an old woman a touching momentary identity with her far-off youthful self, and saying decisively

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'The greatest comfort, Camden, is that you have deserved it.'

'When a man gets a good berth, mother, half the deserving must come after,' said the son, brimful of pleasure, and not trying to conceal it. The gladness in his face was of that active kind which seems to have energy enough not only to flash outwardly, but to light up busy vision within: one seemed to see thoughts, as well as delight, in his glances.

'Now, aunt,' he went on, rubbing his hands and looking at Miss Noble, who was making tender little beaver-like noises, 'There shall be sugar-candy always on the table for you to steal and give to the children, and you shall have a great many new stockings to make presents of, and you shall darn your own more than ever!'

Miss Noble nodded at her nephew with a subdued half-frightened laugh, conscious of having already dropped an additional lump of sugar into her basket on the strength of the new preferment.

'As for you, Winny' - the Vicar went on - 'I shall make no difficulty about your marrying any Lowick bachelor - Mr Solomon Featherstone, for example, as soon as I find you are in love with him.'

Miss Winifred, who had been looking at her brother all the while and crying heartily, which was her way of rejoicing, smiled through her tears and said, 'You must set me the example, Cam: *you* must marry now.'

'With all my heart. But who is in love with me? I am a seedy old fellow,' said the Vicar, rising, pushing his chair away and looking down at himself. 'What do you say, mother?'

'You are a handsome man, Camden: though not so fine a figure of a man as your father,' said the old lady.

'I wish you would marry Miss Garth, brother,' said Miss Winifred. 'She would make us so lively at Lowick.'

'Very fine! You talk as if young women were tied up to be chosen, like poultry at market; as if I had only to ask and everybody would have me,' said the Vicar, not caring to specify.

'We don't want everybody,' said Miss Winifred. 'But *you* would like Miss Garth, mother, shouldn't you?'

'My son's choice shall be mine,' said Mrs Farebrother, with majestic discretion, 'and a wife would be most welcome, Camden. You will want your whist at home when we go to Lowick, and Henrietta Noble never was a whist-player.' (Mrs Farebrother always called her tiny old sister by that magnificent name.)

'I shall do without whist now, mother.'

'Why so, Camden? In my time whist was thought an undeniable amusement for a good churchman,' said Mrs Farebrother, innocent of the meaning that whist had for her son, and speaking rather sharply, as at some dangerous countenancing of new doctrine.

'I shall be too busy for whist; I shall have two parishes,' said the Vicar, preferring not to discuss the virtues of that game.

He had already said to Dorothea, 'I don't feel bound to give up St. Botolph's. It is protest enough against the pluralism they want to reform if I give somebody else most of the money. The stronger thing is not to give up power, but to use it well.'

'I have thought of that,' said Dorothea. 'So far as self is concerned, I think it would be easier to give up power and money than to keep them. It seems very unfitting that I should have this patronage, yet I felt that I ought not to let it be used by some one else instead of me.'

'It is I who am bound to act so that you will not regret your power,' said Mr Farebrother.

His was one of the natures in which conscience gets the more active when the yoke of life ceases to gall them. He made no display of humility on the subject, but in his heart he felt rather ashamed that his conduct had shown laches which others who did not get benefices were free from.

'I used often to wish I had been something else than a clergyman,' he said to Lydgate, 'but perhaps it will be better to try and make as good a clergyman out of myself as I can. That is the well-beneficed point of

view, you perceive, from which difficulties are much simplified,' he ended, smiling.

The Vicar did feel then as if his share of duties would be easy. But Duty has a trick of behaving unexpectedly - something like a heavy friend whom we have amiably asked to visit us, and who breaks his leg within our gates.

Hardly a week later, Duty presented itself in his study under the disguise of Fred Vincy, now returned from Omnibus College with his bachelor's degree.

'I am ashamed to trouble you, Mr Farebrother,' said Fred, whose fair open face was propitiating, 'but you are the only friend I can consult. I told you everything once before, and you were so good that I can't help coming to you again.'

'Sit down, Fred, I'm ready to hear and do anything I can,' said the Vicar, who was busy packing some small objects for removal, and went on with his work.

'I wanted to tell you - ' Fred hesitated an instant and then went on plungingly, 'I might go into the Church now; and really, look where I may, I can't see anything else to do. I don't like it, but I know it's uncommonly hard on my father to say so, after he has spent a good deal of money in educating me for it.' Fred paused again an instant, and then repeated, 'and I can't see anything else to do.'

'I did talk to your father about it, Fred, but I made little way with him. He said it was too late. But you have got over one bridge now: what are your other difficulties?'

'Merely that I don't like it. I don't like divinity, and preaching, and feeling obliged to look serious. I like riding across country, and doing as other men do. I don't mean that I want to be a bad fellow in any way; but I've no taste for the sort of thing people expect of a clergyman. And yet what else am I to do? My father can't spare me any capital, else I might go into farming. And he has no room for me in his trade. And of course I can't begin to study for law or physic now, when my father wants me to earn something. It's all very well to say I'm wrong to go into the Church; but those who say so might as well tell me to go into the backwoods.'

Fred's voice had taken a tone of grumbling remonstrance, and Mr Farebrother might have been inclined to smile if his mind had not been too busy in imagining more than Fred told him.

'Have you any difficulties about doctrines - about the Articles?' he said, trying hard to think of the question simply for Fred's sake.

'No; I suppose the Articles are right. I am not prepared with any arguments to disprove them, and much better, cleverer fellows than I am go in for them entirely. I think it would be rather ridiculous in me to urge scruples of that sort, as if I were a judge,' said Fred, quite simply.

'I suppose, then, it has occurred to you that you might be a fair parish priest without being much of a divine?'

'Of course, if I am obliged to be a clergyman, I shall try and do my duty, though I mayn't like it. Do you think any body ought to blame me?'

'For going into the Church under the circumstances? That depends on your conscience, Fred - how far you have counted the cost, and seen what your position will require of you. I can only tell you about myself, that I have always been too lax, and have been uneasy in consequence.'

'But there is another hindrance,' said Fred, coloring. 'I did not tell you before, though perhaps I may have said things that made you guess it. There is somebody I am very fond of: I have loved her ever since we were children.'

'Miss Garth, I suppose?' said the Vicar, examining some labels very closely.

'Yes. I shouldn't mind anything if she would have me. And I know I could be a good fellow then.'

'And you think she returns the feeling?'

'She never will say so; and a good while ago she made me promise not to speak to her about it again. And she has set her mind especially against my being a clergyman; I know that. But I can't give her up. I do think she cares about me. I saw Mrs Garth last night, and she said that Mary was staying at Lowick Rectory with Miss Farebrother.'

'Yes, she is very kindly helping my sister. Do you wish to go there?'

'No, I want to ask a great favor of you. I am ashamed to bother you in this way; but Mary might listen to what you said, if you mentioned the subject to her - I mean about my going into the Church.'

'That is rather a delicate task, my dear Fred. I shall have to presuppose your attachment to her; and to enter on the subject as you wish me to do, will be asking her to tell me whether she returns it.'

'That is what I want her to tell you,' said Fred, bluntly. 'I don't know what to do, unless I can get at her feeling.'

'You mean that you would be guided by that as to your going into the Church?'

'If Mary said she would never have me I might as well go wrong in one way as another.'

'That is nonsense, Fred. Men outlive their love, but they don't outlive the consequences of their recklessness.'

'Not my sort of love: I have never been without loving Mary. If I had to give her up, it would be like beginning to live on wooden legs.'

'Will she not be hurt at my intrusion?'

'No, I feel sure she will not. She respects you more than any one, and she would not put you off with fun as she does me. Of course I could not have told any one else, or asked any one else to speak to her, but you. There is no one else who could be such a friend to both of us.' Fred paused a moment, and then said, rather complainingly, 'And she ought to acknowledge that I have worked in order to pass. She ought to believe that I would exert myself for her sake.'

There was a moment's silence before Mr Farebrother laid down his work, and putting out his hand to Fred said -

'Very well, my boy. I will do what you wish.'

That very day Mr Farebrother went to Lowick parsonage on the nag which he had just set up. 'Decidedly I am an old stalk,' he thought, 'the young growths are pushing me aside.'

He found Mary in the garden gathering roses and sprinkling the petals on a sheet. The sun was low, and tall trees sent their shadows across the grassy walks where Mary was moving without bonnet or parasol. She did not observe Mr Farebrother's approach along the grass, and had just stooped down to lecture a small black-and-tan terrier, which would persist in walking on the sheet and smelling at the rose-leaves as Mary sprinkled them. She took his fore-paws in one hand, and lifted up the forefinger of the other, while the dog wrinkled his brows and looked embarrassed. 'Fly, Fly, I am ashamed of you,' Mary was

saying in a grave contralto. 'This is not becoming in a sensible dog; anybody would think you were a silly young gentleman.'

'You are unmerciful to young gentlemen, Miss Garth,' said the Vicar, within two yards of her.

Mary started up and blushed. 'It always answers to reason with Fly,' she said, laughingly.

'But not with young gentlemen?'

'Oh, with some, I suppose; since some of them turn into excellent men.'

'I am glad of that admission, because I want at this very moment to interest you in a young gentleman.'

'Not a silly one, I hope,' said Mary, beginning to pluck the roses again, and feeling her heart beat uncomfortably.

'No; though perhaps wisdom is not his strong point, but rather affection and sincerity. However, wisdom lies more in those two qualities than people are apt to imagine. I hope you know by those marks what young gentleman I mean.'

'Yes, I think I do,' said Mary, bravely, her face getting more serious, and her hands cold; 'it must be Fred Vincy.'

'He has asked me to consult you about his going into the Church. I hope you will not think that I consented to take a liberty in promising to do so.'

'On the contrary, Mr Farebrother,' said Mary, giving up the roses, and folding her arms, but unable to look up, 'whenever you have anything to say to me I feel honored.'

'But before I enter on that question, let me just touch a point on which your father took me into confidence; by the way, it was that very evening on which I once before fulfilled a mission from Fred, just after he had gone to college. Mr Garth told me what happened on the night of Featherstone's death - how you refused to burn the will; and he said that you had some heart-prickings on that subject, because you had been the innocent means of hindering Fred from getting his ten thousand pounds. I have kept that in mind, and I have heard something that may relieve you on that score - may show you that no sin-offering is demanded from you there.'

Mr Farebrother paused a moment and looked at Mary. He meant to give Fred his full advantage, but it would be well, he thought, to clear her mind of any superstitions, such as women sometimes follow when they do a man the wrong of marrying him as an act of atonement. Mary's cheeks had begun to burn a little, and she was mute.

'I mean, that your action made no real difference to Fred's lot. I find that the first will would not have been legally good after the burning of the last; it would not have stood if it had been disputed, and you may be sure it would have been disputed. So, on that score, you may feel your mind free.'

'Thank you, Mr Farebrother,' said Mary, earnestly. 'I am grateful to you for remembering my feelings.'

'Well, now I may go on. Fred, you know, has taken his degree. He has worked his way so far, and now the question is, what is he to do? That question is so difficult that he is inclined to follow his father's wishes and enter the Church, though you know better than I do that he was quite set against that formerly. I have questioned him on the subject, and I confess I see no insuperable objection to his being a clergyman, as things go. He says that he could turn his mind to doing his best in that vocation, on one condition. If that condition were fulfilled I would do my utmost in helping Fred on. After a time - not, of course, at first - he might be with me as my curate, and he would have so much to do that his stipend would be nearly what I used to get as vicar. But I repeat that there is a condition without which all this good cannot come to pass. He has opened his heart to me, Miss Garth, and asked me to plead for him. The condition lies entirely in your feeling.'

Mary looked so much moved, that he said after a moment, 'Let us walk a little;' and when they were walking he added, 'To speak quite plainly, Fred will not take any course which would lessen the chance that you would consent to be his wife; but with that prospect, he will try his best at anything you approve.'

'I cannot possibly say that I will ever be his wife, Mr Farebrother: but I certainly never will be his wife if he becomes a clergyman. What you say is most generous and kind; I don't mean for a moment to correct your judgment. It is only that I have my girlish, mocking way of looking at things,' said Mary, with a returning sparkle of playfulness in her answer which only made its modesty more charming.

'He wishes me to report exactly what you think,' said Mr Farebrother.

'I could not love a man who is ridiculous,' said Mary, not choosing to go deeper. 'Fred has sense and knowledge enough to make him respectable, if he likes, in some good worldly business, but I can never

imagine him preaching and exhorting, and pronouncing blessings, and praying by the sick, without feeling as if I were looking at a caricature. His being a clergyman would be only for gentility's sake, and I think there is nothing more contemptible than such imbecile gentility. I used to think that of Mr Crowse, with his empty face and neat umbrella, and mincing little speeches. What right have such men to represent Christianity - as if it were an institution for getting up idiots genteelly - as if - ' Mary checked herself. She had been carried along as if she had been speaking to Fred instead of Mr Farebrother.

'Young women are severe: they don't feel the stress of action as men do, though perhaps I ought to make you an exception there. But you don't put Fred Vincy on so low a level as that?'

'No, indeed, he has plenty of sense, but I think he would not show it as a clergyman. He would be a piece of professional affectation.'

'Then the answer is quite decided. As a clergyman he could have no hope?'

Mary shook her head.

'But if he braved all the difficulties of getting his bread in some other way - will you give him the support of hope? May he count on winning you?'

'I think Fred ought not to need telling again what I have already said to him,' Mary answered, with a slight resentment in her manner. 'I mean that he ought not to put such questions until he has done something worthy, instead of saying that he could do it.'

Mr Farebrother was silent for a minute or more, and then, as they turned and paused under the shadow of a maple at the end of a grassy walk, said, 'I understand that you resist any attempt to fetter you, but either your feeling for Fred Vincy excludes your entertaining another attachment, or it does not: either he may count on your remaining single until he shall have earned your hand, or he may in any case be disappointed. Pardon me, Mary - you know I used to catechise you under that name - but when the state of a woman's affections touches the happiness of another life - of more lives than one - I think it would be the nobler course for her to be perfectly direct and open.'

Mary in her turn was silent, wondering not at Mr Farebrother's manner but at his tone, which had a grave restrained emotion in it. When the strange idea flashed across her that his words had reference to himself, she was incredulous, and ashamed of entertaining it. She had never thought that any man could love her except Fred, who had

espoused her with the umbrella ring, when she wore socks and little strapped shoes; still less that she could be of any importance to Mr Farebrother, the cleverest man in her narrow circle. She had only time to feel that all this was hazy and perhaps illusory; but one thing was clear and determined - her answer.

‘Since you think it my duty, Mr Farebrother, I will tell you that I have too strong a feeling for Fred to give him up for any one else. I should never be quite happy if I thought he was unhappy for the loss of me. It has taken such deep root in me - my gratitude to him for always loving me best, and minding so much if I hurt myself, from the time when we were very little. I cannot imagine any new feeling coming to make that weaker. I should like better than anything to see him worthy of every one's respect. But please tell him I will not promise to marry him till then: I should shame and grieve my father and mother. He is free to choose some one else.’

‘Then I have fulfilled my commission thoroughly,’ said Mr Farebrother, putting out his hand to Mary, ‘and I shall ride back to Middlemarch forthwith. With this prospect before him, we shall get Fred into the right niche somehow, and I hope I shall live to join your hands. God bless you!’

‘Oh, please stay, and let me give you some tea,’ said Mary. Her eyes filled with tears, for something indefinable, something like the resolute suppression of a pain in Mr Farebrother's manner, made her feel suddenly miserable, as she had once felt when she saw her father's hands trembling in a moment of trouble.

‘No, my dear, no. I must get back.’

In three minutes the Vicar was on horseback again, having gone magnanimously through a duty much harder than the renunciation of whist, or even than the writing of penitential meditations.