

Chapter LIII

It is but a shallow haste which concludeth insincerity from what outsiders call inconsistency - putting a dead mechanism of 'ifs' and 'therefores' for the living myriad of hidden suckers whereby the belief and the conduct are wrought into mutual sustainment.

Mr Bulstrode, when he was hoping to acquire a new interest in Lowick, had naturally had an especial wish that the new clergyman should be one whom he thoroughly approved; and he believed it to be a chastisement and admonition directed to his own shortcomings and those of the nation at large, that just about the time when he came in possession of the deeds which made him the proprietor of Stone Court, Mr Farebrother 'read himself' into the quaint little church and preached his first sermon to the congregation of farmers, laborers, and village artisans. It was not that Mr Bulstrode intended to frequent Lowick Church or to reside at Stone Court for a good while to come: he had bought the excellent farm and fine homestead simply as a retreat which he might gradually enlarge as to the land and beautify as to the dwelling, until it should be conducive to the divine glory that he should enter on it as a residence, partially withdrawing from his present exertions in the administration of business, and throwing more conspicuously on the side of Gospel truth the weight of local landed proprietorship, which Providence might increase by unforeseen occasions of purchase. A strong leading in this direction seemed to have been given in the surprising facility of getting Stone Court, when every one had expected that Mr Rigg Featherstone would have clung to it as the Garden of Eden. That was what poor old Peter himself had expected; having often, in imagination, looked up through the sods above him, and, unobstructed by. perspective, seen his frog-faced legatee enjoying the fine old place to the perpetual surprise and disappointment of other survivors.

But how little we know what would make paradise for our neighbors! We judge from our own desires, and our neighbors themselves are not always open enough even to throw out a hint of theirs. The cool and judicious Joshua Rigg had not allowed his parent to perceive that Stone Court was anything less than the chief good in his estimation, and he had certainly wished to call it his own. But as Warren Hastings looked at gold and thought of buying Daylesford, so Joshua Rigg looked at Stone Court and thought of buying gold. He had a very distinct and intense vision of his chief good, the vigorous greed which he had inherited having taken a special form by dint of circumstance: and his chief good was to be a moneychanger. From his earliest employment as an errand-boy in a seaport, he had looked through the windows of the moneychangers as other boys look through the windows of the pastry-cooks; the fascination had wrought itself gradually into a deep special passion; he meant, when he had

property, to do many things, one of them being to marry a genteel young person; but these were all accidents and joys that imagination could dispense with. The one joy after which his soul thirsted was to have a money-changer's shop on a much-frequented quay, to have locks all round him of which he held the keys, and to look sublimely cool as he handled the breeding coins of all nations, while helpless Cupidity looked at him enviously from the other side of an iron lattice. The strength of that passion had been a power enabling him to master all the knowledge necessary to gratify it. And when others were thinking that he had settled at Stone Court for life, Joshua himself was thinking that the moment now was not far off when he should settle on the North Quay with the best appointments in safes and locks.

Enough. We are concerned with looking at Joshua Rigg's sale of his land from Mr Bulstrode's point of view, and he interpreted it as a cheering dispensation conveying perhaps a sanction to a purpose which he had for some time entertained without external encouragement; he interpreted it thus, but not too confidently, offering up his thanksgiving in guarded phraseology. His doubts did not arise from the possible relations of the event to Joshua Rigg's destiny, which belonged to the unmapped regions not taken under the providential government, except perhaps in an imperfect colonial way; but they arose from reflecting that this dispensation too might be a chastisement for himself, as Mr Farebrother's induction to the living clearly was.

This was not what Mr Bulstrode said to any man for the sake of deceiving him: it was what he said to himself - it was as genuinely his mode of explaining events as any theory of yours may be, if you happen to disagree with him. For the egoism which enters into our theories does not affect their sincerity; rather, the more our egoism is satisfied, the more robust is our belief.

However, whether for sanction or for chastisement, Mr Bulstrode, hardly fifteen months after the death of Peter Featherstone, had become the proprietor of Stone Court, and what Peter would say 'if he were worthy to know,' had become an inexhaustible and consolatory subject of conversation to his disappointed relatives. The tables were now turned on that dear brother departed, and to contemplate the frustration of his cunning by the superior cunning of things in general was a cud of delight to Solomon. Mrs Waule had a melancholy triumph in the proof that it did not answer to make false Featherstones and cut off the genuine; and Sister Martha receiving the news in the Chalky Flats said, 'Dear, dear! then the Almighty could have been none so pleased with the almshouses after all.'

Affectionate Mrs Bulstrode was particularly glad of the advantage which her husband's health was likely to get from the purchase of Stone Court. Few days passed without his riding thither and looking over some part of the farm with the bailiff, and the evenings were delicious in that quiet spot, when the new hay-ricks lately set up were sending forth odors to mingle with the breath of the rich old garden. One evening, while the sun was still above the horizon and burning in golden lamps among the great walnut boughs, Mr Bulstrode was pausing on horseback outside the front gate waiting for Caleb Garth, who had met him by appointment to give an opinion on a question of stable drainage, and was now advising the bailiff in the rick-yard.

Mr Bulstrode was conscious of being in a good spiritual frame and more than usually serene, under the influence of his innocent recreation. He was doctrinally convinced that there was a total absence of merit in himself; but that doctrinal conviction may be held without pain when the sense of demerit does not take a distinct shape in memory and revive the tingling of shame or the pang of remorse. Nay, it may be held with intense satisfaction when the depth of our sinning is but a measure for the depth of forgiveness, and a clenching proof that we are peculiar instruments of the divine intention. The memory has as many moods as the temper, and shifts its scenery like a diorama. At this moment Mr Bulstrode felt as if the sunshine were all one with that of far-off evenings when he was a very young man and used to go out preaching beyond Highbury. And he would willingly have had that service of exhortation in prospect now. The texts were there still, and so was his own facility in expounding them. His brief reverie was interrupted by the return of Caleb Garth, who also was on horseback, and was just shaking his bridle before starting, when he exclaimed -

'Bless my heart! what's this fellow in black coming along the lane? He's like one of those men one sees about after the races.'

Mr Bulstrode turned his horse and looked along the lane, but made no reply. The comer was our slight acquaintance Mr Raffles, whose appearance presented no other change than such as was due to a suit of black and a crape hat-band. He was within three yards of the horseman now, and they could see the flash of recognition in his face as he whirled his stick upward, looking all the while at Mr Bulstrode, and at last exclaiming: -

'By Jove, Nick, it's you! I couldn't be mistaken, though the five-and-twenty years have played old Boguy with us both! How are you, eh? you didn't expect to see *me* here. Come, shake us by the hand.' To say that Mr Raffles' manner was rather excited would be only one mode of saying that it was evening. Caleb Garth could see that there was a

moment of struggle and hesitation in Mr Bulstrode, but it ended in his putting out his hand coldly to Raffles and saying -

'I did not indeed expect to see you in this remote country place.'

'Well, it belongs to a stepson of mine,' said Raffles, adjusting himself in a swaggering attitude. 'I came to see him here before. I'm not so surprised at seeing you, old fellow, because I picked up a letter - what you may call a providential thing. It's uncommonly fortunate I met you, though; for I don't care about seeing my stepson: he's not affectionate, and his poor mother's gone now. To tell the truth, I came out of love to you, Nick: I came to get your address, for - look here!' Raffles drew a crumpled paper from his pocket.

Almost any other man than Caleb Garth might have been tempted to linger on the spot for the sake of hearing all he could about a man whose acquaintance with Bulstrode seemed to imply passages in the banker's life so unlike anything that was known of him in Middlemarch that they must have the nature of a secret to pique curiosity. But Caleb was peculiar: certain human tendencies which are commonly strong were almost absent from his mind; and one of these was curiosity about personal affairs. Especially if there was anything discreditable to be found out concerning another man, Caleb preferred not to know it; and if he had to tell anybody under him that his evil doings were discovered, he was more embarrassed than the culprit. He now spurred his horse, and saying, 'I wish you good evening, Mr Bulstrode; I must be getting home,' set off at a trot.

'You didn't put your full address to this letter,' Raffles continued. 'That was not like the first-rate man of business you used to be. 'The Shrubs,' - they may be anywhere: you live near at hand, eh? - have cut the London concern altogether - perhaps turned country squire - have a rural mansion to invite me to. Lord, how many years it is ago! The old lady must have been dead a pretty long while - gone to glory without the pain of knowing how poor her daughter was, eh? But, by Jove! you're very pale and pasty, Nick. Come, if you're going home, I'll walk by your side.'

Mr Bulstrode's usual paleness had in fact taken an almost deathly hue. Five minutes before, the expanse of his life had been submerged in its evening sunshine which shone backward to its remembered morning: sin seemed to be a question of doctrine and inward penitence, humiliation an exercise of the closet, the bearing of his deeds a matter of private vision adjusted solely by spiritual relations and conceptions of the divine purposes. And now, as if by some hideous magic, this loud red figure had risen before him in unmanageable solidity - an incorporate past which had not entered

into his imagination of chastisements. But Mr Bulstrode's thought was busy, and he was not a man to act or speak rashly.

'I was going home,' he said, 'but I can defer my ride a little. And you can, if you please, rest here.'

'Thank you,' said Raffles, making a grimace. 'I don't care now about seeing my stepson. I'd rather go home with you.'

'Your stepson, if Mr Rigg Featherstone was he, is here no longer. I am master here now.'

Raffles opened wide eyes, and gave a long whistle of surprise, before he said, 'Well then, I've no objection. I've had enough walking from the coach-road. I never was much of a walker, or rider either. What I like is a smart vehicle and a spirited cob. I was always a little heavy in the saddle. What a pleasant surprise it must be to you to see me, old fellow!' he continued, as they turned towards the house. 'You don't say so; but you never took your luck heartily - you were always thinking of improving the occasion - you'd such a gift for improving your luck.'

Mr Raffles seemed greatly to enjoy his own wit, and swung his leg in a swaggering manner which was rather too much for his companion's judicious patience.

'If I remember rightly,' Mr Bulstrode observed, with chill anger, 'our acquaintance many years ago had not the sort of intimacy which you are now assuming, Mr Raffles. Any services you desire of me will be the more readily rendered if you will avoid a tone of familiarity which did not lie in our former intercourse, and can hardly be warranted by more than twenty years of separation.'

'You don't like being called Nick? Why, I always called you Nick in my heart, and though lost to sight, to memory dear. By Jove! my feelings have ripened for you like fine old cognac. I hope you've got some in the house now. Josh filled my flask well the last time.'

Mr Bulstrode had not yet fully learned that even the desire for cognac was not stronger in Raffles than the desire to torment, and that a hint of annoyance always served him as a fresh cue. But it was at least clear that further objection was useless, and Mr Bulstrode, in giving orders to the housekeeper for the accommodation of the guest, had a resolute air of quietude.

There was the comfort of thinking that this housekeeper had been in the service of Rigg also, and might accept the idea that Mr Bulstrode entertained Raffles merely as a friend of her former master.

When there was food and drink spread before his visitor in the wainscoted parlor, and no witness in the room, Mr Bulstrode said -

'Your habits and mine are so different, Mr Raffles, that we can hardly enjoy each other's society. The wisest plan for both of us will therefore be to part as soon as possible. Since you say that you wished to meet me, you probably considered that you had some business to transact with me. But under the circumstances I will invite you to remain here for the night, and I will myself ride over here early to-morrow morning - before breakfast, in fact, when I can receive any Communication you have to make to me.'

'With all my heart,' said Raffles; 'this is a comfortable place - a little dull for a continuance; but I can put up with it for a night, with this good liquor and the prospect of seeing you again in the morning. You're a much better host than my stepson was; but Josh owed me a bit of a grudge for marrying his mother; and between you and me there was never anything but kindness.'

Mr Bulstrode, hoping that the peculiar mixture of joviality and sneering in Raffles' manner was a good deal the effect of drink, had determined to wait till he was quite sober before he spent more words upon him. But he rode home with a terribly lucid vision of the difficulty there would be in arranging any result that could be permanently counted on with this man. It was inevitable that he should wish to get rid of John Raffles, though his reappearance could not be regarded as lying outside the divine plan. The spirit of evil might have sent him to threaten Mr Bulstrode's subversion as an instrument of good; but the threat must have been permitted, and was a chastisement of a new kind. It was an hour of anguish for him very different from the hours in which his struggle had been securely private, and which had ended with a sense that his secret misdeeds were pardoned and his services accepted. Those misdeeds even when committed - had they not been half sanctified by the singleness of his desire to devote himself and all he possessed to the furtherance of the divine scheme? And was he after all to become a mere stone of stumbling and a rock of offence? For who would understand the work within him? Who would not, when there was the pretext of casting disgrace upon him, confound his whole life and the truths he had espoused, in one heap of obloquy?

In his closest meditations the life-long habit of Mr Bulstrode's mind clad his most egoistic terrors in doctrinal references to superhuman ends. But even while we are talking and meditating about the earth's orbit and the solar system, what we feel and adjust our movements to is the stable earth and the changing day. And now within all the automatic succession of theoretic phrases - distinct and inmost as the shiver and the ache of oncoming fever when we are discussing

abstract pain, was the forecast of disgrace in the presence of his neighbors and of his own wife. For the pain, as well as the public estimate of disgrace, depends on the amount of previous profession. To men who only aim at escaping felony, nothing short of the prisoner's dock is disgrace. But Mr Bulstrode had aimed at being an eminent Christian.

It was not more than half-past seven in the morning when he again reached Stone Court. The fine old place never looked more like a delightful home than at that moment; the great white lilies were in flower, the nasturtiums, their pretty leaves all silvered with dew, were running away over the low stone wall; the very noises all around had a heart of peace within them. But everything was spoiled for the owner as he walked on the gravel in front and awaited the descent of Mr Raffles, with whom he was condemned to breakfast.

It was not long before they were seated together in the wainscoted parlor over their tea and toast, which was as much as Raffles cared to take at that early hour. The difference between his morning and evening self was not so great as his companion had imagined that it might be; the delight in tormenting was perhaps even the stronger because his spirits were rather less highly pitched. Certainly his manners seemed more disagreeable by the morning light.

'As I have little time to spare, Mr Raffles,' said the banker, who could hardly do more than sip his tea and break his toast without eating it, 'I shall be obliged if you will mention at once the ground on which you wished to meet with me. I presume that you have a home elsewhere and will be glad to return to it.'

'Why, if a man has got any heart, doesn't he want to see an old friend, Nick? - I must call you Nick - we always did call you young Nick when we knew you meant to marry the old widow. Some said you had a handsome family likeness to old Nick, but that was your mother's fault, calling you Nicholas. Aren't you glad to see me again? I expected an invite to stay with you at some pretty place. My own establishment is broken up now my wife's dead. I've no particular attachment to any spot; I would as soon settle hereabout as anywhere.'

'May I ask why you returned from America? I considered that the strong wish you expressed to go there, when an adequate sum was furnished, was tantamount to an engagement that you would remain there for life.'

'Never knew that a wish to go to a place was the same thing as a wish to stay. But I did stay a matter of ten years; it didn't suit me to stay any longer. And I'm not going again, Nick.' Here Mr Raffles winked slowly as he looked at Mr Bulstrode.

'Do you wish to be settled in any business? What is your calling now?'

'Thank you, my calling is to enjoy myself as much as I can. I don't care about working any more. If I did anything it would be a little travelling in the tobacco line - or something of that sort, which takes a man into agreeable company. But not without an independence to fall back upon. That's what I want: I'm not so strong as I was, Nick, though I've got more color than you. I want an independence.'

'That could be supplied to you, if you would engage to keep at a distance,' said Mr Bulstrode, perhaps with a little too much eagerness in his undertone.

'That must be as it suits my convenience,' said Raffles coolly. 'I see no reason why I shouldn't make a few acquaintances hereabout. I'm not ashamed of myself as company for anybody. I dropped my portmanteau at the turnpike when I got down - change of linen - genuine - honor bright - more than fronts and wristbands; and with this suit of mourning, straps and everything, I should do you credit among the nobs here.' Mr Raffles had pushed away his chair and looked down at himself, particularly at his straps. His chief intention was to annoy Bulstrode, but he really thought that his appearance now would produce a good effect, and that he was not only handsome and witty, but clad in a mourning style which implied solid connections.

'If you intend to rely on me in any way, Mr Raffles,' said Bulstrode, after a moment's pause, 'you will expect to meet my wishes.'

'Ah, to be sure,' said Raffles, with a mocking cordiality. 'Didn't I always do it? Lord, you made a pretty thing out of me, and I got but little. I've often thought since, I might have done better by telling the old woman that I'd found her daughter and her grandchild: it would have suited my feelings better; I've got a soft place in my heart. But you've buried the old lady by this time, I suppose - it's all one to her now. And you've got your fortune out of that profitable business which had such a blessing on it. You've taken to being a nob, buying land, being a country bashaw. Still in the Dissenting line, eh? Still godly? Or taken to the Church as more genteel?'

This time Mr Raffles' slow wink and slight protrusion of his tongue was worse than a nightmare, because it held the certitude that it was not a nightmare, but a waking misery. Mr Bulstrode felt a shuddering nausea, and did not speak, but was considering diligently whether he should not leave Raffles to do as he would, and simply defy him as a slanderer. The man would soon show himself disreputable enough to make people disbelieve him. 'But not when he tells any ugly-looking truth about *you*,' said discerning consciousness. And again: it seemed

no wrong to keep Raffles at a distance, but Mr Bulstrode shrank from the direct falsehood of denying true statements. It was one thing to look back on forgiven sins, nay, to explain questionable conformity to lax customs, and another to enter deliberately on the necessity of falsehood.

But since Bulstrode did not speak, Raffles ran on, by way of using time to the utmost.

'I've not had such fine luck as you, by Jove! Things went confoundedly with me in New York; those Yankees are cool hands, and a man of gentlemanly feelings has no chance with them. I married when I came back - a nice woman in the tobacco trade - very fond of me - but the trade was restricted, as we say. She had been settled there a good many years by a friend; but there was a son too much in the case. Josh and I never hit it off. However, I made the most of the position, and I've always taken my glass in good company. It's been all on the square with me; I'm as open as the day. You won't take it ill of me that I didn't look you up before. I've got a complaint that makes me a little dilatory. I thought you were trading and praying away in London still, and didn't find you there. But you see I was sent to you, Nick - perhaps for a blessing to both of us.'

Mr Raffles ended with a jocosely snuffle: no man felt his intellect more superior to religious cant. And if the cunning which calculates on the meanest feelings in men could be, called intellect, he had his share, for under the blurring rallying tone with which he spoke to Bulstrode, there was an evident selection of statements, as if they had been so many moves at chess. Meanwhile Bulstrode had determined on his move, and he said, with gathered resolution -

'You will do well to reflect, Mr Raffles, that it is possible for a man to overreach himself in the effort to secure undue advantage. Although I am not in any way bound to you, I am willing to supply you with a regular annuity - in quarterly payments - so long as you fulfil a promise to remain at a distance from this neighborhood. It is in your power to choose. If you insist on remaining here, even for a short time, you will get nothing from me. I shall decline to know you.'

'Ha, ha!' said Raffles, with an affected explosion, 'that reminds me of a droll dog of a thief who declined to know the constable.'

'Your allusions are lost on me sir,' said Bulstrode, with white heat; 'the law has no hold on me either through your agency or any other.'

'You can't understand a joke, my good fellow. I only meant that I should never decline to know you. But let us be serious. Your quarterly payment won't quite suit me. I like my freedom.'

Here Raffles rose and stalked once or twice up and down the room, swinging his leg, and assuming an air of masterly meditation. At last he stopped opposite Bulstrode, and said, 'I'll tell you what! Give us a couple of hundreds - come, that's modest - and I'll go away - honor bright! - pick up my portmanteau and go away. But I shall not give up my Liberty for a dirty annuity. I shall come and go where I like. Perhaps it may suit me to stay away, and correspond with a friend; perhaps not. Have you the money with you?'

'No, I have one hundred,' said Bulstrode, feeling the immediate riddance too great a relief to be rejected on the ground of future uncertainties. 'I will forward you the other if you will mention an address.'

'No, I'll wait here till you bring it,' said Raffles. 'I'll take a stroll and have a snack, and you'll be back by that time.'

Mr Bulstrode's sickly body, shattered by the agitations he had gone through since the last evening, made him feel abjectly in the power of this loud invulnerable man. At that moment he snatched at a temporary repose to be won on any terms. He was rising to do what Raffles suggested, when the latter said, lifting up his finger as if with a sudden recollection -

'I did have another look after Sarah again, though I didn't tell you; I'd a tender conscience about that pretty young woman. I didn't find her, but I found out her husband's name, and I made a note of it. But hang it, I lost my pocketbook. However, if I heard it, I should know it again. I've got my faculties as if I was in my prime, but names wear out, by Jove! Sometimes I'm no better than a confounded tax-paper before the names are filled in. However, if I hear of her and her family, you shall know, Nick. You'd like to do something for her, now she's your step-daughter.'

'Doubtless,' said Mr Bulstrode, with the usual steady look of his light-gray eyes; 'though that might reduce my power of assisting you.'

As he walked out of the room, Raffles winked slowly at his back, and then turned towards the window to watch the banker riding away - virtually at his command. His lips first curled with a smile and then opened with a short triumphant laugh.

'But what the deuce was the name?' he presently said, half aloud, scratching his head, and wrinkling his brows horizontally. He had not really cared or thought about this point of forgetfulness until it occurred to him in his invention of annoyances for Bulstrode.

'It began with L; it was almost all l's I fancy,' he went on, with a sense that he was getting hold of the slippery name. But the hold was too slight, and he soon got tired of this mental chase; for few men were more impatient of private occupation or more in need of making themselves continually heard than Mr Raffles. He preferred using his time in pleasant conversation with the bailiff and the housekeeper, from whom he gathered as much as he wanted to know about Mr Bulstrode's position in Middlemarch.

After all, however, there was a dull space of time which needed relieving with bread and cheese and ale, and when he was seated alone with these resources in the wainscoted parlor, he suddenly slapped his knee, and exclaimed, 'Ladislaw!' That action of memory which he had tried to set going, and had abandoned in despair, had suddenly completed itself without conscious effort - a common experience, agreeable as a completed sneeze, even if the name remembered is of no value. Raffles immediately took out his pocket-book, and wrote down the name, not because he expected to use it, but merely for the sake of not being at a loss if he ever did happen to want it. He was not going to tell Bulstrode: there was no actual good in telling, and to a mind like that of Mr Raffles there is always probable good in a secret.

He was satisfied with his present success, and by three o'clock that day he had taken up his portmanteau at the turnpike and mounted the coach, relieving Mr Bulstrode's eyes of an ugly black spot on the landscape at Stone Court, but not relieving him of the dread that the black spot might reappear and become inseparable even from the vision of his hearth.