

Chapter LX

Good phrases are surely, and ever were, very commendable. - Justice Shallow.

A few days afterwards - it was already the end of August - there was an occasion which caused some excitement in Middlemarch: the public, if it chose, was to have the advantage of buying, under the distinguished auspices of Mr Borthrop Trumbull, the furniture, books, and pictures which anybody might see by the handbills to be the best in every kind, belonging to Edwin Larcher, Esq. This was not one of the sales indicating the depression of trade; on the contrary, it was due to Mr Larcher's great success in the carrying business, which warranted his purchase of a mansion near Riverston already furnished in high style by an illustrious Spa physician - furnished indeed with such large framefuls of expensive flesh-painting in the dining-room, that Mrs Larcher was nervous until reassured by finding the subjects to be Scriptural. Hence the fine opportunity to purchasers which was well pointed out in the handbills of Mr Borthrop Trumbull, whose acquaintance with the history of art enabled him to state that the hall furniture, to be sold without reserve, comprised a piece of carving by a contemporary of Gibbons.

At Middlemarch in those times a large sale was regarded as a kind of festival. There was a table spread with the best cold eatables, as at a superior funeral; and facilities were offered for that generous-drinking of cheerful glasses which might lead to generous and cheerful bidding for undesirable articles. Mr Larcher's sale was the more attractive in the fine weather because the house stood just at the end of the town, with a garden and stables attached, in that pleasant issue from Middlemarch called the London Road, which was also the road to the New Hospital and to Mr Bulstrode's retired residence, known as the Shrubs. In short, the auction was as good as a fair, and drew all classes with leisure at command: to some, who risked making bids in order simply to raise prices, it was almost equal to betting at the races. The second day, when the best furniture was to be sold, 'everybody' was there; even Mr Thesiger, the rector of St. Peter's, had looked in for a short time, wishing to buy the carved table, and had rubbed elbows with Mr Bambridge and Mr Horrock. There was a wreath of Middlemarch ladies accommodated with seats round the large table in the dining-room, where Mr Borthrop Trumbull was mounted with desk and hammer; but the rows chiefly of masculine faces behind were often varied by incomings and outgoings both from the door and the large bow-window opening on to the lawn.

'Everybody' that day did not include Mr Bulstrode, whose health could not well endure crowds and draughts. But Mrs Bulstrode had particularly wished to have a certain picture - a 'Supper at Emmaus,'

attributed in the catalogue to Guido; and at the last moment before the day of the sale Mr Bulstrode had called at the office of the 'Pioneer,' of which he was now one of the proprietors, to beg of Mr Ladislaw as a great favor that he would obligingly use his remarkable knowledge of pictures on behalf of Mrs Bulstrode, and judge of the value of this particular painting - 'if,' added the scrupulously polite banker, 'attendance at the sale would not interfere with the arrangements for your departure, which I know is imminent.'

This proviso might have sounded rather satirically in Will's ear if he had been in a mood to care about such satire. It referred to an understanding entered into many weeks before with the proprietors of the paper, that he should be at liberty any day he pleased to hand over the management to the subeditor whom he had been training; since he wished finally to quit Middlemarch. But indefinite visions of ambition are weak against the ease of doing what is habitual or beguilingly agreeable; and we all know the difficulty of carrying out a resolve when we secretly long that it may turn out to be unnecessary. In such states of mind the most incredulous person has a private leaning towards miracle: impossible to conceive how our wish could be fulfilled, still - very wonderful things have happened! Will did not confess this weakness to himself, but he lingered. What was the use of going to London at that time of the year? The Rugby men who would remember him were not there; and so far as political writing was concerned, he would rather for a few weeks go on with the 'Pioneer.' At the present moment, however, when Mr Bulstrode was speaking to him, he had both a strengthened resolve to go and an equally strong resolve not to go till he had once more seen Dorothea. Hence he replied that he had reasons for deferring his departure a little, and would be happy to go to the sale.

Will was in a defiant mood, his consciousness being deeply stung with the thought that the people who looked at him probably knew a fact tantamount to an accusation against him as a fellow with low designs which were to be frustrated by a disposal of property. Like most people who assert their freedom with regard to conventional distinction, he was prepared to be sudden and quick at quarrel with any one who might hint that he had personal reasons for that assertion - that there was anything in his blood, his bearing, or his character to which he gave the mask of an opinion. When he was under an irritating impression of this kind he would go about for days with a defiant look, the color changing in his transparent skin as if he were on the *qui vive*, watching for something which he had to dart upon.

This expression was peculiarly noticeable in him at the sale, and those who had only seen him in his moods of gentle oddity or of bright enjoyment would have been struck with a contrast. He was not sorry

to have this occasion for appearing in public before the Middlemarch tribes of Toller, Hackbutt, and the rest, who looked down on him as an adventurer, and were in a state of brutal ignorance about Dante - who sneered at his Polish blood, and were themselves of a breed very much in need of crossing. He stood in a conspicuous place not far from the auctioneer, with a fore-finger in each side-pocket and his head thrown backward, not caring to speak to anybody, though he had been cordially welcomed as a *connoissance* by Mr Trumbull, who was enjoying the utmost activity of his great faculties.

And surely among all men whose vocation requires them to exhibit their powers of speech, the happiest is a prosperous provincial auctioneer keenly alive to his own jokes and sensible of his encyclopedic knowledge. Some saturnine, sour-blooded persons might object to be constantly insisting on the merits of all articles from boot-jacks to 'Berghems;' but Mr Borthrop Trumbull had a kindly liquid in his veins; he was an admirer by nature, and would have liked to have the universe under his hammer, feeling that it would go at a higher figure for his recommendation.

Meanwhile Mrs Larcher's drawing-room furniture was enough for him. When Will Ladislaw had come in, a second fender, said to have been forgotten in its right place, suddenly claimed the auctioneer's enthusiasm, which he distributed on the equitable principle of praising those things most which were most in need of praise. The fender was of polished steel, with much lancet-shaped open-work and a sharp edge.

'Now, ladies,' said he, 'I shall appeal to you. Here is a fender which at any other sale would hardly be offered with out reserve, being, as I may say, for quality of steel and quaintness of design, a kind of thing' - here Mr Trumbull dropped his voice and became slightly nasal, trimming his outlines with his left finger - 'that might not fall in with ordinary tastes. Allow me to tell you that by-and-by this style of workmanship will be the only one in vogue - half-a-crown, you said? thank you - going at half-a-crown, this characteristic fender; and I have particular information that the antique style is very much sought after in high quarters. Three shillings - three-and-sixpence - hold it well up, Joseph! Look, ladies, at the chastity of the design - I have no doubt myself that it was turned out in the last century! Four shillings, Mr Mawmsey? - four shillings.'

'It's not a thing I would put in *my* drawing-room,' said Mrs Mawmsey, audibly, for the warning of the rash husband. 'I wonder *at* Mrs Larcher. Every blessed child's head that fell against it would be cut in two. The edge is like a knife.'

'Quite true,' rejoined Mr Trumbull, quickly, 'and most uncommonly useful to have a fender at hand that will cut, if you have a leather shoe-tie or a bit of string that wants cutting and no knife at hand: many a man has been left hanging because there was no knife to cut him down. Gentlemen, here's a fender that if you had the misfortune to hang yourselves would cut you down in no time - with astonishing celerity - four-and-sixpence - five - five-and-sixpence - an appropriate thing for a spare bedroom where there was a four-poster and a guest a little out of his mind - six shillings - thank you, Mr Clintup - going at six shillings - going - gone!' The auctioneer's glance, which had been searching round him with a preternatural susceptibility to all signs of bidding, here dropped on the paper before him, and his voice too dropped into a tone of indifferent despatch as he said, 'Mr Clintup. Be handy, Joseph.'

'It was worth six shillings to have a fender you could always tell that joke on,' said Mr Clintup, laughing low and apologetically to his next neighbor. He was a diffident though distinguished nurseryman, and feared that the audience might regard his bid as a foolish one.

Meanwhile Joseph had brought a trayful of small articles. 'Now, ladies,' said Mr Trumbull, taking up one of the articles, 'this tray contains a very recherchy lot - a collection of trifles for the drawing-room table - and trifles make the sum of human things - nothing more important than trifles - (yes, Mr Ladislaw, yes, by-and-by) - but pass the tray round, Joseph - these bijoux must be examined, ladies. This I have in my hand is an ingenious contrivance - a sort of practical rebus, I may call it: here, you see, it looks like an elegant heart-shaped box, portable - for the pocket; there, again, it becomes like a splendid double flower - an ornament for the table; and now' - Mr Trumbull allowed the flower to fall alarmingly into strings of heart-shaped leaves - 'a book of riddles! No less than five hundred printed in a beautiful red. Gentlemen, if I had less of a conscience, I should not wish you to bid high for this lot - I have a longing for it myself. What can promote innocent mirth, and I may say virtue, more than a good riddle? - it hinders profane language, and attaches a man to the society of refined females. This ingenious article itself, without the elegant domino-box, card-basket, &c., ought alone to give a high price to the lot. Carried in the pocket it might make an individual welcome in any society. Four shillings, sir? - four shillings for this remarkable collection of riddles with the et caeteras. Here is a sample: 'How must you spell honey to make it catch lady-birds? Answer - money.' You hear? - lady-birds - honey money. This is an amusement to sharpen the intellect; it has a sting - it has what we call satire, and wit without indecency. Four-and-sixpence - five shillings.'

The bidding ran on with warming rivalry. Mr Bowyer was a bidder, and this was too exasperating. Bowyer couldn't afford it, and only

wanted to hinder every other man from making a figure. The current carried even Mr Horrock with it, but this committal of himself to an opinion fell from him with so little sacrifice of his neutral expression, that the bid might not have been detected as his but for the friendly oaths of Mr Bambridge, who wanted to know what Horrock would do with blasted stuff only fit for haberdashers given over to that state of perdition which the horse-dealer so cordially recognized in the majority of earthly existences. The lot was finally knocked down at a guinea to Mr Spilkins, a young Slender of the neighborhood, who was reckless with his pocket-money and felt his want of memory for riddles.

'Come, Trumbull, this is too bad - you've been putting some old maid's rubbish into the sale,' murmured Mr Toller, getting close to the auctioneer. 'I want to see how the prints go, and I must be off soon.'

'Immediately, Mr Toller. It was only an act of benevolence which your noble heart would approve. Joseph! quick with the prints - Lot 235. Now, gentlemen, you who are connoisseurs, you are going to have a treat. Here is an engraving of the Duke of Wellington surrounded by his staff on the Field of Waterloo; and notwithstanding recent events which have, as it were, enveloped our great Hero in a cloud, I will be bold to say - for a man in my line must not be blown about by political winds - that a finer subject - of the modern order, belonging to our own time and epoch - the understanding of man could hardly conceive: angels might, perhaps, but not men, sirs, not men.'

'Who painted it?' said Mr Powderell, much impressed.

'It is a proof before the letter, Mr Powderell - the painter is not known,' answered Trumbull, with a certain gaspingness in his last words, after which he pursed up his lips and stared round him.

'I'll bid a pound!' said Mr Powderell, in a tone of resolved emotion, as of a man ready to put himself in the breach. Whether from awe or pity, nobody raised the price on him.

Next came two Dutch prints which Mr Toller had been eager for, and after he had secured them he went away. Other prints, and afterwards some paintings, were sold to leading Middlemarchers who had come with a special desire for them, and there was a more active movement of the audience in and out; some, who had bought what they wanted, going away, others coming in either quite newly or from a temporary visit to the refreshments which were spread under the marquee on the lawn. It was this marquee that Mr Bambridge was bent on buying, and he appeared to like looking inside it frequently, as a foretaste of its possession. On the last occasion of his return from it he was observed to bring with him a new companion, a stranger to Mr

Trumbull and every one else, whose appearance, however, led to the supposition that he might be a relative of the horse-dealer's - also 'given to indulgence.' His large whiskers, imposing swagger, and swing of the leg, made him a striking figure; but his suit of black, rather shabby at the edges, caused the prejudicial inference that he was not able to afford himself as much indulgence as he liked.

'Who is it you've picked up, Bam?' said Mr Horrock, aside.

'Ask him yourself,' returned Mr Bambridge. 'He said he'd just turned in from the road.'

Mr Horrock eyed the stranger, who was leaning back against his stick with one hand, using his toothpick with the other, and looking about him with a certain restlessness apparently under the silence imposed on him by circumstances.

At length the 'Supper at Emmaus' was brought forward, to Wills immense relief, for he was getting so tired of the proceedings that he had drawn back a little and leaned his shoulder against the wall just behind the auctioneer. He now came forward again, and his eye caught the conspicuous stranger, who, rather to his surprise, was staring at him markedly. But Will was immediately appealed to by Mr Trumbull.

'Yes, Mr Ladislaw, yes; this interests you as a *connoissance*, I think. It is some pleasure,' the auctioneer went on with a rising fervor, 'to have a picture like this to show to a company of ladies and gentlemen - a picture worth any sum to an individual whose means were on a level with his judgment. It is a painting of the Italian school - by the celebrated Guydo, the greatest painter in the world, the chief of the Old Masters, as they are called - I take it, because they were up to a thing or two beyond most of us - in possession of secrets now lost to the bulk of mankind. Let me tell you, gentlemen, I have seen a great many pictures by the Old Masters, and they are not all up to this mark - some of them are darker than you might like and not family subjects. But here is a Guydo - the frame alone is worth pounds - which any lady might be proud to hang up - a suitable thing for what we call a refectory in a charitable institution, if any gentleman of the Corporation wished to show his *munificence*. Turn it a little, sir? yes. Joseph, turn it a little towards Mr Ladislaw - Mr Ladislaw, having been abroad, understands the merit of these things, you observe.'

All eyes were for a moment turned towards Will, who said, coolly, 'Five pounds.' The auctioneer burst out in deep remonstrance.

'Ah! Mr Ladislaw! the frame alone is worth that. Ladies and gentlemen, for the credit of the town! Suppose it should be discovered

hereafter that a gem of art has been amongst us in this town, and nobody in Middlemarch awake to it. Five guineas - five seven-six - five ten. Still, ladies, still! It is a gem, and 'Full many a gem,' as the poet says, has been allowed to go at a nominal price because the public knew no better, because it was offered in circles where there was - I was going to say a low feeling, but no! - Six pounds - six guineas - a Guydo of the first order going at six guineas - it is an insult to religion, ladies; it touches us all as Christians, gentlemen, that a subject like this should go at such a low figure - six pounds ten - seven - '

The bidding was brisk, and Will continued to share in it, remembering that Mrs Bulstrode had a strong wish for the picture, and thinking that he might stretch the price to twelve pounds. But it was knocked down to him at ten guineas, whereupon he pushed his way towards the bow-window and went out. He chose to go under the marquee to get a glass of water, being hot and thirsty: it was empty of other visitors, and he asked the woman in attendance to fetch him some fresh water; but before she was well gone he was annoyed to see entering the florid stranger who had stared at him. It struck Will at this moment that the man might be one of those political parasitic insects of the bloated kind who had once or twice claimed acquaintance with him as having heard him speak on the Reform question, and who might think of getting a shilling by news. In this light his person, already rather heating to behold on a summer's day, appeared the more disagreeable; and Will, half-seated on the elbow of a garden-chair, turned his eyes carefully away from the comer. But this signified little to our acquaintance Mr Raffles, who never hesitated to thrust himself on unwilling observation, if it suited his purpose to do so. He moved a step or two till he was in front of Will, and said with full-mouthed haste, 'Excuse me, Mr Ladislaw - was your mother's name Sarah Dunkirk?'

Will, starting to his feet, moved backward a step, frowning, and saying with some fierceness, 'Yes, sir, it was. And what is that to you?'

It was in Will's nature that the first spark it threw out was a direct answer of the question and a challenge of the consequences. To have said, 'What is that to you?' in the first instance, would have seemed like shuffling - as if he minded who knew anything about his origin!

Raffles on his side had not the same eagerness for a collision which was implied in Ladislaw's threatening air. The slim young fellow with his girl's complexion looked like a tiger-cat ready to spring on him. Under such circumstances Mr Raffles's pleasure in annoying his company was kept in abeyance.

'No offence, my good sir, no offence! I only remember your mother - knew her when she was a girl. But it is your father that you feature, sir. I had the pleasure of seeing your father too. Parents alive, Mr Ladislaw?'

'No!' thundered Will, in the same attitude as before.

'Should be glad to do you a service, Mr Ladislaw - by Jove, I should! Hope to meet again.'

Hereupon Raffles, who had lifted his hat with the last words, turned himself round with a swing of his leg and walked away. Will looked after him a moment, and could see that he did not re-enter the auction-room, but appeared to be walking towards the road. For an instant he thought that he had been foolish not to let the man go on talking; - but no! on the whole he preferred doing without knowledge from that source.

Later in the evening, however, Raffles overtook him in the street, and appearing either to have forgotten the roughness of his former reception or to intend avenging it by a forgiving familiarity, greeted him jovially and walked by his side, remarking at first on the pleasantness of the town and neighborhood. Will suspected that the man had been drinking and was considering how to shake him off when Raffles said -

'I've been abroad myself, Mr Ladislaw - I've seen the world - used to parley-vous a little. It was at Boulogne I saw your father - a most uncommon likeness you are of him, by Jove! mouth - nose - eyes - hair turned off your brow just like his - a little in the foreign style. John Bull doesn't do much of that. But your father was very ill when I saw him. Lord, lord! hands you might see through. You were a small youngster then. Did he get well?'

'No,' said Will, curtly.

'Ah! Well! I've often wondered what became of your mother. She ran away from her friends when she was a young lass - a proud-spirited lass, and pretty, by Jove! I knew the reason why she ran away,' said Raffles, winking slowly as he looked sideways at Will.

'You know nothing dishonorable of her, sir,' said Will, turning on him rather savagely. But Mr Raffles just now was not sensitive to shades of manner.

'Not a bit!' said he, tossing his head decisively 'She was a little too honorable to like her friends - that was it!' Here Raffles again winked slowly. 'Lord bless you, I knew all about 'em - a little in what you may

call the respectable thieving line - the high style of receiving-house - none of your holes and corners - first-rate. Slap-up shop, high profits and no mistake. But Lord! Sarah would have known nothing about it - a dashing young lady she was - fine boarding-school - fit for a lord's wife - only Archie Duncan threw it at her out of spite, because she would have nothing to do with him. And so she ran away from the whole concern. I travelled for 'em, sir, in a gentlemanly way - at a high salary. They didn't mind her running away at first - godly folks, sir, very godly - and she was for the stage. The son was alive then, and the daughter was at a discount. Hallo! here we are at the Blue Bull. What do you say, Mr Ladislaw? - shall we turn in and have a glass?'

'No, I must say good evening,' said Will, dashing up a passage which led into Lowick Gate, and almost running to get out of Raffles's reach.

He walked a long while on the Lowick road away from the town, glad of the starlit darkness when it came. He felt as if he had had dirt cast on him amidst shouts of scorn. There was this to confirm the fellow's statement - that his mother never would tell him the reason why she had run away from her family.

Well! what was he, Will Ladislaw, the worse, supposing the truth about that family to be the ugliest? His mother had braved hardship in order to separate herself from it. But if Dorothea's friends had known this story - if the Chettams had known it - they would have had a fine color to give their suspicions a welcome ground for thinking him unfit to come near her. However, let them suspect what they pleased, they would find themselves in the wrong. They would find out that the blood in his veins was as free from the taint of meanness as theirs.