BOOK VII. TWO TEMPTATIONS

Chapter LXIII

These little things are great to little man. - GOLDSMITH.

'Have you seen much of your scientific phoenix, Lydgate, lately?' said Mr Toller at one of his Christmas dinner-parties, speaking to Mr Farebrother on his right hand.

'Not much, I am sorry to say,' answered the Vicar, accustomed to parry Mr Toller's banter about his belief in the new medical light. 'I am out of the way and he is too busy.'

'Is he? I am glad to hear it,' said Dr. Minchin, with mingled suavity and surprise.

'He gives a great deal of time to the New Hospital,' said Mr Farebrother, who had his reasons for continuing the subject: 'I hear of that from my neighbor, Mrs Casaubon, who goes there often. She says Lydgate is indefatigable, and is making a fine thing of Bulstrode's institution. He is preparing a new ward in case of the cholera coming to us.'

'And preparing theories of treatment to try on the patients, I suppose,' said Mr Toller.

'Come, Toller, be candid,' said Mr Farebrother. 'You are too clever not to see the good of a bold fresh mind in medicine, as well as in everything else; and as to cholera, I fancy, none of you are very sure what you ought to do. If a man goes a little too far along a new road, it is usually himself that he harms more than any one else.'

'I am sure you and Wrench ought to be obliged to him,' said Dr. Minchin, looking towards Toller, 'for he has sent you the cream of Peacock's patients.'

'Lydgate has been living at a great rate for a young beginner,' said Mr Harry Toller, the brewer. 'I suppose his relations in the North back him up.'

'I hope so,' said Mr Chichely, 'else he ought not to have married that nice girl we were all so fond of. Hang it, one has a grudge against a man who carries off the prettiest girl in the town.'

'Ay, by God! and the best too,' said Mr Standish.

‘My friend Vincy didn't half like the marriage, I know that,’ said Mr Chichely. ‘*He* wouldn't do much. How the relations on the other side may have come down I can't say.’ There was an emphatic kind of reticence in Mr Chichely's manner of speaking.

‘Oh, I shouldn't think Lydgate ever looked to practice for a living,’ said Mr Toller, with a slight touch of sarcasm, and there the subject was dropped.

This was not the first time that Mr Farebrother had heard hints of Lydgate's expenses being obviously too great to be met by his practice, but he thought it not unlikely that there were resources or expectations which excused the large outlay at the time of Lydgate's marriage, and which might hinder any bad consequences from the disappointment in his practice. One evening, when he took the pains to go to Middlemarch on purpose to have a chat with Lydgate as of old, he noticed in him an air of excited effort quite unlike his usual easy way of keeping silence or breaking it with abrupt energy whenever he had anything to say. Lydgate talked persistently when they were in his work-room, putting arguments for and against the probability of certain biological views; but he had none of those definite things to say or to show which give the waymarks of a patient uninterrupted pursuit, such as he used himself to insist on, saying that ‘there must be a systole and diastole in all inquiry,’ and that ‘a man's mind must be continually expanding and shrinking between the whole human horizon and the horizon of an object-glass.’ That evening he seemed to be talking widely for the sake of resisting any personal bearing; and before long they went into the drawing room, where Lydgate, having asked Rosamond to give them music, sank back in his chair in silence, but with a strange light in his eyes. ‘He may have been taking an opiate,’ was a thought that crossed Mr Farebrother's mind - ‘tic-douloureux perhaps - or medical worries.’

It did not occur to him that Lydgate's marriage was not delightful: he believed, as the rest did, that Rosamond was an amiable, docile creature, though he had always thought her rather uninteresting - a little too much the pattern-card of the finishing-school; and his mother could not forgive Rosamond because she never seemed to see that Henrietta Noble was in the room. ‘However, Lydgate fell in love with her,’ said the Vicar to himself, ‘and she must be to his taste.’

Mr Farebrother was aware that Lydgate was a proud man, but having very little corresponding fibre in himself, and perhaps too little care about personal dignity, except the dignity of not being mean or foolish, he could hardly allow enough for the way in which Lydgate shrank, as from a burn, from the utterance of any word about his private affairs. And soon after that conversation at Mr Toller's, the Vicar learned something which made him watch the more eagerly for an opportunity

of indirectly letting Lydgate know that if he wanted to open himself about any difficulty there was a friendly ear ready.

The opportunity came at Mr Vincy's, where, on New Year's Day, there was a party, to which Mr Farebrother was irresistibly invited, on the plea that he must not forsake his old friends on the first new year of his being a greater man, and Rector as well as Vicar. And this party was thoroughly friendly: all the ladies of the Farebrother family were present; the Vincy children all dined at the table, and Fred had persuaded his mother that if she did not invite Mary Garth, the Farebrothers would regard it as a slight to themselves, Mary being their particular friend. Mary came, and Fred was in high spirits, though his enjoyment was of a checkered kind - triumph that his mother should see Mary's importance with the chief personages in the party being much streaked with jealousy when Mr Farebrother sat down by her. Fred used to be much more easy about his own accomplishments in the days when he had not begun to dread being 'bowled out by Farebrother,' and this terror was still before him. Mrs Vincy, in her fullest matronly bloom, looked at Mary's little figure, rough wavy hair, and visage quite without lilies and roses, and wondered; trying unsuccessfully to fancy herself caring about Mary's appearance in wedding clothes, or feeling complacency in grandchildren who would 'feature' the Garths. However, the party was a merry one, and Mary was particularly bright; being glad, for Fred's sake, that his friends were getting kinder to her, and being also quite willing that they should see how much she was valued by others whom they must admit to be judges.

Mr Farebrother noticed that Lydgate seemed bored, and that Mr Vincy spoke as little as possible to his son-in-law. Rosamond was perfectly graceful and calm, and only a subtle observation such as the Vicar had not been roused to bestow on her would have perceived the total absence of that interest in her husband's presence which a loving wife is sure to betray, even if etiquette keeps her aloof from him. When Lydgate was taking part in the conversation, she never looked towards him any more than if she had been a sculptured Psyche modelled to look another way: and when, after being called out for an hour or two, he re-entered the room, she seemed unconscious of the fact, which eighteen months before would have had the effect of a numeral before ciphers. In reality, however, she was intensely aware of Lydgate's voice and movements; and her pretty good-tempered air of unconsciousness was a studied negation by which she satisfied her inward opposition to him without compromise of propriety. When the ladies were in the drawing-room after Lydgate had been called away from the dessert, Mrs Farebrother, when Rosamond happened to be near her, said - 'You have to give up a great deal of your husband's society, Mrs Lydgate.'

‘Yes, the life of a medical man is very arduous: especially when he is so devoted to his profession as Mr Lydgate is,’ said Rosamond, who was standing, and moved easily away at the end of this correct little speech.

‘It is dreadfully dull for her when there is no company,’ said Mrs Vincy, who was seated at the old lady's side. ‘I am sure I thought so when Rosamond was ill, and I was staying with her. You know, Mrs Farebrother, ours is a cheerful house. I am of a cheerful disposition myself, and Mr Vincy always likes something to be going on. That is what Rosamond has been used to. Very different from a husband out at odd hours, and never knowing when he will come home, and of a close, proud disposition, *I* think’ - indiscreet Mrs Vincy did lower her tone slightly with this parenthesis. ‘But Rosamond always had an angel of a temper; her brothers used very often not to please her, but she was never the girl to show temper; from a baby she was always as good as good, and with a complexion beyond anything. But my children are all good-tempered, thank God.’

This was easily credible to any one looking at Mrs Vincy as she threw back her broad cap-strings, and smiled towards her three little girls, aged from seven to eleven. But in that smiling glance she was obliged to include Mary Garth, whom the three girls had got into a corner to make her tell them stories. Mary was just finishing the delicious tale of Rumpelstiltskin, which she had well by heart, because Letty was never tired of communicating it to her ignorant elders from a favorite red volume. Louisa, Mrs Vincy's darling, now ran to her with wide-eyed serious excitement, crying, ‘Oh mamma, mamma, the little man stamped so hard on the floor he couldn't get his leg out again!’

‘Bless you, my cherub!’ said mamma; ‘you shall tell me all about it to-morrow. Go and listen!’ and then, as her eyes followed Louisa back towards the attractive corner, she thought that if Fred wished her to invite Mary again she would make no objection, the children being so pleased with her.

But presently the corner became still more animated, for Mr Farebrother came in, and seating himself behind Louisa, took her on his lap; whereupon the girls all insisted that he must hear Rumpelstiltskin, and Mary must tell it over again. He insisted too, and Mary, without fuss, began again in her neat fashion, with precisely the same words as before. Fred, who had also seated himself near, would have felt unmixed triumph in Mary's effectiveness if Mr Farebrother had not been looking at her with evident admiration, while he dramatized an intense interest in the tale to please the children.

‘You will never care any more about my one-eyed giant, Loo,’ said Fred at the end.

‘Yes, I shall. Tell about him now,’ said Louisa.

‘Oh, I dare say; I am quite cut out. Ask Mr Farebrother.’

‘Yes,’ added Mary; ‘ask Mr Farebrother to tell you about the ants whose beautiful house was knocked down by a giant named Tom, and he thought they didn't mind because he couldn't hear them cry, or see them use their pocket-handkerchiefs.’

‘Please,’ said Louisa, looking up at the Vicar.

‘No, no, I am a grave old parson. If I try to draw a story out of my bag a sermon comes instead. Shall I preach you a sermon?’ said he, putting on his short-sighted glasses, and pursing up his lips.

‘Yes,’ said Louisa, falteringly.

‘Let me see, then. Against cakes: how cakes are bad things, especially if they are sweet and have plums in them.’

Louisa took the affair rather seriously, and got down from the Vicar's knee to go to Fred.

‘Ah, I see it will not do to preach on New Year's Day,’ said Mr Farebrother, rising and walking away. He had discovered of late that Fred had become jealous of him, and also that he himself was not losing his preference for Mary above all other women.

‘A delightful young person is Miss Garth,’ said Mrs Farebrother, who had been watching her son's movements.

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Vincy, obliged to reply, as the old lady turned to her expectantly. ‘It is a pity she is not better-looking.’

‘I cannot say that,’ said Mrs Farebrother, decisively. ‘I like her countenance. We must not always ask for beauty, when a good God has seen fit to make an excellent young woman without it. I put good manners first, and Miss Garth will know how to conduct herself in any station.’

The old lady was a little sharp in her tone, having a prospective reference to Mary's becoming her daughter-in-law; for there was this inconvenience in Mary's position with regard to Fred, that it was not suitable to be made public, and hence the three ladies at Lowick Parsonage were still hoping that Camden would choose Miss Garth.

New visitors entered, and the drawing-room was given up to music and games, while whist-tables were prepared in the quiet room on the

other side of the hall. Mr Farebrother played a rubber to satisfy his mother, who regarded her occasional whist as a protest against scandal and novelty of opinion, in which light even a revoke had its dignity. But at the end he got Mr Chichely to take his place, and left the room. As he crossed the hall, Lydgate had just come in and was taking off his great-coat.

'You are the man I was going to look for,' said the Vicar; and instead of entering the drawing-room, they walked along the hall and stood against the fireplace, where the frosty air helped to make a glowing bank. 'You see, I can leave the whist-table easily enough,' he went on, smiling at Lydgate, 'now I don't play for money. I owe that to you, Mrs Casaubon says.'

'How?' said Lydgate, coldly.

'Ah, you didn't mean me to know it; I call that ungenerous reticence. You should let a man have the pleasure of feeling that you have done him a good turn. I don't enter into some people's dislike of being under an obligation: upon my word, I prefer being under an obligation to everybody for behaving well to me.'

'I can't tell what you mean,' said Lydgate, 'unless it is that I once spoke of you to Mrs Casaubon. But I did not think that she would break her promise not to mention that I had done so,' said Lydgate, leaning his back against the corner of the mantel-piece, and showing no radiance in his face.

'It was Brooke who let it out, only the other day. He paid me the compliment of saying that he was very glad I had the living though you had come across his tactics, and had praised me up as a lien and a Tillotson, and that sort of thing, till Mrs Casaubon would hear of no one else.'

'Oh, Brooke is such a leaky-minded fool,' said Lydgate, contemptuously.

'Well, I was glad of the leakiness then. I don't see why you shouldn't like me to know that you wished to do me a service, my dear fellow. And you certainly have done me one. It's rather a strong check to one's self-complacency to find how much of one's right doing depends on not being in want of money. A man will not be tempted to say the Lord's Prayer backward to please the devil, if he doesn't want the devil's services. I have no need to hang on the smiles of chance now.'

'I don't see that there's any money-getting without chance,' said Lydgate; 'if a man gets it in a profession, it's pretty sure to come by chance.'

Mr Farebrother thought he could account for this speech, in striking contrast with Lydgate's former way of talking, as the perversity which will often spring from the moodiness of a man ill at ease in his affairs. He answered in a tone of good-humored admission -

'Ah, there's enormous patience wanted with the way of the world. But it is the easier for a man to wait patiently when he has friends who love him, and ask for nothing better than to help him through, so far as it lies in their power.'

'Oh yes,' said Lydgate, in a careless tone, changing his attitude and looking at his watch. 'People make much more of their difficulties than they need to do.'

He knew as distinctly as possible that this was an offer of help to himself from Mr Farebrother, and he could not bear it. So strangely determined are we mortals, that, after having been long gratified with the sense that he had privately done the Vicar a service, the suggestion that the Vicar discerned his need of a service in return made him shrink into unconquerable reticence. Besides, behind all making of such offers what else must come? - that he should 'mention his case,' imply that he wanted specific things. At that moment, suicide seemed easier.

Mr Farebrother was too keen a man not to know the meaning of that reply, and there was a certain massiveness in Lydgate's manner and tone, corresponding with his physique, which if he repelled your advances in the first instance seemed to put persuasive devices out of question.

'What time are you?' said the Vicar, devouring his wounded feeling.

'After eleven,' said Lydgate. And they went into the drawing-room.