

Chapter LXVII

Now is there civil war within the soul: Resolve is thrust from off the sacred throne
By clamorous Needs, and Pride the grand-vizier
Makes humble compact, plays the supple part
Of envoy and deft-tongued apologist
For hungry rebels.

Happily Lydgate had ended by losing in the billiard-room, and brought away no encouragement to make a raid on luck. On the contrary, he felt unmixed disgust with himself the next day when he had to pay four or five pounds over and above his gains, and he carried about with him a most unpleasant vision of the figure he had made, not only rubbing elbows with the men at the Green Dragon but behaving just as they did. A philosopher fallen to betting is hardly distinguishable from a Philistine under the same circumstances: the difference will chiefly be found in his subsequent reflections, and Lydgate chewed a very disagreeable cud in that way. His reason told him how the affair might have been magnified into ruin by a slight change of scenery - if it had been a gambling-house that he had turned into, where chance could be clutched with both hands instead of being picked up with thumb and fore-finger. Nevertheless, though reason strangled the desire to gamble, there remained the feeling that, with an assurance of luck to the needful amount, he would have liked to gamble, rather than take the alternative which was beginning to urge itself as inevitable.

That alternative was to apply to Mr Bulstrode. Lydgate had so many times boasted both to himself and others that he was totally independent of Bulstrode, to whose plans he had lent himself solely because they enabled him to carry out his own ideas of professional work and public benefit - he had so constantly in their personal intercourse had his pride sustained by the sense that he was making a good social use of this predominating banker, whose opinions he thought contemptible and whose motives often seemed to him an absurd mixture of contradictory impressions - that he had been creating for himself strong ideal obstacles to the proffering of any considerable request to him on his own account.

Still, early in March his affairs were at that pass in which men begin to say that their oaths were delivered in ignorance, and to perceive that the act which they had called impossible to them is becoming manifestly possible. With Dover's ugly security soon to be put in force, with the proceeds of his practice immediately absorbed in paying back debts, and with the chance, if the worst were known, of daily supplies being refused on credit, above all with the vision of Rosamond's hopeless discontent continually haunting him, Lydgate had begun to see that he should inevitably bend himself to ask help from somebody or other. At first he had considered whether he should write to Mr

Vincy; but on questioning Rosamond he found that, as he had suspected, she had already applied twice to her father, the last time being since the disappointment from Sir Godwin; and papa had said that Lydgate must look out for himself. 'Papa said he had come, with one bad year after another, to trade more and more on borrowed capital, and had had to give up many indulgences; he could not spare a single hundred from the charges of his family. He said, let Lydgate ask Bulstrode: they have always been hand and glove.'

Indeed, Lydgate himself had come to the conclusion that if he must end by asking for a free loan, his relations with Bulstrode, more at least than with any other man, might take the shape of a claim which was not purely personal. Bulstrode had indirectly helped to cause the failure of his practice, and had also been highly gratified by getting a medical partner in his plans: - but who among us ever reduced himself to the sort of dependence in which Lydgate now stood, without trying to believe that he had claims which diminished the humiliation of asking? It was true that of late there had seemed to be a new languor of interest in Bulstrode about the Hospital; but his health had got worse, and showed signs of a deep-seated nervous affection. In other respects he did not appear to be changed: he had always been highly polite, but Lydgate had observed in him from the first a marked coldness about his marriage and other private circumstances, a coldness which he had hitherto preferred to any warmth of familiarity between them. He deferred the intention from day to day, his habit of acting on his conclusions being made infirm by his repugnance to every possible conclusion and its consequent act. He saw Mr Bulstrode often, but he did not try to use any occasion for his private purpose. At one moment he thought, 'I will write a letter: I prefer that to any circuitous talk;' at another he thought, 'No; if I were talking to him, I could make a retreat before any signs of disinclination.'

Still the days passed and no letter was written, no special interview sought. In his shrinking from the humiliation of a dependent attitude towards Bulstrode, he began to familiarize his imagination with another step even more unlike his remembered self. He began spontaneously to consider whether it would be possible to carry out that puerile notion of Rosamond's which had often made him angry, namely, that they should quit Middlemarch without seeing anything beyond that preface. The question came - 'Would any man buy the practice of me even now, for as little as it is worth? Then the sale might happen as a necessary preparation for going away.'

But against his taking this step, which he still felt to be a contemptible relinquishment of present work, a guilty turning aside from what was a real and might be a widening channel for worthy activity, to start again without any justified destination, there was this obstacle, that the purchaser, if procurable at all, might not be quickly

forthcoming. And afterwards? Rosamond in a poor lodging, though in the largest city or most distant town, would not find the life that could save her from gloom, and save him from the reproach of having plunged her into it. For when a man is at the foot of the hill in his fortunes, he may stay a long while there in spite of professional accomplishment. In the British climate there is no incompatibility between scientific insight and furnished lodgings: the incompatibility is chiefly between scientific ambition and a wife who objects to that kind of residence.

But in the midst of his hesitation, opportunity came to decide him. A note from Mr Bulstrode requested Lydgate to call on him at the Bank. A hypochondriacal tendency had shown itself in the banker's constitution of late; and a lack of sleep, which was really only a slight exaggeration of an habitual dyspeptic symptom, had been dwelt on by him as a sign of threatening insanity. He wanted to consult Lydgate without delay on that particular morning, although he had nothing to tell beyond what he had told before. He listened eagerly to what Lydgate had to say in dissipation of his fears, though this too was only repetition; and this moment in which Bulstrode was receiving a medical opinion with a sense of comfort, seemed to make the communication of a personal need to him easier than it had been in Lydgate's contemplation beforehand. He had been insisting that it would be well for Mr Bulstrode to relax his attention to business.

'One sees how any mental strain, however slight, may affect a delicate frame,' said Lydgate at that stage of the consultation when the remarks tend to pass from the personal to the general, 'by the deep stamp which anxiety will make for a time even on the young and vigorous. I am naturally very strong; yet I have been thoroughly shaken lately by an accumulation of trouble.'

'I presume that a constitution in the susceptible state in which mine at present is, would be especially liable to fall a victim to cholera, if it visited our district. And since its appearance near London, we may well besiege the Mercy-seat for our protection,' said Mr Bulstrode, not intending to evade Lydgate's allusion, but really preoccupied with alarms about himself.

'You have at all events taken your share in using good practical precautions for the town, and that is the best mode of asking for protection,' said Lydgate, with a strong distaste for the broken metaphor and bad logic of the banker's religion, somewhat increased by the apparent deafness of his sympathy. But his mind had taken up its long-prepared movement towards getting help, and was not yet arrested. He added, 'The town has done well in the way of cleansing, and finding appliances; and I think that if the cholera should come,

even our enemies will admit that the arrangements in the Hospital are a public good.'

'Truly,' said Mr Bulstrode, with some coldness. 'With regard to what you say, Mr Lydgate, about the relaxation of my mental labor, I have for some time been entertaining a purpose to that effect - a purpose of a very decided character. I contemplate at least a temporary withdrawal from the management of much business, whether benevolent or commercial. Also I think of changing my residence for a time: probably I shall close or let 'The Shrubs,' and take some place near the coast - under advice of course as to salubrity. That would be a measure which you would recommend?'

'Oh yes,' said Lydgate, falling backward in his chair, with ill-repressed impatience under the banker's pale earnest eyes and intense preoccupation with himself.

'I have for some time felt that I should open this subject with you in relation to our Hospital,' continued Bulstrode. 'Under the circumstances I have indicated, of course I must cease to have any personal share in the management, and it is contrary to my views of responsibility to continue a large application of means to an institution which I cannot watch over and to some extent regulate. I shall therefore, in case of my ultimate decision to leave Middlemarch, consider that I withdraw other support to the New Hospital than that which will subsist in the fact that I chiefly supplied the expenses of building it, and have contributed further large sums to its successful working.'

Lydgate's thought, when Bulstrode paused according to his wont, was, 'He has perhaps been losing a good deal of money.' This was the most plausible explanation of a speech which had caused rather a startling change in his expectations. He said in reply -

'The loss to the Hospital can hardly be made up, I fear.'

'Hardly,' returned Bulstrode, in the same deliberate, silvery tone; 'except by some changes of plan. The only person who may be certainly counted on as willing to increase her contributions is Mrs Casaubon. I have had an interview with her on the subject, and I have pointed out to her, as I am about to do to you, that it will be desirable to win a more general support to the New Hospital by a change of system.' Another pause, but Lydgate did not speak.

'The change I mean is an amalgamation with the Infirmary, so that the New Hospital shall be regarded as a special addition to the elder institution, having the same directing board. It will be necessary, also, that the medical management of the two shall be combined. In this

way any difficulty as to the adequate maintenance of our new establishment will be removed; the benevolent interests of the town will cease to be divided.'

Mr Bulstrode had lowered his eyes from Lydgate's face to the buttons of his coat as he again paused.

'No doubt that is a good device as to ways and means,' said Lydgate, with an edge of irony in his tone. 'But I can't be expected to rejoice in it at once, since one of the first results will be that the other medical men will upset or interrupt my methods, if it were only because they are mine.'

'I myself, as you know, Mr Lydgate, highly valued the opportunity of new and independent procedure which you have diligently employed: the original plan, I confess, was one which I had much at heart, under submission to the Divine Will. But since providential indications demand a renunciation from me, I renounce.'

Bulstrode showed a rather exasperating ability in this conversation. The broken metaphor and bad logic of motive which had stirred his hearer's contempt were quite consistent with a mode of putting the facts which made it difficult for Lydgate to vent his own indignation and disappointment. After some rapid reflection, he only asked -

'What did Mrs Casaubon say?'

'That was the further statement which I wished to make to you,' said Bulstrode, who had thoroughly prepared his ministerial explanation. 'She is, you are aware, a woman of most munificent disposition, and happily in possession - not I presume of great wealth, but of funds which she can well spare. She has informed me that though she has destined the chief part of those funds to another purpose, she is willing to consider whether she cannot fully take my place in relation to the Hospital. But she wishes for ample time to mature her thoughts on the subject, and I have told her that there is no need for haste - that, in fact, my own plans are not yet absolute.'

Lydgate was ready to say, 'If Mrs Casaubon would take your place, there would be gain, instead of loss.' But there was still a weight on his mind which arrested this cheerful candor. He replied, 'I suppose, then, that I may enter into the subject with Mrs Casaubon.'

'Precisely; that is what she expressly desires. Her decision, she says, will much depend on what you can tell her. But not at present: she is, I believe, just setting out on a journey. I have her letter here,' said Mr Bulstrode, drawing it out, and reading from it. 'I am immediately otherwise engaged,' she says. 'I am going into Yorkshire with Sir

James and Lady Chettam; and the conclusions I come to about some land which I am to see there may affect my power of contributing to the Hospital.' Thus, Mr Lydgate, there is no haste necessary in this matter; but I wished to apprise you beforehand of what may possibly occur.'

Mr Bulstrode returned the letter to his side-pocket, and changed his attitude as if his business were closed. Lydgate, whose renewed hope about the Hospital only made him more conscious of the facts which poisoned his hope, felt that his effort after help, if made at all, must be made now and vigorously.

'I am much obliged to you for giving me full notice,' he said, with a firm intention in his tone, yet with an interruptedness in his delivery which showed that he spoke unwillingly. 'The highest object to me is my profession, and I had identified the Hospital with the best use I can at present make of my profession. But the best use is not always the same with monetary success. Everything which has made the Hospital unpopular has helped with other causes - I think they are all connected with my professional zeal - to make me unpopular as a practitioner. I get chiefly patients who can't pay me. I should like them best, if I had nobody to pay on my own side.' Lydgate waited a little, but Bulstrode only bowed, looking at him fixedly, and he went on with the same interrupted enunciation - as if he were biting an objectionable leek.

'I have slipped into money difficulties which I can see no way out of, unless some one who trusts me and my future will advance me a sum without other security. I had very little fortune left when I came here. I have no prospects of money from my own family. My expenses, in consequence of my marriage, have been very much greater than I had expected. The result at this moment is that it would take a thousand pounds to clear me. I mean, to free me from the risk of having all my goods sold in security of my largest debt - as well as to pay my other debts - and leave anything to keep us a little beforehand with our small income. I find that it is out of the question that my wife's father should make such an advance. That is why I mention my position to - to the only other man who may be held to have some personal connection with my prosperity or ruin.'

Lydgate hated to hear himself. But he had spoken now, and had spoken with unmistakable directness. Mr Bulstrode replied without haste, but also without hesitation.

'I am grieved, though, I confess, not surprised by this information, Mr Lydgate. For my own part, I regretted your alliance with my brother-in-law's family, which has always been of prodigal habits, and which has already been much indebted to me for sustainment in its present

position. My advice to you, Mr Lydgate, would be, that instead of involving yourself in further obligations, and continuing a doubtful struggle, you should simply become a bankrupt.'

'That would not improve my prospect,' said Lydgate, rising and speaking bitterly, 'even if it were a more agreeable thing in itself.'

'It is always a trial,' said Mr Bulstrode; 'but trial, my dear sir, is our portion here, and is a needed corrective. I recommend you to weigh the advice I have given.'

'Thank you,' said Lydgate, not quite knowing what he said. 'I have occupied you too long. Good-day.'