

Chapter LXIX

'If thou hast heard a word, let it die with thee.' - Ecclesiasticus.

Mr Bulstrode was still seated in his manager's room at the Bank, about three o'clock of the same day on which he had received Lydgate there, when the clerk entered to say that his horse was waiting, and also that Mr Garth was outside and begged to speak with him.

'By all means,' said Bulstrode; and Caleb entered. 'Pray sit down, Mr Garth,' continued the banker, in his suavest tone.

'I am glad that you arrived just in time to find me here. I know you count your minutes.'

'Oh,' said Caleb, gently, with a slow swing of his head on one side, as he seated himself and laid his hat on the floor.

He looked at the ground, leaning forward and letting his long fingers droop between his legs, while each finger moved in succession, as if it were sharing some thought which filled his large quiet brow.

Mr Bulstrode, like every one else who knew Caleb, was used to his slowness in beginning to speak on any topic which he felt to be important, and rather expected that he was about to recur to the buying of some houses in Blindman's Court, for the sake of pulling them down, as a sacrifice of property which would be well repaid by the influx of air and light on that spot. It was by propositions of this kind that Caleb was sometimes troublesome to his employers; but he had usually found Bulstrode ready to meet him in projects of improvement, and they had got on well together. When he spoke again, however, it was to say, in rather a subdued voice -

'I have just come away from Stone Court, Mr Bulstrode.'

'You found nothing wrong there, I hope,' said the banker; 'I was there myself yesterday. Abel has done well with the lambs this year.'

'Why, yes,' said Caleb, looking up gravely, 'there is something wrong - a stranger, who is very ill, I think. He wants a doctor, and I came to tell you of that. His name is Raffles.'

He saw the shock of his words passing through Bulstrode's frame. On this subject the banker had thought that his fears were too constantly on the watch to be taken by surprise; but he had been mistaken.

'Poor wretch!' he said in a compassionate tone, though his lips trembled a little. 'Do you know how he came there?'

'I took him myself,' said Caleb, quietly - 'took him up in my gig. He had got down from the coach, and was walking a little beyond the turning from the toll-house, and I overtook him. He remembered seeing me with you once before, at Stone Court, and he asked me to take him on. I saw he was ill: it seemed to me the right thing to do, to carry him under shelter. And now I think you should lose no time in getting advice for him.' Caleb took up his hat from the floor as he ended, and rose slowly from his seat.

'Certainly,' said Bulstrode, whose mind was very active at this moment. 'Perhaps you will yourself oblige me, Mr Garth, by calling at Mr Lydgate's as you pass - or stay! he may at this hour probably be at the Hospital. I will first send my man on the horse there with a note this instant, and then I will myself ride to Stone Court.'

Bulstrode quickly wrote a note, and went out himself to give the commission to his man. When he returned, Caleb was standing as before with one hand on the back of the chair, holding his hat with the other. In Bulstrode's mind the dominant thought was, 'Perhaps Raffles only spoke to Garth of his illness. Garth may wonder, as he must have done before, at this disreputable fellow's claiming intimacy with me; but he will know nothing. And he is friendly to me - I can be of use to him.'

He longed for some confirmation of this hopeful conjecture, but to have asked any question as to what Raffles had said or done would have been to betray fear.

'I am exceedingly obliged to you, Mr Garth,' he said, in his usual tone of politeness. 'My servant will be back in a few minutes, and I shall then go myself to see what can be done for this unfortunate man. Perhaps you had some other business with me? If so, pray be seated.'

'Thank you,' said Caleb, making a slight gesture with his right hand to waive the invitation. 'I wish to say, Mr Bulstrode, that I must request you to put your business into some other hands than mine. I am obliged to you for your handsome way of meeting me - about the letting of Stone Court, and all other business. But I must give it up.' A sharp certainty entered like a stab into Bulstrode's soul.

'This is sudden, Mr Garth,' was all he could say at first.

'It is,' said Caleb; 'but it is quite fixed. I must give it up.'

He spoke with a firmness which was very gentle, and yet he could see that Bulstrode seemed to cower under that gentleness, his face looking dried and his eyes swerving away from the glance which rested on him. Caleb felt a deep pity for him, but he could have used

no pretexts to account for his resolve, even if they would have been of any use.

'You have been led to this, I apprehend, by some slanders concerning me uttered by that unhappy creature,' said Bulstrode, anxious now to know the utmost.

'That is true. I can't deny that I act upon what I heard from him.'

'You are a conscientious man, Mr Garth - a man, I trust, who feels himself accountable to God. You would not wish to injure me by being too ready to believe a slander,' said Bulstrode, casting about for pleas that might be adapted to his hearer's mind. 'That is a poor reason for giving up a connection which I think I may say will be mutually beneficial.'

'I would injure no man if I could help it,' said Caleb; 'even if I thought God winked at it. I hope I should have a feeling for my fellow-creature. But, sir - I am obliged to believe that this Raffles has told me the truth. And I can't be happy in working with you, or profiting by you. It hurts my mind. I must beg you to seek another agent.'

'Very well, Mr Garth. But I must at least claim to know the worst that he has told you. I must know what is the foul speech that I am liable to be the victim of,' said Bulstrode, a certain amount of anger beginning to mingle with his humiliation before this quiet man who renounced his benefits.

'That's needless,' said Caleb, waving his hand, bowing his head slightly, and not swerving from the tone which had in it the merciful intention to spare this pitiable man. 'What he has said to me will never pass from my lips, unless something now unknown forces it from me. If you led a harmful life for gain, and kept others out of their rights by deceit, to get the more for yourself, I dare say you repent - you would like to go back, and can't: that must be a bitter thing' - Caleb paused a moment and shook his head - 'it is not for me to make your life harder to you.'

'But you do - you do make it harder to me,' said Bulstrode constrained into a genuine, pleading cry. 'You make it harder to me by turning your back on me.'

'That I'm forced to do,' said Caleb, still more gently, lifting up his hand. 'I am sorry. I don't judge you and say, he is wicked, and I am righteous. God forbid. I don't know everything. A man may do wrong, and his will may rise clear out of it, though he can't get his life clear. That's a bad punishment. If it is so with you, - well, I'm very sorry for you. But I have that feeling inside me, that I can't go on working with

you. That's all, Mr Bulstrode. Everything else is buried, so far as my will goes. And I wish you good-day.'

'One moment, Mr Garth!' said Bulstrode, hurriedly. 'I may trust then to your solemn assurance that you will not repeat either to man or woman what - even if it have any degree of truth in it - is yet a malicious representation?' Caleb's wrath was stirred, and he said, indignantly -

'Why should I have said it if I didn't mean it? I am in no fear of you. Such tales as that will never tempt my tongue.'

'Excuse me - I am agitated - I am the victim of this abandoned man.'

'Stop a bit! you have got to consider whether you didn't help to make him worse, when you profited by his vices.'

'You are wronging me by too readily believing him,' said Bulstrode, oppressed, as by a nightmare, with the inability to deny flatly what Raffles might have said; and yet feeling it an escape that Caleb had not so stated it to him as to ask for that flat denial.

'No,' said Caleb, lifting his hand deprecatingly; 'I am ready to believe better, when better is proved. I rob you of no good chance. As to speaking, I hold it a crime to expose a man's sin unless I'm clear it must be done to save the innocent. That is my way of thinking, Mr Bulstrode, and what I say, I've no need to swear. I wish you good-day.'

Some hours later, when he was at home, Caleb said to his wife, incidentally, that he had had some little differences with Bulstrode, and that in consequence, he had given up all notion of taking Stone Court, and indeed had resigned doing further business for him.

'He was disposed to interfere too much, was he?' said Mrs Garth, imagining that her husband had been touched on his sensitive point, and not been allowed to do what he thought right as to materials and modes of work.

'Oh,' said Caleb, bowing his head and waving his hand gravely. And Mrs Garth knew that this was a sign of his not intending to speak further on the subject.

As for Bulstrode, he had almost immediately mounted his horse and set off for Stone Court, being anxious to arrive there before Lydgate.

His mind was crowded with images and conjectures, which were a language to his hopes and fears, just as we hear tones from the vibrations which shake our whole system. The deep humiliation with

which he had winced under Caleb Garth's knowledge of his past and rejection of his patronage, alternated with and almost gave way to the sense of safety in the fact that Garth, and no other, had been the man to whom Raffles had spoken. It seemed to him a sort of earnest that Providence intended his rescue from worse consequences; the way being thus left open for the hope of secrecy. That Raffles should be afflicted with illness, that he should have been led to Stone Court rather than elsewhere - Bulstrode's heart fluttered at the vision of probabilities which these events conjured up. If it should turn out that he was freed from all danger of disgrace - if he could breathe in perfect liberty - his life should be more consecrated than it had ever been before. He mentally lifted up this vow as if it would urge the result he longed for - he tried to believe in the potency of that prayerful resolution - its potency to determine death. He knew that he ought to say, 'Thy will be done;' and he said it often. But the intense desire remained that the will of God might be the death of that hated man.

Yet when he arrived at Stone Court he could not see the change in Raffles without a shock. But for his pallor and feebleness, Bulstrode would have called the change in him entirely mental. Instead of his loud tormenting mood, he showed an intense, vague terror, and seemed to deprecate Bulstrode's anger, because the money was all gone - he had been robbed - it had half of it been taken from him. He had only come here because he was ill and somebody was hunting him - somebody was after him he had told nobody anything, he had kept his mouth shut. Bulstrode, not knowing the significance of these symptoms, interpreted this new nervous susceptibility into a means of alarming Raffles into true confessions, and taxed him with falsehood in saying that he had not told anything, since he had just told the man who took him up in his gig and brought him to Stone Court. Raffles denied this with solemn adjurations; the fact being that the links of consciousness were interrupted in him, and that his minute terror-stricken narrative to Caleb Garth had been delivered under a set of visionary impulses which had dropped back into darkness.

Bulstrode's heart sank again at this sign that he could get no grasp over the wretched man's mind, and that no word of Raffles could be trusted as to the fact which he most wanted to know, namely, whether or not he had really kept silence to every one in the neighborhood except Caleb Garth. The housekeeper had told him without the least constraint of manner that since Mr Garth left, Raffles had asked her for beer, and after that had not spoken, seeming very ill. On that side it might be concluded that there had been no betrayal. Mrs Abel thought, like the servants at The Shrubs, that the strange man belonged to the unpleasant 'kin' who are among the troubles of the rich; she had at first referred the kinship to Mr Rigg, and where there was property left, the buzzing presence of such large blue-bottles

seemed natural enough. How he could be 'kin' to Bulstrode as well was not so clear, but Mrs Abel agreed with her husband that there was 'no knowing,' a proposition which had a great deal of mental food for her, so that she shook her head over it without further speculation.

In less than an hour Lydgate arrived. Bulstrode met him outside the wainscoted parlor, where Raffles was, and said -

'I have called you in, Mr Lydgate, to an unfortunate man who was once in my employment, many years ago. Afterwards he went to America, and returned I fear to an idle dissolute life. Being destitute, he has a claim on me. He was slightly connected with Rigg, the former owner of this place, and in consequence found his way here. I believe he is seriously ill: apparently his mind is affected. I feel bound to do the utmost for him.'

Lydgate, who had the remembrance of his last conversation with Bulstrode strongly upon him, was not disposed to say an unnecessary word to him, and bowed slightly in answer to this account; but just before entering the room he turned automatically and said, 'What is his name?' - to know names being as much a part of the medical man's accomplishment as of the practical politician's.

'Raffles, John Raffles,' said Bulstrode, who hoped that whatever became of Raffles, Lydgate would never know any more of him.

When he had thoroughly examined and considered the patient, Lydgate ordered that he should go to bed, and be kept there in as complete quiet as possible, and then went with Bulstrode into another room.

'It is a serious case, I apprehend,' said the banker, before Lydgate began to speak.

'No - and yes,' said Lydgate, half dubiously. 'It is difficult to decide as to the possible effect of long-standing complications; but the man had a robust constitution to begin with. I should not expect this attack to be fatal, though of course the system is in a ticklish state. He should be well watched and attended to.'

'I will remain here myself,' said Bulstrode. 'Mrs Abel and her husband are inexperienced. I can easily remain here for the night, if you will oblige me by taking a note for Mrs Bulstrode.'

'I should think that is hardly necessary,' said Lydgate. 'He seems tame and terrified enough. He might become more unmanageable. But there is a man here - is there not?'

'I have more than once stayed here a few nights for the sake of seclusion,' said Bulstrode, indifferently; 'I am quite disposed to do so now. Mrs Abel and her husband can relieve or aid me, if necessary.'

'Very well. Then I need give my directions only to you,' said Lydgate, not feeling surprised at a little peculiarity in Bulstrode.

'You think, then, that the case is hopeful?' said Bulstrode, when Lydgate had ended giving his orders.

'Unless there turn out to be further complications, such as I have not at present detected - yes,' said Lydgate. 'He may pass on to a worse stage; but I should not wonder if he got better in a few days, by adhering to the treatment I have prescribed. There must be firmness. Remember, if he calls for liquors of any sort, not to give them to him. In my opinion, men in his condition are oftener killed by treatment than by the disease. Still, new symptoms may arise. I shall come again to-morrow morning.'

After waiting for the note to be carried to Mrs Bulstrode, Lydgate rode away, forming no conjectures, in the first instance, about the history of Raffles, but rehearsing the whole argument, which had lately been much stirred by the publication of Dr. Ware's abundant experience in America, as to the right way of treating cases of alcoholic poisoning such as this. Lydgate, when abroad, had already been interested in this question: he was strongly convinced against the prevalent practice of allowing alcohol and persistently administering large doses of opium; and he had repeatedly acted on this conviction with a favorable result.

'The man is in a diseased state,' he thought, 'but there's a good deal of wear in him still. I suppose he is an object of charity to Bulstrode. It is curious what patches of hardness and tenderness lie side by side in men's dispositions. Bulstrode seems the most unsympathetic fellow I ever saw about some people, and yet he has taken no end of trouble, and spent a great deal of money, on benevolent objects. I suppose he has some test by which he finds out whom Heaven cares for - he has made up his mind that it doesn't care for me.'

This streak of bitterness came from a plenteous source, and kept widening in the current of his thought as he neared Lowick Gate. He had not been there since his first interview with Bulstrode in the morning, having been found at the Hospital by the banker's messenger; and for the first time he was returning to his home without the vision of any expedient in the background which left him a hope of raising money enough to deliver him from the coming destitution of everything which made his married life tolerable - everything which saved him and Rosamond from that bare isolation in

which they would be forced to recognize how little of a comfort they could be to each other. It was more bearable to do without tenderness for himself than to see that his own tenderness could make no amends for the lack of other things to her. The sufferings of his own pride from humiliations past and to come were keen enough, yet they were hardly distinguishable to himself from that more acute pain which dominated them - the pain of foreseeing that Rosamond would come to regard him chiefly as the cause of disappointment and unhappiness to her. He had never liked the makeshifts of poverty, and they had never before entered into his prospects for himself; but he was beginning now to imagine how two creatures who loved each other, and had a stock of thoughts in common, might laugh over their shabby furniture, and their calculations how far they could afford butter and eggs. But the glimpse of that poetry seemed as far off from him as the carelessness of the golden age; in poor Rosamond's mind there was not room enough for luxuries to look small in. He got down from his horse in a very sad mood, and went into the house, not expecting to be cheered except by his dinner, and reflecting that before the evening closed it would be wise to tell Rosamond of his application to Bulstrode and its failure. It would be well not to lose time in preparing her for the worst.

But his dinner waited long for him before he was able to eat it. For on entering he found that Dover's agent had already put a man in the house, and when he asked where Mrs Lydgate was, he was told that she was in her bedroom. He went up and found her stretched on the bed pale and silent, without an answer even in her face to any word or look of his. He sat down by the bed and leaning over her said with almost a cry of prayer -

'Forgive me for this misery, my poor Rosamond! Let us only love one another.'

She looked at him silently, still with the blank despair on her face; but then the tears began to fill her blue eyes, and her lip trembled. The strong man had had too much to bear that day. He let his head fall beside hers and sobbed.

He did not hinder her from going to her father early in the morning - it seemed now that he ought not to hinder her from doing as she pleased. In half an hour she came back, and said that papa and mamma wished her to go and stay with them while things were in this miserable state. Papa said he could do nothing about the debt - if he paid this, there would be half-a-dozen more. She had better come back home again till Lydgate had got a comfortable home for her. 'Do you object, Tertius?'

'Do as you like,' said Lydgate. 'But things are not coming to a crisis immediately. There is no hurry.'

'I should not go till to-morrow,' said Rosamond; 'I shall want to pack my clothes.'

'Oh, I would wait a little longer than to-morrow - there is no knowing what may happen,' said Lydgate, with bitter irony. 'I may get my neck broken, and that may make things easier to you.'

It was Lydgate's misfortune and Rosamond's too, that his tenderness towards her, which was both an emotional prompting and a well-considered resolve, was inevitably interrupted by these outbursts of indignation either ironical or remonstrant. She thought them totally unwarranted, and the repulsion which this exceptional severity excited in her was in danger of making the more persistent tenderness unacceptable.

'I see you do not wish me to go,' she said, with chill mildness; 'why can you not say so, without that kind of violence? I shall stay until you request me to do otherwise.'

Lydgate said no more, but went out on his rounds. He felt bruised and shattered, and there was a dark line under his eyes which Rosamond had not seen before. She could not bear to look at him. Tertius had a way of taking things which made them a great deal worse for her.