Chapter LXXIV

'Mercifully grant that we may grow aged together.' - BOOK OF TOBIT: Marriage Prayer.

In Middlemarch a wife could not long remain ignorant that the town held a bad opinion of her husband. No feminine intimate might carry her friendship so far as to make a plain statement to the wife of the unpleasant fact known or believed about her husband; but when a woman with her thoughts much at leisure got them suddenly employed on something grievously disadvantageous to her neighbors, various moral impulses were called into play which tended to stimulate utterance. Candor was one. To be candid, in Middlemarch phraseology, meant, to use an early opportunity of letting your friends know that you did not take a cheerful view of their capacity, their conduct, or their position; and a robust candor never waited to be asked for its opinion. Then, again, there was the love of truth - a wide phrase, but meaning in this relation, a lively objection to seeing a wife look happier than her husband's character warranted, or manifest too much satisfaction in her lot - the poor thing should have some hint given her that if she knew the truth she would have less complacency in her bonnet, and in light dishes for a supper-party. Stronger than all, there was the regard for a friend's moral improvement, sometimes called her soul, which was likely to be benefited by remarks tending to gloom, uttered with the accompaniment of pensive staring at the furniture and a manner implying that the speaker would not tell what was on her mind, from regard to the feelings of her hearer. On the whole, one might say that an ardent charity was at work setting the virtuous mind to make a neighbor unhappy for her good.

There were hardly any wives in Middlemarch whose matrimonial misfortunes would in different ways be likely to call forth more of this moral activity than Rosamond and her aunt Bulstrode. Mrs Bulstrode was not an object of dislike, and had never consciously injured any human being. Men had always thought her a handsome comfortable woman, and had reckoned it among the signs of Bulstrode's hypocrisy that he had chosen a red-blooded Vincy, instead of a ghastly and melancholy person suited to his low esteem for earthly pleasure. When the scandal about her husband was disclosed they remarked of her - 'Ah, poor woman! She's as honest as the day - *she* never suspected anything wrong in him, you may depend on it.' Women, who were intimate with her, talked together much of 'poor Harriet,' imagined what her feelings must be when she came to know everything, and conjectured how much she had already come to know. There was no spiteful disposition towards her; rather, there was a busy benevolence anxious to ascertain what it would be well for her to feel and do under the circumstances, which of course kept the imagination occupied with her character and history from the times

when she was Harriet Vincy till now. With the review of Mrs Bulstrode and her position it was inevitable to associate Rosamond, whose prospects were under the same blight with her aunt's. Rosamond was more severely criticised and less pitied, though she too, as one of the good old Vincy family who had always been known in Middlemarch, was regarded as a victim to marriage with an interloper. The Vincys had their weaknesses, but then they lay on the surface: there was never anything bad to be 'found out' concerning them. Mrs Bulstrode was vindicated from any resemblance to her husband. Harriet's faults were her own.

'She has always been showy,' said Mrs Hackbutt, making tea for a small party, 'though she has got into the way of putting her religion forward, to conform to her husband; she has tried to hold her head up above Middlemarch by making it known that she invites clergymen and heaven-knows-who from Riverston and those places.'

'We can hardly blame her for that,' said Mrs Sprague; 'because few of the best people in the town cared to associate with Balstrode, and she must have somebody to sit down at her table.'

'Mr Thesiger has always countenanced him,' said Mrs Hackbutt. 'I think he must be sorry now.'

'But he was never fond of him in his heart - that every one knows,' said Mrs Tom Toller. 'Mr Thesiger never goes into extremes. He keeps to the truth in what is evangelical. It is only clergymen like Mr Tyke, who want to use Dissenting hymn-books and that low kind of religion, who ever found Bulstrode to their taste.'

'I understand, Mr Tyke is in great distress about him,' said Mrs Hackbutt. 'And well he may be: they say the Bulstrodes have half kept the Tyke family.'

'And of coarse it is a discredit to his doctrines,' said Mrs Sprague, who was elderly, and old-fashioned in her opinions.

'People will not make a boast of being methodistical in Middlemarch for a good while to come.'

'I think we must not set down people's bad actions to their religion,' said falcon-faced Mrs Plymdale, who had been listening hitherto.

'Oh, my dear, we are forgetting,' said Mrs Sprague. 'We ought not to be talking of this before you.'

'I am sure I have no reason to be partial,' said Mrs Plymdale, coloring. 'It's true Mr Plymdale has always been on good terms with Mr

Bulstrode, and Harriet Vincy was my friend long before she married him. But I have always kept my own opinions and told her where she was wrong, poor thing. Still, in point of religion, I must say, Mr Bulstrode might have done what he has, and worse, and yet have been a man of no religion. I don't say that there has not been a little too much of that - I like moderation myself. But truth is truth. The men tried at the assizes are not all over-religious, I suppose.'

'Well,' said Mrs Hackbutt, wheeling adroitly, 'all I can say is, that I think she ought to separate from him.'

'I can't say that,' said Mrs Sprague. 'She took him for better or worse, you know.'

'But `worse' can never mean finding out that your husband is fit for Newgate,' said Mrs Hackbutt. 'Fancy living with such a man! I should expect to be poisoned.'

'Yes, I think myself it is an encouragement to crime if such men are to be taken care of and waited on by good wives,' said Mrs Tom Toller.

'And a good wife poor Harriet has been,' said Mrs Plymdale. 'She thinks her husband the first of men. It's true he has never denied her anything.'

'Well, we shall see what she will do,' said Mrs Hackbutt. 'I suppose she knows nothing yet, poor creature. I do hope and trust I shall not see her, for I should be frightened to death lest I should say anything about her husband. Do you think any hint has reached her?'

'I should hardly think so,' said Mrs Tom Toller. 'We hear that he is ill, and has never stirred out of the house since the meeting on Thursday; but she was with her girls at church yesterday, and they had new Tuscan bonnets. Her own had a feather in it. I have never seen that her religion made any difference in her dress.'

'She wears very neat patterns always,' said Mrs Plymdale, a little stung. 'And that feather I know she got dyed a pale lavender on purpose to be consistent. I must say it of Harriet that she wishes to do right.'

'As to her knowing what has happened, it can't be kept from her long,' said Mrs Hackbutt. 'The Vincys know, for Mr Vincy was at the meeting. It will he a great blow to him. There is his daughter as well as his sister.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Mrs Sprague. 'Nobody supposes that Mr Lydgate can go on holding up his head in Middlemarch, things look so black

about the thousand pounds he took just at that man's death. It really makes one shudder.'

'Pride must have a fall,' said Mrs Hackbutt.

'I am not so sorry for Rosamond Vincy that was as I am for her aunt,' said Mrs Plymdale. 'She needed a lesson.'

'I suppose the Bulstrodes will go and live abroad somewhere,' said Mrs Sprague. 'That is what is generally done when there is anything disgraceful in a family.'

'And a most deadly blow it will be to Harriet,' said Mrs Plymdale. 'If ever a woman was crushed, she will be. I pity her from my heart. And with all her faults, few women are better. From a girl she had the neatest ways, and was always good-hearted, and as open as the day. You might look into her drawers when you would - always the same. And so she has brought up Kate and Ellen. You may think how hard it will be for her to go among foreigners.'

'The doctor says that is what he should recommend the Lydgates to do,' said Mrs Sprague. 'He says Lydgate ought to have kept among the French.'

'That would suit *her* well enough, I dare say,' said Mrs Plymdale; 'there is that kind of lightness about her. But she got that from her mother; she never got it from her aunt Bulstrode, who always gave her good advice, and to my knowledge would rather have had her marry elsewhere.'

Mrs Plymdale was in a situation which caused her some complication of feeling. There had been not only her intimacy with Mrs Bulstrode, but also a profitable business relation of the great Plymdale dyeing house with Mr Bulstrode, which on the one hand would have inclined her to desire that the mildest view of his character should be the true one, but on the other, made her the more afraid of seeming to palliate his culpability. Again, the late alliance of her family with the Tollers had brought her in connection with the best circle, which gratified her in every direction except in the inclination to those serious views which she believed to be the best in another sense. The sharp little woman's conscience was somewhat troubled in the adjustment of these opposing 'bests,' and of her griefs and satisfactions under late events, which were likely to humble those who needed humbling, but also to fall heavily on her old friend whose faults she would have preferred seeing on a background of prosperity.

Poor Mrs Bulstrode, meanwhile, had been no further shaken by the oncoming tread of calamity than in the busier stirring of that secret

uneasiness which had always been present in her since the last visit of Raffles to The Shrubs. That the hateful man had come ill to Stone Court, and that her husband had chosen to remain there and watch over him, she allowed to be explained by the fact that Raffles had been employed and aided in earlier-days, and that this made a tie of benevolence towards him in his degraded helplessness; and she had been since then innocently cheered by her husband's more hopeful speech about his own health and ability to continue his attention to business. The calm was disturbed when Lydgate had brought him home ill from the meeting, and in spite of comforting assurances during the next few days, she cried in private from the conviction that her husband was not suffering from bodily illness merely, but from something that afflicted his mind. He would not allow her to read to him, and scarcely to sit with him, alleging nervous susceptibility to sounds and movements; yet she suspected that in shutting himself up in his private room he wanted to be busy with his papers. Something, she felt sure, had happened. Perhaps it was some great loss of money; and she was kept in the dark. Not daring to question her husband, she said to Lydgate, on the fifth day after the meeting, when she had not left home except to go to church -

'Mr Lydgate, pray be open with me: I like to know the truth. Has anything happened to Mr Bulstrode?'

'Some little nervous shock,' said Lydgate, evasively. He felt that it was not for him to make the painful revelation.

'But what brought it on?' said Mrs Bulstrode, looking directly at him with her large dark eyes.

'There is often something poisonous in the air of public rooms,' said Lydgate. 'Strong men can stand it, but it tells on people in proportion to the delicacy of their systems. It is often impossible to account for the precise moment of an attack - or rather, to say why the strength gives way at a particular moment.'

Mrs Bulstrode was not satisfied with this answer. There remained in her the belief that some calamity had befallen her husband, of which she was to be kept in ignorance; and it was in her nature strongly to object to such concealment. She begged leave for her daughters to sit with their father, and drove into the town to pay some visits, conjecturing that if anything were known to have gone wrong in Mr Bulstrode's affairs, she should see or hear some sign of it.

She called on Mrs Thesiger, who was not at home, and then drove to Mrs Hackbutt's on the other side of the churchyard. Mrs Hackbutt saw her coming from an up-stairs window, and remembering her former alarm lest she should meet Mrs Bulstrode, felt almost bound in

consistency to send word that she was not at home; but against that, there was a sudden strong desire within her for the excitement of an interview in which she was quite determined not to make the slightest allusion to what was in her mind.

Hence Mrs Bulstrode was shown into the drawing-room, and Mrs Hackbutt went to her, with more tightness of lip and rubbing of her hands than was usually observable in her, these being precautions adopted against freedom of speech. She was resolved not to ask how Mr Bulstrode was.

'I have not been anywhere except to church for nearly a week,' said Mrs Bulstrode, after a few introductory remarks. 'But Mr Bulstrode was taken so ill at the meeting on Thursday that I have not liked to leave the house.'

Mrs Hackbutt rubbed the back of one hand with the palm of the other held against her chest, and let her eyes ramble over the pattern on the rug.

'Was Mr Hackbutt at the meeting?' persevered Mrs Bulstrode.

'Yes, he was,' said Mrs Hackbutt, with the same attitude. 'The land is to be bought by subscription, I believe.'

'Let us hope that there will be no more cases of cholera to be buried in it,' said Mrs Bulstrode. 'It is an awful visitation. But I always think Middlemarch a very healthy spot. I suppose it is being used to it from a child; but I never saw the town I should like to live at better, and especially our end.'

'I am sure I should be glad that you always should live at Middlemarch, Mrs Bulstrode,' said Mrs Hackbutt, with a slight sigh. 'Still, we must learn to resign ourselves, wherever our lot may be cast. Though I am sure there will always be people in this town who will wish you well.'

Mrs Hackbutt longed to say, 'if you take my advice you will part from your husband,' but it seemed clear to her that the poor woman knew nothing of the thunder ready to bolt on her head, and she herself could do no more than prepare her a little. Mrs Bulstrode felt suddenly rather chill and trembling: there was evidently something unusual behind this speech of Mrs Hackbutt's; but though she had set out with the desire to be fully informed, she found herself unable now to pursue her brave purpose, and turning the conversation by an inquiry about the young Hackbutts, she soon took her leave saying that she was going to see Mrs Plymdale. On her way thither she tried to imagine that there might have been some unusually warm sparring

at the meeting between Mr Bulstrode and some of his frequent opponents - perhaps Mr Hackbutt might have been one of them. That would account for everything.

But when she was in conversation with Mrs Plymdale that comforting explanation seemed no longer tenable. 'Selina' received her with a pathetic affectionateness and a disposition to give edifying answers on the commonest topics, which could hardly have reference to an ordinary quarrel of which the most important consequence was a perturbation of Mr Bulstrode's health. Beforehand Mrs Bulstrode had thought that she would sooner question Mrs Plymdale than any one else; but she found to her surprise that an old friend is not always the person whom it is easiest to make a confidant of: there was the barrier of remembered communication under other circumstances - there was the dislike of being pitied and informed by one who had been long wont to allow her the superiority. For certain words of mysterious appropriateness that Mrs Plymdale let fall about her resolution never to turn her back on her friends, convinced Mrs Bulstrode that what had happened must be some kind of misfortune, and instead of being able to say with her native directness, 'What is it that you have in your mind?' she found herself anxious to get away before she had heard anything more explicit. She began to have an agitating certainty that the misfortune was something more than the mere loss of money, being keenly sensitive to the fact that Selina now, just as Mrs Hackbutt had done before, avoided noticing what she said about her husband, as they would have avoided noticing a personal blemish.

She said good-by with nervous haste, and told the coachman to drive to Mr Vincy's warehouse. In that short drive her dread gathered so much force from the sense of darkness, that when she entered the private counting-house where her brother sat at his desk, her knees trembled and her usually florid face was deathly pale. Something of the same effect was produced in him by the sight of her: he rose from his seat to meet her, took her by the hand, and said, with his impulsive rashness -

'God help you, Harriet! you know all.'

That moment was perhaps worse than any which came after. It contained that concentrated experience which in great crises of emotion reveals the bias of a nature, and is prophetic of the ultimate act which will end an intermediate struggle. Without that memory of Raffles she might still have thought only of monetary ruin, but now along with her brother's look and words there darted into her mind the idea of some guilt in her husband - then, under the working of terror came the image of her husband exposed to disgrace - and then, after an instant of scorching shame in which she felt only the eyes of the world, with one leap of her heart she was at his side in mournful

but unreproaching fellowship with shame and isolation. All this went on within her in a mere flash of time - while she sank into the chair, and raised her eyes to her brother, who stood over her. 'I know nothing, Walter. What is it?' she said, faintly.

He told her everything, very inartificially, in slow fragments, making her aware that the scandal went much beyond proof, especially as to the end of Raffles.

'People will talk,' he said. 'Even if a man has been acquitted by a jury, they'll talk, and nod and wink - and as far as the world goes, a man might often as well be guilty as not. It's a breakdown blow, and it damages Lydgate as much as Bulstrode. I don't pretend to say what is the truth. I only wish we had never heard the name of either Bulstrode or Lydgate. You'd better have been a Vincy all your life, and so had Rosamond.' Mrs Bulstrode made no reply.

'But you must bear up as well as you can, Harriet. People don't blame *you*. And I'll stand by you whatever you make up your mind to do,' said the brother, with rough but well-meaning affectionateness.

'Give me your arm to the carriage, Walter,' said Mrs Bulstrode. 'I feel very weak.'

And when she got home she was obliged to say to her daughter, 'I am not well, my dear; I must go and lie down. Attend to your papa. Leave me in quiet. I shall take no dinner.'

She locked herself in her room. She needed time to get used to her maimed consciousness, her poor lopped life, before she could walk steadily to the place allotted her. A new searching light had fallen on her husband's character, and she could not judge him leniently: the twenty years in which she had believed in him and venerated him by virtue of his concealments came back with particulars that made them seem an odious deceit. He had married her with that bad past life hidden behind him, and she had no faith left to protest his innocence of the worst that was imputed to him. Her honest ostentatious nature made the sharing of a merited dishonor as bitter as it could be to any mortal.

But this imperfectly taught woman, whose phrases and habits were an odd patchwork, had a loyal spirit within her. The man whose prosperity she had shared through nearly half a life, and who had unvaryingly cherished her - now that punishment had befallen him it was not possible to her in any sense to forsake him. There is a forsaking which still sits at the same board and lies on the same couch with the forsaken soul, withering it the more by unloving proximity. She knew, when she locked her door, that she should

unlock it ready to go down to her unhappy husband and espouse his sorrow, and say of his guilt, I will mourn and not reproach. But she needed time to gather up her strength; she needed to sob out her farewell to all the gladness and pride of her life. When she had resolved to go down, she prepared herself by some little acts which might seem mere folly to a hard onlooker; they were her way of expressing to all spectators visible or invisible that she had begun a new life in which she embraced humiliation. She took off all her ornaments and put on a plain black gown, and instead of wearing her much-adorned cap and large bows of hair, she brushed her hair down and put on a plain bonnet-cap, which made her look suddenly like an early Methodist.

Bulstrode, who knew that his wife had been out and had come in saying that she was not well, had spent the time in an agitation equal to hers. He had looked forward to her learning the truth from others, and had acquiesced in that probability, as something easier to him than any confession. But now that he imagined the moment of her knowledge come, he awaited the result in anguish. His daughters had been obliged to consent to leave him, and though he had allowed some food to be brought to him, he had not touched it. He felt himself perishing slowly in unpitied misery. Perhaps he should never see his wife's face with affection in it again. And if he turned to God there seemed to be no answer but the pressure of retribution.

It was eight o'clock in the evening before the door opened and his wife entered. He dared not look up at her. He sat with his eyes bent down, and as she went towards him she thought he looked smaller - he seemed so withered and shrunken. A movement of new compassion and old tenderness went through her like a great wave, and putting one hand on his which rested on the arm of the chair, and the other on his shoulder, she said, solemnly but kindly -

'Look up, Nicholas.'

He raised his eyes with a little start and looked at her half amazed for a moment: her pale face, her changed, mourning dress, the trembling about her mouth, all said, 'I know;' and her hands and eyes rested gently on him. He burst out crying and they cried together, she sitting at his side. They could not yet speak to each other of the shame which she was bearing with him, or of the acts which had brought it down on them. His confession was silent, and her promise of faithfulness was silent. Open-minded as she was, she nevertheless shrank from the words which would have expressed their mutual consciousness, as she would have shrunk from flakes of fire. She could not say, 'How much is only slander and false suspicion?' and he did not say, 'I am innocent.'