

Chapter LXXXI

‘Du Erde warst auch diese Nacht beständig, Und athmest neu erquickt zu meinen Füssen, Beginnest schon mit Lust mich zu umgeben, Zum regst und ruhrst ein kraftiges Reschliessen Zum höchsten Dasein immerfort zu streben. - Faust: 2r Theil.

When Dorothea was again at Lydgate's door speaking to Martha, he was in the room close by with the door ajar, preparing to go out. He heard her voice, and immediately came to her.

‘Do you think that Mrs Lydgate can receive me this morning?’ she said, having reflected that it would be better to leave out all allusion to her previous visit.

‘I have no doubt she will,’ said Lydgate, suppressing his thought about Dorothea's looks, which were as much changed as Rosamond's, ‘if you will be kind enough to come in and let me tell her that you are here. She has not been very well since you were here yesterday, but she is better this morning, and I think it is very likely that she will be cheered by seeing you again.’

It was plain that Lydgate, as Dorothea had expected, knew nothing about the circumstances of her yesterday's visit; nay, he appeared to imagine that she had carried it out according to her intention. She had prepared a little note asking Rosamond to see her, which she would have given to the servant if he had not been in the way, but now she was in much anxiety as to the result of his announcement.

After leading her into the drawing-room, he paused to take a letter from his pocket and put it into her hands, saying, ‘I wrote this last night, and was going to carry it to Lowick in my ride. When one is grateful for something too good for common thanks, writing is less unsatisfactory than speech - one does not at least *hear* how inadequate the words are.’

Dorothea's face brightened. ‘It is I who have most to thank for, since you have let me take that place. You *have* consented?’ she said, suddenly doubting.

‘Yes, the check is going to Bulstrode to-day.’

He said no more, but went up-stairs to Rosamond, who had but lately finished dressing herself, and sat languidly wondering what she should do next, her habitual industry in small things, even in the days of her sadness, prompting her to begin some kind of occupation, which she dragged through slowly or paused in from lack of interest. She looked ill, but had recovered her usual quietude of manner, and

Lydgate had feared to disturb her by any questions. He had told her of Dorothea's letter containing the check, and afterwards he had said, 'Ladislaw is come, Rosy; he sat with me last night; I dare say he will be here again to-day. I thought he looked rather battered and depressed.' And Rosamond had made no reply.

Now, when he came up, he said to her very gently, 'Rosy, dear, Mrs Casaubon is come to see you again; you would like to see her, would you not?' That she colored and gave rather a startled movement did not surprise him after the agitation produced by the interview yesterday - a beneficent agitation, he thought, since it seemed to have made her turn to him again.

Rosamond dared not say no. She dared not with a tone of her voice touch the facts of yesterday. Why had Mrs Casaubon come again? The answer was a blank which Rosamond could only fill up with dread, for Will Ladislaw's lacerating words had made every thought of Dorothea a fresh smart to her. Nevertheless, in her new humiliating uncertainty she dared do nothing but comply. She did not say yes, but she rose and let Lydgate put a light shawl over her shoulders, while he said, 'I am going out immediately.' Then something crossed her mind which prompted her to say, 'Pray tell Martha not to bring any one else into the drawing-room.' And Lydgate assented, thinking that he fully understood this wish. He led her down to the drawing-room door, and then turned away, observing to himself that he was rather a blundering husband to be dependent for his wife's trust in him on the influence of another woman.

Rosamond, wrapping her soft shawl around her as she walked towards Dorothea, was inwardly wrapping her soul in cold reserve. Had Mrs Casaubon come to say anything to her about Will? If so, it was a liberty that Rosamond resented; and she prepared herself to meet every word with polite impassibility. Will had bruised her pride too sorely for her to feel any compunction towards him and Dorothea: her own injury seemed much the greater. Dorothea was not only the 'preferred' woman, but had also a formidable advantage in being Lydgate's benefactor; and to poor Rosamond's pained confused vision it seemed that this Mrs Casaubon - this woman who predominated in all things concerning her - must have come now with the sense of having the advantage, and with animosity prompting her to use it. Indeed, not Rosamond only, but any one else, knowing the outer facts of the case, and not the simple inspiration on which Dorothea acted, might well have wondered why she came.

Looking like the lovely ghost of herself, her graceful slimness wrapped in her soft white shawl, the rounded infantine mouth and cheek inevitably suggesting mildness and innocence, Rosamond paused at three yards' distance from her visitor and bowed. But Dorothea, who

had taken off her gloves, from an impulse which she could never resist when she wanted a sense of freedom, came forward, and with her face full of a sad yet sweet openness, put out her hand. Rosamond could not avoid meeting her glance, could not avoid putting her small hand into Dorothea's, which clasped it with gentle motherliness; and immediately a doubt of her own prepossessions began to stir within her. Rosamond's eye was quick for faces; she saw that Mrs Casaubon's face looked pale and changed since yesterday, yet gentle, and like the firm softness of her hand. But Dorothea had counted a little too much on her own strength: the clearness and intensity of her mental action this morning were the continuance of a nervous exaltation which made her frame as dangerously responsive as a bit of finest Venetian crystal; and in looking at Rosamond, she suddenly found her heart swelling, and was unable to speak - all her effort was required to keep back tears. She succeeded in that, and the emotion only passed over her face like the spirit of a sob; but it added to Rosamond's impression that Mrs Casaubon's state of mind must be something quite different from what she had imagined.

So they sat down without a word of preface on the two chairs that happened to be nearest, and happened also to be close together; though Rosamond's notion when she first bowed was that she should stay a long way off from Mrs Casaubon. But she ceased thinking how anything would turn out - merely wondering what would come. And Dorothea began to speak quite simply, gathering firmness as she went on.

'I had an errand yesterday which I did not finish; that is why I am here again so soon. You will not think me too troublesome when I tell you that I came to talk to you about the injustice that has been shown towards Mr Lydgate. It will cheer you - will it not? - to know a great deal about him, that he may not like to speak about himself just because it is in his own vindication and to his own honor. You will like to know that your husband has warm friends, who have not left off believing in his high character? You will let me speak of this without thinking that I take a liberty?'

The cordial, pleading tones which seemed to flow with generous heedlessness above all the facts which had filled Rosamond's mind as grounds of obstruction and hatred between her and this woman, came as soothingly as a warm stream over her shrinking fears. Of course Mrs Casaubon had the facts in her mind, but she was not going to speak of anything connected with them. That relief was too great for Rosamond to feel much else at the moment. She answered prettily, in the new ease of her soul -

'I know you have been very good. I shall like to hear anything you will say to me about Tertius.'

'The day before yesterday,' said Dorothea, 'when I had asked him to come to Lowick to give me his opinion on the affairs of the Hospital, he told me everything about his conduct and feelings in this sad event which has made ignorant people cast suspicions on him. The reason he told me was because I was very bold and asked him. I believed that he had never acted dishonorably, and I begged him to tell me the history. He confessed to me that he had never told it before, not even to you, because he had a great dislike to say, 'I was not wrong,' as if that were proof, when there are guilty people who will say so. The truth is, he knew nothing of this man Raffles, or that there were any bad secrets about him; and he thought that Mr Bulstrode offered him the money because he repented, out of kindness, of having refused it before. All his anxiety about his patient was to treat him rightly, and he was a little uncomfortable that the case did not end as he had expected; but he thought then and still thinks that there may have been no wrong in it on any one's part. And I have told Mr Farebrother, and Mr Brooke, and Sir James Chettam: they all believe in your husband. That will cheer you, will it not? That will give you courage?'

Dorothea's face had become animated, and as it beamed on Rosamond very close to her, she felt something like bashful timidity before a superior, in the presence of this self-forgetful ardor. She said, with blushing embarrassment, 'Thank you: you are very kind.'

'And he felt that he had been so wrong not to pour out everything about this to you. But you will forgive him. It was because he feels so much more about your happiness than anything else - he feels his life bound into one with yours, and it hurts him more than anything, that his misfortunes must hurt you. He could speak to me because I am an indifferent person. And then I asked him if I might come to see you; because I felt so much for his trouble and yours. That is why I came yesterday, and why I am come to-day. Trouble is so hard to bear, is it not? - How can we live and think that any one has trouble - piercing trouble - and we could help them, and never try?'

Dorothea, completely swayed by the feeling that she was uttering, forgot everything but that she was speaking from out the heart of her own trial to Rosamond's. The emotion had wrought itself more and more into her utterance, till the tones might have gone to one's very marrow, like a low cry from some suffering creature in the darkness. And she had unconsciously laid her hand again on the little hand that she had pressed before.

Rosamond, with an overmastering pang, as if a wound within her had been probed, burst into hysterical crying as she had done the day before when she clung to her husband. Poor Dorothea was feeling a great wave of her own sorrow returning over her - her thought being drawn to the possible share that Will Ladislaw might have in

Rosamond's mental tumult. She was beginning to fear that she should not be able to suppress herself enough to the end of this meeting, and while her hand was still resting on Rosamond's lap, though the hand underneath it was withdrawn, she was struggling against her own rising sobs. She tried to master herself with the thought that this might be a turning-point in three lives - not in her own; no, there the irrevocable had happened, but - in those three lives which were touching hers with the solemn neighborhood of danger and distress. The fragile creature who was crying close to her - there might still be time to rescue her from the misery of false incompatible bonds; and this moment was unlike any other: she and Rosamond could never be together again with the same thrilling consciousness of yesterday within them both. She felt the relation between them to be peculiar enough to give her a peculiar influence, though she had no conception that the way in which her own feelings were involved was fully known to Mrs Lydgate.

It was a newer crisis in Rosamond's experience than even Dorothea could imagine: she was under the first great shock that had shattered her dream-world in which she had been easily confident of herself and critical of others; and this strange unexpected manifestation of feeling in a woman whom she had approached with a shrinking aversion and dread, as one who must necessarily have a jealous hatred towards her, made her soul totter all the more with a sense that she had been walking in an unknown world which had just broken in upon her.

When Rosamond's convulsed throat was subsiding into calm, and she withdrew the handkerchief with which she had been hiding her face, her eyes met Dorothea's as helplessly as if they had been blue flowers. What was the use of thinking about behavior after this crying? And Dorothea looked almost as childish, with the neglected trace of a silent tear. Pride was broken down between these two.

'We were talking about your husband,' Dorothea said, with some timidity. 'I thought his looks were sadly changed with suffering the other day. I had not seen him for many weeks before. He said he had been feeling very lonely in his trial; but I think he would have borne it all better if he had been able to be quite open with you.'

'Tertius is so angry and impatient if I say anything,' said Rosamond, imagining that he had been complaining of her to Dorothea. 'He ought not to wonder that I object to speak to him on painful subjects.'

'It was himself he blamed for not speaking,' said Dorothea. 'What he said of you was, that he could not be happy in doing anything which made you unhappy - that his marriage was of course a bond which must affect his choice about everything; and for that reason he refused my proposal that he should keep his position at the Hospital,

because that would bind him to stay in Middlemarch, and he would not undertake to do anything which would be painful to you. He could say that to me, because he knows that I had much trial in my marriage, from my husband's illness, which hindered his plans and saddened him; and he knows that I have felt how hard it is to walk always in fear of hurting another who is tied to us.'

Dorothea waited a little; she had discerned a faint pleasure stealing over Rosamond's face. But there was no answer, and she went on, with a gathering tremor, 'Marriage is so unlike everything else. There is something even awful in the nearness it brings. Even if we loved some one else better than - than those we were married to, it would be no use' - poor Dorothea, in her palpitating anxiety, could only seize her language brokenly - 'I mean, marriage drinks up all our power of giving or getting any blessedness in that sort of love. I know it may be very dear - but it murders our marriage - and then the marriage stays with us like a murder - and everything else is gone. And then our husband - if he loved and trusted us, and we have not helped him, but made a curse in his life - '

Her voice had sunk very low: there was a dread upon her of presuming too far, and of speaking as if she herself were perfection addressing error. She was too much preoccupied with her own anxiety, to be aware that Rosamond was trembling too; and filled with the need to express pitying fellowship rather than rebuke, she put her hands on Rosamond's, and said with more agitated rapidity, - 'I know, I know that the feeling may be very dear - it has taken hold of us unawares - it is so hard, it may seem like death to part with it - and we are weak - I am weak - '

The waves of her own sorrow, from out of which she was struggling to save another, rushed over Dorothea with conquering force. She stopped in speechless agitation, not crying, but feeling as if she were being inwardly grappled. Her face had become of a deathlier paleness, her lips trembled, and she pressed her hands helplessly on the hands that lay under them.

Rosamond, taken hold of by an emotion stronger than her own - hurried along in a new movement which gave all things some new, awful, undefined aspect - could find no words, but involuntarily she put her lips to Dorothea's forehead which was very near her, and then for a minute the two women clasped each other as if they had been in a shipwreck.

'You are thinking what is not true,' said Rosamond, in an eager half-whisper, while she was still feeling Dorothea's arms round her - urged by a mysterious necessity to free herself from something that oppressed her as if it were blood guiltiness.

They moved apart, looking at each other.

'When you came in yesterday - it was not as you thought,' said Rosamond in the same tone.

There was a movement of surprised attention in Dorothea. She expected a vindication of Rosamond herself.

'He was telling me how he loved another woman, that I might know he could never love me,' said Rosamond, getting more and more hurried as she went on. 'And now I think he hates me because - because you mistook him yesterday. He says it is through me that you will think ill of him - think that he is a false person. But it shall not be through me. He has never had any love for me - I know he has not - he has always thought slightly of me. He said yesterday that no other woman existed for him beside you. The blame of what happened is entirely mine. He said he could never explain to you - because of me. He said you could never think well of him again. But now I have told you, and he cannot reproach me any more.'

Rosamond had delivered her soul under impulses which she had not known before. She had begun her confession under the subduing influence of Dorothea's emotion; and as she went on she had gathered the sense that she was repelling Will's reproaches, which were still like a knife-wound within her.

The revulsion of feeling in Dorothea was too strong to be called joy. It was a tumult in which the terrible strain of the night and morning made a resistant pain: - she could only perceive that this would be joy when she had recovered her power of feeling it. Her immediate consciousness was one of immense sympathy without cheek; she cared for Rosamond without struggle now, and responded earnestly to her last words -

'No, he cannot reproach you any more.'

With her usual tendency to over-estimate the good in others, she felt a great outgoing of her heart towards Rosamond, for the generous effort which had redeemed her from suffering, not counting that the effort was a reflex of her own energy. After they had been silent a little, she said -

'You are not sorry that I came this morning?'

'No, you have been very good to me,' said Rosamond. 'I did not think that you would be so good. I was very unhappy. I am not happy now. Everything is so sad.'

'But better days will come. Your husband will be rightly valued. And he depends on you for comfort. He loves you best. The worst loss would be to lose that - and you have not lost it,' said Dorothea.

She tried to thrust away the too overpowering thought of her own relief, lest she should fail to win some sign that Rosamond's affection was yearning back towards her husband.

'Tertius did not find fault with me, then?' said Rosamond, understanding now that Lydgate might have said anything to Mrs Casaubon, and that she certainly was different from other women. Perhaps there was a faint taste of jealousy in the question. A smile began to play over Dorothea's face as she said -

'No, indeed! How could you imagine it?' But here the door opened, and Lydgate entered.

'I am come back in my quality of doctor,' he said. 'After I went away, I was haunted by two pale faces: Mrs Casaubon looked as much in need of care as you, Rosy. And I thought that I had not done my duty in leaving you together; so when I had been to Coleman's I came home again. I noticed that you were walking, Mrs Casaubon, and the sky has changed - I think we may have rain. May I send some one to order your carriage to come for you?'

'Oh, no! I am strong: I need the walk,' said Dorothea, rising with animation in her face. 'Mrs Lydgate and I have chatted a great deal, and it is time for me to go. I have always been accused of being immoderate and saying too much.'

She put out her hand to Rosamond, and they said an earnest, quiet good-by without kiss or other show of effusion: there had been between them too much serious emotion for them to use the signs of it superficially.

As Lydgate took her to the door she said nothing of Rosamond, but told him of Mr Farebrother and the other friends who had listened with belief to his story.

When he came back to Rosamond, she had already thrown herself on the sofa, in resigned fatigue.

'Well, Rosy,' he said, standing over her, and touching her hair, 'what do you think of Mrs Casaubon now you have seen so much of her?'

'I think she must be better than any one,' said Rosamond, 'and she is very beautiful. If you go to talk to her so often, you will be more discontented with me than ever!'

Lydgate laughed at the 'so often.' 'But has she made you any less discontented with me?'

'I think she has,' said Rosamond, looking up in his face. 'How heavy your eyes are, Tertius - and do push your hair back.' He lifted up his large white hand to obey her, and felt thankful for this little mark of interest in him. Poor Rosamond's vagrant fancy had come back terribly scourged - meek enough to nestle under the old despised shelter. And the shelter was still there: Lydgate had accepted his narrowed lot with sad resignation. He had chosen this fragile creature, and had taken the burthen of her life upon his arms. He must walk as he could, carrying that burthen pitifully.