Chapter LXXXVI

'Le coeur se sature d'amour comme d'un sel divin qui le conserve; de la l'incorruptible adherence de ceux qui se sont aimes des l'aube de la vie, et la fraicheur des vielles amours prolonges. Il existe un embaumement d'amour. C'est de Daphnis et Chloe que sont faits Philemon et Baucis. Cette vieillesse la, ressemblance du soir avec l'aurore.' - VICTOR HUGO: L'homme qui rit.

Mrs Garth, hearing Caleb enter the passage about tea-time, opened the parlor-door and said, 'There you are, Caleb. Have you had your dinner?' (Mr Garth's meals were much subordinated to 'business.')

'Oh yes, a good dinner - cold mutton and I don't know what. Where is Mary?'

'In the garden with Letty, I think.'

'Fred is not come yet?'

'No. Are you going out again without taking tea, Caleb?' said Mrs Garth, seeing that her absent-minded husband was putting on again the hat which he had just taken off.

'No, no; I'm only going to Mary a minute.'

Mary was in a grassy corner of the garden, where there was a swing loftily hung between two pear-trees. She had a pink kerchief tied over her head, making a little poke to shade her eyes from the level sunbeams, while she was giving a glorious swing to Letty, who laughed and screamed wildly. Seeing her father, Mary left the swing and went to meet him, pushing back the pink kerchief and smiling afar off at him with the involuntary smile of loving pleasure.

'I came to look for you, Mary,' said Mr Garth. 'Let us walk about a bit.'

Mary knew quite well that her father had something particular to say: his eyebrows made their pathetic angle, and there was a tender gravity in his voice: these things had been signs to her when she was Letty's age. She put her arm within his, and they turned by the row of nut-trees.

'It will be a sad while before you can be married, Mary,' said her father, not looking at her, but at the end of the stick which he held in his other hand.

'Not a sad while, father - I mean to be merry,' said Mary, laughingly. 'I have been single and merry for four-and-twenty years and more: I

suppose it will not be quite as long again as that.' Then, after a little pause, she said, more gravely, bending her face before her father's, 'If you are contented with Fred?'

Caleb screwed up his mouth and turned his head aside wisely.

'Now, father, you did praise him last Wednesday. You said he had an uncommon notion of stock, and a good eye for things.'

'Did I?' said Caleb, rather slyly.

'Yes, I put it all down, and the date, anno Domini, and everything,' said Mary. 'You like things to be neatly booked. And then his behavior to you, father, is really good; he has a deep respect for you; and it is impossible to have a better temper than Fred has.'

'Ay, ay; you want to coax me into thinking him a fine match.'

'No, indeed, father. I don't love him because he is a fine match.'

'What for, then?'

'Oh, dear, because I have always loved him. I should never like scolding any one else so well; and that is a point to be thought of in a husband.'

'Your mind is quite settled, then, Mary?' said Caleb, returning to his first tone. 'There's no other wish come into it since things have been going on as they have been of late?' (Caleb meant a great deal in that vague phrase;) 'because, better late than never. A woman must not force her heart - she'll do a man no good by that.'

'My feelings have not changed, father,' said Mary, calmly. 'I shall be constant to Fred as long as he is constant to me. I don't think either of us could spare the other, or like any one else better, however much we might admire them. It would make too great a difference to us - like seeing all the old places altered, and changing the name for everything. We must wait for each other a long while; but Fred knows that.'

Instead of speaking immediately, Caleb stood still and screwed his stick on the grassy walk. Then he said, with emotion in his voice, 'Well, I've got a bit of news. What do you think of Fred going to live at Stone Court, and managing the land there?'

'How can that ever be, father?' said Mary, wonderingly.

'He would manage it for his aunt Bulstrode. The poor woman has been to me begging and praying. She wants to do the lad good, and it might be a fine thing for him. With saving, he might gradually buy the stock, and he has a turn for farming.'

'Oh, Fred would be so happy! It is too good to believe.'

'Ah, but mind you,' said Caleb, turning his head warningly, 'I must take it on *my* shoulders, and be responsible, and see after everything; and that will grieve your mother a bit, though she mayn't say so. Fred had need be careful.'

'Perhaps it is too much, father,' said Mary, checked in her joy. 'There would be no happiness in bringing you any fresh trouble.'

'Nay, nay; work is my delight, child, when it doesn't vex your mother. And then, if you and Fred get married,' here Caleb's voice shook just perceptibly, 'he'll be steady and saving; and you've got your mother's cleverness, and mine too, in a woman's sort of way; and you'll keep him in order. He'll be coming by-and-by, so I wanted to tell you first, because I think you'd like to tell *him* by yourselves. After that, I could talk it well over with him, and we could go into business and the nature of things.'

'Oh, you dear good father!' cried Mary, putting her hands round her father's neck, while he bent his head placidly, willing to be caressed. 'I wonder if any other girl thinks her father the best man in the world!'

'Nonsense, child; you'll think your husband better.'

'Impossible,' said Mary, relapsing into her usual tone; 'husbands are an inferior class of men, who require keeping in order.'

When they were entering the house with Letty, who had run to join them, Mary saw Fred at the orchard-gate, and went to meet him.

'What fine clothes you wear, you extravagant youth!' said Mary, as Fred stood still and raised his hat to her with playful formality. 'You are not learning economy.'

'Now that is too bad, Mary,' said Fred. 'Just look at the edges of these coat-cuffs! It is only by dint of good brushing that I look respectable. I am saving up three suits - one for a wedding-suit.'

'How very droll you will look! - like a gentleman in an old fashion-book.'

'Oh no, they will keep two years.'

'Two years! be reasonable, Fred,' said Mary, turning to walk. 'Don't encourage flattering expectations.'

'Why not? One lives on them better than on unflattering ones. If we can't be married in two years, the truth will be quite bad enough when it comes.'

'I have heard a story of a young gentleman who once encouraged flattering expectations, and they did him harm.'

'Mary, if you've got something discouraging to tell me, I shall bolt; I shall go into the house to Mr Garth. I am out of spirits. My father is so cut up - home is not like itself. I can't bear any more bad news.'

'Should you call it bad news to be told that you were to live at Stone Court, and manage the farm, and be remarkably prudent, and save money every year till all the stock and furniture were your own, and you were a distinguished agricultural character, as Mr Borthrop Trumbull says - rather stout, I fear, and with the Greek and Latin sadly weather-worn?'

'You don't mean anything except nonsense, Mary?' said Fred, coloring slightly nevertheless.

'That is what my father has just told me of as what may happen, and he never talks nonsense,' said Mary, looking up at Fred now, while he grasped her hand as they walked, till it rather hurt her; but she would not complain.

'Oh, I could be a tremendously good fellow then, Mary, and we could be married directly.'

'Not so fast, sir; how do you know that I would not rather defer our marriage for some years? That would leave you time to misbehave, and then if I liked some one else better, I should have an excuse for jilting you.'

'Pray don't joke, Mary,' said Fred, with strong feeling. 'Tell me seriously that all this is true, and that you are happy because of it - because you love me best.'

'It is all true, Fred, and I am happy because of it - because I love you best,' said Mary, in a tone of obedient recitation.

They lingered on the door-step under the steep-roofed porch, and Fred almost in a whisper said -

‘When we were first engaged, with the umbrella-ring, Mary, you used to - ‘

The spirit of joy began to laugh more decidedly in Mary's eyes, but the fatal Ben came running to the door with Brownie yapping behind him, and, bouncing against them, said -

‘Fred and Mary! are you ever coming in? - or may I eat your cake?’

FINALE

Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending. Who can quit young lives after being long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years? For the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-waited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval.

Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning, as it was to Adam and Eve, who kept their honeymoon in Eden, but had their first little one among the thorns and thistles of the wilderness. It is still the beginning of the home epic - the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete union which makes the advancing years a climax, and age the harvest of sweet memories in common.

Some set out, like Crusaders of old, with a glorious equipment of hope and enthusiasm and get broken by the way, wanting patience with each other and the world.

All who have cared for Fred Vincy and Mary Garth will like to know that these two made no such failure, but achieved a solid mutual happiness. Fred surprised his neighbors in various ways. He became rather distinguished in his side of the county as a theoretic and practical farmer, and produced a work on the ‘Cultivation of Green Crops and the Economy of Cattle-Feeding’ which won him high congratulations at agricultural meetings. In Middlemarch admiration was more reserved: most persons there were inclined to believe that the merit of Fred's authorship was due to his wife, since they had never expected Fred Vincy to write on turnips and mangel-wurzel.

But when Mary wrote a little book for her boys, called ‘Stories of Great Men, taken from Plutarch,’ and had it printed and published by Gripp & Co., Middlemarch, every one in the town was willing to give the credit of this work to Fred, observing that he had been to the University, ‘where the ancients were studied,’ and might have been a clergyman if he had chosen.

In this way it was made clear that Middlemarch had never been deceived, and that there was no need to praise anybody for writing a book, since it was always done by somebody else.

Moreover, Fred remained unswervingly steady. Some years after his marriage he told Mary that his happiness was half owing to Farebrother, who gave him a strong pull-up at the right moment. I cannot say that he was never again misled by his hopefulness: the yield of crops or the profits of a cattle sale usually fell below his estimate; and he was always prone to believe that he could make money by the purchase of a horse which turned out badly - though this, Mary observed, was of course the fault of the horse, not of Fred's judgment. He kept his love of horsemanship, but he rarely allowed himself a day's hunting; and when he did so, it was remarkable that he submitted to be laughed at for cowardliness at the fences, seeming to see Mary and the boys sitting on the five-barred gate, or showing their curly heads between hedge and ditch.

There were three boys: Mary was not discontented that she brought forth men-children only; and when Fred wished to have a girl like her, she said, laughingly, 'that would be too great a trial to your mother.' Mrs Vincy in her declining years, and in the diminished lustre of her housekeeping, was much comforted by her perception that two at least of Fred's boys were real Vincys, and did not 'feature the Garths.' But Mary secretly rejoiced that the youngest of the three was very much what her father must have been when he wore a round jacket, and showed a marvellous nicety of aim in playing at marbles, or in throwing stones to bring down the mellow pears.

Ben and Letty Garth, who were uncle and aunt before they were well in their teens, disputed much as to whether nephews or nieces were more desirable; Ben contending that it was clear girls were good for less than boys, else they would not be always in petticoats, which showed how little they were meant for; whereupon Letty, who argued much from books, got angry in replying that God made coats of skins for both Adam and Eve alike - also it occurred to her that in the East the men too wore petticoats. But this latter argument, obscuring the majesty of the former, was one too many, for Ben answered contemptuously, 'The more spooneys they!' and immediately appealed to his mother whether boys were not better than girls. Mrs Garth pronounced that both were alike naughty, but that boys were undoubtedly stronger, could run faster, and throw with more precision to a greater distance. With this oracular sentence Ben was well satisfied, not minding the naughtiness; but Letty took it ill, her feeling of superiority being stronger than her muscles.

Fred never became rich - his hopefulness had not led him to expect that; but he gradually saved enough to become owner of the stock and

furniture at Stone Court, and the work which Mr Garth put into his hands carried him in plenty through those 'bad times' which are always present with farmers. Mary, in her matronly days, became as solid in figure as her mother; but, unlike her, gave the boys little formal teaching, so that Mrs Garth was alarmed lest they should never be well grounded in grammar and geography. Nevertheless, they were found quite forward enough when they went to school; perhaps, because they had liked nothing so well as being with their mother. When Fred was riding home on winter evenings he had a pleasant vision beforehand of the bright hearth in the wainscoted parlor, and was sorry for other men who could not have Mary for their wife; especially for Mr Farebrother. 'He was ten times worthier of you than I was,' Fred could now say to her, magnanimously. 'To be sure he was,' Mary answered; 'and for that reason he could do better without me. But you - I shudder to think what you would have been - a curate in debt for horse-hire and cambric pocket-handkerchiefs!'

On inquiry it might possibly be found that Fred and Mary still inhabit Stone Court - that the creeping plants still cast the foam of their blossoms over the fine stone-wall into the field where the walnut-trees stand in stately row - and that on sunny days the two lovers who were first engaged with the umbrella-ring may be seen in white-haired placidity at the open window from which Mary Garth, in the days of old Peter Featherstone, had often been ordered to look out for Mr Lydgate.

Lydgate's hair never became white. He died when he was only fifty, leaving his wife and children provided for by a heavy insurance on his life. He had gained an excellent practice, alternating, according to the season, between London and a Continental bathing-place; having written a treatise on Gout, a disease which has a good deal of wealth on its side. His skill was relied on by many paying patients, but he always regarded himself as a failure: he had not done what he once meant to do. His acquaintances thought him enviable to have so charming a wife, and nothing happened to shake their opinion. Rosamond never committed a second compromising indiscretion. She simply continued to be mild in her temper, inflexible in her judgment, disposed to admonish her husband, and able to frustrate him by stratagem. As the years went on he opposed her less and less, whence Rosamond concluded that he had learned the value of her opinion; on the other hand, she had a more thorough conviction of his talents now that he gained a good income, and instead of the threatened cage in Bride Street provided one all flowers and gilding, fit for the bird of paradise that she resembled. In brief, Lydgate was what is called a successful man. But he died prematurely of diphtheria, and Rosamond afterwards married an elderly and wealthy physician, who took kindly to her four children. She made a very pretty show with her daughters, driving out in her carriage, and often spoke of her

happiness as ‘a reward’ - she did not say for what, but probably she meant that it was a reward for her patience with Tertius, whose temper never became faultless, and to the last occasionally let slip a bitter speech which was more memorable than the signs he made of his repentance. He once called her his basil plant; and when she asked for an explanation, said that basil was a plant which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains. Rosamond had a placid but strong answer to such speeches. Why then had he chosen her? It was a pity he had not had Mrs Ladislaw, whom he was always praising and placing above her. And thus the conversation ended with the advantage on Rosamond's side. But it would be unjust not to tell, that she never uttered a word in depreciation of Dorothea, keeping in religious remembrance the generosity which had come to her aid in the sharpest crisis of her life.

Dorothea herself had no dreams of being praised above other women, feeling that there was always something better which she might have done, if she had only been better and known better. Still, she never repented that she had given up position and fortune to marry Will Ladislaw, and he would have held it the greatest shame as well as sorrow to him if she had repented. They were bound to each other by a love stronger than any impulses which could have marred it. No life would have been possible to Dorothea which was not filled with emotion, and she had now a life filled also with a beneficent activity which she had not the doubtful pains of discovering and marking out for herself. Will became an ardent public man, working well in those times when reforms were begun with a young hopefulness of immediate good which has been much checked in our days, and getting at last returned to Parliament by a constituency who paid his expenses. Dorothea could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them, and that she should give him wifely help. Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done - not even Sir James Chettam, who went no further than the negative prescription that she ought not to have married Will Ladislaw.

But this opinion of his did not cause a lasting alienation; and the way in which the family was made whole again was characteristic of all concerned. Mr Brooke could not resist the pleasure of corresponding with Will and Dorothea; and one morning when his pen had been remarkably fluent on the prospects of Municipal Reform, it ran off into an invitation to the Grange, which, once written, could not be done away with at less cost than the sacrifice (hardly to be conceived) of the whole valuable letter. During the months of this correspondence Mr Brooke had continually, in his talk with Sir James Chettam, been

presupposing or hinting that the intention of cutting off the entail was still maintained; and the day on which his pen gave the daring invitation, he went to Freshitt expressly to intimate that he had a stronger sense than ever of the reasons for taking that energetic step as a precaution against any mixture of low blood in the heir of the Brookes.

But that morning something exciting had happened at the Hall. A letter had come to Celia which made her cry silently as she read it; and when Sir James, unused to see her in tears, asked anxiously what was the matter, she burst out in a wail such as he had never heard from her before.

'Dorothea has a little boy. And you will not let me go and see her. And I am sure she wants to see me. And she will not know what to do with the baby - she will do wrong things with it. And they thought she would die. It is very dreadful! Suppose it had been me and little Arthur, and Dodo had been hindered from coming to see me! I wish you would be less unkind, James!'

'Good heavens, Celia!' said Sir James, much wrought upon, 'what do you wish? I will do anything you like. I will take you to town to-morrow if you wish it.' And Celia did wish it.

It was after this that Mr Brooke came, and meeting the Baronet in the grounds, began to chat with him in ignorance of the news, which Sir James for some reason did not care to tell him immediately. But when the entail was touched on in the usual way, he said, 'My dear sir, it is not for me to dictate to you, but for my part I would let that alone. I would let things remain as they are.'

Mr Brooke felt so much surprised that he did not at once find out how much he was relieved by the sense that he was not expected to do anything in particular.

Such being the bent of Celia's heart, it was inevitable that Sir James should consent to a reconciliation with Dorothea and her husband. Where women love each other, men learn to smother their mutual dislike. Sir James never liked Ladislaw, and Will always preferred to have Sir James's company mixed with another kind: they were on a footing of reciprocal tolerance which was made quite easy only when Dorothea and Celia were present.

It became an understood thing that Mr and Mrs Ladislaw should pay at least two visits during the year to the Grange, and there came gradually a small row of cousins at Freshitt who enjoyed playing with the two cousins visiting Tipton as much as if the blood of these cousins had been less dubiously mixed.

Mr Brooke lived to a good old age, and his estate was inherited by Dorothea's son, who might have represented Middlemarch, but declined, thinking that his opinions had less chance of being stifled if he remained out of doors.

Sir James never ceased to regard Dorothea's second marriage as a mistake; and indeed this remained the tradition concerning it in Middlemarch, where she was spoken of to a younger generation as a fine girl who married a sickly clergyman, old enough to be her father, and in little more than a year after his death gave up her estate to marry his cousin - young enough to have been his son, with no property, and not well-born. Those who had not seen anything of Dorothea usually observed that she could not have been 'a nice woman,' else she would not have married either the one or the other.

Certainly those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it. A new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is forever gone. But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know.

Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

The End