Chapter XI - In The Cottage

IT was but half-past four the next morning when Dinah, tired of lying awake listening to the birds and watching the growing light through the little window in the garret roof, rose and began to dress herself very quietly, lest she should disturb Lisbeth. But already some one else was astir in the house, and had gone downstairs, preceded by Gyp. The dog's pattering step was a sure sign that it was Adam who went down; but Dinah was not aware of this, and she thought it was more likely to be Seth, for he had told her how Adam had stayed up working the night before. Seth, however, had only just awakened at the sound of the opening door. The exciting influence of the previous day, heightened at last by Dinah's unexpected presence, had not been counteracted by any bodily weariness, for he had not done his ordinary amount of hard work; and so when he went to bed; it was not till he had tired himself with hours of tossing wakefulness that drowsiness came, and led on a heavier morning sleep than was usual with him.

But Adam had been refreshed by his long rest, and with his habitual impatience of mere passivity, he was eager to begin the new day and subdue sadness by his strong will and strong arm. The white mist lay in the valley; it was going to be a bright warm day, and he would start to work again when he had had his breakfast.

'There's nothing but what's bearable as long as a man can work,' he said to himself; 'the natur o' things doesn't change, though it seems as if one's own life was nothing but change. The square o' four is sixteen, and you must lengthen your lever in proportion to your weight, is as true when a man's miserable as when he's happy; and the best o' working is, it gives you a grip hold o' things outside your own lot.'

As he dashed the cold water over his head and face, he felt completely himself again, and with his black eyes as keen as ever and his thick black hair all glistening with the fresh moisture, he went into the workshop to look out the wood for his father's coffin, intending that he and Seth should carry it with them to Jonathan Burge's and have the coffin made by one of the workmen there, so that his mother might not see and hear the sad task going forward at home.

He had just gone into the workshop when his quick ear detected a light rapid foot on the stairs - certainly not his mother's. He had been in bed and asleep when Dinah had come in, in the evening, and now he wondered whose step this could be. A foolish thought came, and moved him strangely. As if it could be Hetty! She was the last person likely to be in the house. And yet he felt reluctant to go and look and have the clear proof that it was some one else. He stood leaning on a plank he had taken hold of, listening to sounds which his imagination

interpreted for him so pleasantly that the keen strong face became suffused with a timid tenderness. The light footstep moved about the kitchen, followed by the sound of the sweeping brush, hardly making so much noise as the lightest breeze that chases the autumn leaves along the dusty path; and Adam's imagination saw a dimpled face, with dark bright eyes and roguish smiles looking backward at this brush, and a rounded figure just leaning a little to clasp the handle. A very foolish thought - it could not be Hetty; but the only way of dismissing such nonsense from his head was to go and see WHO it was, for his fancy only got nearer and nearer to belief while he stood there listening. He loosed the plank and went to the kitchen door.

'How do you do, Adam Bede?' said Dinah, in her calm treble, pausing from her sweeping and fixing her mild grave eyes upon him. 'I trust you feel rested and strengthened again to bear the burden and heat of the day.'

It was like dreaming of the sunshine and awaking in the moonlight. Adam had seen Dinah several times, but always at the Hall Farm, where he was not very vividly conscious of any woman's presence except Hetty's, and he had only in the last day or two begun to suspect that Seth was in love with her, so that his attention had not hitherto been drawn towards her for his brother's sake. But now her slim figure, her plain black gown, and her pale serene face impressed him with all the force that belongs to a reality contrasted with a preoccupying fancy. For the first moment or two he made no answer, but looked at her with the concentrated, examining glance which a man gives to an object in which he has suddenly begun to be interested. Dinah, for the first time in her life, felt a painful self-consciousness; there was something in the dark penetrating glance of this strong man so different from the mildness and timidity of his brother Seth. A faint blush came, which deepened as she wondered at it. This blush recalled Adam from his forgetfulness.

'I was quite taken by surprise; it was very good of you to come and see my mother in her trouble,' he said, in a gentle grateful tone, for his quick mind told him at once how she came to be there. 'I hope my mother was thankful to have you,' he added, wondering rather anxiously what had been Dinah's reception.

'Yes,' said Dinah, resuming her work, 'she seemed greatly comforted after a while, and she's had a good deal of rest in the night, by times. She was fast asleep when I left her.'

'Who was it took the news to the Hall Farm?' said Adam, his thoughts reverting to some one there; he wondered whether SHE had felt anything about it.

‘It was Mr Irwine, the clergyman, told me, and my aunt was grieved for your mother when she heard it, and wanted me to come; and so is my uncle, I'm sure, now he's heard it, but he was gone out to Rosseter all yesterday. They'll look for you there as soon as you've got time to go, for there's nobody round that hearth but what's glad to see you.’

Dinah, with her sympathetic divination, knew quite well that Adam was longing to hear if Hetty had said anything about their trouble; she was too rigorously truthful for benevolent invention, but she had contrived to say something in which Hetty was tacitly included. Love has a way of cheating itself consciously, like a child who plays at solitary hide-and-seek; it is pleased with assurances that it all the while disbelieves. Adam liked what Dinah had said so much that his mind was directly full of the next visit he should pay to the Hall Farm, when Hetty would perhaps behave more kindly to him than she had ever done before.

‘But you won't be there yourself any longer?’ he said to Dinah.

‘No, I go back to Snowfield on Saturday, and I shall have to set out to Treddleston early, to be in time for the Oakbourne carrier. So I must go back to the farm to-night, that I may have the last day with my aunt and her children. But I can stay here all to-day, if your mother would like me; and her heart seemed inclined towards me last night.’

‘Ah, then, she's sure to want you to-day. If mother takes to people at the beginning, she's sure to get fond of 'em; but she's a strange way of not liking young women. Though, to be sure,’ Adam went on, smiling, ‘her not liking other young women is no reason why she shouldn't like you.’

Hitherto Gyp had been assisting at this conversation in motionless silence, seated on his haunches, and alternately looking up in his master's face to watch its expression and observing Dinah's movements about the kitchen. The kind smile with which Adam uttered the last words was apparently decisive with Gyp of the light in which the stranger was to be regarded, and as she turned round after putting aside her sweeping-brush, he trotted towards her and put up his muzzle against her hand in a friendly way.

‘You see Gyp bids you welcome,’ said Adam, ‘and he's very slow to welcome strangers.’

‘Poor dog!’ said Dinah, patting the rough grey coat, ‘I've a strange feeling about the dumb things as if they wanted to speak, and it was a trouble to 'em because they couldn't. I can't help being sorry for the dogs always, though perhaps there's no need. But they may well have

more in them than they know how to make us understand, for we can't say half what we feel, with all our words.'

Seth came down now, and was pleased to find Adam talking with Dinah; he wanted Adam to know how much better she was than all other women. But after a few words of greeting, Adam drew him into the workshop to consult about the coffin, and Dinah went on with her cleaning.

By six o'clock they were all at breakfast with Lisbeth in a kitchen as clean as she could have made it herself. The window and door were open, and the morning air brought with it a mingled scent of southernwood, thyme, and sweet-briar from the patch of garden by the side of the cottage. Dinah did not sit down at first, but moved about, serving the others with the warm porridge and the toasted oat-cake, which she had got ready in the usual way, for she had asked Seth to tell her just what his mother gave them for breakfast. Lisbeth had been unusually silent since she came downstairs, apparently requiring some time to adjust her ideas to a state of things in which she came down like a lady to find all the work done, and sat still to be waited on. Her new sensations seemed to exclude the remembrance of her grief. At last, after tasting the porridge, she broke silence:

'Ye might ha' made the parridge worse,' she said to Dinah; 'I can ate it wi'out its turnin' my stomach. It might ha' been a trifle thicker an' no harm, an' I allays putten a sprig o' mint in mysen; but how's ye t' know that? The lads arena like to get folks as 'll make their parridge as I'n made it for 'em; it's well if they get onybody as 'll make parridge at all. But ye might do, wi' a bit o' showin'; for ye're a stirrin' body in a mornin', an' ye've a light heel, an' ye've cleaned th' house well enough for a ma'shift.'

'Makeshift, mother?' said Adam. 'Why, I think the house looks beautiful. I don't know how it could look better.'

'Thee dostna know? Nay; how's thee to know? Th' men ne'er know whether the floor's cleaned or cat-licked. But thee'lt know when thee gets thy parridge burnt, as it's like enough to be when I'n gi'en o'er makin' it. Thee'lt think thy mother war good for summat then.'

'Dinah,' said Seth, 'do come and sit down now and have your breakfast. We're all served now.'

'Aye, come an' sit ye down - do,' said Lisbeth, 'an' ate a morsel; ye'd need, arter bein' upo' your legs this hour an' half a'ready. Come, then,' she added, in a tone of complaining affection, as Dinah sat down by her side, 'I'll be loath for ye t' go, but ye canna stay much longer, I doubt. I could put up wi' ye i' th' house better nor wi' most folks.'

'I'll stay till to-night if you're willing,' said Dinah. 'I'd stay longer, only I'm going back to Snowfield on Saturday, and I must be with my aunt to-morrow.'

'Eh, I'd ne'er go back to that country. My old man come from that Stonyshire side, but he left it when he war a young un, an' i' the right on't too; for he said as there war no wood there, an' it 'ud ha' been a bad country for a carpenter.'

'Ah,' said Adam, 'I remember father telling me when I was a little lad that he made up his mind if ever he moved it should be south'ard. But I'm not so sure about it. Bartle Massey says - and he knows the South - as the northern men are a finer breed than the southern, harder-headed and stronger-bodied, and a deal taller. And then he says in some o' those counties it's as flat as the back o' your hand, and you can see nothing of a distance without climbing up the highest trees. I couldn't abide that. I like to go to work by a road that'll take me up a bit of a hill, and see the fields for miles round me, and a bridge, or a town, or a bit of a steeple here and there. It makes you feel the world's a big place, and there's other men working in it with their heads and hands besides yourself.'

'I like th' hills best,' said Seth, 'when the clouds are over your head and you see the sun shining ever so far off, over the Loamford way, as I've often done o' late, on the stormy days. It seems to me as if that was heaven where there's always joy and sunshine, though this life's dark and cloudy.'

'Oh, I love the Stonyshire side,' said Dinah; 'I shouldn't like to set my face towards the countries where they're rich in corn and cattle, and the ground so level and easy to tread; and to turn my back on the hills where the poor people have to live such a hard life and the men spend their days in the mines away from the sunlight. It's very blessed on a bleak cold day, when the sky is hanging dark over the hill, to feel the love of God in one's soul, and carry it to the lonely, bare, stone houses, where there's nothing else to give comfort.'

'Eh!' said Lisbeth, 'that's very well for ye to talk, as looks welly like the snowdrop-flowers as ha' lived for days an' days when I'n gethered 'em, wi' nothin' but a drop o' water an' a peep o' daylight; but th' hungry foulks had better leave th' hungry country. It makes less mouths for the scant cake. But,' she went on, looking at Adam, 'donna thee talk o' goin' south'ard or north'ard, an' leavin' thy feyther and mother i' the churchyard, an' goin' to a country as they know nothin' on. I'll ne'er rest i' my grave if I donna see thee i' the churchyard of a Sunday.'

'Donna fear, mother,' said Adam. 'If I hadna made up my mind not to go, I should ha' been gone before now.'

He had finished his breakfast now, and rose as he was speaking.

'What art goin' to do?' asked Lisbeth. 'Set about thy feyther's coffin?'

'No, mother,' said Adam; 'we're going to take the wood to the village and have it made there.'

'Nay, my lad, nay,' Lisbeth burst out in an eager, wailing tone; 'thee wotna let nobody make thy feyther's coffin but thysen? Who'd make it so well? An' him as know'd what good work war, an's got a son as is the head o' the village an' all Treddles'on too, for cleverness.'

'Very well, mother, if that's thy wish, I'll make the coffin at home; but I thought thee wouldstna like to hear the work going on.'

'An' why shouldna I like 't? It's the right thing to be done. An' what's liking got to do wi't? It's choice o' mislikings is all I'n got i' this world. One morsel's as good as another when your mouth's out o' taste. Thee mun set about it now this mornin' fust thing. I wonna ha' nobody to touch the coffin but thee.'

Adam's eyes met Seth's, which looked from Dinah to him rather wistfully.

'No, Mother,' he said, 'I'll not consent but Seth shall have a hand in it too, if it's to be done at home. I'll go to the village this forenoon, because Mr Burge 'ull want to see me, and Seth shall stay at home and begin the coffin. I can come back at noon, and then he can go.'

'Nay, nay,' persisted Lisbeth, beginning to cry, 'I'n set my heart on't as thee shalt ma' thy feyther's coffin. Thee't so stiff an' masterful, thee't ne'er do as thy mother wants thee. Thee wast often angered wi' thy feyther when he war alive; thee must be the better to him now he's gone. He'd ha' thought nothin' on't for Seth to ma's coffin.'

'Say no more, Adam, say no more,' said Seth, gently, though his voice told that he spoke with some effort; 'Mother's in the right. I'll go to work, and do thee stay at home.'

He passed into the workshop immediately, followed by Adam; while Lisbeth, automatically obeying her old habits, began to put away the breakfast things, as if she did not mean Dinah to take her place any longer. Dinah said nothing, but presently used the opportunity of quietly joining the brothers in the workshop.

They had already got on their aprons and paper caps, and Adam was standing with his left hand on Seth's shoulder, while he pointed with the hammer in his right to some boards which they were looking at.

Their backs were turned towards the door by which Dinah entered, and she came in so gently that they were not aware of her presence till they heard her voice saying, 'Seth Bede!' Seth started, and they both turned round. Dinah looked as if she did not see Adam, and fixed her eyes on Seth's face, saying with calm kindness, 'I won't say farewell. I shall see you again when you come from work. So as I'm at the farm before dark, it will be quite soon enough.'

'Thank you, Dinah; I should like to walk home with you once more. It'll perhaps be the last time.'

There was a little tremor in Seth's voice. Dinah put out her hand and said, 'You'll have sweet peace in your mind to-day, Seth, for your tenderness and long-suffering towards your aged mother.'

She turned round and left the workshop as quickly and quietly as she had entered it. Adam had been observing her closely all the while, but she had not looked at him. As soon as she was gone, he said, 'I don't wonder at thee for loving her, Seth. She's got a face like a lily.'

Seth's soul rushed to his eyes and lips: he had never yet confessed his secret to Adam, but now he felt a delicious sense of disburdenment, as he answered, 'Aye, Addy, I do love her - too much, I doubt. But she doesna love me, lad, only as one child o' God loves another. She'll never love any man as a husband - that's my belief.'

'Nay, lad, there's no telling; thee mustna lose heart. She's made out o' stuff with a finer grain than most o' the women; I can see that clear enough. But if she's better than they are in other things, I canna think she'll fall short of 'em in loving.'

No more was said. Seth set out to the village, and Adam began his work on the coffin.

'God help the lad, and me too,' he thought, as he lifted the board. 'We're like enough to find life a tough job - hard work inside and out. It's a strange thing to think of a man as can lift a chair with his teeth and walk fifty mile on end, trembling and turning hot and cold at only a look from one woman out of all the rest i' the world. It's a mystery we can give no account of; but no more we can of the sprouting o' the seed, for that matter.'