Chapter XIV - The Return Home

WHILE that parting in the wood was happening, there was a parting in the cottage too, and Lisbeth had stood with Adam at the door, straining her aged eyes to get the last glimpse of Seth and Dinah, as they mounted the opposite slope.

'Eh, I'm loath to see the last on her,' she said to Adam, as they turned into the house again. 'I'd ha' been willin' t' ha' her about me till I died and went to lie by my old man. She'd make it easier dyin' - she spakes so gentle an' moves about so still. I could be fast sure that pictur' was drawed for her i' thy new Bible - th' angel a-sittin' on the big stone by the grave. Eh, I wouldna mind ha'in a daughter like that; but nobody ne'er marries them as is good for aught.'

'Well, Mother, I hope thee WILT have her for a daughter; for Seth's got a liking for her, and I hope she'll get a liking for Seth in time.'

'Where's th' use o' talkin' a-that'n? She caresna for Seth. She's goin' away twenty mile aff. How's she to get a likin' for him, I'd like to know? No more nor the cake 'ull come wi'out the leaven. Thy figurin' books might ha' tould thee better nor that, I should think, else thee mightst as well read the commin print, as Seth allays does.'

'Nay, Mother,' said Adam, laughing, 'the figures tell us a fine deal, and we couldn't go far without 'em, but they don't tell us about folks's feelings. It's a nicer job to calculate THEM. But Seth's as good-hearted a lad as ever handled a tool, and plenty o' sense, and good-looking too; and he's got the same way o' thinking as Dinah. He deserves to win her, though there's no denying she's a rare bit o' workmanship. You don't see such women turned off the wheel every day.'

'Eh, thee't allays stick up for thy brother. Thee'st been just the same, e'er sin' ye war little uns together. Thee wart allays for halving iverything wi' him. But what's Seth got to do with marryin', as is on'y three-an'-twenty? He'd more need to learn an' lay by sixpence. An' as for his desarving her - she's two 'ear older nor Seth: she's pretty near as old as thee. But that's the way; folks mun allays choose by contrairies, as if they must be sorted like the pork - a bit o' good meat wi' a bit o' offal.'

To the feminine mind in some of its moods, all things that might be receive a temporary charm from comparison with what is; and since Adam did not want to marry Dinah himself, Lisbeth felt rather peevish on that score - as peevish as she would have been if he HAD wanted to marry her, and so shut himself out from Mary Burge and the partnership as effectually as by marrying Hetty.

It was more than half-past eight when Adam and his mother were talking in this way, so that when, about ten minutes later, Hetty reached the turning of the lane that led to the farmyard gate, she saw Dinah and Seth approaching it from the opposite direction, and waited for them to come up to her. They, too, like Hetty, had lingered a little in their walk, for Dinah was trying to speak words of comfort and strength to Seth in these parting moments. But when they saw Hetty, they paused and shook hands; Seth turned homewards, and Dinah came on alone.

'Seth Bede would have come and spoken to you, my dear,' she said, as she reached Hetty, 'but he's very full of trouble to-night.'

Hetty answered with a dimpled smile, as if she did not quite know what had been said; and it made a strange contrast to see that sparkling self-engrossed loveliness looked at by Dinah's calm pitying face, with its open glance which told that her heart lived in no cherished secrets of its own, but in feelings which it longed to share with all the world. Hetty liked Dinah as well as she had ever liked any woman; how was it possible to feel otherwise towards one who always put in a kind word for her when her aunt was finding fault, and who was always ready to take Totty off her hands - little tiresome Totty, that was made such a pet of by every one, and that Hetty could see no interest in at all? Dinah had never said anything disapproving or reproachful to Hetty during her whole visit to the Hall Farm; she had talked to her a great deal in a serious way, but Hetty didn't mind that much, for she never listened: whatever Dinah might say, she almost always stroked Hetty's cheek after it, and wanted to do some mending for her. Dinah was a riddle to her; Hetty looked at her much in the same way as one might imagine a little perching bird that could only flutter from bough to bough, to look at the swoop of the swallow or the mounting of the lark; but she did not care to solve such riddles, any more than she cared to know what was meant by the pictures in the Pilgrim's Progress, or in the old folio Bible that Marty and Tommy always plagued her about on a Sunday.

Dinah took her hand now and drew it under her own arm.

'You look very happy to-night, dear child,' she said. 'I shall think of you often when I'm at Snowfield, and see your face before me as it is now. It's a strange thing - sometimes when I'm quite alone, sitting in my room with my eyes closed, or walking over the hills, the people I've seen and known, if it's only been for a few days, are brought before me, and I hear their voices and see them look and move almost plainer than I ever did when they were really with me so as I could touch them. And then my heart is drawn out towards them, and I feel their lot as if it was my own, and I take comfort in spreading it before

the Lord and resting in His love, on their behalf as well as my own. And so I feel sure you will come before me.'

She paused a moment, but Hetty said nothing.

'It has been a very precious time to me,' Dinah went on, 'last night and to-day - seeing two such good sons as Adam and Seth Bede. They are so tender and thoughtful for their aged mother. And she has been telling me what Adam has done, for these many years, to help his father and his brother; it's wonderful what a spirit of wisdom and knowledge he has, and how he's ready to use it all in behalf of them that are feeble. And I'm sure he has a loving spirit too. I've noticed it often among my own people round Snowfield, that the strong, skilful men are often the gentlest to the women and children; and it's pretty to see 'em carrying the little babies as if they were no heavier than little birds. And the babies always seem to like the strong arm best. I feel sure it would be so with Adam Bede. Don't you think so, Hetty?'

'Yes,' said Hetty abstractedly, for her mind had been all the while in the wood, and she would have found it difficult to say what she was assenting to. Dinah saw she was not inclined to talk, but there would not have been time to say much more, for they were now at the yard-gate.

The still twilight, with its dying western red and its few faint struggling stars, rested on the farm-yard, where there was not a sound to be heard but the stamping of the cart-horses in the stable. It was about twenty minutes after sunset. The fowls were all gone to roost, and the bull-dog lay stretched on the straw outside his kennel, with the black-and-tan terrier by his side, when the falling-to of the gate disturbed them and set them barking, like good officials, before they had any distinct knowledge of the reason.

The barking had its effect in the house, for, as Dinah and Hetty approached, the doorway was filled by a portly figure, with a ruddy black-eyed face which bore in it the possibility of looking extremely acute, and occasionally contemptuous, on market-days, but had now a predominant after-supper expression of hearty good-nature. It is well known that great scholars who have shown the most pitiless acerbity in their criticism of other men's scholarship have yet been of a relenting and indulgent temper in private life; and I have heard of a learned man meekly rocking the twins in the cradle with his left hand, while with his right he inflicted the most lacerating sarcasms on an opponent who had betrayed a brutal ignorance of Hebrew. Weaknesses and errors must be forgiven - alas! they are not alien to us - but the man who takes the wrong side on the momentous subject of the Hebrew points must be treated as the enemy of his race. There was the same sort of antithetic mixture in Martin Poyser: he was of so

excellent a disposition that he had been kinder and more respectful than ever to his old father since he had made a deed of gift of all his property, and no man judged his neighbours more charitably on all personal matters; but for a farmer, like Luke Britton, for example, whose fallows were not well cleaned, who didn't know the rudiments of hedging and ditching, and showed but a small share of judgment in the purchase of winter stock, Martin Poyser was as hard and implacable as the north-east wind. Luke Britton could not make a remark, even on the weather, but Martin Poyser detected in it a taint of that unsoundness and general ignorance which was palpable in all his farming operations. He hated to see the fellow lift the pewter pint to his mouth in the bar of the Royal George on market-day, and the mere sight of him on the other side of the road brought a severe and critical expression into his black eyes, as different as possible from the fatherly glance he bent on his two nieces as they approached the door. Mr Poyser had smoked his evening pipe, and now held his hands in his pockets, as the only resource of a man who continues to sit up after the day's business is done.

'Why, lasses, ye're rather late to-night,' he said, when they reached the little gate leading into the causeway. 'The mother's begun to fidget about you, an' she's got the little un ill. An' how did you leave the old woman Bede, Dinah? Is she much down about the old man? He'd been but a poor bargain to her this five year.'

'She's been greatly distressed for the loss of him,' said Dinah, 'but she's seemed more comforted to-day. Her son Adam's been at home all day, working at his father's coffin, and she loves to have him at home. She's been talking about him to me almost all the day. She has a loving heart, though she's sorely given to fret and be fearful. I wish she had a surer trust to comfort her in her old age.'

'Adam's sure enough,' said Mr Poyser, misunderstanding Dinah's wish. 'There's no fear but he'll yield well i' the threshing. He's not one o' them as is all straw and no grain. I'll be bond for him any day, as he'll be a good son to the last. Did he say he'd be coming to see us soon? But come in, come in,' he added, making way for them; 'I hadn't need keep y' out any longer.'

The tall buildings round the yard shut out a good deal of the sky, but the large window let in abundant light to show every corner of the house-place.

Mrs. Poyser, seated in the rocking-chair, which had been brought out of the 'right-hand parlour,' was trying to soothe Totty to sleep. But Totty was not disposed to sleep; and when her cousins entered, she raised herself up and showed a pair of flushed cheeks, which looked

fatter than ever now they were defined by the edge of her linen night-cap.

In the large wicker-bottomed arm-chair in the left-hand chimney-nook sat old Martin Poyser, a hale but shrunken and bleached image of his portly black-haired son - his head hanging forward a little, and his elbows pushed backwards so as to allow the whole of his forearm to rest on the arm of the chair. His blue handkerchief was spread over his knees, as was usual indoors, when it was not hanging over his head; and he sat watching what went forward with the quiet OUTWARD glance of healthy old age, which, disengaged from any interest in an inward drama, spies out pins upon the floor, follows one's minutest motions with an unexpectant purposeless tenacity, watches the flickering of the flame or the sun-gleams on the wall, counts the quarries on the floor, watches even the hand of the clock, and pleases itself with detecting a rhythm in the tick.

'What a time o' night this is to come home, Hetty!' said Mrs. Poyser. 'Look at the clock, do; why, it's going on for half-past nine, and I've sent the gells to bed this half-hour, and late enough too; when they've got to get up at half after four, and the mowers' bottles to fill, and the baking; and here's this blessed child wi' the fever for what I know, and as wakeful as if it was dinner-time, and nobody to help me to give her the physic but your uncle, and fine work there's been, and half of it spilt on her night-gown - it's well if she's swallowed more nor 'ull make her worse i'stead o' better. But folks as have no mind to be o' use have allays the luck to be out o' the road when there's anything to be done.'

'I did set out before eight, aunt,' said Hetty, in a pettish tone, with a slight toss of her head. 'But this clock's so much before the clock at the Chase, there's no telling what time it'll be when I get here.'

'What! You'd be wanting the clock set by gentlefolks's time, would you? An' sit up burnin' candle, an' lie a-bed wi' the sun a-bakin' you like a cowcumber i' the frame? The clock hasn't been put forrard for the first time to-day, I reckon.'

The fact was, Hetty had really forgotten the difference of the clocks when she told Captain Donnithorne that she set out at eight, and this, with her lingering pace, had made her nearly half an hour later than usual. But here her aunt's attention was diverted from this tender subject by Totty, who, perceiving at length that the arrival of her cousins was not likely to bring anything satisfactory to her in particular, began to cry, 'Munny, munny,' in an explosive manner.

'Well, then, my pet, Mother's got her, Mother won't leave her; Totty be a good dilling, and go to sleep now,' said Mrs. Poyser, leaning back

and rocking the chair, while she tried to make Totty nestle against her. But Totty only cried louder, and said, 'Don't yock!' So the mother, with that wondrous patience which love gives to the quickest temperament, sat up again, and pressed her cheek against the linen night-cap and kissed it, and forgot to scold Hetty any longer.

'Come, Hetty,' said Martin Poyser, in a conciliatory tone, 'go and get your supper i' the pantry, as the things are all put away; an' then you can come and take the little un while your aunt undresses herself, for she won't lie down in bed without her mother. An' I reckon YOU could eat a bit, Dinah, for they don't keep much of a house down there.'

'No, thank you, Uncle,' said Dinah; 'I ate a good meal before I came away, for Mrs. Bede would make a kettle-cake for me.'

'I don't want any supper,' said Hetty, taking off her hat. 'I can hold Totty now, if Aunt wants me.'

'Why, what nonsense that is to talk!' said Mrs. Poyser. 'Do you think you can live wi'out eatin', an' nourish your inside wi' stickin' red ribbons on your head? Go an' get your supper this minute, child; there's a nice bit o' cold pudding i' the safe - just what you're fond of.'

Hetty complied silently by going towards the pantry, and Mrs. Poyser went on speaking to Dinah.

'Sit down, my dear, an' look as if you knowed what it was to make yourself a bit comfortable i' the world. I warrant the old woman was glad to see you, since you stayed so long.'

'She seemed to like having me there at last; but her sons say she doesn't like young women about her commonly; and I thought just at first she was almost angry with me for going.'

'Eh, it's a poor look-out when th' ould folks doesna like the young uns,' said old Martin, bending his head down lower, and seeming to trace the pattern of the quarries with his eye.

'Aye, it's ill livin' in a hen-roost for them as doesn't like fleas,' said Mrs. Poyser. 'We've all had our turn at bein' young, I reckon, be't good luck or ill.'

'But she must learn to 'commodate herself to young women,' said Mr Poyser, 'for it isn't to be counted on as Adam and Seth 'ull keep bachelors for the next ten year to please their mother. That 'ud be unreasonable. It isn't right for old nor young nayther to make a bargain all o' their own side. What's good for one's good all round i' the long run. I'm no friend to young fellows a-marrying afore they

know the difference atween a crab an' a apple; but they may wait o'er long.'

'To be sure,' said Mrs. Poyser; 'if you go past your dinner-time, there'll be little relish o' your meat. You turn it o'er an' o'er wi' your fork, an' don't eat it after all. You find faut wi' your meat, an' the faut's all i' your own stomach.'

Hetty now came back from the pantry and said, 'I can take Totty now, Aunt, if you like.'

'Come, Rachel,' said Mr Poyser, as his wife seemed to hesitate, seeing that Totty was at last nestling quietly, 'thee'dst better let Hetty carry her upstairs, while thee tak'st thy things off. Thee't tired. It's time thee wast in bed. Thee't bring on the pain in thy side again.'

'Well, she may hold her if the child 'ull go to her,' said Mrs. Poyser.

Hetty went close to the rocking-chair, and stood without her usual smile, and without any attempt to entice Totty, simply waiting for her aunt to give the child into her hands.

'Wilt go to Cousin Hetty, my dilling, while mother gets ready to go to bed? Then Totty shall go into Mother's bed, and sleep there all night.'

Before her mother had done speaking, Totty had given her answer in an unmistakable manner, by knitting her brow, setting her tiny teeth against her underlip, and leaning forward to slap Hetty on the arm with her utmost force. Then, without speaking, she nestled to her mother again.

'Hey, hey,' said Mr Poyser, while Hetty stood without moving, 'not go to Cousin Hetty? That's like a babby. Totty's a little woman, an' not a babby.'

'It's no use trying to persuade her,' said Mrs. Poyser. 'She allays takes against Hetty when she isn't well. Happen she'll go to Dinah.'

Dinah, having taken off her bonnet and shawl, had hitherto kept quietly seated in the background, not liking to thrust herself between Hetty and what was considered Hetty's proper work. But now she came forward, and, putting out her arms, said, 'Come Totty, come and let Dinah carry her upstairs along with Mother: poor, poor Mother! she's so tired - she wants to go to bed.'

Totty turned her face towards Dinah, and looked at her an instant, then lifted herself up, put out her little arms, and let Dinah lift her from her mother's lap. Hetty turned away without any sign of ill

humour, and, taking her hat from the table, stood waiting with an air of indifference, to see if she should be told to do anything else.

'You may make the door fast now, Poyser; Alick's been come in this long while,' said Mrs. Poyser, rising with an appearance of relief from her low chair. 'Get me the matches down, Hetty, for I must have the rushlight burning i' my room. Come, Father.'

The heavy wooden bolts began to roll in the house doors, and old Martin prepared to move, by gathering up his blue handkerchief, and reaching his bright knobbed walnut-tree stick from the corner. Mrs. Poyser then led the way out of the kitchen, followed by the gandfather, and Dinah with Totty in her arms - all going to bed by twilight, like the birds. Mrs. Poyser, on her way, peeped into the room where her two boys lay; just to see their ruddy round cheeks on the pillow, and to hear for a moment their light regular breathing.

'Come, Hetty, get to bed,' said Mr Poyser, in a soothing tone, as he himself turned to go upstairs. 'You didna mean to be late, I'll be bound, but your aunt's been worrited to-day. Good-night, my wench, good-night.'