Chapter XXVI - The Dance

ARTHUR had chosen the entrance-hall for the ballroom: very wisely, for no other room could have been so airy, or would have had the advantage of the wide doors opening into the garden, as well as a ready entrance into the other rooms. To be sure, a stone floor was not the pleasantest to dance on, but then, most of the dancers had known what it was to enjoy a Christmas dance on kitchen quarries. It was one of those entrance-halls which make the surrounding rooms look like closets - with stucco angels, trumpets, and flower-wreaths on the lofty ceiling, and great medallions of miscellaneous heroes on the walls, alternating with statues in niches. Just the sort of place to be ornamented well with green boughs, and Mr Craig had been proud to show his taste and his hothouse plants on the occasion. The broad steps of the stone staircase were covered with cushions to serve as seats for the children, who were to stay till half-past nine with the servant-maids to see the dancing, and as this dance was confined to the chief tenants, there was abundant room for every one. The lights were charmingly disposed in coloured-paper lamps, high up among green boughs, and the farmers' wives and daughters, as they peeped in, believed no scene could be more splendid; they knew now quite well in what sort of rooms the king and queen lived, and their thoughts glanced with some pity towards cousins and acquaintances who had not this fine opportunity of knowing how things went on in the great world. The lamps were already lit, though the sun had not long set, and there was that calm light out of doors in which we seem to see all objects more distinctly than in the broad day.

It was a pretty scene outside the house: the farmers and their families were moving about the lawn, among the flowers and shrubs, or along the broad straight road leading from the east front, where a carpet of mossy grass spread on each side, studded here and there with a dark flat-boughed cedar, or a grand pyramidal fir sweeping the ground with its branches, all tipped with a fringe of paler green. The groups of cottagers in the park were gradually diminishing, the young ones being attracted towards the lights that were beginning to gleam from the windows of the gallery in the abbey, which was to be their dancing-room, and some of the sober elder ones thinking it time to go home quietly. One of these was Lisbeth Bede, and Seth went with her - not from filial attention only, for his conscience would not let him join in dancing. It had been rather a melancholy day to Seth: Dinah had never been more constantly present with him than in this scene, where everything was so unlike her. He saw her all the more vividly after looking at the thoughtless faces and gay-coloured dresses of the young women - just as one feels the beauty and the greatness of a pictured Madonna the more when it has been for a moment screened from us by a vulgar head in a bonnet. But this presence of Dinah in his mind only helped him to bear the better with his mother's mood,

which had been becoming more and more querulous for the last hour. Poor Lisbeth was suffering from a strange conflict of feelings. Her joy and pride in the honour paid to her darling son Adam was beginning to be worsted in the conflict with the jealousy and fretfulness which had revived when Adam came to tell her that Captain Donnithorne desired him to join the dancers in the hall. Adam was getting more and more out of her reach; she wished all the old troubles back again, for then it mattered more to Adam what his mother said and did.

'Eh, it's fine talkin' o' dancin',' she said, 'an' thy father not a five week in's grave. An' I wish I war there too, i'stid o' bein' left to take up merrier folks's room above ground.'

'Nay, don't look at it i' that way, Mother,' said Adam, who was determined to be gentle to her to-day. 'I don't mean to dance - I shall only look on. And since the captain wishes me to be there, it 'ud look as if I thought I knew better than him to say as I'd rather not stay. And thee know'st how he's behaved to me to-day.'

'Eh, thee't do as thee lik'st, for thy old mother's got no right t' hinder thee. She's nought but th' old husk, and thee'st slipped away from her, like the ripe nut.'

'Well, Mother,' said Adam, 'I'll go and tell the captain as it hurts thy feelings for me to stay, and I'd rather go home upo' that account: he won't take it ill then, I daresay, and I'm willing.' He said this with some effort, for he really longed to be near Hetty this evening.

'Nay, nay, I wonna ha' thee do that - the young squire 'ull be angered. Go an' do what thee't ordered to do, an' me and Seth 'ull go whome. I know it's a grit honour for thee to be so looked on - an' who's to be prouder on it nor thy mother? Hadna she the cumber o' rearin' thee an' doin' for thee all these 'ears?'

'Well, good-bye, then, Mother - good-bye, lad - remember Gyp when you get home,' said Adam, turning away towards the gate of the pleasure-grounds, where he hoped he might be able to join the Poysers, for he had been so occupied throughout the afternoon that he had had no time to speak to Hetty. His eye soon detected a distant group, which he knew to be the right one, returning to the house along the broad gravel road, and he hastened on to meet them.

'Why, Adam, I'm glad to get sight on y' again,' said Mr Poyser, who was carrying Totty on his arm. 'You're going t' have a bit o' fun, I hope, now your work's all done. And here's Hetty has promised no end o' partners, an' I've just been askin' her if she'd agreed to dance wi' you, an' she says no.'

‘Well, I didn't think o' dancing to-night,’ said Adam, already tempted to change his mind, as he looked at Hetty.

‘Nonsense!’ said Mr Poyser. ‘Why, everybody's goin' to dance to-night, all but th' old squire and Mrs. Irwine. Mrs. Best's been tellin' us as Miss Lyddy and Miss Irwine 'ull dance, an' the young squire 'ull pick my wife for his first partner, t' open the ball: so she'll be forced to dance, though she's laid by ever sin' the Christmas afore the little un was born. You canna for shame stand still, Adam, an' you a fine young fellow and can dance as well as anybody.’

‘Nay, nay,’ said Mrs. Poyser, ‘it 'ud be unbecomin'. I know the dancin's nonsense, but if you stick at everything because it's nonsense, you wonna go far i' this life. When your broth's ready-made for you, you mun swallow the thickenin', or else let the broth alone.’

‘Then if Hetty 'ull dance with me,’ said Adam, yielding either to Mrs. Poyser's argument or to something else, ‘I'll dance whichever dance she's free.’

‘I've got no partner for the fourth dance,’ said Hetty; ‘I'll dance that with you, if you like.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr Poyser, ‘but you mun dance the first dance, Adam, else it'll look partic'ler. There's plenty o' nice partners to pick an' choose from, an' it's hard for the gells when the men stan' by and don't ask 'em.’

Adam felt the justice of Mr Poyser's observation: it would not do for him to dance with no one besides Hetty; and remembering that Jonathan Burge had some reason to feel hurt to-day, he resolved to ask Miss Mary to dance with him the first dance, if she had no other partner.

‘There's the big clock strikin' eight,’ said Mr Poyser; ‘we must make haste in now, else the squire and the ladies 'ull be in afore us, an' that wouldna look well.’

When they had entered the hall, and the three children under Molly's charge had been seated on the stairs, the folding-doors of the drawing-room were thrown open, and Arthur entered in his regimentals, leading Mrs. Irwine to a carpet-covered dais ornamented with hot-house plants, where she and Miss Anne were to be seated with old Mr Donnithorne, that they might look on at the dancing, like the kings and queens in the plays. Arthur had put on his uniform to please the tenants, he said, who thought as much of his militia dignity as if it had been an elevation to the premiership. He had not the least

objection to gratify them in that way: his uniform was very advantageous to his figure.

The old squire, before sitting down, walked round the hall to greet the tenants and make polite speeches to the wives: he was always polite; but the farmers had found out, after long puzzling, that this polish was one of the signs of hardness. It was observed that he gave his most elaborate civility to Mrs. Poyser to-night, inquiring particularly about her health, recommending her to strengthen herself with cold water as he did, and avoid all drugs. Mrs. Poyser curtsied and thanked him with great self-command, but when he had passed on, she whispered to her husband, 'I'll lay my life he's brewin' some nasty turn against us. Old Harry doesna wag his tail so for nothin'.' Mr Poyser had no time to answer, for now Arthur came up and said, 'Mrs. Poyser, I'm come to request the favour of your hand for the first dance; and, Mr Poyser, you must let me take you to my aunt, for she claims you as her partner.'

The wife's pale cheek flushed with a nervous sense of unwonted honour as Arthur led her to the top of the room; but Mr Poyser, to whom an extra glass had restored his youthful confidence in his good looks and good dancing, walked along with them quite proudly, secretly flattering himself that Miss Lydia had never had a partner in HER life who could lift her off the ground as he would. In order to balance the honours given to the two parishes, Miss Irwine danced with Luke Britton, the largest Broxton farmer, and Mr Gawaine led out Mrs. Britton. Mr Irwine, after seating his sister Anne, had gone to the abbey gallery, as he had agreed with Arthur beforehand, to see how the merriment of the cottagers was prospering. Meanwhile, all the less distinguished couples had taken their places: Hetty was led out by the inevitable Mr Craig, and Mary Burge by Adam; and now the music struck up, and the glorious country-dance, best of all dances, began.

Pity it was not a boarded floor! Then the rhythmic stamping of the thick shoes would have been better than any drums. That merry stamping, that gracious nodding of the head, that waving bestowal of the hand - where can we see them now? That simple dancing of well-covered matrons, laying aside for an hour the cares of house and dairy, remembering but not affecting youth, not jealous but proud of the young maidens by their side - that holiday sprightliness of portly husbands paying little compliments to their wives, as if their courting days were come again - those lads and lasses a little confused and awkward with their partners, having nothing to say - it would be a pleasant variety to see all that sometimes, instead of low dresses and large skirts, and scanning glances exploring costumes, and languid men in lacquered boots smiling with double meaning.

There was but one thing to mar Martin Poyser's pleasure in this dance: it was that he was always in close contact with Luke Britton, that slovenly farmer. He thought of throwing a little glazed coldness into his eye in the crossing of hands; but then, as Miss Irwine was opposite to him instead of the offensive Luke, he might freeze the wrong person. So he gave his face up to hilarity, unchilled by moral judgments.

How Hetty's heart beat as Arthur approached her! He had hardly looked at her to-day: now he must take her hand. Would he press it? Would he look at her? She thought she would cry if he gave her no sign of feeling. Now he was there - he had taken her hand - yes, he was pressing it. Hetty turned pale as she looked up at him for an instant and met his eyes, before the dance carried him away. That pale look came upon Arthur like the beginning of a dull pain, which clung to him, though he must dance and smile and joke all the same. Hetty would look so, when he told her what he had to tell her; and he should never be able to bear it - he should be a fool and give way again. Hetty's look did not really mean so much as he thought: it was only the sign of a struggle between the desire for him to notice her and the dread lest she should betray the desire to others. But Hetty's face had a language that transcended her feelings. There are faces which nature charges with a meaning and pathos not belonging to the single human soul that flutters beneath them, but speaking the joys and sorrows of foregone generations - eyes that tell of deep love which doubtless has been and is somewhere, but not paired with these eyes - perhaps paired with pale eyes that can say nothing; just as a national language may be instinct with poetry unfelt by the lips that use it. That look of Hetty's oppressed Arthur with a dread which yet had something of a terrible unconfessed delight in it, that she loved him too well. There was a hard task before him, for at that moment he felt he would have given up three years of his youth for the happiness of abandoning himself without remorse to his passion for Hetty.

These were the incongruous thoughts in his mind as he led Mrs. Poyser, who was panting with fatigue, and secretly resolving that neither judge nor jury should force her to dance another dance, to take a quiet rest in the dining-room, where supper was laid out for the guests to come and take it as they chose.

'I've desired Hetty to remember as she's got to dance wi' you, sir,' said the good innocent woman; 'for she's so thoughtless, she'd be like enough to go an' engage herself for ivery dance. So I told her not to promise too many.'

'Thank you, Mrs. Poyser,' said Arthur, not without a twinge. 'Now, sit down in this comfortable chair, and here is Mills ready to give you what you would like best.'

He hurried away to seek another matronly partner, for due honour must be paid to the married women before he asked any of the young ones; and the country-dances, and the stamping, and the gracious nodding, and the waving of the hands, went on joyously.

At last the time had come for the fourth dance - longed for by the strong, grave Adam, as if he had been a delicate-handed youth of eighteen; for we are all very much alike when we are in our first love; and Adam had hardly ever touched Hetty's hand for more than a transient greeting - had never danced with her but once before. His eyes had followed her eagerly to-night in spite of himself, and had taken in deeper draughts of love. He thought she behaved so prettily, so quietly; she did not seem to be flirting at all she smiled less than usual; there was almost a sweet sadness about her. ‘God bless her!’ he said inwardly; ‘I'd make her life a happy 'un, if a strong arm to work for her, and a heart to love her, could do it.’

And then there stole over him delicious thoughts of coming home from work, and drawing Hetty to his side, and feeling her cheek softly pressed against his, till he forgot where he was, and the music and the tread of feet might have been the falling of rain and the roaring of the wind, for what he knew.

But now the third dance was ended, and he might go up to her and claim her hand. She was at the far end of the hall near the staircase, whispering with Molly, who had just given the sleeping Totty into her arms before running to fetch shawls and bonnets from the landing. Mrs. Poyser had taken the two boys away into the dining-room to give them some cake before they went home in the cart with Grandfather and Molly was to follow as fast as possible.

‘Let me hold her,’ said Adam, as Molly turned upstairs; ‘the children are so heavy when they're asleep.’

Hetty was glad of the relief, for to hold Totty in her arms, standing, was not at all a pleasant variety to her. But this second transfer had the unfortunate effect of rousing Totty, who was not behind any child of her age in peevishness at an unseasonable awaking. While Hetty was in the act of placing her in Adam's arms, and had not yet withdrawn her own, Totty opened her eyes, and forthwith fought out with her left fist at Adam's arm, and with her right caught at the string of brown beads round Hetty's neck. The locket leaped out from her frock, and the next moment the string was broken, and Hetty, helpless, saw beads and locket scattered wide on the floor.

‘My locket, my locket!’ she said, in a loud frightened whisper to Adam; ‘never mind the beads.’

Adam had already seen where the locket fell, for it had attracted his glance as it leaped out of her frock. It had fallen on the raised wooden dais where the band sat, not on the stone floor; and as Adam picked it up, he saw the glass with the dark and light locks of hair under it. It had fallen that side upwards, so the glass was not broken. He turned it over on his hand, and saw the enamelled gold back.

'It isn't hurt,' he said, as he held it towards Hetty, who was unable to take it because both her hands were occupied with Totty.

'Oh, it doesn't matter, I don't mind about it,' said Hetty, who had been pale and was now red.

'Not matter?' said Adam, gravely. 'You seemed very frightened about it. I'll hold it till you're ready to take it,' he added, quietly closing his hand over it, that she might not think he wanted to look at it again.

By this time Molly had come with bonnet and shawl, and as soon as she had taken Totty, Adam placed the locket in Hetty's hand. She took it with an air of indifference and put it in her pocket, in her heart vexed and angry with Adam because he had seen it, but determined now that she would show no more signs of agitation.

'See,' she said, 'they're taking their places to dance; let us go.'

Adam assented silently. A puzzled alarm had taken possession of him. Had Hetty a lover he didn't know of? For none of her relations, he was sure, would give her a locket like that; and none of her admirers, with whom he was acquainted, was in the position of an accepted lover, as the giver of that locket must be. Adam was lost in the utter impossibility of finding any person for his fears to alight on. He could only feel with a terrible pang that there was something in Hetty's life unknown to him; that while he had been rocking himself in the hope that she would come to love him, she was already loving another. The pleasure of the dance with Hetty was gone; his eyes, when they rested on her, had an uneasy questioning expression in them; he could think of nothing to say to her; and she too was out of temper and disinclined to speak. They were both glad when the dance was ended.

Adam was determined to stay no longer; no one wanted him, and no one would notice if he slipped away. As soon as he got out of doors, he began to walk at his habitual rapid pace, hurrying along without knowing why, busy with the painful thought that the memory of this day, so full of honour and promise to him, was poisoned for ever. Suddenly, when he was far on through the Chase, he stopped, startled by a flash of reviving hope. After all, he might be a fool, making a great misery out of a trifle. Hetty, fond of finery as she was, might have bought the thing herself. It looked too expensive for that - it looked

like the things on white satin in the great jeweller's shop at Rosseter. But Adam had very imperfect notions of the value of such things, and he thought it could certainly not cost more than a guinea. Perhaps Hetty had had as much as that in Christmas boxes, and there was no knowing but she might have been childish enough to spend it in that way; she was such a young thing, and she couldn't help loving finery! But then, why had she been so frightened about it at first, and changed colour so, and afterwards pretended not to care? Oh, that was because she was ashamed of his seeing that she had such a smart thing - she was conscious that it was wrong for her to spend her money on it, and she knew that Adam disapproved of finery. It was a proof she cared about what he liked and disliked. She must have thought from his silence and gravity afterwards that he was very much displeased with her, that he was inclined to be harsh and severe towards her foibles. And as he walked on more quietly, chewing the cud of this new hope, his only uneasiness was that he had behaved in a way which might chill Hetty's feeling towards him. For this last view of the matter must be the true one. How could Hetty have an accepted lover, quite unknown to him? She was never away from her uncle's house for more than a day; she could have no acquaintances that did not come there, and no intimacies unknown to her uncle and aunt. It would be folly to believe that the locket was given to her by a lover. The little ring of dark hair he felt sure was her own; he could form no guess about the light hair under it, for he had not seen it very distinctly. It might be a bit of her father's or mother's, who had died when she was a child, and she would naturally put a bit of her own along with it.

And so Adam went to bed comforted, having woven for himself an ingenious web of probabilities - the surest screen a wise man can place between himself and the truth. His last waking thoughts melted into a dream that he was with Hetty again at the Hall Farm, and that he was asking her to forgive him for being so cold and silent.

And while he was dreaming this, Arthur was leading Hetty to the dance and saying to her in low hurried tones, 'I shall be in the wood the day after to-morrow at seven; come as early as you can.' And Hetty's foolish joys and hopes, which had flown away for a little space, scared by a mere nothing, now all came fluttering back, unconscious of the real peril. She was happy for the first time this long day, and wished that dance would last for hours. Arthur wished it too; it was the last weakness he meant to indulge in; and a man never lies with more delicious languor under the influence of a passion than when he has persuaded himself that he shall subdue it to-morrow.

But Mrs. Poyser's wishes were quite the reverse of this, for her mind was filled with dreary forebodings as to the retardation of to-morrow morning's cheese in consequence of these late hours. Now that Hetty

had done her duty and danced one dance with the young squire, Mr Poyser must go out and see if the cart was come back to fetch them, for it was half-past ten o'clock, and notwithstanding a mild suggestion on his part that it would be bad manners for them to be the first to go, Mrs. Poyser was resolute on the point, 'manners or no manners.'

'What! Going already, Mrs. Poyser?' said old Mr Donnithorne, as she came to curtsy and take leave; 'I thought we should not part with any of our guests till eleven. Mrs. Irwine and I, who are elderly people, think of sitting out the dance till then.'

'Oh, Your Honour, it's all right and proper for gentlefolks to stay up by candlelight - they've got no cheese on their minds. We're late enough as it is, an' there's no lettin' the cows know as they mustn't want to be milked so early to-morrow mornin'. So, if you'll please t' excuse us, we'll take our leave.'

'Eh!' she said to her husband, as they set off in the cart, 'I'd sooner ha' brewin' day and washin' day together than one o' these pleasurin' days. There's no work so tirin' as danglin' about an' starin' an' not rightly knowin' what you're goin' to do next; and keepin' your face i' smilin' order like a grocer o' market-day for fear people shouldna think you civil enough. An' you've nothing to show for't when it's done, if it isn't a yallow face wi' eatin' things as disagree.'

'Nay, nay,' said Mr Poyser, who was in his merriest mood, and felt that he had had a great day, 'a bit o' pleasuring's good for thee sometimes. An' thee danc'st as well as any of 'em, for I'll back thee against all the wives i' the parish for a light foot an' ankle. An' it was a great honour for the young squire to ask thee first - I reckon it was because I sat at th' head o' the table an' made the speech. An' Hetty too - she never had such a partner before - a fine young gentleman in reg'mentals. It'll serve you to talk on, Hetty, when you're an old woman - how you danced wi' th' young squire the day he come o' age.'