

## Chapter XXVIII - A Dilemma

IT was only a few minutes measured by the clock - though Adam always thought it had been a long while - before he perceived a gleam of consciousness in Arthur's face and a slight shiver through his frame. The intense joy that flooded his soul brought back some of the old affection with it.

'Do you feel any pain, sir?' he said, tenderly, loosening Arthur's cravat.

Arthur turned his eyes on Adam with a vague stare which gave way to a slightly startled motion as if from the shock of returning memory. But he only shivered again and said nothing.

'Do you feel any hurt, sir?' Adam said again, with a trembling in his voice.

Arthur put his hand up to his waistcoat buttons, and when Adam had unbuttoned it, he took a longer breath. 'Lay my head down,' he said, faintly, 'and get me some water if you can.'

Adam laid the head down gently on the fern again, and emptying the tools out of the flag-basket, hurried through the trees to the edge of the Grove bordering on the Chase, where a brook ran below the bank.

When he returned with his basket leaking, but still half-full, Arthur looked at him with a more thoroughly reawakened consciousness.

'Can you drink a drop out o' your hand, sir?' said Adam, kneeling down again to lift up Arthur's head.

'No,' said Arthur, 'dip my cravat in and souse it on my head.'

The water seemed to do him some good, for he presently raised himself a little higher, resting on Adam's arm.

'Do you feel any hurt inside sir?' Adam asked again

'No - no hurt,' said Arthur, still faintly, 'but rather done up.'

After a while he said, 'I suppose I fainted away when you knocked me down.'

'Yes, sir, thank God,' said Adam. 'I thought it was worse.'

'What! You thought you'd done for me, eh? Come help me on my legs.'

'I feel terribly shaky and dizzy,' Arthur said, as he stood leaning on Adam's arm; 'that blow of yours must have come against me like a battering-ram. I don't believe I can walk alone.'

'Lean on me, sir; I'll get you along,' said Adam. 'Or, will you sit down a bit longer, on my coat here, and I'll prop y' up. You'll perhaps be better in a minute or two.'

'No,' said Arthur. 'I'll go to the Hermitage - I think I've got some brandy there. There's a short road to it a little farther on, near the gate. If you'll just help me on.'

They walked slowly, with frequent pauses, but without speaking again. In both of them, the concentration in the present which had attended the first moments of Arthur's revival had now given way to a vivid recollection of the previous scene. It was nearly dark in the narrow path among the trees, but within the circle of fir-trees round the Hermitage there was room for the growing moonlight to enter in at the windows. Their steps were noiseless on the thick carpet of fir-needles, and the outward stillness seemed to heighten their inward consciousness, as Arthur took the key out of his pocket and placed it in Adam's hand, for him to open the door. Adam had not known before that Arthur had furnished the old Hermitage and made it a retreat for himself, and it was a surprise to him when he opened the door to see a snug room with all the signs of frequent habitation.

Arthur loosed Adam's arm and threw himself on the ottoman. 'You'll see my hunting-bottle somewhere,' he said. 'A leather case with a bottle and glass in.'

Adam was not long in finding the case. 'There's very little brandy in it, sir,' he said, turning it downwards over the glass, as he held it before the window; 'hardly this little glassful.'

'Well, give me that,' said Arthur, with the peevishness of physical depression. When he had taken some sips, Adam said, 'Hadn't I better run to th' house, sir, and get some more brandy? I can be there and back pretty soon. It'll be a stiff walk home for you, if you don't have something to revive you.'

'Yes - go. But don't say I'm ill. Ask for my man Pym, and tell him to get it from Mills, and not to say I'm at the Hermitage. Get some water too.'

Adam was relieved to have an active task - both of them were relieved to be apart from each other for a short time. But Adam's swift pace could not still the eager pain of thinking - of living again with

concentrated suffering through the last wretched hour, and looking out from it over all the new sad future.

Arthur lay still for some minutes after Adam was gone, but presently he rose feebly from the ottoman and peered about slowly in the broken moonlight, seeking something. It was a short bit of wax candle that stood amongst a confusion of writing and drawing materials. There was more searching for the means of lighting the candle, and when that was done, he went cautiously round the room, as if wishing to assure himself of the presence or absence of something. At last he had found a slight thing, which he put first in his pocket, and then, on a second thought, took out again and thrust deep down into a waste-paper basket. It was a woman's little, pink, silk neckerchief. He set the candle on the table, and threw himself down on the ottoman again, exhausted with the effort.

When Adam came back with his supplies, his entrance awoke Arthur from a doze.

'That's right,' Arthur said; 'I'm tremendously in want of some brandy-vigour.'

'I'm glad to see you've got a light, sir,' said Adam. 'I've been thinking I'd better have asked for a lanthorn.'

'No, no; the candle will last long enough - I shall soon be up to walking home now.'

'I can't go before I've seen you safe home, sir,' said Adam, hesitatingly.

'No: it will be better for you to stay - sit down.'

Adam sat down, and they remained opposite to each other in uneasy silence, while Arthur slowly drank brandy-and-water, with visibly renovating effect. He began to lie in a more voluntary position, and looked as if he were less overpowered by bodily sensations. Adam was keenly alive to these indications, and as his anxiety about Arthur's condition began to be allayed, he felt more of that impatience which every one knows who has had his just indignation suspended by the physical state of the culprit. Yet there was one thing on his mind to be done before he could recur to remonstrance: it was to confess what had been unjust in his own words. Perhaps he longed all the more to make this confession, that his indignation might be free again; and as he saw the signs of returning ease in Arthur, the words again and again came to his lips and went back, checked by the thought that it would be better to leave everything till to-morrow. As long as they were silent they did not look at each other, and a foreboding came across Adam that if they began to speak as though they remembered

the past - if they looked at each other with full recognition - they must take fire again. So they sat in silence till the bit of wax candle flickered low in the socket, the silence all the while becoming more irksome to Adam. Arthur had just poured out some more brandy-and-water, and he threw one arm behind his head and drew up one leg in an attitude of recovered ease, which was an irresistible temptation to Adam to speak what was on his mind.

'You begin to feel more yourself again, sir,' he said, as the candle went out and they were half-hidden from each other in the faint moonlight.

'Yes: I don't feel good for much - very lazy, and not inclined to move; but I'll go home when I've taken this dose.'

There was a slight pause before Adam said, 'My temper got the better of me, and I said things as wasn't true. I'd no right to speak as if you'd known you was doing me an injury: you'd no grounds for knowing it; I've always kept what I felt for her as secret as I could.'

He paused again before he went on.

'And perhaps I judged you too harsh - I'm apt to be harsh - and you may have acted out o' thoughtlessness more than I should ha' believed was possible for a man with a heart and a conscience. We're not all put together alike, and we may misjudge one another. God knows, it's all the joy I could have now, to think the best of you.'

Arthur wanted to go home without saying any more - he was too painfully embarrassed in mind, as well as too weak in body, to wish for any further explanation to-night. And yet it was a relief to him that Adam reopened the subject in a way the least difficult for him to answer. Arthur was in the wretched position of an open, generous man who has committed an error which makes deception seem a necessity. The native impulse to give truth in return for truth, to meet trust with frank confession, must be suppressed, and duty was becoming a question of tactics. His deed was reacting upon him - was already governing him tyrannously and forcing him into a course that jarred with his habitual feelings. The only aim that seemed admissible to him now was to deceive Adam to the utmost: to make Adam think better of him than he deserved. And when he heard the words of honest retraction - when he heard the sad appeal with which Adam ended - he was obliged to rejoice in the remains of ignorant confidence it implied. He did not answer immediately, for he had to be judicious and not truthful.

'Say no more about our anger, Adam,' he said, at last, very languidly, for the labour of speech was unwelcome to him; 'I forgive your momentary injustice - it was quite natural, with the exaggerated

notions you had in your mind. We shall be none the worse friends in future, I hope, because we've fought. You had the best of it, and that was as it should be, for I believe I've been most in the wrong of the two. Come, let us shake hands.'

Arthur held out his hand, but Adam sat still.

'I don't like to say 'No' to that, sir,' he said, 'but I can't shake hands till it's clear what we mean by't. I was wrong when I spoke as if you'd done me an injury knowingly, but I wasn't wrong in what I said before, about your behaviour t' Hetty, and I can't shake hands with you as if I held you my friend the same as ever till you've cleared that up better.'

Arthur swallowed his pride and resentment as he drew back his hand. He was silent for some moments, and then said, as indifferently as he could, 'I don't know what you mean by clearing up, Adam. I've told you already that you think too seriously of a little flirtation. But if you are right in supposing there is any danger in it - I'm going away on Saturday, and there will be an end of it. As for the pain it has given you, I'm heartily sorry for it. I can say no more.'

Adam said nothing, but rose from his chair and stood with his face towards one of the windows, as if looking at the blackness of the moonlit fir-trees; but he was in reality conscious of nothing but the conflict within him. It was of no use now - his resolution not to speak till to-morrow. He must speak there and then. But it was several minutes before he turned round and stepped nearer to Arthur, standing and looking down on him as he lay.

'It'll be better for me to speak plain,' he said, with evident effort, 'though it's hard work. You see, sir, this isn't a trifle to me, whatever it may be to you. I'm none o' them men as can go making love first to one woman and then t' another, and don't think it much odds which of 'em I take. What I feel for Hetty's a different sort o' love, such as I believe nobody can know much about but them as feel it and God as has given it to 'em. She's more nor everything else to me, all but my conscience and my good name. And if it's true what you've been saying all along - and if it's only been trifling and flirting as you call it, as 'll be put an end to by your going away - why, then, I'd wait, and hope her heart 'ud turn to me after all. I'm loath to think you'd speak false to me, and I'll believe your word, however things may look.'

'You would be wronging Hetty more than me not to believe it,' said Arthur, almost violently, starting up from the ottoman and moving away. But he threw himself into a chair again directly, saying, more feebly, 'You seem to forget that, in suspecting me, you are casting imputations upon her.'

'Nay, sir,' Adam said, in a calmer voice, as if he were half-relieved - for he was too straightforward to make a distinction between a direct falsehood and an indirect one - 'Nay, sir, things don't lie level between Hetty and you. You're acting with your eyes open, whatever you may do; but how do you know what's been in her mind? She's all but a child - as any man with a conscience in him ought to feel bound to take care on. And whatever you may think, I know you've disturbed her mind. I know she's been fixing her heart on you, for there's a many things clear to me now as I didn't understand before. But you seem to make light o' what she may feel - you don't think o' that.'

'Good God, Adam, let me alone!' Arthur burst out impetuously; 'I feel it enough without your worrying me.'

He was aware of his indiscretion as soon as the words had escaped him.

'Well, then, if you feel it,' Adam rejoined, eagerly; 'if you feel as you may ha' put false notions into her mind, and made her believe as you loved her, when all the while you meant nothing, I've this demand to make of you - I'm not speaking for myself, but for her. I ask you t' undeceive her before you go away. Y'aren't going away for ever, and if you leave her behind with a notion in her head o' your feeling about her the same as she feels about you, she'll be hankering after you, and the mischief may get worse. It may be a smart to her now, but it'll save her pain i' th' end. I ask you to write a letter - you may trust to my seeing as she gets it. Tell her the truth, and take blame to yourself for behaving as you'd no right to do to a young woman as isn't your equal. I speak plain, sir, but I can't speak any other way. There's nobody can take care o' Hetty in this thing but me.'

'I can do what I think needful in the matter,' said Arthur, more and more irritated by mingled distress and perplexity, 'without giving promises to you. I shall take what measures I think proper.'

'No,' said Adam, in an abrupt decided tone, 'that won't do. I must know what ground I'm treading on. I must be safe as you've put an end to what ought never to ha' been begun. I don't forget what's owing to you as a gentleman, but in this thing we're man and man, and I can't give up.'

There was no answer for some moments. Then Arthur said, 'I'll see you to-morrow. I can bear no more now; I'm ill.' He rose as he spoke, and reached his cap, as if intending to go.

'You won't see her again!' Adam exclaimed, with a flash of recurring anger and suspicion, moving towards the door and placing his back

against it. 'Either tell me she can never be my wife - tell me you've been lying - or else promise me what I've said.'

Adam, uttering this alternative, stood like a terrible fate before Arthur, who had moved forward a step or two, and now stopped, faint, shaken, sick in mind and body. It seemed long to both of them - that inward struggle of Arthur's - before he said, feebly, 'I promise; let me go.'

Adam moved away from the door and opened it, but when Arthur reached the step, he stopped again and leaned against the door-post.

'You're not well enough to walk alone, sir,' said Adam. 'Take my arm again.'

Arthur made no answer, and presently walked on, Adam following. But, after a few steps, he stood still again, and said, coldly, 'I believe I must trouble you. It's getting late now, and there may be an alarm set up about me at home.'

Adam gave his arm, and they walked on without uttering a word, till they came where the basket and the tools lay.

'I must pick up the tools, sir,' Adam said. 'They're my brother's. I doubt they'll be rusted. If you'll please to wait a minute.'

Arthur stood still without speaking, and no other word passed between them till they were at the side entrance, where he hoped to get in without being seen by any one. He said then, 'Thank you; I needn't trouble you any further.'

'What time will it be conven'ent for me to see you to-morrow, sir?' said Adam.

'You may send me word that you're here at five o'clock,' said Arthur; 'not before.'

'Good-night, sir,' said Adam. But he heard no reply; Arthur had turned into the house.