Chapter XXX - The Delivery Of The Letter

THE next Sunday Adam joined the Poysers on their way out of church, hoping for an invitation to go home with them. He had the letter in his pocket, and was anxious to have an opportunity of talking to Hetty alone. He could not see her face at church, for she had changed her seat, and when he came up to her to shake hands, her manner was doubtful and constrained. He expected this, for it was the first time she had met him since she had been aware that he had seen her with Arthur in the Grove.

'Come, you'll go on with us, Adam,' Mr Poyser said when they reached the turning; and as soon as they were in the fields Adam ventured to offer his arm to Hetty. The children soon gave them an opportunity of lingering behind a little, and then Adam said:

'Will you contrive for me to walk out in the garden a bit with you this evening, if it keeps fine, Hetty? I've something partic'lar to talk to you about.'

Hetty said, 'Very well.' She was really as anxious as Adam was that she should have some private talk with him. She wondered what he thought of her and Arthur. He must have seen them kissing, she knew, but she had no conception of the scene that had taken place between Arthur and Adam. Her first feeling had been that Adam would be very angry with her, and perhaps would tell her aunt and uncle, but it never entered her mind that he would dare to say anything to Captain Donnithorne. It was a relief to her that he behaved so kindly to her to-day, and wanted to speak to her alone, for she had trembled when she found he was going home with them lest he should mean 'to tell.' But, now he wanted to talk to her by herself, she should learn what he thought and what he meant to do. She felt a certain confidence that she could persuade him not to do anything she did not want him to do; she could perhaps even make him believe that she didn't care for Arthur; and as long as Adam thought there was any hope of her having him, he would do just what she liked, she knew. Besides, she MUST go on seeming to encourage Adam, lest her uncle and aunt should be angry and suspect her of having some secret lover.

Hetty's little brain was busy with this combination as she hung on Adam's arm and said 'yes' or 'no' to some slight observations of his about the many hawthorn-berries there would be for the birds this next winter, and the low-hanging clouds that would hardly hold up till morning. And when they rejoined her aunt and uncle, she could pursue her thoughts without interruption, for Mr Poyser held that though a young man might like to have the woman he was courting on his arm, he would nevertheless be glad of a little reasonable talk

about business the while; and, for his own part, he was curious to heal the most recent news about the Chase Farm. So, through the rest of the walk, he claimed Adam's conversation for himself, and Hetty laid her small plots and imagined her little scenes of cunning blandishment, as she walked along by the hedgerows on honest Adam's arm, quite as well as if she had been an elegantly clad coquette alone in her boudoir. For if a country beauty in clumsy shoes be only shallow-hearted enough, it is astonishing how closely her mental processes may resemble those of a lady in society and crinoline, who applies her refined intellect to the problem of committing indiscretions without compromising herself. Perhaps the resemblance was not much the less because Hetty felt very unhappy all the while. The parting with Arthur was a double pain to her - mingling with the tumult of passion and vanity there was a dim undefined fear that the future might shape itself in some way quite unlike her dream. She clung to the comforting hopeful words Arthur had uttered in their last meeting - 'I shall come again at Christmas, and then we will see what can be done.' She clung to the belief that he was so fond of her, he would never be happy without her; and she still hugged her secret - that a great gentleman loved her - with gratified pride, as a superiority over all the girls she knew. But the uncertainty of the future, the possibilities to which she could give no shape, began to press upon her like the invisible weight of air; she was alone on her little island of dreams, and all around her was the dark unknown water where Arthur was gone. She could gather no elation of spirits now by looking forward, but only by looking backward to build confidence on past words and caresses. But occasionally, since Thursday evening, her dim anxieties had been almost lost behind the more definite fear that Adam might betray what he knew to her uncle and aunt, and his sudden proposition to talk with her alone had set her thoughts to work in a new way. She was eager not to lose this evening's opportunity; and after tea, when the boys were going into the garden and Totty begged to go with them, Hetty said, with an alacrity that surprised Mrs. Poyser, 'I'll go with her, Aunt.'

It did not seem at all surprising that Adam said he would go too, and soon he and Hetty were left alone together on the walk by the filbert-trees, while the boys were busy elsewhere gathering the large unripe nuts to play at 'cob-nut' with, and Totty was watching them with a puppylike air of contemplation. It was but a short time - hardly two months - since Adam had had his mind filled with delicious hopes as he stood by Hetty's side un this garden. The remembrance of that scene had often been with him since Thursday evening: the sunlight through the apple-tree boughs, the red bunches, Hetty's sweet blush. It came importunately now, on this sad evening, with the low-hanging clouds, but he tried to suppress it, lest some emotion should impel him to say more than was needful for Hetty's sake.

‘After what I saw on Thursday night, Hetty,’ he began, ‘you won't think me making too free in what I'm going to say. If you was being courted by any man as 'ud make you his wife, and I'd known you was fond of him and meant to have him, I should have no right to speak a word to you about it; but when I see you're being made love to by a gentleman as can never marry you, and doesna think o' marrying you, I feel bound t' interfere for you. I can't speak about it to them as are i' the place o' your parents, for that might bring worse trouble than's needful.’

Adam's words relieved one of Hetty's fears, but they also carried a meaning which sickened her with a strengthened foreboding. She was pale and trembling, and yet she would have angrily contradicted Adam, if she had dared to betray her feelings. But she was silent.

‘You're so young, you know, Hetty,’ he went on, almost tenderly, ‘and y' haven't seen much o' what goes on in the world. It's right for me to do what I can to save you from getting into trouble for want o' your knowing where you're being led to. If anybody besides me knew what I know about your meeting a gentleman and having fine presents from him, they'd speak light on you, and you'd lose your character. And besides that, you'll have to suffer in your feelings, wi' giving your love to a man as can never marry you, so as he might take care of you all your life.’

Adam paused and looked at Hetty, who was plucking the leaves from the filbert-trees and tearing them up in her hand. Her little plans and preconcerted speeches had all forsaken her, like an ill-learnt lesson, under the terrible agitation produced by Adam's words. There was a cruel force in their calm certainty which threatened to grapple and crush her flimsy hopes and fancies. She wanted to resist them - she wanted to throw them off with angry contradiction - but the determination to conceal what she felt still governed her. It was nothing more than a blind prompting now, for she was unable to calculate the effect of her words.

‘You've no right to say as I love him,’ she said, faintly, but impetuously, plucking another rough leaf and tearing it up. She was very beautiful in her paleness and agitation, with her dark childish eyes dilated and her breath shorter than usual. Adam's heart yearned over her as he looked at her. Ah, if he could but comfort her, and soothe her, and save her from this pain; if he had but some sort of strength that would enable him to rescue her poor troubled mind, as he would have rescued her body in the face of all danger!

‘I doubt it must be so, Hetty,’ he said, tenderly; ‘for I canna believe you'd let any man kiss you by yourselves, and give you a gold box with his hair, and go a-walking i' the Grove to meet him, if you didna love

him. I'm not blaming you, for I know it 'ud begin by little and little, till at last you'd not be able to throw it off. It's him I blame for stealing your love i' that way, when he knew he could never make you the right amends. He's been trifling with you, and making a plaything of you, and caring nothing about you as a man ought to care.'

'Yes, he does care for me; I know better nor you,' Hetty burst out. Everything was forgotten but the pain and anger she felt at Adam's words.

'Nay, Hetty,' said Adam, 'if he'd cared for you rightly, he'd never ha' behaved so. He told me himself he meant nothing by his kissing and presents, and he wanted to make me believe as you thought light of 'em too. But I know better nor that. I can't help thinking as you've been trusting to his loving you well enough to marry you, for all he's a gentleman. And that's why I must speak to you about it, Hetty, for fear you should be deceiving yourself. It's never entered his head the thought o' marrying you.'

'How do you know? How durst you say so?' said Hetty, pausing in her walk and trembling. The terrible decision of Adam's tone shook her with fear. She had no presence of mind left for the reflection that Arthur would have his reasons for not telling the truth to Adam. Her words and look were enough to determine Adam: he must give her the letter.

'Perhaps you can't believe me, Hetty, because you think too well of him - because you think he loves you better than he does. But I've got a letter i' my pocket, as he wrote himself for me to give you. I've not read the letter, but he says he's told you the truth in it. But before I give you the letter, consider, Hetty, and don't let it take too much hold on you. It wouldna ha' been good for you if he'd wanted to do such a mad thing as marry you: it 'ud ha' led to no happiness i' th' end.'

Hetty said nothing; she felt a revival of hope at the mention of a letter which Adam had not read. There would be something quite different in it from what he thought.

Adam took out the letter, but he held it in his hand still, while he said, in a tone of tender entreaty, 'Don't you bear me ill will, Hetty, because I'm the means o' bringing you this pain. God knows I'd ha' borne a good deal worse for the sake o' sparing it you. And think - there's nobody but me knows about this, and I'll take care of you as if I was your brother. You're the same as ever to me, for I don't believe you've done any wrong knowingly.'

Hetty had laid her hand on the letter, but Adam did not loose it till he had done speaking. She took no notice of what he said - she had not

listened; but when he loosed the letter, she put it into her pocket, without opening it, and then began to walk more quickly, as if she wanted to go in.

'You're in the right not to read it just yet,' said Adam. 'Read it when you're by yourself. But stay out a little bit longer, and let us call the children: you look so white and ill, your aunt may take notice of it.'

Hetty heard the warning. It recalled to her the necessity of rallying her native powers of concealment, which had half given way under the shock of Adam's words. And she had the letter in her pocket: she was sure there was comfort in that letter in spite of Adam. She ran to find Totty, and soon reappeared with recovered colour, leading Totty, who was making a sour face because she had been obliged to throw away an unripe apple that she had set her small teeth in.

'Hegh, Totty,' said Adam, 'come and ride on my shoulder - ever so high - you'll touch the tops o' the trees.'

What little child ever refused to be comforted by that glorious sense of being seized strongly and swung upward? I don't believe Ganymede cried when the eagle carried him away, and perhaps deposited him on Jove's shoulder at the end. Totty smiled down complacently from her secure height, and pleasant was the sight to the mother's eyes, as she stood at the house door and saw Adam coming with his small burden.

'Bless your sweet face, my pet,' she said, the mother's strong love filling her keen eyes with mildness, as Totty leaned forward and put out her arms. She had no eyes for Hetty at that moment, and only said, without looking at her, 'You go and draw some ale, Hetty; the gells are both at the cheese.'

After the ale had been drawn and her uncle's pipe lighted, there was Totty to be taken to bed, and brought down again in her night-gown because she would cry instead of going to sleep. Then there was supper to be got ready, and Hetty must be continually in the way to give help. Adam stayed till he knew Mrs. Poyser expected him to go, engaging her and her husband in talk as constantly as he could, for the sake of leaving Hetty more at ease. He lingered, because he wanted to see her safely through that evening, and he was delighted to find how much self-command she showed. He knew she had not had time to read the letter, but he did not know she was buoyed up by a secret hope that the letter would contradict everything he had said. It was hard work for him to leave her - hard to think that he should not know for days how she was bearing her trouble. But he must go at last, and all he could do was to press her hand gently as he said 'Good-bye,' and hope she would take that as a sign that if his love could ever be a refuge for her, it was there the same as ever. How busy

his thoughts were, as he walked home, in devising pitying excuses for her folly, in referring all her weakness to the sweet lovingness of her nature, in blaming Arthur, with less and less inclination to admit that his conduct might be extenuated too! His exasperation at Hetty's suffering - and also at the sense that she was possibly thrust for ever out of his own reach - deafened him to any plea for the miscalled friend who had wrought this misery. Adam was a clear-sighted, fair-minded man - a fine fellow, indeed, morally as well as physically. But if Aristides the Just was ever in love and jealous, he was at that moment not perfectly magnanimous. And I cannot pretend that Adam, in these painful days, felt nothing but righteous indignation and loving pity. He was bitterly jealous, and in proportion as his love made him indulgent in his judgment of Hetty, the bitterness found a vent in his feeling towards Arthur.

'Her head was allays likely to be turned,' he thought, 'when a gentleman, with his fine manners, and fine clothes, and his white hands, and that way o' talking gentlefolks have, came about her, making up to her in a bold way, as a man couldn't do that was only her equal; and it's much if she'll ever like a common man now.' He could not help drawing his own hands out of his pocket and looking at them - at the hard palms and the broken finger-nails. 'I'm a roughish fellow, altogether; I don't know, now I come to think on't, what there is much for a woman to like about me; and yet I might ha' got another wife easy enough, if I hadn't set my heart on her. But it's little matter what other women think about me, if she can't love me. She might ha' loved me, perhaps, as likely as any other man - there's nobody hereabouts as I'm afraid of, if he hadn't come between us; but now I shall belike be hateful to her because I'm so different to him. And yet there's no telling - she may turn round the other way, when she finds he's made light of her all the while. She may come to feel the vally of a man as 'ud be thankful to be bound to her all his life. But I must put up with it whichever way it is - I've only to be thankful it's been no worse. I am not th' only man that's got to do without much happiness i' this life. There's many a good bit o' work done with a bad heart. It's God's will, and that's enough for us: we shouldn't know better how things ought to be than He does, I reckon, if we was to spend our lives i' puzzling. But it 'ud ha' gone near to spoil my work for me, if I'd seen her brought to sorrow and shame, and through the man as I've always been proud to think on. Since I've been spared that, I've no right to grumble. When a man's got his limbs whole, he can bear a smart cut or two.'

As Adam was getting over a stile at this point in his reflections, he perceived a man walking along the field before him. He knew it was Seth, returning from an evening preaching, and made haste to overtake him.

‘I thought thee'dst be at home before me,’ he said, as Seth turned round to wait for him, ‘for I'm later than usual to-night.’

‘Well, I'm later too, for I got into talk, after meeting, with John Barnes, who has lately professed himself in a state of perfection, and I'd a question to ask him about his experience. It's one o' them subjects that lead you further than y' expect - they don't lie along the straight road.’

They walked along together in silence two or three minutes. Adam was not inclined to enter into the subtleties of religious experience, but he was inclined to interchange a word or two of brotherly affection and confidence with Seth. That was a rare impulse in him, much as the brothers loved each other. They hardly ever spoke of personal matters, or uttered more than an allusion to their family troubles. Adam was by nature reserved in all matters of feeling, and Seth felt a certain timidity towards his more practical brother.

‘Seth, lad,’ Adam said, putting his arm on his brother's shoulder, ‘hast heard anything from Dinah Morris since she went away?’

‘Yes,’ said Seth. ‘She told me I might write her word after a while, how we went on, and how mother bore up under her trouble. So I wrote to her a fortnight ago, and told her about thee having a new employment, and how Mother was more contented; and last Wednesday, when I called at the post at Treddles'on, I found a letter from her. I think thee'dst perhaps like to read it, but I didna say anything about it because thee'st seemed so full of other things. It's quite easy t' read - she writes wonderful for a woman.’

Seth had drawn the letter from his pocket and held it out to Adam, who said, as he took it, ‘Aye, lad, I've got a tough load to carry just now - thee mustna take it ill if I'm a bit silenter and crustier nor usual. Trouble doesna make me care the less for thee. I know we shall stick together to the last.’

‘I take nought ill o' thee, Adam. I know well enough what it means if thee't a bit short wi' me now and then.’

‘There's Mother opening the door to look out for us,’ said Adam, as they mounted the slope. ‘She's been sitting i' the dark as usual. Well, Gyp, well, art glad to see me?’

Lisbeth went in again quickly and lighted a candle, for she had heard the welcome rustling of footsteps on the grass, before Gyp's joyful bark.

‘Eh, my lads! Th' hours war ne'er so long sin' I war born as they'n been this blessed Sunday night. What can ye both ha' been doin' till this time?’

‘Thee shouldstna sit i' the dark, Mother,’ said Adam; ‘that makes the time seem longer.’

‘Eh, what am I to do wi' burnin' candle of a Sunday, when there's on'y me an' it's sin to do a bit o' knittin'? The daylight's long enough for me to stare i' the booke as I canna read. It 'ud be a fine way o' shortenin' the time, to make it waste the good candle. But which on you's for ha'in' supper? Ye mun ayther be clemmed or full, I should think, seein' what time o' night it is.’

‘I'm hungry, Mother,’ said Seth, seating himself at the little table, which had been spread ever since it was light.

‘I've had my supper,’ said Adam. ‘Here, Gyp,’ he added, taking some cold potato from the table and rubbing the rough grey head that looked up towards him.

‘Thee needstna be gi'in' th' dog,’ said Lisbeth; ‘I'n fed him well a'ready. I'm not like to forget him, I reckon, when he's all o' thee I can get sight on.’

‘Come, then, Gyp,’ said Adam, ‘we'll go to bed. Good-night, Mother; I'm very tired.’

‘What ails him, dost know?’ Lisbeth said to Seth, when Adam was gone upstairs. ‘He's like as if he was struck for death this day or two - he's so cast down. I found him i' the shop this forenoon, arter thee wast gone, a-sittin' an' doin' nothin' - not so much as a booke afore him.’

‘He's a deal o' work upon him just now, Mother,’ said Seth, ‘and I think he's a bit troubled in his mind. Don't you take notice of it, because it hurts him when you do. Be as kind to him as you can, Mother, and don't say anything to vex him.’

‘Eh, what dost talk o' my vexin' him? An' what am I like to be but kind? I'll ma' him a kettle-cake for breakfast i' the mornin'.’

Adam, meanwhile, was reading Dinah's letter by the light of his dip candle.

DEAR BROTHER SETH - Your letter lay three days beyond my knowing of it at the post, for I had not money enough by me to pay the carriage, this being a time of great need and sickness here, with the

rains that have fallen, as if the windows of heaven were opened again; and to lay by money, from day to day, in such a time, when there are so many in present need of all things, would be a want of trust like the laying up of the manna. I speak of this, because I would not have you think me slow to answer, or that I had small joy in your rejoicing at the worldly good that has befallen your brother Adam. The honour and love you bear him is nothing but meet, for God has given him great gifts, and he uses them as the patriarch Joseph did, who, when he was exalted to a place of power and trust, yet yearned with tenderness towards his parent and his younger brother.

'My heart is knit to your aged mother since it was granted me to be near her in the day of trouble. Speak to her of me, and tell her I often bear her in my thoughts at evening time, when I am sitting in the dim light as I did with her, and we held one another's hands, and I spoke the words of comfort that were given to me. Ah, that is a blessed time, isn't it, Seth, when the outward light is fading, and the body is a little wearied with its work and its labour. Then the inward light shines the brighter, and we have a deeper sense of resting on the Divine strength. I sit on my chair in the dark room and close my eyes, and it is as if I was out of the body and could feel no want for evermore. For then, the very hardship, and the sorrow, and the blindness, and the sin I have beheld and been ready to weep over - yea, all the anguish of the children of men, which sometimes wraps me round like sudden darkness - I can bear with a willing pain, as if I was sharing the Redeemer's cross. For I feel it, I feel it - infinite love is suffering too - yea, in the fulness of knowledge it suffers, it yearns, it mourns; and that is a blind self-seeking which wants to be freed from the sorrow wherewith the whole creation groaneth and travaileth. Surely it is not true blessedness to be free from sorrow, while there is sorrow and sin in the world: sorrow is then a part of love, and love does not seek to throw it off. It is not the spirit only that tells me this - I see it in the whole work and word of the Gospel. Is there not pleading in heaven? Is not the Man of Sorrows there in that crucified body wherewith he ascended? And is He not one with the Infinite Love itself - as our love is one with our sorrow?

'These thoughts have been much borne in on me of late, and I have seen with new clearness the meaning of those words, 'If any man love me, let him take up my cross.' I have heard this enlarged on as if it meant the troubles and persecutions we bring on ourselves by confessing Jesus. But surely that is a narrow thought. The true cross of the Redeemer was the sin and sorrow of this world - that was what lay heavy on his heart - and that is the cross we shall share with him, that is the cup we must drink of with him, if we would have any part in that Divine Love which is one with his sorrow.

'In my outward lot, which you ask about, I have all things and abound. I have had constant work in the mill, though some of the other hands have been turned off for a time, and my body is greatly strengthened, so that I feel little weariness after long walking and speaking. What you say about staying in your own country with your mother and brother shows me that you have a true guidance; your lot is appointed there by a clear showing, and to seek a greater blessing elsewhere would be like laying a false offering on the altar and expecting the fire from heaven to kindle it. My work and my joy are here among the hills, and I sometimes think I cling too much to my life among the people here, and should be rebellious if I was called away.

'I was thankful for your tidings about the dear friends at the Hall Farm, for though I sent them a letter, by my aunt's desire, after I came back from my sojourn among them, I have had no word from them. My aunt has not the pen of a ready writer, and the work of the house is sufficient for the day, for she is weak in body. My heart cleaves to her and her children as the nearest of all to me in the flesh - yea, and to all in that house. I am carried away to them continually in my sleep, and often in the midst of work, and even of speech, the thought of them is borne in on me as if they were in need and trouble, which yet is dark to me. There may be some leading here; but I wait to be taught. You say they are all well.

'We shall see each other again in the body, I trust, though, it may be, not for a long while; for the brethren and sisters at Leeds are desirous to have me for a short space among them, when I have a door opened me again to leave Snowfield.

'Farewell, dear brother - and yet not farewell. For those children of God whom it has been granted to see each other face to face, and to hold communion together, and to feel the same spirit working in both can never more be sundered though the hills may lie between. For their souls are enlarged for evermore by that union, and they bear one another about in their thoughts continually as it were a new strength. - Your faithful Sister and fellow-worker in Christ,

'DINAH MORRIS.'

'I have not skill to write the words so small as you do and my pen moves slow. And so I am straitened, and say but little of what is in my mind. Greet your mother for me with a kiss. She asked me to kiss her twice when we parted.'

Adam had refolded the letter, and was sitting meditatively with his head resting on his arm at the head of the bed, when Seth came upstairs.

‘Hast read the letter?’ said Seth.

‘Yes,’ said Adam. ‘I don't know what I should ha' thought of her and her letter if I'd never seen her: I daresay I should ha' thought a preaching woman hateful. But she's one as makes everything seem right she says and does, and I seemed to see her and hear her speaking when I read the letter. It's wonderful how I remember her looks and her voice. She'd make thee rare and happy, Seth; she's just the woman for thee.’

‘It's no use thinking o' that,’ said Seth, despondingly. ‘She spoke so firm, and she's not the woman to say one thing and mean another.’

‘Nay, but her feelings may grow different. A woman may get to love by degrees - the best fire dosna flare up the soonest. I'd have thee go and see her by and by: I'd make it convenient for thee to be away three or four days, and it 'ud be no walk for thee - only between twenty and thirty mile.’

‘I should like to see her again, whether or no, if she wouldna be displeased with me for going,’ said Seth.

‘She'll be none displeased,’ said Adam emphatically, getting up and throwing off his coat. ‘It might be a great happiness to us all if she'd have thee, for mother took to her so wonderful and seemed so contented to be with her.’

‘Aye,’ said Seth, rather timidly, ‘and Dinah's fond o' Hetty too; she thinks a deal about her.’

Adam made no reply to that, and no other word but ‘good-night’ passed between them.