Chapter XXXI - In Hetty's Bed-Chamber

IT was no longer light enough to go to bed without a candle, even in Mrs. Poyser's early household, and Hetty carried one with her as she went up at last to her bedroom soon after Adam was gone, and bolted the door behind her.

Now she would read her letter. It must - it must have comfort in it. How was Adam to know the truth? It was always likely he should say what he did say.

She set down the candle and took out the letter. It had a faint scent of roses, which made her feel as if Arthur were close to her. She put it to her lips, and a rush of remembered sensations for a moment or two swept away all fear. But her heart began to flutter strangely, and her hands to tremble as she broke the seal. She read slowly; it was not easy for her to read a gentleman's handwriting, though Arthur had taken pains to write plainly.

'DEAREST HETTY - I have spoken truly when I have said that I loved you, and I shall never forget our love. I shall be your true friend as long as life lasts, and I hope to prove this to you in many ways. If I say anything to pain you in this letter, do not believe it is for want of love and tenderness towards you, for there is nothing I would not do for you, if I knew it to be really for your happiness. I cannot bear to think of my little Hetty shedding tears when I am not there to kiss them away; and if I followed only my own inclinations, I should be with her at this moment instead of writing. It is very hard for me to part from her - harder still for me to write words which may seem unkind, though they spring from the truest kindness.

'Dear, dear Hetty, sweet as our love has been to me, sweet as it would be to me for you to love me always, I feel that it would have been better for us both if we had never had that happiness, and that it is my duty to ask you to love me and care for me as little as you can. The fault has all been mine, for though I have been unable to resist the longing to be near you, I have felt all the while that your affection for me might cause you grief. I ought to have resisted my feelings. I should have done so, if I had been a better fellow than I am; but now, since the past cannot be altered, I am bound to save you from any evil that I have power to prevent. And I feel it would be a great evil for you if your affections continued so fixed on me that you could think of no other man who might be able to make you happier by his love than I ever can, and if you continued to look towards something in the future which cannot possibly happen. For, dear Hetty, if I were to do what you one day spoke of, and make you my wife, I should do what you yourself would come to feel was for your misery instead of your welfare. I know you can never be happy except by marrying a man in

your own station; and if I were to marry you now, I should only be adding to any wrong I have done, besides offending against my duty in the other relations of life. You know nothing, dear Hetty, of the world in which I must always live, and you would soon begin to dislike me, because there would be so little in which we should be alike.

'And since I cannot marry you, we must part - we must try not to feel like lovers any more. I am miserable while I say this, but nothing else can be. Be angry with me, my sweet one, I deserve it; but do not believe that I shall not always care for you - always be grateful to you - always remember my Hetty; and if any trouble should come that we do not now foresee, trust in me to do everything that lies in my power.

'I have told you where you are to direct a letter to, if you want to write, but I put it down below lest you should have forgotten. Do not write unless there is something I can really do for you; for, dear Hetty, we must try to think of each other as little as we can. Forgive me, and try to forget everything about me, except that I shall be, as long as I live, your affectionate friend,

'ARTHUR DONNITHORNE.'

Slowly Hetty had read this letter; and when she looked up from it there was the reflection of a blanched face in the old dim glass - a white marble face with rounded childish forms, but with something sadder than a child's pain in it. Hetty did not see the face - she saw nothing - she only felt that she was cold and sick and trembling. The letter shook and rustled in her hand. She laid it down. It was a horrible sensation - this cold and trembling. It swept away the very ideas that produced it, and Hetty got up to reach a warm cloak from her clothes-press, wrapped it round her, and sat as if she were thinking of nothing but getting warm. Presently she took up the letter with a firmer hand, and began to read it through again. The tears came this time - great rushing tears that blinded her and blotched the paper. She felt nothing but that Arthur was cruel - cruel to write so, cruel not to marry her. Reasons why he could not marry her had no existence for her mind; how could she believe in any misery that could come to her from the fulfilment of all she had been longing for and dreaming of? She had not the ideas that could make up the notion of that misery.

As she threw down the letter again, she caught sight of her face in the glass; it was reddened now, and wet with tears; it was almost like a companion that she might complain to - that would pity her. She leaned forward on her elbows, and looked into those dark overflooding eyes and at the quivering mouth, and saw how the tears came thicker and thicker, and how the mouth became convulsed with sobs.

The shattering of all her little dream-world, the crushing blow on her new-born passion, afflicted her pleasure-craving nature with an overpowering pain that annihilated all impulse to resistance, and suspended her anger. She sat sobbing till the candle went out, and then, wearied, aching, stupefied with crying, threw herself on the bed without undressing and went to sleep.

There was a feeble dawn in the room when Hetty awoke, a little after four o'clock, with a sense of dull misery, the cause of which broke upon her gradually as she began to discern the objects round her in the dim light. And then came the frightening thought that she had to conceal her misery as well as to bear it, in this dreary daylight that was coming. She could lie no longer. She got up and went towards the table: there lay the letter. She opened her treasure-drawer: there lay the ear-rings and the locket - the signs of all her short happiness - the signs of the lifelong dreariness that was to follow it. Looking at the little trinkets which she had once eyed and fingered so fondly as the earnest of her future paradise of finery, she lived back in the moments when they had been given to her with such tender caresses, such strangely pretty words, such glowing looks, which filled her with a bewildering delicious surprise - they were so much sweeter than she had thought anything could be. And the Arthur who had spoken to her and looked at her in this way, who was present with her now - whose arm she felt round her, his cheek against hers, his very breath upon her - was the cruel, cruel Arthur who had written that letter, that letter which she snatched and crushed and then opened again, that she might read it once more. The half-benumbed mental condition which was the effect of the last night's violent crying made it necessary to her to look again and see if her wretched thoughts were actually true - if the letter was really so cruel. She had to hold it close to the window, else she could not have read it by the faint light. Yes! It was worse - it was more cruel. She crushed it up again in anger. She hated the writer of that letter - hated him for the very reason that she hung upon him with all her love - all the girlish passion and vanity that made up her love.

She had no tears this morning. She had wept them all away last night, and now she felt that dry-eyed morning misery, which is worse than the first shock because it has the future in it as well as the present. Every morning to come, as far as her imagination could stretch, she would have to get up and feel that the day would have no joy for her. For there is no despair so absolute as that which comes with the first moments of our first great sorrow, when we have not yet known what it is to have suffered and be healed, to have despaired and to have recovered hope. As Hetty began languidly to take off the clothes she had worn all the night, that she might wash herself and brush her hair, she had a sickening sense that her life would go on in this way. She should always be doing things she had no pleasure in, getting up

to the old tasks of work, seeing people she cared nothing about, going to church, and to Treddleston, and to tea with Mrs. Best, and carrying no happy thought with her. For her short poisonous delights had spoiled for ever all the little joys that had once made the sweetness of her life - the new frock ready for Treddleston Fair, the party at Mr Britton's at Broxton wake, the beaux that she would say 'No' to for a long while, and the prospect of the wedding that was to come at last when she would have a silk gown and a great many clothes all at once. These things were all flat and dreary to her now; everything would be a weariness, and she would carry about for ever a hopeless thirst and longing.

She paused in the midst of her languid undressing and leaned against the dark old clothes-press. Her neck and arms were bare, her hair hung down in delicate rings - and they were just as beautiful as they were that night two months ago, when she walked up and down this bed-chamber glowing with vanity and hope. She was not thinking of her neck and arms now; even her own beauty was indifferent to her. Her eyes wandered sadly over the dull old chamber, and then looked out vacantly towards the growing dawn. Did a remembrance of Dinah come across her mind? Of her foreboding words, which had made her angry? Of Dinah's affectionate entreaty to think of her as a friend in trouble? No, the impression had been too slight to recur. Any affection or comfort Dinah could have given her would have been as indifferent to Hetty this morning as everything else was except her bruised passion. She was only thinking she could never stay here and go on with the old life - she could better bear something quite new than sinking back into the old everyday round. She would like to run away that very morning, and never see any of the old faces again. But Hetty's was not a nature to face difficulties - to dare to loose her hold on the familiar and rush blindly on some unknown condition. Hers was a luxurious and vain nature - not a passionate one - and if she were ever to take any violent measure, she must be urged to it by the desperation of terror. There was not much room for her thoughts to travel in the narrow circle of her imagination, and she soon fixed on the one thing she would do to get away from her old life: she would ask her uncle to let her go to be a lady's maid. Miss Lydia's maid would help her to get a situation, if she krew Hetty had her uncle's leave.

When she had thought of this, she fastened up her hair and began to wash: it seemed more possible to her to go downstairs and try to behave as usual. She would ask her uncle this very day. On Hetty's blooming health it would take a great deal of such mental suffering as hers to leave any deep impress; and when she was dressed as neatly as usual in her working-dress, with her hair tucked up under her little cap, an indifferent observer would have been more struck with the young roundness of her cheek and neck and the darkness of her eyes

and eyelashes than with any signs of sadness about her. But when she took up the crushed letter and put it in her drawer, that she might lock it out of sight, hard smarting tears, having no relief in them as the great drops had that fell last night, forced their way into her eyes. She wiped them away quickly: she must not cry in the day-time. Nobody should find out how miserable she was, nobody should know she was disappointed about anything; and the thought that the eyes of her aunt and uncle would be upon her gave her the self-command which often accompanies a great dread. For Hetty looked out from her secret misery towards the possibility of their ever knowing what had happened, as the sick and weary prisoner might think of the possible pillory. They would think her conduct shameful, and shame was torture. That was poor little Hetty's conscience.

So she locked up her drawer and went away to her early work.

In the evening, when Mr Poyser was smoking his pipe, and his good-nature was therefore at its superlative moment, Hetty seized the opportunity of her aunt's absence to say, 'Uncle, I wish you'd let me go for a lady's maid.'

Mr Poyser took the pipe from his mouth and looked at Hetty in mild surprise for some moments. She was sewing, and went on with her work industriously.

'Why, what's put that into your head, my wench?' he said at last, after he had given one conservative puff.

'I should like it - I should like it better than farm-work.'

'Nay, nay; you fancy so because you donna know it, my wench. It wouldn't be half so good for your health, nor for your luck i' life. I'd like you to stay wi' us till you've got a good husband: you're my own niece, and I wouldn't have you go to service, though it was a gentleman's house, as long as I've got a home for you.'

Mr Poyser paused, and puffed away at his pipe.

'I like the needlework,' said Hetty, 'and I should get good wages.'

'Has your aunt been a bit sharp wi' you?' said Mr Poyser, not noticing Hetty's further argument. 'You mustna mind that, my wench - she does it for your good. She wishes you well; an' there isn't many aunts as are no kin to you 'ud ha' done by you as she has.'

'No, it isn't my aunt,' said Hetty, 'but I should like the work better.'

‘It was all very well for you to learn the work a bit - an' I gev my consent to that fast enough, sin' Mrs. Pomfret was willing to teach you. For if anything was t' happen, it's well to know how to turn your hand to different sorts o' things. But I niver meant you to go to service, my wench; my family's ate their own bread and cheese as fur back as anybody knows, hanna they, Father? You wouldna like your grand-child to take wage?’

‘Na-a-y,’ said old Martin, with an elongation of the word, meant to make it bitter as well as negative, while he leaned forward and looked down on the floor. ‘But the wench takes arter her mother. I'd hard work t' hould HER in, an' she married i' spite o' me - a feller wi' on'y two head o' stock when there should ha' been ten on's farm - she might well die o' th' inflammation afore she war thirty.’

It was seldom the old man made so long a speech, but his son's question had fallen like a bit of dry fuel on the embers of a long unextinguished resentment, which had always made the grandfather more indifferent to Hetty than to his son's children. Her mother's fortune had been spent by that good-for-nought Sorrel, and Hetty had Sorrel's blood in her veins.

‘Poor thing, poor thing!’ said Martin the younger, who was sorry to have provoked this retrospective harshness. ‘She'd but bad luck. But Hetty's got as good a chance o' getting a solid, sober husband as any gell i' this country.’

After throwing out this pregnant hint, Mr Poyser recurred to his pipe and his silence, looking at Hetty to see if she did not give some sign of having renounced her ill-advised wish. But instead of that, Hetty, in spite of herself, began to cry, half out of ill temper at the denial, half out of the day's repressed sadness.

‘Hegh, hegh!’ said Mr Poyser, meaning to check her playfully, ‘don't let's have any crying. Crying's for them as ha' got no home, not for them as want to get rid o' one. What dost think?’ he continued to his wife, who now came back into the house-place, knitting with fierce rapidity, as if that movement were a necessary function, like the twittering of a crab's antennae.

‘Think? Why, I think we shall have the fowl stole before we are much older, wi' that gell forgetting to lock the pens up o' nights. What's the matter now, Hetty? What are you crying at?’

‘Why, she's been wanting to go for a lady's maid,’ said Mr Poyser. ‘I tell her we can do better for her nor that.’

‘I thought she'd got some maggot in her head, she's gone about wi' her mouth buttoned up so all day. It's all wi' going so among them servants at the Chase, as we war fools for letting her. She thinks it 'ud be a finer life than being wi' them as are akin to her and ha' brought her up sin' she war no bigger nor Marty. She thinks there's nothing belongs to being a lady's maid but wearing finer clothes nor she was born to, I'll be bound. It's what rag she can get to stick on her as she's thinking on from morning till night, as I often ask her if she wouldn't like to be the mawkin i' the field, for then she'd be made o' rags inside and out. I'll never gi' my consent to her going for a lady's maid, while she's got good friends to take care on her till she's married to somebody better nor one o' them valets, as is neither a common man nor a gentleman, an' must live on the fat o' the land, an's like enough to stick his hands under his coat-tails and expect his wife to work for him.’

‘Aye, aye,’ said Mr Poyser, ‘we must have a better husband for her nor that, and there's better at hand. Come, my wench, give over crying and get to bed. I'll do better for you nor letting you go for a lady's maid. Let's hear no more on't.’

When Hetty was gone upstairs he said, ‘I canna make it out as she should want to go away, for I thought she'd got a mind t' Adam Bede. She's looked like it o' late.’

‘Eh, there's no knowing what she's got a liking to, for things take no more hold on her than if she was a dried pea. I believe that gell, Molly - as is aggravatin' enough, for the matter o' that - but I believe she'd care more about leaving us and the children, for all she's been here but a year come Michaelmas, nor Hetty would. But she's got this notion o' being a lady's maid wi' going among them servants - we might ha' known what it 'ud lead to when we let her go to learn the fine work. But I'll put a stop to it pretty quick.’

‘Thee'dst be sorry to part wi' her, if it wasn't for her good,’ said Mr Poyser. ‘She's useful to thee i' the work.’

‘Sorry? Yes, I'm fonder on her nor she deserves - a little hard-hearted hussy, wanting to leave us i' that way. I can't ha' had her about me these seven year, I reckon, and done for her, and taught her everything wi'out caring about her. An' here I'm having linen spun, an' thinking all the while it'll make sheeting and table-clothing for her when she's married, an' she'll live i' the parish wi' us, and never go out of our sights - like a fool as I am for thinking aught about her, as is no better nor a cherry wi' a hard stone inside it.’

‘Nay, nay, thee mustna make much of a trifle,’ said Mr Poyser, soothingly. ‘She's fond on us, I'll be bound; but she's young, an' gets

things in her head as she can't rightly give account on. Them young fillies 'ull run away often wi'-ou; knowing why.'

Her uncle's answers, however, had had another effect on Hetty besides that of disappointing her and making her cry. She knew quite well whom he had in his mind in his allusions to marriage, and to a sober, solid husband; and when she was in her bedroom again, the possibility of her marrying Adam presented itself to her in a new light. In a mind where no strong sympathies are at work, where there is no supreme sense of right to which the agitated nature can cling and steady itself to quiet endurance, one of the first results of sorrow is a desperate vague clutching after any deed that will change the actual condition. Poor Hetty's vision of consequences, at no time more than a narrow fantastic calculation of her own probable pleasures and pains, was now quite shut out by reckless irritation under present suffering, and she was ready for one of those convulsive, motiveless actions by which wretched men and women leap from a temporary sorrow into a lifelong misery.

Why should she not marry Adam? She did not care what she did, so that it made some change in her life. She felt confident that he would still want to marry her, and any further thought about Adam's happiness in the matter had never yet visited her.

'Strange!' perhaps you will say, 'this rush of impulse to-wards a course that might have seemed the most repugnant to her present state of mind, and in only the second night of her sadness!'

Yes, the actions of a little trivial soul like Hetty's, struggling amidst the serious sad destinies of a human being, are strange. So are the motions of a little vessel without ballast tossed about on a stormy sea. How pretty it looked with its parti-coloured sail in the sunlight, moored in the quiet bay!

'Let that man bear the loss who loosed it from its moorings.'

But that will not save the vessel - the pretty thing that might have been a lasting joy.