

Chapter XXXIV - The Betrothal

IT was a dry Sunday, and really a pleasant day for the 2d of November. There was no sunshine, but the clouds were high, and the wind was so still that the yellow leaves which fluttered down from the hedgerow elms must have fallen from pure decay. Nevertheless, Mrs. Poyser did not go to church, for she had taken a cold too serious to be neglected; only two winters ago she had been laid up for weeks with a cold; and since his wife did not go to church, Mr Poyser considered that on the whole it would be as well for him to stay away too and 'keep her company.' He could perhaps have given no precise form to the reasons that determined this conclusion, but it is well known to all experienced minds that our firmest convictions are often dependent on subtle impressions for which words are quite too coarse a medium. However it was, no one from the Poyser family went to church that afternoon except Hetty and the boys; yet Adam was bold enough to join them after church, and say that he would walk home with them, though all the way through the village he appeared to be chiefly occupied with Marty and Tommy, telling them about the squirrels in Binton Coppice, and promising to take them there some day. But when they came to the fields he said to the boys, 'Now, then, which is the stoutest walker? Him as gets to th' home-gate first shall be the first to go with me to Binton Coppice on the donkey. But Tommy must have the start up to the next stile, because he's the smallest.'

Adam had never behaved so much like a determined lover before. As soon as the boys had both set off, he looked down at Hetty and said, 'Won't you hang on my arm, Hetty?' in a pleading tone, as if he had already asked her and she had refused. Hetty looked up at him smilingly and put her round arm through his in a moment. It was nothing to her, putting her arm through Adam's, but she knew he cared a great deal about having her arm through his, and she wished him to care. Her heart beat no faster, and she looked at the half-bare hedgerows and the ploughed field with the same sense of oppressive dulness as before. But Adam scarcely felt that he was walking. He thought Hetty must know that he was pressing her arm a little - a very little. Words rushed to his lips that he dared not utter - that he had made up his mind not to utter yet - and so he was silent for the length of that field. The calm patience with which he had once waited for Hetty's love, content only with her presence and the thought of the future, had forsaken him since that terrible shock nearly three months ago. The agitations of jealousy had given a new restlessness to his passion - had made fear and uncertainty too hard almost to bear. But though he might not speak to Hetty of his love, he would tell her about his new prospects and see if she would be pleased. So when he was enough master of himself to talk, he said, 'I'm going to tell your uncle some news that'll surprise him, Hetty; and I think he'll be glad to hear it too.'

'What's that?' Hetty said indifferently.

'Why, Mr Burge has offered me a share in his business, and I'm going to take it.'

There was a change in Hetty's face, certainly not produced by any agreeable impression from this news. In fact she felt a momentary annoyance and alarm, for she had so often heard it hinted by her uncle that Adam might have Mary Burge and a share in the business any day, if he liked, that she associated the two objects now, and the thought immediately occurred that perhaps Adam had given her up because of what had happened lately, and had turned towards Mary Burge. With that thought, and before she had time to remember any reasons why it could not be true, came a new sense of forsakenness and disappointment. The one thing - the one person - her mind had rested on in its dull weariness, had slipped away from her, and peevish misery filled her eyes with tears. She was looking on the ground, but Adam saw her face, saw the tears, and before he had finished saying, 'Hetty, dear Hetty, what are you crying for?' his eager rapid thought had flown through all the causes conceivable to him, and had at last alighted on half the true one. Hetty thought he was going to marry Mary Burge - she didn't like him to marry - perhaps she didn't like him to marry any one but herself? All caution was swept away - all reason for it was gone, and Adam could feel nothing but trembling joy. He leaned towards her and took her hand, as he said:

'I could afford to be married now, Hetty - I could make a wife comfortable; but I shall never want to be married if you won't have me.'

Hetty looked up at him and smiled through her tears, as she had done to Arthur that first evening in the wood, when she had thought he was not coming, and yet he came. It was a feebler relief, a feebler triumph she felt now, but the great dark eyes and the sweet lips were as beautiful as ever, perhaps more beautiful, for there was a more luxuriant womanliness about Hetty of late. Adam could hardly believe in the happiness of that moment. His right hand held her left, and he pressed her arm close against his heart as he leaned down towards her.

'Do you really love me, Hetty? Will you be my own wife, to love and take care of as long as I live?'

Hetty did not speak, but Adam's face was very close to hers, and she put up her round cheek against his, like a kitten. She wanted to be caressed - she wanted to feel as if Arthur were with her again.

Adam cared for no words after that, and they hardly spoke through the rest of the walk. He only said, 'I may tell your uncle and aunt, mayn't I, Hetty?' and she said, 'Yes.'

The red fire-light on the hearth at the Hall Farm shone on joyful faces that evening, when Hetty was gone upstairs and Adam took the opportunity of telling Mr and Mrs. Poyser and the grandfather that he saw his way to maintaining a wife now, and that Hetty had consented to have him.

'I hope you have no objections against me for her husband,' said Adam; 'I'm a poor man as yet, but she shall want nothing as I can work for.'

'Objections?' said Mr Poyser, while the grandfather leaned forward and brought out his long 'Nay, nay.' 'What objections can we ha' to you, lad? Never mind your being poorish as yet; there's money in your head-piece as there's money i' the sown field, but it must ha' time. You'n got enough to begin on, and we can do a deal tow'rt the bit o' furniture you'll want. Thee'st got feathers and linen to spare - plenty, eh?'

This question was of course addressed to Mrs. Poyser, who was wrapped up in a warm shawl and was too hoarse to speak with her usual facility. At first she only nodded emphatically, but she was presently unable to resist the temptation to be more explicit.

'It ud be a poor tale if I hadna feathers and linen,' she said, hoarsely, 'when I never sell a fowl but what's plucked, and the wheel's a-going every day o' the week.'

'Come, my wench,' said Mr Poyser, when Hetty came down, 'come and kiss us, and let us wish you luck.'

Hetty went very quietly and kissed the big good-natured man.

'There!' he said, patting her on the back, 'go and kiss your aunt and your grandfather. I'm as wishful t' have you settled well as if you was my own daughter; and so's your aunt, I'll be bound, for she's done by you this seven 'ear, Hetty, as if you'd been her own. Come, come, now,' he went on, becoming jocose, as soon as Hetty had kissed her aunt and the old man, 'Adam wants a kiss too, I'll warrant, and he's a right to one now.'

Hetty turned away, smiling, towards her empty chair.

'Come, Adam, then, take one,' persisted Mr Poyser, 'else y' arena half a man.'

Adam got up, blushing like a small maiden - great strong fellow as he was - and, putting his arm round Hetty stooped down and gently kissed her lips.

It was a pretty scene in the red fire-light; for there were no candles - why should there be, when the fire was so bright and was reflected from all the pewter and the polished oak? No one wanted to work on a Sunday evening. Even Hetty felt something like contentment in the midst of all this love. Adam's attachment to her, Adam's caress, stirred no passion in her, were no longer enough to satisfy her vanity, but they were the best her life offered her now - they promised her some change.

There was a great deal of discussion before Adam went away, about the possibility of his finding a house that would do for him to settle in. No house was empty except the one next to Will Maskery's in the village, and that was too small for Adam now. Mr Poyser insisted that the best plan would be for Seth and his mother to move and leave Adam in the old home, which might be enlarged after a while, for there was plenty of space in the woodyard and garden; but Adam objected to turning his mother out.

'Well, well,' said Mr Poyser at last, 'we needna fix everything to-night. We must take time to consider. You canna think o' getting married afore Easter. I'm not for long courtships, but there must be a bit o' time to make things comfortable.'

'Aye, to be sure,' said Mrs. Poyser, in a hoarse whisper; 'Christian folks can't be married like cuckoos, I reckon.'

'I'm a bit daunted, though,' said Mr Poyser, 'when I think as we may have notice to quit, and belike be forced to take a farm twenty mile off.'

'Eh,' said the old man, staring at the floor and lifting his hands up and down, while his arms rested on the elbows of his chair, 'it's a poor tale if I mun leave th' ould spot an be buried in a strange parish. An' you'll happen ha' double rates to pay,' he added, looking up at his son.

'Well, thee mustna fret beforehand, father,' said Martin the younger. 'Happen the captain 'ull come home and make our peace wi' th' old squire. I build upo' that, for I know the captain 'll see folks righted if he can.'