Chapter XLIV - Arthur's Return

When Arthur Donnithorne landed at Liverpool and read the letter from his Aunt Lydia, briefly announcing his grand-father's death, his first feeling was, 'Poor Grandfather! I wish I could have got to him to be with him when he died. He might have felt or wished something at the last that I shall never know now. It was a lonely death.'

It is impossible to say that his grief was deeper than that. Pity and softened memory took place of the old antagonism, and in his busy thoughts about the future, as the chaise carried him rapidly along towards the home where he was now to be master, there was a continually recurring effort to remember anything by which he could show a regard for his grandfather's wishes, without counteracting his own cherished aims for the good of the tenants and the estate. But it is not in human nature - only in human pretence - for a young man like Arthur, with a fine constitution and fine spirits, thinking well of himself, believing that others think well of him, and having a very ardent intention to give them more and more reason for that good opinion - it is not possible for such a young man, just coming into a splendid estate through the death of a very old man whom he was not fond of, to feel anything very different from exultant joy. Now his real life was beginning; now he would have room and opportunity for action, and he would use them. He would show the Loamshire people what a fine country gentleman was; he would not exchange that career for any other under the sun. He felt himself riding over the hills in the breezy autumn days, looking after favourite plans of drainage and enclosure; then admired on sombre mornings as the best rider on the best horse in the hunt; spoken well of on market-days as a first-rate landlord; by and by making speeches at election dinners, and showing a wonderful knowledge of agriculture; the patron of new ploughs and drills, the severe upbraider of negligent landowners, and withal a jolly fellow that everybody must like - happy faces greeting him everywhere on his own estate, and the neighbouring families on the best terms with him. The Irwines should dine with him every week, and have their own carriage to come in, for in some very delicate way that Arthur would devise, the lay-impropriator of the Hayslope tithes would insist on paying a couple of hundreds more to the vicar; and his aunt should be as comfortable as possible, and go on living at the Chase, if she liked, in spite of her old-maidish ways - at least until he was married, and that event lay in the indistinct background, for Arthur had not yet seen the woman who would play the lady-wife to the first-rate country gentleman.

These were Arthur's chief thoughts, so far as a man's thoughts through hours of travelling can be compressed into a few sentences, which are only like the list of names telling you what are the scenes in a long long panorama full of colour, of detail, and of life. The happy

faces Arthur saw greeting him were not pale abstractions, but real ruddy faces, long familiar to him: Martin Poyser was there - the whole Poyser family.

What - Hetty?

Yes; for Arthur was at ease about Hetty - not quite at ease about the past, for a certain burning of the ears would come whenever he thought of the scenes with Adam last August, but at ease about her present lot. Mr Irwine, who had been a regular correspondent, telling him all the news about the old places and people, had sent him word nearly three months ago that Adam Bede was not to marry Mary Burge, as he had thought, but pretty Hetty Sorrel. Martin Poyser and Adam himself had both told Mr Irwine all about it - that Adam had been deeply in love with Hetty these two years, and that now it was agreed they were to be married in March. That stalwart rogue Adam was more susceptible than the rector had thought; it was really quite an idyllic love affair; and if it had not been too long to tell in a letter, he would have liked to describe to Arthur the blushing looks and the simple strong words with which the fine honest fellow told his secret. He knew Arthur would like to hear that Adam had this sort of happiness in prospect.

Yes, indeed! Arthur felt there was not air enough in the room to satisfy his renovated life, when he had read that passage in the letter. He threw up the windows, he rushed out of doors into the December air, and greeted every one who spoke to him with an eager gaiety, as if there had been news of a fresh Nelson victory. For the first time that day since he had come to Windsor, he was in true boyish spirits. The load that had been pressing upon him was gone, the haunting fear had vanished. He thought he could conquer his bitterness towards Adam now - could offer him his hand, and ask to be his friend again, in spite of that painful memory which would still make his ears burn. He had been knocked down, and he had been forced to tell a lie: such things make a scar, do what we will. But if Adam were the same again as in the old days, Arthur wished to be the same too, and to have Adam mixed up with his business and his future, as he had always desired before the accursed meeting in August. Nay, he would do a great deal more for Adam than he should otherwise have done, when he came into the estate; Hetty's husband had a special claim on him - Hetty herself should feel that any pain she had suffered through Arthur in the past was compensated to her a hundredfold. For really she could not have felt much, since she had so soon made up her mind to marry Adam.

You perceive clearly what sort of picture Adam and Hetty made in the panorama of Arthur's thoughts on his journey homeward. It was March now; they were soon to be married: perhaps they were already

married. And now it was actually in his power to do a great deal for them. Sweet - sweet little Hetty! The little puss hadn't cared for him half as much as he cared for her; for he was a great fool about her still - was almost afraid of seeing her - indeed, had not cared much to look at any other woman since he parted from her. That little figure coming towards him in the Grove, those dark-fringed childish eyes, the lovely lips put up to kiss him - that picture had got no fainter with the lapse of months. And she would look just the same. It was impossible to think how he could meet her: he should certainly tremble. Strange, how long this sort of influence lasts, for he was certainly not in love with Hetty now. He had been earnestly desiring, for months, that she should marry Adam, and there was nothing that contributed more to his happiness in these moments than the thought of their marriage. It was the exaggerating effect of imagination that made his heart still beat a little more quickly at the thought of her. When he saw the little thing again as she really was, as Adam's wife, at work quite prosaically in her new home, he should perhaps wonder at the possibility of his past feelings. Thank heaven it had turned out so well! He should have plenty of affairs and interests to fill his life now, and not be in danger of playing the fool again.

Pleasant the crack of the post-boy's whip! Pleasant the sense of being hurried along in swift ease through English scenes, so like those round his own home, only not quite so charming. Here was a market-town - very much like Treddleston - where the arms of the neighbouring lord of the manor were borne on the sign of the principal inn; then mere fields and hedges, their vicinity to a market-town carrying an agreeable suggestion of high rent, till the land began to assume a trimmer look, the woods were more frequent, and at length a white or red mansion looked down from a moderate eminence, or allowed him to be aware of its parapet and chimneys among the dense-looking masses of oaks and elms - masses reddened now with early buds. And close at hand came the village: the small church, with its red-tiled roof, looking humble even among the faded half-timbered houses; the old green gravestones with nettles round them; nothing fresh and bright but the children, opening round eyes at the swift post-chaise; nothing noisy and busy but the gaping curs of mysterious pedigree. What a much prettier village Hayslope was! And it should not be neglected like this place: vigorous repairs should go on everywhere among farm-buildings and cottages, and travellers in post-chaises, coming along the Rosseter road, should do nothing but admire as they went. And Adam Bede should superintend all the repairs, for he had a share in Burge's business now, and, if he liked, Arthur would put some money into the concern and buy the old man out in another year or two. That was an ugly fault in Arthur's life, that affair last summer, but the future should make amends. Many men would have retained a feeling of vindictiveness towards Adam, but he would not - he would resolutely overcome all littleness of that kind, for

he had certainly been very much in the wrong; and though Adam had been harsh and violent, and had thrust on him a painful dilemma, the poor fellow was in love, and had real provocation. No, Arthur had not an evil feeling in his mind towards any human being: he was happy, and would make every one else happy that came within his reach.

And here was dear old Hayslope at last, sleeping, on the hill, like a quiet old place as it was, in the late afternoon sunlight, and opposite to it the great shoulders of the Binton Hills, below them the purplish blackness of the hanging woods, and at last the pale front of the Abbey, looking out from among the oaks of the Chase, as if anxious for the heir's return. 'Poor Grandfather! And he lies dead there. He was a young fellow once, coming into the estate and making his plans. So the world goes round! Aunt Lydia must feel very desolate, poor thing; but she shall be indulged as much as she indulges her fat Fido.'

The wheels of Arthur's chaise had been anxiously listened for at the Chase, for to-day was Friday, and the funeral had already been deferred two days. Before it drew up on the gravel of the courtyard, all the servants in the house were assembled to receive him with a grave, decent welcome, befitting a house of death. A month ago, perhaps, it would have been difficult for them to have maintained a suitable sadness in their faces, when Mr Arthur was come to take possession; but the hearts of the head-servants were heavy that day for another cause than the death of the old squire, and more than one of them was longing to be twenty miles away, as Mr Craig was, knowing what was to become of Hetty Sorrel - pretty Hetty Sorrel - whom they used to see every week. They had the partisanship of household servants who like their places, and were not inclined to go the full length of the severe indignation felt against him by the farming tenants, but rather to make excuses for him; nevertheless, the upper servants, who had been on terms of neighbourly intercourse with the Poysers for many years, could not help feeling that the longed-for event of the young squire's coming into the estate had been robbed of all its pleasantness.

To Arthur it was nothing surprising that the servants looked grave and sad: he himself was very much touched on seeing them all again, and feeling that he was in a new relation to them. It was that sort of pathetic emotion which has more pleasure than pain in it - which is perhaps one of the most delicious of all states to a good-natured man, conscious of the power to satisfy his good nature. His heart swelled agreeably as he said, 'Well, Mills, how is my aunt?'

But now Mr Bygate, the lawyer, who had been in the house ever since the death, came forward to give deferential greetings and answer all questions, and Arthur walked with him towards the library, where his Aunt Lydia was expecting him. Aunt Lydia was the only person in the

house who knew nothing about Hetty. Her sorrow as a maiden daughter was unmixed with any other thoughts than those of anxiety about funeral arrangements and her own future lot; and, after the manner of women, she mourned for the father who had made her life important, all the more because she had a secret sense that there was little mourning for him in other hearts.

But Arthur kissed her tearful face more tenderly than he had ever done in his life before.

'Dear Aunt,' he said affectionately, as he held her hand, 'YOUR loss is the greatest of all, but you must tell me how to try and make it up to you all the rest of your life.'

'It was so sudden and so dreadful, Arthur,' poor Miss Lydia began, pouring out her little plaints, and Arthur sat down to listen with impatient patience. When a pause came, he said:

'Now, Aunt, I'll leave you for a quarter of an hour just to go to my own room, and then I shall come and give full attention to everything.'

'My room is all ready for me, I suppose, Mills?' he said to the butler, who seemed to be lingering uneasily about the entrance-hall.

'Yes, sir, and there are letters for you; they are all laid on the writing-table in your dressing-room.'

On entering the small anteroom which was called a dressing-room, but which Arthur really used only to lounge and write in, he just cast his eyes on the writing-table, and saw that there were several letters and packets lying there; but he was in the uncomfortable dusty condition of a man who has had a long hurried journey, and he must really refresh himself by attending to his toilette a little, before he read his letters. Pym was there, making everything ready for him, and soon, with a delightful freshness about him, as if he were prepared to begin a new day, he went back into his dressing-room to open his letters. The level rays of the low afternoon sun entered directly at the window, and as Arthur seated himself in his velvet chair with their pleasant warmth upon him, he was conscious of that quiet well-being which perhaps you and I have felt on a sunny afternoon when, in our brightest youth and health, life has opened a new vista for us, and long to-morrows of activity have stretched before us like a lovely plain which there was no need for hurrying to look at, because it was all our own.

The top letter was placed with its address upwards: it was in Mr Irwine's handwriting, Arthur saw at once; and below the address was written, 'To be delivered as soon as he arrives.' Nothing could have

been less surprising to him than a letter from Mr Irwine at that moment: of course, there was something he wished Arthur to know earlier than it was possible for them to see each other. At such a time as that it was quite natural that Irwine should have something pressing to say. Arthur broke the seal with an agreeable anticipation of soon seeing the writer.

'I send this letter to meet you on your arrival, Arthur, because I may then be at Stoniton, whither I am called by the most painful duty it has ever been given me to perform, and it is right that you should know what I have to tell you without delay.

'I will not attempt to add by one word of reproach to the retribution that is now falling on you: any other words that I could write at this moment must be weak and unmeaning by the side of those in which I must tell you the simple fact.

'Hetty Sorrel is in prison, and will be tried on Friday for the crime of child-murder.'...

Arthur read no more. He started up from his chair and stood for a single minute with a sense of violent convulsion in his whole frame, as if the life were going out of him with horrible throbs; but the next minute he had rushed out of the room, still clutching the letter - he was hurrying along the corridor, and down the stairs into the hall. Mills was still there, but Arthur did not see him, as he passed like a hunted man across the hall and out along the gravel. The butler hurried out after him as fast as his elderly limbs could run: he guessed, he knew, where the young squire was going.

When Mills got to the stables, a horse was being saddled, and Arthur was forcing himself to read the remaining words of the letter. He thrust it into his pocket as the horse was led up to him, and at that moment caught sight of Mills' anxious face in front of him.

'Tell them I'm gone - gone to Stoniton,' he said in a muffled tone of agitation - sprang into the saddle, and set off at a gallop.