

## Chapter XLV - In The Prison

NEAR sunset that evening an elderly gentleman was standing with his back against the smaller entrance-door of Stoniton jail, saying a few last words to the departing chaplain. The chaplain walked away, but the elderly gentleman stood still, looking down on the pavement and stroking his chin with a ruminating air, when he was roused by a sweet clear woman's voice, saying, 'Can I get into the prison, if you please?'

He turned his head and looked fixedly at the speaker for a few moments without answering.

'I have seen you before,' he said at last. 'Do you remember preaching on the village green at Hayslope in Loamshire?'

'Yes, sir, surely. Are you the gentleman that stayed to listen on horseback?'

'Yes. Why do you want to go into the prison?'

'I want to go to Hetty Sorrel, the young woman who has been condemned to death - and to stay with her, if I may be permitted. Have you power in the prison, sir?'

'Yes; I am a magistrate, and can get admittance for you. But did you know this criminal, Hetty Sorrel?'

'Yes, we are kin. My own aunt married her uncle, Martin Poyser. But I was away at Leeds, and didn't know of this great trouble in time to get here before to-day. I entreat you, sir, for the love of our heavenly Father, to let me go to her and stay with her.'

'How did you know she was condemned to death, if you are only just come from Leeds?'

'I have seen my uncle since the trial, sir. He is gone back to his home now, and the poor sinner is forsaken of all. I beseech you to get leave for me to be with her.'

'What! Have you courage to stay all night in the prison? She is very sullen, and will scarcely make answer when she is spoken to.'

'Oh, sir, it may please God to open her heart still. Don't let us delay.'

'Come, then,' said the elderly gentleman, ringing and gaining admission, 'I know you have a key to unlock hearts.'

Dinah mechanically took off her bonnet and shawl as soon as they were within the prison court, from the habit she had of throwing them off when she preached or prayed, or visited the sick; and when they entered the jailer's room, she laid them down on a chair unthinkingly. There was no agitation visible in her, but a deep concentrated calmness, as if, even when she was speaking, her soul was in prayer reposing on an unseen support.

After speaking to the jailer, the magistrate turned to her and said, 'The turnkey will take you to the prisoner's cell and leave you there for the night, if you desire it, but you can't have a light during the night - it is contrary to rules. My name is Colonel Townley: if I can help you in anything, ask the jailer for my address and come to me. I take some interest in this Hetty Sorrel, for the sake of that fine fellow, Adam Bede. I happened to see him at Hayslope the same evening I heard you preach, and recognized him in court to-day, ill as he looked.'

'Ah, sir, can you tell me anything about him? Can you tell me where he lodges? For my poor uncle was too much weighed down with trouble to remember.'

'Close by here. I inquired all about him of Mr Irwine. He lodges over a tinman's shop, in the street on the right hand as you entered the prison. There is an old school-master with him. Now, good-bye: I wish you success.'

'Farewell, sir. I am grateful to you.'

As Dinah crossed the prison court with the turnkey, the solemn evening light seemed to make the walls higher than they were by day, and the sweet pale face in the cap was more than ever like a white flower on this background of gloom. The turnkey looked askance at her all the while, but never spoke. He somehow felt that the sound of his own rude voice would be grating just then. He struck a light as they entered the dark corridor leading to the condemned cell, and then said in his most civil tone, 'It'll be pretty nigh dark in the cell a'ready, but I can stop with my light a bit, if you like.'

'Nay, friend, thank you,' said Dinah. 'I wish to go in alone.'

'As you like,' said the jailer, turning the harsh key in the lock and opening the door wide enough to admit Dinah. A jet of light from his lantern fell on the opposite corner of the cell, where Hetty was sitting on her straw pallet with her face buried in her knees. It seemed as if she were asleep, and yet the grating of the lock would have been likely to waken her.

The door closed again, and the only light in the cell was that of the evening sky, through the small high grating - enough to discern human faces by. Dinah stood still for a minute, hesitating to speak because Hetty might be asleep, and looking at the motionless heap with a yearning heart. Then she said, softly, 'Hetty!'

There was a slight movement perceptible in Hetty's frame - a start such as might have been produced by a feeble electrical shock - but she did not look up. Dinah spoke again, in a tone made stronger by irrepressible emotion, 'Hetty...it's Dinah.'

Again there was a slight startled movement through Hetty's frame, and without uncovering her face, she raised her head a little, as if listening.

'Hetty...Dinah is come to you.'

After a moment's pause, Hetty lifted her head slowly and timidly from her knees and raised her eyes. The two pale faces were looking at each other: one with a wild hard despair in it, the other full of sad yearning love. Dinah unconsciously opened her arms and stretched them out.

'Don't you know me, Hetty? Don't you remember Dinah? Did you think I wouldn't come to you in trouble?'

Hetty kept her eyes fixed on Dinah's face - at first like an animal that gazes, and gazes, and keeps aloof.

'I'm come to be with you, Hetty - not to leave you - to stay with you - to be your sister to the last.'

Slowly, while Dinah was speaking, Hetty rose, took a step forward, and was clasped in Dinah's arms.

They stood so a long while, for neither of them felt the impulse to move apart again. Hetty, without any distinct thought of it, hung on this something that was come to clasp her now, while she was sinking helpless in a dark gulf; and Dinah felt a deep joy in the first sign that her love was welcomed by the wretched lost one. The light got fainter as they stood, and when at last they sat down on the straw pallet together, their faces had become indistinct.

Not a word was spoken. Dinah waited, hoping for a spontaneous word from Hetty, but she sat in the same dull despair, only clutching the hand that held hers and leaning her cheek against Dinah's. It was the human contact she clung to, but she was not the less sinking into the dark gulf.

Dinah began to doubt whether Hetty was conscious who it was that sat beside her. She thought suffering and fear might have driven the poor sinner out of her mind. But it was borne in upon her, as she afterwards said, that she must not hurry God's work: we are overhasty to speak - as if God did not manifest himself by our silent feeling, and make his love felt through ours. She did not know how long they sat in that way, but it got darker and darker, till there was only a pale patch of light on the opposite wall: all the rest was darkness. But she felt the Divine presence more and more - nay, as if she herself were a part of it, and it was the Divine pity that was beating in her heart and was willing the rescue of this helpless one. At last she was prompted to speak and find out how far Hetty was conscious of the present.

'Hetty,' she said gently, 'do you know who it is that sits by your side?'

'Yes,' Hetty answered slowly, 'it's Dinah.'

'And do you remember the time when we were at the Hall Farm together, and that night when I told you to be sure and think of me as a friend in trouble?'

'Yes,' said Hetty. Then, after a pause, she added, 'But you can do nothing for me. You can't make 'em do anything. They'll hang me o' Monday - it's Friday now.'

As Hetty said the last words, she clung closer to Dinah, shuddering.

'No, Hetty, I can't save you from that death. But isn't the suffering less hard when you have somebody with you, that feels for you - that you can speak to, and say what's in your heart?...Yes, Hetty: you lean on me: you are glad to have me with you.'

'You won't leave me, Dinah? You'll keep close to me?'

'No, Hetty, I won't leave you. I'll stay with you to the last....But, Hetty, there is some one else in this cell besides me, some one close to you.'

Hetty said, in a frightened whisper, 'Who?'

'Some one who has been with you through all your hours of sin and trouble - who has known every thought you have had - has seen where you went, where you lay down and rose up again, and all the deeds you have tried to hide in darkness. And on Monday, when I can't follow you - when my arms can't reach you - when death has parted us - He who is with us now, and knows all, will be with you then. It makes no difference - whether we live or die, we are in the presence of God.'

'Oh, Dinah, won't nobody do anything for me? Will they hang me for certain?...I wouldn't mind if they'd let me live.'

'My poor Hetty, death is very dreadful to you. I know it's dreadful. But if you had a friend to take care of you after death - in that other world - some one whose love is greater than mine - who can do everything?...If God our Father was your friend, and was willing to save you from sin and suffering, so as you should neither know wicked feelings nor pain again? If you could believe he loved you and would help you, as you believe I love you and will help you, it wouldn't be so hard to die on Monday, would it?'

'But I can't know anything about it,' Hetty said, with sullen sadness.

'Because, Hetty, you are shutting up your soul against him, by trying to hide the truth. God's love and mercy can overcome all things - our ignorance, and weakness, and all the burden of our past wickedness - all things but our wilful sin, sin that we cling to, and will not give up. You believe in my love and pity for you, Hetty, but if you had not let me come near you, if you wouldn't have looked at me or spoken to me, you'd have shut me out from helping you. I couldn't have made you feel my love; I couldn't have told you what I felt for you. Don't shut God's love out in that way, by clinging to sin....He can't bless you while you have one falsehood in your soul; his pardoning mercy can't reach you until you open your heart to him, and say, 'I have done this great wickedness; O God, save me, make me pure from sin.' While you cling to one sin and will not part with it, it must drag you down to misery after death, as it has dragged you to misery here in this world, my poor, poor Hetty. It is sin that brings dread, and darkness, and despair: there is light and blessedness for us as soon as we cast it off. God enters our souls then, and teaches us, and brings us strength and peace. Cast it off now, Hetty - now: confess the wickedness you have done - the sin you have been guilty of against your Heavenly Father. Let us kneel down together, for we are in the presence of God.'

Hetty obeyed Dinah's movement, and sank on her knees. They still held each other's hands, and there was long silence. Then Dinah said, 'Hetty, we are before God. He is waiting for you to tell the truth.'

Still there was silence. At last Hetty spoke, in a tone of beseeching -

'Dinah...help me...I can't feel anything like you...my heart is hard.'

Dinah held the clinging hand, and all her soul went forth in her voice:

'Jesus, thou present Saviour! Thou hast known the depths of all sorrow: thou hast entered that black darkness where God is not, and hast uttered the cry of the forsaken. Come Lord, and gather of the

fruits of thy travail and thy pleading. Stretch forth thy hand, thou who art mighty to save to the uttermost, and rescue this lost one. She is clothed round with thick darkness. The fetters of her sin are upon her, and she cannot stir to come to thee. She can only feel her heart is hard, and she is helpless. She cries to me, thy weak creature....Saviour! It is a blind cry to thee. Hear it! Pierce the darkness! Look upon her with thy face of love and sorrow that thou didst turn on him who denied thee, and melt her hard heart.

‘See, Lord, I bring her, as they of old brought the sick and helpless, and thou didst heal them. I bear her on my arms and carry her before thee. Fear and trembling have taken hold on her, but she trembles only at the pain and death of the body. Breathe upon her thy life-giving Spirit, and put a new fear within her - the fear of her sin. Make her dread to keep the accursed thing within her soul. Make her feel the presence of the living God, who beholds all the past, to whom the darkness is as noonday; who is waiting now, at the eleventh hour, for her to turn to him, and confess her sin, and cry for mercy - now, before the night of death comes, and the moment of pardon is for ever fled, like yesterday that returneth not.

‘Saviour! It is yet time - time to snatch this poor soul from everlasting darkness. I believe - I believe in thy infinite love. What is my love or my pleading? It is quenched in thine. I can only clasp her in my weak arms and urge her with my weak pity. Thou - thou wilt breathe on the dead soul, and it shall arise from the unanswering sleep of death.

‘Yea, Lord, I see thee, coming through the darkness coming, like the morning, with healing on thy wings. The marks of thy agony are upon thee - I see, I see thou art able and willing to save - thou wilt not let her perish for ever. Come, mighty Saviour! Let the dead hear thy voice. Let the eyes of the blind be opened. Let her see that God encompasses her. Let her tremble at nothing but at the sin that cuts her off from him. Melt the hard heart. Unseal the closed lips: make her cry with her whole soul, ‘Father, I have sinned.’...’

‘Dinah,’ Hetty sobbed out, throwing her arms round Dinah's neck, ‘I will speak...I will tell...I won't hide it any more.’

But the tears and sobs were too violent. Dinah raised her gently from her knees and seated her on the pallet again, sitting down by her side. It was a long time before the convulsed throat was quiet, and even then they sat some time in stillness and darkness, holding each other's hands. At last Hetty whispered, ‘I did do it, Dinah...I buried it in the wood...the little baby...and it cried...I heard it cry...ever such a way off...all night...and I went back because it cried.’

She paused, and then spoke hurriedly in a louder, pleading tone.

'But I thought perhaps it wouldn't die - there might somebody find it. I didn't kill it - I didn't kill it myself. I put it down there and covered it up, and when I came back it was gone....It was because I was so very miserable, Dinah...I didn't know where to go...and I tried to kill myself before, and I couldn't. Oh, I tried so to drown myself in the pool, and I couldn't. I went to Windsor - I ran away - did you know? I went to find him, as he might take care of me; and he was gone; and then I didn't know what to do. I daredn't go back home again - I couldn't bear it. I couldn't have bore to look at anybody, for they'd have scorned me. I thought o' you sometimes, and thought I'd come to you, for I didn't think you'd be cross with me, and cry shame on me. I thought I could tell you. But then the other folks 'ud come to know it at last, and I couldn't bear that. It was partly thinking o' you made me come toward Stoniton; and, besides, I was so frightened at going wandering about till I was a beggar-woman, and had nothing; and sometimes it seemed as if I must go back to the farm sooner than that. Oh, it was so dreadful, Dinah...I was so miserable...I wished I'd never been born into this world. I should never like to go into the green fields again - I hated 'em so in my misery.'

Hetty paused again, as if the sense of the past were too strong upon her for words.

'And then I got to Stoniton, and I began to feel frightened that night, because I was so near home. And then the little baby was born, when I didn't expect it; and the thought came into my mind that I might get rid of it and go home again. The thought came all of a sudden, as I was lying in the bed, and it got stronger and stronger...I longed so to go back again...I couldn't bear being so lonely and coming to beg for want. And it gave me strength and resolution to get up and dress myself. I felt I must do it...I didn't know how...I thought I'd find a pool, if I could, like that other, in the corner of the field, in the dark. And when the woman went out, I felt as if I was strong enough to do anything...I thought I should get rid of all my misery, and go back home, and never let 'em know why I ran away I put on my bonnet and shawl, and went out into the dark street, with the baby under my cloak; and I walked fast till I got into a street a good way off, and there was a public, and I got some warm stuff to drink and some bread. And I walked on and on, and I hardly felt the ground I trod on; and it got lighter, for there came the moon - oh, Dinah, it frightened me when it first looked at me out o' the clouds - it never looked so before; and I turned out of the road into the fields, for I was afraid o' meeting anybody with the moon shining on me. And I came to a haystack, where I thought I could lie down and keep myself warm all night. There was a place cut into it, where I could make me a bed, and I lay comfortable, and the baby was warm against me; and I must have gone to sleep for a good while, for when I woke it was morning, but not very light, and the baby was crying. And I saw a wood a little way

off...I thought there'd perhaps be a ditch or a pond there...and it was so early I thought I could hide the child there, and get a long way off before folks was up. And then I thought I'd go home - I'd get rides in carts and go home and tell 'em I'd been to try and see for a place, and couldn't get one. I longed so for it, Dinah, I longed so to be safe at home. I don't know how I felt about the baby. I seemed to hate it - it was like a heavy weight hanging round my neck; and yet its crying went through me, and I daredn't look at its little hands and face. But I went on to the wood, and I walked about, but there was no water....'

Hetty shuddered. She was silent for some moments, and when she began again, it was in a whisper.

I came to a place where there was lots of chips and turf, and I sat down on the trunk of a tree to think what I should do. And all of a sudden I saw a hole under the nut-tree, like a little grave. And it darted into me like lightning - I'd lay the baby there and cover it with the grass and the chips. I couldn't kill it any other way. And I'd done it in a minute; and, oh, it cried so, Dinah - I couldn't cover it quite up - I thought perhaps somebody 'ud come and take care of it, and then it wouldn't die. And I made haste out of the wood, but I could hear it crying all the while; and when I got out into the fields, it was as if I was held fast - I couldn't go away, for all I wanted so to go. And I sat against the haystack to watch if anybody 'ud come. I was very hungry, and I'd only a bit of bread left, but I couldn't go away. And after ever such a while - hours and hours - the man came - him in a smock-frock, and he looked at me so, I was frightened, and I made haste and went on. I thought he was going to the wood and would perhaps find the baby. And I went right on, till I came to a village, a long way off from the wood, and I was very sick, and faint, and hungry. I got something to eat there, and bought a loaf. But I was frightened to stay. I heard the baby crying, and thought the other folks heard it too - and I went on. But I was so tired, and it was getting towards dark. And at last, by the roadside there was a barn - ever such a way off any house - like the barn in Abbot's Close, and I thought I could go in there and hide myself among the hay and straw, and nobody 'ud be likely to come. I went in, and it was half full o' trusses of straw, and there was some hay too. And I made myself a bed, ever so far behind, where nobody could find me; and I was so tired and weak, I went to sleep....But oh, the baby's crying kept waking me, and I thought that man as looked at me so was come and laying hold of me. But I must have slept a long while at last, though I didn't know, for when I got up and went out of the barn, I didn't know whether it was night or morning. But it was morning, for it kept getting lighter, and I turned back the way I'd come. I couldn't help it, Dinah; it was the baby's crying made me go - and yet I was frightened to death. I thought that man in the smock-frock 'ud see me and know I put the baby there. But I went on, for all that. I'd left off thinking about going home - it



had gone out o' my mind. I saw nothing but that place in the wood where I'd buried the baby...I see it now. Oh Dinah! shall I allays see it?'

Hetty clung round Dinah and shuddered again. The silence seemed long before she went on.

'I met nobody, for it was very early, and I got into the wood...I knew the way to the place...the place against the nut-tree; and I could hear it crying at every step...I thought it was alive....I don't know whether I was frightened or glad...I don't know what I felt. I only know I was in the wood and heard the cry. I don't know what I felt till I saw the baby was gone. And when I'd put it there, I thought I should like somebody to find it and save it from dying; but when I saw it was gone, I was struck like a stone, with fear. I never thought o' stirring, I felt so weak. I knew I couldn't run away, and everybody as saw me 'ud know about the baby. My heart went like a stone. I couldn't wish or try for anything; it seemed like as if I should stay there for ever, and nothing 'ud ever change. But they came and took me away.'

Hetty was silent, but she shuddered again, as if there was still something behind; and Dinah waited, for her heart was so full that tears must come before words. At last Hetty burst out, with a sob, 'Dinah, do you think God will take away that crying and the place in the wood, now I've told everything?'

'Let us pray, poor sinner. Let us fall on our knees again, and pray to the God of all mercy.'