

Chapter XLVI - The Hours Of Suspense

ON Sunday morning, when the church bells in Stoniton were ringing for morning service, Bartle Massey re-entered Adam's room, after a short absence, and said, 'Adam, here's a visitor wants to see you.'

Adam was seated with his back towards the door, but he started up and turned round instantly, with a flushed face and an eager look. His face was even thinner and more worn than we have seen it before, but he was washed and shaven this Sunday morning.

'Is it any news?' he said.

'Keep yourself quiet, my lad,' said Bartle; 'keep quiet. It's not what you're thinking of. It's the young Methodist woman come from the prison. She's at the bottom o' the stairs, and wants to know if you think well to see her, for she has something to say to you about that poor castaway; but she wouldn't come in without your leave, she said. She thought you'd perhaps like to go out and speak to her. These preaching women are not so back'ard commonly,' Bartle muttered to himself.

'Ask her to come in,' said Adam.

He was standing with his face towards the door, and as Dinah entered, lifting up her mild grey eyes towards him, she saw at once the great change that had come since the day when she had looked up at the tall man in the cottage. There was a trembling in her clear voice as she put her hand into his and said, 'Be comforted, Adam Bede, the Lord has not forsaken her.'

'Bless you for coming to her,' Adam said. 'Mr Massey brought me word yesterday as you was come.'

They could neither of them say any more just yet, but stood before each other in silence; and Bartle Massey, too, who had put on his spectacles, seemed transfixed, examining Dinah's face. But he recovered himself first, and said, 'Sit down, young woman, sit down,' placing the chair for her and retiring to his old seat on the bed.

'Thank you, friend; I won't sit down,' said Dinah, 'for I must hasten back. She entreated me not to stay long away. What I came for, Adam Bede, was to pray you to go and see the poor sinner and bid her farewell. She desires to ask your forgiveness, and it is meet you should see her to-day, rather than in the early morning, when the time will be short.'

Adam stood trembling, and at last sank down on his chair again.

'It won't be,' he said, 'it'll be put off - there'll perhaps come a pardon. Mr Irwine said there was hope. He said, I needn't quite give it up.'

'That's a blessed thought to me,' said Dinah, her eyes filling with tears. 'It's a fearful thing hurrying her soul away so fast.'

'But let what will be,' she added presently. 'You will surely come, and let her speak the words that are in her heart. Although her poor soul is very dark and discerns little beyond the things of the flesh, she is no longer hard. She is contrite, she has confessed all to me. The pride of her heart has given way, and she leans on me for help and desires to be taught. This fills me with trust, for I cannot but think that the brethren sometimes err in measuring the Divine love by the sinner's knowledge. She is going to write a letter to the friends at the Hall Farm for me to give them when she is gone, and when I told her you were here, she said, 'I should like to say good-bye to Adam and ask him to forgive me.' You will come, Adam? Perhaps you will even now come back with me.'

'I can't,' Adam said. 'I can't say good-bye while there's any hope. I'm listening, and listening - I can't think o' nothing but that. It can't be as she'll die that shameful death - I can't bring my mind to it.'

He got up from his chair again and looked away out of the window, while Dinah stood with compassionate patience. In a minute or two he turned round and said, 'I will come, Dinah...to-morrow morning...if it must be. I may have more strength to bear it, if I know it must be. Tell her, I forgive her; tell her I will come - at the very last.'

'I will not urge you against the voice of your own heart,' said Dinah. 'I must hasten back to her, for it is wonderful how she clings now, and was not willing to let me out of her sight. She used never to make any return to my affection before, but now tribulation has opened her heart. Farewell, Adam. Our heavenly Father comfort you and strengthen you to bear all things.' Dinah put out her hand, and Adam pressed it in silence.

Bartle Massey was getting up to lift the stiff latch of the door for her, but before he could reach it, she had said gently, 'Farewell, friend,' and was gone, with her light step down the stairs.

'Well,' said Bartle, taking off his spectacles and putting them into his pocket, 'if there must be women to make trouble in the world, it's but fair there should be women to be comforters under it; and she's one - she's one. It's a pity she's a Methodist; but there's no getting a woman without some foolishness or other.'

Adam never went to bed that night. The excitement of suspense, heightening with every hour that brought him nearer the fatal moment, was too great, and in spite of his entreaties, in spite of his promises that he would be perfectly quiet, the schoolmaster watched too.

‘What does it matter to me, lad?’ Bartle said: ‘a night's sleep more or less? I shall sleep long enough, by and by, underground. Let me keep thee company in trouble while I can.’

It was a long and dreary night in that small chamber. Adam would sometimes get up and tread backwards and forwards along the short space from wall to wall; then he would sit down and hide his face, and no sound would be heard but the ticking of the watch on the table, or the falling of a cinder from the fire which the schoolmaster carefully tended. Sometimes he would burst out into vehement speech, ‘If I could ha' done anything to save her - if my bearing anything would ha' done any good...but t' have to sit still, and know it, and do nothing...it's hard for a man to bear...and to think o' what might ha' been now, if it hadn't been for HIM....O God, it's the very day we should ha' been married.’

‘Aye, my lad,’ said Bartle tenderly, ‘it's heavy - it's heavy. But you must remember this: when you thought of marrying her, you'd a notion she'd got another sort of a nature inside her. You didn't think she could have got hardened in that little while to do what she's done.’

‘I know - I know that,’ said Adam. ‘I thought she was loving and tender-hearted, and wouldn't tell a lie, or act deceitful. How could I think any other way? And if he'd never come near her, and I'd married her, and been loving to her, and took care of her, she might never ha' done anything bad. What would it ha' signified - my having a bit o' trouble with her? It 'ud ha' been nothing to this.’

‘There's no knowing, my lad - there's no knowing what might have come. The smart's bad for you to bear now: you must have time - you must have time. But I've that opinion of you, that you'll rise above it all and be a man again, and there may good come out of this that we don't see.’

‘Good come out of it!’ said Adam passionately. ‘That doesn't alter th' evil: HER ruin can't be undone. I hate that talk o' people, as if there was a way o' making amends for everything. They'd more need be brought to see as the wrong they do can never be altered. When a man's spoiled his fellow-creatur's life, he's no right to comfort himself with thinking good may come out of it. Somebody else's good doesn't alter her shame and misery.’

'Well, lad, well,' said Bartle, in a gentle tone, strangely in contrast with his usual peremptoriness and impatience of contradiction, 'it's likely enough I talk foolishness. I'm an old fellow, and it's a good many years since I was in trouble myself. It's easy finding reasons why other folks should be patient.'

'Mr Massey,' said Adam penitently, 'I'm very hot and hasty. I owe you something different; but you mustn't take it ill of me.'

'Not I, lad - not I.'

So the night wore on in agitation till the chill dawn and the growing light brought the tremulous quiet that comes on the brink of despair. There would soon be no more suspense.

'Let us go to the prison now, Mr Massey,' said Adam, when he saw the hand of his watch at six. 'If there's any news come, we shall hear about it.'

The people were astir already, moving rapidly, in one direction, through the streets. Adam tried not to think where they were going, as they hurried past him in that short space between his lodging and the prison gates. He was thankful when the gates shut him in from seeing those eager people.

No; there was no news come - no pardon - no reprieve.

Adam lingered in the court half an hour before he could bring himself to send word to Dinah that he was come. But a voice caught his ear: he could not shut out the words.

'The cart is to set off at half-past seven.'

It must be said - the last good-bye: there was no help.

In ten minutes from that time, Adam was at the door of the cell. Dinah had sent him word that she could not come to him; she could not leave Hetty one moment; but Hetty was prepared for the meeting.

He could not see her when he entered, for agitation deadened his senses, and the dim cell was almost dark to him. He stood a moment after the door closed behind him, trembling and stupefied.

But he began to see through the dimness - to see the dark eyes lifted up to him once more, but with no smile in them. O God, how sad they looked! The last time they had met his was when he parted from her with his heart full of joyous hopeful love, and they looked out with a tearful smile from a pink, dimpled, childish face. The face was marble

now; the sweet lips were pallid and half-open and quivering; the dimples were all gone - all but one, that never went; and the eyes - O, the worst of all was the likeness they had to Hetty's. They were Hetty's eyes looking at him with that mournful gaze, as if she had come back to him from the dead to tell him of her misery.

She was clinging close to Dinah; her cheek was against Dinah's. It seemed as if her last faint strength and hope lay in that contact, and the pitying love that shone out from Dinah's face looked like a visible pledge of the Invisible Mercy.

When the sad eyes met - when Hetty and Adam looked at each other - she felt the change in him too, and it seemed to strike her with fresh fear. It was the first time she had seen any being whose face seemed to reflect the change in herself: Adam was a new image of the dreadful past and the dreadful present. She trembled more as she looked at him.

'Speak to him, Hetty,' Dinah said; 'tell him what is in your heart.'

Hetty obeyed her, like a little child.

'Adam...I'm very sorry...I behaved very wrong to you...will you forgive me...before I die?'

Adam answered with a half-sob, 'Yes, I forgive thee Hetty. I forgave thee long ago.'

It had seemed to Adam as if his brain would burst with the anguish of meeting Hetty's eyes in the first moments, but the sound of her voice uttering these penitent words touched a chord which had been less strained. There was a sense of relief from what was becoming unbearable, and the rare tears came - they had never come before, since he had hung on Seth's neck in the beginning of his sorrow.

Hetty made an involuntary movement towards him, some of the love that she had once lived in the midst of was come near her again. She kept hold of Dinah's hand, but she went up to Adam and said timidly, 'Will you kiss me again, Adam, for all I've been so wicked?'

Adam took the blanched wasted hand she put out to him, and they gave each other the solemn unspeakable kiss of a lifelong parting.

'And tell him,' Hetty said, in rather a stronger voice, 'tell him...for there's nobody else to tell him...as I went after him and couldn't find him...and I hated him and cursed him once...but Dinah says I should forgive him...and I try...for else God won't forgive me.'

There was a noise at the door of the cell now - the key was being turned in the lock, and when the door opened, Adam saw indistinctly that there were several faces there. He was too agitated to see more - even to see that Mr Irwine's face was one of them. He felt that the last preparations were beginning, and he could stay no longer. Room was silently made for him to depart, and he went to his chamber in loneliness, leaving Bartle Massey to watch and see the end.