Chapter XLVIII - Another Meeting In The Wood

THE next day, at evening, two men were walking from opposite points towards the same scene, drawn thither by a common memory. The scene was the Grove by Donnithorne Chase: you know who the men were.

The old squire's funeral had taken place that morning, the will had been read, and now in the first breathing-space, Arthur Donnithorne had come out for a lonely walk, that he might look fixedly at the new future before him and confirm himself in a sad resolution. He thought he could do that best in the Grove.

Adam too had come from Stontion on Monday evening, and to-day he had not left home, except to go to the family at the Hall Farm and tell them everything that Mr Irwine had left untold. He had agreed with the Poysers that he would follow them to their new neighbourhood, wherever that might be, for he meant to give up the management of the woods, and, as soon as it was practicable, he would wind up his business with Jonathan Burge and settle with his mother and Seth in a home within reach of the friends to whom he felt bound by a mutual sorrow.

'Seth and me are sure to find work,' he said. 'A man that's got our trade at his finger-ends is at home everywhere; and we must make a new start. My mother won't stand in the way, for she's told me, since I came home, she'd made up her mind to being buried in another parish, if I wished it, and if I'd be more comfortable elsewhere. It's wonderful how quiet she's been ever since I came back. It seems as if the very greatness o' the trouble had quieted and calmed her. We shall all be better in a new country, though there's some I shall be loath to leave behind. But I won't part from you and yours, if I can help it, Mr Poyser. Trouble's made us kin.'

'Aye, lad,' said Martin. 'We'll go out o' hearing o' that man's name. But I doubt we shall ne'er go far enough for folks not to find out as we've got them belonging to us as are transported o'er the seas, and were like to be hanged. We shall have that flyin' up in our faces, and our children's after us.'

That was a long visit to the Hall Farm, and drew too strongly on Adam's energies for him to think of seeing others, or re-entering on his old occupations till the morrow. 'But to-morrow,' he said to himself, 'I'll go to work again. I shall learn to like it again some time, maybe; and it's right whether I like it or not.'

This evening was the last he would allow to be absorbed by sorrow: suspense was gone now, and he must bear the unalterable. He was

resolved not to see Arthur Donnithorne again, if it were possible to avoid him. He had no message to deliver from Hetty now, for Hetty had seen Arthur. And Adam distrusted himself - he had learned to dread the violence of his own feeling. That word of Mr Irwine's - that he must remember what he had felt after giving the last blow to Arthur in the Grove - had remained with him.

These thoughts about Arthur, like all thoughts that are charged with strong feeling, were continually recurring, and they always called up the image of the Grove - of that spot under the overarching boughs where he had caught sight of the two bending figures, and had been possessed by sudden rage.

'I'll go and see it again to-night for the last time,' he said; 'it'll do me good; it'll make me feel over again what I felt when I'd knocked him down. I felt what poor empty work it was, as soon as I'd done it, before I began to think he might be dead.'

In this way it happened that Arthur and Adam were walking towards the same spot at the same time.

Adam had on his working-dress again, now, for he had thrown off the other with a sense of relief as soon as he came home; and if he had had the basket of tools over his shoulder, he might have been taken, with his pale wasted face, for the spectre of the Adam Bede who entered the Grove on that August evening eight months ago. But he had no basket of tools, and he was not walking with the old erectness, looking keenly round him; his hands were thrust in his side pockets, and his eyes rested chiefly on the ground. He had not long entered the Grove, and now he paused before a beech. He knew that tree well; it was the boundary mark of his youth - the sign, to him, of the time when some of his earliest, strongest feelings had left him. He felt sure they would never return. And yet, at this moment, there was a stirring of affection at the remembrance of that Arthur Donnithorne whom he had believed in before he had come up to this beech eight months ago. It was affection for the dead: THAT Arthur existed no longer.

He was disturbed by the sound of approaching footsteps, but the beech stood at a turning in the road, and he could not see who was coming until the tall slim figure in deep mourning suddenly stood before him at only two yards' distance. They both started, and looked at each other in silence. Often, in the last fortnight, Adam had imagined himself as close to Arthur as this, assailing him with words that should be as harrowing as the voice of remorse, forcing upon him a just share in the misery he had caused; and often, too, he had told himself that such a meeting had better not be. But in imagining the meeting he had always seen Arthur, as he had met him on that evening in the Grove, florid, careless, light of speech; and the figure

before him touched him with the signs of suffering. Adam knew what suffering was - he could not lay a cruel finger on a bruised man. He felt no impulse that he needed to resist. Silence was more just than reproach. Arthur was the first to speak.

‘Adam,’ he said, quietly, ‘it may be a good thing that we have met here, for I wished to see you. I should have asked to see you to-morrow.’

He paused, but Adam said nothing.

‘I know it is painful to you to meet me,’ Arthur went on, ‘but it is not likely to happen again for years to come.’

‘No, sir,’ said Adam, coldly, ‘that was what I meant to write to you to-morrow, as it would be better all dealings should be at an end between us, and somebody else put in my place.’

Arthur felt the answer keenly, and it was not without an effort that he spoke again.

‘It was partly on that subject I wished to speak to you. I don't want to lessen your indignation against me, or ask you to do anything for my sake. I only wish to ask you if you will help me to lessen the evil consequences of the past, which is unchangeable. I don't mean consequences to myself, but to others. It is but little I can do, I know. I know the worst consequences will remain; but something may be done, and you can help me. Will you listen to me patiently?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Adam, after some hesitation; ‘I'll hear what it is. If I can help to mend anything, I will. Anger 'ull mend nothing, I know. We've had enough o' that.’

‘I was going to the Hermitage,’ said Arthur. ‘Will you go there with me and sit down? We can talk better there.’

The Hermitage had never been entered since they left it together, for Arthur had locked up the key in his desk. And now, when he opened the door, there was the candle burnt out in the socket; there was the chair in the same place where Adam remembered sitting; there was the waste-paper basket full of scraps, and deep down in it, Arthur felt in an instant, there was the little pink silk handkerchief. It would have been painful to enter this place if their previous thoughts had been less painful.

They sat down opposite each other in the old places, and Arthur said, ‘I'm going away, Adam; I'm going into the army.’

Poor Arthur felt that Adam ought to be affected by this announcement - ought to have a movement of sympathy towards him. But Adam's lips remained firmly closed, and the expression of his face unchanged.

'What I want to say to you,' Arthur continued, 'is this: one of my reasons for going away is that no one else may leave Hayslope - may leave their home on my account. I would do anything, there is no sacrifice I would not make, to prevent any further injury to others through my - through what has happened.'

Arthur's words had precisely the opposite effect to that he had anticipated. Adam thought he perceived in them that notion of compensation for irretrievable wrong, that self-soothing attempt to make evil bear the same fruits as good, which most of all roused his indignation. He was as strongly impelled to look painful facts right in the face as Arthur was to turn away his eyes from them. Moreover, he had the wakeful suspicious pride of a poor man in the presence of a rich man. He felt his old severity returning as he said, 'The time's past for that, sir. A man should make sacrifices to keep clear of doing a wrong; sacrifices won't undo it when it's done. When people's feelings have got a deadly wound, they can't be cured with favours.'

'Favours!' said Arthur, passionately; 'no; how can you suppose I meant that? But the Poysers - Mr Irwine tells me the Poysers mean to leave the place where they have lived so many years - for generations. Don't you see, as Mr Irwine does, that if they could be persuaded to overcome the feeling that drives them away, it would be much better for them in the end to remain on the old spot, among the friends and neighbours who know them?'

'That's true,' said Adam coldly. 'But then, sir, folks's feelings are not so easily overcome. It'll be hard for Martin Poyser to go to a strange place, among strange faces, when he's been bred up on the Hall Farm, and his father before him; but then it 'ud be harder for a man with his feelings to stay. I don't see how the thing's to be made any other than hard. There's a sort o' damage, sir, that can't be made up for.'

Arthur was silent some moments. In spite of other feelings dominant in him this evening, his pride winced under Adam's mode of treating him. Wasn't he himself suffering? Was not he too obliged to renounce his most cherished hopes? It was now as it had been eight months ago - Adam was forcing Arthur to feel more intensely the irrevocableness of his own wrong-doing. He was presenting the sort of resistance that was the most irritating to Arthur's eager ardent nature. But his anger was subdued by the same influence that had subdued Adam's when they first confronted each other - by the marks of suffering in a long familiar face. The momentary struggle ended in the feeling that he could bear a great deal from Adam, to whom he had been the occasion

of bearing so much; but there was a touch of pleading, boyish vexation in his tone as he said, 'But people may make injuries worse by unreasonable conduct - by giving way to anger and satisfying that for the moment, instead of thinking what will be the effect in the future.

'If I were going to stay here and act as landlord,' he added presently, with still more eagerness - 'if I were careless about what I've done - what I've been the cause of, you would have some excuse, Adam, for going away and encouraging others to go. You would have some excuse then for trying to make the evil worse. But when I tell you I'm going away for years - when you know what that means for me, how it cuts off every plan of happiness I've ever formed - it is impossible for a sensible man like you to believe that there is any real ground for the Poysers refusing to remain. I know their feeling about disgrace - Mr Irwine has told me all; but he is of opinion that they might be persuaded out of this idea that they are disgraced in the eyes of their neighbours, and that they can't remain on my estate, if you would join him in his efforts - if you would stay yourself and go on managing the old woods.'

Arthur paused a moment and then added, pleadingly, 'You know that's a good work to do for the sake of other people, besides the owner. And you don't know but that they may have a better owner soon, whom you will like to work for. If I die, my cousin Tradgett will have the estate and take my name. He is a good fellow.'

Adam could not help being moved: it was impossible for him not to feel that this was the voice of the honest warm-hearted Arthur whom he had loved and been proud of in old days; but nearer memories would not be thrust away. He was silent; yet Arthur saw an answer in his face that induced him to go on, with growing earnestness.

'And then, if you would talk to the Poysers - if you would talk the matter over with Mr Irwine - he means to see you to-morrow - and then if you would join your arguments to his to prevail on them not to go....I know, of course, that they would not accept any favour from me - I mean nothing of that kind - but I'm sure they would suffer less in the end. Irwine thinks so too. And Mr Irwine is to have the chief authority on the estate - he has consented to undertake that. They will really be under no man but one whom they respect and like. It would be the same with you, Adam, and it could be nothing but a desire to give me worse pain that could incline you to go.'

Arthur was silent again for a little while, and then said, with some agitation in his voice, 'I wouldn't act so towards you, I know. If you were in my place and I in yours, I should try to help you to do the best.'

Adam made a hasty movement on his chair and looked on the ground. Arthur went on, ‘Perhaps you've never done anything you've had bitterly to repent of in your life, Adam; if you had, you would be more generous. You would know then that it's worse for me than for you.’

Arthur rose from his seat with the last words, and went to one of the windows, looking out and turning his back on Adam, as he continued, passionately, ‘Haven't I loved her too? Didn't I see her yesterday? Shan't I carry the thought of her about with me as much as you will? And don't you think you would suffer more if you'd been in fault?’

There was silence for several minutes, for the struggle in Adam's mind was not easily decided. Facile natures, whose emotions have little permanence, can hardly understand how much inward resistance he overcame before he rose from his seat and turned towards Arthur. Arthur heard the movement, and turning round, met the sad but softened look with which Adam said, ‘It's true what you say, sir. I'm hard - it's in my nature. I was too hard with my father, for doing wrong. I've been a bit hard t' everybody but her. I felt as if nobody pitied her enough - her suffering cut into me so; and when I thought the folks at the farm were too hard with her, I said I'd never be hard to anybody myself again. But feeling overmuch about her has perhaps made me unfair to you. I've known what it is in my life to repent and feel it's too late. I felt I'd been too harsh to my father when he was gone from me - I feel it now, when I think of him. I've no right to be hard towards them as have done wrong and repent.’

Adam spoke these words with the firm distinctness of a man who is resolved to leave nothing unsaid that he is bound to say; but he went on with more hesitation.

‘I wouldn't shake hands with you once, sir, when you asked me - but if you're willing to do it now, for all I refused then...’

Arthur's white hand was in Adam's large grasp in an instant, and with that action there was a strong rush, on both sides, of the old, boyish affection.

‘Adam,’ Arthur said, impelled to full confession now, ‘it would never have happened if I'd known you loved her. That would have helped to save me from it. And I did struggle. I never meant to injure her. I deceived you afterwards - and that led on to worse; but I thought it was forced upon me, I thought it was the best thing I could do. And in that letter I told her to let me know if she were in any trouble: don't think I would not have done everything I could. But I was all wrong from the very first, and horrible wrong has come of it. God knows, I'd give my life if I could undo it.’

They sat down again opposite each other, and Adam said, tremulously, ‘How did she seem when you left her, sir?’

‘Don't ask me, Adam,’ Arthur said; ‘I feel sometimes as if I should go mad with thinking of her looks and what she said to me, and then, that I couldn't get a full pardon - that I couldn't save her from that wretched fate of being transported - that I can do nothing for her all those years; and she may die under it, and never know comfort any more.’

‘Ah, sir,’ said Adam, for the first time feeling his own pain merged in sympathy for Arthur, ‘you and me'll often be thinking o' the same thing, when we're a long way off one another. I'll pray God to help you, as I pray him to help me.’

‘But there's that sweet woman - that Dinah Morris,’ Arthur said, pursuing his own thoughts and not knowing what had been the sense of Adam's words, ‘she says she shall stay with her to the very last moment - till she goes; and the poor thing clings to her as if she found some comfort in her. I could worship that woman; I don't know what I should do if she were not there. Adam, you will see her when she comes back. I could say nothing to her yesterday - nothing of what I felt towards her. Tell her,’ Arthur went on hurriedly, as if he wanted to hide the emotion with which he spoke, while he took off his chain and watch, ‘tell her I asked you to give her this in remembrance of me - of the man to whom she is the one source of comfort, when he thinks of...I know she doesn't care about such things - or anything else I can give her for its own sake. But she will use the watch - I shall like to think of her using it.’

‘I'll give it to her, sir,’ Adam said, ‘and tell her your words. She told me she should come back to the people at the Hall Farm.’

‘And you will persuade the Poysers to stay, Adam?’ said Arthur, reminded of the subject which both of them had forgotten in the first interchange of revived friendship. ‘You will stay yourself, and help Mr Irwine to carry out the repairs and improvements on the estate?’

‘There's one thing, sir, that perhaps you don't take account of,’ said Adam, with hesitating gentleness, ‘and that was what made me hang back longer. You see, it's the same with both me and the Poysers: if we stay, it's for our own worldly interest, and it looks as if we'd put up with anything for the sake o' that. I know that's what they'll feel, and I can't help feeling a little of it myself. When folks have got an honourable independent spirit, they don't like to do anything that might make 'em seem base-minded.’

‘But no one who knows you will think that, Adam. That is not a reason strong enough against a course that is really more generous, more unselfish than the other. And it will be known - it shall be made known, that both you and the Poysers stayed at my entreaty. Adam, don't try to make things worse for me; I'm punished enough without that.’

‘No, sir, no,’ Adam said, looking at Arthur with mournful affection. ‘God forbid I should make things worse for you. I used to wish I could do it, in my passion - but that was when I thought you didn't feel enough. I'll stay, sir, I'll do the best I can. It's all I've got to think of now - to do my work well and make the world a bit better place for them as can enjoy it.’

‘Then we'll part now, Adam. You will see Mr Irwine to-morrow, and consult with him about everything.’

‘Are you going soon, sir?’ said Adam.

‘As soon as possible - after I've made the necessary arrangements. Good-bye, Adam. I shall think of you going about the old place.’

‘Good-bye, sir. God bless you.’

The hands were clasped once more, and Adam left the Hermitage, feeling that sorrow was more bearable now hatred was gone.

As soon as the door was closed behind him, Arthur went to the waste-paper basket and took out the little pink silk handkerchief.