

Book Six

Chapter XLIX - At The Hall Farm

THE first autumnal afternoon sunshine of 1801 - more than eighteen months after that parting of Adam and Arthur in the Hermitage - was on the yard at the Hall Farm; and the bull-dog was in one of his most excited moments, for it was that hour of the day when the cows were being driven into the yard for their afternoon milking. No wonder the patient beasts ran confusedly into the wrong places, for the alarming din of the bull-dog was mingled with more distant sounds which the timid feminine creatures, with pardonable superstition, imagined also to have some relation to their own movements - with the tremendous crack of the waggoner's whip, the roar of his voice, and the booming thunder of the waggon, as it left the rick-yard empty of its golden load.

The milking of the cows was a sight Mrs. Poyser loved, and at this hour on mild days she was usually standing at the house door, with her knitting in her hands, in quiet contemplation, only heightened to a keener interest when the vicious yellow cow, who had once kicked over a pailful of precious milk, was about to undergo the preventive punishment of having her hinder-legs strapped.

To-day, however, Mrs. Poyser gave but a divided attention to the arrival of the cows, for she was in eager discussion with Dinah, who was stitching Mr Poyser's shirt-collars, and had borne patiently to have her thread broken three times by Totty pulling at her arm with a sudden insistence that she should look at 'Baby,' that is, at a large wooden doll with no legs and a long skirt, whose bald head Totty, seated in her small chair at Dinah's side, was caressing and pressing to her fat cheek with much fervour. Totty is larger by more than two years' growth than when you first saw her, and she has on a black frock under her pinafore. Mrs. Poyser too has on a black gown, which seems to heighten the family likeness between her and Dinah. In other respects there is little outward change now discernible in our old friends, or in the pleasant house-place, bright with polished oak and pewter.

'I never saw the like to you, Dinah,' Mrs. Poyser was saying, 'when you've once took anything into your head: there's no more moving you than the rooted tree. You may say what you like, but I don't believe that's religion; for what's the Sermon on the Mount about, as you're so fond o' reading to the boys, but doing what other folks 'ud have you do? But if it was anything unreasonable they wanted you to do, like taking your cloak off and giving it to 'em, or letting 'em slap you i' the face, I daresay you'd be ready enough. It's only when one 'ud have you do what's plain common sense and good for yourself, as you're obstinate th' other way.'

'Nay, dear Aunt,' said Dinah, smiling slightly as she went on with her work, 'I'm sure your wish 'ud be a reason for me to do anything that I didn't feel it was wrong to do.'

'Wrong! You drive me past bearing. What is there wrong, I should like to know, i' staying along wi' your own friends, as are th' happier for having you with 'em an' are willing to provide for you, even if your work didn't more nor pay 'em for the bit o' sparrow's victual y' eat and the bit o' rag you put on? An' who is it, I should like to know, as you're bound t' help and comfort i' the world more nor your own flesh and blood - an' me th' only aunt you've got above-ground, an' am brought to the brink o' the grave welly every winter as comes, an' there's the child as sits beside you 'ull break her little heart when you go, an' the grandfather not been dead a twelvemonth, an' your uncle 'ull miss you so as never was - a-lighting his pipe an' waiting on him, an' now I can trust you wi' the butter, an' have had all the trouble o' teaching you, and there's all the sewing to be done, an' I must have a strange gell out o' Treddles'on to do it - an' all because you must go back to that bare heap o' stones as the very crows fly over an' won't stop at.'

'Dear Aunt Rachel,' said Dinah, looking up in Mrs. Poyser's face, 'it's your kindness makes you say I'm useful to you. You don't really want me now, for Nancy and Molly are clever at their work, and you're in good health now, by the blessing of God, and my uncle is of a cheerful countenance again, and you have neighbours and friends not a few - some of them come to sit with my uncle almost daily. Indeed, you will not miss me; and at Snowfield there are brethren and sisters in great need, who have none of those comforts you have around you. I feel that I am called back to those amongst whom my lot was first cast. I feel drawn again towards the hills where I used to be blessed in carrying the word of life to the sinful and desolate.'

'You feel! Yes,' said Mrs. Poyser, returning from a parenthetic glance at the cows, 'that's allays the reason I'm to sit down wi', when you've a mind to do anything contrary. What do you want to be preaching for more than you're preaching now? Don't you go off, the Lord knows where, every Sunday a-preaching and praying? An' haven't you got Methodists enow at Treddles'on to go and look at, if church-folks's faces are too handsome to please you? An' isn't there them i' this parish as you've got under hand, and they're like enough to make friends wi' Old Harry again as soon as your back's turned? There's that Bessy Cranage - she'll be flaunting i' new finery three weeks after you're gone, I'll be bound. She'll no more go on in her new ways without you than a dog 'ull stand on its hind-legs when there's nobody looking. But I suppose it doesna matter so much about folks's souls i' this country, else you'd be for staying with your own aunt, for she's none so good but what you might help her to be better.'

There was a certain something in Mrs. Poyser's voice just then, which she did not wish to be noticed, so she turned round hastily to look at the clock, and said: 'See there! It's tea-time; an' if Martin's i' the rick-yard, he'll like a cup. Here, Totty, my chicken, let mother put your bonnet on, and then you go out into the rick-yard and see if Father's there, and tell him he mustn't go away again without coming t' have a cup o' tea; and tell your brothers to come in too.'

Totty trotted off in her flapping bonnet, while Mrs. Poyser set out the bright oak table and reached down the tea-cups.

'You talk o' them gells Nancy and Molly being clever i' their work,' she began again; 'it's fine talking. They're all the same, clever or stupid - one can't trust 'em out o' one's sight a minute. They want somebody's eye on 'em constant if they're to be kept to their work. An' suppose I'm ill again this winter, as I was the winter before last? Who's to look after 'em then, if you're gone? An' there's that blessed child - something's sure t' happen to her - they'll let her tumble into the fire, or get at the kettle wi' the boiling lard in't, or some mischief as 'ull lame her for life; an' it'll be all your fault, Dinah.'

'Aunt,' said Dinah, 'I promise to come back to you in the winter if you're ill. Don't think I will ever stay away from you if you're in real want of me. But, indeed, it is needful for my own soul that I should go away from this life of ease and luxury in which I have all things too richly to enjoy - at least that I should go away for a short space. No one can know but myself what are my inward needs, and the besetments I am most in danger from. Your wish for me to stay is not a call of duty which I refuse to hearken to because it is against my own desires; it is a temptation that I must resist, lest the love of the creature should become like a mist in my soul shutting out the heavenly light.'

'It passes my cunning to know what you mean by ease and luxury,' said Mrs. Poyser, as she cut the bread and butter. 'It's true there's good victual enough about you, as nobody shall ever say I don't provide enough and to spare, but if there's ever a bit o' odds an' ends as nobody else 'ud eat, you're sure to pick it out...but look there! There's Adam Bede a-carrying the little un in. I wonder how it is he's come so early.'

Mrs. Poyser hastened to the door for the pleasure of looking at her darling in a new position, with love in her eyes but reproof on her tongue.

'Oh for shame, Totty! Little gells o' five year old should be ashamed to be carried. Why, Adam, she'll break your arm, such a big gell as that; set her down - for shame!'

'Nay, nay,' said Adam, 'I can lift her with my hand - I've no need to take my arm to it.'

Totty, looking as serenely unconscious of remark as a fat white puppy, was set down at the door-place, and the mother enforced her reproof with a shower of kisses.

'You're surprised to see me at this hour o' the day,' said Adam.

'Yes, but come in,' said Mrs. Poyser, making way for him; 'there's no bad news, I hope?'

'No, nothing bad,' Adam answered, as he went up to Dinah and put out his hand to her. She had laid down her work and stood up, instinctively, as he approached her. A faint blush died away from her pale cheek as she put her hand in his and looked up at him timidly.

'It's an errand to you brought me, Dinah,' said Adam, apparently unconscious that he was holding her hand all the while; 'mother's a bit ailing, and she's set her heart on your coming to stay the night with her, if you'll be so kind. I told her I'd call and ask you as I came from the village. She overworks herself, and I can't persuade her to have a little girl t' help her. I don't know what's to be done.'

Adam released Dinah's hand as he ceased speaking, and was expecting an answer, but before she had opened her lips Mrs. Poyser said, 'Look there now! I told you there was folks enow t' help i' this parish, wi'out going further off. There's Mrs. Bede getting as old and cas'alty as can be, and she won't let anybody but you go a-nigh her hardly. The folks at Snowfield have learnt by this time to do better wi'out you nor she can.'

'I'll put my bonnet on and set off directly, if you don't want anything done first, Aunt,' said Dinah, folding up her work.

'Yes, I do want something done. I want you t' have your tea, child; it's all ready - and you'll have a cup, Adam, if y' arena in too big a hurry.'

'Yes, I'll have a cup, please; and then I'll walk with Dinah. I'm going straight home, for I've got a lot o' timber valuations to write out.'

'Why, Adam, lad, are you here?' said Mr Poyser, entering warm and coatless, with the two black-eyed boys behind him, still looking as much like him as two small elephants are like a large one. 'How is it we've got sight o' you so long before foddering-time?'

'I came on an errand for Mother,' said Adam. 'She's got a touch of her old complaint, and she wants Dinah to go and stay with her a bit.'

'Well, we'll spare her for your mother a little while,' said Mr Poyser. 'But we wanna spare her for anybody else, on'y her husband.'

'Husband!' said Marty, who was at the most prosaic and literal period of the boyish mind. 'Why, Dinah hasn't got a husband.'

'Spare her?' said Mrs. Poyser, placing a seed-cake on the table and then seating herself to pour out the tea. 'But we must spare her, it seems, and not for a husband neither, but for her own megrims. Tommy, what are you doing to your little sister's doll? Making the child naughty, when she'd be good if you'd let her. You shanna have a morsel o' cake if you behave so.'

Tommy, with true brotherly sympathy, was amusing himself by turning Dolly's skirt over her bald head and exhibiting her truncated body to the general scorn - an indignity which cut Totty to the heart.

'What do you think Dinah's been a-telling me since dinner-time?' Mrs. Poyser continued, looking at her husband.

'Eh! I'm a poor un at guessing,' said Mr Poyser.

'Why, she means to go back to Snowfield again, and work i' the mill, and starve herself, as she used to do, like a creatur as has got no friends.'

Mr Poyser did not readily find words to express his unpleasant astonishment; he only looked from his wife to Dinah, who had now seated herself beside Totty, as a bulwark against brotherly playfulness, and was busying herself with the children's tea. If he had been given to making general reflections, it would have occurred to him that there was certainly a change come over Dinah, for she never used to change colour; but, as it was, he merely observed that her face was flushed at that moment. Mr Poyser thought she looked the prettier for it: it was a flush no deeper than the petal of a monthly rose. Perhaps it came because her uncle was looking at her so fixedly; but there is no knowing, for just then Adam was saying, with quiet surprise, 'Why, I hoped Dinah was settled among us for life. I thought she'd given up the notion o' going back to her old country.'

'Thought! Yes,' said Mrs. Poyser, 'and so would anybody else ha' thought, as had got their right end up'ards. But I suppose you must be a Methodist to know what a Methodist 'ull do. It's ill guessing what the bats are flying after.'

'Why, what have we done to you. Dinah, as you must go away from us?' said Mr Poyser, still pausing over his tea-cup. 'It's like breaking

your word, welly, for your aunt never had no thought but you'd make this your home.'

'Nay, Uncle,' said Dinah, trying to be quite calm. 'When I first came, I said it was only for a time, as long as I could be of any comfort to my aunt.'

'Well, an' who said you'd ever left off being a comfort to me?' said Mrs. Poyser. 'If you didna mean to stay wi' me, you'd better never ha' come. Them as ha' never had a cushion don't miss it.'

'Nay, nay,' said Mr Poyser, who objected to exaggerated views. 'Thee mustna say so; we should ha' been ill off wi'out her, Lady day was a twelvemont'. We mun be thankful for that, whether she stays or no. But I canna think what she mun leave a good home for, to go back int' a country where the land, most on't, isna worth ten shillings an acre, rent and profits.'

'Why, that's just the reason she wants to go, as fur as she can give a reason,' said Mrs. Poyser. 'She says this country's too comfortable, an' there's too much t' eat, an' folks arena miserable enough. And she's going next week. I canna turn her, say what I will. It's allays the way wi' them meek-faced people; you may's well pelt a bag o' feathers as talk to 'em. But I say it isna religion, to be so obstinate - is it now, Adam?'

Adam saw that Dinah was more disturbed than he had ever seen her by any matter relating to herself, and, anxious to relieve her, if possible, he said, looking at her affectionately, 'Nay, I can't find fault with anything Dinah does. I believe her thoughts are better than our guesses, let 'em be what they may. I should ha' been thankful for her to stay among us, but if she thinks well to go, I wouldn't cross her, or make it hard to her by objecting. We owe her something different to that.'

As it often happens, the words intended to relieve her were just too much for Dinah's susceptible feelings at this moment. The tears came into the grey eyes too fast to be hidden and she got up hurriedly, meaning it to be understood that she was going to put on her bonnet.

'Mother, what's Dinah crying for?' said Totty. 'She isn't a naughty dell.'

'Thee'st gone a bit too fur,' said Mr Poyser. 'We've no right t' interfere with her doing as she likes. An' thee'dst be as angry as could be wi' me, if I said a word against anything she did.'

'Because you'd very like be finding fault wi'out reason,' said Mrs. Poyser. 'But there's reason i' what I say, else I shouldna say it. It's easy talking for them as can't love her so well as her own aunt does. An' me got so used to her! I shall feel as uneasy as a new sheared sheep when she's gone from me. An' to think of her leaving a parish where she's so looked on. There's Mr Irwine makes as much of her as if she was a lady, for all her being a Methodist, an' wi' that maggot o' preaching in her head - God forgi'e me if I'm i' the wrong to call it so.'

'Aye,' said Mr Poyser, looking jocose; 'but thee dostna tell Adam what he said to thee about it one day. The missis was saying, Adam, as the preaching was the only fault to be found wi' Dinah, and Mr Irwine says, 'But you mustn't find fault with her for that, Mrs. Poyser; you forget she's got no husband to preach to. I'll answer for it, you give Poyser many a good sermon.' The parson had thee there,' Mr Poyser added, laughing unctuously. 'I told Bartle Massey on it, an' he laughed too.'

'Yes, it's a small joke sets men laughing when they sit a-staring at one another with a pipe i' their mouths,' said Mrs. Poyser. 'Give Bartle Massey his way and he'd have all the sharpness to himself. If the chaff-cutter had the making of us, we should all be straw, I reckon. Totty, my chicken, go upstairs to cousin Dinah, and see what she's doing, and give her a pretty kiss.'

This errand was devised for Totty as a means of checking certain threatening symptoms about the corners of the mouth; for Tommy, no longer expectant of cake, was lifting up his eyelids with his forefingers and turning his eyeballs towards Totty in a way that she felt to be disagreeably personal.

'You're rare and busy now - eh, Adam?' said Mr Poyser. 'Burge's getting so bad wi' his asthmy, it's well if he'll ever do much riding about again.'

'Yes, we've got a pretty bit o' building on hand now,' said Adam, 'what with the repairs on th' estate, and the new houses at Treddles'on.'

'I'll bet a penny that new house Burge is building on his own bit o' land is for him and Mary to go to,' said Mr Poyser. 'He'll be for laying by business soon, I'll warrant, and be wanting you to take to it all and pay him so much by th' 'ear. We shall see you living on th' hill before another twelvemont's over.'

'Well,' said Adam, 'I should like t' have the business in my own hands. It isn't as I mind much about getting any more money. We've enough and to spare now, with only our two selves and mother; but I should

like t' have my own way about things - I could try plans then, as I can't do now.'

'You get on pretty well wi' the new steward, I reckon?' said Mr Poyser.

'Yes, yes; he's a sensible man enough; understands farming - he's carrying on the draining, and all that, capital. You must go some day towards the Stonyshire side and see what alterations they're making. But he's got no notion about buildings. You can so seldom get hold of a man as can turn his brains to more nor one thing; it's just as if they wore blinkers like th' horses and could see nothing o' one side of 'em. Now, there's Mr Irwine has got notions o' building more nor most architects; for as for th' architects, they set up to be fine fellows, but the most of 'em don't know where to set a chimney so as it shan't be quarrelling with a door. My notion is, a practical builder that's got a bit o' taste makes the best architect for common things; and I've ten times the pleasure i' seeing after the work when I've made the plan myself.'

Mr Poyser listened with an admiring interest to Adam's discourse on building, but perhaps it suggested to him that the building of his corn-rick had been proceeding a little too long without the control of the master's eye, for when Adam had done speaking, he got up and said, 'Well, lad, I'll bid you good-bye now, for I'm off to the rick-yard again.'

Adam rose too, for he saw Dinah entering, with her bonnet on and a little basket in her hand, preceded by Totty.

'You're ready, I see, Dinah,' Adam said; 'so we'll set off, for the sooner I'm at home the better.'

'Mother,' said Totty, with her treble pipe, 'Dinah was saying her prayers and crying ever so.'

'Hush, hush,' said the mother, 'little gells mustn't chatter.'

Whereupon the father, shaking with silent laughter, set Totty on the white deal table and desired her to kiss him. Mr and Mrs. Poyser, you perceive, had no correct principles of education.

'Come back to-morrow if Mrs. Bede doesn't want you, Dinah,' said Mrs. Poyser: 'but you can stay, you know, if she's ill.'

So, when the good-byes had been said, Dinah and Adam left the Hall Farm together.