

Chapter XXIII - Dinner-Time

WHEN Adam heard that he was to dine upstairs with the large tenants, he felt rather uncomfortable at the idea of being exalted in this way above his mother and Seth, who were to dine in the cloisters below. But Mr Mills, the butler, assured him that Captain Donnithorne had given particular orders about it, and would be very angry if Adam was not there.

Adam nodded and went up to Seth, who was standing a few yards off. 'Seth, lad,' he said, 'the captain has sent to say I'm to dine upstairs - he wishes it particular, Mr Mills says, so I suppose it 'ud be behaving ill for me not to go. But I don't like sitting up above thee and mother, as if I was better than my own flesh and blood. Thee't not take it unkind, I hope?'

'Nay, nay, lad,' said Seth, 'thy honour's our honour; and if thee get'st respect, thee'st won it by thy own deserts. The further I see thee above me, the better, so long as thee feel'st like a brother to me. It's because o' thy being appointed over the woods, and it's nothing but what's right. That's a place o' trust, and thee't above a common workman now.'

'Aye,' said Adam, 'but nobody knows a word about it yet. I haven't given notice to Mr Burge about leaving him, and I don't like to tell anybody else about it before he knows, for he'll be a good bit hurt, I doubt. People 'ull be wondering to see me there, and they'll like enough be guessing the reason and asking questions, for there's been so much talk up and down about my having the place, this last three weeks.'

'Well, thee canst say thee wast ordered to come without being told the reason. That's the truth. And mother 'ull be fine and joyful about it. Let's go and tell her.'

Adam was not the only guest invited to come upstairs on other grounds than the amount he contributed to the rent-roll. There were other people in the two parishes who derived dignity from their functions rather than from their pocket, and of these Bartle Massey was one. His lame walk was rather slower than usual on this warm day, so Adam lingered behind when the bell rang for dinner, that he might walk up with his old friend; for he was a little too shy to join the Poyser party on this public occasion. Opportunities of getting to Hetty's side would be sure to turn up in the course of the day, and Adam contented himself with that for he disliked any risk of being 'joked' about Hetty - the big, outspoken, fearless man was very shy and diffident as to his love-making.

'Well, Mester Massey,' said Adam, as Bartle came up 'I'm going to dine upstairs with you to-day: the captain's sent me orders.'

'Ah!' said Bartle, pausing, with one hand on his back. 'Then there's something in the wind - there's something in the wind. Have you heard anything about what the old squire means to do?'

'Why, yes,' said Adam; 'I'll tell you what I know, because I believe you can keep a still tongue in your head if you like, and I hope you'll not let drop a word till it's common talk, for I've particular reasons against its being known.'

'Trust to me, my boy, trust to me. I've got no wife to worm it out of me and then run out and cackle it in everybody's hearing. If you trust a man, let him be a bachelor - let him be a bachelor.'

'Well, then, it was so far settled yesterday that I'm to take the management o' the woods. The captain sent for me t' offer it me, when I was seeing to the poles and things here and I've agreed to't. But if anybody asks any questions upstairs, just you take no notice, and turn the talk to something else, and I'll be obliged to you. Now, let us go on, for we're pretty nigh the last, I think.'

'I know what to do, never fear,' said Bartle, moving on. 'The news will be good sauce to my dinner. Aye, aye, my boy, you'll get on. I'll back you for an eye at measuring and a head-piece for figures, against any man in this county and you've had good teaching - you've had good teaching.'

When they got upstairs, the question which Arthur had left unsettled, as to who was to be president, and who vice, was still under discussion, so that Adam's entrance passed without remark.

'It stands to sense,' Mr Casson was saying, 'as old Mr Poyser, as is th' oldest man i' the room, should sit at top o' the table. I wasn't butler fifteen year without learning the rights and the wrongs about dinner.'

'Nay, nay,' said old Martin, 'I'n gi'en up to my son; I'm no tenant now: let my son take my place. Th' ould foulks ha' had their turn: they mun make way for the young uns.'

'I should ha' thought the biggest tenant had the best right, more nor th' oldest,' said Luke Britton, who was not fond of the critical Mr Poyser; 'there's Mester Holdsworth has more land nor anybody else on th' estate.'

'Well,' said Mr Poyser, 'suppose we say the man wi' the foulest land shall sit at top; then whoever gets th' honour, there'll be no envying on him.'

'Eh, here's Mester Massey,' said Mr Craig, who, being a neutral in the dispute, had no interest but in conciliation; 'the schoolmaster ought to be able to tell you what's right. Who's to sit at top o' the table, Mr Massey?'

'Why, the broadest man,' said Bartle; 'and then he won't take up other folks' room; and the next broadest must sit at bottom.'

This happy mode of settling the dispute produced much laughter - a smaller joke would have sufficed for that Mr Casson, however, did not feel it compatible with his dignity and superior knowledge to join in the laugh, until it turned out that he was fixed on as the second broadest man. Martin Poyser the younger, as the broadest, was to be president, and Mr Casson, as next broadest, was to be vice.

Owing to this arrangement, Adam, being, of course, at the bottom of the table, fell under the immediate observation of Mr Casson, who, too much occupied with the question of precedence, had not hitherto noticed his entrance. Mr Casson, we have seen, considered Adam 'rather lifted up and peppery-like': he thought the gentry made more fuss about this young carpenter than was necessary; they made no fuss about Mr Casson, although he had been an excellent butler for fifteen years.

'Well, Mr Bede, you're one o' them as mounts hup'ards apace,' he said, when Adam sat down. 'You've niver dined here before, as I remember.'

'No, Mr Casson,' said Adam, in his strong voice, that could be heard along the table; 'I've never dined here before, but I come by Captain Donnithorne's wish, and I hope it's not disagreeable to anybody here.'

'Nay, nay,' said several voices at once, 'we're glad ye're come. Who's got anything to say again' it?'

'And ye'll sing us 'Over the hills and far away,' after dinner, wonna ye?' said Mr Chowne. 'That's a song I'm uncommon fond on.'

'Peeh!' said Mr Craig; 'it's not to be named by side o' the Scotch tunes. I've never cared about singing myself; I've had something better to do. A man that's got the names and the natur o' plants in's head isna likely to keep a hollow place t' hold tunes in. But a second cousin o' mine, a drovier, was a rare hand at remembering the Scotch tunes. He'd got nothing else to think on.'

'The Scotch tunes!' said Bartle Massey, contemptuously; 'I've heard enough o' the Scotch tunes to last me while I live. They're fit for nothing but to frighten the birds with - that's to say, the English birds, for the Scotch birds may sing Scotch for what I know. Give the lads a bagpipe instead of a rattle, and I'll answer for it the corn 'll be safe.'

'Yes, there's folks as find a pleasure in undervallying what they know but little about,' said Mr Craig.

'Why, the Scotch tunes are just like a scolding, nagging woman,' Bartle went on, without deigning to notice Mr Craig's remark. 'They go on with the same thing over and over again, and never come to a reasonable end. Anybody 'ud think the Scotch tunes had always been asking a question of somebody as deaf as old Taft, and had never got an answer yet.'

Adam minded the less about sitting by Mr Casson, because this position enabled him to see Hetty, who was not far off him at the next table. Hetty, however, had not even noticed his presence yet, for she was giving angry attention to Totty, who insisted on drawing up her feet on to the bench in antique fashion, and thereby threatened to make dusty marks on Hetty's pink-and-white frock. No sooner were the little fat legs pushed down than up they came again, for Totty's eyes were too busy in staring at the large dishes to see where the plum pudding was for her to retain any consciousness of her legs. Hetty got quite out of patience, and at last, with a frown and pout, and gathering tears, she said, 'Oh dear, Aunt, I wish you'd speak to Totty; she keeps putting her legs up so, and messing my frock.'

'What's the matter wi' the child? She can niver please you,' said the mother. 'Let her come by the side o' me, then. I can put up wi' her.'

Adam was looking at Hetty, and saw the frown, and pout, and the dark eyes seeming to grow larger with pettish half-gathered tears. Quiet Mary Burge, who sat near enough to see that Hetty was cross and that Adam's eyes were fixed on her, thought that so sensible a man as Adam must be reflecting on the small value of beauty in a woman whose temper was bad. Mary was a good girl, not given to indulge in evil feelings, but she said to herself, that, since Hetty had a bad temper, it was better Adam should know it. And it was quite true that if Hetty had been plain, she would have looked very ugly and unamiable at that moment, and no one's moral judgment upon her would have been in the least beguiled. But really there was something quite charming in her pettishness: it looked so much more like innocent distress than ill humour; and the severe Adam felt no movement of disapprobation; he only felt a sort of amused pity, as if he had seen a kitten setting up its back, or a little bird with its

feathers ruffled. He could not gather what was vexing her, but it was impossible to him to feel otherwise than that she was the prettiest thing in the world, and that if he could have his way, nothing should ever vex her any more. And presently, when Totty was gone, she caught his eye, and her face broke into one of its brightest smiles, as she nodded to him. It was a bit of flirtation - she knew Mary Burge was looking at them. But the smile was like wine to Adam.