

Chapter XXXII - Mrs Poyser 'Has Her Say Out'

THE next Saturday evening there was much excited discussion at the Donnithorne Arms concerning an incident which had occurred that very day - no less than a second appearance of the smart man in top-boots said by some to be a mere farmer in treaty for the Chase Farm, by others to be the future steward, but by Mr Casson himself, the personal witness to the stranger's visit, pronounced contemptuously to be nothing better than a bailiff, such as Satchell had been before him. No one had thought of denying Mr Casson's testimony to the fact that he had seen the stranger; nevertheless, he proffered various corroborating circumstances.

'I see him myself,' he said; 'I see him coming along by the Crab-tree Meadow on a bald-faced hoss. I'd just been t' hev a pint - it was half after ten i' the fore-noon, when I hev my pint as reg'lar as the clock - and I says to Knowles, as druv up with his waggon, 'You'll get a bit o' barley to-day, Knowles,' I says, 'if you look about you'; and then I went round by the rick-yard, and towart the Treddles'on road, and just as I come up by the big ash-tree, I see the man i' top-boots coming along on a bald-faced hoss - I wish I may never stir if I didn't. And I stood still till he come up, and I says, 'Good morning, sir,' I says, for I wanted to hear the turn of his tongue, as I might know whether he was a this-country man; so I says, 'Good morning, sir: it 'll 'old hup for the barley this morning, I think. There'll be a bit got hin, if we've good luck.' And he says, 'Eh, ye may be raight, there's noo tallin',' he says, and I knowed by that' - here Mr Casson gave a wink - 'as he didn't come from a hundred mile off. I daresay he'd think me a hodd talker, as you Loamshire folks allays does hany one as talks the right language.'

'The right language!' said Bartle Massey, contemptuously. 'You're about as near the right language as a pig's squeaking is like a tune played on a key-bugle.'

'Well, I don't know,' answered Mr Casson, with an angry smile. 'I should think a man as has lived among the gentry from a by, is likely to know what's the right language pretty nigh as well as a schoolmaster.'

'Aye, aye, man,' said Bartle, with a tone of sarcastic consolation, 'you talk the right language for you. When Mike Holdsworth's goat says ba-a-a, it's all right - it 'ud be unnatural for it to make any other noise.'

The rest of the party being Loamsnire men, Mr Casson had the laugh strongly against him, and wisely fell back on the previous question, which, far from being exhausted in a single evening, was renewed in the churchyard, before service, the next day, with the fresh interest

conferred on all news when there is a fresh person to hear it; and that fresh hearer was Martin Poyser, who, as his wife said, 'never went boozin' with that set at Casson's, a-sittin' soakin' in drink, and looking as wise as a lot o' cod-fish wi' red faces.'

It was probably owing to the conversation she had had with her husband on their way from church concerning this problematic stranger that Mrs. Poyser's thoughts immediately reverted to him when, a day or two afterwards, as she was standing at the house-door with her knitting, in that eager leisure which came to her when the afternoon cleaning was done, she saw the old squire enter the yard on his black pony, followed by John the groom. She always cited it afterwards as a case of prevision, which really had something more in it than her own remarkable penetration, that the moment she set eyes on the squire she said to herself, 'I shouldna wonder if he's come about that man as is a-going to take the Chase Farm, wanting Poyser to do something for him without pay. But Poyser's a fool if he does.'

Something unwonted must clearly be in the wind, for the old squire's visits to his tenantry were rare; and though Mrs. Poyser had during the last twelvemonth recited many imaginary speeches, meaning even more than met the ear, which she was quite determined to make to him the next time he appeared within the gates of the Hall Farm, the speeches had always remained imaginary.

'Good-day, Mrs. Poyser,' said the old squire, peering at her with his short-sighted eyes - a mode of looking at her which, as Mrs. Poyser observed, 'allays aggravated me: it was as if you was a insect, and he was going to dab his finger-nail on you.'

However, she said, 'Your servant, sir,' and curtsied with an air of perfect deference as she advanced towards him: she was not the woman to misbehave towards her betters, and fly in the face of the catechism, without severe provocation.

'Is your husband at home, Mrs. Poyser?'

'Yes, sir; he's only i' the rick-yard. I'll send for him in a minute, if you'll please to get down and step in.'

'Thank you; I will do so. I want to consult him about a little matter; but you are quite as much concerned in it, if not more. I must have your opinion too.'

'Hetty, run and tell your uncle to come in,' said Mrs. Poyser, as they entered the house, and the old gentleman bowed low in answer to Hetty's curtsy; while Totty, conscious of a pinafore stained with

gooseberry jam, stood hiding her face against the clock and peeping round furtively.

'What a fine old kitchen this is!' said Mr Donnithorne, looking round admiringly. He always spoke in the same deliberate, well-chiselled, polite way, whether his words were sugary or venomous. 'And you keep it so exquisitely clean, Mrs. Poyser. I like these premises, do you know, beyond any on the estate.'

'Well, sir, since you're fond of 'em, I should be glad if you'd let a bit o' repairs be done to 'em, for the boarding's i' that state as we're like to be eaten up wi' rats and mice; and the cellar, you may stan' up to your knees i' water in't, if you like to go down; but perhaps you'd rather believe my words. Won't you please to sit down, sir?'

'Not yet; I must see your dairy. I have not seen it for years, and I hear on all hands about your fine cheese and butter,' said the squire, looking politely unconscious that there could be any question on which he and Mrs. Poyser might happen to disagree. 'I think I see the door open, there. You must not be surprised if I cast a covetous eye on your cream and butter. I don't expect that Mrs. Satchell's cream and butter will bear comparison with yours.'

'I can't say, sir, I'm sure. It's seldom I see other folks's butter, though there's some on it as one's no need to see - the smell's enough.'

'Ah, now this I like,' said Mr Donnithorne, looking round at the damp temple of cleanliness, but keeping near the door. 'I'm sure I should like my breakfast better if I knew the butter and cream came from this dairy. Thank you, that really is a pleasant sight. Unfortunately, my slight tendency to rheumatism makes me afraid of damp: I'll sit down in your comfortable kitchen. Ah, Poyser, how do you do? In the midst of business, I see, as usual. I've been looking at your wife's beautiful dairy - the best manager in the parish, is she not?'

Mr Poyser had just entered in shirt-sleeves and open waistcoat, with a face a shade redder than usual, from the exertion of 'pitching.' As he stood, red, rotund, and radiant, before the small, wiry, cool old gentleman, he looked like a prize apple by the side of a withered crab.

'Will you please to take this chair, sir?' he said, lifting his father's arm-chair forward a little: 'you'll find it easy.'

'No, thank you, I never sit in easy-chairs,' said the old gentleman, seating himself on a small chair near the door. 'Do you know, Mrs. Poyser - sit down, pray, both of you - I've been far from contented, for some time, with Mrs. Satchell's dairy management. I think she has not a good method, as you have.'

‘Indeed, sir, I can't speak to that,’ said Mrs. Poyser in a hard voice, rolling and unrolling her knitting and looking icily out of the window, as she continued to stand opposite the squire. Poyser might sit down if he liked, she thought; she wasn't going to sit down, as if she'd give in to any such smooth-tongued palaver. Mr Poyser, who looked and felt the reverse of icy, did sit down in his three-cornered chair.

‘And now, Poyser, as Satchell is laid up, I am intending to let the Chase Farm to a respectable tenant. I'm tired of having a farm on my own hands - nothing is made the best of in such cases, as you know. A satisfactory bailiff is hard to find; and I think you and I, Poyser, and your excellent wife here, can enter into a little arrangement in consequence, which will be to our mutual advantage.’

‘Oh,’ said Mr Poyser, with a good-natured blankness of imagination as to the nature of the arrangement.

‘If I'm called upon to speak, sir,’ said Mrs. Poyser, after glancing at her husband with pity at his softness, ‘you know better than me; but I don't see what the Chase Farm is t' us - we've cumber enough wi' our own farm. Not but what I'm glad to hear o' anybody respectable coming into the parish; there's some as ha' been brought in as hasn't been looked on i' that character.’

‘You're likely to find Mr Thurle an excellent neighbour, I assure you - such a one as you will feel glad to have accommodated by the little plan I'm going to mention, especially as I hope you will find it as much to your own advantage as his.’

‘Indeed, sir, if it's anything t' our advantage, it'll be the first offer o' the sort I've heard on. It's them as take advantage that get advantage i' this world, I think. Folks have to wait long enough afore it's brought to 'em.’

‘The fact is, Poyser,’ said the squire, ignoring Mrs. Poyser's theory of worldly prosperity, ‘there is too much dairy land, and too little plough land, on the Chase Farm to suit Thurle's purpose - indeed, he will only take the farm on condition of some change in it: his wife, it appears, is not a clever dairy-woman, like yours. Now, the plan I'm thinking of is to effect a little exchange. If you were to have the Hollow Pastures, you might increase your dairy, which must be so profitable under your wife's management; and I should request you, Mrs. Poyser, to supply my house with milk, cream, and butter at the market prices. On the other hand, Poyser, you might let Thurle have the Lower and Upper Ridges, which really, with our wet seasons, would be a good riddance for you. There is much less risk in dairy land than corn land.’

Mr Poyser was leaning forward, with his elbows on his knees, his head on one side, and his mouth screwed up - apparently absorbed in making the tips of his fingers meet so as to represent with perfect accuracy the ribs of a ship. He was much too acute a man not to see through the whole business, and to foresee perfectly what would be his wife's view of the subject; but he disliked giving unpleasant answers. Unless it was on a point of farming practice, he would rather give up than have a quarrel, any day; and, after all, it mattered more to his wife than to him. So, after a few moments' silence, he looked up at her and said mildly, 'What dost say?'

Mrs. Poyser had had her eyes fixed on her husband with cold severity during his silence, but now she turned away her head with a toss, looked icily at the opposite roof of the cow-shed, and spearing her knitting together with the loose pin, held it firmly between her clasped hands.

'Say? Why, I say you may do as you like about giving up any o' your corn-land afore your lease is up, which it won't be for a year come next Michaelmas, but I'll not consent to take more dairy work into my hands, either for love or money; and there's nayther love nor money here, as I can see, on'y other folks's love o' theirselves, and the money as is to go into other folks's pockets. I know there's them as is born t' own the land, and them as is born to sweat on't' - here Mrs. Poyser paused to gasp a little - 'and I know it's christened folks's duty to submit to their betters as fur as flesh and blood 'ull bear it; but I'll not make a martyr o' myself, and wear myself to skin and bone, and worret myself as if I was a churn wi' butter a-coming in't, for no landlord in England, not if he was King George himself.'

'No, no, my dear Mrs. Poyser, certainly not,' said the squire, still confident in his own powers of persuasion, 'you must not overwork yourself; but don't you think your work will rather be lessened than increased in this way? There is so much milk required at the Abbey that you will have little increase of cheese and butter making from the addition to your dairy; and I believe selling the milk is the most profitable way of disposing of dairy produce, is it not?'

'Aye, that's true,' said Mr Poyser, unable to repress an opinion on a question of farming profits, and forgetting that it was not in this case a purely abstract question.

'I daresay,' said Mrs. Poyser bitterly, turning her head half-way towards her husband and looking at the vacant arm-chair - 'I daresay it's true for men as sit i' th' chimney-corner and make believe as everything's cut wi' ins an' outs to fit int' everything else. If you could make a pudding wi' thinking o' the batter, it 'ud be easy getting dinner. How do I know whether the milk 'ull be wanted constant?'

What's to make me sure as the house won't be put o' board wage afore we're many months older, and then I may have to lie awake o' nights wi' twenty gallons o' milk on my mind - and Dingall 'ull take no more butter, let alone paying for it; and we must fat pigs till we're obliged to beg the butcher on our knees to buy 'em, and lose half of 'em wi' the measles. And there's the fetching and carrying, as 'ud be welly half a day's work for a man an' hoss - that's to be took out o' the profits, I reckon? But there's folks 'ud hold a sieve under the pump and expect to carry away the water.'

'That difficulty - about the fetching and carrying - you will not have, Mrs. Poyser,' said the squire, who thought that this entrance into particulars indicated a distant inclination to compromise on Mrs. Poyser's part. 'Bethell will do that regularly with the cart and pony.'

'Oh, sir, begging your pardon, I've never been used t' having gentlefolks's servants coming about my back places, a-making love to both the gells at once and keeping 'em with their hands on their hips listening to all manner o' gossip when they should be down on their knees a-scouring. If we're to go to ruin, it shanna be wi' having our back kitchen turned into a public.'

'Well, Poyser,' said the squire, shifting his tactics and looking as if he thought Mrs. Poyser had suddenly withdrawn from the proceedings and left the room, 'you can turn the Hollows into feeding-land. I can easily make another arrangement about supplying my house. And I shall not forget your readiness to accommodate your landlord as well as a neighbour. I know you will be glad to have your lease renewed for three years, when the present one expires; otherwise, I daresay Thurle, who is a man of some capital, would be glad to take both the farms, as they could be worked so well together. But I don't want to part with an old tenant like you.'

To be thrust out of the discussion in this way would have been enough to complete Mrs. Poyser's exasperation, even without the final threat. Her husband, really alarmed at the possibility of their leaving the old place where he had been bred and born - for he believed the old squire had small spite enough for anything - was beginning a mild remonstrance explanatory of the inconvenience he should find in having to buy and sell more stock, with, 'Well, sir, I think as it's rether hard...' when Mrs. Poyser burst in with the desperate determination to have her say out this once, though it were to rain notices to quit and the only shelter were the work-house.

'Then, sir, if I may speak - as, for all I'm a woman, and there's folks as thinks a woman's fool enough to stan' by an' look on while the men sign her soul away, I've a right to speak, for I make one quarter o' the rent, and save another quarter - I say, if Mr Thurle's so ready to take

farms under you, it's a pity but what he should take this, and see if he likes to live in a house wi' all the plagues o' Egypt in't - wi' the cellar full o' water, and frogs and toads hoppin' up the steps by dozens - and the floors rotten, and the rats and mice gnawing every bit o' cheese, and runnin' over our heads as we lie i' bed till we expect 'em to eat us up alive - as it's a mercy they hanna eat the children long ago. I should like to see if there's another tenant besides Poyser as 'ud put up wi' never having a bit o' repairs done till a place tumbles down - and not then, on'y wi' begging and praying and having to pay half - and being strung up wi' the rent as it's much if he gets enough out o' the land to pay, for all he's put his own money into the ground beforehand. See if you'll get a stranger to lead such a life here as that: a maggot must be born i' the rotten cheese to like it, I reckon. You may run away from my words, sir,' continued Mrs. Poyser, following the old squire beyond the door - for after the first moments of stunned surprise he had got up, and, waving his hand towards her with a smile, had walked out towards his pony. But it was impossible for him to get away immediately, for John was walking the pony up and down the yard, and was some distance from the causeway when his master beckoned.

'You may run away from my words, sir, and you may go spinnin' underhand ways o' doing us a mischief, for you've got Old Harry to your friend, though nobody else is, but I tell you for once as we're not dumb creatures to be abused and made money on by them as ha' got the lash i' their hands, for want o' knowing how t' undo the tackle. An' if I'm th' only one as speaks my mind, there's plenty o' the same way o' thinking i' this parish and the next to 't, for your name's no better than a brimstone match in everybody's nose - if it isna two-three old folks as you think o' saving your soul by giving 'em a bit o' flannel and a drop o' porridge. An' you may be right i' thinking it'll take but little to save your soul, for it'll be the smallest savin' y' iver made, wi' all your scrapin'.'

There are occasions on which two servant-girls and a waggoner may be a formidable audience, and as the squire rode away on his black pony, even the gift of short-sightedness did not prevent him from being aware that Molly and Nancy and Tim were grinning not far from him. Perhaps he suspected that sour old John was grinning behind him - which was also the fact. Meanwhile the bull-dog, the black-and-tan terrier, Alick's sheep-dog, and the gander hissing at a safe distance from the pony's heels carried out the idea of Mrs. Poyser's solo in an impressive quartet.

Mrs. Poyser, however, had no sooner seen the pony move off than she turned round, gave the two hilarious damsels a look which drove them into the back kitchen, and unspearing her knitting, began to knit again with her usual rapidity as she re-entered the house.

'Thee'st done it now,' said Mr Poyser, a little alarmed and uneasy, but not without some triumphant amusement at his wife's outbreak.

'Yes, I know I've done it,' said Mrs. Poyser; 'but I've had my say out, and I shall be th' easier for't all my life. There's no pleasure i' living if you're to be corked up for ever, and only dribble your mind out by the sly, like a leaky barrel. I shan't repent saying what I think, if I live to be as old as th' old squire; and there's little likelihood - for it seems as if them as aren't wanted here are th' only folks as aren't wanted i' th' other world.'

'But thee wutna like moving from th' old place, this Michaelmas twelvemonth,' said Mr Poyser, 'and going into a strange parish, where thee know'st nobody. It'll be hard upon us both, and upo' Father too.'

'Eh, it's no use worreting; there's plenty o' things may happen between this and Michaelmas twelvemonth. The captain may be master afore them, for what we know,' said Mrs. Poyser, inclined to take an unusually hopeful view of an embarrassment which had been brought about by her own merit and not by other people's fault.

'I'M none for worreting,' said Mr Poyser, rising from his three-cornered chair and walking slowly towards the door; 'but I should be loath to leave th' old place, and the parish where I was bred and born, and Father afore me. We should leave our roots behind us, I doubt, and niver thrive again.'