

Chapter LIII - The Harvest Supper

As Adam was going homeward, on Wednesday evening, in the six o'clock sunlight, he saw in the distance the last load of barley winding its way towards the yard-gate of the Hall Farm, and heard the chant of 'Harvest Home!' rising and sinking like a wave. Fainter and fainter, and more musical through the growing distance, the falling dying sound still reached him, as he neared the Willow Brook. The low westering sun shone right on the shoulders of the old Binton Hills, turning the unconscious sheep into bright spots of light; shone on the windows of the cottage too, and made them a-flame with a glory beyond that of amber or amethyst. It was enough to make Adam feel that he was in a great temple, and that the distant chant was a sacred song.

'It's wonderful,' he thought, 'how that sound goes to one's heart almost like a funeral bell, for all it tells one o' the joyfullest time o' the year, and the time when men are mostly the thankfullest. I suppose it's a bit hard to us to think anything's over and gone in our lives; and there's a parting at the root of all our joys. It's like what I feel about Dinah. I should never ha' come to know that her love 'ud be the greatest o' blessings to me, if what I counted a blessing hadn't been wrenched and torn away from me, and left me with a greater need, so as I could crave and hunger for a greater and a better comfort.'

He expected to see Dinah again this evening, and get leave to accompany her as far as Oakbourne; and then he would ask her to fix some time when he might go to Snowfield, and learn whether the last best hope that had been born to him must be resigned like the rest. The work he had to do at home, besides putting on his best clothes, made it seven before he was on his way again to the Hall Farm, and it was questionable whether, with his longest and quickest strides, he should be there in time even for the roast beef, which came after the plum pudding, for Mrs. Poyser's supper would be punctual.

Great was the clatter of knives and pewter plates and tin cans when Adam entered the house, but there was no hum of voices to this accompaniment: the eating of excellent roast beef, provided free of expense, was too serious a business to those good farm-labourers to be performed with a divided attention, even if they had had anything to say to each other - which they had not. And Mr Poyser, at the head of the table, was too busy with his carving to listen to Bartle Massey's or Mr Craig's ready talk.

'Here, Adam,' said Mrs. Poyser, who was standing and looking on to see that Molly and Nancy did their duty as waiters, 'here's a place kept for you between Mr Massey and the boys. It's a poor tale you couldn't come to see the pudding when it was whole.'

Adam looked anxiously round for a fourth woman's figure, but Dinah was not there. He was almost afraid of asking about her; besides, his attention was claimed by greetings, and there remained the hope that Dinah was in the house, though perhaps disinclined to festivities on the eve of her departure.

It was a goodly sight - that table, with Martin Poyser's round good-humoured face and large person at the head of it helping his servants to the fragrant roast beef and pleased when the empty plates came again. Martin, though usually blest with a good appetite, really forgot to finish his own beef to-night - it was so pleasant to him to look on in the intervals of carving and see how the others enjoyed their supper; for were they not men who, on all the days of the year except Christmas Day and Sundays, ate their cold dinner, in a makeshift manner, under the hedgerows, and drank their beer out of wooden bottles - with relish certainly, but with their mouths towards the zenith, after a fashion more endurable to ducks than to human bipeds. Martin Poyser had some faint conception of the flavour such men must find in hot roast beef and fresh-drawn ale. He held his head on one side and screwed up his mouth, as he nudged Bartle Massey, and watched half-witted Tom Tholer, otherwise known as 'Tom Saft,' receiving his second plateful of beef. A grin of delight broke over Tom's face as the plate was set down before him, between his knife and fork, which he held erect, as if they had been sacred tapers. But the delight was too strong to continue smouldering in a grin - it burst out the next instant in a long-drawn 'haw, haw!' followed by a sudden collapse into utter gravity, as the knife and fork darted down on the prey. Martin Poyser's large person shook with his silent unctuous laugh. He turned towards Mrs. Poyser to see if she too had been observant of Tom, and the eyes of husband and wife met in a glance of good-natured amusement.

'Tom Saft' was a great favourite on the farm, where he played the part of the old jester, and made up for his practical deficiencies by his success in repartee. His hits, I imagine, were those of the flail, which falls quite at random, but nevertheless smashes an insect now and then. They were much quoted at sheep-shearing and haymaking times, but I refrain from recording them here, lest Tom's wit should prove to be like that of many other bygone jesters eminent in their day - rather of a temporary nature, not dealing with the deeper and more lasting relations of things.

Tom excepted, Martin Poyser had some pride in his servants and labourers, thinking with satisfaction that they were the best worth their pay of any set on the estate. There was Kester Bale, for example (Beale, probably, if the truth were known, but he was called Bale, and was not conscious of any claim to a fifth letter), the old man with the close leather cap and the network of wrinkles on his sun-browned

face. Was there any man in Loamshire who knew better the 'natur' of all farming work? He was one of those invaluable labourers who can not only turn their hand to everything, but excel in everything they turn their hand to. It is true Kester's knees were much bent outward by this time, and he walked with a perpetual curtsy, as if he were among the most reverent of men. And so he was; but I am obliged to admit that the object of his reverence was his own skill, towards which he performed some rather affecting acts of worship. He always thatched the ricks - for if anything were his forte more than another, it was thatching - and when the last touch had been put to the last beehive rick, Kester, whose home lay at some distance from the farm, would take a walk to the rick-yard in his best clothes on a Sunday morning and stand in the lane, at a due distance, to contemplate his own thatching walking about to get each rick from the proper point of view. As he curtsied along, with his eyes upturned to the straw knobs imitative of golden globes at the summits of the beehive ricks, which indeed were gold of the best sort, you might have imagined him to be engaged in some pagan act of adoration. Kester was an old bachelor and reputed to have stockings full of coin, concerning which his master cracked a joke with him every pay-night: not a new unseasoned joke, but a good old one, that had been tried many times before and had worn well. 'Th' young measter's a merry mon,' Kester frequently remarked; for having begun his career by frightening away the crows under the last Martin Poyser but one, he could never cease to account the reigning Martin a young master. I am not ashamed of commemorating old Kester. You and I are indebted to the hard hands of such men - hands that have long ago mingled with the soil they tilled so faithfully, thriftily making the best they could of the earth's fruits, and receiving the smallest share as their own wages.

Then, at the end of the table, opposite his master, there was Alick, the shepherd and head-man, with the ruddy face and broad shoulders, not on the best terms with old Kester; indeed, their intercourse was confined to an occasional snarl, for though they probably differed little concerning hedging and ditching and the treatment of ewes, there was a profound difference of opinion between them as to their own respective merits. When Tityrus and Meliboeus happen to be on the same farm, they are not sentimentally polite to each other. Alick, indeed, was not by any means a honeyed man. His speech had usually something of a snarl in it, and his broad-shouldered aspect something of the bull-dog expression - 'Don't you meddle with me, and I won't meddle with you.' But he was honest even to the splitting of an oat-grain rather than he would take beyond his acknowledged share, and as 'close-fisted' with his master's property as if it had been his own - throwing very small handfuls of damaged barley to the chickens, because a large handful affected his imagination painfully with a sense of profusion. Good-tempered Tim, the waggoner, who loved his horses, had his grudge against Alick in the matter of corn.

They rarely spoke to each other, and never looked at each other, even over their dish of cold potatoes; but then, as this was their usual mode of behaviour towards all mankind, it would be an unsafe conclusion that they had more than transient fits of unfriendliness. The bucolic character at Hayslope, you perceive, was not of that entirely genial, merry, broad-grinning sort, apparently observed in most districts visited by artists. The mild radiance of a smile was a rare sight on a field-labourer's face, and there was seldom any gradation between bovine gravity and a laugh. Nor was every labourer so honest as our friend Alick. At this very table, among Mr Poyser's men, there is that big Ben Tholoway, a very powerful thresher, but detected more than once in carrying away his master's corn in his pockets - an action which, as Ben was not a philosopher, could hardly be ascribed to absence of mind. However, his master had forgiven him, and continued to employ him, for the Tholoways had lived on the Common time out of mind, and had always worked for the Poyser's. And on the whole, I daresay, society was not much the worse because Ben had not six months of it at the treadmill, for his views of depredation were narrow, and the House of Correction might have enlarged them. As it was, Ben ate his roast beef to-night with a serene sense of having stolen nothing more than a few peas and beans as seed for his garden since the last harvest supper, and felt warranted in thinking that Alick's suspicious eye, for ever upon him, was an injury to his innocence.

But NOW the roast beef was finished and the cloth was drawn, leaving a fair large deal table for the bright drinking-cans, and the foaming brown jugs, and the bright brass candlesticks, pleasant to behold. NOW, the great ceremony of the evening was to begin - the harvest-song, in which every man must join. He might be in tune, if he liked to be singular, but he must not sit with closed lips. The movement was obliged to be in triple time; the rest was ad libitum.

As to the origin of this song - whether it came in its actual state from the brain of a single rhapsodist, or was gradually perfected by a school or succession of rhapsodists, I am ignorant. There is a stamp of unity, of individual genius upon it, which inclines me to the former hypothesis, though I am not blind to the consideration that this unity may rather have arisen from that consensus of many minds which was a condition of primitive thought, foreign to our modern consciousness. Some will perhaps think that they detect in the first quatrain an indication of a lost line, which later rhapsodists, failing in imaginative vigour, have supplied by the feeble device of iteration. Others, however, may rather maintain that this very iteration is an original felicity, to which none but the most prosaic minds can be insensible.

The ceremony connected with the song was a drinking ceremony. (That is perhaps a painful fact, but then, you know, we cannot reform our forefathers.) During the first and second quatrain, sung decidedly forte, no can was filled.

Here's a health unto our master, The founder of the feast; Here's a health unto our master And to our mistress!

And may his doings prosper, Whate'er he takes in hand, For we are all his servants, And are at his command.

But now, immediately before the third quatrain or chorus, sung fortissimo, with emphatic raps of the table, which gave the effect of cymbals and drum together, Alick's can was filled, and he was bound to empty it before the chorus ceased.

Then drink, boys, drink! And see ye do not spill, For if ye do, ye shall drink two, For 'tis our master's will.

When Alick had gone successfully through this test of steady-handed manliness, it was the turn of old Kester, at his right hand - and so on, till every man had drunk his initiatory pint under the stimulus of the chorus. Tom Saft - the rogue - took care to spill a little by accident; but Mrs. Poyser (too officiously, Tom thought) interfered to prevent the exaction of the penalty.

To any listener outside the door it would have been the reverse of obvious why the 'Drink, boys, drink!' should have such an immediate and often-repeated encore; but once entered, he would have seen that all faces were at present sober, and most of them serious - it was the regular and respectable thing for those excellent farm-labourers to do, as much as for elegant ladies and gentlemen to smirk and bow over their wine-glasses. Bartle Massey, whose ears were rather sensitive, had gone out to see what sort of evening it was at an early stage in the ceremony, and had not finished his contemplation until a silence of five minutes declared that 'Drink, boys, drink!' was not likely to begin again for the next twelvemonth. Much to the regret of the boys and Totty: on them the stillness fell rather flat, after that glorious thumping of the table, towards which Totty, seated on her father's knee, contributed with her small might and small fist.

When Bartle re-entered, however, there appeared to be a general desire for solo music after the choral. Nancy declared that Tim the waggoner knew a song and was 'allays singing like a lark i' the stable,' whereupon Mr Poyser said encouragingly, 'Come, Tim, lad, let's hear it.' Tim looked sheepish, tucked down his head, and said he couldn't sing, but this encouraging invitation of the master's was echoed all round the table. It was a conversational opportunity: everybody could

say, 'Come, Tim,' except Alick, who never relaxed into the frivolity of unnecessary speech. At last, Tim's next neighbour, Ben Tholoway, began to give emphasis to his speech by nudges, at which Tim, growing rather savage, said, 'Let me alooan, will ye? Else I'll ma' ye sing a toon ye wanna like.' A good-tempered waggoner's patience has limits, and Tim was not to be urged further.

'Well, then, David, ye're the lad to sing,' said Ben, willing to show that he was not discomfited by this check. 'Sing 'My loove's a roos wi'out a thorn.'

The amatory David was a young man of an unconscious abstracted expression, which was due probably to a squint of superior intensity rather than to any mental characteristic; for he was not indifferent to Ben's invitation, but blushed and laughed and rubbed his sleeve over his mouth in a way that was regarded as a symptom of yielding. And for some time the company appeared to be much in earnest about the desire to hear David's song. But in vain. The lyricism of the evening was in the cellar at present, and was not to be drawn from that retreat just yet.

Meanwhile the conversation at the head of the table had taken a political turn. Mr Craig was not above talking politics occasionally, though he piqued himself rather on a wise insight than on specific information. He saw so far beyond the mere facts of a case that really it was superfluous to know them.

'I'm no reader o' the paper myself,' he observed to-night, as he filled his pipe, 'though I might read it fast enough if I liked, for there's Miss Lyddy has 'em and 's done with 'em i' no time. But there's Mills, now, sits i' the chimney-corner and reads the paper pretty nigh from morning to night, and when he's got to th' end on't he's more addle-headed than he was at the beginning. He's full o' this peace now, as they talk on; he's been reading and reading, and thinks he's got to the bottom on't. 'Why, Lor' bless you, Mills,' says I, 'you see no more into this thing nor you can see into the middle of a potato. I'll tell you what it is: you think it'll be a fine thing for the country. And I'm not again' it - mark my words - I'm not again' it. But it's my opinion as there's them at the head o' this country as are worse enemies to us nor Bony and all the mounseers he's got at 's back; for as for the mounseers, you may skewer half-a-dozen of 'em at once as if they war frogs.'

'Aye, aye,' said Martin Poyser, listening with an air of much intelligence and edification, 'they ne'er ate a bit o' beef i' their lives. Mostly sallet, I reckon.'

'And says I to Mills,' continued Mr Craig, 'Will you try to make me believe as furriners like them can do us half th' harm them ministers

do with their bad government? If King George 'ud turn 'em all away and govern by himself, he'd see everything righted. He might take on Billy Pitt again if he liked; but I don't see myself what we want wi' anybody besides King and Parliament. It's that nest o' ministers does the mischief, I tell you."

'Ah, it's fine talking,' observed Mrs. Poyser, who was now seated near her husband, with Totty on her lap - 'it's fine talking. It's hard work to tell which is Old Harry when everybody's got boots on.'

'As for this peace,' said Mr Poyser, turning his head on one side in a dubitative manner and giving a precautionary puff to his pipe between each sentence, 'I don't know. Th' war's a fine thing for the country, an' how'll you keep up prices wi'out it? An' them French are a wicked sort o' folks, by what I can make out. What can you do better nor fight 'em?'

'Ye're partly right there, Poyser,' said Mr Craig, 'but I'm not again' the peace - to make a holiday for a bit. We can break it when we like, an' I'm in no fear o' Bony, for all they talk so much o' his cliverness. That's what I says to Mills this morning. Lor' bless you, he sees no more through Bony!...why, I put him up to more in three minutes than he gets from's paper all the year round. Says I, 'Am I a gardener as knows his business, or arn't I, Mills? Answer me that.' 'To be sure y' are, Craig,' says he - he's not a bad fellow, Mills isn't, for a butler, but weak i' the head. 'Well,' says I, 'you talk o' Bony's cliverness; would it be any use my being a first-rate gardener if I'd got nought but a quagmire to work on?' 'No,' says he. 'Well,' I says, 'that's just what it is wi' Bony. I'll not deny but he may be a bit clever - he's no Frenchman born, as I understand - but what's he got at's back but mounseers?'

Mr Craig paused a moment with an emphatic stare after this triumphant specimen of Socratic argument, and then added, thumping the table rather fiercely, 'Why, it's a sure thing - and there's them 'ull bear witness to't - as i' one regiment where there was one man a-missing, they put the regimentals on a big monkey, and they fit him as the shell fits the walnut, and you couldn't tell the monkey from the mounseers!'

'Ah! Think o' that, now!' said Mr Poyser, impressed at once with the political bearings of the fact and with its striking interest as an anecdote in natural history.

'Come, Craig,' said Adam, 'that's a little too strong. You don't believe that. It's all nonsense about the French being such poor sticks. Mr Irwine's seen 'em in their own country, and he says they've plenty o' fine fellows among 'em. And as for knowledge, and contrivances, and

manufactures, there's a many things as we're a fine sight behind 'em in. It's poor foolishness to run down your enemies. Why, Nelson and the rest of 'em 'ud have no merit i' beating 'em, if they were such offal as folks pretend.'

Mr Poyser looked doubtfully at Mr Craig, puzzled by this opposition of authorities. Mr Irwine's testimony was not to be disputed; but, on the other hand, Craig was a knowing fellow, and his view was less startling. Martin had never 'heard tell' of the French being good for much. Mr Craig had found no answer but such as was implied in taking a long draught of ale and then looking down fixedly at the proportions of his own leg, which he turned a little outward for that purpose, when Bartle Massey returned from the fireplace, where he had been smoking his first pipe in quiet, and broke the silence by saying, as he thrust his forefinger into the canister, 'Why, Adam, how happened you not to be at church on Sunday? Answer me that, you rascal. The anthem went limping without you. Are you going to disgrace your schoolmaster in his old age?'

'No, Mr Massey,' said Adam. 'Mr and Mrs. Poyser can tell you where I was. I was in no bad company.'

'She's gone, Adam - gone to Snowfield,' said Mr Poyser, reminded of Dinah for the first time this evening. 'I thought you'd ha' persuaded her better. Nought 'ud hold her, but she must go yesterday forenoon. The missis has hardly got over it. I thought she'd ha' no sperrit for th' harvest supper.'

Mrs. Poyser had thought of Dinah several times since Adam had come in, but she had had 'no heart' to mention the bad news.

'What!' said Bartle, with an air of disgust. 'Was there a woman concerned? Then I give you up, Adam.'

'But it's a woman you'n spoke well on, Bartle,' said Mr Poyser. 'Come now, you canna draw back; you said once as women wouldna ha' been a bad invention if they'd all been like Dinah.'

'I meant her voice, man - I meant her voice, that was all,' said Bartle. 'I can bear to hear her speak without wanting to put wool in my ears. As for other things, I daresay she's like the rest o' the women - thinks two and two 'll come to make five, if she cries and bothers enough about it.'

'Aye, aye!' said Mrs. Poyser; 'one 'ud think, an' hear some folks talk, as the men war 'cute enough to count the corns in a bag o' wheat wi' only smelling at it. They can see through a barn-door, they can. Perhaps that's the reason THEY can see so little o' this side on't.'

Martin Poyser shook with delighted laughter and winked at Adam, as much as to say the schoolmaster was in for it now.

‘Ah!’ said Bartle sneeringly, ‘the women are quick enough - they're quick enough. They know the rights of a story before they hear it, and can tell a man what his thoughts are before he knows 'em himself.’

‘Like enough,’ said Mrs. Poyser, ‘for the men are mostly so slow, their thoughts overrun 'em, an' they can only catch 'em by the tail. I can count a stocking-top while a man's getting's tongue ready an' when he outs wi' his speech at last, there's little broth to be made on't. It's your dead chicks take the longest hatchin'. Howiver, I'm not denyin' the women are foolish: God Almighty made 'em to match the men.’

‘Match!’ said Bartle. ‘Aye, as vinegar matches one's teeth. If a man says a word, his wife 'll match it with a contradiction; if he's a mind for hot meat, his wife 'll match it with cold bacon; if he laughs, she'll match him with whimpering. She's such a match as the horse-fly is to th' horse: she's got the right venom to sting him with - the right venom to sting him with.’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Poyser, ‘I know what the men like - a poor soft, as 'ud simper at 'em like the picture o' the sun, whether they did right or wrong, an' say thank you for a kick, an' pretend she didna know which end she stood uppermost, till her husband told her. That's what a man wants in a wife, mostly; he wants to make sure o' one fool as 'ull tell him he's wise. But there's some men can do wi'out that - they think so much o' themselves a'ready. An' that's how it is there's old bachelors.’

‘Come, Craig,’ said Mr Poyser jocosely, ‘you mun get married pretty quick, else you'll be set down for an old bachelor; an' you see what the women 'ull think on you.’

‘Well,’ said Mr Craig, willing to conciliate Mrs. Poyser and setting a high value on his own compliments, ‘I like a cleverish woman - a woman o' sperrit - a managing woman.’

‘You're out there, Craig,’ said Bartle, dryly; ‘you're out there. You judge o' your garden-stuff on a better plan than that. You pick the things for what they can excel in - for what they can excel in. You don't value your peas for their roots, or your carrots for their flowers. Now, that's the way you should choose women. Their cleverness 'll never come to much - never come to much - but they make excellent simpletons, ripe and strong-flavoured.’

‘What dost say to that?’ said Mr Poyser, throwing himself back and looking merrily at his wife.

'Say!' answered Mrs. Poyser, with dangerous fire kindling in her eye. 'Why, I say as some folks' tongues are like the clocks as run on strikin', not to tell you the time o' the day, but because there's summat wrong i' their own inside...'

Mrs. Poyser would probably have brought her rejoinder to a further climax, if every one's attention had not at this moment been called to the other end of the table, where the lyricism, which had at first only manifested itself by David's sotto voce performance of 'My love's a rose without a thorn,' had gradually assumed a rather deafening and complex character. Tim, thinking slightly of David's vocalization, was impelled to supersede that feeble buzz by a spirited commencement of 'Three Merry Mowers,' but David was not to be put down so easily, and showed himself capable of a copious crescendo, which was rendering it doubtful whether the rose would not predominate over the mowers, when old Kester, with an entirely unmoved and immovable aspect, suddenly set up a quavering treble - as if he had been an alarum, and the time was come for him to go off.

The company at Alick's end of the table took this form of vocal entertainment very much as a matter of course, being free from musical prejudices; but Bartle Massey laid down his pipe and put his fingers in his ears; and Adam, who had been longing to go ever since he had heard Dinah was not in the house, rose and said he must bid good-night.

'I'll go with you, lad,' said Bartle; 'I'll go with you before my ears are split.'

'I'll go round by the Common and see you home, if you like, Mr Massey,' said Adam.

'Aye, aye!' said Bartle; 'then we can have a bit o' talk together. I never get hold of you now.'

'Eh! It's a pity but you'd sit it out,' said Martin Poyser. 'They'll all go soon, for th' missis niver lets 'em stay past ten.'

But Adam was resolute, so the good-nights were said, and the two friends turned out on their starlight walk together.

'There's that poor fool, Vixen, whimpering for me at home,' said Bartle. 'I can never bring her here with me for fear she should be struck with Mrs. Poyser's eye, and the poor bitch might go limping for ever after.'

'I've never any need to drive Gyp back,' said Adam, laughing. 'He always turns back of his own head when he finds out I'm coming here.'

'Aye, aye,' said Bartle. 'A terrible woman! - made of needles, made of needles. But I stick to Martin - I shall always stick to Martin. And he likes the needles, God help him! He's a cushion made on purpose for 'em.'

'But she's a downright good-natur'd woman, for all that,' said Adam, 'and as true as the daylight. She's a bit cross wi' the dogs when they offer to come in th' house, but if they depended on her, she'd take care and have 'em well fed. If her tongue's keen, her heart's tender: I've seen that in times o' trouble. She's one o' those women as are better than their word.'

'Well, well,' said Bartle, 'I don't say th' apple isn't sound at the core; but it sets my teeth on edge - it sets my teeth on edge.'