

Chapter V - Showing That Tom Had Opened the Oyster

‘And now we've settled this Newcastle business, Tom,’ said Mr Deane, that same afternoon, as they were seated in the private room at the Bank together, ‘there's another matter I want to talk to you about. Since you're likely to have rather a smoky, unpleasant time of it at Newcastle for the next few weeks, you'll want a good prospect of some sort to keep up your spirits.’

Tom waited less nervously than he had done on a former occasion in this apartment, while his uncle took out his snuff-box and gratified each nostril with deliberate impartiality.

‘You see, Tom,’ said Mr Deane at last, throwing himself backward, ‘the world goes on at a smarter pace now than it did when I was a young fellow. Why, sir, forty years ago, when I was much such a strapping youngster as you, a man expected to pull between the shafts the best part of his life, before he got the whip in his hand. The looms went slowish, and fashions didn't alter quite so fast; I'd a best suit that lasted me six years. Everything was on a lower scale, sir, - in point of expenditure, I mean. It's this steam, you see, that has made the difference; it drives on every wheel double pace, and the wheel of fortune along with 'em, as our Mr Stephen Guest said at the anniversary dinner (he hits these things off wonderfully, considering he's seen nothing of business). I don't find fault with the change, as some people do. Trade, sir, opens a man's eyes; and if the population is to get thicker upon the ground, as it's doing, the world must use its wits at inventions of one sort or other. I know I've done my share as an ordinary man of business. Somebody has said it's a fine thing to make two ears of corn grow where only one grew before; but, sir, it's a fine thing, too, to further the exchange of commodities, and bring the grains of corn to the mouths that are hungry. And that's our line of business; and I consider it as honorable a position as a man can hold, to be connected with it.’

Tom knew that the affair his uncle had to speak of was not urgent; Mr Deane was too shrewd and practical a man to allow either his reminiscences or his snuff to impede the progress of trade. Indeed, for the last month or two, there had been hints thrown out to Tom which enabled him to guess that he was going to hear some proposition for his own benefit. With the beginning of the last speech he had stretched out his legs, thrust his hands in his pockets, and prepared himself for some introductory diffuseness, tending to show that Mr Deane had succeeded by his own merit, and that what he had to say to young men in general was, that if they didn't succeed too it was because of their own demerit. He was rather surprised, then, when his uncle put a direct question to him.

'Let me see, - it's going on for seven years now since you applied to me for a situation, eh, Tom?'

'Yes, sir; I'm three-and-twenty now,' said Tom.

'Ah, it's as well not to say that, though; for you'd pass for a good deal older, and age tells well in business. I remember your coming very well; I remember I saw there was some pluck in you, and that was what made me give you encouragement. And I'm happy to say I was right; I'm not often deceived. I was naturally a little shy at pushing my nephew, but I'm happy to say you've done me credit, sir; and if I'd had a son o' my own, I shouldn't have been sorry to see him like you.'

Mr Deane tapped his box and opened it again, repeating in a tone of some feeling, 'No, I shouldn't have been sorry to see him like you.'

'I'm very glad I've given you satisfaction, sir; I've done my best,' said Tom, in his proud, independent way.

'Yes, Tom, you've given me satisfaction. I don't speak of your conduct as a son; though that weighs with me in my opinion of you. But what I have to do with, as a partner in our firm, is the qualities you've shown as a man o' business. Ours is a fine business, - a splendid concern, sir, - and there's no reason why it shouldn't go on growing; there's a growing capital, and growing outlets for it; but there's another thing that's wanted for the prosperity of every concern, large or small, and that's men to conduct it, - men of the right habits; none o' your flashy fellows, but such as are to be depended on. Now this is what Mr Guest and I see clear enough. Three years ago we took Gell into the concern; we gave him a share in the oil-mill. And why? Why, because Gell was a fellow whose services were worth a premium. So it will always be, sir. So it was with me. And though Gell is pretty near ten years older than you, there are other points in your favor.'

Tom was getting a little nervous as Mr Deane went on speaking; he was conscious of something he had in his mind to say, which might not be agreeable to his uncle, simply because it was a new suggestion rather than an acceptance of the proposition he foresaw.

'It stands to reason,' Mr Deane went on, when he had finished his new pinch, 'that your being my nephew weighs in your favor; but I don't deny that if you'd been no relation of mine at all, your conduct in that affair of Pelley's bank would have led Mr Guest and myself to make some acknowledgment of the service you've been to us; and, backed by your general conduct and business ability, it has made us determine on giving you a share in the business, - a share which we shall be glad to increase as the years go on. We think that'll be better, on all grounds, than raising your salary. It'll give you more

importance, and prepare you better for taking some of the anxiety off my shoulders by and by. I'm equal to a good deal o' work at present, thank God; but I'm getting older, - there's no denying that. I told Mr Guest I would open the subject to you; and when you come back from this northern business, we can go into particulars. This is a great stride for a young fellow of three-and-twenty, but I'm bound to say you've deserved it.'

'I'm very grateful to Mr Guest and you, sir; of course I feel the most indebted to *you*, who first took me into the business, and have taken a good deal of pains with me since.'

Tom spoke with a slight tremor, and paused after he had said this.

'Yes, yes,' said Mr Deane. 'I don't spare pains when I see they'll be of any use. I gave myself some trouble with Gell, else he wouldn't have been what he is.'

'But there's one thing I should like to mention to you uncle. I've never spoken to you of it before. If you remember, at the time my father's property was sold, there was some thought of your firm buying the Mill; I know you thought it would be a very good investment, especially if steam were applied.'

'To be sure, to be sure. But Wakem outbid us; he'd made up his mind to that. He's rather fond of carrying everything over other people's heads.'

'Perhaps it's of no use my mentioning it at present,' Tom went on, 'but I wish you to know what I have in my mind about the Mill. I've a strong feeling about it. It was my father's dying wish that I should try and get it back again whenever I could; it was in his family for five generations. I promised my father; and besides that, I'm attached to the place. I shall never like any other so well. And if it should ever suit your views to buy it for the firm, I should have a better chance of fulfilling my father's wish. I shouldn't have liked to mention the thing to you, only you've been kind enough to say my services have been of some value. And I'd give up a much greater chance in life for the sake of having the Mill again, - I mean having it in my own hands, and gradually working off the price.'

Mr Deane had listened attentively, and now looked thoughtful.

'I see, I see,' he said, after a while; 'the thing would be possible if there were any chance of Wakem's parting with the property. But that I *don't* see. He's put that young Jetsome in the place; and he had his reasons when he bought it, I'll be bound.'

'He's a loose fish, that young Jetsome,' said Tom. 'He's taking to drinking, and they say he's letting the business go down. Luke told me about it, - our old miller. He says he sha'n't stay unless there's an alteration. I was thinking, if things went on that way, Wakem might be more willing to part with the Mill. Luke says he's getting very sour about the way things are going on.'

'Well, I'll turn it over, Tom. I must inquire into the matter, and go into it with Mr Guest. But, you see, it's rather striking out a new branch, and putting you to that, instead of keeping you where you are, which was what we'd wanted.'

'I should be able to manage more than the Mill when things were once set properly going, sir. I want to have plenty of work. There's nothing else I care about much.'

There was something rather sad in that speech from a young man of three-and-twenty, even in uncle Deane's business-loving ears.

'Pooh, pooh! you'll be having a wife to care about one of these days, if you get on at this pace in the world. But as to this Mill, we mustn't reckon on our chickens too early. However, I promise you to bear it in mind, and when you come back we'll talk of it again. I am going to dinner now. Come and breakfast with us to-morrow morning, and say good-bye to your mother and sister before you start.'