

Chapter XXXII

'They'll take suggestion as a cat laps milk.' - SHAKESPEARE: Tempest.

The triumphant confidence of the Mayor founded on Mr Featherstone's insistent demand that Fred and his mother should not leave him, was a feeble emotion compared with all that was agitating the breasts of the old man's blood-relations, who naturally manifested more their sense of the family tie and were more visibly numerous now that he had become bedridden. Naturally: for when 'poor Peter' had occupied his arm-chair in the wainscoted parlor, no assiduous beetles for whom the cook prepares boiling water could have been less welcome on a hearth which they had reasons for preferring, than those persons whose Featherstone blood was ill-nourished, not from penuriousness on their part, but from poverty. Brother Solomon and Sister Jane were rich, and the family candor and total abstinence from false politeness with which they were always received seemed to them no argument that their brother in the solemn act of making his will would overlook the superior claims of wealth. Themselves at least he had never been unnatural enough to banish from his house, and it seemed hardly eccentric that he should have kept away Brother Jonah, Sister Martha, and the rest, who had no shadow of such claims. They knew Peter's maxim, that money was a good egg, and should be laid in a warm nest.

But Brother Jonah, Sister Martha, and all the needy exiles, held a different point of view. Probabilities are as various as the faces to be seen at will in fretwork or paper-hangings: every form is there, from Jupiter to Judy, if you only look with creative inclination. To the poorer and least favored it seemed likely that since Peter had done nothing for them in his life, he would remember them at the last. Jonah argued that men liked to make a surprise of their wills, while Martha said that nobody need be surprised if he left the best part of his money to those who least expected it. Also it was not to be thought but that an own brother 'lying there' with dropsy in his legs must come to feel that blood was thicker than water, and if he didn't alter his will, he might have money by him. At any rate some blood-relations should be on the premises and on the watch against those who were hardly relations at all. Such things had been known as forged wills and disputed wills, which seemed to have the golden-hazy advantage of somehow enabling non-legatees to live out of them. Again, those who were no blood-relations might be caught making away with things - and poor Peter 'lying there' helpless! Somebody should be on the watch. But in this conclusion they were at one with Solomon and Jane; also, some nephews, nieces, and cousins, arguing with still greater subtilty as to what might be done by a man able to 'will away' his property and give himself large treats of oddity, felt in a

handsome sort of way that there was a family interest to be attended to, and thought of Stone Court as a place which it would be nothing but right for them to visit. Sister Martha, otherwise Mrs Cranch, living with some wheeziness in the Chalky Flats, could not undertake the journey; but her son, as being poor Peter's own nephew, could represent her advantageously, and watch lest his uncle Jonah should make an unfair use of the improbable things which seemed likely to happen. In fact there was a general sense running in the Featherstone blood that everybody must watch everybody else, and that it would be well for everybody else to reflect that the Almighty was watching him.

Thus Stone Court continually saw one or other blood-relation alighting or departing, and Mary Garth had the unpleasant task of carrying their messages to Mr Featherstone, who would see none of them, and sent her down with the still more unpleasant task of telling them so. As manager of the household she felt bound to ask them in good provincial fashion to stay and eat; but she chose to consult Mrs Vincy on the point of extra down-stairs consumption now that Mr Featherstone was laid up.

'Oh, my dear, you must do things handsomely where there's last illness and a property. God knows, I don't grudge them every ham in the house - only, save the best for the funeral. Have some stuffed veal always, and a fine cheese in cut. You must expect to keep open house in these last illnesses,' said liberal Mrs Vincy, once more of cheerful note and bright plumage.

But some of the visitors alighted and did not depart after the handsome treating to veal and ham. Brother Jonah, for example (there are such unpleasant people in most families; perhaps even in the highest aristocracy there are Brobdingnag specimens, gigantically in debt and bloated at greater expense) - Brother Jonah, I say, having come down in the world, was mainly supported by a calling which he was modest enough not to boast of, though it was much better than swindling either on exchange or turf, but which did not require his presence at Brassing so long as he had a good corner to sit in and a supply of food. He chose the kitchen-corner, partly because he liked it best, and partly because he did not want to sit with Solomon, concerning whom he had a strong brotherly opinion. Seated in a famous arm-chair and in his best suit, constantly within sight of good cheer, he had a comfortable consciousness of being on the premises, mingled with fleeting suggestions of Sunday and the bar at the Green Man; and he informed Mary Garth that he should not go out of reach of his brother Peter while that poor fellow was above ground. The troublesome ones in a family are usually either the wits or the idiots. Jonah was the wit among the Featherstones, and joked with the maid-servants when they came about the hearth, but seemed to consider Miss Garth a suspicious character, and followed her with cold eyes.

Mary would have borne this one pair of eyes with comparative ease, but unfortunately there was young Cranch, who, having come all the way from the Chalky Flats to represent his mother and watch his uncle Jonah, also felt it his duty to stay and to sit chiefly in the kitchen to give his uncle company. Young Cranch was not exactly the balancing point between the wit and the idiot, - verging slightly towards the latter type, and squinting so as to leave everything in doubt about his sentiments except that they were not of a forcible character. When Mary Garth entered the kitchen and Mr Jonah Featherstone began to follow her with his cold detective eyes, young Cranch turning his head in the same direction seemed to insist on it that she should remark how he was squinting, as if he did it with design, like the gypsies when Borrow read the New Testament to them. This was rather too much for poor Mary; sometimes it made her bilious, sometimes it upset her gravity. One day that she had an opportunity she could not resist describing the kitchen scene to Fred, who would not be hindered from immediately going to see it, affecting simply to pass through. But no sooner did he face the four eyes than he had to rush through the nearest door which happened to lead to the dairy, and there under the high roof and among the pans he gave way to laughter which made a hollow resonance perfectly audible in the kitchen. He fled by another doorway, but Mr Jonah, who had not before seen Fred's white complexion, long legs, and pinched delicacy of face, prepared many sarcasms in which these points of appearance were wittily combined with the lowest moral attributes.

'Why, Tom, *you* don't wear such gentlemanly trousers - you haven't got half such fine long legs,' said Jonah to his nephew, winking at the same time, to imply that there was something more in these statements than their undeniableness. Tom looked at his legs, but left it uncertain whether he preferred his moral advantages to a more vicious length of limb and reprehensible gentility of trouser.

In the large wainscoted parlor too there were constantly pairs of eyes on the watch, and own relatives eager to be 'sitters-up.' Many came, lunched, and departed, but Brother Solomon and the lady who had been Jane Featherstone for twenty-five years before she was Mrs Waule found it good to be there every day for hours, without other calculable occupation than that of observing the cunning Mary Garth (who was so deep that she could be found out in nothing) and giving occasional dry wrinkly indications of crying - as if capable of torrents in a wetter season - at the thought that they were not allowed to go into Mr Featherstone's room. For the old man's dislike of his own family seemed to get stronger as he got less able to amuse himself by saying biting things to them. Too languid to sting, he had the more venom refluent in his blood.

Not fully believing the message sent through Mary Garth, they had presented themselves together within the door of the bedroom, both in black - Mrs Waule having a white handkerchief partially unfolded in her hand - and both with faces in a sort of half-mourning purple; while Mrs Vincy with her pink cheeks and pink ribbons flying was actually administering a cordial to their own brother, and the light-complexioned Fred, his short hair curling as might be expected in a gambler's, was lolling at his ease in a large chair.

Old Featherstone no sooner caught sight of these funereal figures appearing in spite of his orders than rage came to strengthen him more successfully than the cordial. He was propped up on a bed-rest, and always had his gold-headed stick lying by him. He seized it now and swept it backwards and forwards in as large an area as he could, apparently to ban these ugly spectres, crying in a hoarse sort of screech -

'Back, back, Mrs Waule! Back, Solomon!'

'Oh, Brother. Peter,' Mrs Waule began - but Solomon put his hand before her repressingly. He was a large-cheeked man, nearly seventy, with small furtive eyes, and was not only of much blander temper but thought himself much deeper than his brother Peter; indeed not likely to be deceived in any of his fellow-men, inasmuch as they could not well be more greedy and deceitful than he suspected them of being. Even the invisible powers, he thought, were likely to be soothed by a bland parenthesis here and there - coming from a man of property, who might have been as impious as others.

'Brother Peter,' he said, in a wheedling yet gravely official tone, 'It's nothing but right I should speak to you about the Three Crofts and the Manganese. The Almighty knows what I've got on my mind - '

'Then he knows more than I want to know,' said Peter, laying down his stick with a show of truce which had a threat in it too, for he reversed the stick so as to make the gold handle a club in case of closer fighting, and looked hard at Solomon's bald head.

'There's things you might repent of, Brother, for want of speaking to me,' said Solomon, not advancing, however. 'I could sit up with you to-night, and Jane with me, willingly, and you might take your own time to speak, or let me speak.'

'Yes, I shall take my own time - you needn't offer me yours,' said Peter.

'But you can't take your own time to die in, Brother,' began Mrs Waule, with her usual woolly tone. 'And when you lie speechless you may be tired of having strangers about you, and you may think of me

and my children' - but here her voice broke under the touching thought which she was attributing to her speechless brother; the mention of ourselves being naturally affecting.

'No, I shan't,' said old Featherstone, contradictiously. 'I shan't think of any of you. I've made my will, I tell you, I've made my will.' Here he turned his head towards Mrs Vincy, and swallowed some more of his cordial.

'Some people would be ashamed to fill up a place belonging by rights to others,' said Mrs Waule, turning her narrow eyes in the same direction.

'Oh, sister,' said Solomon, with ironical softness, 'you and me are not fine, and handsome, and clever enough: we must be humble and let smart people push themselves before us.'

Fred's spirit could not bear this: rising and looking at Mr Featherstone, he said, 'Shall my mother and I leave the room, sir, that you may be alone with your friends?'

'Sit down, I tell you,' said old Featherstone, snappishly. 'Stop where you are. Good-by, Solomon,' he added, trying to wield his stick again, but failing now that he had reversed the handle. 'Good-by, Mrs Waule. Don't you come again.'

'I shall be down-stairs, Brother, whether or no,' said Solomon. 'I shall do my duty, and it remains to be seen what the Almighty will allow.'

'Yes, in property going out of families,' said Mrs Waule, in continuation, - 'and where there's steady young men to carry on. But I pity them who are not such, and I pity their mothers. Good-by, Brother Peter.'

'Remember, I'm the eldest after you, Brother, and prospered from the first, just as you did, and have got land already by the name of Featherstone,' said Solomon, relying much on that reflection, as one which might be suggested in the watches of the night. 'But I bid you good-by for the present.'

Their exit was hastened by their seeing old Mr Featherstone pull his wig on each side and shut his eyes with his mouth-widening grimace, as if he were determined to be deaf and blind.

None the less they came to Stone Court daily and sat below at the post of duty, sometimes carrying on a slow dialogue in an undertone in which the observation and response were so far apart, that any one hearing them might have imagined himself listening to speaking

automata, in some doubt whether the ingenious mechanism would really work, or wind itself up for a long time in order to stick and be silent. Solomon and Jane would have been sorry to be quick: what that led to might be seen on the other side of the wall in the person of Brother Jonah.

But their watch in the wainscoted parlor was sometimes varied by the presence of other guests from far or near. Now that Peter Featherstone was up-stairs, his property could be discussed with all that local enlightenment to be found on the spot: some rural and Middlemarch neighbors expressed much agreement with the family and sympathy with their interest against the Vincys, and feminine visitors were even moved to tears, in conversation with Mrs Waule, when they recalled the fact that they themselves had been disappointed in times past by codicils and marriages for spite on the part of ungrateful elderly gentlemen, who, it might have been supposed, had been spared for something better. Such conversation paused suddenly, like an organ when the bellows are let drop, if Mary Garth came into the room; and all eyes were turned on her as a possible legatee, or one who might get access to iron chests.

But the younger men who were relatives or connections of the family, were disposed to admire her in this problematic light, as a girl who showed much conduct, and who among all the chances that were flying might turn out to be at least a moderate prize. Hence she had her share of compliments and polite attentions.

Especially from Mr Borthrop Trumbull, a distinguished bachelor and auctioneer of those parts, much concerned in the sale of land and cattle: a public character, indeed, whose name was seen on widely distributed placards, and who might reasonably be sorry for those who did not know of him. He was second cousin to Peter Featherstone, and had been treated by him with more amenity than any other relative, being useful in matters of business; and in that programme of his funeral which the old man had himself dictated, he had been named as a Bearer. There was no odious cupidity in Mr Borthrop Trumbull - nothing more than a sincere sense of his own merit, which, he was aware, in case of rivalry might tell against competitors; so that if Peter Featherstone, who so far as he, Trumbull, was concerned, had behaved like as good a soul as ever breathed, should have done anything handsome by him, all he could say was, that he had never fished and fawned, but had advised him to the best of his experience, which now extended over twenty years from the time of his apprenticeship at fifteen, and was likely to yield a knowledge of no surreptitious kind. His admiration was far from being confined to himself, but was accustomed professionally as well as privately to delight in estimating things at a high rate. He was an amateur of superior phrases, and never used poor language without immediately

correcting himself - which was fortunate, as he was rather loud, and given to predominate, standing or walking about frequently, pulling down his waistcoat with the air of a man who is very much of his own opinion, trimming himself rapidly with his fore-finger, and marking each new series in these movements by a busy play with his large seals. There was occasionally a little fierceness in his demeanor, but it was directed chiefly against false opinion, of which there is so much to correct in the world that a man of some reading and experience necessarily has his patience tried. He felt that the Featherstone family generally was of limited understanding, but being a man of the world and a public character, took everything as a matter of course, and even went to converse with Mr Jonah and young Cranch in the kitchen, not doubting that he had impressed the latter greatly by his leading questions concerning the Chalky Flats. If anybody had observed that Mr Borthrop Trumbull, being an auctioneer, was bound to know the nature of everything, he would have smiled and trimmed himself silently with the sense that he came pretty near that. On the whole, in an auctioneering way, he was an honorable man, not ashamed of his business, and feeling that 'the celebrated Peel, now Sir Robert,' if introduced to him, would not fail to recognize his importance.

'I don't mind if I have a slice of that ham, and a glass of that ale, Miss Garth, if you will allow me,' he said, coming into the parlor at half-past eleven, after having had the exceptional privilege of seeing old Featherstone, and standing with his back to the fire between Mrs Waule and Solomon.

'It's not necessary for you to go out; - let me ring the bell.'

'Thank you,' said Mary, 'I have an errand.'

'Well, Mr Trumbull, you're highly favored,' said Mrs Waule.

'What! seeing the old man?' said the auctioneer, playing with his seals dispassionately. 'Ah, you see he has relied on me considerably.' Here he pressed his lips together, and frowned meditatively.

'Might anybody ask what their brother has been saying?' said Solomon, in a soft tone of humility, in which he had a sense of luxurious cunning, he being a rich man and not in need of it.

'Oh yes, anybody may ask,' said Mr Trumbull, with loud and good-humored though cutting sarcasm. 'Anybody may interrogate. Any one may give their remarks an interrogative turn,' he continued, his sonorousness rising with his style. 'This is constantly done by good speakers, even when they anticipate no answer. It is what we call a

figure of speech - speech at a high figure, as one may say.' The eloquent auctioneer smiled at his own ingenuity.

'I shouldn't be sorry to hear he'd remembered you, Mr Trumbull,' said Solomon. 'I never was against the deserving. It's the undeserving I'm against.'

'Ah, there it is, you see, there it is,' said Mr Trumbull, significantly. 'It can't be denied that undeserving people have been legatees, and even residuary legatees. It is so, with testamentary dispositions.' Again he pursed up his lips and frowned a little.

'Do you mean to say for certain, Mr Trumbull, that my brother has left his land away from our family?' said Mrs Waule, on whom, as an unhopeful woman, those long words had a depressing effect.

'A man might as well turn his land into charity land at once as leave it to some people,' observed Solomon, his sister's question having drawn no answer.

'What, Blue-Coat land?' said Mrs Waule, again. 'Oh, Mr Trumbull, you never can mean to say that. It would be flying in the face of the Almighty that's prospered him.'

While Mrs Waule was speaking, Mr Borthrop Trumbull walked away from the fireplace towards the window, patrolling with his fore-finger round the inside of his stock, then along his whiskers and the curves of his hair. He now walked to Miss Garth's work-table, opened a book which lay there and read the title aloud with pompous emphasis as if he were offering it for sale:

'Anne of Geierstein' (pronounced Jeersteen) or the 'Maiden of the Mist, by the author of Waverley.' Then turning the page, he began sonorously - 'The course of four centuries has well-nigh elapsed since the series of events which are related in the following chapters took place on the Continent.' He pronounced the last truly admirable word with the accent on the last syllable, not as unaware of vulgar usage, but feeling that this novel delivery enhanced the sonorous beauty which his reading had given to the whole.

And now the servant came in with the tray, so that the moments for answering Mrs Waule's question had gone by safely, while she and Solomon, watching Mr Trumbull's movements, were thinking that high learning interfered sadly with serious affairs. Mr Borthrop Trumbull really knew nothing about old Featherstone's will; but he could hardly have been brought to declare any ignorance unless he had been arrested for misprision of treason.

'I shall take a mere mouthful of ham and a glass of ale,' he said, reassuringly. 'As a man with public business, I take a snack when I can. I will back this ham,' he added, after swallowing some morsels with alarming haste, 'against any ham in the three kingdoms. In my opinion it is better than the hams at Freshitt Hall - and I think I am a tolerable judge.'

'Some don't like so much sugar in their hams,' said Mrs Waule. 'But my poor brother would always have sugar.'

'If any person demands better, he is at liberty to do so; but, God bless me, what an aroma! I should be glad to buy in that quality, I know. There is some gratification to a gentleman' - here Mr Trumbull's voice conveyed an emotional remonstrance - 'in having this kind of ham set on his table.'

He pushed aside his plate, poured out his glass of ale and drew his chair a little forward, profiting by the occasion to look at the inner side of his legs, which he stroked approvingly - Mr Trumbull having all those less frivolous airs and gestures which distinguish the predominant races of the north.

'You have an interesting work there, I see, Miss Garth,' he observed, when Mary re-entered. 'It is by the author of `Waverley': that is Sir Walter Scott. I have bought one of his works myself - a very nice thing, a very superior publication, entitled `Ivanhoe.' You will not get any writer to beat him in a hurry, I think - he will not, in my opinion, be speedily surpassed. I have just been reading a portion at the commencement of `Anne of Jeersteen.' It commences well.' (Things never began with Mr Borthrop Trumbull: they always commenced, both in private life and on his handbills.) 'You are a reader, I see. Do you subscribe to our Middlemarch library?'

'No,' said Mary. 'Mr Fred Vincy brought this book.'

'I am a great bookman myself,' returned Mr Trumbull. 'I have no less than two hundred volumes in calf, and I flatter myself they are well selected. Also pictures by Murillo, Rubens, Teniers, Titian, Vandyck, and others. I shall be happy to lend you any work you like to mention, Miss Garth.'

'I am much obliged,' said Mary, hastening away again, 'but I have little time for reading.'

'I should say my brother has done something for *her* in his will,' said Mr Solomon, in a very low undertone, when she had shut the door behind her, pointing with his head towards the absent Mary.

'His first wife was a poor match for him, though,' said Mrs Waule. 'She brought him nothing: and this young woman is only her niece, - and very proud. And my brother has always paid her wage.'

'A sensible girl though, in my opinion,' said Mr Trumbull, finishing his ale and starting up with an emphatic adjustment of his waistcoat. 'I have observed her when she has been mixing medicine in drops. She minds what she is doing, sir. That is a great point in a woman, and a great point for our friend up-stairs, poor dear old soul. A man whose life is of any value should think of his wife as a nurse: that is what I should do, if I married; and I believe I have lived single long enough not to make a mistake in that line. Some men must marry to elevate themselves a little, but when I am in need of that, I hope some one will tell me so - I hope some individual will apprise me of the fact. I wish you good morning, Mrs Waule. Good morning, Mr Solomon. I trust we shall meet under less melancholy auspices.'

When Mr Trumbull had departed with a fine bow, Solomon, leaning forward, observed to his sister, 'You may depend, Jane, my brother has left that girl a lumping sum.'

'Anybody would think so, from the way Mr Trumbull talks,' said Jane. Then, after a pause, 'He talks as if my daughters wasn't to be trusted to give drops.'

'Auctioneers talk wild,' said Solomon. 'Not but what Trumbull has made money.'