

doorway of a small inner room on the right hand, of a character between pantry and cellar, was Dick Dewy's father Reuben, by vocation a "tranter," or irregular carrier. He was a stout florid man about forty years of age, who surveyed people up and down when first making their acquaintance, and generally smiled at the horizon or other distant object during conversations with friends, walking about with a steady sway, and turning out his toes very considerably. Being now occupied in bending over a hogshead, that stood in the pantry ready horsed for the process of broaching, he did not take the trouble to turn or raise his eyes at the entry of his visitors, well knowing by their footsteps that they were the expected old comrades.

The main room, on the left, was decked with bunches of holly and other evergreens, and from the middle of the beam bisecting the ceiling hung the mistletoe, of a size out of all proportion to the room, and extending so low that it became necessary for a full-grown person to walk round it in passing, or run the risk of entangling his hair. This apartment contained Mrs. Dewy the tranter's wife, and the four remaining children, Susan, Jim, Bessy, and Charley, graduating uniformly though at wide stages from the age of sixteen to that of four years--the eldest of the series being separated from Dick the firstborn by a nearly equal interval.

Some circumstance had apparently caused much grief to Charley just previous to the entry of the choir, and he had absently taken down a small looking-glass, holding it before his face to learn how the human

countenance appeared when engaged in crying, which survey led him to pause at the various points in each wail that were more than ordinarily striking, for a thorough appreciation of the general effect. Bessy was leaning against a chair, and glancing under the plaits about the waist of the plaid frock she wore, to notice the original unfaded pattern of the material as there preserved, her face bearing an expression of regret that the brightness had passed away from the visible portions. Mrs. Dewy sat in a brown settle by the side of the glowing wood fire--so glowing that with a heedful compression of the lips she would now and then rise and put her hand upon the hams and flitches of bacon lining the chimney, to reassure herself that they were not being broiled instead of smoked--a misfortune that had been known to happen now and then at Christmas-time.

"Hullo, my sonnies, here you be, then!" said Reuben Dewy at length, standing up and blowing forth a vehement gust of breath. "How the blood do puff up in anybody's head, to be sure, a-stooping like that! I was just going out to gate to hark for ye." He then carefully began to wind a strip of brown paper round a brass tap he held in his hand. "This in the cask here is a drop o' the right sort" (tapping the cask); "'tis a real drop o' cordial from the best picked apples--Sansoms, Stubbards, Five-corners, and such-like--you d'mind the sort, Michael?" (Michael nodded.) "And there's a sprinkling of they that grow down by the orchard-rails--streaked ones--rail apples we d'call 'em, as 'tis by the rails they grow, and not knowing the right name. The water-cider from 'em is as good as most people's best cider is."

"Ay, and of the same make too," said Bowman. "'It rained when we wrung it out, and the water got into it,' folk will say. But 'tis on'y an excuse. Watered cider is too common among us."

"Yes, yes; too common it is!" said Spinks with an inward sigh, whilst his eyes seemed to be looking at the case in an abstract form rather than at the scene before him. "Such poor liquor do make a man's throat feel very melancholy--and is a disgrace to the name of stimmilent."

"Come in, come in, and draw up to the fire; never mind your shoes," said Mrs. Dewy, seeing that all except Dick had paused to wipe them upon the door-mat. "I am glad that you've stepped up-along at last; and, Susan, you run down to Grammer Kaytes's and see if you can borrow some larger candles than these fourteens. Tommy Leaf, don't ye be afeard! Come and sit here in the settle."

This was addressed to the young man before mentioned, consisting chiefly of a human skeleton and a smock-frock, who was very awkward in his movements, apparently on account of having grown so very fast that before he had had time to get used to his height he was higher.

"Hee--hee--ay!" replied Leaf, letting his mouth continue to smile for some time after his mind had done smiling, so that his teeth remained in view as the most conspicuous members of his body.

"Here, Mr. Penny," resumed Mrs. Dewy, "you sit in this chair. And how's your daughter, Mrs. Brownjohn?"

"Well, I suppose I must say pretty fair." He adjusted his spectacles a quarter of an inch to the right. "But she'll be worse before she's better, 'a b'lieve."

"Indeed--poor soul! And how many will that make in all, four or five?"

"Five; they've buried three. Yes, five; and she not much more than a maid yet. She do know the multiplication table onmistakable well. However, 'twas to be, and none can gainsay it."

Mrs. Dewy resigned Mr. Penny. "Wonder where your grandfather James is?" she inquired of one of the children. "He said he'd drop in to-night."

"Out in fuel-house with grandfather William," said Jimmy.

"Now let's see what we can do," was heard spoken about this time by the tranter in a private voice to the barrel, beside which he had again established himself, and was stooping to cut away the cork.

"Reuben, don't make such a mess o' tapping that barrel as is mostly made in this house," Mrs. Dewy cried from the fireplace. "I'd tap a hundred without wasting more than you do in one. Such a squizzling and squirting job as 'tis in your hands! There, he always was such a clumsy man

indoors."

"Ay, ay; I know you'd tap a hundred beautiful, Ann--I know you would; two hundred, perhaps. But I can't promise. This is a' old cask, and the wood's rotted away about the tap-hole. The husbird of a feller Sam Lawson--that ever I should call'n such, now he's dead and gone, poor heart!--took me in completely upon the feat of buying this cask. 'Reub,' says he--'a always used to call me plain Reub, poor old heart!--'Reub,' he said, says he, 'that there cask, Reub, is as good as new; yes, good as new. 'Tis a wine-hogshead; the best port-wine in the commonwealth have been in that there cask; and you shall have en for ten shillens, Reub,'--'a said, says he--'he's worth twenty, ay, five-and-twenty, if he's worth one; and an iron hoop or two put round en among the wood ones will make en worth thirty shillens of any man's money, if--"

"I think I should have used the eyes that Providence gave me to use afore I paid any ten shillens for a jimcrack wine-barrel; a saint is sinner enough not to be cheated. But 'tis like all your family was, so easy to be deceived."

"That's as true as gospel of this member," said Reuben.

Mrs. Dewy began a smile at the answer, then altering her lips and refolding them so that it was not a smile, commenced smoothing little Bessy's hair; the tranter having meanwhile suddenly become oblivious to conversation, occupying himself in a deliberate cutting and arrangement

of some more brown paper for the broaching operation.

"Ah, who can believe sellers!" said old Michael Mail in a carefully-cautious voice, by way of tiding-over this critical point of affairs.

"No one at all," said Joseph Bowman, in the tone of a man fully agreeing with everybody.

"Ay," said Mail, in the tone of a man who did not agree with everybody as a rule, though he did now; "I knowed a' auctioneering feller once--a very friendly feller 'a was too. And so one hot day as I was walking down the front street o' Casterbridge, jist below the King's Arms, I passed a' open winder and see him inside, stuck upon his perch, a-selling off. I jist nodded to en in a friendly way as I passed, and went my way, and thought no more about it. Well, next day, as I was oilen my boots by fuel-house door, if a letter didn't come wi' a bill charging me with a feather-bed, bolster, and pillers, that I had bid for at Mr. Taylor's sale. The slim-faced martel had knocked 'em down to me because I nodded to en in my friendly way; and I had to pay for 'em too. Now, I hold that that was coming it very close, Reuben?"

"'Twas close, there's no denying," said the general voice.

"Too close, 'twas," said Reuben, in the rear of the rest. "And as to Sam Lawson--poor heart! now he's dead and gone too!--I'll warrant, that if so

be I've spent one hour in making hoops for that barrel, I've spent fifty, first and last. That's one of my hoops"--touching it with his elbow--"that's one of mine, and that, and that, and all these."

"Ah, Sam was a man," said Mr. Penny, contemplatively.

"Sam was!" said Bowman.

"Especially for a drap o' drink," said the tranter.

"Good, but not religious-good," suggested Mr. Penny.

The tranter nodded. Having at last made the tap and hole quite ready, "Now then, Suze, bring a mug," he said. "Here's luck to us, my sonnies!"

The tap went in, and the cider immediately squirted out in a horizontal shower over Reuben's hands, knees, and leggings, and into the eyes and neck of Charley, who, having temporarily put off his grief under pressure of more interesting proceedings, was squatting down and blinking near his father.

"There 'tis again!" said Mrs. Dewy.

"Devil take the hole, the cask, and Sam Lawson too, that good cider should be wasted like this!" exclaimed the tranter. "Your thumb! Lend me your thumb, Michael! Ram it in here, Michael! I must get a bigger

tap, my sonnies."

"'Dd it cold inthide te hole?" inquired Charley of Michael, as he continued in a stooping posture with his thumb in the cork-hole.

"What wonderful odds and ends that chiel has in his head to be sure!" Mrs. Dewy admiringly exclaimed from the distance. "I lay a wager that he thinks more about how 'tis inside that barrel than in all the other parts of the world put together."

All persons present put on a speaking countenance of admiration for the cleverness alluded to, in the midst of which Reuben returned. The operation was then satisfactorily performed; when Michael arose and stretched his head to the extremest fraction of height that his body would allow of, to re-straighten his back and shoulders--thrusting out his arms and twisting his features to a mass of wrinkles to emphasize the relief aquired. A quart or two of the beverage was then brought to table, at which all the new arrivals reseated themselves with wide-spread knees, their eyes meditatively seeking out any speck or knot in the board upon which the gaze might precipitate itself.

"Whatever is father a-biding out in fuel-house so long for?" said the tranter. "Never such a man as father for two things--cleaving up old dead apple-tree wood and playing the bass-viol. 'A'd pass his life between the two, that 'a would." He stepped to the door and opened it.



"Father!"

"Ay!" rang thinly from round the corner.

"Here's the barrel tapped, and we all a-waiting!"

A series of dull thuds, that had been heard without for some time past, now ceased; and after the light of a lantern had passed the window and made wheeling rays upon the ceiling inside the eldest of the Dewy family appeared.