CHAPTER III: THE ASSEMBLED QUIRE

William Dewy--otherwise grandfather William--was now about seventy; yet an ardent vitality still preserved a warm and roughened bloom upon his face, which reminded gardeners of the sunny side of a ripe ribstone-pippin; though a narrow strip of forehead, that was protected from the weather by lying above the line of his hat-brim, seemed to belong to some town man, so gentlemanly was its whiteness. His was a humorous and kindly nature, not unmixed with a frequent melancholy; and he had a firm religious faith. But to his neighbours he had no character in particular. If they saw him pass by their windows when they had been bottling off old mead, or when they had just been called long-headed men who might do anything in the world if they chose, they thought concerning him, "Ah, there's that good-hearted man--open as a child!" If they saw him just after losing a shilling or half-a-crown, or accidentally letting fall a piece of crockery, they thought, "There's that poor weak-minded man Dewy again! Ah, he's never done much in the world either!" If he passed when fortune neither smiled nor frowned on them, they merely thought him old William Dewy.

"Ah, so's--here you be!--Ah, Michael and Joseph and John--and you too, Leaf! a merry Christmas all! We shall have a rare log-wood fire directly, Reub, to reckon by the toughness of the job I had in cleaving 'em." As he spoke he threw down an armful of logs which fell in the chimney-corner with a rumble, and looked at them with something of the

admiring enmity he would have bestowed on living people who had been very

obstinate in holding their own. "Come in, grandfather James."

Old James (grandfather on the maternal side) had simply called as a visitor. He lived in a cottage by himself, and many people considered him a miser; some, rather slovenly in his habits. He now came forward from behind grandfather William, and his stooping figure formed a well-illuminated picture as he passed towards the fire-place. Being by trade a mason, he wore a long linen apron reaching almost to his toes, corduroy breeches and gaiters, which, together with his boots, graduated in tints of whitish-brown by constant friction against lime and stone. He also wore a very stiff fustian coat, having folds at the elbows and shoulders as unvarying in their arrangement as those in a pair of bellows: the ridges and the projecting parts of the coat collectively exhibiting a shade different from that of the hollows, which were lined with small ditch-like accumulations of stone and mortar-dust. The extremely large side-pockets, sheltered beneath wide flaps, bulged out convexly whether empty or full; and as he was often engaged to work at buildings far away--his breakfasts and dinners being eaten in a strange chimney-corner, by a garden wall, on a heap of stones, or walking along the road--he carried in these pockets a small tin canister of butter, a small canister of sugar, a small canister of tea, a paper of salt, and a paper of pepper; the bread, cheese, and meat, forming the substance of his meals, hanging up behind him in his basket among the hammers and chisels. If a passer-by looked hard at him when he was drawing forth any of these, "My

buttery," he said, with a pinched smile.

"Better try over number seventy-eight before we start, I suppose?" said William, pointing to a heap of old Christmas-carol books on a side table.

"Wi' all my heart," said the choir generally.

"Number seventy-eight was always a teaser--always. I can mind him ever since I was growing up a hard boy-chap."

"But he's a good tune, and worth a mint o' practice," said Michael.

"He is; though I've been mad enough wi' that tune at times to seize en and tear en all to linnit. Ay, he's a splendid carrel--there's no denying that."

"The first line is well enough," said Mr. Spinks; "but when you come to 'O, thou man,' you make a mess o't."

"We'll have another go into en, and see what we can make of the martel. Half-an-hour's hammering at en will conquer the toughness of en; I'll warn it."

"'Od rabbit it all!" said Mr. Penny, interrupting with a flash of his spectacles, and at the same time clawing at something in the depths of a large side-pocket. "If so be I hadn't been as scatter-brained and

thirtingill as a chiel, I should have called at the schoolhouse wi' a boot as I cam up along. Whatever is coming to me I really can't estimate at all!"

"The brain has its weaknesses," murmured Mr. Spinks, waving his head ominously. Mr. Spinks was considered to be a scholar, having once kept a night-school, and always spoke up to that level.

"Well, I must call with en the first thing to-morrow. And I'll empt my pocket o' this last too, if you don't mind, Mrs. Dewy." He drew forth a last, and placed it on a table at his elbow. The eyes of three or four followed it.

"Well," said the shoemaker, seeming to perceive that the interest the object had excited was greater than he had anticipated, and warranted the last's being taken up again and exhibited; "now, whose foot do ye suppose this last was made for? It was made for Geoffrey Day's father, over at Yalbury Wood. Ah, many's the pair o' boots he've had off the last! Well, when 'a died, I used the last for Geoffrey, and have ever since, though a little doctoring was wanted to make it do. Yes, a very queer natured last it is now, 'a b'lieve," he continued, turning it over caressingly. "Now, you notice that there" (pointing to a lump of leather bradded to the toe), "that's a very bad bunion that he've had ever since 'a was a boy. Now, this remarkable large piece" (pointing to a patch nailed to the side), "shows a' accident he received by the tread of a horse, that squashed his foot a'most to a pomace. The horseshoe cam full-butt on

this point, you see. And so I've just been over to Geoffrey's, to know if he wanted his bunion altered or made bigger in the new pair I'm making."

During the latter part of this speech, Mr. Penny's left hand wandered towards the cider-cup, as if the hand had no connection with the person speaking; and bringing his sentence to an abrupt close, all but the extreme margin of the bootmaker's face was eclipsed by the circular brim of the vessel.

"However, I was going to say," continued Penny, putting down the cup, "I ought to have called at the school"--here he went groping again in the depths of his pocket--"to leave this without fail, though I suppose the first thing to-morrow will do."

He now drew forth and placed upon the table a boot--small, light, and prettily shaped--upon the heel of which he had been operating.

"The new schoolmistress's!"

"Ay, no less, Miss Fancy Day; as neat a little figure of fun as ever I see, and just husband-high."

"Never Geoffrey's daughter Fancy?" said Bowman, as all glances present converged like wheel-spokes upon the boot in the centre of them.

"Yes, sure," resumed Mr. Penny, regarding the boot as if that alone were his auditor; "'tis she that's come here schoolmistress. You knowed his daughter was in training?"

"Strange, isn't it, for her to be here Christmas night, Master Penny?"

"Yes; but here she is, 'a b'lieve."

"I know how she comes here--so I do!" chirruped one of the children.

"Why?" Dick inquired, with subtle interest.

"Pa'son Maybold was afraid he couldn't manage us all to-morrow at the dinner, and he talked o' getting her jist to come over and help him hand about the plates, and see we didn't make pigs of ourselves; and that's what she's come for!"

"And that's the boot, then," continued its mender imaginatively, "that she'll walk to church in to-morrow morning. I don't care to mend boots I don't make; but there's no knowing what it may lead to, and her father always comes to me."

There, between the cider-mug and the candle, stood this interesting receptacle of the little unknown's foot; and a very pretty boot it was. A character, in fact--the flexible bend at the instep, the rounded localities of the small nestling toes, scratches from careless scampers

now forgotten--all, as repeated in the tell-tale leather, evidencing a nature and a bias. Dick surveyed it with a delicate feeling that he had no right to do so without having first asked the owner of the foot's permission.

"Now, neighbours, though no common eye can see it," the shoemaker went on, "a man in the trade can see the likeness between this boot and that last, although that is so deformed as hardly to recall one of God's creatures, and this is one of as pretty a pair as you'd get for ten-and-sixpence in Casterbridge. To you, nothing; but 'tis father's voot and daughter's voot to me, as plain as houses."

"I don't doubt there's a likeness, Master Penny--a mild likeness--a fantastical likeness," said Spinks. "But I han't got imagination enough to see it, perhaps."

Mr. Penny adjusted his spectacles.

"Now, I'll tell ye what happened to me once on this very point. You used to know Johnson the dairyman, William?"

"Ay, sure; I did."

"Well, 'twasn't opposite his house, but a little lower down--by his paddock, in front o' Parkmaze Pool. I was a-bearing across towards Bloom's End, and lo and behold, there was a man just brought out o' the

Pool, dead; he had un'rayed for a dip, but not being able to pitch it just there had gone in flop over his head. Men looked at en; women looked at en; children looked at en; nobody knowed en. He was covered wi' a sheet; but I catched sight of his voot, just showing out as they carried en along. 'I don't care what name that man went by,' I said, in my way, 'but he's John Woodward's brother; I can swear to the family voot.' At that very moment up comes John Woodward, weeping and teaving, 'I've lost my brother! I've lost my brother!'"

"Only to think of that!" said Mrs. Dewy.

"'Tis well enough to know this foot and that foot," said Mr. Spinks. "'Tis long-headed, in fact, as far as feet do go. I know little, 'tis true--I say no more; but show me a man's foot, and I'll tell you that man's heart."

"You must be a cleverer feller, then, than mankind in jineral," said the tranter.

"Well, that's nothing for me to speak of," returned Mr. Spinks. "A man lives and learns. Maybe I've read a leaf or two in my time. I don't wish to say anything large, mind you; but nevertheless, maybe I have."

"Yes, I know," said Michael soothingly, "and all the parish knows, that ye've read sommat of everything a'most, and have been a great filler of young folks' brains. Learning's a worthy thing, and ye've got it, Master

Spinks."

"I make no boast, though I may have read and thought a little; and I know--it may be from much perusing, but I make no boast--that by the time a man's head is finished, 'tis almost time for him to creep underground. I am over forty-five."

Mr. Spinks emitted a look to signify that if his head was not finished, nobody's head ever could be.

"Talk of knowing people by their feet!" said Reuben. "Rot me, my sonnies, then, if I can tell what a man is from all his members put together, oftentimes."

"But still, look is a good deal," observed grandfather William absently, moving and balancing his head till the tip of grandfather James's nose was exactly in a right line with William's eye and the mouth of a miniature cavern he was discerning in the fire. "By the way," he continued in a fresher voice, and looking up, "that young crater, the schoolmis'ess, must be sung to to-night wi' the rest? If her ear is as fine as her face, we shall have enough to do to be up-sides with her."

"What about her face?" said young Dewy.

"Well, as to that," Mr. Spinks replied, "'tis a face you can hardly gainsay. A very good pink face, as far as that do go. Still, only a

face, when all is said and done."

"Come, come, Elias Spinks, say she's a pretty maid, and have done wi' her," said the tranter, again preparing to visit the cider-barrel.