

CHAPTER V: THE LISTENERS

When the expectant stillness consequent upon the exclamation had nearly died out of them all, an increasing light made itself visible in one of the windows of the upper floor. It came so close to the blind that the exact position of the flame could be perceived from the outside.

Remaining steady for an instant, the blind went upward from before it, revealing to thirty concentrated eyes a young girl, framed as a picture by the window architrave, and unconsciously illuminating her countenance to a vivid brightness by a candle she held in her left hand, close to her face, her right hand being extended to the side of the window. She was wrapped in a white robe of some kind, whilst down her shoulders fell a twining profusion of marvellously rich hair, in a wild disorder which proclaimed it to be only during the invisible hours of the night that such a condition was discoverable. Her bright eyes were looking into the grey world outside with an uncertain expression, oscillating between courage and shyness, which, as she recognized the semicircular group of dark forms gathered before her, transformed itself into pleasant resolution.

Opening the window, she said lightly and warmly--"Thank you, singers, thank you!"

Together went the window quickly and quietly, and the blind started downward on its return to its place. Her fair forehead and eyes

vanished; her little mouth; her neck and shoulders; all of her. Then the spot of candlelight shone nebulously as before; then it moved away.

"How pretty!" exclaimed Dick Dewy.

"If she'd been rale wexwork she couldn't ha' been comelier," said Michael Mail.

"As near a thing to a spiritual vision as ever I wish to see!" said tranter Dewy.

"O, sich I never, never see!" said Leaf fervently.

All the rest, after clearing their throats and adjusting their hats, agreed that such a sight was worth singing for.

"Now to Farmer Shiner's, and then replenish our insides, father?" said the tranter.

"Wi' all my heart," said old William, shouldering his bass-viol.

Farmer Shiner's was a queer lump of a house, standing at the corner of a lane that ran into the principal thoroughfare. The upper windows were much wider than they were high, and this feature, together with a broad bay-window where the door might have been expected, gave it by day the aspect of a human countenance turned askance, and wearing a sly and

wicked leer. To-night nothing was visible but the outline of the roof upon the sky.

The front of this building was reached, and the preliminaries arranged as usual.

"Four breaths, and number thirty-two, 'Behold the Morning Star,'" said old William.

They had reached the end of the second verse, and the fiddlers were doing the up bow-stroke previously to pouring forth the opening chord of the third verse, when, without a light appearing or any signal being given, a roaring voice exclaimed--

"Shut up, woll 'ee! Don't make your blaring row here! A feller wi' a headache enough to split his skull likes a quiet night!"

Slam went the window.

"Hullo, that's a' ugly blow for we!" said the tranter, in a keenly appreciative voice, and turning to his companions.

"Finish the carrel, all who be friends of harmony!" commanded old William; and they continued to the end.

"Four breaths, and number nineteen!" said William firmly. "Give it him

well; the quire can't be insulted in this manner!"

A light now flashed into existence, the window opened, and the farmer stood revealed as one in a terrific passion.

"Drown en!--drown en!" the tranter cried, fiddling frantically. "Play fortissimy, and drown his spaking!"

"Fortissimy!" said Michael Mail, and the music and singing waxed so loud that it was impossible to know what Mr. Shiner had said, was saying, or was about to say; but wildly flinging his arms and body about in the forms of capital Xs and Ys, he appeared to utter enough invectives to consign the whole parish to perdition.

"Very onseemly--very!" said old William, as they retired. "Never such a dreadful scene in the whole round o' my carrel practice--never! And he a churchwarden!"

"Only a drap o' drink got into his head," said the tranter. "Man's well enough when he's in his religious frame. He's in his worldly frame now. Must ask en to our bit of a party to-morrow night, I suppose, and so put en in humour again. We bear no mortal man ill-will."

They now crossed Mellstock Bridge, and went along an embowered path beside the From towards the church and vicarage, meeting Voss with the hot mead and bread-and-cheese as they were approaching the churchyard.

This determined them to eat and drink before proceeding further, and they entered the church and ascended to the gallery. The lanterns were opened, and the whole body sat round against the walls on benches and whatever else was available, and made a hearty meal. In the pauses of conversation there could be heard through the floor overhead a little world of undertones and creaks from the halting clockwork, which never spread further than the tower they were born in, and raised in the more meditative minds a fancy that here lay the direct pathway of Time.

Having done eating and drinking, they again tuned the instruments, and once more the party emerged into the night air.

"Where's Dick?" said old Dewy.

Every man looked round upon every other man, as if Dick might have been transmuted into one or the other; and then they said they didn't know.

"Well now, that's what I call very nasty of Master Dicky, that I do," said Michael Mail.

"He've clinked off home-along, depend upon't," another suggested, though not quite believing that he had.

"Dick!" exclaimed the tranter, and his voice rolled sonorously forth among the yews.

He suspended his muscles rigid as stone whilst listening for an answer, and finding he listened in vain, turned to the assemblage.

"The treble man too! Now if he'd been a tenor or counter chap, we might ha' contrived the rest o't without en, you see. But for a quire to lose the treble, why, my sonnies, you may so well lose your . . ." The tranter paused, unable to mention an image vast enough for the occasion.

"Your head at once," suggested Mr. Penny.

The tranter moved a pace, as if it were puerile of people to complete sentences when there were more pressing things to be done.

"Was ever heard such a thing as a young man leaving his work half done and turning tail like this!"

"Never," replied Bowman, in a tone signifying that he was the last man in the world to wish to withhold the formal finish required of him.

"I hope no fatal tragedy has overtook the lad!" said his grandfather.

"O no," replied tranter Dewy placidly. "Wonder where he's put that there fiddle of his. Why that fiddle cost thirty shillings, and good words besides. Somewhere in the damp, without doubt; that instrument will be unglued and spoilt in ten minutes--ten! ay, two."

"What in the name o' righteousness can have happened?" said old William, more uneasily. "Perhaps he's drowned!"

Leaving their lanterns and instruments in the belfry they retraced their steps along the waterside track. "A strapping lad like Dick d'know better than let anything happen onawares," Reuben remarked. "There's sure to be some poor little scam reason for't staring us in the face all the while." He lowered his voice to a mysterious tone: "Neighbours, have ye noticed any sign of a scornful woman in his head, or suchlike?"

"Not a glimmer of such a body. He's as clear as water yet."

"And Dicky said he should never marry," cried Jimmy, "but live at home always along wi' mother and we!"

"Ay, ay, my sonny; every lad has said that in his time."

They had now again reached the precincts of Mr. Shiner's, but hearing nobody in that direction, one or two went across to the schoolhouse. A light was still burning in the bedroom, and though the blind was down, the window had been slightly opened, as if to admit the distant notes of the carollers to the ears of the occupant of the room.

Opposite the window, leaning motionless against a beech tree, was the lost man, his arms folded, his head thrown back, his eyes fixed upon the illuminated lattice.

"Why, Dick, is that thee? What b'st doing here?"

Dick's body instantly flew into a more rational attitude, and his head was seen to turn east and west in the gloom, as if endeavouring to discern some proper answer to that question; and at last he said in rather feeble accents--"Nothing, father."

"Th'st take long enough time about it then, upon my body," said the tranter, as they all turned anew towards the vicarage.

"I thought you hadn't done having snap in the gallery," said Dick.

"Why, we've been traypsing and rambling about, looking everywhere, and thinking you'd done fifty deathly things, and here have you been at nothing at all!"

"The stupidity lies in that point of it being nothing at all," murmured Mr. Spinks.

The vicarage front was their next field of operation, and Mr. Maybold, the lately-arrived incumbent, duly received his share of the night's harmonies. It was hoped that by reason of his profession he would have been led to open the window, and an extra carol in quick time was added to draw him forth. But Mr. Maybold made no stir.

"A bad sign!" said old William, shaking his head.

However, at that same instant a musical voice was heard exclaiming from inner depths of bedclothes--"Thanks, villagers!"

"What did he say?" asked Bowman, who was rather dull of hearing. Bowman's

voice, being therefore loud, had been heard by the vicar within.

"I said, 'Thanks, villagers!'" cried the vicar again.

"Oh, we didn't hear 'ee the first time!" cried Bowman.

"Now don't for heaven's sake spoil the young man's temper by answering like that!" said the tranter.

"You won't do that, my friends!" the vicar shouted.

"Well to be sure, what ears!" said Mr. Penny in a whisper. "Beats any horse or dog in the parish, and depend upon't, that's a sign he's a proper clever chap."

"We shall see that in time," said the tranter.

Old William, in his gratitude for such thanks from a comparatively new inhabitant, was anxious to play all the tunes over again; but renounced

his desire on being reminded by Reuben that it would be best to leave well alone.

"Now putting two and two together," the tranter continued, as they went their way over the hill, and across to the last remaining houses; "that is, in the form of that young female vision we zeed just now, and this young tenor-voiced parson, my belief is she'll wind en round her finger, and twist the pore young feller about like the figure of 8--that she will so, my sonnies."