

CHAPTER II: A MEETING OF THE QUIRE

It was the evening of a fine spring day. The descending sun appeared as a nebulous blaze of amber light, its outline being lost in cloudy masses hanging round it, like wild locks of hair.

The chief members of Mellstock parish choir were standing in a group in front of Mr. Penny's workshop in the lower village. They were all brightly illuminated, and each was backed up by a shadow as long as a steeple; the lowness of the source of light rendering the brims of their hats of no use at all as a protection to the eyes.

Mr. Penny's was the last house in that part of the parish, and stood in a hollow by the roadside so that cart-wheels and horses' legs were about level with the sill of his shop-window. This was low and wide, and was open from morning till evening, Mr. Penny himself being invariably seen working inside, like a framed portrait of a shoemaker by some modern Moroni. He sat facing the road, with a boot on his knees and the awl in his hand, only looking up for a moment as he stretched out his arms and bent forward at the pull, when his spectacles flashed in the passer's face with a shine of flat whiteness, and then returned again to the boot as usual. Rows of lasts, small and large, stout and slender, covered the wall which formed the background, in the extreme shadow of which a kind of dummy was seen sitting, in the shape of an apprentice with a string tied round his hair (probably to keep it out of his eyes). He smiled at

remarks that floated in from without, but was never known to answer them in Mr. Penny's presence. Outside the window the upper-leather of a Wellington-boot was usually hung, pegged to a board as if to dry. No sign was over his door; in fact--as with old banks and mercantile houses--advertising in any shape was scorned, and it would have been felt as beneath his dignity to paint up, for the benefit of strangers, the name of an establishment whose trade came solely by connection based on personal respect.

His visitors now came and stood on the outside of his window, sometimes leaning against the sill, sometimes moving a pace or two backwards and forwards in front of it. They talked with deliberate gesticulations to Mr. Penny, enthroned in the shadow of the interior.

"I do like a man to stick to men who be in the same line o' life--o' Sundays, anyway--that I do so."

"'Tis like all the doings of folk who don't know what a day's work is, that's what I say."

"My belief is the man's not to blame; 'tis she--she's the bitter weed!"

"No, not altogether. He's a poor gawk-hammer. Look at his sermon yesterday."

"His sermon was well enough, a very good guessable sermon, only he

couldn't put it into words and speak it. That's all was the matter wi' the sermon. He hadn't been able to get it past his pen."

"Well--ay, the sermon might have been good; for, 'tis true, the sermon of Old Eccl'iastes himself lay in Eccl'iastes's ink-bottle afore he got it out."

Mr. Penny, being in the act of drawing the last stitch tight, could afford time to look up and throw in a word at this point.

"He's no spouter--that must be said, 'a b'lieve."

"'Tis a terrible muddle sometimes with the man, as far as spout do go," said Spinks.

"Well, we'll say nothing about that," the tranter answered; "for I don't believe 'twill make a penneth o' difference to we poor martels here or hereafter whether his sermons be good or bad, my sonnies."

Mr. Penny made another hole with his awl, pushed in the thread, and looked up and spoke again at the extension of arms.

"'Tis his goings-on, souls, that's what it is." He clenched his features for an Herculean addition to the ordinary pull, and continued, "The first thing he done when he came here was to be hot and strong about church business."

"True," said Spinks; "that was the very first thing he done."

Mr. Penny, having now been offered the ear of the assembly, accepted it, ceased stitching, swallowed an unimportant quantity of air as if it were a pill, and continued:

"The next thing he do do is to think about altering the church, until he found 'twould be a matter o' cost and what not, and then not to think no more about it."

"True: that was the next thing he done."

"And the next thing was to tell the young chaps that they were not on no account to put their hats in the christening font during service."

"True."

"And then 'twas this, and then 'twas that, and now 'tis--"

Words were not forcible enough to conclude the sentence, and Mr. Penny gave a huge pull to signify the concluding word.

"Now 'tis to turn us out of the quire neck and crop," said the tranter after an interval of half a minute, not by way of explaining the pause and pull, which had been quite understood, but as a means of keeping the

subject well before the meeting.

Mrs. Penny came to the door at this point in the discussion. Like all good wives, however much she was inclined to play the Tory to her husband's Whiggism, and vice versa, in times of peace, she coalesced with him heartily enough in time of war.

"It must be owned he's not all there," she replied in a general way to the fragments of talk she had heard from indoors. "Far below poor Mr. Grinham" (the late vicar).

"Ay, there was this to be said for he, that you were quite sure he'd never come mumbudgeting to see ye, just as you were in the middle of your work, and put you out with his fuss and trouble about ye."

"Never. But as for this new Mr. Maybold, though he mid be a very well-intending party in that respect, he's unbearable; for as to sifting your cinders, scrubbing your floors, or emptying your slops, why, you can't do it. I assure you I've not been able to empt them for several days, unless I throw 'em up the chimley or out of winder; for as sure as the sun you meet him at the door, coming to ask how you are, and 'tis such a confusing thing to meet a gentleman at the door when ye are in the mess o' washing."

"'Tis only for want of knowing better, poor gentleman," said the tranter.

"His meaning's good enough. Ay, your pa'son comes by fate: 'tis heads or

tails, like pitch-halfpenny, and no choosing; so we must take en as he is, my sonnies, and thank God he's no worse, I suppose."

"I fancy I've seen him look across at Miss Day in a warmer way than Christianity asked for," said Mrs. Penny musingly; "but I don't quite like to say it."

"O no; there's nothing in that," said grandfather William.

"If there's nothing, we shall see nothing," Mrs. Penny replied, in the tone of a woman who might possibly have private opinions still.

"Ah, Mr. Grinham was the man!" said Bowman. "Why, he never troubled us wi' a visit from year's end to year's end. You might go anywhere, do anything: you'd be sure never to see him."

"Yes, he was a right sensible pa'son," said Michael. "He never entered our door but once in his life, and that was to tell my poor wife--ay, poor soul, dead and gone now, as we all shall!--that as she was such a' old aged person, and lived so far from the church, he didn't at all expect her to come any more to the service."

"And 'a was a very jinerous gentleman about choosing the psalms and hymns o' Sundays. 'Confound ye,' says he, 'blare and scrape what ye will, but don't bother me!'"

"And he was a very honourable man in not wanting any of us to come and hear him if we were all on-end for a jaunt or spree, or to bring the babies to be christened if they were inclined to squalling. There's good in a man's not putting a parish to unnecessary trouble."

"And there's this here man never letting us have a bit o' peace; but keeping on about being good and upright till 'tis carried to such a pitch as I never see the like afore nor since!"

"No sooner had he got here than he found the font wouldn't hold water, as it hadn't for years off and on; and when I told him that Mr. Grinham never minded it, but used to spet upon his vinger and christen 'em just as well, 'a said, 'Good Heavens! Send for a workman immediate. What place have I come to!' Which was no compliment to us, come to that."

"Still, for my part," said old William, "though he's arrayed against us, I like the hearty borussnorus ways of the new pa'son."

"You, ready to die for the quire," said Bowman reproachfully, "to stick up for the quire's enemy, William!"

"Nobody will feel the loss of our church-work so much as I," said the old man firmly; "that you d'all know. I've a-been in the quire man and boy ever since I was a chiel of eleven. But for all that 'tisn't in me to call the man a bad man, because I truly and sincerely believe en to be a

good young feller."

Some of the youthful sparkle that used to reside there animated William's eye as he uttered the words, and a certain nobility of aspect was also imparted to him by the setting sun, which gave him a Titanic shadow at least thirty feet in length, stretching away to the east in outlines of imposing magnitude, his head finally terminating upon the trunk of a grand old oak-tree.

"Maybe's a hearty feller enough," the tranter replied, "and will spak to you be you dirty or be you clane. The first time I met en was in a drong, and though 'a didn't know me no more than the dead, 'a passed the time of day. 'D'ye do?' he said, says he, nodding his head. 'A fine day.' Then the second time I met en was full-buff in town street, when my breeches were tore into a long strent by getting through a copse of thorns and brimbles for a short cut home-along; and not wanting to disgrace the man by spaking in that state, I fixed my eye on the weathercock to let en pass me as a stranger. But no: 'How d'ye do, Reuben?' says he, right hearty, and shook my hand. If I'd been dressed in silver spangles from top to toe, the man couldn't have been civiller."

At this moment Dick was seen coming up the village-street, and they turned and watched him.