

CHAPTER III: A TURN IN THE DISCUSSION

"I'm afraid Dick's a lost man," said the tranter.

"What?--no!" said Mail, implying by his manner that it was a far commoner thing for his ears to report what was not said than that his judgment should be at fault.

"Ay," said the tranter, still gazing at Dick's unconscious advance. "I don't at all like what I see! There's too many o' them looks out of the winder without noticing anything; too much shining of boots; too much peeping round corners; too much looking at the clock; telling about clever things she did till you be sick of it; and then upon a hint to that effect a horrible silence about her. I've walked the path once in my life and know the country, neighbours; and Dick's a lost man!" The tranter turned a quarter round and smiled a smile of miserable satire at the setting new moon, which happened to catch his eye.

The others became far too serious at this announcement to allow them to speak; and they still regarded Dick in the distance.

"'Twas his mother's fault," the tranter continued, "in asking the young woman to our party last Christmas. When I eyed the blue frock and light heels o' the maid, I had my thoughts directly. 'God bless thee, Dicky my sonny,' I said to myself; 'there's a delusion for thee!'"

"They seemed to be rather distant in manner last Sunday, I thought?" Mail tentatively observed, as became one who was not a member of the family.

"Ay, that's a part of the zickness. Distance belongs to it, slyness belongs to it, queerest things on earth belongs to it! There, 't may as well come early as late s'far as I know. The sooner begun, the sooner over; for come it will."

"The question I ask is," said Mr. Spinks, connecting into one thread the two subjects of discourse, as became a man learned in rhetoric, and beating with his hand in a way which signified that the manner rather than the matter of his speech was to be observed, "how did Mr. Maybold know she could play the organ? You know we had it from her own lips, as far as lips go, that she has never, first or last, breathed such a thing to him; much less that she ever would play."

In the midst of this puzzle Dick joined the party, and the news which had caused such a convulsion among the ancient musicians was unfolded to him.

"Well," he said, blushing at the allusion to Miss Day, "I know by some words of hers that she has a particular wish not to play, because she is a friend of ours; and how the alteration comes, I don't know."

"Now, this is my plan," said the tranter, reviving the spirit of the discussion by the infusion of new ideas, as was his custom--"this is my

plan; if you don't like it, no harm's done. We all know one another very well, don't we, neighbours?"

That they knew one another very well was received as a statement which, though familiar, should not be omitted in introductory speeches.

"Then I say this"--and the tranter in his emphasis slapped down his hand on Mr. Spinks's shoulder with a momentum of several pounds, upon which Mr. Spinks tried to look not in the least startled--"I say that we all move down-along straight as a line to Pa'son Mayble's when the clock has gone six to-morrow night. There we one and all stand in the passage, then one or two of us go in and spak to en, man and man; and say, 'Pa'son Mayble, every tradesman d'like to have his own way in his workshop, and Mellstock Church is yours. Instead of turning us out neck and crop, let us stay on till Christmas, and we'll gie way to the young woman, Mr. Mayble, and make no more ado about it. And we shall always be quite willing to touch our hats when we meet ye, Mr. Mayble, just as before.' That sounds very well? Hey?"

"Proper well, in faith, Reuben Dewy."

"And we won't sit down in his house; 'twould be looking too familiar when only just reconciled?"

"No need at all to sit down. Just do our duty man and man, turn round, and march out--he'll think all the more of us for it."

"I hardly think Leaf had better go wi' us?" said Michael, turning to Leaf and taking his measure from top to bottom by the eye. "He's so terrible silly that he might ruin the concern."

"He don't want to go much; do ye, Thomas Leaf?" said William.

"Hee-hee! no; I don't want to. Only a teeny bit!"

"I be mortal afeard, Leaf, that you'll never be able to tell how many cuts d'take to sharpen a spar," said Mail.

"I never had no head, never! that's how it happened to happen, hee-hee!"

They all assented to this, not with any sense of humiliating Leaf by disparaging him after an open confession, but because it was an accepted thing that Leaf didn't in the least mind having no head, that deficiency of his being an unimpassioned matter of parish history.

"But I can sing my treble!" continued Thomas Leaf, quite delighted at being called a fool in such a friendly way; "I can sing my treble as well as any maid, or married woman either, and better! And if Jim had lived, I should have had a clever brother! To-morrow is poor Jim's birthday. He'd ha' been twenty-six if he'd lived till to-morrow."

"You always seem very sorry for Jim," said old William musingly.

"Ah! I do. Such a stay to mother as he'd always ha' been! She'd never have had to work in her old age if he had continued strong, poor Jim!"

"What was his age when 'a died?"

"Four hours and twenty minutes, poor Jim. 'A was born as might be at night; and 'a didn't last as might be till the morning. No, 'a didn't last. Mother called en Jim on the day that would ha' been his christening day if he had lived; and she's always thinking about en. You see he died so very young."

"Well, 'twas rather youthful," said Michael.

"Now to my mind that woman is very romantical on the matter o' children?" said the tranter, his eye sweeping his audience.

"Ah, well she mid be," said Leaf. "She had twelve regular one after another, and they all, except myself, died very young; either before they was born or just afterwards."

"Pore feller, too. I suppose th'st want to come wi' us?" the tranter murmured.

"Well, Leaf, you shall come wi' us as yours is such a melancholy family," said old William rather sadly.

"I never see such a melancholy family as that afore in my life," said Reuben. "There's Leaf's mother, poor woman! Every morning I see her eyes mooning out through the panes of glass like a pot-sick winder-flower; and as Leaf sings a very high treble, and we don't know what we should do without en for upper G, we'll let en come as a trate, poor feller."

"Ay, we'll let en come, 'a b'lieve," said Mr. Penny, looking up, as the pull happened to be at that moment.

"Now," continued the tranter, dispersing by a new tone of voice these digressions about Leaf; "as to going to see the pa'son, one of us might call and ask en his meaning, and 'twould be just as well done; but it will add a bit of flourish to the cause if the quire waits on him as a body. Then the great thing to mind is, not for any of our fellers to be nervous; so before starting we'll one and all come to my house and have a rasher of bacon; then every man-jack het a pint of cider into his inside; then we'll warm up an extra drop wi' some mead and a bit of ginger; every one take a thimbleful--just a glimmer of a drop, mind ye, no more, to finish off his inner man--and march off to Pa'son Mayble. Why, sonnies, a man's not himself till he is fortified wi' a bit and a drop? We shall be able to look any gentleman in the face then without shrink or shame."

Mail recovered from a deep meditation and downward glance into the earth in time to give a cordial approval to this line of action, and the

meeting adjourned.

CHAPTER IV: THE INTERVIEW WITH THE VICAR

At six o'clock the next day, the whole body of men in the choir emerged from the tranter's door, and advanced with a firm step down the lane. This dignity of march gradually became obliterated as they went on, and by the time they reached the hill behind the vicarage a faint resemblance to a flock of sheep might have been discerned in the venerable party. A word from the tranter, however, set them right again; and as they descended the hill, the regular tramp, tramp, tramp of the united feet was clearly audible from the vicarage garden. At the opening of the gate there was another short interval of irregular shuffling, caused by a rather peculiar habit the gate had, when swung open quickly, of striking against the bank and slamming back into the opener's face.

"Now keep step again, will ye?" said the tranter. "It looks better, and more becomes the high class of arrant which has brought us here." Thus they advanced to the door.

At Reuben's ring the more modest of the group turned aside, adjusted their hats, and looked critically at any shrub that happened to lie in the line of vision; endeavouring thus to give a person who chanced to