

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

look out of the windows the impression that their request, whatever it was going to be, was rather a casual thought occurring whilst they were inspecting the vicar's shrubbery and grass-plot than a predetermined thing. The tranter, who, coming frequently to the vicarage with luggage, coals, firewood, etc., had none of the awe for its precincts that filled the breasts of most of the others, fixed his eyes firmly on the knocker during this interval of waiting. The knocker having no characteristic worthy of notice, he relinquished it for a knot in one of the door-panels, and studied the winding lines of the grain.

"O, sir, please, here's Tranter Dewy, and old William Dewy, and young Richard Dewy, O, and all the quire too, sir, except the boys, a-come to see you!" said Mr. Maybold's maid-servant to Mr. Maybold, the pupils of her eyes dilating like circles in a pond.

"All the choir?" said the astonished vicar (who may be shortly described as a good-looking young man with courageous eyes, timid mouth, and neutral nose), abandoning his writing and looking at his parlour-maid after speaking, like a man who fancied he had seen her face before but couldn't recollect where.

"And they looks very firm, and Tranter Dewy do turn neither to the right hand nor to the left, but stares quite straight and solemn with his mind made up!"

"O, all the choir," repeated the vicar to himself, trying by that simple

device to trot out his thoughts on what the choir could come for.

"Yes; every man-jack of 'em, as I be alive!" (The parlour-maid was rather local in manner, having in fact been raised in the same village.)

"Really, sir, 'tis thought by many in town and country that--"

"Town and country!--Heavens, I had no idea that I was public property in this way!" said the vicar, his face acquiring a hue somewhere between that of the rose and the peony. "Well, 'It is thought in town and country that--"

"It is thought that you be going to get it hot and strong!--excusen my incivility, sir."

The vicar suddenly recalled to his recollection that he had long ago settled it to be decidedly a mistake to encourage his servant Jane in giving personal opinions. The servant Jane saw by the vicar's face that he recalled this fact to his mind; and removing her forehead from the edge of the door, and rubbing away the indent that edge had made, vanished into the passage as Mr. Maybold remarked, "Show them in, Jane."

A few minutes later a shuffling and jostling (reduced to as refined a form as was compatible with the nature of shuffles and jostles) was heard in the passage; then an earnest and prolonged wiping of shoes, conveying the notion that volumes of mud had to be removed; but the roads being so clean that not a particle of dirt appeared on the choir's boots (those of

all the elder members being newly oiled, and Dick's brightly polished), this wiping might have been set down simply as a desire to show that respectable men had no wish to take a mean advantage of clean roads for curtailing proper ceremonies. Next there came a powerful whisper from the same quarter:-

"Now stand stock-still there, my sonnies, one and all! And don't make no noise; and keep your backs close to the wall, that company may pass in and out easy if they want to without squeezing through ye: and we two are enough to go in." . . . The voice was the tranter's.

"I wish I could go in too and see the sight!" said a reedy voice--that of Leaf.

"'Tis a pity Leaf is so terrible silly, or else he might," said another.

"I never in my life seed a quire go into a study to have it out about the playing and singing," pleaded Leaf; "and I should like to see it just once!"

"Very well; we'll let en come in," said the tranter. "You'll be like chips in porridge, {1} Leaf--neither good nor hurt. All right, my sonny, come along;" and immediately himself, old William, and Leaf appeared in the room.

"We took the liberty to come and see 'ee, sir," said Reuben, letting his

hat hang in his left hand, and touching with his right the brim of an imaginary one on his head. "We've come to see 'ee, sir, man and man, and no offence, I hope?"

"None at all," said Mr. Maybold.

"This old aged man standing by my side is father; William Dewy by name, sir."

"Yes; I see it is," said the vicar, nodding aside to old William, who smiled.

"I thought you mightn't know en without his bass-viol," the tranter apologized. "You see, he always wears his best clothes and his bass-viol a-Sundays, and it do make such a difference in a' old man's look."

"And who's that young man?" the vicar said.

"Tell the pa'son yer name," said the tranter, turning to Leaf, who stood with his elbows nailed back to a bookcase.

"Please, Thomas Leaf, your holiness!" said Leaf, trembling.

"I hope you'll excuse his looks being so very thin," continued the tranter deprecatingly, turning to the vicar again. "But 't isn't his fault, poor feller. He's rather silly by nature, and could never get

fat; though he's a' excellent treble, and so we keep him on."

"I never had no head, sir," said Leaf, eagerly grasping at this opportunity for being forgiven his existence.

"Ah, poor young man!" said Mr. Maybold.

"Bless you, he don't mind it a bit, if you don't, sir," said the tranter assuringly. "Do ye, Leaf?"

"Not I--not a morsel--hee, hee! I was afeard it mightn't please your holiness, sir, that's all."

The tranter, finding Leaf get on so very well through his negative qualities, was tempted in a fit of generosity to advance him still higher, by giving him credit for positive ones. "He's very clever for a silly chap, good-now, sir. You never knowed a young feller keep his smock-frocks so clane; very honest too. His ghastly looks is all there is against en, poor feller; but we can't help our looks, you know, sir."

"True: we cannot. You live with your mother, I think, Leaf?"

The tranter looked at Leaf to express that the most friendly assistant to his tongue could do no more for him now, and that he must be left to his own resources.

"Yes, sir: a widder, sir. Ah, if brother Jim had lived she'd have had a clever son to keep her without work!"

"Indeed! poor woman. Give her this half-crown. I'll call and see your mother."

"Say, 'Thank you, sir,'" the tranter whispered imperatively towards Leaf.

"Thank you, sir!" said Leaf.

"That's it, then; sit down, Leaf," said Mr. Maybold.

"Y-yes, sir!"

The tranter cleared his throat after this accidental parenthesis about Leaf, rectified his bodily position, and began his speech.

"Mr. Mayble," he said, "I hope you'll excuse my common way, but I always like to look things in the face."

Reuben made a point of fixing this sentence in the vicar's mind by gazing hard at him at the conclusion of it, and then out of the window.

Mr. Maybold and old William looked in the same direction, apparently under the impression that the things' faces alluded to were there visible.

"What I have been thinking"--the tranter implied by this use of the past tense that he was hardly so discourteous as to be positively thinking it then--"is that the quire ought to be gie'd a little time, and not done away wi' till Christmas, as a fair thing between man and man. And, Mr. Maybe, I hope you'll excuse my common way?"

"I will, I will. Till Christmas," the vicar murmured, stretching the two words to a great length, as if the distance to Christmas might be measured in that way. "Well, I want you all to understand that I have no personal fault to find, and that I don't wish to change the church music by forcible means, or in a way which should hurt the feelings of any parishioners. Why I have at last spoken definitely on the subject is that a player has been brought under--I may say pressed upon--my notice several times by one of the churchwardens. And as the organ I brought with me is here waiting" (pointing to a cabinet-organ standing in the study), "there is no reason for longer delay."

"We made a mistake I suppose then, sir? But we understood the young woman didn't want to play particularly?" The tranter arranged his countenance to signify that he did not want to be inquisitive in the least.

"No, nor did she. Nor did I definitely wish her to just yet; for your playing is very good. But, as I said, one of the churchwardens has been so anxious for a change, that, as matters stand, I couldn't consistently

refuse my consent."

Now for some reason or other, the vicar at this point seemed to have an idea that he had prevaricated; and as an honest vicar, it was a thing he determined not to do. He corrected himself, blushing as he did so, though why he should blush was not known to Reuben.

"Understand me rightly," he said: "the church-warden proposed it to me, but I had thought myself of getting--Miss Day to play."

"Which churchwarden might that be who proposed her, sir?--excusing my common way." The tranter intimated by his tone that, so far from being inquisitive, he did not even wish to ask a single question.

"Mr. Shiner, I believe."

"Clk, my sonny!--beg your pardon, sir, that's only a form of words of mine, and slipped out accidental--he nourishes enmity against us for some reason or another; perhaps because we played rather hard upon en Christmas night. Anyhow 'tis certain sure that Mr. Shiner's real love for music of a particular kind isn't his reason. He've no more ear than that chair. But let that be."

"I don't think you should conclude that, because Mr. Shiner wants a different music, he has any ill-feeling for you. I myself, I must own, prefer organ-music to any other. I consider it most proper, and feel

justified in endeavouring to introduce it; but then, although other music is better, I don't say yours is not good."

"Well then, Mr. Maybe, since death's to be, we'll die like men any day you name (excusing my common way)."

Mr. Maybold bowed his head.

"All we thought was, that for us old ancient singers to be choked off quiet at no time in particular, as now, in the Sundays after Easter, would seem rather mean in the eyes of other parishes, sir. But if we fell glorious with a bit of a flourish at Christmas, we should have a respectable end, and not dwindle away at some nameless paltry second-Sunday-after or Sunday-next-before something, that's got no name of his own."

"Yes, yes, that's reasonable; I own it's reasonable."

"You see, Mr. Maybe, we've got--do I keep you inconvenient long, sir?"

"No, no."

"We've got our feelings--father there especially."

The tranter, in his earnestness, had advanced his person to within six inches of the vicar's.

"Certainly, certainly!" said Mr. Maybold, retreating a little for convenience of seeing. "You are all enthusiastic on the subject, and I am all the more gratified to find you so. A Laodicean lukewarmness is worse than wrongheadedness itself."

"Exactly, sir. In fact now, Mr. Mayble," Reuben continued, more impressively, and advancing a little closer still to the vicar, "father there is a perfect figure o' wonder, in the way of being fond of music!"

The vicar drew back a little further, the tranter suddenly also standing back a foot or two, to throw open the view of his father, and pointing to him at the same time.

Old William moved uneasily in the large chair, and with a minute smile on the mere edge of his lips, for good-manners, said he was indeed very fond of tunes.

"Now, you see exactly how it is," Reuben continued, appealing to Mr. Maybold's sense of justice by looking sideways into his eyes. The vicar seemed to see how it was so well that the gratified tranter walked up to him again with even vehement eagerness, so that his waistcoat-buttons almost rubbed against the vicar's as he continued: "As to father, if you or I, or any man or woman of the present generation, at the time music is a-playing, was to shake your fist in father's face, as may be this way, and say, 'Don't you be delighted with that music!'"--the tranter went

back to where Leaf was sitting, and held his fist so close to Leaf's face that the latter pressed his head back against the wall: "All right, Leaf, my sonny, I won't hurt you; 'tis just to show my meaning to Mr. Maybe.--As I was saying, if you or I, or any man, was to shake your fist in father's face this way, and say, 'William, your life or your music!' he'd say, 'My life!' Now that's father's nature all over; and you see, sir, it must hurt the feelings of a man of that kind for him and his bass-viol to be done away wi' neck and crop."

The tranter went back to the vicar's front and again looked earnestly at his face.

"True, true, Dewy," Mr. Maybold answered, trying to withdraw his head and shoulders without moving his feet; but finding this impracticable, edging back another inch. These frequent retreats had at last jammed Mr. Maybold between his easy-chair and the edge of the table.

And at the moment of the announcement of the choir, Mr. Maybold had just re-dipped the pen he was using; at their entry, instead of wiping it, he had laid it on the table with the nib overhanging. At the last retreat his coat-tails came in contact with the pen, and down it rolled, first against the back of the chair, thence turning a summersault into the seat, thence falling to the floor with a rattle.

The vicar stooped for his pen, and the tranter, wishing to show that, however great their ecclesiastical differences, his mind was not so small

as to let this affect his social feelings, stooped also.

"And have you anything else you want to explain to me, Dewy?" said Mr. Maybold from under the table.

"Nothing, sir. And, Mr. Maybe, you be not offended? I hope you see our desire is reason?" said the tranter from under the chair.

"Quite, quite; and I shouldn't think of refusing to listen to such a reasonable request," the vicar replied. Seeing that Reuben had secured the pen, he resumed his vertical position, and added, "You know, Dewy, it is often said how difficult a matter it is to act up to our convictions and please all parties. It may be said with equal truth, that it is difficult for a man of any appreciativeness to have convictions at all. Now in my case, I see right in you, and right in Shiner. I see that violins are good, and that an organ is good; and when we introduce the organ, it will not be that fiddles were bad, but that an organ was better. That you'll clearly understand, Dewy?"

"I will; and thank you very much for such feelings, sir. Piph-h-h-h! How the blood do get into my head, to be sure, whenever I quat down like that!" said Reuben, who having also risen to his feet stuck the pen vertically in the inkstand and almost through the bottom, that it might not roll down again under any circumstances whatever.

Now the ancient body of minstrels in the passage felt their curiosity

surging higher and higher as the minutes passed. Dick, not having much affection for this errand, soon grew tired, and went away in the direction of the school. Yet their sense of propriety would probably have restrained them from any attempt to discover what was going on in the study had not the vicar's pen fallen to the floor. The conviction that the movement of chairs, etc., necessitated by the search, could only have been caused by the catastrophe of a bloody fight beginning, overpowered all other considerations; and they advanced to the door, which had only just fallen to. Thus, when Mr. Maybold raised his eyes after the stooping he beheld glaring through the door Mr. Penny in full-length portraiture, Mail's face and shoulders above Mr. Penny's head, Spinks's forehead and eyes over Mail's crown, and a fractional part of Bowman's countenance under Spinks's arm--crescent-shaped portions of other heads and faces being visible behind these--the whole dozen and odd eyes bristling with eager inquiry.

Mr. Penny, as is the case with excitable boot-makers and men, seeing the vicar look at him and hearing no word spoken, thought it incumbent upon himself to say something of any kind. Nothing suggested itself till he had looked for about half a minute at the vicar.

"You'll excuse my naming of it, sir," he said, regarding with much commiseration the mere surface of the vicar's face; "but perhaps you don't know that your chin have bust out a-bleeding where you cut yourself a-shaving this morning, sir."

"Now, that was the stooping, depend upon't," the tranter suggested, also looking with much interest at the vicar's chin. "Blood always will bust out again if you hang down the member that's been bleeding."

Old William raised his eyes and watched the vicar's bleeding chin likewise; and Leaf advanced two or three paces from the bookcase, absorbed in the contemplation of the same phenomenon, with parted lips and delighted eyes.

"Dear me, dear me!" said Mr. Maybold hastily, looking very red, and brushing his chin with his hand, then taking out his handkerchief and wiping the place.

"That's it, sir; all right again now, 'a b'lieve--a mere nothing," said Mr. Penny. "A little bit of fur off your hat will stop it in a minute if it should bust out again."

"I'll let 'ee have a bit off mine," said Reuben, to show his good feeling; "my hat isn't so new as yours, sir, and 'twon't hurt mine a bit."

"No, no; thank you, thank you," Mr. Maybold again nervously replied.

"'Twas rather a deep cut seemingly?" said Reuben, feeling these to be the kindest and best remarks he could make.

"O, no; not particularly."

"Well, sir, your hand will shake sometimes a-shaving, and just when it comes into your head that you may cut yourself, there's the blood."

"I have been revolving in my mind that question of the time at which we make the change," said Mr. Maybold, "and I know you'll meet me half-way. I think Christmas-day as much too late for me as the present time is too early for you. I suggest Michaelmas or thereabout as a convenient time for both parties; for I think your objection to a Sunday which has no name is not one of any real weight."

"Very good, sir. I suppose mortal men mustn't expect their own way entirely; and I express in all our names that we'll make shift and be satisfied with what you say." The tranter touched the brim of his imaginary hat again, and all the choir did the same. "About Michaelmas, then, as far as you are concerned, sir, and then we make room for the next generation."

"About Michaelmas," said the vicar.