

CHAPTER VII: THE TRANTER'S PARTY

During the afternoon unusual activity was seen to prevail about the precincts of tranter Dewy's house. The flagstone floor was swept of dust, and a sprinkling of the finest yellow sand from the innermost stratum of the adjoining sand-pit lightly scattered thereupon. Then were produced large knives and forks, which had been shrouded in darkness and grease since the last occasion of the kind, and bearing upon their sides, "Shear-steel, warranted," in such emphatic letters of assurance, that the warranter's name was not required as further proof, and not given. The key was left in the tap of the cider-barrel, instead of being carried in a pocket. And finally the tranter had to stand up in the room and let his wife wheel him round like a turnstile, to see if anything discreditable was visible in his appearance.

"Stand still till I've been for the scissors," said Mrs. Dewy.

The tranter stood as still as a sentinel at the challenge.

The only repairs necessary were a trimming of one or two whiskers that had extended beyond the general contour of the mass; a like trimming of a slightly-frayed edge visible on his shirt-collar; and a final tug at a grey hair--to all of which operations he submitted in resigned silence, except the last, which produced a mild "Come, come, Ann," by way of expostulation.

"Really, Reuben, 'tis quite a disgrace to see such a man," said Mrs. Dewy, with the severity justifiable in a long-tried companion, giving him another turn round, and picking several of Smiler's hairs from the shoulder of his coat. Reuben's thoughts seemed engaged elsewhere, and he yawned. "And the collar of your coat is a shame to behold--so plastered with dirt, or dust, or grease, or something. Why, wherever could you have got it?"

"'Tis my warm nater in summer-time, I suppose. I always did get in such a heat when I bustle about."

"Ay, the Dewys always were such a coarse-skinned family. There's your brother Bob just as bad--as fat as a porpoise--wi' his low, mean, 'How'st do, Ann?' whenever he meets me. I'd 'How'st do' him indeed! If the sun only shines out a minute, there be you all streaming in the face--I never see!"

"If I be hot week-days, I must be hot Sundays."

"If any of the girls should turn after their father 'twill be a bad look-out for 'em, poor things! None of my family were sich vulgar sweaters, not one of 'em. But, Lord-a-mercy, the Dewys! I don't know how ever I cam' into such a family!"

"Your woman's weakness when I asked ye to jine us. That's how it was I

suppose." But the tranter appeared to have heard some such words from his wife before, and hence his answer had not the energy it might have shown if the inquiry had possessed the charm of novelty.

"You never did look so well in a pair o' trousers as in them," she continued in the same unimpassioned voice, so that the unfriendly criticism of the Dewy family seemed to have been more normal than spontaneous. "Such a cheap pair as 'twas too. As big as any man could wish to have, and lined inside, and double-lined in the lower parts, and an extra piece of stiffening at the bottom. And 'tis a nice high cut that comes up right under your armpits, and there's enough turned down inside the seams to make half a pair more, besides a piece of cloth left that will make an honest waistcoat--all by my contriving in buying the stuff at a bargain, and having it made up under my eye. It only shows what may be done by taking a little trouble, and not going straight to the rascally tailors."

The discourse was cut short by the sudden appearance of Charley on the scene, with a face and hands of hideous blackness, and a nose like a guttering candle. Why, on that particularly cleanly afternoon, he should have discovered that the chimney-crook and chain from which the hams were

suspended should have possessed more merits and general interest as playthings than any other articles in the house, is a question for nursing mothers to decide. However, the humour seemed to lie in the result being, as has been seen, that any given player with these articles

was in the long-run daubed with soot. The last that was seen of Charley by daylight after this piece of ingenuity was when in the act of vanishing from his father's presence round the corner of the house--looking back over his shoulder with an expression of great sin on his face, like Cain as the Outcast in Bible pictures.

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The guests had all assembled, and the tranter's party had reached that degree of development which accords with ten o'clock P.M. in rural assemblies. At that hour the sound of a fiddle in process of tuning was heard from the inner pantry.

"That's Dick," said the tranter. "That lad's crazy for a jig."

"Dick! Now I cannot--really, I cannot have any dancing at all till Christmas-day is out," said old William emphatically. "When the clock ha' done striking twelve, dance as much as ye like."

"Well, I must say there's reason in that, William," said Mrs. Penny. "If you do have a party on Christmas-night, 'tis only fair and honourable to the sky-folk to have it a sit-still party. Jigging parties be all very well on the Devil's holidays; but a jigging party looks suspicious now. O yes; stop till the clock strikes, young folk--so say I."

It happened that some warm mead accidentally got into Mr. Spinks's head

about this time.

"Dancing," he said, "is a most strengthening, livening, and courting movement, 'specially with a little beverage added! And dancing is good. But why disturb what is ordained, Richard and Reuben, and the company zhineraly? Why, I ask, as far as that do go?"

"Then nothing till after twelve," said William.

Though Reuben and his wife ruled on social points, religious questions were mostly disposed of by the old man, whose firmness on this head quite counterbalanced a certain weakness in his handling of domestic matters. The hopes of the younger members of the household were therefore relegated to a distance of one hour and three-quarters--a result that took visible shape in them by a remote and listless look about the eyes--the singing of songs being permitted in the interim.

At five minutes to twelve the soft tuning was again heard in the back quarters; and when at length the clock had whizzed forth the last stroke, Dick appeared ready primed, and the instruments were boldly handled; old William very readily taking the bass-viol from its accustomed nail, and touching the strings as irreligiously as could be desired.

The country-dance called the 'Triumph, or Follow my Lover,' was the figure with which they opened. The tranter took for his partner Mrs. Penny, and Mrs. Dewy was chosen by Mr. Penny, who made so much of his

limited height by a judicious carriage of the head, straightening of the back, and important flashes of his spectacle-glasses, that he seemed almost as tall as the tranter. Mr. Shiner, age about thirty-five, farmer and church-warden, a character principally composed of a crimson stare, vigorous breath, and a watch-chain, with a mouth hanging on a dark smile but never smiling, had come quite willingly to the party, and showed a wondrous obliviousness of all his antics on the previous night. But the comely, slender, prettily-dressed prize Fancy Day fell to Dick's lot, in spite of some private machinations of the farmer, for the reason that Mr. Shiner, as a richer man, had shown too much assurance in asking the favour, whilst Dick had been duly courteous.

We gain a good view of our heroine as she advances to her place in the ladies' line. She belonged to the taller division of middle height. Flexibility was her first characteristic, by which she appeared to enjoy the most easeful rest when she was in gliding motion. Her dark eyes--arched by brows of so keen, slender, and soft a curve, that they resembled nothing so much as two slurs in music--showed primarily a bright sparkle each. This was softened by a frequent thoughtfulness, yet not so frequent as to do away, for more than a few minutes at a time, with a certain coquettishness; which in its turn was never so decided as to banish honesty. Her lips imitated her brows in their clearly-cut outline and softness of bend; and her nose was well shaped--which is saying a great deal, when it is remembered that there are a hundred pretty mouths and eyes for one pretty nose. Add to this, plentiful knots of dark-brown hair, a gauzy dress of white, with blue facings; and the

slightest idea may be gained of the young maiden who showed, amidst the rest of the dancing-ladies, like a flower among vegetables. And so the dance proceeded. Mr. Shiner, according to the interesting rule laid down, deserted his own partner, and made off down the middle with this fair one of Dick's--the pair appearing from the top of the room like two persons tripping down a lane to be married. Dick trotted behind with what was intended to be a look of composure, but which was, in fact, a rather silly expression of feature--implying, with too much earnestness, that such an elopement could not be tolerated. Then they turned and came back, when Dick grew more rigid around his mouth, and blushed with ingenuous ardour as he joined hands with the rival and formed the arch over his lady's head; which presumably gave the figure its name; relinquishing her again at setting to partners, when Mr. Shiner's new chain quivered in every link, and all the loose flesh upon the tranter--who here came into action again--shook like jelly. Mrs. Penny, being always rather concerned for her personal safety when she danced with the tranter, fixed her face to a chronic smile of timidity the whole time it lasted--a peculiarity which filled her features with wrinkles, and reduced her eyes to little straight lines like hyphens, as she jigged up and down opposite him; repeating in her own person not only his proper movements, but also the minor flourishes which the richness of the tranter's imagination led him to introduce from time to time--an imitation which had about it something of slavish obedience, not unmixed with fear.

The ear-rings of the ladies now flung themselves wildly about, turning

violent summersaults, banging this way and that, and then swinging quietly against the ears sustaining them. Mrs. Crumpler--a heavy woman, who, for some reason which nobody ever thought worth inquiry, danced in a clean apron--moved so smoothly through the figure that her feet were never seen; conveying to imaginative minds the idea that she rolled on castors.

Minute after minute glided by, and the party reached the period when ladies' back-hair begins to look forgotten and dissipated; when a perceptible dampness makes itself apparent upon the faces even of delicate girls--a ghastly dew having for some time rained from the features of their masculine partners; when skirts begin to be torn out of their gathers; when elderly people, who have stood up to please their juniors, begin to feel sundry small tremblings in the region of the knees, and to wish the interminable dance was at Jericho; when (at country parties of the thorough sort) waistcoats begin to be unbuttoned, and when the fiddlers' chairs have been wriggled, by the frantic bowing of their occupiers, to a distance of about two feet from where they originally stood.

Fancy was dancing with Mr. Shiner. Dick knew that Fancy, by the law of good manners, was bound to dance as pleasantly with one partner as with another; yet he could not help suggesting to himself that she need not have put quite so much spirit into her steps, nor smiled quite so frequently whilst in the farmer's hands.

"I'm afraid you didn't cast off," said Dick mildly to Mr. Shiner, before the latter man's watch-chain had done vibrating from a recent whirl.

Fancy made a motion of accepting the correction; but her partner took no notice, and proceeded with the next movement, with an affectionate bend towards her.

"That Shiner's too fond of her," the young man said to himself as he watched them. They came to the top again, Fancy smiling warmly towards her partner, and went to their places.

"Mr. Shiner, you didn't cast off," said Dick, for want of something else to demolish him with; casting off himself, and being put out at the farmer's irregularity.

"Perhaps I sha'n't cast off for any man," said Mr. Shiner.

"I think you ought to, sir."

Dick's partner, a young lady of the name of *Lizzy*--called *Lizz* for short--tried to mollify.

"I can't say that I myself have much feeling for casting off," she said.

"Nor I," said Mrs. Penny, following up the argument, "especially if a friend and neighbour is set against it. Not but that 'tis a terrible

tasty thing in good hands and well done; yes, indeed, so say I."

"All I meant was," said Dick, rather sorry that he had spoken correctingly to a guest, "that 'tis in the dance; and a man has hardly any right to hack and mangle what was ordained by the regular dance-maker, who, I daresay, got his living by making 'em, and thought of nothing else all his life."

"I don't like casting off: then very well; I cast off for no dance-maker that ever lived."

Dick now appeared to be doing mental arithmetic, the act being really an effort to present to himself, in an abstract form, how far an argument with a formidable rival ought to be carried, when that rival was his mother's guest. The dead-lock was put an end to by the stamping arrival up the middle of the tranter, who, despising minutiae on principle, started a theme of his own.

"I assure you, neighbours," he said, "the heat of my frame no tongue can tell!" He looked around and endeavoured to give, by a forcible gaze of self-sympathy, some faint idea of the truth.

Mrs. Dewy formed one of the next couple.

"Yes," she said, in an auxiliary tone, "Reuben always was such a hot man."

Mrs. Penny implied the species of sympathy that such a class of affliction required, by trying to smile and to look grieved at the same time.

"If he only walk round the garden of a Sunday morning, his shirt-collar is as limp as no starch at all," continued Mrs. Dewy, her countenance lapsing parenthetically into a housewifely expression of concern at the reminiscence.

"Come, come, you women-folk; 'tis hands across--come, come!" said the tranter; and the conversation ceased for the present.