

CHAPTER VIII: THEY DANCE MORE WILDLY

Dick had at length secured Fancy for that most delightful of country-dances, opening with six-hands-round.

"Before we begin," said the tranter, "my proposal is, that 'twould be a right and proper plan for every mortal man in the dance to pull off his jacket, considering the heat."

"Such low notions as you have, Reuben! Nothing but strip will go down with you when you are a-dancing. Such a hot man as he is!"

"Well, now, look here, my sonnies," he argued to his wife, whom he often addressed in the plural masculine for economy of epithet merely; "I don't see that. You dance and get hot as fire; therefore you lighten your clothes. Isn't that nature and reason for gentle and simple? If I strip by myself and not necessary, 'tis rather pot-housey I own; but if we stout chaps strip one and all, why, 'tis the native manners of the country, which no man can gainsay? Hey--what did you say, my sonnies?"

"Strip we will!" said the three other heavy men who were in the dance; and their coats were accordingly taken off and hung in the passage, whence the four sufferers from heat soon reappeared, marching in close column, with flapping shirt-sleeves, and having, as common to them all, a general glance of being now a match for any man or dancer in England or

Ireland. Dick, fearing to lose ground in Fancy's good opinion, retained his coat like the rest of the thinner men; and Mr. Shiner did the same from superior knowledge.

And now a further phase of revelry had disclosed itself. It was the time of night when a guest may write his name in the dust upon the tables and chairs, and a bluish mist pervades the atmosphere, becoming a distinct halo round the candles; when people's nostrils, wrinkles, and crevices in general, seem to be getting gradually plastered up; when the very fiddlers as well as the dancers get red in the face, the dancers having advanced further still towards incandescence, and entered the cadaverous phase; the fiddlers no longer sit down, but kick back their chairs and saw madly at the strings, with legs firmly spread and eyes closed, regardless of the visible world. Again and again did Dick share his Love's hand with another man, and wheel round; then, more delightfully, promenaded in a circle with her all to himself, his arm holding her waist more firmly each time, and his elbow getting further and further behind her back, till the distance reached was rather noticeable; and, most blissful, swinging to places shoulder to shoulder, her breath curling round his neck like a summer zephyr that had strayed from its proper date. Threading the couples one by one they reached the bottom, when there arose in Dick's mind a minor misery lest the tune should end before they could work their way to the top again, and have anew the same exciting run down through. Dick's feelings on actually reaching the top in spite of his doubts were supplemented by a mortal fear that the fiddling might even stop at this supreme moment; which prompted him to

convey a stealthy whisper to the far-gone musicians, to the effect that they were not to leave off till he and his partner had reached the bottom of the dance once more, which remark was replied to by the nearest of those convulsed and quivering men by a private nod to the anxious young man between two semiquavers of the tune, and a simultaneous "All right, ay, ay," without opening the eyes. Fancy was now held so closely that Dick and she were practically one person. The room became to Dick like a picture in a dream; all that he could remember of it afterwards being the look of the fiddlers going to sleep, as humming-tops sleep, by increasing their motion and hum, together with the figures of grandfather James and old Simon Crumpler sitting by the chimney-corner, talking and nodding in dumb-show, and beating the air to their emphatic sentences like people near a threshing machine.

The dance ended. "Piph-h-h-h!" said tranter Dewy, blowing out his breath in the very finest stream of vapour that a man's lips could form. "A regular tightener, that one, sonnies!" He wiped his forehead, and went to the cider and ale mugs on the table.

"Well!" said Mrs. Penny, flopping into a chair, "my heart haven't been in such a thumping state of uproar since I used to sit up on old Midsummer-eves to see who my husband was going to be."

"And that's getting on for a good few years ago now, from what I've heard you tell," said the tranter, without lifting his eyes from the cup he was filling. Being now engaged in the business of handing round

refreshments, he was warranted in keeping his coat off still, though the other heavy men had resumed theirs.

"And a thing I never expected would come to pass, if you'll believe me, came to pass then," continued Mrs. Penny. "Ah, the first spirit ever I see on a Midsummer-eve was a puzzle to me when he appeared, a hard puzzle, so say I!"

"So I should have fancied," said Elias Spinks.

"Yes," said Mrs. Penny, throwing her glance into past times, and talking on in a running tone of complacent abstraction, as if a listener were not a necessity. "Yes; never was I in such a taking as on that Midsummer-eve! I sat up, quite determined to see if John Wildway was going to marry me or no. I put the bread-and-cheese and beer quite ready, as the witch's book ordered, and I opened the door, and I waited till the clock struck twelve, my nerves all alive and so strained that I could feel every one of 'em twitching like bell-wires. Yes, sure! and when the clock had struck, lo and behold, I could see through the door a little small man in the lane wi' a shoemaker's apron on."

Here Mr. Penny stealthily enlarged himself half an inch.

"Now, John Wildway," Mrs. Penny continued, "who courted me at that time, was a shoemaker, you see, but he was a very fair-sized man, and I couldn't believe that any such a little small man had anything to do wi'

me, as anybody might. But on he came, and crossed the threshold--not John, but actually the same little small man in the shoemaker's apron--"

"You needn't be so mighty particular about little and small!" said her husband.

"In he walks, and down he sits, and O my goodness me, didn't I flee upstairs, body and soul hardly hanging together! Well, to cut a long story short, by-long and by-late, John Wildway and I had a miff and parted; and lo and behold, the coming man came! Penny asked me if I'd go snacks with him, and afore I knew what I was about a'most, the thing was done."

"I've fancied you never knew better in your life; but I mid be mistaken," said Mr. Penny in a murmur.

After Mrs. Penny had spoken, there being no new occupation for her eyes, she still let them stay idling on the past scenes just related, which were apparently visible to her in the centre of the room. Mr. Penny's remark received no reply.

During this discourse the tranter and his wife might have been observed standing in an unobtrusive corner, in mysterious closeness to each other, a just perceptible current of intelligence passing from each to each, which had apparently no relation whatever to the conversation of their guests, but much to their sustenance. A conclusion of some kind having

at length been drawn, the palpable confederacy of man and wife was once more obliterated, the tranter marching off into the pantry, humming a tune that he couldn't quite recollect, and then breaking into the words of a song of which he could remember about one line and a quarter. Mrs. Dewy spoke a few words about preparations for a bit of supper.

That elder portion of the company which loved eating and drinking put on a look to signify that till this moment they had quite forgotten that it was customary to expect suppers on these occasions; going even further than this politeness of feature, and starting irrelevant subjects, the exceeding flatness and forced tone of which rather betrayed their object. The younger members said they were quite hungry, and that supper would be delightful though it was so late.

Good luck attended Dick's love-passes during the meal. He sat next Fancy, and had the thrilling pleasure of using permanently a glass which had been taken by Fancy in mistake; of letting the outer edge of the sole of his boot touch the lower verge of her skirt; and to add to these delights the cat, which had lain unobserved in her lap for several minutes, crept across into his own, touching him with fur that had touched her hand a moment before. There were, besides, some little pleasures in the shape of helping her to vegetable she didn't want, and when it had nearly alighted on her plate taking it across for his own use, on the plea of waste not, want not. He also, from time to time, sipped sweet sly glances at her profile; noticing the set of her head,

the curve of her throat, and other artistic properties of the lively goddess, who the while kept up a rather free, not to say too free, conversation with Mr. Shiner sitting opposite; which, after some uneasy criticism, and much shifting of argument backwards and forwards in Dick's mind, he decided not to consider of alarming significance.

"A new music greets our ears now," said Miss Fancy, alluding, with the sharpness that her position as village sharpener demanded, to the contrast between the rattle of knives and forks and the late notes of the fiddlers.

"Ay; and I don't know but what 'tis sweeter in tone when you get above forty," said the tranter; "except, in faith, as regards father there. Never such a mortal man as he for tunes. They do move his soul; don't 'em, father?"

The eldest Dewy smiled across from his distant chair an assent to Reuben's remark.

"Spaking of being moved in soul," said Mr. Penny, "I shall never forget the first time I heard the 'Dead March.' 'Twas at poor Corp'l Nineman's funeral at Casterbridge. It fairly made my hair creep and fidget about like a vlock of sheep--ah, it did, souls! And when they had done, and the last trump had sounded, and the guns was fired over the dead hero's grave, a' icy-cold drop o' moist sweat hung upon my forehead, and another upon my jawbone. Ah, 'tis a very solemn thing!"

"Well, as to father in the corner there," the tranter said, pointing to old William, who was in the act of filling his mouth; "he'd starve to death for music's sake now, as much as when he was a boy-chap of fifteen."

"Truly, now," said Michael Mail, clearing the corner of his throat in the manner of a man who meant to be convincing; "there's a friendly tie of some sort between music and eating." He lifted the cup to his mouth, and drank himself gradually backwards from a perpendicular position to a slanting one, during which time his looks performed a circuit from the wall opposite him to the ceiling overhead. Then clearing the other corner of his throat: "Once I was a-setting in the little kitchen of the Dree Mariners at Casterbridge, having a bit of dinner, and a brass band struck up in the street. Such a beautiful band as that were! I was setting eating fried liver and lights, I well can mind--ah, I was! and to save my life, I couldn't help chawing to the tune. Band played six-eight time; six-eight chaws I, willynilly. Band plays common; common time went my teeth among the liver and lights as true as a hair. Beautiful 'twere! Ah, I shall never forget that there band!"

"That's as tuneful a thing as ever I heard of," said grandfather James, with the absent gaze which accompanies profound criticism.

"I don't like Michael's tuneful stories then," said Mrs. Dewy. "They are quite coarse to a person o' decent taste."

Old Michael's mouth twitched here and there, as if he wanted to smile but didn't know where to begin, which gradually settled to an expression that it was not displeasing for a nice woman like the tranter's wife to correct him.

"Well, now," said Reuben, with decisive earnestness, "that sort o' coarse touch that's so upsetting to Ann's feelings is to my mind a recommendation; for it do always prove a story to be true. And for the same reason, I like a story with a bad moral. My sonnies, all true stories have a coarse touch or a bad moral, depend upon't. If the story-tellers could ha' got decency and good morals from true stories, who'd ha' troubled to invent parables?" Saying this the tranter arose to fetch a new stock of cider, ale, mead, and home-made wines.

Mrs. Dewy sighed, and appended a remark (ostensibly behind her husband's back, though that the words should reach his ears distinctly was understood by both): "Such a man as Dewy is! Nobody do know the trouble I have to keep that man barely respectable. And did you ever hear too--just now at supper-time--talking about 'taties' with Michael in such a work-folk way. Well, 'tis what I was never brought up to! With our family 'twas never less than 'taters,' and very often 'pertatoes' outright; mother was so particular and nice with us girls there was no family in the parish that kept them selves up more than we."

The hour of parting came. Fancy could not remain for the night, because

she had engaged a woman to wait up for her. She disappeared temporarily from the flagging party of dancers, and then came downstairs wrapped up and looking altogether a different person from whom she had been hitherto, in fact (to Dick's sadness and disappointment), a woman somewhat reserved and of a phlegmatic temperament--nothing left in her of the romping girl that she had seemed but a short quarter-hour before, who had not minded the weight of Dick's hand upon her waist, nor shirked the purlieus of the mistletoe.

"What a difference!" thought the young man--hoary cynic pro tem. "What a miserable deceiving difference between the manners of a maid's life at dancing times and at others! Look at this lovely Fancy! Through the whole past evening touchable, squeezeable--even kissable! For whole half-hours I held her so close to me that not a sheet of paper could have been shipped between us; and I could feel her heart only just outside my own, her life beating on so close to mine, that I was aware of every breath in it. A flit is made upstairs--a hat and a cloak put on--and I no more dare to touch her than--" Thought failed him, and he returned to realities.

But this was an endurable misery in comparison with what followed. Mr. Shiner and his watch-chain, taking the intrusive advantage that ardent bachelors who are going homeward along the same road as a pretty young woman always do take of that circumstance, came forward to assure Fancy--with a total disregard of Dick's emotions, and in tones which were certainly not frigid--that he (Shiner) was not the man to go to bed

before seeing his Lady Fair safe within her own door--not he, nobody should say he was that;--and that he would not leave her side an inch till the thing was done--drown him if he would. The proposal was assented to by Miss Day, in Dick's foreboding judgment, with one degree--or at any rate, an appreciable fraction of a degree--of warmth beyond that required by a disinterested desire for protection from the dangers of the night.

All was over; and Dick surveyed the chair she had last occupied, looking now like a setting from which the gem has been torn. There stood her glass, and the romantic teaspoonful of elder wine at the bottom that she couldn't drink by trying ever so hard, in obedience to the mighty arguments of the tranter (his hand coming down upon her shoulder the while, like a Nasmyth hammer); but the drinker was there no longer. There were the nine or ten pretty little crumbs she had left on her plate; but the eater was no more seen.

There seemed a disagreeable closeness of relationship between himself and the members of his family, now that they were left alone again face to face. His father seemed quite offensive for appearing to be in just as high spirits as when the guests were there; and as for grandfather James (who had not yet left), he was quite fiendish in being rather glad they were gone.

"Really," said the tranter, in a tone of placid satisfaction, "I've had so little time to attend to myself all the evenen, that I mean to enjoy a

quiet meal now! A slice of this here ham--neither too fat nor too lean--so; and then a drop of this vinegar and pickles--there, that's it--and I shall be as fresh as a lark again! And to tell the truth, my sonny, my inside has been as dry as a lime-basket all night."

"I like a party very well once in a while," said Mrs. Dewy, leaving off the adorned tones she had been bound to use throughout the evening, and returning to the natural marriage voice; "but, Lord, 'tis such a sight of heavy work next day! What with the dirty plates, and knives and forks, and dust and smother, and bits kicked off your furniture, and I don't know what all, why a body could a'most wish there were no such things as Christmases . . . Ah-h dear!" she yawned, till the clock in the corner had ticked several beats. She cast her eyes round upon the displaced, dust-laden furniture, and sank down overpowered at the sight.

"Well, I be getting all right by degrees, thank the Lord for't!" said the tranter cheerfully through a mangled mass of ham and bread, without lifting his eyes from his plate, and chopping away with his knife and fork as if he were felling trees. "Ann, you may as well go on to bed at once, and not bide there making such sleepy faces; you look as long-favoured as a fiddle, upon my life, Ann. There, you must be wearied out, 'tis true. I'll do the doors and draw up the clock; and you go on, or you'll be as white as a sheet to-morrow."

"Ay; I don't know whether I shan't or no." The matron passed her hand across her eyes to brush away the film of sleep till she got upstairs.

Dick wondered how it was that when people were married they could be so blind to romance; and was quite certain that if he ever took to wife that dear impossible Fancy, he and she would never be so dreadfully practical and undemonstrative of the Passion as his father and mother were. The most extraordinary thing was, that all the fathers and mothers he knew were just as undemonstrative as his own.