

CHAPTER VI: YALBURY WOOD AND THE KEEPER'S HOUSE

A mood of blitheness rarely experienced even by young men was Dick's on the following Monday morning. It was the week after the Easter holidays, and he was journeying along with Smart the mare and the light spring-cart, watching the damp slopes of the hill-sides as they streamed in the warmth of the sun, which at this unsettled season shone on the grass with the freshness of an occasional inspector rather than as an accustomed proprietor. His errand was to fetch Fancy, and some additional household goods, from her father's house in the neighbouring parish to her dwelling at Mellstock. The distant view was darkly shaded with clouds; but the nearer parts of the landscape were whitely illumined by the visible rays of the sun streaming down across the heavy gray shade behind.

The tranter had not yet told his son of the state of Shiner's heart that had been suggested to him by Shiner's movements. He preferred to let such delicate affairs right themselves; experience having taught him that the uncertain phenomenon of love, as it existed in other people, was not a groundwork upon which a single action of his own life could be founded.

Geoffrey Day lived in the depths of Yalbury Wood, which formed portion of one of the outlying estates of the Earl of Wessex, to whom Day was head game-keeper, timber-steward, and general overlooker for this district.

The wood was intersected by the highway from Casterbridge to London at a

place not far from the house, and some trees had of late years been felled between its windows and the ascent of Yalbury Hill, to give the solitary cottager a glimpse of the passers-by.

It was a satisfaction to walk into the keeper's house, even as a stranger, on a fine spring morning like the present. A curl of wood-smoke came from the chimney, and drooped over the roof like a blue feather in a lady's hat; and the sun shone obliquely upon the patch of grass in front, which reflected its brightness through the open doorway and up the staircase opposite, lighting up each riser with a shiny green radiance, and leaving the top of each step in shade.

The window-sill of the front room was between four and five feet from the floor, dropping inwardly to a broad low bench, over which, as well as over the whole surface of the wall beneath, there always hung a deep shade, which was considered objectionable on every ground save one, namely, that the perpetual sprinkling of seeds and water by the caged canary above was not noticed as an eyesore by visitors. The window was set with thickly-leaded diamond glazing, formed, especially in the lower panes, of knotty glass of various shades of green. Nothing was better known to Fancy than the extravagant manner in which these circular knots or eyes distorted everything seen through them from the outside--lifting hats from heads, shoulders from bodies; scattering the spokes of cart-wheels, and bending the straight fir-trunks into semicircles. The ceiling was carried by a beam traversing its midst, from the side of which projected a large nail, used solely and constantly as a peg for

Geoffrey's hat; the nail was arched by a rainbow-shaped stain, imprinted by the brim of the said hat when it was hung there dripping wet.

The most striking point about the room was the furniture. This was a repetition upon inanimate objects of the old principle introduced by Noah, consisting for the most part of two articles of every sort. The duplicate system of furnishing owed its existence to the forethought of Fancy's mother, exercised from the date of Fancy's birthday onwards. The arrangement spoke for itself: nobody who knew the tone of the household could look at the goods without being aware that the second set was a provision for Fancy, when she should marry and have a house of her own. The most noticeable instance was a pair of green-faced eight-day clocks, ticking alternately, which were severally two and half minutes and three minutes striking the hour of twelve, one proclaiming, in Italian flourishes, Thomas Wood as the name of its maker, and the other--arched at the top, and altogether of more cynical appearance--that of Ezekiel Saunders. They were two departed clockmakers of Casterbridge, whose desperate rivalry throughout their lives was nowhere more emphatically perpetuated than here at Geoffrey's. These chief specimens of the marriage provision were supported on the right by a couple of kitchen dressers, each fitted complete with their cups, dishes, and plates, in their turn followed by two dumb-waiters, two family Bibles, two warming-pans, and two intermixed sets of chairs.

But the position last reached--the chimney-corner--was, after all, the most attractive side of the parallelogram. It was large enough to admit,

in addition to Geoffrey himself, Geoffrey's wife, her chair, and her work-table, entirely within the line of the mantel, without danger or even inconvenience from the heat of the fire; and was spacious enough overhead to allow of the insertion of wood poles for the hanging of bacon, which were cloaked with long shreds of soot, floating on the draught like the tattered banners on the walls of ancient aisles.

These points were common to most chimney corners of the neighbourhood; but one feature there was which made Geoffrey's fireside not only an object of interest to casual aristocratic visitors--to whom every cottage fireside was more or less a curiosity--but the admiration of friends who were accustomed to fireplaces of the ordinary hamlet model. This peculiarity was a little window in the chimney-back, almost over the fire, around which the smoke crept caressingly when it left the perpendicular course. The window-board was curiously stamped with black circles, burnt thereon by the heated bottoms of drinking-cups, which had rested there after previously standing on the hot ashes of the hearth for the purpose of warming their contents, the result giving to the ledge the look of an envelope which has passed through innumerable post-offices.

Fancy was gliding about the room preparing dinner, her head inclining now to the right, now to the left, and singing the tips and ends of tunes that sprang up in her mind like mushrooms. The footsteps of Mrs. Day could be heard in the room overhead. Fancy went finally to the door.

"Father! Dinner."

A tall spare figure was seen advancing by the window with periodical steps, and the keeper entered from the garden. He appeared to be a man who was always looking down, as if trying to recollect something he said yesterday. The surface of his face was fissured rather than wrinkled, and over and under his eyes were folds which seemed as a kind of exterior eyelids. His nose had been thrown backwards by a blow in a poaching fray, so that when the sun was low and shining in his face, people could see far into his head. There was in him a quiet grimness, which would in his moments of displeasure have become surliness, had it not been tempered by honesty of soul, and which was often wrongheadedness because not allied with subtlety.

Although not an extraordinarily taciturn man among friends slightly richer than himself, he never wasted words upon outsiders, and to his trapper Enoch his ideas were seldom conveyed by any other means than nods and shakes of the head. Their long acquaintance with each other's ways, and the nature of their labours, rendered words between them almost superfluous as vehicles of thought, whilst the coincidence of their horizons, and the astonishing equality of their social views, by startling the keeper from time to time as very damaging to the theory of master and man, strictly forbade any indulgence in words as courtesies.

Behind the keeper came Enoch (who had been assisting in the garden) at the well-considered chronological distance of three minutes--an interval

of non-appearance on the trapper's part not arrived at without some reflection. Four minutes had been found to express indifference to indoor arrangements, and simultaneousness had implied too great an anxiety about meals.

"A little earlier than usual, Fancy," the keeper said, as he sat down and looked at the clocks. "That Ezekiel Saunders o' thine is tearing on afore Thomas Wood again."

"I kept in the middle between them," said Fancy, also looking at the two clocks.

"Better stick to Thomas," said her father. "There's a healthy beat in Thomas that would lead a man to swear by en offhand. He is as true as the town time. How is it your stap-mother isn't here?"

As Fancy was about to reply, the rattle of wheels was heard, and "Weh-hey, Smart!" in Mr. Richard Dewy's voice rolled into the cottage from round the corner of the house.

"Hullo! there's Dewy's cart come for thee, Fancy--Dick driving--afore time, too. Well, ask the lad to have pot-luck with us."

Dick on entering made a point of implying by his general bearing that he took an interest in Fancy simply as in one of the same race and country as himself; and they all sat down. Dick could have wished her manner had

not been so entirely free from all apparent consciousness of those accidental meetings of theirs: but he let the thought pass. Enoch sat diagonally at a table afar off, under the corner cupboard, and drank his cider from a long perpendicular pint cup, having tall fir-trees done in brown on its sides. He threw occasional remarks into the general tide of conversation, and with this advantage to himself, that he participated in the pleasures of a talk (slight as it was) at meal-times, without saddling himself with the responsibility of sustaining it.

"Why don't your stap-mother come down, Fancy?" said Geoffrey. "You'll excuse her, Mister Dick, she's a little queer sometimes."

"O yes,--quite," said Richard, as if he were in the habit of excusing people every day.

"She d'belong to that class of womankind that become second wives: a rum class rather."

"Indeed," said Dick, with sympathy for an indefinite something.

"Yes; and 'tis trying to a female, especially if you've been a first wife, as she hev."

"Very trying it must be."

"Yes: you see her first husband was a young man, who let her go too far;

in fact, she used to kick up Bob's-a-dying at the least thing in the world. And when I'd married her and found it out, I thought, thinks I, 'Tis too late now to begin to cure 'e;' and so I let her bide. But she's queer,--very queer, at times!"

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yes: there; wives be such a provoking class o' society, because though they be never right, they be never more than half wrong."

Fancy seemed uneasy under the infliction of this household moralizing, which might tend to damage the airy-fairy nature that Dick, as maiden shrewdness told her, had accredited her with. Her dead silence impressed Geoffrey with the notion that something in his words did not agree with her educated ideas, and he changed the conversation.

"Did Fred Shiner send the cask o' drink, Fancy?"

"I think he did: O yes, he did."

"Nice solid feller, Fred Shiner!" said Geoffrey to Dick as he helped himself to gravy, bringing the spoon round to his plate by way of the potato-dish, to obviate a stain on the cloth in the event of a spill.

Now Geoffrey's eyes had been fixed upon his plate for the previous four or five minutes, and in removing them he had only carried them to the

spoon, which, from its fulness and the distance of its transit, necessitated a steady watching through the whole of the route. Just as intently as the keeper's eyes had been fixed on the spoon, Fancy's had been fixed on her father's, without premeditation or the slightest phase of furtiveness; but there they were fastened. This was the reason why:

Dick was sitting next to her on the right side, and on the side of the table opposite to her father. Fancy had laid her right hand lightly down upon the table-cloth for an instant, and to her alarm Dick, after dropping his fork and brushing his forehead as a reason, flung down his own left hand, overlapping a third of Fancy's with it, and keeping it there. So the innocent Fancy, instead of pulling her hand from the trap, settled her eyes on her father's, to guard against his discovery of this perilous game of Dick's. Dick finished his mouthful; Fancy finished her crumb, and nothing was done beyond watching Geoffrey's eyes. Then the hands slid apart; Fancy's going over six inches of cloth, Dick's over one. Geoffrey's eye had risen.

"I said Fred Shiner is a nice solid feller," he repeated, more emphatically.

"He is; yes, he is," stammered Dick; "but to me he is little more than a stranger."

"O, sure. Now I know en as well as any man can be known. And you know en very well too, don't ye, Fancy?"

Geoffrey put on a tone expressing that these words signified at present about one hundred times the amount of meaning they conveyed literally.

Dick looked anxious.

"Will you pass me some bread?" said Fancy in a flurry, the red of her face becoming slightly disordered, and looking as solicitous as a human being could look about a piece of bread.

"Ay, that I will," replied the unconscious Geoffrey. "Ay," he continued, returning to the displaced idea, "we are likely to remain friendly wi' Mr. Shiner if the wheels d'run smooth."

"An excellent thing--a very capital thing, as I should say," the youth answered with exceeding relevance, considering that his thoughts, instead of following Geoffrey's remark, were nestling at a distance of about two feet on his left the whole time.

"A young woman's face will turn the north wind, Master Richard: my heart if 'twon't." Dick looked more anxious and was attentive in earnest at these words. "Yes; turn the north wind," added Geoffrey after an impressive pause. "And though she's one of my own flesh and blood . . ."

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"Will you fetch down a bit of raw-mil' cheese from pantry-shelf?" Fancy

interrupted, as if she were famishing.

"Ay, that I will, chiel; chiel, says I, and Mr. Shiner only asking last Saturday night . . . cheese you said, Fancy?"

Dick controlled his emotion at these mysterious allusions to Mr. Shiner,--the better enabled to do so by perceiving that Fancy's heart went not with her father's--and spoke like a stranger to the affairs of the neighbourhood. "Yes, there's a great deal to be said upon the power of maiden faces in settling your courses," he ventured, as the keeper retreated for the cheese.

"The conversation is taking a very strange turn: nothing that I have ever done warrants such things being said!" murmured Fancy with emphasis, just loud enough to reach Dick's ears.

"You think to yourself, 'twas to be," cried Enoch from his distant corner, by way of filling up the vacancy caused by Geoffrey's momentary absence. "And so you marry her, Master Dewy, and there's an end o't."

"Pray don't say such things, Enoch," came from Fancy severely, upon which Enoch relapsed into servitude.

"If we be doomed to marry, we marry; if we be doomed to remain single, we do," replied Dick.

Geoffrey had by this time sat down again, and he now made his lips thin by severely straining them across his gums, and looked out of the window along the vista to the distant highway up Yalbury Hill. "That's not the case with some folk," he said at length, as if he read the words on a board at the further end of the vista.

Fancy looked interested, and Dick said, "No?"

"There's that wife o' mine. It was her doom to be nobody's wife at all in the wide universe. But she made up her mind that she would, and did it twice over. Doom? Doom is nothing beside a elderly woman--quite a chiel in her hands!"

A movement was now heard along the upstairs passage, and footsteps descending. The door at the foot of the stairs opened, and the second Mrs. Day appeared in view, looking fixedly at the table as she advanced towards it, with apparent obliviousness of the presence of any other human being than herself. In short, if the table had been the personages, and the persons the table, her glance would have been the most natural imaginable.

She showed herself to possess an ordinary woman's face, iron-grey hair, hardly any hips, and a great deal of cleanliness in a broad white apron-string, as it appeared upon the waist of her dark stuff dress.

"People will run away with a story now, I suppose," she began saying, "that Jane Day's tablecloths are as poor and ragged as any union beggar's!"

Dick now perceived that the tablecloth was a little the worse for wear, and reflecting for a moment, concluded that 'people' in step-mother language probably meant himself. On lifting his eyes he found that Mrs. Day had vanished again upstairs, and presently returned with an armful of new damask-linen tablecloths, folded square and hard as boards by long compression. These she flounced down into a chair; then took one, shook it out from its folds, and spread it on the table by instalments, transferring the plates and dishes one by one from the old to the new cloth.

"And I suppose they'll say, too, that she ha'n't a decent knife and fork in her house!"

"I shouldn't say any such ill-natured thing, I am sure--" began Dick. But Mrs. Day had vanished into the next room. Fancy appeared distressed.

"Very strange woman, isn't she?" said Geoffrey, quietly going on with his dinner. "But 'tis too late to attempt curing. My heart! 'tis so growed into her that 'twould kill her to take it out. Ay, she's very queer: you'd be amazed to see what valuable goods we've got stowed away upstairs."

Back again came Mrs. Day with a box of bright steel horn-handled knives, silver-plated forks, carver, and all complete. These were wiped of the preservative oil which coated them, and then a knife and fork were laid down to each individual with a bang, the carving knife and fork thrust into the meat dish, and the old ones they had hitherto used tossed away.

Geoffrey placidly cut a slice with the new knife and fork, and asked Dick if he wanted any more.

The table had been spread for the mixed midday meal of dinner and tea, which was common among frugal countryfolk. "The parishioners about here," continued Mrs. Day, not looking at any living being, but snatching up the brown delf tea-things, "are the laziest, gossipest, poachest, jailest set of any ever I came among. And they'll talk about my teapot and tea-things next, I suppose!" She vanished with the teapot, cups, and saucers, and reappeared with a tea-service in white china, and a packet wrapped in brown paper. This was removed, together with folds of tissue-paper underneath; and a brilliant silver teapot appeared.

"I'll help to put the things right," said Fancy soothingly, and rising from her seat. "I ought to have laid out better things, I suppose. But" (here she enlarged her looks so as to include Dick) "I have been away from home a good deal, and I make shocking blunders in my housekeeping." Smiles and suavity were then dispensed all around by this bright little bird.

After a little more preparation and modification, Mrs. Day took her seat at the head of the table, and during the latter or tea division of the meal, presided with much composure. It may cause some surprise to learn that, now her vagary was over, she showed herself to be an excellent person with much common sense, and even a religious seriousness of tone on matters pertaining to her afflictions.