

## CHAPTER VII: DICK MAKES HIMSELF USEFUL

The effect of Geoffrey's incidental allusions to Mr. Shiner was to restrain a considerable flow of spontaneous chat that would otherwise have burst from young Dewy along the drive homeward. And a certain remark he had hazarded to her, in rather too blunt and eager a manner, kept the young lady herself even more silent than Dick. On both sides there was an unwillingness to talk on any but the most trivial subjects, and their sentences rarely took a larger form than could be expressed in two or three words.

Owing to Fancy being later in the day than she had promised, the charwoman had given up expecting her; whereupon Dick could do no less than stay and see her comfortably tided over the disagreeable time of entering and establishing herself in an empty house after an absence of a week. The additional furniture and utensils that had been brought (a canary and cage among the rest) were taken out of the vehicle, and the horse was unharnessed and put in the plot opposite, where there was some tender grass. Dick lighted the fire already laid; and activity began to loosen their tongues a little.

"There!" said Fancy, "we forgot to bring the fire-irons!"

She had originally found in her sitting-room, to bear out the expression 'nearly furnished' which the school-manager had used in his letter to

her, a table, three chairs, a fender, and a piece of carpet. This 'nearly' had been supplemented hitherto by a kind friend, who had lent her fire-irons and crockery until she should fetch some from home.

Dick attended to the young lady's fire, using his whip-handle for a poker till it was spoilt, and then flourishing a hurdle stick for the remainder of the time.

"The kettle boils; now you shall have a cup of tea," said Fancy, diving into the hamper she had brought.

"Thank you," said Dick, whose drive had made him ready for some, especially in her company.

"Well, here's only one cup-and-saucer, as I breathe! Whatever could mother be thinking about? Do you mind making shift, Mr. Dewy?"

"Not at all, Miss Day," said that civil person.

"--And only having a cup by itself? or a saucer by itself?"

"Don't mind in the least."

"Which do you mean by that?"

"I mean the cup, if you like the saucer."

"And the saucer, if I like the cup?"

"Exactly, Miss Day."

"Thank you, Mr. Dewy, for I like the cup decidedly. Stop a minute; there are no spoons now!" She dived into the hamper again, and at the end of two or three minutes looked up and said, "I suppose you don't mind if I can't find a spoon?"

"Not at all," said the agreeable Richard.

"The fact is, the spoons have slipped down somewhere; right under the other things. O yes, here's one, and only one. You would rather have one than not, I suppose, Mr. Dewy?"

"Rather not. I never did care much about spoons."

"Then I'll have it. I do care about them. You must stir up your tea with a knife. Would you mind lifting the kettle off, that it may not boil dry?"

Dick leapt to the fireplace, and earnestly removed the kettle.

"There! you did it so wildly that you have made your hand black. We always use kettle-holders; didn't you learn housewifery as far as that,

Mr. Dewy? Well, never mind the soot on your hand. Come here. I am going to rinse mine, too."

They went to a basin she had placed in the back room. "This is the only basin I have," she said. "Turn up your sleeves, and by that time my hands will be washed, and you can come."

Her hands were in the water now. "O, how vexing!" she exclaimed. "There's not a drop of water left for you, unless you draw it, and the well is I don't know how many furlongs deep; all that was in the pitcher I used for the kettle and this basin. Do you mind dipping the tips of your fingers in the same?"

"Not at all. And to save time I won't wait till you have done, if you have no objection?"

Thereupon he plunged in his hands, and they paddled together. It being the first time in his life that he had touched female fingers under water, Dick duly registered the sensation as rather a nice one.

"Really, I hardly know which are my own hands and which are yours, they have got so mixed up together," she said, withdrawing her own very suddenly.

"It doesn't matter at all," said Dick, "at least as far as I am concerned."

"There! no towel! Whoever thinks of a towel till the hands are wet?"

"Nobody."

"'Nobody.' How very dull it is when people are so friendly! Come here, Mr. Dewy. Now do you think you could lift the lid of that box with your elbow, and then, with something or other, take out a towel you will find under the clean clothes? Be sure don't touch any of them with your wet hands, for the things at the top are all Starched and Ironed."

Dick managed, by the aid of a knife and fork, to extract a towel from under a muslin dress without wetting the latter; and for a moment he ventured to assume a tone of criticism.

"I fear for that dress," he said, as they wiped their hands together.

"What?" said Miss Day, looking into the box at the dress alluded to. "O, I know what you mean--that the vicar will never let me wear muslin?"

"Yes."

"Well, I know it is condemned by all orders in the church as flaunting, and unfit for common wear for girls who've their living to get; but we'll see."

"In the interest of the church, I hope you don't speak seriously."

"Yes, I do; but we'll see." There was a comely determination on her lip, very pleasant to a beholder who was neither bishop, priest, nor deacon.

"I think I can manage any vicar's views about me if he's under forty."

Dick rather wished she had never thought of managing vicars.

"I certainly shall be glad to get some of your delicious tea," he said in rather a free way, yet modestly, as became one in a position between that of visitor and inmate, and looking wistfully at his lonely saucer.

"So shall I. Now is there anything else we want, Mr Dewy?"

"I really think there's nothing else, Miss Day."

She prepared to sit down, looking musingly out of the window at Smart's enjoyment of the rich grass. "Nobody seems to care about me," she murmured, with large lost eyes fixed upon the sky beyond Smart.

"Perhaps Mr. Shiner does," said Dick, in the tone of a slightly injured man.

"Yes, I forgot--he does, I know." Dick precipitately regretted that he had suggested Shiner, since it had produced such a miserable result as this.

"I'll warrant you'll care for somebody very much indeed another day, won't you, Mr. Dewy?" she continued, looking very feelingly into the mathematical centre of his eyes.

"Ah, I'll warrant I shall," said Dick, feelingly too, and looking back into her dark pupils, whereupon they were turned aside.

"I meant," she went on, preventing him from speaking just as he was going to narrate a forcible story about his feelings; "I meant that nobody comes to see if I have returned--not even the vicar."

"If you want to see him, I'll call at the vicarage directly we have had some tea."

"No, no! Don't let him come down here, whatever you do, whilst I am in such a state of disarrangement. Parsons look so miserable and awkward when one's house is in a muddle; walking about, and making impossible suggestions in quaint academic phrases till your flesh creeps and you wish them dead. Do you take sugar?"

Mr. Maybold was at this instant seen coming up the path.

"There! That's he coming! How I wish you were not here!--that is, how awkward--dear, dear!" she exclaimed, with a quick ascent of blood to her face, and irritated with Dick rather than the vicar, as it seemed.

"Pray don't be alarmed on my account, Miss Day--good-afternoon!" said Dick in a huff, putting on his hat, and leaving the room hastily by the back-door.

The horse was caught and put in, and on mounting the shafts to start he saw through the window the vicar, standing upon some books piled in a chair, and driving a nail into the wall; Fancy, with a demure glance, holding the canary-cage up to him, as if she had never in her life thought of anything but vicars and canaries.