

## CHAPTER VIII: DICK MEETS HIS FATHER

For several minutes Dick drove along homeward, with the inner eye of reflection so anxiously set on his passages at arms with Fancy, that the road and scenery were as a thin mist over the real pictures of his mind. Was she a coquette? The balance between the evidence that she did love him and that she did not was so nicely struck, that his opinion had no stability. She had let him put his hand upon hers; she had allowed her gaze to drop plumb into the depths of his--his into hers--three or four times; her manner had been very free with regard to the basin and towel; she had appeared vexed at the mention of Shiner. On the other hand, she had driven him about the house like a quiet dog or cat, said Shiner cared for her, and seemed anxious that Mr. Maybold should do the same.

Thinking thus as he neared the handpost at Mellstock Cross, sitting on the front board of the spring cart--his legs on the outside, and his whole frame jiggling up and down like a candle-flame to the time of Smart's trotting--who should he see coming down the hill but his father in the light wagon, quivering up and down on a smaller scale of shakes, those merely caused by the stones in the road. They were soon crossing each other's front.

"Weh-hey!" said the tranter to Smiler.

"Weh-hey!" said Dick to Smart, in an echo of the same voice.

"Th'st hauled her back, I suppose?" Reuben inquired peaceably.

"Yes," said Dick, with such a clinching period at the end that it seemed he was never going to add another word. Smiler, thinking this the close of the conversation, prepared to move on.

"Weh-hey!" said the tranter. "I tell thee what it is, Dick. That there maid is taking up thy thoughts more than's good for thee, my sonny. Thou'rt never happy now unless th'rt making thyself miserable about her in one way or another."

"I don't know about that, father," said Dick rather stupidly.

"But I do--Wey, Smiler!--'Od rot the women, 'tis nothing else wi' 'em nowadays but getting young men and leading 'em astray."

"Pooh, father! you just repeat what all the common world says; that's all you do."

"The world's a very sensible feller on things in jeneral, Dick; very sensible indeed."

Dick looked into the distance at a vast expanse of mortgaged estate. "I wish I was as rich as a squire when he's as poor as a crow," he murmured; "I'd soon ask Fancy something."

"I wish so too, wi' all my heart, sonny; that I do. Well, mind what beest about, that's all."

Smart moved on a step or two. "Supposing now, father,--We-hey, Smart!--I did think a little about her, and I had a chance, which I ha'n't; don't you think she's a very good sort of--of--one?"

"Ay, good; she's good enough. When you've made up your mind to marry, take the first respectable body that comes to hand--she's as good as any other; they be all alike in the groundwork; 'tis only in the flourishes there's a difference. She's good enough; but I can't see what the nation a young feller like you--wi' a comfortable house and home, and father and mother to take care o' thee, and who sent 'ee to a school so good that 'twas hardly fair to the other children--should want to go hollering after a young woman for, when she's quietly making a husband in her pocket, and not troubled by chick nor chiel, to make a poverty-stric' wife and family of her, and neither hat, cap, wig, nor waistcoat to set 'em up with: be drowned if I can see it, and that's the long and the short o't, my sonny."

Dick looked at Smart's ears, then up the hill; but no reason was suggested by any object that met his gaze.

"For about the same reason that you did, father, I suppose."

"Dang it, my sonny, thou'st got me there!" And the tranter gave vent to a grim admiration, with the mien of a man who was too magnanimous not to appreciate artistically a slight rap on the knuckles, even if they were his own.

"Whether or no," said Dick, "I asked her a thing going along the road."

"Come to that, is it? Turk! won't thy mother be in a taking! Well, she's ready, I don't doubt?"

"I didn't ask her anything about having me; and if you'll let me speak, I'll tell 'ee what I want to know. I just said, Did she care about me?"

"Piph-ph-ph!"

"And then she said nothing for a quarter of a mile, and then she said she didn't know. Now, what I want to know is, what was the meaning of that speech?" The latter words were spoken resolutely, as if he didn't care for the ridicule of all the fathers in creation.

"The meaning of that speech is," the tranter replied deliberately, "that the meaning is meant to be rather hid at present. Well, Dick, as an honest father to thee, I don't pretend to deny what you d'know well enough; that is, that her father being rather better in the pocket than we, I should welcome her ready enough if it must be somebody."

"But what d'ye think she really did mean?" said the unsatisfied Dick.

"I'm afeard I am not o' much account in guessing, especially as I was not there when she said it, and seeing that your mother was the only 'ooman I ever cam' into such close quarters as that with."

"And what did mother say to you when you asked her?" said Dick musingly.

"I don't see that that will help 'ee."

"The principle is the same."

"Well--ay: what did she say? Let's see. I was oiling my working-day boots without taking 'em off, and wi' my head hanging down, when she just brushed on by the garden hatch like a fluttering leaf. 'Ann,' I said, says I, and then,--but, Dick I'm afeard 'twill be no help to thee; for we were such a rum couple, your mother and I, leastways one half was, that is myself--and your mother's charms was more in the manner than the material."

"Never mind! 'Ann,' said you."

"'Ann,' said I, as I was saying . . . 'Ann,' I said to her when I was oiling my working-day boots wi' my head hanging down, 'Woot hae me?' . . . What came next I can't quite call up at this distance o' time. Perhaps your mother would know,--she's got a better memory for her little

triumphs than I. However, the long and the short o' the story is that we were married somehow, as I found afterwards. 'Twas on White Tuesday,--Mellstock Club walked the same day, every man two and two, and a fine day 'twas,--hot as fire,--how the sun did strike down upon my back going to church! I well can mind what a bath o' sweating I was in, body and soul! But Fance will ha' thee, Dick--she won't walk with another chap--no such good luck."

"I don't know about that," said Dick, whipping at Smart's flank in a fanciful way, which, as Smart knew, meant nothing in connection with going on. "There's Pa'son Maybold, too--that's all against me."

"What about he? She's never been stuffing into thy innocent heart that he's in hove with her? Lord, the vanity o' maidens!"

"No, no. But he called, and she looked at him in such a way, and at me in such a way--quite different the ways were,--and as I was coming off, there was he hanging up her birdcage."

"Well, why shouldn't the man hang up her bird-cage? Turk seize it all, what's that got to do wi' it? Dick, that thou beest a white-lyvered chap I don't say, but if thou beestn't as mad as a cappel-faced bull, let me smile no more."

"O, ay."

"And what's think now, Dick?"

"I don't know."

"Here's another pretty kettle o' fish for thee. Who d'ye think's the bitter weed in our being turned out? Did our party tell 'ee?"

"No. Why, Pa'son Maybold, I suppose."

"Shiner,--because he's in love with thy young woman, and d'want to see her young figure sitting up at that queer instrument, and her young fingers rum-strumming upon the keys."

A sharp ado of sweet and bitter was going on in Dick during this communication from his father. "Shiner's a fool!--no, that's not it; I don't believe any such thing, father. Why, Shiner would never take a bold step like that, unless she'd been a little made up to, and had taken it kindly. Pooh!"

"Who's to say she didn't?"

"I do."

"The more fool you."

"Why, father of me?"

"Has she ever done more to thee?"

"No."

"Then she has done as much to he--rot 'em! Now, Dick, this is how a maid is. She'll swear she's dying for thee, and she is dying for thee, and she will die for thee; but she'll fling a look over t'other shoulder at another young feller, though never leaving off dying for thee just the same."

"She's not dying for me, and so she didn't fling a look at him."

"But she may be dying for him, for she looked at thee."

"I don't know what to make of it at all," said Dick gloomily.

"All I can make of it is," the tranter said, raising his whip, arranging his different joints and muscles, and motioning to the horse to move on, "that if you can't read a maid's mind by her motions, nature d'seem to say thou'st ought to be a bachelor. Clk, clk! Smiler!" And the tranter moved on.

Dick held Smart's rein firmly, and the whole concern of horse, cart, and man remained rooted in the lane. How long this condition would have lasted is unknown, had not Dick's thoughts, after adding up numerous



items of misery, gradually wandered round to the fact that as something must be done, it could not be done by staying there all night.

Reaching home he went up to his bedroom, shut the door as if he were going to be seen no more in this life, and taking a sheet of paper and uncorking the ink-bottle, he began a letter. The dignity of the writer's mind was so powerfully apparent in every line of this effusion that it obscured the logical sequence of facts and intentions to an appreciable degree; and it was not at all clear to a reader whether he there and then left off loving Miss Fancy Day; whether he had never loved her seriously, and never meant to; whether he had been dying up to the present moment, and now intended to get well again; or whether he had hitherto been in good health, and intended to die for her forthwith.

He put this letter in an envelope, sealed it up, directed it in a stern handwriting of straight dashes--easy flourishes being rigorously excluded. He walked with it in his pocket down the lane in strides not an inch less than three feet long. Reaching her gate he put on a resolute expression--then put it off again, turned back homeward, tore up his letter, and sat down.

That letter was altogether in a wrong tone--that he must own. A heartless man-of-the-world tone was what the juncture required. That he rather wanted her, and rather did not want her--the latter for choice; but that as a member of society he didn't mind making a query in jaunty terms, which could only be answered in the same way: did she mean

anything by her bearing towards him, or did she not?

This letter was considered so satisfactory in every way that, being put into the hands of a little boy, and the order given that he was to run with it to the school, he was told in addition not to look behind him if Dick called after him to bring it back, but to run along with it just the same. Having taken this precaution against vacillation, Dick watched his messenger down the road, and turned into the house whistling an air in such ghastly jerks and starts, that whistling seemed to be the act the very furthest removed from that which was instinctive in such a youth.

The letter was left as ordered: the next morning came and passed--and no answer. The next. The next. Friday night came. Dick resolved that if no answer or sign were given by her the next day, on Sunday he would meet her face to face, and have it all out by word of mouth.

"Dick," said his father, coming in from the garden at that moment--in each hand a hive of bees tied in a cloth to prevent their egress--"I think you'd better take these two swarms of bees to Mrs. Maybold's to-morrow, instead o' me, and I'll go wi' Smiler and the wagon."

It was a relief; for Mrs. Maybold, the vicar's mother, who had just taken into her head a fancy for keeping bees (pleasantly disguised under the pretence of its being an economical wish to produce her own honey), lived near the watering-place of Budmouth-Regis, ten miles off, and the business of transporting the hives thither would occupy the whole day,

and to some extent annihilate the vacant time between this evening and the coming Sunday. The best spring-cart was washed throughout, the axles oiled, and the bees placed therein for the journey.