

"Very well."

## CHAPTER II: FURTHER ALONG THE ROAD

Dick's spirits having risen in the course of these admissions of his sweetheart, he now touched Smart with the whip; and on Smart's neck, not far behind his ears. Smart, who had been lost in thought for some time, never dreaming that Dick could reach so far with a whip which, on this particular journey, had never been extended further than his flank, tossed his head, and scampered along with exceeding briskness, which was very pleasant to the young couple behind him till, turning a bend in the road, they came instantly upon the farmer, farmer's man, and farmer's wife with the flapping mantle, all jogging on just the same as ever.

"Bother those people! Here we are upon them again."

"Well, of course. They have as much right to the road as we."

"Yes, but it is provoking to be overlooked so. I like a road all to myself. Look what a lumbering affair theirs is!" The wheels of the farmer's cart, just at that moment, jogged into a depression running across the road, giving the cart a twist, whereupon all three nodded to the left, and on coming out of it all three nodded to the right, and went

on jerking their backs in and out as usual. "We'll pass them when the road gets wider."

When an opportunity seemed to offer itself for carrying this intention into effect, they heard light flying wheels behind, and on their quartering there whizzed along past them a brand-new gig, so brightly polished that the spokes of the wheels sent forth a continual quivering light at one point in their circle, and all the panels glared like mirrors in Dick and Fancy's eyes. The driver, and owner as it appeared, was really a handsome man; his companion was Shiner. Both turned round as they passed Dick and Fancy, and stared with bold admiration in her face till they were obliged to attend to the operation of passing the farmer. Dick glanced for an instant at Fancy while she was undergoing their scrutiny; then returned to his driving with rather a sad countenance.

"Why are you so silent?" she said, after a while, with real concern.

"Nothing."

"Yes, it is, Dick. I couldn't help those people passing."

"I know that."

"You look offended with me. What have I done?"

"I can't tell without offending you."

"Better out."

"Well," said Dick, who seemed longing to tell, even at the risk of offending her, "I was thinking how different you in love are from me in love. Whilst those men were staring, you dismissed me from your thoughts altogether, and--"

"You can't offend me further now; tell all!"

"And showed upon your face a pleased sense of being attractive to 'em."

"Don't be silly, Dick! You know very well I didn't."

Dick shook his head sceptically, and smiled.

"Dick, I always believe flattery if possible--and it was possible then. Now there's an open confession of weakness. But I showed no consciousness of it."

Dick, perceiving by her look that she would adhere to her statement, charitably forbore saying anything that could make her prevaricate. The sight of Shiner, too, had recalled another branch of the subject to his mind; that which had been his greatest trouble till her company and words had obscured its probability.

"By the way, Fancy, do you know why our quire is to be dismissed?"

"No: except that it is Mr. Maybold's wish for me to play the organ."

"Do you know how it came to be his wish?"

"That I don't."

"Mr. Shiner, being churchwarden, has persuaded the vicar; who, however, was willing enough before. Shiner, I know, is crazy to see you playing every Sunday; I suppose he'll turn over your music, for the organ will be close to his pew. But--I know you have never encouraged him?"

"Never once!" said Fancy emphatically, and with eyes full of earnest truth. "I don't like him indeed, and I never heard of his doing this before! I have always felt that I should like to play in a church, but I never wished to turn you and your choir out; and I never even said that I could play till I was asked. You don't think for a moment that I did, surely, do you?"

"I know you didn't, dear."

"Or that I care the least morsel of a bit for him?"

"I know you don't."

The distance between Budmouth and Mellstock was ten or eleven miles, and there being a good inn, 'The Ship,' four miles out of Budmouth, with a mast and cross-trees in front, Dick's custom in driving thither was to divide the journey into three stages by resting at this inn going and coming, and not troubling the Budmouth stables at all, whenever his visit to the town was a mere call and deposit, as to-day.

Fancy was ushered into a little tea-room, and Dick went to the stables to see to the feeding of Smart. In face of the significant twitches of feature that were visible in the ostler and labouring men idling around, Dick endeavoured to look unconscious of the fact that there was any sentiment between him and Fancy beyond a tranter's desire to carry a passenger home. He presently entered the inn and opened the door of Fancy's room.

"Dick, do you know, it has struck me that it is rather awkward, my being here alone with you like this. I don't think you had better come in with me."

"That's rather unpleasant, dear."

"Yes, it is, and I wanted you to have some tea as well as myself too, because you must be tired."

"Well, let me have some with you, then. I was denied once before, if you

recollect, Fancy."

"Yes, yes, never mind! And it seems unfriendly of me now, but I don't know what to do."

"It shall be as you say, then." Dick began to retreat with a dissatisfied wrinkling of face, and a farewell glance at the cosy tea-tray.

"But you don't see how it is, Dick, when you speak like that," she said, with more earnestness than she had ever shown before. "You do know, that even if I care very much for you, I must remember that I have a difficult position to maintain. The vicar would not like me, as his schoolmistress, to indulge in a tete-a-tete anywhere with anybody."

"But I am not any body!" exclaimed Dick.

"No, no, I mean with a young man;" and she added softly, "unless I were really engaged to be married to him."

"Is that all? Then, dearest, dearest, why we'll be engaged at once, to be sure we will, and down I sit! There it is, as easy as a glove!"

"Ah! but suppose I won't! And, goodness me, what have I done!" she faltered, getting very red. "Positively, it seems as if I meant you to say that!"

"Let's do it! I mean get engaged," said Dick. "Now, Fancy, will you be my wife?"

"Do you know, Dick, it was rather unkind of you to say what you did coming along the road," she remarked, as if she had not heard the latter part of his speech; though an acute observer might have noticed about her breast, as the word 'wife' fell from Dick's lips, a soft silent escape of breaths, with very short rests between each.

"What did I say?"

"About my trying to look attractive to those men in the gig."

"You couldn't help looking so, whether you tried or no. And, Fancy, you do care for me?"

"Yes."

"Very much?"

"Yes."

"And you'll be my own wife?"

Her heart quickened, adding to and withdrawing from her cheek varying

tones of red to match each varying thought. Dick looked expectantly at the ripe tint of her delicate mouth, waiting for what was coming forth.

"Yes--if father will let me."

Dick drew himself close to her, compressing his lips and pouting them out, as if he were about to whistle the softest melody known.

"O no!" said Fancy solemnly.

The modest Dick drew back a little.

"Dick, Dick, kiss me and let me go instantly!--here's somebody coming!" she whisperingly exclaimed.

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Half an hour afterwards Dick emerged from the inn, and if Fancy's lips had been real cherries probably Dick's would have appeared deeply stained. The landlord was standing in the yard.

"Heu-heu! hay-hay, Master Dewy! Ho-ho!" he laughed, letting the laugh slip out gently and by degrees that it might make little noise in its exit, and smiting Dick under the fifth rib at the same time. "This will never do, upon my life, Master Dewy! calling for tay for a feymel passenger, and then going in and sitting down and having some too, and



biding such a fine long time!"

"But surely you know?" said Dick, with great apparent surprise. "Yes, yes! Ha-ha!" smiting the landlord under the ribs in return.

"Why, what? Yes, yes; ha-ha!"

"You know, of course!"

"Yes, of course! But--that is--I don't."

"Why about--between that young lady and me?" nodding to the window of the room that Fancy occupied.

"No; not I!" said the innkeeper, bringing his eyes into circles.

"And you don't!"

"Not a word, I'll take my oath!"

"But you laughed when I laughed."

"Ay, that was me sympathy; so did you when I laughed!"

"Really, you don't know? Goodness--not knowing that!"

"I'll take my oath I don't!"

"O yes," said Dick, with frigid rhetoric of pitying astonishment, "we're engaged to be married, you see, and I naturally look after her."

"Of course, of course! I didn't know that, and I hope ye'll excuse any little freedom of mine, Mr. Dewy. But it is a very odd thing; I was talking to your father very intimate about family matters only last Friday in the world, and who should come in but Keeper Day, and we all then fell a-talking o' family matters; but neither one o' them said a mortal word about it; knowen me too so many years, and I at your father's own wedding. 'Tisn't what I should have expected from an old neighbour!"

"Well, to say the truth, we hadn't told father of the engagement at that time; in fact, 'twasn't settled."

"Ah! the business was done Sunday. Yes, yes, Sunday's the courting day. Heu-heu!"

"No, 'twasn't done Sunday in particular."

"After school-hours this week? Well, a very good time, a very proper good time."

"O no, 'twasn't done then."

"Coming along the road to-day then, I suppose?"

"Not at all; I wouldn't think of getting engaged in a dog-cart."

"Dammy--might as well have said at once, the when be blowed! Anyhow, 'tis a fine day, and I hope next time you'll come as one."

Fancy was duly brought out and assisted into the vehicle, and the newly affianced youth and maiden passed up the steep hill to the Ridgeway, and vanished in the direction of Mellstock.