

### CHAPTER III: A CONFESSION

It was a morning of the latter summer-time; a morning of lingering dews, when the grass is never dry in the shade. Fuchsias and dahlias were laden till eleven o'clock with small drops and dashes of water, changing the colour of their sparkle at every movement of the air; and elsewhere hanging on twigs like small silver fruit. The threads of garden spiders appeared thick and polished. In the dry and sunny places, dozens of long-legged crane-flies whizzed off the grass at every step the passer took.

Fancy Day and her friend Susan Dewy the tranter's daughter, were in such a spot as this, pulling down a bough laden with early apples. Three months had elapsed since Dick and Fancy had journeyed together from Budmouth, and the course of their love had run on vigorously during the whole time. There had been just enough difficulty attending its development, and just enough finesse required in keeping it private, to lend the passion an ever-increasing freshness on Fancy's part, whilst, whether from these accessories or not, Dick's heart had been at all times as fond as could be desired. But there was a cloud on Fancy's horizon now.

"She is so well off--better than any of us," Susan Dewy was saying. "Her father farms five hundred acres, and she might marry a doctor or curate or anything of that kind if she contrived a little."

"I don't think Dick ought to have gone to that gipsy-party at all when he knew I couldn't go," replied Fancy uneasily.

"He didn't know that you would not be there till it was too late to refuse the invitation," said Susan.

"And what was she like? Tell me."

"Well, she was rather pretty, I must own."

"Tell straight on about her, can't you! Come, do, Susan. How many times did you say he danced with her?"

"Once."

"Twice, I think you said?"

"Indeed I'm sure I didn't."

"Well, and he wanted to again, I expect."

"No; I don't think he did. She wanted to dance with him again bad enough, I know. Everybody does with Dick, because he's so handsome and such a clever courter."

"O, I wish!--How did you say she wore her hair?"

"In long curls,--and her hair is light, and it curls without being put in paper: that's how it is she's so attractive."

"She's trying to get him away! yes, yes, she is! And through keeping this miserable school I mustn't wear my hair in curls! But I will; I don't care if I leave the school and go home, I will wear my curls! Look, Susan, do! is her hair as soft and long as this?" Fancy pulled from its coil under her hat a twine of her own hair, and stretched it down her shoulder to show its length, looking at Susan to catch her opinion from her eyes.

"It is about the same length as that, I think," said Miss Dewy.

Fancy paused hopelessly. "I wish mine was lighter, like hers!" she continued mournfully. "But hers isn't so soft, is it? Tell me, now."

"I don't know."

Fancy abstractedly extended her vision to survey a yellow butterfly and a red-and-black butterfly that were flitting along in company, and then became aware that Dick was advancing up the garden.

"Susan, here's Dick coming; I suppose that's because we've been talking about him."

"Well, then, I shall go indoors now--you won't want me;" and Susan turned practically and walked off.

Enter the single-minded Dick, whose only fault at the gipsying, or picnic, had been that of loving Fancy too exclusively, and depriving himself of the innocent pleasure the gathering might have afforded him, by sighing regretfully at her absence,--who had danced with the rival in sheer despair of ever being able to get through that stale, flat, and unprofitable afternoon in any other way; but this she would not believe.

Fancy had settled her plan of emotion. To reproach Dick? O no, no. "I am in great trouble," said she, taking what was intended to be a hopelessly melancholy survey of a few small apples lying under the tree; yet a critical ear might have noticed in her voice a tentative tone as to the effect of the words upon Dick when she uttered them.

"What are you in trouble about? Tell me of it," said Dick earnestly.

"Darling, I will share it with 'ee and help 'ee."

"No, no: you can't! Nobody can!"

"Why not? You don't deserve it, whatever it is. Tell me, dear."

"O, it isn't what you think! It is dreadful: my own sin!"

"Sin, Fancy! as if you could sin! I know it can't be."

"'Tis, 'tis!" said the young lady, in a pretty little frenzy of sorrow.

"I have done wrong, and I don't like to tell it! Nobody will forgive me, nobody! and you above all will not! . . . I have allowed myself to--to--fl--"

"What,--not flirt!" he said, controlling his emotion as it were by a sudden pressure inward from his surface. "And you said only the day before yesterday that you hadn't flirted in your life!"

"Yes, I did; and that was a wicked story! I have let another love me, and--"

"Good G--! Well, I'll forgive you,--yes, if you couldn't help it,--yes, I will!" said the now dismal Dick. "Did you encourage him?"

"O,--I don't know,--yes--no. O, I think so!"

"Who was it?" A pause. "Tell me!"

"Mr. Shiner."

After a silence that was only disturbed by the fall of an apple, a long-checked sigh from Dick, and a sob from Fancy, he said with real austerity--

"Tell it all;--every word!"

"He looked at me, and I looked at him, and he said, 'Will you let me show you how to catch bullfinches down here by the stream?' And I--wanted to know very much--I did so long to have a bullfinch! I couldn't help that and I said, 'Yes!' and then he said, 'Come here.' And I went with him down to the lovely river, and then he said to me, 'Look and see how I do it, and then you'll know: I put this birdlime round this twig, and then I go here,' he said, 'and hide away under a bush; and presently clever Mister Bird comes and perches upon the twig, and flaps his wings, and you've got him before you can say Jack'--something; O, O, O, I forget what!"

"Jack Sprat," mournfully suggested Dick through the cloud of his misery.

"No, not Jack Sprat," she sobbed.

"Then 'twas Jack Robinson!" he said, with the emphasis of a man who had resolved to discover every iota of the truth, or die.

"Yes, that was it! And then I put my hand upon the rail of the bridge to get across, and--That's all."

"Well, that isn't much, either," said Dick critically, and more cheerfully. "Not that I see what business Shiner has to take upon himself to teach you anything. But it seems--it do seem there must have

been more than that to set you up in such a dreadful taking?"

He looked into Fancy's eyes. Misery of miseries!--guilt was written there still.

"Now, Fancy, you've not told me all!" said Dick, rather sternly for a quiet young man.

"O, don't speak so cruelly! I am afraid to tell now! If you hadn't been harsh, I was going on to tell all; now I can't!"

"Come, dear Fancy, tell: come. I'll forgive; I must,--by heaven and earth, I must, whether I will or no; I love you so!"

"Well, when I put my hand on the bridge, he touched it--"

"A scamp!" said Dick, grinding an imaginary human frame to powder.

"And then he looked at me, and at last he said, 'Are you in love with Dick Dewy?' And I said, 'Perhaps I am!' and then he said, 'I wish you weren't then, for I want to marry you, with all my soul.'"

"There's a villain now! Want to marry you!" And Dick quivered with the bitterness of satirical laughter. Then suddenly remembering that he might be reckoning without his host: "Unless, to be sure, you are willing to have him,--perhaps you are," he said, with the wretched indifference

of a castaway.

"No, indeed I am not!" she said, her sobs just beginning to take a favourable turn towards cure.

"Well, then," said Dick, coming a little to his senses, "you've been stretching it very much in giving such a dreadful beginning to such a mere nothing. And I know what you've done it for,--just because of that gipsy-party!" He turned away from her and took five paces decisively, as if he were tired of an ungrateful country, including herself. "You did it to make me jealous, and I won't stand it!" He flung the words to her over his shoulder and then stalked on, apparently very anxious to walk to the remotest of the Colonies that very minute.

"O, O, O, Dick--Dick!" she cried, trotting after him like a pet lamb, and really seriously alarmed at last, "you'll kill me! My impulses are bad--miserably wicked,--and I can't help it; forgive me, Dick! And I love you always; and those times when you look silly and don't seem quite good enough for me,--just the same, I do, Dick! And there is something more serious, though not concerning that walk with him."

"Well, what is it?" said Dick, altering his mind about walking to the Colonies; in fact, passing to the other extreme, and standing so rooted to the road that he was apparently not even going home.

"Why this," she said, drying the beginning of a new flood of tears she



had been going to shed, "this is the serious part. Father has told Mr. Shiner that he would like him for a son-in-law, if he could get me;--that he has his right hearty consent to come courting me!"