

## PART THE FOURTH--AUTUMN

### CHAPTER I: GOING NUTTING

Dick, dressed in his 'second-best' suit, burst into Fancy's sitting-room with a glow of pleasure on his face.

It was two o'clock on Friday, the day before her contemplated visit to her father, and for some reason connected with cleaning the school the children had been given this Friday afternoon for pastime, in addition to the usual Saturday.

"Fancy! it happens just right that it is a leisure half day with you. Smart is lame in his near-foot-afore, and so, as I can't do anything, I've made a holiday afternoon of it, and am come for you to go nutting with me!"

She was sitting by the parlour window, with a blue frock lying across her lap and scissors in her hand.

"Go nutting! Yes. But I'm afraid I can't go for an hour or so."

"Why not? 'Tis the only spare afternoon we may both have together for weeks."

"This dress of mine, that I am going to wear on Sunday at Yalbury;--I find it fits so badly that I must alter it a little, after all. I told the dressmaker to make it by a pattern I gave her at the time; instead of that, she did it her own way, and made me look a perfect fright."

"How long will you be?" he inquired, looking rather disappointed.

"Not long. Do wait and talk to me; come, do, dear."

Dick sat down. The talking progressed very favourably, amid the snipping and sewing, till about half-past two, at which time his conversation began to be varied by a slight tapping upon his toe with a walking-stick he had cut from the hedge as he came along. Fancy talked and answered him, but sometimes the answers were so negligently given, that it was evident her thoughts lay for the greater part in her lap with the blue dress.

The clock struck three. Dick arose from his seat, walked round the room with his hands behind him, examined all the furniture, then sounded a few notes on the harmonium, then looked inside all the books he could find, then smoothed Fancy's head with his hand. Still the snipping and sewing went on.

The clock struck four. Dick fidgeted about, yawned privately; counted the knots in the table, yawned publicly; counted the flies on the

ceiling, yawned horribly; went into the kitchen and scullery, and so thoroughly studied the principle upon which the pump was constructed that he could have delivered a lecture on the subject. Stepping back to Fancy, and finding still that she had not done, he went into her garden and looked at her cabbages and potatoes, and reminded himself that they seemed to him to wear a decidedly feminine aspect; then pulled up several weeds, and came in again. The clock struck five, and still the snipping and sewing went on.

Dick attempted to kill a fly, peeled all the rind off his walking-stick, then threw the stick into the scullery because it was spoilt, produced hideous discords from the harmonium, and accidentally overturned a vase of flowers, the water from which ran in a rill across the table and dribbled to the floor, where it formed a lake, the shape of which, after the lapse of a few minutes, he began to modify considerably with his foot, till it was like a map of England and Wales.

"Well, Dick, you needn't have made quite such a mess."

"Well, I needn't, I suppose." He walked up to the blue dress, and looked at it with a rigid gaze. Then an idea seemed to cross his brain.

"Fancy."

"Yes."

"I thought you said you were going to wear your gray gown all day to-morrow on your trip to Yalbury, and in the evening too, when I shall be with you, and ask your father for you?"

"So I am."

"And the blue one only on Sunday?"

"And the blue one Sunday."

"Well, dear, I sha'n't be at Yalbury Sunday to see it."

"No, but I shall walk to Longpuddle church in the afternoon with father, and such lots of people will be looking at me there, you know; and it did set so badly round the neck."

"I never noticed it, and 'tis like nobody else would."

"They might."

"Then why not wear the gray one on Sunday as well? 'Tis as pretty as the blue one."

"I might make the gray one do, certainly. But it isn't so good; it didn't cost half so much as this one, and besides, it would be the same I wore Saturday."

"Then wear the striped one, dear."

"I might."

"Or the dark one."

"Yes, I might; but I want to wear a fresh one they haven't seen."

"I see, I see," said Dick, in a voice in which the tones of love were decidedly inconvenienced by a considerable emphasis, his thoughts meanwhile running as follows: "I, the man she loves best in the world, as she says, am to understand that my poor half-holiday is to be lost, because she wants to wear on Sunday a gown there is not the slightest necessity for wearing, simply, in fact, to appear more striking than usual in the eyes of Longpuddle young men; and I not there, either."

"Then there are three dresses good enough for my eyes, but neither is good enough for the youths of Longpuddle," he said.

"No, not that exactly, Dick. Still, you see, I do want--to look pretty to them--there, that's honest! But I sha'n't be much longer."

"How much?"

"A quarter of an hour."

"Very well; I'll come in in a quarter of an hour."

"Why go away?"

"I mid as well."

He went out, walked down the road, and sat upon a gate. Here he meditated and meditated, and the more he meditated the more decidedly did he begin to fume, and the more positive was he that his time had been scandalously trifled with by Miss Fancy Day--that, so far from being the simple girl who had never had a sweetheart before, as she had solemnly assured him time after time, she was, if not a flirt, a woman who had had no end of admirers; a girl most certainly too anxious about her frocks; a girl, whose feelings, though warm, were not deep; a girl who cared a great deal too much how she appeared in the eyes of other men. "What she loves best in the world," he thought, with an incipient spice of his father's grimness, "is her hair and complexion. What she loves next best, her gowns and hats; what she loves next best, myself, perhaps!"

Suffering great anguish at this disloyalty in himself and harshness to his darling, yet disposed to persevere in it, a horribly cruel thought crossed his mind. He would not call for her, as he had promised, at the end of a quarter of an hour! Yes, it would be a punishment she well deserved. Although the best part of the afternoon had been wasted he would go nutting as he had intended, and go by himself.

He leaped over the gate, and pushed up the lane for nearly two miles, till a winding path called Snail-Creep sloped up a hill and entered a hazel copse by a hole like a rabbit's burrow. In he plunged, vanished among the bushes, and in a short time there was no sign of his existence upon earth, save an occasional rustling of boughs and snapping of twigs in divers points of Grey's Wood.

Never man nutted as Dick nutted that afternoon. He worked like a galley slave. Half-hour after half-hour passed away, and still he gathered without ceasing. At last, when the sun had set, and bunches of nuts could not be distinguished from the leaves which nourished them, he shouldered his bag, containing quite two pecks of the finest produce of the wood, about as much use to him as two pecks of stones from the road, strolled down the woodland track, crossed the highway and entered the homeward lane, whistling as he went.

Probably, Miss Fancy Day never before or after stood so low in Mr. Dewy's opinion as on that afternoon. In fact, it is just possible that a few more blue dresses on the Longpuddle young men's account would have clarified Dick's brain entirely, and made him once more a free man.

But Venus had planned other developments, at any rate for the present. Cuckoo-Lane, the way he pursued, passed over a ridge which rose keenly against the sky about fifty yards in his van. Here, upon the bright after-glow about the horizon, was now visible an irregular shape, which

at first he conceived to be a bough standing a little beyond the line of its neighbours. Then it seemed to move, and, as he advanced still further, there was no doubt that it was a living being sitting in the bank, head bowed on hand. The grassy margin entirely prevented his footsteps from being heard, and it was not till he was close that the figure recognized him. Up it sprang, and he was face to face with Fancy.

"Dick, Dick! O, is it you, Dick!"

"Yes, Fancy," said Dick, in a rather repentant tone, and lowering his nuts.

She ran up to him, flung her parasol on the grass, put her little head against his breast, and then there began a narrative, disjointed by such a hysterical weeping as was never surpassed for intensity in the whole history of love.

"O Dick," she sobbed out, "where have you been away from me? O, I have suffered agony, and thought you would never come any more! 'Tis cruel, Dick; no 't isn't, it is justice! I've been walking miles and miles up and down Grey's Wood, trying to find you, till I was wearied and worn out, and I could walk no further, and had come back this far! O Dick, directly you were gone, I thought I had offended you and I put down the dress; 't isn't finished now, and I never will finish, it, and I'll wear an old one Sunday! Yes, Dick, I will, because I don't care what I wear when you are not by my side--ha, you think I do, but I don't!--and I ran



after you, and I saw you go up Snail-Creep and not look back once, and then you plunged in, and I after you; but I was too far behind. O, I did wish the horrid bushes had been cut down, so that I could see your dear shape again! And then I called out to you, and nobody answered, and I was afraid to call very loud, lest anybody else should hear me. Then I kept wandering and wandering about, and it was dreadful misery, Dick. And

then I shut my eyes and fell to picturing you looking at some other woman, very pretty and nice, but with no affection or truth in her at all, and then imagined you saying to yourself, 'Ah, she's as good as Fancy, for Fancy told me a story, and was a flirt, and cared for herself more than me, so now I'll have this one for my sweetheart.' O, you won't, will you, Dick, for I do love you so!"

It is scarcely necessary to add that Dick renounced his freedom there and then, and kissed her ten times over, and promised that no pretty woman of the kind alluded to should ever engross his thoughts; in short, that though he had been vexed with her, all such vexation was past, and that henceforth and for ever it was simply Fancy or death for him. And then they set about proceeding homewards, very slowly on account of Fancy's weariness, she leaning upon his shoulder, and in addition receiving support from his arm round her waist; though she had sufficiently recovered from her desperate condition to sing to him, 'Why are you wandering here, I pray?' during the latter part of their walk. Nor is it necessary to describe in detail how the bag of nuts was quite forgotten until three days later, when it was found among the brambles and restored

empty to Mrs. Dewy, her initials being marked thereon in red cotton; and how she puzzled herself till her head ached upon the question of how on earth her meal-bag could have got into Cuckoo-Lane.