

CHAPTER IV: THE SPELL

Mrs. Endorfield's advice was duly followed.

"I be proper sorry that your daughter isn't so well as she might be," said a Mellstock man to Geoffrey one morning.

"But is there anything in it?" said Geoffrey uneasily, as he shifted his hat to the right. "I can't understand the report. She didn't complain to me a bit when I saw her."

"No appetite at all, they say."

Geoffrey crossed to Mellstock and called at the school that afternoon. Fancy welcomed him as usual, and asked him to stay and take tea with her.

"I be'n't much for tea, this time o' day," he said, but stayed.

During the meal he watched her narrowly. And to his great consternation discovered the following unprecedented change in the healthy girl--that she cut herself only a diaphanous slice of bread-and-butter, and, laying it on her plate, passed the meal-time in breaking it into pieces, but eating no more than about one-tenth of the slice. Geoffrey hoped she would say something about Dick, and finish up by weeping, as she had done after the decision against him a few days subsequent to the interview in

the garden. But nothing was said, and in due time Geoffrey departed again for Yalbury Wood.

"'Tis to be hoped poor Miss Fancy will be able to keep on her school," said Geoffrey's man Enoch to Geoffrey the following week, as they were shovelling up ant-hills in the wood.

Geoffrey stuck in the shovel, swept seven or eight ants from his sleeve, and killed another that was prowling round his ear, then looked perpendicularly into the earth as usual, waiting for Enoch to say more.

"Well, why shouldn't she?" said the keeper at last.

"The baker told me yesterday," continued Enoch, shaking out another emmet

that had run merrily up his thigh, "that the bread he've left at that there school-house this last month would starve any mouse in the three creations; that 'twould so! And afterwards I had a pint o' small down at Morrs's, and there I heard more."

"What might that ha' been?"

"That she used to have a pound o' the best rolled butter a week, regular as clockwork, from Dairyman Viney's for herself, as well as just so much salted for the helping girl, and the 'ooman she calls in; but now the same quantity d'last her three weeks, and then 'tis thoughted she throws it away sour."

"Finish doing the emmets, and carry the bag home-along." The keeper resumed his gun, tucked it under his arm, and went on without whistling to the dogs, who however followed, with a bearing meant to imply that they did not expect any such attentions when their master was reflecting.

On Saturday morning a note came from Fancy. He was not to trouble about sending her the couple of rabbits, as was intended, because she feared she should not want them. Later in the day Geoffrey went to Casterbridge and called upon the butcher who served Fancy with fresh meat, which was put down to her father's account.

"I've called to pay up our little bill, Neighbour Haylock, and you can gie me the chiel's account at the same time."

Mr. Haylock turned round three quarters of a circle in the midst of a heap of joints, altered the expression of his face from meat to money, went into a little office consisting only of a door and a window, looked very vigorously into a book which possessed length but no breadth; and then, seizing a piece of paper and scribbling thereupon, handed the bill.

Probably it was the first time in the history of commercial transactions that the quality of shortness in a butcher's bill was a cause of tribulation to the debtor. "Why, this isn't all she've had in a whole month!" said Geoffrey.

"Every mossel," said the butcher--"(now, Dan, take that leg and shoulder to Mrs. White's, and this eleven pound here to Mr. Martin's)--you've been treating her to smaller joints lately, to my thinking, Mr. Day?"

"Only two or three little scam rabbits this last week, as I am alive--I wish I had!"

"Well, my wife said to me--(Dan! not too much, not too much on that tray at a time; better go twice)--my wife said to me as she posted up the books: she says, 'Miss Day must have been affronted this summer during that hot muggy weather that spolit so much for us; for depend upon't,' she says, 'she've been trying John Grimmett unknown to us: see her account else.' 'Tis little, of course, at the best of times, being only for one, but now 'tis next kin to nothing."

"I'll inquire," said Geoffrey despondingly.

He returned by way of Mellstock, and called upon Fancy, in fulfilment of a promise. It being Saturday, the children were enjoying a holiday, and on entering the residence Fancy was nowhere to be seen. Nan, the charwoman, was sweeping the kitchen.

"Where's my da'ter?" said the keeper.

"Well, you see she was tired with the week's teaching, and this morning she said, 'Nan, I sha'n't get up till the evening.' You see, Mr. Day, if

people don't eat, they can't work; and as she've gie'd up eating, she must gie up working."

"Have ye carried up any dinner to her?"

"No; she don't want any. There, we all know that such things don't come without good reason--not that I wish to say anything about a broken heart, or anything of the kind."

Geoffrey's own heart felt inconveniently large just then. He went to the staircase and ascended to his daughter's door.

"Fancy!"

"Come in, father."

To see a person in bed from any cause whatever, on a fine afternoon, is depressing enough; and here was his only child Fancy, not only in bed, but looking very pale. Geoffrey was visibly disturbed.

"Fancy, I didn't expect to see thee here, chiel," he said. "What's the matter?"

"I'm not well, father."

"How's that?"

"Because I think of things."

"What things can you have to think o' so mortal much?"

"You know, father."

"You think I've been cruel to thee in saying that that penniless Dick o' thine sha'n't marry thee, I suppose?"

No answer.

"Well, you know, Fancy, I do it for the best, and he isn't good enough for thee. You know that well enough." Here he again looked at her as she lay. "Well, Fancy, I can't let my only chiel die; and if you can't live without en, you must ha' en, I suppose."

"O, I don't want him like that; all against your will, and everything so disobedient!" sighed the invalid.

"No, no, 't isn't against my will. My wish is, now I d'see how 'tis hurten thee to live without en, that he shall marry thee as soon as we've considered a little. That's my wish flat and plain, Fancy. There, never cry, my little maid! You ought to ha' cried afore; no need o' crying now 'tis all over. Well, howsoever, try to step over and see me and mother-law to-morrow, and ha' a bit of dinner wi' us."

"And--Dick too?"

"Ay, Dick too, 'far's I know."

"And when do you think you'll have considered, father, and he may marry me?" she coaxed.

"Well, there, say next Midsummer; that's not a day too long to wait."

On leaving the school Geoffrey went to the tranter's. Old William opened the door.

"Is your grandson Dick in 'ithin, William?"

"No, not just now, Mr. Day. Though he've been at home a good deal lately."

"O, how's that?"

"What wi' one thing, and what wi' t'other, he's all in a mope, as might be said. Don't seem the feller he used to. Ay, 'a will sit studding and thinking as if 'a were going to turn chapel-member, and then do nothing but traypse and wamble about. Used to be such a chatty boy, too, Dick did; and now 'a don't speak at all. But won't ye step inside? Reuben will be home soon, 'a b'lieve."

"No, thank you, I can't stay now. Will ye just ask Dick if he'll do me the kindness to step over to Yalbury to-morrow with my da'ter Fancy, if she's well enough? I don't like her to come by herself, now she's not so terrible topping in health."

"So I've heard. Ay, sure, I'll tell him without fail."