

CHAPTER V: AFTER GAINING HER POINT

The visit to Geoffrey passed off as delightfully as a visit might have been expected to pass off when it was the first day of smooth experience in a hitherto obstructed love-course. And then came a series of several happy days, of the same undisturbed serenity. Dick could court her when he chose; stay away when he chose,--which was never; walk with her by winding streams and waterfalls and autumn scenery till dews and twilight sent them home. And thus they drew near the day of the Harvest Thanksgiving, which was also the time chosen for opening the organ in Mellstock Church.

It chanced that Dick on that very day was called away from Mellstock. A young acquaintance had died of consumption at Charmley, a neighbouring village, on the previous Monday, and Dick, in fulfilment of a long-standing promise, was to assist in carrying him to the grave. When on Tuesday, Dick went towards the school to acquaint Fancy with the fact, it is difficult to say whether his own disappointment at being denied the sight of her triumphant debut as organist, was greater than his vexation that his pet should on this great occasion be deprived of the pleasure of his presence. However, the intelligence was communicated. She bore it as she best could, not without many expressions of regret, and convictions that her performance would be nothing to her now.

Just before eleven o'clock on Sunday he set out upon his sad errand. The

funeral was to be immediately after the morning service, and as there were four good miles to walk, driving being inconvenient, it became necessary to start comparatively early. Half an hour later would certainly have answered his purpose quite as well, yet at the last moment nothing would content his ardent mind but that he must go a mile out of his way in the direction of the school, in the hope of getting a glimpse of his Love as she started for church.

Striking, therefore, into the lane towards the school, instead of across the ewelease direct to Charmley, he arrived opposite her door as his goddess emerged.

If ever a woman looked a divinity, Fancy Day appeared one that morning as she floated down those school steps, in the form of a nebulous collection of colours inclining to blue. With an audacity unparalleled in the whole history of village-school-mistresses at this date--partly owing, no doubt, to papa's respectable accumulation of cash, which rendered her profession not altogether one of necessity--she had actually donned a hat and feather, and lowered her hitherto plainly looped-up hair, which now fell about her shoulders in a profusion of curls. Poor Dick was astonished: he had never seen her look so distractingly beautiful before, save on Christmas-eve, when her hair was in the same luxuriant condition of freedom. But his first burst of delighted surprise was followed by less comfortable feelings, as soon as his brain recovered its power to think.

Fancy had blushed;--was it with confusion? She had also involuntarily pressed back her curls. She had not expected him.

"Fancy, you didn't know me for a moment in my funeral clothes, did you?"

"Good-morning, Dick--no, really, I didn't know you for an instant in such a sad suit."

He looked again at the gay tresses and hat. "You've never dressed so charming before, dearest."

"I like to hear you praise me in that way, Dick," she said, smiling archly. "It is meat and drink to a woman. Do I look nice really?"

"Fie! you know it. Did you remember,--I mean didn't you remember about my going away to-day?"

"Well, yes, I did, Dick; but, you know, I wanted to look well;--forgive me."

"Yes, darling; yes, of course,--there's nothing to forgive. No, I was only thinking that when we talked on Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday and Friday about my absence to-day, and I was so sorry for it, you said, Fancy, so were you sorry, and almost cried, and said it would be no pleasure to you to be the attraction of the church to-day, since I could

not be there."

"My dear one, neither will it be so much pleasure to me . . . But I do take a little delight in my life, I suppose," she pouted.

"Apart from mine?"

She looked at him with perplexed eyes. "I know you are vexed with me, Dick, and it is because the first Sunday I have curls and a hat and feather since I have been here happens to be the very day you are away and won't be with me. Yes, say it is, for that is it! And you think that all this week I ought to have remembered you wouldn't be here today, and not have cared to be better dressed than usual. Yes, you do, Dick, and it is rather unkind!"

"No, no," said Dick earnestly and simply, "I didn't think so badly of you as that. I only thought that--if you had been going away, I shouldn't have tried new attractions for the eyes of other people. But then of course you and I are different, naturally."

"Well, perhaps we are."

"Whatever will the vicar say, Fancy?"

"I don't fear what he says in the least!" she answered proudly. "But he won't say anything of the sort you think. No, no."

"He can hardly have conscience to, indeed."

"Now come, you say, Dick, that you quite forgive me, for I must go," she said with sudden gaiety, and skipped backwards into the porch. "Come here, sir;--say you forgive me, and then you shall kiss me;--you never have yet when I have worn curls, you know. Yes, just where you want to so much,--yes, you may!"

Dick followed her into the inner corner, where he was probably not slow in availing himself of the privilege offered.

"Now that's a treat for you, isn't it?" she continued. "Good-bye, or I shall be late. Come and see me to-morrow: you'll be tired to-night."

Thus they parted, and Fancy proceeded to the church. The organ stood on one side of the chancel, close to and under the immediate eye of the vicar when he was in the pulpit, and also in full view of the congregation. Here she sat down, for the first time in such a conspicuous position, her seat having previously been in a remote spot in the aisle.

"Good heavens--disgraceful! Curls and a hat and feather!" said the daughters of the small gentry, who had either only curly hair without a hat and feather, or a hat and feather without curly hair. "A bonnet for church always," said sober matrons.

That Mr. Maybold was conscious of her presence close beside him during the sermon; that he was not at all angry at her development of costume; that he admired her, she perceived. But she did not see that he loved her during that sermon-time as he had never loved a woman before; that her proximity was a strange delight to him; and that he gloried in her musical success that morning in a spirit quite beyond a mere cleric's glory at the inauguration of a new order of things.

The old choir, with humbled hearts, no longer took their seats in the gallery as heretofore (which was now given up to the school-children who were not singers, and a pupil-teacher), but were scattered about with their wives in different parts of the church. Having nothing to do with conducting the service for almost the first time in their lives, they all felt awkward, out of place, abashed, and inconvenienced by their hands. The tranter had proposed that they should stay away to-day and go nutting, but grandfather William would not hear of such a thing for a moment. "No," he replied reproachfully, and quoted a verse: "Though this has come upon us, let not our hearts be turned back, or our steps go out of the way."

So they stood and watched the curls of hair trailing down the back of the successful rival, and the waving of her feather, as she swayed her head. After a few timid notes and uncertain touches her playing became markedly correct, and towards the end full and free. But, whether from prejudice or unbiassed judgment, the venerable body of musicians could not help

thinking that the simpler notes they had been wont to bring forth were more in keeping with the simplicity of their old church than the crowded chords and interludes it was her pleasure to produce.