## CHAPTER VI: INTO TEMPTATION

The day was done, and Fancy was again in the school-house. About five o'clock it began to rain, and in rather a dull frame of mind she wandered into the schoolroom, for want of something better to do. She was thinking--of her lover Dick Dewy? Not precisely. Of how weary she was of living alone: how unbearable it would be to return to Yalbury under the rule of her strange-tempered step-mother; that it was far better to be married to anybody than do that; that eight or nine long months had yet to be lived through ere the wedding could take place.

At the side of the room were high windows of Ham-hill stone, upon either sill of which she could sit by first mounting a desk and using it as a footstool. As the evening advanced here she perched herself, as was her custom on such wet and gloomy occasions, put on a light shawl and bonnet, opened the window, and looked out at the rain.

The window overlooked a field called the Grove, and it was the position from which she used to survey the crown of Dick's passing hat in the early days of their acquaintance and meetings. Not a living soul was now visible anywhere; the rain kept all people indoors who were not forced abroad by necessity, and necessity was less importunate on Sundays than during the week.

Sitting here and thinking again--of her lover, or of the sensation she

had created at church that day?--well, it is unknown--thinking and thinking she saw a dark masculine figure arising into distinctness at the further end of the Grove--a man without an umbrella. Nearer and nearer he came, and she perceived that he was in deep mourning, and then that it was Dick. Yes, in the fondness and foolishness of his young heart, after walking four miles, in a drizzling rain without overcoat or umbrella, and in face of a remark from his love that he was not to come because he would be tired, he had made it his business to wander this mile out of his way again, from sheer wish of spending ten minutes in her presence.

"O Dick, how wet you are!" she said, as he drew up under the window. "Why, your coat shines as if it had been varnished, and your hat--my goodness, there's a streaming hat!"

"O, I don't mind, darling!" said Dick cheerfully. "Wet never hurts me, though I am rather sorry for my best clothes. However, it couldn't be helped; we lent all the umbrellas to the women. I don't know when I shall get mine back!"

"And look, there's a nasty patch of something just on your shoulder."

"Ah, that's japanning; it rubbed off the clamps of poor Jack's coffin when we lowered him from our shoulders upon the bier! I don't care about that, for 'twas the last deed I could do for him; and 'tis hard if you can't afford a coat for an old friend."

Fancy put her hand to her mouth for half a minute. Underneath the palm of that little hand there existed for that half-minute a little yawn.

"Dick, I don't like you to stand there in the wet. And you mustn't sit down. Go home and change your things. Don't stay another minute."

"One kiss after coming so far," he pleaded.

"If I can reach, then."

He looked rather disappointed at not being invited round to the door. She twisted from her seated position and bent herself downwards, but not even by standing on the plinth was it possible for Dick to get his lips into contact with hers as she held them. By great exertion she might have reached a little lower; but then she would have exposed her head to the rain.

"Never mind, Dick; kiss my hand," she said, flinging it down to him. "Now, good-bye."

"Good-bye."

He walked slowly away, turning and turning again to look at her till he was out of sight. During the retreat she said to herself, almost involuntarily, and still conscious of that morning's triumph--"I like Dick, and I love him; but how plain and sorry a man looks in the rain,

with no umbrella, and wet through!"

As he vanished, she made as if to descend from her seat; but glancing in the other direction she saw another form coming along the same track. It was also that of a man. He, too, was in black from top to toe; but he carried an umbrella.

He drew nearer, and the direction of the rain caused him so to slant his umbrella that from her height above the ground his head was invisible, as she was also to him. He passed in due time directly beneath her, and in looking down upon the exterior of his umbrella her feminine eyes perceived it to be of superior silk--less common at that date than since--and of elegant make. He reached the entrance to the building, and Fancy suddenly lost sight of him. Instead of pursuing the roadway as Dick had done he had turned sharply round into her own porch.

She jumped to the floor, hastily flung off her shawl and bonnet, smoothed and patted her hair till the curls hung in passable condition, and listened. No knock. Nearly a minute passed, and still there was no knock. Then there arose a soft series of raps, no louder than the tapping of a distant woodpecker, and barely distinct enough to reach her ears. She composed herself and flung open the door.

In the porch stood Mr. Maybold.

There was a warm flush upon his face, and a bright flash in his eyes,

which made him look handsomer than she had ever seen him before.

"Good-evening, Miss Day."

"Good-evening, Mr. Maybold," she said, in a strange state of mind. She had noticed, beyond the ardent hue of his face, that his voice had a singular tremor in it, and that his hand shook like an aspen leaf when he laid his umbrella in the corner of the porch. Without another word being spoken by either, he came into the schoolroom, shut the door, and moved close to her. Once inside, the expression of his face was no more discernible, by reason of the increasing dusk of evening.

"I want to speak to you," he then said; "seriously--on a perhaps unexpected subject, but one which is all the world to me--I don't know what it may be to you, Miss Day."

No reply.

"Fancy, I have come to ask you if you will be my wife?"

As a person who has been idly amusing himself with rolling a snowball might start at finding he had set in motion an avalanche, so did Fancy start at these words from the vicar. And in the dead silence which followed them, the breathings of the man and of the woman could be distinctly and separately heard; and there was this difference between them--his respirations gradually grew quieter and less rapid after the

enunciation hers, from having been low and regular, increased in quickness and force, till she almost panted.

"I cannot, I cannot, Mr. Maybold--I cannot! Don't ask me!" she said.

"Don't answer in a hurry!" he entreated. "And do listen to me. This is no sudden feeling on my part. I have loved you for more than six months! Perhaps my late interest in teaching the children here has not been so single-minded as it seemed. You will understand my motive--like me better, perhaps, for honestly telling you that I have struggled against my emotion continually, because I have thought that it was not well for me to love you! But I resolved to struggle no longer; I have examined the feeling; and the love I bear you is as genuine as that I could bear any woman! I see your great charm; I respect your natural talents, and the refinement they have brought into your nature--they are quite enough, and more than enough for me! They are equal to anything ever required of the mistress of a quiet parsonage-house--the place in which I shall pass my days, wherever it may be situated. O Fancy, I have watched you, criticized you even severely, brought my feelings to the light of judgment, and still have found them rational, and such as any man might have expected to be inspired with by a woman like you! So there is nothing hurried, secret, or untoward in my desire to do this. Fancy, will you marry me?"

No answer was returned.

"Don't refuse; don't," he implored. "It would be foolish of you--I mean cruel! Of course we would not live here, Fancy. I have had for a long time the offer of an exchange of livings with a friend in Yorkshire, but I have hitherto refused on account of my mother. There we would go. Your musical powers shall be still further developed; you shall have whatever pianoforte you like; you shall have anything, Fancy, anything to make you happy--pony-carriage, flowers, birds, pleasant society; yes, you have enough in you for any society, after a few months of travel with me! Will you, Fancy, marry me?"

Another pause ensued, varied only by the surging of the rain against the window-panes, and then Fancy spoke, in a faint and broken voice.

"Yes, I will," she said.

"God bless you, my own!" He advanced quickly, and put his arm out to embrace her. She drew back hastily. "No no, not now!" she said in an agitated whisper. "There are things;--but the temptation is, O, too strong, and I can't resist it; I can't tell you now, but I must tell you! Don't, please, don't come near me now! I want to think, I can scarcely get myself used to the idea of what I have promised yet." The next minute she turned to a desk, buried her face in her hands, and burst into a hysterical fit of weeping. "O, leave me to myself!" she sobbed; "leave me! O, leave me!"

"Don't be distressed; don't, dearest!" It was with visible difficulty

that he restrained himself from approaching her. "You shall tell me at your leisure what it is that grieves you so; I am happy--beyond all measure happy!--at having your simple promise."

"And do go and leave me now!"

"But I must not, in justice to you, leave for a minute, until you are yourself again."

"There then," she said, controlling her emotion, and standing up; "I am not disturbed now."

He reluctantly moved towards the door. "Good-bye!" he murmured tenderly. "I'll come to-morrow about this time."