

CHAPTER VII: SECOND THOUGHTS

The next morning the vicar rose early. The first thing he did was to write a long and careful letter to his friend in Yorkshire. Then, eating a little breakfast, he crossed the meadows in the direction of Casterbridge, bearing his letter in his pocket, that he might post it at the town office, and obviate the loss of one day in its transmission that would have resulted had he left it for the foot-post through the village.

It was a foggy morning, and the trees shed in noisy water-drops the moisture they had collected from the thick air, an acorn occasionally falling from its cup to the ground, in company with the drippings. In the meads, sheets of spiders'-web, almost opaque with wet, hung in folds over the fences, and the falling leaves appeared in every variety of brown, green, and yellow hue.

A low and merry whistling was heard on the highway he was approaching, then the light footsteps of a man going in the same direction as himself. On reaching the junction of his path with the road, the vicar beheld Dick Dewy's open and cheerful face. Dick lifted his hat, and the vicar came out into the highway that Dick was pursuing.

"Good-morning, Dewy. How well you are looking!" said Mr. Maybold.

"Yes, sir, I am well--quite well! I am going to Casterbridge now, to get

Smart's collar; we left it there Saturday to be repaired."

"I am going to Casterbridge, so we'll walk together," the vicar said.

Dick gave a hop with one foot to put himself in step with Mr. Maybold, who proceeded: "I fancy I didn't see you at church yesterday, Dewy. Or were you behind the pier?"

"No; I went to Charmley. Poor John Dunford chose me to be one of his bearers a long time before he died, and yesterday was the funeral. Of course I couldn't refuse, though I should have liked particularly to have been at home as 'twas the day of the new music."

"Yes, you should have been. The musical portion of the service was successful--very successful indeed; and what is more to the purpose, no ill-feeling whatever was evinced by any of the members of the old choir. They joined in the singing with the greatest good-will."

"'Twas natural enough that I should want to be there, I suppose," said Dick, smiling a private smile; "considering who the organ-player was."

At this the vicar reddened a little, and said, "Yes, yes," though not at all comprehending Dick's true meaning, who, as he received no further reply, continued hesitatingly, and with another smile denoting his pride as a lover--

"I suppose you know what I mean, sir? You've heard about me and--Miss

Day?"

The red in Maybold's countenance went away: he turned and looked Dick in the face.

"No," he said constrainedly, "I've heard nothing whatever about you and Miss Day."

"Why, she's my sweetheart, and we are going to be married next Midsummer.

We are keeping it rather close just at present, because 'tis a good many months to wait; but it is her father's wish that we don't marry before, and of course we must submit. But the time 'ill soon slip along."

"Yes, the time will soon slip along--Time glides away every day--yes."

Maybold said these words, but he had no idea of what they were. He was conscious of a cold and sickly thrill throughout him; and all he reasoned was this that the young creature whose graces had intoxicated him into making the most imprudent resolution of his life, was less an angel than a woman.

"You see, sir," continued the ingenuous Dick, "'twill be better in one sense. I shall by that time be the regular manager of a branch o' father's business, which has very much increased lately, and business, which we think of starting elsewhere. It has very much increased lately,

and we expect next year to keep a' extra couple of horses. We've already our eye on one--brown as a berry, neck like a rainbow, fifteen hands, and not a gray hair in her--offered us at twenty-five want a crown. And to kip pace with the times I have had some cards prented and I beg leave to hand you one, sir."

"Certainly," said the vicar, mechanically taking the card that Dick offered him.

"I turn in here by Grey's Bridge," said Dick. "I suppose you go straight on and up town?"

"Yes."

"Good-morning, sir."

"Good-morning, Dewy."

Maybold stood still upon the bridge, holding the card as it had been put into his hand, and Dick's footsteps died away towards Durnover Mill. The vicar's first voluntary action was to read the card:--

DEWY AND SON,
TRANTERS AND HAULIERS,
MELLSTOCK.

NB.--Furniture, Coals, Potatoes, Live and Dead Stock, removed to any

distance on the shortest notice.

Mr. Maybold leant over the parapet of the bridge and looked into the river. He saw--without heeding--how the water came rapidly from beneath the arches, glided down a little steep, then spread itself over a pool in which dace, trout, and minnows sported at ease among the long green locks of weed that lay heaving and sinking with their roots towards the current. At the end of ten minutes spent leaning thus, he drew from his pocket the letter to his friend, tore it deliberately into such minute fragments that scarcely two syllables remained in juxtaposition, and sent the whole handful of shreds fluttering into the water. Here he watched them eddy, dart, and turn, as they were carried downwards towards the ocean and gradually disappeared from his view. Finally he moved off, and pursued his way at a rapid pace back again to Mellstock Vicarage.

Nerving himself by a long and intense effort, he sat down in his study and wrote as follows:

"DEAR MISS DAY,--The meaning of your words, 'the temptation is too strong,' of your sadness and your tears, has been brought home to me by an accident. I know to-day what I did not know yesterday--that you are not a free woman.

"Why did you not tell me--why didn't you? Did you suppose I knew? No. Had I known, my conduct in coming to you as I did would have been reprehensible.

"But I don't chide you! Perhaps no blame attaches to you--I can't tell. Fancy, though my opinion of you is assailed and disturbed in a way which cannot be expressed, I love you still, and my word to you holds good yet. But will you, in justice to an honest man who relies upon your word to him, consider whether, under the circumstances, you can honourably forsake him?--Yours ever sincerely,

"ARTHUR MAYBOLD."

He rang the bell. "Tell Charles to take these copybooks and this note to the school at once."

The maid took the parcel and the letter, and in a few minutes a boy was seen to leave the vicarage gate, with the one under his arm, and the other in his hand. The vicar sat with his hand to his brow, watching the lad as he descended Church Lane and entered the waterside path which intervened between that spot and the school.

Here he was met by another boy, and after a free salutation and pugilistic frisk had passed between the two, the second boy came on his way to the vicarage, and the other vanished out of sight.

The boy came to the door, and a note for Mr. Maybold was brought in.

He knew the writing. Opening the envelope with an unsteady hand, he read

the subjoined words:

"DEAR MR. MAYBOLD,--I have been thinking seriously and sadly through the whole of the night of the question you put to me last evening and of my answer. That answer, as an honest woman, I had no right to give.

"It is my nature--perhaps all women's--to love refinement of mind and manners; but even more than this, to be ever fascinated with the idea of surroundings more elegant and pleasing than those which have been customary. And you praised me, and praise is life to me. It was alone my sensations at these things which prompted my reply. Ambition and vanity they would be called; perhaps they are so.

"After this explanation I hope you will generously allow me to withdraw the answer I too hastily gave.

"And one more request. To keep the meeting of last night, and all that passed between us there, for ever a secret. Were it to become known, it would utterly blight the happiness of a trusting and generous man, whom I love still, and shall love always.--Yours sincerely,

"FANCY DAY.

The last written communication that ever passed from the vicar to Fancy,

was a note containing these words only:

"Tell him everything; it is best. He will forgive you."