

PART THE FIFTH: CONCLUSION

CHAPTER I: 'THE KNOT THERE'S NO UNTYING'

The last day of the story is dated just subsequent to that point in the development of the seasons when country people go to bed among nearly naked trees, are lulled to sleep by a fall of rain, and awake next morning among green ones; when the landscape appears embarrassed with the sudden weight and brilliancy of its leaves; when the night-jar comes and strikes up for the summer his tune of one note; when the apple-trees have bloomed, and the roads and orchard-grass become spotted with fallen petals; when the faces of the delicate flowers are darkened, and their heads weighed down, by the throng of honey-bees, which increase their humming till humming is too mild a term for the all-pervading sound; and when cuckoos, blackbirds, and sparrows, that have hitherto been merry and respectful neighbours, become noisy and persistent intimates.

The exterior of Geoffrey Day's house in Yalbury Wood appeared exactly as was usual at that season, but a frantic barking of the dogs at the back told of unwonted movements somewhere within. Inside the door the eyes beheld a gathering, which was a rarity indeed for the dwelling of the solitary wood-steward and keeper.

About the room were sitting and standing, in various gnarled attitudes, our old acquaintance, grandfathers James and William, the tranter, Mr. Penny, two or three children, including Jimmy and Charley, besides three or four country ladies and gentlemen from a greater distance who do not require any distinction by name. Geoffrey was seen and heard stamping about the outhouse and among the bushes of the garden, attending to details of daily routine before the proper time arrived for their performance, in order that they might be off his hands for the day. He appeared with his shirt-sleeves rolled up; his best new nether garments, in which he had arrayed himself that morning, being temporarily disguised under a weekday apron whilst these proceedings were in operation. He occasionally glanced at the hives in passing, to see if his wife's bees were swarming, ultimately rolling down his shirt-sleeves and going indoors, talking to tranter Dewy whilst buttoning the wristbands, to save time; next going upstairs for his best waistcoat, and coming down again to make another remark whilst buttoning that, during the time looking fixedly in the tranter's face as if he were a looking-glass.

The furniture had undergone attenuation to an alarming extent, every duplicate piece having been removed, including the clock by Thomas Wood; Ezekiel Saunders being at last left sole referee in matters of time.

Fancy was stationary upstairs, receiving her layers of clothes and adornments, and answering by short fragments of laughter which had more fidgetiness than mirth in them, remarks that were made from time to time by Mrs. Dewy and Mrs. Penny, who were assisting her at the toilet, Mrs.

Day having pleaded a queerness in her head as a reason for shutting herself up in an inner bedroom for the whole morning. Mrs. Penny appeared with nine corkscrew curls on each side of her temples, and a back comb stuck upon her crown like a castle on a steep.

The conversation just now going on was concerning the banns, the last publication of which had been on the Sunday previous.

"And how did they sound?" Fancy subtly inquired.

"Very beautiful indeed," said Mrs. Penny. "I never heard any sound better."

"But how?"

"O, so natural and elegant, didn't they, Reuben!" she cried, through the chinks of the unceiled floor, to the tranter downstairs.

"What's that?" said the tranter, looking up inquiringly at the floor above him for an answer.

"Didn't Dick and Fancy sound well when they were called home in church last Sunday?" came downwards again in Mrs. Penny's voice.

"Ay, that they did, my sonnies!--especially the first time. There was a terrible whispering piece of work in the congregation, wasn't there,

neighbour Penny?" said the tranter, taking up the thread of conversation on his own account and, in order to be heard in the room above, speaking very loud to Mr. Penny, who sat at the distance of three feet from him, or rather less.

"I never can mind seeing such a whispering as there was," said Mr. Penny, also loudly, to the room above. "And such sorrowful envy on the maidens' faces; really, I never did see such envy as there was!"

Fancy's lineaments varied in innumerable little flushes, and her heart palpitated innumerable little tremors of pleasure. "But perhaps," she said, with assumed indifference, "it was only because no religion was going on just then?"

"O, no; nothing to do with that. 'Twas because of your high standing in the parish. It was just as if they had one and all caught Dick kissing and coling ye to death, wasn't it, Mrs. Dewy?"

"Ay; that 'twas."

"How people will talk about one's doings!" Fancy exclaimed.

"Well, if you make songs about yourself, my dear, you can't blame other people for singing 'em."

"Mercy me! how shall I go through it?" said the young lady again, but

merely to those in the bedroom, with a breathing of a kind between a sigh and a pant, round shining eyes, and warm face.

"O, you'll get through it well enough, child," said Mrs. Dewy placidly.

"The edge of the performance is took off at the calling home; and when once you get up to the chancel end o' the church, you feel as saucy as you please. I'm sure I felt as brave as a sodger all through the deed--though of course I dropped my face and looked modest, as was becoming to a maid. Mind you do that, Fancy."

"And I walked into the church as quiet as a lamb, I'm sure," subjoined Mrs. Penny. "There, you see Penny is such a little small man. But certainly, I was flurried in the inside o' me. Well, thinks I, 'tis to be, and here goes! And do you do the same: say, 'Tis to be, and here goes!'"

"Is there such wonderful virtue in 'Tis to be, and here goes!'" inquired Fancy.

"Wonderful! 'Twill carry a body through it all from wedding to churching, if you only let it out with spirit enough."

"Very well, then," said Fancy, blushing. "'Tis to be, and here goes!"

"That's a girl for a husband!" said Mrs. Dewy.

"I do hope he'll come in time!" continued the bride-elect, inventing a new cause of affright, now that the other was demolished.

"'Twould be a thousand pities if he didn't come, now you be so brave," said Mrs. Penny.

Grandfather James, having overheard some of these remarks, said downstairs with mischievous loudness--

"I've known some would-be weddings when the men didn't come."

"They've happened not to come, before now, certainly," said Mr. Penny, cleaning one of the glasses of his spectacles.

"O, do hear what they are saying downstairs," whispered Fancy. "Hush, hush!"

She listened.

"They have, haven't they, Geoffrey?" continued grandfather James, as Geoffrey entered.

"Have what?" said Geoffrey.

"The men have been known not to come."

"That they have," said the keeper.

"Ay; I've knowed times when the wedding had to be put off through his not appearing, being tired of the woman. And another case I knowed was when the man was caught in a man-trap crossing Oaker's Wood, and the three months had run out before he got well, and the banns had to be published over again."

"How horrible!" said Fancy.

"They only say it on purpose to tease 'ee, my dear," said Mrs. Dewy.

"'Tis quite sad to think what wretched shifts poor maids have been put to," came again from downstairs. "Ye should hear Clerk Wilkins, my brother-law, tell his experiences in marrying couples these last thirty year: sometimes one thing, sometimes another--'tis quite heart-rending--enough to make your hair stand on end."

"Those things don't happen very often, I know," said Fancy, with smouldering uneasiness.

"Well, really 'tis time Dick was here," said the tranter.

"Don't keep on at me so, grandfather James and Mr. Dewy, and all you down

there!" Fancy broke out, unable to endure any longer. "I am sure I shall

die, or do something, if you do!"

"Never you hearken to these old chaps, Miss Day!" cried Nat Callcome, the best man, who had just entered, and threw his voice upward through the chinks of the floor as the others had done. "'Tis all right; Dick's coming on like a wild feller; he'll be here in a minute. The hive o' bees his mother gie'd en for his new garden swarmed jist as he was starting, and he said, 'I can't afford to lose a stock o' bees; no, that I can't, though I fain would; and Fancy wouldn't wish it on any account.' So he jist stopped to ting to 'em and shake 'em."

"A genuine wise man," said Geoffrey.

"To be sure, what a day's work we had yesterday!" Mr. Callcome continued, lowering his voice as if it were not necessary any longer to include those in the room above among his audience, and selecting a remote corner of his best clean handkerchief for wiping his face. "To be sure!"

"Things so heavy, I suppose," said Geoffrey, as if reading through the chimney-window from the far end of the vista.

"Ay," said Nat, looking round the room at points from which furniture had been removed. "And so awkward to carry, too. 'Twas ath'art and across Dick's garden; in and out Dick's door; up and down Dick's stairs; round and round Dick's chammers till legs were worn to stumps: and Dick is so particular, too. And the stores of victuals and drink that lad has laid

in: why, 'tis enough for Noah's ark! I'm sure I never wish to see a choicer half-dozen of hams than he's got there in his chimley; and the cider I tasted was a very pretty drop, indeed;--none could desire a prettier cider."

"They be for the love and the stalled ox both. Ah, the greedy martels!" said grandfather James.

"Well, may-be they be. Surely," says I, "that couple between 'em have heaped up so much furniture and victuals, that anybody would think they were going to take hold the big end of married life first, and begin wi' a grown-up family. Ah, what a bath of heat we two chaps were in, to be sure, a-getting that furniture in order!"

"I do so wish the room below was ceiled," said Fancy, as the dressing went on; "we can hear all they say and do down there."

"Hark! Who's that?" exclaimed a small pupil-teacher, who also assisted this morning, to her great delight. She ran half-way down the stairs, and peeped round the banister. "O, you should, you should, you should!" she exclaimed, scrambling up to the room again.

"What?" said Fancy.

"See the bridesmaids! They've just a come! 'Tis wonderful, really! 'tis wonderful how muslin can be brought to it. There, they don't look a bit

like themselves, but like some very rich sisters o' theirs that nobody knew they had!"

"Make 'em come up to me, make 'em come up!" cried Fancy ecstatically; and the four damsels appointed, namely, Miss Susan Dewy, Miss Bessie Dewy, Miss Vashti Sniff, and Miss Mercy Onmey, surged upstairs, and floated along the passage.

"I wish Dick would come!" was again the burden of Fancy.

The same instant a small twig and flower from the creeper outside the door flew in at the open window, and a masculine voice said, "Ready, Fancy dearest?"

"There he is, he is!" cried Fancy, tittering spasmodically, and breathing as it were for the first time that morning.

The bridesmaids crowded to the window and turned their heads in the direction pointed out, at which motion eight earrings all swung as one:--not looking at Dick because they particularly wanted to see him, but with an important sense of their duty as obedient ministers of the will of that apotheosised being--the Bride.

"He looks very taking!" said Miss Vashti Sniff, a young lady who blushed cream-colour and wore yellow bonnet ribbons.

Dick was advancing to the door in a painfully new coat of shining cloth, primrose-coloured waistcoat, hat of the same painful style of newness, and with an extra quantity of whiskers shaved off his face, and hair cut to an unwonted shortness in honour of the occasion.

"Now, I'll run down," said Fancy, looking at herself over her shoulder in the glass, and flitting off.

"O Dick!" she exclaimed, "I am so glad you are come! I knew you would, of course, but I thought, Oh if you shouldn't!"

"Not come, Fancy! Het or wet, blow or snow, here come I to-day! Why, what's possessing your little soul? You never used to mind such things a bit."

"Ah, Mr. Dick, I hadn't hoisted my colours and committed myself then!" said Fancy.

"'Tis a pity I can't marry the whole five of ye!" said Dick, surveying them all round.

"Heh-heh-heh!" laughed the four bridesmaids, and Fancy privately touched Dick and smoothed him down behind his shoulder, as if to assure herself that he was there in flesh and blood as her own property.

"Well, whoever would have thought such a thing?" said Dick, taking off

his hat, sinking into a chair, and turning to the elder members of the company.

The latter arranged their eyes and lips to signify that in their opinion nobody could have thought such a thing, whatever it was.

"That my bees should ha' swarmed just then, of all times and seasons!" continued Dick, throwing a comprehensive glance like a net over the whole auditory. "And 'tis a fine swarm, too: I haven't seen such a fine swarm for these ten years."

"A' excellent sign," said Mrs. Penny, from the depths of experience. "A' excellent sign."

"I am glad everything seems so right," said Fancy with a breath of relief.

"And so am I," said the four bridesmaids with much sympathy.

"Well, bees can't be put off," observed the inharmonious grandfather James. "Marrying a woman is a thing you can do at any moment; but a swarm o' bees won't come for the asking."

Dick fanned himself with his hat. "I can't think," he said thoughtfully, "whatever 'twas I did to offend Mr. Maybold, a man I like so much too. He rather took to me when he came first, and used to say he should like to

see me married, and that he'd marry me, whether the young woman I chose lived in his parish or no. I just hinted to him of it when I put in the banns, but he didn't seem to take kindly to the notion now, and so I said no more. I wonder how it was."

"I wonder!" said Fancy, looking into vacancy with those beautiful eyes of hers--too refined and beautiful for a tranter's wife; but, perhaps, not too good.

"Altered his mind, as folks will, I suppose," said the tranter. "Well, my sonnies, there'll be a good strong party looking at us to-day as we go along."

"And the body of the church," said Geoffrey, "will be lined with females, and a row of young fellers' heads, as far down as the eyes, will be noticed just above the sills of the chancel-winders."

"Ay, you've been through it twice," said Reuben, "and well mid know."

"I can put up with it for once," said Dick, "or twice either, or a dozen times."

"O Dick!" said Fancy reproachfully.

"Why, dear, that's nothing,--only just a bit of a flourish. You be as nervous as a cat to-day."

"And then, of course, when 'tis all over," continued the tranter, "we shall march two and two round the parish."

"Yes, sure," said Mr. Penny: "two and two: every man hitched up to his woman, 'a b'lieve."

"I never can make a show of myself in that way!" said Fancy, looking at Dick to ascertain if he could.

"I'm agreed to anything you and the company like, my dear!" said Mr. Richard Dewy heartily.

"Why, we did when we were married, didn't we, Ann?" said the tranter; "and so do everybody, my sonnies."

"And so did we," said Fancy's father.

"And so did Penny and I," said Mrs. Penny: "I wore my best Bath clogs, I remember, and Penny was cross because it made me look so tall."

"And so did father and mother," said Miss Mercy Onmey.

"And I mean to, come next Christmas!" said Nat the groomsman vigorously, and looking towards the person of Miss Vashti Sniff.

"Respectable people don't nowadays," said Fancy. "Still, since poor mother did, I will."

"Ay," resumed the tranter, "'twas on a White Tuesday when I committed it. Mellstock Club walked the same day, and we new-married folk went a-gaying round the parish behind 'em. Everybody used to wear something white at Whitsuntide in them days. My sonnies, I've got the very white trousers that I wore, at home in box now. Ha'n't I, Ann?"

"You had till I cut 'em up for Jimmy," said Mrs. Dewy.

"And we ought, by rights, after doing this parish, to go round Higher and Lower Mellstock, and call at Viney's, and so work our way hither again across He'th," said Mr. Penny, recovering scent of the matter in hand.

"Dairyman Viney is a very respectable man, and so is Farmer Kex, and we ought to show ourselves to them."

"True," said the tranter, "we ought to go round Mellstock to do the thing well. We shall form a very striking object walking along in rotation, good-now, neighbours?"

"That we shall: a proper pretty sight for the nation," said Mrs. Penny.

"Hullo!" said the tranter, suddenly catching sight of a singular human figure standing in the doorway, and wearing a long smock-frock of pillow-

case cut and of snowy whiteness. "Why, Leaf! whatever dost thou do here?"

"I've come to know if so be I can come to the wedding--hee-hee!" said Leaf in a voice of timidity.

"Now, Leaf," said the tranter reproachfully, "you know we don't want 'ee here to-day: we've got no room for ye, Leaf."

"Thomas Leaf, Thomas Leaf, fie upon ye for prying!" said old William.

"I know I've got no head, but I thought, if I washed and put on a clane shirt and smock-frock, I might just call," said Leaf, turning away disappointed and trembling.

"Poor feller!" said the tranter, turning to Geoffrey. "Suppose we must let en come? His looks are rather against en, and he is terrible silly; but 'a have never been in jail, and 'a won't do no harm."

Leaf looked with gratitude at the tranter for these praises, and then anxiously at Geoffrey, to see what effect they would have in helping his cause.

"Ay, let en come," said Geoffrey decisively. "Leaf, th'rt welcome, 'st know;" and Leaf accordingly remained.

They were now all ready for leaving the house, and began to form a procession in the following order: Fancy and her father, Dick and Susan Dewy, Nat Callcome and Vashti Sniff, Ted Waywood and Mercy Onmey, and Jimmy and Bessie Dewy. These formed the executive, and all appeared in strict wedding attire. Then came the tranter and Mrs. Dewy, and last of all Mr. and Mrs. Penny;--the tranter conspicuous by his enormous gloves, size eleven and three-quarters, which appeared at a distance like boxing gloves bleached, and sat rather awkwardly upon his brown hands; this hallmark of respectability having been set upon himself to-day (by Fancy's special request) for the first time in his life.

"The proper way is for the bridesmaids to walk together," suggested Fancy.

"What? 'Twas always young man and young woman, arm in crook, in my time!" said Geoffrey, astounded.

"And in mine!" said the tranter.

"And in ours!" said Mr. and Mrs. Penny.

"Never heard o' such a thing as woman and woman!" said old William; who, with grandfather James and Mrs. Day, was to stay at home.

"Whichever way you and the company like, my dear!" said Dick, who, being on the point of securing his right to Fancy, seemed willing to renounce

all other rights in the world with the greatest pleasure. The decision was left to Fancy.

"Well, I think I'd rather have it the way mother had it," she said, and the couples moved along under the trees, every man to his maid.

"Ah!" said grandfather James to grandfather William as they retired, "I wonder which she thinks most about, Dick or her wedding raiment!"

"Well, 'tis their nature," said grandfather William. "Remember the words of the prophet Jeremiah: 'Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire?'"

Now among dark perpendicular firs, like the shafted columns of a cathedral; now through a hazel copse, matted with primroses and wild hyacinths; now under broad beeches in bright young leaves they threaded their way into the high road over Yalbury Hill, which dipped at that point directly into the village of Geoffrey Day's parish; and in the space of a quarter of an hour Fancy found herself to be Mrs. Richard Dewy, though, much to her surprise, feeling no other than Fancy Day still.

On the circuitous return walk through the lanes and fields, amid much chattering and laughter, especially when they came to stiles, Dick discerned a brown spot far up a turnip field.

"Why, 'tis Enoch!" he said to Fancy. "I thought I missed him at the house this morning. How is it he's left you?"

"He drank too much cider, and it got into his head, and they put him in Weatherbury stocks for it. Father was obliged to get somebody else for a day or two, and Enoch hasn't had anything to do with the woods since."

"We might ask him to call down to-night. Stocks are nothing for once, considering 'tis our wedding day." The bridal party was ordered to halt.

"Eno-o-o-o-ch!" cried Dick at the top of his voice.

"Y-a-a-a-a-a-as!" said Enoch from the distance.

"D'ye know who I be-e-e-e-e-e?"

"No-o-o-o-o-o-o!"

"Dick Dew-w-w-w-wy!"

"O-h-h-h-h-h!"

"Just a-ma-a-a-a-a-arried!"

"O-h-h-h-h-h!"

"This is my wife, Fa-a-a-a-a-ancy!" (holding her up to Enoch's view as if she had been a nosegay.)

"O-h-h-h-h-h!"

"Will ye come across to the party to-ni-i-i-i-i-ight!"

"Ca-a-a-a-a-an't!"

"Why n-o-o-o-o-ot?"

"Don't work for the family no-o-o-o-ow!"

"Not nice of Master Enoch," said Dick, as they resumed their walk.

"You mustn't blame en," said Geoffrey; "the man's not hisself now; he's in his morning frame of mind. When he's had a gallon o' cider or ale, or a pint or two of mead, the man's well enough, and his manners be as good as anybody's in the kingdom."