

CHAPTER II: UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE

The point in Yalbury Wood which abutted on the end of Geoffrey Day's premises was closed with an ancient tree, horizontally of enormous extent, though having no great pretensions to height. Many hundreds of birds had been born amidst the boughs of this single tree; tribes of rabbits and hares had nibbled at its bark from year to year; quaint tufts of fungi had sprung from the cavities of its forks; and countless families of moles and earthworms had crept about its roots. Beneath and beyond its shade spread a carefully-tended grass-plot, its purpose being to supply a healthy exercise-ground for young chickens and pheasants; the hens, their mothers, being enclosed in coops placed upon the same green flooring.

All these encumbrances were now removed, and as the afternoon advanced, the guests gathered on the spot, where music, dancing, and the singing of songs went forward with great spirit throughout the evening. The propriety of every one was intense by reason of the influence of Fancy, who, as an additional precaution in this direction, had strictly charged her father and the tranter to carefully avoid saying 'thee' and 'thou' in their conversation, on the plea that those ancient words sounded so very humiliating to persons of newer taste; also that they were never to be seen drawing the back of the hand across the mouth after drinking--a local English custom of extraordinary antiquity, but stated by Fancy to be decidedly dying out among the better classes of society.

In addition to the local musicians present, a man who had a thorough knowledge of the tambourine was invited from the village of Tantrum Clangley,--a place long celebrated for the skill of its inhabitants as performers on instruments of percussion. These important members of the assembly were relegated to a height of two or three feet from the ground, upon a temporary erection of planks supported by barrels. Whilst the dancing progressed the older persons sat in a group under the trunk of the tree,--the space being allotted to them somewhat grudgingly by the young ones, who were greedy of pirouetting room,--and fortified by a table against the heels of the dancers. Here the gaffers and gammers, whose dancing days were over, told stories of great impressiveness, and at intervals surveyed the advancing and retiring couples from the same retreat, as people on shore might be supposed to survey a naval engagement in the bay beyond; returning again to their tales when the pause was over. Those of the whirling throng, who, during the rests between each figure, turned their eyes in the direction of these seated ones, were only able to discover, on account of the music and bustle, that a very striking circumstance was in course of narration--denoted by an emphatic sweep of the hand, snapping of the fingers, close of the lips, and fixed look into the centre of the listener's eye for the space of a quarter of a minute, which raised in that listener such a reciprocating working of face as to sometimes make the distant dancers half wish to know what such an interesting tale could refer to.

Fancy caused her looks to wear as much matronly expression as was

obtainable out of six hours' experience as a wife, in order that the contrast between her own state of life and that of the unmarried young women present might be duly impressed upon the company: occasionally stealing glances of admiration at her left hand, but this quite privately; for her ostensible bearing concerning the matter was intended to show that, though she undoubtedly occupied the most wondrous position in the eyes of the world that had ever been attained, she was almost unconscious of the circumstance, and that the somewhat prominent position in which that wonderfully-emblazoned left hand was continually found to be placed, when handing cups and saucers, knives, forks, and glasses, was quite the result of accident. As to wishing to excite envy in the bosoms of her maiden companions, by the exhibition of the shining ring, every one was to know it was quite foreign to the dignity of such an experienced married woman. Dick's imagination in the meantime was far less capable of drawing so much wantedness from his new condition. He had been for two or three hours trying to feel himself merely a newly-married man, but had been able to get no further in the attempt than to realize that he was Dick Dewy, the tranter's son, at a party given by Lord Wessex's head man-in-charge, on the outlying Yalbury estate, dancing and chatting with Fancy Day.

Five country dances, including 'Haste to the Wedding,' two reels, and three fragments of horn-pipes, brought them to the time for supper, which, on account of the dampness of the grass from the immaturity of the summer season, was spread indoors. At the conclusion of the meal Dick

went out to put the horse in; and Fancy, with the elder half of the four bridesmaids, retired upstairs to dress for the journey to Dick's new cottage near Mellstock.

"How long will you be putting on your bonnet, Fancy?" Dick inquired at the foot of the staircase. Being now a man of business and married, he was strong on the importance of time, and doubled the emphasis of his words in conversing, and added vigour to his nods.

"Only a minute."

"How long is that?"

"Well, dear, five."

"Ah, sonnies!" said the tranter, as Dick retired, "'tis a talent of the female race that low numbers should stand for high, more especially in matters of waiting, matters of age, and matters of money."

"True, true, upon my body," said Geoffrey.

"Ye spak with feeling, Geoffrey, seemingly."

"Anybody that d'know my experience might guess that."

"What's she doing now, Geoffrey?"

"Claning out all the upstairs drawers and cupboards, and dusting the second-best chainey--a thing that's only done once a year. 'If there's work to be done I must do it,' says she, 'wedding or no.'"

"'Tis my belief she's a very good woman at bottom."

"She's terrible deep, then."

Mrs. Penny turned round. "Well, 'tis humps and hollers with the best of us; but still and for all that, Dick and Fancy stand as fair a chance of having a bit of sunsheen as any married pair in the land."

"Ay, there's no gainsaying it."

Mrs. Dewy came up, talking to one person and looking at another. "Happy, yes," she said. "'Tis always so when a couple is so exactly in tune with one another as Dick and she."

"When they be'n't too poor to have time to sing," said grandfather James.

"I tell ye, neighbours, when the pinch comes," said the tranter: "when the oldest daughter's boots be only a size less than her mother's, and the rest o' the flock close behind her. A sharp time for a man that, my sonnies; a very sharp time! Chanticleer's comb is a-cut then, 'a believe."

"That's about the form o't," said Mr. Penny. "That'll put the stuns upon a man, when you must measure mother and daughter's lasts to tell 'em apart."

"You've no cause to complain, Reuben, of such a close-coming flock," said Mrs. Dewy; "for ours was a stragging lot enough, God knows!"

"I d'know it, I d'know it," said the tranter. "You be a well-enough woman, Ann."

Mrs. Dewy put her mouth in the form of a smile, and put it back again without smiling.

"And if they come together, they go together," said Mrs. Penny, whose family had been the reverse of the tranter's; "and a little money will make either fate tolerable. And money can be made by our young couple, I know."

"Yes, that it can!" said the impulsive voice of Leaf, who had hitherto humbly admired the proceedings from a corner. "It can be done--all that's wanted is a few pounds to begin with. That's all! I know a story about it!"

"Let's hear thy story, Leaf," said the tranter. "I never knew you were clever enough to tell a story. Silence, all of ye! Mr. Leaf will tell a

story."

"Tell your story, Thomas Leaf," said grandfather William in the tone of a schoolmaster.

"Once," said the delighted Leaf, in an uncertain voice, "there was a man who lived in a house! Well, this man went thinking and thinking night and day. At last, he said to himself, as I might, 'If I had only ten pound, I'd make a fortune.' At last by hook or by crook, behold he got the ten pounds!"

"Only think of that!" said Nat Callcome satirically.

"Silence!" said the tranter.

"Well, now comes the interesting part of the story! In a little time he made that ten pounds twenty. Then a little time after that he doubled it, and made it forty. Well, he went on, and a good while after that he made it eighty, and on to a hundred. Well, by-and-by he made it two hundred! Well, you'd never believe it, but--he went on and made it four hundred! He went on, and what did he do? Why, he made it eight hundred! Yes, he did," continued Leaf, in the highest pitch of excitement, bringing down his fist upon his knee with such force that he quivered with the pain; "yes, and he went on and made it A THOUSAND!"

"Hear, hear!" said the tranter. "Better than the history of England, my

sonnies!"

"Thank you for your story, Thomas Leaf," said grandfather William; and then Leaf gradually sank into nothingness again.

Amid a medley of laughter, old shoes, and elder-wine, Dick and his bride took their departure, side by side in the excellent new spring-cart which the young tranter now possessed. The moon was just over the full, rendering any light from lamps or their own beauties quite unnecessary to the pair. They drove slowly along Yalbury Bottom, where the road passed between two copses. Dick was talking to his companion.

"Fancy," he said, "why we are so happy is because there is such full confidence between us. Ever since that time you confessed to that little flirtation with Shiner by the river (which was really no flirtation at all), I have thought how artless and good you must be to tell me o' such a trifling thing, and to be so frightened about it as you were. It has won me to tell you my every deed and word since then. We'll have no secrets from each other, darling, will we ever?--no secret at all."

"None from to-day," said Fancy. "Hark! what's that?"

From a neighbouring thicket was suddenly heard to issue in a loud, musical, and liquid voice--

"Tippiwit! swe-e-et! ki-ki-ki! Come hither, come hither, come hither!"

"O, 'tis the nightingale," murmured she, and thought of a secret she would never tell.