

13.

The cottage which Michael Henchard hired for his wife Susan under her name of Newson--in pursuance of their plan--was in the upper or western part of the town, near the Roman wall, and the avenue which overshadowed it. The evening sun seemed to shine more yellowly there than anywhere else this autumn--stretching its rays, as the hours grew later, under the lowest sycamore boughs, and steeping the ground-floor of the dwelling, with its green shutters, in a substratum of radiance which the foliage screened from the upper parts. Beneath these sycamores on the town walls could be seen from the sitting-room the tumuli and earth forts of the distant uplands; making it altogether a pleasant spot, with the usual touch of melancholy that a past-marked prospect lends.

As soon as the mother and daughter were comfortably installed, with a white-aproned servant and all complete, Henchard paid them a visit, and remained to tea. During the entertainment Elizabeth was carefully hoodwinked by the very general tone of the conversation that prevailed--a proceeding which seemed to afford some humour to Henchard, though his wife was not particularly happy in it. The visit was repeated again and again with business-like determination by the Mayor, who seemed to have schooled himself into a course of strict mechanical rightness towards this woman of prior claim, at any expense to the later one and to his own sentiments.

One afternoon the daughter was not indoors when Henchard came, and he said drily, "This is a very good opportunity for me to ask you to name the happy day, Susan."

The poor woman smiled faintly; she did not enjoy pleasantries on a situation into which she had entered solely for the sake of her girl's reputation. She liked them so little, indeed, that there was room for wonder why she had countenanced deception at all, and had not bravely let the girl know her history. But the flesh is weak; and the true explanation came in due course.

"O Michael!" she said, "I am afraid all this is taking up your time and giving trouble--when I did not expect any such thing!" And she looked at him and at his dress as a man of affluence, and at the furniture he had provided for the room--ornate and lavish to her eyes.

"Not at all," said Henchard, in rough benignity. "This is only a cottage--it costs me next to nothing. And as to taking up my time"--here his red and black visage kindled with satisfaction--"I've a splendid fellow to superintend my business now--a man whose like I've never been able to lay hands on before. I shall soon be able to leave everything to him, and have more time to call my own than I've had for these last twenty years."

Henchard's visits here grew so frequent and so regular that it soon became whispered, and then openly discussed in Casterbridge that the

masterful, coercive Mayor of the town was raptured and enervated by the genteel widow Mrs. Newson. His well-known haughty indifference to the society of womankind, his silent avoidance of converse with the sex, contributed a piquancy to what would otherwise have been an unromantic matter enough. That such a poor fragile woman should be his choice was inexplicable, except on the ground that the engagement was a family affair in which sentimental passion had no place; for it was known that they were related in some way. Mrs. Henchard was so pale that the boys called her "The Ghost." Sometimes Henchard overheard this epithet when they passed together along the Walks--as the avenues on the walls were named--at which his face would darken with an expression of destructiveness towards the speakers ominous to see; but he said nothing.

He pressed on the preparations for his union, or rather reunion, with this pale creature in a dogged, unflinching spirit which did credit to his conscientiousness. Nobody would have conceived from his outward demeanour that there was no amatory fire or pulse of romance acting as stimulant to the bustle going on in his gaunt, great house; nothing but three large resolves--one, to make amends to his neglected Susan, another, to provide a comfortable home for Elizabeth-Jane under his paternal eye; and a third, to castigate himself with the thorns which these restitutory acts brought in their train; among them the lowering of his dignity in public opinion by marrying so comparatively humble a woman.

Susan Henchard entered a carriage for the first time in her life when she stepped into the plain brougham which drew up at the door on the wedding-day to take her and Elizabeth-Jane to church. It was a windless morning of warm November rain, which floated down like meal, and lay in a powdery form on the nap of hats and coats. Few people had gathered round the church door though they were well packed within. The Scotchman, who assisted as groomsman, was of course the only one present, beyond the chief actors, who knew the true situation of the contracting parties. He, however, was too inexperienced, too thoughtful, too judicial, too strongly conscious of the serious side of the business, to enter into the scene in its dramatic aspect. That required the special genius of Christopher Coney, Solomon Longways, Buzzford, and their fellows. But they knew nothing of the secret; though, as the time for coming out of church drew on, they gathered on the pavement adjoining, and expounded the subject according to their lights.

"'Tis five-and-forty years since I had my settlement in this here town," said Coney; "but daze me if I ever see a man wait so long before to take so little! There's a chance even for thee after this, Nance Mockridge." The remark was addressed to a woman who stood behind his shoulder--the same who had exhibited Henchard's bad bread in public when Elizabeth and her mother entered Casterbridge.

"Be cust if I'd marry any such as he, or thee either," replied that lady. "As for thee, Christopher, we know what ye be, and the less said the better. And as for he--well, there--(lowering her voice) 'tis said

'a was a poor parish 'prentice--I wouldn't say it for all the world--but
'a was a poor parish 'prentice, that began life wi' no more belonging to
'en than a carrion crow."

"And now he's worth ever so much a minute," murmured Longways. "When
a
man is said to be worth so much a minute, he's a man to be considered!"

Turning, he saw a circular disc reticulated with creases, and recognized
the smiling countenance of the fat woman who had asked for another song
at the Three Mariners. "Well, Mother Cuxsom," he said, "how's this?
Here's Mrs. Newson, a mere skellinton, has got another husband to keep
her, while a woman of your tonnage have not."

"I have not. Nor another to beat me....Ah, yes, Cuxsom's gone, and so
shall leather breeches!"

"Yes; with the blessing of God leather breeches shall go."

"'Tisn't worth my old while to think of another husband," continued Mrs.
Cuxsom. "And yet I'll lay my life I'm as respectable born as she."

"True; your mother was a very good woman--I can mind her. She were
rewarded by the Agricultural Society for having begot the greatest
number of healthy children without parish assistance, and other virtuous
marvels."

"'Twas that that kept us so low upon ground--that great hungry family."

"Ay. Where the pigs be many the wash runs thin."

"And dostn't mind how mother would sing, Christopher?" continued Mrs. Cuxsom, kindling at the retrospection; "and how we went with her to the party at Mellstock, do ye mind?--at old Dame Ledlow's, farmer Shinar's aunt, do ye mind?--she we used to call Toad-skin, because her face were so yaller and freckled, do ye mind?"

"I do, hee-hee, I do!" said Christopher Coney.

"And well do I--for I was getting up husband-high at that time--one-half girl, and t'other half woman, as one may say. And canst mind"--she prodded Solomon's shoulder with her finger-tip, while her eyes twinkled between the crevices of their lids--"canst mind the sherry-wine, and the zilver-snuffers, and how Joan Dummett was took bad when we were coming home, and Jack Griggs was forced to carry her through the mud; and how 'a let her fall in Dairyman Sweet-apple's cow-barton, and we had to clane her gown wi' grass--never such a mess as a' were in?"

"Ay--that I do--hee-hee, such doggery as there was in them ancient days, to be sure! Ah, the miles I used to walk then; and now I can hardly step over a furrow!"

Their reminiscences were cut short by the appearance of the reunited pair--Henchard looking round upon the idlers with that ambiguous gaze of his, which at one moment seemed to mean satisfaction, and at another fiery disdain.

"Well--there's a difference between 'em, though he do call himself a teetotaller," said Nance Mockridge. "She'll wish her cake dough afore she's done of him. There's a blue-beardy look about 'en; and 'twill out in time."

"Stuff--he's well enough! Some folk want their luck buttered. If I had a choice as wide as the ocean sea I wouldn't wish for a better man. A poor twanking woman like her--'tis a godsend for her, and hardly a pair of jumps or night-rail to her name."

The plain little brougham drove off in the mist, and the idlers dispersed. "Well, we hardly know how to look at things in these times!" said Solomon. "There was a man dropped down dead yesterday, not so very many miles from here; and what wi' that, and this moist weather, 'tis scarce worth one's while to begin any work o' consequence to-day. I'm in such a low key with drinking nothing but small table ninepenny this last week or two that I shall call and warm up at the Mar'ners as I pass along."

"I don't know but that I may as well go with 'ee, Solomon," said Christopher; "I'm as clammy as a cockle-snail."