

"For Heaven's sake, pop thy hands under the pump, Deb! Upon my soul, if the London folk only knowed of thee and thy slovenly ways, they'd swaller their milk and butter more mincing than they do a'ready; and that's saying a good deal."

The milking progressed, till towards the end Tess and Clare, in common with the rest, could hear the heavy breakfast table dragged out from the wall in the kitchen by Mrs Crick, this being the invariable preliminary to each meal; the same horrible scrape accompanying its return journey when the table had been cleared.

## XXI

There was a great stir in the milk-house just after breakfast. The churn revolved as usual, but the butter would not come. Whenever this happened the dairy was paralyzed. Squish, squash echoed the milk in the great cylinder, but never arose the sound they waited for.

Dairyman Crick and his wife, the milkmaids Tess, Marian, Retty Priddle, Izz Huett, and the married ones from the cottages; also Mr Clare, Jonathan Kail, old Deborah, and the rest, stood gazing

hopelessly at the churn; and the boy who kept the horse going outside put on moon-like eyes to show his sense of the situation. Even the melancholy horse himself seemed to look in at the window in inquiring despair at each walk round.

"'Tis years since I went to Conjuror Trendle's son in Egdon--years!" said the dairyman bitterly. "And he was nothing to what his father had been. I have said fifty times, if I have said once, that I DON'T believe in en; though 'a do cast folks' waters very true. But I shall have to go to 'n if he's alive. O yes, I shall have to go to 'n, if this sort of thing continnys!"

Even Mr Clare began to feel tragical at the dairyman's desperation.

"Conjuror Fall, t'other side of Casterbridge, that they used to call 'Wide-O', was a very good man when I was a boy," said Jonathan Kail. "But he's rotten as touchwood by now."

"My grandfather used to go to Conjuror Mynterne, out at Owlscombe, and a clever man a' were, so I've heard grandfer say," continued Mr Crick. "But there's no such genuine folk about nowadays!"

Mrs Crick's mind kept nearer to the matter in hand.

"Perhaps somebody in the house is in love," she said tentatively.

"I've heard tell in my younger days that that will cause it. Why,

Crick--that maid we had years ago, do ye mind, and how the butter didn't come then--"

"Ah yes, yes!--but that isn't the rights o't. It had nothing to do with the love-making. I can mind all about it--'twas the damage to the churn."

He turned to Clare.

"Jack Dollop, a 'hore's-bird of a fellow we had here as milker at one time, sir, courted a young woman over at Mellstock, and deceived her as he had deceived many afore. But he had another sort o' woman to reckon wi' this time, and it was not the girl herself. One Holy Thursday of all days in the almanack, we was here as we mid be now, only there was no churning in hand, when we zid the girl's mother coming up to the door, wi' a great brass-mounted umbrella in her hand that would ha' felled an ox, and saying 'Do Jack Dollop work here?--because I want him! I have a big bone to pick with he, I can assure 'n!' And some way behind her mother walked Jack's young woman, crying bitterly into her handkercher. 'O Lard, here's a time!' said Jack, looking out o' winder at 'em. 'She'll murder me! Where shall I get--where shall I--? Don't tell her where I be!' And with that he scrambled into the churn through the trap-door, and shut himself inside, just as the young woman's mother busted into the milk-house. 'The villain--where is he?' says she. 'I'll claw his face for'n, let me only catch him!' Well, she hunted about

everywhere, ballyragging Jack by side and by seam, Jack lying a'most stifled inside the churn, and the poor maid--or young woman rather--standing at the door crying her eyes out. I shall never forget it, never! 'Twould have melted a marble stone! But she couldn't find him nowhere at all."

The dairyman paused, and one or two words of comment came from the listeners.

Dairyman Crick's stories often seemed to be ended when they were not really so, and strangers were betrayed into premature interjections of finality; though old friends knew better. The narrator went on--

"Well, how the old woman should have had the wit to guess it I could never tell, but she found out that he was inside that there churn. Without saying a word she took hold of the winch (it was turned by handpower then), and round she swung him, and Jack began to flop about inside. 'O Lard! stop the churn! let me out!' says he, popping out his head. 'I shall be churned into a pummy!' (He was a cowardly chap in his heart, as such men mostly be). 'Not till ye make amends for ravaging her virgin innocence!' says the old woman. 'Stop the churn you old witch!' screams he. 'You call me old witch, do ye, you deceiver!' says she, 'when ye ought to ha' been calling me mother-law these last five months!' And on went the churn, and Jack's bones rattled round again. Well, none of us ventured to interfere; and at last 'a promised to make it right wi' her. 'Yes--I'll be as good as

my word!" he said. And so it ended that day."

While the listeners were smiling their comments there was a quick movement behind their backs, and they looked round. Tess, pale-faced, had gone to the door.

"How warm 'tis to-day!" she said, almost inaudibly.

It was warm, and none of them connected her withdrawal with the reminiscences of the dairyman. He went forward and opened the door for her, saying with tender raillery--

"Why, maidy" (he frequently, with unconscious irony, gave her this pet name), "the prettiest milker I've got in my dairy; you mustn't get so fagged as this at the first breath of summer weather, or we shall be finely put to for want of 'ee by dog-days, shan't we, Mr Clare?"

"I was faint--and--I think I am better out o' doors," she said mechanically; and disappeared outside.

Fortunately for her the milk in the revolving churn at that moment changed its squashing for a decided flick-flack.

"'Tis coming!" cried Mrs Crick, and the attention of all was called off from Tess.

That fair sufferer soon recovered herself externally; but she remained much depressed all the afternoon. When the evening milking was done she did not care to be with the rest of them, and went out of doors, wandering along she knew not whither. She was wretched--O so wretched--at the perception that to her companions the dairyman's story had been rather a humorous narration than otherwise; none of them but herself seemed to see the sorrow of it; to a certainty, not one knew how cruelly it touched the tender place in her experience. The evening sun was now ugly to her, like a great inflamed wound in the sky. Only a solitary cracked-voice reed-sparrow greeted her from the bushes by the river, in a sad, machine-made tone, resembling that of a past friend whose friendship she had outworn.

In these long June days the milkmaids, and, indeed, most of the household, went to bed at sunset or sooner, the morning work before milking being so early and heavy at a time of full pails. Tess usually accompanied her fellows upstairs. To-night, however, she was the first to go to their common chamber; and she had dozed when the other girls came in. She saw them undressing in the orange light of the vanished sun, which flushed their forms with its colour; she dozed again, but she was reawakened by their voices, and quietly turned her eyes towards them.

Neither of her three chamber-companions had got into bed. They were standing in a group, in their nightgowns, barefooted, at the window,

the last red rays of the west still warming their faces and necks and the walls around them. All were watching somebody in the garden with deep interest, their three faces close together: a jovial and round one, a pale one with dark hair, and a fair one whose tresses were auburn.

"Don't push! You can see as well as I," said Retty, the auburn-haired and youngest girl, without removing her eyes from the window.

"'Tis no use for you to be in love with him any more than me, Retty Priddle," said jolly-faced Marian, the eldest, silyly. "His thoughts be of other cheeks than thine!"

Retty Priddle still looked, and the others looked again.

"There he is again!" cried Izz Huett, the pale girl with dark damp hair and keenly cut lips.

"You needn't say anything, Izz," answered Retty. "For I zid you kissing his shade."

"WHAT did you see her doing?" asked Marian.

"Why--he was standing over the whey-tub to let off the whey, and the shade of his face came upon the wall behind, close to Izz, who was

standing there filling a vat. She put her mouth against the wall and kissed the shade of his mouth; I zid her, though he didn't."

"O Izz Huett!" said Marian.

A rosy spot came into the middle of Izz Huett's cheek.

"Well, there was no harm in it," she declared, with attempted coolness. "And if I be in love wi'en, so is Retty, too; and so be you, Marian, come to that."

Marian's full face could not blush past its chronic pinkness.

"I!" she said. "What a tale! Ah, there he is again! Dear eyes--dear face--dear Mr Clare!"

"There--you've owned it!"

"So have you--so have we all," said Marian, with the dry frankness of complete indifference to opinion. "It is silly to pretend otherwise amongst ourselves, though we need not own it to other folks. I would just marry 'n to-morrow!"

"So would I--and more," murmured Izz Huett.

"And I too," whispered the more timid Retty.



The listener grew warm.

"We can't all marry him," said Izz.

"We shan't, either of us; which is worse still," said the eldest.

"There he is again!"

They all three blew him a silent kiss.

"Why?" asked Retty quickly.

"Because he likes Tess Durbeyfield best," said Marian, lowering her voice. "I have watched him every day, and have found it out."

There was a reflective silence.

"But she don't care anything for 'n?" at length breathed Retty.

"Well--I sometimes think that too."

"But how silly all this is!" said Izz Huett impatiently. "Of course he won't marry any one of us, or Tess either--a gentleman's son, who's going to be a great landowner and farmer abroad! More likely to ask us to come wi'en as farm-hands at so much a year!"

One sighed, and another sighed, and Marian's plump figure sighed biggest of all. Somebody in bed hard by sighed too. Tears came into the eyes of Retty Priddle, the pretty red-haired youngest--the last bud of the Paridelles, so important in the county annals. They watched silently a little longer, their three faces still close together as before, and the triple hues of their hair mingling. But the unconscious Mr Clare had gone indoors, and they saw him no more; and, the shades beginning to deepen, they crept into their beds. In a few minutes they heard him ascend the ladder to his own room. Marian was soon snoring, but Izz did not drop into forgetfulness for a long time. Retty Priddle cried herself to sleep.

The deeper-passioned Tess was very far from sleeping even then. This conversation was another of the bitter pills she had been obliged to swallow that day. Scarce the least feeling of jealousy arose in her breast. For that matter she knew herself to have the preference. Being more finely formed, better educated, and, though the youngest except Retty, more woman than either, she perceived that only the slightest ordinary care was necessary for holding her own in Angel Clare's heart against these her candid friends. But the grave question was, ought she to do this? There was, to be sure, hardly a ghost of a chance for either of them, in a serious sense; but there was, or had been, a chance of one or the other inspiring him with a passing fancy for her, and enjoying the pleasure of his attentions while he stayed here. Such unequal attachments had led to marriage; and she had heard from Mrs Crick that Mr Clare had one day asked, in

a laughing way, what would be the use of his marrying a fine lady, and all the while ten thousand acres of Colonial pasture to feed, and cattle to rear, and corn to reap. A farm-woman would be the only sensible kind of wife for him. But whether Mr Clare had spoken seriously or not, why should she, who could never conscientiously allow any man to marry her now, and who had religiously determined that she never would be tempted to do so, draw off Mr Clare's attention from other women, for the brief happiness of sunning herself in his eyes while he remained at Talbothays?

## XXII

They came downstairs yawning next morning; but skimming and milking were proceeded with as usual, and they went indoors to breakfast. Dairyman Crick was discovered stamping about the house. He had received a letter, in which a customer had complained that the butter had a twang.

"And begad, so 't have!" said the dairyman, who held in his left hand a wooden slice on which a lump of butter was stuck. "Yes--taste for yourself!"

Several of them gathered round him; and Mr Clare tasted, Tess tasted,