

Nature, and not from the abodes of Art.

XXVIII

Her refusal, though unexpected, did not permanently daunt Clare. His experience of women was great enough for him to be aware that the negative often meant nothing more than the preface to the affirmative; and it was little enough for him not to know that in the manner of the present negative there lay a great exception to the dallyings of coyness. That she had already permitted him to make love to her he read as an additional assurance, not fully trowing that in the fields and pastures to "sigh gratis" is by no means deemed waste; love-making being here more often accepted inconsiderately and for its own sweet sake than in the carking, anxious homes of the ambitious, where a girl's craving for an establishment paralyzes her healthy thought of a passion as an end.

"Tess, why did you say 'no' in such a positive way?" he asked her in the course of a few days.

She started.

"Don't ask me. I told you why--partly. I am not good enough--not

worthy enough."

"How? Not fine lady enough?"

"Yes--something like that," murmured she. "Your friends would scorn me."

"Indeed, you mistake them--my father and mother. As for my brothers, I don't care--" He clasped his fingers behind her back to keep her from slipping away. "Now--you did not mean it, sweet?--I am sure you did not! You have made me so restless that I cannot read, or play, or do anything. I am in no hurry, Tess, but I want to know--to hear from your own warm lips--that you will some day be mine--any time you may choose; but some day?"

She could only shake her head and look away from him.

Clare regarded her attentively, conned the characters of her face as if they had been hieroglyphics. The denial seemed real.

"Then I ought not to hold you in this way--ought I? I have no right to you--no right to seek out where you are, or walk with you! Honestly, Tess, do you love any other man?"

"How can you ask?" she said, with continued self-suppression.

"I almost know that you do not. But then, why do you repulse me?"

"I don't repulse you. I like you to--tell me you love me; and you may always tell me so as you go about with me--and never offend me."

"But you will not accept me as a husband?"

"Ah--that's different--it is for your good, indeed, my dearest!

O, believe me, it is only for your sake! I don't like to give myself the great happiness o' promising to be yours in that way--because--because I am SURE I ought not to do it."

"But you will make me happy!"

"Ah--you think so, but you don't know!"

At such times as this, apprehending the grounds of her refusal to be her modest sense of incompetence in matters social and polite, he would say that she was wonderfully well-informed and versatile--which was certainly true, her natural quickness and her admiration for him having led her to pick up his vocabulary, his accent, and fragments of his knowledge, to a surprising extent. After these tender contests and her victory she would go away by herself under the remotest cow, if at milking-time, or into the sedge or into her room, if at a leisure interval, and mourn silently, not a minute after an apparently phlegmatic negative.

The struggle was so fearful; her own heart was so strongly on the side of his--two ardent hearts against one poor little conscience--that she tried to fortify her resolution by every means in her power. She had come to Talbothays with a made-up mind. On no account could she agree to a step which might afterwards cause bitter rueing to her husband for his blindness in wedding her. And she held that what her conscience had decided for her when her mind was unbiassed ought not to be overruled now.

"Why don't somebody tell him all about me?" she said. "It was only forty miles off--why hasn't it reached here? Somebody must know!"

Yet nobody seemed to know; nobody told him.

For two or three days no more was said. She guessed from the sad countenances of her chamber companions that they regarded her not only as the favourite, but as the chosen; but they could see for themselves that she did not put herself in his way.

Tess had never before known a time in which the thread of her life was so distinctly twisted of two strands, positive pleasure and positive pain. At the next cheese-making the pair were again left alone together. The dairyman himself had been lending a hand; but Mr Crick, as well as his wife, seemed latterly to have acquired a suspicion of mutual interest between these two; though they walked

so circumspectly that suspicion was but of the faintest. Anyhow, the dairyman left them to themselves.

They were breaking up the masses of curd before putting them into the vats. The operation resembled the act of crumbling bread on a large scale; and amid the immaculate whiteness of the curds Tess Durbeyfield's hands showed themselves of the pinkness of the rose. Angel, who was filling the vats with his handful, suddenly ceased, and laid his hands flat upon hers. Her sleeves were rolled far above the elbow, and bending lower he kissed the inside vein of her soft arm.

Although the early September weather was sultry, her arm, from her dabbling in the curds, was as cold and damp to his mouth as a new-gathered mushroom, and tasted of the whey. But she was such a sheaf of susceptibilities that her pulse was accelerated by the touch, her blood driven to her finger-ends, and the cool arms flushed hot. Then, as though her heart had said, "Is coyness longer necessary? Truth is truth between man and woman, as between man and man," she lifted her eyes and they beamed devotedly into his, as her lip rose in a tender half-smile.

"Do you know why I did that, Tess?" he said.

"Because you love me very much!"

"Yes, and as a preliminary to a new entreaty."

"Not AGAIN!"

She looked a sudden fear that her resistance might break down under her own desire.

"O, Tessy!" he went on, "I CANNOT think why you are so tantalizing. Why do you disappoint me so? You seem almost like a coquette, upon my life you do--a coquette of the first urban water! They blow hot and blow cold, just as you do, and it is the very last sort of thing to expect to find in a retreat like Talbothays. ... And yet, dearest," he quickly added, observing now the remark had cut her, "I know you to be the most honest, spotless creature that ever lived. So how can I suppose you a flirt? Tess, why don't you like the idea of being my wife, if you love me as you seem to do?"

"I have never said I don't like the idea, and I never could say it; because--it isn't true!"

The stress now getting beyond endurance, her lip quivered, and she was obliged to go away. Clare was so pained and perplexed that he ran after and caught her in the passage.

"Tell me, tell me!" he said, passionately clasping her, in forgetfulness of his curdy hands: "do tell me that you won't belong

to anybody but me!"

"I will, I will tell you!" she exclaimed. "And I will give you a complete answer, if you will let me go now. I will tell you my experiences--all about myself--all!"

"Your experiences, dear; yes, certainly; any number." He expressed assent in loving satire, looking into her face. "My Tess, no doubt, almost as many experiences as that wild convolvulus out there on the garden hedge, that opened itself this morning for the first time. Tell me anything, but don't use that wretched expression any more about not being worthy of me."

"I will try--not! And I'll give you my reasons to-morrow--next week."

"Say on Sunday?"

"Yes, on Sunday."

At last she got away, and did not stop in her retreat till she was in the thicket of pollard willows at the lower side of the barton, where she could be quite unseen. Here Tess flung herself down upon the rustling undergrowth of spear-grass, as upon a bed, and remained crouching in palpitating misery broken by momentary shoots of joy, which her fears about the ending could not altogether suppress.

In reality, she was drifting into acquiescence. Every see-saw of her breath, every wave of her blood, every pulse singing in her ears, was a voice that joined with nature in revolt against her scrupulousness. Reckless, inconsiderate acceptance of him; to close with him at the altar, revealing nothing, and chancing discovery; to snatch ripe pleasure before the iron teeth of pain could have time to shut upon her: that was what love counselled; and in almost a terror of ecstasy Tess divined that, despite her many months of lonely self-chastisement, wrestlings, communings, schemes to lead a future of austere isolation, love's counsel would prevail.

The afternoon advanced, and still she remained among the willows. She heard the rattle of taking down the pails from the forked stands; the "waow-waow!" which accompanied the getting together of the cows. But she did not go to the milking. They would see her agitation; and the dairyman, thinking the cause to be love alone, would good-naturedly tease her; and that harassment could not be borne.

Her lover must have guessed her overwrought state, and invented some excuse for her non-appearance, for no inquiries were made or calls given. At half-past six the sun settled down upon the levels with the aspect of a great forge in the heavens; and presently a monstrous pumpkin-like moon arose on the other hand. The pollard willows, tortured out of their natural shape by incessant choppings, became spiny-haired monsters as they stood up against it. She went in and

upstairs without a light.

It was now Wednesday. Thursday came, and Angel looked thoughtfully at her from a distance, but intruded in no way upon her. The indoor milkmaids, Marian and the rest, seemed to guess that something definite was afoot, for they did not force any remarks upon her in the bedchamber. Friday passed; Saturday. To-morrow was the day.

"I shall give way--I shall say yes--I shall let myself marry him--I cannot help it!" she jealously panted, with her hot face to the pillow that night, on hearing one of the other girls sigh his name in her sleep. "I can't bear to let anybody have him but me! Yet it is a wrong to him, and may kill him when he knows! O my heart--O--O--O!"

XXIX

"Now, who mid ye think I've heard news o' this morning?" said Dairyman Crick, as he sat down to breakfast next day, with a riddling gaze round upon the munching men and maids. "Now, just who mid ye think?"

One guessed, and another guessed. Mrs Crick did not guess, because