

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

she knew already.

"Well," said the dairyman, "'tis that slack-twisted 'hore's-bird of a feller, Jack Dollop. He's lately got married to a widow-woman."

"Not Jack Dollop? A villain--to think o' that!" said a milker.

The name entered quickly into Tess Durbeyfield's consciousness, for it was the name of the lover who had wronged his sweetheart, and had afterwards been so roughly used by the young woman's mother in the butter-churn.

"And had he married the valiant matron's daughter, as he promised?" asked Angel Clare absently, as he turned over the newspaper he was reading at the little table to which he was always banished by Mrs Crick, in her sense of his gentility.

"Not he, sir. Never meant to," replied the dairyman. "As I say, 'tis a widow-woman, and she had money, it seems--fifty poun' a year or so; and that was all he was after. They were married in a great hurry; and then she told him that by marrying she had lost her fifty poun' a year. Just fancy the state o' my gentleman's mind at that news! Never such a cat-and-dog life as they've been leading ever since! Serves him well beright. But onluckily the poor woman gets the worst o't."

"Well, the silly body should have told en sooner that the ghost of her first man would trouble him," said Mrs Crick.

"Ay, ay," responded the dairyman indecisively. "Still, you can see exactly how 'twas. She wanted a home, and didn't like to run the risk of losing him. Don't ye think that was something like it, maidens?"

He glanced towards the row of girls.

"She ought to ha' told him just before they went to church, when he could hardly have backed out," exclaimed Marian.

"Yes, she ought," agreed Izz.

"She must have seen what he was after, and should ha' refused him," cried Retty spasmodically.

"And what do you say, my dear?" asked the dairyman of Tess.

"I think she ought--to have told him the true state of things--or else refused him--I don't know," replied Tess, the bread-and-butter choking her.

"Be cust if I'd have done either o't," said Beck Knibbs, a married helper from one of the cottages. "All's fair in love and war. I'd

ha' married en just as she did, and if he'd said two words to me about not telling him beforehand anything whatsoever about my first chap that I hadn't chose to tell, I'd ha' knocked him down wi' the rolling-pin--a scam little feller like he! Any woman could do it."

The laughter which followed this sally was supplemented only by a sorry smile, for form's sake, from Tess. What was comedy to them was tragedy to her; and she could hardly bear their mirth. She soon rose from table, and, with an impression that Clare would soon follow her, went along a little wriggling path, now stepping to one side of the irrigating channels, and now to the other, till she stood by the main stream of the Var. Men had been cutting the water-weeds higher up the river, and masses of them were floating past her--moving islands of green crow-foot, whereon she might almost have ridden; long locks of which weed had lodged against the piles driven to keep the cows from crossing.

Yes, there was the pain of it. This question of a woman telling her story--the heaviest of crosses to herself--seemed but amusement to others. It was as if people should laugh at martyrdom.

"Tessy!" came from behind her, and Clare sprang across the gully, alighting beside her feet. "My wife--soon!"

"No, no; I cannot. For your sake, O Mr Clare; for your sake, I say no!"

"Tess!"

"Still I say no!" she repeated.

Not expecting this, he had put his arm lightly round her waist the moment after speaking, beneath her hanging tail of hair. (The younger dairymaids, including Tess, breakfasted with their hair loose on Sunday mornings before building it up extra high for attending church, a style they could not adopt when milking with their heads against the cows.) If she had said "Yes" instead of "No" he would have kissed her; it had evidently been his intention; but her determined negative deterred his scrupulous heart. Their condition of domiciliary comradeship put her, as the woman, to such disadvantage by its enforced intercourse, that he felt it unfair to her to exercise any pressure of blandishment which he might have honestly employed had she been better able to avoid him. He released her momentarily-imprisoned waist, and withheld the kiss.

It all turned on that release. What had given her strength to refuse him this time was solely the tale of the widow told by the dairyman; and that would have been overcome in another moment. But Angel said no more; his face was perplexed; he went away.

Day after day they met--somewhat less constantly than before; and thus two or three weeks went by. The end of September drew near, and

she could see in his eye that he might ask her again.

His plan of procedure was different now--as though he had made up his mind that her negatives were, after all, only coyness and youth startled by the novelty of the proposal. The fitful evasiveness of her manner when the subject was under discussion countenanced the idea. So he played a more coaxing game; and while never going beyond words, or attempting the renewal of caresses, he did his utmost orally.

In this way Clare persistently wooed her in undertones like that of the purling milk--at the cow's side, at skimmings, at butter-makings, at cheese-makings, among broody poultry, and among farrowing pigs--as no milkmaid was ever wooed before by such a man.

Tess knew that she must break down. Neither a religious sense of a certain moral validity in the previous union nor a conscientious wish for candour could hold out against it much longer. She loved him so passionately, and he was so godlike in her eyes; and being, though untrained, instinctively refined, her nature cried for his tutelary guidance. And thus, though Tess kept repeating to herself, "I can never be his wife," the words were vain. A proof of her weakness lay in the very utterance of what calm strength would not have taken the trouble to formulate. Every sound of his voice beginning on the old subject stirred her with a terrifying bliss, and she coveted the recantation she feared.

His manner was--what man's is not?--so much that of one who would love and cherish and defend her under any conditions, changes, charges, or revelations, that her gloom lessened as she basked in it. The season meanwhile was drawing onward to the equinox, and though it was still fine, the days were much shorter. The dairy had again worked by morning candlelight for a long time; and a fresh renewal of Clare's pleading occurred one morning between three and four.

She had run up in her bedgown to his door to call him as usual; then had gone back to dress and call the others; and in ten minutes was walking to the head of the stairs with the candle in her hand. At the same moment he came down his steps from above in his shirt-sleeves and put his arm across the stairway.

"Now, Miss Flirt, before you go down," he said peremptorily. "It is a fortnight since I spoke, and this won't do any longer. You MUST tell me what you mean, or I shall have to leave this house. My door was ajar just now, and I saw you. For your own safety I must go. You don't know. Well? Is it to be yes at last?"

"I am only just up, Mr Clare, and it is too early to take me to task!" she pouted. "You need not call me Flirt. 'Tis cruel and untrue. Wait till by and by. Please wait till by and by! I will really think seriously about it between now and then. Let me go downstairs!"

She looked a little like what he said she was as, holding the candle sideways, she tried to smile away the seriousness of her words.

"Call me Angel, then, and not Mr Clare."

"Angel."

"Angel dearest--why not?"

"'Twould mean that I agree, wouldn't it?"

"It would only mean that you love me, even if you cannot marry me; and you were so good as to own that long ago."

"Very well, then, 'Angel dearest', if I MUST," she murmured, looking at her candle, a roguish curl coming upon her mouth, notwithstanding her suspense.

Clare had resolved never to kiss her until he had obtained her promise; but somehow, as Tess stood there in her prettily tucked-up milking gown, her hair carelessly heaped upon her head till there should be leisure to arrange it when skimming and milking were done, he broke his resolve, and brought his lips to her cheek for one moment. She passed downstairs very quickly, never looking back at him or saying another word. The other maids were already down,

and the subject was not pursued. Except Marian, they all looked wistfully and suspiciously at the pair, in the sad yellow rays which the morning candles emitted in contrast with the first cold signals of the dawn without.

When skimming was done--which, as the milk diminished with the approach of autumn, was a lessening process day by day--Retty and the rest went out. The lovers followed them.

"Our tremulous lives are so different from theirs, are they not?" he musingly observed to her, as he regarded the three figures tripping before him through the frigid pallor of opening day.

"Not so very different, I think," she said.

"Why do you think that?"

"There are very few women's lives that are not--tremulous," Tess replied, pausing over the new word as if it impressed her. "There's more in those three than you think."

"What is in them?"

"Almost either of 'em," she began, "would make--perhaps would make--a properer wife than I. And perhaps they love you as well as I--almost."

"O, Tessy!"

There were signs that it was an exquisite relief to her to hear the impatient exclamation, though she had resolved so intrepidly to let generosity make one bid against herself. That was now done, and she had not the power to attempt self-immolation a second time then. They were joined by a milker from one of the cottages, and no more was said on that which concerned them so deeply. But Tess knew that this day would decide it.

In the afternoon several of the dairyman's household and assistants went down to the meads as usual, a long way from the dairy, where many of the cows were milked without being driven home. The supply was getting less as the animals advanced in calf, and the supernumerary milkers of the lush green season had been dismissed.

The work progressed leisurely. Each pailful was poured into tall cans that stood in a large spring-waggon which had been brought upon the scene; and when they were milked, the cows trailed away. Dairyman Crick, who was there with the rest, his wrapper gleaming miraculously white against a leaden evening sky, suddenly looked at his heavy watch.

"Why, 'tis later than I thought," he said. "Begad! We shan't be soon enough with this milk at the station, if we don't mind. There's

no time to-day to take it home and mix it with the bulk afore sending off. It must go to station straight from here. Who'll drive it across?"

Mr Clare volunteered to do so, though it was none of his business, asking Tess to accompany him. The evening, though sunless, had been warm and muggy for the season, and Tess had come out with her milking-hood only, naked-armed and jacketless; certainly not dressed for a drive. She therefore replied by glancing over her scant habiliments; but Clare gently urged her. She assented by relinquishing her pail and stool to the dairyman to take home, and mounted the spring-waggon beside Clare.

XXX

In the diminishing daylight they went along the level roadway through the meads, which stretched away into gray miles, and were backed in the extreme edge of distance by the swarthy and abrupt slopes of Egdon Heath. On its summit stood clumps and stretches of fir-trees, whose notched tips appeared like battlemented towers crowning black-fronted castles of enchantment.

They were so absorbed in the sense of being close to each other that