

## XXXVI

Clare arose in the light of a dawn that was ashy and furtive, as though associated with crime. The fireplace confronted him with its extinct embers; the spread supper-table, whereon stood the two full glasses of untasted wine, now flat and filmy; her vacated seat and his own; the other articles of furniture, with their eternal look of not being able to help it, their intolerable inquiry what was to be done? From above there was no sound; but in a few minutes there came a knock at the door. He remembered that it would be the neighbouring cottager's wife, who was to minister to their wants while they remained here.

The presence of a third person in the house would be extremely awkward just now, and, being already dressed, he opened the window and informed her that they could manage to shift for themselves that morning. She had a milk-can in her hand, which he told her to leave at the door. When the dame had gone away he searched in the back quarters of the house for fuel, and speedily lit a fire. There was plenty of eggs, butter, bread, and so on in the larder, and Clare soon had breakfast laid, his experiences at the dairy having rendered him facile in domestic preparations. The smoke of the kindled wood rose from the chimney without like a lotus-headed column; local

people who were passing by saw it, and thought of the newly-married couple, and envied their happiness.

Angel cast a final glance round, and then going to the foot of the stairs, called in a conventional voice--

"Breakfast is ready!"

He opened the front door, and took a few steps in the morning air. When, after a short space, he came back she was already in the sitting-room mechanically readjusting the breakfast things. As she was fully attired, and the interval since his calling her had been but two or three minutes, she must have been dressed or nearly so before he went to summon her. Her hair was twisted up in a large round mass at the back of her head, and she had put on one of the new frocks--a pale blue woollen garment with neck-frillings of white. Her hands and face appeared to be cold, and she had possibly been sitting dressed in the bedroom a long time without any fire. The marked civility of Clare's tone in calling her seemed to have inspired her, for the moment, with a new glimmer of hope. But it soon died when she looked at him.

The pair were, in truth, but the ashes of their former fires. To the hot sorrow of the previous night had succeeded heaviness; it seemed as if nothing could kindle either of them to fervour of sensation any more.

He spoke gently to her, and she replied with a like undemonstrativeness. At last she came up to him, looking in his sharply-defined face as one who had no consciousness that her own formed a visible object also.

"Angel!" she said, and paused, touching him with her fingers lightly as a breeze, as though she could hardly believe to be there in the flesh the man who was once her lover. Her eyes were bright, her pale cheek still showed its wonted roundness, though half-dried tears had left glistening traces thereon; and the usually ripe red mouth was almost as pale as her cheek. Throbbingly alive as she was still, under the stress of her mental grief the life beat so brokenly that a little further pull upon it would cause real illness, dull her characteristic eyes, and make her mouth thin.

She looked absolutely pure. Nature, in her fantastic trickery, had set such a seal of maidenhood upon Tess's countenance that he gazed at her with a stupefied air.

"Tess! Say it is not true! No, it is not true!"

"It is true."

"Every word?"

"Every word."

He looked at her imploringly, as if he would willingly have taken a lie from her lips, knowing it to be one, and have made of it, by some sort of sophistry, a valid denial. However, she only repeated--

"It is true."

"Is he living?" Angel then asked.

"The baby died."

"But the man?"

"He is alive."

A last despair passed over Clare's face.

"Is he in England?"

"Yes."

He took a few vague steps.

"My position--is this," he said abruptly. "I thought--any man would have thought--that by giving up all ambition to win a wife with

social standing, with fortune, with knowledge of the world, I should secure rustic innocence as surely as I should secure pink cheeks; but--However, I am no man to reproach you, and I will not."

Tess felt his position so entirely that the remainder had not been needed. Therein lay just the distress of it; she saw that he had lost all round.

"Angel--I should not have let it go on to marriage with you if I had not known that, after all, there was a last way out of it for you; though I hoped you would never--"

Her voice grew husky.

"A last way?"

"I mean, to get rid of me. You CAN get rid of me."

"How?"

"By divorcing me."

"Good heavens--how can you be so simple! How can I divorce you?"

"Can't you--now I have told you? I thought my confession would give you grounds for that."

"O Tess--you are too, too--childish--unformed--crude, I suppose! I don't know what you are. You don't understand the law--you don't understand!"

"What--you cannot?"

"Indeed I cannot."

A quick shame mixed with the misery upon his listener's face.

"I thought--I thought," she whispered. "O, now I see how wicked I seem to you! Believe me--believe me, on my soul, I never thought but that you could! I hoped you would not; yet I believed, without a doubt, that you could cast me off if you were determined, and didn't love me at--at--all!"

"You were mistaken," he said.

"O, then I ought to have done it, to have done it last night! But I hadn't the courage. That's just like me!"

"The courage to do what?"

As she did not answer he took her by the hand.

"What were you thinking of doing?" he inquired.

"Of putting an end to myself."

"When?"

She writhed under this inquisitorial manner of his. "Last night," she answered.

"Where?"

"Under your mistletoe."

"My good--! How?" he asked sternly.

"I'll tell you, if you won't be angry with me!" she said, shrinking.

"It was with the cord of my box. But I could not--do the last thing! I was afraid that it might cause a scandal to your name."

The unexpected quality of this confession, wrung from her, and not volunteered, shook him perceptibly. But he still held her, and, letting his glance fall from her face downwards, he said, "Now, listen to this. You must not dare to think of such a horrible thing! How could you! You will promise me as your husband to attempt that no more."

"I am ready to promise. I saw how wicked it was."

"Wicked! The idea was unworthy of you beyond description."

"But, Angel," she pleaded, enlarging her eyes in calm unconcern upon him, "it was thought of entirely on your account--to set you free without the scandal of the divorce that I thought you would have to get. I should never have dreamt of doing it on mine. However, to do it with my own hand is too good for me, after all. It is you, my ruined husband, who ought to strike the blow. I think I should love you more, if that were possible, if you could bring yourself to do it, since there's no other way of escape for 'ee. I feel I am so utterly worthless! So very greatly in the way!"

"Ssh!"

"Well, since you say no, I won't. I have no wish opposed to yours."

He knew this to be true enough. Since the desperation of the night her activities had dropped to zero, and there was no further rashness to be feared.

Tess tried to busy herself again over the breakfast-table with more or less success, and they sat down both on the same side, so that their glances did not meet. There was at first something awkward in hearing each other eat and drink, but this could not be escaped;

moreover, the amount of eating done was small on both sides. Breakfast over, he rose, and telling her the hour at which he might be expected to dinner, went off to the miller's in a mechanical pursuance of the plan of studying that business, which had been his only practical reason for coming here.

When he was gone Tess stood at the window, and presently saw his form crossing the great stone bridge which conducted to the mill premises. He sank behind it, crossed the railway beyond, and disappeared. Then, without a sigh, she turned her attention to the room, and began clearing the table and setting it in order.

The charwoman soon came. Her presence was at first a strain upon Tess, but afterwards an alleviation. At half-past twelve she left her assistant alone in the kitchen, and, returning to the sitting-room, waited for the reappearance of Angel's form behind the bridge.

About one he showed himself. Her face flushed, although he was a quarter of a mile off. She ran to the kitchen to get the dinner served by the time he should enter. He went first to the room where they had washed their hands together the day before, and as he entered the sitting-room the dish-covers rose from the dishes as if by his own motion.

"How punctual!" he said.

"Yes. I saw you coming over the bridge," said she.

The meal was passed in commonplace talk of what he had been doing during the morning at the Abbey Mill, of the methods of bolting and the old-fashioned machinery, which he feared would not enlighten him greatly on modern improved methods, some of it seeming to have been in use ever since the days it ground for the monks in the adjoining conventual buildings--now a heap of ruins. He left the house again in the course of an hour, coming home at dusk, and occupying himself through the evening with his papers. She feared she was in the way and, when the old woman was gone, retired to the kitchen, where she made herself busy as well as she could for more than an hour.

Clare's shape appeared at the door. "You must not work like this," he said. "You are not my servant; you are my wife."

She raised her eyes, and brightened somewhat. "I may think myself that--indeed?" she murmured, in piteous raillery. "You mean in name! Well, I don't want to be anything more."

"You MAY think so, Tess! You are. What do you mean?"

"I don't know," she said hastily, with tears in her accents. "I thought I--because I am not respectable, I mean. I told you I thought I was not respectable enough long ago--and on that account

I didn't want to marry you, only--only you urged me!"

She broke into sobs, and turned her back to him. It would almost have won round any man but Angel Clare. Within the remote depths of his constitution, so gentle and affectionate as he was in general, there lay hidden a hard logical deposit, like a vein of metal in a soft loam, which turned the edge of everything that attempted to traverse it. It had blocked his acceptance of the Church; it blocked his acceptance of Tess. Moreover, his affection itself was less fire than radiance, and, with regard to the other sex, when he ceased to believe he ceased to follow: contrasting in this with many impressionable natures, who remain sensuously infatuated with what they intellectually despise. He waited till her sobbing ceased.

"I wish half the women in England were as respectable as you," he said, in an ebullition of bitterness against womankind in general.

"It isn't a question of respectability, but one of principle!"

He spoke such things as these and more of a kindred sort to her, being still swayed by the antipathetic wave which warps direct souls with such persistence when once their vision finds itself mocked by appearances. There was, it is true, underneath, a back current of sympathy through which a woman of the world might have conquered him. But Tess did not think of this; she took everything as her deserts, and hardly opened her mouth. The firmness of her devotion to him was indeed almost pitiful; quick-tempered as she naturally was, nothing

that he could say made her unseemly; she sought not her own; was not provoked; thought no evil of his treatment of her. She might just now have been Apostolic Charity herself returned to a self-seeking modern world.

This evening, night, and morning were passed precisely as the preceding ones had been passed. On one, and only one, occasion did she--the formerly free and independent Tess--venture to make any advances. It was on the third occasion of his starting after a meal to go out to the flour-mill. As he was leaving the table he said "Goodbye," and she replied in the same words, at the same time inclining her mouth in the way of his. He did not avail himself of the invitation, saying, as he turned hastily aside--

"I shall be home punctually."

Tess shrank into herself as if she had been struck. Often enough had he tried to reach those lips against her consent--often had he said gaily that her mouth and breath tasted of the butter and eggs and milk and honey on which she mainly lived, that he drew sustenance from them, and other follies of that sort. But he did not care for them now. He observed her sudden shrinking, and said gently--

"You know, I have to think of a course. It was imperative that we should stay together a little while, to avoid the scandal to you that would have resulted from our immediate parting. But you must see it

is only for form's sake."

"Yes," said Tess absently.

He went out, and on his way to the mill stood still, and wished for a moment that he had responded yet more kindly, and kissed her once at least.

Thus they lived through this despairing day or two; in the same house, truly; but more widely apart than before they were lovers. It was evident to her that he was, as he had said, living with paralyzed activities in his endeavour to think of a plan of procedure. She was awe-stricken to discover such determination under such apparent flexibility. His consistency was, indeed, too cruel. She no longer expected forgiveness now. More than once she thought of going away from him during his absence at the mill; but she feared that this, instead of benefiting him, might be the means of hampering and humiliating him yet more if it should become known.

Meanwhile Clare was meditating, verily. His thought had been unsuspending; he was becoming ill with thinking; eaten out with thinking, withered by thinking; scourged out of all his former pulsating, flexuous domesticity. He walked about saying to himself, "What's to be done--what's to be done?" and by chance she overheard him. It caused her to break the reserve about their future which had hitherto prevailed.

"I suppose--you are not going to live with me--long, are you, Angel?" she asked, the sunk corners of her mouth betraying how purely mechanical were the means by which she retained that expression of chastened calm upon her face.

"I cannot" he said, "without despising myself, and what is worse, perhaps, despising you. I mean, of course, cannot live with you in the ordinary sense. At present, whatever I feel, I do not despise you. And, let me speak plainly, or you may not see all my difficulties. How can we live together while that man lives?--he being your husband in nature, and not I. If he were dead it might be different... Besides, that's not all the difficulty; it lies in another consideration--one bearing upon the future of other people than ourselves. Think of years to come, and children being born to us, and this past matter getting known--for it must get known. There is not an uttermost part of the earth but somebody comes from it or goes to it from elsewhere. Well, think of wretches of our flesh and blood growing up under a taunt which they will gradually get to feel the full force of with their expanding years. What an awakening for them! What a prospect! Can you honestly say 'Remain' after contemplating this contingency? Don't you think we had better endure the ills we have than fly to others?"

Her eyelids, weighted with trouble, continued drooping as before.

"I cannot say 'Remain,'" she answered, "I cannot; I had not thought so far."

Tess's feminine hope--shall we confess it?--had been so obstinately recuperative as to revive in her surreptitious visions of a domiciliary intimacy continued long enough to break down his coldness even against his judgement. Though unsophisticated in the usual sense, she was not incomplete; and it would have denoted deficiency of womanhood if she had not instinctively known what an argument lies in propinquity. Nothing else would serve her, she knew, if this failed. It was wrong to hope in what was of the nature of strategy, she said to herself: yet that sort of hope she could not extinguish. His last representation had now been made, and it was, as she said, a new view. She had truly never thought so far as that, and his lucid picture of possible offspring who would scorn her was one that brought deadly convictions to an honest heart which was humanitarian to its centre. Sheer experience had already taught her that in some circumstances there was one thing better than to lead a good life, and that was to be saved from leading any life whatever. Like all who have been previsioned by suffering, she could, in the words of M. Sully-Prudhomme, hear a penal sentence in the fiat, "You shall be born," particularly if addressed to potential issue of hers.

Yet such is the vulpine slyness of Dame Nature, that, till now, Tess had been hoodwinked by her love for Clare into forgetting it might result in vitalizations that would inflict upon others what she had

bewailed as misfortune to herself.

She therefore could not withstand his argument. But with the self-combating proclivity of the supersensitive, an answer thereto arose in Clare's own mind, and he almost feared it. It was based on her exceptional physical nature; and she might have used it promisingly. She might have added besides: "On an Australian upland or Texan plain, who is to know or care about my misfortunes, or to reproach me or you?" Yet, like the majority of women, she accepted the momentary presentment as if it were the inevitable. And she may have been right. The intuitive heart of woman knoweth not only its own bitterness, but its husband's, and even if these assumed reproaches were not likely to be addressed to him or to his by strangers, they might have reached his ears from his own fastidious brain.

It was the third day of the estrangement. Some might risk the odd paradox that with more animalism he would have been the nobler man. We do not say it. Yet Clare's love was doubtless ethereal to a fault, imaginative to impracticability. With these natures, corporal presence is something less appealing than corporal absence; the latter creating an ideal presence that conveniently drops the defects of the real. She found that her personality did not plead her cause so forcibly as she had anticipated. The figurative phrase was true: she was another woman than the one who had excited his desire.

"I have thought over what you say," she remarked to him, moving her forefinger over the tablecloth, her other hand, which bore the ring that mocked them both, supporting her forehead. "It is quite true, all of it; it must be. You must go away from me."

"But what can you do?"

"I can go home."

Clare had not thought of that.

"Are you sure?" he inquired.

"Quite sure. We ought to part, and we may as well get it past and done. You once said that I was apt to win men against their better judgement; and if I am constantly before your eyes I may cause you to change your plans in opposition to your reason and wish; and afterwards your repentance and my sorrow will be terrible."

"And you would like to go home?" he asked.

"I want to leave you, and go home."

"Then it shall be so."

Though she did not look up at him, she started. There was a

difference between the proposition and the covenant, which she had felt only too quickly.

"I feared it would come to this," she murmured, her countenance meekly fixed. "I don't complain, Angel, I--I think it best. What you said has quite convinced me. Yes, though nobody else should reproach me if we should stay together, yet somewhen, years hence, you might get angry with me for any ordinary matter, and knowing what you do of my by-gones, you yourself might be tempted to say words, and they might be overheard, perhaps by my own children. O, what only hurts me now would torture and kill me then! I will go--to-morrow."

"And I shall not stay here. Though I didn't like to initiate it, I have seen that it was advisable we should part--at least for a while, till I can better see the shape that things have taken, and can write to you."

Tess stole a glance at her husband. He was pale, even tremulous; but, as before, she was appalled by the determination revealed in the depths of this gentle being she had married--the will to subdue the grosser to the subtler emotion, the substance to the conception, the flesh to the spirit. Propensities, tendencies, habits, were as dead leaves upon the tyrannous wind of his imaginative ascendancy.

He may have observed her look, for he explained--

"I think of people more kindly when I am away from them"; adding cynically, "God knows; perhaps we will shake down together some day, for weariness; thousands have done it!"

That day he began to pack up, and she went upstairs and began to pack also. Both knew that it was in their two minds that they might part the next morning for ever, despite the gloss of assuaging conjectures thrown over their proceeding because they were of the sort to whom any parting which has an air of finality is a torture. He knew, and she knew, that, though the fascination which each had exercised over the other--on her part independently of accomplishments--would probably in the first days of their separation be even more potent than ever, time must attenuate that effect; the practical arguments against accepting her as a housemate might pronounce themselves more strongly in the boreal light of a remoter view. Moreover, when two people are once parted--have abandoned a common domicile and a common environment--new growths insensibly bud upward to fill each vacated place; unforeseen accidents hinder intentions, and old plans are forgotten.

XXXVII

Midnight came and passed silently, for there was nothing to announce