

she came close, the girl turned serenely and recognized her, the young man walking off in embarrassment. The woman was Izz Huett, whose interest in Tess's excursion immediately superseded her own proceedings. Tess did not explain very clearly its results, and Izz, who was a girl of tact, began to speak of her own little affair, a phase of which Tess had just witnessed.

"He is Amby Seedling, the chap who used to sometimes come and help at Talbothays," she explained indifferently. "He actually inquired and found out that I had come here, and has followed me. He says he's been in love wi' me these two years. But I've hardly answered him."

## XLVI

Several days had passed since her futile journey, and Tess was afield. The dry winter wind still blew, but a screen of thatched hurdles erected in the eye of the blast kept its force away from her. On the sheltered side was a turnip-slicing machine, whose bright blue hue of new paint seemed almost vocal in the otherwise subdued scene. Opposite its front was a long mound or "grave", in which the roots had been preserved since early winter. Tess was standing at the uncovered end, chopping off with a bill-hook the fibres and earth from each root, and throwing it after the operation into the slicer.

A man was turning the handle of the machine, and from its trough came the newly-cut swedes, the fresh smell of whose yellow chips was accompanied by the sounds of the snuffling wind, the smart swish of the slicing-blades, and the choppings of the hook in Tess's leather-gloved hand.

The wide acreage of blank agricultural brownness, apparent where the swedes had been pulled, was beginning to be striped in wales of darker brown, gradually broadening to ribands. Along the edge of each of these something crept upon ten legs, moving without haste and without rest up and down the whole length of the field; it was two horses and a man, the plough going between them, turning up the cleared ground for a spring sowing.

For hours nothing relieved the joyless monotony of things. Then, far beyond the ploughing-teams, a black speck was seen. It had come from the corner of a fence, where there was a gap, and its tendency was up the incline, towards the swede-cutters. From the proportions of a mere point it advanced to the shape of a ninepin, and was soon perceived to be a man in black, arriving from the direction of Flintcomb-Ash. The man at the slicer, having nothing else to do with his eyes, continually observed the corner, but Tess, who was occupied, did not perceive him till her companion directed her attention to his approach.

It was not her hard taskmaster, Farmer Groby; it was one in a

semi-clerical costume, who now represented what had once been the free-and-easy Alec d'Urberville. Not being hot at his preaching there was less enthusiasm about him now, and the presence of the grinder seemed to embarrass him. A pale distress was already on Tess's face, and she pulled her curtained hood further over it.

D'Urberville came up and said quietly--

"I want to speak to you, Tess."

"You have refused my last request, not to come near me!" said she.

"Yes, but I have a good reason."

"Well, tell it."

"It is more serious than you may think."

He glanced round to see if he were overheard. They were at some distance from the man who turned the slicer, and the movement of the machine, too, sufficiently prevented Alec's words reaching other ears. D'Urberville placed himself so as to screen Tess from the labourer, turning his back to the latter.

"It is this," he continued, with capricious compunction. "In thinking of your soul and mine when we last met, I neglected to

inquire as to your worldly condition. You were well dressed, and I did not think of it. But I see now that it is hard--harder than it used to be when I--knew you--harder than you deserve. Perhaps a good deal of it is owing to me!"

She did not answer, and he watched her inquiringly, as, with bent head, her face completely screened by the hood, she resumed her trimming of the swedes. By going on with her work she felt better able to keep him outside her emotions.

"Tess," he added, with a sigh of discontent,--"yours was the very worst case I ever was concerned in! I had no idea of what had resulted till you told me. Scamp that I was to foul that innocent life! The whole blame was mine--the whole unconventional business of our time at Trantridge. You, too, the real blood of which I am but the base imitation, what a blind young thing you were as to possibilities! I say in all earnestness that it is a shame for parents to bring up their girls in such dangerous ignorance of the gins and nets that the wicked may set for them, whether their motive be a good one or the result of simple indifference."

Tess still did no more than listen, throwing down one globular root and taking up another with automatic regularity, the pensive contour of the mere fieldwoman alone marking her.

"But it is not that I came to say," d'Urberville went on. "My

circumstances are these. I have lost my mother since you were at Trantridge, and the place is my own. But I intend to sell it, and devote myself to missionary work in Africa. A devil of a poor hand I shall make at the trade, no doubt. However, what I want to ask you is, will you put it in my power to do my duty--to make the only reparation I can make for the trick played you: that is, will you be my wife, and go with me? ... I have already obtained this precious document. It was my old mother's dying wish."

He drew a piece of parchment from his pocket, with a slight fumbling of embarrassment.

"What is it?" said she.

"A marriage licence."

"O no, sir--no!" she said quickly, starting back.

"You will not? Why is that?"

And as he asked the question a disappointment which was not entirely the disappointment of thwarted duty crossed d'Urberville's face. It was unmistakably a symptom that something of his old passion for her had been revived; duty and desire ran hand-in-hand.

"Surely," he began again, in more impetuous tones, and then looked

round at the labourer who turned the slicer.

Tess, too, felt that the argument could not be ended there.

Informing the man that a gentleman had come to see her, with whom she wished to walk a little way, she moved off with d'Urberville across the zebra-striped field. When they reached the first newly-ploughed section he held out his hand to help her over it; but she stepped forward on the summits of the earth-rolls as if she did not see him.

"You will not marry me, Tess, and make me a self-respecting man?" he repeated, as soon as they were over the furrows.

"I cannot."

"But why?"

"You know I have no affection for you."

"But you would get to feel that in time, perhaps--as soon as you really could forgive me?"

"Never!"

"Why so positive?"

"I love somebody else."

The words seemed to astonish him.

"You do?" he cried. "Somebody else? But has not a sense of what is morally right and proper any weight with you?"

"No, no, no--don't say that!"

"Anyhow, then, your love for this other man may be only a passing feeling which you will overcome--"

"No--no."

"Yes, yes! Why not?"

"I cannot tell you."

"You must in honour!"

"Well then ... I have married him."

"Ah!" he exclaimed; and he stopped dead and gazed at her.

"I did not wish to tell--I did not mean to!" she pleaded. "It is a secret here, or at any rate but dimly known. So will you, PLEASE

will you, keep from questioning me? You must remember that we are now strangers."

"Strangers--are we? Strangers!"

For a moment a flash of his old irony marked his face; but he determinedly chastened it down.

"Is that man your husband?" he asked mechanically, denoting by a sign the labourer who turned the machine.

"That man!" she said proudly. "I should think not!"

"Who, then?"

"Do not ask what I do not wish to tell!" she begged, and flashed her appeal to him from her upturned face and lash-shadowed eyes.

D'Urberville was disturbed.

"But I only asked for your sake!" he retorted hotly. "Angels of heaven!--God forgive me for such an expression--I came here, I swear, as I thought for your good. Tess--don't look at me so--I cannot stand your looks! There never were such eyes, surely, before Christianity or since! There--I won't lose my head; I dare not. I own that the sight of you had waked up my love for you, which, I



believed, was extinguished with all such feelings. But I thought that our marriage might be a sanctification for us both. 'The unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband,' I said to myself. But my plan is dashed from me; and I must bear the disappointment!"

He moodily reflected with his eyes on the ground.

"Married. Married! ... Well, that being so," he added, quite calmly, tearing the licence slowly into halves and putting them in his pocket; "that being prevented, I should like to do some good to you and your husband, whoever he may be. There are many questions that I am tempted to ask, but I will not do so, of course, in opposition to your wishes. Though, if I could know your husband, I might more easily benefit him and you. Is he on this farm?"

"No," she murmured. "He is far away."

"Far away? From YOU? What sort of husband can he be?"

"O, do not speak against him! It was through you! He found out--"

"Ah, is it so! ... That's sad, Tess!"

"Yes."

"But to stay away from you--to leave you to work like this!"

"He does not leave me to work!" she cried, springing to the defence of the absent one with all her fervour. "He don't know it! It is by my own arrangement."

"Then, does he write?"

"I--I cannot tell you. There are things which are private to ourselves."

"Of course that means that he does not. You are a deserted wife, my fair Tess--"

In an impulse he turned suddenly to take her hand; the buff-glove was on it, and he seized only the rough leather fingers which did not express the life or shape of those within.

"You must not--you must not!" she cried fearfully, slipping her hand from the glove as from a pocket, and leaving it in his grasp. "O, will you go away--for the sake of me and my husband--go, in the name of your own Christianity!"

"Yes, yes; I will," he said abruptly, and thrusting the glove back to her he turned to leave. Facing round, however, he said, "Tess, as God is my judge, I meant no humbug in taking your hand!"

A pattering of hoofs on the soil of the field, which they had not noticed in their preoccupation, ceased close behind them; and a voice reached her ear:

"What the devil are you doing away from your work at this time o' day?"

Farmer Groby had espied the two figures from the distance, and had inquisitively ridden across, to learn what was their business in his field.

"Don't speak like that to her!" said d'Urberville, his face blackening with something that was not Christianity.

"Indeed, Mister! And what mid Methodist pa'sons have to do with she?"

"Who is the fellow?" asked d'Urberville, turning to Tess.

She went close up to him.

"Go--I do beg you!" she said.

"What! And leave you to that tyrant? I can see in his face what a churl he is."

"He won't hurt me. HE'S not in love with me. I can leave at Lady-Day."

"Well, I have no right but to obey, I suppose. But--well, goodbye!"

Her defender, whom she dreaded more than her assailant, having reluctantly disappeared, the farmer continued his reprimand, which Tess took with the greatest coolness, that sort of attack being independent of sex. To have as a master this man of stone, who would have cuffed her if he had dared, was almost a relief after her former experiences. She silently walked back towards the summit of the field that was the scene of her labour, so absorbed in the interview which had just taken place that she was hardly aware that the nose of Groby's horse almost touched her shoulders.

"If so be you make an agreement to work for me till Lady-Day, I'll see that you carry it out," he growled. "'Od rot the women--now 'tis one thing, and then 'tis another. But I'll put up with it no longer!"

Knowing very well that he did not harass the other women of the farm as he harassed her out of spite for the flooring he had once received, she did for one moment picture what might have been the result if she had been free to accept the offer just made her of being the monied Alec's wife. It would have lifted her completely

out of subjection, not only to her present oppressive employer, but to a whole world who seemed to despise her. "But no, no!" she said breathlessly; "I could not have married him now! He is so unpleasant to me."

That very night she began an appealing letter to Clare, concealing from him her hardships, and assuring him of her undying affection. Any one who had been in a position to read between the lines would have seen that at the back of her great love was some monstrous fear--almost a desperation--as to some secret contingencies which were not disclosed. But again she did not finish her effusion; he had asked Izz to go with him, and perhaps he did not care for her at all. She put the letter in her box, and wondered if it would ever reach Angel's hands.

After this her daily tasks were gone through heavily enough, and brought on the day which was of great import to agriculturists--the day of the Candlemas Fair. It was at this fair that new engagements were entered into for the twelve months following the ensuing Lady-Day, and those of the farming population who thought of changing their places duly attended at the county-town where the fair was held. Nearly all the labourers on Flintcomb-Ash farm intended flight, and early in the morning there was a general exodus in the direction of the town, which lay at a distance of from ten to a dozen miles over hilly country. Though Tess also meant to leave at the quarter-day, she was one of the few who did not go to the fair,

having a vaguely-shaped hope that something would happen to render another outdoor engagement unnecessary.

It was a peaceful February day, of wonderful softness for the time, and one would almost have thought that winter was over. She had hardly finished her dinner when d'Urberville's figure darkened the window of the cottage wherein she was a lodger, which she had all to herself to-day.

Tess jumped up, but her visitor had knocked at the door, and she could hardly in reason run away. D'Urberville's knock, his walk up to the door, had some indescribable quality of difference from his air when she last saw him. They seemed to be acts of which the doer was ashamed. She thought that she would not open the door; but, as there was no sense in that either, she arose, and having lifted the latch stepped back quickly. He came in, saw her, and flung himself down into a chair before speaking.

"Tess--I couldn't help it!" he began desperately, as he wiped his heated face, which had also a superimposed flush of excitement. "I felt that I must call at least to ask how you are. I assure you I had not been thinking of you at all till I saw you that Sunday; now I cannot get rid of your image, try how I may! It is hard that a good woman should do harm to a bad man; yet so it is. If you would only pray for me, Tess!"

The suppressed discontent of his manner was almost pitiable, and yet Tess did not pity him.

"How can I pray for you," she said, "when I am forbidden to believe that the great Power who moves the world would alter His plans on my account?"

"You really think that?"

"Yes. I have been cured of the presumption of thinking otherwise."

"Cured? By whom?"

"By my husband, if I must tell."

"Ah--your husband--your husband! How strange it seems! I remember you hinted something of the sort the other day. What do you really believe in these matters, Tess?" he asked. "You seem to have no religion--perhaps owing to me."

"But I have. Though I don't believe in anything supernatural."

D'Urberville looked at her with misgiving.

"Then do you think that the line I take is all wrong?"

"A good deal of it."

"H'm--and yet I've felt so sure about it," he said uneasily.

"I believe in the SPIRIT of the Sermon on the Mount, and so did my dear husband... But I don't believe--"

Here she gave her negations.

"The fact is," said d'Urberville drily, "whatever your dear husband believed you accept, and whatever he rejected you reject, without the least inquiry or reasoning on your own part. That's just like you women. Your mind is enslaved to his."

"Ah, because he knew everything!" said she, with a triumphant simplicity of faith in Angel Clare that the most perfect man could hardly have deserved, much less her husband.

"Yes, but you should not take negative opinions wholesale from another person like that. A pretty fellow he must be to teach you such scepticism!"

"He never forced my judgement! He would never argue on the subject with me! But I looked at it in this way; what he believed, after inquiring deep into doctrines, was much more likely to be right than what I might believe, who hadn't looked into doctrines at all."



"What used he to say? He must have said something?"

She reflected; and with her acute memory for the letter of Angel Clare's remarks, even when she did not comprehend their spirit, she recalled a merciless polemical syllogism that she had heard him use when, as it occasionally happened, he indulged in a species of thinking aloud with her at his side. In delivering it she gave also Clare's accent and manner with reverential faithfulness.

"Say that again," asked d'Urberville, who had listened with the greatest attention.

She repeated the argument, and d'Urberville thoughtfully murmured the words after her.

"Anything else?" he presently asked.

"He said at another time something like this"; and she gave another, which might possibly have been paralleled in many a work of the pedigree ranging from the *Dictionnaire Philosophique* to Huxley's *Essays*.

"Ah--ha! How do you remember them?"

"I wanted to believe what he believed, though he didn't wish me to;

and I managed to coax him to tell me a few of his thoughts. I can't say I quite understand that one; but I know it is right."

"H'm. Fancy your being able to teach me what you don't know yourself!"

He fell into thought.

"And so I threw in my spiritual lot with his," she resumed. "I didn't wish it to be different. What's good enough for him is good enough for me."

"Does he know that you are as big an infidel as he?"

"No--I never told him--if I am an infidel."

"Well--you are better off to-day than I am, Tess, after all! You don't believe that you ought to preach my doctrine, and, therefore, do no despite to your conscience in abstaining. I do believe I ought to preach it, but, like the devils, I believe and tremble, for I suddenly leave off preaching it, and give way to my passion for you."

"How?"

"Why," he said aridly; "I have come all the way here to see you to-day! But I started from home to go to Casterbridge Fair, where

I have undertaken to preach the Word from a waggon at half-past two this afternoon, and where all the brethren are expecting me this minute. Here's the announcement."

He drew from his breast-pocket a poster whereon was printed the day, hour, and place of meeting, at which he, d'Urberville, would preach the Gospel as aforesaid.

"But how can you get there?" said Tess, looking at the clock.

"I cannot get there! I have come here."

"What, you have really arranged to preach, and--"

"I have arranged to preach, and I shall not be there--by reason of my burning desire to see a woman whom I once despised!--No, by my word and truth, I never despised you; if I had I should not love you now! Why I did not despise you was on account of your being unsmirched in spite of all; you withdrew yourself from me so quickly and resolutely when you saw the situation; you did not remain at my pleasure; so there was one petticoat in the world for whom I had no contempt, and you are she. But you may well despise me now! I thought I worshipped on the mountains, but I find I still serve in the groves! Ha! ha!"

"O Alec d'Urberville! what does this mean? What have I done!"

"Done?" he said, with a soulless sneer in the word. "Nothing intentionally. But you have been the means--the innocent means--of my backsliding, as they call it. I ask myself, am I, indeed, one of those 'servants of corruption' who, 'after they have escaped the pollutions of the world, are again entangled therein and overcome'--whose latter end is worse than their beginning?" He laid his hand on her shoulder. "Tess, my girl, I was on the way to, at least, social salvation till I saw you again!" he said freakishly shaking her, as if she were a child. "And why then have you tempted me? I was firm as a man could be till I saw those eyes and that mouth again--surely there never was such a maddening mouth since Eve's!" His voice sank, and a hot archness shot from his own black eyes. "You temptress, Tess; you dear damned witch of Babylon--I could not resist you as soon as I met you again!"

"I couldn't help your seeing me again!" said Tess, recoiling.

"I know it--I repeat that I do not blame you. But the fact remains. When I saw you ill-used on the farm that day I was nearly mad to think that I had no legal right to protect you--that I could not have it; whilst he who has it seems to neglect you utterly!"

"Don't speak against him--he is absent!" she cried in much excitement. "Treat him honourably--he has never wronged you! O leave his wife before any scandal spreads that may do harm to his

honest name!"

"I will--I will," he said, like a man awakening from a luring dream.

"I have broken my engagement to preach to those poor drunken boobies at the fair--it is the first time I have played such a practical joke. A month ago I should have been horrified at such a possibility. I'll go away--to swear--and--ah, can I! to keep away." Then, suddenly: "One clasp, Tessy--one! Only for old friendship--"

"I am without defence. Alec! A good man's honour is in my keeping--think--be ashamed!"

"Pooh! Well, yes--yes!"

He clenched his lips, mortified with himself for his weakness. His eyes were equally barren of worldly and religious faith. The corpses of those old fitful passions which had lain inanimate amid the lines of his face ever since his reformation seemed to wake and come together as in a resurrection. He went out indeterminately.

Though d'Urberville had declared that this breach of his engagement to-day was the simple backsliding of a believer, Tess's words, as echoed from Angel Clare, had made a deep impression upon him, and continued to do so after he had left her. He moved on in silence, as if his energies were benumbed by the hitherto undreamt-of possibility that his position was untenable. Reason had had nothing to do with

his whimsical conversion, which was perhaps the mere freak of a careless man in search of a new sensation, and temporarily impressed by his mother's death.

The drops of logic Tess had let fall into the sea of his enthusiasm served to chill its effervescence to stagnation. He said to himself, as he pondered again and again over the crystallized phrases that she had handed on to him, "That clever fellow little thought that, by telling her those things, he might be paving my way back to her!"

## XLVII

It is the threshing of the last wheat-rick at Flintcomb-Ash farm. The dawn of the March morning is singularly inexpressive, and there is nothing to show where the eastern horizon lies. Against the twilight rises the trapezoidal top of the stack, which has stood forlornly here through the washing and bleaching of the wintry weather.

When Izz Huett and Tess arrived at the scene of operations only a rustling denoted that others had preceded them; to which, as the light increased, there were presently added the silhouettes of two men on the summit. They were busily "unhaling" the rick, that is, stripping off the thatch before beginning to throw down the