

The Hand of Ethelberta

By

Thomas Hardy

PREFACE

This somewhat frivolous narrative was produced as an interlude between stories of a more sober design, and it was given the sub-title of a comedy to indicate--though not quite accurately--the aim of the performance. A high degree of probability was not attempted in the arrangement of the incidents, and there was expected of the reader a certain lightness of mood, which should inform him with a good-natured willingness to accept the production in the spirit in which it was offered. The characters themselves, however, were meant to be consistent and human.

On its first appearance the novel suffered, perhaps deservedly, for what was involved in these intentions--for its quality of unexpectedness in particular--that unforgivable sin in the critic's sight--the immediate precursor of 'Ethelberta' having been a purely rural tale. Moreover, in its choice of medium, and line of perspective, it undertook a delicate task: to excite interest in a drama--if such a dignified word may be used in the connection--wherein servants were as important as, or more important than, their masters; wherein the drawing-room was sketched in many cases from the point of view of the servants' hall. Such a reversal of the social foreground has, perhaps, since grown more welcome, and readers even of the finer crusted kind may now be disposed to pardon a writer for presenting the sons and daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Chickereel as beings who come within the scope of a congenial regard.

T. H.

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1. A STREET IN ANGLEBURY--A HEATH NEAR IT--INSIDE THE 'RED LION'
INN

Young Mrs. Petherwin stepped from the door of an old and well-appointed inn in a Wessex town to take a country walk. By her look and carriage she appeared to belong to that gentle order of society which has no worldly sorrow except when its jewellery gets stolen; but, as a fact not generally known, her claim to distinction was rather one of brains than of blood. She was the daughter of a gentleman who lived in a large house not his own, and began life as a baby christened Ethelberta after an infant of title who does not come into the story at all, having merely furnished Ethelberta's mother with a subject of contemplation. She became teacher in a school, was praised by examiners, admired by gentlemen, not admired by gentlewomen, was touched up with accomplishments by masters who were coaxed into painstaking by her many graces, and, entering a mansion as governess to the daughter thereof, was stealthily married by the son. He, a minor like herself, died from a chill caught during the wedding tour, and a few weeks later was followed into the grave by Sir Ralph Petherwin, his unforgiving father, who had

bequeathed his wealth to his wife absolutely.

These calamities were a sufficient reason to Lady Petherwin for pardoning all concerned. She took by the hand the forlorn Ethelberta--who seemed rather a detached bride than a widow--and finished her education by placing her for two or three years in a boarding-school at Bonn. Latterly she had brought the girl to England to live under her roof as daughter and companion, the condition attached being that Ethelberta was never openly to recognize her relations, for reasons which will hereafter appear.

The elegant young lady, as she had a full right to be called if she cared for the definition, arrested all the local attention when she emerged into the summer-evening light with that diadem-and-sceptre bearing--many people for reasons of heredity discovering such graces only in those whose vestibules are lined with ancestral mail, forgetting that a bear may be taught to dance. While this air of hers lasted, even the inanimate objects in the street appeared to know that she was there; but from a way she had of carelessly overthrowing her dignity by versatile moods, one could not calculate upon its presence to a certainty when she was round corners or in little lanes which demanded no repression of animal spirits.

'Well to be sure!' exclaimed a milkman, regarding her. 'We should freeze in our beds if 'twere not for the sun, and, dang me! if she isn't a pretty piece. A man could make a meal between them eyes and chin--eh,

hostler? Odd nation dang my old sides if he couldn't!

The speaker, who had been carrying a pair of pails on a yoke, deposited them upon the edge of the pavement in front of the inn, and straightened his back to an excruciating perpendicular. His remarks had been addressed to a rickety person, wearing a waistcoat of that preternatural length from the top to the bottom button which prevails among men who have to do with horses. He was sweeping straws from the carriage-way beneath the stone arch that formed a passage to the stables behind.

'Never mind the cursing and swearing, or somebody who's never out of hearing may clap yer name down in his black book,' said the hostler, also pausing, and lifting his eyes to the mullioned and transomed windows and moulded parapet above him--not to study them as features of ancient architecture, but just to give as healthful a stretch to the eyes as his acquaintance had done to his back. 'Michael, a old man like you ought to think about other things, and not be looking two ways at your time of life. Pouncing upon young flesh like a carrion crow--'tis a vile thing in a old man.'

'Tis; and yet 'tis not, for 'tis a naterel taste,' said the milkman, again surveying Ethelberta, who had now paused upon a bridge in full view, to look down the river. 'Now, if a poor needy feller like myself could only catch her alone when she's dressed up to the nines for some grand party, and carry her off to some lonely place--sakes, what a pot of jewels and goold things I warrant he'd find about her! 'Twould pay en

for his trouble.'

'I don't dispute the picter; but 'tis sly and untimely to think such roguery. Though I've had thoughts like it, 'tis true, about high women--Lord forgive me for't.'

'And that figure of fashion standing there is a widow woman, so I hear?'

'Lady--not a penny less than lady. Ay, a thing of twenty-one or thereabouts.'

'A widow lady and twenty-one. 'Tis a backward age for a body who's so forward in her state of life.'

'Well, be that as 'twill, here's my showings for her age. She was about the figure of two or three-and-twenty when a' got off the carriage last night, tired out wi' boaming about the country; and nineteen this morning when she came downstairs after a sleep round the clock and a clane-washed face: so I thought to myself, twenty-one, I thought.'

'And what's the young woman's name, make so bold, hostler?'

'Ay, and the house were all in a stoor with her and the old woman, and their boxes and camp-kettles, that they carry to wash in because hand-basons bain't big enough, and I don't know what all; and t'other folk stopping here were no more than dirt thencefor'ard.'

'I suppose they've come out of some noble city a long way herefrom?'

'And there was her hair up in buckle as if she'd never seen a clay-cold man at all. However, to cut a long story short, all I know besides about 'em is that the name upon their luggage is Lady Petherwin, and she's the widow of a city gentleman, who was a man of valour in the Lord Mayor's Show.'

'Who's that chap in the gaiters and pack at his back, come out of the door but now?' said the milkman, nodding towards a figure of that description who had just emerged from the inn and trudged off in the direction taken by the lady--now out of sight.

'Chap in the gaiters? Chok' it all--why, the father of that nobleman that you call chap in the gaiters used to be hand in glove with half the Queen's court.'

'What d'ye tell o'?'

'That man's father was one of the mayor and corporation of Sandbourne, and was that familiar with men of money, that he'd slap 'em upon the shoulder as you or I or any other poor fool would the clerk of the parish.'

'O, what's my lordlin's name, make so bold, then?'

'Ay, the toppermost class nowadays have left off the use of wheels for the good of their constitutions, so they traipse and walk for many years up foreign hills, where you can see nothing but snow and fog, till there's no more left to walk up; and if they reach home alive, and ha'n't got too old and weared out, they walk and see a little of their own parishes. So they tower about with a pack and a stick and a clane white pocket-handkerchief over their hats just as you see he's got on his. He's been staying here a night, and is off now again. "Young man, young man," I think to myself, "if your shoulders were bent like a bandy and your knees bowed out as mine be, till there is not an inch of straight bone or gristle in 'ee, th' wouldstn't go doing hard work for play 'a b'lieve."

'True, true, upon my song. Such a pain as I have had in my lynes all this day to be sure; words don't know what shipwreck I suffer in these lynes o' mine--that they do not! And what was this young widow lady's maiden name, then, hostler? Folk have been peeping after her, that's true; but they don't seem to know much about her family.'

'And while I've tended horses fifty year that other folk might straddle 'em, here I be now not a penny the better! Often-times, when I see so many good things about, I feel inclined to help myself in common justice to my pocket.

"Work hard and be poor,
Do nothing and get more."

But I draw in the horns of my mind and think to myself, "Forbear, John Hostler, forbear!"--Her maiden name? Faith, I don't know the woman's maiden name, though she said to me, "Good evening, John;" but I had no memory of ever seeing her afore--no, no more than the dead inside church-hatch--where I shall soon be likewise--I had not. "Ay, my nabs," I think to myself, "more know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows."

'More know Tom Fool--what rambling old canticle is it you say, hostler?' inquired the milkman, lifting his ear. 'Let's have it again--a good saying well spit out is a Christmas fire to my withered heart. More know Tom Fool--'

'Than Tom Fool knows,' said the hostler.

'Ah! That's the very feeling I've feeled over and over again, hostler, but not in such gifted language. 'Tis a thought I've had in me for years, and never could lick into shape!--O-ho-ho-ho! Splendid! Say it again, hostler, say it again! To hear my own poor notion that had no name brought into form like that--I wouldn't ha' lost it for the world! More know Tom Fool than--than--h-ho-ho-ho-ho!'

'Don't let your sense o' vitness break out in such uproar, for heaven's sake, or folk will surely think you've been laughing at the lady and gentleman. Well, here's at it again--Night t'ee, Michael.' And the hostler went on with his sweeping.

'Night t'ee, hostler, I must move too,' said the milkman, shouldering his yoke, and walking off; and there reached the inn in a gradual diminuendo, as he receded up the street, shaking his head convulsively, 'More know--Tom Fool--than Tom Fool--ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!'

The 'Red Lion,' as the inn or hotel was called which of late years had become the fashion among tourists, because of the absence from its precincts of all that was fashionable and new, stood near the middle of the town, and formed a corner where in winter the winds whistled and assembled their forces previous to plunging helter-skelter along the streets. In summer it was a fresh and pleasant spot, convenient for such quiet characters as sojourned there to study the geology and beautiful natural features of the country round.

The lady whose appearance had asserted a difference between herself and the Anglebury people, without too clearly showing what that difference was, passed out of the town in a few moments and, following the highway across meadows fed by the Froom, she crossed the railway and soon got into a lonely heath. She had been watching the base of a cloud as it closed down upon the line of a distant ridge, like an upper upon a lower eyelid, shutting in the gaze of the evening sun. She was about to return before dusk came on, when she heard a commotion in the air immediately behind and above her head. The saunterer looked up and saw a wild-duck flying along with the greatest violence, just in its rear being another large bird, which a countryman would have pronounced to be one of the

biggest duck-hawks that he had ever beheld. The hawk neared its intended victim, and the duck screamed and redoubled its efforts.

Ethelberta impulsively started off in a rapid run that would have made a little dog bark with delight and run after, her object being, if possible, to see the end of this desperate struggle for a life so small and unheard-of. Her stateliness went away, and it could be forgiven for not remaining; for her feet suddenly became as quick as fingers, and she raced along over the uneven ground with such force of tread that, being a woman slightly heavier than gossamer, her patent heels punched little D's in the soil with unerring accuracy wherever it was bare, crippled the heather-twigs where it was not, and sucked the swampy places with a sound of quick kisses.

Her rate of advance was not to be compared with that of the two birds, though she went swiftly enough to keep them well in sight in such an open place as that around her, having at one point in the journey been so near that she could hear the whisk of the duck's feathers against the wind as it lifted and lowered its wings. When the bird seemed to be but a few yards from its enemy she saw it strike downwards, and after a level flight of a quarter of a minute, vanish. The hawk swooped after, and Ethelberta now perceived a whitely shining oval of still water, looking amid the swarthy level of the heath like a hole through to a nether sky.

Into this large pond, which the duck had been making towards from the beginning of its precipitate flight, it had dived out of sight. The

excited and breathless runner was in a few moments close enough to see the disappointed hawk hovering and floating in the air as if waiting for the reappearance of its prey, upon which grim pastime it was so intent that by creeping along softly she was enabled to get very near the edge of the pool and witness the conclusion of the episode. Whenever the duck was under the necessity of showing its head to breathe, the other bird would dart towards it, invariably too late, however; for the diver was far too experienced in the rough humour of the buzzard family at this game to come up twice near the same spot, unaccountably emerging from opposite sides of the pool in succession, and bobbing again by the time its adversary reached each place, so that at length the hawk gave up the contest and flew away, a satanic moodiness being almost perceptible in the motion of its wings.

The young lady now looked around her for the first time, and began to perceive that she had run a long distance--very much further than she had originally intended to come. Her eyes had been so long fixed upon the hawk, as it soared against the bright and mottled field of sky, that on regarding the heather and plain again it was as if she had returned to a half-forgotten region after an absence, and the whole prospect was darkened to one uniform shade of approaching night. She began at once to retrace her steps, but having been indiscriminately wheeling round the pond to get a good view of the performance, and having followed no path thither, she found the proper direction of her journey to be a matter of some uncertainty.

'Surely,' she said to herself, 'I faced the north at starting:' and yet on walking now with her back where her face had been set, she did not approach any marks on the horizon which might seem to signify the town. Thus dubiously, but with little real concern, she walked on till the evening light began to turn to dusk, and the shadows to darkness.

Presently in front of her Ethelberta saw a white spot in the shade, and it proved to be in some way attached to the head of a man who was coming towards her out of a slight depression in the ground. It was as yet too early in the evening to be afraid, but it was too late to be altogether courageous; and with balanced sensations Ethelberta kept her eye sharply upon him as he rose by degrees into view. The peculiar arrangement of his hat and pugree soon struck her as being that she had casually noticed on a peg in one of the rooms of the 'Red Lion,' and when he came close she saw that his arms diminished to a peculiar smallness at their junction with his shoulders, like those of a doll, which was explained by their being girt round at that point with the straps of a knapsack that he carried behind him. Encouraged by the probability that he, like herself, was staying or had been staying at the 'Red Lion,' she said, 'Can you tell me if this is the way back to Anglebury?'

'It is one way; but the nearest is in this direction,' said the tourist--the same who had been criticized by the two old men.

At hearing him speak all the delicate activities in the young lady's person stood still: she stopped like a clock. When she could again fence

with the perception which had caused all this, she breathed.

'Mr. Julian!' she exclaimed. The words were uttered in a way which would have told anybody in a moment that here lay something connected with the light of other days.

'Ah, Mrs. Petherwin!--Yes, I am Mr. Julian--though that can matter very little, I should think, after all these years, and what has passed.'

No remark was returned to this rugged reply, and he continued unconcernedly, 'Shall I put you in the path--it is just here?'

'If you please.'

'Come with me, then.'

She walked in silence at his heels, not a word passing between them all the way: the only noises which came from the two were the brushing of her dress and his gaiters against the heather, or the smart rap of a stray flint against his boot.

They had now reached a little knoll, and he turned abruptly: 'That is Anglebury--just where you see those lights. The path down there is the one you must follow; it leads round the hill yonder and directly into the town.'

'Thank you,' she murmured, and found that he had never removed his eyes from her since speaking, keeping them fixed with mathematical exactness upon one point in her face. She moved a little to go on her way; he moved a little less--to go on his.

'Good-night,' said Mr. Julian.

The moment, upon the very face of it, was critical; and yet it was one of those which have to wait for a future before they acquire a definite character as good or bad.

Thus much would have been obvious to any outsider; it may have been doubly so to Ethelberta, for she gave back more than she had got, replying, 'Good-bye--if you are going to say no more.'

Then in struck Mr. Julian: 'What can I say? You are nothing to me. . . . I could forgive a woman doing anything for spite, except marrying for spite.'

'The connection of that with our present meeting does not appear, unless it refers to what you have done. It does not refer to me.'

'I am not married: you are.'

She did not contradict him, as she might have done. 'Christopher,' she said at last, 'this is how it is: you knew too much of me to respect me,

and too little to pity me. A half knowledge of another's life mostly does injustice to the life half known.'

'Then since circumstances forbid my knowing you more, I must do my best to know you less, and elevate my opinion of your nature by forgetting what it consists in,' he said in a voice from which all feeling was polished away.

'If I did not know that bitterness had more to do with those words than judgment, I--should be--bitter too! You never knew half about me; you only knew me as a governess; you little think what my beginnings were.'

'I have guessed. I have many times told myself that your early life was superior to your position when I first met you. I think I may say without presumption that I recognize a lady by birth when I see her, even under reverses of an extreme kind. And certainly there is this to be said, that the fact of having been bred in a wealthy home does slightly redeem an attempt to attain to such a one again.'

Ethelberta smiled a smile of many meanings.

'However, we are wasting words,' he resumed cheerfully. 'It is better for us to part as we met, and continue to be the strangers that we have become to each other. I owe you an apology for having been betrayed into more feeling than I had a right to show, and let us part friends. Good night, Mrs. Petherwin, and success to you. We may meet again, some day,

I hope.'

'Good night,' she said, extending her hand. He touched it, turned about, and in a short time nothing remained of him but quick regular brushings against the heather in the deep broad shadow of the moor.

Ethelberta slowly moved on in the direction that he had pointed out. This meeting had surprised her in several ways. First, there was the conjuncture itself; but more than that was the fact that he had not parted from her with any of the tragic resentment that she had from time to time imagined for that scene if it ever occurred. Yet there was really nothing wonderful in this: it is part of the generous nature of a bachelor to be not indisposed to forgive a portionless sweetheart who, by marrying elsewhere, has deprived him of the bliss of being obliged to marry her himself. Ethelberta would have been disappointed quite had there not been a comforting development of exasperation in the middle part of his talk; but after all it formed a poor substitute for the loving hatred she had expected.

When she reached the hotel the lamp over the door showed a face a little flushed, but the agitation which at first had possessed her was gone to a mere nothing. In the hall she met a slender woman wearing a silk dress of that peculiar black which in sunlight proclaims itself to have once seen better days as a brown, and days even better than those as a lavender, green, or blue.

'Menlove,' said the lady, 'did you notice if any gentleman observed and followed me when I left the hotel to go for a walk this evening?'

The lady's-maid, thus suddenly pulled up in a night forage after lovers, put a hand to her forehead to show that there was no mistake about her having begun to meditate on receiving orders to that effect, and said at last, 'You once told me, ma'am, if you recollect, that when you were dressed, I was not to go staring out of the window after you as if you were a doll I had just manufactured and sent round for sale.'

'Yes, so I did.'

'So I didn't see if anybody followed you this evening.'

'Then did you hear any gentleman arrive here by the late train last night?'

'O no, ma'am--how could I?' said Mrs. Menlove--an exclamation which was more apposite than her mistress suspected, considering that the speaker, after retiring from duty, had slipped down her dark skirt to reveal a light, puffed, and festooned one, put on a hat and feather, together with several pennyweights of metal in the form of rings, brooches, and earrings--all in a time whilst one could count a hundred--and enjoyed half-an-hour of prime courtship by an honourable young waiter of the town, who had proved constant as the magnet to the pole for the space of the day and a half that she had known him.

Going at once upstairs, Ethelberta ran down the passage, and after some hesitation softly opened the door of the sitting-room in the best suite of apartments that the inn could boast of.

In this room sat an elderly lady writing by the light of two candles with green shades. Well knowing, as it seemed, who the intruder was, she continued her occupation, and her visitor advanced and stood beside the table. The old lady wore her spectacles low down her cheek, her glance being depressed to about the slope of her straight white nose in order to look through them. Her mouth was pursed up to almost a youthful shape as

she formed the letters with her pen, and a slight move of the lip accompanied every downstroke. There were two large antique rings on her forefinger, against which the quill rubbed in moving backwards and forwards, thereby causing a secondary noise rivalling the primary one of the nib upon the paper.

'Mamma,' said the younger lady, 'here I am at last.'

A writer's mind in the midst of a sentence being like a ship at sea, knowing no rest or comfort till safely piloted into the harbour of a full stop, Lady Petherwin just replied with 'What,' in an occupied tone, not rising to interrogation. After signing her name to the letter, she raised her eyes.

'Why, how late you are, Ethelberta, and how heated you look!' she said.
'I have been quite alarmed about you. What do you say has happened?'

The great, chief, and altogether eclipsing thing that had happened was the accidental meeting with an old lover whom she had once quarrelled with; and Ethelberta's honesty would have delivered the tidings at once, had not, unfortunately, all the rest of her attributes been dead against that act, for the old lady's sake even more than for her own.

'I saw a great cruel bird chasing a harmless duck!' she exclaimed innocently. 'And I ran after to see what the end of it would be--much further than I had any idea of going. However, the duck came to a pond, and in running round it to see the end of the fight, I could not remember which way I had come.'

'Mercy!' said her mother-in-law, lifting her large eyelids, heavy as window-shutters, and spreading out her fingers like the horns of a snail. 'You might have sunk up to your knees and got lost in that swampy place--such a time of night, too. What a tomboy you are! And how did you find your way home after all!'

'O, some man showed me the way, and then I had no difficulty, and after that I came along leisurely.'

'I thought you had been running all the way; you look so warm.'

'It is a warm evening. . . . Yes, and I have been thinking of old times as I walked along,' she said, 'and how people's positions in life alter. Have I not heard you say that while I was at Bonn, at school, some family that we had known had their household broken up when the father died, and that the children went away you didn't know where?'

'Do you mean the Julians?'

'Yes, that was the name.'

'Why, of course you know it was the Julians. Young Julian had a day or two's fancy for you one summer, had he not?--just after you came to us, at the same time, or just before it, that my poor boy and you were so desperately attached to each other.'

'O yes, I recollect,' said Ethelberta. 'And he had a sister, I think. I wonder where they went to live after the family collapse.'

'I do not know,' said Lady Petherwin, taking up another sheet of paper. 'I have a dim notion that the son, who had been brought up to no profession, became a teacher of music in some country town--music having always been his hobby. But the facts are not very distinct in my memory.' And she dipped her pen for another letter.

Ethelberta, with a rather fallen countenance, then left her mother-in-

law, and went where all ladies are supposed to go when they want to torment their minds in comfort--to her own room. Here she thoughtfully sat down awhile, and some time later she rang for her maid.

'Menlove,' she said, without looking towards a rustle and half a footstep that had just come in at the door, but leaning back in her chair and speaking towards the corner of the looking-glass, 'will you go down and find out if any gentleman named Julian has been staying in this house? Get to know it, I mean, Menlove, not by directly inquiring; you have ways of getting to know things, have you not? If the devoted George were here now, he would help--'

'George was nothing to me, ma'am.'

'James, then.'

'And I only had James for a week or ten days: when I found he was a married man, I encouraged his addresses very little indeed.'

'If you had encouraged him heart and soul, you couldn't have fumed more at the loss of him. But please to go and make that inquiry, will you, Menlove?'

In a few minutes Ethelberta's woman was back again. 'A gentleman of that name stayed here last night, and left this afternoon.'

'Will you find out his address?'

Now the lady's-maid had already been quick-witted enough to find out that, and indeed all about him; but it chanced that a fashionable illustrated weekly paper had just been sent from the bookseller's, and being in want of a little time to look it over before it reached her mistress's hands, Mrs. Menlove retired, as if to go and ask the question--to stand meanwhile under the gas-lamp in the passage, inspecting the fascinating engravings. But as time will not wait for tire-women, a natural length of absence soon elapsed, and she returned again and said,

'His address is, Upper Street, Sandbourne.'

'Thank you, that will do,' replied her mistress.

The hour grew later, and that dreamy period came round when ladies' fancies, that have lain shut up close as their fans during the day, begin to assert themselves anew. At this time a good guess at Ethelberta's thoughts might have been made from her manner of passing the minutes away. Instead of reading, entering notes in her diary, or doing any ordinary thing, she walked to and fro, curled her pretty nether lip within her pretty upper one a great many times, made a cradle of her locked fingers, and paused with fixed eyes where the walls of the room set limits upon her walk to look at nothing but a picture within her mind.

