

## THE FIRE AT TRANTER SWEATLEY'S.

A WESSEX BALLAD.

BY THOMAS HARDY.

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"They had long met o' Sundays—her true-love and she—  
And at junketings, May-poles, and flings;  
But she dwelt w' a crabbed old uncle, and he  
Swore by noon and by night that her husband should be  
Nabour Sweatley (a man often weak at the knee  
From taking o' sommat more chee ful than tea),  
Who tranted, and moved people's things.

She cried, "O pray, pity me!" naught would he hear;  
Then with wild rainy eyes she obeyed.  
She chid when her love was for clinking off w' her;  
The parson was told, as the season drew near,  
To throw over pulpit the names of the pair  
As fitting one flesh to be made.

The wedding-day dawned, and the morning drew on,  
The couple stood bridegroom and bride;  
The evening was passed, and when midnight had gone  
The folks horned out "God Save the King," and anon  
To their home the pair gloomily hid.

The lover, Sim Tankens, mourned heart-sick and drew  
To be thus of his darling deprived;  
He roamed in the dark around field, mound, and mere,  
And almost without knowing it, found himself near  
The house of the tranter, and now of his dear,  
Where the moving lights showed they'd arrived.

The bride sought her chimner so calm and so pale  
That a Northern had thought her resigned;  
But to eyes that had seen her in seasons of weal—  
Like the white cloud of smoke, the red battlefield's veil—  
That look told of havoc behind.

The bridegroom yet loitered a beaker to drain,  
Then recoiled to the linah for more;  
When the candle-snuff kindled the chaff from his grain,  
Flames sprout and rush upward w' might and w' main,  
And round beams, thatch, and chimney-tun roar.

Young Sim in the distance aroused by the light,  
Through brimble and underwood tears,  
Till he comes to the orchard, when slap in his sight,  
Beneath a bowed codlin-tree trimming w' fright,  
W' an old coat she'd found on a scarecrow bedight,  
His gentle young Barbara appears.

Her form in these cold, mildewed tatters he views,  
Played about by the frolicsome breeze;  
Her light-tripping totties, her ten little toes,  
All bare and besprinkled w' fall's chilly dews,  
While her great frightened eyes, through her ringlets so  
Shone like stars through a tangle of trees.

She eyed him; and, as a weir-hatch is drawn,  
Her tears, penned by terror before,  
W' a rushing of sobs in a torrent were strawn  
Till her power to pour 'em seemed wasted and gone  
From the heft of misfortune she bore.

"O Sim! my own Sim, I must call 'ee—I will!  
All the world have turned round on me so!  
Can you help her who loved 'ee, though acting so ill?  
Can you pity her misery—feel for her still?  
When worse than her body so quivering and chill  
Is her heart in its winter of woe!"

"I think I could almost have borne it," she said,  
"Had my griefs one by one come to hand;  
But oh, to be slave to an uncle for bread,  
And then, upon top o' that, driven to wed,  
And then, upon top o' that, burnt out o' bed,  
Is more than my natur can stand!"

Sim's soul like a lion within him outsprung  
(Sim had a great soul when his feelings were wrung)—  
"Feel for 'ee, dear Barbie!" he cried.  
Then his warm working-jacket about her he flung,  
Maden back, horsed her up, till behind him she clung:  
Like a chiel on a gypsy her figure uplung  
As the two sleeves before him he tied.

Over piggeries, and mixens, and apples, and hay,  
They stumbled straight into the night;  
And finding, at length, where a bridle path lay,  
In round, kindly spectacles glared every way  
To gather some clew to the sight.

The old Miss Tankens she searched here and there  
For some closet—though fearing 'twas sin—  
Where Barbie could hide, and for clothes she could wear,  
A task hard enough with a creature so fair,  
Who, half-scrammed, to death, sat and cried in a chair  
To think what a stoer she was in.

The loft, up the ladder, seemed safe; and all day  
In that hiding she laid her sweet limbs;  
But most of the time in a terrible way  
Well knowing that there'd be the piper to pay,  
When 'twas found that, instead of the element's prey,  
She was living in lodgings at Sim's.

"Where's the tranter?" said men and boys;  
"Where can he be?"  
"Where's the tranter?" said Barbie alone;  
"Wherever's the tranter?" said every body;  
They sifted the dust of his perished roof-tree,  
And all they could find was a bone!

Then the uncle cried, "Lord, pray have mercy on me!"  
And in sorrow began to repent;  
But before 'twas complete, and till she was free,  
Barbie drew up her loft-ladder, tight turned her key,  
(Sim hating in breakfast, and dinner, and tea)  
Till the crabbed man gied his consent.

There was skimmity-riding with rout, shout, and flare  
In Weatherbury, Stokeham, and Windleton, ere  
They had proof of old Sweatley's decay;  
The Mellstock and Yalbury folk stood in a stare  
(The tranter owned houses and garden-ground there),  
But little did Sim or his Barbara care—  
For he took her to church the next day.

## TWO STRINGS TO ONE BEAU.

A CLERICAL EXPERIENCE.

I am strongly of opinion that I am the sweetest curate who ever wore a white tie; and I have, moreover, reason to believe that my opinion is shared by most of the young ladies and middle-aged spinsters in the District of St. Seraphina's, Tyburnia.

What the married ladies, fathers of families, and city-going young men think, I do not in the least care. I have the most utter scorn for all my own sex, more especially my brother curates and "literary characters."

Those last mentioned, I think, ought to be summarily expelled from civilised society. I hold newspapers essentially vulgar, and most books a bore; but I am fond of the flute, light-coloured kid gloves, and long coats. I think it better to mention these facts at the outset, because

I would really rather that vulgar people did not read my experience—they would not understand it. We should have no sort of sympathy, and I think sympathy is so charming. I have never communicated these particulars to any one except a clergyman; but he was a man of grievously latitudinarian opinions on most subjects. I need scarcely say, therefore, that when I told him the mental anxiety and bodily suffering I had undergone, he rudely and coarsely exclaimed, "Serve you jolly well right."

But I am anticipating. Let me return to the point whence I set out—that is myself. I am tall, and, I think graceful. My hair curls most satisfactorily, and my hands are pronounced perfect. One young lady asked me if I had ever had them modelled, and I thought the question remarkably graceful and appropriate. I forgot just now to mention that I like rings, and wear as many as my small fingers will allow. My feet correspond with my hands; and I am also, I ought to have stated, exceedingly prone to polished-leather boots. As to whiskers, I vary. My normal condition is what my Broad-Church friend—that is, my *quondam* friend, for I have cut him—termed 'shoulder of mutton,' though I never heard of a shoulder of mutton being soft and silky like my *favoris*. Sometimes, however, I fancy I should look better shaven, and shave accordingly; and once I wore a moustache; but I was taken for a 'writer,' so I have cultivated large whiskers again, and think I shall stick to them. My hair I part down the middle.

St. Seraphina's is not quite so aristocratic as I could wish. I fear most of my parishioners are in business, but they don't live over their shops, so nobody knows it. I would not for the world have my friends know that I preach to shopkeepers. My family is resident at Boulogne. Papa finds foreign soil suit him best, and informs me that London is 'too hot' for him. I find it quite cool in Tyburnia.

I am not a university man. I think universities low. I studied pastoral theology at a London college, and was considered condescending in my visits among the poor. I am thankful to say there are no poor, or free seats, at St. Seraphina's.

When first I came to St. Seraphina's, a woman (that is a term I use when I want to express withering contempt—a sort of violent antithesis to a lady) said to me:

"Mr. Tuft—I forgot to mention that my name is Adolphus Tuft—I mean to marry you out of hand."

The woman was a matron, or I should have screamed for protection. But forewarned forearmed. I avoided that particular hour, except when heavy dinners or crowded 'at homes' were on. Very little business is done at assemblies of that kind. I never let her catch me at a garden-party in her back-yard, or at croquet at the Horticultural. There they can get you into a corner, and you are helpless. I like a 'hop'—did I mention at the outset that I waltz like an archangel? I don't think I did.

I consider matrimony on the whole vulgar, a necessary evil, perhaps, but too common to be exactly good form; and if there is one thing I live for, it is form. I don't mean ritualistic forms. Possibly I should go in for Ritualism, for the sake of the costumes, if I could intone, but I cannot. Coloured stoles are delicious; and so would copes be if they were 'sloped' a little more in the neck. Banners I object to; they put me in mind of an election or a Foresters' fête at the Crystal Palace.

What I thoroughly enjoy is a cosy flirtation. I hate an outspoken across-table kind of affair where people can hear what you say, and some scribbling fellow is as likely as not to say a smarter thing than you, or cover you with confusion by some loose remark. I like a corner of a crowded room or, better still, a vestry at decoration times, when you have a girl all to yourself, and can talk to her like a Platonic bishop.

I mean no harm—I am as harmless as a child. Girls always say so when they have known me about a month; but the first three weeks they think me charmingly 'dreadful,' especially when the shoulder-of-muttons are well on. The moustache was simply fatal.

I write all this in the present tense, because it is the autobiographical result of my experience at St. Seraphina's. What follows is, to adopt Longfellow's expression, the 'aftermath.' Let me merge in the historic, and show how the mild shoulder-of-mutton developed once more into the truculent moustache.

The first girl I had a decided *affaire* with (I omitted to mention I like French terms when you can avoid plain English) was Adelina Trevelyan. She was a resplendent creature, as tall as myself, and looked like the goddess Diana when she handled a croquet-mallet. (Did I mention that I adore croquet? I think not.)

Adelina Trevelyan and I had a desperate flirtation down at Wimbledon, when the croquet tournament was on last year. I should live down there during that time, only the firing at the camp is too much for my nerves. We came to pink cream-laid *billets-doux* in less than no time. We were not exactly 'engaged' at first. I hate the word. It reminds me of a railway *coupé*, or a table at a restaurant. It smacks of Acts of Parliament, settlements, and possible Probate and Divorce Courts. We would not use the expression, therefore, in case of breach of promise, but we understood each other remarkably well. I should like to give you an idea of the language of the *haut ton* under such circumstances. (It's a dreadful avowal to make, but I do it under the seal of confession, mind: I fear Adelina Trevelyan's father was in the oil-and-pickle line. I saw the name over a door in St. Gile's once, and

bolted into the nearest hansom.) This is how we talked:

"I wonder if those dweadful men—I always lisp when I want to make havoc with female affections—if those dweadful men who are firing up there ever play at croquet?"

"I don't know who you mean by *dreadful* men, Mr. Tuft. If you mean the officers at Wimbledon, let me tell you I don't consider them at all dreadful. I think officers are ducks."

"Do you weally, though?"

I struck an attitude, leaning on my mallet, pushing back my wide-awake from my forehead, and letting my shoulder-of-muttons float upon the breeze. I look particularly striking in that pose, and have been photographed in it several times.

"It is true they are volunteers, and I prefer regulars. But it's mostly the uniform—"

"Ya-as, there's something in that."

"Well, of course there's something in it; but I don't think it matters much what is inside, any more than it does with curates, as long as the vestments are pretty."

"One for me," I suggested, as I drove my ball to the final goal.

"Meaning the game, or remark?" asked Adelina.

"Weally, Miss Trevelyan, you are too sharp."

Now that is what I call intellectual and improving conversation, combining instruction with amusement, as the Polytechnic bills say. We did a good deal of it in Tyburnia between Monday and Saturday. But here is a higher flight. This is how I always begin when I mean mischief:

"My dear Miss Trevelyan, do you know Mrs. Jones told me that Miss Smith had informed her Mrs. Brown said we were being talked about?"

"Nonsense, Mr. Tuft."

"Serious sober earnest, Miss Trevelyan."

(I drop the lisp when things come to this pass.) Then Adelina Trevelyan pretends to be crying. I know she isn't, but make believe to think she is, soothe her, wipe her eyes, and *voilà tout*—we are talked about.

We were talked about, and not without reason. Adelina and I were clandestinely engaged, and I ought in due course of things to have 'seen papa.' But I hate papas in general, and loathed Adelina's in particular.

We used to write one another the sweetest little notes, on pink paper, done up in three-cornered envelopes, like rose-coloured two-penny tarts—an utterly unnecessary proceeding, by the way, because we could see one another whenever we liked, and did, as a fact, meet most days in the week. I used to dine and tea out a good deal. That and playing flute and piano-forte duets I called 'visiting in my parish and doing parochial work.'

By the way, perhaps the common world, having been initiated in Tyburnian talk, would like a fragment of Tyburnian correspondence. In these days, when *servants* go mad over some old cuneiform characters about the way-bill of Noah's Ark or pastrycook's accounts for Belshazzar's Feast, I cannot but think it would be far more edifying for nineteenth-century London to know what is going on in its midst, or rather in the ethereal regions that lie above its ordinary haunts. I select two billets at random—one of the last I received from Adelina, and the answer I sent. I ought to premise that I was organising a female guild for the diffusion of charity and croquet among the lower classes.

(Copy.)

"Dear Mr. Tuft,—I think your idea *charming* (Adelina always underlined a good deal. It's a kind of epistolary gush girls are much inclined to.) 'I find the *lower* orders in my district eat with *two-pronged forks*, and altogether want *civilising*. I agree with you, croquet is the *missing link*. With a croquet-ground in every parish, vulgarity would *vanish*.—Yours *à la mort*,

ADELINA.

"P.S. We were seen in our walk yesterday. I dread to think what papa will say when he hears of it."

This was a sly way Adelina had of trying to bring me to book, I knew. She always put it, as the chief subject of her letter, in a post-script; and I invariably pretended not to see it. I responded thus:

"Dearest Adelina."

(I never minced matters, though aware I laid myself open to an action for breach; but I knew the Trevelyans were too thin-skinned ever to imperil their position by bringing one.)

"Dearest Adelina,—The croquet shall be organised at once. We have no poor, so must begin with the footmen and ladies' maids. *Au revoir*.—Yours *ad mortem*,

"DOLLIE."

I am not quite sure I liked the abbreviation of my name; but she made it, and I felt bound to adopt it. I heard a big military cousin of hers guffawing about it one day. He said Dollie was effeminate for a man, but might suit a curate. I'd rather be a charity-boy than such a walrus as Cornet Darcy.

Adelina's comparison of me was to a big Newfoundland pup. It was perhaps more playful than polite; but as she seemed to think the simile involved a deal of caressing, I put in no objection.

This was string No. 1; and for a time all went smoothly, merrily as the proverbial marriage-bell, and much more so. I prefer Cupid to Hymen immensely, and protest against the former being looked upon simply as a prelude to the latter. Let me pass on, then, to string No. 2.

I never had anything to do with war. I hate

guns and trumpets and any thing noisy, so I don't know what mode of strategy I should adopt; but in love, which is more in my line, I reverse the Napoleonic policy of concentrating my battalions on a single point. My maxim is *Divide et impera*. As long as I kept my two strings well apart, everything went on serenely.

Mary Watson was the very female antipodes of Adelina Trevelyan—a nice, cosy, comfortable little girl, whose solicitude about my health first brought her to my notice. I labour under a more or less permanent cold, which is always threatening to develop into an interesting bronchitis, and dear little Mary used to call at my lodgings every day, heedless of Mrs. Grundy, and ask how 'dear Mr. Dollie's cold was.' I had to rebuke the maid-servant continually for sniggering when she brought up the message, but I thought it was very nice and attentive of Mary; and when she said one day, 'I hope, dear Mr. Dollie, you like somebody in the parish besides Miss Trevelyan,' I felt I could not do less than squeeze her plump little hand and say: 'Mary dear, I love you.'

She opened her two big eyes until they fairly goggled; and, little innocent creature though I had deemed her up to that time, showed how well she had profited by maternal instruction, since she replied, 'Then, Dollie, we are engaged.'

I never was so frightened in my life; but the e was no backing out, so I accepted the situation. Let me be perfectly frank. If I had been going to marry anybody, there was nobody I should have preferred to Mary Watson. Adelina Trevelyan was a splendid creature, but would I am sure, have become expensive. We were walking in an out-of-the-way nook in Kensington Gardens, so, heedless of the *consequence* and the consequences, I kissed her and said, 'We are one, Mary.'

Mary had a lot of big awkward brothers, who seemed to me to divide their time between riding to the City on the knifeboards of omnibuses, playing billiards with short pipes in their mouths, and railing at the inferior clergy. 'I say, Jack,' I heard Will Watson exclaim out to Cornet Darcy in the open street, and in evident allusion to a sweet long coat I had just adopted, something between a cassock and a clerical Ulster, 'why don't those ladylike gentlemen wear crinolines?'

Another time he pointed me out to a little boy in the street as the Shah; and I had to see the urchin before I could get him to cease following me and staring open-mouthed at my coat-tails. So you see I had to undergo some persecution. It was not all *coulour de rose* even at St. Seraphina's, and with two strings to one's bow.

It was a blessing that I had no parochial visiting on week-day services. I can't imagine how men get through their regular duties with such distractions. My sermons I bought for a shilling and threehalfpence each, postage included, so they gave me no trouble; but the amount of correspondence I did while my two 'strings' lasted would have killed a clerk in the War Office; and, as for walking, I became like a converted wandering Jew or a country postman.

Directly Adelina saw which way the wind was blowing in the matter of Mary, she made me put my engagement to her in black and white. She was going to stand no nonsense from that 'frump' Mary Watson, as she termed her; so she insisted on trotting me out every day in the places where parishioners most did congregate. In fact, Adelina Trevelyan and Mary Watson were like the two people in the old-fashioned weather-houses, where directly one went in the other popped out; only in the weather-houses the dolls were supposed to be of opposite sexes. My charmers, on the contrary, were both ladies; and I assure you I sometimes felt, like Captain Macheath, how happy I could have been with either, were t'other dear charmer away.

On the whole I preferred Mary Watson. Adelina felt bound to be smart, and was often rude to me in consequence. Mary was always cozy and kind. I remember one day she drew the most charming cabinet picture of of the country curate's wife helping him in his work, turning his once solitary little house into home, trotting up and down the lanes of the tiny parish in hob-nailed boots to take some comfort to a sick person, teaching the little children in his schools, and sitting by his side during the long winter evenings, ready to look up references while was writing his sermon.

I was getting so interested that I trembled for my safety, and felt bound to chaff. I therefore dashed down all her pretty *châteaux en Espagne* by saying:

"In fact, a poetical version of the prose 'Love in a Cottage.' Do you know what cockney John Keats says?"

"Love in a cottage, water and a crust,  
Is—Love forgive us!—cinders, ashes,  
dust!"

She never tried word-pictures again.

Now occurred what I felt certain must lead to a *contretemps* (you will not, I am sure, have failed to notice my familiarity with the French language.) Adelina Trevelyan and Mary Watson struck up a violent friendship, which I saw must be the beginning of the end. Adelina had hitherto looked down on Mary, both physically and socially, and I had done all I could to widen instead of abridge the interval; but Fate took the matter out of my hands and made them fast friends. I felt convinced that, from that moment, my days were numbered.

What I am now going to introduce into my narrative, in chronological order, of course came to my knowledge after the event.

Adelina and Mary were at one of their confabs,