



The best short stories of

Thomas Hardy



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Simplified by

A.G. Eyre



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Longman Simplified English Series

This book has been specially prepared to make enjoyable reading for people to whom English is a second or a foreign language. An English writer never thinks of avoiding unusual words, so that the learner, trying to read the book in its original form, has to turn frequently to the dictionary and so loses much of the pleasure that the book ought to give.

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¹ The 2000 root words of the *General Service List of English Words* of the *Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection*. In 1975 the General Editor of the series compiled an appendix deleting some low frequency words and adding words whose frequency seems to have increased since the General Service List was first published.

Foreword

Thomas Hardy, poet and novelist, is best known for his books about Wessex. This name will not be found on a map: it is an area of southwest England that was once a separate kingdom and has many ancient remains of the Iron Age and Stone Age. The heart of Wessex is the county of Dorset, with its centre at Dorchester, which Hardy calls 'Casterbridge' in his novels: *Under the greenwood tree*, *Far from the madding crowd*, *The return of the native*, *The mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and various others. These stories give us a colourful picture of Dorset life in the middle nineteenth century. It was a hard life, and Hardy's characters often struggle not only against the roughness of nature and of their fellow men but also against a pitiless fate that seems to play with them like a cat with a mouse.

The best of his short stories are also of Wessex, and some of them reflect a similar struggle; others, as this collection shows, are full of humour. Though Hardy paints the scenes that he knew, his stories are often based on the memories of older people. So *The withered arm*, *The grave by the signpost*, *The three strangers*, and *The Winters and the Palmleys*, are set in the years that followed the long war with Napoleon's France, when crime (as after our World Wars) increased alarmingly, and a man could still be hanged for stealing a sheep or setting fire to a building.

Such severity had stopped before Hardy was born in 1840, in a straw-roofed cottage on the edge of the wild open heath, east of Dorchester. At the age of twenty-two he went to London to study the art of designing buildings, which became his profession. He stayed there five years,

and often returned all through his life. London society formed the background for some of his writings, but it was too artificial to produce anything comparable with his Wessex stories. On his death in 1929 he was laid among the nation's heroes in Westminster Abbey, but his heart was buried where it had always belonged, in the quiet Dorset village of his birth.

Three of our stories are taken from *Wessex tales* (1888), four from *Life's little ironies* (1894) and one from *A changed man* (1913).

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Netty Sargent and the dead man's hand

Netty Sargent used to live with her uncle, in a lonely house on the edge of the woods outside Longpuddle. I remember her as a tall and active young woman, with black hair and dancing eyes, and with a curious way of twisting her mouth when she was making fun of you.

Her sweetheart was a young man named Jasper Cliff; and though she might have had many better fellows, he so greatly attracted her that it was Jasper or nobody for her. He was a selfish fellow. His eyes may have been fixed on Netty, but his mind was fixed on her uncle's house; though he was fond of her in his way - I admit that.

This house, built by her great-grandfather, with its garden and little field, was held by her uncle under an ancient system of land law. The right to it was given by the squire to a particular person, for his lifetime. If her uncle died without arranging for his right to pass to Netty, the property would fall into the squire's possession. It was easy to arrange; her uncle only had to apply and pay a few pounds. This was the custom, and the squire could not hinder it.

But the squire was very anxious to get hold of the house and land. Every Sunday, when he saw the old man in church, he said to himself: 'A little weaker in his knees, a little more bent in his back - and he hasn't applied to pass on his right. Haha!'

It was extraordinary that old Sargent should have been so slow to provide for his niece, his only relative; but some people are like that. Week after week, he put off calling at the squire's agent's office, saying to himself: 'I shall have more time next market day than I have now.' One

unfortunate hindrance was that he didn't much like Jasper Cliff. And as Jasper kept urging Netty, and Netty on that account kept urging her uncle, the old man tended to postpone the application as long as he could, to annoy the selfish young lover. At last old Mr Sargent fell ill, and then Jasper could bear it no longer; he produced the money himself, and handed it to Netty, and spoke to her plainly.

'You and your uncle ought to know better. You should press him more. There's the money. If you two let the house and ground slip out of your possession, I won't marry you! Girls that can do such things don't deserve a husband!'

The worried girl took the money and went home, and told her uncle she would have no husband if she had no house. Old Mr Sargent scorned the money, but he did now take some action, for he saw that she was determined to marry Jasper, and he didn't want to make her unhappy. The squire was much annoyed, but he couldn't object, and the documents were prepared. As old Sargent was now too weak to go to the agent's house, the document signed by the squire was to be brought to his house, for him to keep, a copy would then be signed by him and sent back to the squire.

The agent had promised to call on old Sargent for this purpose at five o'clock, and Netty put the money on her desk, to be ready for him. While doing this, she heard a slight cry from her uncle, and she saw that he had fallen forward in his chair. She went and lifted him, but he was unconscious, and he remained so. Neither medicine nor other remedies had any effect. It seemed as if the end had come. Before she could go for the doctor his face grew quite cold and white, and she saw that help would be useless. He was dead.

Netty's situation now struck her in all its seriousness. The house, garden and field were lost - by a few hours - and with them she had lost a home for herself and her lover. She couldn't believe that Jasper would carry out his

threat, but she trembled at the thought. Why couldn't her uncle have lived just two hours longer, since he had lived so long? It was now past three o'clock; the agent was to call at five. If all had gone well, by ten minutes past five the house would have been hers. How that miserable old squire would rejoice at getting possession!

Then an idea struck Netty. Perhaps on this dull December evening she could gain her right in spite of her uncle's neglect!

The first thing was to fasten the outer door, so as to make sure that she wasn't interrupted. Then she placed her uncle's small heavy table in front of the fire. Then she went to her uncle's body, still in its chair - an armchair with a high seat and with little wheels under its legs - and she wheeled the chair, with her uncle on it, to the table, and she placed him there with his back towards the window. She laid the family Bible open in front of him, and placed his first finger on the page. Then she opened his eyelids a bit, and put his glasses on him, so that from behind he appeared just as if he were reading the holy book. Then she unfastened the door and sat down; and when it grew dark she lit a candle, and put it on the table beside him.

You can guess how she was feeling till the agent came, and how she nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard his knock. She went straight to the door.

'I'm sorry, sir,' she said quietly, 'my uncle isn't well tonight, and I'm afraid he can't see you.'

'So I've come all this way for nothing!' exclaimed the agent. 'You can't act for him. He must sign the document in my presence.'

She looked doubtful. 'Uncle is so nervous about official business,' she said, 'that he has put this off for years, as you know; today I've really been afraid that it would make him go out of his mind. I could hear his three teeth knocking together when I told him you'd be here soon with the documents.'

'Poor old fellow - I'm sorry for him. But the thing can't be done unless I see him and witness his signature.'

'Suppose, sir, that you see him sign while he doesn't see you looking at him? I'd calm him by saying you weren't strict about the manner of witnessing. If it's done in your presence, that's enough, isn't it? As he's such a nervous old man, it would be very kind of you.'

'But how can I be a witness without his seeing me?'

'In this way, sir, if you'll just step over here.'

She led him a few yards to the left, till they were outside the sitting room window. The curtain had not been drawn, on purpose, and the candlelight shone out into the garden. The agent could see, at the other end of the room, the back and side of the old man's head, and his arm, with the Bible and candle in front of him, and with his glasses on his nose — just as Netty had placed him.

'He's reading his Bible, as you see, sir,' she said, in her humble way.

'Yes. But I thought he was a careless man in matters of religion?'

'He always was fond of his Bible,' Netty replied, 'though I think he's almost falling asleep over it just at this moment. Now, you could stand here and see him sign, couldn't you, sir, as he's so weak and ill?'

'Very well,' said the agent, lighting a cigar. 'You have the money ready, of course?'

'Yes,' said Netty, 'I'll bring it out.' She fetched it, and when he had counted it, he took the precious documents out of his pocket and gave one to her to be signed.

'Uncle's hand is a little unsteady,' she said. 'And as he's half asleep, too, I don't know what sort of signature he'll be able to make. May I hold his hand?'

'Yes, hold his hand, young woman. It doesn't matter, as long as he signs.'

Netty re-entered the house, and the agent went on smoking outside the window. Now came the most delicate part of Netty's performance. The agent saw her put the inkstand in front of her uncle, and touch his arm as if to wake him, and speak to him, and spread out the document; and when she had shown him where to sign, she dipped the

pen in the ink and put it into his hand. To hold his hand, she carefully stepped behind him, so that the agent could only see a little bit of his head, and the hand that she held; but he saw the old man's hand write his name on the document.

As soon as it was done, she came out with it, and the agent signed it as a witness by the light that shone through the window. Then he gave her the copy signed by the squire, and left. And next morning Netty told the neighbours that her uncle was dead in his bed. She must have undressed him and put him there.

Every good or bad deed has its just reward, they say. Fate punished Netty for her clever trick to gain Jasper. Two years after they were married, he started beating her – not hard, you know, just enough to put her in a temper; so she told the neighbours what she had done to win him, and how she regretted it now.

When the old squire was dead, and his son took his place, her confession began to be whispered around. But Netty was a pretty young woman, and the squire's son was an attractive young man, and more broad-minded than his father, and he never took any action against her.

The withered arm

It was a farm with eighty cows, and the milkers were all at work. The hour was about six, on an early April evening, and three-quarters of the cows had been finished, so there was opportunity for a little conversation.

'He's bringing home his new wife tomorrow, I hear.' The voice seemed to come from a cow called Cherry, but the speaker was a woman whose face was pressed against Cherry's side.

'Has anybody seen her?' said another.

'They say she's a rosy-faced little thing, and years younger than he is,' said the first.

'How old do you call him, then?'

'Thirty or so.'

'More like forty,' a third voice interrupted.

That started an argument, till a man's voice cried: 'What does Farmer Lodge's age, or his wife's, matter to us? Get on with your work, or it'll be dark before we've done.' This speaker was the head man who was in charge of them.

Nothing more was said publicly about the farmer's marriage, but the first woman murmured under her cow to her neighbour: 'It's hard for her.' And she glanced past the cow's tail at a thin fading woman of thirty who was milking rather apart from the rest.

'Oh, no,' said the second. 'He hasn't spoken to Rhoda Brook for years.'

When the milking was done, they washed their buckets and went to their various homes. The thin woman was joined by a boy of about twelve, and they too went away

up the field. But their way lay apart from that of the others, to a lonely spot high above the river and not far from the border of Egdon Heath, whose dark outline could be seen in the distance.

'They say that your father will bring his young wife home tomorrow,' the woman remarked. 'I shall send you to market, and you'll be sure to meet them.'

'Yes, mother,' said the boy. 'Is father married, then?'

'Yes. You can give her a look, and tell me what she's like, if you do see her. Whether she's dark or fair, and whether she's as tall as I am. And whether she seems like a woman who has worked for her living, or one that has always had money and looks like a lady, as I expect she does.'

'Yes, mother.'

They crept up the hill in the fading light and entered their mud-walled cottage. There she knelt at the fireside and blew on the red-hot ashes till a log burst into flame. Its warmth brought colour to her pale face, and made her dark eyes, that had once been beautiful, seem beautiful again. Looking into the fire, she repeated her requests to the boy, and again he promised, but inattentively this time, for he was cutting a mark in the back of a chair with his pocket knife.

2

On the road from Anglebury to Holmstoke there is a steep hill, and farmers driving home from Anglebury market climb it slowly. The next evening, a new little cart with a yellow body and red wheels was rolling westward along the level highway behind a powerful horse. The driver was a healthy-looking middle-aged farmer. Beside him sat a woman, many years younger - almost, indeed, a girl. Her face, too, was fresh in colour, but with the soft quality of a rose. The long white stretch of road ahead was empty except for the figure of a boy, who was carrying a heavy bundle.

When they slowed down at the foot of the hill, and he was only a few yards in front, he turned and looked straight at the

farmer's wife, just as if he were trying to look into her mind. The farmer, though he seemed annoyed, didn't order him to get out of the way; so the boy walked on beside their horse, and went on staring at her, till they reached the top of the hill. Then the farmer drove quickly on, with relief in his face, having taken no outward notice of the boy whatever.

'How that poor boy stared at me!' said the young wife. 'He comes from the village, I suppose?'

'From the neighbourhood. I think he lives with his mother, a mile or two off.'

'He knows who we are, no doubt?'

'Oh, yes. You must expect to be stared at just at first, my pretty Gertrude.'

'I do - though I think the poor boy may have looked at us in the hope that we might relieve him of his heavy load, rather than from curiosity.'

'Oh, no,' said her husband lightly. 'These country boys are used to a load on their backs.' And the red wheels spun round till a large white house came into view, with farm buildings behind it.

Meanwhile the boy had turned up a lane towards his mother's cottage. She had come home from milking and was scraping potatoes in the doorway. 'Did you see her?' she asked, as he came up. 'Is she young? Is she ladylike? How does she look?'

He threw down his bundle. 'Yes, I saw her. She's quite grown up. A complete lady. Her hair is lightish. Her face is pretty. Her eyes are blue, and her mouth is very nice and red; and when she smiles, her teeth show white.'

'Is she tall?' said the woman sharply.

'I couldn't see. She was sitting down.'

'Then go to Holmstoke church tomorrow morning. She's sure to be there. Go early and see her walking in, then come home and tell me if she's taller than I am.'

'Very well, mother. But why don't you go and see for yourself?'

'Me? I wouldn't look up if she were to pass my window this instant!'

Next day she put a clean shirt on the boy and sent him off to church. When he reached home she said 'Well?' before he had even entered the room.

'She's not tall. She's rather short. But she's very pretty. In fact, she's lovely.'

'That's enough,' said his mother quickly. 'Now, spread the tablecloth; that rabbit you caught is very tender. What were her hands like?' And she went on asking questions, about how the lady looked and what she wore, till she had a picture in her mind that was as real as a photograph.

3

One night, two or three weeks later, Rhoda Brook had a dream. She dreamt that this young wife, with a horribly twisted face that bore all the signs of age, was sitting on her chest as she lay in bed. The pressure of Mrs Lodge's body grew heavier; the blue eyes stared cruelly into her face; and then the figure held out its left hand scornfully, so as to make the ring that it wore shine in Rhoda's eyes. Maddened in mind, and almost breathless with the pressure on her chest, the sleeper struggled. In a last despairing effort she swung out her right hand, seized the ghost by its left arm, and threw it to the floor. As she did so, she woke with a low cry.

'Oh, merciful heaven!' she cried, sitting on the edge of the bed in a cold sweat. 'That was not a dream - she was here!'

She could feel her enemy's arm in her grasp even now, like real flesh and bone. She looked on the floor, but there was nothing to be seen.

Rhoda Brook slept no more that night, and when she went milking at daybreak they noticed how pale she looked. Her hands shook as she milked, and she still had the feel of the arm. She came home to breakfast as wearily as if it had been supper time.

'What was that noise in your room last night, mother?' said her son. 'You fell off the bed, surely?'

'Did you hear anything fall? At what time?'

‘Just when the clock struck two.’

She couldn't explain, and when the meal was done she went silently about her housework, with the boy assisting her, as he hated working on the farm. Between eleven and twelve she heard the garden gate being opened, and there, inside the gate, stood the woman of her dream. Rhoda seemed frozen stiff with shock.

‘Ah, she said she'd come!’ exclaimed the boy.

‘Said so? When? How does she know us? I told you never to speak to anyone in that house, or go near the place,’ said his mother angrily.

‘I didn't. I met her in the road. She said: “Are you the poor boy who had to bring that heavy load from market?” And she looked at my boots and said they wouldn't keep my feet dry, because they were so cracked. “I'll bring you some better boots, and see your mother,” she said. She gives things away to others in the village.’

Mrs Lodge was by this time close to the door. On her arm she carried a basket. Rhoda had almost expected to see the scorn and the cruelty of her dream on the visitor's face. She would have escaped if she could, but there was no back door, and the boy was already answering Mrs Lodge's gentle knock.

‘I see I've come to the right house,’ she said, glancing at the boy, and smiling.

The figure was that of the ghost; but her voice was so sweet and her smile was so tender that Rhoda could hardly believe her own senses. Mrs Lodge had brought the promised pair of boots and other useful articles. At these proofs of kindness, Rhoda's conscience troubled her. This innocent young thing should have her blessing and not her curse.

Nearly two weeks later, Mrs Lodge called again. On this occasion the boy was absent. The two women had a friendly conversation, and enquired after each other's health.

‘I have one little trouble which puzzles me,’ said Mrs Lodge. ‘It's nothing serious, but I can't understand it.’

She uncovered her left arm. On its pink round surface