

THE HURLY-BURLY

By A. E. COPPARD

I

THE Weetmans—mother, son, and daughter—lived on a thriving farm. It was small enough, God knows ; but it had always been a turbulent place of abode. For the servant it was “ Phemy, do this,” or “ Phemy, have you done that ? ” from dawn to dark, and even from dark to dawn there was a hovering of unrest. The widow Weetman, a partial invalid, was the only figure that manifested any semblance of tranquillity ; and it was a misleading one, for she sat day after day on her large hams, knitting and nodding, and lifting her grey face only to grumble, her spectacled eyes transfixing the culprit with a basilisk glare. And her daughter Alice, the housekeeper, who had a large face, a dominating face, in some respects she was all face, was like a blast in a corridor with her “ Maize for the hens, Phemy !—More firewood, Phemy !—Who has set the trap in the harness room ?—Come along !—Have you scoured the skimming pans ?—Why not ?—Where are you idling ?—Come along, Phemy, I have no time to waste this morning ; you really must help me ! ” It was not only in the house that this cataract of industry flowed ; outside there was activity enough for a regiment. A master-farmer’s work consists largely of a series of conversations with other master-farmers, a long-winded way of doing long-headed things ; but Glastonbury Weetman, the son, was not like that at all ; he was the incarnation of energy, always doing and doing, chock-full of orders, adjurations, oburgatives, blame, and blasphemy. That was the kind of place Phemy Madigan worked at. No one could rest on laurels there. The farm and the home possessed everybody, lock, stock, and barrel ; work was like a tiger, it ate you up implacably. The Weetmans did not mind—they liked being eaten by such a tiger.

After six or seven years of this Alice went back to marry an old sweet-heart in Canada, where the Weetmans had originally come from ; but Phemy’s burden was in no way lessened thereby. There were as many things to wash and sew and darn ; there was always a cart of churns about to dash for a train it could not possibly catch, or a horse to shoe that could not possibly be spared. Weetman hated to see his people merely walking. “ Run over to the barn for that hayfork ! ” or “ Slip across to the ricks, quick, now ! ” he would cry ; and if ever an unwary hen hampered his own path it only did so once—and no more. His labourers were mere things of flesh and blood, but they occasionally resented his ceaseless flagellations. Glas Weetman did not like to be impeded or controverted ; one day in a rage he had smashed that lumbering loon of a carter called Gathercole. For this he was sent to gaol for a month.

The day after he had been sentenced Phemy Madigan, alone in the

house with Mrs. Weetman, had waked at the usual early hour. It was a foggy September morning ; Sampson and his boy Daniel were clattering pails in the dairy shed. The girl felt sick and gloomy as she dressed ; it was a wretched house to work in, crickets in the kitchen, cockroaches in the garret, spiders and mice everywhere. It was an old long low house ; she knew that when she descended the stairs the walls would be stained with autumnal dampness, the banisters and rails oozing with moisture. She wished she was a lady and married, and living in a palace fifteen stories high.

It was fortunate that she was big and strong, though she had only been a charity girl taken from the workhouse by the Weetmans when she was fourteen years old. That was seven years ago. It was fortunate that she was fed well at the farm, very well indeed ; it was the one virtue of the place. But her meals did not counterbalance things ; that farm ate up the body and blood of people. And at times the pressure was charged with a special excitation, as if a taut elastic thong had been plucked and released with a reverberating ping.

It was so on this morning. Mrs. Weetman was dead in her bed.

At that crisis a new sense descended upon the girl, a sense of responsibility. She was not in fear, she felt no grief or surprise. It concerned her in some way, but she herself was unconcerned, and she slid without effort into the position of mistress of the farm. She opened a window and looked out of doors. A little way off a boy with a red scarf stood by an open gate.

“ Oi—oi, kup, kup, kup ! ” he cried to the cows in that field. Some of the cows, having got up, stared amiably at him, others sat on ignoring his hail, while one or two plodded deliberately towards him. “ Oi—oi, kup, kup, kup ! ”

“ Lazy rascal, that boy,” remarked Phemy ; “ we shall have to get rid of him. Dan’l ! Come here, Dan’l ! ” she screamed, waving her arm wildly. “ Quick ! ”

She sent him away for police and doctor. At the inquest there were no relatives in England who could be called upon, no other witnesses than Phemy. After the funeral she wrote a letter to Glastonbury Weetman in gaol, informing him of his bereavement, but to this he made no reply. Meanwhile the work of the farm was pressed forward under her control ; for though she was revelling in her personal release from the torment she would not permit others to share her intermission. She had got Mrs. Weetman’s keys and her box of money. She paid the two men and the boy their wages week by week. The last of the barley was reaped, the oats stacked, the roots hoed, the churns sent daily under her supervision. And always she was bustling the men.

“ O dear me, these lazy rogues ! ” she would complain to the empty rooms. “ They waste time, so it’s robbery—it is robbery. You may wear yourself to the bone, and what does it signify to such as them ? All the responsibility too ! They would take your skin if they could get it off you—and they can’t ! ”

She kept such a sharp eye on the corn and meal and eggs that Sampson grew surly. She placated him by handing him Mr. Weetman's gun and a few cartridges, saying: "Just shoot me a couple of rabbits over in the warren when you got time." At the end of the day Mr. Sampson had not succeeded in killing a rabbit, so he kept the gun and the cartridges many more days. Phemy was really happy. The gloom of the farm had disappeared. The farmhouse and everything about it looked beautiful, beautiful indeed with its yard full of ricks, the pond full of ducks, the fields full of sheep and cattle, and the trees still full of leaves and birds. She flung maize about the yard; the hens scampered towards it and the young pigs galloped, quarrelling over the grains which they groped and snuffled for, grinding each one separately in their iron jaws, while the white pullets stalked delicately among them, picked up the maize seeds—one, two, three—and swallowed them like ladies. Sometimes on cold mornings she would go outside and give an apple to the fat bay pony when he galloped back from the station. He would stand puffing with a kind of rapture, the wind from his nostrils discharging in the frosty air vague shapes like smoky trumpets. Presently, upon his hide, a little ball of liquid mysteriously suspired, grew, slid, dropped from his flanks into the road. And then drops would begin to come from all parts of him until the road beneath was dabbled by a shower from his dew-distilling outline. Phemy would say:

"The wretches! They were so late they drove him near distracted, poor thing. Lazy rogues, but wait till master comes back, they'd better be careful!"

And if any friendly person in the village asked her, "How are you getting on up there, Phemy?" she would reply, "Oh, as well as you can expect with so much to be done—and such men!" The interlocutor might hint that there was no occasion in the circumstances to distress oneself, but then Phemy would be vexed. To her, honesty was as holy as the Sabbath to a little child. Behind her back they jested about her foolishness; but, after all, wisdom isn't a process, it's a result, it's the fruit of the tree. One can't be wise, one can only be fortunate.

On the last day of her elysium the workhouse master and the chaplain had stalked over the farm, shooting partridges. In the afternoon she met them and asked for a couple of birds for Weetman's return on the morrow. The workhouse was not far away, it was on a hill facing west, and at sunset-time its windows would often catch the glare so powerfully that the whole building seemed to burn like a box of contained and smokeless fire. Very beautiful it looked to Phemy.

II

The men had come to work punctually, and Phemy herself found so much to do that she had no time to give the pony an apple. She cleared the kitchen once and for all of the pails, guns, harness, and implements that so hampered its domestic intention, and there were abundant signs

elsewhere of a new impulse at work in the establishment. She did not know at what hour to expect the prisoner, so she often went to the garden-gate and glanced up the road. The night had been wild with windy rain, but morn was sparkingly clear though breezy still. Crisp leaves rustled about the road where the polished chestnuts beside the parted husks lay in numbers, mixed with coral buds of the yews. The sycamore leaves were black rags, but the delicate elm foliage fluttered down like yellow stars. There was a brown field neatly adorned with white coned heaps of turnips, behind it a small upland of deeply green lucerne, behind that nothing but blue sky and rolling cloud. The turnips, washed by the rain, were creamy polished globes.

When at last he appeared she scarcely knew him. Glas Weetman was a big, though not fleshy, man of thirty, with a large boyish face and a flat bald head. Now he had a thick dark beard. He was hungry, but his first desire was to be shaved. He stood before the kitchen mirror, first clipping the beard away with scissors, and as he lathered the remainder he said :

“ Well, it’s a bad state of things, this—my sister dead and my mother gone to America. What shall us do ? ”

He perceived in the glass that she was smiling.

“ There’s naught funny in it, my comic gal ! ” he bawled indignantly. “ What are you laughing at ? ”

“ I wer’n’t laughing. It’s your mother that’s dead.”

“ My mother that’s dead, I know.”

“ And Miss Alice that’s gone to America.”

“ To America, I know, I know, so you can stop making your bullock’s eyes and get me something to eat. What’s been going on here ? ”

She gave him an outline of affairs. He looked at her sternly when he asked her about his sweetheart :

“ Has Rosa Beauchamp been along here ? ”

“ No,” said Phemy, and he was silent. She was surprised at the question. The Beauchamps were such respectable high-up people that to Phemy’s simple mind they could not possibly favour an alliance now with a man that had been in prison ; it was absurd, but she did not say so to him. And she was bewildered to find that her conviction was wrong, for Rosa came along later in the day and everything between her master and his sweetheart was just as before ; Phemy had not divined so much love and forgiveness in high-up people.

It was the same with everything else. The old harsh rushing life was resumed, Weetman turned to his farm with an accelerated vigour to make up for the lost time, and the girl’s golden week or two of ease became an unforgotten dream. The pails, the guns, the harness crept back into the kitchen. Spiders, cockroaches, and mice were more noticeable than ever before, and Weetman himself seemed embittered, harsher. Time alone could never still him, there was a force in his frame, a buzzing in his blood. But there was a difference between them now ; Phemy no longer feared him. She obeyed him, it is true, with eagerness, she worked in the house

like a woman and in the fields like a man. They ate their meals together, and from this dissonant comradeship the girl, in a dumb kind of way, began to love him.

One April evening, on coming in from the fields, he found her lying on the couch beneath the window, dead plumb fast asleep, with no meal ready at all. He flung his bundle of harness to the flags and bawled angrily to her. To his surprise she did not stir. He was somewhat abashed; he stepped over to look at her. She was lying on her side. There was a large rent in her bodice between sleeve and shoulder; her flesh looked soft and agreeable to him. Her shoes had slipped off to the floor; her lips were folded in a sleepy pout.

"Why, she's quite a pretty cob," he murmured. "She's all right, she's just tired, the Lord above knows what for."

But he could not rouse the sluggard. Then a fancy moved him to lift her in his arms; he carried her from the kitchen and, staggering up the stairs, laid the sleeping girl on her own bed. He then went downstairs and ate pie and drank beer in the candle-light, guffawing once or twice. "A pretty cob, rather." As he stretched himself after the meal a new notion amused him: he put a plateful of food upon a tray, together with a mug of beer and the candle. Doffing his heavy boots and leggings, he carried the tray into Phemy's room. And he stopped there.

III

The new circumstance that thus slipped into her life did not effect any noticeable alteration of its general contour and progress. Weetman did not change towards her. Phemy accepted his mastership not alone because she loved him, but because her powerful sense of loyalty covered all the possible opprobrium. She did not seem to mind his continued relations with Rosa.

Towards midsummer one evening Glastonbury came in in the late dusk. Phemy was there in the darkened kitchen. "Master!" she said immediately he entered. He stopped before her. She continued: "Something's happened."

"Huh, while the world goes popping round something sall always happen!"

"It's me—I'm took—a baby, master," she said. He stood chock-still. His back was to the light, she could not see the expression on his face, perhaps he wanted to embrace her.

"Let's have a light, sharp," he said in his brusque way. "The supper smells good, but I can't see what I'm smelling, and I can only fancy what I be looking at."

She lit the candles and they ate supper in silence. Afterwards he sat away from the table with his legs outstretched and crossed, hands sunk into pockets, pondering while the girl cleared the table. Soon he put his powerful arm around her waist and drew her to sit on his knees.

“ Are ye sure o’ that ? ” he demanded.

She was sure.

“ Quite ? ”

She was quite sure.

“ Ah, well, then,” he sighed conclusively, “ we’ll be married ! ”

The girl sprang to her feet. “ No, no, no ! How can you be married ? You don’t mean that—not married—there’s Miss Beauchamp ! ” She paused and added a little unsteadily, “ She’s your true love, master.”

“ Ay, but I’ll not wed her ! ” he cried sternly. “ If there’s no gainsaying this that’s come on you I’ll stand to my guns. It’s right and proper for we to have a marriage.”

His great thick-fingered hands rested upon his knees ; the candles threw a wash of light upon his polished leggings ; he stared into the fireless grate.

“ But we do not want to do that,” said the girl dully and doubtfully. “ You have given your ring to her, you’ve given her your word. I don’t want you to do this for me. It’s all right, master, it’s all right.”

“ Are ye daft ? ” he cried. “ I tell you we’ll wed. Don’t keep clacking about Rosa—I’ll stand to my guns.” He paused before adding, “ She’d gimme the rightabout, fine now—don’t you see, stupid—but I’ll not give her the chance.”

Her eyes were lowered. “ She’s your true love, master.”

“ What would become of you and your child ? Ye couldn’t bide here ! ”

“ No,” said the trembling girl.

“ I’m telling you what we must do, modest and proper ; there’s naught else to be done, and I’m middling glad of it, I am. Life’s a see-saw affair. I’m middling glad of this.”

So, soon, without a warning to anyone, least of all to Rosa Beauchamp, they were married by the registrar. The change in her domestic status produced no other change ; in marrying Weetman she but married all his ardour, she was swept into its current. She helped to milk cows, she boiled nauseating messes for pigs, chopped mangolds, mixed meal, and sometimes drove a harrow in his windy fields. Though they slept together, she was still his servant. Sometimes he called her his “ pretty little cob,” and then she knew he was fond of her. But in general his custom was disillusioning. His way with her was his way with his beasts ; he knew what he wanted, it was easy to get. If for a brief space a little romantic flower began to bud in her breast it was frozen as a bud, and the vague longing disappeared at length from her eyes. And she became aware that Rosa Beauchamp was not yet done with ; somewhere in the darkness of the fields Glastonbury still met her. Phemy did not mind.

In the new year she bore him a son that died as it came to life. Glas was angry at that, as angry as if he had lost a horse. He felt that he had been duped, that the marriage had been a stupid sacrifice, and in this he was savagely supported by Rosa. And yet Phemy did not mind ; the farm had got its grip upon her, it was consuming her body and blood.

Weetman was just going to drive into town ; he sat fuming in the trap behind the fat bay pony.

“ Bring me that whip from the passage ! ” he shouted. “ There’s never a dam thing handy ! ”

Phemy appeared with the whip. “ Take me with you,” she said.

“ God-a-mighty ! What for ? I be comen back in an hour. They ducks want looking over, and you’ve all the taties to grade.”

She stared at him irresolutely.

“ And who’s to look after the house ? You know it won’t lock up—the key’s lost. Get up there ! ”

He cracked his whip in the air as the pony dashed away.

In the summer Phemy fell sick, her arm swelled enormously. The doctor came again and again. It was blood-poisoning, caught from a diseased cow that she had milked with a cut finger. A nurse arrived, but Phemy knew she was doomed, and though tortured with pain she was for once vexed and protestant. For it was a June night, soft and nubile, with a marvellous moon ; a nightingale threw its impetuous garland into the air. She lay listening to it and thinking with sad pleasure of the time when Glastonbury was in prison, how grand she was in her solitude, ordering everything for the best and working superbly. She wanted to go on and on for evermore, though she knew she had never known peace in maidenhood or marriage. The troubled waters of the world never ceased to flow ; in the night there was no rest—only darkness. Nothing could emerge now. She was leaving it all to Rosa Beauchamp. Glastonbury was gone out somewhere—perhaps to meet Rosa in the fields. There was the nightingale, and it was very bright outside.

“ Nurse,” moaned the dying girl, “ what was I born into the world at all for ? ”