

The Withered Arm

by Thomas Hardy

(Adapted book. Beginner level)

Chapter 1. The milkmaid and the wife

It was six o'clock on a warm April evening, milking time for Farmer Lodge's eighty cows. They stood quietly in the dairy, and the milkmaids were all at work.

'They say Farmer Lodge is coming home with his new wife tomorrow,' said one milkmaid.

'Yes. And she's young and pretty, I hear,' a second girl said.

She looked past her cow to the other end of the dairy. There was another milkmaid there, a thin, older woman, about thirty years old.

The first girl looked at the older woman too. 'I'm sorry for her,' she said quietly to her friend.

'Oh no,' said the second girl. 'That was years and years ago. Farmer Lodge never speaks to Rhoda Brook these days.'

When the milking was finished, the milkmaids left the dairy and went home. The thin woman, Rhoda Brook, did not walk to the village with the other girls. She went up the hill behind the farm to a little house near the trees. It was a poor house, of only two rooms, and the roof did not keep the rain out.

At the door of the house the woman met her son, a boy of about twelve, and they went inside.

'I heard something at the dairy today,' the woman said. 'Your father is bringing his young wife home tomorrow. I want you to go and look at her.'

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

'Yes ... You can go into town and do my shopping for me. And when you see her, there or on the road, look at her carefully.'

'Yes, mother.'

'What is she like? I want to know. Is she tall, is she short? Are her eyes blue or brown or green? Look at the colour of her hair, the colour

of her dress. And look at her hands. Does she have small white hands, or the hands of a milkmaid, a worker's hands? You must look at all these things, and tell me.'

'Yes, mother,' the boy said again. He took a piece of bread from the table and began to eat it.

His mother said nothing more, but turned her thin, pale face to the open door. Her beautiful dark eyes stared out at the trees, seeing and not seeing.

* * *

The next evening was warm and sunny. The road from the town to the farm went up and down a number of hills, and near the top of one big hill the boy saw a carriage behind him. It was Farmer Lodge with his new wife. She was a pretty young thing, much younger than her husband, with a sweet, innocent face.

The boy carried a heavy bag, and was happy to stop and stare for a minute. The carriage came slowly up the hill, and the boy took a good long look at the farmer's wife. His eyes never left her face.

The farmer did not look at the boy once, and at the top of the hill the carriage went faster, leaving the boy behind. 'How that poor boy stared at me!' said the young wife. 'Yes, my love. I saw that,' the farmer said.

'Is he a boy from the village?'

'No. I think he lives with his mother on one of these hills.'

'He knows you, then.'

'Of course. And everyone is going to stare at you at first, my pretty Gertrude.'

'Yes, I know. But that poor boy had a very heavy bag. Perhaps he wanted us to help him with the bag.'

'Oh, these country boys can carry anything,' said her husband. 'They do it all the time.'

The carriage went quickly on. After a time the boy left the road and went up the hill to his mother's house.

She was home before him. She took the heavy bag from him and began to take the things out.

‘Well, did you see her?’

‘Yes. I had a good look at her on the road.’

‘And what is she like?’

‘She’s nice.’

‘Is she young?’

‘Well, she’s older than me.’

‘Of course she is. But is she older than me?’

‘No, she’s younger.’

‘Ah. What colour is her hair?’

‘It’s a brown colour, and her face is very pretty.’

‘Are her eyes dark?’

‘No, they’re blue, and her mouth is very nice and red, and when she smiles, you can see white teeth.’

‘Is she tall?’ said the woman, a little angrily.

‘I couldn’t see. She was in the carriage.’

‘Then tomorrow you must go to church. Go early, before she and Mr Lodge arrive, and watch her when she walks in. Then come home and tell me.’

‘Very well, mother. But why don’t you go and look at her?’

‘Never! I don’t want to see her. She was with Mr Lodge, of course. Did he look at you or speak to you?’

‘No.’

The next day the boy went to church, and waited and watched. When Mr and Mrs Lodge arrived, everybody - not just the boy - stared at the new wife with interest. When the boy reached home, his mother said, ‘Well?’

‘She’s not tall. She’s short,’ the boy said.

‘Ah!’ said his mother, pleased.

‘But she’s very pretty - very. She had a beautiful white dress on, and it made a lot of noise when she moved. Mr Lodge looked very happy with her.’

‘No more now,’ said the woman. ‘You can tell me more later.’

In the next days, Rhoda Brook heard more and more from her son about the new wife. The boy often saw Mrs Lodge around the

farmhouse, but his mother never saw her, and never went near the farmhouse.

At the dairy the other milkmaids talked a lot about the new wife. They usually stopped when Rhoda was near, but she heard some of it. She remembered everything, and forgot nothing.

And slowly Rhoda Brook made a picture in her head of the young Airs Lodge - a picture as good, as true as a photograph.

Chapter 2. The dream

One night, two or three weeks later, when the boy was in bed, Rhoda Brook sat by the dying fire in her little house. She stared at the fire for a long time, but she saw only the picture in her head of the new wife. At last, tired from her day's work, she went to bed.

But the picture of Gertrude Lodge did not go away. When Rhoda slept, the young wife was still there in Rhoda's dreams. She sat on Rhoda's body in the bed, staring into Rhoda's face. Her blue eyes were cold, and with a cruel laugh, she put her left hand in front of Rhoda's eyes. There, on the third finger, was her wedding-ring. And the phantom of Gertrude Lodge laughed again.

Rhoda turned this way and that way, but the phantom was still there. It sat, heavier and heavier, on Rhoda's body, and now Rhoda could not move. Always in her ears was that cruel laugh, and always in front of her eyes was that left hand with its wedding-ring.

At last, half-dead with terror, Rhoda suddenly put out her right hand, took hold of the phantom's left arm, and pulled it hard.

The phantom fell off the bed onto the floor, and Rhoda sat up.

'Dear God!' she cried. She felt cold, so cold. 'That was not a dream - she was here!'

She could still feel the young woman's arm under her hand - a warm, living arm. She looked on the floor for the woman's body, but there was nothing there.

Rhoda Brook slept no more that night, and at the dairy early the next morning, she looked pale and ill. She could not forget the feel of that arm under her hand.

When she came home for breakfast, her son asked her, 'What was that noise in your room last night, mother? Did you fall off the bed?'

'Noise? What time did you hear it?'

'About two o'clock. But what was it, mother? Something fell, I heard it. Was it you?'

Rhoda did not answer, and after breakfast she began to do her work in the house. At about midday she heard something, and looked out of the window. At the bottom of the garden stood a woman - the woman from her dream. Rhoda stood still, and stared.

The boy came to look out of the window too.

'Oh, there's Mrs Lodge,' he said. 'She told me-'

'Told you?' said his mother. She looked angry. 'Why did you speak to her? I told you not to.'

'She spoke to me first. I met her in the road.'

'When was this?'

'Yesterday.'

'What did you tell her?'

'Nothing. She began to talk to me, and then she saw my old shoes. She said, "Do they keep the rain out?" And I said, "No, they don't, but mother and I have no money for new shoes." Then she said, "I can give you some better shoes." She's bringing them now, I think. Perhaps they're in her bag. She's very nice, mother - she gives things to lots of people.'

By now Mrs Lodge was at the door. Rhoda wanted to run away, but there was no back door in her little house. So she waited, and the boy ran to open the door.

'This is the right house then,' said Mrs Lodge, smiling at the boy. 'And this is your mother, is it?'

The face and body were the same as those of the phantom in Rhoda's dream, but there was nothing cruel in this face. The blue eyes were warm, and the smile was sweet and kind.

The young woman took the shoes out of her bag, and gave them to the boy. She smiled and talked in a warm and friendly way.

‘How kind she is!’ thought Rhoda. ‘How young and sweet and innocent! Why did I have that bad dream about her? She’s a friend, not an enemy.’

* * *

Two days later Mrs Lodge came again, with a new shirt for the boy, and twelve days after that she visited Rhoda a third time. The boy was out that day.

‘I like walking up here on the hill,’ Mrs Lodge told Rhoda. ‘And your house is the only one up here.’

They talked about the weather and the village, then Mrs Lodge got up to leave. ‘Are you well, Rhoda?’ she asked. ‘You look pale.’

‘Oh, I’m always pale,’ said Rhoda. ‘But what about you, Mrs Lodge? Are you well?’

‘Yes, I am, but ... there is something ... It’s nothing very bad, but I don’t understand it.’

She uncovered her left hand and arm. There were marks on the arm, yellowy-brown marks, like marks made by fingers. Rhoda stared at them.

‘How did it happen?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Mrs Lodge. ‘One night, when I was in bed, I had a dream ... and then suddenly, my arm hurt very badly. Perhaps I hit it on something in the daytime, but I don’t remember it.’ She laughed. ‘My dear husband says it’s nothing very much, and he’s right, of course.’

‘Yes ... Which night was that?’ said Rhoda.

Mrs Lodge thought for a moment. ‘It was two weeks ago today. It was two o’clock in the night - I remember, because I heard the clock.’

It was the same night, the same hour, as Rhoda’s dream of the phantom. Rhoda remembered the terror of it, and felt cold.

‘How can this be?’ she thought, when Mrs Lodge left. ‘Did I do that? But why? She is innocent and kind - I don’t want to hurt her. And

how can a thing like that happen? Only witches can do things like that ...’

Chapter 3. The face in the glass

The days went past, and Rhoda Brook was afraid to meet Mrs Lodge again. She liked her, and did not want to remember the strange dream or the strange marks on the young wife’s arm. But she could not stop thinking about them.

One day they met on the road from the village. They began to talk, and after a minute or two Rhoda said, ‘How is your arm, Mrs Lodge? Is it better now?’

‘No, it isn’t. It’s worse than before. Sometimes it hurts very badly.’

‘What does the doctor say about it?’ asked Rhoda.

‘He doesn’t understand it. He just says, “Put the arm in hot water for five minutes twice a day.” Well, I do that, but it doesn’t help.’

‘Can I look at your arm?’ asked Rhoda.

Once again, the younger woman uncovered her arm, and Rhoda stared at it.

The arm was thinner, and a little withered. And the marks looked more and more like marks made by fingers. Rhoda remembered her dream, and the feel of the arm under her hand - in just the same place.

‘It looks like the marks of fingers,’ Gertrude Lodge said’. She tried to laugh. ‘My husband says they are a witch’s marks. A witch put her hand on my arm, he says, and it’s killing the flesh.’

‘No, no,’ said Rhoda quickly. She felt cold and afraid. ‘Don’t listen to those old stories.’

The young wife’s face was unhappy. ‘No, but ... you see, I think he begins to ... to love me less, because of these marks on my arm. Men always like their wives to be pretty, don’t they?’

‘Some men do,’ said Rhoda. ‘But don’t show him the arm. Cover it all the time, and then he can’t see it.’

‘Ah, but he knows the marks are there.’ Gertrude looked away, but Rhoda could see the tears in her eyes.

‘I hope your arm is better soon, Mrs Lodge,’ she said quietly.

She said goodbye and began to walk home. She felt sorry for the poor, innocent young wife, and did not want to hurt her. But she did not feel sorry for the husband. She walked home, thinking about him. ‘So, Farmer Lodge,’ she thought. ‘You loved me once, but then you left me, and did nothing to help me. You wanted a new, younger and prettier woman for your wife. But she is not so pretty now, is she?’

* * *

The next day Rhoda walked home from the dairy after evening milking at the usual time. She was nearly at her house when she saw Gertrude Lodge behind her. Rhoda went down the hill to meet her.

‘Oh, Rhoda!’ called Gertrude. ‘I wanted to see you - to ask you ...’ Her face was pale and worried, and she held her left arm with her other hand. ‘Somebody told me,’ she said, ‘about a man at Egdon Heath. They don’t know his name, but they say he is a famous Wise Man, and can help people with ... with things like this.’

She looked down at her left arm, and then looked at Rhoda, with hope in her eyes. ‘They say you know about him, this Wise Man. Do you know his name?’

‘Perhaps they mean Mr Trendle,’ Rhoda said slowly. She felt ill. This man Trendle, people said, could do many strange things. He could understand dreams, he could drive phantoms out of houses, he could stop the work of witches ... ‘I am not a witch,’ she thought. ‘I am not! I do not believe in these things.’

Gertrude watched her. ‘You know him,’ she said. ‘I can see it in your face. Of course, I don’t believe in Wise Men. What can they do? But ... well, I can just go and see him. Is it far to his house?’

‘Yes - about five miles,’ said Rhoda.

‘Well, I must walk there. I cannot tell my husband about this. Can you come with me, Rhoda, to show me the way? Perhaps tomorrow afternoon?’

‘Oh no, it’s ... I ...’ Rhoda began.

‘Please!’ said Gertrude.

And in the end Rhoda could not say no. Mrs Lodge was good and kind, and she needed a friend’s help. But perhaps a Wise Man could see into people’s dreams. Rhoda did not want to meet this man Trendle, and she was afraid ...

* * *

The next afternoon she met Gertrude by the trees near her house, and they began the long walk across the hills to Egdon Heath. It was a cold day, and the sky above the hills was dark and unfriendly.

They found Mr Trendle’s house outside the village. He was at home when they arrived. He was an old man with grey hair, and he looked long and hard at Rhoda when he saw her. Mrs Lodge told him about her arm, and he looked at it carefully.

‘No, doctors can’t do anything for this,’ he said. This is the work of an enemy.’

Rhoda moved away a little.

‘An enemy? What enemy?’ asked Mrs Lodge.

‘I don’t know,’ said the Wise Man, looking at her. ‘But perhaps you do. I can show the person to you. Do you want me to do that?’

‘Yes,’ said Gertrude. ‘Yes, please show me.’

Mr Trendle took Gertrude into another room, but the door was open, and Rhoda could see into the room.

The Wise Man took an egg, and did something to it. Then he put a glass of water on the table, and carefully broke the egg open. The white of the egg went down into the water, changing to a milky white colour, and moving slowly round and round.

He put the glass in front of Gertrude. ‘Look down into the water,’ he said. ‘Look for a face.’

Gertrude stared down into the water.

‘Do you see a face?’ the Wise Man asked quietly.

Gertrude whispered something, but Rhoda could not hear. She turned away from the door.

When Mrs Lodge came out, her face was pale - paler than Rhoda's. Mr Trendle closed the door behind her, and the two women began to walk home. But things were not the same between them.

'Did he - did he ask for money?' Rhoda said quietly.

'Oh no, nothing. He did not want a penny,' said Gertrude.

'And what did you see?' asked Rhoda.

'Nothing ... I - I don't want to speak about it.'

Gertrude did not look at Rhoda. Her pretty young face looked ten years older, and was now more like the face of the phantom in Rhoda's dream.

They did not speak for a long time, then Gertrude said suddenly, 'Did you want me to come here and see this Wise Man? How strange of you!'

'No, I didn't. But now, I am not sorry we came.'

For the first time since her dream Rhoda felt a little pleased. Life was cruel, she thought, and Gertrude Lodge must learn that lesson too.

On the long walk home they did not speak again about their visit to the Wise Man. But other people did, and whispered stories about it in all the farms and dairies. Mrs Lodge could no longer use her withered arm to do anything, and people began to put the word 'witch' in front of the name 'Rhoda Brook'.

Rhoda said nothing to anybody about the phantom of her dream, but her face got thinner and paler. And in the spring she and her boy left their house and went away into the hills in the west.

Chapter 4. The cure for a curse

Six years went past, and Air and Mrs Lodge's married life was not happy. The farmer said little, and did not often smile. His wife had a withered arm, and there were no children to call him 'father', and to run laughing around the farmhouse. He thought of Rhoda Brook and her son. His son. But that was the past, and he could not change it now.

Gertrude Lodge was a different woman too. She was only twenty-five, but she looked older. Once a happy, smiling woman, she was now

sad and worried all the time. She loved her husband, but he no longer loved her, and she knew it. 'Six years of married life, and only a few months of love,' she sometimes whispered.

Her left arm was no better. She tried one thing after another, but nothing helped it. Some of the things were a little strange, and her husband did not like them.

'You think too much about your arm,' he said. 'You need somebody to talk to - somebody to be around the house. At one time there was a boy ... I wanted him to come and live with us, but he is too old now. And he went away. I don't know where.'

Gertrude knew about this boy now, and all of Rhoda Brook's story, but she and her husband never spoke about it. And she never said anything to him about her visit to the Wise Man of Egdon Heath, or about the face in the glass.

She wanted so much to find a cure for her arm. 'My husband cannot love me because of this arm,' she thought. 'So I must find a cure for it, I must. The Wise Man helped me before. Perhaps he can help me again.'

So one day she walked to Egdon Heath. She did not know the way, but at last she found the house.

'You can send away other things, I know,' she said to Trendle. 'Hair on women's faces, and things like that. Why can't you send this away?' She uncovered her poor, withered arm.

'No, I'm sorry, but I can't help you,' said Trendle. 'Your arm is withered because of a curse. It's not easy to find a cure for that.'

'Is there no cure, anywhere?' asked Gertrude sadly. 'There is one thing ...' Trendle began slowly. 'But it's not easy for a woman to do.'

'Oh, tell me!' said Gertrude. 'Please!'

'You must put the withered arm on the neck of a hanged man. You must do it before he's cold - just after they take his body down.'

Gertrude's face was pale. 'How can that do good?'

'It can turn the blood, and that changes many things in the body. You must go to the jail when they hang someone, and wait for the body

when they bring it in. In the old days lots of people did it; these days, not so many do it. But it is still the best cure for a curse.'

* * *

Back at home Gertrude thought about this for a long time. She tried to forget it, but she couldn't. She wanted to be pretty again, she wanted her husband to love her again. Yes, she must try this cure, she must.

'But how do I do it?' she thought. 'Where is the nearest jail? How can I get there? How often do they hang people? And when there is a hanging, how can I learn about it before it happens?'

So many questions. There was no one to help her, but slowly she began to find the answers. She asked careful questions in the village, because country people always know everything.

One old man was very helpful. 'The nearest jail is at Casterbridge, fifteen miles away,' he told Gertrude. 'They have trials there every three months, and there's usually a hanging after the trials. Some poor man or boy takes a cow or a sheep, or just some bread, and they hang him for it. Lots of people go to watch the hangings. I don't know why.'

The next trials were in July, Gertrude learnt. She asked her husband about them, but Lodge said very little. He was colder to her than usual, and she did not ask him again. He was often away these days, so she did not see much of him.

July came, and Gertrude went to see the helpful old man in the village again. 'Just one hanging this time,' he told her. 'It's for arson, I think. They're going to hang him next Saturday.'

Gertrude walked slowly home. 'I cannot tell my husband about this ... this cure,' she thought. 'And how can I be away from home for two nights? What can I say to him?'

But in the end it was easy. On the Thursday before the hanging, Lodge came to her. 'I'm going away for three nights,' he said. 'It's about farm work, so you can't come with me.'

'That's all right,' Gertrude said quietly. 'I'm happy to stay at home.'

They said nothing more, and on Thursday Lodge drove away in the carriage.

Chapter 5. The hangman

The next morning Gertrude got ready to leave for Casterbridge. She did not want to go by road because she did not want to meet any of her husband's friends. So she took one of the heavy horses from the farm, and rode west across the hills.

She was afraid of riding with a half-dead arm, but the farm horse was quiet and slow, and easy to ride. He carried her uphill and downhill, past rivers and through trees, moving west all the time.

The sun slowly went down in the sky, and it was nearly eight o'clock when Gertrude stopped for a moment at the top of a hill. It was the last hill before the town, and she could see the roofs of Casterbridge below. There was a big building on a hill at the end of the town, with a white roof. She knew this was the jail, and she could see a lot of workmen on the roof.

'What are they doing?' she thought. 'They're building something up there on the roof ... Oh!'

Suddenly, she understood, and quickly turned her eyes away. It was a warm summer evening, but she shivered with cold.

'Tomorrow they're going to hang a man on that roof,' she thought. 'And when he is dead ...'

She shivered again, but then she remembered her husband's cold words and his unsmiling face, and she rode on down into the town.

She found a room to stay for the night, and then went out into the town.

'What do I do now?' she thought. 'How can I get into the jail tomorrow? Who must I talk to? The men at the jail, or the hangman?'

She was afraid to go to the jail, so she went to find the hangman. He had a house down by the river, a boy in the town told her.

When she found the house, she stood outside for some minutes, afraid to go to the door. Then the door opened and a man came out.

‘Who are you?’ he called out. ‘What do you want?’

‘I want to speak to you for a minute.’

He came nearer, and looked at her. ‘Well, well, that’s a pretty face,’ he said. ‘Come into the house.’

They went inside. Davies (that was his name) was a hangman on some days, but a gardener on other days.

‘Is it about gardening work?’ he asked Gertrude. ‘I can’t do any tomorrow, because I’m working at the jail.’

‘Yes, yes, I know. That’s why I’m here.’

‘Ah! I thought so. Is the poor man one of your family then? Perhaps your young brother? No,’ - Davies looked at Gertrude’s dress - ‘I don’t think so. Was he one of your farm workers perhaps?’

‘No. What time is the hanging?’

‘The same as usual - twelve o’clock.’

‘And it is ... it is going to happen, yes?’

‘Oh yes, nothing can stop the hanging now,’ said Davies. ‘But I’m sorry for this young man, I truly am. He’s only eighteen. They say it was arson, but I don’t know. He was there when the fire began, but there were

Chapter 6. The blood turns

At half past twelve on Saturday Gertrude Lodge walked up the hill to the jail. She went there by the small back streets, because there were so many people in the town. They were there for a holiday, to watch the hanging.

At one o’clock she was inside the jail. The hangman took her to a long dark room with a table. ‘Wait there,’ he told her. ‘Two or three minutes, no more.’

He went away, and Gertrude waited. She had a veil over her face, and her left arm was uncovered, ready. She stood still, with her eyes closed, listening, and shivering with terror.

Soon she heard noises, and could hear heavy feet on the stairs. The heavy feet came nearer, and four men came into the room with a

long box. It was open, and in it was the body of a young man, with a cover over his face. The men put the box down on the table.

‘Now!’ said a voice in Gertrude’s ear. ‘Now!’

But the young woman was half-dead with terror, and at first she could not move. Then she opened her eyes and came up to the table. She could hear other noises outside the room. There were more people coming.

Davies the hangman was by her side. He uncovered the body’s face, took Gertrude’s hand, and put her arm across the dead man’s neck.

Gertrude screamed.

And at once there was a second scream. A woman’s scream, but not Gertrude’s. Gertrude turned round.

Behind her stood Rhoda Brook, her face pale, and her eyes red with crying. Behind Rhoda stood Gertrude’s husband. He looked old and sad, but there were no tears in his eyes.

‘You! What in God’s name are you doing here?’ he whispered angrily.

‘Oh, cruel, cruel woman!’ cried Rhoda. ‘Why do you come between us and our child now? This is the true meaning of my dream! You are like that cruel phantom at last!’

When Gertrude saw her husband with Rhoda, she knew at once that the dead young man was Rhoda’s son. She stared at Rhoda, with terror in her eyes.

Then Rhoda ran to Gertrude, closed her hand round the younger woman’s arm, and pulled her away from the table. When she let go of the arm, the young wife fell down, at her husband’s feet.

She never opened her eyes again. They carried her out of the jail into the town, but she never got home alive. Perhaps it was the ‘turning of the blood’, perhaps it was her withered arm, perhaps it was her terror in the jail when she turned and saw Rhoda behind her. Doctors came and looked at her, but they could do nothing to help her, and three days later she died.

In those days the unhappy parents of a hanged man came and took the body away after the hanging. That was why Farmer Lodge was at the jail with Rhoda that day. It was not his first visit to the jail. With Rhoda, he went many times to visit his son that summer, and that was why he was away from the farm so often.

But after his young wife died, nobody ever saw Farmer Lodge in Casterbridge again. He went home to his farm, but he did not stay there long. After a short time he sold the farm and the farmhouse, and all the cows and sheep and horses. Then he went away to live in a small town by the sea. He lived very quietly, without any friends or family near him.

When he died two years later, he left a lot of money. Most of it went to a home for poor boys, but there was money for Rhoda Brook too.

For some time nobody could find Rhoda. Then one day she came back to her old house near the dairy. But she never took a penny of Farmer Lodge's money. She went back to work in the dairy, and worked there for many long years, milking the cows in the morning, and again in the evening. Her dark hair turned white, and her sad pale face looked thin and old.

Most people knew Rhoda's story, and sometimes they watched her at milking time. What did she think about, all those long days, at morning and evening milking?

But nobody ever asked her, and nobody ever knew the answer.

- THE END -

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