

These-an'-Thats Wife

FROM A COTTAGE IN TROY

By Quiller-Couch

In the matter of These-an'-That himself, public opinion in Troy is divided. To the great majority he appears scandalously careless of his honour; while there are just six or seven who fight with a suspicion that there dwells something divine in the man.

To reach the town from my cottage I have to cross the Passage Ferry, either in the smaller boat which Eli pulls single-handed, or (if a market-cart or donkey, or drove of cattle be waiting on the slip) I must hang about till Eli summons his boy to help him with the horse-boat. Then the gangway is lowered, the beasts are driven on board, the passengers follow at a convenient distance, and the long sweeps take us slowly across the tide. It was on such a voyage, a few weeks after I settled in the neighbourhood, that I first met These-an'-That.

I was leaning back against the chain, with my cap tilted forward to keep off the dazzle of the June sunshine on the water, and lazily watching Eli as he pushed his sweep. Suddenly I grew aware that by frequent winks and jerks of the head he wished to direct my attention to a passenger on my right—a short, round man in black, with a basket of eggs on his arm.

There was quite a remarkable dearth of feature on this passenger's face, which was large, soft, and unhealthy in colour: but what surprised me was to see, as he blinked in the sunlight, a couple of big tears trickle down his cheeks and splash among the eggs in his basket.

"There's trouble agen, up at Kit's," remarked Eli, finishing his stroke with a jerk, and speaking for the general benefit, though the words were particularly addressed to a drover opposite.

"Ho?" said the drover: "that woman agen?"

The passengers, one and all, bent their eyes on the man in black, who smeared his face with his cuff, and began weeping afresh, silently.

"Beat en blue las' night, an' turned en to doors—the dirty trollop."

"Eli, don't 'ee—" put in the poor man, in a low, deprecating voice.

"Iss, an' no need to tell what for," exclaimed a red-faced woman who stood by the drover, with two baskets of poultry at her feet. "She's a low lot; a low trapesin' baggage. If These-an'-That, there, wasn' but a poor, ha'f-baked shammick, he'd ha' killed that wife o' his afore this."

"Naybours, I'd as lief you didn't mention it," appealed These-an'-That, huskily.

"I'm afeard you'm o' no account, These-an'-That: but sam-sodden, if I may say so," the drover observed.

"Put in wi' the bread, an' took out wi' the cakes," suggested Eli.

"Wife!—a pretty bitch, she an' the whole kit, up there!" went on the market-woman. "If you durstn't lay finger 'pon your wedded wife, These-an'-That, but let her an' that long-legged gamekeeper turn'ee to doors, you must be no better 'n a worm,—that'a all I say."

I saw the man's face twitch as she spoke of the gamekeeper. But he only answered in the same dull way.

"I'd as lief you didn't mention it, friends,—if 'tis all the same."

His real name was Tom Warne, as I learnt from Eli afterwards; and he lived at St Kit's, a small fruit-growing hamlet two miles up the river, where his misery was the scandal of the place. The very children knew it, and would follow him in a crowd sometimes, pelting him with horrible

taunts as he slouched along the road to the kitchen garden out of which he made his living. He never struck one; never even answered; but avoided the school-house as he would a plague; and if he saw the Parson coming would turn a mile out of his road.

The Parson had called at the cottage a score of times at least: for the business was quite intolerable. Two evenings out of the six, the long-legged gamekeeper, who was just a big, drunken bully, would swagger easily into These-an'-That's kitchen and sit himself down without so much as "by your leave." "Good evenin', gamekeeper" the husband would say in his dull, nerveless voice. Mostly he only got a jeer in reply. The fellow would sit drinking These-an'-That's cider and laughing with These-an'-That's wife, until the pair, very likely, took too much, and the woman without any cause broke into a passion, flew at the little man, and drove him out of doors, with broomstick or talons, while the gamekeeper hammered on the table and roared at the sport. His employer was an absentee who hated the Parson, so the Parson groaned in vain over the scandal.

Well, one Fair-day I crossed in Eli's boat with the pair. The woman—a dark gipsy creature—was tricked out in violet and yellow, with a sham gold watch-chain and great aluminium earrings: and the gamekeeper had driven her down in his spring-cart. As Eli pushed off, I saw a small boat coming down the river across our course. It was These-an'-That, pulling down with vegetables for the fair. I cannot say if the two saw him: but he glanced up for a moment at the sound of their laughter, then bent his head and rowed past us a trifle more quickly. The distance was too great to let me see his face.

I was the last to step ashore. As I waited for Eli to change my sixpence, he nodded after the couple, who by this time had reached the top of the landing-stage, arm in arm.

"A bad day's work for *her*, I reckon."

It struck me at the moment as a moral reflection of Eli's, and no more. Late in the afternoon, however, I was enlightened.

In the midst of the Fair, about four o'clock, a din of horns, beaten kettles, and hideous yelling, broke out in Troy. I met the crowd in the main street, and for a moment felt afraid of it. They had seized the woman in the taproom of the "Man-o'-War"—where the game-keeper was lying in a drunken sleep—and were hauling her along in a Ram Riding. There is nothing so cruel as a crowd, and I have seen nothing in my life like the face of These-an'-That's wife. It was bleeding; it was framed in tangles of black, dishevelled hair; it was livid; but, above all, it was possessed with an awful fear—a horror it turned a man white to look on. Now and then she bit and fought like a cat: but the men around held her tight, and mostly had to drag her, her feet trailing, and the horns and kettles dinning in her wake.

There lay a rusty old ducking-cage among the lumber up at the town-hall; and some fellows had fetched this down, with the poles and chain, and planted it on the edge of the Town Quay, between the American Shooting Gallery and the World-Renowned Swing Boats. To this they dragged her, and strapped her fast.

There is no need to describe what followed. Even the virtuous women who stood and applauded would like to forget it, perhaps. At the third souse, the rusty pivot of the ducking-pole broke, and the cage, with the woman in it, plunged under water.

They dragged her ashore at the end of the pole in something less than a minute. They unstrapped and laid her gently down, and began to feel over her heart, to learn if it were still

beating. And then the crowd parted, and These-an'-That came through it. His face wore no more expression than usual, but his lips were working in a queer way.

He went up to his wife, took off his hat, and producing an old red handkerchief from the crown, wiped away some froth and green weed that hung about her mouth. Then he lifted her limp hand, and patting the back of it gently. turned on the crowd. His lips were still working. It was evident he was trying to say something.

"Naybours," the words came at last, in the old dull tone; "I'd as lief you hadn' thought o' this."

He paused for a moment, gulped down something in his throat, and went on—

"I wudn' say you didn' mean it for the best, an' thankin' you kindly. But you didn' know her. Roughness, if I may say, was never no good wi' her. It must ha' been very hard for her to die like this, axin your parden, for she wasn' one to bear pain."

Another long pause.

"No, she cudn' bear pain. P'raps *he* might ha' stood it better—though o' course you acted for the best, an' thankin' you kindly. I'd as lief take her home now, naybours, if 'tis all the same."

He lifted the body in his arms, and carried it pretty steadily down the quay steps to his market-boat, that was moored below. Two minutes later he had pushed off and was rowing it quietly homewards.

There is no more to say, except that the woman recovered. She had fainted, I suppose, as they pulled her out. Anyhow, These-an'-That restored her to life—and she ran away the very next week with the gamekeeper.