

Chapter 1

Looking for work



A man and a woman carrying a little girl in her arms slowly approached the village of Weydon-Priors on foot. It was a late summer evening and the man hoped to find work in the surrounding farms. There were many villages like this in this part of

southwest England, and in the early part of the nineteenth century a young man could always find work if he was prepared to look for it.

The man, Michael Henchard, was young and tall, he had a serious-looking face, and he was very sun-tanned from spending many hours working in the fields. His wife, Susan, was also young and her face might have been attractive once, but now it had the bitter look of a woman who had been badly treated by life. Although they walked side by side and they were clearly a small family, there was no sense of closeness or fondness between them. He was reading something on a sheet of paper and he seemed to almost not notice her. She, having nothing to say to him, spoke quietly and softly to her little daughter.

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As they got closer and closer to the village, they heard the sounds of a fair. They walked toward it and came across a number of large, square tents, which were selling different kinds of food and drink. Hungry after their long walk, they decided to eat something and went into one of the tents. Inside they found people sitting at long, narrow tables that went along each side of the tent. In the middle, there was a red-faced woman serving “furmity¹” from a big pot over a fire. This was a hot mixture of corn², milk, raisins, and other ingredients. The young woman ordered three bowls of furmity and they sat down to eat.

Despite being hungry, Michael Henchard did not like the mixture and wished it was a glass of beer instead. As he was thinking this, he noticed that, for a little extra money, the old woman added alcohol to the furmity of some of the others in the tent. She poured it quickly and quietly from a bottle, which she kept under the table. So he passed his bowl to her and, with a little nod and a smile, she added some alcohol to his, too. Now he found the furmity a much tastier mixture. In fact, it was so tasty that he soon asked for more.

After the first bowl he felt relaxed, and after the second he was sharing amusing stories with other men in the tent. The third made him a little aggressive, and after the fourth he was looking for trouble. The young woman saw, too late, that it was going to be difficult to change her husband's mood. Their little daughter, who had been quiet up to that point, was now tired and beginning to complain.

"Michael, it's time to leave. We have to find a place to spend the night," she reminded him, trying to pull him away from the table.

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But Henchard was not listening to her. The conversation among the men had turned to the high ideals of youth and the low realities of later life.

"I got married when I was eighteen, like a fool," said Henchard, with bitterness. "I could have been someone important – I could have made my fortune. But instead, here I am, with only fifteen shillings³ in my pocket and two extra mouths to feed."

It was getting late and outside the tent the fair was coming to an end. The shouts of men wanting to sell their last few animals could be heard.

"Who'll take this last horse?" shouted one man. "She's a fine animal, just a little over five years old, but there's nothing wrong with her at all. Who'll give me forty shillings for her? You won't get a better price than that."

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Hearing these shouts from inside the tent, Henchard said in a loud voice, "Those men out there can get rid of their horses when they don't want them. Why can't we do that with our wives, too?"

One or two men laughed.

"I wouldn't be surprised if there was someone who would buy *your* wife from you. She looks like a fine woman," said one of them.

Now was a good time to stop this joke: to continue with it would not be sensible. But Henchard was in no mood to be sensible.

“Well, here’s your chance. What will you offer me for this rare beauty?” he said, pointing at Susan.

“Michael, you’ve said things like this before, but this joke is no longer funny,” said the young woman.

“I know I’ve said it before and I meant it. All I want is a buyer,” he replied.

Raising his voice he said, “Well, is anyone interested? If you are, now’s your chance.”

Again there were a few laughs. Susan begged him to leave the tent, “Come on Michael, it’s getting dark and I’ve had enough of this nonsense. If you don’t come now, I will leave without you.”

But Henchard did not move; it was almost as if he didn’t hear her. This time his voice was even louder, “This woman is no good to me. Who among you will buy her?”

Chapter 2

The right price

Hearing this, his wife's face changed color. There was nothing begging in her voice or her expression now.

"Michael, this is getting very serious, very serious indeed," Susan said.

"Will anybody buy her?" he repeated.

"I wish someone would," Susan cried out, "for I am not at all happy with my present owner."

"There, you see? She agrees to the sale. She takes the child, I take my tools and we go our separate ways. It is as simple as that. So who'll be the auctioneer⁴ for the sale?"

"I will," said a man at the same table. "Who'll make an offer for this lady?"

Suddenly the tent was strangely silent.

"Five shillings," said a voice from the back. There were a few nervous laughs.

"Only serious offers please," said Henchard. "Who'll say a guinea⁵?"

There was no answer.

"Raise the price, auctioneer," said the husband.

"Two guineas!" said the auctioneer.

"If they don't take her for two guineas in ten seconds, they'll have to give more," said Henchard.

There was silence for ten seconds.

"Very well, it's now three guineas for the lady," said the auctioneer.

"No offer? Come on, she has cost me at least fifty times that price. I tell you what – I won't accept less than five guineas for her," shouted Henchard, bringing his fist down on the table with great force as he spoke.

“If any man will pay five guineas and treat her well, he can have her forever and never hear from me again. Five guineas and she’s yours. Susan, do you agree?”

His wife lowered her head in a silent yes.

“Right, you all heard that,” said the auctioneer. “Five guineas, or the sale is canceled. Any offers?”

There was silence.

“For the last time, will anybody give five guineas for the lady?”

“Yes,” said a loud voice from the doorway.

Everyone turned to see who had spoken. It was a sailor that had come into the tent quietly in the last few minutes. All conversations around the tent now stopped.

“Saying is one thing and paying is another,” said Henchard, turning slowly to face the sailor.

The sailor took out five pounds and five shilling coins and threw them down on the table in front of Henchard. Up to this point it had all seemed like a game or a joke that had gone on too long. But now with real money on the table, the seller, the woman being sold, and the buyer were part of a drama. The air in the tent was suddenly heavy and still: everyone’s eyes were locked on these three and the money that lay between them. Henchard was too surprised to react. Susan broke the silence.

“Michael, if you touch that money, Elizabeth-Jane and I will leave with this man. And you will never see us again,” she told her husband slowly.

Then she added, “This is no joke, Michael.”

This last comment seemed to sting Henchard into action. “Of course it’s no joke,” he replied. “I take the money, the sailor takes you.”

“She should come with me only if she is willing. I don’t mean to hurt her,” said the sailor.

“She is willing, as long as she can take the child,” said Henchard.



Susan looked at Michael and, seeing no change in his eyes, nodded at the sailor. She picked up Elizabeth-Jane and her few possessions and walked toward the sailor. Reaching the doorway of the tent, she took off her wedding ring and threw it at Henchard's face. Then she took the sailor's arm and left.

After this scene, there was no more to be said or done. The customers left one by one and Henchard's head sank lower and lower until it was eventually lying on the table. A few minutes later he was snoring.

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The next morning Henchard woke up with a headache. He had some memory of the night before, but it was not clear. He had an uncomfortable feeling that he'd done something bad – *very* bad. Looking at the ground, he saw a small object – his wife Susan's wedding ring. Now he began to remember the night's unhappy events. He felt inside his shirt pocket: the five pounds and five shilling coins were proof of what had happened. He knew he had to get up immediately and find Susan and Elizabeth-Jane. Surely it would not be too late to make everything right? As he walked toward the village to start his search, he saw the church and stopped to think for a moment. Entering the church, he knelt down near the front. Looking up at the cross, he said the following words:

“I, Michael Henchard, make a promise before God – that for the next twenty-one years, the same number that I have lived so far, I will not touch any kind of strong drink.”

Standing up, he had the feeling that this was the start of a new direction. He left the church to begin the search for his wife and daughter.

But it was not as easy as he thought. First of all, no one knew either the sailor or Susan; neither of them was from that area. Second, to make a big fuss about the loss of his wife and daughter

would mean explaining how it had happened, and Henchard did not want all the talk and gossip this would create. So, as a result, his search was a quiet one and he made little progress. After Weydon-Priors he tried to find Susan and Elizabeth-Jane in other nearby villages, but no one had seen them and no one knew anything about them.

Henchard searched far and wide in the weeks and months that followed, but found no clue to put him on the right path. Finally he reached a port town, and here he discovered that they had sailed for Canada a short time earlier. There was nothing else to do and nowhere else to look.

Henchard now decided to go to Casterbridge, a town that he had passed through on his travels. Here, he would start a new life and try to put the mistakes of his past behind him.

Chapter 3

Looking for a relative

Eighteen years later Susan was taking another long journey on foot, but this time she was alone with Elizabeth-Jane. They were approaching the town of Casterbridge. The events that led to this second journey were as follows:

For several years she and Newson, the sailor, lived in Canada; they were not rich, but they managed. Then, when Elizabeth-Jane was twelve, they moved back to England. Here, Susan finally told a friend about the terrible circumstances of her meeting Newson. This friend told her that there was no reason to stay with Newson, that the sale of a wife was not, nor could ever be, the same as a real marriage. From that moment, Susan was certain that she had made a mistake accepting Newson as her “new” husband. But a few years later something happened to change her circumstances again: the ship that Newson was working on sank near Newfoundland. They were told that everyone had drowned; there were no survivors. Elizabeth-Jane was now a young woman of eighteen and Susan, because of her hard life, looked older than her age and was frequently sick. They were almost as poor as they had been when she met Newson, only now there was no Newson to provide an income. A month after the news of Newson’s death, Susan realized that there was only one possible path toward a life of a little more comfort, a life of better opportunities for Elizabeth-Jane.

They left for Weydon-Priors on foot, following the same roads that she had taken on her journey with Michael Henchard – almost eighteen years earlier. It was the only way she knew how to try to find Henchard. In Weydon-Priors she managed to speak to the same old, red-faced woman selling furrinity,