

The  
Withered  
Arm

THOMAS HARDY

# THE WITHERED ARM

## Chapter 1

### *The Poor Milkmaid*

There were eighty cows in the dairy in a farm in Holmstoke. It was a beautiful April evening and it was milking time for the cows. The time was about six o'clock in the evening.



*A beautiful April evening at the dairy.*

All the milkmaids and milkmen were at work. They were about to finish for the day and it was a good time for a conversation.

‘People say Farmer Lodge is bringing his new wife to the farm tomorrow,’ said a milkmaid. ‘They say she’s very young and pretty.’

Another milkmaid looked from behind the cow. ‘That’s right. She’s much younger than Farmer Lodge,’ said the milkmaid.

There was another milkmaid. She was quite thin and her skin looked very pale. She turned her face and looked past her cow’s tail to the other side of the dairy. She said nothing. She was Rhoda Brook. Mr Lodge loved her once in the past, but not anymore.

‘They say she’s a rosy-cheeked young woman and years younger than Farmer Lodge,’ said the first milkmaid.

‘How old is he?’ asked the second milkmaid with a quick look.

‘Thirty or over, I suppose’.

‘More like forty,’ said a milkman. He had a hat and looked like a woman. They continued milking the cows while they talked more and more about Farmer Lodge and his new wife.

‘We don’t know anything else about Farmer Lodge’s wife,’ said a milkmaid.

‘This is very difficult for Rhoda Brook, poor woman.’

'I feel very sorry for her,' murmured the first milkmaid from behind her cow.

'Farmer Lodge doesn't speak to Rhoda Brook anymore. He left her a long time ago' said the second milkmaid.

A firm voice cried with authority, 'Stop gossiping!' Now! Get on with your work and finish it before it gets dark. Mr Lodge's new wife isn't your business. I still pay him nine pounds a year for every cow. Did you know that?' said a man angrily. He was the dairyman. He employed the milkmaids and milkmen.

The milkmaids and milkmen finished milking. They cleaned the dairy and went home. The thin milkmaid, Rhoda Brook did not walk with the others. She met her son, a boy of twelve and went away up the fields towards their home. It was a small old cottage near Watermeads and not far from the border of Egdon Heath.

On the road, Rhoda stopped her son and started to talk to him. 'The workers said something at the dairy today. Your father is bringing his new wife home from Anglebury tomorrow,' said Rhoda Brook. 'They say she's very young and pretty.'



*Rhoda talked to her son on the road home.*

Her pale face looked tired and sad.

'I want you to go to the market and meet them' said she in a sad way.

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

'Yes, you can go and look at his wife. Come back and tell me what she's like. If you see her, look at her carefully. Look at the colour of her eyes and her hair. Look at her height and look at her dress. Look at her hands. I want to know if she's a rich spoilt woman or a worker just like me. You must tell me everything about her.'

'Don't worry mother! I can go tomorrow and take a long look at her. When I come back, I can tell you all about her.'

The mother and the son walked up the hill in the twilight and went to the cottage. They went inside. The house was in a bad shape. It had mud walls. Rhoda Brook knelt down in the chimney-corner. She looked around tiredly with her dark eyes, thinking of the farmer's new wife.



*Rhoda knelt down by the chimney.*

‘Go and meet her. Is she dark or fair? Does she have smooth white hands like a real lady, or the hands of a milkmaid? Is she tall or short?’ repeated Rhoda Brook.

The boy listened to his mother in an inattentive way and promised again.