A Country Wife

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Chapter One

'Never trust a man who wears spotless white trousers.' Family saying

I came out on to the church porch feeling dazed. My right hand held a contact lens that had shot off my eyeball - probably in terror - as the vicar began his address on the theme of 'Marriage is Martyrdom'. And my left was held firmly in Charlie's large, calloused fingers. I would have liked to have stayed there, in the hot sunlight, savouring the triumph (and amazement) I felt at having nabbed - in the teeth of fierce female opposition - such a brilliant matrimonial prize.

But he rushed me, along with my bridesmaids, into a Victorian milk-cart borrowed for the occasion, lifted the reins and yelled at his stallion, Bob: 'You irritating, bothersome, blithering, vegecidal maniac - get on!' Or rather, he didn't. There is no way I could write down what he said. It was unprintably rude, and consisted mainly of four-letter words. He drove all his horses using foul language, and they responded to it eagerly. Probably because it had a rhythmic lilt, and carried an undertone of affection.

At the familiar torrent of abuse, Bob broke into a brisk trot. The chains on his harness jingled, the cart bounced up and down, and the little bridesmaids screamed. If Charlie stopped yelling filth for more than a minute or two Bob's ears would swivel anxiously, and after a while his step would falter - so the four-letter words were pretty well incessant as we pounded through the narrow Dorset lanes to my parents' cottage. Bob also farted at regular intervals, which, along with the swearing, somewhat detracted from the tastefulness with which both sets of parents had hoped to imbue the occasion.

The relationship Charlie had with his horses was very close, I knew. When left tied up at shows, Bob would scan the crowd for Charlie's face, and pick it out, from hundreds of others, at a huge distance, and he was so trusting that, for a party trick, Charlie would crawl through his back legs on his hands and knees. They even slept together. When Charlie went off to distant ploughing matches with Bob he could never afford hotels, so he would sleep in the lorry - or a stable. He said that though Bob slept lying down, and frequently shifted position in the night, he was always somehow aware of a human presence next to him, and never kicked, or rolled over. A dealer friend of Charlie's had once explained to me that he, too, always slept with his horses when he was away from home. And the only time he had ever got into any difficulty was when, one morning, he had washed his face in the bucket of water one of his geldings was drinking out of. 'He did kick me then,' the dealer said soberly. 'I could tell he thought "Blooming cheek!"'

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Carthorses, long dresses and the lush Dorset countryside might sound romantic, but Charlie managed to give them his unique rough edge. For the wedding he was wearing, instead of a suit, a long cotton smock hand-sewn by his mother. It was a difficult garment for anyone - except for, say, Little Lord Fauntleroy, to carry off - but Charlie wore it like a rebel. Within a few hours it was blotched with saddle-oil and mud, spotted with wine and cigarette ash, and he was standing in it up to his waist in duck weed, playfully ducking his small nephews in the ornamental pond in my parents' garden.

The next morning I woke up, on the first day of my new life, in a little white back bedroom with flowered curtains. Charlie was still asleep in the brass bed, so I climbed out carefully, glancing out of the window at the covered concrete yard where, he had told me, the sheep came in every winter to lamb. Beside it was a rough, grassed space where I planned to keep poultry and rabbits.

Pulling on some jeans and a T-shirt, I walked through the huge parlour that ran the whole width of the bungalow we were to live in. It had been converted from an old barn, so had rather odd room divisions. The parlour was a mess: there were glasses and bottles everywhere, and in the middle of the carpet was a heap of horse-manure. This was because, after the wedding, the more hardened drinkers had come back to continue the party, and Charlie had finally got rid of them by bringing two of his horses in through the front door. Though nearly all these guests were farmers, and used to livestock, they were appalled to find themselves so close to it in a domestic setting - and they had fled.

I opened the kitchen door and found myself in a little walled front garden. Near at hand I could hear the horses moving in the stable, their metal shoes clattering on the cobbled floor. And all around me, on every side, were fields rolling up to the horizon, because the farm was set in a wide bowl in the hills. At the bottom of the bowl the fields were relatively flat and that rich green that comes from pretty well incessant drizzle, but as they got steeper they were more and more covered by gorse and bracken and woodland.

On either side of me were barns, outbuildings, old, half-ruined cottages - and towering above them all, visible from every angle, Bettiscombe Manor, where Charlie's parents lived. Slightly too small to be a stately home, it had something of that grandeur and self-possession. Early eighteenth century, with smoky-pink brick walls, slate roofs and a delicate white shell porch, everything about it was immaculate. Its windows dazzled, the tiny lawn enclosed by its front railings was a brilliant, weedless emerald. Even the ten yellow dusters drying on a line in the walled laundry yard had all been pegged out with military precision.

The first inescapable truth about marrying a farmer: your husband is always very closely attached indeed to his parents. If he does not actually live with them, in the bedroom he has had since he was born, he still lives uncomfortably close. And they like to drop in and talk to him all day, and supervise ninety per cent of his behaviour. You may think, as the new wife, that you have more influence over him than they do. You are wrong. Very, very wrong.

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It was going to be a scorchingly hot day, which was good, because the hay was ready to be made. When he had planned the wedding, Charlie had hit on the brilliant idea of holding it in early June, because then the guests who stayed overnight could help with haymaking. (We had our honeymoon before the ceremony, to make this possible.)

I had never made hay myself, and had a hazy idea that it involved shady hedgerows, picnics in the sun and riding on laden haywains. And I was sure my friends would like to take part. Especially since Charlie used horses for farm work whenever he could. So though the hay would be baled (by a contractor), it would be fluffed up ready for baling with a horse and tedder and later the bales would be carried into the barn on a cart pulled by Bob and his companion, Ben.

But somehow, as I walked across the drive to the semi-ruined cottage where all my university friends were sleeping, I began to be a trifle doubtful about this idea. And I was even more so when I saw how tired and hung-over they all were. None of them was interested in even having a cup of tea. They just wanted to be left alone to die.

With a great deal of difficulty, I got them all mustered in the hayfield at midday. The sun was blazing by then, and there was not an atom of shade. In the distance the baler was chugging out parcels of hay, and nearer at hand Charlie was hurling bales up on to a wagon. He did this in an effortless, show-off way, using a pitchfork, the sweat barely breaking out on his muscular arms.

I was supposed to stand in the cart, and stack the bales in a neat arrangement that would not immediately tumble to the ground. This was astoundingly, horrifyingly hard to do. For a start, the bales were pricklier than they had any right to be. They had in with them, along with a weeny amount of grass, a huge quantity of thistles, nettles and brambles. And if you managed to squeeze your fingers under the hairy orange string keeping them together, and lift one up, not only did you get blisters, but an incipent hernia, because they were so heavy.

Out in the field, my friends - soft, pale and arty - were supposed to be rolling bales towards Charlie ready to be pitch forked, but after doing this for a pitifully short amount of time had begun standing around in groups complaining, or just slumping on the (prickly) ground in despair. They reminded me of mutinous players in a school hockey match.

When the cart was full they brightened at the thought of a ride, but as it was impossible to climb the steep sides, and anyway the bales kept crashing off (because I was so crap at stacking), they had to walk instead. And even as we entered the barn I could see them sneaking off, in their unsuitable wedding shoes, and making a run for their cars.

It was, strangely, worse inside the barn than out. You would have thought that it would be cooler. But it certainly was not - especially up underneath the broiling tin roof, which was where, for some inexplicable reason, I was supposed to put the new bales. I had to drag them through narrow passageways in a stack of ancient, mouse-smelling hay, and grapple them into position, while, behind me, Charlie made joky

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references to my incompetence and slowness, and occasionally goosed me by way of encouragement.

Still, the work did become easier once my friends had gone. I found some old gloves to protect my hands, and our best man, Reg - an enormous, woolly-haired countryman - staggered unsteadily out of his cottage beside the barn and offered to help. The horses did not like him much, and rolled their eyes and snorted when he got too close, which was surprising, as he was full of anecdotes about his skill as a horseman. Reg lived with Billy, a pretty blond man who worked as a cleaner for Charlie's mother. And though it was perfectly obvious that they must be lovers - Billy was most affectionate, and they shared a double bed - Reg persisted in the pretence that they were simply good mates. Whenever he could, he talked about all the women he had rogered. Mention any village in Dorset and he would instantly butt in, winking, to inform you that there was a gateway beside the pub where he had given a barmaid a damn good seeing-to. (Or a cosy corner in the churchyard where a female lay preacher had once been pleasantly surprised.)

The work was tough, but there was also pleasure in pushing myself to the physical limit - and surviving. And the banter was fun. Billy came out, in a pair of strawberry-coloured gloves, and while Charlie and Reg vied to see who was fittest, hurling bales unfeasible distances, and springing across dangerous chasms between the cart and the stack, we gossiped or delivered neat put-downs.

At last the shadows lengthened, and I lay, arms aching, on my back, on top of the last load of the day, gazing up at the sky, and then at the tops of the trees as they closed in above me on the turning into the barn. The cart jogged heavily over ruts in the dried mud, and it was very restful listening to Charlie in the distance persuading the horses - in the rudest possible way - to turn and back slowly towards the stack.

The whole romance had been conducted within earshot of horses, and in this valley. I had known Charlie since I'd been a teenager. My mother had been brought up on a Dorset farm, and hated it. (She used to sing a song called 'Misery Farm': 'We're all miserable, all so miserable, down on misery farm'.) And she met my father at a dance given by the Pinneys and married him and moved to London as soon as she could. When I was fourteen they bought a holiday cottage near the Pinneys and I met Charlie for the first time.

I had been carefully trained by my older brother to be a tomboy. His favourite entertainment, whenever we stayed anywhere in the country, was to explore the farms and parkland of insanely bad-tempered landowners. He loved it when a hypertensive, red-faced gent appeared in the distance, shouted 'Hoi!', and started chasing us, pitchfork in hand. Shrieking with excitement and terror (and in my case, wishing desperately that I'd never agreed to participate), we'd sprint across fields, leap prickly hedges and tunnel through ditches solid with mud. So I was initially scornful when, the first day we met, Charlie invited me on a walk and kept opening gates for me and pulling aside barbed wire. Did he think I didn't know how to vault barriers like that?

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But after a while I warmed to his courtliness. He made me feel admired and treasured, and I'd never had much confidence. We had a lot in common because we were both the youngest in our families - with a brother and two sisters each - and we both hated being teased.

We went out together, very shyly, for a few months (we only ever kissed twice), and it ended because both families enjoyed ribbing us so much. When Charlie's Uncle Rupert wrote a long comic poem about our romance and read it out to gales of laughter at a Christmas party I felt too ashamed to go on with things. We did remain friends, though.

And then, one Christmas Eve, when we were both in our early twenties, our relationship suddenly developed. He was living with a very pretty woman slightly older than him, in a cottage beside the Manor. I bicycled over and had dinner with them, and when she packed and left to stay with her family for Christmas I lingered behind.

The cottage had barely any lighting, and we sat in the dark, beside a flickering fire, while Charlie played with the two farm sheepdogs. He stroked the ears of one and rubbed the stomach of another, and talked about his horses. I could hear them snorting and stamping while he did this, because the house was set into a sloping field and the animals were sheltering in an open-sided cellar beneath it.

Unlike other farmers in 1975, who were intoxicated by modern tractors and just wanted to become more and more mechanised, Charlie preferred horse power. This was, it has to be said, largely because he was short of funds. When he had started farming the family farm four years earlier, he had milked cows. He had done this - he explained - in a highly disagreeable manner. As he did not have the money to build a milking- parlour he had bought a second-hand 'milking-bale'. This was a portable, half-collapsing, rusty shack with milking machines in it, which he towed out to whatever field the cows were grazing in. They then had to be reluctantly chased into it, and the milk that came out of them had to be dragged in churns to the top of the farm's bumpy drive by 8 a.m. The only way to get it there was on a tractor, and, of course, because the tractor was rusty and half-collapsing, too, it would never start. Horses were the answer. They were cheap, reliable and, as Charlie was fond of saying, you never go into the barn and find that the tractors have produced a baby - whereas (with a minuscule amount of forward planning) this happens every year with horses.

While he talked, I kept gazing at him. When we had gone out in our teens he had been short - barely five foot three, my height - with huge hands and feet. And though I had liked his character and enjoyed being with him, I had not found him that attractive. But he had changed. He had grown very nearly a foot and lost all his adolescent awkwardness. Now rather scarily sure of himself, he was tall and slender, with long light brown hair, a bony face with a very straight nose, large hazel eyes and a wonderful full, wide mouth. His surroundings, too, had immense, ramshackle charm. The frames were falling out of the tiny wooden windows, there were thick cobwebs on the low beamed ceiling and rain kept hissing down the big open chimney on to the fire. It was the sort of house an impoverished Thomas Hardy hero

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might live in. In fact, it was exactly like that, because the house had only recently been used as the setting for a series of dramatised Thomas Hardy short stories. The film crew had been attracted by the picturesque, old-fashioned buildings at Bettiscombe and the presence of working-horses, and only found fault with the furniture in Charlie's cottage. So a props man had hurriedly run-up some rustic-looking tables, cupboards and settles - which Charlie was still using. As he had also been an extra, and been 'styled' by a make-up artist, he even looked more authentically rural than before, with his heavy sideburns. (His friends had all been extras, too, which meant that they, too, had a theatrical rusticity. In fact that little pocket of West Dorset was pretty much changed for ever by the BBC.)

It suddenly seemed a wonderful idea to go out with Charlie again. After all, I knew already that he was gentle, kind and liked me. The same thought seemed to strike him, too, because, after an hour or so, he strayed on to the subject of how unhappy he was with his live-in partner: how she shouted at him and bad-temperedly threw plates, and the whole relationship was on the point of collapse . . .

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