

Chapter V  
WEDDING AT THE MARSH

It was a beautiful sunny day for the wedding, a muddy earth but a bright sky. They had three cabs and two big closed-in vehicles. Everybody crowded in the parlour in excitement. Anna was still upstairs. Her father kept taking a nip of brandy. He was handsome in his black coat and grey trousers. His voice was hearty but troubled. His wife came down in dark grey silk with lace, and a touch of peacock blue in her bonnet. Her little body was very sure and definite. Brangwen was thankful she was there, to sustain him among all these people.

The carriages! The Nottingham Mrs. Brangwen, in silk brocade, stands in the doorway saying who must go with whom. There is a great bustle. The front door is opened, and the wedding guests are walking down the garden path, whilst those still waiting peer through the window, and the little crowd at the gate gorges and stretches. How funny such dressed-up people look in the winter sunshine!

They are gone — another lot! There begins to be more room. Anna comes down blushing and very shy, to be viewed in her white silk and her veil. Her mother-in-law surveys her objectively, twitches the white train, arranges the folds of the veil and asserts herself.

Loud exclamations from the window that the bridegroom's carriage has just passed.

"Where's your hat, father, and your gloves?" cries the bride, stamping her white slipper, her eyes flashing through her veil. He hunts round — his hair is ruffled. Everybody has gone but the bride and her father. He is ready—his face very red and daunted. Tilly dithers in the little porch, waiting to open the door. A waiting woman walks round Anna, who asks:

"Am I all right?"

She is ready. She bridles herself and looks queenly. She waves her hand sharply to her father:

"Come here!"

He goes. She puts her hand very lightly on his arm, and holding her bouquet like a shower, stepping, oh, very graciously, just a little impatient with her father for being so red in the face, she sweeps slowly past the fluttering Tilly, and down the path. There are hoarse shouts at the gate, and all her floating foamy whiteness passes slowly into the cab.

Her father notices her slim ankle and foot as she steps up: a child's foot. His heart is hard with tenderness. But she is in ecstasies with herself for making such a lovely spectacle. All the way she sat flamboyant with bliss because it

was all so lovely. She looked down solicitously at her bouquet: white roses and lilies-of-the-valley and tube-roses and maidenhair fern — very rich and cascade like.

Her father sat bewildered with all this strangeness, his heart was so full it felt hard, and he couldn't think of anything.

The church was decorated for Christmas, dark with evergreens, cold and snowy with white flowers. He went vaguely down to the altar. How long was it since he had gone to be married himself? He was not sure whether he was going to be married now, or what he had come for. He had a troubled notion that he had to do something or other. He saw his wife's bonnet, and wondered why *she* wasn't there with him.

They stood before the altar. He was staring up at the east window, that glowed intensely, a sort of blue purple: it was deep blue glowing, and some crimson, and little yellow flowers held fast in veins of shadow, in a heavy web of darkness. How it burned alive in radiance among its black web.

"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" He felt somebody touch him. He started. The words still re-echoed in his memory, but were drawing off.

"Me," he said hastily.

Anna bent her head and smiled in her veil. How absurd he was.

Brangwen was staring away at the burning blue window at the back of the altar, and wondering vaguely, with pain, if he ever should get old, if he ever should feel arrived and established. He was here at Anna's wedding. Well, what right had he to feel responsible, like a father? He was still as unsure and unfixated as when he had married himself. His wife and he! With a pang of anguish he realized what uncertainties they both were. He was a man of forty five. Forty five! In five more years fifty. Then sixty — then seventy — then it was finished. My God — and one still was so unestablished!

How did one grow old — how could one become confident? He wished he felt older. Why, what difference was there, as far as he felt matured or completed, between him now and him at his own wedding? He might be getting married over again — he and his wife. He felt himself tiny, a little, upright figure on a plain circled round with the immense, roaring sky: he and his wife, two little, upright figures walking across this plain, whilst the heavens shimmered and roared about them. When did one come to an end? In which direction was it finished? There was no end, no finish, only this roaring vast space. Did one never get old, never die? That was the clue. He exulted strangely, with torture. He would go on with his wife, he and she like two children camping in the plains. What was sure but the endless sky? But that was so sure, so boundless.

Still the royal blue colour burned and blazed and sported itself in the web of darkness before him, unwearyingly rich and splendid. How rich and splendid

his own life was, red and burning and blazing and sporting itself in the dark meshes of his body: and his wife, how she glowed and burned dark within her meshes! Always it was so unfinished and unformed!

There was a loud noise of the organ. The whole party was trooping to the vestry. There was a blotted, scrawled book — and that young girl putting back her veil in her vanity, and laying her hand with the wedding-ring self-consciously conspicuous, and signing her name proudly because of the vain spectacle she made:

“Anna Theresa Lensky.”

“Anna Theresa Lensky” — what a vain, independent minx she was! The bridegroom, slender in his black swallow-tail and grey trousers, solemn as a young solemn cat, was writing seriously:

“William Brangwen.”

That looked more like it.

“Come and sign, father” cried the imperious young hussy.

“Thomas Brangwen — clumsy fist” he said to himself as he signed.

Then his brother, a big, sallow fellow with black side whiskers wrote:

“Alfred Brangwen.”

“How many more Brangwens?” said Tom Brangwen, ashamed of the too frequent recurrence of his family name.

When they were out again in the sunshine, and he saw the frost hoary and blue among the long grass under the tombstones, the holly berries overhead twinkling scarlet as the bells rang, the yew trees hanging their black, motionless, ragged boughs, everything seemed like a vision.

The marriage party went across the graveyard to the wall, mounted it by the little steps, and descended. Oh, a vain white peacock of a bride perching herself on the top of the wall and giving her hand to the bridegroom on the other side, to be helped down! The vanity of her white, slim, daintily stepping feet, and her arched neck. And the regal impudence with which she seemed to dismiss them all, the others, parents and wedding guests, as she went with her young husband.

In the cottage big fires were burning, there were dozens of glasses on the table, and holly and mistletoe hanging up. The wedding party crowded in, and Tom Brangwen, becoming roisterous, poured out drinks. Everybody must drink. The bells were ringing away against the windows.

“Lift your glasses up” shouted Tom Brangwen from the parlour “lift your glasses up, an’ drink to the hearth an’ home — hearth an’ home, an’ may they enjoy it.”

“Night an’ day, an’ may they enjoy it” shouted Frank Brangwen, in addition.

“Hammer an’ tongs, and may they enjoy it” shouted Alfred Brangwen, the saturnine.

“Fill your glasses up, an’ let’s have it all over again” shouted Tom Brangwen.

“Hearth an’ home, an’ may ye enjoy it.”

There was a ragged shout of the company in response.

“Bed an’ blessin’, an’ may ye enjoy it” shouted Frank Brangwen.

There was a swelling chorus in answer.

“Comin’ and goin’, an’ may ye enjoy it” shouted the saturnine Alfred Brangwen, and the men roared by now boldly, and the women said, “Just hark, now!”

There was a touch of scandal in the air.

Then the party rolled off in the carriages, full speed back to the Marsh, to a large meal of the high tea order, which lasted for an hour and a half. The bride and bridegroom sat at the head of the table, very prim and shining both of them, wordless, whilst the company raged down the table.

The Brangwen men had brandy in their tea, and were becoming unmanageable. The saturnine Alfred had glittering, unseeing eyes, and a strange, fierce way of laughing that showed his teeth. His wife glowered at him and jerked her head at him like a snake. He was oblivious. Frank Brangwen, the butcher, flushed and florid and handsome, roared echoes to his two brothers. Tom Brangwen, in his solid fashion, was letting himself go at last.

These three brothers dominated the whole company. Tom Brangwen wanted to make a speech. For the first time in his life, he must spread himself wordily.

“Marriage” he began, his eyes twinkling and yet quite profound, for he was deeply serious and hugely amused at the same time, “Marriage” he said, speaking in the slow, full-mouthed way of the Brangwens, “is what we’re made for —”

“Let him talk” said Alfred Brangwen, slowly and inscrutably, “let him talk.” Mrs. Alfred darted indignant eyes at her husband.

“A man” continued Tom Brangwen, “enjoys being a man: for what purpose was he made a man, if not to enjoy it?”

“That a true word” said Frank, floridly.

“And likewise” continued Tom Brangwen, “a woman enjoys being a woman: at least we surmise she does —”

“Oh, don’t you bother —” called a farmer’s wife.

“You may back your life they’d be summisin’.” said Frank’s wife.

“Now” continued Tom Brangwen “for a man to be a man, it takes a woman —”

“It does that” said a woman grimly.

“And for a woman to be a woman, it takes a man —” continued Tom Brangwen.

“All speak up, men” chimed in a feminine voice.

“Therefore we have marriage” continued Tom Brangwen.

“Hold, hold” said Alfred Brangwen. “Don’t run us off our legs.”

And in dead silence the glasses were filled. The bride and bridegroom, two children, sat with intent, shining faces at the head of the table, abstracted.

“There’s no marriage in heaven” went on Tom Brangwen; “but on earth there is marriage.”

“That’s the difference between ’em” said Alfred Brangwen, mocking.

“Alfred” said Tom Brangwen “keep your remarks till afterwards, and then we’ll thank you for them. — There’s very little else, on earth, but marriage. You can talk about making money, or saving souls. You can save your own soul seven times over, and you may have a mint of money, but your soul goes gnawin’, gnawin’, gnawin’, and it says there’s something it must have. In heaven there is no marriage. But on earth there is marriage, else heaven drops out, and there’s no bottom to it.”

“Just hark you now” said Frank’s wife.

“Go on, Thomas” said Alfred sardonically.

“If we’ve got to be Angels” went on Tom Brangwen, haranguing the company at large, “and if there is no such thing as a man nor a woman amongst them, then it seems to me as a married couple makes one Angel.”

“It’s the brandy” said Alfred Brangwen wearily.

“For” said Tom Brangwen, and the company was listening to the conundrum, “an Angel can’t be less than a human being. And if it was only the soul of a man minus the man, then it would be less than a human being.”

“Decidedly” said Alfred.

And a laugh went round the table. But Tom Brangwen was inspired.

“An Angel’s got to be more than a human being” he continued. “So I say, an Angel is the soul of man and woman in one: they rise united at the Judgment Day, as one Angel —”

“Praising the Lord” said Frank.

“Praising the Lord” repeated Tom.

“And what about the women left over?” asked Alfred, jeering. The company was getting uneasy.

“That I can’t tell. How do I know as there is anybody left over at the Judgment Day? Let that be. What I say is, that when a man’s soul and a woman’s soul unites together — that makes an Angel —”

“I dunno about souls. I know as one plus one makes three, sometimes” said Frank. But he had the laugh to himself.

“Bodies and souls, it’s the same” said Tom.

“And what about your missis, who was married afore you knew her?” asked Alfred, set on edge by this discourse.

“That I can’t tell you. If I am to become an Angel, it’ll be my married soul, and not my single soul. It’ll not be the soul of me when I was a lad: for I hadn’t a soul as would *make* an Angel then.”

“I can always remember” said Frank’s wife “when our Harold was bad, he did nothink but see an angel at th’ back o’ th’ lookin’ glass. ‘Look, mother’ ’e said, ‘at that angel!’ ‘Theer isn’t no angel, my duck’ I said, but he wouldn’t have it. I took th’ lookin’ glass off’n th’ dressin’-table, but it made no difference. He kep’ on sayin’ it was there. My word, it did give me a turn. I thought for sure as I’d lost him.”

“I can remember” said another man, Tom’s sister’s husband, “my mother gave me a good hidin’ once, for sayin’ I’d got an angel up my nose. She seed me pokin’, an’ she said: ‘What are you pokin’ at your nose for — give over.’ ‘There’s an angel up it,’ I said, an’ she fetched me such a wipe. But there was. We used

to call them thistle things 'angels' as wafts about. An' I'd pushed one o' these up my nose, for some reason or other."

"It's wonderful what children will get up their noses" said Frank's wife. "I c'n remember our Hemmie, she shoved one o' them bluebell things out o' th' middle of a bluebell, what they call 'candles', up her nose, and oh, we had some work! I'd seen her stickin' 'em on the end of her nose, like, but I never thought she'd be so soft as to shove it right up. She was a gel of eight or more. Oh, my word, we got a crochet hook an' I don't know what...."

Tom Brangwen's mood of inspiration began to pass away. He forgot all about it, and was soon roaring and shouting with the rest. Outside the wake came, singing the carols. They were invited into the bursting house. They had two fiddles and a piccolo. There in the parlour they played carols, and the whole company sang them at the top of its voice. Only the bride and bridegroom sat with shining eyes and strange, bright faces, and scarcely sang, or only with just moving lips.

The wake departed, and the guysers came. There was loud applause, and shouting and excitement as the old mystery play of St. George, in which every man present had acted as a boy, proceeded, with banging and thumping of club and dripping pan.

"By Jove, I got a crack once, when I was playin' Beelzebub" said Tom Brangwen, his eyes full of water with laughing. "It knocked all th' sense out of me as you'd crack an egg. But I tell you, when I come to, I played Old Johnny Roger with St. George, I did that."

He was shaking with laughter. Another knock came at the door. There was a hush.

"It's th' cab" said somebody from the door.

"Walk in" shouted Tom Brangwen, and a red-faced grinning man entered.

"Now, you two, get yourselves ready an' off to blanket fair" shouted Tom Brangwen. "Strike a daisy, but if you're not off like a blink o' lightnin', you shanna go, you s'll sleep separate."

Anna rose silently and went to change her dress. Will Brangwen would have gone out, but Tilly came with his hat and coat. The youth was helped on.

"Well, here's luck, my boy" shouted his father.

"When th' fat's in th' fire, let it frizzle," admonished his uncle Frank.

"Fair and *softly* does it, fair an' *softly* does it," cried his aunt, Frank's wife, contrary.

“You don’t want to fall over yourself” said his uncle by marriage. “You’re not a bull at a gate.”

“Let a man have his own road” said Tom Brangwen testily. “Don’t be so free of your advice — it’s his wedding this time, not yours.”

“E don’t want many signposts” said his father. “There’s some roads a man has to be led, an’ there’s some roads a boss-eyed man can only follow wi’ one eye shut. But this road can’t be lost by a blind man nor a boss-eyed man nor a cripple — and he’s neither, thank God.”

“Don’t you be so sure o’ your walkin’ powers” cried Frank’s wife. “There’s many a man gets no further than halfway, nor can’t to save his life, let him live for ever.”

“Why, how do you know?” said Alfred.

“It’s plain enough in th’ looks o’ some” retorted Lizzie, his sister-in-law.

The youth stood with a faint, half-hearing smile on his face. He was tense and abstracted. These things, or anything, scarcely touched him.

Anna came down, in her day dress, very elusive. She kissed everybody, men and women, Will Brangwen shook hands with everybody, kissed his mother, who began to cry, and the whole party went surging out to the cab.

The young couple were shut up, last injunctions shouted at them.

“Drive on” shouted Tom Brangwen.

The cab rolled off. They saw the light diminish under the ash trees. Then the whole party, quietened, went indoors.

“They’ll have three good fires burning,” said Tom Brangwen, looking at his watch. “I told Emma to make ’em up at nine, an’ then leave the door on th’ latch. It’s only half-past. They’ll have three fires burning, an’ lamps lighted, an’ Emma will ha’ warmed th’ bed wi’ th’ warmin’ pan. So I s’d think they’ll be all right.”

The party was much quieter. They talked of the young couple.

“She said she didn’t want a servant in” said Tom Brangwen. “The house isn’t big enough, she’d always have the creature under her nose. Emma’ll do what is wanted of her, an’ they’ll be to themselves.”

“It’s best” said Lizzie “you’re more free.”

The party talked on slowly. Brangwen looked at his watch.



“Let’s go an’ give ’em a carol” he said. “We s’ll find th’ fiddles at the ‘Cock an’ Robin’.”

“Ay, come on” said Frank.

Alfred rose in silence. The brother-in-law and one of Will’s brothers rose also.

The five men went out. The night was flashing with stars. Sirius blazed like a signal at the side of the hill, Orion, stately and magnificent, was sloping along.

Tom walked with his brother, Alfred. The men’s heels rang on the ground.

“It’s a fine night” said Tom.

“Ay” said Alfred.

“Nice to get out.”

“Ay.”

The brothers walked close together, the bond of blood strong between them. Tom always felt very much the junior to Alfred.

“It’s a long while since *you* left home,” he said.

“Ay,” said Alfred. “I thought I was getting a bit oldish — but I’m not. It’s the things you’ve got as gets worn out, it’s not you yourself.”

“Why, what’s worn out?”

“Most folks as I’ve anything to do with — as has anything to do with me. They all break down. You’ve got to go on by yourself, if it’s only to perdition. There’s nobody going alongside even there.”

Tom Brangwen meditated this.

“Maybe you was never broken in” he said.

“No, I never was” said Alfred proudly.

And Tom felt his elder brother despised him a little. He winced under it.

“Everybody’s got a way of their own” he said, stubbornly. “It’s only a dog as hasn’t. An’ them as can’t take what they give an’ give what they take, they must go by themselves, or get a dog as’ll follow ’em.”

“They can do without the dog” said his brother. And again Tom Brangwen was humble, thinking his brother was bigger than himself. But if he was, he was. And if it were finer to go alone, it was: he did not want to go for all that.

They went over the field, where a thin, keen wind blew round the ball of the hill, in the starlight. They came to the stile, and to the side of Anna's house. The lights were out, only on the blinds of the rooms downstairs, and of a bedroom upstairs, firelight flickered.

"We'd better leave 'em alone" said Alfred Brangwen.

"Nay, nay" said Tom. "We'll carol 'em, for th' last time."

And in a quarter of an hour's time, eleven silent, rather tipsy men scrambled over the wall, and into the garden by the yew trees, outside the windows where faint firelight glowered on the blinds. There came a shrill sound, two violins and a piccolo shrilling on the frosty air.

"In the fields with their flocks abiding." A commotion of men's voices broke out singing in ragged unison.

Anna Brangwen had started up, listening, when the music began. She was afraid.

"It's the wake" he whispered.

She remained tense, her heart beating heavily, possessed with strange, strong fear. Then there came the burst of men's singing, rather uneven. She strained still, listening.

"It's Dad" she said, in a low voice. They were silent, listening.

"And my father" he said.

She listened still. But she was sure. She sank down again into bed, into his arms. He held her very close, kissing her. The hymn rambled on outside, all the men singing their best, having forgotten everything else under the spell of the fiddles and the tune. The firelight glowed against the darkness in the room. Anna could hear her father singing with gusto.

"Aren't they silly" she whispered.

And they crept closer, closer together, hearts beating to one another. And even as the hymn rolled on, they ceased to hear it.