Angel Clare’s Story

[Note. If the reader should require more introduction to this narrative than the above title, it may be said I had the privilege recently of examining the papers of the James family of Marnhull, and that amongst them found the following document, now published with the consent of the family. There was no date attached, but internal evidence suggests that it must have been composed in 1915 or 1916. The writer, Mr Michael James, was born in 1858, and died in 1928.]

I’ve read Mr Hardy’s account. In fact I’ve read each version, as he has tinkered with it. How could I not, since I was so deeply involved. And I would have let his account rest, but that as I come closer to death, I worry that my grandchildren, and their children, may sometime read Mr Hardy’s powerful and disturbing book, and I will not be alive to tell them how it seemed to me. So in the end I’ve decided to write it down for them. Mr Hardy is a fair, even a generous man, and he has a sympathetic imagination, but it was Tess he knew, not me; it was her story he was telling. And though he was in court, and heard my testimony, and faithfully embodies some of my thoughts and feelings in his account, I do have something more to say, though only this rotten fever, and the consciousness of my mortality and his book’s apparent immortality, have persuaded me to write. Perhaps it would have been simpler if I had let him interview me back in 1889; but it was too painful then, and I was too angry.

Where should I begin? Well, one of the things that seems most important now is the class business. I think, since I came back from Brazil, I have been as nearly free of a consciousness of class as an Englishman can be, but when I first went to Talbothays, I had only got as far as an indifference to the forms and observances of the society I grew up in. When I began to learn agriculture by staying for a while and working on various kinds of farms, I felt towards the workers mostly a good-humoured condescension.
At Talbothays things were rather different, in that some of the labourers lived in. But still at first I kept myself to myself, and hardly noticed the special arrangements that were made for me, to keep me from too intimate contact with the workfolk, thought nothing of the curtseying and the pulling of the forelock and the sirring. My whole life had been conducted thus far with such an accompaniment, directed at my parents when I was younger, of course, but accorded to me as soon as I began to look like a man. It was like the air I breathed.

When I arrived at Talbothays I thought myself a radical, a rebel. I had rejected the religious faith of my father some years before; now I was rejecting the sterile narrow intellectual life of my brothers, returning (in the sense that some of my ancestors, certainly, were agriculturists) to the dynasties-outlasting process of getting food for man's body. Ploughing, or shearing, or milking, I thought, no-one would have power to tell me how to think or what to believe — there would be intellectual liberty. And I was right, I still think, in a limited way, so long as I could be master of my own land, and could associate only with those who respected my freedom; it might have worked in Australia, or South Africa. But never in England. Of course I hoped to make money as well, but it was the ideal of freedom and idea of return, of working to fulfil mankind's most basic need, that drew me to it. Romantic, of course, sentimental, even, though I think I have in late years made something real out of the half-practical idealism.

I have just re-read what Mr Hardy wrote about my life before Tess arrived at Talbothays. It still seems odd to see myself called Angel, but I suppose he had his ironic purpose. Can you imagine my father and mother calling a child of theirs Angel? But Mr Hardy probably would have made it Jesus if we were in the custom of using the name, as the Spanish are. But, aside from the tendency to make me speak like my father, which I think I had got out of the habit of doing by the time I left school, I cannot really disagree with the image of me he presents as rising out of the past. (I noticed, by the way, that in the manuscript of his account of these events which Mr Hardy gave to the British Museum a few years ago, and which I went up to town specially to look at before I set to writing this — what — explanation, he said at first that I loomed out of the past. There is an ominous quality in 'loom' which he must have regretted forgoing in favour of the much more positive, even organic 'rise'. But I suppose too much prefiguring of the disaster,