

'Ay, she's coming soon,' said Bob. 'She has gone to this aunt's at Melchester to get her things packed, and suchlike, or she would have come with me. I am going to meet the coach at the King's Arms, Casterbridge, on Sunday, at one o'clock. To show what a capital sort of wife she'll be, I may tell you that she wanted to come by the Mercury, because 'tis a little cheaper than the other. But I said, "For once in your life do it well, and come by the Royal Mail, and I'll pay." I can have the pony and trap to fetch her, I suppose, as 'tis too far for her to walk?'

'Of course you can, Bob, or anything else. And I'll do all I can to give you a good wedding feast.'

## XVI. THEY MAKE READY FOR THE ILLUSTRIOUS STRANGER

Preparations for Matilda's welcome, and for the event which was to follow, at once occupied the attention of the mill. The miller and his man had but dim notions of housewifery on any large scale; so the great wedding cleaning was kindly supervised by Mrs. Garland, Bob being mostly away during the day with his brother, the trumpet-major, on various errands, one of which was to buy paint and varnish for the gig that Matilda was to be fetched in, which he had determined to decorate with

his own hands.

By the widow's direction the old familiar incrustation of shining dirt, imprinted along the back of the settle by the heads of countless jolly sitters, was scrubbed and scraped away; the brown circle round the nail whereon the miller hung his hat, stained by the brim in wet weather, was whitened over; the tawny smudges of bygone shoulders in the passage were removed without regard to a certain genial and historical value which they had acquired. The face of the clock, coated with verdigris as thick as a diachylon plaister, was rubbed till the figures emerged into day; while, inside the case of the same chronometer, the cobwebs that formed triangular hammocks, which the pendulum could hardly wade through, were cleared away at one swoop.

Mrs. Garland also assisted at the invasion of worm-eaten cupboards, where layers of ancient smells lingered on in the stagnant air, and recalled to the reflective nose the many good things that had been kept there. The upper floors were scrubbed with such abundance of water that the old-established death-watches, wood-lice, and flour-worms were all drowned, the suds trickling down into the room below in so lively and novel a manner as to convey the romantic notion that the miller lived in a cave with dripping stalactites.

They moved what had never been moved before--the oak coffer, containing the miller's wardrobe--a tremendous weight, what with its locks, hinges,

nails, dirt, framework, and the hard stratification of old jackets, waistcoats, and knee-breeches at the bottom, never disturbed since the miller's wife died, and half pulverized by the moths, whose flattened skeletons lay amid the mass in thousands.

'It fairly makes my back open and shut!' said Loveday, as, in obedience to Mrs. Garland's direction, he lifted one corner, the grinder and David assisting at the others. 'All together: speak when ye be going to heave. Now!'

The pot covers and skimmers were brought to such a state that, on examining them, the beholder was not conscious of utensils, but of his own face in a condition of hideous elasticity. The broken clock-line was mended, the kettles rocked, the creeper nailed up, and a new handle put to the warming-pan. The large household lantern was cleaned out, after three years of uninterrupted accumulation, the operation yielding a conglomerate of candle-snuffs, candle-ends, remains of matches, lamp-black, and eleven ounces and a half of good grease--invaluable as dubbing for skitty boots and ointment for cart-wheels.

Everybody said that the mill residence had not been so thoroughly scoured for twenty years. The miller and David looked on with a sort of awe tempered by gratitude, tacitly admitting by their gaze that this was beyond what they had ever thought of. Mrs. Garland supervised all with disinterested benevolence. It would never have done, she said, for his future daughter-in-law to see the house in its original state. She would

have taken a dislike to him, and perhaps to Bob likewise.

'Why don't ye come and live here with me, and then you would be able to see to it at all times?' said the miller as she bustled about again. To which she answered that she was considering the matter, and might in good time. He had previously informed her that his plan was to put Bob and his wife in the part of the house that she, Mrs. Garland, occupied, as soon as she chose to enter his, which relieved her of any fear of being incommoded by Matilda.

The cooking for the wedding festivities was on a proportionate scale of thoroughness. They killed the four supernumerary chickens that had just begun to crow, and the little curly-tailed barrow pig, in preference to the sow; not having been put up fattening for more than five weeks it was excellent small meat, and therefore more delicate and likely to suit a town-bred lady's taste than the large one, which, having reached the weight of fourteen score, might have been a little gross to a cultured palate. There were also provided a cold chine, stuffed veal, and two pigeon pies. Also thirty rings of black-pot, a dozen of white-pot, and ten knots of tender and well-washed chitterlings, cooked plain in case she should like a change.

As additional reserves there were sweetbreads, and five milts, sewed up at one side in the form of a chrysalis, and stuffed with thyme, sage, parsley, mint, groats, rice, milk, chopped egg, and other ingredients. They were afterwards roasted before a slow fire, and eaten hot.

The business of chopping so many herbs for the various stuffings was found to be aching work for women; and David, the miller, the grinder, and the grinder's boy being fully occupied in their proper branches, and Bob being very busy painting the gig and touching up the harness, Loveday called in a friendly dragoon of John's regiment who was passing by, and he, being a muscular man, willingly chopped all the afternoon for a quart of strong, judiciously administered, and all other victuals found, taking off his jacket and gloves, rolling up his shirt-sleeves and unfastening his collar in an honourable and energetic way.

All windfalls and maggot-cored codlins were excluded from the apple pies; and as there was no known dish large enough for the purpose, the puddings were stirred up in the milking-pail, and boiled in the three-legged bell-metal crock, of great weight and antiquity, which every travelling tinker for the previous thirty years had tapped with his stick, coveted, made a bid for, and often attempted to steal.

In the liquor line Loveday laid in an ample barrel of Casterbridge 'strong beer.' This renowned drink--now almost as much a thing of the past as Falstaff's favourite beverage--was not only well calculated to win the hearts of soldiers blown dry and dusty by residence in tents on a hill-top, but of any wayfarer whatever in that land. It was of the most beautiful colour that the eye of an artist in beer could desire; full in body, yet brisk as a volcano; piquant, yet without a twang; luminous as an autumn sunset; free from streakiness of taste; but, finally, rather

heady. The masses worshipped it, the minor gentry loved it more than wine, and by the most illustrious county families it was not despised. Anybody brought up for being drunk and disorderly in the streets of its natal borough, had only to prove that he was a stranger to the place and its liquor to be honourably dismissed by the magistrates, as one overtaken in a fault that no man could guard against who entered the town unawares.

In addition, Mr. Loveday also tapped a hogshead of fine cider that he had had mellowing in the house for several months, having bought it of an honest down-country man, who did not colour, for any special occasion like the present. It had been pressed from fruit judiciously chosen by an old hand--Horner and Cleeves apple for the body, a few Tom-Putts for colour, and just a dash of Old Five-corners for sparkle--a selection originally made to please the palate of a well-known temperate earl who was a regular cider-drinker, and lived to be eighty-eight.

On the morning of the Sunday appointed for her coming Captain Bob Loveday set out to meet his bride. He had been all the week engaged in painting the gig, assisted by his brother at odd times, and it now appeared of a gorgeous yellow, with blue streaks, and tassels at the corners, and red wheels outlined with a darker shade. He put in the pony at half-past eleven, Anne looking at him from the door as he packed himself into the vehicle and drove off. There may be young women who look out at young men driving to meet their brides as Anne looked at Captain Bob, and yet

are quite indifferent to the circumstances; but they are not often met with.

So much dust had been raised on the highway by traffic resulting from the presence of the Court at the town further on, that brambles hanging from the fence, and giving a friendly scratch to the wanderer's face, were dingy as church cobwebs; and the grass on the margin had assumed a paper-

shaving hue. Bob's father had wished him to take David, lest, from want of recent experience at the whip, he should meet with any mishap; but, picturing to himself the awkwardness of three in such circumstances, Bob would not hear of this; and nothing more serious happened to his driving than that the wheel-marks formed two serpentine lines along the road during the first mile or two, before he had got his hand in, and that the horse shied at a milestone, a piece of paper, a sleeping tramp, and a wheelbarrow, just to make use of the opportunity of being in bad hands.

He entered Casterbridge between twelve and one, and, putting up at the Old Greyhound, walked on to the Bow. Here, rather dusty on the ledges of his clothes, he stood and waited while the people in their best summer dresses poured out of the three churches round him. When they had all gone, and a smell of cinders and gravy had spread down the ancient high-street, and the pie-dishes from adjacent bakehouses had all travelled past, he saw the mail coach rise above the arch of Grey's Bridge, a quarter of a mile distant, surmounted by swaying knobs, which proved to be the heads of the outside travellers.

'That's the way for a man's bride to come to him,' said Robert to himself with a feeling of poetry; and as the horn sounded and the horses clattered up the street he walked down to the inn. The knot of hostlers and inn-servants had gathered, the horses were dragged from the vehicle, and the passengers for Casterbridge began to descend. Captain Bob eyed them over, looked inside, looked outside again; to his disappointment Matilda was not there, nor her boxes, nor anything that was hers. Neither coachman nor guard had seen or heard of such a person at Melchester; and Bob walked slowly away.

Depressed by forebodings to an extent which took away nearly a third of his appetite, he sat down in the parlour of the Old Greyhound to a slice from the family joint of the landlord. This gentleman, who dined in his shirt-sleeves, partly because it was August, and partly from a sense that they would not be so fit for public view further on in the week, suggested that Bob should wait till three or four that afternoon, when the road-waggon would arrive, as the lost lady might have preferred that mode of conveyance; and when Bob appeared rather hurt at the suggestion, the landlord's wife assured him, as a woman who knew good life, that many genteel persons travelled in that way during the present high price of provisions. Loveday, who knew little of travelling by land, readily accepted her assurance and resolved to wait.

Wandering up and down the pavement, or leaning against some hot wall between the waggon-office and the corner of the street above, he passed

the time away. It was a still, sunny, drowsy afternoon, and scarcely a soul was visible in the length and breadth of the street. The office was not far from All Saints' Church, and the church-windows being open, he could hear the afternoon service from where he lingered as distinctly as if he had been one of the congregation. Thus he was mentally conducted through the Psalms, through the first and second lessons, through the burst of fiddles and clarionets which announced the evening-hymn, and well into the sermon, before any signs of the waggon could be seen upon the London road.

The afternoon sermons at this church being of a dry and metaphysical nature at that date, it was by a special providence that the waggon-office was placed near the ancient fabric, so that whenever the Sunday waggon was late, which it always was in hot weather, in cold weather, in wet weather, and in weather of almost every other sort, the rattle, dismounting, and swearing outside completely drowned the parson's voice within, and sustained the flagging interest of the congregation at precisely the right moment. No sooner did the charity children begin to writhe on their benches, and adult snores grow audible, than the waggon arrived.

Captain Loveday felt a kind of sinking in his poetry at the possibility of her for whom they had made such preparations being in the slow, unwieldy vehicle which crunched its way towards him; but he would not give in to the weakness. Neither would he walk down the street to meet the waggon, lest she should not be there. At last the broad wheels drew

up against the kerb, the waggoner with his white smock-frock, and whip as long as a fishing-line, descended from the pony on which he rode alongside, and the six broad-chested horses backed from their collars and shook themselves. In another moment something showed forth, and he knew that Matilda was there.

Bob felt three cheers rise within him as she stepped down; but it being Sunday he did not utter them. In dress, Miss Johnson passed his expectations--a green and white gown, with long, tight sleeves, a green silk handkerchief round her neck and crossed in front, a green parasol, and green gloves. It was strange enough to see this verdant caterpillar turn out of a road-waggon, and gracefully shake herself free from the bits of straw and fluff which would usually gather on the raiment of the grandest travellers by that vehicle.

'But, my dear Matilda,' said Bob, when he had kissed her three times with much publicity--the practical step he had determined on seeming to demand that these things should no longer be done in a corner--'my dear Matilda, why didn't you come by the coach, having the money for't and all?'

'That's my scrimping!' said Matilda in a delightful gush. 'I know you won't be offended when you know I did it to save against a rainy day!'

Bob, of course, was not offended, though the glory of meeting her had been less; and even if vexation were possible, it would have been out of

place to say so. Still, he would have experienced no little surprise had he learnt the real reason of his Matilda's change of plan. That angel had, in short, so wildly spent Bob's and her own money in the adornment of her person before setting out, that she found herself without a sufficient margin for her fare by coach, and had scrimped from sheer necessity.

'Well, I have got the trap out at the Greyhound,' said Bob. 'I don't know whether it will hold your luggage and us too; but it looked more respectable than the waggon on a Sunday, and if there's not room for the boxes I can walk alongside.'

'I think there will be room,' said Miss Johnson mildly. And it was soon very evident that she spoke the truth; for when her property was deposited on the pavement, it consisted of a trunk about eighteen inches long, and nothing more.

'O--that's all!' said Captain Loveday, surprised.

'That's all,' said the young woman assuringly. 'I didn't want to give trouble, you know, and what I have besides I have left at my aunt's.'

'Yes, of course,' he answered readily. 'And as it's no bigger, I can carry it in my hand to the inn, and so it will be no trouble at all.'

He caught up the little box, and they went side by side to the Greyhound;

and in ten minutes they were trotting up the Southern Road.

Bob did not hurry the horse, there being many things to say and hear, for which the present situation was admirably suited. The sun shone occasionally into Matilda's face as they drove on, its rays picking out all her features to a great nicety. Her eyes would have been called brown, but they were really eel-colour, like many other nice brown eyes; they were well-shaped and rather bright, though they had more of a broad shine than a sparkle. She had a firm, sufficient nose, which seemed to say of itself that it was good as noses go. She had rather a picturesque way of wrapping her upper in her lower lip, so that the red of the latter showed strongly. Whenever she gazed against the sun towards the distant hills, she brought into her forehead, without knowing it, three short vertical lines--not there at other times--giving her for the moment rather a hard look. And in turning her head round to a far angle, to stare at something or other that he pointed out, the drawn flesh of her neck became a mass of lines. But Bob did not look at these things, which, of course, were of no significance; for had she not told him, when they compared ages, that she was a little over two-and-twenty?

As Nature was hardly invented at this early point of the century, Bob's Matilda could not say much about the glamour of the hills, or the shimmering of the foliage, or the wealth of glory in the distant sea, as she would doubtless have done had she lived later on; but she did her best to be interesting, asking Bob about matters of social interest in the neighbourhood, to which she seemed quite a stranger.

'Is your watering-place a large city?' she inquired when they mounted the hill where the Overcombe folk had waited for the King.

'Bless you, my dear--no! 'Twould be nothing if it wasn't for the Royal Family, and the lords and ladies, and the regiments of soldiers, and the frigates, and the King's messengers, and the actors and actresses, and the games that go on.'

At the words 'actors and actresses,' the innocent young thing pricked up her ears.

'Does Elliston pay as good salaries this summer as in--?'

'O, you know about it then? I thought--'

'O no, no! I have heard of Budmouth--read in the papers, you know, dear Robert, about the doings there, and the actors and actresses, you know.'

'Yes, yes, I see. Well, I have been away from England a long time, and don't know much about the theatre in the town; but I'll take you there some day. Would it be a treat to you?'

'O, an amazing treat!' said Miss Johnson, with an ecstasy in which a close observer might have discovered a tinge of ghastliness.