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The Woodlanders

By

Thomas Hardy

CHAPTER I.

The rambler who, for old association or other reasons, should trace the forsaken coach-road running almost in a meridional line from Bristol to the south shore of England, would find himself during the latter half of his journey in the vicinity of some extensive woodlands, interspersed with apple-orchards. Here the trees, timber or fruit-bearing, as the case may be, make the wayside hedges ragged by their drip and shade, stretching over the road with easeful horizontality, as if they found the unsubstantial air an adequate support for their limbs. At one place, where a hill is crossed, the largest of the woods shows itself bisected by the high-way, as the head of thick hair is bisected by the white line of its parting. The spot is lonely.

The physiognomy of a deserted highway expresses solitude to a degree that is not reached by mere dales or downs, and bespeaks a tomb-like stillness more emphatic than that of glades and pools. The contrast of what is with what might be probably accounts for this. To step, for instance, at the place under notice, from the hedge of the plantation into the adjoining pale thoroughfare, and pause amid its emptiness for a moment, was to exchange by the act of a single stride the simple absence of human companionship for an incubus of the forlorn.

At this spot, on the lowering evening of a by-gone winter's day, there stood a man who had entered upon the scene much in the aforesaid

manner. Alighting into the road from a stile hard by, he, though by no means a "chosen vessel" for impressions, was temporarily influenced by some such feeling of being suddenly more alone than before he had emerged upon the highway.

It could be seen by a glance at his rather finical style of dress that he did not belong to the country proper; and from his air, after a while, that though there might be a sombre beauty in the scenery, music in the breeze, and a wan procession of coaching ghosts in the sentiment of this old turnpike-road, he was mainly puzzled about the way. The dead men's work that had been expended in climbing that hill, the blistered soles that had trodden it, and the tears that had wetted it, were not his concern; for fate had given him no time for any but practical things.

He looked north and south, and mechanically prodded the ground with his walking-stick. A closer glance at his face corroborated the testimony of his clothes. It was self-complacent, yet there was small apparent ground for such complacence. Nothing irradiated it; to the eye of the magician in character, if not to the ordinary observer, the expression enthroned there was absolute submission to and belief in a little assortment of forms and habitudes.

At first not a soul appeared who could enlighten him as he desired, or seemed likely to appear that night. But presently a slight noise of laboring wheels and the steady dig of a horse's shoe-tips became

audible; and there loomed in the notch of the hill and plantation that the road formed here at the summit a carrier's van drawn by a single horse. When it got nearer, he said, with some relief to himself, "'Tis Mrs. Dollery's--this will help me."

The vehicle was half full of passengers, mostly women. He held up his stick at its approach, and the woman who was driving drew rein.

"I've been trying to find a short way to Little Hintock this last half-hour, Mrs. Dollery," he said. "But though I've been to Great Hintock and Hintock House half a dozen times I am at fault about the small village. You can help me, I dare say?"

She assured him that she could--that as she went to Great Hintock her van passed near it--that it was only up the lane that branched out of the lane into which she was about to turn--just ahead. "Though," continued Mrs. Dollery, "'tis such a little small place that, as a town gentleman, you'd need have a candle and lantern to find it if ye don't know where 'tis. Bedad! I wouldn't live there if they'd pay me to. Now at Great Hintock you do see the world a bit."

He mounted and sat beside her, with his feet outside, where they were ever and anon brushed over by the horse's tail.

This van, driven and owned by Mrs. Dollery, was rather a movable attachment of the roadway than an extraneous object, to those who knew

it well. The old horse, whose hair was of the roughness and color of heather, whose leg-joints, shoulders, and hoofs were distorted by harness and drudgery from colthood--though if all had their rights, he ought, symmetrical in outline, to have been picking the herbage of some Eastern plain instead of tugging here--had trodden this road almost daily for twenty years. Even his subjection was not made congruous throughout, for the harness being too short, his tail was not drawn through the crupper, so that the breeching slipped awkwardly to one side. He knew every subtle incline of the seven or eight miles of ground between Hintock and Sherton Abbas--the market-town to which he journeyed--as accurately as any surveyor could have learned it by a Dumpy level.

The vehicle had a square black tilt which nodded with the motion of the wheels, and at a point in it over the driver's head was a hook to which the reins were hitched at times, when they formed a catenary curve from the horse's shoulders. Somewhere about the axles was a loose chain, whose only known purpose was to clink as it went. Mrs. Dollery, having to hop up and down many times in the service of her passengers, wore, especially in windy weather, short leggings under her gown for modesty's sake, and instead of a bonnet a felt hat tied down with a handkerchief, to guard against an earache to which she was frequently subject. In the rear of the van was a glass window, which she cleaned with her pocket-handkerchief every market-day before starting. Looking at the van from the back, the spectator could thus see through its interior a square piece of the same sky and landscape that he saw

without, but intruded on by the profiles of the seated passengers, who, as they rumbled onward, their lips moving and heads nodding in animated private converse, remained in happy unconsciousness that their mannerisms and facial peculiarities were sharply defined to the public eye.

This hour of coming home from market was the happy one, if not the happiest, of the week for them. Snugly ensconced under the tilt, they could forget the sorrows of the world without, and survey life and recapitulate the incidents of the day with placid smiles.

The passengers in the back part formed a group to themselves, and while the new-comer spoke to the proprietress, they indulged in a confidential chat about him as about other people, which the noise of the van rendered inaudible to himself and Mrs. Dollery, sitting forward.

"'Tis Barber Percombe--he that's got the waxen woman in his window at the top of Abbey Street," said one. "What business can bring him from his shop out here at this time and not a journeyman hair-cutter, but a master-barber that's left off his pole because 'tis not genteel!"

They listened to his conversation, but Mr. Percombe, though he had nodded and spoken genially, seemed indisposed to gratify the curiosity which he had aroused; and the unrestrained flow of ideas which had animated the inside of the van before his arrival was checked thenceforward.

Thus they rode on till they turned into a half-invisible little lane, whence, as it reached the verge of an eminence, could be discerned in the dusk, about half a mile to the right, gardens and orchards sunk in a concave, and, as it were, snipped out of the woodland. From this self-contained place rose in stealthy silence tall stems of smoke, which the eye of imagination could trace downward to their root on quiet hearth-stones festooned overhead with hams and flitches. It was one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world where may usually be found more meditation than action, and more passivity than meditation; where reasoning proceeds on narrow premises, and results in inferences wildly imaginative; yet where, from time to time, no less than in other places, dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely knit interdependence of the lives therein.

This place was the Little Hintock of the master-barber's search. The coming night gradually obscured the smoke of the chimneys, but the position of the sequestered little world could still be distinguished by a few faint lights, winking more or less ineffectually through the leafless boughs, and the undiscerned songsters they bore, in the form of balls of feathers, at roost among them.

Out of the lane followed by the van branched a yet smaller lane, at the corner of which the barber alighted, Mrs. Dollery's van going on to the larger village, whose superiority to the despised smaller one as an

exemplar of the world's movements was not particularly apparent in its means of approach.

"A very clever and learned young doctor, who, they say, is in league with the devil, lives in the place you be going to--not because there's anybody for'n to cure there, but because 'tis the middle of his district."

The observation was flung at the barber by one of the women at parting, as a last attempt to get at his errand that way.

But he made no reply, and without further pause the pedestrian plunged towards the umbrageous nook, and paced cautiously over the dead leaves which nearly buried the road or street of the hamlet. As very few people except themselves passed this way after dark, a majority of the denizens of Little Hintock deemed window-curtains unnecessary; and on this account Mr. Percombe made it his business to stop opposite the casements of each cottage that he came to, with a demeanor which showed that he was endeavoring to conjecture, from the persons and things he observed within, the whereabouts of somebody or other who resided here.

Only the smaller dwellings interested him; one or two houses, whose size, antiquity, and rambling appurtenances signified that notwithstanding their remoteness they must formerly have been, if they were not still, inhabited by people of a certain social standing, being neglected by him entirely. Smells of pomace, and the hiss of

fermenting cider, which reached him from the back quarters of other tenements, revealed the recent occupation of some of the inhabitants, and joined with the scent of decay from the perishing leaves underfoot.

Half a dozen dwellings were passed without result. The next, which stood opposite a tall tree, was in an exceptional state of radiance, the flickering brightness from the inside shining up the chimney and making a luminous mist of the emerging smoke. The interior, as seen through the window, caused him to draw up with a terminative air and watch. The house was rather large for a cottage, and the door, which opened immediately into the living-room, stood ajar, so that a ribbon of light fell through the opening into the dark atmosphere without. Every now and then a moth, decrepit from the late season, would flit for a moment across the out-coming rays and disappear again into the night.