

Interlopers at the Knap

By

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CHAPTER I

The north road from Casterbridge is tedious and lonely, especially in winter-time. Along a part of its course it connects with Long-Ash Lane, a monotonous track without a village or hamlet for many miles, and with very seldom a turning. Unapprized wayfarers who are too old, or too young, or in other respects too weak for the distance to be traversed, but who, nevertheless, have to walk it, say, as they look wistfully ahead, 'Once at the top of that hill, and I must surely see the end of Long-Ash Lane!' But they reach the hilltop, and Long-Ash Lane stretches in front as mercilessly as before.

Some few years ago a certain farmer was riding through this lane in the gloom of a winter evening. The farmer's friend, a dairyman, was riding beside him. A few paces in the rear rode the farmer's man. All three were well horsed on strong, round-barrelled cobs; and to be well horsed was to be in better spirits about Long-Ash Lane than poor pedestrians could attain to during its passage.

But the farmer did not talk much to his friend as he rode along. The enterprise which had brought him there filled his mind; for in truth it was important. Not altogether so important was it, perhaps, when estimated by its value to society at large; but if the true measure of a deed be proportionate to the space it occupies in the heart of him who undertakes it, Farmer Charles Darton's business to-night could hold its own with the business of kings.

He was a large farmer. His turnover, as it is called, was probably thirty thousand pounds a year. He had a great many draught horses, a great many milch cows, and of sheep a multitude. This comfortable position was, however, none of his own making. It had been created by his father, a man of a very different stamp from the present representative of the line.

Darton, the father, had been a one-idea'd character, with a buttoned-up pocket and a chink-like eye brimming with commercial subtlety. In Darton the son, this trade subtlety had become transmuted into emotional, and the harshness had disappeared; he would have been called a sad man but for his constant care not to divide himself from lively friends by piping notes out of harmony with theirs. Contemplative, he allowed his mind to be a quiet meeting-place for memories and hopes. So that, naturally enough, since succeeding to the agricultural calling, and up to his present age of thirty-two, he had neither advanced nor receded as a capitalist--a stationary result which did not agitate one of his unambitious, unstrategic nature, since he had all that he desired. The motive of his expedition to-night showed the same absence of anxious regard for Number One.

The party rode on in the slow, safe trot proper to night-time and bad roads, Farmer Darton's head jiggling rather unromantically up and down against the sky, and his motions being repeated with bolder emphasis by his friend Japheth Johns; while those of the latter were travestied in jerks still less softened by art in the person of the lad who attended them. A pair of whitish objects hung one on each side of the latter, bumping against him at each step, and still further spoiling the grace of his seat. On close inspection they might have been perceived to be open rush baskets--one containing a turkey, and the other some bottles of wine.

'D'ye feel ye can meet your fate like a man, neighbour Darton?' asked Johns, breaking a silence which had lasted while five-and-twenty hedgerow trees had glided by.

Mr. Darton with a half-laugh murmured, 'Ay--call it my fate! Hanging and wiving go by destiny.' And then they were silent again.

The darkness thickened rapidly, at intervals shutting down on the land in a perceptible flap, like the wave of a wing. The customary close of day was accelerated by a simultaneous blurring of the air. With the fall of night had come a mist just damp enough to incommode, but not sufficient to saturate them. Countrymen as they were--born, as may be said, with only an open door between them and the four seasons--they regarded the mist but as an added obscuration, and ignored its humid quality.

They were travelling in a direction that was enlivened by no modern current of traffic, the place of Darton's pilgrimage being an old-fashioned village--one of the Hintocks (several villages of that name, with a distinctive prefix or affix, lying thereabout)--where the people make the best cider and cider-wine in all Wessex, and where the dunghills smell of pomace instead of stable refuse as elsewhere. The lane was sometimes so narrow that the brambles of the hedge, which hung forward like anglers' rods over a stream, scratched their hats and curry-combed their whiskers as they passed. Yet this neglected lane had been a highway to Queen Elizabeth's subjects and the cavalcades of the past. Its day was over now, and its history as a national artery done for ever.

'Why I have decided to marry her,' resumed Darton (in a measured musical voice of confidence which revealed a good deal of his composition), as he glanced round to see that the lad was not too near, 'is not only that I like her, but that I can do no better, even from a fairly practical point of view. That I might ha' looked higher is possibly true, though it is really all nonsense. I have had experience enough in looking above me. "No more superior women for me," said I--you know when. Sally is a comely, independent, simple character, with no make-up about her, who'll think me as much a superior to her as I used to think--you know who I mean--was to me.'

'Ay,' said Johns. 'However, I shouldn't call Sally Hall simple. Primary, because no Sally is; secondary, because if some could be, this one wouldn't. 'Tis a wrong denomination to apply to a woman, Charles, and affects me, as your best man, like cold water. 'Tis like recommending a stage play by saying there's neither murder, villainy, nor harm of any sort in it, when that's what you've paid your half-crown to see.'

'Well; may your opinion do you good. Mine's a different one.' And turning the conversation from the philosophical to the practical, Darton expressed a hope that the said Sally had received what he'd sent on by the carrier that day.

Johns wanted to know what that was.

'It is a dress,' said Darton. 'Not exactly a wedding-dress; though she may use it as one if she likes. It is rather serviceable than showy--suitable for the winter weather.'

'Good,' said Johns. 'Serviceable is a wise word in a bridegroom. I commend ye, Charles.'

'For,' said Darton, 'why should a woman dress up like a rope-dancer because she's going to do the most solemn deed of her life except dying?'

'Faith, why? But she will, because she will, I suppose,' said Dairyman Johns.

'H'm,' said Darton.

The lane they followed had been nearly straight for several miles, but it now took a turn, and winding uncertainly for some distance forked into two. By night country roads are apt to reveal ungainly qualities which pass without observation during day; and though Darton had travelled this way before, he had not done so frequently, Sally having been wooed at the house of a relative near his own. He never remembered seeing at this spot a pair of alternative ways looking so equally probable as these two did now. Johns rode on a few steps.

'Don't be out of heart, sonny,' he cried. 'Here's a handpost. Enoch--come and climm this post, and tell us the way.'

The lad dismounted, and jumped into the hedge where the post stood under a tree.

'Unstrap the baskets, or you'll smash up that wine!' cried Darton, as the young man began spasmodically to climb the post, baskets and all.

'Was there ever less head in a brainless world?' said Johns. 'Here, simple Nocky, I'll do it.' He leapt off, and with much puffing climbed the post, striking a match when he reached the top, and moving the light along the arm, the lad standing and gazing at the spectacle.

'I have faced tantalization these twenty years with a temper as mild as milk!' said Japheth; 'but such things as this don't come short of devilry!' And flinging the match away, he slipped down to the ground.

'What's the matter?' asked Darton.

'Not a letter, sacred or heathen--not so much as would tell us the way to the great fireplace--ever I should sin to say it! Either the moss and mildew have eat away the words, or we have arrived in a land where the natyves have lost the art o' writing, and should ha' brought our compass like Christopher Columbus.'

'Let us take the straightest road,' said Darton placidly; 'I shan't be sorry to get there--'tis a tiresome ride. I would have driven if I had known.'

'Nor I neither, sir,' said Enoch. 'These straps plough my shoulder like a zull. If 'tis much further to your lady's home, Maister Darton, I shall ask to be let carry half of these good things in my innerds--hee, hee!'

'Don't you be such a reforming radical, Enoch,' said Johns sternly. 'Here, I'll take the turkey.'

This being done, they went forward by the right-hand lane, which ascended a hill, the left winding away under a plantation. The pit-a-pat of their horses' hoofs lessened up the slope; and the ironical directing-post stood in solitude as before, holding out its blank arms to the raw breeze, which brought a snore from the wood as if Skrymir the Giant were sleeping there.