

CHAPTER II

Three miles to the left of the travellers, along the road they had not followed, rose an old house with mullioned windows of Ham-hill stone, and chimneys of lavish solidity. It stood at the top of a slope beside King's-Hintock village-street; and immediately in front of it grew a large sycamore-tree, whose bared roots formed a convenient staircase from the road below to the front door of the dwelling. Its situation gave the house what little distinctive name it possessed, namely, 'The Knap.' Some forty yards off a brook dribbled past, which, for its size, made a great deal of noise. At the back was a dairy barton, accessible for vehicles and live-stock by a side 'drong.' Thus much only of the character of the homestead could be divined out of doors at this shady evening-time.

But within there was plenty of light to see by, as plenty was construed at Hintock. Beside a Tudor fireplace, whose moulded four-centred arch was nearly hidden by a figured blue-cloth blower, were seated two women--mother and daughter--Mrs. Hall, and Sarah, or Sally; for this was a part of the world where the latter modification had not as yet been effaced as a vulgarity by the march of intellect. The owner of the name was the young woman by whose means Mr. Darton proposed to put an end to his bachelor condition on the approaching day.

The mother's bereavement had been so long ago as not to leave much mark of its occurrence upon her now, either in face or clothes. She had resumed the mob-cap of her early married life, enlivening its whiteness by a few rose-du-Barry ribbons. Sally required no such aids to pinkness. Roseate good-nature lit up her gaze; her features showed curves of decision and judgment; and she might have been regarded without much mistake as a warm-hearted, quick-spirited, handsome girl.

She did most of the talking, her mother listening with a half-absent air, as she picked up fragments of red-hot wood ember with the tongs, and piled them upon the brands. But the number of speeches that passed was very small in proportion to the meanings exchanged. Long experience together often enabled them to see the course of thought in each other's minds without a word being spoken. Behind them, in the centre of the room, the

table was spread for supper, certain whiffs of air laden with fat vapours, which ever and anon entered from the kitchen, denoting its preparation there.

'The new gown he was going to send you stays about on the way like himself,' Sally's mother was saying.

'Yes, not finished, I daresay,' cried Sally independently. 'Lord, I shouldn't be amazed if it didn't come at all! Young men make such kind promises when they are near you, and forget 'em when they go away. But he doesn't intend it as a wedding-gown--he gives it to me merely as a gown to wear when I like--a travelling-dress is what it would be called by some. Come rathe or come late it don't much matter, as I have a dress of my own to fall back upon. But what time is it?'

She went to the family clock and opened the glass, for the hour was not otherwise discernible by night, and indeed at all times was rather a thing to be investigated than beheld, so much more wall than window was there in the apartment. 'It is nearly eight,' said she.

'Eight o'clock, and neither dress nor man,' said Mrs. Hall.

'Mother, if you think to tantalize me by talking like that, you are much mistaken! Let him be as late as he will--or stay away altogether--I don't care,' said Sally. But a tender, minute quaver in the negation showed that there was something forced in that statement.

Mrs. Hall perceived it, and drily observed that she was not so sure about Sally not caring. 'But perhaps you don't care so much as I do, after all,' she said. 'For I see what you don't, that it is a good and flourishing match for you; a very honourable offer in Mr. Darton. And I think I see a kind husband in him. So pray God 'twill go smooth, and wind up well.'

Sally would not listen to misgivings. Of course it would go smoothly, she asserted. 'How you are up and down, mother!' she went on. 'At this moment, whatever hinders him, we are not so anxious to see him as he is to be here, and his thought runs on before him, and settles down upon us like the star in the east. Hark!' she exclaimed, with a breath of relief, her eyes sparkling. 'I heard something. Yes--here they are!'

The next moment her mother's slower ear also distinguished the familiar reverberation occasioned by footsteps clambering up the roots of the sycamore.

'Yes it sounds like them at last,' she said. 'Well, it is not so very late after all, considering the distance.'

The footfall ceased, and they arose, expecting a knock. They began to think it might have been, after all, some neighbouring villager under Bacchic influence, giving the centre of the road a wide berth, when their doubts were dispelled by the new-comer's entry into the passage. The door of the room was gently opened, and there appeared, not the pair of travellers with whom we have already made acquaintance, but a pale-faced man in the garb of extreme poverty--almost in rags.

'O, it's a tramp--gracious me!' said Sally, starting back.

His cheeks and eye-orbits were deep concaves--rather, it might be, from natural weakness of constitution than irregular living, though there were indications that he had led no careful life. He gazed at the two women fixedly for a moment: then with an abashed, humiliated demeanour, dropped his glance to the floor, and sank into a chair without uttering a word.

Sally was in advance of her mother, who had remained standing by the fire. She now tried to discern the visitor across the candles.

'Why--mother,' said Sally faintly, turning back to Mrs. Hall. 'It is Phil, from Australia!'

Mrs. Hall started, and grew pale, and a fit of coughing seized the man with the ragged clothes. 'To come home like this!' she said. 'O, Philip--are you ill?'

'No, no, mother,' replied he impatiently, as soon as he could speak.

'But for God's sake how do you come here--and just now too?'

'Well, I am here,' said the man. 'How it is I hardly know. I've come home, mother, because I was driven to it. Things were against me out there, and went from bad to worse.'

'Then why didn't you let us know?--you've not writ a line for the last two or three years.'

The son admitted sadly that he had not. He said that he had hoped and thought he might fetch up again, and be able to send good news. Then he had been obliged to abandon that hope, and had finally come home from sheer necessity--previously to making a new start. 'Yes, things are very bad with me,' he repeated, perceiving their commiserating glances at his clothes.

They brought him nearer the fire, took his hat from his thin hand, which was so small and smooth as to show that his attempts to fetch up again had not been in a manual direction. His mother resumed her inquiries, and dubiously asked if he had chosen to come that particular night for any special reason.

For no reason, he told her. His arrival had been quite at random. Then Philip Hall looked round the room, and saw for the first time that the table was laid somewhat luxuriously, and for a larger number than themselves;

and that an air of festivity pervaded their dress. He asked quickly what was going on.

'Sally is going to be married in a day or two,' replied the mother; and she explained how Mr. Darton, Sally's intended husband, was coming there that night with the groomsman, Mr. Johns, and other details. 'We thought it must be their step when we heard you,' said Mrs. Hall.

The needy wanderer looked again on the floor. 'I see--I see,' he murmured. 'Why, indeed, should I have come to-night? Such folk as I are not wanted here at these times, naturally. And I have no business here--spoiling other people's happiness.'

'Phil,' said his mother, with a tear in her eye, but with a thinness of lip and severity of manner which were presumably not more than past events justified; 'since you speak like that to me, I'll speak honestly to you. For these three years you have taken no thought for us. You left home with a good supply of money, and strength and education, and you ought to have made good use of it all. But you come back like a beggar; and that you come in a very awkward time for us cannot be denied. Your return to-night may do us much harm. But mind--you are welcome to this home as long as it is mine. I don't wish to turn you adrift. We will make the best of a bad job; and I hope you are not seriously ill?'

'O no. I have only this infernal cough.'

She looked at him anxiously. 'I think you had better go to bed at once,' she said.

'Well--I shall be out of the way there,' said the son wearily. 'Having ruined myself, don't let me ruin you by being seen in these togs, for Heaven's sake. Who do you say Sally is going to be married to--a Farmer Darton?'

'Yes--a gentleman-farmer--quite a wealthy man. Far better in station than she could have expected. It is a good thing, altogether.'

'Well done, little Sal!' said her brother, brightening and looking up at her with a smile. 'I ought to have written; but perhaps I have thought of you all the more. But let me get out of sight. I would rather go and jump into the river than be seen here. But have you anything I can drink? I am confoundedly thirsty with my long tramp.'

'Yes, yes, we will bring something upstairs to you,' said Sally, with grief in her face.

'Ay, that will do nicely. But, Sally and mother--' He stopped, and they waited. 'Mother, I have not told you all,' he resumed slowly, still looking on the floor between his knees. 'Sad as what you see of me is, there's worse behind.'

His mother gazed upon him in grieved suspense, and Sally went and leant upon the bureau, listening for every sound, and sighing. Suddenly she turned round, saying, 'Let them come, I don't care! Philip, tell the worst, and take your time.'

'Well, then,' said the unhappy Phil, 'I am not the only one in this mess. Would to Heaven I were! But--'

'O, Phil!'

'I have a wife as destitute as I.'

'A wife?' said his mother.

'Unhappily!'

'A wife! Yes, that is the way with sons!'

'And besides--' said he.

'Besides! O, Philip, surely--'

'I have two little children.'

'Wife and children!' whispered Mrs. Hall, sinking down confounded.

'Poor little things!' said Sally involuntarily.

His mother turned again to him. 'I suppose these helpless beings are left in Australia?'

'No. They are in England.'

'Well, I can only hope you've left them in a respectable place.'

'I have not left them at all. They are here--within a few yards of us. In short, they are in the stable.'

'Where?'

'In the stable. I did not like to bring them indoors till I had seen you, mother, and broken the bad news a bit to you. They were very tired, and are resting out there on some straw.'

Mrs. Hall's fortitude visibly broke down. She had been brought up not without refinement, and was even more moved by such a collapse of genteel aims as this than a substantial dairyman's widow would in ordinary have been moved. 'Well, it must be borne,' she said, in a low voice, with her hands tightly joined. 'A starving son, a starving wife, starving children! Let it be. But why is this come to us now, to-day, to-night? Could no other misfortune happen to helpless women than this, which will quite upset my poor girl's chance of a happy life? Why have you done us this wrong, Philip? What respectable man will come here, and marry open-eyed into a family of vagabonds?'

'Nonsense, mother!' said Sally vehemently, while her face flushed. 'Charley isn't the man to desert me. But if he should be, and won't marry me because Phil's come, let him go and marry elsewhere. I won't be ashamed of my own flesh and blood for any man in England--not I!' And then Sally turned away and burst into tears.

'Wait till you are twenty years older and you will tell a different tale,' replied her mother.

The son stood up. 'Mother,' he said bitterly, 'as I have come, so I will go. All I ask of you is that you will allow me and mine to lie in your stable to-night. I give you my word that we'll be gone by break of day, and trouble you no further!'

Mrs. Hall, the mother, changed at that. 'O no,' she answered hastily; 'never shall it be said that I sent any of my own family from my door. Bring 'em in, Philip, or take me out to them.'

'We will put 'em all into the large bedroom,' said Sally, brightening, 'and make up a large fire. Let's go and help them in, and call Rebekah.' (Rebekah was the woman who assisted at the dairy and housework; she lived in a cottage hard by with her husband, who attended to the cows.)

Sally went to fetch a lantern from the back-kitchen, but her brother said, 'You won't want a light. I lit the lantern that was hanging there.'

'What must we call your wife?' asked Mrs. Hall.

'Helena,' said Philip.

With shawls over their heads they proceeded towards the back door.

'One minute before you go,' interrupted Philip. 'I--I haven't confessed all.'

'Then Heaven help us!' said Mrs. Hall, pushing to the door and clasping her hands in calm despair.

'We passed through Evershead as we came,' he continued, 'and I just looked in at the "Sow-and-Acorn" to see if old Mike still kept on there as usual. The carrier had come in from Sherton Abbas at that moment, and guessing that I was bound for this place--for I think he knew me--he asked me to bring on a dressmaker's parcel for Sally that was marked "immediate." My wife had walked on with the children. 'Twas a flimsy parcel, and the paper was torn, and I found on looking at it that it was a thick warm gown. I didn't wish you to see poor Helena in a shabby state. I was ashamed that you should--'twas not what she was born to. I untied the parcel in the road, took it on to her where she was waiting in the Lower Barn, and told her I had managed to get it for her, and that she was to ask no question. She, poor thing, must have supposed I obtained it on trust, through having reached a place where I was known, for she put it on gladly enough. She has it on now. Sally has other gowns, I daresay.'

Sally looked at her mother, speechless.

'You have others, I daresay!' repeated Phil, with a sick man's impatience. 'I thought to myself, "Better Sally cry than Helena freeze." Well, is the dress of great consequence? 'Twas nothing very ornamental, as far as I could see.'

'No--no; not of consequence,' returned Sally sadly, adding in a gentle voice, 'You will not mind if I lend her another instead of that one, will you?'

Philip's agitation at the confession had brought on another attack of the cough, which seemed to shake him to pieces. He was so obviously unfit to sit in a chair that they helped him upstairs at once; and having hastily given him a cordial and kindled the bedroom fire, they descended to fetch their unhappy new relations.