

CHAPTER V

That evening Sally was making 'pinner's' for the milkers, who were now increased by two, for her mother and herself no longer joined in milking the cows themselves. But upon the whole there was little change in the household economy, and not much in its appearance, beyond such minor particulars as that the crack over the window, which had been a hundred years coming, was a trifle wider; that the beams were a shade blacker; that the influence of modernism had supplanted the open chimney corner by a grate; that Rebekah, who had worn a cap when she had plenty of hair, had left it off now she had scarce any, because it was reported that caps were not fashionable; and that Sally's face had naturally assumed a more womanly and experienced cast.

Mrs. Hall was actually lifting coals with the tongs, as she had used to do.

'Five years ago this very night, if I am not mistaken--' she said, laying on an ember.

'Not this very night--though 'twas one night this week,' said the correct Sally.

'Well, 'tis near enough. Five years ago Mr. Darton came to marry you, and my poor boy Phil came home to die.' She sighed. 'Ah, Sally,' she presently said, 'if you had managed well Mr. Darton would have had you, Helena or none.'

'Don't be sentimental about that, mother,' begged Sally. 'I didn't care to manage well in such a case. Though I liked him, I wasn't so anxious. I would never have married the man in the midst of such a hitch as that was,' she added with decision; 'and I don't think I would if he were to ask me now.'

'I am not sure about that, unless you have another in your eye.'

'I wouldn't; and I'll tell you why. I could hardly marry him for love at this time o' day. And as we've quite enough to live on if we give up the dairy to-morrow, I should have no need to marry for any meaner reason . . . I am quite happy enough as I am, and there's an end of it.'

Now it was not long after this dialogue that there came a mild rap at the door, and in a moment there entered Rebekah, looking as though a ghost had arrived. The fact was that that accomplished skimmer and churner (now a resident in the house) had overheard the desultory observations between mother and daughter, and on opening the door to Mr. Darton thought the coincidence must have a grisly meaning in it. Mrs. Hall welcomed the farmer with warm surprise, as did Sally, and for a moment they rather wanted words.

'Can you push up the chimney-crook for me, Mr Darton? the notches hitch,' said the matron. He did it, and the homely little act bridged over the awkward consciousness that he had been a stranger for four years.

Mrs. Hall soon saw what he had come for, and left the principals together while she went to prepare him a late tea, smiling at Sally's recent hasty assertions of indifference, when she saw how civil Sally was. When tea was ready she joined them. She fancied that Darton did not look so confident as when he had arrived; but Sally was quite light-hearted, and the meal passed pleasantly.

About seven he took his leave of them. Mrs. Hall went as far as the door to light him down the slope. On the doorstep he said frankly--'I came to ask your daughter to marry me; chose the night and everything, with an eye to a favourable answer. But she won't.'

'Then she's a very ungrateful girl!' emphatically said Mrs. Hall.

Darton paused to shape his sentence, and asked, 'I--I suppose there's nobody else more favoured?'

'I can't say that there is, or that there isn't,' answered Mrs. Hall. 'She's private in some things. I'm on your side, however, Mr. Darton, and I'll talk to her.'

'Thank 'ee, thank 'ee!' said the farmer in a gayer accent; and with this assurance the not very satisfactory visit came to an end. Darton descended the roots of the sycamore, the light was withdrawn, and the door closed. At the bottom of the slope he nearly ran against a man about to ascend.

'Can a jack-o'-lent believe his few senses on such a dark night, or can't he?' exclaimed one whose utterance Darton recognized in a moment, despite its unexpectedness. 'I dare not swear he can, though I fain would!' The speaker was Johns.

Darton said he was glad of this opportunity, bad as it was, of putting an end to the silence of years, and asked the dairyman what he was travelling that way for.

Japheth showed the old jovial confidence in a moment. 'I'm going to see your--relations--as they always seem to me,' he said--'Mrs. Hall and Sally. Well, Charles, the fact is I find the natural barbarousness of man is much increased by a bachelor life, and, as your leavings were always good enough for me, I'm trying civilization here.' He nodded towards the house.

'Not with Sally--to marry her?' said Darton, feeling something like a rill of ice water between his shoulders.

'Yes, by the help of Providence and my personal charms. And I think I shall get her. I am this road every week--my present dairy is only four miles off,

you know, and I see her through the window. 'Tis rather odd that I was going to speak practical to-night to her for the first time. You've just called?'

'Yes, for a short while. But she didn't say a word about you.'

'A good sign, a good sign. Now that decides me. I'll swing the mallet and get her answer this very night as I planned.'

A few more remarks, and Darton, wishing his friend joy of Sally in a slightly hollow tone of jocularly, bade him good-bye. Johns promised to write particulars, and ascended, and was lost in the shade of the house and tree. A rectangle of light appeared when Johns was admitted, and all was dark again.

'Happy Japheth!' said Darton. 'This then is the explanation!'

He determined to return home that night. In a quarter of an hour he passed out of the village, and the next day went about his swede-lifting and storing as if nothing had occurred.

He waited and waited to hear from Johns whether the wedding-day was fixed: but no letter came. He learnt not a single particular till, meeting Johns one day at a horse-auction, Darton exclaimed genially--rather more genially than he felt--'When is the joyful day to be?'

To his great surprise a reciprocity of gladness was not conspicuous in Johns. 'Not at all,' he said, in a very subdued tone. "'Tis a bad job; she won't have me.'

Darton held his breath till he said with treacherous solicitude, 'Try again--'tis coyness.'

'O no,' said Johns decisively. 'There's been none of that. We talked it over dozens of times in the most fair and square way. She tells me plainly, I don't suit her. 'Twould be simply annoying her to ask her again. Ah, Charles, you threw a prize away when you let her slip five years ago.'

'I did--I did,' said Darton.

He returned from that auction with a new set of feelings in play. He had certainly made a surprising mistake in thinking Johns his successful rival. It really seemed as if he might hope for Sally after all.

This time, being rather pressed by business, Darton had recourse to pen-and-ink, and wrote her as manly and straightforward a proposal as any woman could wish to receive. The reply came promptly:-

'DEAR MR. DARTON,--I am as sensible as any woman can be of the goodness that leads you to make me this offer a second time. Better women than I would be proud of the honour, for when I read your nice long speeches on mangold-wurzel, and such like topics, at the Casterbridge Farmers' Club, I do feel it an honour, I assure you. But my answer is just the same as before. I will not try to explain what, in truth, I cannot explain--my reasons; I will simply say that I must decline to be married to you. With good wishes as in former times, I am, your faithful friend, 'SALLY HALL.'

Darton dropped the letter hopelessly. Beyond the negative, there was just a possibility of sarcasm in it--'nice long speeches on mangold-wurzel' had a suspicious sound. However, sarcasm or none, there was the answer, and he had to be content.

He proceeded to seek relief in a business which at this time engrossed much of his attention--that of clearing up a curious mistake just current in the county, that he had been nearly ruined by the recent failure of a local bank. A farmer named Darton had lost heavily, and the similarity of name had probably led to the error. Belief in it was so persistent that it demanded several days of letter-writing to set matters straight, and persuade the world that he was as solvent as ever he had been in his life. He had hardly concluded this worrying task when, to his delight, another letter arrived in the handwriting of Sally.

Darton tore it open; it was very short.

'DEAR MR. DARTON,--We have been so alarmed these last few days by the report that you were ruined by the stoppage of --'s Bank, that, now it is contradicted I hasten, by my mother's wish, to say how truly glad we are to find there is no foundation for the report. After your kindness to my poor brother's children, I can do no less than write at such a moment. We had a letter from each of them a few days ago.--Your faithful friend, 'SALLY HALL.'

'Mercenary little woman!' said Darton to himself with a smile. 'Then that was the secret of her refusal this time--she thought I was ruined.'

Now, such was Darton, that as hours went on he could not help feeling too generously towards Sally to condemn her in this. What did he want in a wife? he asked himself. Love and integrity. What next? Worldly wisdom. And was there really more than worldly wisdom in her refusal to go aboard a

sinking ship? She now knew it was otherwise. 'Begad,' he said, 'I'll try her again.'

The fact was he had so set his heart upon Sally, and Sally alone, that nothing was to be allowed to baulk him; and his reasoning was purely formal.

Anniversaries having been unpropitious, he waited on till a bright day late in May--a day when all animate nature was fancying, in its trusting, foolish way, that it was going to bask out of doors for evermore. As he rode through Long-Ash Lane it was scarce recognizable as the track of his two winter journeys. No mistake could be made now, even with his eyes shut. The cuckoo's note was at its best, between April tentativeness and midsummer decrepitude, and the reptiles in the sun behaved as winningly as kittens on a hearth. Though afternoon, and about the same time as on the last occasion, it was broad day and sunshine when he entered Hintock, and the details of the Knap dairy-house were visible far up the road. He saw Sally in the garden, and was set vibrating. He had first intended to go on to the inn; but 'No,' he said; 'I'll tie my horse to the garden-gate. If all goes well it can soon be taken round: if not, I mount and ride away'

The tall shade of the horseman darkened the room in which Mrs. Hall sat, and made her start, for he had ridden by a side path to the top of the slope, where riders seldom came. In a few seconds he was in the garden with Sally.

Five--ay, three minutes--did the business at the back of that row of bees. Though spring had come, and heavenly blue consecrated the scene, Darton succeeded not. 'No,' said Sally firmly. 'I will never, never marry you, Mr. Darton. I would have done it once; but now I never can.'

'But!--implored Mr. Darton. And with a burst of real eloquence he went on to declare all sorts of things that he would do for her. He would drive her to see her mother every week--take her to London--settle so much money upon her--Heaven knows what he did not promise, suggest, and tempt her with. But it availed nothing. She interposed with a stout negative, which closed

the course of his argument like an iron gate across a highway. Darton paused.

'Then,' said he simply, 'you hadn't heard of my supposed failure when you declined last time?'

'I had not,' she said. 'But if I had 'twould have been all the same.'

'And 'tis not because of any soreness from my slighting you years ago?'

'No. That soreness is long past.'

'Ah--then you despise me, Sally?'

'No,' she slowly answered. 'I don't altogether despise you. I don't think you quite such a hero as I once did--that's all. The truth is, I am happy enough as I am; and I don't mean to marry at all. Now, may I ask a favour, sir?' She spoke with an ineffable charm, which, whenever he thought of it, made him curse his loss of her as long as he lived.

'To any extent.'

'Please do not put this question to me any more. Friends as long as you like, but lovers and married never.'

'I never will,' said Darton. 'Not if I live a hundred years.'

And he never did. That he had worn out his welcome in her heart was only too plain.

When his step-children had grown up, and were placed out in life, all communication between Darton and the Hall family ceased. It was only by chance that, years after, he learnt that Sally, notwithstanding the solicitations her attractions drew down upon her, had refused several offers of marriage, and steadily adhered to her purpose of leading a single life.

THE END.

May 1884.