

CHAPTER II

Regularly once a week they rode out in marching order.

Returning up the town on one of these occasions, the romantic pelisse flapping behind each horseman's shoulder in the soft south-west wind, Captain Maumbry glanced up at the oriel. A mutual nod was exchanged between him and the person who sat there reading. The reader and a friend in the room with him followed the troop with their eyes all the way up the street, till, when the soldiers were opposite the house in which Laura lived, that young lady became discernible in the balcony.

'They are engaged to be married, I hear,' said the friend.

'Who--Maumbry and Laura? Never--so soon?'

'Yes.'

'He'll never marry. Several girls have been mentioned in connection with his name. I am sorry for Laura.'

'Oh, but you needn't be. They are excellently matched.'

'She's only one more.'

'She's one more, and more still. She has regularly caught him. She is a born player of the game of hearts, and she knew how to beat him in his own practices. If there is one woman in the town who has any chance of holding her own and marrying him, she is that woman.'

This was true, as it turned out. By natural proclivity Laura had from the first entered heart and soul into military romance as exhibited in the plots and characters of those living exponents of it who came under her notice. From her earliest young womanhood civilians, however promising, had no chance of winning her interest if the meanest warrior were within the horizon. It may be that the position of her uncle's house (which was her home) at the corner of West Street nearest the barracks, the daily passing of the troops, the constant blowing of trumpet-calls a furlong from her windows, coupled with the fact that she knew nothing of the inner realities of military life, and hence idealized it, had also helped her mind's original bias for thinking men-at-arms the only ones worthy of a woman's heart.

Captain Maumbry was a typical prize; one whom all surrounding maidens had had coveted, ached for, angled for, wept for, had by her judicious management become subdued to her purpose; and in addition to the pleasure of marrying the man she loved, Laura had the joy of feeling herself hated by the mothers of all the marriageable girls of the neighbourhood.

The man in the oriel went to the wedding; not as a guest, for at this

time he was but slightly acquainted with the parties; but mainly because the church was close to his house; partly, too, for a reason which moved many others to be spectators of the ceremony; a subconsciousness that, though the couple might be happy in their experiences, there was sufficient possibility of their being otherwise to colour the musings of an onlooker with a pleasing pathos of conjecture. He could on occasion do a pretty stroke of rhyming in those days, and he beguiled the time of waiting by pencilling on a blank page of his prayer-book a few lines which, though kept private then, may be given here:-

AT A HASTY WEDDING

(Triolet)

If hours be years the twain are blest,
For now they solace swift desire
By lifelong ties that tether zest
If hours be years. The twain are blest
Do eastern suns slope never west,
Nor pallid ashes follow fire.
If hours be years the twain are blest
For now they solace swift desire.

As if, however, to falsify all prophecies, the couple seemed to find in marriage the secret of perpetuating the intoxication of a courtship which, on Maumbry's side at least, had opened without serious intent.

During the winter following they were the most popular pair in and about Casterbridge--nay in South Wessex itself. No smart dinner in the country houses of the younger and gayer families within driving distance of the borough was complete without their lively presence; Mrs. Maumbry was the blithest of the whirling figures at the county ball; and when followed that inevitable incident of garrison-town life, an amateur dramatic entertainment, it was just the same. The acting was for the benefit of such and such an excellent charity--nobody cared what, provided the play were played--and both Captain Maumbry and his wife were in the piece, having been in fact, by mutual consent, the originators of the performance. And so with laughter, and thoughtlessness, and movement, all went merrily. There was a little backwardness in the bill-paying of the couple; but in justice to them it must be added that sooner or later all owings were paid.