

ENTER A DRAGOON

I lately had a melancholy experience (said the gentleman who is answerable for the truth of this story). It was that of going over a doomed house with whose outside aspect I had long been familiar--a house, that is, which by reason of age and dilapidation was to be pulled down during the following week. Some of the thatch, brown and rotten as the gills of old mushrooms, had, indeed, been removed before I walked over the building. Seeing that it was only a very small house--which is usually called a 'cottage-residence'--situated in a remote hamlet, and that it was not more than a hundred years old, if so much, I was led to think in my progress through the hollow rooms, with their cracked walls and sloping floors, what an exceptional number of abrupt family incidents had taken place therein--to reckon only those which had come to my own knowledge. And no doubt there were many more of which I had never heard.

It stood at the top of a garden stretching down to the lane or street that ran through a hermit-group of dwellings in Mellstock parish. From a green gate at the lower entrance, over which the thorn hedge had been shaped to an arch by constant clippings, a gravel path ascended between the box edges of once trim raspberry, strawberry, and vegetable plots, towards the front door. This was in colour an ancient and bleached green that could be rubbed off with the finger, and it bore a small long-featured brass knocker covered with verdigris in its crevices. For

some years before this eve of demolition the homestead had degenerated, and been divided into two tenements to serve as cottages for farm labourers; but in its prime it had indisputable claim to be considered neat, pretty, and genteel.

The variety of incidents above alluded to was mainly owing to the nature of the tenure, whereby the place had been occupied by families not quite of the kind customary in such spots--people whose circumstances, position, or antecedents were more or less of a critical happy-go-lucky cast. And of these residents the family whose term comprised the story I wish to relate was that of Mr. Jacob Paddock the market-gardener, who dwelt there for some years with his wife and grown-up daughter.

An evident commotion was agitating the premises, which jerked busy sounds

across the front plot, resembling those of a disturbed hive. If a member of the household appeared at the door it was with a countenance of abstraction and concern.

Evening began to bend over the scene; and the other inhabitants of the hamlet came out to draw water, their common well being in the public road opposite the garden and house of the Paddocks. Having wound up their bucketsfull respectively they lingered, and spoke significantly together. From their words any casual listener might have gathered information of what had occurred.

The woodman who lived nearest the site of the story told most of the tale. Selina, the daughter of the Paddocks opposite, had been surprised that afternoon by receiving a letter from her once intended husband, then a corporal, but now a sergeant-major of dragoons, whom she had hitherto supposed to be one of the slain in the Battle of the Alma two or three years before.

'She picked up wi'en against her father's wish, as we know, and before he got his stripes,' their informant continued. 'Not but that the man was as hearty a feller as you'd meet this side o' London. But Jacob, you

see, wished her to do better, and one can understand it. However, she was determined to stick to him at that time; and for what happened she was not much to blame, so near as they were to matrimony when the war broke out and spoiled all.'

'Even the very pig had been killed for the wedding,' said a woman, 'and the barrel o' beer ordered in. O, the man meant honourable enough. But to be off in two days to fight in a foreign country--'twas natural of her father to say they should wait till he got back.'

'And he never came,' murmured one in the shade.

'The war ended but her man never turned up again. She was not sure he was killed, but was too proud, or too timid, to go and hunt for him.'

'One reason why her father forgave her when he found out how matters stood was, as he said plain at the time, that he liked the man, and could see that he meant to act straight. So the old folks made the best of what they couldn't mend, and kept her there with 'em, when some wouldn't. Time has proved seemingly that he did mean to act straight, now that he has writ to her that he's coming. She'd have stuck to him all through the time, 'tis my belief; if t'other hadn't come along.'

'At the time of the courtship,' resumed the woodman, 'the regiment was quartered in Casterbridge Barracks, and he and she got acquainted by his calling to buy a penn'orth of rathe-ripes off that tree yonder in her

father's orchard--though 'twas said he seed her over hedge as well as the apples. He declared 'twas a kind of apple he much fancied; and he called for a penn'orth every day till the tree was cleared. It ended in his calling for her.'

"'Twas a thousand pities they didn't jine up at once and ha' done wi' it.

'Well; better late than never, if so be he'll have her now. But, Lord, she'd that faith in 'en that she'd no more belief that he was alive, when a' didn't come, than that the undermost man in our churchyard was alive. She'd never have thought of another but for that--O no!'

"'Tis awkward, altogether, for her now.'

'Still she hadn't married wi' the new man. Though to be sure she would have committed it next week, even the licence being got, they say, for she'd have no banns this time, the first being so unfortunate.'

'Perhaps the sergeant-major will think he's released, and go as he came.'

'O, not as I reckon. Soldiers bain't particular, and she's a tidy piece o' furniture still. What will happen is that she'll have her soldier, and break off with the master-wheelwright, licence or no--daze me if she won't.'

In the progress of these desultory conjectures the form of another

neighbour arose in the gloom. She nodded to the people at the well, who replied 'G'd night, Mrs. Stone,' as she passed through Mr. Paddock's gate towards his door. She was an intimate friend of the latter's household, and the group followed her with their eyes up the path and past the windows, which were now lighted up by candles inside.