

II

Mrs. Stone paused at the door, knocked, and was admitted by Selina's mother, who took her visitor at once into the parlour on the left hand, where a table was partly spread for supper. On the 'beaufet' against the wall stood probably the only object which would have attracted the eye of a local stranger in an otherwise ordinarily furnished room, a great plum-cake guarded as if it were a curiosity by a glass shade of the kind seen in museums--square, with a wooden back like those enclosing stuffed specimens of rare feather or fur. This was the mummy of the cake intended in earlier days for the wedding-feast of Selina and the soldier, which had been religiously and lovingly preserved by the former as a testimony to her intentional respectability in spite of an untoward subsequent circumstance, which will be mentioned. This relic was now as dry as a brick, and seemed to belong to a pre-existent civilization. Till quite recently, Selina had been in the habit of pausing before it daily, and recalling the accident whose consequences had thrown a shadow over her life ever since--that of which the water-drawers had spoken--the sudden news one morning that the Route had come for the ---th Dragoons, two days only being the interval before departure; the hurried consultation as to what should be done, the second time of asking being past but not the third; and the decision that it would be unwise to solemnize matrimony in such haphazard circumstances, even if it were possible, which was doubtful.

Before the fire the young woman in question was now seated on a low stool, in the stillness of reverie, and a toddling boy played about the floor around her.

'Ah, Mrs. Stone!' said Selina, rising slowly. 'How kind of you to come in. You'll bide to supper? Mother has told you the strange news, of course?'

'No. But I heard it outside, that is, that you'd had a letter from Mr. Clark--Sergeant-Major Clark, as they say he is now--and that he's coming to make it up with 'ee.'

'Yes; coming to-night--all the way from the north of England where he's quartered. I don't know whether I'm happy or--frightened at it. Of course I always believed that if he was alive he'd come and keep his solemn vow to me. But when it is printed that a man is killed--what can you think?'

'It was printed?'

'Why, yes. After the Battle of the Alma the book of the names of the killed and wounded was nailed up against Casterbridge Town Hall door. 'Twas on a Saturday, and I walked there o' purpose to read and see for myself; for I'd heard that his name was down. There was a crowd of people round the book, looking for the names of relations; and I can mind that when they saw me they made way for me--knowing that we'd been just

going to be married--and that, as you may say, I belonged to him. Well, I reached up my arm, and turned over the farrels of the book, and under the "killed" I read his surname, but instead of "John" they'd printed "James," and I thought 'twas a mistake, and that it must be he. Who could have guessed there were two nearly of one name in one regiment.'

'Well--he's coming to finish the wedding of 'ee as may be said; so never mind, my dear. All's well that ends well.'

'That's what he seems to say. But then he has not heard yet about Mr. Miller; and that's what rather terrifies me. Luckily my marriage with him next week was to have been by licence, and not banns, as in John's case; and it was not so well known on that account. Still, I don't know what to think.'

'Everything seems to come just 'twixt cup and lip with 'ee, don't it now, Miss Paddock. Two weddings broke off--'tis odd! How came you to accept Mr. Miller, my dear?'

'He's been so good and faithful! Not minding about the child at all; for he knew the rights of the story. He's dearly fond o' Johnny, you know--just as if 'twere his own--isn't he, my duck? Do Mr. Miller love you or don't he?'

'Iss! An' I love Mr. Miller,' said the toddler.

'Well, you see, Mrs. Stone, he said he'd make me a comfortable home; and thinking 'twould be a good thing for Johnny, Mr. Miller being so much better off than me, I agreed at last, just as a widow might--which is what I have always felt myself; ever since I saw what I thought was John's name printed there. I hope John will forgive me!'

'So he will forgive 'ee, since 'twas no manner of wrong to him. He ought to have sent 'ee a line, saying 'twas another man.'

Selina's mother entered. 'We've not known of this an hour, Mrs. Stone,' she said. 'The letter was brought up from Lower Mellstock Post-office by one of the school children, only this afternoon. Mr. Miller was coming here this very night to settle about the wedding doings. Hark! Is that your father? Or is it Mr. Miller already come?'

The footsteps entered the porch; there was a brushing on the mat, and the door of the room sprung back to disclose a rubicund man about thirty years of age, of thriving master-mechanic appearance and obviously comfortable temper. On seeing the child, and before taking any notice whatever of the elders, the comer made a noise like the crowing of a cock and flapped his arms as if they were wings, a method of entry which had the unqualified admiration of Johnny.

'Yes--it is he,' said Selina constrainedly advancing.

'What--were you all talking about me, my dear?' said the genial young man

when he had finished his crowing and resumed human manners. 'Why what's the matter,' he went on. 'You look struck all of a heap.' Mr. Miller spread an aspect of concern over his own face, and drew a chair up to the fire.

'O mother, would you tell Mr. Miller, if he don't know?'

'Mister Miller! and going to be married in six days!' he interposed.

'Ah--he don't know it yet!' murmured Mrs. Paddock.

'Know what?'

'Well--John Clark--now Sergeant-Major Clark--wasn't shot at Alma after all. 'Twas another of almost the same name.'

'Now that's interesting! There were several cases like that.'

'And he's home again; and he's coming here to-night to see her.'

'Whatever shall I say, that he may not be offended with what I've done?' interposed Selina.

'But why should it matter if he be?'

'O! I must agree to be his wife if he forgives me--of course I must.'

'Must! But why not say nay, Selina, even if he do forgive 'ee?'

'O no! How can I without being wicked? You were very very kind, Mr. Miller, to ask me to have you; no other man would have done it after what had happened; and I agreed, even though I did not feel half so warm as I ought. Yet it was entirely owing to my believing him in the grave, as I knew that if he were not he would carry out his promise; and this shows that I was right in trusting him.'

'Yes . . . He must be a goodish sort of fellow,' said Mr. Miller, for a moment so impressed with the excellently faithful conduct of the sergeant-major of dragoons that he disregarded its effect upon his own position. He sighed slowly and added, 'Well, Selina, 'tis for you to say. I love you, and I love the boy; and there's my chimney-corner and sticks o' furniture ready for 'ee both.'

'Yes, I know! But I mustn't hear it any more now,' murmured Selina quickly. 'John will be here soon. I hope he'll see how it all was when I tell him. If so be I could have written it to him it would have been better.'

'You think he doesn't know a single word about our having been on the brink o't. But perhaps it's the other way--he's heard of it and that may have brought him.'

'Ah--perhaps he has!' she said brightening. 'And already forgives me.'

'If not, speak out straight and fair, and tell him exactly how it fell out. If he's a man he'll see it.'

'O he's a man true enough. But I really do think I shan't have to tell him at all, since you've put it to me that way!'

As it was now Johnny's bedtime he was carried upstairs, and when Selina came down again her mother observed with some anxiety, 'I fancy Mr. Clark must be here soon if he's coming; and that being so, perhaps Mr. Miller wouldn't mind--wishing us good-night! since you are so determined to stick to your sergeant-major.' A little bitterness bubbled amid the closing words. 'It would be less awkward, Mr. Miller not being here--if he will allow me to say it.'

'To be sure; to be sure,' the master-wheelwright exclaimed with instant conviction, rising alertly from his chair. 'Lord bless my soul,' he said, taking up his hat and stick, 'and we to have been married in six days! But Selina--you're right. You do belong to the child's father since he's alive. I'll try to make the best of it.'

Before the generous Miller had got further there came a knock to the door accompanied by the noise of wheels.

'I thought I heard something driving up!' said Mrs Paddock.

They heard Mr. Paddock, who had been smoking in the room opposite, rise and go to the door, and in a moment a voice familiar enough to Selina was audibly saying, 'At last I am here again--not without many interruptions! How is it with 'ee, Mr. Paddock? And how is she? Thought never to see me again, I suppose?'

A step with a clink of spurs in it struck upon the entry floor.

'Danged if I bain't caught!' murmured Mr. Miller, forgetting company-speech. 'Never mind--I may as well meet him here as elsewhere; and I should like to see the chap, and make friends with en, as he seems one o' the right sort.' He returned to the fireplace just as the sergeant-major was ushered in.