

"I have not left them at all. They are here, within a few yards of us. In short, they are 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. "A starving son, a starving wife, starving children. Let it be. But why is this come to us now, to-day, to-night? 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!"

The son stood up. "Mother," he said, "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. "Oh, 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."

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; but one minute before you go, I—I haven't confessed all."

"Then heaven help us!" said Mrs. Hall, pausing at the door in calm despair.

"We passed through Verton as we came," he continued, "and the carrier had come in from Casterbridge at that moment, and asked me to bring on a dressmaker's parcel for Sally that was marked 'immediate.' '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 and told her I had managed to get it for her, and that she was to ask no questions. 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 dare say."

Sally looked at her mother, speechless.

"You have others, I dare say," 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 up stairs at once; and having hastily given him a cordial and kindled the bedroom fire, they descended to fetch their unhappy new relations.

### III.

It was with strange feelings that the girl and her mother, lately so cheerful, passed out of the back door into the open air of the barton, laden with hay scents and

the herby breath of cows. The stable door was open. Softly nearing the door, Mrs. Hall pronounced the name "Helena?"

There was no answer for the moment. Looking in she was taken by surprise. Two people appeared before her. For one, instead of the drabish woman she had expected, Mrs. Hall saw a pale, dark-eyed, lady-like creature, whose personality ruled her attire rather than was ruled by it. She was in a new and handsome dress, of course, and an old bonnet. She was standing up, agitated; her hand was held by her companion—none else than Sally's affianced, Farmer Charles Darton, upon whose fine figure the pale stranger's eyes were fixed, as his were fixed upon her. His other hand held the rein of his horse, which was standing saddled as if just led in.

At sight of Mrs. Hall they both turned, looking at her in a way neither quite conscious nor unconscious, and without seeming to recollect that words were necessary as a solution to the scene. In another moment Sally entered also, when Mr. Darton dropped his companion's hand, led the horse aside, and came to greet his betrothed and Mrs. Hall.

"Ah!" he said smiling, with something like forced composure, "this is a roundabout way of arriving you will say, my dear Mrs. Hall. But I saw a light here and led in my horse at once; my friend Johns and my man have gone on to the Sheaf of Arrows with theirs, not to crowd you too much. No sooner had I entered than I saw that this lady had taken temporary shelter here, and I found I was intruding."

"She is my daughter-in-law," said Mrs. Hall calmly. "My son, too, is in the house, but he has gone to bed unwell."

Sally had stood staring wonderingly at the scene until this moment, hardly recognizing Darton's shake of the hand. The spell that bound her was broken by her perceiving the two little children seated on a heap of hay. She suddenly went forward, spoke to them, and took one on her arm and the other in her hand.

Philip Hall's wife, in spite of this interruption to her first rencontre, seemed scarcely so much affected by it as to feel any one's presence in addition to Mr. Darton's. However, arousing herself by a quick reflection, she threw a sudden, critical glance of her sad eyes upon Mrs. Hall, and, apparently finding her satisfactory, advanced to her in a meek initiative. Then Sally and the stranger spoke some friendly words to each other, and Sally went on with the children into the house. Mrs. Hall and Helena followed, and Mr. Darton followed these, looking at Helena's dress and outline, and listening to her voice like a man in a dream.

By the time the others reached the house Sally had already gone up stairs with the tired children. A bed was made up for the little ones and some supper given to them. On descending the stairs, after seeing this done, Sally went to the sitting-room. Young Mrs. Hall entered it just in advance of her, having in the interim retired with her mother-in-law to take off her bonnet and otherwise make herself presentable. Hence it was evident that no further communication could have passed between her and Mr. Darton since their brief interview in the stable.

They at once sat down to supper, the present of wine and turkey not being produced for consumption to-night, lest the premature display of those gifts should seem to throw doubt on Mrs. Hall's capacities as a provider.

A general conversation was begun and continued briskly, though it was in the main restricted to Mrs. Hall and Japheth Johns, who had come in. There being slight call upon Sally's tongue she had ample leisure to do what her heart most desired—namely, watch her in-