

mother explained to her that Darton had readily assented to the postponement.

"No doubt he has," said Sally with sad emphasis. "It is not put off for a week, or a month, or a year. I shall never marry him, and she will."

IV.

One day, seven months later on, when Mr. Darton was as usual at his farm, twenty miles from Hintock, a note reached him from Helena. She thanked him for his kind offer about her children, which her mother-in-law had duly communicated, and stated that she would be glad to accept it as regarded the eldest, the boy. Helena had, in truth, good need to do so, for her uncle had left her penniless, and all application to some relatives in India had failed. There was, besides, as she said, no good school near Hintock to which she could send the child.

On a fine summer day the boy came. He was entered as a day scholar at a popular school at Casterbridge, three or four miles from Darton's, having first been taught by Darton to ride a forest pony, on which he cantered to and from the aforesaid fount of knowledge.

When the Christmas holidays came it was arranged that he should spend them with his mother. The journey was, for some reason or other, performed in two stages, Darton in person accompanying him the first half of the journey. Reaching the Pack Horse, a roadside inn, and the appointed place of meeting, Darton inquired if Miss and young Mrs. Hall were there to meet little Philip. He was answered by the appearance of Helena alone at the door.

"At the last moment Sally would not come," she faltered.

That meeting practically settled the point toward which these long-severed persons were converging. But nothing was broached about it for some time yet. Sally Hall had, in fact, imparted the first decisive motion to events by refusing to accompany Helena. She soon gave them a second move by writing the following note:

[Private.]

DEAR CHARLES:—
Living here so long and intimately with Helena, I have naturally learnt her history, especially that of it which refers to you. I am sure she would accept you as a husband at the proper time, and I think you ought to give her the opportunity. You inquire in an old note if I am sorry that I showed temper (which it seems?) that night when I heard you talking to her. No, Charles, I am not sorry at all for what I said then. Yours sincerely, SALLY HALL.

Thus set in train, the transfer of Darton's heart back to its original quarters proceeded by mere lapse of time. The following summer Darton was united to Helena at a simple matter-of-fact wedding; and she and her little girl joined the boy who had already grown to look on Darton's house as home.

For some months the farmer experienced an unprecedented happiness and satisfaction. There had been a flaw in his life, and it was as neatly mended as was humanly possible. But after a season the stream of events followed less clearly, and there were shades in his reveries. Helena was a fragile woman, of little staying power, physically or morally, and since the time that he had originally known her (eight or ten years before) she had been severely tried. She had loved herself out, in short, and was now occasionally given to moping. Sometimes she spoke regretfully of the gentilities of her early life, and instead of comparing her present state with her condition as the wife of the unlucky Hall, she mused rather on what it had been before she took the first fatal step of clandestinely marrying him. She did not care to please such people as those with whom she was thrown as a thriving farmer's wife. She allowed the pretty trifles of agricultural domesticity to glide by her as sorry details, and had it not been for the children Dar-

ton's house would have seemed but little brighter than it had been before. This led to occasional unpleasantness, until Darton sometimes declared to himself that such endeavors as his to rectify early deviations of the heart by harking back to the old point mostly failed of success. But he kept these unmelodious thoughts to himself, and was outwardly considerate and kind.

This somewhat barren tract of his life had extended to less than a year and a half, when his ponderings were cut short by the loss of the woman they concerned. When she was in her grave he thought better of her than when she had been alive; the farm was a worse place without her than with her, after all. No woman short of divine could have gone through such an experience as hers with her first husband without becoming a little soured. Her stagnant sympathies, her sometimes unreasonable manner, had covered a heart frank and well-meaning, and originally hopeful and warm. She left him a tiny red infant in white wrappings. To make life as easy as possible to this touching object became at once his care.

As this child learnt to walk and talk Darton learnt to see feasibility in a scheme which pleased him. Revolving the experiment which he had hitherto made upon life, he fancied he had gained wisdom from his mistakes and caution from his miscarriages.

What the scheme was needs no penetration to discover. Once more he had opportunity to recast and rectify his ill-wrought situations by returning to Sally Hall, who still lived quietly on under her mother's roof at Hintock Abbas. Darton was not a man to act rapidly, and the working out of his reparative designs might have been delayed for some time. But there came a winter evening precisely like the one which had darkened over that former ride to Hintock Abbas, and he asked himself why he should postpone longer, when the very landscape called for a repetition of that attempt.

He told his man to saddle the mare, booted and spurred himself with a younger horseman's nicety, kissed the two youngest children, and rode off. Nothing hindered the smoothness of his journey, which seemed not half its former length. Though dark, it was only between five and six o'clock when the bulky chimneys of Mrs. Hall's residence appeared in view behind the sycamore tree. He put up at the Sheaf of Arrows as in former time; and when he had plumed himself before the inn mirror, called for a glass of negus, and smoothed out the incipient wrinkles of care, he walked on to the Knop with a quick step.

V.

That evening Sally was making "pinner" for the milkers, which 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; 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