



*A Group of
Noble Dames*



by Thomas Hardy



Copyright © 2023 by Thomas Hardy.

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Contents

Preface

1. Dame the First
2. Dame the Second
3. Dame the Third
4. Dame the Fourth
5. Dame the Fifth
6. Dame the Sixth
7. Dame the Seventh
8. Dame the Eighth
9. Dame the Ninth
10. Dame the Tenth

About Author



Preface

The pedigrees of our county families, arranged in diagrams on the pages of county histories, mostly appear at first sight to be as barren of any touch of nature as a table of logarithms. But given a clue—the faintest tradition of what went on behind the scenes, and this dryness as of dust may be transformed into a palpitating drama. More, the careful comparison of dates alone—that of birth with marriage, of marriage with death, of one marriage, birth, or death with a kindred marriage, birth, or death—will often effect the same transformation, and anybody practised in raising images from such genealogies finds himself unconsciously filling into the framework the motives, passions, and personal qualities which would appear to be the single explanation possible of some extraordinary conjunction in times, events, and personages that occasionally marks these reticent family records.

Out of such pedigrees and supplementary material most of the following stories have arisen and taken shape.

I would make this preface an opportunity of expressing my sense of the courtesy and kindness of several bright-eyed Noble Dames yet in the flesh, who, since the first publication of these tales in periodicals, six or seven years ago, have given me interesting comments and conjectures on such of the narratives as they have recognized to be connected with their own families, residences, or traditions; in which they have shown a truly philosophic absence of prejudice in their regard of those incidents whose relation has tended more distinctly to dramatize than to eulogize their ancestors. The outlines they have also given of other singular events in their family histories for use in a second "Group of Noble Dames," will, I fear, never reach the printing-press through me; but I shall store them up in memory of my informants' good nature.

T. H. June 1896.



Dame the First

THE FIRST COUNTESS OF WESSEX

By the Local Historian

King's-Hintock Court (said the narrator, turning over his memoranda for reference)—King's-Hintock Court is, as we know, one of the most imposing of the mansions that overlook our beautiful Blackmoor or Blakemore Vale. On the particular occasion of which I have to speak this building stood, as it had often stood before, in the perfect silence of a calm clear night, lighted only by the cold shine of the stars. The season was winter, in days long ago, the last century having run but little more than a third of its length. North, south, and west, not a casement was unfastened, not a curtain undrawn; eastward, one window on the upper floor was open, and a girl of twelve or thirteen was leaning over the sill. That she had not

taken up the position for purposes of observation was apparent at a glance, for she kept her eyes covered with her hands.

The room occupied by the girl was an inner one of a suite, to be reached only by passing through a large bedchamber adjoining. From this apartment voices in altercation were audible, everything else in the building being so still. It was to avoid listening to these voices that the girl had left her little cot, thrown a cloak round her head and shoulders, and stretched into the night air.

But she could not escape the conversation, try as she would. The words reached her in all their painfulness, one sentence in masculine tones, those of her father, being repeated many times.

'I tell 'ee there shall be no such betrothal! I tell 'ee there sha'n't! A child like her!'

She knew the subject of dispute to be herself. A cool feminine voice, her mother's, replied:

'Have done with you, and be wise. He is willing to wait a good five or six years before the marriage takes place, and there's not a man in the county to compare with him.'

'It shall not be! He is over thirty. It is wickedness.'

'He is just thirty, and the best and finest man alive—a perfect match for her.'

'He is poor!'

'But his father and elder brothers are made much of at Court—none so constantly at the palace as they; and with her fortune, who knows? He may be able to get a barony.'

'I believe you are in love with en yourself!'

‘How can you insult me so, Thomas! And is it not monstrous for you to talk of my wickedness when you have a like scheme in your own head? You know you have. Some bumpkin of your own choosing—some petty gentleman who lives down at that outlandish place of yours, Falls-Park—one of your pot-companions’ sons—’

There was an outburst of imprecation on the part of her husband in lieu of further argument. As soon as he could utter a connected sentence he said: ‘You crow and you domineer, mistress, because you are heiress-general here. You are in your own house; you are on your own land. But let me tell ‘ee that if I did come here to you instead of taking you to me, it was done at the dictates of convenience merely. H-! I’m no beggar! Ha’n’t I a place of my own? Ha’n’t I an avenue as long as thine? Ha’n’t I beeches that will more than match thy oaks? I should have lived in my own quiet house and land, contented, if you had not called me off with your airs and graces. Faith, I’ll go back there; I’ll not stay with thee longer! If it had not been for our Betty I should have gone long ago!’

After this there were no more words; but presently, hearing the sound of a door opening and shutting below, the girl again looked from the window. Footsteps crunched on the gravel-walk, and a shape in a drab greatcoat, easily distinguishable as her father, withdrew from the house. He moved to the left, and she watched him diminish down the long east front till he had turned the corner and vanished. He must have gone round to the stables.

She closed the window and shrank into bed, where she cried herself to sleep. This child, their only one, Betty, beloved ambitiously by her mother, and with uncalculating passionateness by her father,

was frequently made wretched by such episodes as this; though she was too young to care very deeply, for her own sake, whether her mother betrothed her to the gentleman discussed or not.

The Squire had often gone out of the house in this manner, declaring that he would never return, but he had always reappeared in the morning. The present occasion, however, was different in the issue: next day she was told that her father had ridden to his estate at Falls-Park early in the morning on business with his agent, and might not come back for some days.

Falls-Park was over twenty miles from King's-Hintock Court, and was altogether a more modest centre-piece to a more modest possession than the latter. But as Squire Dornell came in view of it that February morning, he thought that he had been a fool ever to leave it, though it was for the sake of the greatest heiress in Wessex. Its classic front, of the period of the second Charles, derived from its regular features a dignity which the great, battlemented, heterogeneous mansion of his wife could not eclipse. Altogether he was sick at heart, and the gloom which the densely-timbered park threw over the scene did not tend to remove the depression of this rubicund man of eight-and-forty, who sat so heavily upon his gelding. The child, his darling Betty: there lay the root of his trouble. He was unhappy when near his wife, he was unhappy when away from his little girl; and from this dilemma there was no practicable escape. As a consequence he indulged rather freely in the pleasures of the table, became what was called a three bottle man, and, in his wife's estimation, less and less presentable to her polite friends from town.

He was received by the two or three old servants who were in charge of the lonely place, where a few rooms only were kept habitable for his use or that of his friends when hunting; and during the morning he was made more comfortable by the arrival of his faithful servant Tupcombe from King's-Hintock. But after a day or two spent here in solitude he began to feel that he had made a mistake in coming. By leaving King's-Hintock in his anger he had thrown away his best opportunity of counteracting his wife's preposterous notion of promising his poor little Betty's hand to a man she had hardly seen. To protect her from such a repugnant bargain he should have remained on the spot. He felt it almost as a misfortune that the child would inherit so much wealth. She would be a mark for all the adventurers in the kingdom. Had she been only the heiress to his own unassuming little place at Falls, how much better would have been her chances of happiness!

His wife had divined truly when she insinuated that he himself had a lover in view for this pet child. The son of a dear deceased friend of his, who lived not two miles from where the Squire now was, a lad a couple of years his daughter's senior, seemed in her father's opinion the one person in the world likely to make her happy. But as to breathing such a scheme to either of the young people with the indecent haste that his wife had shown, he would not dream of it; years hence would be soon enough for that. They had already seen each other, and the Squire fancied that he noticed a tenderness on the youth's part which promised well. He was strongly tempted to profit by his wife's example, and forestall her match-making by throwing the two young people together there at Falls. The girl,

though marriageable in the views of those days, was too young to be in love, but the lad was fifteen, and already felt an interest in her.

Still better than keeping watch over her at King's Hintock, where she was necessarily much under her mother's influence, would it be to get the child to stay with him at Falls for a time, under his exclusive control. But how accomplish this without using main force? The only possible chance was that his wife might, for appearance's sake, as she had done before, consent to Betty paying him a day's visit, when he might find means of detaining her till Reynard, the suitor whom his wife favoured, had gone abroad, which he was expected to do the following week. Squire Dornell determined to return to King's-Hintock and attempt the enterprise. If he were refused, it was almost in him to pick up Betty bodily and carry her off.

The journey back, vague and Quixotic as were his intentions, was performed with a far lighter heart than his setting forth. He would see Betty, and talk to her, come what might of his plan.

So he rode along the dead level which stretches between the hills skirting Falls-Park and those bounding the town of Ivell, trotted through that borough, and out by the King's-Hintock highway, till, passing the villages he entered the mile-long drive through the park to the Court. The drive being open, without an avenue, the Squire could discern the north front and door of the Court a long way off, and was himself visible from the windows on that side; for which reason he hoped that Betty might perceive him coming, as she sometimes did on his return from an outing, and run to the door or wave her handkerchief.

But there was no sign. He inquired for his wife as soon as he set foot to earth.

‘Mistress is away. She was called to London, sir.’

‘And Mistress Betty?’ said the Squire blankly.

‘Gone likewise, sir, for a little change. Mistress has left a letter for you.’

The note explained nothing, merely stating that she had posted to London on her own affairs, and had taken the child to give her a holiday. On the fly-leaf were some words from Betty herself to the same effect, evidently written in a state of high jubilation at the idea of her jaunt. Squire Dornell murmured a few expletives, and submitted to his disappointment. How long his wife meant to stay in town she did not say; but on investigation he found that the carriage had been packed with sufficient luggage for a sojourn of two or three weeks.

King’s-Hintock Court was in consequence as gloomy as Falls-Park had been. He had lost all zest for hunting of late, and had hardly attended a meet that season. Dornell read and re-read Betty’s scrawl, and hunted up some other such notes of hers to look over, this seeming to be the only pleasure there was left for him. That they were really in London he learnt in a few days by another letter from Mrs. Dornell, in which she explained that they hoped to be home in about a week, and that she had had no idea he was coming back to King’s-Hintock so soon, or she would not have gone away without telling him.

Squire Dornell wondered if, in going or returning, it had been her plan to call at the Reynards’ place near Melchester, through which

city their journey lay. It was possible that she might do this in furtherance of her project, and the sense that his own might become the losing game was harassing.

He did not know how to dispose of himself, till it occurred to him that, to get rid of his intolerable heaviness, he would invite some friends to dinner and drown his cares in grog and wine. No sooner was the carouse decided upon than he put it in hand; those invited being mostly neighbouring landholders, all smaller men than himself, members of the hunt; also the doctor from Evershead, and the like—some of them rollicking blades whose presence his wife would not have countenanced had she been at home. ‘When the cat’s away—!’ said the Squire.

They arrived, and there were indications in their manner that they meant to make a night of it. Baxby of Sherton Castle was late, and they waited a quarter of an hour for him, he being one of the liveliest of Dornell’s friends; without whose presence no such dinner as this would be considered complete, and, it may be added, with whose presence no dinner which included both sexes could be conducted with strict propriety. He had just returned from London, and the Squire was anxious to talk to him—for no definite reason; but he had lately breathed the atmosphere in which Betty was.

At length they heard Baxby driving up to the door, whereupon the host and the rest of his guests crossed over to the dining-room. In a moment Baxby came hastily in at their heels, apologizing for his lateness.

‘I only came back last night, you know,’ he said; ‘and the truth o’t is, I had as much as I could carry.’ He turned to the Squire. ‘Well,

Dornell—so cunning Reynard has stolen your little ewe lamb? Ha, ha!

‘What?’ said Squire Dornell vacantly, across the dining-table, round which they were all standing, the cold March sunlight streaming in upon his full-clean shaven face.

‘Surely th’st know what all the town knows?—you’ve had a letter by this time?—that Stephen Reynard has married your Betty? Yes, as I’m a living man. It was a carefully-arranged thing: they parted at once, and are not to meet for five or six years. But, Lord, you must know!’

A thud on the floor was the only reply of the Squire. They quickly turned. He had fallen down like a log behind the table, and lay motionless on the oak boards.

Those at hand hastily bent over him, and the whole group were in confusion. They found him to be quite unconscious, though puffing and panting like a blacksmith’s bellows. His face was livid, his veins swollen, and beads of perspiration stood upon his brow.

‘What’s happened to him?’ said several.

‘An apoplectic fit,’ said the doctor from Evershead, gravely.

He was only called in at the Court for small ailments, as a rule, and felt the importance of the situation. He lifted the Squire’s head, loosened his cravat and clothing, and rang for the servants, who took the Squire upstairs.

There he lay as if in a drugged sleep. The surgeon drew a basin-full of blood from him, but it was nearly six o’clock before he came to himself. The dinner was completely disorganized, and some had gone home long ago; but two or three remained.

‘Bless my soul,’ Baxby kept repeating, ‘I didn’t know things had come to this pass between Dornell and his lady! I thought the feast he was spreading to-day was in honour of the event, though privately kept for the present! His little maid married without his knowledge!’

As soon as the Squire recovered consciousness he gasped: “Tis abduction! ‘Tis a capital felony! He can be hung! Where is Baxby? I am very well now. What items have ye heard, Baxby?’

The bearer of the untoward news was extremely unwilling to agitate Dornell further, and would say little more at first. But an hour after, when the Squire had partially recovered and was sitting up, Baxby told as much as he knew, the most important particular being that Betty’s mother was present at the marriage, and showed every mark of approval. ‘Everything appeared to have been done so regularly that I, of course, thought you knew all about it,’ he said.

‘I knew no more than the underground dead that such a step was in the wind! A child not yet thirteen! How Sue hath outwitted me! Did Reynard go up to Lon’on with ‘em, d’ye know?’

‘I can’t say. All I know is that your lady and daughter were walking along the street, with the footman behind ‘em; that they entered a jeweller’s shop, where Reynard was standing; and that there, in the presence o’ the shopkeeper and your man, who was called in on purpose, your Betty said to Reynard—so the story goes: ‘pon my soul I don’t vouch for the truth of it—she said, “Will you marry me?” or, “I want to marry you: will you have me—now or never?” she said.’

‘What she said means nothing,’ murmured the Squire, with wet eyes. ‘Her mother put the words into her mouth to avoid the serious consequences that would attach to any suspicion of force. The

words be not the child's: she didn't dream of marriage—how should she, poor little maid! Go on.'

'Well, be that as it will, they were all agreed apparently. They bought the ring on the spot, and the marriage took place at the nearest church within half-an-hour.'

A day or two later there came a letter from Mrs. Dornell to her husband, written before she knew of his stroke. She related the circumstances of the marriage in the gentlest manner, and gave cogent reasons and excuses for consenting to the premature union, which was now an accomplished fact indeed. She had no idea, till sudden pressure was put upon her, that the contract was expected to be carried out so soon, but being taken half unawares, she had consented, having learned that Stephen Reynard, now their son-in-law, was becoming a great favourite at Court, and that he would in all likelihood have a title granted him before long. No harm could come to their dear daughter by this early marriage-contract, seeing that her life would be continued under their own eyes, exactly as before, for some years. In fine, she had felt that no other such fair opportunity for a good marriage with a shrewd courtier and wise man of the world, who was at the same time noted for his excellent personal qualities, was within the range of probability, owing to the rusticated lives they led at King's-Hintock. Hence she had yielded to Stephen's solicitation, and hoped her husband would forgive her. She wrote, in short, like a woman who, having had her way as to the deed, is prepared to make any concession as to words and subsequent behaviour.

All this Dornell took at its true value, or rather, perhaps, at less than its true value. As his life depended upon his not getting into a passion, he controlled his perturbed emotions as well as he was able, going about the house sadly and utterly unlike his former self. He took every precaution to prevent his wife knowing of the incidents of his sudden illness, from a sense of shame at having a heart so tender; a ridiculous quality, no doubt, in her eyes, now that she had become so imbued with town ideas. But rumours of his seizure somehow reached her, and she let him know that she was about to return to nurse him. He thereupon packed up and went off to his own place at Falls-Park.

Here he lived the life of a recluse for some time. He was still too unwell to entertain company, or to ride to hounds or elsewhere; but more than this, his aversion to the faces of strangers and acquaintances, who knew by that time of the trick his wife had played him, operated to hold him aloof.

Nothing could influence him to censure Betty for her share in the exploit. He never once believed that she had acted voluntarily. Anxious to know how she was getting on, he despatched the trusty servant Tupcombe to Evershead village, close to King's-Hintock, timing his journey so that he should reach the place under cover of dark. The emissary arrived without notice, being out of livery, and took a seat in the chimney-corner of the Sow-and-Acorn.

The conversation of the droppers-in was always of the nine days' wonder—the recent marriage. The smoking listener learnt that Mrs. Dornell and the girl had returned to King's-Hintock for a day or two, that Reynard had set out for the Continent, and that Betty had since

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>