

The pair of legs that carried him were rickety, and there was a bias in his gait which inclined him somewhat to the left of a straight line. He occasionally gave a smart nod, as if in confirmation of some opinion, though he was not thinking of anything in particular. An empty egg basket was slung upon his arm, the nap of his hat was ruffled, a patch being quite worn away at its brim where his thumb came in taking it off. Presently he was met by an elderly parson astride on a gray mare, who, as he rode, hummed a wandering tune. "Good night 'ee," said the man with the basket. "Good night, Sir John," said the parson. The pedestrian, after another pace or two, halted, and turned round. "Now, sir, begging your pardon; we met last market-day on this road about this time, and I said 'Good night,' and you made reply 'Good night,' Sir John," he said; and, after a moment's hesitation: "It was on account of a discovery I made some little time ago, whilst I was hunting up pedigrees for the new county history. I am Parson Tringham, the antiquary, of Stagfoot Lane. Don't you really know, Durbeyfield, that you are the lineal representative of the ancient and knightly family of the d'Urbervilles, who derive their descent from Sir Pagan d'Urberville, that renowned knight who came from Normandy with William the Conqueror, as appears by Battle Abbey Roll?" "Never heard it before, sir!" "Well it is true. Thow up your chin a moment, so that I may catch the profile of your face better. Yes, that's the d'Urberville nose and chin--a little debased. Your ancestor was one of the twelve knights who assisted the Lord of Estremaville in his conquest of Glamorganshire. Branches of your family held manors over all this part of England; their names appear in the Pipe Rolls in the time of King Stephen. In the reign of King John one of them was rich enough to give a manor to the Knights Hospitallers; and in Edward the Second's time your forefather Brian was summoned to Westminster to attend the great Council there. You declined a little in Oliver Cromwell's time, but to no serious extent, and in Charles the Second's reign you were made Knights of the Royal Oak for your loyalty. Aye, there have been generations of Sir Johns among you, and if knighthood were hereditary, like a baronetcy, as it practically was in old times, when men were knighted from father to son, you would be Sir John now." "Ye don't say so!" "In short," concluded the parson, decisively smacking his leg with his switch, "there's hardly such another family in England." "Daze my eyes, and isn't there?" said Durbeyfield. "And here have I been knocking about, year after year, from pillar to post, as if I was no more than the commonest feller in the parish... And how long hev this news about me been known, Pa'son Tringham?"

The clergyman explained that, as far as he was aware, it had quite died out of knowledge, and could hardly be said to be known at all. His own investigations had begun on a day in the preceding spring when, having been engaged in tracing the vicissitudes of the d'Urberville family, he had observed Durbeyfield's name on his waggon, and had thereupon been led to make inquiries about his father and grandfather till he had no doubt on the subject. "At first I resolved not to disturb you with such a useless piece of information," said he. "However, our impulses are too strong for our judgement sometimes. I thought you might perhaps know something of it all the while." "Well, I have heard once or twice, 'tis true, that my family had seen better days afore they came to Blackmoor. But I took no notice o' it, thinking it to mean that we had once kept two horses where we now keep only one. I've got a wold silver spoon, and a wold graven seal at home, too; but, Lord, what's a spoon and seal? ... And to think that I and these noble d'Urbervilles were one flesh all the time. 'Twas said that my gr't-granfer had secrets, and didn't care to talk of where he came from... And where do we raise our smoke, now, parson, if I may make so bold; I mean, where do we d'Urbervilles live?" "You don't live anywhere. You are extinct--as a county family..." "That's bad..." "Yes--what the mendacious family chronicles call extinct in the male line--that is, gone down--gone under..." "Then where do we lie?" "At Kingsbere-sub-Greenhill: rows and rows of you in your vaults, with your effigies under Purbeck-marble canopies..." "And where be our family mansions and estates?" "You haven't any..." "Oh? No lands neither?" "None; though you once had 'em in abundance, as I said, for you family consisted of numerous branches. In this county there was a seat of yours at Kingsbere, and another at Sherton, and another in Millpond, and another at Lullstead, and another at Wellbridge..." "And shall we ever come into our own again?" "Ah--that I can't tell!" "And what had I better do about it, sir?" asked Durbeyfield, in a pause. "Oh--nothing, nothing; except chasten yourself with the thought of 'how are the mighty fallen.' It is a fact of some interest to the local historian and genealogist, nothing more. There are several families among the cottagers of this county of almost equal lustre. Good night..." "But you'll turn back and have a quart of beer wi' me on the strength o' it, Pa'son Tringham? There's a very pretty brew in tap at the Pure Drop--though, to be sure, not so good as at Rollier's..." "No, thank you--not this evening, Durbeyfield. You've had enough already." Concluding thus, the parson rode on his way, with doubts as to his discretion in retailing this curious bit of lore. When he was gone, Durbeyfield walked a few steps in a profound reverie, and then sat down upon the grassy bank by the roadside, depositing his basket before him. In a few minutes a youth appeared in the distance, walking in the same direction as that which had been pursued by Durbeyfield. The latter, on seeing him, held up his hand, and the lad quickened his pace and came near. "Boy, take up that basket! I want 'ee to go on an errand for me." The lad-like stripling frowned. "Who be you, then, John Durbeyfield, to order me about and call me 'boy'? You know my name as well as I know yours!" "Do you, do you?" That's the secret--that's the secret! Now obey my orders, and take the message I'm going to charge 'ee wi'..." Well, Fred, I don't mind telling you that the secret is that I'm one of a noble race--it has been just found out by me this present afternoon, P.M. And as he made the announce ment, Durbeyfield, declining from his sitting position, luxuriously stretched himself out upon the bank among the daisies. The lad stood before Durbeyfield, and contemplated his length from crown to toe. "Sir John d'Urberville, that's who I am," continued the prostrate man. "That is, if knights were baronets--which they be. 'Tis recorded in history all about me. Most know of such a place, lad, as Kingsbere-sub-Greenhill?" "Ees, I've been there to Greenhill Fair..." "Well, under the church of that city there lie--" "Tisn't a city, the place I mean; leastwise 'twadn' where I was there--'twas a little one-eyed, blinking sort o' place." "Never you mind the place, boy, that's not the question before us. Under the church of that there parish lie my ancestors--hundreds of 'em--in coats of mail and jewels, in gr't lead coffins weighing tons and tons. There's not a man in the county o' South-Wessex that's got grander and nobler skillemtons in his family than I..." "Oh?" "Now take up that basket, and goo on to Marlott, and when you've come to The Pure Drop Inn, tell 'em to send a horse and carriage to me immed'ately, to carry me hmwae. And in the bottom o' the carriage they be to put a noggin o' rum in a small bottle, and chalk it up to my account. And when you've done that goo on to my house with the basket, and tell my wife to put away that washing, because she needn't finish it, and wait till I come hmwae, as I've said to her." As the lad stood in a dubious attitude, Durbeyfield put his hand in his pocket, and produced a shilling, one of the chronically few that he possessed. "Here's for your labour, lad." This made a difference in the young man's estimate of the position. "Yes, Sir John. Thank 'ee. Anything else I can do for 'ee, Sir John?" "Tell 'em at hmwae that I should like for supper--well, lamb's fry if they can get it; and if they can't, black-pot; and if they can't get that, well chitterlings will do..." "Yes, Sir John." The boy took up the basket, and as he set out the note is of a brass band were heard from the direction of the village. "What's that?" said Durbeyfield. "Not on account o' I?" "Tis the women's club-walking, Sir John. Why, your dater is one o' the members." "To be sure--I'd quite forgot it in my thoughts of greater things! Well, vamp on to Marlott, will ye, and order that carriage, and maybe I'll drive round and inspect the club." The lad departed, and Durbeyfield lay waiting on the grass and daisies in the evening sun. Not a soul passed that way for a long while, and the faint notes of the band were the only human sound audible within the rim of blue hills. If the village of Marlott lay amid the north-eastern undulations of the beautiful Vale of Blakemoor, or Blackmoor, asforesaid, an engirdled and secluded region, for the most part untrodden as yet by tourist or landscape-painter, though within a four hours' journey from London. It is a vale whose acquaintance is best made by viewing it from the summits of the hills that surround it--except perhaps during the droughts of summer. An unguided ramble into its recesses in bad weather is apt to engender dissatisfaction with its charms of arrow, tortuous, and miry ways. This fertile and sheltered tract of country, in which the fields are never brown and the springs never dry, is bounded on the south by the bold chalk ridge that embraces the prominences of Hambleton Hill, Bulbarrow, Nettlescombe-Tout, Dogbury, High Stoy, and Bubb Down. The traveller from the coast, who, after plodding northward for a score of miles over calcareous downs and corn-lands, suddenly reaches the verge of one of these escarpments, is surprised and delighted to behold, extended like a map beneath him, a country differing absolutely from that which he has passed through. Behind him the hills are open, the sun blazes down upon fields so large as to give an unclosed character to the landscape, the lanes are white, the hedges low and plashed, the atmosphere colourless. Here, in the valley, the world seems to be constructed upon a smaller and more delicate scale; the fields are mere paddocks, so reduced that from this height their hedgerows appear a network of dark green threads overspreading the paler green of the grass. The atmosphere beneath is languorous, and is so tinged with azure that what artists call the middle distance partakes also of that hue, while the horizon beyond is of the deepest ultramarine. Arable lands are few and limited; with but slight exceptions the prospect is a broad rich mass of grass and trees, mantling minor hills and dales within the major. Such is the Vale of Blackmoor. The district is of historic, no less than of topographical interest. The Vale was known in former times as the Forest of White Hart, from a curious legend of King Henry III's reign, in which the killing by a certain Thomas de la Lynd of a beautiful white hart which the king had run down and spared, was made the occasion of a heavy fine. In those days, and till comparatively recent times, the country was densely wooded. Even now, traces of its earlier condition are to be found in the old oak copses and irregular belts of timber that yet survive upon its slopes, and the hollow row-trunked trees that shade so many of its pastures. The forests have departed, but some old customs of their shades remain. Many, however, linger only in a metamorphosed or disguised form. The May-Day dance, for instance, used to be discerned on the afternoon unscipators in the ceremony. Its singularity lay less in the manner, but either the natural shyness of the softer sex, or a sarcastic attitude on the part of male relatives, had denuded such women's clubs as remained (if any other did) of their glory and consummation. The club of Marlott alone lived hundreds of years, if not as benefit-club, as votive sisterhood of some sort; and it walked still. The banded ones were all dressed in white gowns--a gay survival from Old Style days, when cays before the habit of taking long views had reduced emotions to a monotonous average. Their first exhibition of themselves was in a processional march of two and two round the parish lit up their figures against the green hedges and creeper-laced house-fronts; for, though the whole troop wore white garments, no two whites were alike among them. Some approached some wor girl carr are. Th etic, ap when nd wa beauti nabilite ed to ma hobby, of the e

who c Drop, ho, in h head, a xcept th t's all," sh e's got hi ur upon he ad really pained her they said n f he had any; and thus she moved on quantity, and tapped her neighbour w ct was on her tongue to some extent, de probably as rich an utterance as any to be er lower lip had a way of thrusting the mid -day, for all her bouncing handsome wo the curves of her mouth now and the grow momentarily fasci , and no more. Nothin 'space, dancing beg uline inhabitants of ers were three you eir consecutive a regulation c an uncribbe student lid

a villag e, togeth er with other idlers and pedestrians, gathered round the spot, and appeared inclined to negotiate for a partner. Among these ng men of a super ior class , carrying small knapsacks strapped to their shoulders, and stout sticks in their hands. Their general likeness to each other ges, would almost have suggested that they might be, what in fact they were, brothers. The eldest wore the white tie, high waistcoat, and thin-brimmed i urate; the second was the normal undergraduate; the appearance of the third and youngest would hardly have been sufficient to characterize him; there d, uncubined aspect in his eyes and attire, implying that he had hardly as yet found the entrance to his professional groove. That he was a desultory tentat of something and everything might only have been predicted of him. These three brethren told casual acquaintance that they were spending their Whitsum ys in a walking tour through the Vale of Blackmoor, their course being south-westerly from the town of Shaston on the north-east. They leant over the gate y the highway, and inquired as to the meaning of the dance and the white-frocked maids. The two elder of the brothers were plainly not intending to linger m ore than a moment, but the spectacle of a bevy of girls dancing without male partners seemed to amuse the third, and make him in no hurry to move on. He u nstrapped his knapsack, put it, with his stick, on the hedge-bank, and opened the gate. "What are you going to do, Angel?" asked the eldest. "I am inclined to go and have a fling with them. Why not all of us--just for a minute or two--it will not detain us long?" "No--no; nonsense!" said the first. "Dancing in public with a troop of country hoydens--suppose we should be seen! Come along, or it will be dark before we get to Stourcastle, and there's no place we can sleep at nearer t hen that; besides, we must get through another chapter of A Counterblast to Agnosticism before we turn in, now I have taken the trouble to bring the book..." "All rig ht--I'll overtake you and Cuthbert in five minutes; don't stop; I give my word that I will, Felix." The two elder reluctantly left him and walked on, taking their brother's k napsack to relieve him in following, and the youngest entered the field. "This is a thousand pities," he said gallantly, to two or three of the girls nearest him, as soon as there was a pause in the dance. "Where are your partners, my dears?" "They've not left off work yet," answered one of the boldest. "They'll be here by and by. Till then , will you be one, sir?" "Certainly. But what's one among so many!" "Better than none. This melancholy work facing and footing it to one of your own sort, and no clipping an d colling at all. Now, pick and choose..." "Ssh--don't be so forc'd!" said a shy girl. The young man, thus invited, glanced them over, and attempted some discrimination; but, as the group were all so new to him, he could not very well exercise it. He took almost the first that came to hand, which was not the speaker, as she had expected; nor did it hap pen to be Tess Durbeyfield. Pedigree, ancestral skeletons, monumental record, the d'Urberville lineaments, did not help Tess in her life's battle as yet, even to the extent of attracti ng to her a dancing-partner over the heads of the commonest peas