

**THE WORKS OF THOMAS
HARDY IN PROSE AND
VERSE, WITH PREFACES AND
NOTES. PROSE. VOL. XIV**

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The works of Thomas Hardy in prose and verse, with prefaces and notes. Prose. VOL. XIV by Thomas Hardy

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THOMAS HARDY

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Wessex Edition

THE WORKS OF THOMAS HARDY
IN PROSE AND VERSE

WITH PREFACES AND NOTES

PROSE

VOL. XIV



Wintoncester Cathedral (in Lady Mottisfont)

A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES

THAT IS TO SAY

THE FIRST COUNTESS OF WESSEX
BARBARA OF THE HOUSE OF GREBE
THE MARCHIONESS OF STONEHENGE
LADY MOTTISFONT · THE LADY
ICENWAY · SQUIRE PETRICK'S LADY
ANNA, LADY BAXBY · THE LADY
PENELOPE · THE DUCHESS OF HAMP-
TONSHIRE · THE HONOURABLE LAURA

BY

THOMAS HARDY

' . . . Store of Ladies, whose bright eyes
Rain influence,'—L'ALLEGRO.

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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,

A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES

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.

The tales were first collected and published in their present form in 1891.

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 eighteenth 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 bed-chamber 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