

Under the Greenwood Tree

By

Thomas Hardy

Web-Books.Com

Under the Greenwood Tree

Preface.....	3
PART I: 1. Mellstock-Lane	5
PART I: 2. The Tranter's.....	8
PART I: 3. The Assembled Quire.....	13
PART I: 4. Going The Rounds	18
PART I: 5. The Listeners	22
PART I: 6. Christmas Morning.....	27
PART I: 7. The Tranter's Party	32
PART I: 8. They Dance More Wildly	37
PART I: 9. Dick Calls At The School.....	43
PART II: 1. Passing By The School.....	45
PART II: 2. A Meeting Of The Quire	46
PART II: 3. A Turn In The Discussion.....	50
PART II: 4. Interview With The Vicar	54
PART II: 5. Returning Home Ward	62
PART II: 6. Yalbury Wood And The Keeper's House.....	65
PART II: 7. Dick Makes Himself Useful.....	73
PART II: 8. Dick Meets His Father.....	77
PART III: 1. Driving Out Of Budmouth	82
PART III: 2. Further Along The Road	86
PART III: 3. A Confession	92
PART III: 4. An Arrangement	97
PART IV: 1. Going Nutting	100
PART IV: 2. Honey-Taking, And Afterwards	105
PART IV: 3. Fancy In The Rain.....	114
PART IV: 4. The Spell.....	117
PART IV: 5. After Gaining Her Point	121
PART IV: 6. Into Temptation.....	124
PART IV: 7. Second Thoughts	128
PART V: 1. 'The Knot There's No Untying'	132
PART V: 2. Under The Greenwood Tree	142

Preface

This story of the Mellstock Quire and its old established west-gallery musicians, with some supplementary descriptions of similar officials in *Two on a Tower*, *A Few Crusted Characters*, and other places, is intended to be a fairly true picture, at first hand, of the personages, ways, and customs which were common among such orchestral bodies in the villages of fifty or sixty years ago.

One is inclined to regret the displacement of these ecclesiastical bandsmen by an isolated organist (often at first a barrel-organist) or harmonium player; and despite certain advantages in point of control and accomplishment which were, no doubt, secured by installing the single artist, the change has tended to stultify the professed aims of the clergy, its direct result being to curtail and extinguish the interest of parishioners in church doings. Under the old plan, from half a dozen to ten full-grown players, in addition to the numerous more or less grown-up singers, were officially occupied with the Sunday routine, and concerned in trying their best to make it an artistic outcome of the combined musical taste of the congregation. With a musical executive limited, as it mostly is limited now, to the parson's wife or daughter and the school-children, or to the school-teacher and the children, an important union of interests has disappeared.

The zest of these bygone instrumentalists must have been keen and staying to take them, as it did, on foot every Sunday after a toilsome week, through all weathers, to the church, which often lay at a distance from their homes. They usually received so little in payment for their performances that their efforts were really a labour of love. In the parish I had in my mind when writing the present tale, the gratuities received yearly by the musicians at Christmas were somewhat as follows: From the manor-house ten shillings and a supper; from the vicar ten shillings; from the farmers five shillings each; from each cottage-household one shilling; amounting altogether to not more than ten shillings a head annually--just enough, as an old executant told me, to pay for their fiddle-strings, repairs, rosin, and music-paper (which they mostly ruled themselves). Their music in those days was all in their own manuscript, copied in the evenings after work, and their music-books were home-bound.

It was customary to inscribe a few jigs, reels, horn-pipes, and ballads in the same book, by beginning it at the other end, the insertions being continued from front and back till sacred and secular met together in the middle, often with bizarre effect, the words of some of the songs exhibiting that ancient and broad humour which our grandfathers, and possibly grandmothers, took delight in, and is in these days unquotable.

The aforesaid fiddle-strings, rosin, and music-paper were supplied by a pedlar, who travelled exclusively in such wares from parish to parish, coming to each village about every six months. Tales are told of the consternation once caused among the church fiddlers when, on the occasion of their producing a new Christmas anthem, he did not come to time, owing to being snowed up on the downs, and the straits they were in

through having to make shift with whipcord and twine for strings. He was generally a musician himself, and sometimes a composer in a small way, bringing his own new tunes, and tempting each choir to adopt them for a consideration. Some of these compositions which now lie before me, with their repetitions of lines, half-lines, and half-words, their fugues and their intermediate symphonies, are good singing still, though they would hardly be admitted into such hymn-books as are popular in the churches of fashionable society at the present time.

August 1896.

Under the Greenwood Tree was first brought out in the summer of 1872 in two volumes. The name of the story was originally intended to be, more appropriately, The Mellstock Quire, and this has been appended as a sub-title since the early editions, it having been thought inadvisable to displace for it the title by which the book first became known.

In rereading the narrative after a long interval there occurs the inevitable reflection that the realities out of which it was spun were material for another kind of study of this little group of church musicians than is found in the chapters here penned so lightly, even so farcically and flippantly at times. But circumstances would have rendered any aim at a deeper, more essential, more transcendent handling inadvisable at the date of writing; and the exhibition of the Mellstock Quire in the following pages must remain the only extant one, except for the few glimpses of that perished band which I have given in verse elsewhere.

T. H.

April 1912.

PART I: 1. Mellstock-Lane

PART THE FIRST--WINTER

To dwellers in a wood almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of the breeze the fir-trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself; the ash hisses amid its quiverings; the beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall. And winter, which modifies the note of such trees as shed their leaves, does not destroy its individuality.

On a cold and starry Christmas-eve within living memory a man was passing up a lane towards Mellstock Cross in the darkness of a plantation that whispered thus distinctively to his intelligence. All the evidences of his nature were those afforded by the spirit of his footsteps, which succeeded each other lightly and quickly, and by the liveliness of his voice as he sang in a rural cadence:

"With the rose and the lily And the daffodowndilly, The lads and the lasses a-sheep-shearing go."

The lonely lane he was following connected one of the hamlets of Mellstock parish with Upper Mellstock and Lewgate, and to his eyes, casually glancing upward, the silver and black-stemmed birches with their characteristic tufts, the pale grey boughs of beech, the dark-creviced elm, all appeared now as black and flat outlines upon the sky, wherein the white stars twinkled so vehemently that their flickering seemed like the flapping of wings. Within the woody pass, at a level anything lower than the horizon, all was dark as the grave. The copse-wood forming the sides of the bower interlaced its branches so densely, even at this season of the year, that the draught from the north-east flew along the channel with scarcely an interruption from lateral breezes.

After passing the plantation and reaching Mellstock Cross the white surface of the lane revealed itself between the dark hedgerows like a ribbon jagged at the edges; the irregularity being caused by temporary accumulations of leaves extending from the ditch on either side.

The song (many times interrupted by flitting thoughts which took the place of several bars, and resumed at a point it would have reached had its continuity been unbroken) now received a more palpable check, in the shape of "Ho-i-i-i-i-i!" from the crossing lane to Lower Mellstock, on the right of the singer who had just emerged from the trees.

"Ho-i-i-i-i-i!" he answered, stopping and looking round, though with no idea of seeing anything more than imagination pictured.

"Is that thee, young Dick Dewy?" came from the darkness.

"Ay, sure, Michael Mail."

"Then why not stop for fellow-craters--going to thy own father's house too, as we be, and knowen us so well?"

Dick Dewy faced about and continued his tune in an under-whistle, implying that the business of his mouth could not be checked at a moment's notice by the placid emotion of friendship.

Having come more into the open he could now be seen rising against the sky, his profile appearing on the light background like the portrait of a gentleman in black cardboard. It assumed the form of a low-crowned hat, an ordinary-shaped nose, an ordinary chin, an ordinary neck, and ordinary shoulders. What he consisted of further down was invisible from lack of sky low enough to picture him on.

Shuffling, halting, irregular footsteps of various kinds were now heard coming up the hill, and presently there emerged from the shade severally five men of different ages and gaits, all of them working villagers of the parish of Mellstock. They, too, had lost their rotundity with the daylight, and advanced against the sky in flat outlines, which suggested some processional design on Greek or Etruscan pottery. They represented the chief portion of Mellstock parish choir. The first was a bowed and bent man, who carried a fiddle under his arm, and walked as if engaged in studying some subject connected with the surface of the road. He was Michael Mail, the man who had halloooed to Dick.

The next was Mr. Robert Penny, boot- and shoemaker; a little man, who, though rather round-shouldered, walked as if that fact had not come to his own knowledge, moving on with his back very hollow and his face fixed on the north-east quarter of the heavens before him, so that his lower waist-coat-buttons came first, and then the remainder of his figure. His features were invisible; yet when he occasionally looked round, two faint moons of light gleamed for an instant from the precincts of his eyes, denoting that he wore spectacles of a circular form.

The third was Elias Spinks, who walked perpendicularly and dramatically. The fourth outline was Joseph Bowman's, who had now no distinctive appearance beyond that of a human being. Finally came a weak lath-like form, trotting and stumbling along with one shoulder forward and his head inclined to the left, his arms dangling nervelessly in the wind as if they were empty sleeves. This was Thomas Leaf.

"Where be the boys?" said Dick to this somewhat indifferently- matched assembly.

The eldest of the group, Michael Mail, cleared his throat from a great depth.

"We told them to keep back at home for a time, thinken they wouldn't be wanted yet awhile; and we could choose the tuens, and so on."

"Father and grandfather William have expected ye a little sooner. I have just been for a run round by Ewelease Stile and Hollow Hill to warm my feet."

"To be sure father did! To be sure 'a did expect us--to taste the little barrel beyond compare that he's going to tap."

"'Od rabbit it all! Never heard a word of it!" said Mr. Penny, gleams of delight appearing upon his spectacle-glasses, Dick meanwhile singing parenthetically--"The lads and the lasses a-sheep- shearing go."

"Neighbours, there's time enough to drink a sight of drink now afore bedtime?" said Mail.

"True, true--time enough to get as drunk as lords!" replied Bowman cheerfully.

This opinion being taken as convincing they all advanced between the varying hedges and the trees dotting them here and there, kicking their toes occasionally among the crumpled leaves. Soon appeared glimmering indications of the few cottages forming the small hamlet of Upper Mellstock for which they were bound, whilst the faint sound of church-bells ringing a Christmas peal could be heard floating over upon the breeze from the direction of Longpuddle and Weatherbury parishes on the other side of the hills. A little wicket admitted them to the garden, and they proceeded up the path to Dick's house.

PART I: 2. The Tranter's

It was a long low cottage with a hipped roof of thatch, having dormer windows breaking up into the eaves, a chimney standing in the middle of the ridge and another at each end. The window-shutters were not yet closed, and the fire- and candle-light within radiated forth upon the thick bushes of box and laurestinus growing in clumps outside, and upon the bare boughs of several codlin-trees hanging about in various distorted shapes, the result of early training as espaliers combined with careless climbing into their boughs in later years. The walls of the dwelling were for the most part covered with creepers, though these were rather beaten back from the doorway--a feature which was worn and scratched by much passing in and out, giving it by day the appearance of an old keyhole. Light streamed through the cracks and joints of outbuildings a little way from the cottage, a sight which nourished a fancy that the purpose of the erection must be rather to veil bright attractions than to shelter unsightly necessities. The noise of a beetle and wedges and the splintering of wood was periodically heard from this direction; and at some little distance further a steady regular munching and the occasional scurr of a rope betokened a stable, and horses feeding within it.

The choir stamped severally on the door-stone to shake from their boots any fragment of earth or leaf adhering thereto, then entered the house and looked around to survey the condition of things. Through the open doorway of a small inner room on the right hand, of a character between pantry and cellar, was Dick Dewy's father Reuben, by vocation a "tranter," or irregular carrier. He was a stout florid man about forty years of age, who surveyed people up and down when first making their acquaintance, and generally smiled at the horizon or other distant object during conversations with friends, walking about with a steady sway, and turning out his toes very considerably. Being now occupied in bending over a hogshead, that stood in the pantry ready horsed for the process of broaching, he did not take the trouble to turn or raise his eyes at the entry of his visitors, well knowing by their footsteps that they were the expected old comrades.

The main room, on the left, was decked with bunches of holly and other evergreens, and from the middle of the beam bisecting the ceiling hung the mistletoe, of a size out of all proportion to the room, and extending so low that it became necessary for a full-grown person to walk round it in passing, or run the risk of entangling his hair. This apartment contained Mrs. Dewy the tranter's wife, and the four remaining children, Susan, Jim, Bessy, and Charley, graduating uniformly though at wide stages from the age of sixteen to that of four years--the eldest of the series being separated from Dick the firstborn by a nearly equal interval.

Some circumstance had apparently caused much grief to Charley just previous to the entry of the choir, and he had absently taken down a small looking-glass, holding it before his face to learn how the human countenance appeared when engaged in crying, which survey led him to pause at the various points in each wail that were more than

ordinarily striking, for a thorough appreciation of the general effect. Bessy was leaning against a chair, and glancing under the plaits about the waist of the plaid frock she wore, to notice the original unfaded pattern of the material as there preserved, her face bearing an expression of regret that the brightness had passed away from the visible portions. Mrs. Dewy sat in a brown settle by the side of the glowing wood fire--so glowing that with a heedful compression of the lips she would now and then rise and put her hand upon the hams and flitches of bacon lining the chimney, to reassure herself that they were not being broiled instead of smoked--a misfortune that had been known to happen now and then at Christmas- time.

"Hullo, my sonnies, here you be, then!" said Reuben Dewy at length, standing up and blowing forth a vehement gust of breath. "How the blood do puff up in anybody's head, to be sure, a-stooping like that! I was just going out to gate to hark for ye." He then carefully began to wind a strip of brown paper round a brass tap he held in his hand. "This in the cask here is a drop o' the right sort" (tapping the cask); "'tis a real drop o' cordial from the best picked apples--Sansoms, Stubbards, Five-corners, and such--like--you d'mind the sort, Michael?" (Michael nodded.) "And there's a sprinkling of they that grow down by the orchard-rails--streaked ones--rail apples we d'call 'em, as 'tis by the rails they grow, and not knowing the right name. The water-cider from 'em is as good as most people's best cider is."

"Ay, and of the same make too," said Bowman. "It rained when we wrung it out, and the water got into it, folk will say. But 'tis on'y an excuse. Watered cider is too common among us."

"Yes, yes; too common it is!" said Spinks with an inward sigh, whilst his eyes seemed to be looking at the case in an abstract form rather than at the scene before him. "Such poor liquor do make a man's throat feel very melancholy--and is a disgrace to the name of stimmilent."

"Come in, come in, and draw up to the fire; never mind your shoes," said Mrs. Dewy, seeing that all except Dick had paused to wipe them upon the door-mat. "I am glad that you've stepped up-along at last; and, Susan, you run down to Grammer Kaytes's and see if you can borrow some larger candles than these fourteens. Tommy Leaf, don't ye be afeard! Come and sit here in the settle."

This was addressed to the young man before mentioned, consisting chiefly of a human skeleton and a smock-frock, who was very awkward in his movements, apparently on account of having grown so very fast that before he had had time to get used to his height he was higher.

"Hee--hee--ay!" replied Leaf, letting his mouth continue to smile for some time after his mind had done smiling, so that his teeth remained in view as the most conspicuous members of his body.

"Here, Mr. Penny," resumed Mrs. Dewy, "you sit in this chair. And how's your daughter, Mrs. Brownjohn?"

"Well, I suppose I must say pretty fair." He adjusted his spectacles a quarter of an inch to the right. "But she'll be worse before she's better, 'a b'lieve."

"Indeed--poor soul! And how many will that make in all, four or five?"

"Five; they've buried three. Yes, five; and she not much more than a maid yet. She do know the multiplication table onmistakable well. However, 'twas to be, and none can gainsay it."

Mrs. Dewy resigned Mr. Penny. "Wonder where your grandfather James is?" she inquired of one of the children. "He said he'd drop in to- night."

"Out in fuel-house with grandfather William," said Jimmy.

"Now let's see what we can do," was heard spoken about this time by the tranter in a private voice to the barrel, beside which he had again established himself, and was stooping to cut away the cork.

"Reuben, don't make such a mess o' tapping that barrel as is mostly made in this house," Mrs. Dewy cried from the fireplace. "I'd tap a hundred without wasting more than you do in one. Such a squizzling- -and squirting job as 'tis in your hands! There, he always was such a clumsy man indoors."

"Ay, ay; I know you'd tap a hundred beautiful, Ann--I know you would; two hundred, perhaps. But I can't promise. This is a' old cask, and the wood's rotted away about the tap-hole. The husbird of a feller Sam Lawson--that ever I should call'n such, now he's dead and gone, poor heart!--took me in completely upon the feat of buying this cask. 'Reub,' says he--'a always used to call me plain Reub, poor old heart!--'Reub,' he said, says he, 'that there cask, Reub, is as good as new; yes, good as new. 'Tis a wine-hogshead; the best port-wine in the commonwealth have been in that there cask; and you shall have en for ten shillens, Reub,'--'a said, says he--'he's worth twenty, ay, five-and-twenty, if he's worth one; and an iron hoop or two put round en among the wood ones will make en worth thirty shillens of any man's money, if--'"

"I think I should have used the eyes that Providence gave me to use afore I paid any ten shillens for a jimcrack wine-barrel; a saint is sinner enough not to be cheated. But 'tis like all your family was, so easy to be deceived."

"That's as true as gospel of this member," said Reuben.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

